



*The treasure we look for
is hidden in the ground on which we tread*

Henri Nouwen

What follows is an extract from Margaret Silf, *Sacred in the City Seeing the Sacred in the Everyday*

Margaret Silf invites us to look with new vision at where we live. She says, "this is the holy city – your city – alive with the sacred mystery all around you and deep within you."

FROM DAWN TO DUSK

BEGINNINGS

While you were asleep – or maybe not – the day began with a holy hour, as the birds welcomed the new day with their dawn chorus. An early walk through your neighbourhood will give you a free ticket to the concert. It has been said that a bird doesn't sing because it has a message. It sings because it has a song. Forget the "messages" that crowd your mind. Listen for a sacred moment, to the song that your heart longs to sing. What is that song really about? Is anything preventing you from singing it?

As you are reading this page, a woman nearby, in a home or in the local maternity hospital, is going into labour. A new life is beginning. Just to bring this

simple fact, this minute-by-minute miracle can be an invitation to ponder our own beginnings. What did we dream of becoming? Sometimes those early aspirations take shape in our later lives in ways we didn't expect, and might not even recognise.

ENDINGS

And just as surely, while you read, someone nearby, either at home or in a hospital or a hospice, is taking their final breath. A life is passing away as another is beginning. A walk through the city streets as night is falling can bring home to us the fact of our own mortality. The bright lights can temporarily blind us to the shortness of our lives and offer us distraction and diversion, and yet inevitably the night falls. We find ourselves in darkness. The lights have gone out, but another kind of light reveals itself – the starlight and the moonlight – much greater, more lasting lights than the neon signs of cinema and night club. It turns out that life and death are not mortal enemies but equal partners in the infinite dance of life. Every ending is a new beginning but the future cannot come to birth in us until we are ready to cut the cord of whatever is holding us to the past.

AND THE ROAD BETWEEN

As I look back over my own years on earth I can see that no experience, no part of our story, is ever wasted. We may feel that we are living on stony ground, but many who have gone before us have discovered for themselves that this is the very place wherein the sacred mystery dwells. An ancient story (recounted in Genesis 28:10-16) tells us the same kind of truth:

A man called Jacob once made the journey to a place called Haran. Night fell while he was still on the road, so he settled for the night in a stony place. Taking one of the bigger stones for a pillow, he lay down to sleep in the place where he found himself, and as he slept, he had a dream. In his dream he saw a ladder that started exactly where he was lying and reached all the way up to heaven. As he watched, he saw angels going up and down the ladder, and he heard the voice of God saying: "I am giving you this land on which you are lying. The path that lies behind you may have been a story of obstacles and problems. What lies ahead is beyond anything you can imagine, but know only this: I am with you, whatever happens, going ahead of you, keeping you in my heart and guiding your steps. I will never forget you and I will fulfil everything I have promised you." Then Jacob woke, and looked around him, and said: "Truly God is in this place, this stony ground, and I never knew it."

(Adapted from Genesis 28:10-16)

The story reminds me of a winegrower in the Cognac region of France, who planted a tiny vine sapling in the stony ground there. It grew, beneath clear blue skies until it became a strong vine. Its strength came from the struggle it had to put down deep roots among the rocks. Its growth was also helped by the liberal piles of manure that were heaped onto it.

Time passed, as time must always pass. The vine, bathed in the purest light, bore the finest grapes. The time for harvest arrived. The grapes were torn from their mother vine, crushed and fermented. The new wine was left again, and time passed, as time must always pass. And the day arrived when the fruit of the vine was found to have become not merely wine, but the finest cognac, which would bring life and warmth and inspiration to many.

Our lives are like that little sapling. They need the struggle life presents us with, and the clear light of divine and human loving. They need the manure that life throws at us, and above all they need time, to become all that they are born to be.

Cherish the sapling. It is that of God within you, and within everyone you meet, however deeply buried. Engage with the struggle. Rejoice in the light. Welcome the manure for, believe it or not, it is nourishing your growth. Endure the crushing, and let time mature you into who you truly are.

REFLECTION FROM DAWN TO DUSK

- ◆ Take some time to stroll around your neighbourhood, noticing the young at play, or the growth of trees and flowers in parks or gardens. Where do you see new life coming to birth? Now look at your own life. It may seem like stony ground, but the struggle with the stones is making you stronger. Where do you see new life sprouting in your own life?
- ◆ At nightfall, bring the day to an end with a simple prayer of reflection on all that the day has brought, giving thanks for the gifts, expressing any regrets you may have, and allowing the day to sink beyond the horizon of your consciousness as you entrust yourself to the darkness.
- ◆ Hear the promise of God (Jeremiah 31:13) to turn our mourning into gladness and make every ending a new beginning. When has this promise been fulfilled for you in the past? Can you trust in the future?

