

Embracing Hope

Soul food to help chase away the blues

by Joy Lenton



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"I sometimes think that the world has created a conspiracy to destroy hope. As Joy Lenton notes in 'Embracing Hope', hope is the last thing to leave us. Lenton goes the world one better and stakes a claim for hope, and asks us to find it in these poems, blessings, and devotionals she's gathered together. Reading this collection is once again to feel the heart being pinpricked back to life."

—Glynn Young, *author of the Dancing Priest novels and Poetry at Work, and editor at Tweetspeak Poetry*

"I have long loved Joy's words and even more, her heart. She writes from a place of deep faith, forged in the fires of chronic illness, and refined on the anvil of pain. That depth rises through every page of this book. Embracing Hope is a book I will return to again and again. It is manna, exquisite in both poetry and prose, sown throughout with thoughtful questions and reflective journal prompts, and concluding with a lovely collection of additional hope-filled resources."

—Cindee Snider Re, *Chronic Joy Ministry founder, and author of Discovering Hope: Beginning the Journey Toward Hope in Chronic Illness (Chronic Joy Thrive Series)*

"Joy's writing and poetry always has a way of arresting my thoughts and causing me to listen. She never fails to invite us to come alongside as she hears those gentle invitations and nudgings to become aware of God's presence. If you have been longing for words that might help to open your heart to the beauty and hope all around us, then this book is an encouraging guide to help steer you in the right direction"

—Bettie Gilbert, *Treasure From The Sands podcaster and blogger at bettiegraseasons.com*

"I really love the poems, soul exhale thoughts, reflective questions and blessings Joy Lenton offers here. This is a peaceful and inviting book, written by someone who has lived with pain and hurt and shares from her heart. Unlike other books I've seen that try to give a formula for everything, this book offers a gentle invitation to go at our own pace, and to know Jesus understands and meets us where we are."

—Gayl Wright, *blogger at gaylswright.com*

"While going through a time of uncertainty, Joy's poems and the words God whispered to her heart brought me both comfort and courage to keep walking forward. Joy's words have helped me to see purpose, and to remember that even when life seems to pass us by, 'life's heartbeat' is still 'ringing loud and clear in us.' She shows us how to slow, to see

and hear God's Presence with us in the here and now. I am so thankful for her precious words and her willingness to draw us closer to the heart of God.”

—*Anna Smit, Treasures From The Sands podcaster and blogger at flamingabundance.com*

“In ‘Embracing Hope’, Joy Lenton offers us a personal yet universal journey through her poetry and reflections. My hope is that you will find affirmation, comfort, challenge and hope within these pages. I certainly did!”

—*Pastor Michael Moore, writer at scotsirishpadre.blog*

Dedication

For all who are in need of a fresh infusion of hope, those who are feeling low and discouraged or have temporarily lost the hope you had, I offer you this resource to encourage and inspire you to look for signs of hope again. May you discover how hope is not only possible for you but closer at hand than you might think.

Introduction

What this book is about

Welcome to Embracing Hope. In this eclectic mix of thoughts you will discover small snapshot glimpses of life and faith experiences to encourage your heart. May you receive them as soul food to help chase away the blues.

Aspects of renewal, embracing change, possibilities and potential speak directly to your soul via the immediacy of poetry, which is written in a poetic storytelling way. There are accompanying blessings and soul food exhale breather reflections as well. May they encourage and give you hope when life gets tough.

How this book can help you

The characteristics of spring are a governing theme, but you can enjoy diving into these pages whenever a fresh infusion of hope is required. Because if we look in-between the bare and bleak places of loss, discouragement and pain in our lives, you and I can discover sacred spaces revealing glimpses of hope and light to us.

Rather than viewing this book like a definitive dictionary or an atlas with all the contours drawn in, consider it instead as a gentle guide book and a soul journey companion to help reveal places where hope might be missing or deficient. May it encourage you to explore hope's source, as you notice the signposts indicating where hope can be found.

Why I can help you

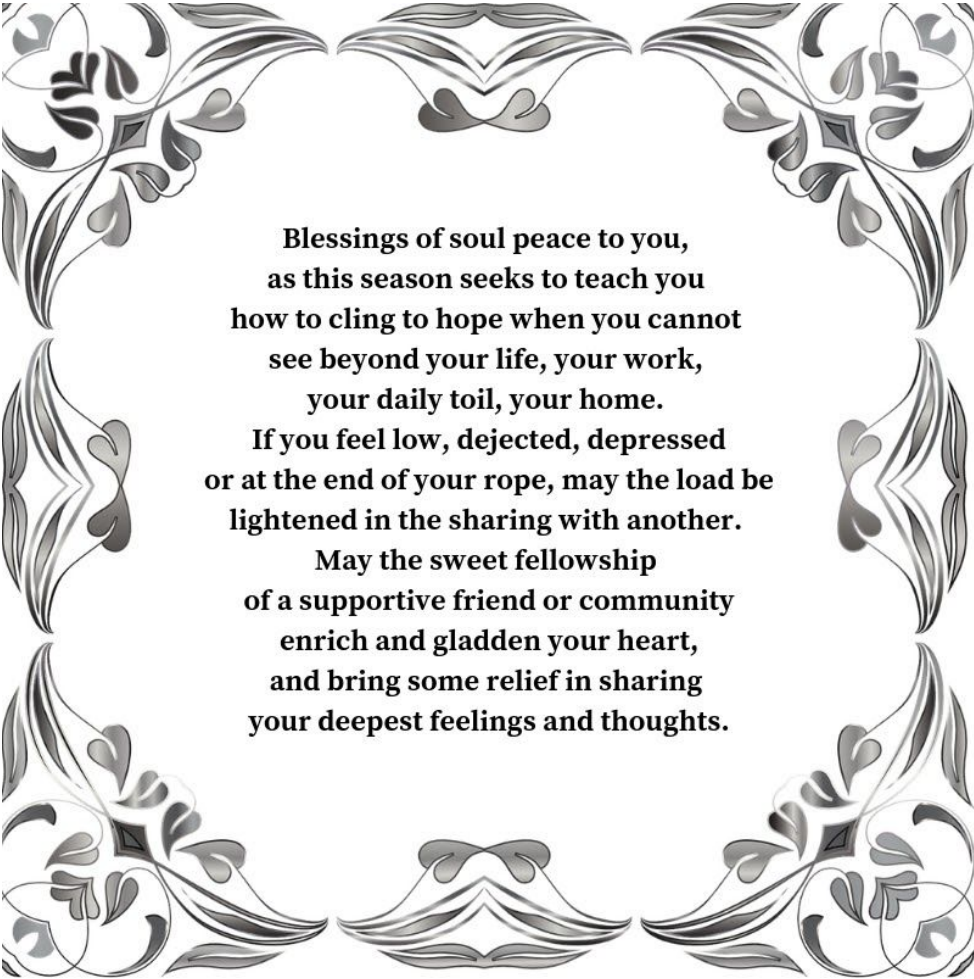
Although I am no expert in psychology, I used to be a nurse supporting people who were hurting physically and emotionally. Now I have a calling to nurture souls instead. My life experiences of childhood sexual abuse, rejection, a broken home, mental health breakdown, depression, grief, and years of living with pain and chronic illness have given me insight into depths of darkness, and feelings of despair and hopelessness.

As a woman of faith who has had to battle her way to a position of acceptance, peace and rest in Christ, I also understand how difficult it can be to embrace or hold on to hope in adverse circumstances. As we journey together here, I want to help you see and consider how hope is possible for you too, no matter what you might be going through. Let's begin.

Sensing a thaw



Blessing 1: Soul peace

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**Blessings of soul peace to you,
as this season seeks to teach you
how to cling to hope when you cannot
see beyond your life, your work,
your daily toil, your home.**

**If you feel low, dejected, depressed
or at the end of your rope, may the load be
lightened in the sharing with another.**

**May the sweet fellowship
of a supportive friend or community
enrich and gladden your heart,
and bring some relief in sharing
your deepest feelings and thoughts.**

Awaiting

Sitting with the ache of longing,
I hear the trees sigh and
sway, with desire
rooted deep within
their system, like a light

low and dim, recessed in pitch-black
darkness and hollowness,
awaiting an awakening, as it
leans toward spring's entry.

My own soul light is but a candlewick,
a nub, barely flickering
but still alive,
for hope is always last to leave us.

Each thin twig seems to be signalling
to me as it wavers
in the breeze,
stripped bare now, it still
retains leaf memory,

a faded shape and space where
vitality sat,
budding and spreading itself,
stretching out with chlorophyll sacs.

As I shift my own pared back bones,
I look to trees
and soil and slate-grey skies, with an
impatient, wistful eye

that wants to hurry time, knowing
each cyclical
change arrives at just the perfect
moment, right when
we're full of discontent.

Soul Exhale: Adjusting to change

Those of us who suffer from SAD usually welcome the lengthening light, brighter days and improvement in the dark lethargy we feel. Winter can feel endless and waiting interminable when we ache for difference.

Our hearts tend to droop in the waiting. We get weary and impatient for change. Sometimes at the expense of forgetting the soul treasure we have already received in days and times of darkness. Such as vital signs of holy life and presence with us, around and within us.

Slow and small are perfectly fine ways to enter this season. So don't beat yourself up if you see others forging ahead and you feel left behind. There is value in moving at your own pace. In fact, it's the best way to proceed.

What might God be teaching us as we adjust? I believe he is saying that it's fine to find our own way through, to make allowances for our natural reactions and personality. Not to rush. Because you and I are unique, as are our lives and circumstances.

How might it look to open yourself up to slowly coming alive to the hope and potential wrapped up in these days?

How can you best prepare for spring if you feel lethargic or unwilling to embrace change?

Wake me up

wake me up
when earth's hard crust starts to break
and snowdrops
dare to show their fragile heads
their wobbly whiteness, green stems

wake me up
when woods ring with birdsong
and bluebells rise
like bobbing purple diamonds
carpeting the forest floor

wake me up
when temperatures rise too
air is perfumed
by lily of the valley
sounding a reveille

wake me up
when lambs are being born
and tulips
nod multi-coloured petals
heavily as stiff breezes blow

wake me up
when light begins to pour
and daffodils
flower, shine forth as gold
radiating signs of hope

Soul Exhale: Taking it at your own pace

I tend to sleep deeper during winter. It's much harder than usual to prise myself out of bed. Despite chronic illness giving me a clear physical need for extra rest and sleep, my desire to spend all day hugging the duvet is usually thwarted by a greater need to use my time wisely and be present for my loved ones, never mind use the bathroom!

Eventually, one must surface. Put in an appearance. Show willingness, at least. Sit hugging a coffee mug and take all morning to wake up. Fatigue is ever-present for me, due to having M.E, but the driven perfectionist, who still resides within, always tries to push me upwards and onwards.

I don't always listen to her. She has learnt I can't be chivvied into action just because she says so. Even if she keeps reminding me of what more able souls are achieving - and why am I still sitting vegetating? As she sees it.

One of the upsides to my health challenges is having the perfect excuse to pause, with frequent soul stops in my day in which to ponder and pray. And write, of course.

Therefore, I don't get too concerned about my inner perfectionist because I consider all those things (and the act of getting up, washed and dressed) as activities. It's a matter of perspective, right?

What matters most is not whether we hurry to get up, throw off our winter clothes at the first sign of spring or stay huddled up in jumpers, coats and blankets. Because it's more about our heart attitude and willingness to invite change into our lives than anything else.

What helps you to embrace change?

How are you learning to control, if not conquer, your inner perfectionist or society's expectations of you?

There's a stir

life feels bland
months on end with no real change
winter's tough
chill seeps into my soul
I'm craving crocuses

my eyes scan
eagerly seeking signs
searching the ground
wondering if spring has come
if new life can now be found

I look up
maybe the heavens hear me
my long sighs
my need for alteration
my ache for a surprise

there's a stir
rumblings beneath the earth
silent cries
it is coming, I can hear
something good will soon arise

my patience
finally gets its reward
when I wake
hastily part the curtains
see evidence of my faith

Soul Exhale: Something stirs

Something stirs beneath the soil in our winter of discontent. It presses through with a kind of wild persistence. Pushing aside discouragement, disregarding a lack of courage. It is answering a call from eons ago, and those still to come.

As it breaks the surface asunder, something yields and gasps for air. It's our soul stretching into its new shape. It is also hope arising. Not yet phoenix-bold, perhaps, but daring to lift itself above our concerns. Above our fragile self-image. Above our fears.

Winter's dusty grey ashes still sit within, yet they know their days are limited. Because hope is like an unstoppable fire, fuelled by faith, unquenchable and unlimited in its scope. Bright and brave and beautiful, it blazes and burns in our hearts.

Maybe not at first. Maybe all we have is a slight stirring, a hint of colour in the otherwise colourless landscape of our souls. Perhaps we discover hope as a faintly scented perfume, growing stronger the more we try to remember and recapture it.

And we gaze at hope in awe as longings of old start to resurface. Who is this light-bringer invading our darkest days? Where did hope come from? Was it really hiding in plain sight and we missed it? Maybe. Or we forgot to search it out, to crave it enough, and to want the change it offers us.

Can you feel hope stirring inside? And offer it welcome?

What does it look like to you? Is it new or like an old, familiar friend?

Splintered

watching the world
through cracked glass
my splintered soul
slowed down to a crawl
seeking a way to be whole

shards of ice
layer upon layer
sit inside
I'm ready for a thaw
I can no longer hide

fingertips pressed
touching against the edges
trying to hold
my brokenness together
seal up each painful crack

give me the glue
the way to paste it all
mount a comeback
from the lost, lonely years
from my past, from these tears

being mended
is my raison d'être
why I exist
why I don't give up the fight
look for the light as it appears

Soul Exhale: Seeing beauty in brokenness

I had soul beauty but I was unaware of it, so I lived like one impoverished. And I ached for difference because I couldn't match the face I met in the mirror with my preference.

Maybe you've felt the same?

I honed in on the flaws and saw plenty enough to keep me fully occupied for years. Several imperfections cried out loud and I bowed down to their name, holding it all inside where my real self sits.

After years of heartache, shame and pain, I learnt how to embrace my inner and outer brokenness, the imperfections of being human we all experience. Because beyond those things, I saw how God is breaking us all into beauty again. God offers us soul renewal and hope, as he does in the words below, which I received in prayer.

Prayer whisper: Brokenness

"Don't lament over your brokenness, rejoice instead, because it allows me access to be your Restorer, Healer and Saviour. Each particle, all those broken shards of you are being tenderly gathered, lovingly held and carefully pieced back together better than before.

Your broken places are grace entrances. Your weaknesses are sources for my strength to infiltrate. Your tears are like dew in my own eyes as I cry with you and for you, longing above all things to dry your tears, offer my rest and peace, the consolation of my love.

A broken life becomes broken open more by my grace, made beautiful by my love and radiant with the light of my presence. All you give to me is returned to you abundantly, made new, pulsing with promise and potential."

Do you shrink back from your brokenness and imperfections?

How might you embrace them without losing heart?

I sense a thaw

the cold earth stirs
there are cracks appearing
on the surface
tiny fresh shoots showing
still rimed with soil and snow

I sense a thaw
changes are taking place
it's in the air
mirrored within my soul
longing for life, new growth

tentative bulbs
begin to peep above
soft as wood pulp
it's an act of courage
it's revelation of love

I want to cry
seeing small signs of green
they're so alive
they're ready for anything
braving the chill of change

now is the time
earth will yield its hard crust
and so must I
surrender to a new song
embrace a fresh season

Soul Exhale: Sensing glimmers

I hear a solo blackbird singing into morning mistiness, his tune dedicated to heaven's breath and the unadulterated joy of being alive. While I sit inside my bedroom quietly listening, trying to tune my heart to his frequency.

Yet something heavy seems to chain me here to earth, sitting on my soul, pressing me low and pushing me into isolation. I sometimes feel alone, for every one of us is a tiny little island at times. Yet we have been created for togetherness, for knowing joy, hope, peace and love, for relationship and companionship.

We need a holy seed to germinate and take root within our hearts, and a glimmer of grace to open up our bounded souls and let the light of holy presence permeate every part. Then it will begin to fill and flood us with love and hope, with more than enough heat to set our cold souls on fire and cause a thaw inside.

A blackbird sings out first spring to others, whether sister, brother, lovers or soul companions, who hear the sound as sweet music to their ears. They respond in kind with answering swift harmony of voice, just as we can do for one another, when we've grown to trust. May we learn to sing a new song in days to come.

What speaks to you of joy and a sense of being alive?

Are there any areas in your life where you need a thaw to take place?

Look between

A shedding has occurred,
rendering the trees
barren, bare, vulnerable
to every breath of wind
and aching absent
of their leafy covering.

May I learn to embrace
my own losses
my shredded past
my grief and pain,
and learn to look between
the gaps where leaves
have been—and grow again.

May my perspective
shift to make room
and to take in
the strange airiness
found only in bare beauty's
bleak appeal to us.

For it is only when
we lose the trappings
we have become
dependent on
that we can open up
to nature's cup
of growth and life and hope.

Soul Exhale: Looking in-between

I look out of the kitchen window and notice how the shadows of the morning are decidedly softer than I've seen them later in the day. Though I'm not always up and about or alert enough to check.

They are smudged in delicate shades of grey, with less definition than those formed by afternoon sun, more blurred and suggestive than deliberately delineated. As if someone has lightly shaded them in with a softened, blunt pencil.

Their very weakness of form is quietly alluring, calling me to make a closer inspection of what might lie behind their cloudy opacity. *Could it be the object I think it is? Or is it an invitation to use my imagination and spiritual senses?*

A seeming translucence is how they choose to portray the ethereal space they inhabit. A space which appears to hold a mirror to all hidden things that lie concealed, with a gradual unfolding as revealed mystery.

In the gaps, those in-between spaces and breathing places which life and creation offer us, we might see beyond the view directly in front of us and discern spiritual truth clearer than before.

Perhaps the more well versed we become in the art of spiritual seeing, the more we will notice. Because signs can be borne on a breeze, a wisp of cloud, a shaft of sunlight, a shadow, a laugh or a hug, a stirring sound and a prayer. They could be everywhere.

All these markers of holy incarnation are wrapped with love's tenderest gaze, beaming benevolently from above. They appear to penetrate earth with a 'look at me!' invitation to sense grace in the here and now. And to allow our hope and expectation to rise in the act of seeing itself.

When have you been surprised by seeing something through fresh eyes?

Consider how you might enhance your spiritual seeing senses.

Liveliness

it's the brightness
emerging at dusk and dawn
when skies lighten
when our souls rise higher
and we're grateful to be born

it may start
as a grey-fogged muffledness
signalling drear, death
but we are created
for such moments as this

blueness lies hidden
yet the clouds are softly tinged
with a rosy pink
and we experience colour
light and life's significance

we discover
our souls are naturally drawn
to liveliness
which mother earth consists of
but not always fully formed

at the heart
of all our darkened days
lies hidden joy
just waiting to be revealed
just waiting for us to claim

Soul Exhale: Maintaining a lively imagination

Liveliness is the last way you might describe my days, circumscribed as they are by weakness and weariness. But what I do try hard to maintain is having a lively imagination instead, the kind I enjoyed with ease as a child. It means my dreams can be unlimited.

I think it's a necessity for a poet and writer, but also for everyone who desires to rise above their hard circumstances and see hope before there is any clear evidence yet. *Accuse us of daydreaming if you like, but sometimes you have to envision the future before it appears.*

I long to journey through more than my mind's landscape, to places far and wide, with the taste of heat scorching the tongue, with meals both foreign and familiar. Especially during the depths of winter or when I mourn my inability to travel.

I long for a place where cicada song stirs the sultry air, while I watch the sway of windswept trees, then dip into restful, sun-saturated slumber, where I find a deeper peace, unlike any I have known before.

Maybe I'll discover a whole other way to exist, to be and to breathe, to think and feel, to experience fresh encounters with reality. It has to beat sitting at home staring at a screen.

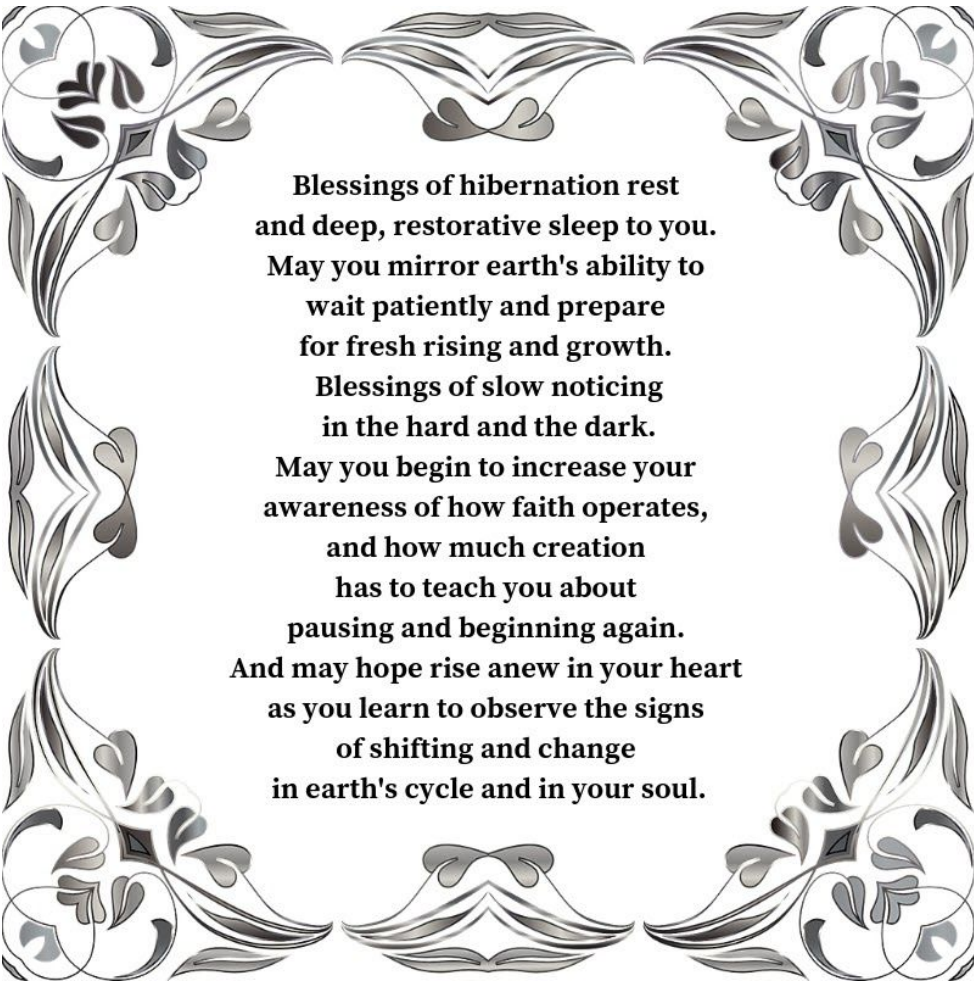
It will be an oasis of hope, quietly waiting on my presence, as I walk for miles and run and swim and climb, like someone supple, fit and lithe, whose body feels alert, alive and energised.

But for now I sit and rest and think and write, in my one necessarily sedentary life, and I ache for better, brighter things, while I seek to be grateful for the kind of life I live.

How do you maintain a liveliness of soul when you're weary?

Try to exercise your imagination creatively this week and note how it affects your mood.

Blessing 2: Resting, waiting and noticing

A decorative border composed of stylized, symmetrical floral and leaf motifs in shades of gray, framing the central text.

**Blessings of hibernation rest
and deep, restorative sleep to you.
May you mirror earth's ability to
wait patiently and prepare
for fresh rising and growth.**

**Blessings of slow noticing
in the hard and the dark.
May you begin to increase your
awareness of how faith operates,
and how much creation
has to teach you about
pausing and beginning again.
And may hope rise anew in your heart
as you learn to observe the signs
of shifting and change
in earth's cycle and in your soul.**

About the author



Joy Lenton is a contemplative Christian writer, poet and blogger, who loves books, dark chocolate, good coffee and great conversation. She's a grateful grace embracer, with a special affinity for the hurting. Her mission is to bless and encourage others by sharing the hope and joy we have in Jesus.

She is the author of [Seeking Solace: Discovering grace in life's hard places](#), and a contributor to [Mosaic of Grace: God's Beautiful Reshaping of Our Broken Lives](#) by James Prescott, [Taking off The Mask: Daring To Be the Person God created you To Be](#) by Claire Musters, and [Finding Purpose: Rediscovering Meaning in a Life with Chronic Illness](#) by Cindee Snider Re.

As a woman with a painful past, who is an M.E, arthritis, hypermobility syndrome and fibromyalgia sufferer, Joy writes with a desire to support and encourage those who live with chronic illness or might be going through painful and challenging circumstances.

You can find her sharing reflections, poetry and prayers at her [Words of Joy](#) blog and mostly poetry at [Poetry Joy](#), as well as contributing to the Godspace blog. She has been published in several poetry anthologies, including [Celebrations - 15 Years Of the People's Poetry](#), and acted as a guest poet for [Jenneth Graser's](#) summer 2018 [Poetry As Therapy Online Retreat](#).