

## The Gentle Road Home by Phyllis Cole-Dai

On this second day of 2022, I have to admit I'm emotionally drained. COVID is surging again. Rampaging wildfires have displaced thousands of people in Colorado. Thousands more are without power after record snowfall in California. The nation's had another deadly shooting spree. My family's holiday travels across the country were, um, adventurous. Before our return home, my 82 year-old mother gifted me with her wedding ring, "in case I lose my mind and forget to do it later." Busted my heart.

Still, there are joys: Nathan, home from college, working his usual wizardry in the kitchen. Jihong, across the room, his cold thankfully just a cold. Beautiful snow, sifting down on the sub-zero world outside our snug house. Companionable cats, purring next to me beside the fire. This apple I'm eating, crisp and sweet. The thought of you, reading these words.

Back before Christmas, I led a weekend retreat in California. At its close, one of the retreatants presented me with *The Whole Language: The Power of Extravagant Tenderness*. I happen to be an admirer of the book's author, Gregory Boyle. He's the founder of Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles, "the largest gang-intervention, rehabilitation, and reentry program in the world."

Extravagant. Tenderness.

I've been reading snatches of Boyle's book in hotel rooms, in airports, on bumpy flights. Last night, when I finally finished, I flipped back through the pages, reviewing lines I'd highlighted.

"Make us into a cento," they said, in chorus.

So that's exactly what I've done.

A cento is a literary work—usually a poem—composed entirely of quotations from other works, which are attributed to the author(s). In this case, I've stitched together scraps of lines from Boyle's book. I haven't used every sentence I highlighted or quoted every line in full. I just scavenged for pieces of literary fabric and joined them together, as if I were making a quilt with no pattern.

My cento-quilting has resulted in a didactic poem: a poem that instructs. It's the kind of poem I tend to turn to when feeling somewhat drained, as now. Such a poem invites; it encourages; it stimulates, and catalyzes; it reminds me of what I know and can do. At times, a didactic poem does all these things at once—a warm covering for my spirit's bed.

I present this cento to you, thick (but not heavy) with layers of extravagant tenderness. Consider it a New Year's gift, courtesy of Gregory Boyle. May your reading of it serve you

as well as my creating of it has served me. Who knows? Maybe it will inspire you to create a cento from some of your favorite lines from one or more of your favorite books.

(See the cento with all lines attributed.)

## Gentle Road Home A Cento

Lean into the grief.  
Look death in the eye.  
Say yes to the necessary  
culmination of life.

Abandon performance.  
You're the boss of you.

Deepen the sense of your own truth.  
Live this truth against all odds.

Choose to stay on good terms with your life.  
Choose love as the architecture of your heart.  
Catch yourself not wanting to get  
separated from your kindness.  
Be at home with yourself,  
then put the welcome mat out  
so that others find a home in you.  
Be poised to enter into relationship  
with anyone  
anywhere.

Look to the excluded and say:  
We will not live without you.  
We all have the same last name.

Enable folks to high purpose.  
Be on the lookout for the hidden  
wholeness in everyone.  
See who other people are  
and quit staring at who they aren't.  
It will always be less exhausting  
to love than to find fault.

We are all medics in a war zone.  
We want a different world.  
It's not about getting to solutions

as much as getting to each other.  
Every day, we inch closer.

So, what do we do now?  
Repurpose our own living  
in the wake of death.  
Continue to unlock

eternity for each other.  
Create the place  
where healing can happen,  
Here and Now.

Choose joy  
and it becomes

the gentle road home.