You are not moving, you are being moved.
You are not singing, you are being sung.
You are not praying, you are being prayed.

Prayed at the speed of love.

Hello, I'm Janet Conner. You may know me as the author of Writing Down Your Soul. That's typically how people stumble into Janet Conner. That book, when it came out now 11 years ago, became a very surprising to me bestseller, and it paved the way for six more, including a few of your favorites: The Lotus and the Lily, Soul Vows, and Find Your Soul's Purpose. I was thrilled to write those books and teach those courses and help people go back and forth across that threshold, as Rumi called it, where the two worlds meet by riding the mystical theta brainwave state. In a nutshell, everything I do is about that. The access to the Divine is in the mystical theta brainwave state. So that's who I thought I was, and that's what I thought I was doing.

But the Divine Feminine had another plan, and she awakened me in the night on February 25, 2018, a day that's now marked every year in my calendar as a very sacred anniversary, and whispered—it was a whisper, but it was unmistakable—two words, "Prayer Artist," in my left ear. And Prayer Artist has changed everything, everything.

Starting that very morning, I found myself writing a whole new genre of prayer, eventually redefining prayer altogether. That felt like, ooh, that's quite a responsibility, but it was non-negotiable. I need to redefine prayer away from the definition that's in the dictionary, which is as patriarchal as it can possibly be. Go ahead. Look it up, and you like me might burst into tears. And so I'm saying, "Okay, I will redefine prayer," and now instead of teaching those courses… and I loved those courses, and they are still available online. But now I'm leading prayer intensives with the most magnificent women mystics.

And if you were listening to me back then, you know that I had to walk away from a show I adored, The Soul Directed Life, in order to create this podcast,
Praying at the Speed of Love, so we could share our prayer stories. So every day I wake realizing, "Okay. I don't know what's going to happen today, but prayer is in charge." Prayer is just having her way with me, and all of this year, but especially since the quarantine started, which for me in the United States in Florida was March, ever since then prayer has been, I'm going to call it, awakening a bone memory, bone. It's not in my mind. It's not in books. This is a bone memory of how we prayed before patriarchy. I call it, because she calls it original prayer, original prayer. Original is such an evocative word. So this is prayer that is forever ancient, forever ancient, and yet in the moment you pray, it's so fresh. It's so new. It's brand new. That for me is original prayer.

So today on Praying at the Speed of Love Episode 29… now think about that. Look at that. Twenty-nine in numerology is a 2 plus 9 is 11, and what is 11? It's the number of the Divine Feminine. It's the number of the angels. It's not an accident, although Janet did not plan it, but here we are at Episode 29, returning to that ancient bone memory all the way to Mother Earth with Christine Valters Paintner.

Christine is the abbess, the online abbess, for a real treasure, Abbey of the Arts. It's a virtual monastic offering of classes and resources on the sacred interplay…the two are not parallel. They're not separate. They're a dance like the figure eight, like the lemniscate. I always mispronounce that word. It's a sacred interplay of two things: creative expression and contemplative practice. Christine is the author of so many books you treasure. I have a whole shelf over my left shoulder here, starting with The Artist Rule, Lectio Divina, The Soul of a Pilgrim, The Wisdom of the Body, so many more. But we are so blessed to have a conversation today with Christine in Galway, Ireland to talk about her newest book, a new treasure, a treasure that belongs on your sacred literature shelf, Earth, Earth Our Original—see, there's that word I adore so much—Earth, Our Original Monastery.

In this conversation, there is absolutely positively something waiting for you, just for you. There is some nugget of whisper, some nugget of love, some nugget of Earth wisdom, some bone memory that's hovering in the air, waiting to enter your heart, your body, your bones and transform your life. So listen as the glorious Tibetan bowl sings her song, awakening your invisible ear that you may hear what wants to be heard.

[the bowl rings]

Gentle song today. She has such a sweet, gentle song, but I realized something just now asking her to open our ears. She's made out of seven metals. She's handmade in the north of India, so it's not one of those perfect symmetrical… no. She's hand-hammered seven metals, so every speck of her is different. And she
always has different songs and different tones. But as many years as I have been
starting every gathering of every prayer intensive, every course I ever taught,
every show, it's now as we begin to think about Earth, Our Original Monastery
that I realize she comes to us singing the song of seven metals in Mother Earth.

Oh, Christine Valters Paintner, it is such a joy to have this conversation with you,
from me in Florida to you in Galway, Ireland, and then our voice is going out to
hearts everywhere around the world. So what do you say we start with prayer?

Christine Valters Paintner Sounds wonderful, Janet. Thank you. I'm going to begin by reading
a poem. I actually have a collection of poems coming out in the fall called The
Wisdom of Wild Grace, so it sort of is building off of this "Earth as original
monastery consciousness" and material. And I have a whole section in that poetry
book of saint and animal stories, of the kinship between the saints and the
animals, so this story is called "Saint Cuthbert and the Otters."

The saint stands immersed in the North Sea, his nightly vigil.
Waves lap his beard, offers prayers of wildness and wakefulness.
The moon is a communion wafer floating across sky.
He smiles as curious seals swim past.

When dawn approaches, birds open their beaks, and song land on his shoulders.
Each morning, he steps back onto shore, with wrinkled toes, skin pale blue.
Two otters scurry over, warm him with their fish-hued breath, wrap themselves
around his frigid feet until he can wiggle them again.

They beckon him to romp and frolic, and in the midst of this, otter Saint Rumble
Rumpus lost in laughter.
He forgets himself, forgets the many names of God and realizes this too is a kind
of prayer [laughter].

Janet Conner And it had to be otters, right? I mean the minute you say the word "otter," you see
those adorable… they're so precious and—

Christine Valters Paintner If I could be reincarnated as an animal, it would be an otter in a
heartbeat. No question. I picked that poem just for you too because of the focus
on prayer and the sort of consciousness of how animals can teach us the
playfulness of prayer and the delight of prayer and that it's not always this one
serious kind of thing, that it helps break us open to other possibilities, so.

Janet Conner And you do that in all your books: The Way of Illumination, if I'm remembering
the title correctly, Saint Francis. I mean how close to the animals can you possibly
get, right? Always that, and Thomas Merton, all of his poetry. He's always talking
to the trees are praying and the weeds, and everybody's praying. Growing up in all
of our traditions—but I did grow up Irish Catholic—you're in a school, sitting in a chair, opening books, learning principles, and nobody ever… I never got that evocative, exquisite, sensual adoration between God in the tree and Saint Francis.

Christine Valters Paintner  Yep. It's hard to do in a classroom [laughter]. That's why I think it's so marvelous these days that there's all these nature preschools and primary schools, forest schools. It's an amazing development. I would love to see more of that because I think—

Janet Conner  Well, I'm hoping high school teachers, grade school teachers, and that are getting your books and your poetry books and reading them. Do you get any conversation from teachers that they're—

Christine Valters Paintner  Not so much, not so much like grade school, high school. I mean definitely kind of a more adult kind of education, but I'd love to think that during this time of pandemic that people would be drawn… that being outdoors is one of the safer places to be, and so maybe that will help spark more people being outside and particularly in kind of educational settings. That might be a place for people to find some solace and a little bit more of safety. I don't know.

Janet Conner  Yeah, the timing of your book is like almost scary [laughter]. It's so utterly perfect. When you wrote this book, there's no pandemic, and you have to finish the manuscript a full year before. So there was no pandemic on the horizon, but your opening paragraph… I read it and started giggling. It's like, "Wait a second," so obviously, it's just divinely orchestrated.

Here's the opening paragraph: "Of the many rich and fruitful paths available as part of the Christian tradition, the monastic way calls to me the strongest. The invitation to live life with more slowness, simplicity, and attentiveness is a rich gift in a world driven by speed, consumerism, and distraction." Right? The very things that got us into this situation. "Contemplative practices help to offer an antidote to ways of living that have contributed to the destruction of Earth." Now, are you surprised at how perfect the timing of this book is?

Christine Valters Paintner  Well, I suppose, in my mind, that this pandemic has amplified a collective anxiety that was already present that I think is what I was responding to. So I'm grateful for the timing, and it sort of makes sense. If now that I reflect back on it, it makes sense that our collective anxiety would only be getting more and more amplified. Of course, I wasn't expecting a global pandemic, of course, and certainly wish that it weren't so; however, this human catastrophe that's been in the works for generations and generations is now being unleashed on us in a different way. And so I'm grateful that the book has a way to respond to that even if I couldn't have known exactly the circumstances it would be released into.
Janet Conner: Yeah. It's absolutely divine timing. So on this show, which is all about prayer, the first question I always ask everybody is, "Well, how did you pray as a child?" and then, "How has your prayer life evolved?" It's your prayer story. You don't get a lot of places to tell your prayer story. What's your prayer story?

Christine Valters Paintner: Well, it's a great question because, as a child, my parents were atheists, and so I didn't actually have a kind of a conscious prayer life. Now, they were people that loved to travel. We would go to art museums. We'd go to cathedrals. My father was from Austria, so we'd travel and hike the mountains and the woods. So all of those places... so the esthetic and the natural world were the places that I think I've felt most alive and connected. I don't think I ever had the language as a child, but that was prayer. But certainly it has impacted me going forward as those are the things that I love the most and the things that bring me alive and the things I try and weave into my work.

And then it wasn't until college that I started to really develop this more conscious prayer life. It started with, actually, the Jesuits because I went to a Jesuit college, and [laughter] I have a lot of respect and love for the Jesuits and Saint Ignatius and lots of prayer forums that I still draw upon and the social justice aspect of things. I did the Jesuit Volunteer Corps., so I'd say for a while my prayer life was really shaped by that kind of social justice tradition and, yeah, how our contemplation and action kind of transforms things.

But then it was in graduate school that I discovered the Benedictine Way and the monastic way more generally, and really it was kind of funny because in graduate school, I was sort of turned off by monasticism because I didn't think it had anything to offer me until I started to really study it because I had to. And then I realized I'm actually a monk at heart. And it was sort of this lovely divine joke, where the place that I didn't expect to find myself is actually the place that I felt most nourished and this sense of finding God in all time and all things and all people and also the call to slowness and spaciousness and the gentleness of the practice, the way.

There's not this kind of spiritual heroism that you find sometimes on some paths, that it's a very... as someone who's had chronic illness my whole adult life and a lot of fatigue, it was a path also that offered me a lot of compassion and gentleness for my own limitations, and that was really life-giving as well. And so, of course, then the monastic path became, yeah, the way that sort of carried me forward and then discovering the desert monks and then moving to Ireland and discovering the Celtic monks [laughter], I just love the monks. And I love that now the wisdom that they've brought forward.
Janet Conner: Well, it's a good thing there's a mute button because I'm just giggling my fool head off over here because I went to Jesuit college too. I went to Marquette. Where did you go?

Christine Valters Paintner: I went to Fordham in New York.

Janet Conner: Oh, too, too, too funny. And I went, "Okay. I'm not having anything more to do with that," right? I dropped everything, no devotional practice, no mass, no nothing for years and years and years and years and years, so the big surprise of my life is to discover I'm a monk. I'm a monk. I used to say I'm a nun, but then I didn't want that sort of limited… so I'm a whatever word you can merge these two together. But this is how I live, and I love it. So I feel like I have to sort of apologize to all of the religious people that I went, "No, no. Go away, go away," because this is how I live now. Now, I'm not a… you are a Lay Benedictine Oblate. I sort of stumble bummed into my own practice. I've built my own cloister here. I've built my own spiritual practice. So tell us what is a Benedictine Oblate? Is there like a structure, a bowl, a container for your life?

Christine Valters Paintner: Yeah, there's a couple of aspects to it. Definitely, you're part of a community, and you make a commitment to a particular community. So my community is actually back near Seattle about an hour away from where I used to live when I lived in the States, a community of women that I'm still connected to. And interestingly with the pandemic, I've gotten a little bit more connected because they’ve started doing their oblate meetings by Zoom, so I can actually sort of say hello and be there for part of it, except for the time difference.

That community is really… you're a part of the community of sisters but then also the oblates, and there are a number of aspects of that that I love. One is that it's very much an interdenominational community, so it's not just Catholics, at least in the United States. This isn't actually true globally, but in the United States, Benedictine monasteries tend to welcome people from all denominations. And I love that aspect of things very much. And then, of course, there's this sense of being part of a community of lay people who are married or working in the world and living everyday lives and trying as much as possible to apply the wisdom of Saint Benedict's Rule to their daily lives.

And so when I lived in Seattle, we met once a month down at The Priory, and then we also met once a month as a local… those Seattle oblates would meet together, and we would talk about how do we live in a contemplative way in the world? How do we practice hospitality with the people that we work with? How do we find time for silence and solitude, all of those kinds of things? Of the different monastic practices, what are the ones that we feel most called to integrate in our lives, and how do we support one another in that path? So it's a
rich, rich community, and since moving to Ireland, I have felt the absence of that. So I'm grateful to have some connection still because it's very much, yeah, a rich part of my own faith life.

Janet Conner  So I'm taking notes here, and I'm very surprised because I don't know anything about Saint Benedict's Rule, right? However, every single description you just gave for what it is to be a Benedictine Oblate is what happens in my prayer intensives. We are absolutely a community. Everybody is welcome. I mean, there are people that grew up Muslim, Mormon, Jewish, I mean, absolutely everybody, and lots of people who grew up without any tradition. It is completely interdenominational, global, but we are trying to apply the wisdom of prayer. So that would be the only difference. I'm not specifically looking at Saint Benedict's Rule, but we talk about how can we live a contemplative life? We talk about how, okay, we can live with more silence, more solitude, more communion with the Divine Feminine, would be the language I would use, and how can we support one another? So I'm not only a monk, I think I'm an oblate.

Christine Valters Paintner  Yeah [laughter], you may be a Benedictine without knowing it.

Janet Conner  I'm a Benedictine Oblate, and I didn't know it. Wow. Well, surprises all around.

Christine Valters Paintner  Well, and Benedict talked about, obviously, praying the Liturgy of the Hours, finding God in all moments of the day. He talked about how the kitchen utensils were as sacred as the items on the altars, so finding the sacred in all things, and then of course hospitality, welcoming the stranger as the face of Christ, so finding the Divine in all people. So it really is this way of life that cultivates enough spaciousness to be able to see that Divine network in every aspect of our lives, so it's like anybody who's committed to that is a monk.

Janet Conner  And there are a lot of monks. Well, that's what your fabulous online Abby of the Arts is about, right?

Christine Valters Paintner  Yes, yeah. Exactly, exactly. One of our kind of core programs is called "Monk in the World," and so we have some principles that we abide by and that we reflect on together that reflect different practices from this tradition and other monastic traditions, and, yeah, encouraging, supporting people in how to live this way in everyday life.

Janet Conner  And the link to Abbey of the Arts, all the links for Christine, this book, many of her books, it's all on the Show Notes page at janetconner.com/29. So let's dive into this glorious… I love this book so much. It's called Earth, Our Original—this word I adore—Monastery. I mean just the title… I had to sort of stop and hold the cover to my heart. The title, I think, is a prayer and such an enormous prayer. Would you talk about that title, this book?
Christine Valters Paintner   Yeah. Well, that image came to me in my own prayer, and this sense of, for me, sanctuary has always been in the forests or in the mountains or by the sea. That's the place where I've always experienced that Divine connection most keenly. And in the Celtic tradition, there's this understanding that nature is the Big Book of Revelation, and the scriptures are the Little Book of Revelation. So nature and scripture are held side by side both as revealing this Divine imagination.

And then, of course, I mentioned with regard to the poem that I read that there's this whole tradition of these saint and animal stories. You find them in the desert monk monastic tradition, the Celtic monastic, and then Saint Francis and Julian and other medieval saints like that. There are these wonderful stories of the kinship between saints and animals as a sign of holiness, and I always loved that sense that animals could provide a window into some kind of instinctual being that was somehow a portal to the Divine. And so all of these kinds of aspects of things, and then of course Thomas Merton—you already mentioned—he listens to the trees praying. And he talks about all of creation as the original saints and the elements as the original spiritual directors, and reading and all this, it just sort of came together.

And I realized there is one of the saint and animal stories about Saint Ciaran, and he talks about there were some animals that came and were his first monks. And I think that's when I read that story, it sort of clicked for me that, yeah, creation is this original monastery. It is the place where all of the practices, the liturgy, the sense of sacred space, all of those things originate in creation, in nature. They aren't concepts that we created on our own. There are things that we discovered already alive around us. The Psalms talk about how all of creation is singing praise to the Divine in all moments, so this continual liturgy where our liturgy is just a joining in with that original liturgy already at work in the world around us.

Janet Conner   And in the book, there's a particular phrase that jumped off the page at me, "where the wild edges meet." Now, I've been following you for a while, so I was reading your fabulous Sunday newsletters, which I recommend everybody get, when you were making the decision to leave Seattle. And then so we're following you, and now you're in Austria; you're in Vienna. And then I was shocked out of my mind when you went, "Whoops. Well, I think we're going to Ireland. Not sure why, but we need to move to Ireland," and I remember the day you showed the keys to your apartment, so we're following this history, right, as you travel to place to place.

So in the book you talk about an intimate relationship with the land, with Mother Earth, but especially in the places where the wild edges meet. Now, you're on the
west of Ireland. I haven't been there, but I'm guessing that's wild, wild, especially when you go to the coast. Meeting John O'Donohue, even though I haven't been there, you go, "Woah. It's wild out there."

So talk to us because it's hard right now. All right. We're supposed to stay in. But we all open the door, and we go out for our short walks. They're not very long, and if you're in a city, you're not exactly running into a whole lot of wild edges. So help us visualize, imagine the wild edges and find them even in our tiny, little walks. I step out my front door, and I can go on one of those Rails to Trails walks. And I can't go very far, but I walk. And I come back, and there's no seashore or anything. But I bet you there's wild edges there, and I'm missing them.

Christine Valters Paintner I bet there are too. Yeah. We're fortunate because in Galway City, where we live, we are on the Atlantic Ocean, so there's definitely a sense of being on those wild edges, although our daily walk is up this canal and down this river. It's really quite beautiful. And I'd say any of those edge places, seashores, rivers, edges, lake edges, those places of kind of connection between two different kinds of landscape could be considered a wild edge. I even think of parks… one of the things that I love is when you see plants growing up through concrete sidewalks or growing out of walls, those are places of wild edges too, where nature is kind of erupting out of the everyday kind of urban reality.

I think about birds. Of course, living by the sea we have loads of seagulls, and we have pigeons, pretty ordinary birds. We have crows, and they may be more urban kinds of birds, but they're also that connection to that kind of more instinctual, wilder kind of reality and consciousness. And even in the Celtic imagination, thresholds are a really important concept, so I think of doorways as places of wild edges also because doorways, gates, anything where there's a portal between one space and another can be an invitation to us to consider where are those invitations to cross over into some other kind of awareness or consciousness.

So we could do that even just going out of the door of our house. What does that mean to go from the inner space of hearth and home out into the neighborhood where we live and just to be conscious of that or to offer a prayer of gratitude for… thresholds, in the Celtic imagination, are considered thin places and thin moments, which is where heaven and Earth are closer to one another, that there's something about those wild edges that bring us closer to the Divine than just ordinary moments of consciousness.

Janet Conner And the quarantine has made it, funny enough—it's a such a paradox—a little more possible to notice this because everybody is so enchanted by the pictures now of the penguins walking down the street. And there's elephants, and there's bears. And one of my favorite pictures is a fox on Ha'penny, Dublin, and there's a
fox on a Friday night. Well, ordinarily, on a Friday night, there would be drunk people. There would not be foxes, and so it's so adorable. And so I saw those pictures online. I leave my front door. I go for my little walk, and I've lived here 20 years. I know that path really, really, really well, and it has to be because of the quarantine. It has to be because of the cleaner air. Something's going on. We have families of ducks in this horrible, pathetic, little, I mean, like a retention creepy thing. This is not a beautiful running creek. This is some man-made creepy creek, but lo and behold, there have to be a dozen duck families. And they're not afraid of people now, so they sit on the side of the… they talk to the children. There's more birds. There's more ibis. There have been roseate spoonbills, the pink. Never saw those, never saw those. So nature is coming closer, right, and saying, "Look at me, look at me." And it is, it's prayer.

Christine Valters Paintner Yeah. We have loads of swans in Galway, and every spring there's always baby cygnus born. And so that's not unusual, but it was really sweet because on our walk up the canal and down the river, we passed one of the swan nests. And once those little babies were born, the crowds of people that gathered just to stand there and take photos but just, I think, to be in awe, it was sort of this lovely spontaneous sense of liturgy and celebration of new life. Here's new life in the midst of all that's happening, and what a wonder that is that we're all just standing there in awe of these little baby swans that come every year. But they're still amazing and adorable, of course [laughter].

Janet Conner Oh, have the baby swans inspired a prayer, a poem? I could imagine Merton looking at those baby swans, and bingo there comes the next prayer poem. So you've got a prayer poem for the swans?

Christine Valters Paintner I did actually write a reflection a couple weeks ago inspired by Mother's Day, which had to do with kind of hunger and being fed because I was really aware of the mother swan feeding the baby swans and thus the hunger that's being kindled in me. So it hadn't turned into a poem yet, but it definitely was a… yeah.

Janet Conner But it will. You know what? You're making me realize that… I sit outside now. I spend sometimes till two o'clock in the afternoon, and I almost can't bear to come in. I just need to sit there, and I do my prayers and my deep soul writing and my deep soul reading. This is where I was when I read your book, and I just sit there and sit there. And I do have a little bird feeder in my backyard. It's just this tiny little townhouse backyard, 30 feet by 20 feet. It's just a wee little thing, but I saw something that I had not noticed before.
I'm used to seeing the mama cardinal feed her babies, not in the nest. I don't know where the nests are. But I never saw this before. The male… and it's so easy in cardinals to know who's who, so the red cardinal, first he screams at me, "Get the food out, lady." I go, "Okay, okay. I'm on it." And I bring this, and they like the sunflower seeds. And he chirped, and his wife, the female, came. And he fed her. He fed her, two adults, and then he reached down and got another one. He fed her, and then she reached down and got one and fed him. I've never seen that before.

There was some immense beauty there, an opening, and you're making me remember it, that there was a feeding, a love feeding going on here. And if it weren't for the quarantine, it could have happened and I wouldn't have noticed. Noticing. That's it. They're noticing those swan babies.

Christine Valters Paintner: Yeah. There's time. Yeah. It is a gift, that time just to notice and pay attention and see things unfold that we wouldn't normally see.

Janet Conner: Because we're still. One of the principles that you write about in the book is the monastic quality of stability. Now, this wasn't appealing to me when I was a kid. I felt sorry for the nuns, like, "Oh, you're stuck in that convent." I'm 72. Maybe it takes till now to go, "Woah, stability. What a fabulous thing." But here's what you write: "Stability calls us to a commitment to work through the difficult things of our lives. We can run away, both physically and emotionally, in our desires for distraction, entertainment, and ease."

And it felt, to me, like in that paragraph you were giving us the option that quarantine, that the pandemic, is giving us. There's a choice here. You can say, "Okay. I am home. I'm going to stay home. I'm sheltering at home. I'm completely stable, and I'm going to go into this in a very deep way and see what gifts there are for me here. Or I can turn on Netflix. I can distract myself for…" Now, I haven't had a television for 10 years, so that's actually not an option for me. And I am so grateful, but I notice that there seems to be this different way. There are people that are addressing this by distracting themselves into oblivion, and there are people that hear it. But I just didn't know it was a monastic call to stability, so could you talk to us about the beauty in this monastic call to stability?

Christine Valters Paintner: Yeah. I'm glad you highlighted this because I feel like this has been one of the biggest gifts of the quarantine for me personally. I mean, I've always loved this quality of stability because in the monastic tradition and the monastic setting, it's about the monks staying in one monastery for their entire lives on a physical level, but it's really meant to be reflective of not being able to just run away when things get difficult. And a lot of the desert monks talk about don't go running from place to place because you're just going to bring all of the crap you had in one place to the next place. And we know that's true, and yet we
still, we want to distract ourselves. We want to run. So I find stability, in terms of my own life, in terms of my marriage, the need to stay and commit over and over and over again, marriage vows aren't just a one-time thing. They're a continual process.

I think about all the ways that I try and distract myself, whether it's through Netflix or whether it's through even things like travel or too many books or too many classes or all the things that can scatter our attention. And all of those things can be good things. It's just a matter of how they impact us. And I think, for me, what's been this incredible gift of having to stay within my two or three kilometers of home has been this real invitation to deepen into the place where I am in a way that I hadn't even thought about before because my life involves a fair amount of travel. So there's always something on the horizon. I've always a place I'm going to be heading, and while I love this landscape that I live in and the place I live in, I don't think I realized how much I can distract myself until I was forced.

So now I know for the next year, I'm not traveling anywhere. We cancelled all of our fall programs, and there's this incredible gift. I've been really drawn actually to Julian of Norwich lately because of this fascination with her choice to live in this anchor hold and this sense of what does it mean to be an anchor in the community? And what happens when you are invited to spend every day in the same place, the same husband and dog and plants on the patio and the same walk and all of those things, and what do you start to notice and discover in that process? And both the noticing and the wonder and the attention that can come from that as well as noticing all the thoughts where I do start to distract myself, or I do start to run away in all these different forms. There's so many different ways we can distract ourselves, right, and to keep returning myself again and again to this moment now and to a love of this moment.

I'm actually writing a book right now called A Devotion to the World, and it feels like such a gift to be writing it, another kind of divine timing thing. It feels like a real gift to be writing it right now because it's very much about cultivating a devotion to all of the ordinary tasks of the day. So how can the laundry and the dishes and all of the ordinary things that we do every day become modes of grace? And of course, they all are. It's just we're normally trying to rush our way through them, but there's such a, yeah, grace in the ordinary.

Janet Conner  The way you said that: what happens when you are invited to stay in the same place? Every single one of us upon hearing that can see our house, our yard, our apartment, our relationships if there are other people in the house. And then what are you beginning to notice? And I have been and been almost embarrassed to say

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it out loud: I am finding this quarantine time to be an absolute place of ecstasy. Prayer is able to talk to me, experiment with me. My experience of my daily morning anointing is just exploding, exploding, and I wake up in the morning thrilled to go sit outside and do nothing but read a little bit, lots of deep soul writing, massive amounts of staring off in space. I think very often space is like a profound prayer practice. Just stare off into space. So there are such gifts.

Now, at the exact same time, however, the New York Times on Sunday May 24, it's the most touching homepage you've ever seen in your entire life. They listed a hundred thousand names—obviously, not all on the first page; you had to turn, and there were three or four more pages—the names of a hundred thousand people that have died, I think, just in the United States so far. That's not global. And so at the exact same time—talk about paradox—that I am relishing the discoveries of being alone with my intense prayer life, there's still grief. My tiny grief is I couldn't go to New York to share my son's graduation from law school. So once again, because your book is so exquisite for this time period, you talk about making space for grief.

Christine Valters Paintner   Yeah. Well, I mean, it's hard not to talk about Earth and nature without obviously being aware of the climate crisis and pollution, and I know all of the terrible destruction that we've wrought on nature. And so to write a book about kind of an earth spirituality without addressing how do we make space for that kind of grieving and that kind of sorrow feels like it would be very disingenuous. And I think a lot of us… well, we obviously do not live in a culture that encourages any kind of real grieving process. We're always trying to kind of rush on to the next thing. And so there's this beautiful invitation to make room, and I feel like that's part of my prayer practice in this quarantine time as well as is also to make room for the grieving of all the sorrow of losses that are happening right now.

And one really simple way to do this is just to designate some grieving time each day, which may sound sort of strange or artificial, but there's something about having a little container of time where I allow myself to really be present to the sorrow in the world. I mean, for me, that's part of the… it's such an essential part of the spiritual path is holding the tremendous beauty and wonder and joy of life right alongside of the sorrow and the grief and the loss and all the terrible things that happen, and how do we hold all that together? And I think one way is we make space for the grief, and the ways that I do that myself or putting on a piece of music that evokes that kind of quality of sadness or sorrow for me. And often movement, just really gentle, allowing my body to guide me in that prayer, for me that works really well, allowing that river of grief through me.
Reading the psalms of lament. About a third of all the 150 psalms are psalms of lament, these crying out, "How long, oh, God. Why do you forget my affliction?" this crying out. And there's a wonderful theologian, Walter Brueggemann, who has a whole book called *The Prophetic Imagination*, and he talks about how lament is such an essential practice because it's an act of truth telling. It's an act of crying out. It's an act of entering into a mature relationship with the Divine, of asking the questions that we want to ask and not necessarily finding answers but moving into that mystery and giving space for that. And, yeah, I feel like creating that kind of space for grief and lament and sorrow is really an important part of our practice.

Janet Conner And what more perfect time than quarantine? It does appear that everybody knows someone who has died or knows someone who's died or had the losses of we can't go to our mother in the nursing… I mean, everyone is touched by this. So the invitation is stop rushing and ignoring and keeping yourself on the go and distraction. How can you miss the sorrow? So these principles in the book: stability, wild edges, grief. I love all those. I get all those. But there was one that stopped me in my tracks, and I had to sort of stare off in space and go, "Okay. I need help with this." Holy indifference. Okay. I did. I put the book down. I went, holy—holy, a word I adore, right—indifference. Hmm. So help me; help us. What is holy indifference, and what's the gift?

Christine Valters Paintner Well, if you think about any time that you've ever been really struggling with something in your life, and then you went off maybe to the forest or a hike on a mountain or to the seashore and you had that sense of the grandness of nature, also, for me, the sense of timelessness or deep connection to deep time, the endurance of things, and I often find comfort in those moments where nature is so much bigger than I am. And there are many times when being in creation, in nature, has actually been a real source of solace, and I have felt like nature has witnessed me and met me and blessed me. But there's also been just as much solace in those moments when I feel actually really small but in a very healthy way, when it puts my problems in perspective, when I remember that there's something that endures that's so much bigger than I am. That's a window into this divine love and endurance that will be here long before I came and will continue long after I'm gone [laughter]. And so, yeah. I know indifference is not something that we would necessarily think of as holy or comforting, but there is for me this sense of… yeah.

Janet Conner So hearing you talk about it, I know exactly where I was when I had that feeling. North of San Francisco in Marin County is John Muir Woods, and you step out. And they call this particular area The Cathedral—talk about *Earth, The Original Monastery*—and you're amongst the redwoods, the sequoias, the biggest, most
majestic, most magnificent... and how many hundreds and hundreds of years old are they? And you can't move. You stop. There's no sign that says, "Shut up, everybody." There doesn't have to be. You're standing, little, tiny person, five feet tall, and you're never going to be able to see the top of these trees. They are so wide that 50 people could hold hands and not circle them, and you think how many years has this tree...? This tree was here before the United States. Okay. And it's holy. There's nothing more holy than standing in a grove of trees like that.

Holy indifference. I got it. That's beautiful. It's such a stunning feeling that even though, I think, it's been 20 years since I was there, right, the minute you talk, I go, "Oh." I'm in those trees again, and that makes holy indifference really, really holy. Right? The earth was here for how many billions of years, and she will welcome us again, right? And when we die, she will hold us in her black earth, and the worms will do their job. And we will return to Mother.

Christine Valters Paintner    When I was in college, I took an ecology class, and this was before I sort of had a spiritual awakening. And I would say that finding out about compost was one of the doorways into my own spiritual awakening, was this sense of, "Oh my gosh, things have to die for new life to emerge." And, yeah, it was this wonderful moment of awakening that I still remember [laughter]. I mean as someone who grew up in New York City, so didn't have any connection to farm or manure, things like that, so it was my first exposure to compost, and I thought it was such an amazingly spiritual concept.

Janet Conner    Well, it is because we want to live in a world where we're all young. We're all pretty. We're all [inaudible]. We're all making a lot of money. And people don't want to touch death. They don't want to think about death. We don't touch our dead people and wash them the way we did for thousands of years and lovingly sit with them in... it's not called shiva. All of a sudden I'm forgetting in Jewish—

Christine Valters Paintner    In Jewish? Yeah, yeah. Sit shiva, yeah.

Janet Conner    Okay. All of a sudden I wasn't sure that I knew the word. And everybody comes and sits with you, and the body's right there. It's not off somewhere. And then you dig the hole yourself. There is such an awareness, and if you want to eat food, you've got to pull it out of the ground or kill it, right? There was such an intimacy with life is magnificent, celebrate life, death is part of life, and we return to the earth. We have lived in this separated, isolated, food is in plastic in the grocery store, and so, once again, this is one of the gifts of quarantine is people are really thinking about food. Where does this food come from, and how did agricultural farming and Monsanto destroy and create a situation in which the pandemic could occur? So there are so many gifts, but one of the great ones... I'm thrilled for you
because I didn't figure out compost until a lot later, that this is the cycle of life right in front of your eyes. Earth really is our original monastery, isn't she?

Christine Valters Paintner Yeah, definitely. Absolutely. If we let her [laughter].

Janet Conner Well, she has our undivided attention now if we're willing to get our balls off the distraction. She's talking; she's talking. All we have to do is listen. So Christine, can you help us listen? Can we have some sort of prayer experience with you?

Christine Valters Paintner Yeah, I'd be happy to lead just a short meditation. This is kind of an adaptation of a prayer in my book. It's actually an adaptation of the Examen Prayer of Saint Ignatius, having spoken about Ignatian prayer earlier. And it's a very simple prayer that you do, in that tradition, at the end of each day, but I've kind of adapted it for this creation practice.

So I just invite you to take a few nice, deep breaths, and maybe let it out with a sigh. And as you draw the breath in, just becoming aware of your body and creating any ease by stretching or shifting, just becoming aware that you have a body.

And then letting your awareness drop down into your heart center, and sometimes it can be helpful just to make a physical connection to your heart. And the heart is the sanctuary, the inner sanctuary, where the mystics tell us that the Divine dwells within each one of us. So in this sanctuary of the heart, we have this divine connection, and we can just experience a moment of simply being and resting and being held in that space.

And the heart is the place of openness and receiving as opposed to figuring things out and planning, and so we enter into this meditation from this heart-centered awareness, from this place of just openness to whatever comes.

And I invite you just to think back on the last few days of your life, maybe the last week or so, and to think about a moment that was especially life-giving, a place, a moment in time when you felt especially connected to all of creation, to nature, and you felt a sense of joyfulness or a sense of peace or ease.

And just taking a moment to kind of scan in your memory over these last few days and just letting your memory settle on a moment when you felt this sense of joyful connection, of peacefulness, of love, something that felt especially life-giving.

And when that moment comes to you, just to really inhabit it again for a moment, to trust in the gifts of memory, that memory holds the treasure of our experience, that our experience always has many more layers to it than we actually experience in the moment. And so memory can drop us back into the gift of that, and so
noticing how your body feels in that life-giving moment, remembering any images that come to you, any feelings that arise, and just breathing in a sense of gratitude for that.

And then just very gently letting that go and again entering into your imagination and reflecting it back on the last few days and remembering a moment that was life-draining, where you felt disconnected, or you felt distant from nature, creation, or yourself, where you perhaps felt anxious or fearful. And just taking a moment to remember if there was a moment in time in these last few days when you had this experience.

And just taking a few moments to remember that moment in time and to bring a heart of compassion to yourself in that memory, to know that in the heart is this connection to the infinite source of compassion, so we can breathe compassion into this life-draining moment. And we can perhaps bring some forgiveness to ourselves, and just noticing how our body feels in that place.

And then just taking another nice deep breath and just resting for a moment into a sense of gratitude and forgiveness for what life offers to us, for our human beingness, for the fullness of that. And then just very gently returning your awareness back to the room that you're in.

And one of the gifts of this meditation if you do this every day or even every week… my husband and I tend to do it every week for our Sabbath practice. We share with each other a moment in the week that was life-giving and that was life-draining, and you start to notice patterns of things. And it helps you to discern, "Yes. I want more of those life-giving moments, and what are the life-draining things that I might release, if possible? How can I let go of those?" Or to notice what are the things in my life that create that kind of anxiety and fear? It just can be a really helpful awareness and to let our memory be in service to us of our growing wholeness.

Janet Conner  It's so simple and so beautiful and so rich and so deep and surprising. Both moments that came to me were small. The first moment, the one I want to rehabit and life-giving, at first my brain wanted to come up with… and there have been some outrageous mystical moments in this quarantine where original prayer has really shoo, and so I thought, "Oh, we're going to go there." And then my memory went, "No, you're not. You're going to go over here," and I was once again sitting in my chair outside and listening to the grasshoppers chomp on the leaves. I didn't know when I planted that plant that I was planting it for them, but there's nothing like just sitting there and listening to this teeny, tiny… it's the tiniest sound imaginable, and it makes me so happy. It makes the grasshoppers
happy too [laughter]. So I can return to the big mystical moment another time, but the grasshoppers wanted me to remember what it sounds like to hear them.

Christine Valters Paintner  Yeah, yeah. It's amazing what happens when we just give ourselves the time and space to actually process our experience and show up for it again and, yeah, let it speak to us.

Janet Conner  Well, speaking to you is an unbelievable gift. This book is such a gift, *Earth, Our Original Monastery*. On the Show Notes page at [janetconner.com/29](http://janetconner.com/29)… if you forget the number, just come to [janetconner.com](http://janetconner.com) and click on Podcast, and there will be links to purchase *Earth, Our Original Monastery* in the United States, in the UK, in Canada. And if there are other places you want me to find, just send me an email because we want everyone to have access to all the books that all of our beautiful guests bring on *Praying at the Speed of Love*.

And when I was instructed… I'm not saying that Janet created this. Janet was ordered to create this [laughter]. And it was very clear that this was to be so much more than "here's a conversation to listen to it," which is what your typical podcast is, and that's lovely. But, no, I had very strict orders that it was to be a very evocative place where people could get transcripts and people could click on Prayer Bags. I think it's the only prayer gift bags anywhere in the world, and so when people come and they click on Prayer Bag #29, what are they going to find?

Christine Valters Paintner  The gifts that I felt inspired to offer actually comes from Abbey of the Arts. We produce albums that go along with some of the books that I write because we collaborate with musicians, and we actually have an album of 14 songs that go along with the Earth Monastery theme. And the song that I'm offering is actually a collaboration I did with a wonderful musician named Simon de Voil.

He took a poem that I wrote called "Saint Columba and The Horse," which is about another saint and animal encounter. It's this beautiful story of the day Saint Columba's actually going to die, and his horse comes and knows this and starts to grieve for him. It's really beautiful. And, anyway, I wrote a poem about it, and then Simon wrote a song about it. And we have two versions. The whole song is on our album, but the version I'm giving you is me reading portions of the poem and then interspersed with Simon's refrain, which is really gorgeous. So it's just an invitation for you to feel your connection to that sacred grief, and it's a wonderful story as well. So that's my gift.

Janet Conner  And Sorin, your publisher, is giving all the listeners the gift of Chapter One of *Earth, Our Original Monastery*. So here's my little gift. It's a prayer that came to me, every bit of two years ago. And I always wonder what prayer poem can I read
at the end of these conversations, and I really wasn't certain. "Oh, how about this? Oh, how about that?" And then I read on page 74 in your book, you quote a saint I never heard of, Angela of Foligno, a 13th century Franciscan minister… mystic, sorry.

Christine Valters Paintner   [laughter] And minister.

Janet Conner   And minister, who saw the holy in everything and who suddenly shouted—and you quote her—"The world is pregnant with God!" Exclamation point. Well, the minute I read that I knew that I want to give you my prayer on the world is pregnant with God. It's called "There You Are," and I do think Thomas Merton inspired it.

how can God be in the chlorophyll
and not in my own blood

the mystics say you are here

here in the towering pines
here in the yellowing palms

here in the brazen blue jay
here in the screeching osprey

here in the grasshopper probing the air with its delicate foot
here in the small black butterfly seeking I know not what

here in the invisible breeze
here in the foraging bees

everywhere I look

there you are
there you are
there you are

inside the container that is me

Christine Valters Paintner   Oh, beautiful.

Janet Conner   goddess in goddess
lover in lover
holy in holy

goddess in goddess
lover in lover
holy in holy
turning together to sip the coffee
turning together to stare out the window
turning together to capture this love song

how can I call to you when you are already here?
how can I make love to you when you are inside me?
how can I pray to you when we pray one prayer?
how can I seek you when you arrived in me and never, never can leave?
how can I long for that which I already am?

there you are
there you are
there you are
let us sing.

Christine Valters Paintner Mm, wonderful.

Janet Conner [laughter] Oh, that's a high compliment coming from you [laughter].

Christine Valters Paintner Thanks, Janet.

Janet Conner Thank you [inaudible] glorious conversation because the earth is our original monastery.

T. Frantzich This conversation in the mystic with Prayer Artist Janet Conner has been rated L.

[music] You are not moving, you are being moved.
You are not singing, you are being sung.
You are not praying, you are being prayed
Prayed at the speed of love.