

# The Heart's Desire

by Grace Barr

*Sometimes  
with the bones of the black  
sticks left when the fire  
has gone out  
someone has written  
something new  
in the ashes  
of your life.  
You are not leaving,  
You are arriving.*

—David Whyte, "The Journey"  
from *The House of Belonging*

## SUMMER 1997, SURRENDERING

Within the span of five months in 1997, I would go to Kanuga on two occasions. I arrived there for the first time in June. The rhododendrons were in bloom, their tender, pink petals stitched into the surrounding deep woods like delicate lace. I had been drawn to this Episcopal Conference Center in Hendersonville, North Carolina, to attend a symposium on the labyrinth. At the time I knew almost nothing about the subject and had very little energy, psychic or physical, to learn more. But unknown forces were working, and when someone casually gave me a conference flier, the blurb drew me like a magnet: *To walk the labyrinth is an act of surrender.*

Words have always drawn me. Words in any form. Spoken, written, sung, shouted. Words of scripture have been the exception. I don't really know the Bible. Learning catechism lessons rather than memorizing Bible passages was stressed in my Catholic elementary school. What little scripture I know was read from the pulpit on Sunday mornings. Therefore, it was mysterious that another pull to the mountains of western North Carolina came from a passage in the New Testament: *Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest for awhile.* (Mark 6: 31) Although I don't remember where I read it, my soul recognized the imperative call.

That summer my carefully crafted persona was eroding. I was in the process of leaving my twenty-seven year marriage. A hearing date was set. A divorce would soon be granted, following a public trial in a court of law. There was nothing left to hide behind. In the eyes of some I had surrendered, thrown in the towel, given up, broken a contract. All the pieces that had gone into making me who I appeared to be lay at my feet. I saw

nothing mystical about the path before me; it appeared ugly, littered with the "bones of the black sticks."

*What is it ... that inexorably tips the scales in favor of the extra-ordinary? It is... an irrational factor ...that destines man to emancipate himself from the herd and from its well-worn paths.*

"The Development of the Personality" in *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Vol. 17*

And so I went to the conference, alone, and found myself in an unfamiliar place, surrounded by strangers. After a few days, I met a man in one of the small-group sessions. He asked to sit with me at dinner. He was tall and handsome, like someone from central casting. During the evening, I learned he was a doctor (this was too good to be true), and then he asked the inevitable question: "Grace, are you married?"

"No.

Well, not exactly.

That is, Yes. But not for much longer."

I babbled on. He made a polite, but speedy, exit.

As the conference week continued, I walked a labyrinth for the first time. I listened to Alan Jones, dean of San Francisco's Grace Cathedral and a Dante scholar, read the opening lines of *The Divine Comedy* as they were written originally, in thirteenth-century Italian: *Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita, mi ritrovai per una selva oscura, che la diritta via era smarrita.* ("In the middle of the journey of our life, I found myself in a dark wood where the straightway was lost.") "Our life," Dante had written, his and mine. This is the human experience, I thought, common to us all. Alan also taught: "The path through Purgatory is a labyrinthine journey." In the darkness of my rapidly fragmenting life, I had been handed a flashlight: the knowledge that I was about to embark on holy ground. There would be a way through; there was a lighted path.

Before leaving Kanuga, I broke off a flowering rhododendron branch and tucked it into the trunk of my car. A few days later, when the leaves were beginning to dry and crack, I zipped them into a clear plastic bag and returned them to the trunk. (The bag of dried leaves traveled with me until I sold the car five years later.)

## FALL 1997, OPENING

*Do pearls lie buried  
deep within our hearts?  
Do they mature there  
as in oyster shells,  
layer upon opalescent layer,  
soothing the old sharp places  
like droplets of moonlight  
inside a dark chamber?  
Is such a secreted treasure  
discovered only when  
we open our hearts?*

Grace Barr, *Pearl Divers*

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**Grace Barr** received a degree in English from Florida State University and is a freelance writer and book editor. Her articles have appeared in SOUTHERN ACCENTS, SOUTHERN LIVING, and COASTAL LIVING magazines. She edited the manuscript and wrote jacket copy for MARIETTA: The Gem City of Georgia, published in 2010. A student of Jung for many years, she is a member of the Atlanta Jung Society.

I returned to Kanuga in November, only because friends insisted. They could see the toll the legal proceedings had taken. I had lost "my voice," almost literally. I couldn't finish a sentence and lacked confidence that I had anything to say worth hearing. "We all love Kanuga," they persevered, "and the con-

ference is on The Heart's Desire," which they agreed was a perfect topic. "Perfect for whom?" I wondered.

When we arrived, the ubiquitous rhododendron were green but flowerless. By the time winter took hold with its subfreezing temperatures, the evergreen foliage would be curled, folded down, clamped shut in full survival mode to protect itself from desiccation. In the intervening five months, since leaving Kanuga in June, I had become like the rhododendron: shut down, in a suspended state, and very close to spiritual dehydration.

Depleted, I intended to be marginally present, lying low on the back row. My intention didn't last through the opening-night lecture. The keynote speaker, the Rev. Martin Smith, SSJE, then superior of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist in Cambridge, Massachusetts, booted me awake with his question: "Ask yourself, at the deepest level, why are you here this week?" I wrote the query in my journal and kept my pen moving. "What IS the desire of my heart?" Then came a bit of light. "For too many years, I have lived in an alien environment, separated from my true self. I want to recover Grace."

At the beginning of the conference each person was assigned to a small group, which became one's intimate circle for the week. There we explored questions from the keynote speakers and supported each other in our individual soul work. Together we discovered there is always risk involved in intimacy, and we were willing to be vulnerable to each other. A woman emerged as our leader. She was self-assured and possessed great strength of character. I always sat near her, hoping that through proximity or some unconscious osmosis, I might absorb these same traits.

One night near the end of the week, while walking back to my cabin from the lodge, I stopped on the path to observe the full moon. It was riding above me like a migrating pearl, filling the blue-black sky with pale light. I inhaled air charged with mystery.

The event ended on a Friday morning. My traveling companions and I were sitting at a long table having a final breakfast in the crowded dining room. People were milling about, bidding farewell to new friends. I saw my group leader walking toward me, and I rose to say goodbye. Before I could speak, she said:

"Grace, I have a word from the Lord for you."

"Oh," I said, too stunned to say more and all the while thinking: *Oh, no, I didn't know you were one of those fundamentalist types who drops messages from God on unsuspecting folks. And in the middle of breakfast, for God's sake.*

"And I NEVER have had a word from the Lord for anyone," she quickly followed, as if reading my mind.

"I am supposed to tell you this: *I will restore to you the years you ate locusts in the desert.*"

"Thank you," was all I could say.

"Goodbye, Grace."

"Goodbye. And thank you again."

Driving home to Alabama, I described what had been said. No one seemed to know where the quote was from. Someone suggested it sounded like Old Testament scripture. A few miles down the road, a voice came from the back seat. "I know where it is from." And this wise old friend told me. Later, I entered the "Word" and its provenance on the front page of my conference journal, and filed it away in my bookcase.

**FALL 2004, DISCOVERING**

*We must sense that we live in a world which in some respects is mysterious; ... that not everything which happens can be anticipated.*

—C.G. Jung, from *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*

In October 2004 I accepted an invitation from an old college friend to come to Atlanta for her annual art show. In the intervening seven years since my divorce, I had learned a new way to live, one guided by feeling. I did not grieve an un-lived life; instead, with "flashlight" in hand, I embraced the experiences that came to me. When I stumbled on the path, I recognized the sacredness inherent even in the messiness. My life was being restored to me. On occasion I would recall my Kanuga prophecy, for the message, with its surrounding mystery, did seem prophetic.

My friend's art show was held in a private home. I had just arrived in the afternoon and was near the front door when the doorbell rang. I opened it, and my friend came over and introduced me to the man who was standing there. "Grace, this is Joel Barr. He is one of the artists in the show this year." He said hello, smiled broadly, and I began to stammer and blush, something I rarely do. What had happened?

That evening, at the Meet the Artists Party, Joel searched me out. We talked for a long time, and exchanged email addresses. I returned home to Alabama the next day, and we began corresponding. I soon realized I was beginning to project something larger onto these pleasant exchanges. Then I remembered the long-ago prophecy, "*I will restore to you ....*" I couldn't remember where it was from and went in search of my conference journal. I found the reference, written exactly as it had been told to me seven years before: *the Book of Joel, chapter 2, verse 25.*

#### **FALL 2006, UNITING**

*Wait*

*until a day when the clear light cycles back  
and the air grows increasingly warm,*

*Awaken*

*to a deep recognition of love  
reflected in the dark eyes of a new face,*

*Discover*

*an ancient blueprint there,  
a pattern language you translate easily.*

Grace Barr, from *Apotheosis*

Saturday, October 7, 2006 was a day that sparkled with clear platinum light wrapped in a turquoise blue sky, like the diamond and turquoise band Joel slipped on my finger that morning. Our ceremony celebrated his Jewish heritage and my Christian one. We drank champagne, ate wedding cake, waved goodbye to ninety cheering friends, and drove away for a few days in the North Carolina mountains. I marveled that our destination was like a crown applied to something already infinitely majestic.

My search for Grace began the afternoon I exchanged fear for courage and surrendered to the labyrinth at Kanuga. With new vision, I recognized the serpentine path unfolding before me, and ultimately discovered what was waiting around its blind corners. A fulfillment of desire. A blessing. A grace.