

issue 47

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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**

## **Spirituality**

The spiritual quest is a journey without distance. You travel from where you are right now to where you have always been. From ignorance to recognition, for all you do is see for the first time what you have always been looking at. Whoever heard of a path that brings you to yourself or a method that makes you what you have always been? Spirituality, after all, is only a matter of becoming what you already are. **Anthony de Mello.**

### **I met a man on a train today**

I met a man on the train today. The silver-haired man sat down in the seat beside me and, in a softly spoken voice said "hello", I could tell he was kindly and open straight away. Our conversation began as I assume a lot of travellers begin - "so where are you off to?" It turned out that both he and I had lived in the same small town for a number of years and the conversation flowed from there. It came up that I am an artist and a poet so I gave him some of the lyrics I had written recently.

I get so reflective  
on days like these  
I get an ethereal feeling  
on a day like today  
The world swims around my head  
I feel strangely happy to be part  
of the crowd  
To be part of you  
To be part of life  
To be part of love  
To be part of you  
To be part of you

We chatted about the simple things, what do you do? where do you live? and gradually the conversation progressed to more significant things and he asked me how I lived and endured the hardships of life. After a brief moment of thought, I tried to articulate some of the finer, more pertinent points from the swamp of uncertainty in my head: I refuse to hold any belief system or opinion as indelible; I allow myself to change my view, opinion or belief system at any stage; I realize that I am as fallible now as I was when I was younger; I believe that experience is the best and hardest teacher, and I intend on experiencing life this way, come what may, no regrets. Life is a journey, it is not about reaching a destination. To be happy is the meaning and fundamental motivation of my life. I try to be "aware" aware of the past, present and future. I have learnt and continue to learn to be content with the unknown.

I told him that I had been what I like to call a "hard out Christian" in a Pentecostal church but I left The Church - he asked me why I left,

"for many reasons" I said. Thinking about it, it was probably a two year process of questioning and being questioned. I began to feel disillusioned when I realized that I didn't have the answers to the questions in my mind. To uphold the impossible image of the perfect Christian, not feeling like I was spiritual enough, having a sister who is a lesbian, and when it came down to it, not believing that Jesus Christ is the **only** way to God - and many more reasons. The man asked me if I knew who I was when I left the church, to which I confessed; I did not. In fact I had lost myself in an insular world, I was condemned as a sinful being and so I tried to be more of who I thought the church wanted me to be. I left myself behind in a whirl of worship-leading and fervent following. A pained look crossed the face of the silver-haired man and I could tell the church had let him down.

The man interjected at various points through my incessant ramblings and this is what he said, "if you give yourself fully to someone you hold dear they may hurt you deeply, but if you do not give yourself over fully to the person then you will never experience the height of joy and love that you could." He was referring to holding faith. I thanked him for the challenge while being blindingly aware that I don't know the answers to the questions he inadvertently posed.

The man commented pointing at his head that "some things need to be experienced if we are too thick to get it" and other things we can learn from history and wise people. He said his 17 year old son held the same view as me and I mused, somewhat humbly, on that for a

while, wondering if I had out-grown my adolescence yet.

He agreed with me that life is about living now, being present, not about reaching a destination and added that I seem to look back and look to the future and how rare that was.

The silver-haired man is a wise man. I'd like to know more older people, their very nature has been worn, molded by their experience, and refined to give them the wisdom they now possess, making them who they are today. It seems somewhat ironic to me that only when our life is half over do we possess a good amount of wisdom with which to live by.

He told me I was a 'Journeyman', that I write about how I feel and how I view the world and that the world needs more artists like me. He implored me not to stop being as I am.



I admire and respect the man for the strength of his convictions, but I am happy not knowing and letting myself be open to being taught by the world. These days whenever I feel I can't describe precisely the way I feel about life or what is going on I simply say "Life is a funny old thing" - rather than categorize or box life, I leave it open to interpretation.

The silver-haired man wished me well on my journey - it had been a perfect train ride. I feel very fortunate to have met him, but I'm not sad it has ended. I don't know if our paths will cross once more, but may the journey continue.

Amen.

**Ila Scott**

## Spirituality

*"A robin red breast in a cage,  
Puts all heaven in a rage."*

*William Blake*

Trying to uphold the impossible image of a perfect Christian is probably something that most of us can relate to, having tried at some stage to conform in our thinking and/or behaviour to what was wanted, expected and acceptable to the Church.

When any of us tries to force ourselves (knowingly or not) into a box that doesn't fit, be it faith, job, friendship, whatever, more often than not our spirits mutiny; the fall-out is a slow, creeping death from deep within, of which we're often not even conscious. People can use quite graphic images to describe how this experience has been for them:

- it's like being stuck in a can of sardines, all lined up with no way of moving
- I feel like a jack-in-a-box
- it's like being tied in a straight-jacket

As our spirits speak to us, and dare I say God's spirit speaks to us, we wake up to our denial and aching limbs. The cramped conditions become increasingly unliveable and there is a sense of coming to a place, of God bringing us to a place, where we need to break free and journey into the unknown; into fully discovering and expressing our personalities, ideas and opinions; into further adventures of life and spirituality.

Spirituality may well defy definition, but it has to do with life, lived life, embraced life, real life. It involves an intertwining and interaction between body, mind, heart and spirit. There's an Indian proverb which says

*"everyone is a house with four rooms, a physical, a mental, an emotional and a spiritual. Most of us tend to live in one room most of the time but unless we go into every room every day, even if only to keep it aired, we are not a complete person."*



We get to know our true selves, the good, the bad and the ugly and learn to accept, nurture and appreciate everything that makes us us. We are our past, present and future; at any moment we are what we have been, are and will become. Perhaps as we grow in our knowledge of ourselves we grow in our knowledge of God, and so as we explore and live as we truly are so we journey into God - I think so. Anais Nin puts it this way "The personal life deeply lived always expands into truths beyond itself."

The journey is not one of self-absorption but has a profound impact on the way we live and our interactions with the world. It is not an easy road, perhaps the hardest one of all, for it is a journey into wholeness and into holiness.

"Spirituality is a lot like a natural homing instinct. It is flying home to the place of my true identity and purpose - the "I am" place. Only from that place can I live life to the full - in all its abundance. Only from that place can I be strengthened for the journeys of life."

Maggie Smith<sup>+</sup>

**Donia Macartney-Coxson**

<sup>+</sup> From Spirituality is a lot like that in Refresh, Spirituality Is...A Journal of Contemplative Spirituality, Summer 2003, Volume 3, No 2.

## 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

### THE BIBLE AND ITS AUTHORITY

George and Eileen Anderson

We were brought up in fundamentalist families and churches. After we met and married, we quit attending church. So what is our present position regarding the Bible? Frankly, the Bible is an embarrassment to those who demand a textbook that is both PC and 'modern'. The Bible is neither. Worse still, it is uncompromisingly supernatural: dreams, visions, angels, demons, epic events and miracles are an integral part of its fabric, and attempts to edit out such nuisances leave us with a disjointed antique that loses rather than attracts our attention.

There even appears to be a disquieting sub-text that some scholars suggest is part of its unique nature. Take just one example out of many. The numerical values of the letters and words of the first verse of Genesis can be manipulated to produce pi ( $\pi$ ) to several decimal places. So what? Just that if you do the same manipulation to the first verse of John's gospel (which has a contextual similarity to Genesis 1:1) you get "e", essential to engineers and electricians alike. Use the internet; check it (and its significance) for yourself.

And no other holy book - or pot-boiler, ancient or modern - has achieved such a track record for fulfilled prophecy. 'Must give us pause', as Hamlet said.

But - to us at least - the special character of the Bible lies in what it *doesn't* say and *doesn't* claim. It never, ever (even when touting its own merits) makes any claim to being the ultimate authority.

Take all the writings associated with the resurrection of Jesus. First, there isn't a single account of the event of the resurrection *per se*. Second, the characters in the story didn't accept the event because of an empty tomb and a missing corpse. They became believers because of encounters - person to person, often in broad daylight, always in non-religious situations - with the risen Christ.

Such a relationship, even subsequent to the ascension, was deemed not merely normal but essential to belief. Belief did not - *and should not* - arise from dogma, but from an on-going encounter. May we suggest that the whole question of fundamentalism and Biblical authority is a red herring. The Bible on its own admission and by virtue of its thematic structure is simply an adjunct (it plays second fiddle; it provides pointers and guidelines) to its own major theme: namely that God is a person. Particularly he is a person who gets in touch and develops a relationship with any individual who will take him seriously.

It is part of the history of structured Judaism and Christianity that, while religious lip-service has been paid to the God who used to get in touch and to whom even now we may 'pray' (*think*: recite monologues), yet because of the essentially anarchic nature of a personal day-by-day relationship with God, such a concept is downplayed by those in authority, sometimes to the point of total denial.

But this was the essential meaning of the phrase 'kingdom of God' used repeatedly by Jesus in his teaching. At the risk of using a tautology: God is king in the kingdom of God. It's you and him, period.

On a personal note: it works.

*"If you take [a copy of] the Christian Bible and put it out in the wind and the rain, soon the paper on which the words are printed will disintegrate and the words will be gone. Our bible IS the wind."*

*Anonymous Native American.*

## Spirituality:

When did we start discussing spirituality? I don't remember the word having much currency when I was younger, yet now it seems everyone talks about it, writes about it, sings about it. *Religion* is a heavy, dull word. *Faith* is perhaps a shade warmer. But *spirituality* is where the buzz is.

Everyone is having spiritual experiences. I even heard someone promising tourists who visit some limestone cave a *spiritual experience*. I can't imagine that being a promotional plus 20 years ago. If you go to the Internet you can find dozens of sites containing this word. For example, a few topics from just one site, *Beliefnet* which describes itself as a 'multi-faith e-community'. You can go to pages on meditation and prayer, angels and guides, health and healing, garden and home, the workplace. And the types of spirituality included Christian, Jewish, I Ching, Feng Shui, Tarot, Wicca, and Tibetan Buddhism - to name just a selection.

So the word obviously covers a huge area of human thought and experience, but I'm still not sure how well I understand what we're talking about.

The analogy that I find most useful and interesting is with sexuality. Another fairly vague concept (and incidentally, also a word much more widely used now than formerly.) Of both spirituality and sexuality it may be said: it is an intrinsic part of being human; it is affected by childhood experience and training; organised religion tries to control its expression; it is shared communally yet it is uniquely personal; it connects to social, emotional, physical and mental areas of life. Both may be abused and exploited, misunderstood, analysed, demonised and glorified - or enjoyed as a gift. And finally, both have to do with intimacy. However freely we may discuss them in general terms we are inclined to be somewhat reserved in revealing our personal experiences. To explore either our spirituality or our sexuality we need privacy, respect and safety.

Some interesting study has been done about human spiritual experience. Paul Hawker in his book *Secret Affairs of the Soul* refers to study done by the Religious Experience Unit of Oxford University. This is a study done not by theologians, but by scientists - in fact a biologist, Alister Hardy. He wasn't trying to prove or disprove anything - just report what people were experiencing. He asked the question: *Have you ever been aware of, or influenced by, a presence or power (whether you call it God or not) which is different from your every day self?*

In 1987 in Britain, 48 % of people polled answered yes to that question. What they reported was synchronicity - recognition of divine providence; a sense of the presence of God; answered prayer; a presence in nature; the presence of the dead; and the presence of evil. The same study done in 2000 had 76% of those polled answering yes to the basic question.

These people weren't church go-ers, or members of any particular religious group. But when given the chance they admitted to spiritual experience. Interestingly and perhaps rather alarmingly a study done in America in 1998 discovered that one third of people who regularly attend Christian churches said that they had never experienced God's presence at any time in their life.

I'm wondering now if there's another dimension to the analogy of spirituality and sexuality. Does spirituality find different expression in men and women? Or is that perception based on a purely cultural understanding of masculinity and femininity? It's a fact that at events such as retreats, quiet days, or reflective prayer experiences, women will generally outnumber men at least three to one. Is that because women are more in touch with their spiritual side? Have more time? Or is it that such events are perceived by men as overly feminised? There seem to be a growing number of events and groups catering for male spirituality, from Promise Keepers to Wilderness retreats. Are men re-claiming something they had forgotten they own?

For me spirituality seems to be part of what is universally human. I feel vaguely irritated when the male/female dichotomy is insisted upon even in this field of human experience. Why do we have to polarize everything? Maybe I have the wrong perspective and should be rejoicing in complementary masculine and feminine spirituality, each enriching the other. I would love to know what other people have discovered.

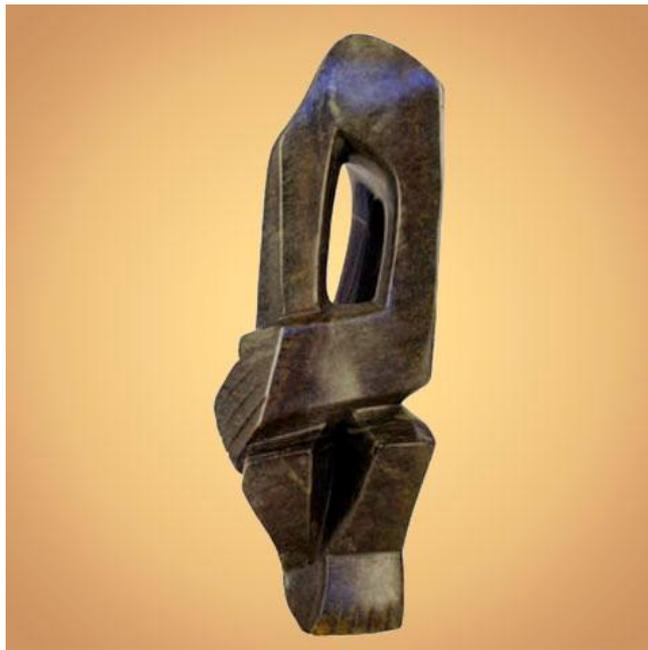
**Adrienne Thompson**

**Note from Ed:** This issue contains views on spirituality from three women. It would be great to hear other views and particularly from a man's perspective. What is happening for men in this realm of spirituality that Adrienne has raised in her last paragraph? How do men develop their spirituality, particularly when they move outside more patriarchal church structures?

## Where your donations go - an update.

In case some of you are wondering what happens to your donations to Spirited Exchanges, here is a list of some of the things that are happening:'

- subsidising the production and sending out of the monthly newsletter (over and above the \$10 subscription)
- a once yearly Facilitation training course - this is a weekend long course that educates people more about what Spirited exchanges is about and what they need to know to facilitate a group. We provide this free to people and ask them to pay for their travel here. These have been well attended and new groups developed led by people who have attended this course.
- running groups and meeting with people one to one.
- resources and materials to educate churches, para church organisations and others about Spirited Exchanges, what it provides and what happens for people who leave churches.
- maintenance and ongoing development of the website.
- having a profile at Parachute and other events.
- looking at other initiatives that would be helpful - currently looking at the possibility of a micro-Greenbelt (see [www.greenbelt.org.uk](http://www.greenbelt.org.uk) for info) type weekend event of our own specifically geared to those in the Spirited Exchanges space. **If you have any thoughts or comments about an event please let Jenny know at: [jenny@central.org.nz](mailto:jenny@central.org.nz)**



If you would like to contribute an article, suggest a topic for discussion, comment about the newsletter or come off the mailing list please write to the Editors: **Jenny McIntosh** or **Donia Macartney-Coxson** at **P.O. Box 11551, Wellington** or email: **Jenny** [spiritex@central.org.nz](mailto:spiritex@central.org.nz) or [jenny@central.org.nz](mailto:jenny@central.org.nz) or **Donia** [donia@central.org.nz](mailto:donia@central.org.nz). For Alan Jamieson: [alan@central.org.nz](mailto:alan@central.org.nz) or [aj@paradise.net.nz](mailto:aj@paradise.net.nz) Website: [www.spiritedexchanges.org.nz](http://www.spiritedexchanges.org.nz)