

Being rooted in your belief

Beloved person,

Blaise Pascal was 31 years old when, on the night of 23rd November 1654, he was overcome by an experience that would change his life forever. Pascal was not only a brilliant mathematician and physicist, but also a philosopher who wrestled with questions about God and life. During that night, he had a religious experience that he himself described with one poignant word: Fire. He tried to capture his experience in short, hurried sentences: 'FIRE. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob. Not the God of philosophers and scholars. Certainty. Feeling. Joy. Peace. God of Jesus Christ.' For eight years, Pascal carried these words, as a tangible reminder of this intense experience, hidden in the lining of his coat, close to his heart. When he died in 1662, the parchment containing his most intimate religious experience was found.¹

What touches me so much about this story is that Pascal did not keep these words in a bookcase but literally close to his heart. I imagine how he spent day after day preoccupied with his head, with reasoning, formulas and proofs. But there are moments when you cannot figure things out with your mind alone, when what happens to you makes you waver or disappointments confuse you. It is precisely then that the need for guidance and direction grows. Where do you find that? Pascal found it in his faith; very close by. How often did Pascal feel the presence of that parchment under his clothes? How often did he place his hand on it, especially in moments of uncertainty or doubt? How often did he descend from his head to his heart to seek wisdom and feel what was right to do?

Perhaps, like Pascal, we carry something with us that reminds us of what is essential. A folded piece of paper in your wallet, a chestnut in your coat pocket, a... When you see it or feel it or find it again, it can take you back to an experience, a song, a word, our foundation, a gesture from someone who was close to you. You could see it as roots that keep you firmly grounded. If you wanted to carry something very close to you, what would you choose to keep close to your heart?

Our roots form the basis of how we move through this world. They influence what we say and do, how we behave towards others and how we interact with nature: what we allow or reject, what we nurture and what we do not. In this way, your roots can, as it were, grow wings: they become visible here and now in the choices we make, in the way we shape our lives. For me, this is the core of humanism: that as human beings, we have a high degree of freedom to choose and at the same time bear responsibility for the consequences of those choices.

This does take practice. Time and again, life invites us to seek balance: between holding on and letting go, between remaining faithful and daring to change. What is loving to do today may look very different tomorrow. There is no definitive formula that teaches us this; it requires reflection, paying close attention to what is happening inside us and around us, and staying the course. Because we are quickly influenced in our own choices by the beliefs and opinions of others. That may feel solid and give a sense of security, but it can prevent you from being true to your own values and what you find important. The trick is to learn to trust your own convictions, what you hold close to your heart, and what truly guides you.

Shouldn't we form communities for this purpose? Places where you can practise with others discovering where your roots lie *and* how, from these roots, you can lovingly give wings to your life every day.

With a warm-hearted greeting,

brother Marten van der Wal



We continue to baptise young and old with our meaningful philosophy

¹See: The Thoughts, Letters and Opuscules of Blaise Pascal

With the annual theme “*A Courageous Journey*”, we explore the tension between roots and wings in the fourth quarter.