CHAPTER 1

The Memory of the Song

was in San Jose in the summer of 2006. When I am on the road teaching, I like to have an afternoon siesta to replenish my strength. Sometimes I enter quite a deep

sleep, and as I wake, it is as if I am climbing out of a place deep in the unconscious. The climb is gradual, and it takes me awhile to reach the surface of wakefulness again. As I began to resurface that afternoon in San Jose, I was aware of the sound of music. It was coming from the garden courtyard just outside my room. A table was being prepared for an evening meal with invited guests. So the music was intermingled with the gentle clinking sounds of wineglasses and silverware being laid. But in my half-wakeful state, the music was not a recording. It was a live ensemble of strings and pipes playing a song that came from a distant place. And the meal was a banquet in an ancient garden courtyard to which we all were invited. I lay for a long time drifting between sleep and consciousness, allowing myself to remember.

What is it we have forgotten about ourselves and one another? In the Celtic tradition, the Garden of Eden is not a place in space and time from which we are separated. It is the deepest dimension of our being from which we live in a type of exile. It is our place of origin or genesis in God. Eden is home, but we live far removed from it. And yet in the Genesis account, the Garden is not destroyed. Rather Adam and Eve become fugitives from the place of their deepest identity. It is a picture of humanity living in exile.

At the beginning of the Hebrew scriptures, the Book of Genesis describes humanity as made in the "image" and "likeness" of God (Genesis 1:26). This is a fundamental truth in our biblical inheritance. Everything else that is said about us in the scriptures needs to be read in the light of this starting point. The image of God is at the core of our being. And like the Garden, it has not been destroyed. It may have become covered over or lost sight of, but it is at the beginning of who we are.

A nineteenth-century teacher in the Celtic world, Alexander Scott, used the analogy of royal garments. Apparently in his day, royal garments were woven through with a costly thread, a thread of gold. And if somehow the golden thread were taken out of the garment, the whole garment would unravel. So it is, he said, with the image of God woven into the fabric of our being. If it were taken out of us, we would unravel. We would cease to be. So the image of God is not simply a characteristic of who we are, which may or may not be there, depending on whether or not we have been baptized. The image of God is the essence of our being. It is the core of the human soul. We are sacred not because we have been baptized or because we belong to one faith tradition over another. We are sacred because we have been born.

But what does it mean to be made in the image of God? What does it mean to say that the Garden is our place of deepest identity? In part, it is to say that wisdom is deep within us, deeper than the ignorance of what we have done or become. It is to say that the passion of God for what is just and right is deep within, deeper than any apathy or participation in wrong that has crippled us. To be made in the image of God is to say that creativity is at the core of our being, deeper than any barrenness that has dominated our lives and relationships. And above all else, it is to say that love and the desire to give ourselves away to one another in love is at the heart of who we are, deeper than any fear or hatred that holds us hostage. Deep within us is a longing for union, for our genesis is in the One from whom all things have come. Our home is the Garden, and deep within us is the yearning to hear its song again.

In The Secret Book of John, a second-century manuscript recovered at Nag Hammadi, Egypt, in 1945 along with The Gospel of Thomas and other lost accounts of Jesus, John the Beloved has a dreamlike encounter with Christ. John has been weeping in grief and uncertainty after the events of the crucifixion. But through his tears, he becomes aware of Christ's presence. This is a favorite theme in John's writings, seeing through tears. We know that pain and loss in our lives can make us close down to life or harden us with bitterness. But John explores the way in which tears can open us up to see what we have not noticed before. It is as if the inner lens of our heart is washed and we see what previously was clouded from sight. What are the tears in our lives today, individually and collectively, the losses within our families and the grief within the human soul at what we are doing to one another as nations and religious communities? John's experience invites us not to shut down to these tears but to see through them and to be opened to what we have not known before or have long ago forgotten.

Christ says to John, in this brief account, that humanity has forgotten itself. We suffer from a "bond of forgetfulness," he says.¹ We do not know ourselves, nor do we remember our beginnings. We are in what is like a deep sleep. And the more distant we become from our true self, the more we fall under the sway of the false self, or what he calls "the counterfeit spirit."² There are three major symptoms to this "bond of forgetfulness," he says. They are ignorance, falseness, and above all, anxiety. When we lose touch with the wisdom that is within us, we live out of ignorance. When we no longer remember the truth of who we are, we become slaves to falseness. And when we forget the deep root of our being, we become prone to fear and anxiety. My eldest son, Brendan, suffered a psychotic breakdown in the summer of 2000 when he was sixteen years old. I was overwhelmed as a father—and again and again at times over these years have been overwhelmed—by a sense of not knowing what to do to help him. And Brendan, of course, is not alone. There are countless young men and women in our world today who are manifesting the deep fears and anxieties of our age. Fear is not only in them; it is in us. It is part of the human psyche. And it is multiplying rapidly. What are we to do to help? How do we enable them and ourselves to hear again the song of our beginnings and to recover the harmony that is within us and between us?

When Brendan became well enough to leave Edinburgh, I took him to the Cairngorm mountains in the highlands of Scotland for a few days of hiking. It is a place of cherished memory for us as a family, of hiking and vacationing together. It is also a place where one can walk for hours without meeting others. I thought it would feel like a safe place for my son in the midst of his often paralyzing fears. The first day, we walked for hours through Glen Feshie without meeting another soul. It seemed that we had made the right decision. But around midday, turning out of the glen to head up Sgoran Dubh, a favorite mountain peak, we noticed two men working on the path ahead of us with pickaxes and shovels. In Brendan's mind, they were there to do him harm, so we needed to give wide berth to get around them. No sooner had we passed, however, than Brendan began to worry about the return journey. They would be there waiting for us.

On the way back, it took all my powers of persuasion to keep Brendan on the single path that leads up and down that mountain. On the far side of Sgoran Dubh is a sheer drop into Gleann Einich. But Brendan kept trying to persuade me to scramble over the steep edge rather than return to the point where we had met the workmen earlier in the day. It was a painful experience for me as a father to feel the dementing effects of fear in my son. By the time we returned to the glen, the workmen were gone. But I was shaken by having witnessed the close relationship between fear and truly mad behavior. We know this relationship in our lives and world today. We experience it within ourselves, and we witness it on an international scale as we are driven as nations toward the precipitous edge of truly destructive policies and actions.

Christ says to John that he is our memory. Humanity has forgotten itself. It has become subject to fears and falseness and ignorance. "I am the memory of the fullness," says Christ.³ He comes to wake us up, both to ourselves and to one another. He carries within himself the true memory of our nature and of the fullness of our relationship with all things. He comes to release us from the falseness of what we are doing to one another. These themes from The Secret Book of John are similar to what we hear in the gospel of John. Jesus says that he has come "that those who do not see may see" (John 9:39). Or as he asserts in his trial before the Roman governor, "For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth" (John 18:37). He is the memory of the song. He witnesses to the truth of who we are.

I do not believe that the gospel, which literally means "good news," is given to tell us that we have failed or been false. That is not news, and it is not good. We already know much of that about ourselves. We know we have been false, even to those whom we most love in our lives and would most want to be true to. We know we have failed people and whole nations throughout the world today, who are suffering or who are subjected to terrible injustices that we could do more to prevent. So the gospel is not given to tell us what we already know. Rather, the gospel is given to tell us what we do not know or what we have forgotten, and that is who we are, sons and daughters of the One from whom all things come. It is when we begin to remember who we are, and who all people truly are, that we will begin to remember also what we should be doing and how we should be relating to one another as individuals and as nations and as an entire earth community.

8

One of the greatest teachers in the Celtic world, John Scotus Eriugena in ninth-century Ireland, also taught that Christ is our memory. We suffer from the "soul's forgetfulness," he says.⁴ Christ comes to reawaken us to our true nature. He is our epiphany. He comes to show us the face of God. He comes to show us also our face, the true face of the human soul. This leads the Celtic tradition to celebrate the relationship between nature and grace. Instead of grace being viewed as opposed to our essential nature or as somehow saving us from ourselves, nature and grace are viewed as flowing together from God. They are both sacred gifts. The gift of nature, says Eriugena, is the gift of "being"; the gift of grace, on the other hand, is the gift of "well-being."5 Grace is given to reconnect us to our true nature. At the heart of our being is the image of God, and thus the wisdom of God, the creativity of God, the passions of God, the longings of God. Grace is opposed not to what is deepest in us but to what is false in us. It is given to restore us to the core of our being and to free us from the unnaturalness of what we are doing to one another and to the earth.

As a father, when I witnessed the paralyzing fears of my son in Glen Feshie, I did not confuse Brendan's illness with his deepest identity. I did not assume that that was his true nature. In fact, part of what I remembered during that agonizing experience was how he had run wild and free as a boy in that same glen, how he had uninhibitedly dabbled his feet in the flowing waters of the Feshie, how he had tumbled carefree in the thick heather. In other words, I remembered Brendan. And I longed for the day, as I long every day in prayer, for the healing graces that will free him and our world from the fears that separate us from the deepest song of our being.

Christ is often referred to in the Celtic tradition as the truly natural one. He comes not to make us more than natural or somehow other than natural but to make us truly natural. He comes to restore us to the original root of our being. As the twentieth-century French mystic-scientist Teilhard de Chardin says much later in the Celtic world, grace is "the seed of resurrection" sown in our nature.6 It is given not to make us something other than ourselves but to make us radically ourselves. Grace is given not to implant in us a foreign wisdom but to make us alive to the wisdom that was born with us in our mother's womb. Grace is given not to lead us into another identity but to reconnect us to the beauty of our deepest identity. And grace is given not that we might find some exterior source of strength but that we might be established again in the deep inner security of our being and in learning to lose ourselves in love for one another to truly find ourselves.

This is not to pretend that there are not infections deep within us and deep within the interrelationships of life. Eriugena refers to sin as an infection, "leprosy of the soul."7 And just as leprosy distorts the human face and makes it appear grotesque and ugly, so sin distorts the countenance of the soul and makes it appear monstrous, so much so that we come to believe that that is the face of the human soul. And just as leprosy is a disease of insensitivity, of loss of feeling, so sin leads us into an insensitivity to what is deepest within us, and more and more we treat one another as if we were not made in the image of God. Eriugena makes the point that in the gospel story when Jesus heals the lepers, he does not give them new faces. Rather he restores them to their true faces and to the freshness of their original countenances. Grace reconnects us to what is first and deepest in us. It restores us to the root of our well-being, which is deeper than the infections that threaten our minds and souls and relationships.

Alexander Scott, the nineteenth-century Celtic teacher, uses the analogy of a plant suffering from blight. If such a plant were shown to botanists, even if the botanists had never seen that type of plant before, they would define it in terms of its essential life features. They would identify the plant with reference to its healthy properties of height and color and scent. They would not define it in terms of its blight. Rather they would say that the blight is foreign to the plant, that it is attacking the essence of the plant. Now this may seem a very

obvious point botanically. But maybe it is so obvious that we have missed the point when it comes to defining human nature. We have tended to define ourselves and one another in terms of the blight, in terms of sin or evil, in terms of the failings or illnesses of our lives, instead of seeing what is deeper still, the beauty of the image of God at the core of our being.

When Eriugena and other Celtic teachers speak of Christ as our memory, as the one who leads us to our deepest identity, as the one who remembers the song of our beginnings, they are not ignoring the depth of sin's infection. They are not suggesting that our true self is just under the surface of a film of falseness, easily recovered, or that the harmony deep within all things can be recaptured with just a bit of fine tuning. The infections within the human soul are chronic. There are diseases of greed and limited self-interest among us as individuals and as nations that are ageless, so much so that we can hardly imagine what the true harmony of the earth sounds like. These are not just superficial infections. They are tangled in the very roots of our being. They are cancerous. And some of them need to be surgically removed.

Eriugena uses the analogy of sin pouncing on everything that is born. In commenting on the words from Genesis 4, "Sin is lurking at the door, its desire is for you," Eriugena says that sin is hovering at the door of the womb, ready to infect everything that comes into being. Given what we now know of the interrelatedness of life and how even the unborn child is infected by the psychological scars of its family or by the pollution of its wider environment, we may wish to say that sin is lurking inside the door of the womb. The shadow comes very close to the beginning of our lives, but deeper still is the Light from which we come. The conception of all life in the universe is sacred.

To say that the root of every person and creature is in God, rather than opposed to God, has enormous implications for how we view ourselves, including our deepest physical, sexual, and emotional energies. It also profoundly affects the way we view one another, even in the midst of terrible failings and falseness in our lives and world. Satan is sometimes referred to by Eriugena and other Celtic teachers as Angel of Light. This is a way of pointing to the deepest identity of everything that has being, whether creaturely or angelic. The extent to which our energies, and the energies of any created thing, are evil and destructive is the extent to which we are not being truly ourselves.

Eriugena may well have believed literally in a personal presence and source of evil, named Satan, as did most of the medieval world, whether Celtic or imperial. More significantly, however, he is inviting us to be aware of our own capacity for falseness and the potential for distortion in everything that has been created. But most important of all, he is recalling us to our deepest identity as born of Light. We become sinful to the extent that we are not being truly ourselves. We become false to the extent that we are not living from the true root of our being. And Eriugena is pointing also to the path of healing and transformation. We find new beginnings not by looking away from the conflicting energies that stir within us but by looking within them for the sacred Origin of life and desire. In the midst of confusions and struggle in our lives, we are being invited to search deeper than the shadows for the Light of our beginnings. It is also the Light of our true end.

A number of years ago, I delivered a talk in Ottawa, Canada, on some of these themes. I referred especially to the prologue of the gospel of John and his words concerning "the true light that enlightens everyone coming into the world" (John 1:9). I was inviting us to watch for that Light within ourselves, in the whole of our being, and to expect to glimpse that Light at the heart of one another and deep within the wisdom of other traditions. At the end of the talk, a Mohawk elder, who had been invited to comment on the common ground between Celtic spirituality and the native spirituality of his people, stood with tears in his eyes. He said, "As I have listened to these themes, I have been wondering where I would be today. I have been wondering where my people would be today. And I have been wondering where we would be as a Western world today if the mission that came to us from Europe centuries ago had come expecting to find Light in us."

We cannot undo the terrible wrongs that have been done in our collective history and in the name of Christ. We can, however, be part of a new birthing within us and between us today. And the new birthing relates to the ancient song that we are invited to hear again. It may seem such a distant song that we hear it only as in a dream. But the more we become reacquainted with its music, the more we will come to know that the deepest notes within us and between us in our world are not discord. They form an ancient harmony.