



issue 44

july 2006

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**

Dark Night of the Soul

I come from a middle-class family with a strict sense of right and wrong, which is rooted in an unashamedly fundamentalist Christian faith. I have been surrounded by love, was fed a diet of wholesome gospel truths, and made a conscious decision to become a Christian at a young age. Walking the path of simple faith through my childhood I received my second baptism, that of the holy spirit, whilst a young teenager. Taking ownership of my family's faith as an adolescent, I stayed a relatively good boy, speaking in tongues, reading the bible, and going to church. At university I joined a Christian Union that I described simply as 'on fire', and my spiritual life went into overdrive.

Christian meetings of some sort became an almost daily occurrence, with prayer, small-groups, worship, bible-study, mentoring and local church - many of which involved me leading. At no point did I go because I felt I ought to, rather a passion for God and for others drove me on. I regularly felt communion with God whilst in prayer, a phenomenon that became more dynamic, until such time as I found myself meeting with local prophets, being impacted deeply by the holy spirit and nurturing prophetic prayer gifts.

My life was not limited to a Christian sub-culture, but was broad: my friends were from a spectrum of faiths, countries and classes; sports and musical activities kept my life full whilst I wasn't studying, and I loved to party. Although I struggled with guilt over alcohol and other recurring sins, as I became more serious about God and holiness I found prayer and accountability partners who

helped me break free from these negative parts of my life.

My simple faith was accompanied by many friends, an active lifestyle, almost unquenchable enthusiasm, an open mind, philosophical and theological study, and a psychology degree.

My faith in the bible evolved. At university I questioned everything, even the concept of 'word of God', and why we trust the bible at all. Simple questions, but no-one I spoke to could provide me an answer any more satisfactory to the word of God question than "it is because it is". I felt like the carpet had been pulled from under my feet, and began to question why I had built my life so much on the bible, instead of on Jesus, the rock the new testament describes as the foundation of life. I found a subtly different way of viewing the bible, but was still able to see it as a source of authority and inspiration.

I became passionate for social justice, and led meetings/attended conferences and protests. I felt a burning inside of me that led me on to more. More God, more healing, more community, more love... I got engaged. Life was good.

However, eight months before the wedding, I broke off the relationship, and despite the intense emotions involved, found a renewed sense of freedom. Part of this freedom involved intellectual change. My foundations for knowledge were totally and utterly dismantled by the challenges of deconstructionism; I realised that the whole structure of truth that gave my life

form was based on the tacit and, worse, dangerous and oppressive cultural assumptions of Western modernity. Critical psychology's critiques of epistemology, patriarchy, cultural imperialism, homophobia and other forms of prejudice challenged my moralistic, black-and-white, "I-am-right" religiosity. But my faith was alive; I was more deeply Christian than ever before. Having lost some of my evangelical trappings, my relationship with Jesus was an intimate one, and I had fresh vision for the church, for my life, and for the world. I remember praying and studying the bible for an hour every day before even starting my other activities, without a sense that it was duty. I loved it. I loved Jesus; I loved God; I loved the church and the world and life to the full.

And then, quite literally overnight, it was gone. All of it. One day I woke up and my best friend had moved away, the centre of my life was removed, and there was void. I had no say in this, but I felt no presence where yesterday there was, I believed in nothing whereas yesterday there was colourful and dynamic faith. The God who I communed with daily was quite simply no-longer there any more.

My entrance into the 'Dark Night of the Soul' was so dramatic I find my words fail to capture the experience at all. Maybe you can imagine the siege of a city, and sitting happily outside without knowing you are in the bowl of a catapult. Realisation only comes when the catch has been released and you're being hurled at dizzying speed through the air, over the city walls, and into a strange world of chaos and uncertainty, a land in which the language you learned as a child suddenly has no meaning. In the words of one contemplative, *"the entrance into the Dark Night of the Spirit is heralded by a definitive stroke of the supernatural, which means that, in a single moment, we are cut off from all that went before, and placed in a new dimension, with no possibility of going back."*

I was filled with a sense of having no choice other than to go with the process and see what was to happen, a bit like a gut-wrenching, heart-stopping theme park ride - once you're on, no-matter how much you scream, you cannot get off until it's all over.

Within weeks my life had spiralled out of control and into a scary, exhilarating ride through parts of life I was not really supposed to see or experience. But see and experience I did, and as I swung between depression and mania I found that I was alienated not only from God, but from all of my friends and family. I just couldn't speak to any of these people any more.

A lost and empty soul, I stumbled through life in what seems in recollection to be a drunken haze. Oscillating between partying every night, to periods sitting, staring blankly in my room. Not knowing anyone, and not being known. Flights of philosophical fancy and completely failed attempts to recreate a Christianity. Madness.

Perhaps what stopped me tipping right over the edge was finding a friend, where all other friends had vanished along with God. Sharing important ideas about postmodernity, clubbing, feminism and psychology, there was someone who could listen to my honesty without fearing that I would now go to hell, and who understood what was important to me. One friend multiplied into two, and slowly I began to crawl out of my introspective hole.

I would like to say that it was like being in a coracle in an ocean storm, small, insignificant, and out of control, but trusting that the enormous waves would take me back to shore. But it wasn't like that. I distrusted everything and everyone. There was no certainty, no deep belief that kept me going through it all. The strength of my faith before was responsible for the depths of my lostness during this time.

Tracing my life from the darkness to wherever it is that I stand now is difficult. Things that helped me keep going were a family who, despite their strong beliefs, cared: even though they didn't know what was going on or how to treat me, they didn't try to force me back into my old Christian clothes. *Dark Nights of the Soul*. Buddhist meditation. *She Who Is*. Not even trying to read the bible or go to church. Tich Naht Hanh. Emerging Church Blogs. Books by Alan Jamieson. People who I knew were praying for me but didn't insist on doing it in front of my face. A professional counsellor, who helped me to see the experience as a bereavement. A spiritual director

who didn't actually try to direct me that much. Buying a round the world ticket that has taken me away from people with expectations of who or how I should be.

Now I like to sit in silence and calm my mind and soul, to take life gently and try not to invest myself too much in any new ideology that might easily be later lost. I realise that my roots are in Christianity, and am looking for creative and positive ways to realise my spirituality within this tradition, but am open to the light provided by others. I am working in a hospital in Wellington and meeting up with Spirited Exchanges people, and am looking to move to another country to teach English. I love the present. I'm not living for next year or even tomorrow, but take sheer delight in simple things like walking, or eating. Through the pain I have become a deeper and less naïve person, and though not written in stone any more, my ways of looking at the world are less destructive and give other people more room to be.

I haven't gone back, I haven't got a new system to replace the old, but would I really want to? I am exploring, thankfully again communicating with some of the important people who I lost. And, at last, I'm feeling OK. **Anon.**

Here's a wee list of some References/Books that have helped: Alan Jamieson: *A Churchless Faith; Called Again (Journeying in Faith)*. Elizabeth Johnson: *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*. Brian McLaren: *A New Kind of Christian*. Thomas Moore: *Dark Nights of the Soul*. Gerd Theissen: *Shadow of the Galilean*. Thich Nhat Hanh: *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. Bernadette Roberts: *The Path to No-self*.

The author is a young man in his early twenties whose varied interests include ultimate frisbee, kitesurfing, reading, music and eating! Future plans: clinical psychology; travel and experiencing exotic cultures, foods and religions; living out the Chinese proverb "read 10,000 books, walk 10,000 miles."

*I'm not afraid to be insecure now
No, it's not comfortable –
But I've had relative comfort*

*The old culture is dying
Discomfort and relevance are
close companions.*

Andrew Wheatley

Friend, in the Desolate Time

Friend, in the desolate time, when your soul is enshrouded in darkness
When, in a deep abyss, memory and feeling die out,
Intellect timidly gropes among shadowy forms and illusions
Heart can no longer sigh, eye is unable to weep
When, from your night-clouded soul the wings of fire have fallen
And you, to nothing, afraid, feel yourself sinking once more,
Say, who rescues you then? - Who is the comforting angel
Brings to your innermost soul order and beauty again,
Building once more your fragmented world, restoring the fallen altar
And when it is raised, lighting the sacred flame?
None but the powerful being who first from the limitless darkness
Kissed to life seraphs and woke numberless suns to their dance.
None but the holy Word who called the worlds into existence
And in whose power the worlds move on their paths to this day.
Therefore, rejoice, oh friend, and sing in the darkness of sorrow:
Night is the mother of day, chaos the neighbour of God.

Erik Johan Stagnelius Translated from the Swedish by Bill Coyle

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

This is my story in response to the last newsletter "power and control can only be power and control if others collude with that and let that happen".

I grew up in a Christian (Anglican) home, and became a "born again" Christian in 1980, eighteen years later I left the Church "system".

The spiritual abuse that happened to me and led to my leaving occurred in a nice little community church, with nice, good, hard working people who knew what community was about. Winter Sunday lunches around a pot of soup and bread rolls; artists, musicians, managers, salespeople, business coaches, furniture makers. I was actively involved, the Church administrator and a Deacon, and my husband led the children's and youth programme.

When I began to do some community studies, with topics such as 'Self Awareness' and 'Communication Skills', my thinking about myself and the world began to change. I recognised in myself some depression and co-dependency traits, and began to understand myself and the problems I was having in my life. This new learning and understanding seemed to clash with what I was experiencing at Church. Leaders who were in disarray, who seemed to want to control others - control what they said, what they wore, who they associated with, and what they did in their personal lives. I was a 'yes' person and there were other 'yes' people who were also running around attending this meeting and that meeting and generally doing all of the things that good Church people do. I began to question a lot of this and I think I began to become a threat to some in the Church community.

The day of reckoning came while I was undertaking my duties as Church Administrator. The Pastor called me into his office and made a statement that was to change my life forever.

He said something like, "Jennie, you seem to struggle to submit to people in authority and, that means, *ultimately to God.*" His words came at me like a shotgun blast, and I was shocked. What I heard him say, was that I was not a Christian. If I couldn't submit to people in authority, (himself and the Church leaders), then I surely couldn't submit to God either. I left his office, picked up my bag and left, never to return to my job or the Church again; it was my community, my work, my life and the life of my husband and children.

What was it about me that allowed others to control and manipulate me?



I believe it was a lot about the way I thought - the way my mind had been trained and developed as a child growing up in a strict family. It was a lot about how I saw myself, what I believed about myself and my place in the world and also about how I viewed God. I had a victim's mentality and that meant that I was scared of people in authority. Life happened to me, I had no personal power, I didn't 'think' for myself, and I was a controller myself - desperately trying to have control

over my own life, and the lives of those around me. I had lost confidence in myself, and was isolated in my inner being. I have had to completely change my thinking.

As a child growing up, I was somehow different to the other siblings in my family who were compliant. I was a rebel who was out of control, leaving school at 15, and home at 17. A lost soul who desperately wanted to find the meaning of life.

No wonder that when I was 'saved' I was so happy to be found that I gave my soul to the Church. I told my husband that God came first in my life. I so wanted to do the right things and fully immersed myself in my new life, much to the detriment of other important relationships. Thus I was very susceptible to this type of control. What a fool I was! At the end of the

day, I take responsibility for allowing myself to be controlled, and therefore to have been a colluder in a manipulative and destructive system.

Today, I am still struggling to find my place in the Church community - to know where and how I fit in. The pain and loss associated with this experience has been enormous; the anger, sorrow and sadness huge. There is a line in a Don Henley song that says, "everything is different now". **Everything** is different. It still hurts at times and I still grieve over the losses. I feel like a displaced person. I believe I was rejected and despised by many when I left the Church. They did not understand. I know that Jesus knows and understands.

Jennie Irving



I applaud your beginning to explore the issue of spiritual abuse; which in my observation is one cause of church leaving within NZ.

When I was studying for a secular counselling degree in 1999, three other Christians and I did our research paper on 'spiritual abuse'. We put one ad in Challenge Weekly, this resulted in a research team member being interviewed for 10 minutes by Radio Rhema. As a result we received phone calls, from Kaitaia to Invercargill, literally, from people

We chose eight people to interview, from mainline protestant denominations, to illustrate that spiritual abuse was not just happening in any one branch or stream of Christianity within NZ. We discovered, for instance, that some of the interviewees were suffering from, and continued to suffer from up to 10 years later, symptoms similar to those listed for post-trauma stress syndrome. Characteristics of clinical depression and generalised anxiety were described by the interviewees. 50% of those interviewed had been involved in middle management of churches.

As part of our literature review, for our research, we read every Christian book available in NZ on the subject at the time, but found nothing referring to NZ, or any other research in NZ even to acknowledge spiritual abuse existed in the NZ church scene. However, results showed that there was no difference in the characteristics of abuse in NZ to that described in the literature reviewed from the UK and USA.

I continue to encounter pastors and Christian leaders, who are ignorant of, resistant to, or in denial about, spiritual abuse, especially in NZ, despite people coming for counsel from their churches.

John R Munro

One of my means of spiritual nurture is to do a form of Lectio Divina with the daily Lectionary readings - I paste them into my word processor and then type my reflections as/if they occur! Yesterday I read the June Spiritex Newsletter on Power and Control. This morning one of the lectionary readings was John 17:20-26 - here are my reflections.

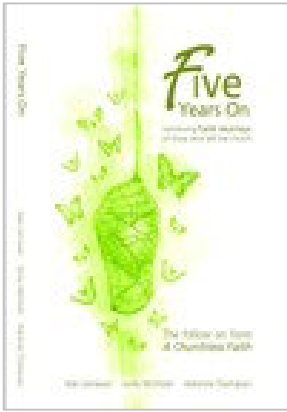
John 17:20-26 "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one.

What does this 'one' mean?

At surface level and pretty universally it is taken to be talking about agreement, cooperation and mutual support between believers ... and from there much manipulation and control comes. Being "one" too easily means supporting, agreeing with, obeying and not questioning leaders. But I wonder ... could Jesus be saying that he wants every believer to be one with God, having the same intimacy and indivisible relationship that is enjoyed within the trinity? Further, could he be praying, asking the Father, that every believer should grow to enjoy a unity, an integrity within themselves? ... that peace would break out and that the warring factions within would reconcile and enhance each other, that we would grow beyond Paul's experience of inner division and struggle (Romans 7:15-24).

I wonder ... Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ... and just maybe when we genuinely each grow in this oneness then the corporate oneness amongst groups of believers will then be seen without power and control and what a witness that would be! I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world." "Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them."

Andrew Pritchard



**Five Years On:
Continuing faith
journey's of those
who have left the
church**

by Alan Jamieson,
Jenny McIntosh,
Adrienne Thompson
Published in New
Zealand by *The
Portland Research
Trust*

Five Years On continues the work begun in *A Churchless Faith* by returning to the same group of church leavers five years after first interviewing them. The findings show how their personal faith and connection with 'church' has changed over a five-year period. To these accounts are added insights from six years of running *Spirited Exchanges* groups for church leavers and those struggling with 'church' focused expressions of the Christian faith. The findings may shock.

Dr Chris Marshall (St. John's Senior Lecturer in Christian Theology, Victoria University, Wellington) says of this book:

"This follow-up to A Churchless Faith is both fascinating and disquieting - fascinating because it shows that people rarely stand still in their journey of faith, whether or not they attend church. And disquieting because it underscores once again just how irrelevant or unhelpful the institutional church has become for so many reflective and intelligent believers today. This book provides further valuable insights into the growing phenomenon of church leavers, whose protest the church ignores at its own peril"

In the foreword Alan writes: "*If Barna [see his book, Revolution] and other Christian commentators are even remotely right then it is crucial we come to understand church leavers and their continued journeys of faith in order to prepare for the new realities of a fundamentally different spiritual landscape.*"

It seems to me that from a church perspective (and here I'm thinking of what Alan refers to as the "established church" [he defines it in the book]) there is something *potentially* (but certainly not always) 'prophetic' in and amongst

the stories of church leavers who have continued their Christian faith journeys in spite of, and apart from, established ways of being church.

So, in what sense am I using the term 'prophetic' when talking about church leavers and a book like *Five Years On*?

Prophetic, firstly in the sense of leavers, their stories and their experiences calling the church *back* to something that it has lost or forgotten; something about its relationship with God and its radical identity as the people of that God which seems to leavers to be missing.

Secondly, I'm using it in terms of a "summons," a calling to the church to become *more* than it currently is in a significantly changed cultural milieu, more than it has allowed itself to settle for.

This is a clear sense that I get when I hear Alan talk of "church leavers" as being crucial in terms of "*the new realities of a fundamentally different spiritual landscape.*" There is a clear sense of a need for conversation, for pastoral listening, and for discerning what it is that the Spirit might be saying to the church. Part 2 will resource both pastoral and leadership reflection, and in a more general sense, networks of conversation within and without church congregations.

The book is a good balance of research, the voices of those they interviewed and the authors own stories, insights, and experience. I think the collaborative / "specialist" (if I can use that word) approach to writing this book is an inspired and certainly, tongue in cheek, a very trinitarian one. It works well and is particularly to the fore in Part 3 where Jenny, Adrienne and Alan "respond" to church leavers from the perspective of *Spirited Exchanges*, a spiritual director, and a pastor. All three give ideas around what their respective roles offer as they accompany church leavers and those struggling with deep and oftentimes painful questions and experiences around faith, church belonging, God, church abuse, doubt etc. Much in evidence and woven through the text is a real humility, wisdom, and warmth of humanity.

Paul Fromont

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 & Donia Macartney-Coxson at P.O. Box 11551, Wellington or email: spiritex@central.org.nz or jenny on jenny@central.org.nz or Donia on donia@central.org.nz.
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