

*The* BLESSINGS *of*  
*Motherprayer*

SACRED WHISPERS  
*of* MOTHERING



BARBARA MAHANY

Abingdon Press  
Nashville

THE BLESSINGS OF MOTHERPRAYER  
SACRED WHISPERS OF MOTHERING

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*This one is for my papa, who birthed in me the pure joy of words, who sat by my side in my darkest hours, and who dwells forever in my wellspring. And who never knew the loves of my life: Blair, Will, and Teddy.*

*Always, for every blessed soul who opens these pages. May sacred whisper find you.*

## *Perhaps the World Ends Here*

*The world begins at a kitchen table. No matter what, we must eat to live.*

*The gifts of earth are brought and prepared, set on the table. So it has been since creation, and it will go on.*

*We chase chickens or dogs away from it. Babies teethe at the corners. They scrape their knees under it.*

*It is here that children are given instructions on what it means to be human. We make men at it, and we make women.*

*At this table we gossip, recall enemies and the ghosts of lovers.*

*Our dreams drink coffee with us as they put their arms around our children. They laugh with us at our poor falling-down selves and as we put ourselves back together once again at the table.*

*This table has been a house in the rain, an umbrella in the sun.*

*Wars have begun and ended at this table. It is a place to hide in the shadow of terror. A place to celebrate the terrible victory.*

*We have given birth on this table, and have prepared our parents for burial here.*

*At this table we sing with joy, with sorrow. We pray of suffering and remorse. We give thanks.*

*Perhaps the world will end at the kitchen table, while we are laughing and crying, eating of the last sweet bite.*

—Joy Harjo

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## *A Note from My Kitchen Table*

**T**he weaving of this book, these pages, has been an exercise in joy, and the rediscovery of wonder and wisdoms and unanswerable questions, ones that held—and hold—my deepest attentions. Here and often, I draw from two wells deep inside, both of which seem never to run dry: the call of my soul to slow time, pay attention, savor what's holy, bow and bend knee in unfiltered gratitude; and, just as certainly, the unending explorations of mothering, that sacred oft-overlooked landscape that presses one heart hard up against another, the one that teaches essential lessons in loving—and living.

Love as you would be loved. Live as if tomorrow's not promised (because it isn't).

I entwine both here—slowing time, motherprayer—because one informs the other. One fuels the other's flame. And circles back again.

To mother with fullest heart, we need sustenance of the soulful sort. And how better to practice the sacred instruction—love without measure, without end, as inscribed in every ancient and timeless text—than to put it to work in the realm where mother and child together learn to find their way, twisting and turning through unmapped terrain, rising to heights not before imagined and lows that dredge the bottomless canyon?

It's messy, all right, and bumpy, too, but it's the surest equation I know in which one life launches another, and courage and love and endless prayerful implorings are essential for flight. Heavenly flight.

First, though, our eyes, our ears, our hearts, and our souls must be opened. Only then can the light—the wisdom and wonder—find its way in, in through the pried-open channels, even in through our brokenness. Maybe especially through our brokenness.

The hope stitched into each loop of word-thread in these pages is that the joy of discovery and rediscovery is “catching,” as my grandmama used to say. That you’ll catch a case of that joy, that you’ll relish what you find here, that one smidge of a morsel—be it short, medium, long, or longer—might be just what you need to sustain you. To carry you through the dry patches of the day, the arid hours of the soul, to quench your heart’s thirst, to quell your deepest yearnings.

Some years ago, before I began a writing practice-turned-spiritual practice of trying to capture the wonder and wisdoms of every blessed day, I wrote what amounted to a credo. It’s as true today as it was back when I first tapped out these words:

*We are looking for everyday grace. I believe that in quietly choosing a way of being, a way of consciously stitching Grace and Beauty into the whole cloth of our days, we can sew love where before there was only one moment passing into another. Making the moment count, that’s what it’s about here. Inhaling, and filling our lungs and our soul with possibility. Learning to breathe again. Learning to listen to the quiet, blessed tick and the tock of our heart. Steeping our soul in purest light so that, together, we can shoosh away the darkness that tries always to seep in through the cracks, wherever they might be. Please, pull up a chair.*

A decade later, I circled back in that way that history and science beckon us: to take measure, to assess, to divine truths, to determine

whether our hypothesis—our hope—has stood the test of time. I was not let down.

*Everyday grace, surely, is the shimmering something we've found, the holiest thing. It's there when you look, when you pay close attention. But it's so easily missed. You need to attend to your post in the watchtower of life. Need to be on the lookout, ever on the lookout. You've no idea where or when it will come, the everyday grace. It doesn't arrive with trumpet blast, nor even a rat-a-tat drumroll. True grace is not seeking applause. Simply the certain knowledge that it's just brushed by, grazed against the contours of your heart and your soul. And it leaves you, every time, just a little bit wiser, a little more certain that Holy is all around.*

*The quiet we set out to find, it infuses every square inch. In a world torn at the seams by incivility, in a world where, day after day, tenderness is trampled under the hard boot heels of hate and bullying and a toughen-up attitude, we stay gentle. We trade, ardently, in tenderness. We hold up a radiant grace, a blessedness that stitches hearts into a whole.*

Never more so than deep in the heart of motherlove—that inexhaustible yet exhausting devotion, unlike any other, the one sealed from the get-go, the one from which there is no escape. It's living-breathing prayer (motherprayer, motherlove, motherfaith) played out in words and beyond words—the verbs of loving attention: to feed, to cradle, to tend, and to attend, a mere sampling—as we love in ways never before beheld. Love our own, yes, *and* love those beyond the walls of the shelter we call home. For motherlove is grace, is balm, is so deeply needed in every nook and cranny of this sorry, shaken world.

Motherlove. It just might be God's most breathtaking invention.

What's offered here, in these pages, is distilled, extracted, as a syrup boiled down from the maple tree's vernal drippings, sweet essence that comes from long, slow simmering. The whole point is to dip in—a teaspoon, a ladle, or even a pot with a lid. Take what you please. Pause. Consider. Go on with your everyday hustle and bustle.

I've unfurled the snippets and threads as the calendar year unfolds, across the arc of the seasons, blessed beautiful seasons, pausing to consider certain holy days and holidays. I've woven in Wonderlists, and Count-Your-Blessings Calendars, a compendium of blessings that amount to meditative Post-its. I've slipped in a seasonal recipe or two, unearthed from the banged-up recipe tin that holds the relics of cooks and bakers and shortcut-takers I have loved. I've punctuated with prayer. (Often, for me, prayer is as much prose as it is poetry or straight-up petition, so what I call a prayer might be more like conversation, thinking aloud, or plain old talking, except I'm talking to God. And because I'm Christian—specifically, Catholic—and my husband is Jewish, our family encounters the Divine in the rituals and idioms of two faith traditions, and sometimes the prayers to which I turn are ones rooted in Hebrew text.) The prayers beyond words will be yours to live and breathe, as I live and breathe mine. And stitching this all together, making it whole, those swatches and threads of thought, notion, and words I might live by. Words that point me toward the holiness all around. And certainly the holiness that animates the blessed heart of mothering.

Because I've culled the pages of my first two books, *Slowing Time: Seeing the Sacred Outside Your Kitchen Door*, and *Motherprayer: Lessons*

*in Loving*, and pulled out those lines and passages with particular resonance, the ones that draw me back for deeper pondering (in addition to weaving in whole new musings and thoughts and newborn prayers), this book might read a bit like you're peeking into my occasional jottings, something of a journal of the heart. I emphatically invite you in, and beg you to scribble in the margins, tuck in snippets and bits all your own. Make of this a living, breathing daily companion.

All in all, this is something of a patchwork. A patchwork of joy. Of love. Of wonderment. And it's the closest I've yet come to field notes on the blessings of motherprayer, fueled and put to flight on the wings of sacred whisper.



# *Newborn Year*

*Season of Beginnings Anew*

*I*n the beginning, we start anew. As the shimmer of the festive days past begins to fade, as the newborn year begins its stirrings, we too breathe in fresh new air. Fill our lungs and our hopes and dreams, once again. Surrender to this chance to start all over again, a surrender born of humility, as we strip away old skin, tick through our litany of stumbles, our shortcomings. We make vows. Promise to try harder. Sketch dreams. Cast prayer upon the updraft. Especially our motherprayer, those vespers at the heart of who we are and how we love. We deepen in this season of long, dark nights, as minute by minute the light comes. Longer, fuller. Reaching from solstice toward equinox. The whole earth, and heavens too, echo our supplications. Our oath to love more fully, to live with the certitude that this time around, we'll inch closer to whom we were meant to be, whom we so deeply imagine. Whom God already sees.



# Newborn Year's Wonderlist

*it's the season of . . .*

---

*snow-laden sky creeping in unawares . . .*

*the red-cheeked badge of courage, come the close of a slow-spoiled walk  
through winter's woods . . .*

*frost ferns on the windowpanes . . .*

*snow falling first in feather-tufts, then fairy-dusted stars, and, finally,  
prodigiously, in what could only be curds . . .*

*noses pressed to glass, keeping watch as winter's storm wallops . . .*

*soup kettle murmuring—slow, steady, hungrily . . .*

*pinecones crackling in the hearth . . .*

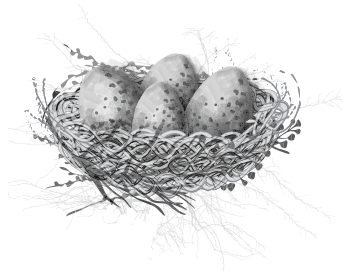
*mittens that dare to be lost, lest they're tethered to strings knotted and threaded  
through coat sleeves . . .*

*scribble your own newborn wonders here . . .*



# *A Count-Your-Blessings Calendar*

*Blessed Be the Newborn Year, Season of Beginnings Anew*



*NEW YEAR'S DAY (JAN. 1): Usher in the new year with a day of quietude; sunrise to sundown, hushed. Unplug. Slow simmer. Amble. May the loudest utterance be the turning of a page. Or the murmur of a tender kiss.*

*BLESSING 2: Weather lesson: In life, we are wise to keep ourselves stocked deep inside with whatever it takes to weather all that life throws our way. It is resilience with which we must line our inner shelves. And unswerving faith, stored in gallon jugs, to ride out any storm.*

*EPIPHANY (JAN. 6): Bundle up and take a moonwalk. Consider the gift of the nightlight that waxes and wanes but always guides our way. Pay attention to the moon's portion. Keep a moon journal, recording each night's lunar fraction, on the way toward wholeness or decline. What blessing, especially for a child. Isn't this the miracle of learning to marvel?*

*BLESSING 4: There is something mystical about the drama of a winter storm. You can't help but feel small as the sky turns marbled gray, the winds pick up, howl.*

*Trees commence their thrashing. It's a fine thing for the human species to remember the amplitude of what we're up against.*

*REV. DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.'S BIRTHDAY (JAN. 15):*

*Read the whole of Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech. Picture the world as you would dream it, then set out to make it real, one act of kindness at a time.*

*BLESSING 6: Take extra care to scatter cracked corn, peanut butter-smearing pine cones, and suet cakes for the loyal backyard critters who've settled in for winter, especially when arctic winds screech. Whisper thanks for those who keep watch on us.*

*BLESSING 7: Proffer consecration for the scarlet-cloaked cardinal—the one flash of pigment till Valentines flutter. He is the very heartbeat of promise, hope on a wing, a laugh-out-loud reminder that we are not alone. That red of reds shatters all that's bleak, shouts: "There is life where you are doubting."*

*CANDLEMAS (FEB. 2): Amid the winter's darkness, pause to consider the blessing of the candles, ordained to illuminate the hours. Fill your kitchen table, gathering a flock of orphan candlesticks. Adorn with winter branches and berries clinging to the bough.*

*BLESSING 9: Behold the bush of snowfall. The flakes free-falling past the porch light, their hard-angled intricacies and puffy contours tumbling, tumbling, lulling all the world and its weary citizens into that fugue state that comes with heavy snow—when at last we take in breath, and hold it. Fill our empty lungs.*

*BLESSING 10: Be dazzled by the diamond-dusted world you just woke up to. The way the flakes catch bits of*

*moonlight, shimmer like a thousand million stars. To be dazzled is a prayer.*

**VALENTINE'S DAY (FEB. 14):**

*Tuck love notes under pillows, inside lunch bags and coat pockets. Sprinkle a trail of construction-paper hearts from bedside to breakfast table, and christen the day with whimsies and joy. Murmur deep thanks for the gifts of heart.*

**BLESSING 12:** *Sometimes winter pushes us to the ends of our hope. It can be the season of nearly giving up. But then the holy hallelujah comes—the red bird, the pure contentment of mere survival, the steaming bowl of soup when you come in from shoveling, winter's Sisyphean folly.*

**BLESSING 13:** *Savor the sanctuary of being tucked in a cozy kitchen, looking out at a winter world of which we stand in awe. Bless the contemplative nature of this season that draws us into the depths of our cave, where we find fuel for the seasons still to come.*

**BLESSING 14:** *Bundle up for a meandering walk in the end-of-winter woods, marvel at the survival of so many species. Marvel at your own.*



# Letter to the New Year



**D**ear Year Soon-to-Crown,  
As I've done before in birthing rooms, I will reach out to cradle you, take you in my hands, pull you close against my chest. You'll hear my heart beating, quietly.

I will study you, be in awe of your sudden appearance, your entrance, your being here. There was no guarantee you and I would meet, and therein is the miracle, the often-taken-for-granted miracle. Yet, unmistakably a miracle. In every way.

Both miracle and blessing, each new year demands my full and unwavering attention. Demands the full attention of all of us standing here on the cusp, filling our hearts and our imaginations with promises, vows, hopes, resolutions of the deepest kind.

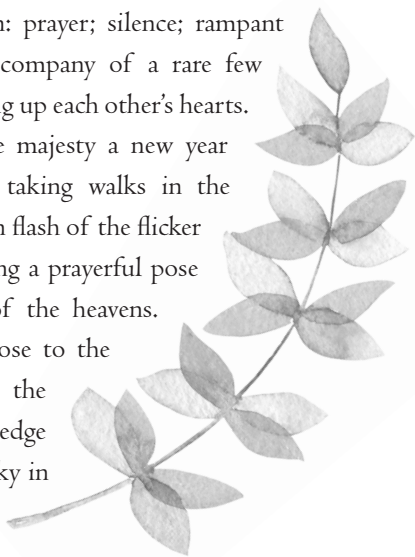
I count on both hands and beyond the people I've loved—loved dearly—who didn't get to know you. The ones, especially, who missed you by a year, or two—the loss still raw, ever a mystery, one I'll never solve. They're the everyday reminder that this new year didn't have to be in my cards. Could have been eclipsed. Gone before I got here.

I can't shake the frame locked in my imagination, the one of my dear friend last March, lying gaunt in her hospital bed, all the tubes finally taken away. There was no need for tubes anymore; they'd been revealed to be false hope, distraction from the inevitable. She looked up at me, asked, thinly, "Can you believe this?" Her words as much declaration as question. I think of her on the doorstep of death, breaths away from slipping to the other side. I hold that moment. Study it. I breathe in her courage; I pray it infuses every last nook and cranny inside me. I pray I live her dying instruction: "Practice gratitude."

I beg you, new-coming year, to be gentle. Maybe you won't be. I realize the gentle needs to come from deep inside me. I need to find the holy balm to steady me through the rough waters to come. I'm bracing myself with double doses of those few things that have proven to be my salvation: prayer; silence; rampant and unheralded kindness; the rapt company of a rare few companions, deep in the act of holding up each other's hearts.

I will usher you in with all the majesty a new year deserves: I'm quieting already. I'm taking walks in the woods, standing in awe of the crimson flash of the flicker darting from oak to oak. I'm assuming a prayerful pose under the star-embroidered dome of the heavens.

I awake with the dawn, press my nose to the window, often step outside, watch the tourmaline streaks stain the eastern edge of night, rise up, rinse the morning sky in diffuse and certain light.



I will curl in my armchair and scribble my own list of promises. The ways I hope to be kind. To be gentle. To forgive. To try and try again.

The dawn of each year draws me into my natural monastic state. I would have been such a cheerful monk, walking the moonlit halls, bare feet slapping the great stone slabs, guided by a flickering candle's flame. I would have relished a bowl of bean soup simmered all New Year's Eve Day. Would have sliced a thick baton of wheatberry bread. Alas, I'm without monastery walls at this moment in my life and thus must do without the stone-slabbed corridors. But I've beans and bread and bees' wax. I've a heart awaiting the new year, and all the prayers it will stir.

Be gentle, New Year. Be kind. And most of all, be blessed.

# *On Lessons from Mothering*

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## **I. Love as You Would Be Loved**

From the start, the moments that enveloped me most, the ones out of which the deepest inklings were born, were the moments that felt bigger, much bigger, than me. These were the moments that pulsed with questions that ultimately ask, how do we love? How, truly, do we love? How do we press against the bounds of what we thought our hearts could do and discover, blessedly, the capacity for more?

---


To mother a child—by birth or by heart, by accident or happenstance or long-held dream—is to encounter love in ways never before beheld. In ways that stretch you, sometimes break you, build you up, and mightily and often demand the best that you can be.

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Lessons learned in motherhood's ineluctable front lines serve as a paradigm for loving far beyond our lifeblood.

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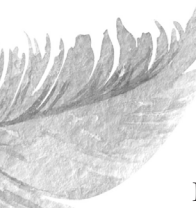
To learn to mother—to learn *from* mothering—is to learn to love in the ways of Jesus and Gandhi and Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King Jr., and even Louisa May Alcott's Marmee. It is to love as instructed in the Gospel, the Torah, the Qur'an, and every holy book ever inscribed: love as you would be loved.

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Along the course of motherhood, I've studied hard the love lessons offered.

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I was intent on teaching myself how to love—unconditionally and without waver—in ways I'd longed to love and be loved.

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I did the one wise thing I know when nothing but abyss lay before me: I unreeled my prayer, set petitions to the wind, counting on those pleas to find the ears, the heart, the soul of Holy Tender God.

I prayed my way home, time after time.



And in the whisperings that stirred my soul and set me on my way, I did learn a thing or two. Learned what it means to love and love deeply. Learned how much it sometimes hurts. Learned just how brave I might be—if pushed, and if my kid's life (or heart or soul) depends on it.

## II. Mothering Matters

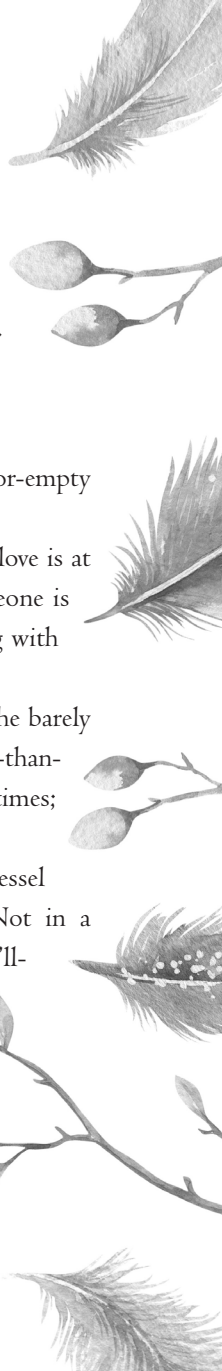
Mothering matters. Life-and-death matters. Whole-or-empty matters.

Mothering matters in those hours when someone you love is at the end, the very end, of his or her rope. When that someone is near despondent with hopelessness. Or maybe just burning with fever.

Mothering matters, too, in all the in-between times. The barely noticed times. The I-remember-you-love-this-jelly-more-than-the-other-kind times. The you-missed-the-bus-again?! times; Oh-sure-I'll-drive-you times . . .

To mother, in the way that I mean, is to become the vessel that your child, your someone who loves you, needs. Not in a hollowed-out, I'm-nothing sort of a way. But in a mighty, I'll-be-what-you-need, I'll-be-*whatever*-you-need sort of a way. Or I'll try anyway.

It is to be living, breathing empathy.



Can you even begin to imagine the job description?

Try this: must be willing, for the duration, to cradle against the harshest winds, cruel winds, winds hell-bent on knocking over the someone you love. Must be alert to cries in the night. And ones at the end of long-distance phone lines. Must be able, without warning, to execute basic first-aid skills (kisses to cuts and bumps, bee stings, and bruised egos required). Must be willing to lie, wide-eyed and heavy-hearted, for long hours, sometimes from midnight till daybreak, pondering the conundrum of the day.

Not-quite-optional: be adept at celebrating small triumphs, ones that no one else might notice, but you know because you've been listening and watching, and you've seen how steep was the path your loved one was climbing. Must let go—not of the heart, but *eventually* of the hands-on role in everyday choices, the small stuff, sometimes even the big stuff. Must witness (wincing or not) the making of mistakes (and be willing to admit your own). Must try not to snap or to scold (*scolding*, a verb some of us might have grown up with, does nothing but chafe at the soul, nip at the bud of the blossoming, beautiful child). Must forgive. Yourself and your someone you love.

### III. The Sacred Heart of Mothering

Maybe in thinking hard and deep and ponderously about the lessons that motherhood demands we struggle through, we might look down one day and see that our heart has grown deeper and wider and wiser than we ever imagined. Maybe we're one iota closer to the glorious magnificence we were meant to be.

Maybe we've learned from this one sacred heart—the heart of our child, from whom we can't, and won't, walk away—just how it might be to be fiercely and tenderly and infinitely loved, in that way that I believe we are loved by God almighty. And meant to love, most certainly.

Just maybe, in exploring motherhood, its interior and its borders, in illuminating the ledge where we let go and turn it over to the updraft I call prayer, maybe in imploring, begging, believing in the tender arms that will not let us—or our children—hurtle into the bottomless nothingness, we'll find God in depths and intimacies we've never known. Or imagined. God who loves us as a mother loves. God who hears the cries of our heart, from down the shadowed corridor, in deep of night. God who keeps the watch light burning, and will not abandon the vigil, not until we find our way through the darkness.

It's in knowing this God that we'll wrap ourselves more freely and more fervently in the shawl of prayer, motherprayer, those utterances that come from our most stripped-down essence. In knowing this God who is fluent in a mother's love, aren't we opening a channel that joins our heart to God's?

Motherhood, it seems, has caught me in its everlasting grip. No other instruction—sacred or otherwise—has so captivated, enchanted, or ignited me.

Nor so blessed me.