Fear Not

Tidings of Comfort and Joy
to Carry You Through the Holiday Season
2021-2022

Readings contributed by members and friends
of Community Congregational Church
Tiburon, California
Dear readers,

Fear not! That’s what the angels told the shepherds as they announced the birth of the baby Jesus in Bethlehem. Encounters with angels apparently can be frightening, and these heavenly messengers wanted the shepherds to know that they need not fear – and in fact they should rejoice! Our reader this year brings a similar message (though not from heights quite as lofty as those of the angels), and it comes to you in many and varied forms. As usual there are a lot of poems, and there are some wonderful stories, both true and fictional, all of which bring good tidings during this time of year when we await the birth of the Light, and as we continue to seek ways to find hope and courage in the midst of daunting challenges. Oh, and mixed in with the poetry and prose are a few festive recipes, and several links to songs and videos.

Contributors were asked this year to send in writings that reflected their “insights, coping strategies, prognostications and visions for the future,” and they responded beautifully and abundantly. You will notice in the Table of Contents that, as was true last year, the reader is divided into a number of sub-sections, each with a certain “theme.” The grouping of the pieces is somewhat arbitrary, as many of them could have been placed in more than one section. But I think you will be able to see why I clustered the writings as I did. You will also notice that all but one of the section headings are in the form of commands, e.g., “let go,” “remember,” “heal.” This is my way of affirming that there is indeed healing power in these writings, and that you would do well to heed the “commands” at the head of each section as you take in the riches offered in this reader.

There is much we might (and often do) fear in our world. There are also angelic presences come to show us that amid the craziness and chaos, there is light, hope, and most importantly, there is love. I believe you will find much food for heart and soul in this well-packed reader. Fear not to dive in!

Sandra Weil
# Fear Not

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Minister’s Message

To come to ground is to find a home in circumstances and in the very physical body we inhabit in the midst of those circumstances and above all to face the truth, no matter how difficult that truth may be; to come to ground is to begin in the courageous conversation, to step into difficulty and by taking that first step, begin the movement through all difficulties, to find the support and foundation that has been beneath our feet all along.

— David Whyte

For twenty months we have navigated this new terrain. We’ve locked down; we’ve opened up; we’ve surged and closed down again. We have masked and unmasked and masked again. Many of us have taken vaccines and boosters when offered. We’ve washed our hands in a way our mothers always wished we would. We’ve learned to let go of things we thought were important, after we realized they weren’t important at all. We embraced our new priorities and wondered why it took a pandemic to help us find them.

You would think that a person steeped in theology, philosophy, and spirituality would retreat to those higher realms in times of struggle and uncertainty. In decades past, I might have been found in a chapel surrounded by incense, making supplication to the Divine for the life of the world, begging for deliverance from the scourge of something like COVID-19. Instead, I have retreated to the soil. The fragrance of earth has become my incense, and the sun and moon and stars are the candles. Audible prayers have been replaced with birdsong to which I can add nothing. My new religion is pure and undefiled, and I’m not sure I can ever complicate it again with the institutional forms of my past.

During all these many months when there was nowhere to be and nothing to be done about it, I simply started walking. I found sidewalks I’d never traveled, neighborhoods I didn’t know existed, parks I’d never taken the time to find, and trails that invited me further and further into the wild. All of these pulled me out my front door and into a new hermitage called earth. No longer do I journey to the farthest reaches of the universe for answers, but to the very ground beneath my feet. I feel its gravitational pull and find that I am perfectly at home.

There are many reasons to say that things will never be the same. This might be one of those difficult truths David Whyte speaks of, but the more I step into it, the more supported I feel, the more steady I am, and hopefully the wiser I have become. In this Advent season, my hope is that we shall find our home in the earthiness of a Judean stable, a humble place perhaps, but one that keeps us at the center of who we really are.

— Rev. David Starbuck Gregory
the lesson of the falling leaves
Lucille Clifton

the leaves believe
such letting go is love
such love is faith
such faith is grace
such grace is god
i agree with the leaves

- contributed by Jolyn O'Hare

* * * * *

Hazel Archer-Ginsberg is an Anthroposophist (student of Rudolf Steiner's Spiritual Science) living in Chicago. She puts out a daily blog called Reverse Ritual in which she shares an astonishing volume and diversity of wisdom. This is one of her recent offerings, telling the story of a leaf who could be any one of us.

- Sandra

Dressed and Ready to Go
Hazel Archer-Ginsberg

Once upon an autumn day that was cut through with the thought of Winter, a little leaf was heard to sigh as leaves often do when the cold wind is swirling about. And the twig said, "What is the matter, little leaf?" And the leaf said, "The wind just told me that one day it would pull me off and throw me down to die!" The twig told this to the branch, and the trunk told it to the bark, and when the roots heard it, the branches of the tall tree rustled all over, and sent back word to the leaf, "Do not be afraid, you shall not go until you want to." And so the leaf stopped sighing, and instead went on nestling and singing. Every time the wind spoke, the tree shook itself and stirred up all its leaves, the branches bobbed, the thin twig twittered, and the little leaf danced merrily up and down, as if nothing could ever pull it off. And so it was all through the month of October. And then November came and it grew colder still.

As the outer light faded, the little leaf noticed that all the leaves around it became brighter. Some were yellow and some scarlet, and some striped with gold or curled with brown. The little leaf asked the tree what this meant. And the tree said, "All these leaves are getting ready to fly away, and they have put on these beautiful colors to celebrate." Then the little leaf began to want to go, too, and grew very beautiful in thinking of it, and when it was a bright orange color, like the wings of a butterfly, it noticed that the branches of the tree had no color in them at all, and so the leaf said, "O branches, why are you so lead-colored and we so golden?" And the tree answered, "I must keep on my work-clothes, for my life is not done, but your clothes are for holiday, because your task almost complete."

Just then a stiff gust of wind came, and the leaf let go, without worry, and the wind took it up and turned it over and over, and whirled it like a spark of fire in the air... and then it dropped gently down under the edge of the tree, among hundreds of other brightly colored leaves. There the little leaf lay dreaming of the sun and stars. And when the child picked it up and held it to the light, it flew out again and became the light.
Spirit Has Its Own Ways
Rogers Carrington

Three leaves flew into my hot tub and I watched them ready themselves for their journey. They righted themselves with their stems proudly raised in the air. The goal I had set for them was to make it through the varied jet streams and whirlpools to travel to where I was sitting on the other side of the hot tub. They demonstrated no interest in what I wanted. In contrast they kept darting in and out, as the streams of water kept pushing them in the same predictable circles. What bothered me is that they didn't seem to care about where I wanted them to go. Occasionally, one of them would look like it found a stream that would transport it to me. Then in an instant it would turn back and join the others in their mindless circle route.

A soft wind swept across the water and all three in unison changed direction toward me. Then just as suddenly they stopped, bobbed up and down and drifted back toward the circle eddies. I realized that no matter how much I wanted them to complete their journey to me, I was powerless to make it happen, unless I violated the unspoken rule I had made that they had to make it on their own. The journey would not be a success if I reached out, scooped them up and brought them to me. They had to do it on their own.

I continued watching them and hoping they would find their way to me and sometimes it seemed like they tried. Then the same old patterns would repeat and they returned to their circle game of going round and round in the same old pattern. I was patient and didn't give up. I still hoped they would find their way to me. I varied my waiting by intentionally being very still and other times stirring the water. Neither worked. But there was a moment when I thought they noticed the disturbance I created. It didn't, however, change their course or alter their circle chasing.

I stopped watching them and shifted my thoughts to myself and asked: What is this game you're playing? Is this a statement about your life? As you are patiently waiting for your dreams to come true, do you still think there is something more you should do? Rationally, you know there isn't ... or is there? Yes, you could break the rules, reach out and violate the role you have been given to play. But would breaking the rule really make a difference or would it get in the way of your dream being successful? It was hard because I wanted to do more than wait, be patient and let things take their course. It was hard to realize that my dream being successful was not up to me. My dream was dependent on too many other forces over which I had no control. I had done my part. That had to be enough.

Then I refocused and got out of my head and looked down. There, bobbing up and down contentedly were all the three leaves. They had found their way to come to me. I hadn't noticed how and hadn't participated in their successful journey. I had sat there patiently and yet impatiently in my head. As before, they had not paid attention to my wants and the strategies they could use to come to me. They just found their way, creating new paths and routes to complete their journey. I thanked them and lifted them out of the hot tub so they could chat with the wind and decide on the next part of their ongoing journey that did not include me.

I was quiet, patient, and realized my dream had a journey of its own to complete. My job was to stand by in readiness and be content that what I needed to do was being done.
Embrace the Darkness

Assumptions – Jeanie Tomanek
Lines Written in the Days of Growing Darkness
Mary Oliver
from A Thousand Mornings

Every year we have been
witness to it; how the
world descends

into a rich mash, in order that
it may resume.
And therefore
who would cry out
to the petals on the ground
to stay,
knowing as we must,
how the vivacity of what was is married
to the vitality of what will be?
I don’t say
it’s easy, but
what else will do

if the love one claims to have for the world
be true?

So let us go on, cheerfully enough,
this and every crisping day,

though the sun be swinging east,
and the ponds be cold and black,
and the sweets of the year be doomed.

This poem speaks to me of hope and faith that carries us through days and times of darkness, literal and figurative.

- Diane Suffridge
Dare to Look Into the Dark
Hazel Archer-Ginsberg

Here is another offering from Hazel Archer-Ginsberg’s blog “Reverse Ritual.” I found this posting especially poetic and insightful, and Hazel gave me permission to include it in the reader.

— Sandra

Greetings Friends,

This morning on the eve of “Daylight Saving Time” in the twilight of a grey dawn, as I stand at the Great Inland Sea, I am greeted by a fine white mist, which spreads across the brown stubble stalks of wild grasses like an undulating blanket. The goddess Natura is resting, rockin in her dark womb the seeds of future growth. She rests also in our souls where we hold the seed of our future self.

What the forthcoming will bring seems covered by the darkening, yet if we dare to look into the dark, we see evidenced in the swirling mists a purposeful pulsing. In these longer nights our spiritual seeds seek to be nurtured, unbound, and cherished. Banking our inner light, we belong to ourselves, and when we consciously gestate this seed of Self in our busy lives, even if only for a few minutes every day, we can live with a deep knowing that through this dark season, and on into the future, which is shrouded in the darkness of time, we are becoming.

Everything changes. All life must fluctuate. Like the scales of Libra, it cannot be fixed. Day and night, life and death, activity and quietness, the out-breath and the in-breath, are the swings of the pendulum, the rhythms which bear us through the cycle of the year and enable us to mature into our true being, when we cultivate the inner observer at the fulcrum of the scales. From this Christic mood we prepare the soil for the future fruits of soul to ripen.
Lean into the darkness.
Take me down to the holy darkness to Love’s roots.
I lean into that darkness,
The darkness that surrounds me,
This nurturing room for my restless spirit.

Let me borrow your eyes, Beloved.
Then I shall see in the dark, though for answers I do not look.
It is enough to wait,
To wait in the holy darkness,
This nurturing womb for Love’s yearning.

Listening to the sound of silence,
And lean into the song of darkness, I wait for You.
Waiting with purpose for who I will become,
Waiting without agenda for things I cannot change,
I become one with the One I love,

For I have seen too many stars,
Too many stars to let the darkness overwhelm me.

I keep vigil:
with my heart’s eternal questions, and with my deep longings.
with those places in my being where the light has grown dim.
with those whose hearts are tired, and with those whose hope is lost.
for those who sleep and for those who cannot rest.
for those with fearful hearts, and for those whose hearts are angry.
for those whose courage is waning and for those whose strength is growing.
for those who suffer, and for those who keep vigil.

I keep vigil. I keep vigil. I keep vigil.

For I have seen too many stars,
Too many stars to let the darkness overwhelm me.

Take a listen here to the song sung by Velma Frye on her album “Take Heart.”

— contributed by Winnie Crittenden
Winter's Cloak
by Joyce Rupp

This year I do not want the dark to leave me.
I need its wrap of silent stillness,
its cloak of long lasting embrace.
Too much light has pulled me away from the chamber of gestation.
Let the dawns come late,
let the sunsets arrive early,
let the evenings extend themselves while I lean into the abyss of my being.
Let me lie in the cave of my soul,
for too much light blinds me,
steals the source of revelation.
Let me seek solace in the empty places of winter’s passage,
those vast dark nights that never fail to shelter me.

– contributed by Christopher Love
Remember
A Time for Memory
Linda Spence

I chose this piece because for me this has been a time of TIME — time to just stand there for a moment and look out at the vast sky and drift instead of driving from here to there and back again for meetings and errands and gatherings etc., etc., and getting another tank of gas. So here I am surrounded by books and photos and time travel memories, in addition to that sky, and it’s been sweet and poignant and discerning, and there’s a lot of dear, warm gratefulness in the mix.

~ Linda

When my little brother, very young, was diagnosed asthmatic, my mother, already wise from my older brother’s lungs, knew what this precarious breath could do to a young life. On the balcony off my parents’ dressing room, she set up two cots, laid out the sleeping bags she had made for our camping trips, then, for pre-dawn dew, rigged a tarp overhang above the head, retractable so as not to miss the stars. A sturdy wooden stand between the cots held the flashlights, thermos, cups, star charts, and books of mythology and fables.

One night when I was brushing my teeth, I heard them out there through the high bathroom window, their voices soft, chummy. Moving closer, I closed my eyes, held my breath, and entered their warmth. Turning out the light, I joined the darkness, made my way downstairs, out the kitchen door, across the cool lawn under my bare feet, and sat on one of the empty swings. Slowly swaying, I leaned back, my toes pointing up to the starry dark, and watched their flashlights tracing as their soft voices floated down on me.

They were happy, they were love, they were mine. I knew. I swung higher, then higher, leaned back and drifted. Stars blurred, as my eyes flowed with the pure completeness of my presence in that moment of us, our three souls so tenderly held on our good tiny spot on this great spinning ball, all of this somehow held aloft within the endless shimmering dark.

* * * * *

Inscription of Memory
Gail Lester

You finger a cottonwood leaf
imprinted in the ceramic vase.
I collected these leaves with my father,
you begin.
I was about twenty and winter was
deep in the woods.
We scraped away snow
maybe a foot or more.
There, beneath, we found them,
many leaves, still wet
for the potter to use.
He chose this one for the urn
and it brings back that
day, just me and my dad.
The Pandemic gave me time to pore over photo albums and boxes of old photos. I was reminded of the old days and my childhood growing up on a Wisconsin farm. The following story emerged from one of those precious memories.

- Gailya

**A Child’s Country Christmas**

Gailya Magdalena

Waking up in my icy-cold bedroom in the old Wisconsin farmhouse, I pressed my nose to the frosty windowpane. The snow sparkled in the sunshine and the world was a fairyland. It was Christmas Eve, the most wonderful day of the year!

I was in first-grade at Zion Lutheran school in Wayside, Wisconsin, and tonight, I would be participating in the Christmas Eve program with the other kids. I had memorized my “piece” and could recite it perfectly. A couple of weeks before, Miss Glandorf had announced to the four first-grade girls that three of us would be chosen to sing “Away in a Manger.” I loved to sing and I could hardly wait! That night before bed, I practiced singing the sweet German Christmas carol over and over again. I wanted to be able to sing it perfectly the next day at school when we practiced.

The next day, when Miss Glandorf announced the names of the girls who would be singing, I could hardly contain my excitement! “Singing the first and second verse will be … Jean.” I held my breath. “Singing the third and fourth verse, will be … Charlotte.” I was next! “Singing the fifth and sixth verse, will be … Marlys.” Stunned, I choked back the tears. I knew all the words to the song and I loved to sing. Why had she left me out?

Christmas Eve had arrived at last, and I could hear bustling sounds behind the closed parlor door. That could mean only one thing: Santa had arrived! The excitement was building. Tonight, when we got home from church, Mom and Dad would open the parlor door and my little sister, Leanne, and I would get to see the Christmas tree, shimmering with light, for the first time. After a quick supper, we bundled up warmly, piled into daddy’s old, blue Chevy and drove to Wayside, where the little church on the hill, the church with the tall spire, was all aglow.

The joyful sound of pipe organ music drew us inside, where the scent of evergreen and pine permeated the air, reminding me of snow-covered forests. Best of all, there were two enormous trees in the front, one on each side of the chancel, illuminated with blue lights and silver tinsel.

The children solemnly paraded toward the chancel, where they would face the congregation. Everything was magical, but in my heart of hearts, I yearned to sing with the other three girls. “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” rang out from the congregation, and then the children’s program began. Rollie did his recitation first, followed by Gordon, and then Myron. It was almost time for the three girls to sing. The moment finally came: Jean and Marlys stood up and moved forward – but, where was Charlotte? Much to my astonishment, Miss Glandorf motioned me to rise and take my place with the other two girls. She bent down and whispered, “Charlotte panicked. Can you sing her part?” I took my place between Jean and Marlys, flooded with a sweet sense of belonging. Daddy had tears in his eyes. “What a wonderful surprise,” he said, “but why didn’t you tell us you would be singing?”
During this past year, my relationship with my special fifty-year-old daughter has been thrust into a different level of intensity. She was born with incomplete development of the corpus callosum membrane in the brain and consequently suffered developmental delays, has limited mental capacity, a rare seizure disorder, and minor cerebral palsy. She needs supervision 24/7. Her pre-covid team of three caregivers has been reduced to one part-time person plus Mom, now pulling plenty of overtime. We are together more hours than we’d prefer, and really, nobody is to blame for the inevitable blisters we’ve developed from rubbing against one another for too long.

Our pace is not a match: I must slow down, develop more patience as my daughter stutters out a sentence or throws a toddler-like tantrum when the right words don’t come to her. The relationship has been thrust into a crucible, rendered to its essential elements. A crucible must withstand a higher temperature than its contents, which makes me wonder if this trying experience is simply another sneaky display of God’s Grace. We may have melted down, but Grace is apparently holding.

It used to be that when circumstances and conditions like my daughter’s diagnosis or the current pandemic arrived without the courtesy of advance notice, my initial responses were not always gracious. I did not welcome them to my house as honored guests (per Rumi’s “The Guest House”); rather, I would resist, deny, try to drown my sorrows in alcohol, and when I gave that up, stuff them down with cake and ice cream instead. It shouldn’t have been a surprise, therefore, that at the beginning of the pandemic when my daughter and I were house-bound and bored, we began baking in earnest, using grease-stained recipes retrieved from a file of yellowed newspaper clippings and hand-scrawled index cards from people long since departed this earth. I embraced nostalgia as a lost love, finding comfort in the working of dough, the aromas, the leisurely teatime ritual of spiced chai, and a slice of Victoria sponge. And now with the approach of the Holiday season, childhood memories of Christmases in London with my beloved and endearingly dysfunctional Scottish family re-surface as reliably as Christmas music in October at Best Buy.

Pudding for the holidays, as in Figgy Pudding, or Plum Pudding, or just plain old store-bought Christmas Pudding, doused in brandy, set alight and borne aloft to the table, was never a tradition in my childhood home, although I wished it had been. You see, Christmas was not part of my parents’ childhood. They’d grown up in Glasgow, Scotland, during the Depression years. For the Scots at that time, Christmas was strictly a religious holiday: midnight mass, and that was it. Besides which, during that era, basic groceries, heating, light, warm clothes, shoes, were scarce — not just in Glasgow, but around the world. To keep warm, many families put on all their clothes and bundled up in bed together, and not just at night. Lacking shoes, some stayed home from mass, and on Mondays, so my parents said, the parish priest was known to visit the absent families and mete out corporal punishment to children.

Such horrors turned my parents away from religion (the “opiate of the masses,” as they saw it), and they became political progressives ignoring Christmas completely. Instead, they raised funds for the Spanish Civil War and played in dance bands — father on clarinet and sax, mother on the piano. As soon as they could, they moved south to the warmer climate of London in England for my father’s musical career. There my parents encountered the English customs of Christmas trees (thanks to Prince Albert from Germany), turkey and presents, none of which appealed to them philosophically, nor economically. However, like parents everywhere, they were not immune to wheedling and whining, those finely-honed skills of childhood, which...
wormed an inroad to their otherwise thrifty hearts. Eventually my sister and I enjoyed whatever modest tree was left in the market by Christmas Eve, and for presents, always a box of new hankies with flowers embroidered in one corner and colored stationery to write to our grandparents. By the time we were teens we’d find talcum powder, bath salts, and sometimes a new nightie under the tree. All very practical gifts, you might note, except for one year, oddly, when I received a Mr. Potato Head set which included a set of plastic body and facial parts to be attached to a raw potato. I was baffled: So what? Who cares? I thought. I’d been hoping instead for a copy of Elvis Presley’s “Let Me Be Your Teddy Bear,” but Elvis, according to my father, was the musical equivalent of the anti-Christ. (Despite the fact that Daddy didn’t believe in religion, he’d spit out the words “Christ” and “Jeezus” whenever he was frustrated. It was confusing.)

Close to Christmas Day, the kitchen would be filled with the fragrance of cloves and cinnamon from mince pies baking in the gas oven while my sister and I used our fingers to draw snowflakes that dribbled down the steamed-up windows. My mother in her stained apron would sip sherry, draw deeply on her cigarette, her cheeks blooming rose pink, and for an hour or so, once a year, the family felt whole and easy. At bedtime on Christmas Eve, my sister and I each draper a long woolly sock over the end of our beds, and in the morning there’d be a thin-skinned tangerine stuffed into its toe. We’d wake to the smell of bacon-sloathered, chestnut-stuffed turkey set in the oven by my mother at dawn, to roast on a low heat for several hours while we opened gifts, dressed in holiday sweaters, and fasted for the upcoming feast. Before the feast, each year without fail, my parents fought about how to carve the turkey, how long the sprouts should be cooked (mother preferred mush, father fork-tender only), and whether or not the children should be allowed a sip of sherry (because the sip turned into gulps and red-faced giggling fits which alarmed my father).

The next day, Boxing Day, we might attend a pantomime show which were musicals for children, based on nursery rhyme characters such as Puss in Boots. English pantomime includes the tradition of characters who cross-dress. The main character, known as the Principal Boy, was played by a woman who bared her lovely legs in fishnet tights, prancing on stage in high heels and a hip-skimming flared jacket. For comic relief, there’d be an elderly Widow or Dame character, always played by a man, often a famous comedian. Actors would pose questions to the audience such as “Now where, I wonder, would I find my pot of potatoes?” and the audience would shout back the answer, usually several times as the character on stage would sometimes feign deafness and make mistakes on purpose, such as opening a door instead of looking in a cupboard. Grown-ups guffawed and children shrieked. Afterwards, at home, we’d enjoy leftover cold turkey in sandwiches and warmed up mince pies for dinner. Somehow cold turkey sandwiches in America just don’t taste the same, and even the term “cold turkey” implies something unpleasant related to a bad habit.

Sixty-some years later, I try to keep up with a few of the English Christmas customs, including pulling apart Christmas crackers (poppers) to retrieve colored tissue paper hats, a silly riddle and maybe a small gift like a whistle. We don’t eat dinner until everyone has on their paper hat. And as for pudding, since living in California for over forty years, I’ve graduated from imported traditional puds to persimmon pudding baked from scratch, the recipe for which is included below and came from my friend Kristin Riley. As a final flourish, the pudding can be drenched in a vanilla-butter-sugar sauce, the recipe for which was given to me by Carolyn Long years ago when she brought a steamed cranberry pudding to one of our Dinners for 8. May you enjoy both the pudding and the sauce, and may Nostalgia embrace your warmly as a beloved friend.
Persimmon Pudding

Ingredients

1 cup persimmon puree
(Note: I prefer ripe Hachiya persimmons which are acorn-shaped, squishy when ripe, and on the outside of which a single large black spot appears when ripe. I have also used the Fuyu ones (shaped like a squat tomato) which are easy to slice and are crunchy like an apple. But if I use Fuyu first I let them ripen on the counter until very soft with skin starting to wrinkle. I use a Cuisinart processor to make the puree after discarding stems and seeds).

2 tsp. baking soda
¼ lb. unsalted butter
1 ½ cups sugar
2 eggs
1 Tbsp. lemon juice
1 cup unbleached flour
1 tsp. ground cinnamon
½ tsp. salt
1 cup chopped walnuts or pecans
½ cup raisins (soaked and drained)

Directions

• Add 2 tsp. baking soda to 1 cup persimmon puree. Set aside. It will swell into a hard jelly.
• Cream butter with sugar.
• Add eggs and lemon juice, mix till well blended and set aside.
• Combine flour, cinnamon, salt. Add this to butter mixture; mix.
• Now add persimmon puree and beat all till well mixed.
• Stir in nuts and raisins.
• Pour batter into greased bundt or loaf pan.
• Set pan within a large baking pan. Add hot water to come up the outside of the bundt/loaf pan by 2 inches. Cover entire baking pan with foil to create water bath which will steam the pudding.
• Bake approx. 2 hours at 325º or until pudding is set. Cool on rack. Carefully loosen sides from pan and invert to a plate. Serve warm, drenched with a sweet sauce of choice. We prefer this recipe from Carolyn Long.

Vanilla/Butter Sauce

½ cup butter
1 cup half and half
1 cup sugar
1 tsp. vanilla essence
Heat on stove top till sugar dissolves and butter melts. Careful, if you boil it the cream will curdle.

There’ll be tons of washing up to do, but it’s worth it for this once-a-year treat.
Connect

Two Ladies Walking Arm in Arm
Georges Van Houten
An Old Marriage
Bill Eichhorn

He said we need to leave
at 8:45 in the morning, but
when 8:45 rolled around,
she was still in her robe
reading the newspaper.
Oh, I thought you said 9:30.

Might be late for
the symphony rehearsal,
but in these later years of an old,
happy marriage, nothing to spat about
when we can arrive whenever, hold hands
and enjoy Mozart and Mendelssohn.

Quick bath, dressed
in stylish purple and black,
she is ready to go. Traffic
light across the Golden Gate.
In our seats. The maestro
raises his baton.
Old Friends

Freya Manfred

Old friends are a steady spring rain,
or late summer sunshine edging into fall,
or frosted leaves along a snowy path –
a voice for all seasons saying, I know you.
The older I grow, the more I fear I'll lose my old friends,
as if too many years have scrolled by
since the day we sprang forth, seeking each other.

Old friend, I knew you before we met.
I saw you at the window of my soul –
I heard you in the steady millstone of my heart
grinding grain for our daily bread.
You are sedimentary, rock-solid cousin earth,
where I stand firmly, astonished by your grace and truth.
And gratitude comes to me and says:

“Tell me anything and I will listen.
Ask me anything, and I will answer you.”

- contributed by Jolyn O’Hare

Old Friends Chatting at the Pub – Gerke Hankes
This poem was inspired by a photo taken by a neighbor of classical pianist Lara Downes, as she played a neighborhood concert in Sacramento, California during the summer of 2020.

- Bill Eichhorn

Neighbors
Bill Eichhorn

She sits at her gleaming white grand piano,
a colorful scarf draped across her shoulders.
Two large windows next to her are wide open
to the night, to her neighborhood. A languishing moon
droops from the evening’s lingering heat.

As she has done many times on the concert stage,
she plays Beethoven, Ellington, Clara Schuman, Bach,
as well as spirituals and freedom songs. Her audience –
neighbors masked, seated on lawn chairs six feet apart –
clap vigorously, enjoying the stories she tells.

Near the end of the evening, she leans out
the window to chat with her neighbors, to ask
how they are doing, do they need anything. Like
loaves and fishes, oatmeal cookies and lemonade
suddenly appear on a table and are enjoyed.

As vaccinations go into arms and restrictions are lifted,
may we remember how we took care of one another
during the pandemic. How our neighborhoods grew
into communities because neighbors offered
their gifts to one another.
Sing, Pray, Practice

Singing Monk – Gaetano Bellei
Living Today in the Moment

Song lyrics
Scott DeTurk
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Living today in the moment
Living today in the here and the now
Trying to stay in each moment I have
I found the will but I’m still learning how to...

Live every day in the moment
Living today one step at a time
Trying to stay in each moment I have
Though the steps may be small, they’re all part of the climb to...

See the world from a new vision
Finding a new point of view
Each moment is a decision
To step out of the old and step into the new.

Living today in the moment
Watching my breath as it comes in and out
Trying to stay in each moment I have
Releasing my fear and releasing my doubt by...

Getting beyond expectation
Learning to get beyond my regret
Trying to stay in each moment I have
Learning how to forgive, learning what to forget

And stay in a new place of being
Away from the whos, whens and whys
And get to a new place of seeing
That I can be smart but I’d rather be wise
I can be nice but I’d rather be good
I can agree but I’d rather speak truth
And I’d rather do right than do what I’m told I should and...

Live every day in the moment
A journey that’s always just begun
Trying to stay in each moment I have
For each moment I have is always the only one.
Stillness and Silence
Quotes shared by Marie Salerno

Within you there is a stillness and a sanctuary to which you can retreat at any time and be yourself.

- Terry Hershey

In our human world, we worship speed and desire. We desire money. We assign money to time. What is time worth? Your time. My time. Our time. Talk fast. Work fast. Drive fast. Walk fast. Run. Who ever told us to wear jogging shoes to work? Don’t saunter. Don’t look. Speed walk. Speed dial .... We do not trust slowness, silence, or stillness.

- Terry Tempest Williams

We should enter these moments of stillness and understand them. We should also speak from these moments of silence and act out of them. We are what we do with that stillness and silence.

- John Chryssavgis

In stillness, we are invited...
invited to receive
invited to see
invited to listen
invited to feel
invited to give
invited to heal
invited to touch
invited to be touched
invited to grow
invited to love
invited to be loved
invited to be one with God
“Be still and know that I am God....”

- Psalm 46

- Herb Thomson
Over the Weather
Naomi Shihab Nye

We forget about the spaciousness
above the clouds

but it’s up there. The sun’s up there too.

When words we hear don’t fit the day,
when we worry
what we did or didn’t do,
what if we close our eyes,
say any word we love
that makes us feel calm,
slip it into the atmosphere
and rise?

Creamy miles of quiet.
Giant swoop of blue.

~ contributed by Jolyn O’Hare

* * * * *

Opening

When you open yourself to the continually changing, impermanent, dynamic nature of your own being and of reality, you increase your capacity to love and care about other people and your capacity to not be afraid. You’re able to keep your eyes open, your heart open, and your mind open. And you notice when you get caught up in prejudice, bias, and aggression. You develop an enthusiasm for no longer watering those negative seeds, from now until the day you die. And you begin to think of your life as offering endless opportunities to start to do things differently.

~ Pema Chödrön, from Practicing Peace in Times of War
Hold On To Me
shared by Doug Cook

The song “Hold On To Me” “found” me this year, and I had to share it with you. The heartfelt lyrics by Lauren Daigle deliver a message that there’s still good in the world. The composer’s explanation of the song is in italics below. I think this song is very poignant for this year of continued COVID disruptions, fires, and drought.

No matter the circumstance you are walking through, there is someone in your life there to help you get through it. There’s something powerful about having people in your life that see who you are through the worst of circumstances and still choose you. “Hold On To Me” is about all of us coming together and remembering that being with each other and being there for each other is what life is truly all about.

Go here to hear the song performed. I find it very moving.

~ Doug

When the best of me is barely breathin'
When I'm not somebody I believe in
Hold on to me

When I miss the light the night has stolen
When I'm slammin' all the doors You've opened
Hold on to me, hold on to me

Hold on to me when it's too dark to see You
When I am sure I have reached the end
Hold on to me when I forget I need You
When I let go, hold me again

When I don't feel like I'm worth defending
When I'm tired of all my pretending
Hold on to me

When I start to break in desperation
Underneath the weight of expectation
Hold on to me, hold on to me

Hold on to me when it's too dark to see You (I'll hold on)
When I am sure I have reached the end
Hold on to me when I forget I need You (I'll hold on)
When I let go, hold me again

I could rest here in Your arms forever
'Cause I know nobody loves me better
Hold on to me, hold on to me.
Psalm 139

A well-known psalm that can be balm for our time.
We are known; we are loved; we are not alone.

- Sandra Weil

O Lord, You have searched me and known me.
You know my sitting down and my rising up;
You understand my thought afar off.
You 'comprehend my path and my lying down,
And are acquainted with all my ways.
For there is not a word on my tongue,
But behold, O Lord, You know it altogether.
You have hedged me behind and before,
And laid Your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
It is high, I cannot attain it.
Where can I go from Your Spirit?
Or where can I flee from Your presence?
If I ascend into heaven, You are there;
If I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there.
If I take the wings of the morning,
And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
Even there Your hand shall lead me,
And Your right hand shall hold me.
If I say, “Surely the darkness shall fall on me,”
Even the night shall be light about me;
Indeed, the darkness shall not hide from You,
But the night shines as the day;
The darkness and the light are both alike to You.
For You formed my inward parts;
You covered me in my mother's womb.
I will praise You, for I am
fearfully and wonderfully made;
Marvelous are Your works,
And that my soul knows very well.
My frame was not hidden from You,
When I was made in secret,
And skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth.
Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed.
And in Your book they all were written,
The days fashioned for me,
When as yet there were none of them.
How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God!
How great is the sum of them!
If I should count them, they would be more in number than the sand;
When I awake, I am still with You.
Oh, that You would slay the wicked, O God!
Depart from me, therefore, you bloodthirsty men.
For they speak against You wickedly;
Your enemies take Your name in vain.
Do I not hate them, O Lord, who hate You?
And do I not loathe those who rise up against You?
I hate them with perfect hatred;
I count them my enemies.
Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Try me, and know my anxieties;
And see if there is any wicked way in me,
And lead me in the way everlasting.

King David
Gerard van Honthorst
God Quotes
from Barbara Brown Taylor
in Learning to Walk in the Dark

∞ God is not a thing. And since God is not a thing, God cannot be held onto. God can only be encountered as that which eclipses the reality of all other things.

∞ I cannot say for sure when my reliable ideas about God began to slip away, but the big chest I used to keep them in is smaller than a shoebox now. Most of the time, I feel so ashamed about this that I do not own up to it unless someone else mentions it first. Then we find a quiet place where we can talk about what it is like to feel more and more devoted to a relationship that we are less and less able to say anything about.

∞ After so many years of trying to cobble together a way of thinking about God that makes sense so that I can safely settle down with it, it all turns to nada. There is no permanently safe place to settle. I will always be at sea, steering by stars. Yet as dark as this sounds, it provides great relief, because it now sounds truer than anything that came before.

∞ The good news is that dark and light, faith and doubt, divine absence and presence, do not exist at opposite poles. Instead, they exist with and within each other, like distinct waves that roll out of the same ocean and roll back into it again. As different as they are, they come from and return to the same source.

∞ This faith will not offer me much to hold on to. It will not give me a safe place to settle. Practicing it will require me to celebrate the sacraments of defeat and loss, but since the religion I know best has a lot to say about losing as the precondition for finding, I can live with that... even my sense of God’s absence can be a token of God’s presence if I let it.

- contributed by Sandra Weil
The Quaker
Anonymous

I walked with my friend, a Quaker, to the newsstand the other night, and he bought a paper, thanking the newsie politely. The newsie didn't even acknowledge it. "A sullen fellow, isn't he?" I commented. "Oh, he's that way every night," shrugged my friend. "Then why do you continue to be so polite to him?" I asked. "Why not?" inquired my friend. "Why should I let him decide how I'm going to act?"

As I thought about this incident later, it occurred to me that the important word was "act." My friend acts toward people; most of us react toward them. He has a sense of inner balance which is lacking in most of us; he knows who he is, what he stands for, how he should behave. He refuses to return incivility for incivility, because then he would no longer be in command of his own conduct.

When we are enjoined in the Bible to return good for evil, we look upon this as a moral injunction—which it is. But it is also a psychological prescription for our emotional health. Nobody is unhappier than the perpetual reactor. His center of emotional gravity is not rooted within himself, where it belongs, but in the world outside him. His spiritual temperature is always being raised or lowered by the social climate around him, and he is a mere creature at the mercy of these elements. Praise gives him a feeling of euphoria, which is false, because it does not last and it does not come from self-approval. Criticism depresses him more than it should, because it confirms his own secretly shaky opinion of himself. Snubs hurt him, and the merest suspicion of unpopularity in any quarter rouses him to bitterness.

A serenity of spirit cannot be achieved until we become the masters of our own actions and attitudes. To let another determine whether we shall be rude or gracious, elated or depressed, is to relinquish control over our own personalities, which is ultimately all we possess. The only true possession is self-possession.

- contributed by Marie Salerno

Follows in his Footsteps – Bob Salo
Be Not Afraid
Bob Dufford

You shall cross the barren desert,
but you shall not die of thirst.
You shall wander far in safety
though you do not know the way.
You shall speak your words in foreign lands
and all will understand.
You shall see the face of God and live.

Be not afraid.
I go before you always.
Come, follow me, and I will give you rest.

If you pass through raging waters in the sea,
you shall not drown.
If you walk amid the burning flames,
you shall not be harmed.
If you stand before the pow'r of hell
and death is at your side,
know that I am with you through it all.

Be not afraid.
I go before you always.
Come, follow me, and I will give you rest.

Blessed are your poor,
for the kingdom shall be theirs.
Blest are you that weep and mourn,
for one day you shall laugh.
And if wicked tongues insult and hate you
all because of me,
blessed, blessed are you!

Be not afraid.
I go before you always.
Come, follow me, and I will give you rest.

Go [here](#) to hear the song sung by John Michael Talbot.
Nothing Can Trouble
St. Teresa of Avila

Is today driving you crazy? This prayer below, known as St. Teresa’s Bookmark, can help you calm down. Is your stomach all tied up in knots with worries? Is your mind racing like a hamster in a cage going around and around on a wheel? Give yourself a break! Take a deep breath. St. Teresa’s Bookmark can give you some much needed perspective on things!

From the website Our Catholic Prayers.

Let nothing disturb you,
Let nothing frighten you,
All things are passing away:
God never changes.
Patience obtains all things
Whoever has God lacks nothing;
God alone suffices.

Here is the Taize chant derived from the prayer (in English and Spanish):

Nothing can trouble
Nothing can trouble,
Nothing can frighten.
Those who seek God shall never go wanting.
Nothing can trouble,
Nothing can frighten.
God alone fills us.

Nada te turbe
Nada te turbe,
Nada te espante.
Quien a Dios tiene nada le falta.
Nada te turbe,
Nada te espante.
Solo Dios basta.

~ contributed by Sandra Weil

Go here for a short YouTube on St. Teresa of Avila.
Christmas Gifts

Every Knee Shall Bow – Frances Gaye Willard
Selections from *Child of the Longest Night*

by Clare Morris

**Before All Else**

Singing creation alive,
Sounding into being:
  cave
    Star
  birth
    child.
Melody to be learned by heart.

**Madonna of the Stamp**

Your mercy comes quietly each December, no matter what we have done, no matter what we have failed to do.
In peel-off icons of Botticelli, Bellini, da Vinci or Della Robbia, you who travel the mails, poised, serene, upon bills, packages, holiday greetings.
Cancelled or discarded, your equanimity endures.

**Birth Watch**

Alive with ancient knowing
Open hands keep a birth watch
What has grown in secret is finally full enough to risk falling into our hands.
Each of us a midwife, we circle the ruptured threshold of birth, Ready to catch this life.

*contributed by Sally Blackburn*
Christmas Eve 2020
Bill Eichhorn

Candles illumine a wooden creche.
Lights twinkle on the tree, as carols mingle with the sound of absence.

A wreath with its red bow welcomes, but it is a COVID Christmas – no mixing of families.

Across the land, families line up at food banks for Christmas dinner – unemployment runs out next week.

While we mourn 330,915 deaths, the president pardons criminals and golfs, members of congress check out.

When the darkness is so deep, so long, let each of us be a candle of kindness to light the way for a neighbor, a stranger.
This is my favorite Christmas story. I hope the reason I chose it will be clear, i.e., my wish that from the “extraordinary respect” for each other that surrounds our congregation, CCC may again grow into “a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm.”

- Christopher Love

The Rabbi’s Gift

The Different Drum version

by M. Scott Peck, M.D.

The story concerns a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. It was once a great order, but because of persecution, all its branch houses were lost and there were only five monks left in the decaying house: the abbot and four others, all over seventy in age. Clearly it was a dying order.

In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a rabbi occasionally used for a hermitage. The old monks had become a bit psychic, so they could always sense when the rabbi was in his hermitage. "The rabbi is in the woods, the rabbi is in the woods," they would whisper. It occurred to the abbot that a visit to the rabbi might result in some advice to save his monastery.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot to his hut. But when the abbot explained his visit, the rabbi could only say, "I know how it is. The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore." So the old abbot and the old rabbi wept together. Then they read parts of the Torah and spoke of deep things. When the abbot had to leave, they embraced each other. "It has been wonderful that we should meet after all these years," the abbot said, "but I have failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me that would help me save my dying order?" "No, I am sorry," the rabbi responded. "I have no advice to give. But I can tell you that the Messiah is one of you."

When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him to ask, "Well what did the rabbi say?" "The rabbi said something very mysterious, it was something cryptic. He said that the Messiah is one of us. I don't know what he meant." In the time that followed, the old monks wondered about the rabbi's words, "The Messiah is one of you." Could he possibly have meant one of us monks? If so, which one?

Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light. Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people's sides, when you look back on it, Elred is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Elred. But surely not Brother Phillip. Phillip is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for always being there when you need him. He just magically appears. Maybe Phillip is the Messiah.

Of course the rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn't be that much for You, could I?
As they contemplated, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect. People still occasionally came to visit the monastery in its beautiful forest to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even to meditate in the dilapidated chapel. As they did so, they sensed the aura of extraordinary respect that began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery to picnic, to play, to pray. They brought their friends to this special place. And their friends brought their friends. Then some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another, and another. So within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order, and thanks to the rabbi’s gift, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm.
Heal in Nature
Maybe it’s too common, too well-known.
But it was the first time I’ve read it.

- Shannon Griffin

My Heart Soars
Chief Dan George

The beauty of the trees,
the softness of the air,
the fragrance of the grass,
speaks to me.

The summit of the mountain,
the thunder of the sky,
the rhythm of the sea,
speaks to me.

The faintness of the stars,
the freshness of the morning,
the dewdrop on the flower,
speaks to me.

The strength of fire,
the taste of salmon,
the trail of the sun,
and the life that never goes away,
they speak to me.

And my heart soars.
Shelter in Place
Kim Stafford

Long before the pandemic, the trees knew how to guard one place with roots and shade. Moss found how to hug a stone for life. Every stream works out how to move in place, staying home even as it flows generously outward, sending bounty far.

Now is our time to practice – singing from balconies, sending words of comfort by any courier, kindling our lonesome generosity to shine in all directions like stars.

- contributed by Jolyn O’Hare

Italians Singing from Balcony
Ryan Louder
We are living at a critical moment of history. Will we truly awaken to the sacredness of every person regardless of gender, race, or religion? Holders of power, both political and religious, are obstructing this work, and some of them are even denying the need for it. But they cannot destroy the vision of sacredness that has welled up again and again over the centuries and is now demanding our attention, perhaps like never before. There is hope. And it is a hope based in our deepest knowing, that every human being is sacred, body and soul.

* * * * *

What most endangers us as an earth community today is that we have neglected our interrelationships — as countries, faiths, and races. The reality is that we need one another... The strength of the sacred feminine is deep within us, in both men and women, young and old. It is awakening again in our depths. We need to open to it, now, if we are to be well.

* * * * *

Many of us today in the Western world are aware that the old order is not working — politically, socially, environmentally, religiously. Countless numbers of us from the Christian community have already lifted anchor and are sailing out of the harbor of our religious homeland, even though we may not know where we are heading or how far we need to go. The good news is that we do not need to know exactly where we are heading. We can choose to be part of an ancient spiritual practice of peregrination, leaving home or the comfort of the familiar in order to seek resurrection, new beginnings.

- contributed by Sandra Weil
Sacred Geometry
Gail Lester

O paper wasp 
high on cathedral wall! 
What gave you instinct 
to build just here, 
forming your curved nest 
beneath a sheltered arch?

You and your saffron-legged 
sisters work ceaselessly 
to form hexagonal cells 
for the brothers, snug inside, 
and continue a lineage 
centuries long 
to protect your queen, 
while cathedral shelters 
Mary, Queen of Heaven. 
Which came first, 
queen or Queen? 
Sacred design or Sacred space?
Very recently I was going through some personal papers and came upon a paper copy of an email from Julie Taylor, dated June 18, 2007, in which she was suggesting a poem to be used in the Pilgrimage Home program. It is such a fine poem I don’t how it didn’t get included in her poetry collection of a year or so ago. Perhaps you could attribute this poem to me via this history.

~ Don Felt

P.S. It is nice to be at CCC vicariously and see ... old friends again.

Ourselves
John Daniel

When the throaty calls of sandhill cranes
echo across the valley, when the rimrock flares
incandescent red, and the junipers
are flames of green on the shortgrass hills,
in that moment of last clear light
when the world seems ready to speak its name,
meet me in the field alongside the pond.
Without careers for once, without things to do,
without dreams or anger or the rattle of fears,
we’ll ask how it can be that we walk this ground
and know that we walk, alive in a world
that didn’t have to be beautiful, alive
in a world that doesn’t have to be.
With no answers, just ourselves and silence,
we’ll listen for the song that waits to be learned,
the song that moves through the passing light.

Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose
John Singer Sargent
The Vista Room
Eloise Rivera

I am very privileged since 1976 to live in a house built in 1903 up on a hill overlooking Red Hill in San Anselmo. A few years ago we remodeled the old porch on the second story, leveled the floor and added beautiful new windows to embrace a wide and distant view in two directions. We call this room the Vista room.

Sometimes I like to sit and read here in the evenings, but during the day, rain, fog, mist or sun, dawn, midday, or sundown, the view does not permit me to read, and invites me to sit quietly. I open my eyes to enjoy the view of the near hill and its switchbacks among the trees, the far hill to the left with large white houses that look quite tiny from here, and other tree-clad hills to the right. The sky is sometimes bright blue, but today there is an endless cloudscape with puffy white and grey clouds, and occasionally white doves or black birds swoop across the expanse or fly in a vast circle and then disappear.

During the whole of last year and before, I have found comfort and inspiration here and connection with nature—the ancient hills, the stately vitality of trees, the flight energy of birds. If I get close to the window and look down, I can see the garden and the pond below. I can see a sparkling blue dragonfly, sometimes perched still on a flower stem by the pond, and sometimes darting at daredevil speed to the other side and another stem. I can even see butterflies fluttering about, and though I cannot see them, I know the lively lizards are either hiding under rocks or skittering here and there. Depending on the time of year, I can see rose bushes blooming pink or red, smoke trees feathering their limbs, tiger lilies full in lovely orange petals, water lilies blushing yellow and rose. I can even see some of the larger koi and goldfish from up here. I am deeply grateful for this haven, a retreat from a troubled world, a respite from a multitude of worries.
When I Am Among the Trees
Mary Oliver

When I am among the trees,
especially the willows and the honey locust,
equally the beech, the oaks and the pines,
they give off such hints of gladness.
I would almost say that they save me, and daily.

I am so distant from the hope of myself,
in which I have goodness, and discernment,
and never hurry through the world
but walk slowly, and bow often.

Around me the trees stir in their leaves
and call out, “Stay awhile.”
The light flows from their branches.

And they call again, “It’s simple,” they say,
“and you too have come
into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled
with light, and to shine.”

This poem resonates deeply for me. I find solace and deep peace walking among the trees.
A particular memory comes to mind. One afternoon after a powerful session that brought up some
deep emotions for me, my spiritual director suggested that I do something nourishing for my spirit
before returning to the events of my day. She suggested that I take a walk among the redwood trees on
the grounds outside the counseling center. As I approached the stand of magnificent redwoods, I felt
drawn to lay down on the earth beneath them. Feeling held and supported by the soft earth beneath
me and gazing up at the sun-dappled branches and the vast blue sky beyond, I felt deep peace and
comfort in my soul. The memory of that moment is a touchstone for me that brings comfort in
challenging times. It helps me remember the light that shines without and also shines from within.

~ Joanne Lefferts
Stepping Past the Edge
Gail Lester

Ribbon of pearl fog lays
low on San Pablo Bay
where waters shine silver
in today’s early light, and
turkey vulture seeks thermals to ride.

Reeds near shore
shimmer rice green on
indigo shallows
and we stand at the edge
of Summer’s honey grasslands.

By our trailhead,
we FaceTime briefly with two little
mountain girls,
but they cannot see us.
Where are you, Granny?
I love you girls,
I say, wondering where I am for them.

Then you sight a feather
on the path – Owl?
Who has loosed this work of beauty?

Mother quail races after an erratic
enduring chick. How do you know
it’s the last one? you ask.
Maybe others stand safe in the bushes.
Their sentry catches up
zig zagging past us.

We lean against a wooden footbridge,
watch an orchestra of juncos
glean seeds from their hiding places
in dried June grass, trembling
stems uncontrollably.

A few more turns into the woodland,
a young buck darts to reach a fawn
uphill from the trail.
Leaps across our path, stubby
antlers fat with velvet.

Keep each other safe,
Protect our fellow beings.
All species need each other
in this breath holding world.
The Poet with His Face in His Hands
a poem by Mary Oliver in the book Devotions.

You want to cry aloud for your
mistakes. But to tell the truth the world
doesn’t need any more of that sound.

So if you’re going to do it and can’t
stop yourself, if your pretty mouth can’t
hold it in, at least go by yourself across

the forty fields and the forty dark inclines
of rocks and water to the place where
the falls are flinging out their white sheets

like crazy, and there is a cave behind all that
jubilation and water fun and you can
stand there under it, and roar all you

want and nothing will be disturbed; you can
drip with despair all afternoon and still,
on a green branch, its wings just lightly touched

by the passing foil of the water, the thrush,
puffing out its spotted breast, will sing
of the perfect, stone-hard beauty of everything.

– contributed by Sandra Weil
I was inspired to record these thoughts after attending Marin Interfaith Council’s Emerging Visionaries event recently. Ras K’dée shared indigenous wisdom as Pomo leader of The Nest, tinyurl.com/2021nestsupport. Project Adapt is a new program promoted by MIC: www.projectadapt.earth/. Robin Wall Kimmerer’s book, Braiding Sweetgrass also informs my forming integration of Simple Amazement.

- Gail

Emerging Into Simple Amazement

Gail Lester

What would it take for our human species to move from a culture of force to one of consent? Around our world, populist and divisive leaders foment chaos and hatred so that their willful ways of life, their domination, can prevail. Those in their thrall create scapegoats, respond with violent rhetoric and action. The bar for civil discourse moves lower and lower to the point where it becomes nearly impossible to find common ground. We watch with growing alarm and a sense of helplessness. But perhaps there is another way. It begins with slowing down, starting each day in simple amazement. Gratitude for water, for our mountain, for sun, moon, rain, for other creatures and the rocks themselves, for moments of love and grace we experience in our lives. We can flow naturally then into a sense of awe and respect. From there we become able to ask permission of others and our land before moving on willfully with our agendas and self-serving priorities. We start to unlearn dominion and control.

How often do we go to the land compared to the marketplace? the young Pomo leader asks. In going to the land and listening, we experience right relationship. This guides us to better understand a wider truth so we take what we actually need with respect instead of what our civilization tells us we deserve, must have.

We must also ask permission to find our own true natures. Otherwise we take ourselves for granted, do not question, and pummel over everything in our way, including our spirits. When we ask permission, it becomes easier to give back in reciprocity, fostering resilience around us, which serves all social, environmental, economic, and cultural life on this planet.

I am left to wonder how we can prevail without force over the powerful who would continue destructive dominion. How we can stay rooted in this model of consent, yet shift the paradigm ... before it is too late? Listening to indigenous wisdom provides me a beginning: unlearn control and develop a more connected relationship, small act by small act. It just makes sense. And I hear it more and more from different corners and teachers: don’t cross boundaries without permission. It gives me hope. This morning the birds are hungry. I refill their suet. Tomorrow I will go to the land.
This poem reminds me of how we are inseparable from the natural world that surrounds us.

- Diane Suffridge

Evening
Rainer Maria Rilke
from The Book of Pictures
translated by Stephen Mitchell

The sky puts on the darkening blue coat held for it by a row of ancient trees; you watch: and the lands grow distant in your sight, one journeying to heaven, one that falls;

and leave you, not at home in either one, not quite so still and dark as the darkened houses, not calling to eternity with the passion of what becomes a star each night, and rises;

and leave you (inexpressibly to unravel) your life, with its immensity and fear, so that, now bounded, now immeasurable, it is alternately stone in you and star.
Feed Your Soul

Cedar Waxwing Pair - Carol Crockett
I recently read this novel by Laurens van der Post, after reading two other of his books set in his native Africa. I share this passage partly for the spiritual meaning it may hold for you, but also for the sheer poetic beauty I find in van der Post’s use of language, which itself is food for the soul.

— Sandra Weil

A strange new consciousness invaded him — a sense that he was dreaming vividly of being awake in the midst of his deepest sleep. Suddenly he felt purified within himself, free of other people’s faces, of smells and colours and above all of other people’s voices. He felt profoundly grateful that the only sound about him was this mindless, ancient prehuman music of the storm. One human voice he feared would be enough to wake him and then he and all would drown. For this dream of being awake suddenly was more urgent than the condition of actually being awake. He felt like an explorer who had at last walked into the true unknown and found that the treasure of discovery was the realization that true awareness needs not only the fact, but also the dream of the fact: these are the two vital ends to the journey between. Then in the swelling rhythm of discovery he was conducted to the edge of the world, to the uttermost frontier of tangible coherent thought, where the exhausted mind and spirit fall down aghast at the view of the purple unhorizoned distances they still have to travel and where only the humble and contrite, the sore-rejected heart is left to take over the journey to the final pass in the mountains where life itself comes and goes. It was as if in this wild night of wind and water, of uncorrupted and incorruptible darkness he was presented with the first, the aboriginal vision of the universe brought face to face with the basic material, the raw and irreducible elements of the pre-created world. It was as if his own being had been driven back so far in time that it had emerged in the moment just before Genesis, when the earth was void and without form and darkness upon the face of the deep, and the spirit of God was about to set out moving upon the face of the great waters. It was a moment in himself of sheer nothingness and of absolute darkness.
Chocolate Chip Cookies
Marie Salerno

This is a family recipe we are all crazy for.

~ Marie

Bake time: about 15 minutes
Oven temperature: 375 °
Yield: about 50 cookies

Ingredients

1 cup butter
½ cup brown sugar
2 to 2 ½ cup flour
½ tsp. baking soda
¾ tsp. vanilla
1 egg yolk
6 oz. chocolate chips
1 beaten egg white for topping
Chocolate sprinkles for topping

Directions

• Cream together the butter and sugar
• Add flour, baking soda, vanilla and egg yolk
• Add chocolate chips
• For each cookie, roll 2 Tbsp. dough in your hands to form a ball. Dip into egg white, then sprinkles. Place balls on ungreased cookie sheet.
• Bake until golden and firm on top.

... and don’t tell me that a good cookie (or two or three) doesn’t feed the soul.

~ Sandra
Our pets can be a great comfort to us, and during these times of upheaval and challenge, the mere presence of our furry friends can be especially healing. Here Gailya gives us the cat’s perspective of living with humans.

– Sandra

One day I will awaken as a cat.
I will stretch and yawn,
maybe visit the kitchen cafeteria.
My human will
kiss the top of my head
and tell me she loves me.

Content in my warm fur,
I will spend the day lounging
on the outdoor patio
worshiping the sun.
I’ll be remembering
my many lives,
my many names,
and the people I’ve loved
along the way.

Then I will close my eyes
for a well-deserved nap
and still purring
I’ll drift away
to sweet oblivion.
Feel the Love
Where Is the Truth?

Song lyrics
Scott DeTurk
copyright 2021

Where is the truth?
Where did it go?
Is it hiding inside you, waiting to guide you?
How will you know?
Where is the truth?
It seems so hard to find.
Does it live in disguise, midst the falsehoods and lies?
Does it have its own mind?

Does it change with the wind?
Does it change with the clime?
Does it change as it’s spinned by the weak and thin-skinned?
Does it change over time?

Where is the truth
That we all can believe?
Somewhere written in stone, or do we each have our own
Truth we wait to receive?

Is it fleeting at best,
Only good for today?
Are we up to the test, the impossible quest
For a truth that will stay and never betray?

Can we only hear when it’s right in our ear?
Why is the most outrageous, always the most contagious?
Does it have to be loud, shouted out by the crowd?
Is it too late to learn, too late to discern, oh, how I yearn ... to know ...

Where is the truth?
Isn’t there only one
For each situation, one affirmation
Under the sun?

When I’m out of my head
And my world’s falling apart
I search for the thread to the feelings that lead
Me back to the start
To the truth that I find in my heart.
Love Is the Only Way Out of Here

Song lyrics
Scott DeTurk
copyright 2021

Will the half-mast flags keep flyin’?
While the innocent keep dyin’?
Will the prayers keep cryin’ out to God to answer why?
Will the marchers keep on walkin’?
As the talkin’ heads keep talkin’
With the homeless reachin’ out their hand to every passers-by?

Is there really no safe haven?
Is there no soul worth the savin’?
No time or place, no future plane where everybody’s sane?
Our anger keeps on risin’
Yet this crazy life keeps surprisin’
As indignation keeps gettin’ screamed from both sides of the aisle.
We keep on pointin’ fingers
As the fear and hatred lingers
Yet this point in time’s just a blink of an eye in the great meanwhile.

Love is the only way out of here
When the world has taken you so low.
Love is the only way out of here
When up is the only place left to go
And you’re losing hope with what life brings.
Love is the only thing to give you wings.
The answer is perfectly clear:
Love is the only way out of here.

It’s another Sunday morning
No more Sunday hats, adorning
No more singing alleluia in your fav’rite key
Though the grace is still amazing
And God’s name we’re all still praising
And the least among us still forgiven unconditionally.
Though this journey’s gettin’ longer
We’ve no choice but to keep gettin’ stronger
And win or lose, the time has come to choose a way out of no way.

Love is the only way out of here
When the world has taken you so low.
Love is the only way out of here
When up is the only place left to go
And you’re losing hope with what life brings.
Love is the only thing to give you wings.
The answer is perfectly clear:
Love is the only way out of here.
Love Is All There Is
Marie Salerno

LOVE is all there is...

Each warm embrace we share, each tender kiss we exchange, each gentle word we speak, each smile we offer; every act of kindness and compassion that emanates from us, returns to us and sweeps over our souls and bodies, not only renewing our spirit but gently washing away the pain, sorrow, and loss that touches our lives from time to time.

LOVE never fails because it cannot fail.

LOVE regenerates itself. As every child knows: the more there is the more there is...

So as we gather together in gratitude with all those we cherish and adore during this season of peace and hope, let us celebrate the word.

Let us renew our faith in the word.

Let us devote ourselves and one another to the word.

For LOVE is all there is.

I wish you a joyous holiday season filled with Love, Laughter, and Good Cheer.

~ Marie
For Joy
Jan Richardson

You can prepare,
but still
it will come to you
by surprise.
crossing through your doorway,
calling your name in greeting,
turning like a child
who quickens suddenly
within you.
It will astonish you
how wide your heart
will open
in welcome
for the joy
that finds you
so ready
and still so
unprepared.

- contributed by Richard Flout
Joy in 2021
David and Carolyn Long

Such a year was 2021! The last twenty months of the pandemic have been challenging for all of us. However, in the midst of this ongoing crisis we have much to be thankful for and can point to significant sources of growth and joy. Near the peak of the pandemic in August 2020, I was diagnosed with ovarian cancer; in the following months I went through major surgery, a bout of procedures to deal with a complication from surgery, as well as six rounds of chemotherapy. I am so thankful that medical facilities in San Francisco were not overwhelmed with COVID patients and that my medical treatment did not have to be postponed because of dysfunctional responses to the pandemic. And it was wonderful to be part of a caring spiritual community like CCC. I experienced so much support and was grateful also for my caregiver husband who is also my cook.

We are thankful for the technology that allowed us to maintain community and friendships even while we were housebound. Soon after the pandemic hit, Dave purchased a subscription to Zoom to be able to host larger and longer meetings. We are thankful for the ability during this period to have been able to communicate effectively. We set up weekly Zoom meetings with our family. Even though we weren’t in the same room, we had more family sharing and knew more about our kids’ and grandkids’ lives than we ever did before the pandemic with occasional phone calls.

At CCC we missed the 7:30 service, but found that the level of sharing in the 10:00 a.m. Zoom gathering was deep and profound, and that we came to better know folks we have known for years. We are also thankful for the many online opportunities to maintain our community and spiritual practices at CCC – communion on Wednesdays, Stone Soup on Thursdays, the contemplative practice on Fridays -and our ability to continue yoga with Christopher Love after he moved to North Carolina. We were also pleased that we could keep the Taize service going once a month on Zoom.

Dave has enjoyed Zoom hosting the board meetings and public meetings for both the Marin Chapter of the California Native Plant Society and the Marin Philosophical Society. For these groups, a silver lining of the pandemic has been a huge increase in attendance at their public meetings. Zoom made it easier for those to attend who had moved away or were housebound, or who would rather attend from their living room than in person.

We are thankful for the kitchen arts that got a boost during the pandemic. A small group led by Bill Eichhorn learned how to make sourdough bread, a practice I have continued (and I have shared my starter with our daughters!). During the pandemic Dave has spent more time collecting recipes and cooking. He has particularly enjoyed cooking while I practiced my flute. The challenge of procuring food during the pandemic has given us a greater appreciation for our interdependence and the many people we have to thank for the cornucopia of food we have in Marin County – from the farmer to the food delivery person.

Daily flute playing was a spiritual practice during the pandemic. It helped to have the incentive of giving a recital for mostly family after Thanksgiving to celebrate my 80th birthday. As we return to more in-person activities, we are thankful that the pandemic has given us a new perspective that hopefully we can use to meld the best of in-person communications with what we have learned about the advantages of online communications.

~ Dave and Carolyn
For the majority of human beings, love is a feeling, a passion, a delirium, or a sickness— and an incurable sickness at that! No, true love is not like that at all. It is a state of consciousness attained by those who have walked the paths of self-perfection for a long time. It is the reward given to those who have understood that they will never be truly happy unless they draw nearer each day to the world of purity, harmony and light, which is the world of God himself.

And as God is the source of love, you receive the greatest gift of all: the feeling that you can expand your love to the whole world, to all creatures and all creation. You are able to stop focusing all your feelings or thoughts on one human being, in the hope that this person will satisfy all your needs, a hope that inevitably ends in suffering and disappointment. Each day, you draw closer to divine love, the only love that can fill your heart and soul.

- contributed by Sandra Weil

Read about Omraam on Wikipedia [here].
Look Ahead with Hope

Land Ahoy! – Oles Kalashnik
My friend Laina Dicker wrote this to me for my birthday. 
I was very touched and want the same joy for all of my dear ones.

- Fondly, Marie Salerno

I hope this season and the new year brings you something attainable and meaningful. 
I wish you beauty every day. 
In the world you see around you 
In the sounds that fall on your ears 
In the friendships that sustain you 
In flavors, textures and aromas 
In art and nature 
In the God-given and man-made 
May each day bring some precious beauty into your life.
You’re a Lot Like Me and I’m a Lot Like You

Song lyrics
Scott DeTurk
copyright 2021

I look in your eyes and what do I see?
You might be a stranger but I bet you’re a lot like me
I’ve got my needs, I’ve got my desires
Doin’ my best when put to the test puttin’ out my share of fires
While I’m tryin’ to navigate this crazy time we’re in
Doin’ things I’ve never done, goin’ places I’ve never been
But at the end of the day one thing I bet is true
I’m a lot like you.

I like doin’ a job that’s gonna pay me fair
And at the end of the month, when the bills are due have a little somethin’ to spare
Come home to a place with a comfortable bed
Safe and clean, warm and dry with a roof over my head
I like a good singer and I like a good song
And I like a good beat to get me on my feet and make me dance along
I’ll bet these are things that we can agree
‘Cause you’re a lot like me.

We won’t always see eye to eye
We won’t always share the same point of view
But there are things in this life that’ll make us both laugh and cry
Plenty of wins and losses we’ve both been through
No matter how we’re raised, or where we come from
Though we might march to a different drum
Black or brown, red, white or blue
You’re a lot like me and I’m a lot like you.

How did we get so far apart?
When we both have so many things that we share in our heart
And where do we go from here?
Is it lack of faith, lack of trust, or just the fear?
Will it ever come clear?

I like to go to the game, I like to cheer for my team
I like to think I’m on the brink of the American Dream
Share some quality time with friends and family
Drink a toast to the perfect host; the father of the bride to be
But I wonder if that time will ever come again.
If it does will it be for me or you and I wonder where or when
When it’s here, I hope we’ll both fin’ly see
That you’re a lot like me.

We won’t always see eye to eye
We won’t always share the same point of view
But there are things in this life that’ll make us both laugh and cry
Plenty of wins and losses we’ve both been through
No matter how we’re raised, or where we come from
We might march to a different drum
Black or brown, red, white or blue
You’re a lot like me and I’m a lot like you.

* * * * *

The Pangolin Man
shared by Barbara George

What continues to give me hope are stories of people doing courageous acts on behalf of others. I came across one such story last year — *The Pangolin Man*. Pangolins were in the news for a while — implicated in how Covid had spread from the animal kingdom to humans. I wanted to learn more about this animal as I knew almost nothing about them, and what I discovered was a story that gave me unexpected joy.

The story was told in film by Ellie Stones who self-funded the project. Moses Arineitwe, a Ugandan, is fighting mightily to save the pangolins in his country. Pangolins are the most illegally traded mammals in the world. When they became overhunted in Asia for their scales used in traditional medicine, the poachers turned to Africa. Additional pressure on their numbers, which are seriously depleted, comes from Ugandans who hunt pangolins for bushmeat. Moses seeks to change the hearts and minds of his countrymen by providing food alternatives to the locals — gardening and fishing. The footage of former poachers harvesting giant cabbages is uplifting. Moses educates the kids to start them early down the path of preservation of this unique creature, the only mammal with scales.

Check out Ellie’s website [here](http://Waterbear.com) for wonderful photos and for a link to view the film — only 17 minutes and free to view on [Waterbear.com](http://Waterbear.com). And if you’re really inspired, Ellie has a link to help fund Moses’ work.

~ Barbara
What Does Moving Forward Look Like?
Rogers Carrington

*from a letter I wrote to my granddaughter Logan*

Since everything is constantly changing, and religion as we have known it has less and less appeal, is there something that is replacing religion to provide humanity with a new source for finding answers? For me the answer is yes. Finding new answers, however, demands that we look in different places from where preceding generations have looked. Ironically, one of the new places is very old: nature, the world around us; and the second is very new: science, quantum physics, and the growing understanding that there is energy in every atom in us, our world and the cosmos. I find when I talk to people about what they believe in, they talk in terms of the incredible wonder of nature and the world we live in. And some are more and more comfortable talking about energy as a spiritual force that is everywhere, that lives within us and all around us. In exploring the nature of energy, both science and spirituality are joining together to discover new pathways for finding answers.

All of us – the earth, the cosmos – is made up of atoms and sub-atomic particles that are always in motion and are growing and changing and are consciously evolving toward a higher consciousness. Everything is expanding and seeking different forms physically and emotionally, and in our new ways of thinking. We are curious about the direction and meaning toward which this evolutionary process is taking us. It seems clear it has a life of its own. And we ourselves are evolving with this conscious evolutionary process. As we realize this, we also realize that we are part of something much bigger than ourselves. We may feel we are just along for the ride, and yet we have an opportunity to contribute to this evolving process. We can even choose to relax and not fight the evolving process that we are a part of. If we fight the changes taking place and want to go back to the way things used to be, we are most likely to suffer and feel alienated from this changing world as we cling to old things that used to feel secure to us and could be depended on, but aren’t secure any longer.

The truth is we are “Strangers in a Strange Land.” As strange as it is, we can be confident we are on an evolving, changing path, even though we don’t know where we are going. Different words are emerging to describe this journey. “We are travelers walking boldly into not knowing.” “We are evolving into a new form of future humans.” “We are living in the now of tomorrow.” These phrases and the evolutionary process I believe we are part of now, express a new awareness of the path we are traveling.

It speaks to a new awareness and an awakening of human consciousness. In our present and future discoveries, we will undoubtedly find ourselves free to explore and live in a world we are privileged to help create and participate in building. The world of dualistic thinking in which we either win or lose, dominate or submit, and hate what is not like us, is losing its power and is gradually fading away. This
cooperative way of thinking and being transcends the old familiar worldview. It is a way of being that transcends religion. It provides us with a perspective and process that is ever-changing and evolving and leading us toward a more meaningful and purposeful life that supports the growth and needs of everyone.

Some people of course will say this is utopian thinking and unworkable. I say that if this is the cosmic intelligent design for how change continues to take place and it contains the opportunity for us to participate in changing the world, then who am I to reject the wisdom of this design? We are given the gifts of life, love, and the energy that lives in us and enables us to choose to participate in this cosmic plan. One of the things I like most about this plan is that it draws on the best information we have in all our disciplines, including science and spirituality, to move us forward in discovering how to create the world we and so many others in the world want to live in.

I believe this plan is spiritual, and comes to us from a cosmic source of intelligence that we are gradually coming to understand. Those who choose this path don’t need to join anything or pay dues to be a member. Instead, we will choose to find like-minded people who, with us, will be contributing to the implementation of this cosmic plan. The power to implement this plan will come from the cosmic source and manifest itself through us to accomplish the varied tasks. Learning to access this power to implement our tasks will take believing that the plan is worth doing, and then learning how to access the power and get directions for using the power to make our contributions. It is not up to us to recruit anyone to join us. People will find us, and we will find them, and we will find ways to work together to make the difference that is ours to make.
Something’s coming. A new year. Anticipation. But for what? Who knows? The past two years were so different from anything I’d ever imagined. Constant changes. Dire fears and adjustments; finally a vaccine; finally a little light at the end of the tunnel. Sadly, some losses; finally, some hugs. What I loved about 2020 is finally doing things that had been forbidden in 2019: reconnecting with family, camping with groups, braving airlines. I still feel disoriented, and 2022 is around the corner. What will the new year bring?

~ Lillie

As Tony asks in “West Side Story”:

Could be, who knows?
There's somethin' due any day
I will know right away, soon as it shows.
It may come cannonballin' down through the sky
Gleam in its eye, bright as a rose.
Who knows? It's only just out of reach
Down the block, on a beach, under a tree.
I got a feelin' there's a miracle due
Gonna come true, comin' to me.
Could it be? Yes, it could.
Somethin's comin', somethin' good, if I can wait.
Somethin's comin', I don't know what it is
But it is gonna be great.
With a click, with a shock
Phone'll jingle, door'll knock, open the latch.
Somethin's comin', don't know when
But it's soon, catch the moon, one-handed catch.
Around the corner
Or whistlin' down the river
Come on, deliver to me.
Will it be? Yes, it will.
Maybe just by holdin' still, it'll be there.
Come on, somethin', come on in, don't be shy
Meet a guy, pull up a chair, the air is hummin'
And somethin' great is comin'.
Who knows? It's only just out of reach
Down the block, on a beach, maybe tonight.
Maybe tonight, maybe tonight...

Watch/hear the YouTube of Tony’s song [here].
Hope Continues to Bloom

Joyce Rupp

yesterday I went to view the dead,
instead I found the living.
my inner fibers stirred wonderingly
as I discovered green beans in abundance.

all those long, heat-filled days,
over a month without moisture,
and there those green beans were,
blooming and bearing bountifully.

I stood and gazed at their resilience,
remembering my own dry days inside
when it seemed not a green bean was left
on the withered vine of my scorched life.

I pondered my own long stretch of drought
without a soothing drop of consoling life.
I saw that my roots, too, had gone down deep,
seeking the secret soil of endurance.

I know now that hope continues to bloom
in the valley of desolation and dryness,
that within my arid, breathless space,
greening life has power over death.

standing before my inner garden
I see how faithfully the unfelt Source
took care of me, feeding my roots
as I sipped unknowingly.

- contributed by Joanne Lefferts
Fear Not