

Journeying to the BLESSED ISLE

Nicola Hoskins-Murphy



"We are but travellers here". Mary MacKillop.

In the early spring of my 58th year, I pack my bags with books, clothes and a teapot, load our ever-faithful little car and set off on a journey. The golden wattle is vibrant, rolling into golden daffodils, fragrant jonquils. The apricot tree is in full bloom with her fragile pink blossoms, the smell dusty and alive as the bees hum. In the friendly company of podcasts, I make my way towards the coast, through rolling paddocks, through the eucalyptus on the ancient mountains. I head north then up the motorway, across big bridges over eucalypt valleys and creeks, google maps nudging me along. *"In one kilometre, use the left lane and take the exit..."* And off the motorway, and through the winding roads through the trees I go. Round and round in sweeping curves, inching closer. I nose the car up the narrow road, tall white gums arching over me in a great avenue and the clear, pure notes of bellbirds pierce the still air. I then turn right into the golden afternoon light. I can see a church, then the educational and convent buildings and then the unfolding gardens of Mary MacKillop Centre Kincumber place.

There is a deep yearning that has drawn me here. A compelling call, there forever inside me. To be known as my own self, known inside and out, all the shadow and light. To blossom and to be seen in my blossoming.

It's called me, tugged at my heart since I was a girl walking through the family orchard in the moonlight, talking to the moon, "my moon". It seemed more present to me then than the demanding light of day - of home and school and how on earth to fit my strange, fey self into it all. Called, in my loneliness, towards something. It was an alive sense, I think, of "having once been part of an all-encompassing sacred maternal presence"¹ and wanting to find my way back. A yearning to come home - as if to return to the Blessed Isle, the Holy Isle - to Avalon. Can I find it here? Can I dare to ask?

It's a silent retreat which I have come to. I've chosen it for the silence, so worn-thin am I by the stresses of the year and by the listening, listening, listening of my work as a psychotherapist. I've come to join a group of Sisters, and one other lay woman like me, in a retreat named *"The Hospitality of God"*. Into this hospitality I have brought my yearning and my shadows. The long shadows I have cast. The years of losing my connection with myself, the shame of not being enough. I bring it all, prayers bubbling, dread lurking, into the gardens and cloisters of Kincumber, the enchanted place that I latterly will come to realise is the Avalon of my heart.



Within that containing circle we will make our own circle of women and bring our shared gaze to settle on a medieval icon from Russia, written by the monk-painter Andrei Rublev for the Church of the Holy Trinity in the Monastery of St. Sergii near Moscow, six hundred years ago.²

When you are with the icon, our teacher and guide tells us, remain silent. As you gaze upon it, see where your eyes are drawn. We gather together in our circle and gaze. We sit quietly together at our meals. We wander through the gardens bursting forth, each day, each moment, unfolding, blossoming. Each day there is a new candle.

Illumination: The icon, I realise - is a window into the eternal - as I gaze through the window, I feel myself beheld in a tender gaze, bathed in a kind of sunlight. Then I see there's a table between the blessed beings in the icon. I find myself placing my story there - the story that weighs on my soul. I place it there, on the table:

Vessel: I see we are vessels, each of us - chosen vessels.

Reverence: It's a way of being, I realise. As we are walking quietly through the gardens, we are nodding to each other, bowing.

We are making our tracks through the gardens, breathing in the garden, breathing in the sunlight. There is a sense of beholding, of being beheld. there is a permeability, a liminality here. I feel myself held in something that feels like an "*all enfolding maternal nature*" where all is permeable³. I feel like it's loving gaze is calling me home. But how can I reconcile this yearning to return to a maternal home with a church and church stories that seem so male? Here I've always become lost, tripped up, felt the old not-enough-ness.

Our teacher has an answer for me before I ask. It's the story of Sarah and her old husband Abraham, and their visit by the angels. Sarah waiting at the door of the tent, listening – I can feel her laughter as she exclaims "What? Now? Now when I am worn out? Now when my Lord is old?" Now am I to have a child? The laughter rises up in my belly and I am laughing with her. Sarah, I realise, in her female embodiment and role, is somehow closer to the mystery here. It is she who will take the flour, knead the dough, bake the bread, organise the killing and preparing of the calf for the feast. It will be her body to carry and bear the child. It's the story from her side.

Translucence: The angels at the feast are simultaneously the Trinity.

I know them I realise. The Dear Ones. I've known them before knowing.

They are in a circle. The longer we gaze the more we can see the movement. They are bowing to each other, gesturing. You can feel each move, feel them turn their blessed heads. They are captured mid-flow in a circle dance.

There's a thrumming inside me. It's the circle, the dance. I think of the figurines of our Neolithic ancestors of old Europe - the many figurines and ceramic pieces which seem to depict the Sacred Feminine. It is as though they speak to the all-enfolding maternal nature that once held us. In rich symbolic markings the circles, spirals and meanders are alive with life⁴.

It is as if the age-old story of Sarah and Abraham, and the newer always-already-there story of the Trinity - as if these stories are being played out within an already-storied landscape, a landscape already woven with circles and spirals. It is as if all things are coming from an eternal now.

"I think," says our teacher, when I ask her about our neolithic forebears, "that they were living the dance. Not separate from it."

The blossoming is happening in our own hearts and starting to spill over. I can imagine music coming from the circle and it sounds like a string quartet. Well, not a string quartet - a string trio.

"There's room for you at the table," our teacher says. "Can you see the space that has been made for you?"

It's afternoon and the moon will be dark tonight. As I'm walking in the blessed gardens, I realise my feet - the soles of my feet - are burning. They're burning! I go to our teacher and tell her.

I find she has a slide prepared already for the next gathering of our circle, as if she knew in advance. An image of bare feet on the dirt. "As you come to know yourself as a precious and beloved part of the circle dance, you come to realise you are on holy ground," she says. "Take off your shoes in your own life: you are on holy ground." That night, when the moon is dark, a poem comes to me, asking to be written and I call it "The Golden Place". (See below).



When I return home, the wattle that was such rich gold has paled into a pale luminescence. The purple blue grape hyacinths I had left in a vase - so plump and deep-toned, their little grapes almost bursting - now each of the little grapes has separated - each sits quietly in its place, old now, dignified and fine.

I don't want to turn the calendar to October - since it was September when I left Avalon. Hard to hold on. I feel further from the blessed Isle. The pressures of life build, and I feel myself contract away from the clear, effortless belonging. The golden liminality harder to reach. Hold what threads of connection I can. Just try to be a vessel for grace. Just keep trying.

And then some time down the breadcrumb trail of my life, I'm invited to join another circle. It's the Contemplative Evolution Network, and in this circle, we hold a shared prayer to make some space and healing in a hurting world (CEN).⁵

The Golden Place

We are in a golden place.

I hear Your music first -

Before I see You;

And I smell the sweetest scent in all the world.

I'm wearing cloth the colour of the earth.

My feet are bare and I can feel the sand in between my toes.

I can taste the air, and it tastes like sunlight.

I walk towards the music: towards You -

Step by step.

The soles of my bare feet burn more and more fiery

As closer and closer I come.

I see a tree, old and gnarled -

It has seen centuries, the living sap ever-coursing in its veins.

There's a great rock, older still;

And a house with verandahs - doors leading inwards:

Many rooms.

Step by step I come, my feet burning

As the scent embraces me - as the music envelops me.

Gripped tight in my sweating hand

I carry an instrument.

Crafted of old wood, old as time and fresh-minted -

It was gifted to me long ago.

I take a deep, shuddering breath,

Bow my head -

And then - then I see You - Dear Ones!

Known by so many names,

Spoken in so many languages,

Through the aeons of time.

I behold You there -

Clothed in incomparable blue.

Your instruments are in your hands

Each crafted of old wood - old as time and new-made;

And you are playing -

Playing sublime, interwoven harmonies.

Each instrument has its own voice.

The ephemeral sounds weave between you.

You nod to each other, incline your precious heads,

Breathe together,

Bow - each to each.



*My feet burn
And the instrument I hold in my hands
Is vibrating already in resonance.
Tentative, I come closer;
A step - burning feet - then another.
I see that You are conscious of me!
You three.
You nod to me as the sound of Your music
Pours forth from Your circle.
I bow low. And then suddenly
I find I must place my instrument down.
I kneel,
And then I fall down, fully prostrate on the sand -
The heat of the ground searing though the cloth
To my bare skin.
And then - I look up: how can I not?
And You nod, each of You - to me:
Your shining eyes filled with all wisdom, all compassion.
Your eyes that have seen everything,
Loved everything
Even me.
A bit awkward, I get myself up.
Take my instrument in my hands,
Stand before You at the edge
Of Your circle.
I feel Your gaze - it's tenderness -
And then there's a great melting,
A great melting in me - as You behold me
All of my shadow
And all of my light.
Ever so graciously, ever so compassionately,
You bow. Drawn inwards, I step, one step, then another
Onto the radiant ground.
And You are playing our music Dear Ones!
Playing since the beginning of time.
The ancient circles and spirals meander through;
Always changing - new themes woven with old threads.
With easy, generous bow-strokes
Your instruments sing
Each to each.
And now - just now -
There's a new note that needs to come in.
I know. I don't need to see the score.
You nod to me - It's coming!
It's a melancholy note
Full of shadow and light
And I must play it with all of my living.
I bow my head:
I know.
And now You incline your precious heads -*

*Ready? It's nearly your entry!
I draw a deep intake of breath
Raise my instrument, settle, as best I can.
Ready, I nod.
And then You breathe as one
And I find that I am breathing with You.
I draw my bow across the strings
Of this precious instrument
That You gifted to me
So long ago.
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¹ Dobson, Marcia D-S (2023). *Metamorphoses of Psyche in Psychoanalysis and Ancient Greek Thought: From Mourning to Creativity*. P.54-55. Routledge London and New York.

² Bunge, Gabriel (2015). *The Rublev Trinity: The Icon of the Trinity by the Monk-Painter Andrei Rublev*. St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Yonkers, New York. p, 69

³ Dobson p. 49

⁴ Gimbutas, Marija (1991). *The Civilization of the Goddess: The World of Old Europe*. Harper, San Francisco.

⁵ Contemplative Evolution Network <https://www.contemplativeevolutionnetwork.com>