Catherine Keller's Cloud of the Impossible*: A Symposium*

with Kirk Wegter-McNelly, "Religious Hypotheses and the Apophatic, Relational Theology of Catherine Keller"; Carol Wayne White, "Aporetic Possibilities in Catherine Keller's Cloud of the Impossible*"; Donovan O. Schaefer, "The Fault in Us: Ethics, Infinity, and Celestial Bodies"; Colleen Mary Carpenter, "Enfolding Violence, Unfolding Hope: Emerging Clouds of Possibility for Women in Roman Catholicism"; and Catherine Keller, "Theology, Science, and* Cloud of the Impossible*."*

ENFOLDING VIOLENCE, UNFOLDING HOPE: EMERGING CLOUDS OF POSSIBILITY FOR WOMEN IN ROMAN CATHOLICISM

by Colleen Mary Carpenter

Abstract. In an effort to think through possible impossibilities, and enfold current problems within Catholicism into the luminous darkness of the cloud of the im/possible, this response to Catherine Keller's *Cloud of the Impossible* considers what might happen should Keller's cloud of mindful unknowing and nonseparable difference billow over and through one particular Catholic conundrum: how to respond to the terrifying reality of domestic violence in the context of a marriage defined as indissoluble, imperishable—inescapable.

Keywords: Catholicism; domestic violence; indissolubility; Catherine Keller; women

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It is perhaps not surprising that the mystery and ecstasy, the humble nonknowing and the dizzying nonseparability, the overwhelming light and the luminous darkness described by Catholic mystics is not in fact part of the experience of everyday Catholics. Instead of contemplating the contradictions and complications of a relentlessly unknowable Infinity, the majority of Catholics embrace a quite knowable faith: there is the Catechism; there are rules; and there are answers. Hence the surprise and shock that greeted Pope Francis's famous question, "Who am I to judge?" One can almost hear the stunned, even angry, response: "*Who are you? You're*

Colleen Mary Carpenter is Sister Mona Riley Endowed Chair of the Humanities and Associate Professor of Theology, St. Catherine University, St. Paul, MN, USA; e-mail: mcarpenter@stkate.edu.

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the Pope! Go ahead, judge; we need to know where we stand—and where those people over there stand, too." Knowing where we stand, of course, can be deeply comforting—especially when we are also quite certain about where we stand with respect to someone else. Yet the mystics refuse to offer us this comfort: standing with them feels far closer to tumbling through utterly insubstantial clouds than to standing on solid ground.

In *Cloud of the Impossible*, Catherine Keller stands with Nicholas of Cusa, Alfred North Whitehead, Walt Whitman, and Judith Butler (among a cloud/crowd of other philosophers, scientists, mystics, dreamers, and poets) in order to entangle the reader in a theology of possible impossibility and indeterminate intimacy. Her exploration of knowing and not-knowing, of difference and (non)separability, and of clouds and cosmology, enfolds philosophy, theology, physics, and poetry, and unfolds a vision of entangled connections and oppositions, a veritable perichoresis of possibilities. The book is dizzying, delightful, and demanding; it is also (at least for me, as a Roman Catholic feminist theologian) a deeply frustrating reminder of what is not possible in my church today. Of course, I'm fairly certain that seeing only the impossible and sinking under its weight means that I have missed the point entirely. In an effort, then, to think through possible impossibilities, and enfold current problems within Catholicism into the luminous darkness of the cloud of the im/possible, I would like to imagine what might happen should Keller's *Cloud* billow over and through one particular Catholic conundrum: how to respond to the terrifying reality of domestic violence in the context of a marriage defined as indissoluble, imperishable—inescapable.

Keller does not explicitly address this particular issue in her book, and yet it is also true that her understanding of apophatic entanglement and the demands it places on us in terms of understanding and engaging with the relationships that give shape to our lives leads directly to an approach to this impasse that gives me new hope for how the Church might engage its followers in cultivating faithful practices of discipleship in the midst of difficult (that is, ridiculously common, even everyday) situations. Keller describes what is involved in "discerning a threefold alter-knowing" for a theory/theology that folds in and out of practice, and it is this *discernment*, and this threefold *alter-knowing*, that I believe can make a difference in this situation (and, of course, in many others) (Keller 2015, 27). The practice of *discernment* has a long and rich history within Catholic spirituality—although it is often associated with and even limited to the spiritually "advanced," including the ordained (men) and explicitly excluding women, whose spiritual experiences, as Sidney Callahan reminds us in *Women Who Hear Voices*, are often suspect (Callahan 2003, 7–11, 25, 28). Similarly, *knowledge* (of God, of the world, of truth) is not, historically, associated with women, who were excluded not just from theological training but from almost all higher education well into the

nineteenth century. But Keller's description of alter-knowing points us towards an alter-practice that may well open new doors for contemporary theology and theologians—*and* for women trapped in the theological-spiritual-physical-practical tangle of a violent marriage. The three aspects of such alter-knowing, which fold and unfold around and between us, enfolding creative and constructive engagement with a particular reality, are "mindful nonknowing . . . constituent relationality . . . [and] manifold justice" (Keller 2015, 27). Each of these will appear in the following discussion, and the origami of their engagement will shape the possibilities for both discernment and action.

The tangle of issues surrounding women, violence, and Catholic teaching can be approached in a distant, emotionless, resolutely rational manner, focusing on history, doctrine, inadequate or misguided interpretation, and unfortunate though understandably inescapable events—but this bloodless knowing is nothing short of wildly misleading. Should one pursue an alter-knowing of the same tangle of issues, then one must begin not with ideas but with human beings, and indeed not with an objective separation between scholar and research but with an appreciation and understanding of the complex, confounding, constituent relationality that binds them together. In pursuit of this alter-knowing, the scholar is not charged with untangling the knot but with demonstrating its connection to other knots, other tangles—and to recognizing her place in the midst of it all. For me, this has meant confronting the fact that the tangle I am sorting through is not simply about anonymous "women" confronting unspecified "violence" related to generic "Catholic teaching," but instead is inescapably about the particular women that I have come to know in my classroom: *my students* are among those entangled by teachings that demean and by actions that leave them bruised and bleeding.

I teach at St. Catherine University, one of the few remaining women's colleges in the United States. Before arriving at St. Kate's ten years ago, I had certainly studied enough feminist history and theology to know perfectly well that violence against women was a pervasive reality—but I had never confronted it in person. I still thought of connection and relationship as key *positive* elements of feminist reflection: I had not bothered to consider that connection—entanglement—can be suffocating, even deadly; I slid past the fact that a web of relationships can entrap a person, holding her fast in strong, sticky threads. The first time a student came to me to talk about being raped, I was shocked and overwhelmed; the first time I got an email from a student saying that she couldn't come to class the next day because her ex-boyfriend, who had promised to kill her, had just gotten out of prison and her family was insisting that she come home until they could figure out how to deal with this, I was stunned. I am no longer surprised: I have conversations like this with my students every semester. I now see faces instead of numbers when I read the statistics put out by the

U.S. Department of Justice (National Network to End Domestic Violence 2004), stating that approximately 1.5 million women are raped and/or physically assaulted by an intimate partner in the United States every year, and one in four women experiences rape and/or physical assault by an intimate partner at some point during her life (Thaden and Thoennes 2000, iii). But I was still new at St. Kate's when the following incident took place; it unfolded in my classroom as a complete surprise. I have been reconsidering what happened since reading *Cloud of the Impossible*, and while I always knew it was a remarkable experience, I have begun to think that what I witnessed was not simply a significant practical discussion of embodied ethics, but far more than that: it was, I believe now, a deeply theological consideration of "the presence of holiness in the flesh of ordinary existence" (Keller 2015, 5).

It was late in the semester, nearly the last class. It was a weekend class, which means adult returning students, women in their 20s and 30s and 40s, trying to finish a degree that had gotten lost along the way, or trying to find a new way forward in their lives. We were reading Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited*, and the topic for this particular class session was his chapter on the moral necessity of telling the truth, no matter what it costs. Thurman acknowledges that deception has always been a useful tool for those whose backs are against the wall—it enables people to fight back against their oppressors in small ways when the situation is such that fighting back openly is not possible. But he goes on to say that while yes, it seems to work; and yes, it can feel really good . . . ultimately, it's the wrong choice to make. And it's the wrong choice because *choosing* to lie will ultimately lead to *becoming* a lie; telling lies, even in the service of standing up against evil, is ultimately self-destructive. He's very clear: telling the truth may well get you killed. But do it anyway, he says: it's the only way to preserve your integrity, to maintain your own sense of dignity (Thurman [1949]1996, 58–73, esp. 70).

I usually open this discussion by taking the contrary position, saying that this sounds quite noble and all, but surely there are times when it *is* right to lie, when lying is good and right and necessary. Thurman's gone too far, hasn't he? And invariably someone agrees, and usually brings up the Nazis at the door with a Jewish family hiding upstairs. But on this particular day, when I challenged my students to come up with a situation in which lying was the right thing to do, no one said anything. I waited for a bit, and then someone finally spoke up: "You should lie," she said slowly, "if you know he'll hit you if you tell the truth." And as I was struggling to find something—anything—to say in response, I heard another voice from the back of the room: "Tell the truth. He's going to hit you anyway."

What followed was perhaps the most incredible hour of class I have ever been privileged to experience. Twenty women spoke about what it was like to face violence—from their husbands, or from other family members, or

in their neighborhood, or in the country they fled before coming to the United States. Everyone had something to say, even the women who hadn't said a word all semester. They spoke passionately about the struggles they faced trying to make loving choices, to protect their children, to protect themselves, and to find ways to teach their children about love instead of hate and anger. The courage and honesty on display were astonishing. Some admitted to not knowing what to do about a particular situation; others offered their own stories in response—gently, generously, not with the demand that her classmate do the same but simply with the hope that her classmate might find a new idea, a new perspective, or at the very least a sense of not being alone.

These women were clearly doing everything in their power to find the right way forward in complex and difficult situations. Their knowing (of their own lives, of the particularities of the situation within which they were working) was deep and rich; their unknowing (of the "right" answers) was fiercely honest, painfully raw, and humbly, generously open. How do you live with dignity in the face of violence? *I wanted us to be a family, but I had to get them away from him.* Do you really forgive your abuser seventy times seven times, or is that just suicide? *This is what I chose; I am still not sure if I did the right thing.* When you forgive, are you modeling Christ to your children, or teaching them that violence is a normal and acceptable part of family life? *This isn't what I wanted; I never thought I'd be here; I did the best I could*. How does one discern how to respond to violence in a way that is loving, forgiving—and preserves one's own dignity and self-worth? *I will not teach my children to hate; I will not let him win.* Thurman's ideas about truth and deception surfaced repeatedly—as did his words about fear, about hatred, and about love. Not everyone agreed with his prescriptions—but it was also clear that engaging with him, and responding to his challenges, enabled the students to articulate their choices and decisions in ways they hadn't quite thought through before. Their knowing and nonknowing and unknowing took shape in their give and take with one another; their understanding of themselves not simply as individual actors but as parts of a relational whole (with their children, parents, siblings, spouse, or others) was evident in both how they saw their power to influence others and their powerlessness to be completely free of others; their commitment to justice for themselves and their children was at the center of everything.

With that conversation in mind—the discernment in action among women who mindfully wrestled with the "wounded and amorous relationality" at the center of their lives (Keller 2015, 37), I'd like to turn to the problem of Catholic marriage and domestic violence. A Catholic woman in a violent marriage often ends up not just in physical danger but also in spiritual crisis because of the conflict between the realities of her dangerous (and potentially life-threatening) marriage and the requirements of

current Catholic teaching. Many Catholics assume that the indissolubility of marriage trumps all other considerations: you're married; you're married forever; if violence is a part of your marriage, so be it. Perhaps it's God's will; perhaps this is your cross to bear. As one woman explained her situation:

> Doing God's will means being kind to my neighbors no matter what it takes, following the Ten Commandments to the best of my ability and then some. And loving my husband, loving other people, basically the love thing. No matter what. That's what God basically wants. My husband has stolen from me. My husband has beaten me, and I still love my husband unconditionally (Reimer-Barry 2007, 130).

Such an attitude is perhaps unusual today, but it is not, in some ways, particularly surprising. Many Catholic women see it as a religious duty to stay married no matter what; many priests have told abused women to return to their abusers. However, in recent years there has been a significant change: it is now widely accepted by Catholic laypeople *and explicitly taught by priests and bishops* that no one has an obligation to remain in a violent marriage. In their 2002 pastoral letter, "When I Cry for Help," the U.S. Catholic Bishops state clearly:

> [V]iolence against women, inside or outside the home, is *never* justified. Violence in any form—physical, sexual, psychological, or verbal—is sinful; often, it is a crime as well. . . . Finally, we emphasize that no person is expected to stay in an abusive marriage. Some abused women believe that church teaching on the permanence of marriage requires them to stay in an abusive relationship. They may hesitate to seek a separation or divorce. They may fear that they cannot re-marry in the Church. Violence and abuse, not divorce, break up a marriage (USCCB 2002).

This is an enormous step forward—a dramatic pastoral change. Significantly, "When I Call for Help" even includes specific suggestions for pastors on how to make the parish not just a safe place where abused women can come for help, but a place where domestic violence is publicly named and condemned as sinful. The bishops suggest using liturgies to "draw attention to violence and abuse," pointing out that "just a mention of domestic violence [in a homily] lets abused women know that someone cares." Even more significant in terms of discernment, the bishops recommend "describe[ing] what abuse is [in homilies] so that women begin to recognize and name what is happening to them" (USCCB 2002). Here the role of the Church is not to prescribe/proscribe a particular course of action, but to aid laypeople (especially, though not exclusively, women) in discernment—in interpreting, understanding, and responding to the particularities of their own lives. Here is an alter-knowing that is utterly unlike centuries of Christian understanding of (avoidance of) domestic violence: The Church is mindful of what it does not know about particular marriages, and of what women themselves might not know/understand

about their own experience; the complex relationships joining and binding church ministers, abused spouses, abusers, children of violent marriages, friends and family members and indeed the rest of the community are acknowledged in the suggestion that the liturgy is a key place to address violence; and the call for justice is heard in the push for each parish to become a place of safety, and a place where violence is named, confronted, and condemned.

Interestingly, this alter-knowing of domestic violence is shaped by the limitations of what can be known about the best way to respond to a given abusive situation. "When I Call for Help" is a document that recognizes the limited, background role of the priest (or other representative or minister of the Church), and further recognizes that there is no simple, "one-size-fits-all" response to abuse. The unknown inherent in the situation is emphasized; the church minister—who is almost certainly used to assuming authority, knowledge, and power in pastoral situations—is reminded that he is in a situation where being the expert-in-charge is not at all appropriate and indeed could well be harmful. The document sets out the role of priests, deacons, and lay ministers in responding to abuse as one in which they are to "Listen to and believe the victim's story; Help her to assess the danger to herself and her children; and refer her to counseling and other specialized services" (USCCB 2002). The victim of domestic violence is seen here as a moral agent who needs support in the difficult choices that lie ahead—the church minister is not there to "save" her, or provide simple answers, but to offer concrete help *as the woman herself discerns how she wants to respond to her particular situation*. The fact that the "right" response to such a situation is not easily nor definitively knowable is emphasized by the pointed reminder that leaving her abuser significantly increases a battered woman's risk of being killed—meaning that a choice that may well be life-saving in some cases can be deadly in others. The risks involved in confronting or attempting to escape an abusive marriage are not just mentioned but highlighted in the text, followed by this important statement: "*Ultimately, abused women must make their own decisions about staying or leaving*" (USCCB 2002; italics in original). With these words, the Church is taking a step back, ceding choice/authority/power to the woman at the center of the situation, and recognizing that "the right thing to do" is a prudential judgment not strictly knowable by an outsider.

Beyond this (already significant) recognition of the knowable uncertainty involved in responding to violence, "When I Call for Help" even suggests that the Church's mindful nonknowing with respect to an abusive marriage does and must extend to whether or not the relationship is irretrievably broken. Restoration of the relationship is recommended *if possible*—and if that is not possible, then the minister's task is to accompany the woman in mourning the loss of the relationship (USCCB 2002). This recognition that not all relationships can be repaired is helpful especially

to those women who have assumed that their Catholic faith means that they cannot leave, or that leaving would make them the guilty party who destroyed the marriage. The bishops recognize that this misunderstanding must be confronted head-on, and thus they say quite clearly, "The person being assaulted needs to know that acting to end the abuse does not violate the marriage promises . . . violence and abuse, not divorce, break up a marriage"(USCCB 2002).

And yet, despite the bishops' turn towards recognizing an abused woman's competence and responsibility to discern her own way forward, problems still remain. Leaving an abusive marriage is one thing; ending it is another, and the Catholic Church insists that ending a valid marriage is not possible. Catholic teaching on the indissolubility of marriage allows for the legitimacy of the physical separation of spouses in some circumstances, but nothing more than that. In the eyes of the Church, the marriage still exists, even if the spouses go through a legal (civil) divorce. Without an annulment (and it is far from certain that one could be granted, because violence and abuse are not canonical grounds for declaring a marriage invalid), a woman is still joined to her abuser by the indissoluble bond of marriage. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church states:

> There are some situations in which living together becomes practically impossible for a variety of reasons. In such cases the Church permits the physical separation of the couple and their living apart. The spouses do not cease to be husband and wife before God and so are not free to contract a new union. In this difficult situation, the best solution would be, if possible, reconciliation. The Christian community is called to help these persons live out their situation in a Christian manner and in fidelity to their marriage bond which remains indissoluble (Catechism 1995, 1649).

This understanding of indissolubility, based on a particular (and not incontestable) interpretation of Scripture, sacrament, and law, ignores and indeed runs roughshod over both mercy and justice. Mercy would free an abused woman from the shackles of a destructive and potentially deadly relationship whose core promise to love and honor has been betrayed and broken by her husband; justice demands—at minimum—that the abuser be removed from further opportunity to harm her. Both of these are thwarted in the Catechism's understanding of violence and marriage—or rather, in its construction of a particular idea of marriage in defiance of any engaged/embodied understanding of violence. And it is not simply that mercy is lacking and justice denied—more than that, there is a particular cruelty in insisting on the indissolubility of a marriage destroyed by domestic violence. Not only does it seem heartless to require that someone who has only known damaging and distorted love can never even hope to experience a love that is healthy and life-giving, but indissolubility in this situation is cruel in that it actively works against what we now understand

about recovery from the profound psychological damage done by domestic violence. In many cases, domestic violence is experienced as "prolonged, repeated trauma . . . [which] creates a special type of relationship, one of coercive control" (Herman 1992, 74). As psychiatrist and trauma specialist Judith Herman explains:

> The methods of establishing control over another person are based upon the systematic, repetitive infliction of psychological trauma. They are the organized techniques of disempowerment and disconnection. Methods of psychological control are designed to instill terror and helplessness and to destroy the victim's sense of self in relation to others. Although violence is a universal method of terror, the perpetrator may use violence infrequently, as a last resort. It is not necessary to use violence often to keep the victim in a constant state of fear. The threat of death or serious harm is much more frequent than the actual resort to violence. Threats against others are often as effective as direct threats against the women. Battered women, for example, frequently report that their abuser has threatened to kill their children, their parents, or any friends who harbor them, should they attempt to escape. (Herman 77)

Recovering from the trauma of a relationship of coercive control is a long, difficult process. For the Church to insist, as a woman attempts to negotiate this process and reconstitute her life (and indeed, her very "sense of self"), that she is *bound by God forever to her abuser in a relationship of faithfulness to him* is, simply, horrifying. It is an insistence that the abuser still gets to control her life—and as such it is a participation in his abuse. It is utterly and completely wrong. Contrast this understanding of indissolubility with Keller's description of self-implicating nonseparability: "The folds of past are unfolded and refolded in relation to the possibilities of future. This does not expunge any entanglement. But it *unsnarls the knots* that render entanglement a captivity and relationship a trap" (Keller 2015, 288; italics in original). Here the idea of connection/entanglement is not abandoned—with respect to a marriage, the bond is not dismissed as unimportant, fragile, or meaningless—and yet the *possibilities of the future* remain open. Indissolubility definitively shuts down any possibility of newness in the future; nonseparability recognizes the reality of human connection, even vowed connection, while making the im/possible claim that entanglement does not and cannot preclude freedom, newness, and hope. Such an understanding of the limits of relationality is not an abandonment of the reality of nonseparability, "but an emancipation of mystery from mystification" (Keller 2015, 288).

Rather than accept the slippery, uncertain cloudiness of unknowing and nonseparability, however, some might hold fast to solid, traditional, unclouded definitions. One might argue, in the case of an abusive marriage, that surely such a relationship was never a valid marriage in the first place; surely an annulment is possible. [*Surely we do not need to cede the*

definition of marriage to the discernment of women; surely the laws and structures already in place—if interpreted properly—are sufficient to deal even with our contemporary understanding of domestic violence; surely there is a limit to the nonknowing we have to face.] Perhaps, perhaps not. The presence of violence in a marriage is not enough to make a marriage invalid; rather, there has to be some defect present from the very beginning. What if the violence didn't begin until after the wedding? Must one then somehow "prove" that the perpetrator was psychologically incapable of entering into a marriage, that his later violence should be seen as evidence of pre-existing psychopathology? Those who have studied trauma victims and their abusers note that "little is known about the mind of the perpetrator. . . . His most consistent feature, in both the testimony of victims and the observations of psychologists, is his apparent normality. Ordinary concepts of psychopathology fail to define or comprehend him" (Herman 1992. 75). How, then, does one prove that a pathology exists—or that it began before the wedding—when it is impossible to define such a pathology in the first place?

In the end, looking to the annulment process as a way to deal with abusive marriages is the wrong path to take, and not just because proving a psychological impediment to a marriage destroyed by abuse may well be impossible. Seeking an annulment after escaping an abusive marriage means, in the end, that a woman is *relying on other people* to make a legal judgment about what happened to her, and how she ought to move forward in her life. Given the complex reality of trauma, and the importance of the *re-establishment of one's compromised autonomy* in the recovery from trauma, it is clear that putting one's future in someone else's hands is exactly the wrong thing to do. Thus the status of an abusive marriage (has it been irretrievably damaged, or is there still hope for some sort of renewal?) should not be an issue of church law, but should instead be recognized as an issue of discernment—which the Church can and should aid in, but whose resolution ultimately rests with the traumatized and recovering woman.

Which leads me back to my classroom, and the discussion that took place around Howard Thurman's challenge to the Christian reader that discipleship requires always telling the truth. My students saw that as a legitimate demand—and yet one that might or might not apply in their own lives. Their own free decision, not a demand or a law imposed from without, was central to their understanding of themselves as women of integrity. Moreover, they were willing to explore the possibility that their first response to the demand for truth might well be wrong; they listened to their classmates: they engaged in the hard work of discernment. In their work with one another that day, and in the choices they had already made, the question "How shall we greet the unknown before us?" (Keller 2015, 286) confronted them, challenged them—and called them to new

understandings of "questionable love" (Keller 2015, 288), new ways to live in the beclouded gap between nonknowing and acting in the here and now.

Where that gap has been shaped/ripped open/pushed apart by the trauma of domestic violence, the Church has recognized that it is important to support a woman's work of discernment around the issue of how to protect herself—whether or not to leave (temporarily or permanently), whether or not to decide to divorce her abuser. "When I Call for Help" structures the Church's role in such a case as a resource, a support—but not as decision maker. If this is true for discerning the first step in dealing with domestic violence (i.e., ending the violence), it can be—should be—equally true in the next step, that is, in a woman's work to recover from that violence. Insisting on the legal process of annulment, or a legal definition of indissolubility or consent or sacrament *is not useful here*, and is instead actively harmful. Women need resources to help them discern how to move forward in a life that has been forever shaped by violence; the Church could choose to find ways to be a support and resource here as well as at the earlier stage. I imagine here the Church as a guide, as an inspiration, as a creative source of possibilities that enable a woman to move towards personal, physical safety while at the same time moving towards a deeper, richer experience of discipleship. I dream of a Church that humbly recognizes the im/possibility inherent in violent, sinful situations (all human situations), and that does not respond with LED-bright definitions and proclamations that attempt to banish all shadows but instead with candle-soft stories and poetry that help illuminate the cloudy darkness within which we live and move and have our being.

Women—my students—face violence all the time. They recognize how difficult it is to respond in a way that honors God, honors themselves, honors their commitments to others; they work to enfold the violence that breaks into their lives into a wider narrative of responsive, questioning, questionable, questing love. Their choices take shape as strength unfolds in and through weakness and refolds back again; as creative decisions fold over crushing mistakes; and as their courage enfolds their entangled relationships in "trembling hospitality" (Keller 2015, 302). "*How shall we greet the unknown before us?*" they ask; "*How then shall we live?*" And I have heard them answer, again and again, in the classroom and in my office, at school and at home, in determination and in generosity, in anger and in hope, and always with wild surprising dazzling unending beauty: *with all my heart with all my heart with all my heart*.

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