



Invitation

The season of Advent affords us the opportunity to remember, express, and anticipate the coming of Christ. We remember the coming of Christ to Bethlehem, we express the spirit of Christ in our lives as believers, and we anticipate a future coming of Christ and the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God. This self-guided Advent retreat isn't about adding another thing to your holiday schedule. It's about creating space to experience the sacred and make meaning from this remarkable and challenging time.

Each week, participants will receive an email on Monday morning featuring a selection of music, artwork, reflection, and poetry written by a different GC|RH community member in response to the theme of "mature hope." We invite you to explore these reflections as an opening into a deeper conversation with the breadth and depth of human experience and to cultivate a posture of welcome towards these themes as they emerge in us, in others, and in the world around us.

Preparation

If possible, set aside a time in the day that is free from distractions. Take a few moments to prepare your space. You may want to gather a few items, such as a candle, journal, or other symbolic elements, that encourage contemplation and reflection. Feel free to adjust these materials to suit your needs and your landscape.

"For One Who Is Exhausted, a Blessing" by John O'Donohue

When the rhythm of the heart becomes hectic,
Time takes on the strain until it breaks;
Then all the unattended stress falls in
On the mind like an endless, increasing weight.

The light in the mind becomes dim.
Things you could take in your stride before
Now become laborsome events of will.

Weariness invades your spirit.
Gravity begins falling inside you,
Dragging down every bone.

The tide you never valued has gone out.
And you are marooned on unsure ground.
Something within you has closed down;
And you cannot push yourself back to life.

You have been forced to enter empty time.
The desire that drove you has relinquished.
There is nothing else to do now but rest
And patiently learn to receive the self
You have forsaken in the race of days.

At first your thinking will darken
And sadness take over like listless weather.
The flow of unwept tears will frighten you.

You have traveled too fast over false ground;
Now your soul has come to take you back.

Take refuge in your senses, open up
To all the small miracles you rushed through.

Become inclined to watch the way of rain
When it falls slow and free.

Imitate the habit of twilight,
Taking time to open the well of color
That fostered the brightness of day.

Draw alongside the silence of stone
Until its calmness can claim you.
Be excessively gentle with yourself.

Stay clear of those vexed in spirit.
Learn to linger around someone of ease
Who feels they have all the time in the world.

Gradually, you will return to yourself,
Having learned a new respect for your heart
And the joy that dwells far within slow time.



Truth: The Dream of Bears by Jackie Morris

Week One: Practicing Hope by Emily Wright

Opening Meditation

[Illuminated Guitar](#) by Garrison Doles

Reading

There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. Luke 21:25

Reflection

I am an inveterate improver. At my best, I see possibilities for new growth, new ways of working together, new opportunities to live lives of mutually life-affirming wholeness around every corner. At other times, I become picky and perfectionistic, convinced of the ‘rightness’ of my approach. Even when I’m operating from a place of flexibility and openness, my habit is to look for what is wrong, to focus on problems that need to be solved, broken things in need of repair, disorder in need of regulation.

The habit of noticing the negative is a part of the human condition. The psychological phenomenon known as “negativity bias” – a tendency to register negative stimuli more readily and to dwell on it longer – is thought to be an adaptive strategy that helps us avoid life-threatening dangers. We don’t want to get rid of our capacity to identify the negative. At the same time, a negativity bias can become maladaptive, especially in the realm of hope. Frank Ostaseski writes:

Mature hope requires both a clear intention and a simultaneous letting go. This hope is not dependent on outcome. In fact, hope is tied to uncertainty because we never know what is going to happen next. The hope is in the potential for our awakened response, not in things turning out a particular way. It is an orientation of the heart, grounded in value and trust in our basic human goodness, not in what we might achieve. That fundamental trust guides our actions and allows us to cooperate with others and to persevere, without attachment to a specific result.

In other words, mature hope begins with trust in goodness and an embrace of the uncertainties, messiness, and incompleteness of life.

Several years ago, I was introduced to a practice developed by Deb Dana, a clinician and specialist in complex trauma and traumatic stress, called noticing glimmers. In contrast to triggers which cue our nervous systems to potential dangers and threats, glimmers are experiences, people, places, or activities that promote feelings of well-being, peace, connection, and vitality. Glimmers don't have to be "mountaintop experiences." Instead, they are the small, fleeting moments that may go unnoticed throughout our days. Here is a sample of my glimmers from the last week: *the view of brilliant red leaves against a deep blue sky, the velvety softness of my dog's ears, dancing around in my kitchen to loud music when no one else is home, the smell of clean laundry.* As I recall these moments, I bring my attention to the felt sensations that arise as embodied memories, further amplifying them in my present reality.

When I focus on the negative, I find it very difficult to trust in goodness and in my capacity to meet the messiness of life. Yet, when I cultivate my attention towards the good, noticing and amplifying glimmers of ordinary abundance, I discover something that feels like the beginnings of mature hope as well.

Questions & Prompts for Reflection

- How do you interpret Ostaseski's description of "mature hope"? What avenues for exploration does this concept invite?
- *Truth: The Dreams of Bears* is an illustrated poem that depicts an imaginative dreamscape. What thoughts, images, or associations does it evoke in you? What connections can you make between this work and the concept of mature hope?
- Consider curating your own list of glimmers this week.

"Truth: The Dreams of Bears" by Jackie Morris

If I said that my love for you was
like the spaces between the notes of a wren's song,
would you understand?
Would you perceive my love to be, therefore,
hardly present, almost nothing?

Or would you feel how my love is wrapped
around by the richest, the wildest song?
And, if I said my love for you is like
the time when the nightingale is absent
from our twilight world,
would you hear it as a silence? Nothing?
No love?
Or as anticipation
of that rich current of music,
which fills heart,
soul,
body,
mind?

And, if I said my love for
you is like the hare's breath,
would you feel it to be transient?
So slight a thing?

Or would you see it as life-giving?

Wild?

A thing that fills the blood, and
sets the hare running?

Music

[The River](#) by Claire Hitchins

A blessing for letting go and stretching beyond – Rev. M Barclay, enfleshed

*May today offer you what your spirit needs
to evolve, to expand, to unfold.
May it stretch you, but just enough.
Not by force nor demand,
But like an invitation that opens slowly,
too careful to be rushed.
May you be brave enough to loosen your grip
on what you know and perceive –
on what you have learned from fear
or inherited from lineages of cruelty.
May you give thanks for all the sources that gifted you
with survival and wisdom, perspective and protection –
but not let your gratitude unnecessarily wed you to them forever.
Everything has a season, a context, a place and a time – even truths that have freed you.
Maybe there are some things that served you well for an era,
but not any longer.
Maybe it's time to rethink, reshape, review.
Maybe you're ready to release another untruth
handed to you early on,
meant to keep you in line, in order, in compliance.
What might be replaced with acceptance
of your power and potential?
For the sake of your own becoming,
and also, us all.
Your soul-work is essential to the labors of love –
Collective and eternal.
Material, relational, and communal repair are all forms of healing
made possible by souls entangled
in shared longings and commitments.
So may this day feed you and challenge you,
surprise and comfort you,
that you might have what you need
to be courageous, to be humble,
and to let your soul grow.*



Reflections in a stream

Week Two: The Pulse of Hope by Cynn timer Davis

Reading

*Hope's home is at the innermost point in us, and in all things. It is a quality of aliveness. It does not come at the end, as the feeling that results from a happy outcome. Rather, it lies at the beginning, as a pulse of truth that sends us forth. When our innermost being is attuned to this pulse it will send us forth in hope, regardless of the physical circumstances of our lives. Hope fills us with the strength to stay present, to abide in the flow of the Mercy no matter what outer storms assail us. It is entered always and only through surrender; that is, through the willingness to let go of everything we are presently clinging to. And yet when we enter it, it enters us and fills us with its own life – a quiet strength beyond anything we have ever known. – Cynthia Bourgeault, *Mystical Hope**

Reflection

While the mood in society through the days between Thanksgiving and Christmas is one of manic excitement and jolliness, by contrast the mood in the Church aligns more closely with our underlying anxiety these days. The resolution of the pandemic seems to continually elude us as one variant follows upon another. The state of our democracy in a time of deep discord feels rocky at best. The fate of our life on Earth, under pressure from the impact of global warming and mass extinction is unknown as well. I for one, am often apprehensive about the future and more so for that of my children and grandchildren in the face of these crises.

Readings for the season of Advent are replete with imagery seemingly made for this historical moment in which we dread the worst, long for deliverance and anxiously seek to sustain hope in a time of profound planetary transition: “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.” (Luke 21:25)

Dare we hope that deliverance and redemption of humankind on Earth is to be expected? How can we think about hope in a way that isn't simply denial of painful realities over which we seemingly have little control? In the reading above, Cynthia Bourgeault, Episcopal priest, contemplative and spiritual

teacher, describes hope as not dependent upon a particular “happy outcome” but rather as “a pulse of truth that sends us forth... regardless of the physical circumstances of our lives.”

And how to stay attuned to this pulse lying deep in our innermost self? Surrender in trust to the Holy Spirit. As a contemplative and teacher, Bourgeault teaches the practice of Centering Prayer: Twenty minutes a day, (ideally twice a day) sit quietly in a comfortable chair, feet on the ground. As thoughts arise simply let them go. Select a word that will serve as a prompt for surrendering thoughts. Choose a word or words that seems good for you, e.g., peace, love, Jesus, let go. (My word is One.) The idea is not to banish thoughts, rather to simply, gently, release them. Surrender them to the still and dark. As emotions arise notice and accept them. Experience them as sensations in your body and then release them. Be aware of your heart center. This practice is described in the Orthodox contemplative tradition as “putting the mind in the heart.” As you gradually settle into the twenty-minute sit, you will notice yourself becoming increasingly calm and centered. The image which best describes the experience to me is that of sinking peacefully to a river bottom and sitting there as thoughts become like leaves, twigs and water bugs floating by up above. In this state of deep surrender, the sense of abiding in the “flow of the Mercy” reigns.

Over time, this practice has the effect of gradually softening the sense that everything depends on me and slowly increasing the perception that we are part of a larger oneness, the body of Christ. But one may ask, can we have a realistic hope that we’ll come together as a human community in time to avoid the worst effects of global warming? Will the pandemic be brought to heel? Will our democracy survive and thrive? Will the promised day ever come when the Lord will “swallow up that veil that shrouds all the peoples, the pall thrown over all the nations... (and) swallow up death forever” (Isaiah 25:7-8)?

To the degree that hope is an existential disposition towards these goods and our timeline extends into the indefinite future, I would say yes. In the meantime, we have faith in “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1).

“Grace” by Joy Harjo

I think of Wind and her wild ways the year we had nothing to lose and lost it anyway in the cursed country of the fox. We still talk about that winter, how the cold froze imaginary buffalo on the stuffed horizon of snowbanks. The haunting voices of the starved and mutilated broke fences, crashed our thermostat dreams, and we couldn’t stand it one more time. So once again we lost a winter in stubborn memory, walked through cheap apartment walls, skated through fields of ghosts into a town that never wanted us, in the epic search for grace.

Like Coyote, like Rabbit, we could not contain our terror and clowned our way through a season of false midnights. We had to swallow that town with laughter, so it would go down easy as honey. And one morning as the sun struggled to break ice, and our dreams had found us with coffee and pancakes in a truck stop along Highway 80, we found grace.

I could say grace was a woman with time on her hands, or a white buffalo escaped from memory. But in that dingy light it was a promise of balance. We once again understood the talk of animals, and spring was lean and hungry with the hope of children and corn.

I would like to say, with grace, we picked ourselves up and walked into the spring thaw. We didn’t; the next season was worse. You went home to Leech Lake to work with the tribe and I went south. And Wind, I am still crazy. I know there is something larger than the memory of a dispossessed people. We have seen it.

Questions & Prompts for Reflection

Recall a time when something for which you fervently hoped did not transpire. Reflect on how the aftermath of that experience affected your perspective in the following dimensions:

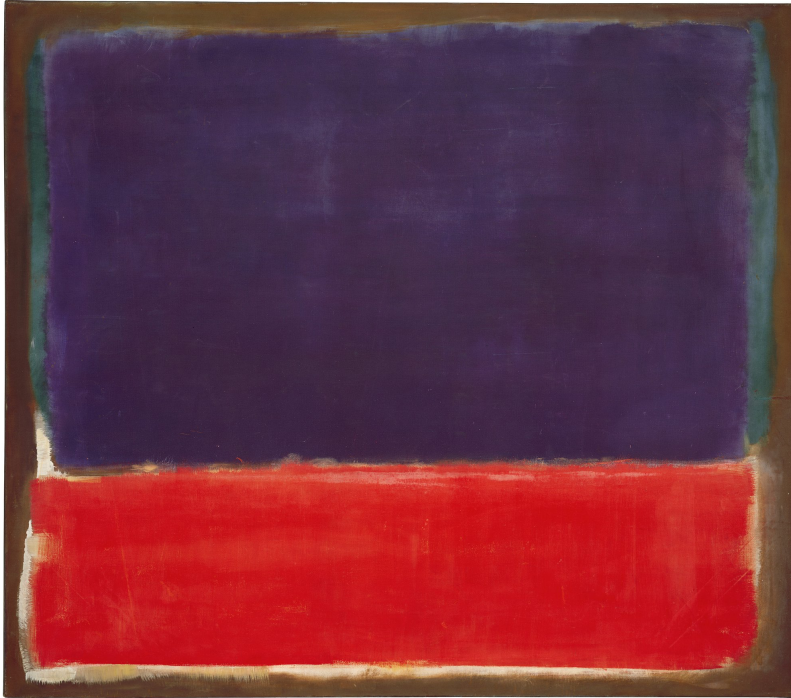
- your understanding of what you need to be happy
- your relationship with others
- your relationship with God

Music

[The Weight feat. Lukas Nelson, Mermans Mosengo, Ringo Starr & Robbie Robertson](#)

Prayer

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.



Mark Rothko, *No. 14, 1951*, © 2019 Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Week 3: Potent Hope by Neal Halvorson Taylor

Opening Meditation

[The Road Home](#) by Conspirare

Reading

For in hope, we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Romans 8:24-25

We can no longer let the people in power decide what is politically possible. We can no longer let the people in power decide what hope is. Hope is not passive. Hope is not blah, blah, blah. Hope is telling the truth. Hope is taking action. And hope always comes from the people.

- Greta Thunberg, Youth4Climate Summit

Hope is an optimizing force that moves us and all of life toward harmony. It doesn't arrive from outside; rather it is an abiding state of being, a hidden wellspring within us.

- Frank Ostaseski, *The Five Invitations*

Reflection

I was very close to Verna. A non-smoker, she died of lung cancer at the age of 67. I sat with Verna in the hospital when she, Irwin, her husband, and Joel, her youngest son and my friend, received the terrible news that she would die soon. There were no words to say. We were all numb and deeply sad. Verna finally broke the silence: "Well, that's that. Nothing more can be said or done about it." And then spoke about Jennifer and Kaia, her young granddaughters. How fun they were, quick to laugh, so smart. She

would miss seeing them grow up. She looked at each of us for a few seconds. And she softly cried. We cried too.

Without naming it, Verna's reaction to her diagnosis was one of mature hope. She blamed no one. She thought about those she loved. She looked at each of us in that tight circle around her bed. Already, her vulnerability, awareness, and courage nurtured us as we contemplated our lives without her laughter, wisdom, and care.

Mature hope comes as a byproduct of authentic relationship. Verna embodied hope in relation to us. Even as she faced death and the loss of time with those she loved, she let go. She trusted that love would prevail, that even in the suffering of the moment there was a reality that held a gracious possibility – that in the future, we would laugh and drink coffee and worry together about the state of the world, just like she enjoyed doing. And she knew that reality included the mysterious possibility of life even in death. She was part of us and would remain part of us long after she died.

Our Advent theme, mature hope, has within it the call to let go and live into the future fully aware of the possibilities – many dangerous, many transformative, some noble. Mature hope is embedded in the deepest regions of our lives, deep within our bodies. It's a leaning, a trajectory into a reality that is more complex and flexible than often portrayed. Hope, as Ruben Alves observes, allows us to imagine "that the frontiers of the possible are not determined by the limits of the actual."

Jesus never used the word hope. The apostle Paul, in contrast, used it 35 times. Instead, Jesus embodied hope in relation to those he taught, healed, and loved. Jesus leaned into folks, into their lives with their real challenges, with their sweat and tears, and gave them hope. Paul's writings reflect on that relational hope that Jesus lived and died – a potent hope that is alive.

In that hospital room with Verna, that hope was real. In our Advent lives, that hope still has potency.

Questions & Prompts for Reflection

- Is there a person who embodied hope for you?
- With whom and in what contexts have you experienced hope? How did that hope feel?

In silence, watch your breath as you inhale and exhale. Breathe in hope. Breathe out expectation. Let go. Lean into hope. Recognize its potency.

"Study the Masters" by Lucille Clifton

like my aunt timmie.
it was her iron,
or one like hers,
that smoothed the sheets
the master slept on
home or hotel, what matters is
he lay himself down on her handiwork
and dreamed. she dreamed too, words:
some cherokee, some masai, and some
huge and particular as hope.
if you had heard her
chanting as she ironed
you would understand form and line
and discipline and order and
america.

Music

[Sure on This Shining Night](#) by Conspirare

Prayer

Holy God, may this be your advent again, may you be alive among us now. Lean into us. Fill our hearts from within. Guide us through the challenges, hurts, and distress that life poses. Make your potent hope a blessing. And bring us again to the wonder and mystery of your luminous presence in all things. Amen.



Personal altar with meditation by Roshi Joan Halifax

Week 4: Uncovering Hope in Encounter by Emily B. Little

Opening Meditation

this is the only moment (species love poetry) by adrienne maree brown

i can't stop being in the present

noticing how the past tells me what i should care about and the future tells me what i should fear
and the past tells me what we forgot
and the future tells me what we must dream
but here

i breathe in
noticing the gift i too often take for granted
not knowing how many breaths i have left
i want to spend them
being
love

i have done so much, so many tasks
but what has mattered most
has been the listening
to the thirsting dirt
to the spiraling wind in the wake of

murmuration
to the drumbeat of ant feet moving abundance with a million hands
the sacred erotic of pollination
the orgasmic opening of mushrooms
pulling the yes for miles underground
the innocent violence of predators
feeding their children
the way the wild wastes nothing
the way the cedar gives me permission
to pray

i thought someone else
had all the instructions
and i, stumbling and following,
praying to become worthy,
must admit i have been grieving and grieving
all i don't know and don't trust
and grieving so deeply
a world that is still breathing
anticipating failure
in spite of my visions

but when i listen
the universe is reminding me
i cannot be taken from her
i am never untethered from her roots
never beyond the whole
and nothing is lost, it is lived
and we are not here to win
but to experience love
and those who do not know love
are missing life in spite of all other accumulation

and when i listen
the universe is teaching me
that control is impossible
and the season will change
and enough is a feeling that cannot be measured
and the small circle is the deepest
and i cannot teach anyone what i have not practiced
and i cannot change anyone but myself
and i will never feel free in a position of demand
and i am already free
and we all are, and when we realize it
we cannot be contained

and we are never i
even when we are lonely
even when we distinctly suffer
even when we distinctly succeed
we are of lineage
of collective
of era
of farmers' hands and strangers' prayers

of singers with their heads thrown back
we are always dancing with our ghosts
and praying for our great great grandchildren
we are always the harvest

and the future is being decided
the future is being practiced
the future is being planted
in this breath
and this breath
and this breath

so i breathe in
noticing the gift i too often take for granted
not knowing how many breaths i have left
i want to spend them
being
love

Reflection

During the pandemic, members of Grace Church Red Hill formed something we call the Ministry of Imagination. I say “something,” which is not a very descriptive word, but I do that purposefully, because each time we gather, the Ministry of Imagination is different. Sometimes it is a space for co-imagination or a place to find slower time. At other times, it is a place for silence without loneliness or a space for holding hope and despair together with others. On others, it is a space for bringing your inside thoughts outside of you. On most days, the Ministry of Imagination is a lesson in being ready to be changed by each encounter we have. Richard Rohr urges us to encounter one another and God by seeing and being seen, expressing ourselves honestly, and listening carefully. For me, the Ministry of the Imagination is a practice in cultivating the capacity to encounter.

Increasing my capacity to encounter means opening myself to being changed in every interaction I have. I will be honest – I am often not successful. I forget; I get caught up in ego, fear, or anger, and it doesn't work. But I keep returning to encounter because when it happens, I do find myself changing, and that feels really good. Oh, and it also feels painful and uncomfortable. Yet, I want a life that feels good *and* uncomfortable. As a new observer of Jesus, one of the lessons I take from his actions is that uncomfortable can feel good.

Uncomfortable and feeling good. Listening carefully and expressing ourselves honestly. These are of examples of holding two things that feel like opposites. Nineteenth century Hasidic master Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Peshischa saw life as an act of balancing between two concepts of the self. One the one hand, each person is merely one of an uncountable number of specks of dust. On the other hand, each human being is unique and irreplaceable. Bunim believed that each perspective was vital and should be always readily available to us. He even encouraged people to write these statements on two pieces of paper and keep one in each pocket. I love that.

For me, the idea that I am both a speck of dust *and* uniquely irreplaceable invites me to take a deep breath and reset. We live in a time of pandemic and climate change. We are aware of the hurt and pain of people around the world. To see oneself as uniquely irreplaceable encourages a sense of responsibility to solve everything. However, to see oneself as a speck of dust might persuade us to retreat and take part in nothing.

We cannot be either superhero or recluse; we must land somewhere in the middle. This middle place is the space of encounter, where we make space for ourselves and others, where we are more comfortable

with ambiguity. This space is also the dwelling place for mature hope. In *The Five Invitations*, Frank Ostaseski writes, “Ordinary hope disguised as expectation is fixated on a specific outcome. This hope gets conflated with the desire for a certain future result. It becomes object focused. It takes us outside of ourselves. The quandary is that when the outcome isn’t achieved, the object isn’t grasped, then our hopes are dashed.”

Our hopes are dashed daily. Somedays the outcomes will be met, only to be changed the next day. But if we are open to encounter and living knowing we are specks of dust and uniquely irreplaceable than I think we can grow into our hope.

Questions... Prompts... Practices

- Take notice of the parts of your body you associate with openness to encounter (perhaps the heart, chest, rib cage, clavicles, or sternum). Is there a gesture, movement or posture you could make with this part of your body? When you make this movement, what kinds of feelings, thoughts, or images arise? Repeat this movement as many times as feels comfortable. During this week, look for the moments when you feel a sense of openness. Pause to enjoy and offer love to whatever inspired this sense of openness. Sometimes we feel too vulnerable or unsettled to open up, especially during the holidays. If that is the case, try placing your hands on these vulnerable places, squeeze a soft pillow, use a weighted blanket, cuddle a pet or a friend. With curiosity and kindness, ask yourself where your heart might feel more spacious.
- Take two pieces of paper and write two sentences on them. One to remind yourself to be humble; the other to remind you of your boundless significance. Use Rabbi Simcha’s: “I am merely one of uncountable specks of dust” and “I am uniquely irreplaceable” or invent your own. Notice what these two reminders do.
- When the Ministry of Imagination gathers for community nights, we usually check in by answering the question, “What is alive in you?” Try asking someone that question this week or ask yourself each morning when you wake up. Some interesting answers might come up for you or for others!

I wrote the following poem recently when I was thinking of time, the growing humans that are my children, asking the questions without answers. Part of my experience of motherhood has been a practice of asking a million questions of the future and not knowing the answers for your children, then reaching into my pockets, knowing I am a speck of dust and a uniquely irreplaceable human being, then looking into my children’s faces and saying, “I don’t know, but I will remain open to every encounter.”

“Will She” by Emily B. Little

Metallic blood on fingers, a willful tooth
falling out of skinny fingers,
Down the drain.

It is somewhere there, out of reach, out of sight—
We both imagine this pearl of a tooth still there,
Cradled in the crook of a pipe,
My longer, heavier, older fingers reach, but can’t find what is beyond them.

Water flows with tears over this tooth,
The water, I think, will slowly wear at it,
This first lost tooth will wear into as many pieces as there are leaves falling outside,
Where will daughter be when it all willingly wears away into nothing?

Will she be leaning over a bridge, tears again over heartbreak?
Will she be trying to bring tears, cutting herself in order to feel something?
Will she be laughing, wind tears in eye corners, on skates skimming over a frozen lake?

Will lakes still be freezing?
Will we feel pain anymore after watching so many animals go extinct?
Will everything or nothing break our hearts when the climate refugees are all of us?

Will daughter follow in my steps, or will all our past steps be erased by the water?

Music

[Look Long](#) by the Indigo Girls

I have loved the Indigo Girls since middle school, and “Look Long” came into my life during the pandemic. The song has a simple, repeating phrase: look long. Instead of looking past short-term – or even long-term – goals, this phrase invites me to gaze beyond the touch of my own actions, beyond the reach of my fears, worries, desires, plans, or wishes, into time outside my conscious ripples. One day our bodies will be buried, and our only ripples will be the ones living on in other creatures. We will no longer have control. In the moments when I find myself in what I call a “doom-cycle,” I put on this song and “look long.”

A morning prayer from Padraig O Tuama

Neither I nor the poets I love found the keys to the kingdom of prayer and we cannot force God to stumble over us where we sit. But I know that it’s a good idea to sit anyway. So every morning I sit, I kneel, waiting, making friends with the habit of listening, hoping that I’m being listened to. There, I greet God in my own disorder.

I say hello to my chaos, my unmade decisions, my unmade bed, my desire and my trouble. I say hello to distraction and privilege, I greet the day and I greet my beloved and bewildering Jesus.

I recognize and greet my burdens, my luck, my controlled and uncontrollable story. I greet my untold stories, my unfolding story, my unloved body, my own love, my own body. I greet the things I think will happen and I say hello to everything I do not know about the day. I greet my own small world and I hope that I can meet the bigger world that day.

I greet my story and hope that I can forget my story during the day, and hope that I can hear some stories, and greet some surprising stories during the long day ahead. I greet God, and I greet the God who is more God than the God I greet. Hello to you all, I say, as the sun rises above the chimneys of North Belfast. Hello.

An Ending and a Beginning

Dear fellow travelers,

Thank you so much for joining us on our Advent journey. We will almost certainly have need for hope in the coming months, and we pray that the seeds planted during this time will quietly unfold as we continue through the Christmas season. May we find hope in relationship, in encounter, through practice. May we have eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to embrace it all.

Be well,
Emily Wright and Neal Halvorson-Taylor

“The Winter of Listening” by David Whyte.

No one but me by the fire,
my hands burning
red in the palms while
the night wind carries
everything away outside.

All this petty worry
while the great cloak
of the sky grows dark
and intense
round every living thing.

What is precious
inside us does not
care to be known
by the mind
in ways that diminish
its presence.

What we strive for
in perfection
is not what turns us
into the lit angel
we desire,

what disturbs
and then nourishes
has everything
we need.

What we hate
in ourselves
is what we cannot know
in ourselves but
what is true to the pattern
does not need
to be explained.

Inside everyone
is a great shout of joy
waiting to be born.

Even with the summer
so far off
I feel it grown in me
now and ready
to arrive in the world.

All those years
listening to those
who had
nothing to say.

All those years
forgetting
how everything
has its own voice
to make
itself heard.

All those years
forgetting
how easily
you can belong
to everything
simply by listening.

And the slow
difficulty
of remembering
how everything
is born from
an opposite

and miraculous
otherness.
Silence and winter
has led me to that
otherness.

So let this winter
of listening
be enough
for the new life
I must call my own.