



blessed

meditations
on a life of
small wonders

Ann Rennie





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*For my father who liked the facts of words
and my mother who liked the fancy,
And to all those teachers who
helped me navigate the in-between.*







Preface

This book offers an ordinary happiness. It is a celebration of the blessings we share in our collective lives.

Blessed invites you into my life to share the joys and memories and ponderings of a woman who is, at last, wising up. There is an element of memoir to some of these pieces, where formative times and places indicate a loose chronology of events. Some pieces were written well over a decade ago and have been resurrected for their first public outing. Some are in response to the pandemic and its impact. Others have been previously published but have been updated and expanded so they speak to the now. A number of these reflect on my own





family life, as a wife to Robert and a mother to Grace, but I hope they move beyond my little triumvirate to a more general application. I offer you something of myself in these pages – it is my way of making sense of the world.

The publication of this book validates my professional choice of employment as a teacher, whilst doing something beyond the confines of the classroom. Teachers occupy one of the most important professions because we pass on knowledge and skills to the next generation. We also pass on dreams and hopes, wonderings and what ifs because our job, after all, is fundamentally to open the minds of our young charges to the rich possibilities around them. I am a teacher of Religious Education and this colours many of the sentiments expressed here. *Blessed* is both worldly and otherworldly, recognising the transcendent as an animating force whilst mindful that we each find different ways to purpose and meaning. I am also an English teacher. Today, in class, if the students have to write a poem, I do too. If we want the next generation to be literate, we need to model what it is to be a reader and a writer. We can also model civility and good will and how to participate in the public conversation in a way that is respectful of various worldviews.

Under the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a reconsideration of the way we live and the priorities we espouse. We have been forced by isolation and lockdown to look inward and





to dispense with some of those frills and fripperies we now recognise as not so important. Our sense of community has been reshaped. We are now attuned to a new reality, and in many ways, a simpler existence, more aware of the heartbeat of humanity.

I am a woman of my words. I believe in words that affirm and encourage, words that stand up and are counted, words that make us better people, that raise our sights to a promising future built on the cherishing of the here and now with each other. As you read *Blessed*, I hope this book of mine, in some small way, helps you find your own small wonders.







*Write it on your heart that every day
is the best day of the year.*

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

In a world that celebrates the next big thing, the newest look, the latest trend, the what's hot and what's not, this year I am going to look out for the small and slight, the soft and singular soul-shifting wonders that can change the colour and mood of a day. These are the little things that mean a lot, when our hearts soar with joy, when we witness the love of mother and child, when we are lost for words in a moment of awe. These are small wonders – where happiness and sometimes holiness is clothed in the





habitual and humdrum; they are the affirmations that life is good and that we have much for which to be thankful.

A small wonder is the poem that exactly matches your mood. It is a twenty-two degree day in early autumn as the trees dress in garnet and gold and the world appears rich with invitation. It is the call from an old friend, the jacaranda waterfall in the back garden, a new version of an old song, the feeling of joy in simply being alive and capable and knowing that you are important to those who love you. It is the long blue day of summer and the strange swoop of serendipity that reignites dormant feelings and suggests other possibilities. It is the clever headline, the incisive cartoon or the quick wit of those who make us laugh. It is the scent on which old memories are resurrected and long ago loves peek into the present. It is the skip in one's step when anticipating the moment of meeting or doing. It is the reliable pleasure of a good long soak in the bath. It is the knowledge that you have agency and ability and a voice; small, maybe, in the din and dun of a noisy world, but a voice nevertheless. A voice trying to be heard with its own plain truth.

I will be looking about me and listening for the voices of prophesy and leadership and gentleness; voices that use words as wonders, not weapons. I will be mindful of competing narratives and look for the kernels of truth inside hype and hyperbole. I will honour words that stand up for good things and do not





double deal or disclaim or masquerade as something they are not; hollow instead of heartfelt. These are of the weasel word variety recently identified by Australian writer Don Watson. They are the words of shiny superficiality, rhetorical ruse, obfuscation, words that trick and tempt and misgive. They are words that do not improve our minds or enlarge our spirits, mired as they are in a meanness that diminishes and humiliates. They are merely transactional, words without soul. Instead, I will enjoy the gentle balm of poetry and philosophical flights of wisdom. I will steep myself in rambunctious tales of imagination and derring-do and read books that make me want to write. I will use words that encourage, celebrate and affirm; words of endearment, of joy, of wonder, of plain old common sense and careful candour.

A small wonder is seeing the kindness of your child and knowing that, somehow, you have done a good job in making them that way. It is the song on the radio that brings the past prancing back in all its rainbow hues. It is looking at a beautiful painting and noticing small particularities: a signature colour, the brilliance of a fold of silk, the slight protuberance of a trembling lip, a tiny buckled shoe, lowering clouds. It is being clothed in a quiet confidence that things are going well and you are part of an enterprise that looks ahead. It is an acceptance that the here and now is to be grasped and shaped well. It is being happy with who you are and not having to jump through others' hoops for





approval. It is the gentle grace of equanimity and an enthusiasm for funny little projects shared with others. It is being able to read and write and sit with a good book and ponder. It is the mystery and intrigue of the imagination which can open up thoughts that are frighteningly large and exquisitely small. It is being chuffed that your brain is still whirring and that you can solve the nine-letter word problem in the morning paper – most days!

This year in my harbouring of small wonders I will succumb to the gentle joys of cloud watching and the chortle of the kookaburra in the old gum tree. I will listen to the rhythm of the rain and marvel at the innocence of a toddler's gummy smile and the giggling that goes with it. I will listen to my daughter as she tries on her dreams for size and I will notice the child who does her best every time, although she does not win the glittering prize. I will encourage the shy and sweet and will not be fooled by the false triumphalism that bigger is better. I will stoop to smell a grandmotherly rose and stop to exchange a cheery word with my neighbour. I will notice the sounds of life around me – the big brass band of getting through the day, the orchestral swell and hum of evensong and the jazzy interlude of unexpectedness.

This year I will learn to accept the small wonder of a compliment. I will notice the colours around me, peacock blue and fuchsia and sun-spun yellow, and be glad for the never-ending palette of creation.





I will submit breathlessly to the star-spangled soup of country skies at night and the cool complicity of moonlight. I will be thankful for the kindness of the colleague who bakes banana muffins and brings them in to share. I will be glad of the cup of tea my husband makes me when I am running out of puff in the evening. I will continue with my own small wordy adventures, dallying delightedly in old tomes and new texts. I will be in awe of the men and women who are humble and resilient and do small wonders when they care for grandchildren, deliver Meals on Wheels and refuse to use age as a reason not to get involved in life swirling around them. I will watch as the next generation innovates and creates, and I will wonder aloud how they thought of such things in the vast realms beyond my own understanding.

Small wonders can be found in the shelter of the predictable pattern. They sparkle in the ebb and flow of the ordinary. Occasionally, they are scintillas of surprise that choreograph change. They are fragments, vignettes, moments of glad grace that build gratitude and delight and give life meaning. Small wonders are alive in the first snowdrop of spring, a child's finger painting, the courtesy of a gangly teenager holding the door open when your hands are full, the tickle and fizz of champagne on a sunny afternoon with good friends, exploring a new neighbourhood, the rainbow after rain. Small wonders are about noticing the decorative marginalia and not being unthinkingly importuned by





the bold and the brash of the attention-seeking. They are rewards for noticing. Small wonders are often clothed in humility and reticence, their delight enjoyed by those who look and learn and listen and linger.

They are a different way of leaning in.

Small wonders are moments of recognition and revelation – moments when we are bathed in an inexplicable exhilaration, a sliver of joy, the diamond moment in the duller duties of the day; when we see ‘a world in a grain of sand and a heaven in a wild flower’, as William Blake wrote. It is when smallness is somehow magnified, amplified, universalised into an amazing all-ness.

The French writer Muriel Barbery asks: ‘Where is beauty to be found? In great things that, like everything else, are doomed to die, or in small things that aspire to nothing, yet know how to set a jewel of infinity in a single moment?’ (*The Elegance of the Hedgehog*, 2006). I am searching for such moments this year as I seek out the small and wondrous. So, I will try again to jump at opportunities and be more spontaneous and led by occasional whimsy. That load of washing can wait, but this bright blue day will not. I will notice the change of seasons, the ladybird on the leaf, the new songs being sung. I will try to be a good friend, holding onto the friendships that have held onto me. I will colour the year with gratitude for what I have, and I will be glad for others. I will lift up my heart. I will jump for joy. I will be excited by the world around me and what it





offers. The road less travelled will beckon me with its serpentine trails and faint tracks and Do Not Enters and I'll visit China to walk along the Great Wall.

The Benedictine nun Joan Chittister suggests that one way of coming to live the good life is to do one thing a day for the soul, one thing a day for the heart and one thing a day for the mind – a perfect trinity of endeavour. I will remove 'someday' from my vocabulary and replace it with a definite date, place and time. I will offer time to causes I believe in. I will watch movies with my daughter and visit galleries with my husband and carve out time on the weekend to wrestle with words. I will laugh and conspire with my siblings to plan the years ahead. I will continue to read voraciously, thankful for all the good words that inspire me. I will wear my bright pink lipstick and remember the importance of playfulness as a salve against seriousness. I will pray, raggedly and hopefully, believing I am heard. I will start the year, as the psalmist writes, with a clean heart.

The writer Annie Dillard reminds us that 'how we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives' (*The Writing Life*, 1998). So, this year I will look about me. I will be alive to small wonders, the wonders that dress our sometimes wounded world in the shimmering threads and shook foil of the beautiful, the truthful and the good.

This is an edited version of an article previously published in *Melbourne Catholic*, February 2018.



... time's thievish progress to eternity ...

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Sonnet 77*

As a woman of a certain age, the speeding up of time is giving me renewed clarity about what matters to me. All the time in the world is no longer how I measure my days and so this year I plan to not be wasteful of the gift of time. This does not mean I have to be productive every waking minute, but it does mean that my time and how I choose to spend it is a special commodity. It is the currency that matters most to me now.

Most of my time is spent at work. So, this year I will make the best use of my time with those with whom I am employed. I will not whinge or moan too





often because what I do is meaningful. I like to think that, in some small way, I am building the future ... that my students will be the poets and philosophers, doctors and decorators, activists and artists of the next generation; that I can bring out the best in those who may still be diffident and shy with a little timely encouragement and the patience that understands the slow burn that ultimately becomes success. I will rely on the data of actually knowing the students in front of me. I will aim to help them reach beyond their grasp in their acquisition of skills and knowledge and an appreciation of all the world has to offer.



Work may not define us, but it says much about who we are. I will endeavour to be collaborative and sharing and fun and realistic. Theologians speak of the sacredness of the workplace and that the work one does confers a special dignity. How we approach this work can inform everything else around us. So, this year, although it will be the *same old, same old*, I will reinvent my relationship with work and reinvest my time there. I will acknowledge that I am personally well matched with my job – I can be a bit theatrical and a tad loquacious whilst ensuring that I cover a mandated curriculum in my own fashion. I know that some of the things I say will take seed and flower later, perhaps so much later that I will never know that my words did indeed hit their mark. Time will do its magic work. I will dutifully attend meetings, although my mind will wander and I will doodle and jot thinking about pretty



words and how I can get some poetry into and out of my budding writers in Year 7.

This year I will be grateful that I am gainfully employed, even when it's hard to get up on a Monday morning and I have five classes on, tram duty and a meeting after school. I will be glad that I have agency and ability and that I can laugh with others and that the decisions I make are not globally important. I will talk to my students about leadership, teamwork, citizenship and how we must get along with each other if we are to take the human story forward. I will try to get smart with technology even though I joke that the only device we really need is the one between our ears and that it is switched on and receptive to the world.

I will belatedly acknowledge that Zoom has enabled me to stay in contact with my students to maintain connection and cheerfulness as the ravages of the pandemic played havoc with the norms of classroom teaching in 2020. Yes, I delivered content and instruction, but more importantly, I aimed to be a constant and predictable presence in a world of uncertainty. As an adult, it was the least and best I could do for the children in my daily care ... even at a distance.

I will try to mix things up a bit, although I am teaching the same book at the same year level as I did last year. I will look to the big picture of what I am doing but will also notice the small improvements in what a student does and comment on them so that





they will be encouraged. I will ask for help when I need it, overcoming years of reticence and a certain embedded obstinacy that doesn't want to rely on others – or go to doctors! I will realise that I am not immortal and invincible and that I do not have to be an Energizer Bunny all the time. I will revel again in good books and good conversations and be glad of my good husband who stands by with good grace.

The fast lane has become too challenging for me. I am not ready for the slow lane. I just want my own lane. Perhaps, as I negotiate the latter part of my life's journey and look for new scenery to add colour to the old, I am becoming a little less acquiescent. I am not getting grumpy, just wanting this later chapter to make interesting and unexpected detours. I am taking charge and looking about me with curiosity.

This year will offer me its marvels, its days of wonder and its days of woe. Mostly it will offer me its days of weekly work and the occasional night-time corrections of grammar and spelling and gentle suggestions for improvement in a student essay. I will also spend this most precious of currencies on doing the things that matter to me. So here you find me on a Monday morning under the dome at the State Library of Victoria, suitably masked and distanced from the few others who have booked in for a three-and-a-half-hour session.

I couldn't be happier. I am fiddle-faddling with words and ideas, sifting and sorting, enjoying a





cerebral humming. I am reminded of Shakespeare's quote about time's thievish progress to eternity. Time is on the wing. So I am spending these joyously stolen moments at a large old desk lit by a green light with scribbled notes around me and my mind brimming and buzzing. Helen Garner's words are inscribed on the wall near me: 'To slide into the Domed Reading Room at ten each morning, specially in summer, off the street outside, was a sensation as delicious as dropping into the water off the concrete edge of the Fitzroy baths'. I, too, slid in at 10 am, but with a summer grizzly grey and contrary outside. However, I am enjoying the warm wraparound delight that comes with the delicious sensation that my time is completely and utterly my own – for now.





Australians all let us rejoice ...

PETER DODDS MCCORMICK, *Advance Australia Fair*

I am spending most of the summer holidays on the balcony. Under my shade umbrella and perched on an old wrought iron chair, I can survey all around me with contentment. It may just be a neighbour's backyard pool and clothes crisping on a line strung between two trees and the silver gleam of a train as it passes and the spire of a church in the distance and a general greenery, but it's my view to enjoy. I can sit here for hours, companioned by the neighbourhood sounds of a child talking or a bit of talkback radio or the chirruping of birds in an airy sort of musical interlude. All I need is a cup of tea, a book to read and a mind briefly untroubled by the timetable of my working life.





The breeze ruffles the newspapers, birds chortle happily and dragonflies and butterflies loop-the-loop in a crazy choreography. The sky is the blue of forever and no clouds spoil the cerulean swatch that gently girdles the suburbs. White and blue agapanthus nod cheerily ready to endure the heat. I can hear the putter and purr of the Ventura bus at the corner of the street and the chug of the train as it clatters purposefully in its sixty second run between Mont Albert and Surrey Hills. I am in the middle of the suburbs in Melbourne ... and could be anywhere in the world.

My husband often tells me that holiday is a state of mind, so I transport myself to Sorrento, Italy or the Peninsula, and enjoy the good things. With a croissant I am in Nice; with a few olives I am in Barcelona. The book I am reading puts me into make-believe Kingsmarkham where Chief Inspector Wexford is solving crime in a place that no longer resembles that green and pleasant land, England. I travel in my mind and it's priceless.

My daughter is at the local pool. My husband is dozing to the cricket and I'm just doing my thing, unhindered. I've been out for a morning coffee and the papers – there are some rituals that can never be tampered with – and have some idea about what is happening in the world because I have the time to read the commentary and analysis, and not just skim through headlines as I do the rest of the year. It's scary as global tensions rise with fear and panic, borders





and alliances shift and political power divides and undermines. I know that what I can do daily, in my small sphere of influence, will not change the world, but it will change my world and those that intersect with it.

For the next few weeks, the only timetable I run to is an internal one. Soon enough the pulsating beat of the urban jungle with its staccato urgencies and improvised importance will become the relentless rhythm of the year. But for now, I can pursue my small pleasures, replenished a little, fortified by the luxuriance of the occasional afternoon nap, the seeing of friends, the pleasure of reading and writing, a few days in Bendigo, watching old black-and-white British movies, going to bed after midnight and not getting up at 5.45 am to get to work early to check my emails, do some photocopying and plan the lessons for the five-period day.

Once the door is slammed on the sun-kissed somnolence of these long languid drowsy days, these days when time pools expansively, I'll be ready to jump to the tune of my masters. The hours will become short and tight, sixty minutes' worth of accountability and productivity with little room for daydreaming or the poetry in motion of the mind left to wander. Data will drive reports and all sorts of performance metrics and I'll tick the boxes that few will bother to note.

Holiday time is qualitatively different to the time we spend at work. It is the time we allow ourselves to





be a little playful, less stressed, more in tune with who we really are. We do not have to look or be busy. We do not have to perform or reach a benchmark or attend a meeting where decisions have already been made.

We can simply be.

Australia Day will mark the end of this idyll. My umbrella is festooned with the Australian flag as I seek shade under its Southern Cross. My daughter tells me it's bogan, but for me it's just practical and not a nod to extreme patriotism of the ugly kind. At night, on these balmy evenings, I can pick out the constellation in the celestial slideshow above, with nought to disturb my reverie but small nocturnal settling sounds: bats swooping, flowers sighing, the invisible threading of a silver spider's web on the flywire, an orchestra of crickets providing a bedtime lullaby, the hum of a radio, the soothing sounds of life breathing in and out; the exhalations of the day done.

The world turns, with its threats and fears and war wounds and its beauty and grandeur and hope, and for these few weeks I count my blessings. I balance, accommodate and jigsaw-fit all the differently configured activities that colour this temporary freedom. I will surrender at the last possible moment.

On an overcrowded, sorely-in-need-of-a-spruce-up-sixty-year-old balcony in an anonymous block of flats in the suburban heartlands, I indulge in my summer dreaming. These imaginative excursions will keep me sane during the coming year as it rushes





ever faster to its end. My sparkly summer dreams may recede as my working year progresses, but they are there tucked snugly into the back pocket of my heart, ever ready to come out to play.

This is an edited version of an article previously published in *The Secret Garden of Spirituality*.

