

chapter one



Brother Wind

All praise be Yours, my God, through Brothers Wind and Air,
And fair and stormy, all the weather's moods,
By which You cherish all that You have made.

—ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI

Deep peace of the flowing air to you,
which fans your face on a sultry day,
the air which you breathe deeply, rhythmically,
which imparts to you energy, consciousness, life.
Deep peace of the flowing air to you!

—CELTIC PRAYER

Wind and Creation



Let me seek, then, the gift of silence, and poverty,
and solitude, where everything I touch is turned into
prayer: where the sky is my prayer, the birds are my
prayer, the wind in the trees is my prayer, for God is
in all.

—Thomas Merton

In the beginning, when God created the heavens and
the earth,
the earth was a formless void and darkness covered
the face of the deep,
while a wind from God swept over the face of the
waters.

—Genesis 1:1–2

Be still deadening North wind;
South wind come, you that waken love,
Breathe through my garden,
Let its fragrance flow,
And the beloved will feed among the flowers.

—St. John of the Cross

The secret life of Me breathes in the wind
And holds all things together soulfully.

—Hildegard of Bingen

You ride on the wings of the wind,
You make the winds your messengers.

—Psalm 104:3–4

Wind is the only one of the four elements that is invisible. The gift of air lacks any discernible form or color or texture, but it makes everything else come alive both literally, as in the gift of life-giving breath, and figuratively, as in the buffeting of things by the wind's power. In Genesis we are told that the mighty wind was present at the very beginning of creation. Wind is air in motion caused by differences in atmospheric pressure. We measure the wind or air by the effect it has on other things, such as the sail of a boat billowing, the treasure of a cooling breeze on a warm day, the gentle bending and bowing of grass in a field, the steady rhythm of our own breathing, or the powerful effects of a strong storm knocking down trees and power lines. Air is also the medium of sound-waves and thus of language and communication. It is connected to voice, our ability to speak of what is most precious to us and to communicate with others.

The metaphor of air or wind offers us a variety of ways to understand our experience of God: as life-breath, as inspiration, as enlivener, as directional guide, as powerful force, or as the current that supports flight. In this chapter you will be invited to pray with air or wind by considering a number of the wind's qualities as symbols for our relationship with God.

St. Francis, in his famous prayer that opens this book, welcomes the wind in all its manifestations and directly associates it with God's work as Creator. Brother Wind is seen as the Creator's fellow-worker, the one who cherishes, supports, strengthens, and invigorates other creatures. Franciscan author Eloi Leclerc, in his book *The Canticle of Creatures: Symbols of Union*, writes of the freedom and detachment of St. Francis's words of praise for Brother Wind:

All its moods! In fact, for [Francis] there is no [such] thing as bad weather any longer. His brotherly feeling for the wind springs from an interior detachment and openness of soul that a man reaches only after much striving. Francis was a man of the open air, there has never been a more receptive soul than St. Francis. The context of the wind is a world open and exposed and swept by a force that will not let you rest and carries you further and further, a force

that refuses to be fettered and overturns every dividing wall and every barrier . . . we can say that the poetic celebration of the wind in all its manifestations shows a soul aspiring to open itself to Being in its entirety and to all its inspirations.

The element of wind invites us to “open our souls to Being,” which means opening ourselves to a God who flows in directions we cannot predict. This element invites us to a radical posture of surrender in releasing our hold on our own plans and making room for God to blow us in the most life-giving direction. As a metaphor for God, wind reminds us that God’s ways are not our ways. The invitation of wind requires of us a detachment from our own longing to control the direction of our lives and a simultaneous surrender to Spirit to allow ourselves to be carried to places of growth and newness.

Wind is also thought to be the most mobile of the elements. The movement of air and its origins and dynamics are more mysterious than those of water; and while the oceans seem deep, vast, and mysterious, they cover only a percentage of the world’s surface, while air envelopes the whole globe.

As I write this chapter on air and wind, I place a feather on my prayer altar. Each morning before I begin I hold it in my hands and ask to be lifted up by the Spirit and given insight and inspiration that will take flight. I take a few moments to breathe deeply the invigorating gift of air.

In this chapter you are invited to explore the wide range of wind’s expression and energy in your prayer: as life-breath, as inspiration, as directional force by allowing yourself to be carried where the wind blows, as powerful sacred presence in the midst of the whirlwind and storms of life, and as the current that lifts your wings in flight.

Getting in Touch with the Element of Wind

- Go sailing.
- Blow bubbles.
- Watch birds flying overhead.

- Lay on the cool grass and gaze at clouds drifting by.
- Fly a kite.
- On a warm summer day, take time to relish the cool breeze that refreshes.
- Light incense in your prayer space and ask that your prayers be carried up toward the heavens with the smoke that rises.
- Consider the power of a windmill.
- Roll down the windows in your car or put your top down and feel the breeze on your face, the wind through your hair.
- Support the development and use of wind energy in your community.



Life Breath

The LORD God formed man from the dust of the
ground
and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life,
and man became a living being.

—Genesis 2:7

God is breath.

—St. Maximus the Confessor

God has given to the earth the breath which feeds
it. It is his breath that gives life to all things. And if
he were to withhold his breath, everything would
be annihilated. His breath vibrates in yours, in your

voice. It is the breath of God that you breathe—and you are unaware of it.

—Theophilus of Antioch

The soul that is united and transformed in God breathes God in God with the same divine breathing with which God, while in her, breathes in himself.

—St. John of the Cross

When you hide your face, they are dismayed. When you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth.

—Psalm 104:29–30

In his hand is the life of every living thing, and the breath of every human being.

—Job 12:10

While the gift of wind is mightily present in the first creation story, another expression of this element, the gift of air or breath, appears in a life-giving way in the second creation story. In the second chapter of Genesis we are offered the image of a transcendent and powerful God who gathers up earth and mud and lovingly molds each indentation, dimple, and crevice into the human person. Then in an act of profound intimacy, God presses God's sacred lips to the nostril opening and breathes divine spirit and life into this creature, animating the human into a living being. Here is an expression of God's tender immanence: God is as close to us as our very breath. God is the sustainer of our breathing. God meets us in the place of dust and clay from which we emerge and to which we return, and infuses us with this life-giving, energizing connection.

Scripture tells us in many ways that it is through the gift of the Spirit that God is the animator of all living things. The Hebrew word for Spirit is *ruach*, which also means the breath of God. God breathed life into us at the moment of creation and continues to breathe into us, through us, and around us. The Sacred Source of Life blows this breath of life into *all* of creation. The great modern mystic and Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin offered the vision of the "breathing together of all things." We are connected to all of life through breath—to humans and animals, as well as to trees and plants, which breathe in the carbon dioxide we release and return oxygen to us in a harmonious exchange and dance of life.

Praying with the gift of air through attention to breath is an ancient Christian practice. One of the earliest known forms is the *Jesus prayer*. The idea behind this prayer is that we connect our conscious prayer with each breath, so that our awareness of God becomes as natural as our breathing and that we might learn to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thes 5:17). The words of this prayer said on the in-breath are "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God," and on the out-breath, "have mercy on me, a sinner." It is also called the *Prayer of the Heart*, because we are invited to speak the words from our heart and to root our prayer in the rhythms of its beating. St. John Climacus writes, "Let the Jesus prayer cleave to your breath," and "With your breathing combine watchfulness and the name of Jesus." Elsewhere he says, "Let us live every moment in 'applying our hearts to wisdom' (Ps 90:12) as the psalmist says, continually breathing Jesus Christ, the power of God the Father and the Wisdom of God." The pursuit of wisdom, for the ancient teachers, involves practicing with the breath.

The tradition of *centering prayer* is an expression of Christian breath prayer as well. In centering prayer you choose a word or phrase that makes you more aware of God's presence, but it can also be practiced by simply being in touch with your breath and using the in and out breaths as an anchor that draws you more deeply into the presence of God.

St. Ignatius of Loyola, in his *Spiritual Exercises*, advises several methods of praying, including to "Pray According to Rhythmic Measures," which is another form of breath prayer. Ignatius writes:

"With each breath taken in or expelled, one should pray mentally, by saying a word of the Our Father, or of any other prayer which is recited. This is done in such a manner that one word of the prayer is said between one breath and another. In between these two breaths one reflects especially on the meaning of that word, or on the person to whom the prayer is being recited." The breath becomes a means by which we slow ourselves down and can begin to be really present to the words we speak in prayer.

FOR REFLECTION

- How do I experience the gift of breath?
- Where in my life do I need to breathe more deeply?
- When I pay attention to my breath, what do I become aware of in my body?

PRAYING WITH AIR AS SACRED BREATH

- As a way of entering your time of prayer, take time to get in touch with your breathing. Don't try to change the rhythm of your breath; simply notice your natural, rhythmic rise and fall. Imagine as you breathe in that God breathes life into you. As you breathe out, imagine releasing all of the distractions and worries that keep you from being fully present in prayer. See if you can just set them aside for a time. Simply spending time with your breath as a way of deepening your awareness of the God who sustains you moment by moment is enough. Take time to become aware of your breathing, and allow your heart to fill with gratitude for this most basic gift of life.
- You can practice centering prayer by using your breath as a guide to drop your awareness inward. Using the image of God's Spirit as life-giving breath, allow that image to help you to rest in God's presence as you follow your own breath into stillness.
- If you feel drawn to use words in your prayer, you might want to add the words of the Jesus prayer to your breath rhythm (in-breath: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God" / out-breath: "have mercy on me, a sinner"). Or use another

traditional prayer that is meaningful to you, such as the Lord's Prayer. As St. Ignatius of Loyola suggested, say each word with one breath, allowing yourself to slow down and really relish the ancient words of the prayer you are saying.

- You can also create your own sacred phrase or mantra to repeat on the in-breath and out-breath. For instance, upon breathing in say, "I receive the gift of life"; upon breathing out say, "I release and surrender." Spend a few moments in silence to see if you can receive the words of your own breath-prayer, those that rise up from your heart, rather than intentionally creating it.
- Either as a closing for your time of prayer, or a prayer that stands on its own, call to mind Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's image of the "breathing together of all things." Imagine as you breathe in and out that your breath is connected in rhythm to the breath of the people you love who are also breathing in and out at this very moment. Allow your imagination to slowly expand so that you visualize your breath connecting you to all other people. Then expand again to include all living creatures. Finally, expand your vision to include trees and plant life, which offer us a mutual exchange of breath. Allow this prayer to connect you to the vast matrix of pulsing life within which we live.

Holy Inspiration

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all
together in one place.
And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like
the rush of a violent wind,
And it filled the entire house where they were sitting.

—Acts 2:1–2

Holy Spirit,
making life alive,
moving in all things,
You are the source of all creation and beings.

Holy Spirit,
cleansing the world of every impurity,
forgiving guilt,
anointing wounds,
glistening,
You are commendable.

You are Life.
You awaken and reawaken everything that is.

—Hildegard of Bingen

This property for which the soul prays so that she may love perfectly she here calls the breathing of the air, because it is a most delicate touch and feeling which the soul feels at this time in the communication of the Holy Spirit; who, sublimely breathing with that his divine breath, raises the soul and informs her that she may breathe into God the same breath of love that the Father breathes into the Son and the Son into the Father, which is the same Holy Spirit that they breathe into her in the said transformation. . . . But the soul that is united and transformed in God breathes in God into God the same divine breath that God, being in her, breathes into her in himself.

—St. Thérèse of Lisieux

Still the Breath Divine does move, and the breath
Divine is Love.

—William Blake

When a bird remains long on the ground it thereby weakens its wings and its feathers grow heavy. Then it rises, flaps its wings and swings itself up till it takes to the air and glides into flight. The longer it flies, the more blissfully it soars, refreshing itself, hardly alighting on the earth to rest. So it is with the soul: We must prepare ourselves in the same way if we wish to come to God. We must rise on wings of longing up to him.

—Mechtild of Magdeburg

The life-giving and sustaining breath of the Spirit is a gift at its most fundamental level. In addition to sustaining our lives, breath and wind also offer us the gifts of awakening and inspiration. When a room in our home feels stuffy, we open a window to “let in some fresh air.” Making a conscious effort to breathe more deeply helps us to feel more alert and awake. We awaken from our slumber each morning, both literally and figuratively. The spiritual journey is a lifetime invitation to notice the places where we have fallen asleep and then awaken again and again—to the beauty of the world, to the abundance of our lives, to the sacredness and dignity of each person, to our own giftedness, to the ways we are called to share those gifts with others, and to the power of love and kindness when we are able to release them into the world.

The Latin word for Spirit is *spiritus* and is the same root as the word “inspire.” One of the gifts of the Spirit is inspiration—as we breathe in life, we also breathe in new vision and possibility. The Book of Acts tells us the story of the disciples gathered together after

Jesus' death in the upper room. At the feast of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit comes to them as both driving wind and tongues of fire. The Spirit re-awakens the disciples to their own courage and conviction. They are given the gift of tongues, which is the gift of communication. Air or breath is the medium through which we give voice to the things we believe most deeply. The Spirit breathes courage and a sense of freedom into them, necessary to go forth and offer the vision of an alternative way of being to the world. We can pray with the gift of air through awareness of its inspirational qualities. When we pray with the image of the Holy Spirit revealed at Pentecost, we can pray with the sacred gifts of renewal and awakening offered to us by God in each moment.

When I read Mechtild of Magdeburg's words about rising up "on wings of longing" to God, I am reminded of the time I spent several months in a small cottage on the water and of herons that I would often observe there. I would walk for hours along the shoreline and see these beautiful creatures standing alone. Then suddenly they would lift themselves into the air on their great wings and fly across the horizon of my vision with such grace. Every time I witnessed this scene, I would experience a connection between their wings of longing and my own. I felt myself lifted for a moment, inspired, carried higher.

The quotations above from St. Thérèse of Lisieux and the poet William Blake offer us another way we are inspired by the Spirit: God breathes love into us. The gift of the Spirit through air is creative inspiration, but just as important, it is the inspiration to grow in our love of others and ourselves. We are invited to continually open our hearts and participate in the love that flows between the three persons of the Trinity.

FOR REFLECTION

- Where in your life do you feel asleep and need to be awakened?
- Where do you need the gift of courage to help you move out of your fear?
- What is being inspired in you?