

COAL @ CHRISTMAS

Some observations on the journey home

Vanessa Compton

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It was a cold December night, the eve of the solstice, not long until Christmas. About fifteen people had shown up for the regular third Thursday guided labyrinth walk, including one woman who'd called earlier in the week to say she was coming down by bus from Toronto and planned to stay over at a bed & breakfast and make a real pilgrimage of it. Knowing this dignified the feeling of enthusiasm and anticipation in the atmosphere and helped bring together as a group the little clusters of friends arriving from all over. None were from the parish except Paddy the minister and myself: the less traditional services and events tend to draw people in who otherwise would be unlikely to come to church. If we were keepers of a pilgrimage site for these seekers, then all the more significance lay in our usual scrambling to get ready.

I had arrived early to sweep up the Sunday school crumbs and wash the surface of the labyrinth in the waning light of late afternoon. I love doing this. The elegance of the pattern glows through the trodden on bits of plasticine, "Good work!" stickers, spilt juice, scraps of wool and chalk and discarded song sheets, the detritus of a busy parish life. Like a mother, like the Earth, the labyrinth underlays all this activity and embraces it. I always feel honoured to be washing Her beautiful face, and through these mundane tasks, helping to prepare for the stunning transformation of our collective perception of sacred space later in the evening when Paddy would gather us in prayer to begin the service. I set out the flowers: a sparkly red poinsettia by the entrance on the information table, which I have draped with a brightly embroidered fringed black silk shawl; a sprawling arrangement of motley red and pink and white carnations and pine branches at the center of the labyrinth; a bowl of prickly, glossy deep green holly with bright scarlet berries, at the far side of the labyrinth; each with clusters of votive candles around them like little altars.

When people arrived, we asked them to help set out dozens more candles in the lunations round the outer edge of the labyrinth, in the window ledges, in the doorways. One woman sensibly suggested a tray, and we said, "What a good idea! But this way, it's a group activity!" Paddy expanded on this theme in the introduction, how we have learned over the years of keeping the labyrinth that this is public sacred art in which all may participate and engage, contribute and receive. To walk it is, he said, to practice body prayer within ancient Anglican tradition, a meditation that embodies the intention of shedding, journeying, turning as repentance. Everyone listened attentively. They took off their shoes and sat quietly as Paddy chanted in plainsong, *Deo gratia*.

I turned down the hall lights and turned up the recording of harp and chant fusion music that we use as accompaniment. The light through the stained glass windows of the church across the courtyard glowed into the hall. The candles flickered in the dusk, outlining the huge circle of the labyrinth. I moved to the labyrinth entrance and opened my hands in invitation. One by one each person came and stood before me. We bowed to one another. I smiled in welcome, hugging those I knew if they reached out. I looked into each face, trying to bring to awareness what that person might be needing then, as I gestured them towards the opening. Each one stepped resolutely forward. As they moved deeper into the circuits, stiff posture and gait resisted and

then relaxed, hunched shoulders dropped, shallow breathing changed to sighs. When everyone had entered, I walked slowly around the perimeter to “wind up” the energy they are building within, and then settled down on the far axis by the holly altar to a sitting meditation where I watched over the people moving along the path and prayed for their wellbeing. On the far side, Paddy was doing the same. Participants have told us that our doing this helps them feel safe. I attended to each one, observing the way their burdens and dilemmas, sorrows and joys were expressed in their walking.

I was glad to see Mary, a regular participant at the labyrinth events. A heavy woman with a corona of silver hair and a big open face with intense eyes, she is graceful on her feet and her smile lights up a room. But she is not always smiling: often her expression is determined and sometimes she marches into the labyrinth as if to battle. Mary says that she does “lots of work” on these walks, and when she shows up, I put out a second box of tissues at the far side of the labyrinth where it is easily reached. She finds the *mudras* I sometimes demonstrate— gestures of prayer and meditation from all over the world— helpful for this work, particularly those of “shedding” and purgation: one for self hugging that becomes a brushing off of old skin or moulting feathers, and a Balinese hand and wrist extension that models an extreme “letting go” where you keep nothing back in your cupped hand.

That night Mary had much to attend to—she was the first one up. She looked festive in colourful flowing clothes and lots of big shiny necklaces, and her toenails were painted sparkly pink! Her eyes were bright as she greeted me at the entrance, then leaned over, grabbed a wad of tissues, and launched herself onto the path like a swan into a river. Throughout the evening she was mercurial, a storyline seeming to unfold in her moods as she first embraced herself, then brushed away something that looked as if it might be sticky and awful, then breathing deeply and shuddering, shook a burden from her shoulders, before making her way to the center where she sat quietly for a very long time staring into the carnations and candlelight, crying softly to herself and wiping her eyes. Finally she got to her feet, turned to look back at the center, and started back out along the path. This time, she danced round the turns, occasionally beaming her big smile, and when she reached the holly altar, serenely knelt down beside it and tenderly stroked its shining leaves. As I sat on the other side of the bowl in deep meditation, even with my eyes closed I could feel the waves of energy coming from her. I looked up and met her glance. She looked beatific.

Afterwards Mary wanted to talk.

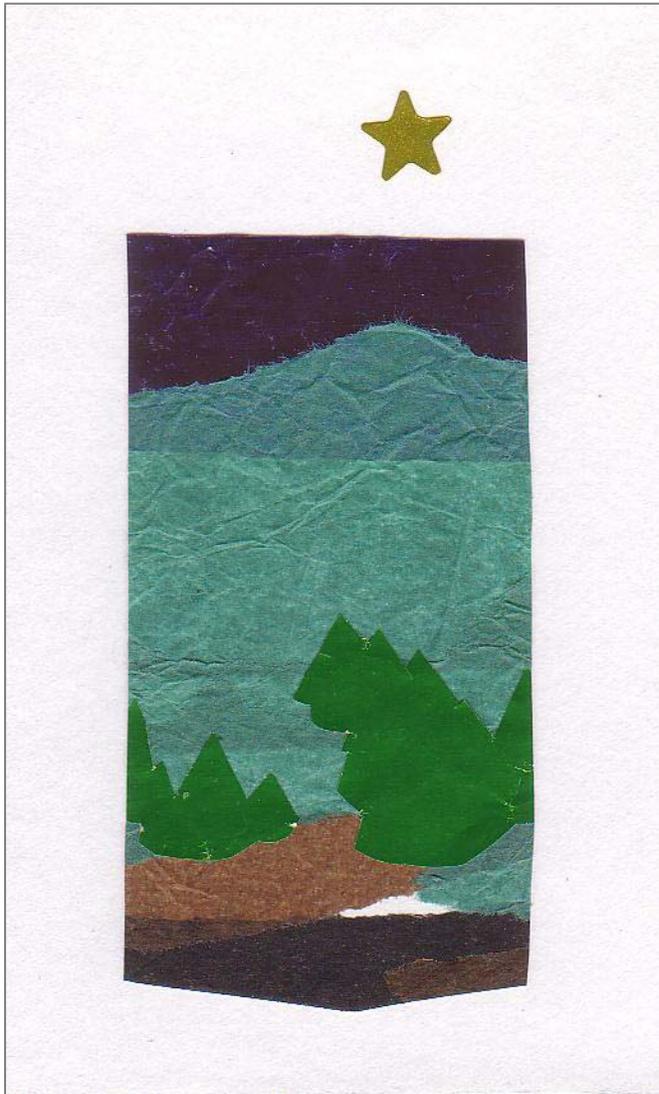
“I left a load of coal in that fourth petal tonight,” she announced cheerfully.

“Oh really? What was going on?” I asked.

“My mother died this year. We didn’t get along at all. I’ve had a lot to work through. I told my sister, ‘You know, this will be the first Christmas dinner in our whole lives that we can put the potatoes on the left side of the plate, and not get told off for being so wrong’, ” she said, her eyes flashing.

I nodded in sympathy. I knew what she meant. There was coal in my Christmas story as well.

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Early January—is there a phrase more bleakly evocative? Bachelard says that “winter is by far the oldest of the seasons...conferring age upon our memories, taking us back to a remote past” and that “a reminder of winter strengthens the happiness of inhabiting... a place to live in.”¹ Cleaning off my desk, I sweep up a torn scrap of pine green tissue paper, leftover from this year’s Christmas card production, a bleak collage of mauve foil sky, mountain range of this green tissue, in the foreground bright green foil pine forest cut out silhouettes over streaks of tan and black representing a northern sort of desert, and, way overhead right off the collage and on the white card backing, a shiny silver star. (The appropriate musical accompaniment would be The Huron Carol “... ‘Twas in the moon of wintertime...”) It is an image of the search for the Desired Object, distant and intangible, in the form of a hard cold light beyond the known but thickly impenetrable and multiply-layered material world. Portrait of the artist-celebrant on the verge of a vision quest or a wild goose chase, perhaps. Maybe it is a map to a birthplace, for an exile. Or directions to a rebirth.

“It’s beautiful,” observed a regular recipient, “but what happened this year? You always do a potato print at Christmas!” It’s true, the Christmas cards I make usually represent an object as a straightforward sign, something tangible: bright orange tangerines, printed on water colour paper, the rough surface perfectly translating the fruit’s dimpled surface; or a vine wreath, black, austere and thorny in the sharply gouged surface of the potato medium, redeemed by the bright red bow painted in after; or a Christmas tree, plaid and scribbly-minimalist.

This year was different. I had finally made the decision to walk away consciously from the futile effort to fulfill the requirements of being the daughter, sister, and niece of an increasingly nasty family of alcoholics. As my personal independence and academic achievements at graduate school increased, so had their hostility. It would have been laughable if it were not so painful, if the dynamics of our encounters did not so consistently reduce me to feeling as if I were eleven years old again. It had finally dawned on me that the patterns characteristic of the alcoholic family had shaped many of my adult relationships outside the

¹ Bachelard, 40

family of origin. The final straw was to hear my mother, during an account of her decision to limit medical intervention in what will likely be a terminal illness, review and evaluate her life's worth. Architecture, opera, literature had made her life worth living, she said. All spectator activities, I noticed. She did not mention her sister, her disastrous marriages, her three estranged children, the grandchildren she rarely saw (though dutifully sent birthday cheques); no students or clients whose lives she may have touched, no clubs or congregations or causes, no contributions to the world, no friendships, not even her garden were on the list. No insights, no triumphs, no rebirths. No Christmases. She followed up this pronouncement by sending a greeting card with instructions not to visit her during the holidays, as our relations were "inharmonious." It was unmistakably the sign for me to move on.

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Moving on. The journey is a common image for the passage through a human life. Sometimes this movement is conceived as running swiftly towards a final goal, as in the term *curriculum*, or the biblical imprimatur at funerals that the dear departed has indeed run the good race. This linear progression towards a fixed point informs the developmental view of childhood, whereby "a universal human Truth can be uncovered and applied to all... would ultimately reveal... our destination in life,"² with any tangential movement quickly identified as a possible deviance and cause for concern and correction. It is a fundamental sort of geometry: a single point has no dimension, but two points allows for a line and therefore movement. Three points, however, delineate a plane, and provide the ground for a generative potentiality that is considered deeply spiritual in contemplative geometry. Out of the triangle can be constructed forms of much dimensional complexity.³ At the very least, it can be seen metaphorically as a model of co-existent alternate perspectives, two (or more) trajectories of thought originating from each point.

In this sense, the linearity of journey epitomised by the layout of twists and turns in the unicursal labyrinth path begins to address the "dual need" Otto Rank identified "for differentiation and likeness, for individuality and connection" expressed in a "reaching out for something bigger... [which] originates in the individual's need for expansion beyond the realm of his self... for some kind of 'beyond'... to which he can submit." As Downing points out, Rank knew that nothing in reality, no human individual or institution, "can carry the weight of this expansion," and it is enormously difficult "to realize that there exists a difference between one's spiritual and one's purely human needs, and that the satisfaction or fulfillment for each has to be found in different spheres."⁴

Downing and Rank, to be fair, were concerned with the pathologies rising from the projection of shadow doubles externalised as an unconscious ruse to avoid the trials of individuation. But the distinction between spiritual and human presents a challenge to those concerned with the project of restoring a recognition of the spiritual dimension of everyday life to education: what does it mean "to expand beyond the realm of self"? Do we abandon a

² Sloan Cannella, 47

³ Lawlor

⁴ Rank in Downing 135

significant connectivity in distinguishing between the “purely human” and the spiritual? Is this yet another constructed and oppositional binary? Can we not inhabit both spheres at once? If we can, I suspect that what we need, as a kind of landmark in the sea of multiple potentialities, is a language that moves between the two (only two? more like n) dimensions, and I propose that imagery and metaphor provide the quickest route to such a common ground. Then we can begin to address the dual need itself, for individuality and connection, solitude and belonging. So, working with the two images presented here, the journey and the load of coal, we can interrogate the stories.

To journey is to journey somewhere, one assumes. The bleak dark landscape of the Christmas card represents the scene in the Nativity story when the birth of the Christ child is marked by the appearance of the mysterious Star, always capitalised in Christian texts. The next scene would be the Adoration, where all the animals and shepherds and exotic Wise Men, having been guided by the Star to Bethlehem, would be depicted kneeling before the Babe who sits safely in his mother’s arms, bathed in a glow of warm celestial light (as distinct from starlight, which is cool and distant). As we enter the space of the Star picture, we carry in our minds the hope of finding this warm, intimate scene. We know that Mary is gracious and the Baby is here to save us, so we can conflate the goal of the journeying with the likelihood of being included in this ideal family moment. Our desire to be so received provides the impetus to make the long hard journey through a darkness filled with our own personal manifestations of Herod’s soldiers and Roman legions, guided only by the cold and distant Star, itself an image of the remote Father. The goal of this journey is to reach that place where hope can be restored for an earthly existence defined by more than the Herods and Romans of the world.

Ideally, this place would be “Home.” What can we say about such a place? In representations of the Nativity, rough though the stable is, the cows and sheep seem benign, the straw is clean, there is light, and the roof is not leaking. It is comfortable enough. Witold Rybczynski, in his history of the concept of “Home,” introduces the idea of comfort as “domestic well-being, a fundamental human need that is deeply rooted in us, and that must be satisfied” and includes “domesticity, physical ease, privacy. All these characteristics contribute together to the atmosphere of interior calm that is part of comfort. If this need is not met in the present, it is not unnatural to look for comfort in tradition.” But the idea of the home as a place of comfort is relatively recent. Medieval thinking did not distinguish the function of an object from its meaning, because of the external character of medieval civilisation:

What mattered was the external world and one’s place in it. Life was a public affair and just as one did not have a strongly developed self-consciousness, one did not have one’s own room...The interior furniture of houses appeared together with the interior furniture of the mind.⁵

The idea of house as “home,” represented in Dutch 17th century genre paintings such as, iconically to us now, Vermeer’s,⁶

brought together the meanings of house and of household, of dwelling and of refuge, of ownership and of affection. ‘Home’ meant the house, but also

⁵ John Lukacs, “The Bourgeois Interior,” *American Scholar*, Vol.39, No. 4 (Autumn, 1970) quoted in Rybczynski, 36.

⁶ Rybczynski, 62. Emphasis added.

everything that was in it and around it, as well as the people, and the sense of satisfaction and contentment that all these conveyed. You could walk out of the house, *but you always returned home*.

Etymological investigation produces interesting divergences and layers to the concept of “home.” Rybczynski notes that the word “home,” an old Anglo-Saxon word (*ham*, *heym* in Dutch) which connotes a physical “place” but also has the more abstract sense of a “state of being,” has no equivalent in the Latin or Slavic European languages. German, Danish, Swedish, Icelandic, Dutch, and English all have similar sounding words for “home,” all derived from the ON “heima.”⁷ Kurtz and Ketcham, however, emphasize the meaning of ‘home’ as the bounded area within which we can define ourselves, discerning between what we are and are not, so creating an identity for ourselves and thus the categories to which we can belong, where we can fit. Etymologically, they argue, this concept of “fit” derives from the Indo-European root word KEI, meaning “a bounded space.” As source for our words “home” and “hide” in its dual meaning, as the verb “to conceal” and the noun referring to the skin covering an animal, “home” can be understood as “the place where one can hide,” one’s vulnerability protected, one’s fittingness unquestioned.⁸ Thus they can say of a place far removed from Vermeer’s serene interiors, that “Home is the place where we can both laugh and cry, where we can find some peace within all the chaos and confusion, where we ... belong, where we fit precisely because of our unfittingness.”⁹

In an extended argument Caputo presents between the religious and the tragic views of the meaning of suffering in human existence, equally convincing for both sides, he describes at length this site of chaos and confusion as perceived by Meister Eckhard, “the great master of disruption.” For Eckhard, there was, beneath the cerebral activities of the mind, “at the base of the soul” or “out on the tip,” what he called “the ground of the soul,” Heidegger’s “heart’s core.” Here occurred the “breakthrough” in understanding of how much greater was God than any system or faculty or sense that humans could muster. But Eckhard said that, rather than a glorious sense of light accompanying this understanding, one had the feeling of falling into a terrible abyss. Here in the abyss, meaning collapses and with it all reassurance that our end of the relationship with God is anything but petty and greedy. Eckhard goes on to say that in the face of this realization of the transcendence of God, we begin to make some headway. But to go forward into the mystery is “strange, uncanny, uncomfortable...the place where all hell broke loose.”¹⁰ Heidegger’s term for a state similarly bereft of meaning, and of its comforts, is the “uncanny” (*Unheimlich*), that is, the Un-Home-y!

Caputo draws the parallel between such a breakthrough/breakdown in theological certainty, and that in radical hermeneutics, when one’s grasp of the conceptual—the “spell of the conceptuality, the illusion...that we have encompassed the world round about” also collapses. The surface web of meanings (the “huts of science”) so carefully constructed and fiercely defended, grows thin and through the gaps the flux beneath is exposed. Meaning—or certainty—withdraws and the movement between the present and the absent, *Abwesen* and

⁷ Rybczynski, 62.

⁸ Kurtz and Ketcham, 236.

⁹ Kurtz and Ketcham, 192.

¹⁰ Caputo, 268–9.

Anwesen, is unsettled and fluctuating. We hover over the abyss and no structure feels fixed.¹¹ How are we to accommodate ourselves to such uncertainty?

Caputo insists that we continue to “write from below...stay with the flow of *physis* and not bail out when the going gets rough.”¹² I understand this to mean for me that, just because there’s a story about a Baby glowing in a stable on the other side of those mountains, it does not necessarily follow that I or those with whom I am given to travel, will ever get to see it. If that is “Home” that we are seeking, we may be homeless and in exile for a very long time. This being a human life, the “flow of *physis*” no doubt includes sore feet. Journeying through the flux would seem then to require the ability to find rest—a still place— and to provide and accept comfort for ourselves and one another, a “home.” The *telos* of the journeying is the Path itself, as well as Light in the stable.

What can we say, to return to the way-station in the parish hall, about the “load of coal” that Mary left in the fourth petal? I understood the reference immediately. Coal recalls damp northern winters, dirty bins in the basement, cranky foul furnaces that needed much attention if the house were to stay warm. I remember the coal-scuttle from the flat in Montreal many years ago, my parents disappearing down to the basement to throw in another load through the long winters. Servants and poor people dealt with coal in its domestic and industrial forms. It was a lowly, dirty, ugly necessity. Coal in your stocking at Christmas is an image known to those of English heritage, a public sign of your poorly-concealed badness, something Father Christmas brought instead of candy, oranges, and toys. Home with coal in the Christmas stocking was not a place where your “hide” was safe. But coal, we all knew, was crushed by the earth in some mysterious invisible remote way that produced diamonds.

Was it a testimonial to healing, like the piles of crutches at Lourdes, a monument to the crippled kind of love she had suffered all these years? Was it an offering to a deity—a jealous Mother goddess— the remains of some kind of sacrificial animal, or the fuel for the fire in which to burn it, as if the pattern on the parish hall floor were a shrine? Was it a contribution to the *temenos* of the labyrinth process, as if in the hermetic atmosphere of the gathering, the pressure of Mary’s focused attention when added to all our cumulative faith in that which we could not yet see, energy on which we had relied to keep the labyrinth open all these years, would transmute the ancient shard into a diamond?

I suggest that the labyrinth path made it possible for Mary, and for me, to reinterpret our journeys with our mothers into pilgrimages. Their intentions may or may not have been good. They saw by the light available to them. They burnt what coal they had. That which they or anyone gives us along the way has the potential to be some quite different substance. Lao Tzu points out that

it is the empty space within the vessel that makes it useful. We make the doors and windows for a room. But it is these empty spaces that make the room livable. Thus, while the tangible has advantages, it is the intangible that makes it useful.

Surely Lao Tzu would say, it’s only a hut.

¹¹ Caputo, 270.

¹² Caputo, 273.

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