

# The Light of Evening

*meditations*

ON GROWING  
IN OLD AGE

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TWENTY-THIRD  
PUBLICATIONS

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# Waking Up

I HAVE EXPERIENCED, AND YOU MUST HAVE AS WELL, THAT THERE IS MORE TO WAKING UP THAN OPENING ONE'S PHYSICAL EYES. It may not be at first light. It may be in the dark when all is quiet. Waking up in a more than physical way is about being present and aware in the here and now, whether we are wearing pajamas or dressed to the hilt.

Waking up can happen in a confrontation, a love moment, or gazing into the bathroom mirror. To be alive this very second in whatever capacity is a miracle that we often ignore. Perhaps, for some of us, with only a few years left, it is urgent to awaken in every sense of the word. It is to embrace what Rabbi Abraham Heschel affirmed: *Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy.*

I believe that when we awaken in this way, we awaken into reverence and the recognition that everything around us is holy in some way. With awakened eyes, even an ordinary day

can be entered with renewed presence. This day will never happen again, nor will the way we live it and love it. This is not an occasion for lament but for deepening participation in the given. Inner and outer worlds can meet. Daily, something of beauty, tenderness, understanding, and gratitude can be lived and shared. Then, even if we wake at night or are in a metaphorical darkness, *there*, for the having, is the gift of being alive even when we feel some fear now and then.

No one can live for us. Our lives can blossom with meaning only if we receive the gift of our remaining time. As our lives round toward their natural ending, we tend to have more time to reflect. The insistence of tasks to be done is not as strong. We can, in a way that we perhaps never could before, think of it as a found generosity of hours to spend in what is familiar and is yet there to be rediscovered in new ways. A day can be tasted, touched and felt, heard, seen, and smelled. To awaken this way is to sense and reverence with all our faculties the wonder of simply being.

## *afterthoughts*

It's easy to be philosophical and grateful when things are relatively benign. But to awaken with pain, with fear, or with a sense of helplessness that sometimes comes with growing older is another matter. With the awareness that our lives are moving toward their end, we might opt for denial and welcome medicines that blunt the truth a bit.

Still, I believe it is all of life I must awaken to—the horror, the joy, and the fear. I need to dare to live as fully as I am able. Getting old is not for sissies, we have heard time and time again. Let's embrace that we aren't sissies. Let's take life by the hand. Let's acknowledge that we are not only brave but adventurous, too. Our age need not be a determining factor in our thinking. We can reclaim that the moments when we are fully awake are precisely those moments that our souls chose to experience by taking birth. There is a difference between the dry tea bag and the one in hot water. I don't think we'll know who we are unless we are willing to enter experience fully, however it shows up, and live it with gusto.

Let's remember and take comfort in these familiar words from Psalm 18: *This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.*



## Our Gift

EVERY ONE OF US HAS IN THEIR BEING SOMETHING THAT IS A GIFT TO BE SHARED WITH THOSE WHOSE LIVES TOUCH OURS. Sometimes the gifts are obvious to others: a knack for leadership, a talent for music, painting, or a calming presence. Sometimes we have no idea what it is that our being offers to others, especially when we are old and can't function as we always used to. This can make us feel like burdens instead of possible gifts to other people. The big temptation when we feel this way is to disparage ourselves. It's hard to realize how in disparaging ourselves we become the very burdens we didn't want to be. Even when subtle, our feelings can fill a room. One of the big spiritual tasks in our later years is to give up needing to be useful as a reason for being. To untether our selves from ideas of what in the past constituted our sense of worth is a bit like free floating in the air. It is liberating when we understand that our worth is not up to us or anyone else to determine. It

requires us to trust that having belonged to our Source from the very beginning, we need no longer prove anything.

What a puzzle! When we turn the picture part of any ordinary jigsaw puzzle over, we'll see the brown or gray cardboard backing. No colors. No picture there, just the outlines of the puzzle pieces as they fit together. If we took one piece out of that puzzle, we would surely see the hole it left. On the colored side, the hole left by the missing piece may not be noticed very much, as it may have depicted only a bit of cloud or the green moss on a stone under a bridge, something seemingly peripheral to the main image.

But seen from behind, the absence is very noticeable. Could we prayerfully let go of having to be this or that important, colorful thing and allow our lives to be sanctified by Spirit? When we think we completely know ourselves, we can be quite sure that we do not. It is God who sees the complete picture when we turn ourselves over. Slowly, perhaps daily, we can learn to trust that our lives have meaning in ways we will never understand. That will help us to give up fixed ideas about ourselves and let us live in the ongoing mystery and beauty of daily life with no obvious agendas or goals. It would mean no insistence on having to have things be just so, according to some artificial standard. Could we think of it as an adventure the old can have perhaps more than others? I believe we can freely float in God's vast love without a tether.



## *afterthoughts*

Old inner habits of thought are tenacious. We have inhabited them to the point of identification. They do not have to confine us, however. Residing in a habitat does not define the creature living there. It is still just itself in an environment that might be supportive or detrimental.

To be the specific creatures that we are is what is asked of us, not perfection, usefulness, or any other attribute that our conditioning and circumstances led us to believe we should be.

Spirit is our true habitat and is unconditional in its acceptance of us. That love pours out to each of us. The false efforts of trying to be *of worth* are ones we have a huge opportunity to release. Looking deeply, are we not already of intrinsic worth and belonging to the whole? There is an old and venerable practice we can do that can help train us to mentally remember that we are graced. Crossing our hands gently over our hearts, we may repeat, Wonder-full, Wonder-full, Wonder-full. When we do this daily, a new habitat is created. Eudora Welty said that *all true serious daring begins within*. Then to dare trust the love that made us is a wonder-full practice.



# Taking Stock

WHETHER WE WANT TO OR NOT, THERE WILL INEVITABLY COME MOMENTS IN THE EVENING OF OUR LIVES TO TAKE STOCK. What have we done that we are proud of? What have we done that we regret? What has never been resolved? What is there yet to engage in? What has mattered all along?

It's not easy to answer these questions. It's human to shy away from the bare and naked truth. An inward courage is needed to do so, or perhaps we need the truth more than we need the stories we might tell ourselves so that we might look worse or better than we are. When taking stock, we need to smile, to know there is no life without mistakes, without some confusion and messiness, and without sudden things happening for apparently no reason. Nor is there a life without special beauty and hidden tenderness. This is true for everyone.

But deeper than that, it is wonderful to know with our whole beings that we are far more than what we have done or what we

have not done. From the beginning, our lives have been held in God's love. Our accounting is not bean counting but counting on God's use of our lives, even counting our mistakes. Then we can trust, knowing that everything that was done by us that we are proud of may be understood to have been done with God's agency. We can drop a sense of ownership and pride and find gratitude and humility instead.

It is a huge relief to drop inflation. Having to be on top, elevated and special, is to teeter on a pedestal whose base always awaits our plunge to the bottom and to the discovery of who we really are: flawed, precious, of singular beauty, and very human. The more we understand and feel God's agency within us, the more effective and beautiful our lives will be and the more they can be lived with delight and courage. This is living in humility. It is a gift of freedom from false efforts and from the tedium of self-absorption. Our given natural capacities will blossom when we act simply and confidently from the love of God within us. There will be a natural quality in what we do. Taking stock with this in mind brings the bar to the heart and not to the striving ego. We can look at the past with genuine, kind eyes that see the grace that was present all along.

## *afterthoughts*

When we can look at the past with kind eyes and see the grace that was present there all along, we will be filled with a quiet joy. It also helps us now, in our old age, to keep growing in the confidence that what we are able to do is enough, even if it is only to smile.

God loves us precisely as we are. To have faith in this is profoundly reassuring. Our precious particularity *does* matter. Our humanity, quirks and all, has infinite value. How curious that in a lived sense of humility so much is rescued. Truth seems always to be paradoxical. Without any self-appointed assessment, we become naked of embellishment. We are stripped of negative self-evaluation. Living then as beloved beings is ultimately both freeing and enabling.

The more we are centered in the fierce, bonding love of God, the more we can release assessment and realize the preciousness of both the difficulties and the joys that are and that have been embedded in our years. Fully consenting to the love that has been and is daily offered to us is the only stock we need to take. To deepen our consent, we can consecrate our cupped and opened hands at the beginning of each day and remind ourselves to take note throughout the day of what is given to us. It is an open-handed gesture, a physical prayer of expectation. At the end of the day, we can take stock of what we have received and give thanks for it. Learning to deeply receive is a one-step humility program. It will keep us growing until our last breath.