



Awakening to *Life*

A Meditation

Beginnings

There is a moment each day when we can hear the dawn even before we see it. If we are awake wide enough and early enough, we may hear the birds beginning to sing even before night gives way to day.

When the monk and mystic, Thomas Merton, heard the song of the birds just before dawn, he imagined that they were asking their Creator for permission to be, for permission to begin that day — just as on the first day of creation.¹ They ask the Creator because they do not take their lives for granted, do not take the day for granted! For the birds, or so it seemed to Thomas Merton, the possibility of beginning each day is as miraculous as it was “in the beginning” of the first day of creation.

How we begin each day affects how we will go through that day. In our culture, it

is not easy to awaken to the miraculous gift of each day and of life itself. Many of us begin the day mechanically — jarred into motion by the sound of an alarm clock. We have set the time to begin, or so we believe, and so we take the possibility of each day for granted. All the gadgets of technology leave us with the illusion that we are or should be in control of how our day begins and proceeds and ends.

And yet so many of us feel our lives are out of control. We are driven by demands and directives which propel us forward or leave us strangely paralysed. For some of us, there are not enough hours in the day and for others there are too many. While some feel oppressed by overwork, others are ground down by lack of work or meaningful work. In our present economic system, human beings are taken for granted.



Gifts not to be taken for granted

If we take our lives for granted, we ourselves will inevitably be taken for granted by someone else. Now, more than ever, we must find our way back to the wonder of life and our way forward to wisdom. We are deluged with information about how to live efficiently or how to become healthy but we lack insight into the why of it all.

We must awaken to life, to the immeasurable gift from God which should not be taken for granted.

Most of us have a ledger view of life. We add up the pluses and minuses and try to account for our lives. In the process, we miss the amazing fact that we even have a life to add up. In a culture of cost-benefit analysis, it is easy to miss the most important realities — which are always incalculable.

It is quite possible that many of us take the most important things in our lives for granted — simply because they are more difficult to calculate, less easy to control. Experience can or

should teach us that we cannot make love or friendship happen. We cannot buy affection. When such relationships appear in our lives, we know they are gifts and they are for free.

So too, we cannot manufacture faith or hope. We may receive faith as grace, act on it and strengthen it but we cannot make ourselves believe. So too, no amount of positive thinking, no new technique, can produce an antidote to doubt and despair. Hope is conceived within us and we are not the parents of our own hope.

How easily we take life itself for granted. We breathe, we eat, we walk, we think, we sleep and expect to awake. We take ten fingers and ten toes for granted. We are more startled when someone has one leg than by the fact that most of us have two. We take the flow and supply of water for granted until and unless it becomes a threatening flood.

How much we want to be in control of our own lives and even the lives of others. We want to decide when to begin the day, what to do and when to call it quits. So too, we are tempted to decide when human life should begin, how it should be lived and when it can or should be ended.

The contemporary compulsion is to be in control. It has now become a great constriction from which we must break free. Let us awaken into life.

As on the First Day of Creation

Let us awaken with a song of gratitude in our hearts. We have been granted this one more day, this time of our lives. May we be a blessing.

Let us breathe and count each breath as a blessing. We are sustained by the air, by generations who have gone before us and are now part of the dust, the stardust and the air. We are upheld by the earth. We have a place to walk on. We have eyes that can notice the difference between day and night. Once again, may we be amazed, as on the first day of creation, that there is night and there is day, evening and morning.

Let us listen to the world about us, as if on the first day of creation. Not only are there birds, there are flowers and trees greening — even in the midst of our cities.

Let us listen to the beating of our hearts — to the hopes and fears which flow through us and beyond us. However burdened and broken our hearts may be, they are still beating and this too should never be taken for granted.

Let us pause to think about the people we know. May we not take them for granted. Let us grant them, friends and enemies and mere acquaintances, a good measure of respect. They too had their beginning in God.

Let us wrap our minds around our planet, moving through space, sustaining us still. It is a planet filled with calamity and cruelty and yet it is there, it is here we find a place to be.

Dwelling in Mystery

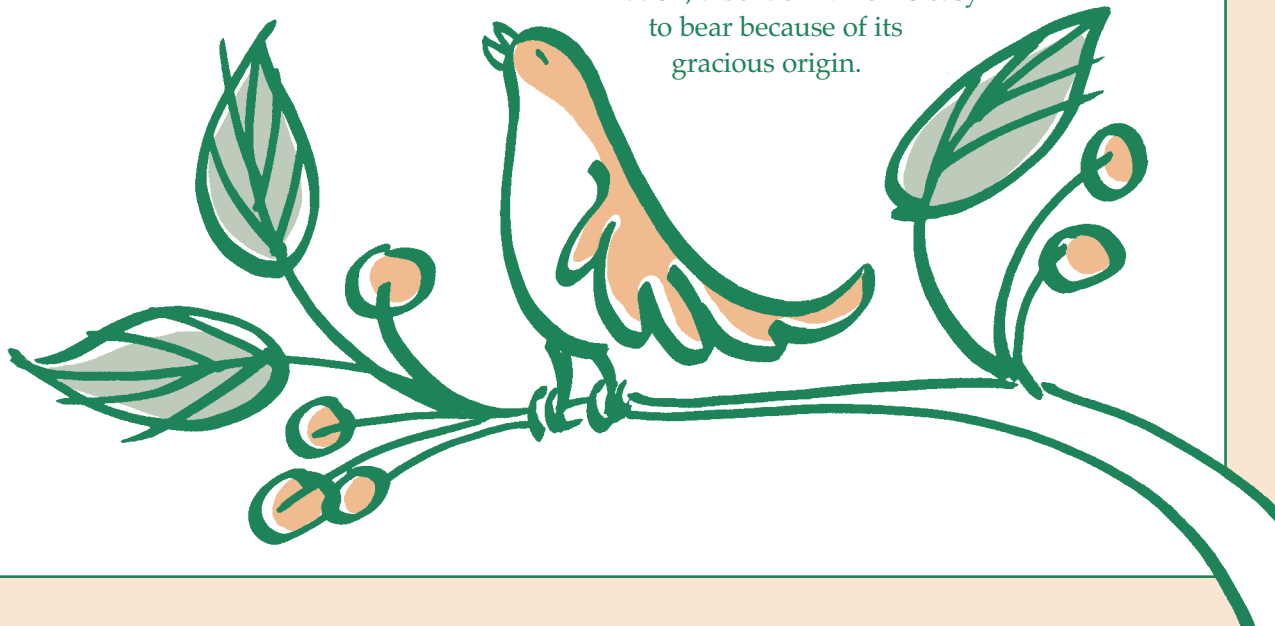
When we dwell in the mystery of the beginning of the day, when we do not take it for granted, we are filled with gratitude for the gift of life.

When we begin the day in gratitude, we are filled with wonder, joy and a sense of trust in what has been given, in what is beyond our control.

As on the first day of creation, we reflect on the mystery of the beginning of each day, the beginning of each life, and see that it is very good.

It is this sense of the goodness of life and creation that we as Christians hold dear. Our faith is rooted in a sense of gratitude because the most important realities are those which we could never manufacture or produce on our own: life, love, faith and hope. We do not bring ourselves to birth, we cannot make others love us, we cannot manufacture faith and hope in our lives. Nor do we want to.

Our purpose in writing this meditation has been to awaken once again this sense of gratitude within the Christian community. This is the heart and soul of the graciousness of our faith. It is because of this sense of gratitude that we want to offer an alternative to a culture in which human living has become constricted by the ethic of control. If we meditate on what we have been given and are grateful for it, we will want to give what has become life-giving for us. Each gift becomes a responsibility, an obligation, a burden which is easy to bear because of its gracious origin.



We have an obligation to speak up publicly in defence of life and to make interventions for the most vulnerable in society. The issues involved are fundamental to the good of our society. However, it is all too easy to restrict such discussions to political, legal or even moral terms. Such discussions are important, but they can be ultimately lifeless if they are severed from the spirit of gratitude which animates the efforts of Christians to live out of a sense of thankfulness for life.

It is not enough for Christians to defend human life at every stage and in all its dimensions. We must be people who love life, who

awaken in the morning with a sense of gratitude, who count each moment as a blessing. Our desire to treasure human life does not arise from any self-made moral perfection on our part. We are tempted by the desire to control as much as many in our culture. Yet we believe that the desire to live gratefully has been placed deep within our hearts and within our tradition, and we want to bear the burden of this blessing.

Let us awaken to life.

*Father, you are holy indeed,
and all creation rightly gives you praise.
All life, all holiness comes from you
through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord,
by the working of the Holy Spirit.²*



NOTES

1 Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* [Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday, 1966].

2 Eucharistic Prayer III, Copyright © 1973, 1975, International Committee on English in the Liturgy, Inc. (ICEL). All rights reserved.

This meditation has been produced by the Catholic Group for Health, Justice and Life. The Group is an ad hoc coalition of four organizations that has made interventions in the Supreme Court of Canada in 1997 and 1998 in two cases that concern the right to life and dignity of the unborn child. Members of the group are: The Canadian Association of the Knights of Columbus, The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCC), The Catholic Health Association of Canada (CHAC) and The Catholic Women's League of Canada. The meditation was initially released on June 12, 1997, as a companion piece to the Group's argument in the Supreme Court.

Copies of this meditation are available in English and in French from the CCCC, 90 Parent Avenue, Ottawa, ON K1N 7B1 – Tel (613) 241-9461 Ext. 230, Fax (613) 240-8117, and the CHAC, 1247 Kilborn Place, Ottawa, ON K1H 6K9 – Tel: (613) 731-7148, Fax (613) 731-7797. A donation to help with the printing costs would be appreciated.

The Group expresses its appreciation to the Catholic Organization for Life and Family for co-ordinating the production of this message and to the CCCC Publications Service for contributing the design.

Awakening to Life – A Meditation, Copyright © CGHJL, 1999. All rights reserved.