

Where is the longing?

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by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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Each Advent, I sit in the near darkness of early hours and locate the longing. Where does that flame pierce the night? Is there hope growing in my belly? Am I stumbling around with the crust of pig slop, searching for the arms of a loving father? Where is the longing? Can I feel the birthing pains in my gut?

I located it, this morning—the primal yearning that has a different shade every year.

I'm facing the repercussions of writing. It happens, no matter how careful you are to talk with family members and hide the identities of others. When you dig deeply into things that matter, your writing exhumes ancestral wreckage, and you can only pray that the words will not do too much damage. In parts of the book I wrote, I recalled the turbulence in our home when I was growing up. I've been working on the book forever, so even though my family knew it was coming, maybe they thought that I would keep writing it and never quite conclude. I do allow perfectionism and procrastination to get tangled up in all of my endeavors.

In spite of my unattainable artistic ambitions, [I finished it](#). Now I'm doing the back-end housework, the marketing and details that authors have to do if they want anyone to read the book, even though (like the actual dishes and laundry) I'd much rather have someone else doing it. I'm redesigning websites, getting book tour details together, writing emails, making book plates, and posting quote cards on Facebook. HarperOne gave me marketing instructions which call for small weekly reminders to make sure people remember that it's coming. I'm an instruction

follower who likes to check off boxes. So the quotes and announcements are on my FB page.

Unlike past publications, my family is now on social media, so they are also regularly reminded of the upcoming publication date. These words, which have been carefully negotiated in the dark corners of our familial history, are coming to a bookstore near you. So it's not surprising that this week, during our Thanksgiving greetings, my mom asked me about it. I said lightly, "I'm sure it'll be fine. Everyone knew what was going on."

My mom answered, "No, Carol. I don't think *anyone* knew."

My sister (who hasn't read it) called it my "Daddy Dearest" book and said that the family was concerned.

Of course, it's not an exposé. I'm not out for vengeance. The point of the book is the healing, not the wounding. Yet, how can you tell the story of one without the other?

It is as close to the truth as I could bear to get. Those of us who grew up in families like mine learn to hide things. So even with the worry, there is a liberating sense to this—perhaps the truth will set us free.

And that is where the longing comes in.

Last summer, my brother, sister, and I got together, which is rare because we're all over the map. We met in D.C. and shared a meal at an old restaurant crammed with history. Over our abundant plates we were doing what siblings do—laughing with one another, impressing one another, and getting on each other's nerves. I asked permission for the stories I was about to tell and recounted the quotes in the pages. For a few moments, we acted like survivors. I glanced worriedly at my niece, afraid that the recollections were new to her. Then, as our forks scraped empty plates, we sorted out why and how, and found comfort in our shared experiences and the depth of understanding that sat beside us. We grieved for one another, as we made meaning from what our little bodies went through.

This year, as I meditated on my longing, my pregnant hope, I located it on that table, somewhere between the salad and the ravioli, when our imperfect lives came together. The pieces were jagged, and yet somehow, we found shelter and glimpsed at the small miracle of *shalom*. At the start of this liturgical year, I yearn to be alive to those moments, when the sweetness and bitterness of life mingle on one plate,

when we can tell the liberating truth, and when we find a broken wholeness.