

Chapter One

THE ACHE OF AUTUMN IN US

THERE IS A SEASON FOR EVERYTHING,
A TIME FOR GIVING BIRTH,
A TIME FOR DYING;
A TIME FOR TEARS,
A TIME FOR LAUGHTER;
A TIME FOR MOURNING,
A TIME FOR DANCING. . . .

— ECCLESIASTES 3:1,2,4

THE TREES GROW MORE RESTLESS;
OCTOBER WIND WEAVES THROUGH THEM;
THEY SHAKE THEIR ARMS IN DISMAY
AS IF TO FIGHT THE COMING COLD
AND THE GRIEF OF LEAVES GOING.

AUTUMN AIR DOES A HEART-DANCE
ON BRANCHES ALREADY GONE BARREN;
THE MISTY AIR CLINGS TO GOLDEN LEAVES,
MAKING THE TREES BEND EVEN LOWER.

IT IS A SEASON TO HOLD THE TREES CLOSE,
TO STAND WITH THEM IN THEIR GRIEVING.
IT IS A TIME TO OPEN MY INNER BEING
TO THE MISTY TRUTHS OF MY OWN GOODBYES.

PRAYING OUR GOODBYES

AUTUMN COMES. IT ALWAYS DOES.
GOODBYE COMES. IT ALWAYS DOES.
THE TREES STRUGGLE WITH THIS TRUTH TODAY
AND IN MY DEEPEST OF BEING, SO DO I.

EVERY AUTUMN, NOSTALGIA FILLS ME;
EVERY AUTUMN, YEARNING HOLDS ME. I CLING TO THE
RIPENESS OF SUMMER,
KNOWING IT WILL BE MANY LONG MONTHS
BEFORE I CAN CATCH A BREATH OF LILAC,
OR THE GREEN OF FRESHLY MOWN GRASS.

AND SO I BEGIN MY FALLOW VIGIL,
REMEMBERING THE TRUTH OF THE AGES:
UNLESS THE WHEAT SEED DIES
IT CANNOT SING A NEW BIRTH.
UNLESS SUMMER GIVES IN TO AUTUMN
SPRINGTIME WILL NEVER EMBRACE ME.

Every autumn reminds me of my vulnerability. It carries the truth that life is fragile, that there are no sure guarantees for a trouble-free life, that there is always some dying in living, that change is inevitable. I was reminded of this in a particularly harsh way last October. There was a beautiful young linden tree just outside my office window. It was a golden glory in the sunshine, full of bright yellow, autumn leaves. One morning a strong wind came from the grey northeast sky. I stood and watched that young tree as every last leaf was stripped and torn away. In less than an hour the tree stood in nakedness, a golden circle of summer's growth at its feet.

I hurt for the tree in its emptiness. Then slowly I saw myself as the linden, moving through my own life stages, knowing how I, too, have sometimes felt the harsh blows of a ripping away. I stood by the window of my inner world and saw the story of transformation pass before me in invitation. At that moment I prayed hard

and deep for openness and for the gift not to fight the process of goodbye.

But as I looked at the empty tree, my prayer became barely a whisper. All those beautiful leaves on the ground, the seemingly tragic stripping of a tree full of life! I felt that no part of me could easily say yes to an experience like that. As I turned away from the window I sensed a kinship with autumn. It had spoken loudly about the way life is with its going, grieving, growing story.

There is an “ache” in autumn that is also within each one of us. This ache is the deep stillness of a late September morning when mist covers the land and the sound of geese going south fills the sky. There is a wordless yearning or a longing for something in the air, and it penetrates the human spirit. It is a tender, nostalgic desire to gather our treasures and hold them close because the ache tells us that someday those treasures will need to be left behind. Autumn speaks to this pain in our own spirits, that ache which we try so hard to ignore or deny or push aside, that little persistent reminder that death is always a part of life.

The ache of autumn that is in us has two faces: One is an ache that lies deep down inside our being. The other is the ache that results from our own individual, particular losses—those farewells that are always going on in our lives.

THE EXISTENTIAL ACHE

One author speaks of an “existential loneliness” that permeates every human spirit, a kind of unnamed pain inside, deep within us, a restlessness, an anxiety, a sense of “all aloneness” that calls out to us. I prefer to name it an “existential ache.” It is a persistent longing in us, and it happens because we are human. It is as strongly present in us as autumn is present in the cycle of the seasons. I believe that this ache is within us because we are composed of both physical and spiritual dimensions. Our body belongs to the earth but our spirit does not. Our final home is not here, although “here” is where we are meant to be transformed by treasuring, reverencing and growing through our human journey. No matter how good the “good earth” is, there is always a part of us

that is yearning, longing, quietly crying out for the true homeland where life is no longer difficult or unfair.

Every once in a while we get in touch with this truth in us. It is not a sadness exactly, not a hurt or a pain as such, but some tremendously deep voice that cries out in bittersweet agony. We catch a glimpse of home and the possibility of who we are meant to be, and this entices us hopefully. But at the same time, we also catch a glimpse of how far we have yet to go; we see that there are many twists and bends and struggles in the road before we arrive home, and this glimpse pains us with its reality. It is the autumn in all of us, the truth that life can never stay just as it is.

This inner ache is felt especially when we sense the mystery of life or the supreme uniqueness of who we are. It is present when we recognize the fleetingness of all that we know and all that we cling to upon this good earth. We have a strong longing at this moment to hold onto all of it, and we realize the impossibility of doing so. We seldom put words on this melancholy. We only dimly sense its presence. But it colors our moods and pervades our activities and weaves its way through our unconscious. It is present in our edginess or in blue days that seem to have no cause. It raises its voice in our inability to concentrate or to feel full satisfaction, even when everything in our lives is going smoothly. It makes itself felt when, perhaps just for a brief moment, we recognize our mortality and the swiftness with which time passes.

There will always be a corner of our heart where it is autumn, that part of us which aches with searching and loneliness, with restlessness or dissatisfaction. It is Augustine's "Our hearts are made for you, O Lord, and they will not rest until they rest in you." It will remain in us until we are truly home.

What about those who never seem to have this experience? Some never recognize the ache for what it is, while others push away these feelings and awarenesses as far from themselves as possible. They cannot bear the message. The ache is not comfortable, and some ignore it or run away from it by being so busy that they do not have time to think or feel anything too deeply. Some press harder in their work; some rush out to buy things when they

feel lonely or down. Some always seek out others so they will not have to listen to that sense of incompleteness within themselves. Radios and televisions that are always on may be attempts to block out the truth that lies within.

Not that we should be self-absorbed by our inner ache, but it is very worthwhile to acknowledge it. This loneliness, paradoxically, joins us with all others in their aloneness. There is a great strength and comfort in this. It is only when we are willing to meet the absolute truth of that aloneness within us that we are no longer alone, that we are able to break through to a level of consciousness that assures us of the magnificent bonding that we have with other humans and with God. We begin to see the ache as a natural part of our humanity and of our inner journey. This awareness and bonding can be a source of a deep and rich spiritual growth. We realize that we are not the only ones who are going home, that we are not the only ones who are still unfinished, that we are not the only ones whose lives call us to many partings before we are at one with the eternal hello. Kenneth Leech expresses it this way:

True self-love means not trying to escape from ourselves, but listening to the voices within us. . . . This involves the acceptance of our fundamental aloneness, not seeking to reduce it, not hoping that friendship, marriage, community, or group, will take it away. That aloneness is an integral part of being human, and an essential element in love. It is out of that aloneness that it becomes possible to respond rather than merely react to people and needs. Response has to grow and emerge out of the depths of myself: it is *my* response, born out of my inner struggle and inner self-knowledge, out of my spirit, my deepest core. This is what spirituality is about.¹

If we are attentive to the inner ache, and if we grow in accepting its truthful message, then we will more readily move through our own particular goodbyes. We will be more open to the growth of the human journey.

THE ACHE OF PARTICULAR GOODBYES

Goodbyes are a part of every single day. Sometimes we choose them, and sometimes they choose us. Usually they are small, not so significant losses that do not pain us very much, but at times they are deep, powerful, wounding experiences that trail around our hearts and pain inside of us for years.

What is a goodbye? It is an empty place in us. It is any situation in which there is some kind of loss, some incompleteness, when a space is created in us that cries out to be filled. Goodbyes are any of those times when we find ourselves without a someone or a something that has given our life meaning and value, when a dimension of our life seems to be out of place or unfulfilled. Goodbyes are all of those experiences that leave us with a hollow feeling someplace deep inside.

We say goodbye to parents, spouses, children, friends, sometimes just for a day or a year, and sometimes until we meet them on the other side of this life. We leave familiar places and secure homes. We bid farewell to strong, healthy bodies, burden-free spirits or minds. We change teachers, schools, parishes and managers, sometimes spouses or religion. We change our ideas, our values, our self-image and our way of interpreting life's situations. We place parents in nursing care homes, allow children to experience risk-taking and growth, say no to love relationships that would be inappropriate or possibly harmful to us or to others. All these hard decisions and choices that we make or experience involve some kind of leave-taking.

In our work world, we experience transfers, changes in skills, different positions and retirement; in natural disasters such as fires, floods, storms of all kinds, we lose significant material possessions that can never be reclaimed. Illness, whether our own or of loved ones, demands a farewell to some of our independence or to our mobility and strength, to our energy and, perhaps, to our sexual drive. We say goodbye through our aging process. We bid adieu to a part of ourselves and others as children grow up and grow away, as we experience relationship adjustments on all levels. There are goodbyes in our ongoing conversion of heart when

we let go of non-truths, of sinful, worn ways or old angers or antipathies that have consumed us. We also experience farewells in adult transitions where we struggle with self-image, goals, and dreams. It may be a time of letting go of our hope of being the best, or of having the perfect parents or the perfect family or the perfect community. These goodbyes that seem to last forever reflect the inner ache of autumn with its hollowness and emptiness.

IDENTIFYING OUR GOODBYES

When the goodbyes are big ones such as the death of a loved one or a divorce, we have no trouble recognizing them. It is the lesser goodbyes that we can avoid or not acknowledge and, in doing so, miss the inner direction and the value of growth they offer us. The following questions may be of help in identifying those goodbyes.

1. *What hurts you now?*
What distresses you, worries you, causes you negative feelings such as anger, envy, jealousy, self-pity, discouragement, anxiety, fear? Is there any part of your life that feels lost?
2. *What do you wish you could get rid of in your life?*
Is it a deep sense of loss due to the death of a loved one, your own illness or a physical pain, a problem at work or at home, a great loneliness, a sinfulness, the hurried pace of life, some guilt, irritating persons, your own lack of mental or spiritual or social growth, another's illness, your own aging, an old memory, an enemy? What would you like to never have to experience again?
3. *What do you wish that you could have more of in your life?*
Would it be faith, friendships, personal giftedness and talents, money, hope, sense of direction, security, good health, a feeling of being that special someone in another's life, time to be with those you love, companionship, freedom, truth? What is it that you most yearn for?

4. *How does it hurt you?*

Is your response one of self-preoccupation or self-centeredness, bodily distress, poor self-image or lack of belief in self, depression, distrust, keeping others shut out, anxiety attacks, misdirected anger, loneliness, emptiness, loss of security, lack of concentration, feelings of failure? How are you (or how is your life) different because of this hurt?

Once we recognize and come to terms with how a goodbye is hurting us, we can begin the process of working with it. For example, if we are letting our pain take us too far from others and too much into self-centeredness, we can begin taking steps to get more involved in the lives of others. If our goodbye is affecting our lack of peace by its anger or bitterness, we can begin to acknowledge those feelings, expressing them in a healthy way and gradually be freed of them. Only after we have acknowledged our losses and have recognized the pain inherent in these goodbyes can we proceed on the journey of self-growth and greater love of others.

THE VALUE OF GOODBYES

Goodbyes, especially the more intense ones, cause us to face the ultimate questions of life: Why suffering? Where am I headed? What are my most cherished values? What do I believe about life after death? Goodbyes create a certain space in us where we allow ourselves room to look at life in perspective and to gradually discover answers to some of those questions about life. We also learn a lot about the significant others in our lives; we learn who is willing to walk the long road with us, whose heart always welcomes us no matter what, who loves us enough to stand with us in good times and in bad, who is willing to love us enough to speak the truth for us or to us. Goodbyes, when reflected upon in faith, can draw us to a greater reliance upon the God of love, our most significant other. With God we can learn to live in hope, with greater meaning and deeper joy. All this only comes with time and with great care of self.

We cannot avoid the ache of autumn. We all hurt in our own way, but we do hurt. The blessedness in the ache within us is that when we grieve over the farewells, we both give ourselves and find ourselves. We become one with whoever and whatever has met us on our journey. We choose to invest ourselves deeply even though we know that the investment might cost us the price of goodbyes and letting go. We believe that the investment of our love is worth it, for we have entered into the mystery of life where the hellos that follow our goodbyes are our guideposts to the eternal home.

We all need to learn how to say goodbye, to acknowledge the pain that is there for us so that we can eventually move on to another hello. When we learn how to say goodbye, we truly learn how to say to ourselves and to others: "Go, God be with you. I entrust you to God. The God of strength, courage, comfort, hope, love, is with you. The God who promises to wipe away all tears will hold you close and will fill your emptiness. Let go and be free to move on. Do not keep yourself from another step in your homeward journey. May the blessing of the God of autumn be with you."

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION, INTEGRATION, DISCUSSION:

1. People experience many kinds of goodbyes. Which do you think is the most difficult?
2. Write down the word *autumn*. Next to it (or under it) write words and phrases that come to your mind as you think of autumn. What is your predominant feeling about autumn?
3. What are the goodbyes that are currently happening in your life? Which is the hardest for you? What makes it so difficult?
4. What is the goodbye through which you have experienced the most growth? What made it so for you?
5. What do you see as the greatest value in your goodbyes?