



Women's Journal

A Publication of Brigid's Place at Christ Church Cathedral
Volume 16 WINTER 2011/SPRING 2012

Theme: **Gratitude**



PUBLICATION OF BRIGID'S PLACE
AT CHRIST CHURCH CATHEDRAL
WINTER 2011/SPRING 2012

Brigid's Place is a 501(c)(3) Tax-Exempt Non-Profit Organization that supports the development of women in mind, body and spirit. Our purpose is to promote interfaith relationships which are mutual, inclusive, and provide unity in diversity; relationships whose basis is love and "power with" rather than "power over" or privilege.

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Southwest Business Printers

Our symbol is Saint Brigid's cross, fashioned from plaited rushes and executed by graphic designer Fiona McGettigan, CORE Design Studio.

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BRIGID'S PLACE

TO OUR READERS

We hope that you enjoy reading the *Women's Journal*. Please consider making a contribution to Brigid's Place to help support its continued publication and distribution. If you've already done so in 2011, thank you!

—*Brigid's Place Editorial Committee*

Please donate through our website at www.brigidsplace.org.

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INVITATION

The theme of the next issue is **GRACE**. You are invited to submit a first-person narrative, article, poem (750 words or less), photograph or artwork on this theme. Please email it by April 1, 2012 to Tracie Jae at Brigid's Place, brigidsplace@brigidsplace.org. Include your name, full address, and daytime phone number, plus a brief two-sentence biography. All submissions are subject to editing.

Life is a Joyride

by Sarah Gish

I had the most amazing 24 hours recently. It wasn't because I inherited a million dollars, or because I went on a great trip, or because I became famous overnight. It was because it was simply a wonderful chunk of time in which I was completely in tune with my natural rhythms and I was able to enjoy simple pleasures fully and completely.

It all started when I picked up my 10-year-old from school and we headed over to the Menil Park for two hours of fun: watching him climb trees (and other adults climb the same tree to read in it!), running with friendly dogs, reading on a blanket, and enjoying lovely Houston weather. I then went to a special workshop for those who care about the environment with "No Impact Man" Colin Beavan, at which I met some wonderful folks who are working hard to make Houston greener. After a great night's sleep, I went with my son and his friend to watch them play tennis; I went to a support group meeting; I had lunch at a really fun burrito place; I saw my friend Lucia's new shop location; and I got a massage. Wow!

I felt so filled up with wonderful feelings of gratitude that as I was driving home from my massage, my mind started drifting to an art project I had filed into the recesses of my mind: creating my next art car, The Joyride. My first art car was The Artmobile—a joint project among friends and neighbors. I like community art, so I had always planned to make my next art car with others as well. But I couldn't quite figure out how, until that "joyride" home.

My plan for the car was always to put clear rocks all over it and to meditate as I placed each



rock carefully on the car. But I blew that idea out to a bigger one: Why don't I write something I am grateful for on each rock? Better yet, how about I enlist everyone I know to write something they are grateful for on rocks and then glue them on the car?! I would literally be driving a car full of gratitude! I love the idea of creating intertwined gratitude lists and zipping through town with them, and can't wait to get started on that project. I hope you'll help me!

I live gratitude. What I mean by that is that I often ponder what I am grateful for and I consciously acknowledge, bless, and thank all that is in my life. As I do that, more blessings seem to flow to me. And when I am grateful, joy flows like a river and, like Ugandan musician Geoffrey Oryema says in his song "The River," "just let it flow...it will flow and wash away our differences and love will grow."

—Sarah Gish is an artist, intuitive guide, mother, family and cultural enrichment guide, community activist, speaker and workshop presenter, marketing consultant, and happy human being. She has been on the rotating circle of Brigid's Place and is an active member of The Magdalene Community. She just celebrated 10 years in business with her company Gish Creative (www.gishcreative.com). Sarah is pictured above, with a somewhat revised concept for her art car, which she showed in Houston's 2011 Art Car Parade.



The Essay I Didn't Write

by Ann Conrad Case

"The world is so full of a number of things, I'm sure we should all be as happy as kings."
—Robert Louis Stevenson

I didn't write on this issue's theme of gratitude—not because I didn't know where to start, but because I didn't know where to stop. When I read an essay, I like to be able to pick out one over-arching idea and I couldn't pin my thoughts down to one idea.

I'm usually a quiet, slow-going individual, but when it comes to "Thanks" I flit through the fields like a demented nymph: I'm so glad I see in color—peach, purple, fiery red!...Oh, there goes someone with a baby!...This lemonade tastes so good!... I have indoor plumping *and* hot and cold running water!... Music! Chopin and Gregorian chant and the themes of every Star Trek series!...Feeling tired and then being able to fall asleep!...Being hungry and then being able to eat!...Tastes—chocolate, garlic, red wine, hot peppers, raspberries! The person who first combined raspberries and chocolate should be *canonized!*...I can read! I can afford to buy books! I have paper and pens in several colors, and highlighters. I can settle down with a new book and a new highlighter, and lose myself in learning. I have a chair and a lamp, and a house to put them in. I have peace and safety for my reading. No one is shooting at me or hitting me or making me hide in terror. I am healthy; I can sit and rise and walk and move, and see and smell and taste and feel. I have enough money; I can take care of myself, pay the bills, buy food...and buy books! I have enough money so I can give some to charity and give

presents to people. *That* is really being rich! I have a piano and I can play it...not well, but I can play for my own amusement!...I will be 71 years old in November—it still amazes me that I'm that old.

If I have learned one thing about gratitude, it's that it helps to throw it ahead of yourself, like a grappling hook, and then proceed to look around for something to be thankful for. This is easy to forget when the raspberries come without chocolate, or it's a little too hot or too cold. The grappling hook is firm; you tug at the rope to test it; then you pull yourself up, hand over hand. The "attitude of gratitude" can be a lifesaver.

Another reason I didn't write this essay is that it's a minefield of clichés: "Count your blessings," "Look for the silver lining," "It could always be worse." But what are clichés, if not true?

Every peek at beauty in any form—word, picture, sound, movement—is such a blessing. Thank you for allowing me to not write on gratitude.

—Sr. Ann Case, O.C.P., is a retired librarian, member of the Episcopal Community of the Paraclete, poet, and pretty good leftovers cook who is currently crocheting lab robes for the men of the local V.A., making "peace bracelets" for whomever will take them, and praying for peace. She resides in Gainesville, FL.

Memory as Gratitude

by John C. Flanagan II

My mother was a story teller who held many generations of memories of family and friends close to her heart. She knew that memories could be expressions of gratitude, and this story she told me will prove it.

Like all dutiful brides, my mother kept careful records of all the wonderful presents she received at her wedding. At the time, she wrote what seemed to her like countless Thank You notes, sitting on the floor of her newlywed apartment. Decades later, at a function hosted by her mother-in-law, my mother was introduced to an elderly woman who was an old friend of my father's family. Hearing the woman's name, mother remembered that this woman had given them a beautiful set of delicate organdy table linens all those years ago. When

mother commented how much she had enjoyed entertaining using the lovely set, the woman's face lit up. The sweet lady immediately said that she had always loved fine linens and had given them as wedding presents all her life. The elation on the woman's face demonstrated that my mother's memory was infinitely more important than any Thank You note ever sent or received.

Mother taught me that long-held memories are the most sincere form of gratitude. To remember the good times shared with loved ones, a thoughtful gift, or a special connection is to show someone how much they mean to you. She encouraged my sister, Anne, and me to follow the tradition as memory keeper and story teller. This is why I tell this story in gratitude of all that my mother, Betty Francis Blaxton Flanagan, taught me.



BON VOYAGE

by Carol J. Rhodes

My inner peace comes from knowing I am whole for another day,
free to choose what I will do with my time and my talents,
unlike those who stay cloistered within themselves,
closed to a world of continuing change.

I wish to stay open to new ideas,
learn something every day I did not know before,
so that at the end of this journey, I will be better prepared
for the next one.

—Carol J. Rhodes' work, including short stories, essays, poetry, non-fiction and plays, has appeared in numerous newspapers, magazines, journals and anthologies. She has won several literary awards for poetry and prose. She lives in Houston, TX.



Safe

by Felicia Hebert Wiggins

I named this photo “Safe” after doing a series of barbed wire when I felt like I was entwined and enmeshed in a bad time emotionally. I am forever grateful to so many of you for getting me through that time.

—*Felicia Hebert Wiggins owns Le Village Guesthouse in Eunice, Louisiana, and is a former member of the Board of Directors of Brigid’s Place. She credits the men and women of Brigid’s Place with helping her through a dense part of her spiritual journey.*

A Chance at Life

by Residents of Brigid’s Hope

Gratitide

by Regina Hines

First, I would like to thank God for making all this possible. I am truly grateful for the Brigid’s Hope Program. It has given me a second chance at life, putting me where I am supposed to be in life instead of where I used to be.

This program saved my life. It taught me how to live again, and I am learning the meaning of living life on life’s terms. It’s a safe, warm, respectful environment, a place to call home—a feeling I haven’t felt in a very long time. I am truly grateful to Brigid’s Hope from the bottom of my heart. Now I am living life, and it is beautiful!

A Place

by Audrey Matthews

For many years I wandered about with no place in life. I began to pray, and then came a light. I’ve been placed on a path where I now have a chance at life—with the help of many strangers, family and friends, and through one woman’s dream, truly a gift from God. Many women, including myself, have been given support, protection and direction, so that we, too, have a chance at life.

Brigid’s Hope is a program that has allowed me to come from under a cloud. Today I have a life filled with joy, success and hope. I walk by faith and a desire that I, too, will be able to give back to others one day. I thank God for those who prepared this way. Brigid’s Hope is my foundation in life.

Gratitude

by Rhonda Wadsworth

I am grateful for...

God’s love and acceptance

Recognizing that my life is worth saving

Abundance of His love for me

Thankfulness for His will

Inspired by the Holy Spirit within

Trusting in Him faithfully

Understanding of His word that directs me

Devoted humbly to His plan for me

Encouraged to fully surrender to my Lord and Savior for the first time in my life.

...God’s will, not mine, saved me. Thank you.

Thanksgiving Every Day

by Andrea Brooks

For me, Thanksgiving is expressed day by day... saying thanks to God for allowing us to share and enjoy the blessings that have been abundantly placed here for us to enjoy...humbly saying thanks to our loving families and friends, allowing them to know that we appreciate them immensely. Each day, gratitude should be expressed for being embraced with the breath of life. Happy Thanksgiving!

Moment of Acceptance

by Beth Lynn Clegg

My former mother-in-law's only means of communication had become the written word or a ringing bell to confirm her presence during numerous daily phone calls. Lou Gehrig's disease had slowly destroyed her ability to speak or swallow food, but that didn't stop her. She pureed everything—chicken, meatloaf, vegetables and fruits...even desserts. Standing at the kitchen sink, towel around her neck with head tilted back, she spooned food into her mouth, hoping some would slide down her paralyzed throat. About a fourth cup of liquid an hour was consumed using this process. She redefined patience.

While others might have wallowed in self-pity, frequent letters expressed gratitude for the gifts God had bestowed on her through the years and the daily blessings she continued to receive: time with family and friends, playing bridge and Skip Bo, church twice on Sunday and on Wednesday evening, buying and selling antiques (a business she conducted for many years), even reuniting our friendship after her son and I divorced.

A deeply religious woman, she had no fear of death, although fully aware of the toll the disease was taking on her body. After executing a Living Will, we promised to abide by her wishes should that become necessary. After the loss of her beloved only son, our youngest son was given durable power-of-attorney. The day came all too soon when their roles were reversed and he made a painful decision.

No tears were shed when her car was sold, but her reaction was both predictable and understandable. "I hate this," she wrote on the ever-present pad. As did we, knowing her last shred of independence had been stripped away. She would be forced to rely on others to drive her to church, bridge, or shopping. She fretted that she might impose on friends: They might not tell her if it was inconvenient. No amount of reassurance to the contrary could dissuade her. Equally adamant was her refusal to consider live-in assistance. She grudgingly accepted a medical alert system, which provided immediate response weeks later when she fell and broke a hip.

The surgery was a success and a feeding tube was inserted at the same time. She had agreed to this procedure, at our insistence to give it a try, but as days passed her overall condition failed to improve. She saw this as an invasion of her body, which had not improved her quality of life. We could not disagree.

The physician's steady gaze met eyes reflecting unflinching resolve. Eighty-seven years of living hadn't diminished her mind or strong-willed determination. Despite the knowledge of her expressed desires, and her 74-pound skeletal frame, he pressed on, espousing concerns for her future while stating the obvious: She was mentally competent to make her own decisions, but why had she ripped the feeding tube from her body, crawled over the bed rail, and pushed a chair against the door in an attempt to block the nursing staff? Surely she must understand that nourishment was her only hope for survival.

She listened intently and penned articulate responses to each question in precise script with growing agitation. He countered with appeals to her reason, as I, my son and daughter, stood by her bedside, urging him to back off, reminding him of her Living Will. What happened next thrust us into reality. She pulled herself to a sitting position, ripped the pad to a clean page, and wrote in bold letters, "I want to die!"

While we struggled with this stunning declaration, we understood. The physician still did not get it. He searched our faces: Could he possibly believe he would find an ally? Perhaps we could have felt pity for him had it not been for the stress he inflicted on her—and us, as we fought to control emotions. He either did not want to accept, or did not understand, she was at peace with her decision. Yet she had to demand that her wishes be honored. How could he be so unsympathetic and unprofessional?

He stood up, shaking his head in disbelief, and left the room. No need for the pad. Her clear blue eyes expressed the depth of gratitude. She raised a hand to an eye, then her heart, before pointing to each of us, signing, "I love you." We responded in kind as she welcomed the hospice representative with open arms.

—Beth Lynn Clegg, an octogenarian who began her writing career 12 years ago, is amazed to have been published in a variety of genre. She also has had a 10-minute play produced. She resides in Houston, TX.

Cloth of Life

by Camille Bloom

Across the room, I catch a glimpse of Mother's Guatemalan cloth. On the rich red background are layers upon layers of ribbon-like colored strips creating motifs of animals and idols of cultural warning signs. Years ago Mother hand-stitched the 12" X 18" piece diagonally across her black jersey dress. She wore the dress to bridge outings until I noticed the fraying elbows on the dress. I carefully snipped and released the art treasure and disposed of the tattered and stained dress. You see, Mother's vision had gradually waned. She lived alone after Bill passed away and before I moved to Houston.

Still upstairs and to the right, I'm looking at the sepia woodblock print of the native Hawaiian weaver. On the trip to Kauai with cousin Diane, we stopped at a gift shop perched high above a canyon drop. The view itself has faded from my memory in just these two years, so I'm grateful to have the art with its bold strokes of energy. Not the cloth itself, but the animus of the weaver caught in a moment of the under/over motion.

When I go downstairs later, I will see the aboriginal fabric designs from the Australian trip to see Holly. All were chosen with a background of earthen gold shades. Would the six samplers of bird and other creature tales eventually be sewn together as a wall-hanging or would they be individually folded and stuffed as pillows?

These different cloths from my life lay in waiting. Are they unfinished stories for my grandson to complete? Often interest lags, skipping a generation. Or perhaps the story is complete in its unconnected fragments...? Isn't that the way of the breath of life that moves us? The meaning is so simple. The beauty is in the moment of choosing to look, observe, appreciate creation. No need to tie it to a function. No necessity for someone else seeing it as I do. God has given me a unique life made up of these myriad strands and fabrics. The quilt of my life is full, yet more can always be added to it.

The secret is keeping my heart open with gratitude.

*A grateful heart a garden is,
Where there is always room
For every lovely, Godlike grace
To come to perfect bloom.
—Hymnal, Copyright 1932*

Working Women in Seattle

by Judy Mood

The summer after I graduated from high school, Susan, my friend since fifth grade, told me about a family friend who worked at a place that needed help. She suggested that we apply, and we did. We were hired—to work in a rag factory.

The name of the place is Buffalo Sanitary Wipers. We joked that we made toilet paper for buffalos, but what we actually did was cut up clothes and other fabric items into square (as much as possible) cleaning rags.

We had a machine cutter on a stand with the motor in the middle, which ran two cutting blades so two women worked on each machine. A bale of clothes (probably donated originally to Goodwill) was put down beside each woman, and the rag produced was tossed onto a conveyor belt. Zippers, buttons, and other trash went into a barrel. It was really lovely work, don't you know. I would have to blow the lint out of my nose several times during the day.

So why in the world would we work in such a place? Well, besides it paying more than a job in a department store, we had the opportunity to meet some very interesting women. Many were Japanese War Brides. One was the Italian-born mother of a classmate. Most didn't think they could get any other kind of job. But I learned to sing a song in Italian, a song in Japanese, and many wonderful stories from these women I worked with. It was an amazing experience.

My friend and I worked there every summer until we graduated from college, and both of us became teachers. The women were very encouraging. They were just sure that if we didn't graduate, we would work at Buffalo the rest of our lives.

Shortly after we started our first teaching jobs, we went back to see the women and thank them for being so special in our lives. We wanted them to know that they had helped us achieve our goals. They were proud of us, and we were grateful to them.

—Judy Mood is a Brigid's Place past president and current board member.

A Recollection of Brigid's Place

by Patty Turney

Presented at the Past President's Luncheon



We were going full steam ahead when Pete left office in December 1999. Sandi Stromberg was doing a great job as our Executive Director and many, many people were actively participating in putting on programs and making a difference in women's lives. Amy Rowland was the first director of Brigid's Hope, which was up and running as an outreach of Brigid's Place to help women getting back into society after prison, and that ministry evolved into its own non-profit eventually.

Programming had been one of my major areas of involvement in the early days of Brigid's Place and we had honed our ability to produce quality programs since the first program brochure was published in the summer of 1996. We began 2000 with a Women's Spirituality Day co-sponsored with the LPA/ECW and Margaret Skidmore was our guest speaker on "Keeping a Spiritual Balance in a Busy Life." We also had many wonderful small groups focusing on a variety of topics. In February of 2000, Sue Monk Kidd returned for a retreat at the Cenacle Retreat House, entitled "Three Gates of the Feminine Soul." Sue, Terry Helwig and Tricia Harrell were the retreat leaders but also presented a program the evening before the retreat—"Dreaming the Goddess Through Time." Sue had not yet published *The Secret Life of Bees*. It was on this retreat that Sue was contacted and told that the book was going to be published. It hit the bookstores in 2002. The 40 women who participated in this February retreat would never be the same again!



Many fine programs continued with regular meetings: Centering Prayer, writing and dream groups, and Searching the Scriptures, which became The Monday Group, still focusing on the study of feminist theology.

What I am most proud of, though, is our women's Lenten meditation publications. In the fall of 1997 a group of women in the Searching the Scriptures Group were discussing what Lenten meditations using the scriptures might look like from a feminist point of view. Though the old view of penance during Lent was beginning to change, the focus of Lent still was to emphasize denial and diminishment of the self as opposed to healing and growth.



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We asked, “How could we view the life-giving experience of Jesus during this transformation time of Lent?” As women in our 40s and 50s we no longer needed or wanted to experience self contempt for not being enough. We wanted something that was truth-telling and real. What better way to make that happen than to do it ourselves? Thus, with a task at hand and a deadline for publication before Ash Wednesday of 1998, Lois Ann Peckham and I started to compile and publish a booklet of women’s Lenten meditations. Many of the women were friends of or active in Brigid’s Place, both lay and clergy. Mary Sieber provided her editing skills for all our publications, totaling five editions that we self-published and *Gifts from Within*, published by Morehouse Publishing.

How we got from here to there, since we didn’t make any effort to publish our meditations nationally, is an amazing story. The women’s organization at the national church office in New York published *A Journal of Women’s Ministries* several times a year and I subscribed to it. We could place an ad for our 2000 issue for under \$200, so we took the chance, wrote the check, and created the ad. Cora Spear was our contact for ordering the booklet. The editor of the publication asked if we would like to put one of the meditations in the January issue as an article and we agreed. The Rev. Susan Quinn Bryan, a Presbyterian minister, had written an exceptional meditation, so we sent that one and it was included along with our ad in the January 2000 issue. Debra Farrington of Morehouse saw this issue and contacted Cora, since her name was on the ad...and the rest is history.

—Patty Turney



Poem to Sophia

by Jennifer Embry

Being president of Brigid's Place was a way to give back to a community of women who have nurtured and encouraged me to explore the Divine Feminine both outside and within. As a cradle Episcopalian, I had been raised by the church through junior choir, EYC, outreach ministries, Altar Guild, and Daughters of the King, but it was not until Brigid's Place that I came to know the feminine Divine. My poem, Sophia, will give you a sense of Her from within:

She appears: Sophia, diamond-like, multifaceted, radiant, strong, reflective. Clear, yet full of color, this is Sophia. In her action, she is sometimes subtle, sometimes radical. She lives in paradoxical thought. She is timeless and yet NOW, spaceless and yet present, formless and yet abundant, nonintrusive and yet available.

Sophia values "both" rather than "either/or." She honors oneness and diversity, individuality and community, love and fear, not as opposites but in relationship to one another. She emphasizes the power of love, rather than the love of power, beauty from the inside out, rather than the outside in, the luxury of time, rather than the luxury of money.

She favors real over perfection, presence over purpose, instinct over intellect, laughter over product, mystery over reason and being over doing.

Sophia's energy is red, palpable, embodied, full of passion, creativity and live-giving blood. Yet she knows death intimately and understands its deep connection to life. She wears purple, is guided by her own intuition, rather than convention. She colors outside the lines and transforms.

Her feet love to dance, her heart loves to sing and her hands love to hold. It is her voice that whispers encouragement to write a poem in a traffic jam, go to the zoo with a child or walk in the park with a friend even, maybe especially, when the laundry needs to be done and the house cleaned.

She has the courage to express her rage at injustice, to be fiercely female, no matter the consequences. She will scream and confront until she is heard. Sometimes she can be heard at night in a concise admonition like, "Don't give away the piano."

Her world is one of yes, without obligation. She is multilingual, fluent in both "yes" and "no." It is her touch that says, "I love you, hold tight" in the midst of chaos, grief or confusion.

Sophia can't be put into a box and doesn't like pedestals, for she is part of all matters of life—in both the tiniest grain of sand and the majestic mountain peak, in the birth of a child and the death of a loved one.

She muses, imagines and creates out of the dust of the earth, the worries of our hearts and the fears of our souls, whenever she is asked.

Her guiding principle is love—accepting, allowing, courageous, not sentimentalized or saccharinized. Her gift is often grace—to reach out even in the face of hate or being wronged, to look fear and denial in the eye, embrace it and honor the process.

Sophia is found in honest and clear relationships, not submissive or subservient, but substantial and steadfast. She offers food for the journey, rest for the weary, both light and fire to illumine our Way.

Humbly knock, seek and invite, for She may be behind the next door, experiencing the center of the flame or just sitting next to you, actively waiting. Her call is to walk with Her, play, spread your wings, make mistakes, wrestle, stumble and Become all that you were created to be.

My most precious outer experience while I was president of Brigid's Place was when over 400 people filled the Great Hall at the Mysticism Conference and Andrew Harvey led the group to chant "Maaaaaaa" repeatedly. The experience was community at its best, and life changing. For me, Brigid's Place is a community where people can deepen and broaden their experiences with the Divine. Thank you all for being a part of that.

—Jennifer Embry is a former Brigid's Place President.

Thanks for The Void

by LaVonne Carlson

Thank you, God, for the void,
for the space to see
what's needed,
and what's not.

Thank you, God, for creating
an opportunity to explore
what's more than enough
and what enough is.

Thank you, God, for showing me
all that I have
and all that I am
so gifted and so rich.

Thank you, God, for teaching me
gratitude, a better attitude,
for filling the void
with just what's needed
in all its fullness,
and nothing more.



—LaVonne Carlson wrote this during a time of unemployment. She now works in communications and marketing at The Council on Alcohol & Drugs-Houston. The author of several nonfiction books, LaVonne lives in Houston, TX.