







Dear Friend,

The bubble of illusion is dissolving. We no longer elevate certain beings as enlightened (unlike ourselves), uniquely qualified to dispense their perfect wisdom from on high; and dismiss others as mere ordinary humans (like us)—still struggling with the obstacles of this bumpy world, incapable of lighting our way home.

We are beginning to recognize that everyone carries the divine spark, and so our everyday relationships become a crucible for transformation.

As I was writing *Wild Mercy*, I took a look at many of the women in my own life who have lifted me and filled me with courage, who challenged me and woke me up. I wrote about these relationships. But the book was becoming way too long and some of these reflections inevitably had to be cut.

Here, I share these four outtakes with you because they are precious to me and because I hope they will help you identify the women in your own life, perhaps hidden in plain sight, who serve as portals to the sacred.

*Mirabai*



## SAINT GLADYS

**W**hen I was in my early twenties, living on the outskirts of a remote village in Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, I met a woman named Gladys who embodied Thérèse of Lisieux's holy example of the Little Way, investing the most ordinary tasks of everyday life as love-offerings to God.


Gladys was around ten years older than I was. She was small and thin, with dark brown skin and a radiant smile. She came to help me out in the eco-lodge my parents had built on the shore of Laguna Bacalar near the border of Belize. My job was a disorganized combination of cooking, cleaning, and tending to the needs of the few guests who found their way to our jungle enclave. The first time we met, Gladys reached up and buttoned my sweater. "You must not get sick," she said, and then patted my face. It was a cool night for the tropics, but that meant the temperature had plummeted from maybe 80 degrees to 72.

From that moment on, Gladys made it her mission to take care of me, making me sit down and eat when she felt I was working too hard, sewing torn seams in my flowing sundress ("So much fabric!" she exclaimed in awe, fingering the wasted material), greeting me with a lingering embrace every day when she showed up for work, and hugging me again when she left at the end of the day. Gladys behaved as if it was an incredible stroke of luck to be able to scramble eggs and squeeze orange juice, to empty the bathroom trash and fetch my sunglasses from across the compound. I was wary at first of her childlike devotion, but soon realized she was utterly authentic and I came to rely on my daily dose of Gladys-love.

A few weeks after Gladys was hired, she showed up with a middle-aged man and introduced him as her friend Manuel. "You need a night watchman here," she said. "Manuel is the perfect person to look out for your property."

I conferred with my parents and they agreed. We were slowly growing and finally had something to protect. Besides, it was the custom in Mexico to have a guard at hotels, and we were trying to be respectful to the culture. Manuel was hired. He proved to be an ideal night watchman. He was vigilant and kindly. Where Gladys bubbled over with sweet chatter, Manuel was largely silent. They balanced each other beautifully, and for a time our little staff exuded harmony.

One morning, Gladys did not show up for work. I made do without her and assumed she'd be back the next day. But she wasn't. So I climbed into the enormous ranch pickup and drove the five kilometers to her house and knocked on the door. After a long pause, Gladys opened. I asked how she was feeling, and inquired whether or not she thought she would be



available for the large party (12 whole guests) that was scheduled to arrive that evening for a bird-watching tour. She shook her head, looking down.

“I do not know when I will be returning,” Gladys whispered. She kept dabbing at the corners of her mouth with a twisted bandana. She didn’t touch me. She was folded in on herself.

I knew this was too good to be true, I admonished myself. Everyone warned me—even the locals—that people here take advantage of well-meaning gringos who are too stupid to erect proper boundaries with the people who work for them. I have often been accused of letting my earnest liberal sensibilities snooker me. I should have known better. I was making Gladys into a saint, I thought, but she’s just a regular human who takes what she wants and then moves on.

I assumed the most lordly stance and formal tone I could muster and let Gladys know that in the future it was imperative that she provide me with advanced warning if she didn’t think she would be making it in to work. She nodded again, eyes still downcast. I did not hug her. I said nothing reassuring. I got back in my silly truck and drove away.

That afternoon, Elvia, who lived with her family in the caretaker’s house on Mom’s property in the village, sauntered up to me as I was preparing to make dinner for the birdwatchers.

“Escuchaste el chisme calienete?” she asked, wondering if I had heard the “hot gossip.” Her eyes were alight with juicy drama.

“Cual chisme?” I asked, too busy to be that interested.

“Gladys,” she said. “She killed herself.”

My heart thundered and my head whirled. “What? Are you sure? Why?”

“That man she was in love with. Her parents did not approve, because he was a campesino.” Elvia smiled a sad smile. “They thought he was taking advantage of Gladys because of . . . how she was.”

“How she was?”

“You know, simple.” Elvia tapped on her head.

So that sweetness and caring I associated with enlightenment was seen by her community as a mental disability.

Without a word to Elvia, ignoring my own obligations in the kitchen, I jumped back in the truck and raced along the jungle highway to the house where Gladys, as it turned out, had been living with her parents and her two small children ever since her husband had left them two years earlier. My beloved Gladys, I was to discover, had many secrets.





Manuel and Gladys, for example, had been carrying on a secret affair. She arranged to get him the job as our night watchman so that she could sneak back over to the lodge when everyone was asleep and spend the night with him. Manuel, tired of living a lie, had ended the relationship the day before. Gladys had already ingested a bottle of rat poison when she had met me at the door. She was gone an hour later.

There is an undeniable element of violence when someone intentionally takes her life. If she leaves children behind, she may bequeath a degree of trauma they carry for the rest of their own lives. Most religions have clear mandates against suicide, insisting that the time and means by which we live and die is up to a distant God, not us.

The divine feminine throws nobody out of her heart. She weeps with those whose despair is too great to bear. She does not condemn them for choosing to lay the burden down. She also stands with those who are left behind in the brutal wake of a loved one's suicide. She holds us in wordless sorrow and tender comfort as we grieve. She may wish the one who died by suicide had stayed long enough to experience the blessings that come on the other side of the descent into hopelessness. But she does not judge. She holds space.

When I arrived at Gladys' parents' home the day of her suicide, the doorway was draped in black crepe, tied with a large black bow. Gladys' body was laid out on the dining room table in an open casket, her hands folded at her breast, her countenance soft. The room was dimly lit with large taper candles. Family and friends, dressed in black, spoke in hushed voices. A circle of elderly women sat around Gladys' body, praying the rosary: *Dios te salve, María. Llena eres de gracia . . . Bendita tú eres entre todas las mujeres . . . Santa María, Madre de Dios, ruega por nosotros pecadores, ahora y en la hora de nuestra muerte. Amen.*

Gladys was buried outside the sanctified ground of the church in a graveyard reserved for sinners, but she was the most beatific person I had ever met. Thirty years later, I still call on Gladys' kindness when it would be easier to close down my heart. When I want to judge people, I try to give them the benefit of the doubt; they may be suffering mightily in ways I will never know. When I'm tempted to be cynical, I give myself over to my inner child, as Gladys did. I endeavor to treat strangers like family and button up their sweaters even when it isn't that cold out.

## Reflection:

What are certain qualities of women you love who have died that you would like to integrate more into your own life? For example, a commitment to creative expression, a willingness to speak truth to power, a flair for hospitality, irreverent humor.





## JENNY BIRD

**J**enny Bird and I were young mothers together. Jenny had been a child prodigy singer-songwriter, much loved in our community for her ongoing musical offerings and service to those in need. I had admired Jenny from afar for years before one day walking into the rock shop where she was selling crystals. I had recently adopted my first child and was preparing a ceremony to bless Daniela's arrival in our family. I wanted a special stone to give to my new daughter as a symbol of our love. After I found myself unloading my whole story, including my self-doubts and anxieties, Jenny Bird ended up gifting me a beautiful specimen of rose quartz—the crystal of the heart, which promotes harmony in relationships and carries the essence of unconditional love.

The next thing I knew, we were having tea, taking walks, discovering how precisely aligned our lives had been, and how lined up our spiritual sensibilities now were. When a house became available to rent next to Jenny Bird's way out on the Hondo Mesa, my little family moved in and our two families have been one family ever since. Jenny Bird's younger daughter, Jessie, was the same age as my younger daughter, Jenny Starr, and was her first and oldest friend. I spent a period as Jenny Bird's road manager, driving her around the country on tour and making arrangements with the venues, but I was so bad at it, we both cheerfully agreed she would be better off with someone who could actually read a map and remember to collect money from the club at the end of the evening.

Jenny Bird is still the person (besides my husband) who reads every word I write before the world gets its hands on it. It's not even her feedback I require; it is the blessing of her seeing. I need Jenny Bird to see me so that I can see myself. We collaborate on creative projects, tend the dying together, and bear witness to each other's shattering losses and sweet surprises. Over the years, our connection is like an accordion. We draw close, we float apart, then come back again. It is the music from that bellows that fills my life with song.

### Reflection:

Who are the women in your life who you can entrust with your tender new ideas and cherished dreams, who by their loving witness, help you to more fully know yourself?





## CHARLENE

**U**nless you are a Buddhist scholar, or a researcher in the field of juvenile diabetes, or were a student of philosophy at the University of New Mexico in the 1980s, you have probably never heard of Charlene McDermott. That's not an accident. This is a woman who has spent her life cultivating the true Self and has wasted very little energy accumulating worldly recognition.

Charlene was my graduate advisor when I was working on my master's degree in philosophy in my early 20s. Her background was in mysticism and epistemology, and my thesis was titled "The Paradox of the Expression of the Ineffable in St. John of the Cross," which focused on mystical knowing (by unknowing). I was fascinated by the pervasive phenomenon in which the mystics of all spiritual traditions and both genders claim that the mystical experience transcends all concepts and defies language itself, and yet they cannot seem to help themselves from offering a treasure trove of passionate poetry and sublime prose. It pours out of them in the wake of their experience of union with the divine.

Charlene had a special affinity for the Christian mystics, so she was a good fit for my research. Besides, I adored her. I took all her classes and savored every word that emerged from her big, red, Italian lips (her Irish last name, an artifact of the first of her three marriages, concealed her own Sicilian heritage). And Charlene loved me back. Even though my IQ was nothing to brag about, I was one of those students who lights up in the face of the beauty of ideas and can make a professor feel like what she does matters. Charlene had attended an Ivy League college at 15 and had a couple PhDs by the time she was my age (22). I, on the other hand, had an entirely alternative education growing up in "hippie land," dropping out of high school and earning a GED, and struggling my way through a bachelor's degree in archaeology before staggering into graduate school in philosophy.

My colorful background did not earn me special treatment, however. My beloved mentor, who by this point had become my friend, was ruthless. She had me rewrite my thesis not once, not twice, but three times. This was no Natalie Goldberg, who was forever encouraging (and indulging) my "wild mind." Charlene insisted on rigorous scholarship, precise writing, and innovative thinking. I ended up being the first woman in our department to graduate "with distinction" in decades. I concluded that it was because the academy didn't know what to do with my unorthodox writing style (bordering on the ecstatic). But I also understood that it was because Charlene McDermott kicked my scholarly ass, and I was better for it. It didn't even hurt that much, because I knew my mentor not only believed in me, but that she loved me.





Charlene is still my hero. An adoptive mother of two children herself, she inspired me to adopt my own daughters, and she agreed to be their godmother. When Jenny died, Charlene rushed to my side. When Ganga Das and I decided to get married (after five years of living together and raising two children together and then losing one), it was Charlene we asked to officiate our wedding. She tracks my work in the world and checks in to make sure I'm eating. She shares just enough of her own struggles to remind me that she is human, and to give me the opportunity to love her back. I hear Charlene's quirky jokes coming out of my mouth and try to remember to embody her unique balance of intellectual rigor and lovingkindness.

### Reflection:

Who are the women in your life who challenge you to be the best version of yourself, who believe in you but also don't let you get away with bullshit? What are the ways they help you to realize your true potential?





## LIKE DAUGHTERS TO ME

**N**ot only have I been mentored, but I have recently found myself unofficially mentoring an array of remarkable young women who are emerging leaders in an arena that still has no definition. These women, like me, are wary of institutionalized religious structures yet passionately in love with the divine. They know that the patriarchal paradigms are not only ineffectual but toxic, and they hear the call deep in the wellspring of their souls to step up and do something to shift the power dynamics, let the light of love come flooding in, and activate around human rights and environmental degradation while they're at it. We are mightily drawn to each other. Their wisdom and sweetness and ferocity dazzle me, and I can hardly believe that such sublime creatures would find anything worthy in my work to inspire them. But secretly I revel in their love (don't tell). They have become like daughters to me.

I'll confess: my own daughters and stepdaughters don't exactly lavish me with appreciation. I have often lamented to my husband that it feels like our girls see me as a "secretary from Iowa"—overly earnest and a little boring (I hope I'm not insulting any readers who may actually be secretaries from Iowa). I love them with every fiber of my being, and I think they love me, too, but I'm grateful that I also get to mother other people's daughters, young women who have the luxury of overlooking my dreary bits, and focusing on our common task of mending the torn fabric of the world.

### Reflection:

Who are some of the women in your life who are not related to you but who feel more like family than many of your relatives? What qualities do they bring to your relationship that make you feel cherished?