



issue 38

nov/dec 2005

a forum for people struggling 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

## SINGLE • NESS

Loneliness is one of the cruellest things that anyone can suffer. The absence of touch, the lack of laughter, a shared smile, or mutual tears, the absence of companionship and intimacy, all are potentially crippling. People deserve and require intimacy, it is an inherent part of our make-up as humans; it is a connecting thread in the weave of our existence, and it is a tragic commentary on our times that so many find it unavailable. For many who are single they confront these and other issues daily. The church, which many look to as 'family' and hence engenders expectations of warmth, inclusiveness and community, often only highlights the issues and appears to compound the fact that Society at large doesn't seem that comfortable with or embracing of singleness either.

### *A dialogue between two contemporary ( and available ) widows*

Singleness isn't my first choice. If I'm honest it doesn't sit comfortably with me. I'd like it to, to make life easier to live, but it doesn't. I know singles who are happy and satisfied with life on their own. I envy them. I guess singleness happened to us because our husbands suddenly died – and that was never part of our plan. Overnight social status altered and social rules changed. It's often felt a marginalised place to be, including in the church. I've always tried to bring a positive perspective to whatever life's brought me, but there's an unavoidable underlying grief around the many losses and changes singleness has brought, and it journeys with me. That's the simple truth.

*Yes, I'd have to say it isn't my first choice either. You can feel quite socially isolated in a gathering when you don't have a partner and you make the numbers at a dinner party look untidy. It often feels hard in a group of couples, especially when it comes time to go home. Then you have situations like one I can remember, very soon after my husband died. There was an organised church lunch where we were assigned places to go and you didn't know who else would be there. I ended up with a most unusual collection of singles, with which I had nothing in common, while all my married friends were put together.*

Early on I remember a church friend telling me she just wanted me to know that she was going to ask me to dinner with all our shared friends, but only married couples were coming other than me. Because she didn't want me to feel

left out she thought she'd wait and invite me around to lunch with a group of singles some other time.

*A lot of things certainly changed. No longer was I considered safe. I'd always heard that single women could be a threat to married people, but then I realised I was one! I suddenly experienced the reality of that.*

Like when some women started being very territorial around husbands, staying physically close, seeming edgy. I was the same me – just widowed. It felt like I'd become an awkward problem – through no fault of my own. My integrity seemed questionable, and that hurt. Some relationships felt uncomfortable when they never were before.

*Male friends just stopped dropping by anymore unless they had their wives or children with them. I wondered if sometimes the men thought I was going to make a pass at them.*

Well were you?

*Yeah, right...*

Being married had challenges. Being reluctantly single does too. So, let's start a list ...in random order...

- *A daily sense of human vulnerability...having to get through everyday life's ups and downs and responsibilities alone, make choices alone, and cope alone. There's no one*

person there committed to you through thick and thin or having a vested interest in sharing the load, or offering strengths to balance your weaknesses...

- *The loneliness – It can be a deep, unfathomable aching. And contrary to the popular view, taking night classes or joining a club somewhere isn't the perfect fix.*

- *The lack of the everyday intimacy of a close relationship – so often taken for granted but inordinately precious, rhythmic and sustaining. Having someone to talk about the little things of the day with, tell private information to, go places with, to get practical help from without feeling embarrassed to ask, even to get grumpy with!*

- *Lack of sexual fulfilment. You're automatically barred from the privilege of sexual fulfilment. Hormones don't just switch on for people on a wedding night. They're on for everyone – they're part of who we are.*

- *Feeling disregarded, or feeling judged and speculated about. Feeling you've failed somehow, that something must be wrong with you – a sense others must be thinking that too. Feeling awkward and embarrassed by situations you find yourself in, or by personal questions people feel they can ask, which were never asked of me when we were married. And all of it affects your self esteem and self image. (And you become aware that at times one's oversensitivity doesn't help either)*

- *Spiritual questions...Why hasn't God favoured me with a partner like others have? Am I sinful? Is this punishment? Are my prayers not good enough? Does God even know I'm here!!!!*

- *The kinds of relationships possible with others is different from when married – you're definitely less easy to manage socially. Your marital status becomes a big part of your definition in a new, disadvantaged way. You're in a 'special category' – some don't really know what to do with you. Those who do always relate to you as a person first are invaluable – they validate your worth and existence. (...This issue has certainly changed our own perspective about single friends we've known in years past, and today)*

- *Being viewed by some, including occasional church leaders, as a potential danger, potentially likely to lure married others astray...someone needing to be 'managed' carefully...placed in home groups and church responsibilities sensitively etc*

- *You're not seen as an adult – often church leadership responsibilities or opportunities to preach are given to people only when they get married.*

- *And the multitude of sensitive issues around meeting someone of the opposite sex in a coupled church context, and in today's world*

There's more, but that's an honest start, and everyone's different. Being able to talk openly about what it is like being single vs. married is taboo in church circles on the whole – no one much is interested in its realities or comfortable with the subject. Even saying yes to writing our conversation down like this has felt risky.

*Yes, most people do feel uncomfortable with the subject, and*

*hurry to change the subject!. Some try to fix you, and feel sorry for you. Some try to befriend you – which isn't what you are looking for. By voicing what it is like you do not want them to have to become your friend.*

Sexuality - all that it means to be male or female – is built into every aspect of our being. Thus the single person, no less than the married person, is called to embrace and celebrate God's gift of sexuality. What does it mean for a single person to live fully one's womanhood or manhood?  
Sheila Pritchard

And in the church context the ideal social image is, of course, being part of a couple or family. Church programmes typically are most relevant to couples and families. I know couples without children often feel the same pressure from the 'married

with children ideal' – a sense of not fitting in to what's expected or wanted as good Christian role modelling in their church. Church language frequently overlooks the existence of single adults, or they get tagged on the end of a line. One single person commented that being single in their church triggered people's condescension, (Good on you for being single – God can really use you single people - bless you – you'll find someone one day ), coupled with a total unwillingness to ever relate meaningfully with them (no social invitations, questions only ever about their job, requests and expectations to babysit without payment and to automatically help at church events because they were 'on their own' with less responsibilities...etc etc)

*I get pissed off that so much church stuff is geared towards the 'norm' being that of the married person, with the inference that if you're not married you're 'lesser than' or just plain invisible. And that the marriage relationship is the only one that matters really. I know of single people not getting jobs in churches because of their singleness. Preaching is rarely about aspects of singleness, but if it is, it is commonly around singles needing to keep pure and righteous. There's even that view around that you're lucky if you're single because that makes you more free to be more spiritual. In fact, I think singles is a category that doesn't exist easily in many churches (other than young adults) and many just leave because it's just too hard to keep battling against the social 'norm' and maintain self esteem.*

Bottom line, I really miss being one of a partnership. I think I was good at partnering when I was married...I enjoyed it. The roller coaster of sincerely praying and hoping to leave singleness behind and the disappointment that I haven't can get so tiring and disheartening..... Though my faith has been genuinely sustaining for me at times, being told more than once that I should consider Jesus like a husband didn't ever do the trick for me!

*Yes, I've always regarded myself as a person who needs close relationships and who enjoys being with people. Not having someone to talk issues and life through with in a day*

*to day way is a huge loss. I think you once called it a living loss – it is always with you. You learn better how to live with it as time goes on and think you are doing OK and then something comes along that highlights it again and....*

It does help to openly table issues together - and share the journey. And I'm deeply grateful for others who've also shared the journey. Some married. Some single. They've made life so much better. They've been alongside me with acceptance, support, love, genuine care, practical help, engaging with me about the issues, insight, loyalty, humour, patience and unshakable no-strings-attached friendship.

*And it's been strange and ironic how we've had unhappy married people say at times they envy our freedom, individuality, not having to fit in around someone else etc!! I guess when it comes down to it, we often just want what we haven't got.*

Well that's true! What we've said will no doubt have echoes for lots of people whose life circumstances present them with unwanted situations. So I guess we journey on, like everyone else, into unchartered land ahead. What do I want for Christmas? Courage for the road, and things to make me laugh.

## **S I N G L E • N E S S - a male perspective**

I was asked if I could write something about being single from a male perspective. "Ha" I thought "I bet they had to think really hard to come up with my name."

As a teenager I was way too shy to ask a girl out and I was convinced that no girl could actually like me this side of a body transplant and major self-esteem overhaul. Unfortunately that body transplant will never happen, but some of the personality overhaul did occur in my early twenties and I came to know myself, I believed in myself, and liked myself, so now I could go out and get the girls right? Ha – I was still way too shy.

I did come close though, one of my work mates in varsity was, well, what can I say, perfect. I liked her and she liked me (yeah, I was surprised too), except she wasn't a Christian. I could've, should've asked her out anyway, but I was too intimidated by "Thou shalt not be unfairly yoked" and I was told "You are setting a good example to the teenagers in the church youth group, a relationship is not the be-all and end-all of life". Great, so I didn't ask her out, but tried to evangelise her instead. Looking back I like to blame the church for my stupidity, and for my singleness.

It takes a special person to be single their whole life and I honestly don't want to be that special.

Certainly the church does more than its fair share in raising the expectation that we should all be happily married off at an early stage; besides the fact that marriage is obviously the only place for sex (so, if you're randy my dear teenagers and young adults you'd better get married hadn't you?!), there's the stigma of not being fully accepted because you're not married.

Ten years ago I would have hoped to be married by now and I would worry about it and write terrible, angst ridden

poems. Five years ago (coincidentally about the time I left church) I started to relax a bit more and just enjoy my life. Am I happy being single? Well no, not happy, I can give you "content" – it's enabled me to do things I mightn't have done otherwise - but I miss not

having that special someone to hug and hold, travel with, laugh with, argue about the TV remote with..... It takes a special person to be single their whole life and I honestly don't want to be that special.

I'm in my early 30s (and did I mention tall, blond and handsome?) and I can still be distracted by females but getting married is not my sole objective in life anymore. Which isn't to say that if the perfect woman came along and introduced herself to me, I wouldn't leap at the chance, I mean, I'd be a fool not to right? Yeah right, if I wasn't so shy.....

At the heart of our creation as humans is to be fully known and loved. Our longings for intimacy and community with one another are a constant reminder of the intimacy and communion inherent in the Trinity.  
Sheila Pritchard

### **Special request**

I am doing an MA in Christian Spirituality and my dissertation topic is the spiritual dimension of the experience of personal abuse and recovery from it; I'm focusing on adults who, like me, had a conscious faith and spirituality and then had a sudden experience of bullying, violence or other abuse; I would like to talk to people who are able to reflect back (well after the event itself) on how their spirituality was affected, threatened, challenged, deepened, lost, nurtured, rescued, whatever, by the event(s). If there is anyone interested/willing to communicate with me please could you email your willingness to Jenny , [jenny@central.org.nz](mailto:jenny@central.org.nz), your anonymity is obviously assured. Many thanks Pam.

Carrie: Think about it. If you are single, after graduation there isn't one occasion where people celebrate you ... Hallmark doesn't make a "congratulations, you didn't marry the wrong guy" card. And where's the flatware for going on vacation alone? *Sex & The City*

Friendship is a single soul dwelling in two bodies. Aristotle

It's more the single people with the questions and doubts who leave the church, those who are in couples appear to find it easier to stay.

*"Kissing in front of those who have no partner is as rude as eating in front of those who have no food"* Ursula Le Guin, quoted in *The Guardian*



. . . i n s i n g l e n e s s . . .

photo: pavel janoukovec©2003

As an unmarried woman, I was thought to be a danger.

I mind the characterization of me. They say that I live alone with two cats, for instance, and I think that that is code for, like, man-hating spinster. Julie Bowen

An analysis of the attitudes within many churches could lead one to conclude that single people are second class citizens who are invisible, with little or nothing to contribute to the healthy life of a community/church - that isn't me!!

*To dare to live alone is the rarest courage; since there are many who had rather meet their bitterest enemy in the field, than their own hearts in their closet.* Charles Caleb Colton

## **Abridged from “There for the long haul a spirituality for today” by Jim Consedine**

There is a story from Nepal. A bandit meets the Buddha in a forest and threatens to kill him. The Buddha says, “May I first ask you to do two things?” The bandit puffs out his chest and roars, “Of course, I am so mighty and powerful that I can do anything you ask.” The Buddha says “Please cut down the lower branches of the tree over there,” which the bandit does with one sweep of his huge sword. He is clearly pleased with his strength and power. He asks, “What is your second request?” Quietly and respectfully the Buddha says, “My second request is that you now put the branch back on the tree.” “You must be crazy”, explodes the bandit. “No,” says the Buddha, “you are the one who is crazy, because all you know is how to destroy, but the mighty and the powerful are really those who know how to build, create and heal.”

Modern society mostly rejects this message. Power is defined by the ability to destroy, to kill, to maim with pre-emptive strikes, when what is needed is pre-emptive non-violence, compassion and wisdom. Forgiveness is not given any space or media time. There is in fact no place for the spiritual dimensions of people to be addressed and recognised. Our modern consumer culture is dominated by global business conglomerates, which have acquisition, avarice, control and violence at their spiritual base and status, greed, racism and domination as their principle values. The same values apply to the world of industry, with labour now directed globally, workers in most countries, especially the third world, are exploited. The corporate media not only reflects the interest of a handful of super wealthy owners but is dominated by “Buy more and be happy” what nonsense!

The world’s people are in crisis – make no mistake about that. When 30,000 die each day in Africa from preventable disease and malnutrition, 1 in 3 children in the UK and NZ, and 40% in the US and Russia live beneath the poverty line we have a crisis. How do we live a life that is holistic, positive, respects our neighbour, sustains us and fulfils us? No one person can answer this and there is a danger that a person from a particular tradition may leave the impression that their particular way has all the answers. I would hate to do that. But of one thing I am sure. We either regularly nourish ourselves spiritually or we run the risk of becoming cynical, blasé, and burnt out, it’s that simple.

I am indebted to a Canadian spiritual writer, Ronald Reaser, for providing a framework for an holistic spirituality that has helped sustain many on the long haul. It is not complete and may not suit all. This framework has what I call four commandments, they are like the legs of a race horse which only races well when all four legs are being used and working together in harmony. They are: personal prayer, personal integrity, and private morality and; social justice; mellowness of spirit and generosity of heart; membership of a group which shares similar aims.

Personal prayer, personal integrity, and private morality. We are responsible for our own spiritual journey. A spirituality for the long haul understands some sort of transcendent Higher Power, larger than the individual but accessible. We all need to spend some time each day nurturing the “inner me” – it can be meditation, contemplation, verbal, silent, standing up, lying horizontal, sitting in the garden, it doesn’t matter. Also, as I have grown older I can see that unless we maintain a clear and firm commitment to personal integrity and private morality we run a great risk of undermining everything else we have done or seek to do.

Social justice. Whether we like it or not we are social beings. The great spiritual traditions teach that all things are interconnected. We no longer live in a world where the needs of our neighbour are unknown to us. They appear on our TV news every night. Social justice demands that we come to understand what it is that keeps our neighbour in poverty, in a war zone, starving, dying of thirst. What affects one affects us all. Seeking justice is an integral part of the journey. It is in our neighbour that we meet the divine.

Mellowness of heart, generosity of spirit. This may sound rather odd but it is essential. It is about being inclusive – it rules out fanatics and fundamentalist, one issue people, and being purely secular; it simply says that our hearts have to be bigger, more generous, and more embracing than such narrowness allows.

Membership of a likeminded group. This is the one that many will balk at – it teaches that we cannot make this journey alone. If we try we will be like the racehorse limping. The reason to belong is that a group contains so much collective wisdom and knowledge, and also sustains us on the journey. For instance: Where does one take personal suffering? Where does one make sense of such things? Carrying the burden alone can make for a very rugged journey, we need each other, solidarity with others who suffer is part of any spiritual journey.

I would like to finish with 2 quotations

A group of Catholic sisters recently wrote “Non-violence is a way of living. It’s a call. It’s an action. It’s a voice. It’s about caring for each other. It’s about education. It’s a change in your heart. It’s a change in your world. It’s a change in the system. It’s risky. It’s visionary. It’s about sustainable living. It’s the only way to be just. It’s a choice. It’s peace-filled. It’s prayer filled. It becomes who we are. It’s what we do. It’s the only true road to a meaningful spirituality in our time.” And Aung San Suu Kyi says “Freedom means choice. It is of the utmost importance to make the right choice. We can choose either to gratify narrow selfish interests or expand our hearts and minds to encompass the needs and aspirations of others. We can strive to build better lives not just for ourselves or own people, but for humanity”

## Open dialogue - a space for reader response

I really identified with the lead article and the small item by REM. I am a Minister, still hanging on in the Church but with a kind of love/hate relationship with it. After 13 years full time in that role, a personal crisis which affected every dimension of my life, including faith, led to my choosing to be non-stipendiary in order to study and get involved in various activities of the "as you did it to the least of these" kind. I considered at one stage resigning my Ministry and could well have left the Church altogether. Three things perhaps held me inside. First, I have for years regarded the Church as more of a family to me than my own family. It has given me a huge amount, and although it has also hurt me badly, the good ultimately outweighed the bad. Second, during my crisis I came very close to losing my faith on one level, and yet all the time felt "held". Third, I reckoned that I do need some kind of fellowship with others on the spiritual journey. Though the church I currently serve part-time is far from perfect, there are people there who are more open and questioning. I don't think they are where I am in terms of spirituality and belief, but equally they're not dogmatic or unwilling to explore. So I'm hanging on, maybe on the edge of the Institution in some ways, while also looking around for companions in the journey I'm actually on. I have found the last two newsletters to be fascinating, and have shared their contents with a friend, who would not call himself a Christian but is something of a soul-friend all the same. As I am in the UK I'm hoping that the UK section will really get going. Keep up the good work, and thanks. PMC

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In response to Peter's McKenzie-Bridal's article: I have in the past been deeply embedded in the church - at times living in vicarages, working full time in the Church, living in community, exploring more radical edgy group stuff I am now a post church rural living person without any intentional spiritual community. I wrestle with what this means in terms of finding fellow-travellers along the way. As I now run a B&B/guest house, I like the image of travellers (pilgrims), the idea of community not as a 'group' of people necessarily, but how we live intentionally in relationship with all those we meet along the way.

Like Peter, I am involved in my local community - helping it be creative and engaging by organising events, networking businesses, thinking strategically about how we see ourselves. A much more productive use of my time that the endless hours I spent in pointless church meetings.

The image I came up with was of the Sacred Fires I see church as a gathered community who keep the holy fires of faith, spirit and story burning on the hilltops - visible and accessible. A fire is a place of warmth and hospitality, it is more temporary than a building, more effort is required to keep it alive, but it is also more satisfying of basic elemental needs. The Holy Fires are places where fragments of hope and meaning are gathered and celebrated, where they are connected to other stories, and where we gain strength to continue our journeys. A few people have made a commitment to keep these Holy Fires alive, some have been there a long time, others stay for short periods. They keep the fires alive not for their own sake but for the sake of those who drop by to sit awhile.

I see all of us as followers of The Way - travelling minstrels in a sacred world, bringing life, questions, dance, reflection and laughter wherever we travel. Occasionally we rest by the Holy Fires to gain refreshment for the journey, and we bring our own stories - fragments of hope and meaning to celebrate there before going out again. A few of us (and I am one) rarely visit the Holy Fires, but are seen lighting occasional fires along the way. The Holy Fires remain important to us, even though we rarely visit, we can point other questing spirits to them, the memory of them we carry within us, and the fire we carry from them we use to light fires where we are lodging for the night.

Rosemary Neave

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

For any contributions to, or comments you would like to make about the newsletter or if you would like to come off the mailing list please write to the Editor: **Jenny McIntosh** at P.O. Box 11551, Wellington or on email: [spiritex@central.org.nz](mailto:spiritex@central.org.nz) or [jenny@central.org.nz](mailto:jenny@central.org.nz) or Donia Macartney [donia@central.org.nz](mailto:donia@central.org.nz). For Alan Jamieson: [alan@central.org.nz](mailto:alan@central.org.nz) or [ai@paradise.net.nz](mailto:ai@paradise.net.nz)