From the Executive Director

My seven-year-old niece, Skylar, was immediately at home when she walked into the New York Museum of Modern Art’s Henri Matisse exhibit featuring his colorful cut-outs. Skylar told me what she learned in school about Matisse’s illness and how he was confined to a wheelchair for the last years of his life. Yet that did not stop him from making art.

Using scissors, painted paper, and straight pins, Matisse created a process he called “carving in color.” I had not realized until experiencing the exhibit that Matisse’s iconic Fall of Icarus was created using his process of “drawing with scissors.”

The pins allowed him to move the stars and parts of Icarus’s body until he found just the right balance. In fact, Matisse considered his printed art book, Jazz, a failure because the printing process took the life out of the rough and raw cut-outs, turning them into flat graphic designs.

As Matisse’s life was waning, he discovered that the real beauty in his creative cut-out art-form was that the paper is easily broken—sometimes curled and folded—perfect in its imperfection. He was at a stage in his life where he could appreciate and be grateful for his creation’s impermanence, even though much work has been done to preserve and restore his art.

What a treat to walk from gallery to gallery with Skylar and listen to her curiosity about the huge cut-outs: “That looks like seaweed. Do you think that’s an apple? This one is my favorite because of the blues and greens. I want to make art like this.” We marveled at how many pinholes were poked in some of the panels where Matisse had moved the cut-out paper many times to find the precise placement.

After visiting the museum, we went to a restaurant for a midday meal. To keep the fidgety Skylar and her three-year-old sister calm, their mother and father gave them colored paper and blunt-nosed scissors to create their own cut-out art.

On the table, I spread out my white cloth napkin as a canvas. Suddenly red, blue, and yellow cut-out paper snakes, baby snakes, and star, turned my napkin into a colorful art story. Matisse’s end-of-life experimentations with color, shape, and impermanence inspired a new generation of artists. I am grateful for a special day of nurturing my nieces’ creative spirits.

In this issue of Connections, I hope your souls will be nourished by the stories of gratitude from the pilgrimage to Iona, Scotland. Christina Leano reminds us that it “is our birthright: to be happy and grateful. We just have to do our work of constant rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks.”

Seeing through the eyes of a child who appreciates Matisse’s art reminds me of our work as spiritual companions. Thank you for inviting people of all ages to nurture their spirits of curiosity, creativity, and gratefulness.

Peace be with you,

Liz Budd Ellmann, MDiv
The Gifts of Iona

Sheila Clark [Alberta, Canada]

Several years ago, I was finding my way through balancing full-time work with caring for my elderly mother when my spiritual director advised me to set aside some money each month to take a trip when my caregiving responsibilities inevitably came to an end. The SDI Interfaith Pilgrimage to Iona was that trip. While on Iona, I sent the following e-mail to my spiritual director:

Coming to Iona clearly qualifies as a pilgrimage for me, ‘a journey taken for an exalted spiritual purpose.’ The gifts have been beyond all imagining. On Sunday, I attended a service in the Anglican retreat house and then later in the Abbey Church. After lunch we all went to the south beach. I found several small cowrie shells of the type that had once been used as a trading currency. I gave all but one to other pilgrims who hadn’t found any. Later, at dinner, I shared the story of my mother with those at my table. Tears welled up in several eyes. They were so receptive.

A mere recitation of activities doesn’t do justice to the filling of blessing I feel. As you undoubtedly recall, I often felt drained when I cared for mom. As much as I loved her, and she loved me, it just couldn’t be helped. Now the blessings overflow such that I have no room to receive it. It is so far beyond any just recompense for caring for mom, I can only receive it as a gift of grace. This truly honours mom. She would be delighted because I am delighted.

Love saturated the very atmosphere. The first night we each chose a three metre length of ribbon and connected it to a wooden hoop. Each morning we unwound our ribbons with expectation. All day their vibrant colors radiated out in all directions of the common room while we hiked, explored the ancient abbey, listened to experts on the history and geology of Iona, picked our way over the rocks to Fingal’s cave, created art that even I could do, and more. Each night
we each carefully wound up our ribbons with gratitude and tucked them in the hoop.

Due to personal circumstances, I had to leave Thursday instead of Saturday morning. My ribbon needed to be unhooked from the hoop. Wendy Rudd, a pilgrim guide, blessed me for sharing myself as she gently wound it up moving slowly toward me. With the task complete, she invited each member of the group to hold my ribbon to cover it, and me, with their love. My eyes locked with each group member as the ribbon was passed around the circle. Sometimes we bowed. Some blew a kiss. Another tucked in a pebble from the beach. All were messages of soul to soul. My ribbon became a blessed, sacred object.

Like millions of pilgrims before me, I have come home with my treasure symbolic of the spiritual purpose for which the pilgrimage was taken. Each morning I unwind my ribbon with trust in the love that will sustain me in the work of the day. Each evening I wind my ribbon mindful of the day’s gifts and the love I will rest in through the night. The gifts of Iona have been rich, indeed.

Reflection on Iona

Anne Chrisp [North Island, New Zealand]

It was a long walk to the Hill of the Angels. That was partly my fault: I didn’t pick the easiest or most straight forward route.

My walk began on a path—the path to North Beach. Then across a paddock or two, and along a sandy beach, over rocks and stone pools—even in some—slipping and sliding over popping sea-weeds.

The path faded away, and I thought that if I kept the sea to my right, I would find my way easily enough. That was without reckoning on cliffs. There was no route around them. I had to head inland, and up steep hills, where the sea could no longer be seen and the way began to feel very uncertain indeed.

My eyes searched out this new landscape. What seemed a foreign land, gained features. Sheep tracks crisscrossing the hills gave texture and direction, and avoided the worst of the bogs. The sheep, staring warily at me, became my guides.
Some places though, the sheep tracks ran out, and the way ahead was harder to see. Then I found other markers: the half-submerged plank, the log of wood, and a white stone. In another place, a rabbit bounded down a steep face ahead of me, showing that way was possible.

At last, a valley opened up back to the sea. There was sand ahead. Despite the black forbidding rocks, I pressed forward, until a large mother goose called out her warning to steer clear of the slippery rocks.

Then around another hill and up a distant mound. There was a path and human life ahead. I breathed in relief to be back in what felt like a civilized land, back where I belonged.

Now, it is over a fortnight since I returned from Iona, and I am back on tar-sealed roads. But one of the highlights of my time on the island was that lost time on its hills. There I learned again the value of a guide, as I was led uncertainly up hills and over rocks, through marshes and around sheer drops. I value my human guides, but on Iona the guides were ones I did not expect—guides in animal form and in nature.

They reminded me that I do not live alone, that guidance is available everywhere if only I take time to look. They reminded me that when I look for guidance in life, I need to keep on walking, for the path is made by walking it.

On tar-sealed roads, I do not see the buttercups and sheep. But in my mind’s eye, I remember them, and I know that guidance and angels are never far away. This was Iona’s gift to me.

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**Iona**

*Ann Hoefler [Bavaria, Germany]*

Isle of mists and poetry.  
Modern pilgrims travel now  
in cars and buses, trains and planes.  
But the final stage—a boat at sea  
connects us to those, who throughout the ages  
were drawn, like us, to a mystery isle  
of saints and fairies and ancient rocks,  
where ‘tis whispered the veil between worlds is thin.

The coming together—talk and laughter.  
The sitting together—morning meditation,  
opening to stillness, loving kindness.  
Writing, painting—uncovering layers  
that lay deep within. Coloured ribbons  
telling the tale of each precious day.

An island of light—with silver skies  
and sudden sunlight. Tantalizing glimpses  
of something revealed, yet never grasped.  
An island of silence—stillness not touched  
by chattering tourists and moaning winds.  
Deep silence in rocks, washed by restless seas  
and in skylarks singing their light-filled songs.

Moving on—as pilgrims do.  
Back to cities, busy lives.  
Can you still find it in the breeze on your cheek?  
In the rain on your roof, can you still hear it?  
And when you sit alone in your silent space  
is that where the veil between worlds is thin?

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**Listening to the Wisdom of Iona**

*Sally Campbell Woodhall [Connecticut, USA]*

It has been said that a pilgrimage to Iona is a _lectio divina_ in sea, wind, and stone and indeed it was. I began by trying to read Iona and gradually let the island read me. Iona called me to deepening. I spent my first morning at the north beaches moving into the margins. It was then that the traveler in me became a pilgrim.
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Sally Taylor and Wendy and Andrew Rudd, our pilgrim guides, invited us to listen to the landscape of Iona. The sea sets the rhythm of the day with its ebb and flow. Deeper than it appears from the shore, its strength carves through stone to create a pathway into the interior where, hidden in the clefts of the rocks, we might hear the voice of the Beloved calling us forth, “Arise, my love, and come away.”

Sally guided us on daily walks, sharing her intimate knowledge of Iona with us. We ate lunch with the sheep on the Hill of Angels and made the arduous trek to the bay of St. Columba from whence, it is said, he could no longer see his beloved Ireland. It reminded us that we, too, journeyed from afar as pilgrim seekers. At Port of Bann, three stalwart pilgrims plunged into the North Atlantic. I stole away and listened to the voice of the Beloved drawing me into deepening through and with this land of monks, martyrs, pilgrims, and Sidhean angels. The final evening, six of us climbed the muddy escarpment of Dun I, the highest point of Iona. We each placed a stone on the cairn and circled it thrice giving thanks for this gift of pilgrimage.

Each day we gathered together to nourish our creative spirits with poetry, music, and art. Wendy helped us to create our own handbook with reflective images and words. Andrew created a climate of listening with poetry and music. Ribbons at the center of our circle symbolized our coming together each day as a pilgrim community. On the last day we walked together to Martyr’s Bay, each one holding their rolled up ribbons to symbolize the end of our time together.

Although we may leave the place of Iona, we do not leave behind the space in our spirit that is Iona. I listened to the wisdom on Iona and learned the wisdom of listening from within the Heart of Love. This is the deepening: listening, living, and giving in the “sacrament of the present moment” (Caussade). May this gift remain in me as I listen to a grandchild with a bruised knee, the struggles of the young, a spirit crushed by addiction, a mother grieving the loss of her child, and the words, spoken and unspoken, as we companion each other on the inner journey. Deep calls out to deep. More to be revealed …

Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, wrote, “Art enables us to find ourselves and to lose ourselves at the same time.” So, too, does Iona. There, to lose oneself is to find oneself as we listen to and let ourselves be transformed by the wisdom of this sacred isle. ♠

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Coming in May of 2016: Experiencing Spiritual Freedom
Practicing Gratitude
Christina Leaño [Florida, USA]

I am one who has uneven recall of much of my past. My husband has learned to ask my family and friends to help him understand my history, as questions to me often have unsatisfactory results. However in the last few years, I have learned pausing is one of the best tricks for remembering moments of gratitude and joy. Such as eating an orange.

Over four years ago, I was living in a Cistercian monastery where bare simplicity was part of the rule of life. Finding pleasure in the simple became the stock of everyday living. At the end of one meal, I recall sitting at the head of one of the shiny grey tables eating an orange. As I peeled the tough outer skin I watched the zest spray my hand. I took a bite. As soon as my mouth soaked in the juice, my pleasure monitors perked up. “This is one good orange,” I thought. I took my time, mindfully eating wedge after wedge. I knew if I consciously lingered in the pleasant sensations and emotions I could imprint this memory of joy. As I continued to savor the citrus’ sweetness, I whispered a prayer to God of thanks for the wonder of being able to appreciate deliciousness.

Our brains, it turns out, are primed to focus on the negative. This makes sense when you think that our forefathers and mothers, living in the wild, would have wanted to remember which plant got them sick or where to avoid scary animals with big teeth. It was a matter of survival. However, while our external circumstances may have changed, our brains haven’t. Neuroscientist Rick Hanson explains, “The brain is like Velcro for negative experiences but Teflon for positive ones.” Thus “negative events and experiences get quickly stored in memory—in contrast to positive events and experiences, which usually need to be held in awareness for a dozen or more seconds to transfer from short-term memory buffers to long-term storage.”

So keeping that in mind, I have learned to go against my natural tendencies to glide over the good moments. If I want to teach my brain to be grateful—to look out for the joyful, as well as the fearful—I have to consciously train it. Lingering a bit longer on an orange’s sweetness not only gives me recall of it later, but helps focus my brain to find such delightful moments in the future. Perhaps that is why St. Paul in the Christian scriptures said, “Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thes 5:16–18). St. Paul wanted us to experience the fullness of life and understood that gratitude is instrumental for living life fully.

I’ve since been intentionally making mental snapshots of positive memories:

✶ Feeling my daughter’s soft hand wrapped around my finger while walking through the redwoods in Oakland, California, USA.
✶ Savoring the sense of connection to swimmers in the ocean while sending them loving kindness from the edge of the water.
✶ Resting in the softness of my heart with the ability to write and share about gratitude.

This is our birthright: to be happy and grateful. We just have to do our work of constant rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks. ✶

Thanksgiving: Grateful for Mixed Blessings
Diane Cameron [New York, USA]

On Thanksgiving Day, many North Americans will sit down to dinner with family or friends, and gratitude will be mentioned as we offer blessings on the meal. At many of our tables there will be a nod to the formerly religious aspect of the day. Someone will suggest, “Let’s go around the table and have everyone say what they’re grateful for.”

It’s easy at times like this to name good health, career success, and our children’s accomplishments, but we
often forget that some of our best gifts don’t come in
pretty wrapping. This year I suggest we put a new spin
on this tradition. This year, ask your guests: “What are
the mixed blessings in your life this year?”

Here are some examples: There was the day you were
running late and therefore missed the big traffic jam; or
the day you skipped church but when channel surfing
you heard a speaker that gave you a completely new
outlook. Or maybe it was the day you got lost in a
new part of town, but while wandering you found a
store that sold exactly what you had been hunting for
months. Get the idea?

Then try upping the ante: How about when you got
fired but you found the work you truly want to do? Or
maybe the person you wanted to marry broke your
heart but months later you met your truest love?

Now let’s push it a bit farther: How about the serious
illness that knocked you off your feet but staying
in bed gave you time to recast your life? Or maybe
the struggle to accept a more permanent disability
revealed a talent you didn’t know you had?

Okay, even harder now: What about the death of a
loved one that devastated you, but one day in the
midst of grief you felt something other than pain, and
you realized that you were feeling joy, and you were
able to feel it because the grief had cracked you open.

Of course the ultimate level of this kind of gratitude is
saying “thank you,” even before the good part comes.
When you’ve had experience with mixed blessings you
begin to know—even while it’s painful or unpleasant—
that there will be meaning in it, and so we say thank
you even when we’re getting hit hard.

These blessings are never pretty. Maybe it was
feedback from a friend that clued you in on the truth
about some personality flaws, or the DWI [Driving
While Intoxicated] that was humiliating was also what
made you change your life. Maybe an emotional
breakdown allowed you to put yourself back together
in a new and stronger way.

So when that, “What are you grateful for?” comes
around at your Thanksgiving table this year don’t
groan, but dig deep. Name the blessings that came
from pain, grief, loss, and trouble. When we can say
thanks for both the good and the bad, then, just like
the pilgrims, we’ll have a real Thanksgiving.

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Thankful for Presence
Nick Wagner, Presence Editor [California, USA]

As we approach the end of the twentieth anniversary year for Presence: An International Journal of Spiritual Direction, I want to take a moment to thank some dedicated volunteers who help make Presence the wonderful journal that it is. If you open your most recent copy to page two, you’ll see listed there all of those who serve on the editorial review panel. Every article that appears in Presence is read by at least two of these wonderful folks, and they give me insightful feedback and suggestions about each article. They do all this in addition to their professional work and their family lives, and I am very grateful for their service.

In addition, someone who is truly behind the scenes is Dolores Nice-Siegenthaler. Dolores is a long-time SDI member, and for many years she has transcribed the interviews that appear in Presence. Her steady, committed service to the journal is just one of the things that makes my job easy and enjoyable. Thanks Dolores, for all your years of service.