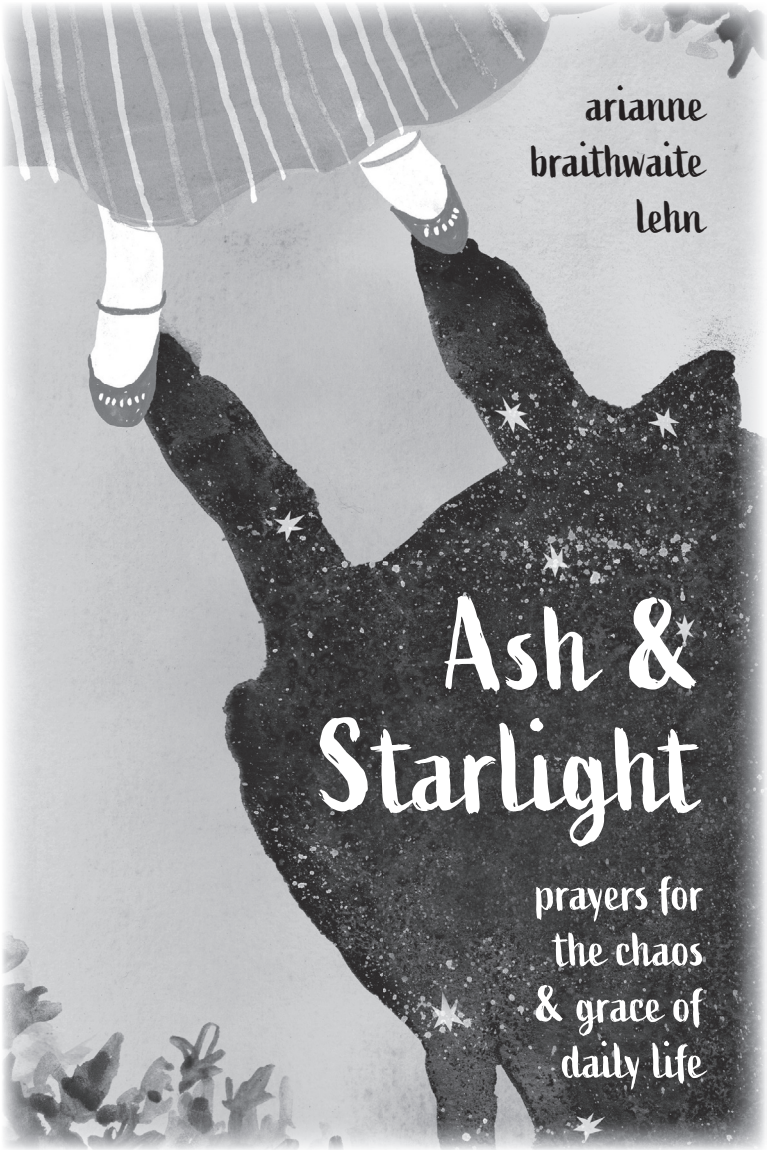
The book cover features a watercolor-style illustration. At the top, a person's legs in a yellow and white striped skirt and gold shoes are visible. Below, a dark, starry shape resembling a cat's silhouette is set against a light blue background. The title 'Ash & Starlight' is written in a yellow, cursive font across the dark shape. The authors' names are in the top right, and the subtitle is in the bottom right.

arianne
braithwaite
lehn

Ash & Starlight

prayers for
the chaos
& grace of
daily life



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*For Dad —
You continue to pilgrimage
with me every day*

Introduction

Every person is a pilgrim journeying toward a sacred place. While each faith tradition encompasses holy sites, there is a personal pilgrimage each one of us takes. And, that is to the most sacred place of all—the heart within.

Each morning, we begin a new leg of the journey toward what's deepest within us—a *Heart* planted within our own hearts meant to stir, guide, and comfort us in every way. Because we are God-breathed creatures infused with God's very essence, the further we go into our own truest heart, the further we go into God's.

At times, a pilgrim is a wanderer. Yet even when we lose sight of where we're headed or start to make a different destination for ourselves—a false identity, a shiny image, an empty promise—the pilgrimage remains seamless. The journey is still holy in all its detours and off-roading. Efficiency and perfection aren't the goals (of which I must remind myself daily).

My own soul connects deeply with the Celtic Christian tradition. Celtic Christianity grounds itself in the goodness of the pilgrimage, the pilgrim, and the Holy One who created both. I resonate with the concept of “thin places”—spaces where the “veil” between heaven and earth feels paper-thin. These places exist in our everyday lives. They are also inside us.

The poetry of Genesis centers us with this. While God created us from the ash and dust of the earth, God then blew divine breath into us. This same breath created the stars—what ancient people saw as “heavenly beings” filled with transcendent, pure, and powerful beauty. The illumined meaning of the poem uncovers a beautiful truth. We are made of earth and we are made of heaven. Ash and starlight woven together.

And ash and starlight fill our journeys too. I was 31 weeks pregnant with my first child the day my father died. With one hand on my belly, I felt my baby kicking inside. With the other, I held Dad's fingers as he ran into Christ's arms.

Following my father's death, his brother commissioned a musical piece in remembrance—not just of my father, but of the message his life spoke. A heart in pilgrimage. It was a song of life's wounds and life's joys. My weary and grief-stricken surrender coupled with God's holy hands in producing the text for that piece. I called it "Ash and Starlight."

This piece would later become the collective title for my most intimate writing—my prayers. Early on in my ministry as a pastor, I began the practice of composing weekly prayers in which I incorporated prayer requests church members shared with me. It became a spiritual discipline through which my truest voice surfaced. When I needed to step away from parish ministry, I continued the practice of writing prayers through a blog titled "Ash and Starlight."

Prayer is how I pilgrimage through the dust and splendor of my own life. It involves expressing what's within me to God and listening for God's responses, questions, comfort, and challenges. There's always this conversation happening within my heart, regardless of whether or not I'm listening to it. Awareness of this dialogue draws me closer toward my journey's desire, awakens me to Love, and helps me know God more deeply.

Too often, I've thought I needed to remove parts of my life or myself in order to grow closer to God. However, I do not need to "fix" anything—my surroundings or myself—in order to pray. I can go deeply into the heart of God anytime. My authentic voice and open heart are what I need, and those are things to which I always have access. Praying while I feed the baby, after I get off a tough phone call, or when I feel completely scattered are all experiences enveloped by God's presence.

I'm learning and relearning how the things needed to strengthen this sense of life-giving connection are not "out there," but within me. My everyday emotions, joys, and frustrations can be the most genuine times of prayer. The inner jumble of thoughts is itself prayer.

And, what I am trying to embrace is how all these everyday experiences matter for my pilgrimage—that where I am is okay,

even *good*. Vibrant connection with God, with others, with my own self, is possible not in spite of, but because of, where I am right now. My faithfulness in this part of the pilgrimage will lead me to the next, and, all the while, I can channel God's blessing when I keep that passage open through prayer.

My hope for you, sibling pilgrim, is to find in these pages a prayerful companion for your own journey. This companion encompasses prayers for your inner landscape and outer rhythms. There are prayers for what you're feeling and prayers for the year's seasons.

These prayers can be starting spots for your own— a springboard you can use to offer to God your own unique thoughts and feelings you need to let loose. Or, these prayers can also be a place for you to rest. I have been so thankful for the prayers of others when I myself didn't have it in me to pray—or didn't want to.

Following each prayer are a few scripture references. These connect with the themes of the prayer and provide nourishment and wisdom for further meditation.

I pray you see how the experiences and emotions you want to leave behind are actually integral to who you are and are becoming. God wants your honest attention and availability more than piety and achievement.

I long for you to be grounded in the deepest promises of which we all need the most reminding: We are loved as we are. We are not alone. We are instruments of blessing, even when we don't realize it.

I hope you feel freshly empowered and equipped to approach life with grace and curiosity; to surrender and trust amid your fears; to rejoice in your current life, even as you're moving toward something else. You will uncover how all the seasons of your inner and outer life instrumentally form you.

May you awaken to sentiments you didn't realize were harbored within you, and invite God to share in them. And, may you say yes to the ash and starlight in your journey, because there is no transformative power in what we deny.

The world is a broken and beautiful place, and a tender, strong God holds us in it. I pray you find connection and wholeness as you run with elation or crawl on hands and knees through the dark. We will all do both.

We won't fully reach the destination—at least, not in this life. But, God will give us glimpses along the way—enough to get us up in the morning and say “yes” all over again. I am so grateful we pilgrimage together.

* * *

Ash and Starlight

On waves where trembling feet
Sink and dance there rises
Between my toes a peace...
Where heaven and earth embrace,
Where the ash in my mouth,
The starlight in my bones
Weave together in wholeness.

I run
Carried on a strength beyond me,
Feet raging against soil I did not choose.
My eyes turn upward,
And through the grit, the tears, the joy
Long to glimpse the land of the living.

I sing
Adding my voice to the universal chorus.
Turning my song from a plea for deliverance
To a chord of gratitude.

I love
Unfurling my hands in aching yes
And clasp the holy gift,
Which is this day,
Which is enough.
Another chance to live,
To burn with grace.¹

*—2015, text by Arianne Braithwaite Lehn,
goes with musical composition by Timothy C. Takach*

¹ An explanation of this composition's meaning can be found at <https://ariannebraithwaitelehn.com/2015/05/23/ash-and-starlight/>

A Short Note on How and to Whom I Pray

While I definitely don't believe prayer must begin with, "Dear God," or end with, "Amen," it can be a comforting framework, collecting me into place when I feel distracted, confused, and stressed. I don't always pray this way. Sometimes, all I can do is groan. Sometimes, I close my eyes and smile. Sometimes, I turn on a piece of music, letting it form the prayers of my heart. And, sometimes, I focus on my breath, remembering it is God's life-force right there.

I have long found comfort in Romans 8:26–27, which promises, "[T]he Spirit helps us in our weakness...[interceding] with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God."

The further I travel on my personal pilgrimage, the more God has expanded my embrace of both new vision and mystery. I celebrate the ever-growing variety of forms, images, and names by which God connects with us. I am deeply grateful to Joyce Rupp (*Fragments of Your Ancient Name*) and Lauren Winner (*Wearing God*) for their profound impact in broadening and deepening my love for the many ways we encounter God.

However I pray, and whatever words I use, I do so in the spirit and loving kindness of Christ—my *Home*.