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a forum for people grappling with faith and church issues

**values being real
supports faith stage transition
respects and validates the journeys of others
allows questions and doubts
lets God defend God**

Inner Knowing



From my earliest years I have been aware of God in some sense. I was brought up in an amazing, evangelical Christian home where my parents continued to explore, change and grow in their faith as well as very much live it. My brother, sister and I had a very ecumenical upbringing, tasting many varieties of church - there was a period of a couple of years sometime between 11 and my mid-teens when we wouldn't know which church we were going to until the Saturday evening or Sunday morning - it could be the Anglican, Pentecostal, Brethren, Methodist, United Reformed, the local "house church", Baptist... I guess as a consequence I kinda learnt to get something out of whatever presentation or persuasion - or maybe I just learnt to be with God wherever. We also went to summer camps where we learnt about and encountered the Holy Spirit - a new area that my parents wanted to be open minded about and explore, but they cautioned us to think about it and decide for ourselves. When I look back I'm grateful for that wisdom and gift, coupled with the core belief or knowing of God that I had, it served to protect me and give me space to constantly question even if only in my most private moments. My inner knowing or core belief in God mixed in to greater or lesser extent with whatever teaching, thinking or feelings in Christianity and church culture I was involved with.

In my late teens, my attendance at church was

somewhat erratic, although I did settle for a while at an Anglican Church in a neighbouring village, where I was able to express and explore my faith independently of family. At college I attended what I suppose you'd call, a charismatic house-church - this was separated into six smaller congregations that met in local schools, and once a month we'd all get together. The congregation I went to was probably the most alternative of the six, with a real mix of personalities, professions and backgrounds. It was a growing, community spirited type of place, quite special and definitely human. Then suddenly the leadership decided that God wanted to bring us all back together and the smaller communities were scrapped in favour of one BIG meeting. A number of us expressed our concerns about this really being the "will of God" and it was the beginning of the end for quite a few of us who gradually drifted away to other churches, to form alternative groups or from church and faith altogether. Throughout all this I kept asking questions of God and my faith - I can only describe it as an ongoing monologue, although I didn't feel my questions were simply disappearing into an empty and unresponsive void: I'd tell God when life was crap; when it was good; talk about not being sure I believed at all; say that I didn't know or understand how faith worked; that I didn't know if He was male, what about mother God, did He have a gender at all? talk about decisions I was making that "weren't right", and query Christians'

attitudes and church teaching around all sorts of things, often pondering the differences between myself, and my attitudes to other people which didn't seem to fit with what I was taught "scripture said" or "Christians should/shouldn't do".

I watched a number of friends and acquaintances who had been "converted" as teenagers become increasingly angry and disillusioned with church and faith. They felt betrayed and deceived when they began to realise that what they'd been sold in church and the realities of their lives just didn't stack up. Add to this a complete lack of understanding and support from the church (or even a more informal gathering that had evolved) concerning everything from mental illness, to disillusionment, to homosexuality, to.... and their rejection of church and faith was perfectly reasonable and sensible.

Church became less and less relevant - I didn't relate to it at all, none of it: the worship; prayer; structure; premises; biblical interpretation; the neatness of it all.... I stopped going to church. Occasionally I'd wonder if I should try and find another church to go to but I didn't want to. My faith remained quiet and rooted deep within me; I don't know how to explain it - I think it might be akin to hibernation. There was a slow, dull beat resonating from within of which I was barely conscious, and my knowledge of it grew, through nothing more spiritually pro-active than living. Being apart from Christian culture my faith grew - there's something about getting back to basics, removing all the rubbish and realising that your core belief/inner knowing is very much intact and alive - it validates it and brings it to life.

Armed with this vulnerable, growing awareness of inner knowing/faith, life went and got pretty shit - I got divorced, and became clinically depressed. To anyone who hasn't been there take it from me depression is definitely real, unbelievably painful, and I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy; words fail me. It is extremely scary not to be able to cope with even the simplest tasks of life like getting out of bed, going to the supermarket, driving to your parents/friends- the energy required to put one foot in front of the other is quite literally superhuman, and you honestly don't think it'll be possible for you to do it. During this time, somehow, my inner knowing stayed with me (albeit still in hibernation phase), I didn't get angry

at God - my shitty life wasn't God's fault - I wasn't amazingly aware of God's support or love or presence, but in the counselling, in the continued frank monologues I used to throw God's way, in the engagement with the pain and brokenness I grew and my belief in that inner knowing grew - and in the midst of shit, God.

So now what? Well I haven't regularly attended church for over 12 years, and I have no desire to do so, although I'm happy and comfortable to attend with friends and family from time to time, and I occasionally hanker after going to mass and the space that liturgy provides. Whatever my faith does and will look like it, and however it expresses itself, it has grown from a traditional, evangelical Christian context, and although that can be a handicap it is a great gift too. I enjoy engaging with others at Spirited Exchanges and hearing and seeing the different journeys that people are on - there is so much to be gleaned, so many gems to discover. I'm still learning, growing, and engaging with life, faith, and my spirituality and I'm learning to trust that knowing more and more. I believe in integrity and being true to self and getting to know myself better is part of the journey of knowing God more, it's a journey that my spiritual director is accompanying me on for the moment and her companionship is immensely precious and quite literally priceless.

I can't say I get it (belief/God/spirituality/faith); I like and relate to what Mike Riddell says in his book Sacred Journey.

"Other people might argue whether God exists or not; I've never been allowed that luxury. Somehow I've always had an awareness of Someone looking over my shoulder. From time to time I curse God or demand explanations. All I am saying is that I can't imagine that I'm shouting my questions into an empty and unresponsive void. **My experience of living prevents me from either atheism or agnosticism, as attractive as they might seem at times.**"

Is it possible I'm deceiving myself - yeah sure - but I suspect that's not the truth of it. I increasingly trust the knowing within me, that feeling in my guts - I trust the journey, myself, God, and the process, life. The mystical, the ying

and yang, paradox, the unknowable and yet just tangible - it captures my imagination, energises and enthuses me - it is the stuff of living, the adventure I have been made for. **Anon**

[The author is a woman in her late thirties who loves Latin music and dancing, is learning to sail, is a bit of an adrenaline sport junkie and is unlikely to decline fine wine or good food! For a living she masquerades as a scientist involved in medical research.]

How might a group of people who don't sit comfortably with traditional forms of church want to shape a corporate gathering space?

Indeed. How do you do it differently without replicating the same structure even if you want to? Is it our automatic default?

The aim was to intentionally develop a post-evangelical space / style for those in something of an 'in-between', unsure, re-forming faith place. To build ways of exploring, interacting, and teasing out issues of faith and life, to be and learn from one another on the Christian faith journey, to be God honouring, and develop community. To develop an entirely different culture based on participation and shared ownership of the 'space'. A place where the secular is brought into the room.

On a recent trip to Central Australia I learnt a number of things about the Aborigine people. One of those was their relationship to property. Buildings for the Aborigine, are symbols of something alien and incompatible with the environment that sustains them, namely the Australian desert. An environment which has sustained them for some sixty thousand years. The Aborigines build what they need for when they need it and leave it behind when they don't need it anymore, when the food and water supply have become scarce in that area. Sometimes they are returned to in a following season when sustenance is again available nearby.



For some, the normal shape of church has become incompatible with what they need within their cultural milieu and has lost relevance and way of being in the Christian faith for them. They feel

alienated by the culture rather than it sustaining them.

For the Aborigine the essence of who they are and what they believe is passed on through stories. The story is not contained in buildings or the old structure but passed on in relationship and journeying together.

For increasing numbers of people it is the *essence* of the Christian faith that is being sought, not the 'property' that goes with it – it has become time for them to move to something that better enables and sustains the next part of the journey.

People were invited to the New Gathering to contribute to forming the space that could do that for them. We first brainstormed around ideas of what people wanted out of a space like this and what they didn't want in terms of general ethos and then looked at how an evening might look in terms of what would be meaningful and life-giving. What has evolved and will continue to evolve is an hour and a half on alternate Sunday evenings. We begin with soup and bread rolls and then move into a more focussed time with a number of components facilitated by different people. The idea being to build a sense of community around a meal and a high degree of ownership, involvement and participation throughout the evening. There are six components –

- a welcome / call to gather together to meet with God
- a focus on some aspect of our world and the people in it
- reflection through some form of the arts – this gives a more multi-sensory / intuitive engagement
- reflection through content – can draw discussion
- connecting – time that allows for people to connect with / engage with God in some way

- the parting – the closing, leave taking, going from here which acknowledges what has taken place during the evening and farewells us from the space.

The ethos developing can be classified under five headings:

- The gathering is circular, without a front. The setting is a reflection of and supports group ethos.
- We endeavour to explore and engage with the world and the community around us.
- The integrity and choices of the individual will be respected.
- We will endeavour to support each other's exploration of faith by sharing our stories, experiences, perspectives and journeys.
- We let God defend God.

There are 'stations' around the room if people prefer to spend some of the time in contemplation. They might reflect on a symbol, piece of artwork or writing or light a candle. Just simple foci for meditation.

Sue, who attends this gathering finds it "a huge relief to find others who are at the same stage as her in their faith journey." After feeling burnt out by the traditional church and its cultural expectations, she feels she is tentatively opening

up to a relationship with God again, but in a safe place for her. She says she finds it 'immensely relaxing', that it is wonderful to have freedom to choose whether to participate or not from the smorgasbord of different people's ideas and thoughts about faith and to take from that what she wants. She appreciates that she can be herself and described the different contributions from people as "a treasure trove of people's creativity – finding faith in God in creative ways."

The biggest challenge has been overturning the very ingrained church culture and getting people to own the responsibility of making it happen. People largely expect church to be put on for them, not that they could help make it happen, let alone alter the way it is going mid-happening by suggesting that we have a bit more time to discuss a thought. For a few the more provocative ideas are a challenge to the surety of their beliefs. However, despite that, the ingredients are there. This could become a very exciting space

Who can be a part of the new gathering? Can I go back to Aborigine culture which says a person is an Aborigine when they say they are, when they identify they are and become part of / enter the story or culture.

Jenny McIntosh

Open dialogue – a space for reader response

...this is an opportunity for open conversation from readers about previous articles. You may offer your own story; a broadening or different view of the subject; or point to other resources. We ask you to respect the same guidelines that are followed in Spirited Exchanges groups:

- We're not trying to produce one answer. There is freedom for differing views and opinions.
- Anyone is free to share his/her own view even if it's different or 'heretical' from some people's perspective.
- We ask for respect for each person's opinions
- We let God defend God

What happened?

I have been a Christian since I was a young boy of eight. My life over the succeeding years has been very much centred around the church and living as a Christian in my community.

It was, therefore a shock to me when a situation arose in the church I had been part of for twenty odd years that, I can now only term as spiritual abuse. As a member of the Diaconate and pastoral support team I became concerned about the number of people leaving without any apparent contact from the church or pastoral support during that time. I therefore disagreed to a section of a report in

relation to pastoral care being presented to the church from the Deacons that said the pastor was doing a good job. The pastor came to hear of this, demanded an apology and when it was not forthcoming, went to everyone in the church seeking support to have us excommunicated. He also arranged a church meeting for everyone to state publicly what they disliked about us and have our membership revoked.

What has been the most difficult aspect in all of this and led to some of the darkest and hardest of my life, has been the response of those who we had

journeyed with in the church who we believed were friends. Only one person phoned us of the two hundred or so people we had loved and cared for over the years. No one came to visit. A nearby farmer we had known a comparatively short time and who would not call himself a Christian, was the only person who showed us real care and support. He regularly contacted us to see how we were. All the Scriptures say about Christian love – 1 Cor 13 seemed to be no longer true to me – in practise Christians seemed worse than unbelievers. Was all I had believed from God's word, when put to the test,

really untrue? Are friendships we make at church only if we are in agreement all the time or believe exactly the same things?

Ten years on my trust in God has undergone healing and is now strong. However, my trust in fellow Christians is damaged. I have made a number of attempts to bring some reconciliation but have had no response. The pastor concerned was subsequently asked to leave because of his confrontational manner but still no reconciliation with the church we once called 'friends'.

John Leuthwaite

A NEW PATH

You have a new path for me to walk with you.

It is neither the familiar old way of religion that I have trodden so long;
nor the dead-end shortcut of lawless, independent freedom that I so often try
and which is no freedom at all.
It is neither the narrow path of unquestioned rules, formulas, traditions, principles;
nor the broad road of a hodge-podge, traditionless quasi-faith.
It is neither life-sucking law nor cheap grace; neither cowardly, indiscriminate mercy nor hard-hearted,
short-sighted truth; neither skin-deep, loveless righteousness nor fear-driven, short-lived peace.

Your path for me does not lose itself in the sidetracks of a dry and godless intellect;
nor meander aimlessly, unthinkingly, along the ways of an undiscerning heart.

It finds itself neither in the thick-walled enclave of co-dependent community;
nor in the boundary-less group of people alone.

You would not see me walk this path fearfully, tentatively,
my eyes lowered in cringing, guilty duty;
nor bound along it as if I need no guide, no light for my feet, not even air to breathe.

Walking this unfamiliar path with you, you are neither a distant, unknown stranger, nor a too-familiar friend
with no mystery. And I am neither a weak, worthless worm, nor a semi-god, all power untapped.

So I here I stand at the threshold of this new path, my two old ways still running faithfully on either side.
They are clear paths, straight roads, easy to walk, but this new way before me is strange, shrouded,
shadowy. Is it a merging of my old ways or is it altogether different? I cannot tell, I do not know. But I do
know that on this path the old and the new, the strange and the familiar are friends. I do know that mercy
and truth meet together, righteousness and peace kiss each other. Here I am bold and afraid, weak and
strong, soft-hearted and strong-minded, alone and in community, a slave and free, rooted and winged,
confident and unsure... And you... you I know so well and do not know at all, so close and so far away.

One more thing I know, that this new path you call me to passes through the very heart of the fire, through
raging rivers and rushing waters. It is not safe. But it is good. It is hard to find, easy to lose, and yet so
often, when I think I have lost my way, my feet stumble unknowingly onto this new path. And every time I
return to the new path from a stint on my old, familiar ways, I will find the road firmer and the horizon
clearer.

Faith Evolving: A Patchwork Journey

Trish McBride 2005

Introduced by Adrienne Thompson

This book is exactly what it calls itself – a patchwork. Like everyone Trish has a bag-full of memories and experiences – in her case collected over 60 odd years of living. In this book she has pulled them out of the bag, spread them out, sorted and selected and arranged, then stitched them together in a colourful, meaningful pattern.

Trish says in her preface that the idea for this book arose from a comment that there are few longitudinal studies of spiritual development. Having been writing over most of her adult life she realised that the stories and articles she had produced through the years of living and working her faith gave the ‘inside story’ of one woman’s growing, changing faith.

So the first section of the book entitled ‘Clothes-line Theology’ offers reflections from a time of life when Trish was mother of a large young family, fully involved in her Catholic Parish and Charismatic prayer group, encountering God as Father and Redeemer and Life-giving Spirit and responding to him with love and devotion.

The second section of the book is called simply ‘After That’. Following the sudden death of her husband Trish had to care for her family as a solo parent. She worked as an industrial chaplain, she did some formal study of theology and ministry and she wrestled with the silence and absence of God. So the pieces from this period ask questions, challenge assumptions. In particular Trish began to experience God beyond the male images offered by a patriarchal church.

The third and final section is named Turangawaewae. After the anguish of the middle years – not only widowhood, but abuse by a clergyman to whom she went for support; and leaving the church which had been her home,

Trish has come through to a place of integration and wholeness. She doesn’t label herself as either Christian or non Christian. She joyfully experiences God as female, and male, and non-human. And she shares not only her experience but disciplined thinking about her experience integrated with theology – her own and that of other theologians.

The book is a patchwork of kinds of writing: poems, articles, personal experience. Many of the poems are also prayers, love-songs to God, love-words from God. There are a few stories and parables. There are articles written for a particular time and place which yet have resonance for today. A few random examples: a poem about the painful reality of *not* grieving for her husband’s death; a powerful recounting of how a woman (Trish) finds the courage to confront her abuser; some measured and careful articles about aspects of Christian (specifically Catholic) theology and practice from contraception to sexual abuse by clergy. I think I personally most appreciate the reflections that come out of an experience: healing at a retreat for example.

Because it’s a patchwork different people will enjoy and appreciate different ‘patches’ more than others; or enjoy them in different moods and at different times. Anyone interested in Fowler’s Stages of Faith will certainly find them exemplified here. People complacent about church will find here stories written in sadness and anger exposing institutionalised violence and abuse. People struggling with church and faith may find new windows of hope and possibility.

Thanks, Trish, for the skill and creativity with which you share your patchwork journey.

