

## A Third Presence

# **A Third Presence**

**Hélène Guisan-Démétriadès**

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*To my beloved children*

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## Author's note

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## Foreword by Helene Peters\*

The purpose of this volume is to help each one of us discover the existence of a third presence that enlightens and inspires us throughout life's arduous and ambiguous experiences. With exacting lucidity the third presence follows the author along the stages of her life as a cultural exile, a wife, a mother, a human being in a century full of revolutionary upheavals.

Hélène Guisan-Démétriadès, with her triple ethnic heritage, has sought to share with the reader her discovery of the peace, joy and faith that flow through the entangled web of our lives and prepare us for a kingdom where the merger of different cultures blends their separate virtues into one rich soil.

We follow her along the complex lanes of family life. At every crossroad she hears the voice of a spiritual guide that is becoming a force in her inner life. We witness the birth and the growth of this third presence that speaks to her in an ever clearer voice: her father's death becomes the gift to her of his life dream, her acceptance of her son's death frees her from her obsession with the past to let the future unfold, her renewed parental love allows her to let her children go and exercise for themselves their god-given freedom . . . . The most moving episodes are those where, with raw honesty, she assesses the bonds that tie the partners of the human couple in a changing world of sex roles. She redefines love to include a third

presence that, at every moment, bridges the confrontations of free and powerful egos.

Going further, Guisan-Démétriadès sees the world ahead of us as only possible with an invisible partnership in which we become conscious of the universal design that rules our planet. She exhorts us to develop this dialogue that will confront our freedom and awaken a divine creative imagination which will wrought a union of souls, minds and hearts.

Hélène Guisan-Démétriadès' ideas are expressed in a heartfelt, poetic style with a most eloquent ring to it. The clarity of the reasoning, the integrity of the display of feelings and the pure flights of lyricism make this book a valuable reading experience.

*Professor Helene Peters is the author of "The Existential Woman" and is Chair Emeritus of the Department of French at Macalester College in St Paul, Minnesota.*



## Introduction

I awaken, I see the sea spread out before me and I say: Thank you. Thank you for the beauty of the earth. Thank you for the flowering grasses, tall and flaxen like corn, radiant above the drystone wall. The rump of the white horse peacefully grazing is barely visible. The pink oleanders rise like a wall as if reaching to challenge the sky. The wind has quieted. I hear the sea. I am the beach. The waves break over me, retreat, return again and again.

To write, to leave the present easy peace in order to delve into one's memory in search of a lost treasure? We all have our own Titanic. The life deep within, sunken vessel, rusted hull, obscure passageways along the collapsed cabins with their doors gaping or locked forever on unfulfilled love, or premature death. Fish glide furtively amongst the white corolla swaying in the silence of what has been.

What is there to bring back to the surface? Broken remnants of a life, fragmented memories shining in the sand? Exposed to daylight will they still retain something of their submarine brilliance?

One day, in a hotel room, I listened to a woman's voice on tape. It was the voice of the actress Mado Maurin speaking to her dead son, actor Patrick Dewaere. He had shot himself in the head in a fit of rage. I too had lost a son seven years before. Shaken, enraptured, sobbing, I

replayed those words ten times over, until I knew them by heart, inspired by a faith far simpler and stronger than my own.

Until then I had always hesitated to write this book. Now she urged me to do so in order that one day, perhaps, others might draw from it strength and purpose in life.

## Chapter 1

### Dictation from Within

**F**or a long time I had been the victim of sudden bouts of acute anguish. They would come upon me in the street and I would start to weep. I could neither control nor conceal my tears. I would imagine my husband, my children – all dead, vanished. I was afraid to get into the car when we were leaving together on Sundays, fearful of the fatal collision that at a stroke would wipe out all my family. I was not used to discussing my problems but this was a very real one.

There was also a recurring dream. It was always about an exam, as a rule my Liberal Arts examination at the university. I was facing an empty page, the subject matter was unknown to me, words failed me. Sometimes I saw a German teacher from High School with whom I had had problems. Time went by and I had to hand in my paper. It was a terrible effort, an unspeakable anguish. Everything was there within reach but I could achieve nothing. When I awoke I realized with relief that I had earned my degree long ago. So why? The dream recurred from time to time. It was a part of me.

A specific experience put an end to it and at the same time revealed its meaning. It was the year we moved. A road was going to cut the garden in two, knock down the

building and run through it. We had to leave the residence, Mon-Repos, the south-facing balcony above the copper beech, the eastern balcony with its hanging wisteria over which our four-year-old son had climbed one day with a conquering step. I had grabbed him from behind just before the fall. There were the garden, the friends, the elderly aunt, the doctor. All these people were soon to disperse.

Another flat awaited us, in need of many necessary repairs. For me this meant another interruption in my work. I was to lose the waiting room in the apartment below ours, that Dr W. allowed me to use when he was not there. A blessed haven where I retreated every morning with my books and notes.

I was working on an essay entitled *Discourse on Power*. This, for me, seemed to be the theme of our era. It was in fact a study on creative imagination. I envisaged its strength as a river diverted from its course, heading directly towards the domination of the outside world, leaving mankind to its misery. Through literature and painting I was analyzing the web of impossibilities in which present day man was enmeshing himself, in the manner of a character from Sartre exclaiming, "I die to prove that it is impossible to live."

I was progressing like an ant through metaphysics, literature and theology, extracting from time to time a written text from my research. The children were praying for their mother to have time to write her book while I was rebelling at having so little, constantly interrupted by the lack of help, the children's illnesses, the social obligations that tied me to my husband's side, and now the strain of a major move.

I had promised myself that once installed in our new abode there would be no mercy. I would trample over the bodies of my family if need be, but I would write. I saw

myself as on a battlefield, striding over the corpses stretched out stiffly on the carpet.

After sorting out our belongings, the disposal of the fencing gear, shrimp nets and the oft repeated promise never more to hoard, I found myself one stage further, on a building site of unfinished repairs with four children between the ages of three and thirteen. Exhausted!

Two months later, I had the unexpected opportunity of escaping for three days. I could make a quick dash to Paris or follow a course on yoga in the Tessin or take part in an international Moral Rearmament Conference at Caux, above Montreux.

A year earlier, I had gone to Caux for one day, full of mixed feelings. To my surprise they vanished. I saw young men and women singing, standing as straight as arrows. Unlike me they had never studied the cause and effect of a vertical stance but their bodies responded spontaneously to some inner prompting. I was struck to hear people of every color and from all walks of life declare that they were going to remake the world, while with all my self-attributed faith, I felt unable to shift even a pin.

During the following year, I endeavored to grasp their secret. It was, no doubt, due to the special time of quiet that started each of their days. But this was not easy to practice. I had to get up earlier than usual and face up to myself before sending the children off to school. I was only rarely successful and even when present at the rendezvous I listened in vain. No messages came, so I used the extra time to indulge in yoga exercises, which were more beneficial.

To tell the truth, I did not believe in the possibility of intercepting some divine message. Were not those who claimed to do so just playing a game of questions and answers while seeming in good faith? There was the

Bible, of course, packed with endless dialogues between man and his God. But was that not a practice that was valid only some 2,000 years ago?

As for living a life of absolute honesty, purity, unselfishness and love, even for a single day, was this not pure Utopia and so why bother even to try? Yet I had to admit that the quality of the thoughts which came to me during my infrequent quiet times were more to the point than my current daily ones.

I opted for Caux. I left on a Whit Sunday, not sure what I would find there. I do not remember in detail the events of that first day. There was the première of the film *Men of Brazil*, with dockers from the port of Rio de Janeiro as actors. I was too preoccupied with myself to pay much attention to the epic struggle of these men against the corruption of a country. Tired, I skipped the evening meal in order to retreat to my room as quickly as possible.

The following morning I thought I heard a knock at my door, or was it a noise from above? Indignantly I looked at my watch. It was 4am. Was I not going to be allowed to sleep in peace? I tossed and turned in vain. Something strange was happening in my throat, like a voice in my neck: "Get up, get dressed." As I was not responding, the voice became insistent. It was so obsessive that finally to silence it I got up and dressed. It was barely daylight. Not knowing what to do with myself, I sat at the table by the window. I opened my Bible and read: *They went up to the mountain to pray*. That was of no concern to me and yet the phrase stuck. Should I not also go to the mountain to pray? But that is absurd. I can just as well pray right here. I clung to my chair, terrified at the idea of having to leave my room. What would I do outside at half past four in the morning other than appear ridiculous? But who knows, perhaps I shall meet someone?

I left my room furtively and found myself in an immense corridor which led I knew not where. I had little knowledge of this huge building and, worse, no sense of direction. My one thought was to get outside and go up the mountain. I went along the corridor, took the first staircase down two floors and discovered a large terrace with garden chairs and tables. Trying to go further, I noticed, a little higher up, a gate that led to the road. It was locked. I retraced my steps and as a last resort sat down on a chair wet with dew.

I looked around. It was the dawn of a radiant June day. The Alps appeared to float triumphantly above light trails of mist. Everything exuded silence and peace. I let my gaze wander over the immense building that curved in a gentle rainbow. 'Mountain House'. The meaning struck me forcibly. The house on the mountain. Thoughts rushed in: *You need not go higher. You are already on the mountain. This house is the house of prayer. Pray.*

As I did not know what to say, I started to recite the Lord's prayer, and suddenly the following words escaped from the others as in a bubble. "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." I stopped there, and knew that from that moment on I would undertake to do my Father's will whatever it might be.

Time passed. For me, who never had any time, that was more than enough. I could examine those famous absolute moral standards. They are merely a measuring instrument, a basic yardstick to place us face to face with the absolute.

Why I immediately put aside honesty and purity I have no idea. It was absolute unselfishness that caught my attention. I had never analyzed myself in this context. Ambition was the business of others. Yet suddenly my whole life passed in front of me in a flash as if I was about to die. My long effort to emerge, to raise myself above

others at school, at the university, by writing, everywhere in order to prove my own worth to myself. That famous book I was dedicating to the countries behind the Iron Curtain, and which I believed I was writing for the glory of God. Had not my glory and His been woven together all along in so tight a plait that I could no longer tell them apart? As I had just committed myself to obey God in all things, I said quite naturally: "Dear Lord, I offer you my book, to write or not to write, as you wish."

This book, my own flesh and blood, my priority in life, held so tightly to my heart that had a bulldozer run over me I would not have slackened my grip, was, in an instant, without pain or effort, surrendered.

Afterwards I thought about myself in the light of absolute love. This too was new. I never believed myself to be different from my own self-portrait. I thought myself so good, so loving! Now, a pitiless inner voice that thought otherwise was saying: "You have never given real love to your husband." Well, that was too much! What else had I done but to sacrifice myself for him in love? Had I not encouraged him to launch into politics to the detriment of my family and myself? Was this not love? "No, you always wanted to do big things for him, not the small things he needed, that were important to him. To love is to give the other person what he needs, not what you would like to give." It took me more than a year to verify the justice of these thoughts, and much longer to learn to love differently.

I returned home with a new face, relaxed, free of myself. Anguish dissolved, the dream, the insoluble problem had vanished and I was no longer afraid to travel by car with the family. It had been my wish for self-accomplishment, cutting out children and husband, which had caused the unbearable anguish. In a single day, all that had disappeared.



The voice which had spoken within me was never heard again in the same physical way, but thoughts, daily evocations instigated by praying and listening, nourished and guided my actions from then on.

I did not write the *Discourse on Power*. I was not ready to say what I wanted to say. One cannot speak of God without God. More than this, I saw, opening before me, broader perspectives than writing, which needed all my strength – a world regenerated by the breath of the Spirit.

Since then it has been my lot to live the themes of my research with humility. With many others I have given myself to the service of God's creative imagination, which has a plan for each of us and for the whole of mankind.

Now, after many years, another book has been written within me, this one out of weakness where I say with the psalmist:

*O Lord, my heart is not lifted up  
My eyes are not raised too high  
I do not occupy myself with things  
Too great and too marvelous for me  
But I have calmed and quieted my soul  
Like a child quieted at its mother breast.  
Like a child that is quieted is my soul.*

## Chapter 2

### In Search of an Identity

I only know the land of my birth, Turkey, through Pasolini's film *Medea*. He chose Cappadocia as the native country of the sorceress. There she practiced her art before following Jason, the bearer of the Golden Fleece, to Greece. That far off land, with its underground cities, stretches east from Ankara to the depths of Asia Minor. Turks and Greeks lived there side by side until the end of the First World War.

Thanks to my father I retain memories of my great grandmother who was widowed at the age of 20 with two sons, Prodromos and Dimitri. Her own father, an educated man by the standards of those days, had taught her to read and write. In her village, where everyone was obliged to speak Turkish, she started to teach the basics of Greek using the psalms and liturgical texts. She was paid by barter with a hen or some vegetables each time the children had finished a book. She was only half accepted by the peasants. For them, teaching was not women's work.

It was from Cappadocia and the villages of Andronikion and Malakope, located near Caesarea, that my paternal and maternal grandparents emigrated at the end of the last century to the capital of Turkey, Constantinople, now Istanbul.

It was a cosmopolitan city, linking Asia and Europe with strong and active Greek, Armenian and Jewish minorities, dedicated to commerce, industry and the liberal professions.

In 1918 victorious Allied troops entered Constantinople and the Greek flags flew in the streets to the great enthusiasm of those who had awaited this day for the previous five centuries. Their joy was short-lived. In order to retain the acquisitions granted by the Treaty of Sèvres and recapture the lands peopled by Greeks from the ancient Byzantine days, Greece flung herself into a foolhardy adventure and forced its army, exhausted by ten years of war, into the very heart of Turkey.

I remember it still. I was five years old. We were spending the summer at our house in Halki (Heybeli Ada), one of the Princes Islands in the sea of Marmara. The house had no electricity. In the pitch dark, and overcoming my fears, I went down the steps which led to the kitchen to join my big brothers and cousins who were listening to the exciting stories told by the cook, praising the advance of the Greek troops.

In fact it was a disaster, or seen from the other side, the triumph of General Ataturk, founder of modern Turkey. In disarray, the Greek army fell back to the coast and the town of Smyrna (Izmir), entirely populated by Greeks. The Turks set fire to the four corners of the city and all the inhabitants perished either in the flames or in the massacre which followed. It was the signal for the exodus. One and a half million Greeks left the Ionian land forever.

My father had a brother living in Switzerland. He decided to send his wife and children there for a few months, long enough for everything to settle down. I remember the departure, the crowd massed on the station platform. My father lifted me up high to kiss me one last

time. And I remember the long journey, three days and nights on the Orient Express, with our mother frantically searching the train for my eldest brother, a lively and inquisitive child who pretended to get off at each station.

It was from my parents and particularly my father, who rejoined us two years later in Lausanne, that I learned the feeling of exile, the loneliness and the insecurity of those who have lost their country. My parents lived in a humanly shrunken world far from their land of birth and from friends and relatives who were dispersed throughout Europe at a time when people did not travel as they do today.

My feeling of exile is tied to the picture of my father at the age of fifty-three, too old to start a new career during a period of economic crisis and acute unemployment. I see him sitting on the leather sofa in the dining room, with a backgammon board in front of him. He plays alone. He moves his pieces and those of his supposed adversary. He tosses the dice and slams down the large black and white chips on the wooden board. The sound of the chips hitting the wood is the first thing I hear when I come home from school, and I find it unbearable. I would rather not come home than hear this.

This was exile, to be torn from the hot and noisy world of Constantinople, rich in people, flowing like grain through the narrow streets before spreading out into the 'Han', those inner courtyards where negotiations and transactions took place. My father was well known, his word as good as his bond. He would buy cloth and fabrics in Lille, Roubaix, and large textile centers in Germany and England and then resell them in the East as far as Samsun, Trebizond, and Aleppo, travelling in his youth on horseback or by coach through mountain roads swarming with highway thieves. Now he was confined to a sleepy little town in Switzerland where he had no place.

Exile was also the uncertainty of living day by day a precarious existence. My mother questioned buying the smallest of household objects. "Is it worth it since we are going to leave?"

It was only in adolescence that I became conscious that I was an outsider as well. I did not quite know who I was or where I belonged. I navigated between the world of home with its language, food, religion, feasts, observances and rules, and that of school where I fitted in happily with the other students. I avidly sought a homeland, reciting Paul Fort, quoting famous names from French history. But I knew they were not linked to my past, which was...what? Though Greek by language and religion, I did not know Greece and had not been born there. My land of birth was elsewhere, irretrievable, lost forever. In fact my only country were my friends, and I clung to them with all my strength whenever there was talk of moving on.

I remember the camp where my class celebrated our school graduation. It was on Swiss National Day, August 1st. We gathered wood all day and piled it up by the lakeshore, ready to respond to other fires that would soon be lit on the mountain tops. That evening, with the flames crackling joyously, my friends broke into patriotic songs. It was wonderful to be sitting there, all together in a circle around the blazing fire, watching the rising sparks fade like our voices into the darkness. I joined in the singing, yet I was not one of them.

During the Second World War I found two ways to identify myself with Greece – teaching ancient Greek and translating the Greek tragedies into French. I was enthralled by their lyricism and by the thousand-year continuity of the language that was my own. I was also living the current drama of the Greek people through their six-month heroic resistance against the Italians on

the Albanian front, then against the Germans in Greece and in Crete, followed by years of occupation and famine.

I could not go to my country, but suddenly it came to me in the form of Greek soldiers, escapees from the Italian prisoner of war camps in 1943 after the fall of Mussolini. In neutral Switzerland they were at first interned in camps. Later, those who wanted could work for farmers in the countryside. We met them and visited the sick in hospital. One would recover, another would die. For the first time in my life I was meeting Greek people, those from the islands and from the countryside. It was they, each with his story, who bonded me to my country.

At the end of the war I was ready to leave for Greece as soon as circumstances permitted and to serve her to the best of my ability. But it was exactly at that moment that I met my husband. He offered me everything I deeply longed for: love, marriage, children, a happy and fruitful life. I accepted him as a blessing, and chased away all other considerations.

These were happy years at Yverdon, a small town on the Lake of Neuchâtel, with three births in four years. Yet already division was invading my heart. I felt a stranger in the little town. It was then without concerts, theatre or cinema, deprived of the cultural life that had been mine before my marriage. I was a stranger to the world of military service, with its uniforms, fatigues or mess-kits that I cleaned, brushed and aired endlessly, a stranger to the excitement of the political meetings after the sessions of the town council dominated by the left. There were also innumerable clubs for shooting, gymnastics and development to which a long-time bachelor lawyer at the center of a small town would almost automatically belong. This was Swiss civic life, a world of work without week-ends, of evenings devoted to files, of preparation of military

courses and of numerous societies from which women were at that time rigorously excluded. Before my marriage I thought myself fully bonded with Switzerland through my friends and cultural interests. Then came immersion into the real country to which I became attached only slowly, through my husband's commitments.

I can see again the Cantonal gymnastic festival of July 1950. My husband presided and had been working on it for a year. Our third child, a boy, was soon to be born. I had returned from Lausanne where I was going to give birth, so as not to miss the festivities. One by one the groups filed past, banners to the fore. There were all the flags of the Canton, from Avenches to Sainte-Croix, from Burtigny to Thierrens, parading fluttering in the breeze, as if the whole Canton of Vaud was swaying down the road with these young men in white and the names of the communes beginning to ring in my heart, evoking the pastures and cornfields, the lakes and vineyards.

Unaware, I was living a life of contradiction. I really wanted my children to be completely Swiss so they would not suffer the divisions and insecurity of my childhood. In my desire for a better future for them I did not realize I was depriving them of half their heritage and that, in any case, by force of a heredity which I had completely underestimated, they would, one day, in their turn feel different.

However, while I wanted them to be Swiss, I constantly nurtured within me the nostalgia of the country I had adopted during the war and which I would have liked to serve. Distance and ignorance encouraged idealization. I reserved my criticism for where I was and the daily life around me.

It was by a deliberate choice that the division in my heart was healed.

“What do you think of Switzerland?” someone asked me one day at Caux. “What is your vision for this country?”

He certainly did not want to embarrass me; was I not a politician’s wife? I remained silent. I had no vision for it. I had never thought of Switzerland as a whole. I kept the pulse of my heart for Greece, where I hoped against hope that destiny would one day take me back. It only took a simple question, asked at the right time, to reveal the absurdity of dreaming of a country out of reach while ignoring the one which had given me everything that counts in life, an education, a faith, a husband, children, friends. I had to accept once and for all the country that had been given me to live in, and serve it as well as I could.

Through that conscious ‘yes’ I put an end to my inner struggles. But it was through the love for a man whose every activity was given to a canton and a country that I really put down roots in Switzerland.

It was a slow journey through the years and across the countryside, between the gentle curves of the Jura and the jagged outline of the Alps, through golden harvests on hillsides and snow-covered forests, which filled me with the history of the inhabitants of a canton. A meandering inventory of places and people calling to mind first the years of mobilization during the war, then the lawyer’s court cases and, later, the electoral campaigns of the politician.

Avenches was more than a Roman amphitheater, the fairground bench where once a week my husband as a young lawyer received his clients on the first floor of a café. There was Rose, the poisoner, who gave small doses of rat poison to her brother, and the tears the counsel for the defense had succeeded in wrenching from the jury. Beneath quivering poplars beside a small tributary of the Orbe River, he had pleaded on the spot the case of a fish



farmer opposing the building of a dam upstream. The mole catcher, the reed thatcher, the carpenter, all filed past the lawyer from the small sleepy town facing the Jura Mountains.

Along the shores of the Lake of Geneva it was not my husband's clients who were featured in his stories but the soldiers. "I lived in the tall vicarage with its green and white shutters, hidden behind that wall, and also with the blacksmith, Badel, whose wife made such delicious biscuits," he told them. "There's the large room in the communal inn where we played a crazy game just before a changing of the guard, flinging ourselves through the windows. In that field I sat my troops down one day when I didn't know how to occupy them and talked about inheritance among farmers. It was a way of teaching them something other than army drill, to imagine that we still had a future and that one day life would get back to normal. Four years is a long time to guard borders."

Under the great oak tree at Burtigny I listened and looked across at the sloping hillside with the villages of Longirod, Marchissy and Bassins filled with memories, and at the army of golden wheat stalks, thick and upright beneath the great white clouds.

As a young wife how I detested all those soldiers who suddenly appeared during our outings, interrupting our all too rare tête-à-têtes. They could be found in every corner of the canton, unavoidable, from St Prex to the terrace at Cully. How I love them today, those soldiers, now white-haired like us, who still talk about the studies they were unable to pursue because no train ran near them or about the business which brought them prosperity. And sometimes it is the wife of a former soldier who remembers the too-heavy backpack that the captain had carried as well as his own in order to help a soldier to keep up. That was Swiss citizenship – not the glories of the battle-

field but the democratic continuity both in years of war and peace, thanks to the lasting relationships established between men of all backgrounds who would otherwise never have met.

The military fraternity in the small town where the lawyer practiced included the baker, the carpenter and the electrician. They could be found in stormy reunions in the council chamber, where left and right squared up to each other 49% to 51%. The mayor refused to shake hands with the young bourgeois because he had not worn out his breeches like he had on the school bench. Inflammatory battles, evening meetings that would continue late into the night at the café. They seemed ridiculous to me, too parochial, and yet for my husband they were the apprenticeship for the Swiss way of life, with its careful structuring from bottom to top like pieces of Lego placed patiently side by side, so that the entire political edifice rises in regular fashion from communes to cantons, and from cantons to country. This is Swiss federalism, a tight network of human relationships among people firmly anchored in their differences but resolved to live together.

The seventies took us to North and South America, to Spain and France, to meet thousands of Swiss whose poverty had driven them from the country throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. My husband had become president of the Association of the Swiss Abroad. Accompanying him was for me like joining a fascinating game of mirrors. I felt intimately close to the Swiss Abroad, not so much as a Swiss coming to bring them the good word, but as a Greek from abroad. I could recognize in them my own feelings. I saw again the nostalgia for and the excessive idealization of the lost homeland. But they also showed me how right it is to remain true to the values and characteristics of one's country of origin. It is through their enterprising nature, their spirit

of hard work and their sense of responsibility that these immigrants have been able to contribute to the development of their adopted countries.

Flying over the yellow curves of the Parana river along the border of Argentina and Paraguay, we discovered a region the size of Switzerland called Misiones, the land having been cleared by the hatchets of poor Swiss immigrants, exposed to flies, fever and isolation, while Paraguay, across the river, still vegetated beneath the dense tropical forest. It was Swiss like these who brought butter to Argentina, apples to southern Patagonia. They constructed bridges like the Golden Gate in San Francisco and the Hudson Bridge in New York. By remaining true to themselves they served two nations at one and the same time.

Through an unconscious absorption, these men also reflected the different places we visited. The Swiss in Barcelona were not at all like those in Madrid, and the easy-going host in Bahia was a hundred miles apart from the stressed-out worker in Sao Paulo. We had fun noting these differences, which showed to what extent assimilation had taken place without altering the deep attachment to the native country.

With today's ever increasing flow of refugees and immigrant workers, and the free circulation of people in Europe, the numbers of those who accept two or more countries as their own will only increase. They will only find their true identity in the larger unity of a continent or the world by the conscious decision to put down roots where fate has driven them, without denying their own background.

Late in life, I inherited from my mother money that was enough to buy a small property in Greece, by the seashore. This dream of my youth was realized at a time when I was no longer thinking about it and gave me

another reason to explore my heart. For the first time I spent more than three weeks at a stretch in Greece, and as a resident, not a tourist. This led to the end of my long idealization. I discovered the weaknesses of my compatriots as well as my own insufferable Swiss superiority. Why couldn't these Greeks organize themselves and get along together like the Swiss?

Once more the chance remark of a friend helped me cross the threshold. Laughingly I had just explained how Swiss I felt in Greece and how Greek in Switzerland.

"Well", he observed, "You are not doing like Saint Paul, who tried to be Jewish with the Jews and Greek with the Greeks!"

It was a good bone to gnaw on. I realized it was really too convenient to identify only with the virtues of the one in order to affirm one's superiority to the other. To be Greek with the Greeks and Swiss with the Swiss was also to identify myself with their weaknesses and to discover what was lacking in my own nature.

If it is a privilege to belong to one land and one history only, there is a richness in being part of several countries at once. Never being able to identify totally with anyone because of the slight differences always perceived between oneself and others, and having the capacity for seeing everything from the outside and inside at the same time. It is a good antidote to nationalism, to the worship of a single way of life, a single way of being and thinking.

I also came to realize that the greatness of an individual or a people is founded not so much on particular virtues as on the ebb and flow of the relationship with the Divine Spirit.

## Chapter 3

### The Death of my Father

**I**t was the autumn of 1961. Time to think about the Christmas holidays – to rent a chalet or rooms at a boarding house in the mountains for the children and me. My husband could not accompany us, busy as he was with the end-of-year activities in his department. Then suddenly a preposterous, upsetting, insistent thought came to me: *Do nothing, book nothing, simply give up the idea of a holiday in the mountains that winter. But why, for what reason? A mystery.*

The conviction was there, persistent, inescapable. There were no lack of objections either, not so much from me as for the children. How to tell them, to get them to agree? My husband did not intervene. In any case he was staying put. Little by little things did sort themselves out. There were invitations from friends, a scout camp, and eventually everyone was settled, except for me who was staying without knowing why. There was one final temptation when my husband decided to take a rest in Menton after the festivities and proposed that I accompany him. For a short while I felt triumphant: here was the reason why I was not to leave with the children. But no, the conviction was firm; I had to remain.

The New Year and St Basil's day, my father's Saint's day, were always celebrated together at my parents'

home. It was the day we exchanged gifts. I had chosen for my father the finest of silk ties, unaware of what was to follow. On January 2nd, the day before my husband's departure for Menton, he and I had a walk along the lake in the glorious sunshine. My parents spent a quiet day answering greetings cards.

The next day I woke up too late for my usual time of reflective listening. I can see myself now, leaning against the radiator, reproaching myself and then thinking without understanding: *Don't be upset, you will meditate all night long.* At that moment the telephone rang. It was my mother asking for help. My father had had to take to his bed, but his doctor was away on holiday. Who could help? My brother for his part was busy bringing from Geneva an orthopaedic specialist, the only person who knew how to patch together the ancient leather truss for my father's double hernia that had come loose and was giving no support. Another doctor arrived, who did not know my father. He feared the danger of an intestinal occlusion and urged that he be taken immediately to the hospital for an operation. My father had always refused to undergo any surgery, and faced with this sudden possibility he lost consciousness. The orthopaedist then arrived, pushed back the hernia and replaced the truss making the trip to the hospital no longer necessary.

That evening, in view of these events, I decided to spend the night with my parents. I stretched out on the old striped velvet sofa in the living room to be on hand. And I started to pray, but what to ask for? A little more life, or the acceptance of death? And because I did not know the answer I said, "Dear God, how should I pray to you?"

Then very precise words came to my lips: "Lord, forgive him for all the evil he has done for the sake of the good he always wanted to do."

That said everything. With his immense pride and under the tyranny of his fears, my father had caused all of us much suffering, denying us our freedom; and yet, he had always wanted the best and had devoted himself to us without counting the cost.

The following day our family doctor returned. My father was still in a coma. I tried in vain to take his hand, to talk to him, but he was beyond reach. Outside there was a hullabaloo as if from a beach. Across the street there was a park covered with a thick layer of snow, and a slope without trees which was a sledding hill for the neighborhood children. They were calling to each other happily from one sled to the other, or sliding on their tummies, head down, shouting victoriously. A death rattle filled the room; outside life carried on.

On the third morning my mother called me: "Come, come quickly, Papa has regained consciousness."

I rushed over; my brother was already there. We surrounded the bed, our mother seated at the foot and we standing. My father gave me a quizzical look as if to say: "Well, you see, this is it and I am not afraid."

He spoke very slowly and with great difficulty, I had to lean very close to catch one word after the other and then make sense out of the whole. "Do whatever you want," he whispered to me in Greek. "Publish it in your name if you wish."

On his deathbed, it was Agamemnon he was thinking of, his translation of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. It is to this translation, first in modern Greek and then in French, that he had given all his time, strength and heart during the last years of his life. This is what he was bequeathing to me – his daughter and rival – through his translation, his desire to create, to exist, to survive. He gave it to me, letting it go, out of love for me.

Then my father dismissed his children with a wave,

wanting to remain alone with his wife. He died the next morning after a difficult night. His poor emaciated appearance had miraculously changed. The skin was taut on his smooth high forehead. He looked like a fifty-year-old with his moustache still black and his features relaxed. Once again I saw the 'Pallicare' on horseback criss-crossing Anatolia to sell fabric ordered from Manchester, Lille or Roubaix, the self-made man who would recite by heart passages from Demosthenes, Corneille or Macaulay.

Had I left for the mountains with the children I would have missed those precious last days with my father. My eldest brother, who lived in London, arrived too late to see him alive.

On the morning of his funeral I was crying and was afraid I would not be able to hold back my tears in church. "Dear God, comfort me," I murmured to myself.

"Comfort you," the inner voice protested, "when I have given him eternal life!"

I did not know what to think, remembering my father's lack of faith, he who believed far more in Plato and Socrates than in the God of the Gospels. Suddenly very distinct words came into my mind: "Matthew 20; verses 1 and 2," repeated several times because I did not at first understand. I never had any knowledge of the numbering of biblical verses and still have great difficulty in finding a quotation. Intrigued, I opened the Bible and look up Matthew, chapter 20, verses 1 and 2. There began the parable of the laborer hired in the last hour who received as much as the one engaged at the start. My heart leapt for joy. My father was alive, forgiven.



## Chapter 4

# Neither Angel nor Beast

**A**t the age of twenty, passionate about Plato, I had imagined a dialogue with the title *Agathon and Callidore*. Agathon was the lover of good works, concerned about what was right while Callidore, the artist, was devoted to the beauty he wished to offer mankind. Agathon and Callidore walked and talked together in the countryside, breathing the sweet smell of cut grass and honeysuckle. Each of them tried to serve and embody in his own way the ideas of good and beauty shining together high up in Plato's heaven.

However my own heaven was already clouding over. Storms threatened. Gathering on the horizon, I could foresee all the clashes which would erupt between my father and my desire to experience, in the name of art, all possible aspects of life. The dialogue was short-lived. Plato's ideas of good and beauty could only converge in God, the God I could not believe in and that I liked even less. Ever-present death cancelled everything.

It was not the reality of death but that of a forbidden love which opened my heart to encounter God.

We were walking, she and I, arm in arm, our eyes fixed on the August sky. She was the wife of the man I loved. A shooting star fell.

"Make a wish," she said, smiling.

“Die” was the word which sprang from me with the lightning speed of that star. My life hanging on her death because of a marriage I refused to break up.

What barriers have principles ever erected against the irresistible forces of passion? What possible help could that wonderful world of ideas be to me? I needed a love stronger than my own to enable me to triumph over a passion which could not be fulfilled. God alone was strong enough both to fight with and against me. He alone could give a final resolution to the old and forgotten argument between Agathon and Callidore.

At the very moment of my solitary inward struggle to give up taking what was not mine, prayers from unknown persons were offered for me on nine consecutive days. They were from cloistered women at the convent of Béthany at Chable sur Yvonand. A friend alerted them without saying anything to me. I surely owe to them a decision that changed the course of my life and led me to God.

Twenty years later I took another step in self knowledge linked to the deepening of my faith. I found at Caux, no longer abstract ideas to embody in reality, but absolute moral standards, which are unalterable measures for evaluating my motives, my thoughts and my actions.

Confronted with absolute honesty, I realized that it was dishonest to pretend to be what you are not. I was exhausting myself in trying to absorb in me, and to project into others, the image of every kind of perfection. In fact I was deifying myself and confining God to my minute person. But God cannot be confined and whoever substitutes himself for God in order to worship his own idol is doomed sooner or later to failure and despair.

We have worshipped and served so many idols through the ages: Apollo, Baal, Astarté, the sun, the

moon, the winds. Today it is money, technology, culture, power. But the cruelest, insatiable idol remains ourselves. We consume ourselves in serving, adorning, beautifying it. We spend our lives validating our image by the number of our possessions and abilities, by the wide range of our virtues, or even our vices. We keep this up until the impotence of old age takes away our sight, hearing, hair, teeth and memory, and nothing really remains within us but our relationship, whether close or distant, to Him who is.

\* \* \*

For several years I used to go up to an attic where, in peace, I could paint what was in my mind. Not being able to take an easel into the countryside, and not gifted for abstract art, my practice was to memorize what I desired to express – the effects of contrasting light falling upon fields, a tree, some houses. Sometimes it was only weeks later that I found the time to paint what had struck me.

The results were strange because remembered scenes would be transformed through forces of which I was not at all conscious. One evening, as night was falling, I was gripped by the sight of the old roofs of the town below the Bessières Bridge and the people crossing it, brilliantly lit, like characters on a stage. I was so impressed by the beauty of the scene that I painted two pictures.

In the first I omitted to paint the old rooftops – no doubt, I thought, because I had not looked at them long enough. The bridge cut the picture in two, Above was a stormy blue-black sky, below, water equally dark. People, silhouetted in the night by the brightness of the street-lamps, were passing each other on the bridge. Curiously they were all dressed in old-fashioned clothes although it was difficult to determine the exact time. A workman went by, a car, a little girl carrying a bouquet, and walk-

ing from right to left, a woman in a long dress bent over a child, with her arm around him.

The second picture was very different. I had, in the meantime noticed the shape of the roofs overlapping each other under the bridge and ventured to paint the old town. This time the bridge divided the canvas very high up. The town below appeared infinitely small and far away. There were only two people walking towards each other. On the left a young boy, dressed all in white, his head covered by a hood, also white. On the right walking to meet him a woman in a short skirt whom I remember touching up and repainting several times. At first she appeared to be in a bizarre kneeling position. I straightened her up with a stroke of the brush. Then she was arching her body in a pretentious way. I could not understand why she looked so unappealing. Finally after more retouching, with her head thrown back and her torso rounded, she came to resemble a question mark. I did not dare touch her again.

A psychologist friend of mine strongly encouraged my efforts. What interested her, it occurred to me later, was not the artistic value of my paintings – they had little except to me – but the decoding of a language of dream-like quality. It was my unconscious world which was finding an expression, without my being aware, through the shapes and figures I was painstakingly borrowing from real life.

My friend looked closely at the two canvasses while I awaited her verdict. Finally she said, “You have not painted two pictures but a diptych.”

As I did not understand, she pointed to the woman leaning tenderly over her child, and to the other, the hateful one, facing the young boy dressed in white. Both were the same mother-child couple, showing my relationship with the son I had lost.

After this, the two pictures revealed their secrets to me, one by one. In the first I was expressing my melancholy view of life. On the floodlit bridge, as on the world stage, people from life gone by were passing, balanced precariously between river and sky, at the mercy of time and the flowing water.

The encounter in the second took place higher up, at a different stage, between the pallid child and the woman who did not know who she was. Sometimes kneeling in prayer, sometimes reviling herself, she ended up being nothing more than a question mark.

Who am I, what am I? The adolescent asks himself, not knowing what he will be; and the question comes back at the end of his life, hardly changed, who am I, what have I been, what have I done with my life?

Can one answer this for oneself, before the final hour or does the answer only come when we are emptying the still warm room of the loved one, when we break open the egg full of his life? We then think we hold, gathered one last time in the palm of our hand with the letters, the photos and the scattered books, the intrinsic essence of a human being.

Many times during my life I thought that I had toppled my idol, such as at Caux during my first experience of listening to the inner voice. But I had hardly knocked it down before it rose again on its own. Only at the death of my son was it finally shattered. All I had wanted to be, all that I thought I was, broke in an instant. What remained was despair at having hindered the growth of a dreaming boy whom I had always considered a young child, and for failing to stretch out my hand to him at the last minute. Thus, in the painting of the Bessières Bridge, I had unconsciously reproduced the hateful image of the woman I had been.

It took me years to forgive myself. The hell into which

guilt throws you is a hell of pride. We suffer because we caused suffering but also because we have been infinitely inferior to what we wanted to be, and we come face to face with our nothingness. I criticized instead of praising, passed judgement instead of understanding, shrank to the size of my own blueprint the zest for life of another person. How could I have reconciled so much permissiveness and harshness, worry and blindness? It is hard to see oneself stripped naked. But it is also a grace.

Who am I, what have I been? To really answer this question we must get away from our view of ourselves and find God's. He alone is judge and if we turn to Him sincerely, He does not pass judgement, He is compassionate. We are so proud that we find it difficult to accept the infinite compassion of God, who knows every tremor of our hearts and who reproaches us with nothing. In the end our successes and failures and even our faults have little importance in His eyes. What counts is our relationship with Him.

Enfolded in the love of God even our mistakes are salvaged. They become the source of a greater good. They are part of the daily progress of the feet that endlessly rise and fall. My mistakes have helped me to see myself truthfully, to no longer want to exceed my limits. I learn not to judge those who lose their way and make mistakes like me, and most of all I learn to change endlessly, in order to try to redeem the time wasted in loving poorly.

\* \* \*

It was an October day in Istanbul, at the end of the afternoon. I was walking along the Boulevard de la République. It was much too early to return to the hotel, and anyway the prospect of the daily power cut did not attract me.

I had come to help an old aunt, the last member of the

family remaining there. She was poverty-stricken and due to her poor health was defenseless against a greedy landlord and a rag and bone man who bled her regularly of the last remnants of her past glory.

Out of an old trunk she took and gave me a yellow envelope stuffed with photographs. On it I was moved to find my father's large handwriting and the address of our family home on Faïk Pasha Street.

That was the road I wanted to find on this late afternoon. I had been told it was not too far from the Boulevard, and, looking up, I was spelling out the name of one of the crossroads, when I heard my name called out. I turned around, flabbergasted. Who could be calling me in this city where I didn't even know ten people?

"You don't recognize me," said a youngish man smiling at me from the corner of the street. "You see, we are not allowed to wear our cassock in town."

Then I remembered the general secretary of the Ecumenical Orthodox Patriarchate of Istanbul. It was Father Bartholomew, Bishop of Philadelphia. He had introduced me, a week earlier, to Patriarch Dimitri; we never imagined that he would succeed him ten years later.

"I am looking for my father's house on Faïk Pasha Street," I replied happily, delighted to have found someone to talk to. "Would you like to have coffee with me?"

He declined but offered to take me where I wanted to go. We went down several steep streets. I was congratulating myself on our meeting; alone I would have found it a difficult task. Faïk Pasha was now a poor street, badly lit, lined with wooden houses. Which one could be my father's house? I had come here only once, on a visit, at the age of seventeen; and I did not remember the number on the envelope. Father Bartholomew walked on, confidently, as if he knew where he was going. He stopped short at a door and rang the bell. A young

woman opened the door, two others ran forward. There were cheerful exclamations, embraces and I found myself abruptly propelled into the house of the Little Sisters of Charles de Foucauld, in an atmosphere of brightness and joy, in striking contrast to my past fifteen days in the depressing grime of my aunt's basement quarters.

The wooden steps glistened. On the first floor one of the sisters showed us an icon of the Virgin which she had just completed. During the ritual offerings of jam and a glass of water, another sister told us of her recent journey to Cappadocia, her meeting with a young Turkish guide passionate about Byzantine churches. Taking her down several dark steps he had said, "It is only here that you go down to find God."

Then Father Bartholomew took his leave. Night had fallen. Although I feared I might not find my way back, I decided to stay. I felt at home. Another priest, accompanied by two relatives from Athens, introduced himself. He celebrated a short service in Greek and the sisters sang the *Kyrie Eleison* in response. Afterwards they gave me this prayer written by Charles de Foucauld which touched me deeply:

*Father, I surrender myself to you,  
Do with me what you will,  
Whatever you do, I thank you,  
I am ready for anything,  
I accept everything.*

*It is enough that your will be done  
For me and all your creatures.  
Father, I desire nothing else.  
I place my soul in your hands,  
I offer it to you, O God,  
With all the love of my heart  
Because I love you*



*And that is the very wish of my love  
To offer myself, to surrender  
Unconditionally into your hands  
With infinite trust,  
For you are my Father.*

Lost in the large city, I had looked for my father's house and, lo, a providential hand had guided me to the Little Sisters of Charles de Foucauld, showing me the only true house of the Father. The Little Sisters had reflected for me, like humble icons, the holy image.

Who am I, what have I been? Neither angel nor beast, but a child of God, striving towards likeness right up to the impossible divine identity.

## Chapter 5

# Motherhood

**T**here is nothing more beautiful than a birth. That moment following the delivery, which puts an end to the long wait, the fears, the imaginings – and the pain. Now all is accomplished. There is nothing left to wish for, the child is there, complete, himself, with his raised eyebrows and the distinct lines in the palm of his hand.

I remember the leafy cherry tree in front of the window under a blue July sky, the glasses of beer to encourage the flow of milk, the cone-shaped skull which appeared one February night to the terror of the grandparents, the pain before ‘the painless birth’ of the first child, the reading of T.S.Eliot’s *Four Quartets* as a prelude to the second.

And already on that face where the first smile has barely flickered, strange fleeting likenesses appear, the venerable features of the father-in-law or the squashed nose of the cousin from Anatolia. A thousand beings swarm in the depths of the infant. Rising from the beginning of time they brush across his newborn face as intertwined inheritances, amazing fusions that will make up his destiny.

The precious years of infancy, which we want to see go by more quickly – in order to get rid of nappies, the asphyxiating pettiness of the tasks, the repetitive ballet of

feedings, clothes, washings, illnesses – yet which we long to hold onto forever. But time passes, without regard for our impatience or our regrets.

And already distance grows. I can still see my eldest, standing against the flap of my desk, armed with a pencil and a piece of paper. We were about to go out for a walk. I was in a hurry and rushed her into putting on her little coat. Much later she told me, “It was important, I had invented writing.” She was only five or six years old. I could no longer keep up.

How to predict the future of our children? The meticulousness of the one who was once so untidy, his aptitude for Japanese even though he struggled with his German grammar. As for the girls, one liked sausages, the other cakes stuffed with chocolate. One scrambled to the top of the ginko-biloba tree, the other prepared a doll’s dinner-party with her crockery set. One knocked down big boys in the grammar-school courtyard by swinging on their shoulders, while the other was frightened to answer the telephone or push open a shop door to buy a rubber. I called them the rose and the dahlia to give credit to subtlety and delicacy, as well as to petulance and brilliancy, but the flowery allusion rendered justice to neither.

And now everything has changed. The tomboy, having become a successful young girl, mixing up her dates with her admirers, is now dedicated to a family of her own and to changing the world. And the gentle and timid little girl is full of daring. As a journalist she boldly confronts anyone of importance and travels alone without a second thought from the sources of the Ganges to Calcutta.

What our children will become is unpredictable, and the uncertainty increases as they approach adolescence. It is a slow meander away from the mother. They draw back into themselves to create their inner world, shel-

tered from our indiscreet glances, our determined views, our instructions, our influence, to become what they are going to be, detached from us. Sometimes it takes death to understand the child who cannot express himself, to penetrate his verbal hints that never said directly what he meant.

It is the ascetic time of motherhood. We have watched over them minute by minute, looking after flat feet, impetigo, dyslexia, and suddenly we are asked to let them go. We who have trembled, prayed, guided, equipped, now have to drop everything and let the ship sail without us. What has been ours, so close and intimate, has to move outside of us. Our children struggle to cut the umbilical cord. We also have to fight within ourselves not to hinder their liberation. We have to give up not only our advice but even more the powerful images, often dangerous, that we carry in us; visions of happiness, career, marriage, resolution of all of life's problems. Some children do all they can to escape these visions, others to realize them, often to their detriment. They are not there to fulfil our dreams, but their own destinies and they do not owe us happiness at any price.

One day they are adults. Little by little the roles are reversed. They are the ones who teach us, who feed us with their experiences. They lead us towards unexplored places through their careers, their travels, and through that new adventure which it is now their turn to engage in, the creation of new beings, of children as unpredictable as they themselves have been.

We cannot stop loving. We are not only fascinated spectators on life's balcony, holding our breath, crying, laughing, thrilled at each adventure. We are also part of a relay team. We pass on the baton and witness of love to a stronger love, a greater love than our own, a better love, who knows everything, who holds the image of our

children's being even from before they are born and the secret of their destiny, as far as they will accept it. It is their turn now to ask the question, "Who am I? What have I been?" and to discover the answer.

We are praying for an essential relationship to be established for them, that they may live and act according to their divine heredity, in their own way. We are mothers of children born for eternal life. The Spirit too, unaware, has visited us. We have carried within us not only a body of flesh and blood, but also a being, human and divine at the same time.

\* \* \*

We are born for joy. Nothing, no denial of life can eradicate this certainty in us that we have been created for joy. It alone is self-sufficient and unquestioning. We cannot create it, we can only receive it as a grace, an overflowing of meaning, an excess of existence.

I am born for joy. I know it when the blue sea calls, "Come and dance!" When in the silence of the night the nightingale trills forth among the tendrils of the grapevines; when one heart speaks to another without words because all is shared; when, in the very midst of anguish, answering thoughts pass through me, assuring me of a presence more precious than anything else.

But lasting happiness, the color of time, does it really exist? Is it not merely the past filtered by memory, or the mirage of a haven emerging from the storm, that one dreams of attaining?

Happiness has not been my goal. I wanted meaning, art, love. So why have I so longed for my children to have what I did not seek for myself? I wanted happiness for them more than anything else. Did I not give birth to them in order that they should be happy?

Daughter of my century, I confused happiness with the

satisfaction of their desires and needs as I saw them. But while I was fussing over their well-being like one would dust a room, blowing away the worries, they plainly saw in my face the secret which I thought buried, the divided soul, the bitterness of thwarted ambitions.

Absorbed in myself, I was not always able to listen to them, to understand what was going on in their own hearts. I did not help them to sort out the tangle of their jealousies or their fears, to face up to suffering in order to achieve each time a firmer foundation. Neglecting the one to the advantage of the other, I was often the cause of the distress I wanted them to avoid. They did not have the childhood I had dreamt for them.

I hated their suffering as being my own failure and thought: If God has created us for happiness, then he has not succeeded either!

I needed time to look again at happiness. We always expect it from outside, from a husband, a wife or children. We expect it from wealth or fame, from the purchase of a car or house, and the heart remains dissatisfied.

God does not see things this way. He does not love as we love. He does not hate our suffering. He does not frantically push it far away from us, as if it were the worst thing that could happen. He uses it to make us grow and change. It is his favorite instrument. How strange is God's love, who counts every hair on our heads, who takes account of the slightest detail of our worries, who guides and protects us; he is the same who also redoubles the blows on his servants, who sets himself against his chosen ones, starting with his own son. The most astonishing thing is that they do not hold it against him. They surrender to his designs and receive in return a peace beyond all understanding.

What counts is our growth. We are not born complete.

Nine months is not enough. We remain unfinished. This life has been given to us as a long gestation outside our mother's womb in view of a new birth. We are here to grow and change according to a likeness inscribed within ourselves, in order to become children of God.

How much time and suffering it takes to make us receptive, able to absorb through all our pores the fullness of life! The day will come, the hour will strike and it will be, who knows, one Whit Sunday perhaps, or midnight in February, or just before Christmas, the day of our true birth.

Then joy and happiness will join hands, the immediate and the long-lasting will merge. The sea will fill the abyss in our hearts. Love itself will be shared like broken bread.

## Chapter 6

# The Power of Forgiveness

**F**orgiveness... I experienced a strange adventure that showed me yet again I am not alone with my most intimate thoughts. It is as if I had a speaking partner who, through circumstances, was conversing with me and counseling me in his own way.

It seems to me that forgiving is one of the most difficult and liberating actions in life. Most often our lives are determined by our character, our habits, our prejudices. We will react rather than act freely. Someone refuses to greet us, snubs or rebuffs us in public, and immediately we bear a grudge, we write that person off as unpleasant or hateful.

Forgiveness is beyond the boundaries of any determinism. It is the ultimate free act. It causes a rupture in the chain where each event breeds the next one indefinitely. It breaks the automatic succession from offence to resentment. Forgiveness launches from a totally new starting point an unpredictable series of actions and reactions, a new history which otherwise would simply not exist.

Considering the importance of the subject, I wanted to write about it. I felt at peace with myself. I could recite the Lord's prayer from beginning to end without being aware of having offended anyone or having been



offended. However, I will now relate what happened to me during the course of a summer.

One evening I went to the theatre to see a Belgian company play a stage adaptation of Claudel's *Les Grandes Odes*, a work I much loved in my youth. After the performance I meet a woman I have known in the past. She has traveled the world as a diplomatic secretary and I have not seen her for forty years. It's a lovely evening. We decide to prolong it by walking down to the lakeside at Ouchy. During our walk a name is mentioned, that of a remarkable teacher to whom I owed a lot but who had also compromised years of my work. I honestly believed that the gratitude and admiration I always felt for him had triumphed over my bitterness and frustration, that I had even forgotten them.

Suddenly I catch myself remembering past events in minute detail, all the more vehemently since my companion has in part been a witness. "What, you haven't got over it yet?" she says in a voice so full of disdain that it fills me with anger and shame at the same time. Who gives her the right to meddle? I have no reason to account to her for my actions.

It was like a searchlight shining on me, the exponent of forgiveness, into the far recesses of my heart, illuminating for my conscience grudges forgotten but still throbbing.

Two months later I was spending a few days with my husband on holiday in a hotel at Mont- Pèlerin. There I got to know an elderly and solitary English lady. One evening she literally threw herself at me, overflowing with enthusiasm because that day, by an amazing coincidence, she had met a woman whom I too had known in the past before my marriage, and who seemed to have kept the best recollections of me. I was frozen in silence. What could I say to my English lady? I felt bitterness ris-

ing within me at the thought of that person who had so cleverly exploited my pen at a time when she had my complete trust.

During the course of a single summer, at a time I wanted to talk of forgiveness, two fortuitous meetings had taken me far back to my youth and revealed rancors festering in my very depths. Brought to the light of day how pathetic they now seemed!

I thanked my divine companion, amazed at the infinite knowledge he has of each heart. Nothing is hidden from him, and to reveal us to ourselves he can create situations that light up the hidden face of our being and remind us that we cannot hold forth about forgiveness without having ourselves totally forgiven.

*O Lord, thou has searched me and known me  
Thou knowest when I sit down,  
Thou discernest my thoughts from afar,  
Searchest out my path and my lying down  
And are acquainted with all my ways.  
Even before a word is on my tongue,  
O Lord, thou knowest it altogether.*

\* \* \*

Like many women of this century, I was for a long time filled with bitterness. For years I deeply resented my husband. Everything he undertook he regarded as sacred. Whatever his activities, they were immediately hoisted onto the pillar of the common good. It was never about himself but rather about a task to which he had to devote his entire being and compared to which I simply did not exist. He told me once, bluntly, after returning late, when I complained about a phone call that came for him around midnight: "You, you don't exist."

I was speechless. That was it, that was exactly right, I

did not exist. When a man is unfaithful it must cause terrible suffering, but when, in the name of so-called sacred tasks, your very existence, in all good conscience, is denied, that is also very painful.

For a long time I concealed my love-hate feelings. One day I had the courage to speak of them to my husband and to ask his forgiveness for my resentment. He did not want to understand. He did not want to search through either my heart or his. It seemed to him unhealthy.

So I withdrew forgiveness. It became conditional: *Recognize your mistake and I'll say no more about it.* This lasted for years. I fought to free myself from a bitterness that poisoned my being and caused my confused children to suffer.

One day a friend suggested that I give up all voluntary effort and put myself in God's hands so that he might free me. Like the blind man and the leper I was sitting with my sore on the roadside, waiting for Christ to come by. Was it months or a year later, I no longer know, I remember only that one day during Holy Week I came across those well known words which spoke afresh to me alone: *Forgive them for they know not what they do.*

My conditional forgiveness made no sense. It is precisely because we do not realize the harm we do that we commit it. We wound others mortally without usually knowing it or wishing to.

Rancor let go of me, and the mysterious strength that emanates from a genuine forgiveness began to spread its effect without my knowledge. It is a secret source of energy, an illuminating strength that passes from one person to another without words, and which defies our feeble understanding. We have both changed a lot; my heart is gratified beyond all expectation.

Miracle of the couple, that fortress built stone by stone through the years and which now stands fast against all

storms. A stretch of firm ground, the last bastion against the ravages of old age, loneliness and death. Miracle of the couple, from whom life is born – so many lives who spread out elsewhere independently – while they now turn their eyes towards the further shore, before the solitary crossing. Separation will come, not that of heroes in novels who have not had the time to love each other, to live together, to share the good and the bad, but that of persons who will be ever present to each other, even through the depths of absence.

Our lives hang intertwined. We see ourselves as we are in the mirror of the other's conscience, naked and recognized, disarmed, accepted. And the two mirrors reflect their image and close up one on the other like the oyster on its pearl. The present has covered everything over, erasing in its serene fullness the quarrels, the weaknesses, the hurts, as if nothing else had existed but the light-hearted happiness of the early days, the days of waltzing at country fairs. It was not, however, happiness which fused us together forever. We followed a coffin, hand in hand, equally guilty, equally victims, broken, forgiven.

"My dream," said a woman on Swiss French television, "is to love only one man. But if I look at my past, then no – such a man does not exist, does not belong to the reality of the *routine*. Ten are needed to take the place of the unattainable one."

In fact the perfect man is not to be found, try as one might. He exists only in the illusion of love that believes it has found everything at once. But as soon as the enchantment is over *Mr Perfect* reveals his pettiness, his limitations and falls back into the crowd. Then the temptation is strong to leave him and find better elsewhere.

The unique is rarely found ready-made. There is a becoming of the couple that is only attained as it lasts. Every couple has its own story which can end very

quickly at any moment, after any argument or lapse, when we let slip "It's your fault" when we intended to say "It's your feast." Love will have been but a sketch, a clip, the kind we like today. It will have been deprived of its duration, cut off from its hope of eternity. We can travel through years of conflict, of tension, of resentment when we live side by side separated by a widening gulf, but the story does not necessarily end there. The crisis need not mean the end. It can be the beginning of a growth, a change of direction for one as for the other. It is in the continuum of the couple that love ripens, that we learn to love differently.

To love within the discipline of love which wants what is best for the other and has the courage to say 'no' and to resist what is wrong. How we resent the man in whom we have ourselves, slowly but surely, nourished tyranny either through idolatry, cowardice or the fear of losing his love.

To move continually from a love which wants to be loved, desired, preferred, to a love which carries and supports, from a love which wants to possess the other totally, including his freedom, to a love which wants the best for the other and encourages him towards his destiny. To accept the other without ceasing to see him growing, open to change such as we hope him to become in God's eyes. Patiently to allow love to ripen like a fruit.

Also, to leave behind the struggle for power, insidious, hidden under a thousand forms of competition, rivalry, and confrontation in words or actions. One day that struggle loses all its justification in the obedience to a single master and in the search for a single will.

The couple's unity is founded on the unity of each person. Divided, fragmented as we usually are, we cannot really unite with anyone. Only the person who is whole can merge into a greater unity without becoming lost.

How difficult it is to love this way, without the help of that inner inspiration, that voice inside us which arbitrates conflicts, which tells us sometimes we are wrong and sometimes we are right and which always suggests forgiveness. At the end of the road with what joy and surprise do we find the unattainable one right next to us. The differences may remain as large as ever, but through counting the same stars, a profound similarity has been established. So much so that the dream of eternity, the communion with the beloved, is found not during our early years through our youthful desire, ardor or intransigence. Rather it is reached in the evening of life, without vows, without words, when sitting side by side, silent under a starry sky, we breathe in deeply the scent of the white jasmine and listen to a recording of Clara Haskil who died long ago, still playing for us alone. She lives again in a recording and Mozart reveals his soul to us. And we too, scattered notes and singular melodies – will we not one day also be recorded, like stardust, and come to life together again in God's memory?

## Chapter 7

# Resurrection

**I**t was the day I had the idea of recreating a sight that had bewitched me in Zurich. It was six o'clock in the evening when I found myself at the entrance to the bridge over the Limmat. It was raining. The wet asphalt reflected the red and yellow lights of the cars and trolley-buses. Within the light of a very tall street lamp a tree wore a halo of thousands of golden leaves. Turning round I saw the square with buses gliding past the lighted shop windows full of costly treasures, to be exchanged at Christmas.

At my feet the embankment steps led to the dark, heavy waters of the river where two white swans were floating. There was such an intensity of life in those thousands of lights and crisscrossed reflections under the large golden tree that I remained there for some time, standing in the rain, absorbing each detail. There was something in that scene that I wanted to paint a few weeks later.

I began with the most beautiful element, which I forgot to mention, the descent of night on the city, the transition from dark blue to blue-black, like a mysterious background to the busy bustle of people. Then the street in front of the shops, the three arches of the parapet and the gloomy water. I have to admit that I was very depressed. Apart from the blue of the night my colors were pallid and I did not know how to go on.

How to superimpose the shops, the buses and the large tree under the street lamp? I was stopped in my tracks, blocked. I had no idea what to do and I do not really remember what followed. Why did I put blood in the dark water instead of the white swans, the blood of my son? I also put some on the road that became merely a bright patch, as if there were traces of blood on snow. By what path of associations did I then think of another blood that had the power to wash everything away? And in the blue-black sky I painted in turquoise the two robbers, their bodies twisted in pain. The contrasting blues made them visible in the night. But how to paint Christ? I felt neither worthy nor strong enough. In any case was he not adequately expressed by his absence and by the traces of his blood at the foot of the invisible cross? Could it not simply signify a descent from the cross with Christ and the cross no longer there?

No, better on the whole to paint in the empty cross. Plucking up all my courage, and as if making the sign of the cross, I sketched in a wooden cross, upright and perfect. Encouraged by this, I took some vermilion and in a single stroke, like a single gush of blood from the bowed head leaning on the shoulder to the dripping feet, I painted Christ on the cross. All this was done without any will or power of my own.

Sometime afterwards two women friends both told me, neither knowing about the other: "You have not painted a crucifixion but a resurrection." Today I still do not understand the meaning of those words, repeated twice over. I see nothing in that crucifixion to warrant it, unless the resurrection was alive within me.

When our son died I had terrible doubts. What happens to those who take their own life, even if illness prompted them to do so? Is there a future life for them? I no longer knew what to believe.



Then about a month later a letter came from America. I received it at Caux during a summer conference. I had enrolled a long time before, to spend a week there and did not want to change my plans. When I arrived with my grief, I felt at the center of the earth's pain, but after a few days I realized that I was only one more tear in the ocean of human suffering. There were many others who had lost their husband or wife, their country, their home, all reason for hope.

It was then that the letter arrived. It was from my son-in-law, who was writing from far away in the United States. He told us in simple words what he had experienced. It was in the evening, he was lying in bed, waiting for his wife who had gone to tuck in the children. Suddenly he saw my son coming towards him on a well kept path. He was very real, yet at the same time it was as if one could see through him.

A mental dialogue followed as my son kept on walking:

"How are you?"

"I am well. I am now on the right road, I am going in the right direction."

Indeed he looked well, with a purpose in his face and walk – he who had always been so hesitant.

"We've been praying for you every day."

"Your prayers have helped; keep praying for me."

"Pray for us too."

"I will."

As he was about to disappear my son-in-law asked quickly:

"May I tell Catherine?"

"Tell her, and my parents too."

By then he had gone.

How to express my joy? I was experiencing an Easter morning. I felt like running, jumping, shouting the glad

news. My son was alive. For him distances were no longer relevant. He was spreading his being within the limitless capacity of God; his life was going on beyond our comprehension.

For most of our contemporaries life stops here. Why? As far back as we can go, all preceding civilizations believed in the reality of an afterlife. Often all that remains of them are the treasures they placed in pyramids, caves, tombs, canoes, to accompany the dead beyond life. We are the first who genuinely do not believe in anything and cast the ashes of our dead to the winds of nothingness.

We reduce to impotence our beloved dead by our insistence that they no longer exist. It is not so much the dead who leave us, but we who cut ourselves off from them by decreeing once and for all that they are out of reach. And if it were we who, by our disbelief, kept them at a distance? If we went on speaking to them as we've always done, if we went on associating them with everything that happens to us, then, who knows, perhaps they would answer us. Perhaps we would pick up a sign, an unexpected blessing, gone in an instant, which would make the heart overflow with irrepressible joy.

It is not a question of deifying those we have lost, nor of trying to reach them through the occult, but of striving to meet them wherever they are, through prayer. It is the Spirit himself who can, if he so wishes, in his time and for his own purpose, grant us those signs of life our whole beings long for. They come to those who believe, not to those who would like proofs.

I remember the first time I took up painting again after his death. It was a washed-out landscape of clouds and water, its only point of interest a whitish explosion in a corner of the canvas. I was crying and lamented to myself:

“To think that you will never more see what I am doing.”

“But I will,” was the reply I heard, firmly articulated, in a scolding tone, impatient, exasperated by my stupidity, the inimitable ring of his voice as if he had been there, looking over my shoulder.

The signs are only valid for those who receive them. Their message is fleeting, derisory, untransmittable, but endowed at the same time with such a persuasive force that they can transform the deepest sorrow into jubilation.

If the thousands, the millions of people over the centuries who have been recipients, could or would testify, the shadows of death would be less opaque. We could see, through the tears of the shadows, another world where life continues.

This is why a few months after my son’s death I wrote about an experience which gave me great joy, entitled *The Scissors*.

I have lost my big kitchen scissors. They were steel-gray with such bright red handles that you could see them the moment you opened the drawer. Where could they have gone? I look for them here and there without worrying too much. Something tells me that I will find them again.

It is odd though! How can such large scissors disappear? Could I have thrown them away in the garbage with the carrot and leek peelings? Or perhaps with the prunings from my plants on the balcony? My cleaning lady seems to think so: “The other day I picked up a knife behind the rubbish can, and another time a spoon.” I let her talk and keep on looking.

Where can they be? Sudden thoughts come to me. I go straight to the balcony. I must have left them next to the water tub when covering up the roses. I go down

to the cellar. In vain I examine the earthy dahlia bulbs. Days pass. It is absurd! How can I possibly have thrown away such large scissors?

At first I was convinced I would find them. In fact I was sure of it because of that voice within me. But weeks went by. I searched everywhere. There is no more hope. I have lost them for good.

I miss them to an unbelievable extent. I think of them constantly. My son had given them to me. I bewail inwardly: Oh God, if only I could find them, my beloved scissors, my child's red scissors! I know they are lost, gone with the garbage pick up, but somehow, impossible though it seems, if I could find them, then, yes, I could believe in the Resurrection. Oh, forgive me, Lord, I did not mean to say such a thing. I ask for nothing. You have already told me so many times. I believe, it is enough.

Then, for some reason I no longer remember, I went into the room with the ever-shut door. I went in and my eyes like magnets alighted on one of the bookcase shelves. I spotted them there, lying flat, those gray and red scissors, sensibly placed in front of his books, so undeniably the same. They were there all the time, behind a simple door, waiting patiently for me, while I had been searching for them everywhere.

I pick them up, run from one end of the corridor to the other, uplifted by a wild joy. I put them back in the drawer. I weep joyfully, "Oh my resurrected son!"

Faith in the resurrection does not do away with the mourning that must run its course. Only after seven or eight years was I able once more to listen to music. Then I realized that the wounds were healing. But what changes in us through faith is our relationship to time. We are freed from obsession with the past and drawn

towards the future. The dead are God's bait to draw us to him. We grope our way, arms outstretched, feeling the intangible, pushing back the limitations of our mind and our senses. As years pass the barriers fall, so many things that we had not understood. We come and go, we evolve, without losing ourselves, within a greater love than the one we lived through. We perceive the endless army, the myriad of witnesses who enfold our child, and we return to our tasks reassured.

The roles are reversed. Our child precedes us. Now he knows more than we do. He whom we taught to read has become our teacher. He whom we brought into the world now patiently teaches us to be born.

## Chapter 8

### A Lamp in Hand

I have not always liked women. At first I regretted being one. I envied my brothers' freedom to come and go as they pleased while I suffocated behind the archaic bars erected round me by the jealous love of a father.

At the university, at the time when Montherlant's *Les Jeunes Filles* (The Young Girls) appeared, I astonished my classmates by siding with the enemy of women and defending the boorishness of a much loved author. In fact, I wanted to be a man. I gave men no quarter and found their abstract discussions far more interesting than women's small talk, which often centered on people. Once married, and with children, I still bent an ear towards men's talk.

However, if I review my life, it is women who line the path of my existence like guardian angels at the crossroads of my destiny. Without knowing each other, they took turns to lead me where I should go. They wiped away my tears with their long hair, prayed for me when I was down. They taught me humor, laughter, music, genuine daily love. They washed away my bitterness and opened the way for a life with God.

Musicians, nurses, teachers, doctors, booksellers, with or without careers, they were love. Many of them have

disappeared. Most are no longer there for me to thank them.

Curiously, neither marriage nor motherhood were instrumental in bringing me back to my femininity, nor any chosen intimates. By trying to change myself in order to change something in the world, by attempting to spread the secret of the inner voice, I naturally came into contact with women who in Switzerland and abroad were striving towards the same goal. I would not have chosen these women right away. For the most part they were neither artists nor intellectuals, but they were way ahead of me on a path where I was taking my first steps. They were rich in countless experiences of a life in God, victories over themselves, reconciliations whose effects were felt far beyond their own families. They unlocked better than I the intricate workings of the heart, and were totally honest. Beside them I was like a novice in a religious community, burning everything I had treasured. No longer did I need to justify my existence by writing or by some career, but I was to change the world at my level.

I was asked to give talks on the women from whom I had always distanced myself. This was in the Sixties. I analyzed the writings of Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Evelyne Sullerot, and I spoke on a quote I borrowed from the first: *Women and the destiny of the world*.

“The men we call great,” said Simone de Beauvoir, “are those who in one way or another have taken the weight of the world on their shoulders. They have taken on that enormous burden. It is something no woman has ever done or been allowed to do, to see the universe as hers, to consider herself guilty of its faults, and glorify herself in its progress.”

While fully accepting the feminist challenge, I distanced myself from feminists of that time who considered

motherhood to be the chief obstacle to feminine achievement. Simone de Beauvoir drew on the Soviet revolution to picture a world where men and women would enjoy absolutely equal rights and where collectives would take on childcare. Women liberated from the constraints of childbearing could take on an economic role that would guarantee their full realization as persons. As for Evelyne Sullerot, she suggested maximum collectivization of domestic work. She demanded a “national planning effort to tackle the Augean stables, which currently an army of women are cleaning painfully and archaically, each in her own pig sty.”

My views at the time were clear and have hardly changed. I said then and still think that the basic choice for women is not between different forms of activity, such as housework and professional work, which can enrich each other during a lifetime. The choice lies at the level of the person, in our deepest motivations, in the will to gain power or to give ourselves to the service of a creative effort. The choice lies between self-fulfilment by any means or the pursuit of a goal beyond ourselves.

I have seen my own path clearly but have not followed it easily. My struggle, and often my suffering, has been to live according to my beliefs. My commitment has not been to give up writing, even though I ceased to write for twenty years. Rather it has been to obey, day by day, what seemed to me consistent with love and with my responsibilities.

The will of God for human beings is not the same for everyone. The diversity of human destinies is great, and individual choices are infinitely varied according to personal abilities and situations. What does not change is the possibility for each of us to lean on a spiritual guide rail or to refuse to be led.

In times of quiet reflection I discovered that ‘room of



one's own' called for by Virginia Woolf – that secret place shielded from all eyes and outside pressures, where we can really be ourselves in the light of the absolute. In this radiance I saw myself at the same time as I was, and also as I was called to become through continuing change.

A morning time of silence helped me, more than any outside activity, to gain my independence. I freed myself successively from my own binding chains and those imposed by others. I started to act according to convictions worked out in the 'inner room' rather than follow the dictates of my character or the advice of those close to me.

Identity for me is no longer linked to sex or the degree of femininity or virility present in human nature. Nor does it depend on the validation through one's career or social standing which so many women seek in order to feel they exist.

Identity is conforming to a design imprinted inside us. To become a human being is to develop the divine image concealed in each one of us, like developing a print from a negative by exposing it to the light.

In the last thirty years I have witnessed the sudden emergence of women from their shells as if they had left a giant incubator. It is a fascinating spectacle. Today women have access to all the possibilities offered to a human being. Wives and mothers still, but also journalists, doctors, lawyers, pilots, managers, mechanics, athletes, administrators, heads of State. In each of these professions, mostly inaccessible at the beginning of the century, they excel, thus paving the way for all the others. Pioneers sent to explore the very limits of science, politics or administration, they are more and more reaching the decision-making centers.

However my admiration is tempered with uneasiness when I see that at the same time our western society is

marching towards disintegration. Loneliness is taking over individuals and nations. Here we are, no longer linked together but just placed side by side like grains of sand in the barren wastelands of our cities. In Paris as in New York half the people live alone. Elsewhere in France as in Switzerland, every third household is solitary. The solitude of young people, the unmarried, the divorced, single parents of single children, lovers between affairs.

Exceptional women who possess enough gifts, health and financial means to enable them to do everything at once have created the illusion that to choose was no longer necessary, that all was possible at the same time and at the highest level, without giving anything up. Without meaning to, they have led many astray.

Today few women appear satisfied with their lot. Nervous tension, overwork, depression, resort to medications or alcohol is increasing among them. Those who remain at home feel devalued compared with those who go out to work. Those who devote themselves entirely to their professions miss the warmth of family life. And those who day after day try to combine motherhood and profession continually feel they are short-changing both their career and the care of their children.

I have before me three surveys carried out by the French paper *Le Nouvel Observateur*, the American *Time* magazine, and a broadcast from the Swiss *Television de Suisse Romande*, all dated 1987. They all point to loneliness and chronic dissatisfaction among women.

According to the Swiss TV broadcast, at least a quarter of the women between 30 and 50 live alone. Despite many being young, gifted and attractive, they often experience low spirits and periods of depression, and scan the classified ads to find a companion for the night. "It's quicker that way; that's what men want and so do I."

Another one says: "One has a body, it contains every-

thing. I have to keep it alive, to share it to its utmost depth, which is not possible; so I am satisfied to share it skin deep. I am probably asking for too much, to be accepted with my refusals, my fears, my misery.”

The women in *Le Nouvel Observateur* tell us: “We are alone because the demands of the couple have become overwhelming. We need the love of the Sixties, the sexuality of the Seventies, plus the personal accomplishments of the Eighties.” Or again: “Women are looking for fusion. Sadly we have had to learn to disassociate sex from feelings. However, men manage that far better than we do.”

As for the American women in *Time*, they are fed up. In spite of a certain sharing of tasks, they continue to feel exploited in marriage. Now that the old divisions of labor are a thing of the past, the husband has become a burden and no longer a support. Men know neither how to listen nor how to express their feelings. The article concludes: “Women are staggering under the weight of wanting to be everything to everyone. Right now they would like men to do likewise. But presuming that this works and that men and women succeed in playing all the roles, will they still need each other?”

These women are perhaps part of a sacrificed generation. They followed the pronouncements of the feminists of the Sixties and were rushed behind them into the dead end of adopting the masculine prototype. In their overriding desire to liberate themselves from old constraints, they adopted men’s language, their way of loving, their style of acting and thinking. They poured themselves into prefabricated moulds supplied by a materialistic society based on competition, profit, rationality – and thus experienced further alienation.

Mistakes are often the unavoidable way to the truth. Feminism has evolved much during the past twenty years.

Imitating men has given way to the search for a deeper identity. We are beginning to appreciate and foster our differences. Motherhood again has its place in our fulfillment.

We are evolving in a world constantly re-creating itself. To a great extent we have liberated ourselves from the hereditary Eve, the clinging vine that could only live and grow when coiled round a family or a male protector. And we no longer wish to become interchangeable with men. What remains is for us to re-invent the couple, the lasting relationship between man and woman, united in love and a common purpose.

At the beginning of this century no one could have imagined the extraordinary blossoming of women in three or four generations. Today no one can predict our further evolution any more than its effects on the world's progress. However we can, by our actions, set the compass for this unknown future.

We have power over life and death in the Western world, by controlling its greening and its vitality through the number of children we choose to bring to birth.

We have the power to collectivize more and more the society where we live, independently from political options, by delegating more and more to the State and its institutions the task of educating, feeding and caring for our children.

We have the power to break down our social structure by no longer maintaining the intricate network of human interactions, which, like capillaries and blood vessels, make life circulate through the whole organism.

But we also have the wonderful possibility of bringing about the rebirth of our world, of revitalizing it wherever we are, at home or in the field, in the factories or in parliaments or ministries. Instead of trying to overtake men in the race for power, money, productivity, we can lead

them with us in another direction by reversing present-day values, affirming the importance of what is humble, the reality of what cannot be seen, the priority of being over doing and the power of the Spirit.

The task is immense. It seems out of reach. But already all around the planet, women, obeying their consciences, are fighting to convert the world to the values needed for its survival. They advance, step by step, dispelling the shadows, lamp in hand.

## Chapter 9

# Love Incarnate

**T**here are countries where hospitality is so deeply ingrained that you cannot step across a threshold without being offered a tray with a candied roll of bitter orange, coffee and a glass of water. No matter how much you claim you are not hungry or thirsty, or that you aren't supposed to eat sweets, it's no use; you have to accept. And so, without delay, you equip your own pantry with these necessary ingredients for life in society.

Sometimes when, weary of cooking, I mentally ask my family and friends, "Could we not get together once, all things considered, without eating?" But these words never cross my lips. I know too well myself how cold it feels to spend two hours in a home where no refreshment is offered.

But is eating really so important? Why do we make so much of it? Can we not distance ourselves from our weighty companion and without him quietly indulge in purely friendly encounters? Well, no, there's no way to rid ourselves of those intertwined bones and nerves, blood vessels and muscles which we carry everywhere with us. Our body wants to receive its share of love and attention. We cannot leave it in the car or tie it up outside the door like a big dog. Without it our professions of love remain abstract. Bread and salt, and the friendship

cup, all recall us to our origin as incarnate beings.

Nowadays, instead of the hearth, we have invented the fridge.

Unfortunately it does not gather people around it like a good table does. Rather people follow each other, one by one, to its closed door.

A lot of eating goes on in the Gospels. Some have even criticized Christ for not fasting like John the Baptist. And it is true that he refuses no invitation and dines everywhere both with the righteous and with sinners. In this way he does his most effective work.

And when he comes from the other dimension of life and meets his disciples after the crucifixion, he does not recount stories about life beyond the grave. His words are every day phrases: "Isn't there something to eat here?" It is when eating that he is recognized. Eating becomes the distinctive mark, the password, of his resurrection. And when he and his disciples have their last encounter he is the one who lovingly prepares for them a wood fire on the shore, who grills some fresh fish for these men exhausted from having thrown their nets all night into the sea. "Come and eat," he tells them. They know he is the one.

There is not a holiday or birthday which does not seal the celebration with a good meal. Eating is like singing – doing something together which gives joy.

Under different skies, in Switzerland or in Greece, the same gestures of conviviality are found, the same communal plunging of forks into the steaming pot of fondue or the delicate plates of cold tomatoes, feta and olives displayed on the table.

Cooking is the highpoint of embodied love. Canning and confidences, the mother is there, busy, attentive, without showing it. A child's heart melts and pours itself out in the warmth and aromas. Never more! Transfig-

ured by remembrance, our favorite dishes become a halo round the memories of our mother.

Never again, no never, these inimitable artichoke hearts encircled with their fine necklace of tiny white onions like pearls floating in blissful happiness. Or those tomatoes called iced, enthroned on their plinth of rice, glazed and shining, simmered in butter and sugar over a low flame. And the chocolate cream dessert made with six eggs! She would call me and I would run up for the delectable scrapings from the bowl.

But you sons, be careful about evoking in front of your wives the dishes cooked by your mother. Don't, in the nostalgia of her love, idealize them outrageously. Every time my mother would serve grilled meat balls, or the white pyramid of almond macaroons, my father never failed to exalt the ground meat slowly and tenderly kneaded by his mother's hands, or to insist on the absolute necessity of using a mortar to get just the right intimate blends of the sugar and the oil of the almonds.

What dreams of my mother at the close of her life! Sometimes the doorbell would ring; when she opened there was my father, his arms full of suitcases. But more often, the dreams were about meals, about invitations to uncles and aunts and friends who had disappeared long ago. She had painstakingly prepared everything. What aromas the kitchen exhaled! There she was, leaning over her oven – and there was nothing but ashes, a charred roast, and her life gone up in smoke.

Yes, so many efforts and pains, grocery shopping, marking time and hurrying, bustlings and waits, bills and accounts, heavy loads, worries about how to sustain life by the shovelful, like the stoker loading coal into the locomotive's greedy boiler.

And the meals, no sooner served than swallowed, neither seen nor savored! Gone and vanished with them the



votive offerings of our labors, piles of scrapings, trimmings, peelings and parings which, if put end to end, would ribbon the earth three times. The mountains of food ingested by just one family in a lifetime – Himalayas of bones, skin, carcasses, nerves, tendons, cans, jars and boxes which we get rid of as quickly as possible, as if they were the tell-tale traces of our animal nature.

Day after day, like Sisyphus, we repeat the same movements in order to perpetuate the very life which flows away, which courses relentlessly from the milky soft bodies of babies to the flabby flesh of the old, which waxes and wanes, fades out and advances anew like the hem of foam where the waves wash the sand. And the only thing which does not perish, which continues with us and even precedes us to that secret other place, is the love of mothers embodied in our daily food, the love that grills fish on the shore, that gives itself to feed us from age to age to the end of time.

## Chapter 10

### The Third Presence

**I**n the world of art I do not know of a more faithful, or more frightening, example of passionate love than Edward Munch's famous painting, *The Kiss*. It goes far beyond Rodin's *Kiss* and those innumerable naked, interlaced bodies of nymphs, fauns and bathers to which sculpture and painting have accustomed us.

Here the lovers are dressed in dark clothing from head to foot. Standing out are the pale patches formed by four hands, his encircling the waist of his beloved and hers clinging to her lover's shoulders. There is only one face, a single one for four hands, the man and the woman merged together in their kiss. The man's black hair and one ear are suggested. The remainder is a monstrous patch of shapeless flesh without nose, mouth or eyes.

More familiar is the portrayal of passion in literature. Tristan and Isolde, Ysé and Mésa, Undine and the Knight have delighted our adolescent dreams. On *La Carte du Tendre*, a map of courtship, we watched the lovers meet at the crossroad and run off together to their doom. The romantic expression of passion awakened in us a delectable expectation of love with a capital L. Baudelaire, Claudel, Giraudoux were our teachers. Love pounced on its prey: "It is he, it is me." So began the obstacle course, a desperate slalom among the taboos which morality,

religion, family and the law placed in the way of the lovers. In the playground of our *School for Wives* it was more of love than of men that we dreamed, ready to risk all for sublime joys or the infernal abyss, for the despair when life is cut short, "End of the line! Everybody gets off!" and there is no future, nothing, no life until a letter, a look restarts the cycle.

We knew almost nothing about sexual matters. Novels of the past were less explicit than those of today, the cinema still chaste, and schools, parents and newspapers were silent. Our language of love contained none of today's terminology. The exact physical pleasure point was of little importance to us. We wanted much more, something quite different: total love, not just its physical dimension.

There are no longer barriers between desire and its immediate gratification. No constraints of custom, belief, background or race are blowing on passion, activating the deadly flames, into which we longed to throw ourselves.

Today's love affairs are so brief! Fate no longer broils them over its coals. And thanks to technology, we escape the consequences of our acts. It is true that every century has its problems. Will we mourn yesterday's fires in the name of today's short-circuits? How would Tristan and Isolde have lived together if 'life', as they say, had not separated them? Would they have quarreled like everyone else? Would they simply have divorced instead of plunging into sickness, death, insanity or the written word like those who have striven to attain the absolute by embracing a body? History does not say. It cannot be followed like a good soap opera. It is the 'farewell forever' of lovers which makes their loves last in our memory.

Love has not been a priority question for the post-war generations of women. They have had too much to do,

defining their own identities and exploring the vast fields of knowledge and action opening up to them, to think about taking another look at love.

They have seen how their mothers loved and have not envied them. On one side there seemed to be self-sacrifice, unassuming tasks, endless lists of duties; on the other was freedom of action, enterprise, decision, absorption in fascinating activities, more rights than obligations. No wonder they wanted to change their roles! The temptation was great to make man their model, in love as in everything else. Women imitated the characteristics they had been most critical of in men. They learned to disassociate physical pleasure from feelings of love. Liberated from pregnancy by the pill, they believed they too could indulge in chance love affairs, one-night stands, escaping the constraints of more lasting commitments. Or, if they did marry, they acted for the assumed comfort of a life where each one contributed job and salary and where children and leisure were pooled. In fact such a union is meant only for good times. If things start to go wrong, one or the other can withdraw his or her contribution without too much harm.

For the women of these two generations the search for an identity has had priority over all else. *Who am I and what can I achieve?* These thoughts and struggles, even if they have been fully answered only by a few very gifted women, have affected the choices and behavior of millions of women throughout the world.

At the death of Simone de Beauvoir, I remember hearing a young woman express her gratitude for this author who had changed her life. She congratulated herself on her first divorce and the honest though difficult relationship she was having with a boy-friend, both inspired by the author. It seemed that a successful love was less important to her than the freedom and clarity she had gained.

To what extent can we live love without loving and for how long? The dogged pursuit of equality, the perpetual accounting of the couple's respective contributions and daily exchanges, can these been reconciled, in the long run, with the unconditional gift of love?

How do you reintroduce love into love's very heart, unity into duality, the lasting into the temporary? Is it still possible to live an everyday love forever? If others have done so before us, why can't we? Is there perhaps a new look to bring to love, a modern expression of its changeless nature?

Once upon a time, says a satirical poet, humans were spherical creatures with four arms, four legs and two identical faces. They could move in both directions or, by kicking their legs into the air, roll at great speed on their eight limbs like acrobats turning cartwheels. But one fine day, to punish them for their pride, Zeus sliced them in two, like soles. And ever since, they spend their time searching for their other half. 'And it is from this time on that love has been written into the hearts of the human race, to recreate the original human, joining two beings into one.'

Four centuries before our era, Aristophanes expresses in his way the essence of love in Plato's *The Banquet*. 'In days gone by we formed a complete being. The desire and the quest for this wholeness is called love.'

Unfortunately or maybe fortunately, it so happens that the two halves of a sole are far from being identical. There is no doubt that our instinctive nature will always urge us to desire the one we love be like us in all things, and to try to enfold him into our own life like a cell which grows by ingesting its neighbor.

I can still see the blackboard on which our biology teacher drew two protozoic cells and illustrated with his chalk the successive phases of their unification, or phago-

cytosis. We watched them moving towards each other, the center of the first then becoming concave and with its two rudimentary arms encircling the other, drawing it into itself. The other allowed itself to be embraced until it finally vanished, completely assimilated. The game was over, unity achieved.

It is easy to become one when the first greedily devours the other, often with the partner's complicity. Activities, tastes, interests, opinions, all can appear to be absolutely the same in a couple. The stronger one attributes to the other his own feelings, which he expresses with a royal 'we' when 'I' would be more appropriate.

How many women pretend to agree in order to please and be loved, while meekly protesting: "He is consuming me, devouring me." This leads finally to surfeit and rejection.

However, from the Old Testament to the Gospels, with Plato in between, the same aspiration for unity is always affirmed, the same injunction: 'Be one!' But what kind of unity is meant? Must it be founded on being similar pushed to the point of being identical? Is love to be a divine stammer, which repeats each creature twice? In order to love each other, do we need to be clones, beings created in series, which biology is threatening to produce?

And yet, how wonderfully prolific nature is in her expression, with her flowers, birds, fish and animals! In the whole universe there are not two identical leaves or two digital imprints. Isn't that amazing? The study of our immune system has taught us that each of our cells is an original, a signature.

Love is the free and joint linking of two beings to something greater than themselves, which each is aware of in the other, yet neither can fully contain. Their lives are like water flowing towards the vast ocean of truth, beauty and goodness.

Love surpasses authority. It is not a hierarchical relationship where one commands and the other obeys, nor is it a case of each one going his or her own way. Love is not one or the other, it is one *and* the other, together, at the same time, moved by the same spirit, which belongs to neither one, but is given to both. Love is mutual life, food and growth.

Love, at its most demanding and lasting, is a game of three, whether the partners are aware or not of the third presence. It is there, but few recognize it, know how to turn to it or let it join in. It is included in the deal of the cards, it is part of the game of love. It alone knows all the cards, can tell at any moment where the trump card is, knows which card to draw, who has cheated, how to restart the game from square one.

Yes, the invisible Partner exists, who cares equally for each player, who never favors one over another and can supply at any moment, if it is accepted, the referee's view of the game. We can trust it to know, not who is right or wrong but by the use of which word or right attitude we can escape every time from a tight spot.

How can we do without the loving messenger who can rekindle a love about to die through the hard confrontations of egos? For husband and wife the perfect lover exists, and it is the very same, a single one for them both, who brings solace, forgiveness and peace of the soul. It is offered in the brimming solitude where they, in turn, bathe, refresh their energy, revive their distinctive natures, become one.

It is towards the end of life more than at the start that those who love each other manage to really become one. It is through the creation of living human beings or realized projects outside of themselves that they find indissoluble unity. If we look back, it is then that we see the footsteps getting closer and finally merging into a single

track. Arguments, closeness, tensions, ruptures and reconciliations from now on are only successive steps in a dance where the man and the woman pursue each other, moving apart and coming together again finally, nevermore to part.

Death itself cannot separate them. For the mysterious Partner will continue to attend to both sides with messages beyond words, weaving over the abyss of separation the tapestry of another life.



## Chapter 11

### Discourse on Power

**I**t is a strange experience, after a lapse of thirty years, to read again notes and reflections on the topic of power. Ideas and insights that seem recent are already there, just in the right place. It seems as if no step forward has been taken in a lifetime. So what has been the use of these years?

And yet, what has been written down appears to be a frozen truth without suppleness or life. It is like looking over an architect's plan. Everything is there, entrances and exits, corridors, doors, even the right number of tiles. But it is only a sketch, without depth. We cannot go in and out as in a real house built of stone and wood. Similarly, my thoughts now, without having really changed, have gained a third dimension, the density of life lived, suffered, re-discovered.

Perhaps to live is just to travel from one dimension to another until we reach the narrow bottleneck of death. Then, without forgetting anything, we will emerge into a new space, with no doors or windows, where we see all at one glance, in an everlasting present.

Years ago I wanted, out of my own strength, to write a paper on power. Now the felled tree is sprouting a new shoot from its stump, obstinately growing on the same spot, singing the glory of the divine power, which responds from its abundance to every act of self-denial.

Past and present join together to praise with a single voice the unfathomable greatness of God and the eternity of the human grafted to him. The serpent's earlier temptation, 'You will be like Gods', is transformed into the vision of a world renewed, where men and women, created by God, together study his purposes and work at their earthly incarnation in their humble daily lives.

If, among the diversity of human civilizations, there is a common feature linking cave man to astronaut, I cannot imagine one more fundamental than the longing for power. From primitive times to the present, all our efforts, whether we called them magic, art or science, have sought by different means to realize a privileged way of life where thought gives rise to being, where to name is to create, and to say is to do. Let there be light, and there it is shining!

Thought disembodied, freed from the constraint of matter's weight. Nothing in nature suggests it to man. To take a single step, what a weight to overcome! What a distance between the most modest of our wishes and its granting, what contrary winds, what intricate rigging. And yet, whether by memory, aspiration or intuition our spirit invincibly moves us toward that state of empowerment where the inner image and its outer form meet, where matter is compliant to our wishes and takes all the shapes conceived by our spirit.

Absolute power is a thought whose fulfilment nothing can stop. We do not find it anywhere except assumed in God. Yet every human domination, every tyrant, every mortal – like the frog in the fable – dreams of it and strives for it.

Primitive people have searched, like us, for power. Unaware of the laws of incarnation, they believed the spirit to be an awesome force, able to create instant happenings in the natural world, free from the link of cause

and effect. They made use of magic, as we do of hydroelectric power, to tame natural forces. They believed that by concentrating the spirit on a desire it could be attained, that even the death of a person could be caused by willing it.

Today science has replaced magic. Through its knowledge and control of the world's natural mechanisms it embodies the desires, plans and dreams of mankind. It allows us to satisfy our primeval desire, to conquer the freedom, ubiquity and power of the spirit. Together with wealth science enables us to excel in the exercise of power.

What a liberation from human limitations in just a century! We have replaced the magic wand with the switch. We hear and see from afar. Beloved voices come to us from beyond oceans. Our eyes view scenes from the other side of the world. We soar in the sky. We heat and light our world thanks to an invisible energy hidden in the heart of matter. We multiply uses of our brain, we record the accumulated knowledge of the whole of humanity in computers' memories which exceed all our capabilities. Like lands reclaimed from the sea, we have extended lifespans by twenty or thirty years. And now we are working at the very roots of our being. Gene by gene, we are deciphering the human code not only in order to heal malfunctions but also to recast our nature.

We are patiently achieving the eternal human dream of becoming the creator. Are we not already, like gods, shaking the tree of knowledge and gathering leaves of gold?

And yet no songs or works of triumph arise from the poets, writers and painters who express our times for us and help us see what we are. What a desperate vision of modern man, not only stripped of the purple robe of his great achievements, but dressed in rags, disfigured,

maimed, tortured. A man of sorrow, the man of Buchenwald, of Bacon, of Beckett.

In the heart of the ordinary person, living this great century of human power, we find only a daily feeling of powerlessness. What to do, we ask ourselves? We can do nothing, it doesn't depend on us. A feeling of fear pervades, aware of that unleashed force that can keep achieving more but doesn't really know what it wants.

How depressing it is to read the newspapers! We have resolved none of humanity's lasting problems. Millions still starve; there is war among nations, races, classes, and even at the core of the couple.

Our power over the natural world has been able to affect it without destroying it, at least up to now. Applied to humanity, it confronts our freedom, and if it goes too far it perverts us and changes us into objects. As beneficial as it has been, power has taken a new direction and is enslaving us.

We are experiencing today the reign of violence in all its forms, through the coercion of money, technology, arms. Law works to limit power and set boundaries, but since it acts by the threat of sanctions, it can only limit the damage. It is unable to change the hearts of people.

There exists a power beyond ours, another spirit active in the universe. Its will and its objectives are unfathomable, its actions uncontrollable. We are free to ignore or recognize it. We can also, under certain conditions, communicate with it. God's spirit has the ability to interact with the human spirit, to weave what it wants to tell us into the thread of our thoughts. If we appeal to God, this spirit can dispel our fears, dissolve our hatreds, relieve our pain. God can also include us in his creative designs, guiding us through labyrinths of circumstances and fortuitous events with a providential leadership which we usually recognize only with hindsight. Unlike

human power, the power of the Spirit is always respectful of our freedom. Rejected, it retires, turns into absence, emptiness, total silence.

For us to start listening to the Spirit requires an initial act of faith. Is there anyone at the other end of the line, and someone ready to answer? It is not a given thing. And how do we recognize, from among all the thoughts that come into our minds, those that do not originate with us? We are sailing in irrational waters. And if one of these thoughts prompts us to take actions we do not like, which are even against our will, shall we obey them or not? Who is master of our lives, we and we alone or someone outside of us? Many questions will remain unanswered so long as we refuse to attempt the experiment. One experience is only confirmed by another experience beyond our reason's objections. Yet, millions of people ahead of us have dived into the deep waters of the inner life, and have passed on their discoveries to us.

God speaks to people. He speaks out of pure grace but also according to the sincerity of our searching, the patience of our listening, our willingness to abandon ourselves to his will. His power, the power which changes hearts and meets our needs, is set in motion by our prayer.

If today there is such a large gulf between what we want and what we are able to do, it is because we no longer rely on the power of God. What we lack is the breathing of the soul. What happens to our body when we do not breathe well? It wastes away and if we cease to breathe at all, it dies. The same is true for our spiritual being which needs to connect with the breath of life each day in order to focus its energy, to eliminate bitterness, resentment, discouragement, and to be ready for a creative plan.

The breakdown of communities and the increasing iso-

lation of individuals are signs of our separation from the Spirit, whose role is precisely to help people to communicate and unite into one body.

“It is not by power or by force, it is by my Spirit that this work will be accomplished,” says the Lord of hosts. This quotation from the prophet Zechariah refers to the reconstruction of the temple in Jerusalem on the return of the Jewish people in 573 BC from exile in Babylon. But for us children of the new covenant, who no longer worship just in temples but in spirit and truth, our task is, under constant tension, to build a world of justice and peace, infinitely close in every act of love, yet infinitely far away.

We live in the age of the outpouring of the Spirit, promised not only to the saints and the prophets but to every person ready to reach down into his deepest self and risk the experience of listening.

*A day for little things, no doubt, but who would dare despise it? People will rejoice when they see the chosen stone in the hands of Zerubbabel (Zechariah 4.10, The Jerusalem Bible).*

To change a single human heart, our own, through the strength of the Spirit, is within our grasp. We need to hold the plumbline straight, not to take delight in our own goodness, but in order to be fit to build, stone by stone, the kingdom.

## Chapter 12

### A World to Save

**A** childhood memory comes back to me: A sunlit garden, a fig tree, some children climbing in it, others below. A woman is reading aloud. I don't understand everything. I am the youngest, the runt of the family. I must be four or five years old. My attention is gripped by the story: a woman running, her child in her arms, pursued by men who want to kill her. She jumps across a stream in a superhuman effort to evade them and save her child, and it is as if I was also jumping with her, an immense, supernatural leap.

The memory stops there, cut short. For at that point came the great rupture, the departure from our home in Princes' Isles, with so deceptive a name. Island Princes yes, but blind, emasculated princes, exiled on those small islands in the Sea of Marmora a stone's throw from Byzantium, by emperors jealously guarding their usurped power.

For years I was unaware of the name of the book, of the story interrupted by a trick of memory or by the end of our holidays. It was much later, while reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that I rediscovered the black slave pursued by men and their dogs, jumping over the river, her child in her arms. Perhaps it is not by chance that this picture comes back to me today, of that woman who leaps into

the void, who stretches herself to her limits and beyond to save what she loves. This total self-giving is part of womanhood.

How should we kindle this ardent flame? By drawing strength from above so that not only a child, but also the world in which we live, may be saved.

Newspapers and television flood our homes daily with extremes of injustice and human cruelty. We see our civilization rocking on its base while at the same time a new world is being erected on a planetary scale. What creative image will preside over its future? Which way will we throw the ball in order to run after it? The way can be shown by thousands and millions of women if we will let ourselves be guided by that inner voice and put into practice a reversal of present-day values.

The values that govern our society don't seem to contribute to its blossoming. Strength, power, prestige, money, sex, success are the idols to which we daily sacrifice our joy and our peace of mind. At a time when we are losing ourselves in ever-increasing conglomerations, to reverse the current values is to restore dignity and purpose to all that is small, humble, fragile. Instead of wandering outside ourselves, it means returning to the heart of our being from which all creation emanates and asserting the reality of what is not seen but is sensed within the heart. And while loneliness spreads over our cities, this is answering, person by person, the great hunger for love by people today.



## Chapter 13

### The Reign or the Kingdom

**E**ve and Mary stand at the gates of the Old and the New Testaments like two symmetrical figures opening and closing the doors of life. The woman of the myth and the woman from the Gospels are strangely alike, each listening for the words which pass through them, which existed before they did.

Eve is water, the spring and the fountain, the clear water that vitalizes and quenches, cleanses and purifies. She is also the water that seeps in, spreads over, covers and drowns everything.

Mythical, atavistic Eve has made her choice. She is the water that embraces the form of each recipient, without merging with any single one.

She flows into all the twists and turns of people, following the slope of their inclinations.

She has chosen to be nothing by herself in order to be everything through others. With her, those who think they take, are themselves taken. She surrenders in order to conquer, she gives up herself in order to take over. She rules by proxy, through weakness more than strength, through tears, moods, complaints, ailments, as surely as by grace and beauty.

Under the tree of knowledge, at the angels' crossroads, Eve listens, receptive, ready to soak in the words that

seem to come from her very depths and still from outside herself.

“See, see,” hisses the serpent, instilling his fluid as she herself will learn to do, “See, if only you eat from the fruit of the tree, you will not die – you will be like gods.”

Eve is not the temptress. She is the tempter’s proxy. In fact Satan is aiming for Adam. And he sees that it is through Eve that he will most easily convince him. She knows Adam far better than he knows himself. To please him, to be loved, to become indispensable, to be his all without losing herself, she anticipates his most secret desire, which he dares not admit to himself, to become godlike, to resemble God. She flies to his aid and releases him from his conscience, like cutting the string of a balloon.

From thenceforth and for evermore, Eve reigns in providence, full of love, understanding and care. She is the mediator, the necessary path of the Spirit, the answer offered to man’s doubts and fantasies. To be the only one needed is her only reason and meaning.

Mary is the most revolutionary woman in human history. She is the first to have totally liberated herself from all human pressures in order to obey a single master, recognized within herself, both source and guarantor of her freedom. “I am the handmaid of the Lord.” It is Mary who embodies the total independence of woman from man. She is the liberated Eve intoned each Sunday during the Orthodox liturgy. With a single “Yes”, an emphatic yes, without flaw or retreat, with a royal yes she breaks all the chains – those which bind us to the impulses of our own nature and those which submit us to others.

Mary said yes to the most foolish words ever addressed to a woman. “You will conceive a son by the power of the Spirit.” And her yes was foolish too. By saying yes she risked everything – death by stoning, the usual

fate reserved for adulterous women at that time, and if not death, then certain shame for herself and her family, cast aside, her future blocked, without husband or children. With a single yes she severed the moorings, she freed herself from her family, from her fiancé, from public opinion, from her own dreams of simple and peaceful happiness.

“I am the handmaid of the Lord.” She was that minute spot in the midst of the cosmos where God’s will reigned completely, so yielding and believing that he chose her as the fertile soil where his Spirit could become flesh. Unlike Eve she never sought to possess or dominate anyone. Unconcerned about reigning she became the Kingdom’s blessed ground.

In bearing the Messiah, Mary took upon herself the weight of the world, the weight of its grace and the weight of its sin. She was a vehicle for God’s plans, and in so being she placed herself spontaneously in front of the whole of mankind in its present and future totality. Barely had Christ been conceived within her that she burst into a song of praise. She greeted the coming of an incredible world such as had never before existed, a world turned inside out like a glove, the one we imagine in our dreams of universal peace and happiness, the one for which so many men have died and die still, weapons in hand, a world where the proud are cast down, the humble exalted, the poor satisfied, the persecuted victorious. Mary’s *Magnificat* is the exact prefiguration of the Beatitudes that Christ would proclaim thirty years later. It is the same spirit prophesying in her as in Him, announcing the new era, the kingdom which is and is not of this world.

Mary is at the heart of the Beatitudes, which are the mystery of our own destiny. She proclaimed herself in advance, joyful, blessed above all women, although, in

human terms, her life was a continuous anguish and suffering from the slaughter of the Innocents to the crucifixion. Is this then the Beatitudes, the reversal of values, the triumph of the humble and the meek? Is the promise of a new world only valid for the life to come, beyond our senses and our comprehension, or does it also concern this life?

The happiness of the kingdom hardly depends on the circumstances of our life or the satisfaction of our desires and needs. The meek, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, are already blessed now here below, even if the fulfilment of these promises is set in the future. It is not a fool's bargain, but an experience that is offered to everyone.

Mary accepted, without ceasing to believe, the gulf between the promises received and the events of her life. For her, as for Christ, it was after her death that the results of her gift began to appear. It was when all had been lost that life burst forth once more like a fountain, a life which still irrigates the arteries of our world, ready, after two thousand years, to flow again in new ways.

The Kingdom is and is not of this world. It is constantly being born. It must be rebuilt until the end of time. It appears or comes apart according to our daily decisions. It takes shape in a heart where values are turned around. It is present in the consenting earth, where day by day God's will is accomplished, like a death, a birth, a *Magnificat*.

It can be said of Mary that she was passive, that she merely submitted to life. It is true that she seems to have done nothing on her own except to say "yes" throughout her life. She accepted the incomprehensible destiny of her son without ever trying to save him. She acquiesced to danger, fear, shame, for the sake not of a family, but of a world to save.

We add up the accounts of our lives in columns of what we have, and what we do. In order to feel that we exist we throw ourselves into works, careers, families, which define our lives. With Mary, being and doing coincided. The energy that we put into all kinds of activities, she concentrated into her adherence to the divine will. It is by pouring herself out that she served as a vessel of the Spirit.

## Chapter 14

### The Creative Vision

**J**ust as a fan spreads out before us, revealing what it has in its folds; just as a blossoming flower expresses, in its time, the essence contained in its seed, we, too, become what we are according to a pre-established image. Being and becoming, like free choice and necessity, are only opposed to each other in logic. In fact, we find them joined and linked in the diverse nodes of our being, just as two lengths of string pulled in opposite directions will knot together.

Since the beginning of time woman has always been bearer of life and creator of links between people. But she is still in evolution. The burgeoning of the capacities and potential of women of all conditions on a vast scale, and the extent of the responsibilities which they assume in all areas of society, is the phenomenon of our century. Woman is attaining the full responsibility of the adult. She takes her place, not by opposing, but by answering the needs of the world.

Today we have no idea whether we are at the beginning or the end of our history. Are we at the dawn of a planetary society where we can at last feed and educate billions of human beings, thanks to the advances of science and to the immense possibilities opened to us by computer sciences? Or are we all doomed to disappear through the

pollution of the seas, the greenhouse effect, holes in the ozone layer? No one can say. There is no doubt, it is the first time we can see ourselves situated between life and death, consciously and responsibly, on a global scale.

In the short term we are threatened by the disintegration of society, the loss of human contacts, and, in ever growing cities, the rise of loneliness leading to drug addiction, violence and crime.

On the threshold of a global civilization we are brought back to the elementary stage of life with others. How do we live together today? How do we cope with differences without destroying them, and remain united between husband and wife, neighbors, ethnic groups, races and classes, who all want to gain the upper hand?

Opposing winds whirl around us. Science draws us closer and closer together in a shrinking world. But our very nearness accentuates and exacerbates our differences. How do we put up with each other without hatred and mutual destruction? How do we live all together, nearly six billion on the face of the earth, when just living as a couple has become so difficult?

Instead of struggling for power in competition over activities and careers, man and woman can agree on a new approach and work together on a big project.

Today we appear to be short of projects. The Marxist dream of universal justice and happiness that fed the hopes of millions for almost a century has collapsed, causing the ruin of whole nations. Admittedly we can go on increasing our power according to the course of scientific discoveries without any real goal in sight; but do we really want all our conquests?

So what to suggest? Is it vain, is it foolish to return to the old forgotten design of the Kingdom, of a world built by us according to the will of God? Human plans rise up proudly, only to fall down. God's plan lasts.

What is God's will for the world? How can we know it other than through the dictation from within, the persistent and patient search for the voice that speaks within us. The daily changes in our motivation, the practice of turning our values around, help us to detect this will and to obey it.

God's will for the world is the Kingdom. However, everything in the world goes against the Kingdom. Everywhere we see the reign of power, the exploitation of person by person. The inborn cruelty of our hearts is freely expressed in the wars started in the name of the good of nations. Natural catastrophes and cataclysms blow away dwellings and people like straw. Famine and disease wipe out what remains. Everything speaks to us of chaos, disorder, hazard, of the vanity of all effort. For we never get to the end of the unleashing of nature's forces or of evil in the human heart. Where is the order, where is the plan? God hides. We remain free to the end to believe or not to believe, because of a lack of compelling proof, and this is as it should be.

It is in looking at our own lives that we become conscious of an eventual plan. At our infinitesimal level we discover a guiding thread, a will which precedes us and which engages in hand-to-hand combat with our freedom. During vital moments circumstances adjust themselves to save or to ruin us, for Providence strikes as well as protects.

It is through faith that we enter into the creative imagination of God, into his design for humanity. God's plan is seen written in the destiny of the Jewish people, with alternating faithful and rebel kings dotting the history of the Chronicles. Some "did that which was good in the sight of the Lord" and brought the people peace and prosperity, others 'did that which was evil' triggering wars, divisions, exile, deportation. The far wanderings of



the Jewish people for two thousand years, and their return before our eyes to the Promised Land, are all part of a plan unfolding across the millennia.

Like an island emerging on the surface of the sea, so the divine purpose manifested itself with the coming of Christ. The prophets, seven or eight centuries before, plunging into the timeless vision of God, described the one who would come to us – humble and riding a donkey, a man of sorrow without beauty or brilliance to arrest our gaze, silently accepting to be spit upon, he who would triumph over death and whose reign would have no end.

Christ trod the road foretold by the prophets. He became in the course of his life on earth what he has been throughout eternity. He carried the likeness of Son to Father to the point of perfect identity.

We, as bearers also of the divine image, can, through faith, enter into the creative design of God. Just as the Son offers himself to man as the absolute yet unreachable model, so the Kingdom offers itself to the world as a necessary, yet unattainable goal. What would the world be without the continual emergence of the Kingdom within it?

Is the Kingdom of this world or not? The same can be asked for man. It is what man is.

It springs up in time, it is completed elsewhere. It manifests itself among us in the choices and behavior of people. It is one of the driving forces of history impelling the world towards its ever-postponed fulfilment. Beneath the Kingdom's timeless brightness, its nightly Milky Way, spreading above the clamor of humanity and the flames of burning forests, civilizations follow each other like waves under the moon driven by the wind of the Spirit.

The kingdom is near. "Repent, for it is at hand!" In Greek it says "Change your thinking". No one can enter

the Kingdom until he has first changed his thinking. It is the only condition.

Within the kingdom, according to a divine algebra, the signs are reversed. The minus becomes the plus. The least proves to be the greatest. Being is worth infinitely more than doing. Eve becomes Mary; the cross, resurrection.

The kingdom is the bursting of freedom within the human heart through the power of forgiveness, the deliverance from the domination of human passions, the beginning of a totally new story.

The kingdom is a world of unity, openness, harmony of hearts. Down are the walls of selfishness. Crumbled the partitions of ignorance and misunderstanding. I feel with you all that you feel, I suffer the pain of your injured foot, I hear your every thought silently, without words. Nothing more comes between us. Like the leaves of the poplar tree rustling as one in a summer breeze, we are stirred together in the everlasting yes. All is well.

With endless striving the world must be made and remade everyday in the image and resemblance of the kingdom, which means a world conforming to the will of God. It is entrusted to us in its continual newness. Maybe today thoughts will come to us that will lead to its rebirth. There is tremendous potential in what does not yet exist, in what has never been and which, one day, carried by the image will come into existence.

Permanence and becoming come together in the life of humanity as in the life of each individual. The layers of the dead, stratified in the Sicilian cliffs above the sea, describe the successive lives of peoples. They appear unchanged through ongoing millennia. Tombs, images of gods, weapons, necklaces and seeds. Yet this virtual standstill through the ages is also a march in a definite direction. It proceeds toward the gathering together of people in a single unity.

Is it not the first time we are seeing ourselves from outside, set free from earth's gravity, turning together with the continents and oceans of our blue planet? The first time we are all communicating in the same instant, visible and audible from one end of the earth to the other? Through convulsions and violence we are striding towards unity.

The gesture of God on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, who with outstretched arm breathes life into man, signifies humanity's adventure through countless ages.

What do we know of the universe? Of the birth and death of stars, the birth and death of humans? Creation lives and throbs unfathomably. It breathes in and out like a single organism. It dies and is reborn indefinitely. A giant star has just exploded, one hundred and seventy thousand years ago.

Its light has crossed the intervening space and only today do we celebrate its dazzling demise in the vast beyond, and the arrival on our earth of the minute elementary particles that it emitted when exploding. What science in the midst of so much ignorance!

And where do we stand in all this? A voice was raised two thousand years ago. *The whole creation is eagerly waiting for God to reveal his sons... (it) has been groaning in one great act of giving birth* (Paul's Epistle to the Romans, 8.19,22, The Jerusalem Bible). Not only Creation but we ourselves know the first-fruits of the Spirit.

This word remains true. Sent out two thousand years ago, its light reaches us today. A new world takes shape on a global scale. It suffers and struggles with spasms and convulsions. And we with it. We do not know what will be born; but with a fervent hope we await the revelation of the children of God.