

**We Stood in the Place of Death and Heard the Living Call Our Name**  
**LCWR Assembly Keynote Address**  
**August 10, 2017—Orlando, Florida**

**Jan Richardson**

As you know, and as you have already shown and sung, a blessing is an excellent place to begin.  
This is one I have written for you.

*Irresistible Blessing*  
For the LCWR

This blessing  
has been walking  
for a long time,  
traveling with no map,  
no signpost, no guide.

It has been aching  
with a heart  
unbelievably broken  
and unimaginably lost  
and immeasurably tired.

This blessing  
does not have it all together.  
This blessing  
sometimes wakes up  
anxious and afraid.

This blessing  
had to be quiet,  
had to let itself sit  
in stillness and sorrow,  
had to let itself stop and rest  
to allow for joy  
to become imaginable  
again  
and grace  
to become believable  
again  
and the presence of love  
to become inescapable  
again.

This blessing knows  
you carry your own sorrow,  
your own grief.  
It knows the weariness  
that visits you,  
the questions  
that attend your road.  
It knows, too,  
how you keep turning yourself  
toward mystery,  
how you keep turning yourself  
toward hope,  
how you keep turning yourself  
toward this world  
with the beautiful stubbornness  
by which a way  
is made.

And so this blessing is glad  
to finally cross your path.

This blessing  
has been waiting  
for you.  
This blessing  
has been watching  
for you.  
This blessing  
has been wanting  
to see your face,  
to speak your name,  
to offer thanks.

This blessing  
meets you  
with glad welcome.  
This blessing  
meets you  
with persistent hope.  
This blessing  
meets you  
with fierce love  
that is ancient  
and present.

This blessing  
comes to you  
with heart impossibly open  
and irresistibly drawn  
and infinitely grateful  
for the blessing  
that you bear,  
for the blessing  
that you are.

© Jan Richardson

That's a blessing for you. Thank you, thank you, thank you for coming to Orlando! This is home for me, and I have been praying you here over the past many months, and then weeks, and then days, and then hours. I could sense you coming, and I have been holding you in prayer and with such anticipation. And I will say that your coming was foretold, for lo, this fortune was in my most recent cookie. It says, I kid you not, "Something spectacular is coming your way!" And here you are! And you are spectacular. I am so glad that we have arrived.

I want to thank you for the extraordinary gift of being with you here in this place. As we gather here, as we hear here, as we are present here in this moment for which I am so grateful, I want to tell you something of what it means to me to be here with you.

My husband, Gary, died several years ago after experiencing massive complications during what we had anticipated would be smooth and successful surgery for a brain aneurysm that had not yet ruptured. In the wake of his unexpected and astonishing death, I discerned that I needed to take some time away from doing public events. My experience of intense grief is that it undoes us and remakes us at a cellular and molecular level. It alters us and it transforms us in ways that we cannot predict or easily navigate. And even as this unmaking and remaking holds many graces—and one of my ongoing prayers is to keep my eyes and my heart open to the graces that come—the process can be hideously messy. That unmaking and remaking is not tidy stuff.

I realized that one of the graces I needed to allow myself was to not expect myself to go through that messy transformation in public. To not try to appear intact and articulate in front of large quantities of people in a time when my life had come apart. The transformation has been much more well-suited to the more private spaces, the more intimate spaces of my studio. I have felt clearly called over the past few years to steward what energies I had into writing and making art in that studio space, where I could explore without agenda, and weep without witnesses, and make big messes, and begin to find the words and images that would help me piece together a new life that I had not anticipated having to live so very soon, just three and a half years after Gary and I were married.

One of the many other reasons I have taken time away from doing public events is that in addition to being my amazing husband—and he was such an amazing husband—Gary was also my collaborator. He was my creative co-conspirator. Gary was a remarkable singer, songwriter,

and storyteller who toured the country offering his concerts all over the place. In addition to the touring and the performing he did, we frequently traveled together, speaking and sharing at conferences and retreats and in worship and workshops throughout the country. I loved collaborating with Gary. I loved conspiring with him. We loved intertwining music, song, story, images, words—intertwining all those threads to create a space of engagement and reflection for the people with whom we were privileged to work.

Although I had spent many years speaking at events before ever meeting Gary and beginning to collaborate with him, I was so wonderfully altered by the experience of working with him that I knew I needed to give myself time to discern what it would look like to begin to offer public events again on my own—if in fact I did begin to offer public events again on my own in the wake of Gary's death. I need to say that one of the things that has happened for me in this process of being unmade, undone, and remade, in this messy transformation, is that I have had to stop making assumptions that the things I was about before Gary's death would be the same things I was about after his death. I realized at some point it was not a foregone conclusion that I would return to doing public events. It has been important to me to learn to let Gary's death—and God, through Gary's death—speak a new word into my life, a word that sometimes leads me in directions I never anticipated.

Now I get to say that when I received the invitation to be with you and when I received that wonderful initial email from Annmarie Sanders in this time when I had been saying, *No—thank you, but no*—to doing public events, I will tell you, as I read that beautiful email from Annmarie, the word that rose up in me was *yes*. I found the invitation irresistible. I probably should say that partly I'm here for selfish purposes. I found I could not pass up the opportunity to stand here with you and say thank you. Thank you for who you are in this world, for the presence of love you embody and are in this world.

Mostly I just wanted to be with you and to speak a word of blessing for you as you continue to be the presence of love in this world. Thank you.

And speaking of blessings, I want to say a word about blessings because I am going to be laying some on you. I will be weaving more blessings through these words that I am sharing with you this morning. I will say about blessings that I am fascinated by them. And I am so grateful that one of things I have been able to continue to do in the wake of Gary's death—a thread that continues from before his death—is to write blessings. I have long been drawn to this ancient literary form that weaves words together with such beauty, and power, and poetry. Throughout the scriptures and the tradition, we see how a blessing has the power to convey God's desire for our well-being and wholeness. We see how a blessing becomes a nearly tangible thing that can be passed on from one person to another. As a gift from God, a blessing has the power to transform us even when—and especially when—our way has become difficult or dark or dangerous.

You can bet that in the wake of Gary's death, that was something I was interested in. Without really thinking about, I knew that in the terrible rending of grief I needed to find words to name what had broken and also to give voice to the grace that persisted in and through the brokenness with such beautiful stubbornness.

Today, in this place, I want to share some blessings with you and to tell some stories about these blessings as a way of inviting us to continue to think about what it means to be the presence of love in this world. In particular, I want to invite us to do some thinking together about what it means to be the presence of love in those times when it seems the love that has been present to us has left us—*seems* to have left us, to have gone from us in death, in whatever form it comes. And death comes in so very many forms: physical death, the death of a dream, the loss of a life we have known, the fracturing of a relationship we had counted on, the ending or changing of a community that has held our hearts, our vocations, our vows. The stories I'll be sharing with you are connected with my experience of looking for, and praying for, and searching for, and stumbling my way toward a new life in the wake of the loss of my husband. That's my own particular, most intense experience of loss and grief, and I am still living with it. But I know in each of our experiences there is a deep, deep river that connects all our losses and that links us together in all the sorrows that we carry. That's been one of the strange and beautiful things about navigating grief in the wake of my husband's death—to know that it is one of the most universal things we can experience, yet it takes such particular form for each of us.

I will be sharing some of my story and some blessings that have arisen from that story, and I do that as a way of inviting you to step with intention into the river that connects each of us not only at the point of our loss but, even more deeply, to the flow of love that is more enduring than even our deepest loss. So as we gather together in this place of connection, I want to ask us a couple of questions. And I will be asking some more because that's who I am. I ask questions. I know I am not alone in being a question-asker in this room. A couple of the questions I invite us to tuck in our pockets as we set out are these: When absence erupts in our lives, how do we call upon the presence of love that goes deeper than our loss? How do we open ourselves anew to the presence of love that endures far, far beyond death? Of course, I don't have one answer that will fit all of us, but I am so grateful to be with you in this space of blessing and presence.

I think blessings are not to be rushed through, so I am going to be enfolding each of the blessings that I share in a brief bit of quiet in the beginning and ending to allow us some space to absorb the blessing rather than immediately rushing to the next thing.

\*\*\*

This next blessing was inspired by the passage in Luke 20 where Jesus, as he is responding to yet another tricky question that has been posed to him, says, in part, "Now he is God not of the dead but of the living, for to God all of them are alive." *All of them are alive*. This blessing is called "God of the Living."

### *God of the Living*

When the wall  
between the worlds  
is too firm,  
too close.

When it seems  
all solidity  
and sharp edges.

When every morning  
you wake as if  
flattened against it,  
its forbidding presence  
fairly pressing the breath  
from you  
all over again.

Then may you be given  
a glimpse  
of how weak the wall

and how strong what stirs  
on the other side,

breathing with you  
and blessing you  
still,  
forever bound to you  
but freeing you  
into this living,  
into this world  
so much wider  
than you ever knew.

From *The Cure for Sorrow: A Book of Blessings for Times of Grief* © Jan Richardson  
(Orlando, FL: Wanton Gospeller Press, 2016)

I wrote this blessing, “God of the Living,” for my blog that I keep at The Painted Prayerbook. It’s an online space where I offer reflections and images in connection with the lectionary readings from Sunday to Sunday. I wrote this blessing because this passage turned up among the lectionary readings for a Sunday soon after All Saints. At the time that I wrote it, I could not have imagined how much I would need this blessing for myself, and how very soon. Just nine days after I finished the blessing and shared it online at The Painted Prayerbook, Gary went into the surgery from which he would never really return.

After his death the words of this blessing came back to me. That’s just how a blessing works. A blessing has the power to work within time and within chronology, but it is not bound by chronology. A blessing is not a particularly linear thing. It has the power to spiral forward and to spiral back, and to meet us when we need it most. And did I need this blessing.

*When the wall between worlds is too firm, too close.* That wall was way too close, much too soon. Here in this life, we feel the presence of that wall intensely sometimes. We feel it painfully; we feel it keenly. We sometimes ache with that sense of separation between this world and the next world, between now and eternity—that “uneasy liminal space between death and life,” as Chris [Pramuk] described it yesterday. We have to learn how to live with this, how to live with those places where the wall feels most present and painful.

The good news in this is that learning how to live with it is not a head thing. Grief is not something that we can figure out; it’s not a problem to be solved with intellect and reasoning, or with platitudes. When we are sorrowing, when our losses have pushed us to that painful wall, the invitation is to be present, to let ourselves lean, just lean against that wall and press our ears against that wall until we can sense and hear and know something of those presences that abide, that continue, that linger on the other side—those presences that live. To lean against that wall until we can hear their beating hearts—those hearts that continue to beat on the other side of that wall—that, as it turns out, might not be a wall at all; might not even be a veil. It might be something more like a threshold that we will never fully cross in this life, but across which something can still happen: a conversation, a communion.

In the wake of Gary’s death, it has become important to me to let myself lean against that wall, and sometimes holler at that wall, and sometimes pound my fists at what seems to be a wall. It has been crucial to me to attend well to the grief, to give it time and space to let it say what it needs to say. And, oh, my goodness, does it have so very much to say. Call it my personal protest or act of resistance in a culture that so often wants to urge us along in our grief, wants us to “move on” beyond our mourning, wants us to be okay because our not being okay can make other people uncomfortable.

Even as I talk about being present to our grief, I want to say that it occurred to me somewhere along the way that what I was being present to was not so much the grief, although I was being present to the grief. What the invitation to me really was, was to be present to the love that goes even deeper than the grief. We experience love and grief as being so deeply intertwined, and, of course, it is impossible to separate them out. We grieve because we love. And though we can try to hurry the grief along—which I don’t think is even really possible because grief always, always has a way of finding us—we risk missing the presence of love that is so bound together with it: the love that is so wonderfully stubborn in finding us even when the form we knew it in has gone, has left us and has left such pain in its wake.

So I will tell you, at this point in the grieving, that one of my prayers has become, *May my love be more fierce than my grief.* It is impossible to ever completely disentangle them. They flow together, but the love flows more deeply, I am sure. Carrying this as one of my prayers has helped me be open to the love that goes deeper than even the most intense sorrow. It is this love that calls us into life and enables us to keep living this life that is so much wider than we ever knew.

\*\*\*

This next blessing is called “Now, Beloved, We Live.”

*Now, Beloved, We Live*

Now, beloved, we live  
in a country that has  
no name.

No ceremony  
for the vows  
we make now,  
no liturgy for  
how wedded,  
no ritual for  
our marriage  
whose only shape  
is this:

I hold your heart  
in my heart  
that you hold.

Never not in  
my bones.  
Never not in  
my blood.

I hold your heart  
in my heart  
that you hold.

Gathered  
without measure,  
given back  
without reserve.  
I hold your heart  
in my heart  
that you hold.

Mystery, all,  
for which I see  
no end but that

I hold your heart  
in my heart  
that you hold.



Blessed, beloved,  
in this country that has  
no name.

I hold your heart  
in my heart  
that you hold.

From *The Cure for Sorrow: A Book of Blessings for Times of Grief* © Jan Richardson  
(Orlando, FL: Wanton Gospeller Press, 2016)

When Gary died, I lost my relationship with some of the language I had once used so comfortably. For one thing, I lost my relationship with pronouns. I can no longer say “we” and “our” and “us” in the ways that I once had. I sometimes stumble over these pronouns still. Is it our home or my home? Is it our dream or my dream?

In addition to losing my relationship with pronouns, I also lost my relationship with tenses. Gary’s death utterly and completely altered my experience of time. What he and I once had considered “is” and “will be” suddenly became “was” and “will not be,” “will never be.” Trying to speak of Gary in the past tense has been one of the most heartbreaking and difficult parts of my grief. The future we had hoped for and dreamed and worked for had ended. Present imperfect.

The blessing that I just shared with you began with the title, “Now, Beloved, We Live.” That’s what came first. Titles usually come to me after I have finished writing a piece so that I can then know what it was I wrote about so that I can give it the title. In this case, the title initially was all that came. And, you know, that would have been a gracious plenty for me because of this: it used the plural pronoun and it used the present tense. In a piece about Gary, to have those two things show up in tandem was a wonder. *Now, Beloved; now, Beloved, we live.* I would have been okay if that was all that came. I could have tucked that title in with my fortune cookie that says, “Something spectacular is coming your way.” That and the title would have carried me a long way. But the rest of a blessing finally came, with its image of this heart that is held in the other heart. *I hold your heart in my heart that you hold.*

*Now, Beloved.*

*Now, Beloved, we live.*

When our hearts break and loss comes, where can we say “we”? Where can we still say “now”? Where can we live in the plural present with those whose hearts we hold and who hold us in theirs? Where can we say “we” and “now”?

For me, one of those places has been in the studio. For Gary and me, our studios were in our home. Mine was at the front of our house; Gary’s was at the back, and we wore a path down the hallway between those two rooms. We were constantly going back and forth into each other’s

creative spaces. In addition to the intentional collaborating and co-conspiring we did together in workshops, retreats, conferences, and worship, we simply had this ongoing conversation about our creative lives, and we inhabited each other's creative process. I loved living in that ongoing conversation that became so crucial, so integral to the way that both Gary and I created.

After Gary died, I found I could not paint in my studio. I found other places to paint—God bless Mom and Dad and their kitchen table—but I could not paint in my studio in our home. I could not stand the thought of sitting down at my drafting table and not being able to call down the hall, “Sweetheart, can you come and take a look at something when you have a chance?” Over time—and it took some time, and that was a grace I allowed myself—I began to move my studio into Gary's studio. It's a process that I am still feeling my way into, but that space is coming to feel like something of a shared space where a kind of collaboration that I don't quite understand is still going on, and where that ongoing conversation is, in fact, ongoing. It is not a conversation that happens with speech or with the kind of hearing I was accustomed to with Gary. It is much more subtle than that, and I am still learning the vocabulary.

When our hearts break, where can we still say “we” in a way that enables us to know we are not alone? Where can we still say “now” in a way that allows us to live into the love that does not end with death? *Now, Beloved, we live.*

\*\*\*

“Blessing for the Brokenhearted.” This blessing has an epigraph that borrows some words of Henry David Thoreau, where he says, “There is no remedy for love but to love more.” I should say I wrote this for the first Valentine's Day after Gary died. For a couple whose most frequent name for each other was Sweetheart, Valentine's Day was no big day for us. I got chocolate out of it, but neither of us expected more than that. And I shared the chocolate that Gary gave me back with him. In some ways, Valentine's Day was just another day, but you can believe that the first one after my sweetheart died carried some weight. But, I thought, maybe this is a good place for a blessing. The one that came was this.

*Blessing for the Brokenhearted*

*There is no remedy for love but to love more.*

– Henry David Thoreau

Let us agree  
for now  
that we will not say  
the breaking  
makes us stronger  
or that it is better  
to have this pain  
than to have done  
without this love.

Let us promise  
we will not  
tell ourselves  
time will heal  
the wound,  
when every day  
our waking  
opens it anew.

Perhaps for now  
it can be enough  
to simply marvel  
at the mystery  
of how a heart  
so broken  
can go on beating,

as if it were made  
for precisely this—

as if it knows  
the only cure for love  
is more of it,

as if it sees  
the heart's sole remedy  
for breaking  
is to love still,

as if it trusts  
that its own  
persistent pulse  
is the rhythm  
of a blessing  
we cannot  
begin to fathom  
but will save us  
nonetheless.

From *The Cure for Sorrow: A Book of Blessings for Times of Grief* © Jan Richardson  
(Orlando, FL: Wanton Gospeller Press, 2016)

On the day that Gary died, of all times on the second day of Advent—leave it to my liturgically-oriented husband to leave on the second day of Advent—and after our family had left the hospital room after he had died, I walked back into Gary's room, and I sat as the nurses began to

take away everything. I watched as they took away the tubes, the wires, the monitors, everything that had tethered my husband to this life until it became clear that nothing would keep him in this life. Finally, after he had been shed of everything, I placed my hand on my husband's chest as I had done so many times in our life together. I loved his strong heart. I said to the nurse how strange it felt to place my hand on my husband's chest now and to feel nothing but my own pulse. And she said to me, "His heart beats in you now."

I will tell you there have been nights when the only prayer I could muster has been to simply listen to the beating of the heart inside me and to trust that Gary's heart was in mine and mine was still in his, and that both our hearts are held in the heart of God, who encompasses us, and holds us, and is present to us in a love beyond imagining.

The mystery in all this is that when our hearts break, they can become bigger. If we can stay with the sorrow and, more important, if we can stay with the love that goes deeper even than the sorrow, that is more fierce than our fiercest grief, our hearts become more open than we ever imagined they could.

That sensation began soon after Gary died—that sensation of my heart becoming bigger in a way I had not imagined. Just a few weeks after he died, on the day before Epiphany Day, I was driving down to South Florida to visit Peg and Chuck, who have been our dearest friends. As I was driving, I became aware of this intense sensation deep in my chest as if something—and I am not just speaking metaphorically here—were hollowing out a space in my chest. It had a physical component to it. As I continued to drive down the road, words began to surface in my consciousness. And what they said—not in a way that I could hear but in a way that I trusted was true—those words said to me, *This is the space you will need to hold him now*. As soon as I sensed those words, the sharpness of the sensation began to ease a bit, but it has not completely stopped. The heart grows bigger and bigger and bigger. It is happening still, as if something in me knows that the only way to meet an endlessly deepening love is with an endlessly expanding heart.

I cannot explain how our hearts have the power to become bigger when they are broken. I can only name it and testify to the truth of it. *This is the space you will need to hold him now*. Who is that for us? For whom or for what do our hearts need to break and become bigger?

\*\*\*

On a bright spring day in the year that Gary died, some months before he died, he and I were on a plane bound from Orlando to Seattle. We were heading to a conference where I would be speaking to the theme, "Illuminating the Edge: Threshold as Sacred Space." As I thought about thresholds as sacred spaces, I found myself thinking about Mary Magdalene and the threshold she found herself on. I love the way that John, in his Gospel, tells of the encounter between Mary Magdalene and the risen Jesus on Easter morning. I am continually drawn to—and confronted by and challenged by—the choice that Mary Magdalene has to make in that moment. Will she try to hold on to what she has known? Or will she accept Christ's call to leave the garden, to cross that threshold, and to go and proclaim what she has seen?

We know what Mary Magdalene chooses. We are here because of what she chooses. She knows what it means to let go in a way that will change her at a cellular level. But somehow she realizes very quickly that the presence of Christ will go with her, that the living presence of love will be more fierce than her letting go, that it will endure long beyond this letting go that she has been asked to do.

As I thought about Mary Magdalene and thresholds, about choosing and releasing, a blessing came. This will be the last one I share with you. I wrote these lines sitting beside my husband as we traveled across the country toward a threshold we could not see. This is called "The Magdalene's Blessing."

*The Magdalene's Blessing*

You hardly imagined  
standing here,  
everything you ever loved  
suddenly returned to you  
looking you in the eye  
and calling your name.

And now  
you do not know  
how to abide this ache  
in the center  
of your chest  
where a door  
slams shut  
and swings open  
at the same time,  
turning on the hinge  
of your aching  
and hopeful heart.

I tell you  
this is not a banishment  
from the garden.

This is an invitation,  
a choice,  
a threshold,  
a gate.

This is your life  
calling to you  
from a place  
you could never

have dreamed  
but now that you  
have glimpsed its edge  
you cannot imagine  
choosing any other way.

So let the tears come  
as anointing,  
as consecration,  
and then  
let them go.

Let this blessing  
gather itself around you.

Let it give you  
what you will need  
for this journey.

You will not remember  
the words—  
they do not matter.

All you need to remember  
is how it sounded  
when you stood  
in the place of death  
and heard the living  
call your name.

From *Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons* © Jan Richardson (Orlando, FL: Wanton Gospeller Press, 2015)

We are people who live on a threshold. We know what it means to stand in what seems to be a place of death and, like Mary Magdalene, to face the choice: Will we try to hold on to what we have known? Or will we let go and cross the threshold and trust the voice of the Living One who calls our name—the One whose resurrected heart we carry with us?

We carry the heart of the resurrected, risen Christ with us. The power of his risen life and of his love beats in us still. Like Mary Magdalene, we are called to carry that heart into the world; to not only carry the good news of Christ's resurrection, but to carry the living presence of the Christ whose heart beats in us still—in places of deepest pain, in places of most intense sorrow, in places of deepest loss, in places of violence, in places where we cannot imagine what the future possibly holds. Those places of death are precisely where the Living One calls our name.

As we prepare to close, I want to share a brief gift with you. It's a video that Gary and I created some years ago. It's called *The Hours of Mary Magdalene*, and it incorporates a series of images that I created called "The Hours of Mary Magdalene"—images based on the life and legends of Mary Magdalene and also inspired by those beautiful medieval prayer books called Books of Hours. The images intertwine with Gary's gorgeous, haunting song called "Mary Magdalena." I invite you to hear and think about how your own name is being called to life.

VIDEO: *The Hours of Mary Magdalene* can be viewed here: <https://vimeo.com/22350095>

And now I simply want to say, my friends, my sisters, we have traveled a way of blessing as we have contemplated together the presence of love that remains with us even in, and especially in, our deepest loss. We began with *the blessing that meets you with fierce love that is ancient and present*. We heard *the blessing that breathes with you from the other side of the wall*, and *the blessing holds your heart in its heart that you hold*. And we heard *the blessing of the broken heart that goes on beating*. We also heard *the blessing that comes when we stand in the place of death and hear the living call our name*.

May we carry these blessings. May we live these blessings. May we be these blessings. Thank you, thank you, thank you for the blessing you are. I hold your heart in my heart that you hold. Bless you.

© Jan Richardson  
janrichardson.com