



my rakusu  
a personal lineage

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May the fruits of my study and practice  
serve to heal and transform the hurt  
I cause through greed, anger, and ignorance.  
May all beings be peace and happy,  
free from suffering, and free from danger,  
be liberated, be liberated.

### **Nana—Mary Elizabeth Harnett, Mary McCarthy**

She always hoped that one of her eight children would become a priest or a nun. My father, the youngest boy, told her, Mom, I'm a carpenter, like St. Joseph and Christ, hoping his chosen trade would please her God, in her eyes. When I approach her memory, I find myself hoping that my taking up the vocation of chaplaincy, in spite of the Buddhism, might meet her approval in some way, too. My memories of her are mostly from the end of her life; I remember how searing and serenely blue her eyes were as she neared death. The peace in the room at Aunt Cathy's house where she was in hospice and where she passed. All of us gathered around in Cathy's kitchen, in the days afterward. I love when my dad and his siblings tell stories of their childhood, it always begins soon after they get together; always their voices get high-pitched as they start shrieking with laughter. (Eight siblings—two sets of twins—and so many more versions of every story, so many stories...) They are each reverent of her, and she made them each reverent, in their own ways, though some of them are now irreverent of the rites of their Catholic childhood.

When I was born she gave me, as with each of the granddaughters before me, a porcelain statue of Mary—she made me reverent of Mary. This I know would make her happy and so I wish she knew: despite my Protestant upbringing with its Puritan pews and the blank wood of the empty cross, she infused my spiritual life from an early age with this sacred image, and a sense of devotion for it. The possibility of the divine embodied in feminine form and of praying to her directly. Was it from Nana that I got the little prayer card by which I taught myself to pray the Hail Mary? I repeated the words to the Mary statue, by flashlight in the bedroom of my childhood home. I think she'd be glad that this prayer is a part of my life even though I never heard it in church. Somehow that statue has made it so that the image of Mary, Mother of God, herself is inseparable from my sense of Mary, Mary McCarthy, my Nana. I pay her homage wherever I see her, traveling throughout Catholic Europe, and in the form of Guadalupe all around New Mexico, Hail Mary, Full of Grace... I feel gratitude to this matriarch of my father's Irish family, whom I hardly knew, in so doing I pay my respects to Catholicism, the religious roots on both sides of my family, the first spiritual lineage of which I am a part.

## My family—Mom & Dad

The central panel of my *rakusu* is made of fabric printed with lotus flowers left over from a set of pillowcases my mom sewed for me. I am happy to think of wearing this flower of awakening over my heart, nurturing the awakened heart, in hopes of cultivating a tiny portion of the love and generosity my mom has shown me throughout my life. Although I sewed most of it across the country from her, I felt very connected to her in the process of sewing, something she taught me to do as a child, and at which she is so talented. When I was born she made me a quilt, under which I still sleep every night, embroidering into it my family tree; this quilt was my first reference point for the names of my ancestors.

I feel regret for the way I transmitted stress to my parents in the final days of sewing my *rakusu*, back home in my parents' house in Connecticut around Christmastime (I'm sorry, guys). In my current phase of life, struggling to find independence and an adult way of relating to my parents, I feel sad knowing how imperfectly I have shown my overwhelming gratitude for the countless ways they have always nurtured and supported me. The phrase "all mother sentient beings" gets me every time; my mom is truly the most thoughtful and giving person I know. My dad is a deeply spiritual man and also happens to be among the world's sweetest people; our relationship has nurtured my faith in life and shown me that laughter is an indispensable resource. I only have to call to mind my parents' loving voices to be overcome by tears of gratitude and love for them and all they've done for me.

I always feel a deep appreciation every time I think about the fact that for my sake, they left the church of their parents. After baptizing me in the Catholic Church, they made the decision that they didn't want me to grow up there, as they did, in a church where women aren't given an equal voice. (Not that church isn't sustained by women, quietly.) This act of home-leaving on their part laid the groundwork so that all my life I have felt supported in seeking my own spiritual truth and finding it in places sometimes very far from home.

My *rakusu* also contains fabric contributions from my extended family, revealing how much love and support I draw from the broad network of my relatives, particularly my dad's sisters Cathy and Noreen, and their families.

In the life of our family, faith, prayer, love and togetherness are crucial resources; when my cousin Ben suffered a traumatic brain injury ten years ago, his parents my aunt and uncle, Noreen and Nick, and his sisters, my cousins, Bekah, Jocelyn, and Michala, made the decision to rely on these resources as a way of finding resilience. Ben today has re-learned to walk and talk, making a recovery that has surpassed all prognoses; perhaps the most amazing thing about him is his attitude, though you might also say his laugh. Ben is a *buddha* and a *bodhisattva* if ever I've known one: he has devoted his life now to volunteer service of all kinds, and he makes friends everywhere. To know Ben is to adore him. Bekah sends me an e-mail with a copy of a speech he gave recently in an elementary school classroom. Ben told the kids, "You will have challenges in your life as well. You do not know what they will be, but you will have them. We all do. It's what you do with them that will define you." In the enclosed notes from the kids, one student told Ben that what he took away from the talk was that "just because someone has been hurt doesn't have to mean that they've been broken." Another child thanked him saying, "You are certainly a bright and genuine soul." Bekah writes to me, "I mean, is this guy for real!?!?"

## **Bekah**

It has been a joy to grow closer to my cousin. She is like a big sister to me, and we also relate about our family roles as big sisters. It was a deep honor to offer a blessing in the very beautiful and personal wedding ceremony of Bekah and her husband Morgan. It meant a lot to be called into this role in my family, and to share this Irish blessing, which was also read at our Nana's funeral.

Last year at this time, as I was beginning my journey with chaplaincy, Bekah and Morgan were six months into their pregnancy with their first child, Phebe, when they lost her. Reconciling this loss is a process only just begun with the grief of this past year. Creativity is one of the resources Bekah and Morgan always manage to use to find resiliency, and in the past year they started a business of Morgan's art, design, and screen-printing. The vintage fabric they sent me for my rakusu was left over from their beautifully made screen-printed wedding invitations. I feel such pride and love when I think of them, my relationship with them is, for me, a blessing, and I wish them all the blessings in the world.

*May the blessing of light be on you, light without and light within.*

*May the blessed sunshine shine on you and warm your heart til it glows like a great peat fire, so that the stranger may come down and warm himself at it, and also a friend.*

*And may the light shine out of the two eyes of you, like a candle set in the two windows of a house, bidding the wanderer come in out of the storm; and may the blessings of rain be on you—the soft, sweet rain.*

*May it fall upon your spirit so that all the little flowers may spring up and shed their sweetness on the air.*

*And may the blessings of the Great Rains be on you, may they beat upon your spirit and wash it fair and clean, and leave there many a shining pool where the blue of heaven shines, and sometimes a star.*

*And may the blessing of the Earth be on you—the great round earth; may you ever have a kindly greeting for those you pass as you're going along the roads.*

*May the earth be soft under you when you rest upon it, tired at the end of the day, and may it rest easy over you when at the last, you lay under it; may it rest so lightly over you that your soul may be out from under it quickly; up and off and on its way to God.*

*And now may the Lord bless you, and bless you kindly. Amen.*



## **Cathy**

My Aunt Cathy is a true inspiration and role model to me in the pursuit of chaplaincy as a vocation. In her career as a social worker she has worked with hospice and currently works in the Cancer Center of a hospital. Her presence in my life is one of guidance, encouragement, deep listening, loving words and laughter in her sweet, soothing voice. As a caregiver, Cathy sees people through old age, sickness, and death every day, and at home she is also incredibly hardworking and loving as a single mom. I admire the way Cathy chose the path of motherhood as an individual, has been content never to marry. I am moved by the memory of the way Cathy took care of my Nana for the last years of her life, the way she set up hospice for her at home. I remember the angel pajamas in which she dressed her mom, the photos with which she surrounded her from throughout Nana's life, the soft music playing in the room. When I asked Cathy for fabric she sent some from her and my cousin Grace, and also thought to include something that belonged to Nana. A touching act of kindhearted thoughtfulness—these are the hallmark of my Aunt Cathy.

## **Niantic Community Church**

When my parents set about finding a different kind of church in which to raise me, they found a home in Niantic Community Church, a federated congregation of the United Church of Christ and United Methodist denominations. The motto of Niantic Community is "Each Member a Minister," and as I grew up there, I felt my own capacity to serve cultivated and called forth as I was encouraged to participate, from a young age, in many different ministries within worship services: scripture reading, playing music, liturgical dance, leading and supporting ritual, and even speaking and preaching in my own words. I received more than a lifetime's worth of teachings and loving-kindness from many different members of this spirited congregation, and the ministers who served over the years. The understanding of Jesus' teachings they gave me spoke about the power of love, forgiveness, renunciation, nonviolence, and speaking truth to power. The message from the pulpit is founded on a liberal social gospel, and the life of the community is quite engaged in working toward what we understand to be Christ's vision of social justice. The heart of the Christianity this church imprinted on my own heart is this ethic of service. The cycle of the year still finds form and meaning for me in the Christian calendar, particularly the deep seasons of Lent and Advent, and the renewal the liturgy around these provides.

Three different ministers from different periods in the life of NCC contributed fabric to my rakusu. Two who are at the church now with whom I have a continuing relationship: John, the brilliant senior pastor; Patty, a Community Minister who skillfully guided me one-on-one as a spiritual director. And Bob, a radical Methodist preacher, now retired, who served as a profound mentor throughout my coming of age, and continues to support me on my path toward chaplaincy. A week before I was set to go through the rite of confirmation, he coached me through a crisis, letting me know that confirming my baptism as a Christian wouldn't bar me from seeking truth outside of the church. This open view of Christianity meant a lot to me then, and has made it so that I feel no need to leave the church of my parents; Christianity and Niantic Community Church are still a meaningful part of my life and the life of my family, and have been the fertile ground of my growth, providing me with strong roots.

## **Mindful Matt & (Inter) Faith Youth Institute**

While I was studying in Bodh Gaya in 2008, I had the incredible opportunity to participate in a Day of Mindfulness at the Mahabodhi Temple with Thich Nhat Hanh. Practicing with Thay, Sister Chan Khong, and the Plum Village sangha that day, I experienced a deep and gratitude-filled awareness of who had brought me onto this path. FYI was a formative camp of sorts that I attended each summer during high school; this youth program held at Andover Newton Theological School encompassed theological reflection, arts, worship, spiritual practice, and service with the homeless community of Boston in what was first an ecumenical Christian setting and has grown into an interfaith one. Matt, who came to be known to me as Mindful Matt, is one of the mentors there each year; now a reverend, he was a seminarian during the summers I spent there. My first exposure to Buddhist practice was Matt's workshop on mindfulness, based on Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings. I remember his calm voice telling us to "touch peace to the earth," as we practiced slow walking on the sun-warmed grass of the ANTS hill campus. And I remember the incredible taste of an orange slice in his guided practice of mindful eating. Chewing slowly under a tent filled with monastics at the Mahabodhi, acknowledging all who had brought the food to the table, I thought of Matt and of FYI, for bringing mindfulness into my life. The creative youth from the most recent summer of the program (2012) painted a piece of fabric, which Matt sent me for my rakusu. The experiences I had at FYI were profoundly enriching, broadening and affirming, and I'm so grateful for the continuing relationship of friends and mentors from this incredible community.

## **Kelly**

Getting off the phone with Kelly, I always feel relieved, renewed, and understood in so many aspects of who I am. The beauty of our sisterhood is the reverential acknowledgment we offer to one another and the commitment we've made to holding the space for this deep sharing and listening. Since we met at FYI almost ten years ago, we have talked on the phone every week, with remarkably few exceptions. When I was in Italy for four months, we wrote letters and e-mails, and when I was in India, we mailed each other audiocassettes. At home in the U.S., we make time one evening a week for an hours-long phone talk, sharing our struggles, our joys, and our spiritual intentions, holding for one another a prayerful vision for our growth and the unfolding expression of our deepest callings. Our weekly ritual grew out of the coming down from the mountaintop process following FYI, a desire to integrate the space for spiritual reflection that was so meaningful there into our lives more consistently. As someone once told Kelly, though in our own journeys in life we are each on our own path, it's a beautiful thing to have a friend walking a parallel path, close enough to wave. Although our callings are taking different forms as Kelly heads into ordination through the UCC and I pursue Buddhist chaplaincy, Kelly's support, wisdom, and understanding are invaluable in guiding me in this pursuit.

## The Bodins

Seven years after I went through confirmation at Niantic Community Church, I formally took the Bodhisattva vow in a ceremony under the Bodhi Tree in Bodh Gaya, India. Undergoing this very special ceremony with me was my childhood friend, Jesse Bodin. During the confirmation process, my dad mentored Jesse, and Jesse's mom, Ellen, mentored me. Jesse and I both had complex processes heading into this rite of passage, in which we questioned deeply the role of the church in our lives. When our confirmation class spent a special overnight retreat at the church, we were introduced to the labyrinth, an experiential tool and spiritual practice that has become incredibly important to me in the 10-plus years since then. I remember sharing a silent smile and a hug with Jesse in that labyrinth in the dark sanctuary that night, standing in a symbol of the circuitous journey we found ourselves on together. It was almost beyond belief when, from separate colleges, we both found ourselves a part of the same sangha of students in Bodh Gaya studying Buddhism years later.

The second time I ever walked a labyrinth was with Ellen, when she took me on a special day trip to meet her friend who is a cloistered Christian nun, an experience that opened me to the profound beauty of the monastic life. As a mentor and friend, Ellen introduced me to a feminine sense of the divine, kindling a deep longing in me for this kind of knowledge in her radical, creative, feminist Sunday school class for young women, and in the books, conversations, and experiences we've shared throughout my life. I am so grateful for the ongoing friendship, mentorship and kinship I feel with the Bodins. Contemplating the ways our spiritual lives have intertwined makes my head spin with the intricacy of karmic connections.

## L'Ana

I first met L'Ana as the teacher of "Mommy and Me" dance class when I was two. She is a close friend and role model, and she will always be my dance teacher. Dancing with L'Ana all the weeks and years of growing up, I was joyfully training in creativity, improvisation, collaboration, and grounding in the body. I've said many times that L'Ana's dance class, during adolescence, was my creativity's salvation; it saw me through those otherwise stifling years of high school. I remember sinking into the marley floor of her studio after school and sighing with the relief of feeling at home. What a gift when someone gives you the space to be totally yourself. L'Ana is a gifted teacher in so many regards and the work she does is so unique in that she empowers young people to make their own dances, embodying their own ideas. I think of some of the titles of the dance concerts I participated in at a young age, *Connections*, *Light*; *Earth Matters: A Dance Prayer for the 21st Century*, and how we danced on the labyrinth in my last concert before graduating and leaving home. The beauty of L'Ana's work is that her creativity flows from her deep spiritual life; she is my first and foremost model for how those two things are integrated. It was with L'Ana, as well as Ellen, that I first danced as liturgy, in church. For my rakusu, L'Ana sent me fabric with a spiral, a mutually beloved symbol of the ever-deepening journey. Her ongoing support of my journey in life has meant so much; it is as her student that I make a dance as part of my Jukai preparation, using movement as another way of contemplating what it means to embody the precepts.



## **Lizzy**

I open the latest mailing envelope from Lizzy, with my name inscribed in her distinct, rounded hand on the front. Out pours a flock of knitted hearts, colorful Valentines of yarn. The beauty of the objects she makes and the creativity they embody are matched only by the love and thoughtfulness Lizzy puts into them. Lizzy's friendship for me is bedrock: like the Irish symbol of the cladagh, when I think of Lizzy I think how lucky I am to know the best kind of love, friendship, and loyalty from knowing her. We studied Irish step dancing together when we were five and now we are collaborating to design a children's book about a girl of that age. My favorite memories of the years before I left my hometown involve Lizzy and wherever we travel together she makes me feel lighthearted through her playfulness, and with her understanding I always feel at home. As long as I've known her, she's had her blankie and the fact that a piece of it has become part of my rakusu touches me deeply. Though it seems fragile, I know how much it has endured. I didn't keep from including it even when I melted a hole into it with an iron; as I wear it, I can only hope to find some of that consistent presence Lizzy offers me as a friend, and some of that amazingly generous heart she shares with the world.

## **Bodh Gaya**

I'll always remember the lemon-honey nights. In Bodh Gaya, our sangha of students staying in the Burmese Vihar was given the opportunity to temporarily ordain as monks and nuns in the Theravadin lineage. A rite performed by the Vihar's abbot, it is usually reserved for the Burmese pilgrims during their time in Bodh Gaya, to increase the merit of the pilgrimage for which they'd saved for a lifetime. I was one of five student nuns who were blessed to undergo this 10-day ordination process under the guidance of Sister Molini and Sister Dhammavajaya. This pair is a dharma powerhouse. While our fellow students ate dinner, we abstained, in accordance with the vows we had taken; instead, we shared lemon honey tea in the Sisters' room, and heard them tell stories about the first Buddhist nuns, from whom we were borrowing our dharma names. I particularly remember the grand gesture Sister Molini would use as she ended each story to illustrate each practitioner's eventual illumination: "...and then she attained enlightenment."

The deepest teaching was the power of their presence, the power of their practice, the way these two transmitted *metta*. At the end of the period of my monastic commitment, I sat my first silent three-day retreat; between the robes and the vows and the intensity of silence amidst this deepening of my practice, I felt every part of my identity drawn into question, destabilized, loosening and unraveling one by one like bad stitches. This first retreat ended with a metta chant from Sister Molini and as she sang, I felt every last door on my heart fling open. I knew why it mattered to cultivate concentration, I felt the sheer force of directed loving-kindness suffusing my body and being.

I've never been able to sum up the experience of those four months I spent in Bodh Gaya. Five years later, I still suffer a deep gratitude for all that I learned there and I wonder how many lifetimes it will take me to integrate it. I remember reading His Holiness the Dalai Lama talking about how Bodh Gaya is a place with a power that enriches every pilgrim who comes there, and that everyone who comes enriches the power of

the place. When I think of the Bodhi Tree, I see in my heart-mind the humble, loving gestures of monks and pilgrims pressing their forehead to the gate around the tree, and making offerings of water to the roots. The Mahabodhi and the Tree are awe-inspiring, but all around the mandala of the place I felt overwhelmed with the beauty of devotion and the commitment to practice: the Tibetans prostrating and spinning prayer wheels, malas moving rapidly through skilled chanting hands, piles of rice spilling out of mandala offerings, and the constant, ethereal droning of the refuge vows in Pali amplified over the loudspeakers.

The semester of Buddhist study I spent in Bodh Gaya was also where I first experienced Zen practice. I remember my *dokusan* with Sensei Ekai Korematsu Osho during my first *sesshin*; we talked about how there is movement in stillness and stillness in movement, and such grace in both. Ever since, I've enjoyed thinking of Zen as a choreography of stillness, and my dancer self has found a deep love for the Soto forms. I definitely never would have come to Upaya Zen Center if it hadn't been for the gift of this experience, but I may also never have come to Santa Fe if it weren't for the gift of the friendships I took away from India. After sharing the only triple room at the Vihar, my friends Joanna and Carrie and I have formed what I hope will be a lifelong sisterhood. Joanna is part of what brought me to Santa Fe; she is the only person that physically joined me during the process of sewing, helping me hold the space for this work, and the only peer I invited to the Jukai ceremony. From her native London, Carrie sent me a treasured, beautiful painted silk *zafu* cover that is becoming the lining of my rakusu envelope, helping me hold space for this rakusu, even from afar. In a rekindling of our pen-pal ship, from Hawaii, another close friend from Bodh Gaya, Austin, sent me part of a soft, well-loved T-shirt; having fabric from him brings to mind his sense of humor and gentle-hearted presence, and I hope it will remind me to be gentle, and not to take myself too seriously. At the closing council of our entire semester in India, another friend in this sangha shared, "It will never be weird to hear from any of you at any point in our lives." I loved that, and I love all the ways we've already found to stay connected; I feel the energetic support of these peers when I practice. One of the greatest gifts of the dharma in my life so far is dharma friends.

## Paolo

In my rakusu is a scrap of fabric from a shirt Paolo wore during our 35-day walking pilgrimage on the Camino de Santiago in 2011. We made a great team on the Camino. I had long held the spiritual dream of making this pilgrimage, and Paolo's practical backpacking knowledge proved quite helpful in setting the pace each day as we made our way from St. Jean Pied de Port in France, over the Pyrenees and westward almost 500 miles to Santiago in Spain. For most of each day on the Camino we'd walk alone, at our own paces, encountering all the thoughts, emotions and memories that this constant movement stirred up from every pocket of the body. And then there were hours when we'd walk together, singing favorite songs loudly with no one near enough to hear, or serving as sounding boards for one another for the deep reflections prompted by taking this long walk far away from home. It was during this summer that I came to the idea to pursue chaplaincy, realizing maybe there was a place for me in this field, after all, even though I'd written it off with the feeling that seminary probably wasn't for me. I remember thinking out loud to Paolo about this and receiving his complete encouragement and support.

In a daily way, and as a force in my life for the five years of our partnership, Paolo has been a rock for me, grounding me through his deep listening, steady attention, and thoughtful insights. He has taught me a lot about sustaining paradox and holding space for ambivalence and conflict within myself through his even-

keeled nature and approach to disagreement. The strength of our relationship has always been how we communicate, even now as we make the transition from being partners to being friends; living and growing together from college into young adulthood has taught me so much about honesty and the balancing dance of intimate relationship. The months of my Jukai preparation ended up being the months in which we brought our relationship to an end.

We always conceptualized our partnership as a kind of tent, a cozy, sheltered interiority, and now somehow it feels like the moment has arrived to pack it up and move on. As I sewed my rakusu, the tears marking this transition passed through regularly like summer storm clouds; I sewed with the feeling that I was making a new home for myself, in taking refuge. It feels like leaving home to leave this relationship behind, yet I walk forward with a deep-seated gratitude for it and a feeling of pride for the miles we covered, the beautiful journeys we completed together.



