

## Second Journey

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### **Abstract**

This article describes in an essay-style the spiritual journey of the author since mid-life. It includes changes in ideas, practices, questions, and also answers. This whole journey is guided by the desire to encounter God on a personal level and to be authentic at every step. A relentlessly honest essay about the love of God and a love for God's family.

### **Warning Bells about 'Spirituality'**

When I agreed to write a piece on 'Christian Spirituality,' several warning bells sounded in my mind. I recalled some words of Kenneth Leech, an Anglican priest who spent his entire ministry in the poor areas of London's East End. According to him, 'spirituality' can be "a dangerous diversion from the living God, from the demands of justice, from the engagement with reality. It can be a form of illusion" (Leech 1992 p 3). He meant that if our spirituality is entirely private, theoretical, comfortable and self-absorbed then it has missed the mark. 'Spirituality' can easily become a form of self-indulgence and a commodity to be consumed.

### **A Faltering Start**

Even when I began writing this article on Christian spirituality, I tried four or five times and gave up in frustration. It simply would not take shape. I found it impossible to impose a structure on whatever it is I have come to know of God over these many years. I had to admit to myself that the subject does not lend itself to any neat categorization. It cannot be contained in the sort of scholarly, coherent and carefully researched piece that readers of *Spes Christiana* might expect. I should have recognized that before I started. I felt the way I did when I visited the Grand Canyon in Arizona. I took many photographs.

I tried to get an angle on it. I tried to fit it all in my view-finder but I just could not frame it. It was simply too vast. All I have now is a collection of faded pictures which evoke nothing of the awe I felt when standing on the rim of that vast chasm.

I might have produced here an objective-sounding account focusing on spiritual disciplines like fasting, prayer, meditation and Bible reading. Indeed in the first half of my teaching life I did exactly that. Such a cerebral approach is characteristic of the first journey. But now it seemed to me that I would somehow be evading the heart of the matter, the opening up of ourselves to the Living God. Any theoretical categories I was attempting to use were pitifully inadequate. I was rather like those disciples returning to Emmaus. I have long walked on the road with Jesus but found myself yet again in danger of not recognizing Him when He appears. And Jesus is the very heart of the matter. I had again to acknowledge that God repeatedly breaches the boundaries of my narrow framework and blinkered experience. What follows then is the result of much trial, error, approximation and not a little foolishness on my part. It would be dishonest to pretend otherwise. And this exploration continues even now when I am at an age when I thought I would be settled in my understandings.

There are yawning gaps in my account here. There is messiness and probably contradiction. You must be prepared to make some leaps where I have failed to build bridges. I am, as it were, stalking God, watching out for a footprint only to find in the end that it is God who is tracking me.

### **Prescriptive or Personal?**

Another danger in this assignment was that I might lapse into a prescriptive account. The church has always encouraged me to have a '*personal* relationship' with God. I am grateful for that. I confess that I have often settled for an impersonal relationship, an easier more distant one. But I cannot have another person's experience of God nor you mine though perhaps the church sometimes encourages us to think otherwise.

And so inevitably this article is in large part autobiographical. It would be so anyway whether I acknowledged it or not. It emerges from my own particular back-story as a WASP male. I must acknowledge all of this – not least to myself. It would concern me if any reader thought that this article offered a model to be imitated. Not at all. This is nothing more than a series of hints and

clues. It is important to emphasize that at the outset. I am wary of any who offer a package tour of the Almighty.

I must tell my story 'slant', as the American poet Emily Dickinson has said. I see no alternative. So I have made a random choice of a starting point to what has been for me 'a second journey'.

### **What Is the Second Journey?**

The second journey starts where the first one ends. The first journey is characterized by being cerebral, systematic, doctrinaire, impersonal. It no longer satisfied me. It is not surprising therefore that I was struck by these celebrated words from Dante which were on the flyleaf of a book whose title kept occurring in things I was reading thirty years ago:

In the middle of our life's road  
I found myself in a dark wood –  
The straight way ahead lost.

The book was *Second Journey: Spiritual Awareness and the Mid-life Crisis* by Gerald O'Collins (O'Collins 1995). He is a writer whose churchmanship is very different from my own. He is a Catholic who came to feel that his Catholicism could no longer adequately sustain his life with God. He said something which startled me in its clarity: "We cannot live the afternoon of life according to the programme of life's morning: for what in the morning was true will at evening have become a lie" (O'Collins 1995, 4). Not only was this true of me but it was also true of many of those friends and people I knew who were giving up on the Adventist church for precisely that reason. The haemorrhaging distressed me and still does. What the church was saying evidently lacked resonance. These friends and I needed to hear words which could sustain the weight of our lives. I was now in middle age and life was complicated by teenage children, ageing relatives and questions of vocation. If only those who spoke for the church could more often engage with people's everyday lives with greater honesty and imagination. If only I could hear my own experience 'named' from the pulpit.

The second journey beckoned.

## **The Beginning of my Second Journey**

I was in mid-life, mid-career and wondering what to do next. I had just declined what on the face of it seemed a good career move. I have never doubted that I did the right thing but was aware that options were narrowing down. I was tired and needed to find new spiritual and professional resources.

6 July 1991 proved to be an important day. It was a Saturday.

We had sung a hymn in church the previous week which had startled and moved me because it summed up my feelings so precisely. I tried but failed to memorize it. So on this summer day I jotted down in an old notebook the verse which had taken me unawares – together with the date for some unknown reason. I did not know it then but that was the birth of my spiritual journal. I have continued with the practice of using a journal ever since. It is not a daily practice. There are long gaps but it is where I record those rustlings of God which I sometimes detect.

The words of that hymn by Charles Wesley were a beacon in a dark place:

Jesus, confirm my heart's desire  
To work, and speak, and think for thee;  
Still let me guard the holy fire,  
And still stir up thy gift in me.

Nothing had shifted 'my heart's desire' but I needed some sense of vocation. I did recognize then, if only dimly, that making myself available for a personal relationship with God might well mean that I would diverge somewhat from conventional understandings of the form which that experience should take. It might mean that God would take me where I did not wish to go. It might involve some painful separation, some unlearning. It was a risk which I slowly felt willing to take ... largely out of desperation.

I was slowly learning that my spiritual life is not distinguishable from the rest of my life. But I did need to create some open space where I might stumble upon God. The space so easily becomes cluttered with all kinds of rubbish, even very worthy rubbish.

I began to recognize that my own attempts to wrestle with God have value only insofar as they enable me to become more fully human in the mould of Jesus. To sense and respond to the human need which surrounds me every day. To recognize God at work in my everyday routines. To gradually confront the nonsense inside me so that other people are less burdened with it.

## Tensions

About this time a friend of ours recommended the writing of Harry Williams, an Anglican priest from a tradition very different from my own. He spoke about life with God with great honesty, clarity and humour.

In his book *Tensions* Williams seemed to put his finger on my pulse time and time again. "Tension [...] is the price of life. [...] It is when we refuse to recognize and welcome tensions which are life-giving that we fall a prey to tensions which are death-dealing". He adds that Jesus made it clear that "there is no such thing as an easy, comfortable, placid relationship with God. If we think that there is and that we have attained to it, that merely shows that we are asleep or dead, perhaps more accurately, simply as yet unborn". He continues: "If our beliefs are cut and dried, it means that we have anaesthetized ourselves against nine-tenths of reality. [...] T]riumphalism [...] is the cowardice which runs away from conflict under the guise of a bogus assurance. [...] People are zealous for a cause when they are not quite positive that it is true" (Williams 1976, 13–15). It all sounded familiar. I learned that I must learn to live with paradox, that I must somehow learn how to sustain these tensions within myself.

This was strong medicine but I recognized enough of what he was saying in myself and in my faith community to want to continue. Williams gave me courage to explore those questions which had always lingered but which I had by no means pressed far enough.

The second journey could not be avoided.

## The Wilderness

I nevertheless felt that I was in a dark place, a kind of wilderness. Lost.

Williams argued in the second book in his trilogy, *True Wilderness*, that in the Bible very important things happen in the wilderness. The book called me to believe that something of significance might happen in my own current, small wilderness if I was able to recognize it. "Our wilderness, then, is a sense of inner isolation. [...] It's a sense of being alone – boringly alone, or saddeningly alone, or terrifyingly alone" (Williams 1965, 29–30). When you feel that isolated, that lost, you begin to plan escape routes which usually turn out to be dead ends.

A guiding scripture in Williams' book is Exodus 20:20–21: "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die. [...] Then

the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was". I had too often let the church do the talking and the thinking. I saw that all too often my conversation, my focus was much more about the church than it was about God. That was in fact a principal way of hiding, of remaining at a distance. I was seeking to validate, justify, understand, explain, motivate myself by reference to the church, not by being a child loved by God. It is a common enough and insidious spiritual evasion. I saw that I was still too dependent on familiar ways of tracking God.

I felt that Williams had identified me when saw the "man who is afraid he isn't there [...] and points at things external to himself, shouting, 'That, that is me'" (Williams 1965, 22). He talks about "this urge to evade the responsibility of being the mysterious, dissatisfied, potentially dangerous, and potentially magnificent people they are" (Williams 1965, 24). He quotes Mk 8:36 (NEB): "What does a man gain by winning the whole world at the cost of his true self?" I experienced this as a call to 'come to myself', rather like the prodigal son, and to stop hiding, stop remaining at a distance – poverty stricken. I admired Williams' determination: "I resolved that I would not preach about any aspect of Christian belief unless it had become part of my own life-blood" (Williams 1965, 8).

But Nicodemus' question lingered: "How can a man be born again when he is old?" Or at least forty-four.

### **God's 'Absence'**

Isaiah 45:15 contains this startling assertion: "Truly, you are a God who hides himself." And hiddenness looks a lot like absence sometimes. Absence or temporary absence or apparent absence. For a purpose known only to God. But from our side it may look like abandonment, both baffling and frightening. Mary's resurrection morning experience seemed to ring true for me. "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him" (John 20:13). Mary wonders whether it has all been for nothing. So too the experience of the two disciples on the Emmaus road. The story in Luke 24 runs through many of seasons of the spiritual life: "We had hoped [...] how foolish you are [...] stay with us [...] they recognized him [...] he vanished [...] our hearts were burning within us". What a tangle of aspiration and emotion! For me, the resurrected Lord is difficult to track sometimes. But there was the promise of resurrection, resurrection now from my own dead past.

I had not yet learned 'I am that I am'. I shall be there as I shall be there. Wendy Robinson says: "God's presence is assured, the form it will take is not" (Robinson 1974, 14). I had made the mistake of deciding in advance what form God's presence should take. "Stay with us." "I am with you always." An elusive presence. This 'absent' God who paradoxically does not know how to be absent.

### **Fellow Travellers**

I was not as alone as I felt. I could not possibly have made the journey without my soulmate. Helen was at least as hungry – more hungry – for her own second journey as I was. From the very beginning of our relationship, we had read and shared our responses to many of the same books. True spiritual companionship within the family or beyond it is indispensable on such a journey. I discovered that apart from Helen there were many people to welcome us on the journey, this second journey. But sadly we could find little evidence that any Adventist writers were addressing the issue.

I had slowly grasped that if you wish to come to the truth, you must read or listen to those who have a different view of the world from your own. That is my natural instinct but it is also part of my training in philosophy. If you listen only to people who agree with you, you may be confirmed in your belief but you may all simply be wrong – together. You may exist in an echo chamber. If however you listen to those who disagree with you, or who do not share all your presuppositions, you have the opportunity to test and modify your belief, or, if those writers can come up with nothing to make you change your mind, to confirm it.

This process of testing involves allowing the Scriptures to probe our hopes and fears, uncomfortable as that may be. I have found that Anglicans, Catholics, Lutherans, those of no faith, novelists, biographers and more, all supply me with the questions with which I can navigate the difficult parts of the journey. So too in a different way the people who live around me. My next-door neighbours have their own different senses of what matters in life. Their questions may sometimes be rough-hewn but they are genuine. I must submit my own ideas to the test of everyday living.

These are all good companions on the second journey. The movement of the Spirit is not confined to those in my own spiritual community or people

just like me. To believe otherwise is pure arrogance. "The wind blows where it chooses" (John 3:8).

### **False Self**

There are those who would like to regiment our experience of God. And it is easy to want simply to fit in. By the time you arrive in your mid-forties you have accumulated various obligations, human and financial. They are such that you cannot simply follow your own whims or dreams. There are other people and factors to consider. One of the effects of this is that you can be squeezed out of shape. You are required to play certain roles even when they are not comfortable, and are obliged to act in a way which is sometimes not authentic. The spiritual danger is that you lose track of yourself. You too easily become a false self. You become your own almost-convincing double. The great danger for the church is that it may be led by some people – mostly men – in mid-life who have become precisely that, false selves, though few would recognize that description. I have witnessed too much of this to deny it.

And, of course, there is great pressure in the church to become David in Saul's armour. For the sake of unity. Or maybe just appearances. For the sake of tidiness. Status, popularity, qualifications, achievements – they are all part of the mould which we squeeze ourselves into. Relentless activity on behalf of the church is dignified by the label 'dedication' or 'commitment', and so we may develop a certain sense of self-worth. There are not many ways of developing it in ministry and so we go for simple indicators: baptisms, doctorates, large pastorates, invitations to speak here and there or to write books. "Unable to be ourselves, we become good party members instead." (Williams 1983, 77)

O'Collins is forensic in his analysis: "We act the play. We learn our lines. We know what people want us to say. We lie. In the end it is not even deliberate" (O'Collins 1995, 10).

I can only plead guilty.

### **Loved?**

If I am not to get my sense of worth from my 'status' where else can it come from? "God so loved the world that [...]." No verse in the Bible is more familiar to a Christian than that. It is at the basis of all our teaching. I knew it well enough. So familiar is it that it is quite possible somehow to know it but not receive its force. Loved the world? Yes, God loves all the masses of people.



But me? That is harder to hear because I have direct acquaintance with all the interior rubbish that clutters my spirit. To know myself loved by God – it is what I have so often missed as I involved myself in the busy-ness of church life. Known and yet still loved. I feared that anyone who really knew me would find much that was fraudulent and unlovable. I confess I have found it difficult to know myself loved by God in deep places.

### **Stillness**

The knowledge of being loved by God comes partly, I think, from the experience of being loved unconditionally by another human being and partly through stillness. I have wondered about calling it ‘silence’. But silence tends to frighten some Christians. Partly because they may associate it with monastic or meditative practice but partly also because most of us cannot manage it without all the churchy noise which usually distracts us.

The wider Christian church has always been nervous of this stillness because you cannot know what people are doing with their silence – it may be subversive. So times of silence in our own faith community are sadly rare. It has become important to me to remember Elijah who came into the presence of his God not through the drama of fire or earthquake but through “a sound of sheer silence” (1 Kings 19:12).

The idea of silence must be approached with a little caution. The practice of silence suits me well but I am probably temperamentally more suited to it than some others. Furthermore, it is possible to be silent without being still because the restlessness is within. So also it is possible to know inner stillness without being silent.

For me, silence can be so articulate.

“Uncrowd my heart, O God, / until silence speaks / in your still, small voice; / turn me from the hearing of words, / and the making of words / and the confusion of much speaking, / to listening, / waiting, / stillness, / silence” (De Waal 2003, 42).

### **Sabbath**

The practice of real Sabbath-keeping offers an unparalleled opportunity for stillness. However, my experience had often been that it was a time of busy-ness with church routines. On the second journey I felt the need to reconsider my patterns of observance.

This is no place for an extended consideration of the Sabbath. Many exist elsewhere. But if I am to flourish spiritually, I need to find a favourable environment to do that, and the Sabbath offers me a particular, even unique, opportunity. I need time to slow down and take stock of the direction of my priorities. There is a real sense in which what is truly important is not that I keep the Sabbath but that the Sabbath keeps me. I gain no religious merit in Sabbath observance but I do gain benefit. It is a time for developing ‘antibodies’ not only against external threats but against all manner of personal weaknesses – let me be clear, sins – which may have a negative impact on others who are important to me. I need time to find out what is life-giving, what makes me fully alive.

At the same time I must acknowledge that Sabbath time is not to be confused with inactivity or inertia. The Jews teach us that the dance of life continues, that the Sabbath is sometimes a time for exuberance, outward-going not inward-retreating. I am amazed at how many Christians beyond the Adventist church are re-discovering the possibilities of Sabbath. Brueggemann says: “Sabbath is [...] a critique of the false desires that focus on idolatry and greed that have immense power for us. When we do not pause for Sabbath, these false desires take power over us. But Sabbath is the chance for self-embrace of our true identity” (Brueggemann 2014, 88). The title of his book *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now*, and other titles tell their own story: Nicola Slee, *Sabbath: The Hidden Heartbeat of Our Lives*, and Lynne Baab: *Sabbath-keeping: Finding Freedom in the Rhythms of Rest*.

### **Church Community**

I am not a gregarious person by nature and will seek out smaller groups rather than larger ones but one of the lessons of the Covid-19 lockdown for me has been that, despite this, I do very much need contact with the members of my community. I have missed them. My community does contain some people whom I have known for a long time and who have been through many seasons of life with me, life-giving and death-dealing. The genius of the church is that it is that rare social organization not formed for the benefit of its members. It brings me into contact with people whom I would not choose to be with. There I meet the ‘other’. Rubbing up against them shows me my own weaknesses and areas of inner desert if I will allow it. No spiritual life can be lived apart from a community to which one feels some obligation. It serves as

a corrective to my self-absorption and provides some protection against worshipping a God made in my own image. It teaches me that my life needs to be about something bigger than myself.

Despite every one of its shortcomings, and they are many, the church is deeply precious to me and I feel protective of it against all those forces, inside and outside, which threaten its health. I do not know of a brief way to examine this further. The best I can do here is to invite you to do a simple exercise which I have used myself and with others. Fill in the blank with the name of a social institution: 'The church is like a...'. The obvious candidates arise often: a hospital (for the sick), a military barracks (to train Christian soldiers), a supermarket (for getting regular supplies), a bank (for building up credit) and so on. The best response I ever heard came from a pastor in the Baltic church in the immediately post-Soviet era: "The church is like a circus". Somehow that helped me to understand what a church is really like. There are ringmasters, clowns, high-flying trapeze artists, wild animals amid all the warmth, interest and aspiration. I leave you explore this simile but I have been happier since I acknowledged both the magnetism and the absurdity of the church. With all that, I choose to remain because it offers access to resources vital to my living well.

### **'The World'**

When seeking to deepen our openness to God there is the danger that we may generate a closedness to 'the world', which is biblical code for the polar opposite to God. The word 'secular' derives from the Latin name for those medieval monks who left the monastery to carry the Word to the marketplace while others simply remained within cloister walls to observe the daily offices and work to sustain the life of the monastic community. It was inevitable that the seculars would return to the monastery with mud on their sandals, and with it some worldly ways and attitudes. These 'seculars' provide me with a fitting image of the tension between the aspiration to holiness and the obligation to live my faith in a context uncongenial to it.

I had resolved that tension already. I could not remain behind the conceptual walls of an institution. Everything about my past shouted that I must be in the world if not of it. The secular world must be allowed to provide its tests to my faith. And yet I wanted to belong. More tensions! Harry Williams concluded that "in order to love God I often had to hate religion and I began to

catch glimpses of God's glory where, on any ecclesiastical estimate, that glory had no right to be" (Williams 1982, ix).

"The wind blows where it chooses".

### **Generosity**

The church only uses the word 'liberal' positively in one sense. When a plea for funds is made, we are often asked to give 'liberally', meaning generously. In that sense I aspire to be liberal. I would like to be more liberal, more generous than I am in my attitudes to other people. More welcoming of their individual strengths and weaknesses, their anxieties, their sadnesses and their joy. I would like to extend to them the sort of graciousness that God extends to me. To use the title of Brian Maclaren's book, I seek a 'generous orthodoxy'. I want myself and my people to avoid all forms of meanness, especially in attitudes.

### **Social justice**

It is a clear teaching of Scripture that true worship of God is inextricably linked with a concern for social justice. The OT prophets along with Jesus and Paul have a strong bias to the poor, the widows, the orphans, and other marginal people with no-one to care for their well-being. I wish I had really grasped this earlier. I have been too content to be a pietist, too concerned with personal redemption, mine and others'. It has affected my understanding of what bearing witness to the way of Jesus really means. Does it mean political engagement? Selective activism because you cannot be involved in all the needs that the world presents? I can only confess that I have not found any satisfactory answer for myself and remain disappointed about that. How can I bring together the way of Jesus and the affairs of the wider community?

### **Prayer**

So much advice about prayer has been offered that I am nervous about adding to it. People's dispositions and circumstances vary so much that it is dangerous to generalize about it. But a great many people who make no profession of faith will admit nevertheless to praying sometimes. I believe that prayer is deeply intimate. As Mark Oakley rightly says: "The older I get, the more difficult I find it to describe what I mean by the word 'prayer'. At the same time, increasingly I realize how important it is" (Oakley 2019, 23).

I will confine myself to a couple of ideas. The first is that I have understood that I and my fellow-believers are prone to want to use God for our own purposes. To enlist God on our side and to get God to guarantee some benefit for ourselves, for those we care about or for a cause we value. But maybe we miss the point. Our being 'with God' cannot be a transaction. I am not to *use* God but to *enjoy* God for who God is. I must be in search of that true wonder for God and God's ways ... which are not our ways. In an age where 'awesome' has become a descriptor so casually used, I need to maintain my sense of awe, of wonder for what Rudolf Otto called the "mysterium tremendum et fascinans".

I have found that while praying by myself I can easily slip into a mind-set where I cater for an imagined audience almost as if I were praying in public. I search for an angle, an idea which would work in a lecture or sermon ... to be addressed to others! I create a structure as if there were some virtue in that. I engage in a kind of holy diplomacy. I almost feel that my prayers should be correctly punctuated! It is only more recently that I have given up trying to be diplomatic, polite, balanced or articulate in prayer. Instead I have found some liberation in opening up my muddled mind, the thoughts not arranged in any coherent order. If my prayer tumbles out in a crass or chaotic way, I have come to believe that God can receive that. I believe that God would swap a kilo of prayerful politeness for a gram of transparency and passion. I regret that I have come to this rather late in life.

I pray that God will be Emmanuel, *with* me and *with* the people who are on my radar, in a manner and at a time of God's choosing. The detail is not mine to fix. I know many people do have prayer lists and that is well and good. I pray not according to a list but according to who may be on my mind or who has crossed my path. I have found freedom in praying in that way. I no longer feel the need to be 'comprehensive' in my coverage.

It may be that this too in time will dry up. Then I will need to reflect further. In times of dryness I often go to prayers, poetry or verses of hymns written by those who have trodden the way before. They give me words when I lack them. My mind invariably loses focus when I am praying. Sometimes I use a very short fragment from Scripture, no more than four or five words and simply repeat them. That is all my tired mind will do sometimes. Sometimes I must just pray that God will receive the stutterings of my fragmented mind. I am encouraged by what Paul says in Romans 8 about "groaning [...] sighs too deep for words". Sometimes that is all I can do.

I believe it is important to clear an open space in my spirit where God can be present. I am reminded of the occasion when Jesus cleared all the clutter from the temple in a plea that true worship might take place. I wonder whether my heavy emphasis on petitionary prayer has sometimes been an evasion of some of the true work of prayer. I 'introduce' God to other needy people rather than laying bare not simply my own neediness but my own self. Perhaps our deepest desires are our true prayers – all the rest is public relations. That means that nothing at all is off-limits in prayer.

All I have to do is turn up.

### **Spirituality and Sexuality**

There can be little doubt that there is a strong identity between our spiritual and our sexual selves. I believe that this is true for both men and women. Here we confront our deepest intimacies, our deepest selves. Jesus hinted at it: "I in you and you in me" (John 15:4). I believe my sexual self gives me clues about my spiritual life if I have the necessary courage and understanding. But I find it difficult to examine this area of life for myself. I have found few who will help me. Embarrassment, inability to access the movements of my own soul, inability to find the right words to capture these deepest feelings, my fears about the sacred and the profane – these all play their part in keeping me from exploring these "treasures of darkness" (Isaiah 45:3).

I believe it is not at all appropriate to have open season on these experiences – that way lie real dangers. So I have few models of how to do it. The best I can do is privately trust to God all my desire, aggression, fantasies, regrets, disappointments, guilts, hurts, blame, tendency to treat others as objects not subjects, etc. The whole of human life is there. But I am understandably afraid to visit this place. I might learn distressing things about myself which would need real maturity to handle. This is difficult inner terrain. There is much to say about such matters and this is not the time. I would simply point in a direction which is suggested by the title of the book *Befriending Our Desires* by Philip Sheldrake (Sheldrake 1994).

### **Confession**

It is strange that a church such as ours which is so interested in sin is so little interested in confession. Of course, we go through the motions and there are generic prayers of confession. But there is little in our corporate worship to

guide me in my own confession. Why is this? First, confession has a whiff of Catholicism about it and so we may throw the baby out with the bathwater. Then there is the embarrassment or discomfort of others' sins or our own being given public expression. And we must take that seriously.

But in private prayer there is no danger that my sins will be paraded for all to see. Part of the problem is that I tend to think that what I must confess lies in my actions or words. But confession looks different when I acknowledge that I must confess who I am rather than what I may have done or said. These are merely the by-product of who I am. That takes me into some serious interior work which may be uncomfortable, and I may not be very good at it. But if I confess that I display tendencies to be envious, materialistic, competitive, proud, lustful, disdainful, controlling – the list goes on – then there arises the possibility and obligation to work on habits which may have developed over a long time and may be difficult to shift. This is tough soul work. But if I can say to God: 'This is who I am and who I have been. I am not proud of it. I have been ignorant of much of it. I have hurt people by being who I am. Forgive. Help me to know forgiveness, receive it when it is given. Help me not to linger in guilt. Help me in the long haul back to a better place', then the way is open for change to occur.

I read once that our greatest sins are either things that we are proud of or things of which we are simply unaware. If that is so then I have difficult work ahead because in both cases I remain totally oblivious to my sins, my going in the wrong direction. I am being asked to hear a narrative about myself which is different from the one I habitually prefer to tell. In the Church of England, the liturgical prayer of confession asks *first* for forgiveness for things we have not done and ought to have done before it speaks of things we have done and ought not to have done. My sins of omission may be more numerous than I care to consider. I can only trust that God will break the news to me gently for this has the potential to be devastating.

## Joy

My experience in the church has taught me well about duty; it has done less well when it comes to joy. It has taken me a long time to recognize that. My church has reinforced my own natural suspicion of spiritual exuberance, my narrow seriousness. To be sure there is a great deal of evangelical noise around in the church but cool rationality is no less a threat. It is encouraged

by an emphasis on doctrine rationally constructed and doctrinally disciplined behaviour. I have learned much about joy from those church members of a different culture from my own.

It is difficult to say exactly what joy is. It is a different creature from all the fun and happiness on offer in the marketplace. Joy simply comes – you cannot plan it. No amount of planning will do it as I discovered once when I went to King's College Chapel, Cambridge for evensong and the anticipated exultation just did not come to me. As C.S. Lewis says we are "surprised by joy".

But maybe too often I miss the moment of joy. It is possible to experience joy in the most unpromising of circumstances. I recognize it when I see it. I see it in airport arrival halls when little children rush towards a parent or grandparent. I see it sometimes in a concert hall at the end of a performance. Sometimes in hospitals too. I may experience it across a gentle landscape lit by evening sun. Walking a cliff path by a vast sea. A quiet moment in a cathedral or sacred space. A line in a play. In a hymn a phrase of which catches me by surprise. The faithfulness of a friend. The deepest loyalty of a spouse. "It is the turning / aside like Moses to the miracle of the lit bush" (*'The Bright Field'*, Thomas 2003, 114).

Joy may be subversive in nature if it comes when others are not expecting it. It suggests a value system which may be different from theirs. There is something gloriously unpredictable about joy. As Buechner says: "Once they have seen him in a stable, they can never be sure where he will appear" (Buechner 1985, 13).

## **Witness**

I have grown up with conventional ideas about witness. It involved men (of a certain personality type) standing above an audience, telling people how things stand and urging them to action. It involved the preparatory work of advertising and crowd events. Much of it felt rather unnatural to me. All these may have their place. Indeed, my own father became an Adventist Christian after attending some public meetings. I have been pleased to see the church more recently moving towards more natural community involvement which is Jesus-shaped. Jesus helps me to become a more human human-being. He extends my capacity for compassion mixed with a little risk taking. I think the most effective witness to Jesus often occurs when I am unconscious that witness is even taking place. Being not telling.



## **Laughter**

Laughter does not attract much attention in the Bible and little that is positive. So it may seem strange to include it here. Fraser says that “laughter is a necessary accomplice of truth-telling” (Fraser 2007, 152), and I remember once hearing someone say: “Laughter is inimical to fascism”. I think the same applies to fundamentalism. The temptation which faces authoritarian leaders is the same as faces evangelical preachers. And me. It is to take myself too seriously. It is a way of making myself the centre of the world, perhaps the most original of sins.

Churches can make the same error on the grand scale. “In man’s ability to perceive and laugh at the comic in himself and his world, the Divine is at work creating order. For there can be no true order without a sense of proportion, and what destroys our sense of proportion is pride. Laughter is the enemy of pride as pride is the handmaiden of illusion”. Berger has said that humour provides “signals of transcendence”. Williams says: “to laugh is to be redeemed” (Williams 2006, 64–65). The healing function of laughter in the spiritual life is to puncture my pretentiousness. It is difficult sometimes to know how seriously to take myself – both child of God and clown. Laughter has the potential to reduce the distance between my assumed persona and who I really am.

Laughing is not far from worshipping. People ‘make us laugh’. And, of course, cry. It comes unbidden, unplanned. So too with worship. It is in the same family of responses both unbidden and profound.

## **Jesus**

None of the foregoing makes much sense unless at the centre of all this thirsting and seeking is Jesus. This means that wherever you go in the Bible Jesus is the One who gives the whole thing resonance. Without Him it can be no more than fascinating religious history. But what does this mean? It means becoming so familiar with the Jesus of the Gospels that He becomes part of the fabric of my being. It means that He rouses something important deep within. It means that I take seriously what he says about a life well-lived. It means creating some open space where we may approach each other. It means being ready to be surprised by the Gospels and not certain that I already know what the accounts are saying. It means not treating as mere metaphor or hy-

perbole some of the uncomfortable things Jesus says and does. It means admitting to myself that I often do not grasp what it means. It means that sometimes I don't want to grasp what it means because of the cost. It means thirsting for more.

The third book in Williams' trilogy is *True Resurrection*. Here he emphasizes his conviction that resurrection cannot be consigned to the past or the future. It is a present lived reality: "Everyone who drinks of this water that I will give will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (John 4:13-14).

I can only reply with the Samaritan woman: "Sir, give me this water" (John 4:15).

Resurrection is now.

### **Conclusion**

I have walked once around the subject of spirituality here. Now there comes a time to be silent. I have walked around it many times myself and frequently pursued false trails even when I was sure I had the scent in my nostrils. But I am confident that as I keep walking, I will detect the divine scent if I provide God with that open space. I look for the cracks in doctrine and practice for "that's where the light gets in", as Leonard Cohen sings.

Three things bother me as I conclude. The first is that it is somehow false to speak of 'the spiritual life'. There is only everyday life imbued with the Spirit of Jesus to a greater or lesser extent. Second is that it is easy to fall into a kind of arrogance in centring my comments on my own experience. Again I say that this article does not provide a model but just some hints. Third it may bother you that I have cited no Adventist authors. I am familiar enough with the thinking of Ellen White to know that much of what I have said here can be anchored in what she has said before, simply in a different idiom.

Further it is entirely possible that what has so caught my attention and excited me over the years has left you cold. That is the danger of being autobiographical. All that I have said is personal but not, I hope, merely individual. I hope that in this article you will have caught a glimpse or two of something which might help you to grow in spirit. Some slant-wise insight. Such glimpses have had a deep effect on how I journey, on how to recognize dead-ends and how to follow promising paths.

The church has beaten a path for me to follow towards God which I would not have found by myself. I remain profoundly grateful for that. At the same time, I have not wanted the church to wall me into an institutional understanding of God. What I believe and am must stand the test of the public space and of my own integrity. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons in the fifth century, once famously said: "The glory of God is man fully alive". I would like to be fully alive.

I have said enough – maybe too much.

I am beginning to find that much of what I believed during the first journey I still affirm and value but for very different reasons, with different motivations and, yes, with greater strength. And some things have been burnt off by the noontide sun.

T.S. Eliot said it so well in his poem "Little Gidding":

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.

I believe that if I can say with the psalmist: "My soul thirsts for God, for the living God" (Psalm 42:2) I shall not be disappointed.

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### **Zusammenfassung**

Dieser Artikel beschreibt im Stil eines Essays die spirituelle Reise ab der Lebensmitte des Autors. Darin enthalten sind Veränderungen in Bezug auf Ideen, Praktiken, Fragen und auch Antworten. Die gesamte Reise ist geleitet vom Wunsch, Gott persönlich zu begegnen und auf jedem Schritt authentisch zu sein. Ein schonungslos ehrliches Essay über die Liebe Gottes und die Liebe zu Gottes Familie.

### **Résumé**

Cet article décrit sous la forme d'un essai le cheminement spirituel de l'auteur à partir de la quarantaine. Il prend en compte les changements dans les idées, les pratiques, les questions et aussi les réponses. Tout ce cheminement est guidé par le désir de rencontrer Dieu à un niveau personnel et d'être authentique à tout moment. Un essai implacablement honnête sur l'amour de Dieu et l'amour pour la famille de Dieu.

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