



WHAT THE LIGHT SHINES THROUGH

A Retreat for Women's Christmas

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SINGING TO THE NIGHT

A Blessing for Women's Christmas

Who would have thought
the sky could be so pierced,
or that it could pour forth such
light through the breach
whose shape matched
so precisely
the hole in the heart
that had ached
for long ages,
weary from all its emptying?

And what had once been
a wound
opened now
like a door
or a dream,
radiant in its welcome,
singing to the night
that would prove itself
at last
not endless.

Call the piercing a star.
Call it the place the light begins.
Call it the point that tethers us
to this sheltering sky.

Call it the hope
that keeps holding us
to this broken,
blessed earth,
that keeps turning us
toward this world
luminous beneath
its shadows.

Call it the vigil fire
kept in that place
where every last thing
will be mended
and we will see one another
finally whole,
shining like the
noonday sun.

Introduction

There is a custom, rooted in Ireland, of celebrating Epiphany (January 6, which brings the Christmas season to a close) as Women's Christmas. Called *Nollaig na mBan* in Irish, Women's Christmas originated as a day when the women, who often carried the domestic responsibilities all year, took Epiphany as an occasion to celebrate together at the end of the holidays, leaving hearth and home to the men for a few hours. Celebrated particularly in County Cork and County Kerry, the tradition is enjoying a revival.

Whether your domestic commitments are many or few, Women's Christmas offers a timely opportunity to pause and step back from whatever has kept you busy and hurried in the past weeks or months. As the Christmas season ends, this is an occasion both to celebrate with friends and also to spend time in reflection before diving into the responsibilities of this new year.

The Women's Christmas Retreat is offered in that spirit. Within these pages is an invitation to rest, to reflect, and to contemplate where you are in your unfolding path. Mindful of those who traveled to welcome the Christ child and who returned home by another way, we will turn our attention toward questions about our own journey.

WISE WOMEN ALSO CAME

Years ago, when I was first starting to discover the artist layer of my soul, I sat down to create a collage to use as a greeting card for Epiphany. I found myself imagining who else might have made the journey to welcome Jesus. A trio of women began to take shape, carrying their treasures to offer the child. I named the piece *Wise Women Also Came*.

Years have passed since those wise women showed up in my life. My style as an artist has changed greatly, and the journey has taken me across much terrain—some that I had dreamed of, some that I never could have anticipated even in dreams. This image of the wise women continues to travel with me, posing questions that linger with me still.

Over this past year, many of the wise women's questions have had to do with the work of mending, restoration, and healing—the ways by which the brokenness within us and around us becomes transformed. Some of these questions have arisen from my ongoing journey to make a new life in the wake of the unexpected death of my husband and creative partner, whose own life was a testimony to the power of redemption and the human capacity for reimagining our path. Some of the questions have come simply from being in this deeply fractured world that continually asks for repair. All the questions are connected, of course, as healing is not meant to happen in isolation but in community.

I am especially curious about how we approach redemption and repair in a way that does not seek to erase, hide, or forget what has gone before. I wonder instead how our scars can become part of a new path, one in which our wounds do not define us but become part of the map by which we find our way.

This year's Women's Christmas Retreat invites you to ponder the practices by which wholeness happens. With reflections and images from my ongoing journey to find new patterns among the pieces, the pages of this retreat offer a welcoming space for you to pray, to imagine, to rest, and to dream as you contemplate how restoration takes place in your life, and how it calls you deeper into the life of the world.

NAVIGATING THE PATH

There are many ways to work with these readings. You can set aside a day—on or near Women’s Christmas, or another time that suits you. You can spread out the reflections over several days or weeks. You might share the retreat with others—a friend near or far, a family member, a small group. You could get together with friends for a cup of tea or a meal on Women’s Christmas—or, again, whenever fits for you—and select just one or two of the readings as a starting place for conversation together.

As you move through these pages, you will likely find that different readings invite different kinds of responses. For one reading, you might feel drawn simply to sit in silence or go for a walk as you engage the questions. With another reading, you might want to respond with words of your own: a journal entry, a poem, a prose piece, a letter, a prayer. A reading could inspire a collage. Or a drawing or painting or sculpture.

With each reflection, as you contemplate the words and the questions—including your own questions that these pages might prompt—I invite you to consider what helps you put the pieces of your life together: the experiences you carry, the scraps of your story, the fragments that seem jagged and painful as well as those that you think of as beautiful. What response—in words, in images, in prayer, in movement, in stillness, in conversation, in solitude—helps you recognize and honor the pieces and put them together in a new way, making your path as you go?

BLESSING OF COMFORT, BLESSING OF CHALLENGE

I pray that in these pages, you will find a space of comfort as well as a space of challenge. If you have arrived at this point in your path feeling weary and depleted, I hope that you will find something here that provides comfort and rest. At the same time, I pray that you will find something that stretches you into new terrain, that invites you to think or move or pray in a direction that will draw you into uncharted territory in your soul, and there find the God who ever waits to meet us in those spaces that lie beyond what is familiar, comfortable, and habitual for us.

In the Gospel of Luke, we read that on the night of Jesus’ birth, shepherds arrive at the manger with a story of angels who brought them astounding tidings of a Savior’s birth. Luke tells us that all who hear the tale of the shepherds are amazed. *But Mary*, Luke writes—Mary, whose path has led her so far from home—*treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart* (Luke 2:19).

As you engage this retreat, may you enter into a space where you can gather up the words, the stories, the fragments and pieces, the gifts and challenges of the past year. May you ponder them in your heart, and there find treasure to sustain you and illuminate your path. May you have comfort and challenge in good measure, and may you be accompanied by many graces. Know that I hold you in prayer and wish you blessings on your way. Merry Women’s Christmas!



Christ Among the Scraps

IN PIECES

For much of my life I did not consider myself an artist. One of my earliest memories, in fact, is of tearing up all my paintings and drawings that my mother had saved. I was about five years old. When my horrified mother found me with the pile of scraps and asked me why I had done it, I replied, *Because they weren't any good!* How early the inner critic starts rising.

Although I considered myself creative in other ways, only in my last year of seminary did I begin to pursue visual art seriously. It was the medium of paper collage that compelled me. I had believed that an artist needed to be able to paint and draw; obviously, since the age of five, I had not thought of myself as someone who could do either of these things well. Yet I found that transformation happened in playing with paper, in taking those skills, picked up in kindergarten, of cutting and tearing and pasting and piecing together. Years later, I found myself wondering if my passion for collage had anything to do with that early memory of destroying my artwork. Perhaps for me, collage is a way of putting those shredded drawings and paintings back together.

Collage became a powerful spiritual practice for me; the drafting table is one of the places where I pray best. It provides a space between and beneath and beyond words, a thin place where memory and hope meet. The practice of collage also provides an image for understanding my work and my life. In much the same way that I sit at my drafting table and take the scraps to piece together a new creation, God does this within me. God takes everything: experiences, stories, memories, relationships, dreams, prayers—all those pieces, light and dark, rough and smooth, jagged and torn—and creates anew from them. I have learned to think of God as the consummate recycler: in God's economy, nothing is wasted. Everything—everything—can be used. Transformed. Redeemed.

What are the pieces you carry right now? Are there things in your life that feel fragmented, fractured, disconnected? How is it for you to notice and name these pieces? Do you have a practice that could help you work with these pieces and discern what new pattern might emerge from them?

BLESSING

From all that is broken,
let there be beauty.
From what is torn, jagged,
ripped, frayed,
let there be
not just mendings
but meetings unimagined.
May the God in whom
nothing is wasted
gather up every scrap,
every shred and shard,
and make of them
new paths,
doorways,
worlds.



Raising the Ruins

RAISING THE RUINS

*They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations.*

—Isaiah 61:4

When I made a trip to Rome with friends, one of the things that fascinated me was the presence of ruins. The Eternal City offers a layered landscape; everywhere we went, the strata of history were visible to us. Past and present inhabit the terrain as companions. I had more than one occasion to wander around the Forum, where there's a particularly high concentration of ancient ruins: basilicas, triumphal arches, temples of gods and goddesses, the House of the Vestal Virgins.

I've been mentally revisiting those ruins as I've contemplated Isaiah 61. The text overwhelms with its imagery of repair and restoration; the author lavishes the reader with his stunning litany that lists the ways that God will bring healing and release to those in captivity of various kinds. To those who have lived with imprisonment, oppression, and grief, the writer offers a prophecy of how they will receive garlands instead of ashes, the oil of gladness, the mantle of praise. He tells of how God has garbed him with the garments of salvation and covered him with a robe of righteousness like a bridegroom decked with a garland, like a bride who adorns herself with jewels. There is further visual fare: *For as the earth brings forth its shoots*, he exults, *and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before the nations.*

In the midst of this dizzying litany, the writer tells of how those whom God heals and frees *shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.* It was this image, amongst the many that he drenches us with, to which I kept returning as I pondered this passage. And it was the Roman ruins that I thought of, those leavings that persist in the present landscape, reminding their visitors of what has gone before.

I wonder what it does to a person's psyche to live in a place that's old enough to have ruins, how it is to be perpetually reminded that we humans are part of a pattern of history. And I wonder what it does to a psyche, and to a soul, to live in a landscape that is largely devoid of ruins—in the typical sense of them, at least—as those of us living in the United States largely do. The absence of ruins makes it more challenging to remember how we inhabit our history, and to recognize and reckon with what haunts us. The ruins we do have, we tend to hide: the burned-out buildings, the falling-down dwellings, the places not considered worth building up. We route traffic around them, or sometimes construct walls along the freeways so those who pass by don't have to see them.

It is easy to become romantic about ruins when they are ancient, when they are lovely, and when we have a less immediate sense of the events that brought about their ruination. In the absence of really knowing those who first lived among them, it's tempting to project our own ideas and imaginings onto what is left behind and to smooth away the sharp edges of memory. Largely removed from the visible past, we don't have to wrestle with it so much.

But there are plenty of ruins that we carry inside, individually and collectively. It is sometimes harder to see them, more difficult to discern the interior terrain of people and families and communities and churches marked by loss, abandonment, struggle, private battles, migration.

Rebuilding a ruin, literal or metaphorical, doesn't allow for much nostalgia. Doing the work of restoration—redeeming a place instead of living with its remnants—gives us little room to hold on to the way things were, or how we thought they were. Reclaiming a ruin, whether tangible or intangible, challenges us to go into the rubble and to see clearly what yet remains: to discern what is yet solid, to

find walls that can bear weight, to sort through the debris and retrieve what we can use. Rebuilding a ruin calls upon our imagination in a deeper, sharper way that romanticizing it does. To restore what has been destroyed, we have to resist seeing the landscape only the way it was, and learn to imagine what is possible now.

When it comes to the losses and devastations around us and within us, how do we discern where God might be calling us to begin the work of restoration? Not all ruins are meant for redemption, after all; some ruins are for fleeing, not for fixing. How do we tell the difference?

ENDURING BLESSING

What I really want to tell you
is to just lay this blessing
on your forehead,
on your heart;
let it rest
in the palm of your hand,
because there is hardly anything
this blessing could say,
any word it could offer
to fill the hollow.

Let this blessing
work its way
into you
with its lines
that hold nearly
unspeakable lament.

Let this blessing
settle into you
with its hope
more ancient
than knowing.

Hear how this blessing
has not come alone—
how it echoes with
the voices of those
who accompany you,
who attend you in every moment,
who continually whisper
this blessing to you.

Hear how they
do not cease
to walk with you,
even when the dark
is deepest.

Hear how they
encompass you always—
breathing this blessing to you,
bearing this blessing to you
still.



Visible Mending

VISIBLE MENDING

During a long season away from painting, as I explored other creative paths, I began to follow a thread in the studio. Literally. I picked up a needle and embroidery floss and began to stitch by hand. I incorporated the stitching with heavy printmaking paper, ashy black watercolor pencils, muslin, and linen. I found the hand stitching well suited to that season: it was slow, it was meditative, it could travel with me when I needed to do some creative hiding.

The stitching reflected and inspired what was happening in other layers of my life. When I took up my needle and thread, I had come through perhaps the rawest spaces of my grief after Gary's death. The stitching offered a way to work with the more subtle layers that remained. It became a focused, intimate practice where I pondered the art of mending and how to make a path from what had fallen apart.

As I have followed the threads, I have savored time spent looking at the work of other textile artists. Some of them clearly have mending on their minds, too, and my imagination has been stoked by how they create anew from what's been damaged. I have found my eye drawn most especially to artists who don't try to cover their tracks but instead let their stitches show. I'm taken by the work of such folks as Celia Pym, whose penchant for public repair has led her to such venues as the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, where she restored garments brought by visitors, and Tom van Deijnen (known as Tom of Holland), who does mending commissions and also volunteers at the Brighton Repair Café in England.

There is a name for this kind of repair; it's called *visible mending*. Visible mending doesn't seek to dismiss the presence of damage or disguise its restoration. Instead, it allows a repair to show itself, taking a defiant delight in salvaging what some might consider ruined. In this way, it gains a sacramental quality. Often defined as *a visible sign of an invisible grace*, a sacrament provides a concrete means to participate in the redemptive work of God that so often seems hidden. Tactile practices of repair give us a window into the mystery of what God is continually doing within us, bringing new life from the wounds—those we can see, as well as those we cannot.

Most of the repairs we are called to make in life are small, incremental, and cumulative. When big transformations happen—in a heart, a relationship, a community, a country—they typically result from these small repairs. Restoration relies on our willingness to engage the slow work of mending over time. It asks us to approach each part of it as a practice: to turn toward what is broken, to imagine what it could become, to discern our role in its healing, and to enter into the rhythms that will support its restoration.

The point of such repair is not to erase every sign of damage; the point, in part, is to show that the damage does not have the final word. What finally emerges from the mending will be both scarred and beautiful. Most of all, it will be whole.

In the work of transformation and healing, do you have places or people to whom you turn for inspiration? What helps you engage in the slow work of mending over time? What (or who) stokes your endurance and feeds your hope?

MENDING BLESSING

O my friend,
take heart.
The work of repair
is aching
in its slowness
and beautiful in
the inches by which
it will arrive.

Do not pray to be patient
but to persist.
Ask for the endurance
that helps us learn
to breathe
in the midst of fear,
to love
in the presence
of sorrow,
to dream
within the rending
of the world that might
be made.



Repair

REPAIR

Kintsugi is an example of visible mending that folks often lift up as an example of how beauty can come from brokenness, and that's a striking example, but some of my favorite images of visible mending are ones where the materials of repair are as humble as what they are repairing. I'm thinking especially of methods such as darning and how artful that can be. I have also been gathering images of other kinds of repairs. Cracked Victorian plates held together by staples. Wooden utensils mended with tin. Things that seem all the more beautiful by the care someone has given to salvaging what might otherwise have been thrown away.

I don't want to be romantic about it, or trite. Damage is damage. It is painful, it can take horrid forms, and the fact that sometimes we are able to bring beauty out of it doesn't excuse the damage or make it acceptable or worth the pain. When some kind of repair can take place—which doesn't mean making it look like it used to—that is a wonder. And if beauty becomes manifest in the repair—that is a wonder too, though not the main goal.

I remember when, sometime after your [Gary's] death, I found myself thinking, *I can't change the fact of my grief, but I can make it beautiful*. Saying that to Maru one night, and hearing her say back, *You don't have to make it beautiful. Just let it be*. And while I think I wasn't wrong to want to bring some beauty to the grief, I think she's right that it's not the main goal and that any beauty that emerges in my grief isn't all dependent on me, on my efforts to wrest some loveliness from the awfulness of your absence.

The fact of not trying to make something look like it used to—that's so much of what draws me to visible mending. Acknowledging that repair isn't about hiding what is broken, damaged, cracked, frayed, torn. It's about working with it. Bringing attention and care. Allowing ourselves to be present to the damage and to ask for the graces we need to be part of how its repair takes place. Not turning away from the brokenness; keeping our eyes open to it and also to the beauty and wholeness that love to slip in and take us by surprise.

What stirs for you as you think about mending and restoration as a process that might enable our scars—literal or figurative—to remain visible, a testimony to the wholeness of the healing that has taken place? How does the work of restoration and repair happen with others as a communal practice, as we seek the repair of the world, not just of our own selves?

BLESSING FOR A BROKEN VESSEL

Do not despair.
You hold the memory
of what it was
to be whole.

It lives deep
in your bones.
It abides
in your heart
that has been torn

and mended
a hundred times.
It persists
in your lungs
that know the mystery
of what it means
to be full,
to be empty,
to be full again.

I am not asking you
to give up your grip
on the shards you clasp
so close to you

but to wonder
what it would be like
for those jagged edges
to meet each other
in some new pattern
that you have never imagined,
that you have never dared
to dream.



Mercy

STUBBORN BLESSING

A Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon."

—Matthew 15:22

Clearly Jesus did not realize who he was dealing with that day. Or did he? Perhaps Jesus knew precisely what he was doing and chose to use this encounter as a teaching moment for his hearers. Or perhaps he was simply in a stubborn mood and found himself facing someone who could match him easily, stubborn for stubborn.

Either way, the story shows us that when it comes to saving what needs to be saved, being merely nice and pliant won't win the day, or the life. Sometimes we need to dig in our heels and do some hollering.

The work of restoration is not for the faint of heart. When we advocate for people and places in need of healing, there will be times that call for endurance, for fierce resolve, for exercising a sacred stubbornness on behalf of what has been broken. What sustains this quality in you? Who inspires you toward the kind of stubbornness that the Canaanite woman showed as she worked to save her daughter's life?

STUBBORN BLESSING

Don't tell me no.
I have seen you
feed the thousands,
seen miracles spill
from your hands
like water, like wine,
seen you with circles
and circles of crowds
pressed around you
and not one soul
turned away.

Don't start with me.

I am saying
you can close the door
but I will keep knocking.
You can go silent
but I will keep shouting.
You can tighten the circle
but I will trace a bigger one
around you,

around the life of my child
who will tell you
no one surpasses a mother
for stubbornness.

I am saying
I know what you
can do with crumbs
and I am claiming mine,
every morsel and scrap
you have up your sleeve.
Unclench your hand,
your heart.
Let the scraps fall
like manna,
like mercy
for the life
of my child,
the life of
the world.

Don't you tell me no.

INTERLUDE

Wise Women Also Came

Wise women also came.
The fire burned
in their wombs
long before they saw
the flaming star
in the sky.
They walked in shadows,
trusting the path
would open
under the light of the moon.

Wise women also came,
seeking no directions,
no permission
from any king.
They came
by their own authority,
their own desire,
their own longing.
They came in quiet,
spreading no rumors,
sparkling no fears
to lead
to innocents' slaughter,
to their sister Rachel's
inconsolable lamentations.

Wise women also came,
and they brought
useful gifts:
water for labor's washing,
fire for warm illumination,
a blanket for swaddling.

Wise women also came,
at least three of them,
holding Mary in the labor,
crying out with her
in the birth pangs,
breathing ancient blessings
into her ear.

Wise women also came,
and they went,
as wise women always do,
home a different way.



Gesture of Grace

IN THE TURNING

You have turned my mourning into dancing.

—Psalm 30:11

It's not that the grief will go away, she said to me. *But you will learn how to weave Gary's memory into your life in a new way.* On a spring day several months after Gary's death, I was talking in my studio with Brenda, hospice chaplain and closest friend for more than half my life. Still reeling from Gary's dying, I could hardly imagine ever being in a more whole place. But when Brenda said those words, I recognized the truth of them.

It took a longer time to live into the truth of those words, to know their reality in my bones. But when I read these words from Psalm 30, they echo in that same place where Brenda's words landed and began, in time, to take hold.

You have turned my mourning into dancing, the psalmist proclaims. I am curious about the tense the psalmist uses here; translated into English, his words are in the present perfect, a tense I could have hardly begun to imagine inhabiting as Brenda and I talked on that springtime day.

In time, I began to sense that what the psalmist presents to us—and what God offers us—is not a set of opposites; it is not mourning *or* dancing, as if we have to choose between them. Rather, it is mourning *and* dancing. As we learn the way of grieving and become present to its rhythms, our hearts become more and more able to hold both the sorrow and joy that are inextricably intertwined. We become freed to dance within the mourning, to dance with the mourning, slowly learning the steps that will bear us into life anew.

The art of repair asks us to hold tensions that can be both painful and wondrous as our hearts develop the capacity to break and mend and become larger in the process, able to contain more than we ever imagined. What helps you hold these tensions? What practices, what people help make it possible for you to work with the places where the tensions intertwine?

BLESSING IN THE TURNING

May you know
the slow mystery
in which mourning
becomes a dance,
turning you toward
the gladness
that wants to meet you
in your grief.

May comfort
come to enfold you,
not to take away
all sorrow

but to infuse it
with tenderness,
with rest,
with every grace
it has.

May you give yourself
to the rhythms
of joy,
even when your steps
are stumbling,
even when you are
most fragile
and faltering.

May you know
the dancing that comes
in the dying,
moving you in time with
the heart that
has held you
always,
even when you
could not hear
its beating,
even when you
could not bear
its love.



Rise Up, Lazarus (Death Has No Power Here)

LEARNING THE LAZARUS BLESSING

He cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"

—John 11:43

I wonder if it gave him pause. I wonder if Lazarus, stirring in his four-day tomb and beginning to feel the graveclothes weighing on his waking skin, had to take a moment to consider. When he heard that cry from beyond the threshold of his tomb; when he awoke to that voice, beloved but already growing strange to ears that had begun to settle into the silence; when that command came and challenged the dead calm of the grave, did Lazarus give a thought to staying put? It cannot have been easy, feeling the pulse of life tickle at the flesh already loosening from his limbs. Was he tempted to simply roll over and turn his face toward the wall so that he could continue his slide into decay?

Nobody goes into the tomb to pull Lazarus out; no one crosses into his realm to haul him to this side of living. Lazarus has to choose whether he will loose himself from the hold of the grave: its hold on him, his hold on it.

Only when Lazarus takes a deep and deciding breath, rises, returns back across the boundary between the living and the dead: only then does Jesus say to the crowd, *Unbind him, and let him go*. Not until Lazarus makes his choice does the unwinding of the shroud begin, and the graveclothes fall away.

On this day, as we keep company with Lazarus and hear the voice of Christ calling to us, what will we choose? What might we need to let go of, to loose ourselves from, so that we can move with freedom into the life to which Christ calls us? Who might need to hear the voice of Christ in us, calling them to new life?

LAZARUS BLESSING

The secret
of this blessing
is that it is written
on the back
of what binds you.

To read
this blessing,
you must take hold
of the end
of what
confines you,
must begin to tug
at the edge
of what wraps
you round.

It may take long
and long
for its length
to fall away,
for the words
of this blessing
to unwind
in folds
about your feet.

By then
you will no longer
need them.

By then this blessing
will have pressed itself
into your waking flesh,
will have passed
into your bones,
will have traveled
every vein

until it comes to rest
inside the chambers
of your heart
that beats to
the rhythm
of benediction

and the cadence
of release.



Finding the Place Where We Can Sing

WHERE WE LEARN TO SING

On the southwest coast of Ireland, there is a town that holds my heart. I visited it briefly with a group of friends during my first sojourn to that country. Through some strange and splendid occasions of synchronicity, I have had the opportunity to return there the past four summers to spend a stretch of time writing. The town's beauty and hospitality have made it a place of remarkable solace and good cheer, a particular gift as I have worked to dream my way into a new life following Gary's death.

If you are familiar with Ireland, you know that its landscape has held tremendous suffering. The town I visit bears witness to this in its Old Cemetery, where there is a Famine Plot containing the remains of thousands who died during the Great Famine in the 19th century.

There is something about Ireland that can stir deep sorrow for me; I suspect it is simply the nature of the country, that its terrain has a way of inviting whatever grief we may carry to come to the surface. I can get sad in Ireland like nowhere else. When I first experienced this, it prompted dismay and a sense of guilt: *I'm in Ireland! How dare I be sad?* And then one day I realized, *Ireland! What a fantastic place to be sad!* Because for all the sorrow that land can evoke, it also knows a vast amount about what to do with it.

I was talking one evening with a friend who lives in the town, and I asked him about this sense that Ireland has a tremendous capacity to absorb grief and to create from it. He nodded vigorously. Poetry, literature, song, art: this country that has held great suffering has also somehow developed an astonishing range and depth of practices that have helped transform its pain. This kind of transformation does not attempt to explain away the trauma or to hide its lingering effects; it does not romanticize it or seek to turn it into something noble. Instead, its long devotion to well-honed creative practices has enabled it to enter into its collective and personal tragedies, to work with them, to clear space within them for something else to come through—something that rises up as celebration, as fierce connection, as joy that, though often complicated and haunted by history, endures even in the midst of ongoing grief.

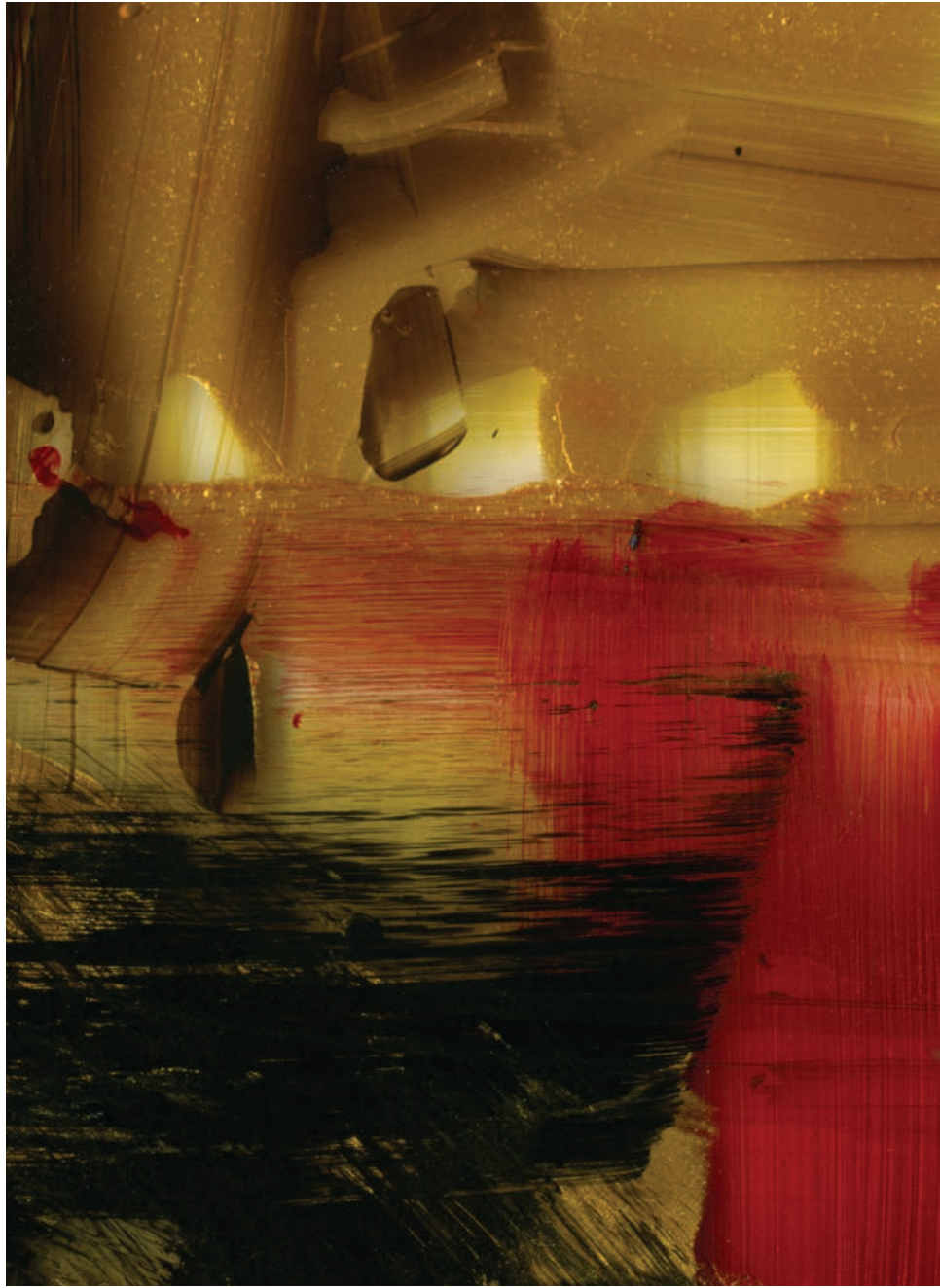
Ireland has been a place that has helped me engage in those practices in my own life, those ways I work on my ability to hold what comes—the sorrow and loss as well as the wonder and gladness that so often inhabit the same space. It has been a place that reminds me that our capacity for joy relies on more than a particular mood or emotion, a disposition over which we do not always have much control. Opening to joy means being willing to let the world enter us, to let it break our hearts, but not to remain overwhelmed by the breaking. It asks that instead of turning away, we find those places where we can engage, can create, can offer what is uniquely ours to offer; those places where we learn to sing amid the brokenness, in celebration of all that goes deeper still.

And for you, is there a place that has welcomed your sorrow and helped you know the joy that is possible within it? Is there somewhere you have seen grace enter into suffering and create anew from it? What does this inspire and invite in your own life?

How Joy Works
A Blessing

You could not stop it
if you tried—
how this blessing
begins to sing
every time it sees
your face,
how it turns itself
in wonder
merely at the mention
of your name.

It is simply
how joy works,
going out to you
when you least expect,
running up to meet you
when you had not thought
to ask.



Gathering the Fragments

GATHERING THE FRAGMENTS

*He told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over,
so that nothing may be lost."*

—John 6:12

It is part of the miracle: how Jesus, with such intention, cares for the fragments following the feast. He sees the abundance that persists, the feast that remains within the fragments. We might think the marvel of the story is that there is enough for everyone. And yet for Jesus, enough does not seem to be enough. There is more: a meal that depends on paying attention to what has been left behind, on turning toward what has been tossed aside.

Call it the persistence of wonder, or the stubbornness of the miraculous: how Christ casts his circle around the fragments, will not loose his hold on what is broken and in pieces. How he gathers them up: a sign of the wholeness he can see, a foretaste of the banquet to come.

As you contemplate the fragments in your life, in the lives of those around you, and in the life of the world, what do you imagine? What do you dream? How might you be called to hold and work with the fragments with others, and dream together of what the brokenness could become?

BLESSING THE FRAGMENTS

Cup your hands together,
and you will see the shape
this blessing wants to take.
Basket, bowl, vessel:
it cannot help but
hold itself open
to welcome
what comes.

This blessing
knows the secret
of the fragments
that find their way
into its keeping,
the wholeness
that may hide
in what has been
left behind,
the persistence of plenty
where there seemed
only lack.

Look into the hollows
of your hands
and ask
what wants to be
gathered there,
what abundance waits
among the scraps
that come to you,
what feast
will offer itself
from the fragments
that remain.



Testimony

WHAT THE LIGHT SHINES THROUGH

The year before Gary died, we received the news that a beloved friend of ours had been diagnosed with a brain tumor. The doctor spoke of Joe's life in terms of months, perhaps weeks. A stained glass artist who devoted his life to finding beautiful ways to capture light, Joe—making his own path as ever—found other ways to measure and mark his remaining days. The threads of community that he tended across the years came to support him and to make it possible for him to be in places he loved. Friends and family enabled him to return, for a time, to his home and studio at the artists' community where he lived, and helped him put on one final, fantastic exhibition and celebration.

Living on the other side of the country, Gary and I missed being present for this, but we were grateful for the words that arrived from mutual friends across the miles, words that told of how Joe entered his dying in much the same way that he entered his living. The tumor impacted his speech and visual recognition skills, and so we found ourselves especially moved by a note from our friend Jennifer after a conversation she'd had with Joe.

Even when he can't control the words that come out he seems, to me, even more himself than ever. He's almost translucent with grace. And I have been so moved by the "random" words that, at times, come instead of the one he's trying for. It's almost as if the words that he has most often expressed come easily; blessing, blest, grace, friends, church, my voice, your voice. . . . He is gentle, brave and mostly concerned with others and how to pass on what's important for him to pass on. I am so moved by his beauty.

Jennifer's words arrived as I was working on a blog reflection on Mark 1:40-45. In the passage, a man with leprosy approaches Jesus and says to him, *If you choose, you can make me clean.* Stretching out his hand and touching him, Jesus says, *I do choose. Be made clean!*

Thinking of Joe as I pondered that passage, I found myself writing about what a mystery it is to me how Jesus chooses, and where, and why. I cannot fathom how he chooses at times to stretch out his hand, and at other times seems to withhold it; how he chooses against the restoration that he offers with such ease in stories such as this one. Why the leper, and not Joe? Why not millions of others across the ages who have lived with illness and pain?

I know, of course, there are few answers to these questions in this lifetime. And I know that it is better to look for the miracles that do come, including the daily wonders of connection in the midst of a world that pushes us toward isolation, the marvels of friendship and community that return to us and gather around us when life breaks us open.

I do not let Christ off the hook for the ways he sometimes chooses. And yet I think still of Joe, speaking the words that came most easily to him. *Blessing. Blest. Grace.* How in the midst of his dying, there was something in him that remained fiercely intact and whole. *Friends. Church.* That knew still how to capture the light. *My voice. Your voice.* That rose up to freely proclaim, to offer testimony in the luminous way he always did.

I wrote a blessing for Joe. Called "What the Light Shines Through," it was read by a friend of ours at his final exhibition and celebration. In the invitation to the gathering, Joe had written, in characteristic style, *Bring food. Bring joy.*

This day. This hour. In each moment given to us, may we bring sustenance. May we bring joy. Whatever illness we bear, whatever wounds we carry, may we be ministers of healing to one another, and may the wholeness that persists within us rise up and shine through, offering testimony in the ways that only we can offer.

WHAT THE LIGHT SHINES THROUGH
A Healing Blessing

Where pain
does not touch you.
Where hurt
does not make its home.
Where despair
does not haunt you.
Where sorrow
does not dwell.

Where disease
does not possess you.
Where death
does not abide.
Where horror
does not hold you.
Where fear
does not raise its head.

Where your wounds
become doorways.
Where your scars
become sacred maps.
Where tears
become pools of gladness.
Where delight
attends your way.

Where every kindness
you have offered
returns to you.
Where each blessing
you have given
makes its way back
to you.
Where every grace
gathers around you.
Where the face of love
mirrors your gaze.

Where you are
what the light
shines through.

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Jan Richardson is an artist, writer, and ordained minister in the United Methodist Church. With a distinctive intertwining of word and image, Jan's work has attracted an international audience drawn to the welcoming and imaginative spaces she creates in her books, online, and in public events. She frequently collaborated with her husband, the singer/songwriter Garrison Doles, until his sudden death in December 2013. Jan's most recent book is *The Cure for Sorrow: A Book of Blessings for Times of Grief*. She makes her home in Florida.

You can find Jan's books, artwork, and more at her blogs and websites:

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