

# Journey to Joy

by Christine Valters Paintner

## Small Group Leader's Guide

Dear Dancing Monks,

Welcome to your own Journey to Joy!

The book's dedication reads, "To everyone who longs to reclaim their full inheritance of joy and who believes in the magic of stories to transform hearts." With this intention in mind, this resource was created to help guide and support your and your community's journey toward claiming your inheritance of joy.

This Small Group Leader's Guide is designed for 4 weeks, reading two sections per week. In the gatherings, there is time allotted for a welcome, a section review with questions as prompts for conversation, a contemplative practice to engage with together, another section review with questions, and a final blessing. Included in this Small Group Leader's Guide are a total of four suggested creative, contemplative practices for participants to do at home, one for every two sections — one practice per week.

There is an 8-week option for this Small Group Leader's Guide as well, allowing you to choose based on your scheduling needs. In the 8-week Guide, your meeting times will be slightly shorter, the structure being a welcome, a section review and questions, a contemplative practice, and a closing blessing. There are also four suggested creative, contemplative practices for participants to do at home for this version.

May your journey ahead overflow with the magical and transformative power of joy.

With great and growing love,

***Christine***

Christine Valters Paintner, OBlSB, PhD, REACE

Abbess for Abbey of the Arts



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\* *Opening prayers, summaries, reflection questions, and contemplative practices written by Delaney Hart unless otherwise noted*

\* *Artwork by Dominique Serfontein*

## Week One

# Responding to the Call

## Preparation

- ✦ Prior to the group gathering, encourage participants to read through the first and second sections.
  - ✦ In the physical book: pg. 1–17
  - ✦ If reading the kindle edition: “Once upon a time there was a woman in midlife...” through “...whose bare branches danced and glimmered in the moonlight.”
- ✦ Prepare the *At-Home Practice Guide Sheets: Blessing Someone’s Heart* to give or send to participants at this week’s gathering.
- ✦ A suggested time allotment of 85–105 minutes is based on a gathering of 5–8 people. Adjust as needed for the size of your group.

## Greeting & Welcome

(10–15 MINUTES)

Honor the presence of everyone gathered. Invite a brief check-in from everyone in the group. (There will be more time to discuss the book later.)

## Lighting a Candle & Opening Prayer

Either light a candle or invite each participant to light a candle if you are meeting online and open the time in prayer. You may use the following as your opening prayer:

*God of Transitions, as we cross this threshold and step into our journey together, may you grant us courage to face the unknown and the uncomfortable; community of guides, companions, and soul friends to know we do not walk this path alone; curiosity to welcome all that we meet along the way; and creativity to help expand our vision to behold all that you intend for us. May it be so.*

## First Section

(25–30 MINUTES)

### Summarize the First Section

We learn that Sophia and her town have lost their spark, their joy. Upon exhausting options for pursuing wellness, Sophia decides to make the dangerous journey beyond the village edge to the Medicine Woman. As she crosses the border bridge, a Troll steals Sophia's joy, leaving her even more exhausted and drained.

### Potential Themes to Highlight

- ✦ loss (communal and personal), disorientation, pilgrimage, the practice of hearing the call and responding, packing/preparing with intention

### Suggested Questions for Shared Reflection

- ✦ Where would the *Fairytale of You* be set? What is the community to which your soul belongs, and what is that community known for?
- ✦ What is your current relationship with the concept of community? Do you experience it as a support system, a burden, something longed for, an ambiguous unknown?
- ✦ What are the ways you feel resonance or dissonance with Sophia?
- ✦ How does the “loss of joy” manifest for you? What are the symptoms of the loss of joy for your inner community (your internal family system), and what are the symptoms for the community surrounding you?

## Contemplative Practice

(20–25 MINUTES)

### Lectio Divina

Invite participants to pray the four movements of *Lectio Divina* using an excerpt from the book and the suggested guidelines below.

#### Potential excerpts for use:

- ✦ Beginning of book, “Once upon a time there was a woman in midlife...” through “The villagers knew they had lost their spark but didn't know how to find it again.”
  - ✦ In the physical book, pg. 1–2 through end of first full paragraph on pg. 2.
- ✦ “It was dark and cool with its [the cave's] stone embrace...” through end of the section, “...whose bare branches danced and glimmered in the moonlight.”
  - ✦ In the physical book, top of pg. 14–17 to end of section.

### **First Movement - Lectio: Settling & Shimmering**

Find a comfortable position where you can remain alert and yet also relax your body. Bring your attention to your breath and allow a few moments to become centered. If you find yourself distracted at any time, gently return to the rhythm of your breath as an anchor for your awareness. Allow yourself to settle into this moment and become fully present. Read the passage once or twice through slowly. Listen for a word that feels significant right now, that is capturing your attention even if you don't know why. Gently repeat this word to yourself in the silence.

### **Second Movement - Meditatio: Savoring & Stirring**

Read the text again. Allow the word or phrase which caught your attention in the first movement to spark your imagination. Savor the word or phrase with all of your senses; notice what smells, sounds, tastes, sights, and feelings are evoked. Then listen for what images, feelings, and memories are stirring, welcoming them in, and then savoring and resting into this experience.

### **Third Movement - Oratio: Summoning & Serving**

Read the text a third time. Listen for an invitation rising up from your experience of prayer so far. Considering the word or phrase and what it has evoked for you in memory, image, or feeling, what is the invitation? This invitation may be a summons toward a new awareness or action.

### **Fourth Movement - Contemplatio: Slowing & Stilling**

Move into a time for simply resting in God and allowing your heart to fill with gratitude for God's presence in this time of prayer. Slow your thoughts and reflections even further and sink into the experience of stillness. Rest in the presence of God and allow yourself to simply be. Rest here for several minutes. Return to your breath if you find yourself distracted.

### **Rest into Silence - 5 minutes**

#### **Closing**

Gently connect with your breath again and slowly bring your awareness back to the room, moving from inner experience to outer experience. Give yourself some time of transition between these moments of contemplative depth and external presence. Take a few minutes to journal about what you experienced in your prayer.<sup>1</sup> You may invite the group to share a word or phrase that shimmered from their reflection.

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpted and adapted from Christine Valter Paintner's *Lectio Divina—The Sacred Art: Transforming Words and Images into Heart-Centered Prayer*. (Skylight Paths Publishing, 2011), pg. xxii

## Second Section

(25–30 MINUTES)

### Summarize the Second Section

Sophia arrives at the Medicine Woman's house and is greeted with warmth, tinctures, and revelations about the Troll who stole her joy. The Medicine Woman then directs Sophia to the cave of stolen joy. After a difficult journey to the cave, Sophia frees the guarding Dragon from the Troll's chains, learns she cannot yet open the jars of joy, and sets off to find the Wise One for help.

### Potential Themes to Highlight

- ✦ doubt, quest, rest (to prepare for a long journey), guides and companions, encountering others enslaved in harmful systems, traveling with soul friends

### Suggested Questions for Shared Reflection

- ✦ What are the ways your body cries out for nourishment?
- ✦ What gifts have you been given when preparing for either a physical or spiritual journey? What gifts are already yours (such as Sophia's writing) that you most often forget?
- ✦ Have you ever felt compelled to guard your joy without feeling permission to enter fully into it? What were the forces or voices that forbade you entrance?
- ✦ Who are the people bound by harmful systems that you have encountered on your own journey? What compassion do you feel called to share with them?

## Preparation for Next Week & Suggestion for Practice

(5 MINUTES to explain and distribute materials)

### Read for Next Week

- ✦ Third and fourth sections
  - ✦ In the physical book: pg. 19–31
  - ✦ If reading the kindle edition: “They came to a small round stone cottage...” through “...she brought her candle to the hearth, lit it, tucked the scroll into her satchel, and she began to walk.”

## At-Home Practice

### **Blessing Someone's Heart** (inspired by the second section)

You're invited to write a blessing or create a work of art full of love reflecting and blessing someone's heart (like Sophia to the Dragon on pg. 13 in the physical book). This could even be an offering to your own heart.

Begin by allowing a few moments to center yourself with deep, intentional breaths. Slowly begin to open your own heart in order to listen for who you are being invited to bless. It may be a close soul friend, an estranged family member, or an ancestor. Remember, it could even be yourself. Try to let go of planning and let yourself receive the invitation.

After your heart has heard who it is you are called to bless, allow a few more minutes with your breath to open the eyes of your heart to see the truths resting at the core of the recipient of your blessing. What are the gifts unique to them? What are their struggles and wounds? What are the words of love they long to hear?

As you see their heart with the eyes of your heart, begin to enter your creative practice — writing, drawing, painting, dancing — and offer your blessing to their heart, letting your expression be as free as possible.

After your expression has come to its conclusion, reflect on how you felt during the experience, what you're invited to take with you into your day and week, and what you feel led to share with the one whose heart you blessed.

## Closing Blessing

(approximately 1 MINUTE)

### For Saying Yes to the Journey

Holy Traveler,  
bless our sacred yes to the call  
you have whispered to us,  
whether a call to new adventure  
or the call that arises out of loss.  
We know you journey with us  
and guide us on the way to new paths.

May we travel with intentionality,  
being conscious of encountering you in each step,  
in each stranger, in each moment of disorientation.

We ask you to bless our feet,  
that they carry us forward to new possibilities.  
Bless our hands,  
that they might help us give form to our creative visions.  
Bless our hearts,  
that we stay open to wonder and numinous moments.  
Bless our throats,  
that we gain courage to speak truth.  
Bless our lips,  
that we take in what is most nourishing.  
Bless our intuition,  
that through wisdom and dreams  
you may be a close companion on the way,  
guiding us through the darkness.<sup>2</sup>



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<sup>2</sup> Closing Blessing by Christine Valters Paintner, *A Book of Everyday Blessings: 100 Prayers for Dancing Monks, Artists, and Pilgrims*. (Ave Maria Press, 2026), pg. 62

## Week Two

# Encountering the Unfamiliar

## Preparation

- ✦ Prior to the group meeting, encourage participants to read through the third and fourth sections.
  - ✦ In the physical book: pg. 19–31
  - ✦ If reading the kindle edition: “They came to a small round stone cottage...” through “...she brought her candle to the hearth, lit it, tucked the scroll into her satchel, and she began to walk.”
- ✦ Prepare the *At-Home Practice Guide Sheet: Acrostic Poem with Your Question* to give or send to participants at this week’s gathering.
- ✦ For more information on this week’s Contemplative Practice *Sacred Imagination*, visit: <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-spiritual-exercises/ignatian-contemplation-imaginative-prayer/>
- ✦ A suggested time allotment of 85–105 minutes is based on a gathering of 5–8 people. Adjust as needed for the size of your group.

## Greeting & Welcome

(10–15 MINUTES)

Honor the presence of everyone gathered. Invite a brief check-in from everyone in the group. (There will be more time to discuss the book later.)

## Lighting a Candle & Opening Prayer

Either light a candle or invite each participant to light a candle if you are meeting online and open the time in prayer. You may use the following as your opening prayer:

*God of Pilgrimage, grant us Wise Ones to prepare and bless us for our journeying. May we have the grace and humility to receive their gifts. As we venture forth, our own questions emerge and blossom. Grant us courage to voice our confusion and open us to hear the answers both surrounding us and within us. Bless us with our song so that we may bless the world in turn. May it be so.*

## Third Section

(25–30 MINUTES)

### Summarize the Third Section

Sophia, the Dragon, and Schatz arrive at the Wise One's cabin where they are once again provided with rest and sustenance in preparation for a long journey. After receiving ritual tea and a blessing from the Wise One, Sophia heads out to find her song, a journey she must make alone.

### Potential Themes to Highlight

- ✦ rest, visions in dreams, symbols, traditions and rituals, mantle of protection, patience and endurance, journeying alone

### Suggested Questions for Shared Reflection

- ✦ Do you have traditions or rituals that help hold and embolden you?
- ✦ What is your relationship with patience and endurance?
- ✦ What are the journeys in your life that you've had to make alone?

## Contemplative Practice

(20–25 MINUTES)

### Sacred Imagination or Imaginative Prayer

#### Potential excerpts for the practice:

- ✦ “When morning arrived...” through “It emboldened her for whatever might be ahead.”
  - ✦ In the physical book, middle of pg. 20 through near the bottom of pg. 21.
- ✦ “Sophia went running back to the Wise One's cottage...” through to the end of the section, “...she brought her candle to the hearth, lit it, tucked the scroll into her satchel, and she began to walk.”
  - ✦ In the physical book, near the bottom of pg. 29 through pg. 31, the end of the section.

To explain the practice, read the following aloud to the participants beforehand or summarize in your own words:

Adapted from a spiritual exercise created by St. Ignatius of Loyola,<sup>3</sup> *Sacred Imagination* is a method of using our imagination to place ourselves fully within a story and receiving the gifts that imagination has to offer. We become onlookers/participants and give full rein to our imagination, allowing our thinking mind to rest and trusting our intuition.

Before beginning the practice, allow a moment to welcome a couple of deep breaths together.

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<sup>3</sup> For more information, visit: <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-spiritual-exercises/ignatian-contemplation-imaginative-prayer/>

As the passage is read aloud, you're invited to enter fully into the story as one of the characters, a non-written observer (such as a fly on the wall!), or even an inanimate object. As the text is read, unbridle your imagination to let your senses paint the picture of the scene for you. What do you see? Hear? Taste or smell? What do you feel in this space?

After the reader has completed the passage, allow 1–2 minutes to sit in silence and remain in the scene that your imagination has revealed to you. Allow the scene to continue to unfold: what are the characters doing or saying? Do *you* say anything? Are there any new sensations that arise from the continuation of this scene?

At the leader's prompting, slowly bring your attention back to the room you're in and discuss with the group what you felt, saw, heard, and any new insights you have or any invitations you've received.

If time allows, read the passage again, and listen for if there's an invitation to enter the story as a different character.

## Fourth Section

(25–30 MINUTES)

### Summarize the Fourth Section

Sophia embarks on her first initiation where she listens deeply to the songs of Creation, poses her question to Creation, and ultimately discovers and unleashes her own song of lament and beauty, blessing the world with her unique voice.

### Potential Themes to Highlight

- spring, deep listening, communing with Creation/more-than-human, finding one's voice, grief and beauty, cosmic song, transformation

### Suggested Questions for Shared Reflection

- When have you felt capable? What surrounded you (physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually) and called for your attention?
- What are ways you have or can commit to becoming “close friends” with the abundance of life and creation around you?
- What questions within you are longing to be voiced by you?
- What are the effects of rest that you've witnessed in your life or in others' lives?

# Preparation for Next Week & Suggestion for Practice

(5 MINUTES to explain and distribute materials)

## Read for Next Week

- ✦ Fifth and sixth sections
  - ✦ In the physical book: pg. 33–49
  - ✦ If reading the kindle edition: “Sophia walked for a long time, all the while singing her song.” through “Listen to the spirit of the earth and you will find your way.”
- ✦ **Ask them to read the text with open hearts and minds and listen for a sentence, phrase, or word that shimmers or sparkles.** These are called “sparklets” and will be gathered together for next week’s Contemplative Practice *Florilegia*.<sup>4</sup>

## At-Home Practice

### **Acrostic Poem with Your Question** (inspired by the fourth section)

Through acrostic poetry, you’re invited to receive wisdom from both the elements and from within yourself.

First, find a space where you can commune with the elements. Whether in a summer-time field or by a candle in the winter-time, find some element to serve as your guide in this practice.

When you’ve settled into a contemplative space, allow a moment to center yourself and listen for the question that is forming in your heart; it could be “What is my song?” or “What is my truth?” or an entirely different question that is calling to you on your particular journey of transformation.

After the question has revealed itself, write it out vertically, each letter on its own line.

From here, you are invited to create an acrostic, listening to both the elemental wisdom from your guide and to the wisdom emerging from within. Try not to edit this process. If your inner critic arises, there is no need to force the voice aside — this can sometimes make it stick around with more stubborn severity. Try to breathe and allow your voices of grace and creativity to stay present with you as well, reminding your critic to allow other voices space to speak. You may even consider engaging with your inner critic further, asking what is at the root of its opinion.

This process is your own, and you are encouraged to experiment and find the balance of inner conversation that works for you.

After completing your acrostic, you’re invited to place it somewhere where you can see it over the coming weeks and notice any shifts in your relationship to your question.

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<sup>4</sup> See the preparation section for next week for more information.

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**An example:**

What is my song?

*Who am I?*

*How am I to show up in the world?*

*Attentively, I witness*

*Tentatively, I grow*

*Inertia keeps me down, yet*

*Speed grinds my bones to dust.*

*My*

*Yes*

*Sings its silver harmonies, whispering to*

*Open my heart and*

*Not succumb to fear.*

*Great joy awaits my “yes”*

## Closing Blessing

(approximately 1 MINUTE)

### For Creative Joy

Blessed Source of Joy,  
carve out room in us for the  
inexpressible delights of love.

Let our hearts become fountains overflowing  
into the world with your love and compassion.  
Help us to pause each day and whisper “thank you”  
for the most ordinary graces and gifts.

In the way that you looked upon your creation  
and called everything *so* good, kindle in us  
the same generous vision.

Lift us beyond our narrow concerns and help us  
to see how there is no separation, that we are all connected.  
Support us in honoring our bodies as sacred temples  
and losing ourselves in the great cosmic dance.<sup>5</sup>



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<sup>5</sup> Closing Blessing by Christine Valters Paintner from the Prayer Cycle, *Monk in the World*  
(<https://abbeyofthearts.com/prayer-cycle/monk-in-the-world/day-7/>)

## Week Three

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# Transformation

## Preparation

- ✦ Prior to the group meeting, encourage participants to read through the fifth and sixth sections.
  - ✦ In the physical book: pg. 33–49
  - ✦ If reading the kindle edition: “Sophia walked for a long time, all the while singing her song.” through “Listen to the spirit of the earth and you will find your way.”
- ✦ **Ask them to read the text with open hearts and minds and listen for a sentence, phrase, or word that shimmers or sparkles.** These are called “sparklets” and will be gathered together for the Contemplative Practice *Florilegia*.<sup>6</sup>
  - ✦ *Florilegia* is a merging of the words “flower” and “gather”. In this gathering, the participants will be invited to share their sparklets with the group to create new texts, a bouquet of gathered shimmering “flowers”.
  - ✦ In case any participant is unable to come with a word that shimmered to them from the reading, you might want to prepare an excerpt that can be read during the meeting. Any passage will serve well.
- ✦ Prepare the *At-Home Practice Guide Sheet: Love Letter to Self* to give or send to participants at this week’s gathering.
- ✦ A suggested time allotment of 85–105 minutes is based on a gathering of 5–8 people. Adjust as needed for the size of your group.

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<sup>6</sup> In addition to the practice description written on pg. 14, I highly recommend referring to this helpful guide with more information on conducting *Florilegia*: <https://www.getliturgized.com/practices/sacred-reading-florilegia>

## Greeting & Welcome

(10–15 MINUTES)

Honor the presence of everyone gathered. Invite a brief check-in from everyone in the group. (There will be more time to discuss the book later.)

### Lighting a Candle & Opening Prayer

Either light a candle or invite each participant to light a candle if you are meeting online and open the time in prayer. You may use the following as your opening prayer:

*God of Love, you see the ways in which we are constricted and divided. Bless our journey as we face the unknown and the uncomfortable. So often we seek to ignore and bypass the root of our discomfort, further binding and disconnecting us. We ask for the guidance and wisdom of Creation and Wise Ones to soften and open us to all we hide from. We pray for your love to be with us as we collaborate with you to transmute our chains into crowns, our wounds into beauty. May it be so.*

## Fifth Section

(25–30 MINUTES)

### Summarize the Fifth Section

Sophia is guided by a flame to a circle of trees where she is invited to “turn every burden into lead and then walk through the flame”. After many weeks of journaling and feeling the weight of her burdens, her cage becomes apparent. She knows her task and walks through the flames, emerging with her burdens transmuted into a golden crown.

### Potential Themes to Highlight

✦ summer, burdens, weight of expectations, transmutation/transformation, freedom, abundance

### Suggested Questions for Shared Reflection

- ✦ What outlets help you to release your burdens and pour out your heart?
- ✦ What burdens do you carry that you long to be transmuted, and what cages do your burdens create? Consider if there are past burdens that have already been transformed in some way. What are the “fires” you’ve walked through?
- ✦ What are symbols of celebration and thanksgiving you could embrace during your journey?

# Contemplative Practice

(20–25 MINUTES)

## Florilegia

*Florilegia* is a merging of the words “flower” and “gather”. In this practice, participants are asked to have read the text with open hearts and minds and to have listened for a sentence, phrase, or word that shimmers or sparkles. These are called “sparklets.” In this gathering, the participants are invited to share their sparklets with the group to create new texts.

Depending on the size of your group, you may want to create 2 or 3 “new texts” instead of just 1 so that only 2–3 sparklets are combined at a time. However, feel free to be creative and assemble as many sparklets into one new text as you feel led! Lean into whatever wants to emerge.

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### An example:

*Sparklet 1: “awaken in tears at the heaviness”*

*Sparklet 2: “What is next?”*

*Sparklet 3: “her song arose in her heart”*

*New Text 1: “awaken in tears at the heaviness... what is next?.. her song arose in her heart”*

After assembling the “bouquet of new text”, see what new message, wisdom, or invitation emerges. There might not always be something earth shattering or even obvious; listen to your felt sense associated with the new text. Then try shuffling the order.

*New Text 2: “what is next?.. her song arose in her heart... awaken in tears at the heaviness”*

Is there anything new that shimmers for the group from this next text?

If working with more than 2 sparklets, you can rearrange the sparklets again.

*New Text 3: “her song arose in her heart... awaken in tears at the heaviness... what is next?”*

Finally, is there any common theme that threads through each sparklet that wasn't apparent before? This could be different for each participant! Welcome the difference.

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If any participant was unable to come with a word that shimmered to them from the reading, you can read an excerpt of your choosing from the book aloud now. Any passage will serve well.

## Sixth Section

(25–30 MINUTES)

### Summarize the Sixth Section

Sophia arrives at the Lake of Reflections where she comes face to face with the parts of her that are crying out for attention. Instead of pushing them away, Sophia engages with each part, listening to what they have to tell her and eventually offering love and understanding to each of them in turn. She is gifted with a pearl to remind her of the transmutation of her wounds into beauty.

### Potential Themes to Highlight

- ✦ autumn, letting go, inner hospitality, parts work, integration, wholeness, clarity

### Suggested Questions for Shared Reflection

(15–25 MINUTES)

- ✦ What are the names of the parts of yourself that call for your attention? What do they look like, and what are their stories? Who of these is most present to you in this season?
- ✦ How have you experienced the transmutation of wounds into beauty?
- ✦ Consider how a pearl is formed through the irritation caused by a foreign substance entering the shell: are there other phenomena of nature that symbolize the transformation of wounds into beauty that you resonate with?

## Preparation for Next Week & Suggestion for Practice

(5 MINUTES to explain and distribute materials)

### Read for Next Week

- ✦ Seventh and eighth sections
  - ✦ In the physical book: pg. 51–72
  - ✦ If reading the kindle edition: “Sophia drank her tea before heading out.” through the end of the book, “And Sophia, the Dragon, the villagers, and the freshly running springs lived joyfully every after.”

## At-Home Practice

### **Love Letters to Self: Welcoming in All Parts of Yourself** (inspired by the sixth section)

This is an invitation to dive deeper into the work of welcoming all the rejected parts of yourself back in and finding wholeness within yourself. If, like Sophia, writing is how you best connect to your inner experience, you may write love letters; however, if you feel drawn to a visual or kinesthetic mode of creativity, you are most welcome to draw, paint, dance, create mandalas, etc. What creative avenue of self-exploration is calling to you today?

Begin the practice by centering yourself with your breath. Imagine this time of centering as a way of stilling your inner waters in order to see more clearly. Then, gaze upon the reflective surface of this calm, inner lake. What faces emerge? What do they look like? What are their names? And how do they make you feel?

As you gaze upon the many faces, which one is most prominent? If the name of this part does not reveal itself, do not push it, but simply spend time in its presence, asking questions and inviting honest answers.

What does this part need? What does it want? What is the other side of this part's face?

As you listen, draw on your creative practice to help deepen your conversation with this part of yourself, letting it speak through words, symbols, colors, or dance.

What has this part been offering you? And what love can you offer in return?

If you wish, you can repeat this process with as many parts as you desire, knowing that this work is never truly finished, but the gifts of clarity and wholeness will accompany each exploration.

## Closing Blessing

(approximately 1 MINUTE)

### For Stepping into the Unknown

God of wild edges and new horizons,  
we seek your presence in those moments  
when we feel out of place and miss the comforts of home.

Sustain our journey when we feel the ache of strangeness,  
the quiver of anxiety, the fear of doubt,  
and help us discover a deeper knowing in the midst of it all  
that doesn't rely on us desperately clinging to our plans  
but calls us to open to the discoveries  
arriving on the doorstep within.

Help us hear your nearness in the beating of our hearts  
and to hold with courage and trust the paradoxes of life:  
communion and loss, beauty and suffering, love and violence,  
as invitations into songs of both lament and praise.

Let us be undone by the mystery  
of it all, and then refashion us  
into wiser, humbler,  
and more compassionate wholeness.<sup>7</sup>



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<sup>7</sup>Closing Blessing by Christine Valters Paintner, *A Book of Everyday Blessings: 100 Prayers for Dancing Monks, Artists, and Pilgrims*. (Ave Maria Press, 2026), pg. 66

## Week Four

# Integration

## Preparation

- ✦ Prior to the group meeting, encourage participants to read through the seventh and eighth sections.
  - ✦ In the physical book: pg. 51–72
  - ✦ If reading the kindle edition: “Sophia drank her tea before heading out.” through the end of the book, “And Sophia, the Dragon, the villagers, and the freshly running springs lived joyfully every after.”
- ✦ Bring materials for the creative Contemplative Practice *Create a Vessel of Joy* and encourage participants to bring some of their own materials as well. If meeting virtually, instruct participants to gather their own materials.
  - ✦ Vessel ideas: mason jars, empty candle containers, some other type of empty vessel that can be decorated, or create a vessel out of a cardboard tube (from an empty roll of toilet paper or paper towel)
  - ✦ Decoration ideas: stickers, magazines to cut out pictures, rhinestones, ribbon, thread or string, washi tape, buttons, paint, colored sharpies, dried leaves and flowers, or sticks
  - ✦ Adhesive material: liquid glue and access to water to make decoupage paste (3 parts glue to 1 part water) or a hot glue gun
  - ✦ Table covering: either a reusable plastic tablecloth, individual placemats, or newspaper for participants to work on
  - ✦ Ambiance: decide if you want to turn on any gentle instrumental music while participants engage in crafting
- ✦ Prepare the *At-Home Practice Guide Sheet: Tell Your Story* to give or send to participants at this week’s gathering.
- ✦ A suggested time allotment of 85–105 minutes is based on a gathering of 5–8 people. Adjust as needed for the size of your group.

## Greeting & Welcome

(10–15 MINUTES)

Honor the presence of everyone gathered. Invite a brief check-in from everyone in the group. (There will be more time to discuss the book later.)

### Lighting a Candle & Opening Prayer

Either light a candle or invite each participant to light a candle if you are meeting online and open the time in prayer. You may use the following as your opening prayer:

*Great Weaver who wove us all together in your tapestry of love, entwine us and strengthen us with the threads of wisdom offered by the ancestors, Sister Death, and future generations. As we near the end of this journey, we ask for your guidance as we seek spaces of stillness to integrate all we have witnessed. May we remember who we are, who we belong to, and all we have learned. May we ever remain open to all we've received thus far and open to the reciprocal energy of shared joy. May it be so.*

## Seventh Section

(25–30 MINUTES)

### Summarize the Seventh Section

Sophia arrives at The Cave of the Ancestors and is visited in dreams by her ancestors, Sister Death, and her future self. These visitations gift her with connection, gratitude, courage, and vision. She then returns to the cottage where she prepares to retrieve her stolen joy from the Cave of Joy.

### Potential Themes to Highlight

- ✦ winter, dreamtime, ancestral lineage, Sister Death, mortality, tapestry of time, return of spring

### Suggested Questions for Shared Reflection

- ✦ What are the gifts you've received over the course of your journey, and are there symbolic touchstones (like Sophia's song, crown, and pearl) you can adopt to help remind you of these gifts?
- ✦ What is your relationship to your ancestral lineage? Deeply connected, fraught, cloaked in the unknown? What thoughts and feelings arise when you consider where you come from?
- ✦ What experiences have served as reminders of your mortality? What has been your response to these reminders?
- ✦ What are the ways you can acknowledge, honor, and embrace being a part of both the tapestry of the past and the tapestry of the future? What resonances and dissonances does this invitation evoke?

# Contemplative Practice

(20–25 MINUTES)

## Create a Vessel of Joy

This is an invitation to create a physical reminder of abundant joy, a way to cultivate your attention to notice joy more readily, and then an avenue through which to share the abundance of joy.

This creative practice has three parts.

- 1) **Create the vessel of joy**, remembering that joy is not found in perfection but found in staying present to the experience.
- 2) Either with a group of soul friends, as a household, or by yourself, **commit to noticing delights or moments of joy or love**. On pieces of paper, write down these experiences and place them in your vessel of joy.
- 3) **Make a practice of routinely revisiting these tokens of your experience and sharing them with others!** If doing this in a group, it can be a great way of harnessing the magic of storytelling to share and nourish joy. If doing this alone, notice how returning to past moments of joy influences your ability to witness and share in the joy of the present.

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**In this gathering, you're invited to begin the first part of this creative practice.** Set up the materials you've prepared and consider putting on some gentle instrumental music. After getting everything prepared, collectively allow 3–5 breaths to center yourselves and tap into the wellspring of joy already within you.

After your centering moment, enter into this meditation.

Keeping your eyes closed, invite the eyes of your heart to open.

With the eyes of your heart, you see the pilgrimage you have taken thus far: saying “yes”, seeking and accepting guidance, traveling with others, traveling alone, discovering your song, transmuting your burdens into a crown and your wounds into beauty, receiving visions from the past and the future and adding your own gifts to the great tapestry of Love. What joy pulses at the heart of your journey? What gathered gifts do you long to share with your community? And what intrinsic gift of self do you feel called to step into and share?

Allow a few moments to ponder. Pay attention to what images, symbols, and colors arise for you out of this invitation.

Gently bring your attention back to the room and to the crafting materials in front of you. How might you represent the images and symbols you received from this pilgrimage with the materials on the table? Gather some of these ideas in front of you.

Then, how might your personal gifts and joys be represented? How do they merge, deepen, or decorate the symbols of wisdom you have received?

Now it's time to create!

As you engage with the materials and create your vessel of joy, gently bring any wandering or perfectionistic thoughts back to your heart center, continually asking yourself questions such as, "What brings me joy?" "How does joy feel in my body?" "What joy do I want to share?" "What is the wisdom I want to carry with me?"

After about 20 minutes, if participants are still working on their vessels of joy, you can make the call on whether to invite participants to take some materials home to finish the project or if you would rather let people continue to create while engaging with the next section's questions.

## Eighth Section

(25–30 MINUTES)

### Summarize the Eighth Section

Sophia, the Dragon, and Schatz arrive at the cave to retrieve the stolen joy. After unsuccessfully trying to open a jar of joy, Sophia remembers all the wisdom she's gleaned over the past year and realizes it is her role to share the joy. Upon receiving the jars of joy, the Dragon and Schatz open them, and the joy begins to expand through the forest exponentially. They then set off to return to the village with the multiplied joy and to bring back to the villagers their stolen joy.

### Potential Themes to Highlight

✦ harvesting gleaned wisdom, sharing joy, celebration, community, homecoming, restoration

### Suggested Questions for Shared Reflection

(10–15 MINUTES)

- ✦ What are some of the ways wisdom from the journey is naturally being integrated into your life? How are you feeling called to further cultivate that integration?
- ✦ When have you experienced joy as irresistible? When has joy been a connecting force in your life?
- ✦ What does "serving joy" mean to you? What would you change in your life in order to serve joy? How might you cultivate the reciprocal energy of shared joy?
- ✦ When has your heart been stone, closed off from joy? What have you discovered helps soften your heart to receive the gift of joy?

## Suggestion for Practice

(5 MINUTES to explain and distribute materials)

### At-Home Practice

#### **Tell Your Story**

“What is joy?” Engage the question through the story of your life, your own fairytale.

How is this question longing to be expressed?

You’re invited to write, draw, dance, create a diagram, or reflect with a soul friend or alone about your own journey to joy.

If your reflection needs scaffolding to build on or a trellis to grow upon, you can list out some main fairy tale elements you’ve noticed and fill in your own experiences. You may use the questions below to help prompt your reflection.

- ✦ What is the community to which you belong known for?
- ✦ What event (outer or inner) has spurred you into pilgrimage?
- ✦ Who or what is the troll that steals your and/or your community’s joy?
- ✦ Who is the Medicine Woman who helps to nourish you? And the Wise One who helps guide you?
- ✦ What unique gift is innate to you?
- ✦ Who is the Drachenhund who guides, buoys, and companions you?
- ✦ Who is the Dragon who is enslaved by the system and you feel called to bless?
- ✦ What are the initiations of transformation you’ve journeyed through?
- ✦ What are the gifts and wisdom offered to you by the seasons, elements, and directions?

Or your journey to joy may share no resemblance to this book, and that is welcome too! This reflection will take as many shapes as there are people who participate — your story is yours to tell.

## Closing Blessing

(approximately 1 MINUTE)

### For Coming Home

God of Homecomings,  
our lives are a pilgrimage journey,  
seeking the discovery of home in the world.  
We travel not in straight lines  
but in circles and spirals, revisiting old patterns  
and ways of being that need healing.  
Help us trust in life’s unfinished nature,  
and also the deep desires of our heart,

calling us to reorient ourselves again and again.

Magnify our vision  
so that each journey we make leads  
to expanded growth and wisdom.

Help us continue to dive into  
the refreshing river of life,  
allowing the current to carry us closer to you.

Carve out in us a space for both grief and joy  
so that we may meet life with eyes and hearts wide open.

Remind us of the ancient pilgrims who travel with us unseen,  
and guide us beyond boundaries to experience you,  
drawing us closer to our own wild edges.

In those moments when we do arrive home,  
give us the deep rest we desire,  
where we remember your presence in all that we do.<sup>8</sup>



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<sup>8</sup>Closing Blessing by Christine Valters Paintner, *A Book of Everyday Blessings: 100 Prayers for Dancing Monks, Artists, and Pilgrims*. (Ave Maria Press, 2026), pg. 67

# Supplementary Gathering

You and the participants may decide you want one extra meeting to discuss and share experiences from the at-home practices (*Blessing Someone's Heart*, *Acrostic Poem with Your Question*, *Love Letters to Self*, and *Tell Your Story*). Decide together if you would appreciate a time to share or if the harvests from these practices were discussed sufficiently in the 4 prior weeks.

