HAMMOCK:

AN EXPLORATION OF FAITH

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ABSTRACT

HAMMOCK: AN EXPLORATION OF FAITH

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Hammock is a collection of personal essays and poems which explore the meaning of faith. In this examination of what faith is and where can it be located, this text—which includes a memoir of my spiritual journey, a collection of my poems, and several of my personal essays—identifies how our ordinary moments can suspend a net of support, a kind of hammock, beneath the center of our lives. We can go inside ourselves and notice all the ways that we are held.

In the opening narrative about my spiritual guides, I describe the ways modern Christian writers, like Richard Rohr and Kathleen Norris, define faith, and I consider the ways these definitions echo the wisdom of many Buddhist teachers, including Thich Nhat Hanh, Jack Kornfield, and Tara Brach. In addition, this work examines the idea of faith through the lens of poetry: the making of poems and the wonder of our earthly existence bring us to an understanding of faith that grounds us in the dirt beneath our feet. My poet guides include Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi, Emily Dickinson, Ada Limón and Mary Oliver.

As the sixth of eight children, raised in an Irish Catholic family, my understanding of faith developed in a rigid environment of sin and repentance. This dissertation explains my own journey from a Christian-centric idea of what faith should and *must* be to a more expansive and mature view of faith. A faith that recognizes the sanctity of our moment-to-moment experience.

The divinity of this moment—whatever might be occurring—is as true and palpable as the holiness of my neighbor's smile.

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to all children and teenagers, pushed away from the power of words, by the magnetism of screens. May the practice of deep reading pull your souls into the sanctity of this world: the one we inhabit right here, right now.

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INTRODUCTION

Little breath, breathe me gently, row me gently,
for I am a river I am learning to cross.

W.S. Merwin

Richard Rohr reminds us that the word "salvation" comes from the Latin word *salus* for healing. And I believe that human beings are on a quest to heal themselves, their families, and the woundedness of this world. This quest assumes a faith in our humanity, our spirits, the goodness of life, itself. We know, in the stillest parts of our hearts, that we are worthy of love and support—of all the awe and possibility life offers. We know that we are spirits tethered to a finite span of time and that we are capable, as well, of cruelty and harm. Yet, we believe that we can be saved: that we will find healing or "salvation," when we slow down, accept our imperfections, and feel our connection to a great spirit of love or what I'll call god.

In the poems and personal essays which follow, I share my inner landscape, the hills and valleys I have travelled in my search to figure out which kinds of belief systems, within and outside of Christianity and Buddhism, are worthy of trust. "Hammock" is my effort to explore an understanding of faith that stretches from the pole of organized religion to the pole of intentional moment-to-moment awareness: a faith which encompasses all the ordinary highs and lows of being a human on this planet. This exploration of faith, and the many demands we place on this idea, will be guided by my spiritual mentors: Richard Rohr, Jack Kornfield, Kathleen Norris, Tara Brach, Alan Watts, and Thich Nhat Hanh. My poet guides include Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi, Mary Oliver, Ada Limón, Maggie Smith and Emily Dickinson.

God is Love

I think any understanding of faith must begin with a close look at one's early life. After all, in our earliest years—when we are obsessed with making sense of our worlds—we are indelibly shaped by the presence or absence of spirituality and/or religion.[1] I grew up in an Irish Catholic family, the sixth child (and third girl) of eight children. My mother ran our large household with rules, worry and a devotion to the Bible. She wanted to be good. She wanted to be blameless. She wanted to follow all the rules of Catholicism. She believed that within the liturgy and the rituals of our faith, she could find refuge and a holy peace. She believed, wholeheartedly, in an all-understanding God, who offered forgiveness and compassion.

My father embodied ease and joy. He whistled as he worked, belted "Blest Be the Lord" and loved to make jokes. He did not pursue God, as much as pull him from his pockets, whenever he needed a lift. He loved his religion; he loved hymns, set prayers—like the grace we shared each night before dinner—and communion. And he was deeply faithful to his idea of an all-loving and benevolent God. A God who did not hurt others. A God who listened to your prayers. With these beliefs breathing inside, my father grew so pained by the exposure of the rampant pedophilia in Catholic parishes, all over the world, that he spent many hours writing letters to the bishops of the Catholic Church in the US. In each letter, he begged the bishops to acknowledge the sexual transgressions of

[1] I think each approach to faith is, at its core, specific to the internal bias and experience of the seeker. Consider the fact that Krista Tippett, famous for interviewing spiritual leaders in her podcast "On Being" (formerly known as "Speaking of Faith") begins each interview with the question, "How would you describe the religious or spiritual background of your childhood?"

the church and to institute a Day of Reconciliation. Start a healing process, he suggested. Ask for forgiveness. But even as my father wrote letter after letter (which received few responses), his faith in a God that was worthy of pure devotion never faltered. For my father, God was as constant as the sun and the moon. And a source of goodness and light.

Every Sunday, our family piled into our Ford Econoline van and drove across town to the marble sanctuary of Immaculate Conception. Once inside, we sat beneath carved angels and sang hymns like "Be Not Afraid." During the masses, I sat and swung my legs and longed to be good. I wanted to be as pure as the picture of the Virgin Mary in blue, over the baptismal font. I wanted to be worthy of the body of Christ, which I was still too young to taste. I closed my eyes and kneeled down like my mother. I tried to feel God in the sanctuary. I tried to get quiet, so I could pray.

My mother's deep faith seemed to seep from her pores. She relied on God, needed God, and needed to please God. She worried about the bill collectors, illness, the violence that was growing in my oldest brother. But she was sure, as well, that the "most important things" were helping those less fortunate: the poor, the elderly, anyone who seemed too alone. My mother had a tremendous gift for listening and holding space for people. And she was generous. Our holiday dinners always included friends from the parish who were without family and in need of connection. My mother cooked large meals and filled paper bags with leftovers for our guests to take home. She invited people over for Sunday dinner, almost every week. I think my mother would have given away her entire self if she thought she could bear it, and God required it. As it was, she gave as

much as she could. (Not too long ago, I learned that she even put her engagement ring, a family heirloom, into the collection basket.)

From my mother, I learned to think of religion as a requirement: The guiding force of any good life. So even though I hated the boredom of Immaculate, I felt I was doing the right thing by being there. And I assumed that inside the church's slow plod through the mass, there was something profoundly important I must learn. I was getting close to the sacred. And I belonged to a God who watched every moment of my days and nights from His perch in the sky. This God could help when I needed forgiveness, comfort, or a chance to go to the movies.

In my earliest years, religion brought the lightness of my father and the security I found in my mother. It provided a structure for living, a way to navigate the poles of good and evil. This polarized way of looking at the human experience sparked a keen sense of judgement within me. If something was not entirely good, I reasoned, it must be bad. If someone did something wrong, like steal or lie or hurt someone else, then that person had to be bad. And once bad, one needed to beg forgiveness, so one could clean one's soul and hope for a fresh start. The idea that I could love myself, that I could be good just as I was, never occurred to me. My behavior seemed to define my person, and in doing so, my entire sense of self. Every day I woke up and tried to earn my goodness, again.

As a child, my feeling of being "bad" or "not enough" was not conscious. I was not aware of how I saw myself. I just understood—without questioning—that I was flawed, sinful, because Christ had died for my sins. [2] And clearly, as a sinner, I had a lot

[2] Decades later, when I was on a silent retreat at Spirit Rock in Woodacre, California, a woman I had never met asked me if I was Irish Catholic, during a small group meeting we had with our meditation

of catching up to do. Always, I found myself feeling like I was doing something wrong. Guilty. Two steps behind what I should have done or said or, even, imagined. I had terrible thoughts about wanting a nicer car, dinner at a restaurant, my own electric train. I yearned for comic books and a television and Vienna Fingers in the pantry. I felt like I should not be wanting anything and trying, rather, to be more generous, more giving and less needy. Always, I should try harder to be good. And I assumed, of course, that everyone felt this way. I believed that feeling like you had to improve—all the time—was part of being human.

When I was young, I did not understand that doubting myself made me paper over my sacred center, even question its existence.

In his books, Father Richard Rohr seeks to shake out the best parts of Catholicism, and in doing so, free the Catholics among us from our notions of unworthiness. In *The Universal Christ* he writes, "After the Western Church separated from the East in the Great Schism of 1054, we gradually lost this profound understanding of how God has been liberating and loving all that is" (4). In fact, says Rohr, the door of faith "closed on the broadest and most beautiful understanding" of an all-loving God after that schism. (4). Rohr argues that Christ is a name for the immense spaciousness of "all true Love" (5). For me, this idea of Christ is revolutionary and startling. For as long as I can remember, my ideas of Christ—of Jesus—even of the Catholic religion, did not make

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teacher. I had just asked him for help because I found myself judging the fact that I kept having the same worry throughout my meditation periods. When the teacher asked me to start counting my judgements and then see —by the sheer number I had—how silly they were, the woman spoke up with anger. "She's Irish Catholic. It's deep in her subconscious. She can't just stop!" It turned out that this woman, ten years my senior, had grown up in Ireland and gone to Catholic school there.

room for love or an all-loving God. Unconditional love was not a concept I could understand as a child. I believed that if I was suffering or striving, I was moving closer to God.

Always, I wondered: Am I being good enough? What would God think?

Fortunately, my best friend Sarah, whom I met when I was three, was an Episcopalian, and she lived two doors down from me. Her father was the Rector of Saint John's Episcopal Church, a small, stone building that sat on the corner of our street and boasted velvet cushions and coffee hours, every Sunday. After singing in the choir, we would race down the steps to the church's basement, grab a square of crumb cake and find ourselves embraced and celebrated by the older members of the parish. I remember Sarah's mom kneeling in front of me and giving me a big hug one morning. "I love you, Lea," she said. Often, I wondered how Sarah had such a different God. At her church, I felt like there was a God of love—a God that was not always making notes on a clipboard about all the ways you had messed up. Sarah's God believed in comfort. Soon, I began to believe her God—this God of love.

In *Universal Christ,* Rohr helps me make sense of my confusion and my attraction to God as a force of love. He says, "God is not an old man on a throne. God is Relationship itself" (28). He goes on to explain that God has an "infinite love" and that that love has "always included all that God created from the very beginning" (28). And if I'm still too hesitant to believe this kind of good news, he goes even further: "What we call the 'soul' of every creature could easily be seen as *the self-knowledge* of God in that creature!" (28). When I read these words, I feel my shoulders relax, my heart soften and

my hypervigilance begin to dissolve. I think back, gratefully, to a small sign Sarah gave me when we were very young. It said, “God is love” in white letters. I kept that in my childhood room on my windowsill and later in the room I moved into during high school. I tried to imprint that message on my psyche.

On Montclair Avenue, where Sarah’s house sat two doors down from mine, I tried to embrace God’s love and all that sweetness in the basement of St. John’s parish. And I learned to love myself a little better and wonder, at times, at my mother’s dark moods and cold silences. Didn’t our faith offer more?

Fortunately, my parents allowed me to indulge in all the heady pleasure of the Episcopal church, every Sunday, as long as I made it to the 12:20 mass at Immaculate afterwards. My parents never tried to block my way to the love in St. John’s. And for that, I am grateful. Without the soft antidote of love I drank often in Sarah’s family and church, I would not have come to know another kind of God. I would not have come to take down my image of God as an old man in the sky, waving a finger at everything I did wrong, and replace it with a spirit of love. Rohr knows this God of love. And he reminds us of this God when he writes, if we keep God in a “retributive frame rather than a restorative frame, we really have no substantial good news” (28-29).

I breathed in the Good News at St. John’s. And this sampling of a restorative God changed my outlook on life and faith in profound ways. No longer did I see religion as a heavy vest, a constant reminder of all I *should* be striving to become. Rather, I began to understand that religion could be a net of pillows beneath your life: something that could cushion your falls and soothe the harder days.

What is "Faith"?

My favorite definition of faith comes from Rohr. To me, his writing feels like the "Big Book" for Recovering Catholics: a clear guide to dismantling our addiction to shame and our obsession with our own unworthiness. In *Universal Christ,* Rohr tells us that faith, at its core, is "*accepting that we are accepted*" (his emphasis) (29). Rohr explains that we cannot fully accept ourselves without accepting "God's radical acceptance of every part of us" (29). This understanding of God's love, of what it means to have faith in a Creator, is radically different from the oxygen spewing into the sanctuaries of many Catholic churches I have visited.

At my father's memorial service, which had over three hundred people, the priest announced that no one should come forward for communion, unless they were practicing Catholics. In other words, we do not "accept" you at our table if you are not one of us. I was horrified as I stood there with my family, at this rude turning away of our friends and neighbors. Inside this dogmatic pronouncement was an othering of everyone in that building who was not Catholic. And it was radically Not Love. The Immaculate of my childhood took the sacrament of sharing a bit of God's body (God's presence) and made it into an offering for only *some* of the many. In the middle of my father's memorial service, we did not meet his all-loving creator; we met a God of conditional love.

Buddhist scholar and teacher Jack Kornfield explains faith as a connection to the sacred. In *After the Ecstasy the Laundry,* he writes, "Connecting to the sacred is perhaps our deepest need and longing" (3). He describes how the Buddha is not found outside oneself in an older, wiser guide but right here, within ourselves. Kornfield urges us to

trust in the many ways that awakening—the pull to wholeness, the pull to being fully alive—calls to us even when we have forgotten this longing. In the stories he shares in *Laundry*, he steps up next to Rohr and offers us a way to see faith as a belief in our own sacredness. He tells us to believe in the "journey home." And this journey is not just our spiritual quest, but a kind of birth right. It is our "mysterious pull to remember" (5). Kornfield writes that in the Hindu religion, the child in the womb sings, "Do not let me forget who I am" (3). Like Rohr, Kornfield urges us to remember that we are from God and of God. We are born not with original sin, but an immutable holiness.

From writers like Jack Kornfield and poet Mary Oliver, I have learned to trust that feeling of holiness, which spikes often in the outside world, when we are moved by a beautiful song or a landscape of vibrant color. Kornfield explains that when we go "to a foreign culture and [experience] the exotic world of new rhythms, fragrances, colors and activity" or when we walk "in the blue-green mountains or [hear] choral music so beautiful it is inspired by gods," we touch our deepest longing for sacredness (5). These kinds of spiritual experiences do not require liturgy or set prayers or even community. They just demand a willingness to be open and aware, a willingness to believe in something beyond our human forms.

In *Evidence: Poems,* Mary Oliver's 19th collection of poems, she shares a poem titled "The Singular and Cheerful Life." In this text, Oliver declares that the "holiest of laws" is to "be alive / until you are not" (71*).* This short instruction, which appears to be so simple and basic, is a reminder to each of us to open to each moment provided. The

poem continues with the juxtaposition of color and form found in a natural mix of weeds and flowers:

> Ragweed
> pale violet bull thistle
> morning glories curling
> through the field corn.
>
> (Oliver, lines 13–16)

Here, Oliver enumerates the sights of weeds and flower, brown, purple, yellow, we so often overlook in our very "singular" lives. Like Kornfield (and painter Frida Kahlo, who urged us to stop and consider the vibrant reds of poppies), Oliver asks us to look here and here and then there. See this weed, that flower, that thistle. And then she ends, in her signature way, by telling us what we need to consider:

> Oh, my dear heart,
> my own dear heart,
> full of hesitations,
> questions, choice of directions,
> look at the world.
> Behold the morning glory,
> the meanest flower, the ragweed, the thistle.
> Look at the grass.
>
> (Oliver, lines 28–35)

My favorite line in the poem is "Look at the grass," which I use as the ending line in my own poem "God's Body," on page 47 of this text. This line is so immediate and so commanding. It reminds me that "God' can be as tangible as a rock or a blade of grass, if it calls to the part of me that wants to awaken and turn to the sacred. In the words of Sufi mystic and poet Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi, who lived in the 13th century, "Grapes want to turn to wine" (qtd in Kornfield 3).

Kornfield urges us to keep Rumi's words at the center of our beings as we move through the dailiness of our lives. Kornfield urges us to find our spiritual homes, to remember that we are each here on a great errand. He writes, "Every day brings its own calls back to the spirit, some small, some large, some surprising, some ordinary" (21). Like Oliver's instructions to "behold" and "look," Kornfield asks us to use our daily moments to "'step out of the bureaucracy of ego' as the Tibetan teacher Chogyam Trungpa counseled" (21). Whether we anticipate this or not, awakening will one day break down our walls and say, "Ready or not, here I am" (20). And when it does, we become more fully alive, in the ways both Oliver and Kornfield are naming.

Beauty and awe—and silence—can create moments of emptiness that Kornfield calls a "Great Void" (71). When we slip into this feeling of openness—or emptiness—we can realize that we are not separate from the trees or the grass or the person standing just beside us, on the corner. We can realize that we are all part of one fabric of existence.

Buddhist teacher and writer Tara Brach describes this in terms of water. She identifies a "Sea of Awareness" in one of her most popular guided meditations ("Sea of Awareness Guided Meditation" 09:45-12:05). In the analogy she sets up, she identifies each being as a drop of water in an ocean of awareness. In this sea, we feel the waves of change and sometimes challenge. The aliveness we experience, when we drop deeper into ourselves and try to sense a wider, vast experience of space, is a feeling of pure "Being." This continuous space—filled with the light of awareness—helps us experience ourselves as part of the "infinite sea" of being, including all the thoughts and sensations that arise within us. We are not separate or finite, but a small part of a great presence.

In my poem "The Waves," on page 61, I tried to capture the feeling—often experienced while meditating—of sinking into an emptiness that floats out in all directions, like a vast sea. Near the end of the poem I write, "Still, the breath bobs inside — / the part of me immersed in you — and you / and all of us in this salty living." Faith is accepting that we belong *in and to* this salty ocean. We are "accepted," as Rohr writes, and recognize that we belong to something that is much larger than ourselves. In fact, our lives are not just about our bad choices, shameful or innocent. Rather, our lives are part of a current of living that rises and falls and eddies and crashes.

Faith, I believe, is our connection to something bigger than ourselves, something as sacred as the sea and as changeable as the weather. This belief—what Kornfield calls an "observation"—helps us see that the usual sense of oneself "as a solid separate being is only an image created in our mind" (74). By dissolving the "I," or separate ego, we remind ourselves to believe, once again, in something that does not begin and end with our individual bodies. Even Emily Dickinson points to this truth in her famous poem, "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" The poem begins, "I'm nobody! Who are you? / Are you nobody, too?" (Dickinson, lines 1-2). Here, Dickinson focuses our attention on the idea of being a "nobody" in connection with other nobodies. In my reading of this, I hear Dickinson asking us to put aside our sense of separateness from others. Rather than pretending I am a "somebody," and in being a somebody, I am a better person than someone else, I need to remember that we are all the same. We are equal beings, all tethered to the life and breath of this world. We are "nobodies" together.

When I was in First Grade, my parents removed all the TV sets we had in our house and sent them off to the "repair shop." At the time, we did not understand that this

shop was a dumpster, somewhere beyond our vision. The removal of television gifted me a love of books. I read everything I could as a child, spending hours in the worlds of England and Narnia. Since we had no appointments with television, my siblings and I were free to roam through as many books as we could collect from the library. Mostly, I loved British literature or books like *Little Women*, which felt like British literature. I loved stories about families and young children and long romps on the moors.

Reading brought me into a world of other beings, who seemed to be just like myself: they struggled with their siblings, regretted their own actions, basked in the comfort of friendships and tried to figure out how to be their own best selves. When I dug into the pages of *Watership Down* or *The Secret Garden*, my feeling of disconnection from what I felt I should be was soothed. The characters who populated these novels were trying to figure who they were, what to do, how to behave. I could see that I was not alone in my journey to belong somewhere. To be good enough. Life was difficult for all young beings.

In college, I fell hard for Emily Dickinson and her secluded world. At one lecture held in the town of Amherst, I heard a writer explain one of her most famous lines, taken from a letter to Mary Bowles, a friend of Dickinson's: "The heart wants what it wants, or else it does not care." (Linscott 288). These words stopped all my thoughts. For the first time, I began to understand that my heart—my voice—was more important than those outside of me. My heart did not care what others said. After that evening, I began immersed myself in Dickinson's biography, her letters and her poems.

Dickinson's compassionate and generous lines prose at times, make me stop and savor each phrase. And her poetry stopped my world as well. In her spare lines, I found

an unflinching gaze that named the brevity of our lives. For example, consider one of her most famous poems, “Because I could not stop for Death:”

> Because I could not stop for Death —
> He kindly stopped for me —
> The Carriage held but just Ourselves —
> And immortality.
>
> We slowly drove — He knew no haste
> And I had put away
> My labor and my leisure too,
> For His Civility —
>
> We passed the School, where Children strove
> At Recess — in the Ring —
> We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain —
> We passed the Setting Sun —
>
> Or rather — He passed Us —
> The Dews drew quivering and Chill —
> For only Gossamer, my Gown —
> My Tippet — only Tulle —
>
> We paused before a House that seemed
> A Swelling of the Ground —
> The Roof was scarcely visible —
> The Cornice — in the Ground —
>
> Since then — ’tis Centuries — and yet
> Feels shorter than the Day
> I first surmised the Horses’ Heads
> Were toward Eternity

Here, Dickinson may be asking us to reconsider what we think of as life, when we imagine Death, personified, stopping and admitting us into a carriage that contains ourselves, his “kindly” presence and “Immortality.” With Death and Immortality, imagine beginning a journey, Dickinson invites. And if we can imagine ourselves inside that carriage, passing the “Setting Sun,” or seeing that that sun had “passed” us, can we

begin to treasure the singularity of our lives, which are temporal and “shorter” than “Eternity”?

Like Oliver, I hear Dickinson urging us to be in this life, now. This one here. Because “Death” is always there, civil and kind and unpredictable.

In “Faith is a fine invention,” Dickinson writes, “Faith is a fine invention / For gentlemen who *See!* / But Microscopes are Prudent / In an Emergency!” (Dickinson, lines 1-4). Dickinson, who kept the Sabbath by “staying home” and adds that she “could not give up all for Christ” was not afraid to think of faith as a man-made “invention” (“Emily Dickinson and the Church”). In this short poem, she points to “Microscopes,” like she is pointing to a reverence for science. Her work seems to belittle the conventions of a church-grown faith and to plant a seed for all poets who espouse nature and awe as the most sacred emblems of faith: Walt Whitman, Robert Frost, Elizabeth Bishop and Mary Oliver.

In a tribute to Emily Dickinson published in “A Poet’s Corner of Responses to Dickinson’s Legacy” on the Dickinson Electronic Archives website, Mary Oliver calls the Amherst poet a “mystery and a miracle” and writes that in “What is Paradise,” we get a real sense of her “as a person”:

> What is — "Paradise" —
> Who live there -—
> Are they "Farmers" —
> Do they "hoe" —
> Do they know that this is "Amherst" —
> And that I— am coming— too —
>
> Do they wear "new shoes"— in "Eden"—
> Is it always pleasant—there—

Won't they scold us —when we're hungry—
Or tell God— how cross we are—

You are sure there's such a person
As a "Father"— in the sky—
So if I get lost— there—ever
Or do what the Nurse calls "die"—
I shan't walk the "Jasper"—barefoot—
Ransomed folks— won't laugh at me—
Maybe "Eden" ain't so lonesome
As New England used to be!

Here, Dickinson questions the Christian theological image of a "Father" in the sky. Like her poem which highlights a "Microscope," she pokes at the big bear of religion, which dictated the morals and behaviors of so much of her 19th century New England society. I believe that Oliver chooses to highlight this poem, one of Dickinson's early ones from 1861 because she, too, does not buy into the idea of a "Father — in the sky." Like Oliver, Dickinson demands that we question these *man*-made understandings of faith and soak in the divinity of nature. In her poem, "Nature is What We See," she gives nature the kind of spiritual power that she seems to feel was misplaced in that Father "in the sky":

"Nature" is what we see—
The Hill—the Afternoon—
Squirrel—Eclipse—the Bumble bee—
Nay—Nature is Heaven—
Nature is what we hear—
The Bobolink—the Sea—
Thunder—the Cricket—
Nay—Nature is Harmony—
Nature is what we know—
Yet have no art to say—
So impotent Our Wisdom is
To her Simplicity.

My favorite lines in this poem are the last two: "So impotent Our Wisdom is / To her Simplicity." Dickinson uses the masculine image of powerlessness (impotence) to

describe mankind's "Wisdom." And Nature? Nature stands up with power due to "her" (I love the emphasis on the feminine) "Simplicity." It feels as if Dickinson is telling her readers that Nature is really everything— "Heaven," and what we "see" and "hear" and "know," but cannot "say," due to our lack of understanding. Like the God her neighbors sought within the churches in Amherst, "Nature" is mysterious, mystical and way beyond any human understanding we can have during our earthly lives. It is the proof of God and the form of God.

Silence

In my early adulthood, I carried a torch for God — the father image I had constructed in my childhood — as I noticed myself craving more and more silence and contemplation. In my late twenties, I joined a Centering Prayer group in a small Episcopal parish in the Bay Area in California. I was on my way to getting married, on my way to my work-life in teaching and on my way, I knew, to having children. But inside of me, I felt a deep restlessness. I wanted to know myself and feel, more directly, the love of God. The love that I had soaked up and savored all those Sunday mornings at St. John's.

Centering Prayer taught me meditation and to trust the deepest floors of my own being. The more I practiced the more I began to sense that all the wisdom I desired was already within me. I did not need to consider the man Jesus—made flesh— or the father, in heaven. What I began to believe was that a force of love, which connected the hill and the afternoon and the rooftops and my lover's hair, all were a piece of that force which

we have agreed to name "God." But that force, I came to understand, had nothing to do with an outsized man in heaven, who was ticking a box that included church attendance, confession and even tithing. Indeed, I began to realize that if "God" is simply a force of love, it is as vibrant within me, at my quietest, as it is around me in the trees and the flowers and the grass. Like Oliver and Dickinson, I began to see the sacred in nature and in all beings—large and small. In "I Happen to Be Standing," Mary Oliver shares a similar sentiment. Near the end of the poem, she writes:

> I wouldn't persuade you from whatever you believe
> or whatever you don't. That's your business.
> But I thought, of the wren's singing, what could this be
> if it isn't a prayer?
> So I just listened, my pen in the air.
>
> *(*Oliver, lines 7-13*)*

In this poem, Oliver invites us to stop and "listen." To hold our pens "in the air" and just hear how the wren sounds. This intentional type of listening—the type in which we suspend everything but our attention to the sound—is what I learned to treasure in my timed silences.

In the circle we created on the second floor of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Burlingame, we sat and trusted in the presence of God within each of us. And when a thought ran through our minds and tried to grab hold of our attention, we silently spoke a sacred word, like "Jesus," and tried to return to emptiness. As the waves of distraction and restlessness moved through me in those sits, I began to taste a deep and comforting acceptance of my own self, just as I was. I began to feel a peace and freedom I had known only in the quietest parts of the Ash Wednesday prayers I had experienced at St. John's. I felt loved and held and perfect, exactly as I was. I felt, for

the very first time, that there really was nothing I had to do or be, everything was just as it should be. I was just as I should be. One retired priest in our circle, who had been the rector of St. Paul's years before, said that he had never felt closer to God than in those silences. This statement both stunned and inspired me: all those years he spent studying and preaching and praying, and all the while, God was most palpable inside his quiet.

In the months and years that followed, I practiced Centering Prayer more and more. I read books by one of its modern pioneers Father John Keating and used it often to calm my intense feelings of anxiety and sadness. As I moved into parenthood, and the challenge of raising a child with emotional dysregulation consumed me, I leaned back into my silence for support, again and again. In the waiting room of doctor's offices, I closed my eyes and let go of my thoughts. As I waited in the car, outside of the preschool, I set a timer and slipped into quiet. The comfort and acceptance the silence brought me, began to shift the way I understood religion. Why does there have to be an altar and a cross? I often wondered. Why so much talking?

Mindfulness and Buddhism

I left California five years after finding Centering Prayer and continued practicing at Grace Episcopal Church in Madison, New Jersey. There I started a Centering Prayer group and helped lead or organize some kind of meditation group for the next 12 years. In 2012, my desire for more silence and more training in contemplation prompted me to take a Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)

class, which was first put together by Jon Kabat Zinn[3]. After that, I enrolled in a two-year training program with Mindful Schools and did a great deal of reading and exploration of basic mindfulness, neuroscience and Buddhist principles. My journey into Buddhism and mindfulness prompted me to leave the Episcopal church and begin attending a Unitarian Universalist community, which offered meditation as part of its service. In the past 12 years of studying mindfulness and Buddhism, I have been inspired by many Buddhist leaders and writers. Again and again, I return to Kornfield and Brach.

Jack Kornfield writes that spiritual life is messy and difficult and that in order for it to be truly "authentic," it needs to be fulfilled here and now "in the place where we live" (22). In other words, spirituality is not something out there-—either in the sky or in the mountains of India—but it is best found inside our own hearts and beings. When we are knocking on the door of the spirit, of God, or truth, the best place to be is inside our own feet, in our own lives, sifting through our own mail.

In my title poem "Hammock," on page 43, I juxtapose an imaginary world of living as a monastic with the world I inhabit in real life, in my home in Madison, New Jersey. The poem is a reckoning of the world I like to believe is pure and connected to the best part of my self, with the world that includes the dirty dishes and the mounds of distraction that come with being a mother and a wife. Where does one put her faith? In this poem, I ask if "desire" is something I can fold "like a shopping list" and put

[3] Jon Kabat Zinn is considered the "pioneer" of the western mindfulness movement. A Professor of Medicine Emeritus at the UMass Medical School in Boston, he founded the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Program (MBSR) Clinic in 1979, at the UMass Memorial Medical Center in Worcester, Massachusetts.

away? Is it something I can hide from myself, so I can be more focused and attentive to the simple rituals of pulling lettuce and sweeping floors?

As the poem continues, I explain that I want my spirit to stretch "taut like a hammock," so it can catch me — all the messy parts of my desire and insecurity and grief — and hold me afloat above the messy earth. I want to be able to lift something within me, like Oliver lifts her pen or Dickinson reaches for paradise, so that I will not get mired in my own distraction and fall into the depths of suffering. I want a "spirit" or a faith that can hold all of the pain of being human. And that, I believe, is a universal want.

Jack Kornfield describes the journey of awakening as the journey of trying to get back home. This seemingly circular quest for belonging fits many of the images that remain emblematic of a spiritual quest: the labyrinth, the enso[4], the mandala. These Buddhist images create a different kind of experience for the viewer than the one most found in Christian churches: the cross. Indeed, in the Russian initiation tale about Baba Yaga, which Kornfield recounts in *Laundry*, the spiritual quest is set in a deep forest. When people come to find Baba Yaga, they are cooked by the hag, when they do not bravely admit their longings. The first seeker, a young man, tells Baba Yaga that he is "sent by his father." But Baba Yaga does not approve of this answer and promptly throws him into her big pot. The second seeker, a young woman, tells Baba Yaga that she is "on [her] own errand." But this answer, too, does not seem to be right, and she is then thrown into Yaga's pot. Only when the third seeker, another

[4] An enso, is a circle that is hand-drawn with a thick brush, and it expresses the Zen mind, a mind uninhibited.

young woman, admits that she is there because of herself and "because of others" and because of "something I have forgotten" does Baba Yaga take her in. The key here is that she acknowledges that she, at one point, knew something and is on a quest to remember it. So, she arrives on a quest for herself, and to help others, but most importantly, she seeks out Baba Yaga because she knows that *deep within her there is a holiness and sanctity that has gotten lost*.

As Kornfield explains, the spiritual journey, like the path into the dangerous woods that surround Baba Yaga's hut, is a journey that calls us to return to the deepest parts of ourselves. It's often described as a kind of coming home. Once there, we touch freedom and comfort and an acceptance of ourselves, just as we are. Kornfield, like Dickinson and Oliver, reminds us that something in us awakens, when we get pulled out of our ordinary way of seeing. And this pull, this awakening, does not require a mysterious journey to a wise guru. According to Kornfield, "We can go to India or Jerusalem — and some of the most magical stories of these masters might have us believe that this is the way a spiritual life *must begin* (my emphasis). But it also begins in a moment of gardening, in the simple act of returning home after a voyage and seeing it fresh" (22). The two reminders I keep from Kornfield, in these words, are that we just need to want to come home, and to be willing to see our lives in a "fresh" way. One of the women Kornfield interviews for his book describes a journey which began with a lot of corporate success, but was followed by the loss of her two closest friends and her mother. She says, "Wrestling with the persistent devil of emptiness directly for the first time was like coming home. I would have never thought it possible, but now I feel most myself when sitting in silence, listening" (13).

Suffering is the gateway, for many, into the spiritual journey. It arrives looking as ordinary as a cattle gate at the foot of a mountain, and then swings open to invite us into a place that is unfamiliar and, often, scary. We encounter addiction, trauma, disconnection, loss, violence, poverty—suffering has many, many faces. And within the murky darkness of it, we long for some kind of sustenance. We long to figure out something about ourselves or about being human, in a persistent and gnawing way. Rumi writes, "Honor this longing. Those that make you return, for whatever reason, to the spirit, be grateful to them. Worry about the others, who give you delicious comfort that keeps you from prayer" (qtd. by Kornfield 5).

Kathleen Norris, author of *The Cloister Walk* and *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* puts Rumi's words into her own language. In her essay, "The Grace of Aridity and Other Comedies," first published in *Portland Magazine,* she writes, "If grace is so wonderful why do we have such difficulty recognizing and accepting it? Maybe it's because grace is not gentle or made-to-order. It often comes disguised as loss, or failure, or unwelcome change" (Doyle 24). Norris describes our suffering as "grace" in this essay. She defines it as "love and protection bestowed freely" on people (24). And this "free" gift is something, she argues, we might not appreciate or even cherish if it arrived easily. Would we not see it, instead, as something of our own doing? Something we caused through our hard work or talent or incredible insight? Norris says that for "grace to be grace" it must take us out of ourselves into places we might never imagine going and give us things "we did not imagine we needed" (25). Like Rumi, Norris believes that we must remember to honor

these life moments, which we would never choose, but which can bring unimaginable gifts.[5]

Norris expands on this idea in "Answered Prayer," a poem she published in *The Year of Common Things,* an early chapbook. The poem opens with the image of a woman bringing soup and bread to her neighbor, who is newly facing the darkness of divorce. The poem ends with the following lines:

> We can't ask
> for what we know we want:
> we have to ask to be led
> someplace we never dreamed of going,
> a place we don't want to be.
>
> We'll find ourselves there
> one morning,
> opened like leaves,
> and it will be all right.
>
> (Norris, lines 20–28)

When I read these lines, I felt my whole spirit exhaling. Yes, we are led to places "we don't want to be." But, says Norris, we will find ourselves "one morning, / opened like leaves." Norris' comparison of the human spirit to a closed leaf helps us feel the persistent hope in this poem. Pushed into places we do not want to be, Norris encourages us to trust the "going." And as our spirits move through the resistance of not wanting, our eyesight grows stronger. And then, Norris goes on to say, "It will be all right." Here, I take her "all right" to mean that we will be "all right," like the neighbor in the midst of divorce. We will find ourselves able to hold the pain and the suffering *and* the light of a

[5] Vinny Ferraro, one of my favorite Buddhist teachers, whom I met through Mindful Schools, says in a 10% Happier podcast, "The real teachings are not placed in the heart. They're placed *on the heart*. So when the heart breaks, they enter." (From the Talmud.)

new beginning. And by holding these two sides of pain, we will remember that we can, indeed, trust that all we need is within.

In her essay "Faith is a Verb," Norris writes, "At its root, 'faith' means to trust" (Norris 5). And she goes on to explain that our friends and loved ones can betray us, but trusting in God—or, I will amend, in something larger than ourselves—is a "blessing" bestowed on us. Although Norris points to 2 Timothy to explain this blessing, I believe we do not need Biblical evidence to see our faith in the nature in front of us or in the "someplace we never dreamed of going." We need, only, to get quiet enough to remember the wisdom and goodness seeded in our very first becoming.

In Rumi's poem "The Guest House," the centers of our souls or "guest houses" are open doors to the wide range of feelings and experiences—heavy and light—we ride each day. This is Coleman Barks' translation of the poem:

> This being human is a guest house.
> Every morning a new arrival.
>
> A joy, a depression, a meanness,
> some momentary awareness comes
> as an unexpected visitor.
>
> Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
> who violently sweep your house
> empty of its furniture,
> still, treat each guest honorably.
> He may be clearing you out
> for some new delight.
>
> The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
> meet them at the door laughing,
> and invite them in.

> Be grateful for whoever comes,
> because each has been sent
> as a guide from beyond.
>
> (Barks 12)

I sometimes wonder what life could feel like if I truly envisioned all the shame and "malice" and violence of life, as packages sent from a "guide from beyond." Would I feel more of the surrender and release that comes with pure acceptance? Would I learn how to be honorable, even in my most challenging moments? I am reading and taking in Rumi's words, quite literally, because I believe his tone is serious. What if we did greet "each guest," inside our beings, with respect and welcome?

Furthermore, who is this "guide" from beyond? I believe it is our deepest wisdom, what we knew before we were born, what we return to in the silence and stillness in meditation. The nondoing of meditation, and the way I began to finally trust myself inside silence, points me to a new understanding of "faith:" *it is the trust I place in the sanctity of my own human experience.* Rather than looking outward at the picture of Christ on the cross or the holy words in the Bible, I can feel my connectedness to a greater presence—one that connects all living things—the more I go inward and surrender to just this moment. This presence—or what I imagine to be a force of love—is always thrumming inside my fingers and pulsing within my blood.

My most recent experience of feeling this tie to everything in this life, so much so that I began to feel the borders of my own self dissolve, took place on a retreat in the Summer of 2024 at Spirit Rock meditation center in Woodside, California. After sitting and walking in silent meditation for several days, I sat in the meditation hall

one night, listening to Eugene Cash give a dharma talk on Right Effort.[6] In this talk, he told us to relax with our effort and to be wary of judging ourselves. He said our self judgements were not helpful and "not true." Then, he slowed down and spoke very deliberately: "You are already good," he said. "Do you get that?" he asked. "Each one of you is good." Inside the silence of my sit, as I listened to his words, I could still feel a part of me tighten and want to resist. Could this be true? I wondered. Could I be good? The conditioning from my childhood, the unspoken doctrine that I had to work and work to try and remove the stain of sin inside my being, still persists. Still needs to be seen and acknowledged. During that sit with Cash, I waved at the small child inside me, clinging to the desire to strive. I offered her a hug and some kindness and a chance to soften into the knowledge that she is OK. You're good, I told her. You don't have to try anymore.

Cash's words help me stop seeing myself as a separate entity and start to experience my being as one part of a larger force—connected, if you will, not just to the people in the room, but to the air and darkness all around me. That night, in the darkness of the meditation hall, I imagined the stars above our mountain, the coyotes wandering the trails behind us (which scared me) and the dry golden grass that spread as far as I could see. I was a part of it—within it—no longer a separate self. This feeling of expansiveness helps me remember that I am not one person on this planet, I am part of life—all of life. And when I die, I will return to that expansiveness. I will in some way return to the dry grass and the stars and the skin cells of the coyotes.

[6] Dharma talks are public lectures on one aspect of Buddhism given by a Buddhist teacher.

In Cash's talk, he described the effortlessness of an eagle, just gliding, floating on the air. And he returned to an earlier part of his talk, when he said that to awaken is a way of becoming intimate with all things. He said, "To awaken with all things is to drop off body and mind and … relax our attachment to who other people are—body and mind—… no trace of awakening remains. And this no trace continues endlessly" (Cash).

The idea of becoming intimate with all things—or relaxing the idea of the self, enough to connect with all things, is an idea that originated with the 13th century Zen Master, Eihie Dōgen. He said, "To study the Buddha way is to study the self; to study the self is to forget the self; to forget the self is to awaken or become intimate with all things" (Tanahashi 23). Dōgen lived in 13th Century Japan and studied Buddhism in China before returning to Tokyo. He founded the Soto School of Zen Buddhism and promoted the practice of sitting meditation (zazen), which has become so popular today.

Kathleen Norris, like Cash and Dōgen, asks her readers to consider the same idea, from the perspective of Christianity. She opens "The Grace of Aridity and Other Comedies" with the words, "It's all about water and grace." Then she goes on to write,

> Our planet is mostly water, as are we: one fact of nature that astonished and delighted me when I first encountered it as a child, and which I still treasure as evidence of the essential unity of all things, is that human blood, chemically speaking, is nearly indistinguishable from sea water. While we live and breathe, we are literally at one with the ocean, and when we die, our bodies become earth.
>
> (Zaleski 186*)*)

Norris joins Dōgen and Cash, when she writes about the "essential unity of all things" and that our bodies become "earth." And I find this resonance, this "unity" with

Buddhism, impactful and affirming.

In addition, Buddhism encourages us to look within our own beings, so that we can, paradoxically, feel our complete connection and intimacy with everything in this world. When we return to the stillness and goodness within ourselves, by dropping out of our thoughts and into our own breath, we remember not only that we are all connected, but we are all sacred and divine. That we only have to come home to our own beings to connect with the most holy part of this human life.

One of the most meaningful practices I have learned in my study of Buddhism comes from Tara Brach. Known for her book *Radical Acceptance*, Brach encourages each of us to practice a series of steps she has popularized called RAIN. RAIN stands for Recognize, Allow, Investigate and Nurture. And each step in this practice is startling and impactful. I can still remember being perched on the edge of the driveway at the Pingry School in Basking Ridge, New Jersey, in the summer of 2016, after I had just taken my daughter, Hope, to a theatre summer camp. As I sat waiting for a break in traffic, I heard Brach describe the "A" in RAIN on her popular podcast *Tara Brach*. "What if you could just "allow" whatever is there to be there?" she asked. "Just allow it" (Brach 13:00-14:10). "Allow" suddenly felt like a truly radical idea to me. Could I "allow" my anger to just be right there as anger? Neither good nor bad. Just there. Anger. I put my hand on my heart and tried to just allow the anger I was feeling on that day. Admittedly, I don't remember why I was angry. But that seems so unimportant now. What shifted for me on that driveway was the idea that I could have these dark thoughts—even the "shame" (those guests that Rumi wrote about)—and

not judge them in one way or another. I could just allow them to be. There I was, on the edge of turning onto a road, and within me I could feel the unpleasant thoughts and feelings that shot up unbidden. As Cash explained to us, in his dharma talk that night at Spirit Rock, thoughts come and go without our requests. They arise and disappear. It's our attachment to these thoughts that creates harm and suffering.

Brach tells us to *allow* and even accept the thoughts that are painful or loaded. See them, invite them in, as Rumi encouraged. And identify where they live in our bodies. Are they in the tightness in our chests? The narrow throbbing in our throats? Brach likes to quip, "The issues are in our tissues." We physically hold emotion in our bodies. And when we tune into their presence—and where we feel them, physically—we can begin to soften their tightness. We can relax their holds on our chests, and in doing so, soften the way these thoughts strangle our minds. Also, we can begin to see them and make space for them. Open ourselves a bit to their presence rather than deny their existence. Like Rumi, we can "invite them in."

What Brach is suggesting with her RAIN practice and Rumi intimates in "The Guest House" is the idea that everything can be looked at with wonder. What if faith is about having a stake in the ground of curiosity and acceptance? What if faith is remaining open to the possibility that what shows up inside our hearts and minds—and on the streets outside our windows—are "guides from beyond"?

Mary Oliver echoes these Buddhist sentiments in her poem on death. In the beginning of "When Death Comes," she writes, "When death comes / like the hungry bear in autumn;" and then goes on to explain how she wants to greet death:

> I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering
> what it's going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

> And therefore I look upon everything
> as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,
> and I look up time as no more than an idea,
> and I consider eternity as another possibility,
>
> and I think of each life as a flower, as common
> as a field daisy, and as singular,
>
> and each name a comfortable music in the mouth,
> tending, as all music does, toward silence,
>
> and each body a lion of courage, and something
> precious to the earth . . .
>
> (Oliver, lines 9-20)

Like Brach, Oliver asks us to greet each new experience—even death—with "curiosity" and marvel "what it's going to be like." These two teachers are urging us to return to our child-like eyes of wonder and not only see what is before us, but approach it as something "singular" that deserves acceptance.

British philosopher and writer Alan Watts, writing in 1951 in *The Wisdom of Insecurity: A Message for an Age of Anxiety,* argues that the root of our human anxiety and frustration is our focus on the future, which is more or less an abstraction. He says:

> If to enjoy even an enjoyable present we must have the assurance of a happy future, we are "crying for the moon." We have no such assurance. The best predictions are still matters of probability rather than certainty, and to the best of our knowledge every one of us is going to suffer and die. If, then, we cannot live happily without an assured future, we are certainly not adapted to living in a finite world where, despite the best plans, accidents will happen, and where death comes at the end.
>
> (35)

Watts is identifying the Buddhist idea of impermanence or *anicca*. This underscores

Oliver's concept of time in "When Death Comes" as "an idea."

Gisela Ullyat explains the Buddhist idea of *anicca* in Oliver's work in her dissertation, "'Bride of Amazement': A Buddhist Perspective on Mary Oliver's Poetry." In Oliver's poems "Poppies" and "Now are the Rough Things Smooth," Ullyat argues, Oliver expresses her belief in impermanence (Ullyat 20). For example, in "Poppies," Oliver writes,

> There isn't a place
> in this world that doesn't
>
> sooner or later drown
> in the indigos of darkness
>
> (Oliver, lines 7-10)

Ullyat's argument is that the image of death or "darkness" is grounded in the "indigos" or dark saturation of "darkness" in these lines. And I would extend her thinking here to add that Oliver is highlighting the inevitability of death and its darkness with her words "sooner or later." Indeed, she is asking us to consider this moment — this one, right now — because we do not know when we will have our last moment. Oliver highlights this same idea in lines 5 and 6 of "Now are the Rough Things Smooth": "And / therefore why pray to permanence, why not pray to impermanence, to change?" (What Do We Know 44). Oliver's questions, which directly accost the reader, demand that we consider those things that we are most uncomfortable considering. Like Watts, she is trying to take us by the collar and remind us that nothing is certain. Most certainly, not ease or happiness. So why not step through each door with curiosity and wonder? Why not put our faith on the ground that is right here, beneath us, right now? Even if it is rocky and painful? Even if it feels like one of Rumi's "unwelcome" experiences?

Oliver makes the idea of impermanence—of facing change and death—a sacred practice. As she writes in "When Death Comes," each body is a "lion of courage." We cannot face the suffering in our lives without courage; and we need courage to accept that "Death" is coming for each of us, at a time we cannot know.

Suffering

In *The Wisdom of Insecurity,* Alan Watts says that the human desire to make sense out of "the seeming chaos of experience" is childish. He states that human beings want their lives to have meaning and that the only way to do this is to put our faith in an eternal order and an eternal life. But life does not fit into neat and permanent packages, he explains. According to Watts, trying to "make sense" out of the chaos of everyday living is like trying to package water in a parcel of paper and send it off in the mail.

Watts wrote *The Wisdom of Insecurity* in 1951 shortly after losing his vocation (as an Episcopal priest) and his marriage to divorce. For decades, he had been fascinated by Zen Buddhism and had tried to blend the mystic traditions of the East and West together. Watts' premise, in his little book on insecurity, is that we cannot put our faith into something beyond this earthly life—an eternal order that we will come to experience later. Instead, he argues that we must accept everything that is before us, right here, right now. He points to the importance of our present-moment living and what we experience in each of our days on this planet, in this earthly life. He states:

> If happiness always depends on something expected in the future, we are chasing a will-o'-the-wisp that ever eludes our grasp, until the future, and

ourselves, vanish into an abyss of death.

(15)

For Watts, chasing an unknown future is foolish. And his argument is that in light of scientific thought, which claims that there is no evidence of a God or an eternal order or a life after death, we need to be more pragmatic and act wisely, when we choose what to imbue with our faith. But, he continues, that does not mean we have to just take life as it is and fall into despair. Rather, we can open ourselves to "another way," which requires only a "correction of mind" (23).

Watts exhorts his readers to consider the differences between belief and faith. Belief, he argues, is "the insistence that the truth is what one would 'lief' or wish it to be" (24). In other words, the truth, for us, becomes what we "wish" the truth would be. If I say five Hail Mary's, I can be forgiven. I can be closer to God, and then, I can go to heaven.

But faith, says Watts, faith is something much more substantial. Faith is "an unreserved opening of the mind to the truth, whatever it may turn out to be" (24). While Rohr argues that faith is *accepting that we are accepted*, Watts is suggesting something a little different. For Watts, who had a Buddhist perspective, faith is accepting the truth—*whatever it may turn out to be*. In essence, faith is a willingness to surrender to whatever shows up. Right now. Watts extends his thinking with this statement, "Belief clings, but faith lets go."

Recently, I had intense pain in my knee after hiking and went to the Emergency Room. The doctor found a blood clot in my leg. While this is an uncomfortable reality and requires months of being on a blood thinner and investigations into the health of my

circulatory system, it is the truth of my condition. And rather than praying to God that this will go away, I can take Watts' advice and open to the truth in front of me. I can accept what is right now. And this acceptance—in and of itself—helps take me to Rohr's view of faith. By accepting what is and not berating myself for having this health condition I am, in essence, *accepting that I am accepted, just as I am*. And, I would argue, most importantly, I am accepting myself just as I am.

Like Rohr's definition of faith, Watts' explanation of faith is refreshing and eye-opening. Emily Dickinson once wrote that she could tell something was true poetry if she felt "physically as if the top of [her] head were taken off" (Wolff 342). This is how I feel when I read Watts' definition of faith. Faith is opening to what is real—whether I like it or not—and then accepting that reality.

Watts' definition of faith supports the main tenets of Buddhism. The Buddha's first of the Four Noble Truths is that life is full of suffering (dukkha). And that is undeniably true. According to Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, peace activist and author,

> Dukkha, or the first noble truth, is translated as ill-being or suffering. Buddhism starts with recognizing the presence of ill-being. We have to accept the fact that ill-being is there, suffering is there. We should not try to run away from the truth. There is suffering in me, there is suffering in you, there is suffering in the world. We have to affirm the truth."
>
> (Hanh)

For Hanh, by accepting our truth, we accept this moment, and by extension, our very selves. Just as we are.

Watts, who undoubtedly was influenced by Hanh's writing and activism, echoes Hanh's idea of accepting the idea of suffering and "affirming" the existence of this as "truth." He says that we "cannot understand life and its mysteries as long as [we] try and

grasp it" (24). We must, in fact, accept that the truth of what is happening and changing in the present moment is the only thing we can really believe in. We get sick. We lose people we love. Childhood, for better or for worse, comes to an end. Change moves like a river.

Indeed, Watts argues, every living thing is constantly in motion. As humans, our blood circulates, our thoughts come and go and our bodies age, every day. All we can put our trust in, is this very moment.

Watts tells us that "poets are so often at their best when speaking of change 'of the transitoriness of human life'" (40). Watts believes that poets are the people who truly see the beauty and wisdom in the movement of life and the ever-changing nature of reality. Poets name this movement, as Oliver and Dickinson so often did. They celebrate the seeding and decay of life. Unlike religion, which tries to make sense out of life by "fixation," or what Watts calls dogma, poetry turns something that would otherwise be "only statuesque and architectural into music" (41).

Words

In the poems and personal essays that follow this introduction, I seek to share the beauty of our individual beings—and our shared humanity—by exploring the different ways our experiences can challenge and shake us—and bring us to joy, awe, and acceptance. Like Oliver, we can see each step out into nature as a step into the throbbing pulse of holy experience. And like Hanh, Brach and Kornfield, we can find a certain

peace and truth in every moment, if we accept and allow what is happening within and around us.

Writing slows me down and open my eyes to the connectedness of my human experience with others. It reminds me to inhabit one breath, one movement, at a time. But most of all, this kind of intentional and reflective creativity sparks wonder and awe. It stops me from the constant forward-motion of making a life and asks me to just *be* in my life. And whether my writing is spare—in the forms of verse—or more loose, in the forms of prose or personal essay, I find deliberate writing essential to my practice of returning to my center, my "home."

Ada Limón, our current poet laureate, helps me think beyond being right here, right now. She asks us to consider, more intentionally, *where* we are. In the collection she edited *You are Here: Poetry in the Natural World,* she brings together fifty previously unpublished poems, from many of our nation's accomplished poets, to interrogate our understandings of "nature" and "poetry" and the ways in which they are in constant conversation. In this collection, Carrie Fountain writes eloquently of our belonging to this earth in her poem "You Belong to the World":

> as do your children, as does your husband.
> It's strange even now to understand that
> you are a mother and a wife, that these gifts
> were given to you and that you received them,
> fond as you've always been of declining
> invitations. You belong to the world. The hands
> that put a peach tree into the earth exactly
> where the last one died in the freeze belong
> to the world and will someday feed it again,
> differently, your body will become food again
>
> (Fountain, lines 1- 10)

These beginning lines of Fountain's poem highlight the connectedness of all of us to the "earth" and the food that your "body" and my "body" will "become." Here, in these spare lines, I understand Rohr's idea of *accepting that we are accepted* and Kornfield's reminder that we want to become what we have always been. Poet Carrie Fountain asks us to remember that we belong, and by doing so, we can put our faith into our relatively short time on this earth.

For Ada Limón, poetry is as visceral as breathing. In an interview with the Buddhist publication *Tricycle*, she says, "One of the biggest reasons I love poetry is that it brings you into the present moment. There's breath built into the page with line breaks, caesuras, and stanza breaks, and that breath is teaching you to slow down. All of that blank space around the poem is a way of silencing everything else before you enter it" (Shaheen 18). Indeed, we can feel the space, the breath, the pause in her work. In her poem "Dead Stars," she writes,

> But mostly we're forgetting we're dead stars too, my mouth is full
> of dust and I wish to reclaim the rising—
>
> to lean in the spotlight of streetlight with you, toward
> what's larger within us, toward how we were born.
>
> Look, we are not unspectacular things.
> We've come this far, survived this much.
>
> (Limón, lines 13-18)

I love the image Limón presents here of leaning "in the spotlight of streetlight" toward what's "larger within us, toward how we were born." Limón, a meditator and student of Buddhism, leans into the idea of remembering our "home" and all that we are and have been before we were "born." Like Kornfield, she calls us to remember that we are "not"

"unspectacular," but "stars" filled with light and possibility. These lines slow everything down and create a space in our minds to see how the ordinary act of stepping outside—even to bring out the garbage—can be an opening to the cosmos we carry within.

Limón, like Dickinson and Oliver, urges us to take an unflinching look at the future of our lives, our deaths. She says, "So often you just forget that you're living, and in doing so you forget that you're dying, and you forget to be present altogether. I always think that one of the easiest ways to remember to love the world is to remember that you have to leave it at some point. That's been a really important remembering for me to do on a regular basis" (Shaheen 18). In nature, as in our poems, we can notice the beginning and ending of our moments, the little deaths that help us practice our final journey.

Poet Maggie Smith, in her memoir *You Could Make This Place Beautiful,* underscores Limón's idea of returning home, by asking us to remember that we belong to ourselves. In her examination of a betrayal that upended her marriage and led to divorce, she returns to a line from Emily Dickinson: "I am out with lanterns, looking for myself" (261). Smith uses this line as an epigraph for the memoir and returns to it, again and again, in her story of becoming more herself. She acknowledges that rage took her right out of her own being and dumped her in a place of despair and hopelessness. The suffering, or *dukkha,* that she sinks into eventually reminds her " to crawl back inside" (263). She continues, "I [need] to find *mine*. To be back inside myself, at peace" (263).

Smith's journey from the question of "what is mine?"—which we can read as *who am I now*—is as circuitous as her questions are "burning." She writes that her "omniscient narrator, the one with all the answers, is nowhere to be found" (261). Her

zigzag path helps me feel grounded in my own search for faith—what can I believe in? What *do* I believe in? Like many Americans, who consider themselves "spiritual but not religious," I see Smith as an example of how to go inward to find "peace." To trust that we are "accepted" as Rohr exhorts, but most importantly, to be willing to accept ourselves.

Smith, as one of our most celebrated modern poets, picks up Dickinson's mantle —literally with the use of the "lanterns" line—and figuratively, by stating that she is trying to tell us "the truth," her own truth, just as Dickinson did in her letters and poems (201). As more and more people leave formal religion, to become a "none" or a nonreligious, more and more people are seeking spirituality, or a connection to a larger presence outside formalized religion. Smith offers herself as a mentor. Hey, she seems to say, this is how I did it.

For me, Smith's writing is as clear and arresting as Oliver's. In the poem "Bride," which appears near the end of her memoir, she writes, "I am my own bride / lifting the veil to see / my face. Darling, I say / I have waited for you all of my life" (309). In this extraordinary image, Smith reminds us that we must first go inside—to our very own selves—lift the "veil" of our many masks and recognize that all the love we seek is right there, in our own hearts. In these lines, I understand "faith" as the act of trusting our own being. Smith, after much seeking, has come to find her own Baba Yaga in her personal corner of Ohio. Her quest helps her remember that she knew something before, that she was once "the wine" that Rumi identifies, and that she is divine: a holy being. Smith calls herself "Darling." And she realizes, "Everything [is] possible" (308).

For me, it is this idea of possibility, which Smith shouts out to us, that gives me

the greatest hope. Like many, I have purchased an Emily Dickinson magnet, with the line, “I Dwell in Possibility,” and have kept it on my fridge for several years. It reminds me that possibility is what we have each day we open our eyes and feel our feet on this earth. I may not be able to live inside a Buddhist monastery *and* have a family. I may not be able to shake free of all the guilt I carry, still, for the murder of Jesus, but I can do what Smith asks: I can remember that I have my own truth, that I am my own true love.

This is what Tara Brach asks us to do when she asks us to nurture our souls. It is what Ada Limón wants us to remember when she asks us to lean into the glow of a streetlight. Lean in, our poets exhort us. Lean in to this life *here*. This very one. It is a hammock of grace which rises to catch us, when we least expect we are falling. It is the the tension between what we have been taught and what we have learned, on our own. It is the call back “home” that Dickinson referenced in the last letter she penned, before dying, “Little Cousins, Called Back” (Wolff 534). It is our deepest need and longing.

HAMMOCK

Often, I imagine waking in a monk's cell,
blackness at 4 am.
The bell sounds in my dreams
— begin again.

I step down cold steps,
pull the black cushion from the pile,
sit with crossed legs
and breathe.

Is this the stillness I knew inside my mother's skin,
where I first grew tissue,
muscle, teeth?

And desire?
Can I fold it like a grocery list?
Stuff it deep in a pocket
of the jeans I keep in the bottom drawer
near the bed?

The monastery stands in smoky fog,
tall eucalyptus along its road,
acres from the coast.

And me?

I repeat my days — one after the other—
in this Plan B —
a life etched
deep in my bones.

I eat rice, sweep floors,
pull lettuce
from soil.

This is the world I first found
in the pages of Merton.

I want a spirit that stretches like a hammock,
taut beneath this life —
this one, here —
that hums through my fingers
as I scrape egg from plate, rinse glasses,
scrub our porcelain sink —
the one still breathing over
the counter and warm coffee.

Here — on the corner of Greenwood,
next to the roses—
where the waves of cars rise and fall;
where the policeman perches, in his black SUV,
ready to flash and ticket, I bless
the return of distraction
and promise
to slow down.

Here — in this life —
I clean my way
into silence.

I stack plates,
rest bowls, and
give thanks.

HOLY THURSDAY, SPRING 2012

The first time I know I am in the side pew on a red cushion — the dark sanctuary shrouds my face and limbs. A woman I don't know whispers behind me. Kneelers tap the tiled floor. The service yawns into another psalm. Time dissolves as the night steals a handful of hours I am not willing to release.

A voice howls into my ribs. Its words echo, like a temple bell, sounding a message I am not ready to hear: *This is not for me.* I scold it like a child. Sh!.

But the voice continues, as if we are not in a church, but sitting on cushions in silence.

What about Buddhism?

All of it feels strange, as if I have just wandered into my neighbor's yard and decided I want her wicker settee more than the iron chairs I purchased, too long ago, at J & M. I like her view. Inside her kitchen, there is something I know I will need. But I am not sure. I do not know what that is.

But Buddhism?

The word ripples inside my arteries that circle my heart. And as I wonder at its timing, I remember how right this voice has been: He will be a part of your life, it said, when I met my husband, his wide hips and white smile in the front office in Palo Alto. Now, I am meeting myself, again, for the first time.

What are you saying? I ask the voice.

The cross on the altar chides me. It waits in the center of the chancel, between the choir stalls. Mother Lauren, unmoving in the Bishop's chair, keeps her gaze down. All that is to come still hovers in the darkness of the damp building. Accusations, hammering, bleeding: this is what comes next. He has to pay with His body and His blood. Again and again. Every year.

What comes next?

I don't ask God, as I would. As I have done. As I have learned to do since before I knew how to ask for comfort.

What comes next?

When the arbor vitae in our back yard bent and broke under the heavy snow, they did not announce their leaving. They did not bow at the foot of the icy grass and say, “It’s been 20 years, and we just don’t feel like reaching anymore.” They just folded their spindly branches and dared anyone to make them whole. And no, I couldn’t. I shook them and

shoveled off their rough green limbs. And then, I pulled a rope around their middles and tried to tie them back together. But they would not rise. They would not do what I needed: what my neighbor demanded. They just knelt and kissed the earth.

What should I do next?

I turn my gaze from the cross. The shiny part of me that is there, inside the blood and duty, knows I will bow down. I will let the soft animal of my body want what it wants.

GOD'S BODY

Mary Oliver says God's body
is everything and everywhere —
in the puddles
and the violets. The tears
pulsing down your face.

Thick weeds strangle our roses,
preening and fat.
And the bees' nest is hot,
just there —
by that sunken mass of earth.

God, they say, is constant
always obedient.
But today he's in those peonies:
sated with pink,
lying in the grass.

Look at the grass.

BUILD AN ARK

An old lady writes me in a spidery style:
My health is much improved.
I feel I may, if God so wills,
build an ark, for the sea
swings in like an iron gate.

I doubt not God is good, well meaning, kind,
vague as fog, looked for like mail.
Everything but what you wished.

Men kill for this, or for as much —
to be blessed, throat, eye and knucklebone.

You may say otherwise.

The petals of the rose —
how adequate unto themselves.

I long for weight and strength,
to lie under the sky
without roof or door.

Sources:

- “Letter from Brooklyn” Derek Walcott
- “A Letter from Phyllis Wheatley” Robert Hayden
- “Yet Do I Marvel” Countee Cullen
- “Under Taurus” Louise Gluck
- “The Truth the Dead Know” Anne Sexton
- “Traveling” Malena Mörling
- “To Earthward” Robert Frost
- “This Consciousness that is Aware” Emily Dickinson
- “Things to Do in the Bible” Elaine Equi
- “This Summer Day” Mary Oliver
- “Question” May Swensen

WILLIAM BLAKE'S "ETERNITY"

Can I "kiss" this fleeting joy?
Here — and here — and now gone,
with the breeze that vanished into
the stretch of sunlight, beyond
my neighbor's fence.

The weeds behind me grow long
and thick, despite a long kneel in the dirt,
my belief in mulch. And behind them, still
nothing. A stretch of soil barren, like that field
where we meet.

Meanwhile, the hydrangeas blossom.
Blue and droopy. Our bounty.

And Blake? Blake says not to "bind" oneself
to a joy (or an ache) — but to open
only, to right now.

CATTEDRALE IN NOTO

One hundred and four degrees
here on the stone steps, beneath the heavy doors.
We move like time is on holiday.

Higher than we can see, bell towers graze the burning
sky, like Icarus, fearless of the sun. We cross into dark cool
and spoken prayer. Our pupils widen.

First, we pass the Virgin, with a waist of ivory blue. Then,
the wood, heavy and broken, fallen like a cross.
But here is Corrado, the saint, in the front.
(See, next to the crucifix, beneath the sculpted angels.)
Kneel, light a candle, pray for love, forgiveness, and hurting toes.

We claim a pew and close our eyes.
Silence fans our sweating hearts. We breathe in sweet
thank yous for this holy life; we breathe out dusty years of trying.

Grazie mille, San Corrado.

We don't know your gray beard, but trust the dried flowers,
blooming on the marble, beneath your painted feet.

RUMI'S FIELD

This is what I need:
to live inside Rumi's field
for the parade of years
still waving down my road.

I see it stretching
so wide
with wild grasses and daisies,
over there
by the birch.

See their oval petals
and dollops
of butter hearts?

They melt the wrongness
I know you did (I'm sure
you did)
and the ice of rightness
slipping within
my grasp.

I do not need a map
to this place.
I know it is here – right
here. It does not
move. It does not
get up and
run away.

But I forget to go.
I do not always
remember there is
a field.

This field, Rumi says, out there
beyond wrongdoing
and rightdoing
reminds me to lay down

my heavy coat
and set free my
bound hair.

I picture the rage sloshing
around my ribs,
draining through my feet.

This field is below the cushion,
where I cross my legs
follow my breath
and let go of all
my wants.

I need to take a photo
of its flowers.
Paint a picture
of its sky.

Was it your wrongdoing and
my rightdoing?
Now, it seems not to
matter.

Rumi says that out beyond,
the smallness of my life,
there is this field.

And I can go.
I can go.

GROUNDING

I began to believe when I heard about the Buddha, placing his right hand,
beneath the Bodhi tree; his palm dirty with clammy soil and belonging.
Lotus flowers rained down as his well of knowing began to fill.

Mara, wily and shaking, tried to blow him from his seat.
First, with desire —seduction — silky female skin.
Then storms of dark ash and rocks — later, even doubt.
But Buddha's right hand anchored his crossed legs. His heart steady.

We are good — all of us in these bodies
with seats — custom-made — for the rise and fall of not knowing.
We are good: I breathe — right hand on my heart —
as I imagine Mara squeezing my throat as regret
fills my mouth. My ears hurt. Mara's voice echoes with pain.

I press the ground; breathing in this earth, breathing out this fear.

TRANSGRESSION

So here we sit, me before you.
on this marble altar
with your collar between us
and the belief that I will tell you
all of my sins.

I must confess something or anything — even a made-up problem
like a fight with my brothers or stolen Hershey's kisses
or the envy I feel
when I think about Sarah.

I must confess
my wicked doings
my shame
the ways I am wrong.

But, you see, I am good.

Inside this blinding light
of this face to face
meeting
I wonder why you can't sense
all the goodness in me.

I am good, I tell the silence
which hangs pungent
and ominous
as incense before mass.

I am good.
My 14-year-old soul and bright blue eyes.
My curve of smile — still hungry for the world.

You see, I do not need your mercy
or forgiveness or Hail Marys full of grace.

My God is full of warm hugs
and deep listening and she does not play favorites.

She says, Oh yes, and I love you
and you're perfect, sweet child.
Yes, you're perfect.

SARAH AT THREE

Sarah pauses at the bottom of our front sidewalk, weeds cracking thick slate
on Montclair Avenue. She is pulling on the pinky of her mother, not hesitant or shy —
so certain of all she knows.

Behind the screen I push myself high on tippy toes and give her a good look.
She is perfect — blonde hair cropped above dark eyes, plaid dress and the buckle shoes I
have wanted since birth. I swing the green door open.

When she comes in, we need no words. Instead, I lead her up the carpeted steps
to the second floor and my dark mahogany wardrobe. I pull out a stuffed doll.
I am living the story which tumbles through my dreams.

Karen tells me to imagine what I want — drop it into the ever-sighing grass that brushes
back and forth from May to June. Picture it, she says, as I trace the wings of her voice,
flying across the ocean from her sofa in Florence.

Sarah and I wove ladders to braided hair and flowered quilts and the red robes that ran
down the short aisle at St. John's. She became the sticky Monkey Bread that fed long
afternoons and tumble-down cartwheels, on the lawn in the front.

When we arrived at the top of my stairs, just outside my room, my fingers trembled and
I paused to breathe. I led her onto the worn oriental rug, the late afternoon shining
on the armoire. filled with all my toys. Look, I smiled. I had so much to share.

LISTEN

I tried to tell you once that the hardest part of getting
locked inside my Parkinson's was the absence of God.

Remember? In the living room? The burnt afternoon light
and the piles of books and mail behind me, on the table.

Your brother's clutter spread as quickly as my wasted muscle melted
into bone — the disease eating even my voice.

Parkinson's swallowed God as well.

I know you couldn't understand — refused to hear; you could not
trust me in the ways you once did. I ruined that trust.

You can be such a Pollyanna, I guess I taught you that. Perhaps,
that too, I must now own. I never saw you.

But God? How could He desert me, become a mythic lie, now
that I have had the babies and prayed on Good Friday again and again?

I said I did not know — I did not know anymore if God would be there
now that I was close. I am dying, I wanted to scream. But I just smiled.

You could not hear this, I know. You looked behind me, at the mail, trying
not to judge. You have tried not to judge, I know.

No, still then, I did not tell you how sorry I am for what I let him do to you. I could
not say it — even in that darkening room.

At last you got up to leave, the silence between us heavier than it's been. I do not
know why I could not love you – not then, not in that moment.

Instead, I told you that your hair was too blonde. It should not be so light — you
cannot carry it. I called this out, my weak voice dissolving in the rug.

You just stopped and looked at me and said, Okay, Mom. Okay.

DEAR MRS. KAIGHN

I never knew I needed saving
until I remembered your quilts.
Our quilts.
The dining table by the windows,
scissors fabric and
the space to try again.

I can trace my first longing,
to your kitchen's long island:
sticky dough, wispy
flour and the freedom to
take my time.

Afternoons, after school,
I ran fast across the sidewalk —
from my house to yours.
Breathless and excited,
hoping to see Sarah.

Your home had airy rooms
and pillowy sofas
hot popcorn and cribbage
on the floor.

Your home had Lionel trains
and high-heeled Barbies,
and fluffy pancakes
with melting butter.

In the basement, one rainy
afternoon, you spelled "Love"
in black marker: with a
bright red "L" and a yellow "o"
and a "v" in Irish green.

Do you remember bubble letters
and Welcome Back Kotter and the

monkey bread filled with butter/

Dear Mrs. Kaighn,
you taught me how love
is wide and soft.
A Toll House cookie,
macaroni and cheese,
a reason to go downstairs.

You taught me how the soul
inside each body leans,
always, toward the light.

Dear Mrs. Kaighn,
outside the stone at St. John's
Mr. Kaighn held your ashes and
I had so many words.

I really did.

They crowded inside my teeth
like secrets from my tongue.

She loved me.

My mother had eight kids
and so many chores. She never
learned how to swim.

Mrs. Kaighn, you taught me
how to swim.

GRATITUDE

For the wash of light in
a new morning.

For silence.

For the work that makes
me forget where
I am.

For Holden, who reminds
me of the deep loneliness
inside each of us.

For the coffee brewing
on the counter
by the door.

For the gifts of safety
and being seen.

For still wanting more.

For my husband's footsteps
upstairs
in the bedroom.

For the lessons of
forgiveness.

For my father
who never stopped
loving us.

THE WAVES

This is how it feels to just touch
the in and the out
relaxed effort
just noting:
the inhale and longer release and
the blessed promise of starting again.
But the nagging thought awaits, like a hawk tracking
prey — a screech
sears the mind and the crumbling of calm
pains my eyes.
Still, the breath bobs inside —
the part of me immersed in you — and you
and all of us in this salty
wet living;
drops of water rocking like buoys
rising and then drowning
here now
and now
and now.

PROPHET MARY

This grasshopper, you say, has enormous and complicated eyes.
This one – right here – who flung herself onto the grass inside
your summer poem.

Pay attention — your words are like bold morning lilies. Pay attention.
To this and this and that beam of light, slanting across the weeds.

It is not complicated, you tell us, it is not about vespers
and incense and the man in the best robes.
Prayer does not require instruction or form. It arrives unbidden
like the monarch returning to the rose.

Last night on Shark Tank, the woman from Malaysia in the flowy yellow dress
cried through her eyeshadow and her past.
After I recovered, she told the sharks, perched on wide swivel chairs,
after I survived, she paused to gulp in big hefts of air, *I asked myself, what can I do?*
What can I do with my one wild and precious life?

The air inside the cameras stopped
and the woman's hands cupped
her cheeks. And the sharks?
They just listened to your words.

ODE TO THE WEEDS

Innocent stalks
of leafy reminders,
rising between the
blood-orange irises,
claiming sun,
wind
soil.

You parade as
fickle
tall grass,
helpful
ground ivy.

You sully
pristine beds
of tulips and creep
into hydrangea.

You make me long
for the stark
silence
of winter.
When you are gone –
disappeared –
forgotten by
early darkness.

In the heady
rush of Spring, I dread
your arrival:
an overdue bill –
posted –
again and again.

Weeds – you haunt
me like the texts

unanswered,
the emails spilling
onto my polished
floor.

You are everything
undone
on the list by the door.

Here, I sit at the table
drinking coffee
while you
steadily
circle the handrail
by the steps.

As I stand at the sink,
my hands soapy with
dinner
you mock me.

You rise inside the cracks
of my patio.
the limbs
of the roses.

I want a life
resistant
to your intrusion.

And yet, how
would that be?

Without you, is there
a line of daffodils,
butter yellow?

See the rosy azaleas
and the lilac, so lavender
wafting sweet

perfume?

Did you do that?
Did you make it all live?

TRUE STORY

She built her family a dream
of a space
with tall ceilings
sun-kissed
walls
and the sweet smell of sage.

She made them a promise
of bathrooms
bedrooms
doors that shut tight.

She found the salt box on the corner: white picket
with roses, outside the farmhouse door.

Then, she wrapped the years of waiting —
shy hopes they had hidden —
into an offer and mailed it with her prayers.

Later, when the books lined the shelves
and the boxes filled the curb,
she cut a little bit of sky and
rolled it into ribbon and
place it in her pocket
for the days
that stormed.

In conversation with: “Fairy Tale” by Miroslav Holub

DEAR MOM

I still want to teach you to sit, so that the tissue of your heart, can let go from rib
and nerve — release. This way the air can cradle you from all sides and the valves
can take their sweet time. Can you hear me? I don't know where you are;
sometimes you bend forward — across this very table — and say my name.

I hear you. But mostly you become my earliest dream —
hovering above everything before. A brush of pink and warmth. I know
there were too many of us — wanting. There is only so much milk, so much time.

MAGNOLIA BLOSSOMS

Magnolia blossoms under your window,
carpeting green shoots here and here.
Raspberry pink and white ice cream.
Raspberry pink and white confetti.
Raspberry pink and white wishes.
Raspberry pink and white blossoms.
Raspberry pink and white beginnings.

ODE TO THE ROSES

Each morning,
you are there,
lavish rubies scaling
white picket.
Resting beauty,
I whisper, from my
upstairs window.

I cannot wait to be
on the thick grass
beside you,
gobsmacked by the
jewels, blooming within
your center.

I see you, I whisper,
like I told four-year-old
Liam
in the circle,
in Children's Chapel:
when he kept
climbing the pew, desperate
for love.

My roses, I mouth
to the dawn,
the blue scent of morning.
Our roses,
I whisper to my husband,
down the hall,
sleeping still.

Back among us, you are,
climbing royals,
reincarnated,
after 29 years, when
he first clipped and watered

and fed the lovelies in
his landlord's garden on
Stanford Avenue.

His small cottage from
a lyric or a legend;
the place we first fell.

Roses, you know me
and my love; our boy and
our girl — grown now —
with long legs and
faraway eyes.

I see you,
in our new world
on Greenwood,
reaching like pine,
for the beating
yellow of heaven.
I see you.

I am the one
with the hose, soaking
your petals with food.

I am the one
who falls down to her
knees
before you. I cannot
help myself;
I bow.

MISSING YOU

Across the ocean and down the coast you wake inside
your childhood home.
Downstairs your mother cradles black coffee
and the phone with the notes she reads first thing —
Dick had a stroke
He's OK
My children love me.

And then Worky serves the eggs and cantaloupe and the squirrels in the back —
scramble over ivy and crumbling brick. They flash through the sun.

Your mother waits for the starlings to arrive at the feeder.

Names fly from her mind followed by the events of the night.
All of the future fades into sky. You arrive at the bottom of the stairs
and she rises arms wide. As you hold her steady her questions go round and round:

Are you staying tonight?
Where's Henry?
Do you have to leave soon?
Is Laurie coming?
Is Laurie coming?

She sits and thrums her fingers on the long table. Your father is doing really well.
She nods as if she is hearing your words instead of her own.
I think he's better. She pauses,
Do you think he's better?

More coffee?
She raises her empty cup and waves it toward the kitchen.

I don't know all you carry but sometimes the weight of it touches everything.
I find you in the living room, head bowed, hands holding your face.
I want to pull you from this dusty evening — lift you into the trails of Vermont.

Outside your mother's kitchen the monarch grazes the tiger lily.
She does not care.

She sees only your father coming finally from sleep.
He takes the chair across from her — as he has for 60 years.
He smiles as she takes his hand.
He does not try to speak.
Words dissolve into his teeth.
Slowly, he pulls back his hand and finds his fork.

Her eyes never leave his face.

EPIPHANY

Like the hump of the whale,
spraying through ocean,
the divine appears.

Here, in this old woman's
skin, shining — you are in a jewelry
shop in downtown Damariscotta.

And there, in that lap of icy
surf, sliding over the bleached
sand and the dead crab.

It shakes its feathers loudly,
like a flight of knowing
inside the ribs.

Look! Look!

I SAW YOU RUNNING

I saw you running at the crest of the hill, hugging
the last curve of Greystone as you lunged
down the dusty course. Your slender shoulders draped in
maroon lycra— “Madison” etched as a banner.
I knew you then: the blond hair, the legs blooming red, the you
that is now so separate from me. In some minute,
when I was distracted by grading or *The New Yorker*
or my desire for sleep, you grew. I did not see
your legs stretch tall. I awoke and you were there
in the kitchen, shining, next to the marble counter and silver fridge.
I did not see your eyes grow wise but I heard your voice—
so clear and loud: “I need the car.”

OH FATHER

Oh Father! I used to call
on the phone
in the hallway
across the kitchen.

Oh Father! Delight filling
my smile as I bent and kissed
the papery skin
of your aging cheek.

You are here, now,
beside me on this
beautiful, blank page.
I can see your teeth —
yellowed with that gap —
your plaid shirt
and gentle smile.

Oh Father! I scratch down
here —quickly — in my favorite
Omni black pen.
How do I say I miss you
in the language
of the dead?

Beside you in the upstairs hallway,
laying carpet,
I learned to hold the special hammer —
a tack hammer — like so
and tap the tacks — not hard —
into the thick snarl
of remnant wool
tap tap tap.

Oh Father! You made time
stretch slow — right here — this
golden haze of one thing then

another
not the numbers in clocks.

Oh Father! You taught me
to smile wide and break
the scrim of daily days
with silly sayings
and honest kindness.

As I live and breathe!

Oh Father, you taught me to care not
for grades or honors
but for books —
words dripping, like ice cream
sweetening every snatched
moment of this decadent life.

“Go slow,” you said and
“Don’t rush!”
And, “It’s OK. It’s OK.” And,
“I’m so sorry” when it was
really not OK.

Oh Father! You never knew the
encyclopedia of story
on YouTube,
the technical trickery
of Google Meet
or the passwords and arcane
codes that simmer
in my gradebook.

The phone was not a curse and the
closed door kept clutter
clear of that sacred
stillness
sanctifying your desk.

To say I miss you is to say

that I miss summer inside
the cold of a long afternoon,
students hostile and tired.

To say I miss you is to be
barren like Macbeth — without
words or music to order
this poem.

I miss you, Father.

Beside you on my knees,
in church, I learned to bless
your wide aching love.
I bless you Father
on this page,
in my heart.

Father, I bless you.

FORGIVENESS

For complaining about the unkindness
a friend spat, across plaid furniture
in her family room, hours before dinner:
salad, chickpeas and wild rice.
I forgive you.

For the raw flesh of feelings that will not stop
rising, like untethered moments, from the heart
to the throat to the mouth, spilling
from tongue to air to table, helpless.
I forgive you.

For hitting snooze and then rolling back into
the sleeve of sleep, even though it goes against
the list of "Stops," carefully written for 2025.
I forgive you.

For forgetting to pay attention to where the phone
is put down, discarded under magazines,
On that shelf, near the stove and then "lost."
I forgive you.

For clutching tightly to the unfairnesses and cuts
that pierce since childhood. For not letting go.
For not knowing how to let them rise and release
and disappear into the branches of the past.
I forgive you.

For all the dinners that could have been just like
grandma's, with three vegetables and concentration.
I forgive you.

For putting more sweaters in the online cart
when everything feels like not enough.
I forgive you.

BEFORE THE HOUR OF HER DEATH

Her skin is luminous
pillow-white with pink still blooming.
At 87 her cropped hair makes her
round face stunning.

“Impressive” my mother-in-law
says, when she first meets my mom.
I don’t even remember where that was.
On Montclair Avenue?

She is lying in bed now, hoping to leave
Montclair Ave, Montclair, this very earth.
Soon. Please God, soon.

Does she whisper to Him all the time,
like me? Does she question and rail and punch
and hit and demand, at last, to die?

Her faith has gone quiet like her love
for my dead father. Tight lips in a red line.
It hurts too much for her to smile, now, when I
appear in the faded light. She opens
wet eyes — two tiny pools— and becomes my mother.

“How’s the house?” Her words slip out slow and stumbly.

“We planted flowers today,” I say.
I don’t know if she imagines the home we are leaving
or the new house I described, with photos on my phone.

*“*Mom?” Her eyes have fallen shut. The pain is
between us. Her body rock-still under a thin blanket.
“We don’t have to talk,” I say.

“Flowers,” she turns toward me. “That’s nice.”

I close my eyes.

Can I just sit beside you, I wonder.

“Hope?” she asks. “How’s Hope?”

Four days before Hope was here,
in her room, pulling the mask back
from her mouth and smiling. Like this
was normal, all good. “Graduation
is still happening. Maybe my parents can go?”
Hope laughing, with her blonde hair
and tank top. Shining.

“I don’t know what’s coming,” my mom quiet
when she said this, months before, when she could
still sit up. When she could still tell my brother
Joey, which bill to pay and which milk to buy. Somehow
we had fallen into a strange confession.

“I don’t know what’s coming,” her smile a strange
twist, her teeth darker than I’d seen.
She sat straight, like a lady.

I dared not say a word, let on I knew
what she was saying.

Behind her that day in the living room, the marble lamp
scolded me: remember, you can not be on
on the couch, in this space. Company only.

And church. Long masses in back pews on Sundays.
Strangers sitting next to me. Strangers whom I sat near every
Sunday of my life but did not know. The emptiness
between us like the emptiness I see, now,
in my mother’s frown.

Where the hell was her God?

Fear presided in her shaking hand
pressed down with a small weight. A Parkinson’s
weight. Neon pink. The shaking like maracas,

in and out of sleep. Her fingernails
tap tap tapping.

Now, she is inside the morphine and wants me gone.
“I’ll let you go,” she says.
Always polite. Even now.

I leave, obediently, as always.

Please God, I beg, walking past my father’s photo,
Be there. Be there.

FORTUNE

Cafe Santa Zita, Lucca Italy

Cosi Caldo! My waitress smiles. Square teeth, cherry lips, skin
the cappuccino brown of Tuscany. *So hot!* I nod, smile, searching
for Italian words I do not have. It is 92 degrees, and we are outside,
damp air pumps from spigots, hidden in corners of this ancient garden.

In 30 minutes, my waitress will go home, take a shower,
and sleep. I cannot wait, she smiles, exhaustion darkens her eyes.

I name my waitress Lucia because I do not know how to speak
in her tongue and my Inglese is too foreign for her.
It is our third morning together in this garden.
Drinking lattes, I read and write, quietly, stealthily, unable to believe
my good fortune: table and time — solitude that sweet pastry
that fills me from the center.

People come and go, at the round tables beside me,
but I am deep into a new essay, scratching words in black ink,
wondering how fortune is bestowed. What god does that?

Lucia has worked for the past week, one person for two, she tells me.
Every. Day. Her eyes are kind. We share middle age.
She asks if I will return again, the next morning? But no,
I leave tomorrow, first Florence then the States.

And when will you come back?

When? I wonder. When will grace rise, unbidden? Because. Just because.

ESSAYS

WES

I was at the oak desk, upstairs, in the old rectory when my sister called to tell me our father had died; the January light washed the room in gray, as the heat pounded through the radiator. Anne's voice felt far away. "Dad died," she said. As I twisted the black phone cord around my finger, my sister began to sob.

For a long time, I just listened to her cry.

"Should I come?" I finally asked. Not sure what the rules would be now. "Yes, do," she said. "Come, now."

I sat for a moment and took in the deep silence of the room. Its high ceilings and peeled strips of wallpaper hinted at the lives it had known: people from decades before. Children's beds, probably, had been pushed inside the alcove where my computer hutch sat. I could picture toys scattered across the wooden floor.

I had given Hardee the desk in front of the two windows, on the opposite side of the office. He had joined the staff after me and shared my space neatly and quietly, crunching the church's earnings and expenses inside his computer. It had seemed only fair. I had a walk-in closet for my Sunday School supplies and all the long bookshelves, built into the interior wall.

My office was one of my favorite spaces in the church. I loved being there, loved being alone, loved imagining how to make someone like Job come alive for nine-year olds.

Now, on this Saturday in January, my father was dead. The news hit the deepest part of my heart. For over twenty years, my father's death had seemed imminent – about to announce itself in any ring of the phone. When I was 19, living at home and working for a semester to gather money for college, my mother picked me up one damp November evening from my job at the computer store. Perched high in the driver's seat of our Ford van, she seemed fragile; I got the sense that something was breaking inside her.

"Daddy had a heart attack," she had said. Her light gray eyes sought my gaze for just a moment before she turned to face the road ahead, her fingers slipping into place on the steering wheel. I don't think we talked on the way home. I just remember the tears wet on her cheeks. I had nothing to offer her. I did so want to comfort her – say the right thing – but I knew my words would come out all wrong.

My father was 53, then – the same age his father had been when he had died of a heart attack. I knew my mother was scared and hated the fear climbing around inside her. She was a woman who shunned negativity. She believed that God did not give you anything you could not bear – and bearing tough times made you stronger. Years later, she would tell me that I came from a long line of strong women. A nugget of inspiration she had been saving, I could tell. And she had meant it sincerely – it had been her inheritance from her own mother. And for years I believed the strength she tried to put in me was serving something good – was helping me. I believed in her wisdom for as long as I could.

My father lived and lived. He survived the open-heart surgery; the year-long depression that began in recovery; another smaller heart attack; shingles in his eye;

weakness in his legs; falling out of his wheelchair; the horrors of the sinful priests; and the unraveling of his eldest daughter, Pat, right in front of him one morning. She screamed and raged as she tried to force more attention out of him. He was in his office at the back of our family home. All the doors had been locked – my sister's husband couldn't get in. Not this time. He wasn't going to calm her down.

One pain, I remember, made it into the public space of our dining room. It was a spring afternoon, and my father was not speaking to my mother. She asked him a question, and he kept his head down, his eyes on the mail he was sorting. My mother snapped her lips together and left, and I stood as still as I could. I had never seen my father so openly angry with my mother. What I remember most, in my childhood, is my mother's disappointment in my father.

My father had grown up as an only child, with new cars and a television and other comforts of middle-class wealth in his small town. When he was 53, he had eight children, a tender love for my mother, his Catholic faith and a penchant for writing letters filled with stick figures and funny messages. "Oh, great one," he wrote under the drawing of a person on a horse. "I am rounding up the cattle. You must hit the books!"

Now, 26 years later, he had gone – whisked without fanfare into the light of the Lord – the Light of God, as he liked to say – without a chance for me or any of us to say goodbye. My mother had gone to the hospital with him alone, after his most recent heart attack. She had not asked us to come; and she had made it clear – in some unspoken way – that we were not allowed to visit. Finally, one night, Anne's husband pronounced this Crawley culture ridiculous. "Your father is sick in the hospital, less than a mile away,"

Michael had said. “And why aren’t you going?” And so Anne went, scared about breaking our unspoken code, but desperate to see my dad. She was not afraid to do what she wanted.

After I hung up with Anne that afternoon, I immediately left my office and went down the steep wooden stairs to find Mother Lauren, still in her office. It was a Saturday, and the building was empty except for Lauren and me and Wes, our sexton. I knew he was probably still in the kitchen, doing the trash. I knew Lauren would be on her way out soon.

Mother Lauren could tell by my face that something was wrong. When she looked up from the dim light of her computer, she paused. After I told her, I think she got up and hugged me. I don’t remember. What I remember is her presence – her quiet way of reaching out and invisibly holding what I was holding, with me. I knew this big dark thing – growing in my center – was too heavy for me. And she knew that she could carry half of it, dutch style, like we carried the gifts for the wise men: one person on each side of the long basket, each holding a handle.

Later, after I had put away my papers and grabbed my purse, I went back downstairs to the kitchen to find Wes. He was there with the mop, frowning at something on the counter.

When he saw me, he shifted his weight from one leg to another and leaned the mop against the sink. His dark eyes and round face were smiling. He didn’t have all his teeth, but the ones he had were brilliantly white.

“You are not leaving before me!” he joked.

"Oh yes I am!" I tried to smile. Wes and I met up every Saturday in the kitchen and vowed to leave the building first, so the other would have to lock up.

I told Wes all my petty grievances and all the silly things the children said on Sundays. I told him about my son and daughter, and he told me which grandchildren he worried about the most. He told me his biggest fear was waking up in the middle of the night and finding his wife, Desiree, dead beside him. He dreamed about this. He spoke about it often, as if he was describing something as small as a bad hamburger in his favorite restaurant. "Wouldn't that be the worst thing?" he would ask. "I couldn't stand that. Sleeping next to a dead body." He would wrinkle his nose and shake his head. "No way."

Now, I paused in front of Wes, wondering if my news was too fresh to tell him, if it was too private to say out loud.

"My dad died," I said

"Oh." Wes' face fell. He picked up the mop and held it in front of him. "Just – like – "

"I just found out. I think it was this morning. I'm not sure." I looked at him, surprised I had no tears. I stayed in the doorway. Frozen by my need to leave.

"I'm sorry," he said, his eyes frowning.

"It's OK." I smiled. "It's – he's been sick off and on for a long time. A heart condition." For a moment, Wes felt so far away from my family. A different world.

The following week we had a large memorial service for my father. It was a bitter cold Friday, and the church was packed. We sang "Blest Be the Lord" and "Be Not Afraid": all my dad's favorites. And I wondered how our family would be able to laugh

without my dad there. Already, the kitchen table was too long and empty. As the days slipped by, I kept expecting to cry. Why hadn't I? My friend, Mary, likes to call me a snowflake: a sensitive soul who cries in the same easy way people clear their throats. A release. But my dad was gone, and I just felt emptiness and a strange peace. I had loved my father, and he had loved me.

Wes died two months later. Unexpectedly. He had a mini stroke and then a heart attack. He never made it out of the hospital. The Saturday after his death his son, Pastor Wes, showed up with his own sons to mop the floors and vacuum. He did the trash and cleaned the bathrooms. I hated the very sight of him. And my heart broke for him. My dad had been eighty one; Wes was only sixty five.

Wes' funeral was held at the Morristown Armory. He belonged to a large faith community in Parsippany and his son, Pastor Wes, led that church.

I drove to the Armory by myself, even though Mother Lauren had urged me to drive with her. When I arrived, I marveled at the size of the parking lot. I had never been to the armory before. The high brick walls of the building reminded me of a factory; I prayed there would be flowers inside.

The air in the armory tasted bitter and cold. Black shadows hung in the corners of the huge hall. Around me, rows and rows of people sat, whispering in crisp suits and pastel dresses. The women wore high heels and lipstick in bright plumes of red. There were at least two hundred people seated already. I found an empty chair in one of the back rows. Mother Lauren sat a few rows ahead. The building seemed to shake when the singing started, and as I stood with my coat on, trying to keep myself from shivering, the tears fell. Wes had been a large presence in my life for several years; I couldn't imagine

being in the building again, on Saturdays, without him. I couldn't imagine existing in the world without him in my background, appearing out of nowhere, joking with me about room setups and the demands made by small, elderly women, who liked to be in charge.

"How many times has Midge asked you to defrost the coffee cake?" I asked Wes one Saturday.

"Oh, she kept calling until I finally answered last night. Nine o'clock! Can you believe her?"

Although my church life seemed to revolve around Sundays, when I would lead Children's Chapel and Sunday School classes and greet new families at coffee hour, my own church happened every Saturday in the stillness of the building. Mother Lauren, Wes, and I would slip around the empty rooms and halls, tracking each other's small sounds. Mother Lauren listened to soft jazz, and Wes' vacuum would swirl around the hallways, as I unpacked crafts and moved furniture in the basement rooms. As the hours passed, a stillness would bloom inside of me: a silence so comforting that I felt as if I was on retreat, re-pinning my soul to the inside of my bones. At home, my husband Rob made lunch for Henry and Hope and took them out on private adventures to the movies or museums. They went hiking and sledding and played cowboy at the Wild Wild West park.

One afternoon, after I had left the church to get some Starbucks, I stepped through the side door and into the sunny haze of the library and paused. I took in the long couches and wing back chairs and thought about all the meetings and small group sharing we had done in that room. I thought about the Sunday after 9/11. In our circle of women, I had sat near the lamp on the end table. There had been whispering and tears and the

uneasiness that blossoms when one does not know what to do. This place, this building, I told myself, as I held my ice coffee in one hand and my keys in the other, this is home. I felt both found and blessed that Saturday afternoon. I felt like I was beginning to understand who I was, inside myself.

I don't know if Wes loved the building in the ways that I did. If I had ever asked, he probably would have snorted and laughed and said, "Are you serious?" There were ugly moments inside those walls – times when I had been told that the children were eating too much of the food at coffee hour and that glitter was messy. Times when I felt as if the building, itself, was more important than the people inside it.

Wes had been pulled aside, too. Where was the toilet paper, the dish soap? Why was the kitchen floor not cleaner?

I had left my job at a local college – teaching as an adjunct – to work at the church. I had needed less homework and a regular paycheck. I had needed more time with my kids. Wes had taken the job with a bunch of other cleaning jobs, twenty years before. I don't know if he had planned on working so long – or if it seemed the only thing he could do to keep everyone in his orbit safe and loved.

Not long after Wes died, Desiree came to the church to walk around the rooms and help her son. She liked being in the building, I know. Desiree had thick braids, blue eyeshadow and hoop earrings. She sat on the stool in the kitchen and talked to me about Wes.

"I never thought he would pass so soon," she said. "The grandkids – they miss him, you know. They are a bit lost. He was helping them get to school and –" she waved at the air. I said nothing as she kept waving at that invisible thing in front of her.

As I listened to Desiree talk and stop and try to explain what it was her life, now, seemed to be, I wondered how she and Wes had made it for so long – through so many kids and grandchildren. In the year before Wes died, he had told me that he had gone to so many funerals. “People are just dying and dying. They’re all leaving. I don’t know – it’s just where we’re at, I guess.” He kept a toothpick in his mouth and pulled at it when he talked.

Today, in my high school English class, I shared a poem about swans. And as I read it, I thought about Wes and Desiree. It’s been eight years since Wes has gone. And yet, in the swans in the poem, who know how to be both “beautiful and brutal” and how to “mate for life,” I see Wes and Desiree. Wes was unabashed in his faith, in his love for his family and in his quiet humility. And I did not really understand all that until he passed. His absence makes him so vivid.

I left my job at the church not long after Wes died. The oxygen had seemed to disappear from that building. Something was off. I felt that the comfort I had known and needed from that building was no longer there. And I knew Wes would have told me to get out and move on. “Dust off those feet. Yeah, just go!” He would have laughed and said, “What are you waiting on?”

Wes emptied his pockets, like my father, giving all he ever had. He was always there.

SURRENDER

Henry put his hands around his neck and squeezed on a Thursday in April. The sun was out that day. The blooms on the magnolia, just outside his window, beginning to open. Raspberry pink. He was just two weeks shy of his eleventh birthday.

First, Henry tried to choke himself in Mrs. Burke's room, on the second floor of the old Central Avenue School building. He sat near the long glass windows in the back row of her fifth-grade class. Mrs. Burke was at the end of her teaching career — on her way to retirement. That year, she had long periods of absences due to the sudden death of her father. Once a week, I dropped by her room to check on Henry's behavior. It was part of his Individual Education Plan (IEP). Often, when I went to see her, she would just stare at me blankly, as if she couldn't remember who I was or why I was there. Then, she would twist her mouth into an expression I tried not to interpret as annoyance. "Well, he's fine," she would finally say. "I guess he does sing sometimes. But he's fine."

Mrs. Burke ignored Henry's hands around his neck and the squeezing. When I had seen him do this at home, I made him stop. And I asked him why he did it. I tried to keep my voice level and calm. I tried not to show how scared I was.

Henry always gave me the same response: "I just want to do away with myself," he would say, in a flat tone. In those moments, I couldn't ever reach him. The Henry that lived inside my bones and was always so close, always pointing out the models of cars or re-sorting his Yu Gi Oh cards — that Henry was gone. I couldn't see him inside his empty eyes.

After he tried to choke himself in Mrs. Burke's room, Henry went into Mrs. Doll's room, where he was learning math and science. There, he put his hands around his neck, again, and Mrs. Doll did not pretend she did not see that. She called Mrs. Fuller, the Assistant Principal, who knew Henry better than any adult in the building, and Mrs. Fuller called me.

I didn't go to the school right away. I remember that I was sitting at my desk in the church office, on the second floor of the old Rectory. I remember that I just sat there for a moment — scared. Then I picked up the church phone and called Dr. Harman. And by some miracle, some amazing blessing, she was there and came on the line. She told me exactly what to do, like I knew she would. She had been preparing me for this moment. She had carefully told Rob and me what to expect — the steps we would have to take — so that we would recognize the new place we were in, so that we would know, in some vague way, that the scary world we had now entered was one that others had mapped out, carefully.

I remember feeling angry with Henry when I picked him up from school. I was so scared that he would hurt himself that I could barely smile when I reached out to hug him. Stay here with me; you have to stay with me, I said, when we got inside our kitchen. I tried to soften my voice. But the pressure of calling the insurance — doing the steps in order, like Dr. Harman had said — made my head hurt. What if I messed up? What if I didn't get to the hospital fast enough? (At the time, I didn't know that he would be taken from us and locked up with kids who were 16, 17, and 18 years old. If I had known what he would hear in his group therapy sessions, that he would be gone for two weeks, would I have taken him?)

In the emergency room, where I felt like a suspect in a strange drama — was I a terrible parent — I tried to pretend we were on a "normal" path. I had been in that place before, of course. Henry had fallen from his bike and skidded on his chin and had calmly listened to the doctor, as he had stitched him together. Our daughter Hope had been there, too, when her five-year-old head had hit a puzzle piece, after slipping in the playroom. At Morristown Hospital, I could pretend that this was one of those inevitable visits. We were there for immediate treatment.

After the psych eval, and the decision that Henry truly was at risk —he might, indeed, hurt himself — the doctor asked him if he would like to ride in an ambulance or ride with me, on the way to another hospital, St. Clare's. Henry chose the ambulance. I wondered if he wanted to lie in a stretcher in the haze of blaring lights because it would feel like an adventure, or if he chose the ambulance because he wanted to show me that he could handle his life: that he would take responsibility, for whatever it was that was happening. (Had I made him feel as if he needed to handle things alone?)

I followed the ambulance to St. Clare's in Boonton. The night was black, and the roads were empty. We went up 287 North to an exit that reminded me of the turnoff we took every year, on our way to Hershey Park. We'd cruise off a ramp like the one I followed and turn giddily onto a path of cornfields. But now, we seemed to be nowhere. Just darkness. Then houses and a stop light and a long flat building that appeared to be abandoned. St. Clare's. I went in, imagining the rest of the night and how it would be. Another plastic chair. Dim lights. Henry in a bed, falling asleep beside me.

Inside the ward, the metal locks buzzed and clicked, and the glass that separated the unit from the waiting room was reinforced with a steel web. After the door swung

open, I saw a mock living room, with boxy wooden furniture and an industrial brown carpet. On the wall next to the nurse's station hung a pay phone. It reminded me of the ones I used to see in downtown New York City, late at night, when I would rush down the pavement on my way to Penn Station.

I wondered about the phone and where I would sit. I was anxious to settle Henry in and begin the rest of the night. I was anxious for some answers.

The male nurse stood before us tall and smiling with a clipboard. "You must be Henry," he said. I felt like we might be at some strange camp. Behind the nurse was another locked door and a black mass of rooms. I realized Henry had no toothbrush or pajamas.

"Do we go back there?" I asked.

"You can come back tomorrow; visiting hours are from 5:30 to 6:30 pm."

I stared at the man before me. A kind enough smile. He was used to saying "you" to parents, I could tell. He was used to how much the parents, helpless before him, did not know.

"What?" I wanted to scream.

"It's OK, Mom," Henry said. He looked at me, his large blue eyes did not seem frightened or worried. He seemed like he was just in his body because he had to be.

I remained glued to the carpet. Could this man force me out? Could he make me leave? I had custody of my own child. I was his parent.

"He'll be fine," the nurse smiled at me. Henry, thin and boyish in his dark jeans, seemed like he was fine. I held my breath.

Did I really have no choice? Was I really supposed to walk out, without my son, in this strange place, at two in the morning?

Dear God, I begged, stay with him.

Driving home I wondered, as I had so many times, if Henry had bipolar. Was Dr. Barrett mistaken when he said it was just depression? Was this bipolar? I thought of my oldest brother, his wild temper, the punches, the arguing, the way my parents had been afraid of him.

Mostly, I wondered why no one could tell me what was wrong with my son. I had read every parenting book and bipolar book and ADHD book I could find. I had smiled through the young girl at the Barnes and Noble bookstore saying, "I'm sorry," when I purchased *The Bipolar Child.* I had gone to many doctors.

As I took the familiar exit towards Morristown, the passenger seat empty beside me, I realized that I would have to be the one to write the manual. I would tell all the others what to do and why, why it was necessary to trust.

Just surrender, I would say. You have to give in to the illness.

I stopped at the traffic light on Park Avenue. Just surrender, I would say.

I laughed out loud. Who knew? Who knew that all the times I had worried about pacifiers and video games and the hot dogs filled with nitrates — all of that — I was living in a world of luxury. I was in a bubble of parenting a healthy child. Now, I was beginning to understand what it felt like to have a child who was ill. A child who was not right. A child who needed to be placed somewhere else.

I remember the moment Henry was born — the blue light of wonder that seized every particle of me. I awoke when I saw him. I awoke in a way that I had never been

awake before. All the pushing and the pain, the feeling that I could die, and it would be OK, really OK, because, well, I had had a really good life so far. And this, this would be enough. All of that fell to the floor, and it was just me and this being, this part of me that felt so familiar and that I suddenly, desperately, loved so much. I was almost in shock at how much I loved him.

And he was beautiful. I know, I'm his mother and all of that. But truly, people stopped us, wherever we went, to comment on his eyes and his skin. He was as stunning as the Gerber baby only, actually, even more beautiful. And smart. He started talking early. "It's hot," he said, when he put his hand near my cup of tea. Or when he pulled himself up near the bathtub and put his hand near the water. "Hot."

We were in California then. Palm trees and perfect days and pushing Henry through the town of Millbrae. Rob and I almost fought over who could hold Henry: we were in love with everything about him. We loved his smile, his singing, his nonstop baby chatter, and the way he got really quiet when I recited *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, in the car, on the way to the library. But almost as much as we were dazzled by our perfect son, we loved being parents. All of my life I had dreamed of being a mother. And the moment I had Henry, I felt a rush of profound light. Dear God, I said, again and again. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

BE NOT AFRAID

When my mother called me, I was adjusting the power cords at Computer Solutions, setting up the work spaces for the class we were holding the next day. At first, she just told me that I would have to walk home. She couldn't pick me up like she usually did. I said nothing, as usual, but silently rolled my eyes. Really? At night? In the dark? Two miles?

"Daddy's had a heart attack," she said. I looked around the dark basement room, at all of the blank monitor faces on the folding tables, in front of the metal chairs. The room held a steady gloom, with its brown carpet and small windows. I felt its darkness creep further inside of me.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

My mother started crying, silently, over the heavy telephone line.

"Where?" I imagined him on a bus, like his own father had been, when he was 53 and had a heart attack. I imagined him going to sleep later that evening, and not waking up, like the first Frank Crawley, whom I had never met.

My mother kept crying, so I waited. It was the least I could do. My mother never asked for anything for herself, not the careful listening she tried to give to us, not a moment to share how difficult it was — the eight kids, the large house, the empty bank account. My eldest brother.

"He's at Mountainside. I'm going there now," she said. "He's 53," she added. And I knew that his age, the same age his own father had been when he had died, was the problem. The major problem. As we held on to the plastic receivers, each one of us silent,

holding our breaths, I knew we both believed, in that moment, that he would die. “He’s so young,” I finally said, even though I did not think of my father as young. I had never thought of my father as young.

“I need him,” my mother’s voice was quiet.

I remember feeling exposed that evening as I walked up the hill from Valley Road on that winding sidewalk that led to Park Street. The cold damp reaching my bones. The darkness hung deeply — no moon or stars lit the path from Upper Montclair to my street on the other side of Watchung Plaza. The emptiness of the silent houses with their long front lawns and wide windows matched my own deep loneliness.

I knew when I got home the rooms would be quiet, and there would be no dinner in the kitchen. My father would not be puttering around his office, sifting through the day’s *Star Ledger*. The first floor would be empty, except for the light in the hall. My younger brothers, “the twins” — Matthew and Paul — were probably across the street at the Thompsons’ house. All my older siblings, by that time, had moved out — they were off, living newly-minted adult lives.

During the days and nights that my mother kept vigil with my father in the hospital, I stopped thinking about myself and my own set of problems. I stopped imagining being at Bates with my closest friends — Jim and Andréa and Chuck. I stopped wondering about Pat Zachary and if he thought of me and how much pot he was smoking.

At 19, I felt that I deserved to be enjoying my sophomore year at Bates, like everyone else, and that I did not deserve to be so rudely forced into working. I blamed my mom for not caring enough to try and help me. I blamed Bates for changing the terms

of my financial aid. And I blamed my brother Joey for being able to continue at Drew, without a blip, his senior year. The October of my freshman year my Nana had died, and my parents' tax return had listed one less dependent the following April, and so, according to the financial aid office at Bates, my parents had more money to pay for my education. And they would, the head of the financial aid office had blithely told me, one hot June day, eight weeks before the start of school. Surely, they would.

"They can't," I had argued back, trying to make him understand that there was no more money. That my parents would not budge on how much they gave me — $2,000 per year. My parents lived by rules. No riding your bike in the road until you were ten; no going up and down the front steps — back stairs only; no going in through the front door; no staying out past midnight in high school; no movies that were not pre-approved with at least two different reviews; no trips to the shore for prom weekend. And no more than $2,000 per year for college.

Of course, how could my parents have raised eight children and not had rules. They tried to be fair to each of us, by making sure that none of us received special treatment. But still. As a daughter who had played by all the rules, saved $4,000 to go to college, chosen a small, private school like my parents had endorsed, and had even subjected herself to the Girls Club of the Montclair Junior League, to earn an extra scholarship, I believed I had tried much harder than my brothers Joe and Mike to get into a good school.

I deserved to be at Bates.

That was the mantra that danced through my head every morning I walked out the door, Bruce Springsteen's "Factory" playing through my walkman, as I made my way to

Upper Montclair and the dark, ugly computer world. Like the mythical narrator of "Factory," I felt that I had entered the blue collar underworld of "work," unfairly, and that I was being forced to do more than I possibly could, even though I was doing a very middle-class job that paid more than I had ever earned. Even though I was essentially a college student, who was taking one semester off to work.

I hated being home, hated the wide swatch of Montclair Avenue, and wished desperately for Maine and the bright autumn leaves that scattered across the bricks and green of my campus quad.

My father seemed smaller and more pale in his hospital bed. He had tubes in his arms and one of those ugly-looking nose breathers in his nostrils. He smiled, weakly, when I saw him. "Hey Mare," he said, holding out his hand, so I could gently hold it in mine. We were close. We loved singing church songs and fixing up the house and going to Friendly's for ice cream. My father taught me how to use a hammer, how to hold a screwdriver gently and press directly down into the center of a screw, without forcing it. He taught me how to put just a bit of paint on a brush, not too much, and scrape it back and forth across the edge of the can. With him, I had crawled down our upstairs hallway, nailing down carpet. With him, I had learned to change a tire and add oil to my engine.

Most of all, my father had taught me how to be happy. He showed me that it was a choice, every day, every hour, to smile wide and make a joke and delight in the person in front of you. My father overflowed with sarcasm and silly signs and sayings like, "People come up to me and say, 'Do you know how to dry dishes?' Oh yes, I say. Oh yes, I am the best dish dryer around."

My father made us believe that he could fight like a lion and nothing would scare him. He sat down with the neighbors' boys, Tom King and Johnny Anello and Chris Kowacheski and listened to what the teachers had told them, the papers they had failed, the dreams they kept. Tom called him "Mr. C," and Johnny had a special knock on our back door. Chris wanted to take him fishing, and asked him again and again.

'Oh yes!" my father would say, "I'll be out there with you. We'll go together. Oh yes!"

But my father's free moments were filled with fixing our cars and painting the back porch and sanding the spackle on our living room walls, just so. He chopped wood in the backyard, made huge stacks by our wood stove and worried aloud about how hard we were on his kitchen chairs. "Don't lean back!" he would call out. "Oh dear God, as I live and breathe! Do you want me to die right now from seeing you do that!"

Now, I grabbed his cold fingers and tried not to cry. "Are you OK?" I asked, feeling ridiculous for asking such a question but unsure of what to say.

He nodded, "Yep. Oh sure." He smiled, "Like a lion." He pointed at the water pitcher. "Get me some, would you?"

I poured his water while my mother went off down the hallway. I handed him the cup with the plastic straw and put the pink pitcher back on the far end of the table. He looked old and strangely vulnerable in his thin hospital gown. His blue eyes drooped under heavy lids. I wanted to lean over and throw both my arms around him, but there were so many tubes.

I did not dare ask my father what he had learned, what had happened, when he would come home. All of that information felt strangely personal — too personal to ask.

My mother would not want me to ask, I knew. And so I stood, awkwardly, by his bedside, wishing I could sit down next to him and take his hand in both of mine — I wanted to comfort him in the same ways he had comforted me when I was small and alone, and in my dark bedroom, scared.

When my mother returned she had a grim line across her mouth. Her chief occupation seemed to be worry — and here, with my father helpless in the hospital room, with all the buzzes and beeps of the monitor keeping tabs on his heart, her fear bloomed.

"Let's let your father rest," she said, in that way that made me feel I had done something wrong; that I shouldn't have come.

My mother's heels clicked down the white linoleum, as we made our way to the silver elevator doors. The air smelled sterile — like a cocktail of bleach and ammonia and Listerine was being vaporized through the light fixtures. Everything had a faint tinge of dirt, and I had an urge to stop and straighten all the manila folders on top of the counter at the nurses' station. I felt out of control. I knew my mother would be even more withdrawn and angry that evening, than she had been at first. She had allowed me to come because it had been a reasonable request, but she hated having anyone there. Her children were not permitted to roam inside her private life. She kept all of us back — with *The New York Times*, her library books, the closed door to her bedroom. We were not allowed in. She did not have the energy. She did not have the time. Then, once in a while, in a rare moment, I would stumble into her sadness. Like I had on the phone, like I had when I had rounded the corner on our front steps when I was a child and saw tears streaming from her eyes, as she shook with anger.

"I need your help," she said, staring at my father, standing in the hall. "I need your help."

In that dark fall of 1985, I was so swamped by my own shock of not being in college that my father's heart scare did not fully overtake me. I could not take it in. Without my friends at home, without my world moving in the way I had been told it would move, I felt inept — like I had failed a test that I had never seen. Two days a week, I went to the gym on Bloomfield Avenue and used the circuit weight machines that strengthened my thighs and hips and arms, as my father got quiet and tried to heal. On the evenings I didn't lift weights, I went five miles in the opposite direction on Bloomfield Avenue, into Verona, to do pilates. An expert mom with a blonde ponytail and a tight stomach pushed us to lift our legs again and again and again as we lay on our sides and cradled our heads. I was determined to dissolve the freshman fifteen, finally, and kept my focus on improving my body, which I felt would be the best proof that I had been fine, quite fine, in my semester away from school.

My father came home after a few days in the hospital and stayed quiet, mostly in front of the television. Seeing him in our large yellow armchair, in front of the cabinet TV felt strange. We had not had a television growing up. My parents had unplugged them when I was in Kindergarten. I remember two of them, small white boxes, sitting at the bottom of our front stairs, waiting to go to the repair shop. They had never returned. The cabinet television and VCR now occupied the large space between our two front windows in our living room. And it was huge. Larger even, than the Dassa's TV, which was the focal point of their family room, in their house directly across the street. The television had come into our home two years before, at Christmas. A present, we were

told, for all of us. But all of us knew, as well, that our mother needed it for her job. She had to make video tapes, and there was no other place to see them but on a TV.

For several weeks, my father stayed in front of evening game shows and loud football games, quiet and unmoving. Not a song left his lips. But I did not worry about him. He was alive. He had not died. And my mother, although worried, had begun to relax. My father would return to working at the bank in Jersey City. He could go back to doing corporate busywork. And she could go back to running trade shows for an art materials association.

My father's tenderness for all of his children was rooted in the sweetest part of Catholicism I have ever known. With him, I could feel the unabiding love of God. A God — in my father's mind — that was a gentle old soul up in heaven, always watching, always loving. Unlike my mother's God, my father's God did not judge or criticize or find us all lacking in goodness and strength. My father's God loved us just as we were, as imperfect as we were — desperate for attention and sweets and a trip to the mall. My father believed that hardship and struggle and deep longing could be brought to the altar of his God and be set down, fully. He could release everything in church and just praise the God who had always been good.

Every Sunday at 8 am, my father attended The Church of the Immaculate Conception without my mother, without most of us, unless I got up early and went with him. He went to the early mass while my mother waited for the mass at 9:30 or the one at 11, when she could see her friends. In the pew next to my father, I marveled at his loud singing, the way he knelt and sat and stood with such reverence. He waited during

communion, as expectant as he must have been, as a boy, with his fishing rod, at the edge of the Harriman lake.

I sang “Blest Be the Lord” with my father and “Be Not Afraid.” He did not mumble or sing quietly like Ron Berrutti’s parents two rows behind us. He sang loudly and with zeal and was always a note or two behind the song, always stumbling for the words, entranced by the music.

With my father I came to believe in the love of God and the words in the songs. I believed in them because I believed in him. I felt safe with my father and deeply loved. His was a warmth and kindness tha filled every room he entered. His was a love that was never conditioned on a chore finished or a kindness given. He loved us because we were his; he loved us because we were God’s.

My father took up writing as his passion in his late seventies after he retired. He wrote about his childhood and fishing and made up stories about the neighbors he had known and summers he had enjoyed as a boy in Sloatsburg, New York. In the early 2000s, after *The Boston Globe* broke the story of the priests and the rampant sexual abuse that had spread through the church — unchecked and hidden — my father grew increasingly sad and disappointed. He wrote letters, first to the bishops of the New Jersey dioceses and then to the bishops around the country. He then sent a letter to every cardinal in Rome. He wanted a day of reconciliation. He wanted the Church to stop and pray and have silence. He wanted the Church to ask the Lord for forgiveness and mercy. He wanted them to admit their sins.

Few bishops and cardinals wrote back to him.

One did, several months later, and he was so touched he wept as he read the letter to me. Dear Sir, it began, and then it thanked him for his letter. And then, the Bishop wrote, “May the face of God shine on you and bring you the sweet peace of Jesus. May you feel God’s love.”

“Isn’t that beautiful?” My father was at the kitchen table, tears streaming from his face. “It’s just so beautiful.”

I was in my late thirties at the time, with my two children Henry and Hope, sitting beside us. My husband Rob stayed quiet at the far end of the table. Respectful. My mother had stopped moving, from the pantry to the table, and we all just stopped and took in the beauty of the moment.

My father loves God so much, I realized then. It hit me like a punch to the gut, how much his church and his faith meant to him. This scandal, this ugliness, ripped his heart in the worst way.

“That is so beautiful, Dad,” I said. I remember marveling at him. At the grace within him, and the grit that drove him to write letter after letter, again and again. He couldn’t save his church from itself — but he could try.

My father survived three heart attacks and two open-heart surgeries and lived until he was 81 in 2013. He died just before my 46th birthday in January. And when I turned around at his funeral, a bitter cold Monday, the sanctuary at Immaculate was overflowing. So many people had come out for this quiet man. So many people had been touched by his gentle humor and loving kindness. I wept for the love in that church. I wept for the love given our family. No one really knew all that my father had carried. No

one really knew how frightened he had been. He had chosen God's love, again and again and again. And, clearly, it had saved his life.

RUNNING ON MONTCLAIR AVENUE

I don't remember the moment I decided I was going to run again. I just remember this feeling taking hold of me one day, while I was teaching, and the feeling was so loud and so familiar that I knew I had to respond. I couldn't pretend anymore that running was something I could give up. At 57, running is something I still want.

The heart wants what it wants, Emily Dickinson wrote in a letter to a friend.

After work, I went home and took out an old pair of running shoes and found the shorts I love, in the bottom of the trunk in my closet, and decided I was going. I drove directly to the trail that snakes through the trees in Loanatka Park. My safe place. My Vermont inside New Jersey.

Loanataka's old trees and thick undergrowth make me forget about everything that does not matter. The streams that laze their ways beside the paved path remind me to keep moving. All you need is one safe space, I imagine writing on a bumper sticker. One place of retreat.

That afternoon — the first time back in my running shoes in six years — I told myself that I was just going to go straight, then make a left, continue across the small stone bridge, and then turn around at the end of the trees, at the road. And I was going to run my best — all the way. And I did. I pushed forward into the strange rhythm of a slow jog; my legs were heavy and wooden and my lungs gasped for air. Where is *my* body, I wondered. I know how to do this.

The body I remember, so palpably, is the one that leaned into the steepest part of the trail that led to the satellite dish at Stanford. I frequented this popular hill — known as

"The Dish" — in the years I lived in Palo Alto, in my early twenties. One evening I circled that 3.7-mile loop twice, with little problem, as I prepped for my first marathon.

The body I remember goes back to the mornings my friend Hillary dragged me from bed, the summer before my senior year of high school. We hit the streets of Montclair before the heat got too strong. We ran up and up the hills of Chestnut then Van Vleck before reaching Highland Avenue, where we could turn and ease into a flat stretch that lasted over a mile. We did six miles before collapsing on my front porch with pitchers of ice water.

I still live inside that body, inside my mind. It is strong and powerful, and it brings me great freedom. It is the body that has always helped me return to the deepest love I have for myself. It is the body I did not know I could want, until I ran.

Now, I have chronic numbness in my feet, and my left leg and hip are tight and weak; I used my hands, at times, to help pull myself out of the car. Six years ago, when the numbness first crept into being, I saw a physical therapist who told me I had to stop running. "First," he said, "You need to figure out what's going on with your feet."

In yoga, I learn that our feet reveal the story of our bodies. My teacher Deb laces her fingers of her right hand between the toes of her left foot and begins to stretch them. "I do this every night," she explains. Her hair is white and her lips ruffle with small lines, yet her energy bounces at the start of each class. I think she's really seventeen.

What does it mean that my feet are numb? I wonder. What does this say about my heart?

That first afternoon back at Loanatka I ran a mile. Then I went back with my husband, Rob, the next three evenings. As he walked, I ran ahead of him and then circled back, trying to go farther than a mile, but eventually gave up. At the end of the week, he told me I looked much stronger. You're doing better, he said. I did seem to be shuffling less and raising my feet more. But I still felt like someone had swapped out my legs for an older pair.

Now, seven weeks later, I can run almost three miles. Not quite. I can run 2.75 miles to be exact. But I am trying to be less exact and more trusting of the way my body is returning to me. Every afternoon, when the deep hunger rises and my anticipation grows, I practically sprint for my shorts and shoes. I have new Hoka running shoes with orthotic insoles. I have found all of my old running shorts and have taken to going alone, as much as I go with my husband. Earlier this week, we raced to the park before a thunderstorm took hold. I ran into the thunder and wished I could run farther.

Next week, my husband and I are flying to San Francisco to see my daughter Hope run a half marathon across the Golden Gate Bridge. She is 21 and a software engineer, a traveler, and a senior at Duke. She has a wide circle of friends, deep compassion and a desire to have a life, filled with ambition and comfort, before she considers a family. She is living into the power and freedom I know she feels when running.

Thirty-two years ago, I lived just outside of San Francisco and ran its half marathon. I ran along the Pacific Coast Highway weeks before I met Rob. I ran my fastest pace that morning. I ran with all the power and freedom I had first known on those streets in Montclair, sweating beside Hillary.

MY SINGING BOWL

The story of this singing bowl started long before 2014, when it became mine. It started back in 1993, and if it could talk, I'm sure it would tell you that it had been sitting on that shelf in Studio Yoga, waiting for me – for over 20 years. This bowl – heavy with brass and the wisdom of Sandrit letters I cannot read – knew that it would take me some time to find my way to its call to deepen awareness. First, I had to have my son Henry, move to New Jersey, join Grace Episcopal Church, have my daughter Hope and reckon with my childhood. I had steps to take before I was ready.

My path to my singing bowl started when I walked into my first meditation group in 1993. I was 27, and I was on my way to being married. And although marriage is a life-changing event, that meditation group cracked me open in ways I never could have imagined. In fact, if you had stopped me on the way to church that day and said, "Girl, you are going to be forever changed by this group. You sure you want this?" I would not have believed you – not at all. By 27, I thought I had lived a lifetime and knew myself. I had been through heady times and sad times and now I was in a magical time. I had met the love of my life and was getting married! Not much could change me. I look back at that young woman with tenderness and awe – she still thought we could skip through this life without ever examining all the glass and glitter that float around our insides. She thought that she could look in the mirror and see her whole entire self.

So, I suppose, this is the story that unravels before me – and lands like a pile of curled photographs – each time I reach for the brass singing bowl I keep in my living room.

My fiancé Rob and I were living in Millbrae, California – ten miles south of San Francisco on the peninsula – and just north of Burlingame, where we found St. Paul's Episcopal Church and Father Stewart, who was willing to do our premarital counseling. As part of our commitment to having premarital counseling, we agreed to attend St. Paul's that year. We agreed between the two of us – because we thought we had to go to church to get the counseling and because I began to want to. (My husband is not a church goer.)

So one bright California Sunday, I decided to go to the meditation group I had seen described in the church bulletin the week before. I'm not sure why I wanted to join this group. If I close my eyes and get quiet, I will remember that in sixth grade, every Wednesday at 6 am, I would run across the lawns from my house to St. John's on the corner and hurry up the steps in the parish hall, to the second floor, where I would land on a folding chair and settle into silence and prayer. And Episcopal prayers have the most beautiful language. Rite One Morning Prayer seemed to sing to me as I fingered the creamy pages of the Book of Common Prayer. I loved those six mornings of Lent, and I think that's what I was remembering when I saw that little slip of an ad for meditation. I think that's the part of me that I had forgotten – so long before – which was now standing up and calling me. In a very loud voice.

I made my way up the carpeted stairs of the church into the parlor. There, I sat down with Kris, who would become a close friend, Rev. Stewart's wife, Allison, who was the founder of the group and Allan, the retired rector of St. Paul's – he had led the church in the 60s and 70s. There were other members of our group, who came and went, but these were three I remember most. We sat in a circle on the stiff wingback chairs and

sofas and started talking about Centering Prayer – a Christian form of meditation. We all agreed that we wanted to get closer to God, and we wanted to try silence. Allison explained how to practice Centering Prayer and talked about some books about the practice, by Father Thomas Keating, a Trappist monk.

I began reading Father Keating's books and attending our meditation group every Sunday before church. We sat upstairs in the parlor and surrendered ourselves to silence and God's work inside of us. When our 20 minutes of meditation ended, we would open our eyes and come back to the furniture, the sunlight and our circle. Our connections to each other grew quickly in the quiet of that room. People shared the most hidden parts of themselves, and I marveled at their honesty. At times, the older members of the group – they were all older than me – shared things I found uncomfortable and unbelievable. One woman shared that her adult daughter would not speak to her. Another said we should get to know the gardens inside ourselves, as all of the land around us was being built up – and we were losing our public gardens.

The old priest, Allan, was in his eighties and used a cane. He had an unlined face that shone with life. He smiled all the time and was deeply moved by the meditation. One time, he described losing a prayer he had wanted to bring us because his wife had swept everything into hiding places, when company was on its way.

"You know how that happens," he had said. "Everything has to be whisked away. As if we never have piles!"

I don't remember Allan's last name, but I do remember loving his presence. He had that soft welcoming spirit I had grown up with at my best friend's Episcopal church in New Jersey. There is something I find so genteel and warm about Episcopal clergy. I

had lived two doors down from my best friend and her father, the rector of St. John's. In my family's world of Roman Catholic masses, priests were not very warm or elegant. I felt most of them held themselves at a distance. They smiled but were not interested in cracking jokes or playing games.

One Sunday, after we had opened our eyes and adjusted to the sun streaming through the long windows, Allan told us that he had never felt as close to God as he did in silence.

"I'm so grateful for this," he said. "In all the time I was a practicing priest I never really stopped to listen to God in this way." His voice was laced with the kind of awe that holds a room in stillness. We sat and just felt his words.

I used to think that you could brush off pages of your past like you ripped out used paper from a notebook. You could just flick them away, and they would sail out into the days behind you, and you would be free of them and would keep on moving forward with a new set of days. Everyday you would wake up as the newest version of yourself. With this perspective, I could dismiss the loneliness of college, the hard relationships with my brothers and any other distasteful parts of my past. I could just toss them away.

But that minister in our circle carried his separateness from God – I could tell – inside of him. He said he had always been too busy. He had been so caught up in planning services and sermons and playing golf that he had neve really taken the time to get close to God.

I carry so much of what he said with me. I used to drive by the entrance to the Crystal Springs Golf Course on Route 287 and think about him, with men from our

parish, playing golf. Now, there was a part of him that was opening up in a new way, and it seemed like it was the very thing he had been craving. The silence fed him.

I bought this round, brass singing bowl from Studio Yoga in 2014. Like the priest in my meditation group, I had fallen for God, hard, in our circles of silence. And this singing bowl represented a new step in my journey of silence. After fifteen years in an Episcopal church in Madison, NJ, I found myself yearninig for something outside of set prayers and hymns and a picture of a God, as a person, rather than a force. For me, "God" has evolved into a presence of love that hangs in the air between people. I think of God not as a "father" or a "son" but as the energy that we can sink into whenever we open our hearts and ask for connection.

Studio Yoga sat on the second floor of the oldest downtown building in Madison for nearly 30 years. And for years, I attended their pilates classes. One day, after I had left my job at Grace Episcopal Church, where I ran all the childen's and family programs, I walked into Studio Yoga to buy a singing bowl. I had started teaching mindfulness classes in schools and community centers, and my business was flourishing. I was ready to replace my wooden chime with a real singing bowl. One I could use in all my classes.

Studio Yoga had a shop in its office, and the price of the singing bowls ranged from 49 dollars to 350 dollars. The bowl I bought cost 59 dollars. And I chose it, partially, for its low price, but mostly for the deep pitch of its sound. It was perfect. This mid-sized bowl – about three inches in diameter — is made of brass and decorated with Sanskrit lettes all around its external edge. Inside the bowl, there are two circles etched in a lighter brass color with small dollops of circles that lace its outer edge. The bowl is in need of a good polish, but I love its small scratches and the dark burnish of the brass. I

love that it looks ancient. It reminds me of the Buddha and the way he would sit perfectly still when Mara came to visit.

Mara is a mythological creature who would try to tempt the Buddha with his beautiful daughters. When that didn't work, he tried to scare him with armies of monsters, but still the Buddha sat still. He put his fingers on the earth and grounded himself in his own connectedness to the moment. I love this story, and the stories that follow. In Buddhist teachings, gurus often explain that the Buddha would invite Mara to tea when he tried to distract him. He turned toward his own fears and monsters and tried to see those demons with an attitude of compassion and curiosity. Why are you here? What happened that made you surface? What do you have to teach me? Mara represents any hard thought or feeling or experience any of us have had.

This singing bowl I carried within a straw basket a good friend gave me as I launched Mindful Kids, my mindfulness business, in 2014. Wherever I went, I carried the bowl and pulled it out into the light of our first lesson – Mindful Listtening. After using it for about eighteen months, I attended a Mindful Schools retreat, where I learned that we should put away our singing bowls, in public workshops and classes, and use only tone bars. The bowl – with its beautiful Buddhist aura – represents a religion many in the secular world find upsetting or threatening. Now, I keep the bowl close to me in my living room, where I meditate, but I no longer travel with it. I own a blue shiny tone bar, made of a modern combination of metals, that is safe for a wary public. Although its sound rings loud and deep, it does not carry the center of my journey. It does not hold my story.

UNMASKED

When I step into my sophomore English class, Claire raises her eyes and puts her hand over her mouth. Much later, I see her braces. Arthur in period two keeps on his white N-95 mask – throughout our block – except when he gets up with his group to practice part of their Macbeth scene. He removes his face covering as he takes the stage. Is he feeling self-conscious because he is the only person in the room, wearing a mask? Or is he nervous about acting in front of his peers?

In the classroom, I marvel at how different my students look unmasked. They are like relatives I have not seen in years: I'm sure I know them, but they look so unfamiliar. My students' mouths are as startling as my Nana's, when she pulled out her teeth, each night, before bed. I sat watching *Dallas*, on the cot in her apartment in Upper Montclair, when she would silently limp in to say "good night." Her wrinkled mouth, swallowing pink lips. She was not my bossy grandmother – waving a Parliament – without her dentures. Her collapsed smile scared me and made me feel as weak and vulnerable as she must have felt every morning, when she took her pearly-whites and slipped them back over her gurms. I am never going to wear dentures, I promised myself those evenings. I was so afraid of getting old and looking weird.

In the hallways, on the first day of mask-less school, tension fills the air. Everyone is looking at each other. I see only jaws, lips, teeth. I feel exposed, suddenly, to the forbidden parts of the people I pass. And then, I cover my own mouth. They are seeing

me. Is my chin too pointy? Are my lips a puffy red, after I loaded my morning toast with salty peanut butter? I am like 15-year old Claire, showing my braces for the first time.

Unmasking feels like stepping out of a Zoom meeting and encountering all those people – safely in boxes in front of you – life-size – in the flesh. Suddenly, everything that could be safely hidden – your loose belly and faded sweats – is revealed. And your rosy skin – smoothed over by Zoom's soft-focus – is now fluorescently lit in an institutional buzz of the here and now: your skin is nothing like that promise on Zoom.

Last summer, I rounded the stairs on the second floor of Brothers College at Drew University and ran straight into Molly Perkins, the head of the Drew Writing Project. She had asked me to give a presentation on mindfulness to her students. For months, I had seen her in various writing programs, online, in a box. I knew her hair, her smile, her slim shoulders. But still, I had no idea what she looked like. In person.

As we stepped towards one another, I tried to harness the spike in my heart rate. I wanted to appear calm, a practitioner of what I preached. Instead, I found myself without words, desperately trying to take her in, all at once. It was Molly, right? We spoke with strange politeness, as if we had known each other many years before, but now could not remember where and when that was.

As my body scoped her body, walking down the hall, I felt my heart rate begin to settle, as my nervous system sensed a green light from hers. For our entire lives, our bodies have been meeting and evaluating the other bodies we encounter in classrooms, cafes, supermarkets. And now, we know people only partially, like we know the

Kardashians or those women on The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills. We know them – we get them – but we have never fully met them.

My nervous system was as startled by the physicality of Molly as my brain must have been when I first saw Ben's teeth. I had known him as a student for two years. At least, I thought I knew him. But when he walked into my eighth-period class, without his mask, I knew his mohawk and his gait, but I did not know his face. Was his mouth always that narrow? His teeth lined up so straight and tight? (When I met his mother in an IEP meeting, two days later, on Zoom, I realized, quite suddenly, that he looked just like his mom. He had always, probably, looked like his mom. But I had never even known what he looked like from the nose down.)

How much does our human biology process? In a recent podcast with author Deb Dana, a clinical social worker, whose work draws on recent research in neuroscience, I learned that our bodies are constantly reading other bodies. When we meet someone whose nervous system is dysregulated, our bodies may pull away. They don't feel calm when sensing the other's rippling nerves. I knew this a tiny bit – but not to the extent that Dana describes. This information, while fascinating, fills me with dread. I worry over all the times my good old nervous system must have been bouncing inside my limbs in panic. How many people did I unknowingly turn off or push away?

But I am relieved, also, that all those times I stepped back, because I just felt it in my gut (so to speak), I felt something real in my gut. Yes, my head was involved – but also my body. But, sometimes, Dana explained, we pull away because the other's

nervous system can remind us of someone in our past. It may not be that the particular person, sitting next to us, is making us uncomfortable. It's the body memory she triggers.

I consider the whole mammalian style of reading nervous systems the next time I sit in a department meeting. As we pull students desks into a small circle in Tricia's classroom, I tell myself that I do not have to fight or flee. And I should not go numb by freezing. Breathe through this, I tell myself. Already the men and women around me are stacking up their armor, folding arms across chests and flipping open Chromebooks. I uncross my legs, try to open up that part of me that likes to listen and tell myself it's OK, I do not have to talk. There are twelve nervous systems in our circle and mine never feels happy.

Inside my students' writing, their internal masks fall away. Mera writes a sincere exploration of the letter "k" that is followed by a period. The kind of "k." that ends a volley of texts. She confesses that she hates this kind of message. It brings steam to her ears and pain to her heart. I can feel her need for approval pulse off the page.

Collin writes about resin. His description is long and instructive. He has discovered 3-D printing and has taught himself how to create a variety of useful objects. It's impressive and interesting. His explanation of the dangers of uncured resin – and the way it can hurt the skin and pollute the lungs – puts me on the inside of his analytical mind. He loves details and order. Today, he asked me if he could write about the importance of using logic, when one is upset, for his This I Believe essay. I wanted to give him a mini-lesson on self-compassion and the messiness of emotions. I wanted to suggest crying and stamping one's feet. But before I could figure out how to respond, he

jumped in, “I know! I can do it on the importance of knowledge. That covers everything!”

Sam, the only black student in our room, writes about his family. He is in New Jersey to play soccer for the elite Red Bulls, and he misses his little brother, Ryan, who still lives in L.A. Recently, he told me that the pressure to go pro (he’s only 15!) has been “messing with his head.” Now, when I look at him, I see he has a boyish smile, and he is sporting a thin moustache. He looks older than he is without his mask. But too young, still, to go pro.

For some students, going maskless is something they will resist for as long as they can. Robert, in the back row, keeps his mask on and says, no, he does not want to sit closer to his classmates. He keeps his novel open as we close our eyes for our daily mindful minute. He disappears into the world inside his books because … I don’t know why. I don’t know what keeps him back from all of us and the world we create, together, in front of him. In his mini-memoir, he writes about his Chinese mother and her hatred of Joe Biden. He lists all his issues with Chinese food. First of all, he explains, it’s “85% trash,” and it includes a variety of “*interesting* meat choices.” He lists scorpion kebabs and donkey meat (which he admits is “pretty alright”) among them. He loves microwaved, processed food. He loves being a Westerner. And I know he’s quite comfortable sitting in the back row, with his book.

When I ask Robert about the story he’s reading, his eyes turn up in a broad smile. “It’s pretty all right,” he says, glancing down at Andy Weir’s *The Martian.* Then, in an effort to keep our conversation going, I offer him a bookmark. He laughs and waves his

hand at me. “I don’t use bookmarks,” he says. He adjusts his mask, making sure it covers his nose. And for a moment, I long to see his mouth and chin. I wonder about his smile.

One of the major conceits that Shakespeare pulls off in *Romeo and Juliet* is the masked ball at the Capulet’s mansion. Romeo – a member of the Montague family, the hateful enemy of the Capulets – sneaks into the ball wearing a decorative mask that hides his nose, eyebrows and the spaces around his eyes. Can you not see who he is? I have wondered, countless times, watching Franco Zeffirelli’s version of this story.

Now, looking at the rows of strangers I have been teaching for several months, I begin to believe in the covering Romeo used to “hide” his face at the masked gala. Maybe that little piece of fabric does mask our true identities. It hides so much of who we are.

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