

Travelling Light

SAMPLE

**DANIEL
O'LEARY**

Travelling Light

YOUR JOURNEY TO WHOLENESS

A book of 'Breathers' to inspire you along the way





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Provide yourselves with no gold or silver,
not even with a few coppers for your purses;
with no haversack for the journey
or spare tunic or footwear or a staff ...
(Mt 10:9-10)

Thus God says to these bones:
'I will cause breath to enter you,
and you shall live.'
(Ezek 37:5)

Tom, aged four, very early one morning, rushed
into the bedroom exclaiming in great excitement,
'Marg, I can breathe! I can breathe! Watch me! Watch me!'
Deep noisy breaths, in and out, then,
'Can you breathe?'
'Yes.'
'Show me! Show me!'
(Margaret Siberry in *Passion for the Possible*)

The present moment is where life can be found, and if you
don't arrive there, you miss your appointment with life. You
don't have to run anymore. Breathing in, we say, 'I have
arrived.' Breathing out, we say, 'I am home.' This is a very
strong practice, a very deep practice.
(Thich Nhat Hahn in *The Present Moment*)

Throw away
All your begging bowls at God's door;
For I have heard the Beloved
prefers sweet threatening shouts,
Something in the order of:
'Hey, Beloved,
My heart is a raging volcano
Of love for you!
You better start kissing me –
Or Else!'
(Hafiz in *I Heard God Laughing*)

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Dedication and Acknowledgements

I dedicate *Travelling Light* to all those who befriended and encouraged me during my recent sabbatical time. The first weeks were spent with the Carmelite Sisters at Thicket Priory near Selby in Yorkshire. They always welcome me with warmth. Father Abbot and the community of Benedictine monks at Pluscarden, near Inverness in Scotland, were my gracious hosts for many more weeks. I joined Sr Pat, the staff and participants at The Franciscan Spiritual Centre in Minnesota, during the late winter and early spring of 2000. It was there, by the banks of the Mississippi, that I learned to cross-country ski and wrote most of this book. Almost everyone at the Centre read and commented on the manuscript. They will recognise their words of wisdom throughout these pages.

After that I stayed at Madonna House in the Santa Fe Archdiocesan Headquarters in Albuquerque where Dominic, John and Luis looked after me. By a window with a stunning view of the Rio Grande valley, it was easy to meditate. While there I visited the Centre for Action and Contemplation founded and directed by the Franciscan priest Richard Rohr and shared in an unforgettable men's retreat with him. I continued with my reflecting and writing in a lovely summer-house on the Galveston coast in Southern Texas, as guest of Sr Kathleen Daly and the Sisters of Charity (Houston) of the Incarnate Word.

From there I travelled to Lebh Shomea House of Prayer in Sarita, between Corpus Christi and the Mexican border, for a 40-day desert retreat. This 'school of solitary prayer' exists under the auspices of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. I was there at the time of the 'triple-digit' heat wave across the southern States. These temperatures, combined with the fairly strict silence, and my encounters with a few of my favourite demons, made this a most memorable experience! Fr Kelly Nemeck OMI, two hermits – Sr Marie Theresa Coombs and Sr Maria Meister – and the delightful Fr Patrick took great

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care of us and provided nourishment for body and soul. I ended the sabbatical with a chance to review my adventures and pull them all together in these pages, with the ever-loving help of Sr Kathleen Dalton and as a spoiled guest of the Sisters of Charity (Halifax) in Nova Scotia, Canada.

I hope that Sean Fagan SM, Margaret Siberry, Linda Marsh, Gill Davis and Fr Mark Noonan CM will be touched by *Travelling Light*. They suggested, as I set out on my recent quest, that I should make some notes. Together with my bishop, David Konstant, they have a trust in my writing abilities, especially when I'm full of doubt. The belief that Seán O Boyle of Columba Press would give this book a warm welcome, provided me with a great incentive to complete the task when motivation ran low. To him and Brian and all at Columba, I wish God speed on their own journeys.

These are some of the people who breathed and walked with me on my spiritual journey. Their invisible faces and forms flit in and out of the pages as you turn them over. Their open and honest hands and hearts were the securest of places for me to do the work I had to do, to write the book I had to write, to shed the tears I had to shed. Wherever they are, may they grace the earth, and walk beautifully upon it.

I also dedicate this book to those special people who, over the years, have encouraged me, trusted me, believed in me, loved me and held me safe. In spite of (or maybe because of!) my 'sins', they never gave up on me. Nor have they ever diminished me. They have only magnified my soul. These angels are, for me, the intimate faces of God. They are my teachers, and the energy of my life. I now know they will never be far away. And the ground between us will always be holy ground.

Introduction

Are you at some kind of crossroads in your life? Do you feel weighed down with unnecessary baggage? Do you have a sense that there should be more to life than what you are now experiencing? Take heart. There are millions like you. And very many of them are finding a new joy and freedom in their daily living once they nourish the needs of the 'hidden self'. Even though the decades are flying by and we do not get another chance of living the abundant life, there is still time. So for God's sake and your own, begin.

There are two questions to ask yourself. Do you feel a call to deepen your life, to live more freely, to be more happy? And the second is, are you prepared to take the time and the trouble to discover this new way of living, and to enjoy it forever? The aim of this book is to empower you to respond 'Yes' to both questions and to travel along the amazing way with you.

It takes courage and trust to take the first step. There will be voices within and without telling you to wait, or that you haven't got what it takes, or to forget it. But if you are ready, and since you are reading this you must be, the way is already being cleared for you.

There is a yearning within all of us to be leaner, looser and lighter in body and soul. We long to be healed of, detached from resentment, grief, fear, jealousy, anger and low self-esteem. The wings and roots of our hearts are coded for free flight and for the grounded love and service of each other.

I have just completed a year's sabbatical devoted entirely to nourishing the spiritual dimension of my life. Written from the heart of this journey, *Travelling Light* is designed to be a companion for you, too, as you decide to set out on your own inner adventures. Part One offers reflections before setting out and prepares us for the pattern of our journeying. The starting point is that deep longing within each of us for 'the pearl of great price', and once felt, it will not go away. The reflections guide us through those first, scary and tentative movements into the

unknown, when we feel the pain of letting go of so much that seems to be the foundation of our security and comfort.

The *Breathers* (Part Two), at the heart of the book, are short meditations and practices for those who set out on this path of their bliss. The adventures will be many. The road unsure. The pain never far away. These daily *Breathers* are written from within the conflicts of my own soul. They sustain me and fill me with courage each new day. I hope they will do the same for you. What is essential is to keep trusting and letting go, to stay open and vulnerable, to live only in the present moment.

The challenge of the spiritual life is not to make more and longer pilgrimages, to say more and longer prayers. It is to explore more deeply into what we already are so that we will live, like second nature, the good news which we already possess. In order to travel light along the path of our inner journey, we do not have to devour more and more books; we only have to continually reflect on the few lines of truth that nourish the heart, and to put that piece of wisdom into practice. In our deepest self, it is to become by habit what we know by heart. One lived sentence can change a life. 'Even a thought, even a possibility,' wrote Friedrich Nietzsche, 'can shatter us and transform us.' And, once our true mind is stretched by a new idea or vision, it never regains its original shape! May God speed you on your journey.

Part Three, the final part of the book, contains three longer meditations that emerged from my graced travelling with different companions and in different settings during my sabbatical year. Written out of a theology of creation and a spirituality of the heart, they draw together many of the insights I gained along the way but they reveal an essential truth – that once reached, the horizon shifts again, and that the journey itself is all. That is why I encourage readers to repeat the daily reflections and practices month after month, for I know, everyday, the vital part they play in my own journey towards becoming an authentic human being.

PART ONE

Pack Nothing

Rake the muck this way. Rake the muck that way.
It will still be muck. In the time you are brooding,
you could be on your way, stringing pearls
for the delight of heaven.

(Hasidic teaching)



A reflection before setting out

AT SOME STAGE in our lives, most of us will set out on some kind of spiritual quest. 'And tell me,' the poet asks, 'what will you do with your one, wild and precious life?' It may be as a last resort when things go very wrong, it may be due to the influence of a friend, it may be when nothing else seems to satisfy our deeper needs. This book is about pacing yourself during that inner journey; about stopping to breathe along the way; about inspirational milestones so as to keep your bearings when there are lots of false signals around you. There will be many times when we need to centre ourselves by breathing in deeply, by nourishing our hearts with new images, affirmations and reassurances. Without such oases in which to catch our breath, check our maps, nourish our souls, we are liable to wander off in all directions.

The Tyranny of Uprooting

It is not always easy to hear the call to move inwards to the centre of our being, in search of the pearl of great price. This quiet call may also challenge and critique, as it did with me, our normal routine of work and style of life, even in radical ways. When we do finally recognise that persistent voice, there is a great temptation to ignore it. We are anxious about what we may have to leave behind and what might happen to us along the way. Most of us fear the unknown. I certainly did a year ago, when I first became aware of the deep intimations that would not go away. The stirrings I was feeling were not about 'time out' for further study or sabbatical travel, but about a need to explore the mystery of my own being.

When I first began to listen to that vague prompting inside me, a thousand reasons for ignoring it rushed in. Our beautiful new church had just been built and dedicated; I felt supported and affirmed in my ministry by faithful and trusting parishioners; also, the next few years in our new presbytery could only be less frenetic and more peaceful. Even though at 63 I was getting on a bit, I was still in good

health and looking forward to working with our prayerful, collaborative community which was vibrant with creative and compassionate ministries of service. Why then did I not listen to reason? Well out of range of the mid-life crisis, why did I feel the call to do this foolish thing? Was I being utterly naïve to imagine I could survive without the friendships, comforts and work that I enjoyed so much? Had I the courage to let go of all of this, and feel the insecurity of loss, the anxiety about the unknown, the fear of being called a fool?

Yet there was no going back. I knew, somehow, that the voice within was authentic. It belonged to that place of truth within us, which, if we can reach it, will never betray us. It is the safest place from which to make a radical decision or simply to reflect on our life – past, present, and future. So often, when our fragile grasp on existence becomes damaged, or when we're torn between options about the best way forward, or when weighing up the pros and cons of arguments and serious decisions, we need a well-nourished heart for the clearest indication of the truest horizon. Once we find our way to that soul-space where God lives, once we negotiate the shadow-lands that surround our inner, holy light, then the maps we draw, the paths we follow, the significant changes we make in our careers and relationships – all such external efforts and outward activities will carry a gracious authenticity and a convincing power because they have grown from our inner silence; they will be sealed by the authority of God.

The *Breathers* and reflections were put together at the beginning of this new century, during my own sabbatical journey at The Spiritual Centre in North America. I felt the need for a ready-to-hand summary of the thoughts and images that I find most helpful for keeping, from day to day, a spiritual and psychological health and balance. I call upon them to create a welcome relief, a spiritual focus to ground myself when suddenly surrounded by negative thoughts or oppressive people. For many travellers on the path of their bliss, the evening or at night is the best time to pray. For me, the morning is the only time I can free my mind and heart and body to meditate and focus on the image or *Breather* that seems

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appropriate. And yet, how often have I forced the promptings of the Holy Spirit from my heart, as I compulsively rushed to my early desk to finish yesterday's left-over work, so as to be ready for another frantic day. On such occasions I have rarely found the time to pray later. In his lovely book *Sabbath*, Wayne Muller quotes an old Hasidic poem:

Take special care to guard your
tongue before the morning prayer.
Even greeting your fellow, we are told,
can be harmful at that hour.
A person who wakes up in the morning is
like a new creation.
If you begin your day with unkind words,
or even trivial matters –
even though you may later turn to prayer,
you have not been true to your Creation.
All of your words each day
are related to one another.
All of them are rooted
in the first words that you speak.

A most important dimension to the *Breathers* is that they are set against my current experiences here at the Centre, with its emphasis on the necessity for body-work and breathing techniques, since body, mind and spirit are always inseparable on the spiritual path. There is something very significant about this revelation. Let me try to explain it a little.

Love's Thinking Body

My head and heart are full of ideas and images about spirituality, wholeness and holiness. After all, I have spent decades learning and writing about the Four Paths of Creation Spirituality, about the gifts and shadows that merge and mix within us, as we journey home towards ourselves, others and therefore God, about personal reflections on a theology of creation and numerous related psychological, spiritual and pedagogical dimensions of our response to the call of Jesus to the abundant life. What needs much more attention now, I

believe, is the way in which we incorporate, 'flesh out', so to speak, our knowledge and wisdom into the texture and reality of our body/mind wholeness. To have insightful, doctrinal notions about being 'in the state of grace' about 'doing God's will' and about 'travelling the spiritual path' is one thing, but to actually experience these realities in our bodies, as an awareness of aliveness and energy, of ease and grace, is quite another. We need to understand more profoundly why our bodies are called 'temples of the Holy Spirit'; why they have a role in awakening us to, and in expressing our spirituality; why they are shrines and tabernacles of the indwelling Trinity; why, according to Tertullian, 'it is on the flesh that the hinge of salvation turns'.

On the one hand, the Catholic tradition of Christianity is wonderfully earthy, sacramental and physical, with its insistence on natural, archetypal elements as the symbols for worship, its uses of ashes, water, incense, oil and wax in its sacramentals and paraliturgies, its rustic and robust celebration of Ember and Rogation Days, its old rituals of prayer to the four directions, in time and tune with the seasons of the year, its relentless adherence to the reality of the Body and Blood of Jesus at Mass, its worship of the totally human body of the Risen Christ in heaven. How strange then that, in spite of this rich and resonant tradition, so much of our theology, scripture work, worship and praying is almost entirely located in the head. The dualistic fear of the body is still such a controlling power in our understanding of the mystery of the incarnation and in our living-out of our Christian baptism and eucharist.

The mystics had no such hang-ups. For them our bodies are the skins of the spirit, our souls made touchable, the time and space expression of the Pure Being of Love. They realised that spiritual visions and devotions were of little real use until they were embodied and grounded in a practical way. Their exceptional and rounded balance of expression and description of centred holiness, their freedom in the use of sensuous images and physical feelings regarding union with God, all combine to delight us with a sense of embodied wisdom, love and power. They knew that we only become whole and radically

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holy when we learn to integrate our spiritual, transcendent self with our personal, human and fleshly self. The source of their wisdom, the role-model they aspired to was, of course, none other than the manner and truth of the birth of God into our human condition. Bringing about this integration is the function and goal of the journey of healing and wholeness and the main reason for writing this book.

In the incarnation, God achieved that total enfleshing of Love in assuming the full humanity of the baby Jesus. Every cell, muscle, bone, fibre and drop of blood of the human body of the divine boy and adult, were the tangible and visible essence of God. To be touched by Jesus was to be touched by God. To hear and see him was to hear and see God. To be hugged and kissed by Jesus was to be hugged and kissed by God. To smell his breath was to smell the breath of God. Jesus lived fully in his body; his physical self was the embodiment of the inner wisdom he carried in his heart; the way he walked, talked, smiled and joked were sacramentals of the truest nature of God. When he ate or fasted and saw to his more mundane bodily functions, he was shaping the physical contours of the holy Word existing from the beginning. When he loved his special friends in the most human of ways and yearned, as we all do, for intimacy, when he was tempted at every turn, like we all are, and distracted too, when he was cold or passionate depending on the state of his self-awareness, his health, the weather, his age – as baby, as child, as boy, as teenager, as adult – he was completely the presence on earth of his Father in heaven.

In spite of all of this most attractive theology of creation, and for many well-documented, but hopelessly misguided reasons, the body has consistently been regarded with suspicion in the mainstream Christian churches and in most of the spiritual traditions of the West. Against this legacy of dismissing, denying or ignoring the sacrament of the body, it is extremely difficult for those with an intuitive or received sense of God, or Being, to embody their beliefs fully, to integrate them into the raw material of the life of the senses. The challenge is to come down from the rarified atmosphere of the mountain of

visions into the blood, sweat and tears of messy, daily struggle in the valley of tears. And that is where power and passion, the inexhaustible wells of energy, are located and flowing over.

To come from our heads to our hearts, in the first place, and then from our hearts to our bodies, requires a degree of vulnerability, a willingness to be open to suffering. To be vulnerable is to risk coming out of our ego-castles where we can settle everything mentally, where we can justify, rationalise and defend our lifestyle and our prayer-life and our role plays. To be vulnerable is to fully inhabit our bodies, to live our feelings and emotions, to own our dark side, to let go of the sham and pretence etched into our way of life for a very long time, to acknowledge our dependence on status, power, money, privilege and relationships. To be vulnerable is to become authentic and to tell the truth about our real motives, our fears and terrors. To bring our spirituality into our bodies, into our lived experiences, is to be very vulnerable indeed. It is also to become free.

How does freedom come in? What do we mean by a free person? We mean someone who is not copying someone else, as so many people have to do to keep their jobs. But what does it 'mean' to find my motivation 'within'? To most people this is a mystery. It is only when I have learned – or rather am learning – to take a few deep breaths, befriend the way I feel just at this moment, however messed up, and allow my feeling to speak and surprise me so that I breathe a sigh of relief, it is only then that I begin to know what it is that we are referring to when we speak of acting 'from within'. And when we catch on to this, freedom becomes a quality, an experience of self, a state of mind, like joy and peace; and this is the freedom that (truly self-) controls. I know a few free people.¹

The key to complementing an intellectual understanding of our faith is to develop a new awareness of our bodies. To truly live in our bodies is to have a conscious and highly attuned sense of ourselves as living, moving, breathing, feeling organisms. Take breathing, for example. Is it not

extraordinary that the most vital element in our lives, the one that plays such a central role in our transformation, is nearly always taken for granted? If we become aware of the power of our breath, we have the ability to bring about real change, both psychologically and spiritually. It is written large into our Story. It all began when God breathed life into mud. A Sufi mystic wrote, 'All is contained in the Divine Breath, like the day in the morning's dawn.' In *Breathing Alive* Reshad Field writes, 'We come into this world on the Breath of His Compassion, and we go out of this world on the Breath of His Mercy.' In between these two eternal Breaths, all creation, human and other-than-human, share in this most wondrous 'moment' with our little breaths of air, the only element on Planet Earth that we all have so intimately in common. Attention to our breathing will be referred to in each day's *Breather*.

Breather One and *Breather Two* set the scene for this understanding of holistic growing and spiritual mindfulness – an understanding that permeates all the *Breathers*. Many practical suggestions regarding the achievement of such an integration of our spiritual selves are made throughout the book. And when we seek to *become* this transformed consciousness that leads to an integrated sense of the whole of our being, it is something more than a mere understanding or knowledge of the miracle of our lives. It is more than a deeper grasp and perception of the marvels of our body, mind and spirit entities. It springs from, and is nourished by a spirit of awe, like the overwhelmed heart of the psalmist who wrote, 'It was you who created my inmost self, and put me together in my mother's womb. For all these mysteries I thank you. For the wonder of myself ...' (Ps 139).

The False Self

The reason for having to set out on the journey, in the first place, is because of what we call the ego, or the false self. The whole thrust of each of the *Breathers* is to grapple with the tyranny of the ego. (*Breather Three* briefly explores the almost unbelievable, hidden influence exerted over us by the awesome power of egoism.) When we are trying to transcend

our negative emotions – the resentment, the cynicism, the fear, the jealousy, the low self-esteem, with which most of us are quite familiar – what we are seeking is our true heart, our true self, because, to some extent, we are all slaves of our false self. At some time in our childhood, or maybe a little later, we began to live an adapted, conditioned life of pretence.

It began, simply, as our way of coping with the imperfection of our parents, our schooling and with the belief systems we inherited, that imposed on us a huge amount of guilt, fear and shame. The resulting amalgam of acquired prejudices, taboos, and anxieties that often leads to neuroses and psychological imbalance, must be explored, exposed and understood, if the spiritual journey is ever to get underway. In spite of all the survival strategies that become so costly in later life, in terms of meaninglessness, depression and emptiness, there is a true self that is very damaged, but not dead, deep within us.

How do we transcend and transform the ego? How do we breathe life again into our lost, true self? Can we even identify the ego, so clever and plausible are its persuasions, so totally in control has it grown within us? Most of the wise and holy people agree, that if we are to reach an appropriate maturity and responsible individuality, we must discern our egotism from our true self, and we begin to do this by keeping a vigilant watch over the arrogance and self-righteousness of the ego. The ego is not all bad. It is shaped through our efforts to cope, survive and manoeuvre for a place from which to hold our own. It is fundamentally a positive, organising energy whose source is the Spirit and whose function is to be a reliable servant, messenger and friend. We need to tame the tyrant-ego and to nurture the co-creator-ego. This is a long journey. But the wind is at our back.

So much of this book is about awareness and living in the present moment. This loving but objective observing, in the here and now, is the first (and probably the last) step to be taken in the journey towards spiritual freedom and light.

By keeping the mirror of awareness clear, we can begin to free ourselves of our compulsions and inappropriate thoughts and behaviour. Awareness is the means; the

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present moment is the focus. We have certain obstacles to face. We must confront our lack of attention and weakness of will, our attachment to our opinions, our slavery to our likes and dislikes, and our perpetual fear of loss. All of these characteristics form the main material for the work of transformation, to be transformed by the resonance of love, the power of our essential self. It is necessary to awaken to this self, which has the power of love that can tame the false self, the ego ... If we could just be, we would be able to relax from the anxiety of becoming something that we are not, getting something we don't have, and trying to shape reality according to our own desires. And yet what we most need is what we already are – our essential self. There is no escape; there is only coming home.²

The Journey Home

What is important about the journey home is that we begin it. That beginning calls for courage. And staying with it calls for courage too. It is God who does the transforming; all we have to do is show up and start walking. Silently, invisibly, we are purified. As we walk we become lighter, leaner, looser. We see things more clearly as we gradually become more empty. And the emptier we become, the more room there is for God to fill us. The more fine-tuned we are, the sweeter will sound the tunes of God. The more hollow we are, the truer the music from the lips of the Flautist. Joyce Rupp captures this image so beautifully.

A small, wooden flute,
an empty, hollow reed,
rests in her silent hand.
It awaits the breath
of one who creates song
through its open form.
My often-empty life
rests in the hand of God;
like the hollowed flute,

it yearns for the melody
which only Breath can give.

The small wooden flute and I,
we need the one who breathes,
we await one who makes melody.

And the one whose touch creates,
awaits our empty, ordinary forms,
so that the song-starved world
may be fed with golden melodies.³

These *Breathers* are all written from within my own soul's journey. In fact I began the venture for my own personal benefit, before deciding to publish the finished work. Some of them have 'saved' me many a time and have provided me also with a way to a deeper meditation when the moment of panic or desperation has passed. They are like the familiar friends, all interconnected, that we call and rely on to see us through the moments of distress, self-doubt or beautiful breakthroughs into higher, brighter places; like wise *anam-charas* that never fail to enrich and empower us at the ordinary and extraordinary moments of our precious lives. And, regarding the breakthrough into enlightenment, I now believe that, if we do differentiate between people, the difference lies, not in the fact that some people have negative emotions and other, more spiritual people, do not. What matters is that, while all, by virtue of their humanity, experience daily temptations, trials and negative feelings, some, like Jesus, manage to transcend them fairly quickly, while others, victims of their own and others' egos, stay hopelessly stuck for far too long in their closed, self-destructive cycle.

I'm aware that the *Breathers* in this book, (apart from *Breathers* One and Two which form a basic backdrop to the whole journey) are shaped only to fit short moments of respite to carry us through the day, until there's time for more substantial rest, prayer, reading or talking with a friend. It is quite surprising how deep, complete and effective even a

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fleeting visit to the sanctuary of our souls can be. Just as many hard-working people have perfected the habit of regaining their energy through strategically-placed ten-minute cat-naps throughout the day, so too, with confident practice, all of us can be empowered by these silent withdrawals into that place within ourselves, that is full of the richest resources of grace and spiritual energy and wisdom. As water is to the fish and sky to the eagle, these moments are pure delight to the soul.

Travelling Light offers thirty one meditations (*Breathers*), one for every day of the month. They are like different glimpses of the same splendid pearl, circling explorations of God's incarnation, varying angles on one eternal truth. Because each meditation has many layers of meanings – enough spiritual energy for the journey of a lifetime – they can be read anew each month, hopefully at deeper levels of understanding. They need to be pored over, reflected upon, wondered at, rather than merely glanced-at or speed-read. As with mystery, their full significance will never be exhausted – they are like a month of Sundays. A blank space follows each day's *Reflection* and *Praxis* for the reader's own thoughts, experiences, stories, poems or dream accounts. Once the inner journey is embarked upon, it is not uncommon for the traveller to remember dreams more vividly than usual. Honouring and interacting with these dreams is of the greatest importance.

I use the term *Breathers* throughout *Travelling Light* because of what I have learned about the importance, for our all-round well-being, of good breathing and of the attention we pay to it. I hope the reader will catch some of this enthusiasm. Our breathing holds the key to the quality of our inner lives. It is the only bodily function that readily bridges the conscious and subconscious, the physical and the spiritual aspects of ourselves. From his conversation with his grandma (p. 7), no one had to remind Tom that his breath was one of the innumerable gifts and pleasures that we all have available to us at every moment to which we are present.

The context of the creation of an inspirational book is of the greatest importance. As well as being supported by your travelling companions, you need to be closely held by those

who love you. It has been my good fortune to be a guest at the Franciscan Sisters' Spiritual Centre while writing these reflections. Also, the physical environment can make all the difference. Little Falls, in north Minnesota, is the home of Charles A. Lindbergh Jr, the hero of the first trans-Atlantic solo flight in 1927. On most days of last winter and spring I walked through Lindbergh's farm and across the ingenious bridges he built over Pike Creek just before it meanders into the Mississippi River. He needed the bridges to reach and feed the sheep, while his father was (very unsuccessfully!) trying to become governor of the State. And as he walked he dreamed of flying.

As a teenager, the handsome Lindbergh dropped his studies and devoted his energies to fast motorbikes and lying on his back under the stars. 'I want to ride the winds,' he said, 'and be part of the sky.' Skilled with his hands, he invented many useful domestic contraptions. He worked with engines and had high hopes of soaring above the clouds. He flew for short distances. 'The Flying Fool' they called him. One rainy evening, barely clearing the trees at the end of the makeshift runway in a wet winter's field, he took off into the black mists, on his journey of destiny. A day later, the lone eagle landed in the fields of France. The world erupted. 'The Flying Fool' had become the 'Lord of the Skies', the 'Hero of the World'. Soon after that, however, his own intense, inner quest began. My mother, who lived in the States at that time, often told us the story. His spirit was stretched to the limits through the extremes of love and loss, of fame and shame, of tragedy and death.

Around here, too, a prehistoric Indian group had lived since 1000BC, and in more recent times, the Dakota tribe used the Mississippi as a primary transportation route and camped all along its west banks. This was the blessed and hallowed ground on which I walked and reflected and crafted this book. I felt so lucky and so graced to be surrounded by an atmosphere of such noble and wise traditions on the one hand, and, on the other, by Lindbergh's spirit of daring, imagination and trust as he took to the skies in a way never before attempted. May a

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little of his inspiration, aspiration and recklessness of heart, as he set out on a lonely and fearful journey, find its way into our reflections, and from there into your own pilgrim souls.

As well as springing from this rich context, each *Breather* is also underpinned by a theology of creation and a spirituality of the heart. (I have explored some of these themes in my recent book *Passion for the Possible*.) Only glimpses are offered here. My dearest hope is that readers will be healed and inspired (from *spiro*, to breathe) by praying these Spirit-filled *Breathers*, knowing (with St Augustine) that the journey into the self is the journey home to God. We meet and celebrate both together. There are two questions to ask yourself. 'Do you feel you are called forth on a special journey by God?' If the answer is 'yes', then 'Have you the courage and trust to begin?' In *The Journey*, Mary Oliver wrote:

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice –
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.

.....

It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice,
which you slowly
recognised as your own,
that kept you company

A REFLECTION BEFORE SETTING OUT

as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do –
determined to save
the only life you could save.⁴

SAMPLE

PART TWO

Thirty-One Breathers for the Journey

Traveller, your footprints are
the only path, the only track:
wayfarer, there is no way,
there is no map or Northern star,
just a blank page and a starless dark;
and should you turn round to admire
the distance that you've made today,
the road will billow into dust.

No way on and no way back,
there is no way, my comrade: trust
your own quick step, the end's delay,
the vanished trail of your own wake,
wayfarer, sea-walker, Christ.

(Don Paterson)



Listen to your body

DAY

1

Have you heard of ‘body wisdom’? Did you know that your body is the wisest part of you; that it can only tell the truth and that it remembers everything? Did you know that every experience you’ve ever had is stored up in your body, and that your every thought and feeling affects every cell and nerve ending in it? While, like you, I have probably known all of this, and have written and talked about the interconnectedness of mind, body and spirit at great length, what I was still lacking was the *process* and experience of *becoming* what I knew, of *realising* my wisdom, of *doing* my theory. I can only speak for myself, of course, and as a man (because women, in general, are more in touch with their bodies than we are) but I now realise that having information and knowledge stored up in my head, about even the holiest of things, is but a small part of full awareness and true wisdom.

Why do I place this theme at the very beginning of our spiritual journey? Because I have come to realise that the body is the forgotten and ignored dimension of wholeness and holiness. Having written several books on the theology of creation and on a spirituality of the heart, I still had not fully understood the significance of the embodiment of that theology and spirituality – the book of the body. Even though I have championed the role of the heart in breaking through into a richer meaning of lived revelation, I had not realised the paramount importance of the role of the body in that breakthrough. Even though I have been driven and drawn by the sheer humanity of God, the raw fleshing of the Word, the total incarnation of divine love, my head still ruled the roost of my life.

Of all the blessed and possible places in the world, it is here in the snow-white, flat, unassuming reaches of Minnesota, that I am discovering a lost chord which is essential to the music of the lived, abundant life. The human body is the hinge of salvation, according to Tertullian. It is God’s masterpiece

– the divine work of art. It is only through the body that God's best secrets are revealed. Maryann, just home from the Cameroons, was telling me today, that in the pidgin English for the Angelus, we find 'And the Word He been take man skin'. God delights in being visible and tangible in human skin. The Blessed Trinity dwells deep within our bodies. We believe in the real presence of the body and blood in the eucharist. Yes, we know it all. In fact the Catholic Church, in its most reliable but mostly forgotten tradition, insists on the bodiliness and complete humanness of Jesus Christ and of all of us, both on earth and in heaven. But somehow we have spiritualised beyond recognition, as though the incarnation had never happened, the unique, vital and essential role of the body in our salvation; we have theorised it to a safe distance from the God-given passions of flesh and blood, to a place where it can be held under complete control. Somewhere along the way we have thrown away the body-clock that brings God's work to full time.

In *Breather One*, I wish to address a few points that will be picked up again in the course of our reflections. These points, about how we see our bodies, can serve only as an introduction to a new life-long awareness. So what better way to begin the challenging journey into new territories of our mystery than by befriending our bodies, our estranged companions, and realising, with clarity, that they are, in fact, our safe and faithful home for our entire lives. We bring them everywhere with us, and they take us to all kinds of inside and outside experiences, and yet we know so little about them. We may have names for parts of the body, some facts and information about how they function, where to go for repairs and alterations, but do we truly love and nurture the amazing mystery that our bodies are? Are we aware of the vibrant stories being told inside our bodies and of the dialogue between the inner and outer experiences in relation to our whole person?

Contemporary culture, fuelled by the advertisers and many dubious chat-show role-models, persuade us to conform to the outer images of what our bodies are supposed to look like. If neglecting, misusing, abusing and bludgeoning our own

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bodies were a crime, most of us would be in jail. We glorify, for instance, the condition of thinness (except where our hair is concerned) and deny the ageing process. Like a difficult object that needs adjusting, we force, contort, starve and punish our bodies out of their natural shape at any given decade of our lives. We are the masters and controllers; our bodies are the victims.

This manipulation began a long time ago. Through training-techniques in childhood; through repression of emotions such as righteous rage and grief because of the perceived code of behaviour at the time; through the re-direction of sexual energy and anger to support religious and cultural convention, we have closed down on the intimate rapport between mind and body. Small wonder that we have become strangers to our bodies; that we often hate them. Many of us, who were brought up in a Catholic environment some decades ago, were subjected to terrible stories and explanations about original sin and about our bodies, with their devilish tricks for leading us into sin. I have long since come to see this indoctrination, this castration of pleasure, as a kind of blasphemy against the awesome Artist of our exquisitely beautiful bodies.

And so, to be able to travel lightly and joyfully on the journey ahead, with all our energies flowing in balance, with body, mind and spirit dancing in rhythm and singing in tune, most of us need a conversion so as to enjoy our bodies. We need a re-education in listening to their wisdom, an awareness of the ability of the nervous system to sense and monitor our inner states, because it is these unfelt, unheard whispers that have such an immense influence on our outer condition and that carry the key to our true fulfilment. These *Breathers* will help the wisdom of the body to heal us when we accept and experience our feelings, especially the negative ones. True self-love, and only then the love of our neighbour, comes about when we develop and honour the feeling capacity. When we begin to believe that the body is in the soul rather than the soul in the body, and when we come alive to our senses and to our skin, and see them as guides and transmitters of energy and grace, our whole lives can be transformed.

And God said:
May you delight in your body.
It is my body too.

May you see the world anew each day:
how else can I behold my beauty?
May you fill the earth with the sounds of life:
how else can I hear my song?

May your skin rejoice in the passion of the sun;
and your tongue tingle with the joy of new wine.
Don't you know you are my senses? Without your
body I cannot be.⁵

SAMPLE

Praxis 1

Begin the awareness work today. Sit down for a few minutes and relax. Pay attention to your breathing. Then try to become more aware of your body. Notice the sensations in its different parts. Can you experience your feet inside your shoes, your clothes against your skin, your back against the chair? Is your jaw locked tight? Which parts can you feel at this very moment? Can you tell how your body is affected by your feelings of stress, anxiety or anger? Throughout the day, and the next few days, gently bring your mind back to your body, along these lines. Gradually you will notice a new relaxation and ease about you. You will sit, stand, move and breathe with more grace, confidence and vitality. Because of our distracted and driven nature, our thoughts go everywhere. But gently, gently, again and again, the transformation will begin to happen. Even an initial awareness about the unity of our body, mind and spirit may begin a life-long process. Later on you may decide to explore the benefits of a more structured form of body-work and body-awareness such as *yoga*, *t'ai chi*, *reiki*, or a programme of stretching and aerobic exercises. In the meantime, try to be as faithful as you can to a daily pattern of mindfulness regarding your body sensations, your breathing, your thoughts and feelings.