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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

## Going Beyond What We Know A Path of Unlearning

### *Putting you in the picture:*

**Name:** Julianne McEldowney

**Age:** 33

### **Situation in life:**

*I choose to be single, currently flatting with 2 others in Onehunga Auckland.*

### **Christian perspective:**

*born into a Christian evangelical worldview in small-town Canterbury, I attended church regularly all my life, officially 'accepted Jesus into my heart at age 9, but had a sense of God well before then (it seemed the thing to do). As a teenager became involved in church activities - youth group, leading worship...*

### **Significant events in childhood:**

*at 8 my mother died (cancer), 2 years later dad remarried - I gained a second mum and 2-step brothers (became a merged family); at 13 my younger sister died (different kind of cancer). Through these events I never doubted God's presence, just accepted that life wasn't a neat little package.*

*What made sense for me about life was that relationships were important, but I'm not sure I knew how to relate with people on the level of being real. My perception was that life was to be fully lived - in my early 20s each day was full of activity, there was no room for rest, reading, or engaging truly with the riches of life (joy, sadness, creativity) - I was skating along the surface. Not having ambition for a career, I took opportunities that came my way, and immersed myself in finding connection through activity at church. Underneath the activity, was a growing sense of being dissatisfied, that there had to be something else...*

*I attended Bible College in 1997, hoping this would provide answers to my searching - one year at a time for 3 years I hoped, prayed and waited.....a degree gained, I left, found a job, and again immersed myself in church until, burnout, I needed a break. The unrest didn't stop there, I was still marking time. Needing to find a sense of belonging, I became attached to what I knew, even if it wasn't particularly liberating. A constant wallpaper thought (always present, part of my inner scene) was that my call was to work overseas - everything would come together then; I would find my purpose. In the meantime all my activity was marking time, part of the bigger picture. After much deliberation and the encouragement of friends I was accepted to work for 4 months in a place ending in "...stan". Being as far away from my NZ experience as possible I began to stop running (there was no where else to run to...). I had time to think, I met people who talked about intentional living and who lived it out - they had concern for world issues, but lived simply and faithfully in the present.*

*When I returned to my church in Auckland I didn't fit anymore (I sat at the back, couldn't sing the songs anymore, and gradually couldn't endure an entire service...I was disconnected). I moved to a new flat, met people who offered an alternative Christian experience, and who showed me what it meant to be in relationship (i.e. they could think for themselves and think differently and that was OK). After a lot of avoidance and internal turmoil I eventually left my church and support networks, and started again - unlearning what had been my life and reassembling what I knew. Part of my journey is written below that's helping to reshape what's important for me now.*

We talk about unpacking our faith...letting go of certain beliefs/ideas, being open to what lies beyond being evangelical, sifting the things we want to keep, and what we will leave behind. Seeking truth in ways that goes beyond what I know is taking me out of my comfort zone, but also bringing me to a new place that gives me hope for the road ahead.

The journey of letting go has meant more than physically leaving church and undoing my faith framework. With the absence of being involved in church stuff, I found that I had to face who I was, there was time to think. I regarded my thoughts as defining who I was – they dictated how I perceived I was regarded by others, how I interacted with my world, and impacted on my emotional state. My experience was one of confusion, being tossed about by whatever thought happened to pass by on any given occasion. It hasn't been easy having these realisations – discovering stuff about yourself that you'd rather keep running from!

Centering Prayer, a christian meditation practice, has been significant in restoring hope in seeking God and finding peace within. This practice is bringing me home to living in the present moment, i.e. not distracted by what I hope will be. It's a practice of letting go of thoughts in order to seek God who is beyond these. Mary Margaret Funk in her book, *A Mind at Peace*, says, *"To know our thoughts is an essential step in redirecting our heart to God in prayer. ... The key practice leading us to know our thoughts and to renounce our thoughts, is silence. Wisdom tells us that silence will teach us everything."*

In seeking God in this realm of silence, I am beginning to have a sense of what it means to be fully known. In this space I can simply 'be' – there's no need for pretence, or defence mechanisms – there is nothing to be proved. But it's a discipline of letting thoughts go and not dwelling on them.

Engaging in Centering Prayer is inviting God's presence and action within. At other times our attention moves outward to discover God's presence everywhere. According to Meister Eckhart, *"What we plant in the soil of contemplation, we shall reap in the harvest of action"*. I'm finding that I have a greater appreciation for creation, and what is, and that I am more centred in my approach to what I do in the everyday.

### *What is Centering Prayer*

Centering prayer is a method of prayer which uses a sacred word to draw you back to rest in the silence. Take a moment.... imagine yourself sitting quietly, with your eyes closed, breathing fully and deeply; rest in the silence. As thoughts appear gently use your sacred word to return to the silence. You repeat this sequence, continuing to choose to let go of your thoughts and return to the silence. And so begins a new way of connecting with God, and yourself, and the world around you.

Funk describes this process as seeking God through the cloud of unlearning. *"At the most elementary level, silence allows us to know ourselves because we move against the automatic chatter of conscious living."*



I've found this practice centres me in the here and now. My thoughts tell me how I am – anxious, worried, stressed, excited, happy – and as I learn to let these go, using a sacred word – the anxiety or feeling shifts, I'm able to remain balanced rather than tossed about by my thoughts. Another gem from Mary Margaret Funk is that *"We are not our thoughts. Thoughts come and thoughts go"*. I've found this to be reassuring!

There's a change happening from within, a growing sense of wholeness and being OK with myself and the world – the good and even the not-so-good. It's like being able to hold different views/perspectives/situations – not needing black and white answers to big questions (a new trust that is colourful).

This is a journey – the thoughts come and go, but in being aware and choosing to let them go is a discipline that may take a lifetime to master. The journey of letting go has become something more than leaving church and what I thought I believed. It is now a journey of letting go of thoughts to seek God who is beyond even these. This is giving me hope beyond the path of knowing.

### **If you want to know more about Centring Prayer:**

contact: Andrew Rockell, the person who introduced me to this practice and who has facilitated a number of Centering Prayer workshops in Auckland. He can be contacted by email: [anaru\\_r@clear.net.nz](mailto:anaru_r@clear.net.nz)

[www.thecentering.org/centering\\_method.html](http://www.thecentering.org/centering_method.html)

Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening by Katherine Bourgeault.

New Seeds of Contemplation, by Thomas Merton.

A Mind at Peace, by Mary Margaret Funk.



### Older, Wider, Wiser...

*Several years back I began to investigate the possibility of changing my image of God. It had occurred to me that this might be a good place to lodge for awhile. I had recognised that whilst God remained frowning and disapproving towards me, I was always going to be crippled and unable to travel very far before being hustled back into the fold. Was it possible that God had a different view of me from the view that I had been taught?*

*Over time I began to see that God might just be on my side and rather than wanting (or even needing) to blame and punish me for my 'predicament', was actually wanting to walk sympathetically with me on my own 'Emmaus road'. Perhaps God knew the pain of creation and its longings as beings created in the image of God to grow into the likeness of God – flawed as our attempts might be. Perhaps God understood. It was an important realisation and one that left me free to explore all sorts of previously unthinkable avenues.*

*I have recently read Richard Holloway's wonderful book, *Looking in the Distance* and discovered this sentence.*

*'But once we abandon the salvation scheme that sees Jesus as a divine figure sent to rescue us from God's wrath at our God-inflicted sinfulness, we get him back ...'*

*Ah, yes! A simple articulation of what I had been struggling with for some years.*

*I had been finding it so difficult to discard the many tenets that my previous history in church life had taught me – they clung to me as a limpet. But suddenly those individual and separate belief items were resolved when I realised that what I have actually done is to leave behind a theology of anxiety (about the present and the continual blight of 'sin') and a theology of fear (about the eternal consequences of believing the 'right' thing) and have adopted a theology of the 'now', of the Micah 6:8 persuasion.*

*'So what does God require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God'.*

*And Hilliel's version of Matthew 7:12 – 'don't do to others what you would not like them to do to you'.*

*It is a positive 'theology' of life rather than the old theology of death. So now, issues such as biblical inspiration (for which often read inerrancy), original sin, the divinity of Jesus, the literal physical resurrection, the trinity and a thousand others, become side issues.*

*They might be true, they might not – it doesn't matter anymore, because God is no longer angry with me. They don't need to be true and are no longer issues to trouble or debate. They are yesterday's (albeit perfectly legitimate) expressions of faith – today I express my understanding of, and relationship with, the transcendent with different words and in different ways.*

**However, as always, I reserve the right to change my mind by tomorrow lunchtime.**

## Some more on Centering Prayer....

Contemplative (or centering prayer) is the opening of mind and heart - our whole being - to God, the Ultimate Mystery, beyond thoughts, words and emotions, whom we know by faith is within us, closer than breathing, thinking, feeling and choosing; even closer than consciousness itself. The root of all prayer is interior silence.

Though we think of prayer as thoughts or feelings expressed in words, this is only one expression. Contemplative Prayer is a prayer of silence, an experience of God's presence as the ground in which our being is rooted, the Source from whom our life emerges at every moment.

For the Church's first sixteen centuries Contemplative Prayer was the *goal* of Christian spirituality. After the Reformation, this living tradition was virtually lost; in more recent times it has been rediscovered.

Centering prayer is a method used for, or the process of, contemplative prayer in the Christian tradition, although people of all faith paths can use this form. As the 16<sup>th</sup> Century's Gregory the Great expressed it, its focus is on resting in god, being in communion with the divine in an attitude of silence. It has some similarities to eastern meditation in that it involves the use of a single word, repeated like a mantra: possibilities include: *jesus*, *love*, *peace*, *abba*, *shalom*. Because of this, some have referred to centering prayer as a 'monologion', or one-word prayer. Like a mantra, the repetition of the word serves as a focal point, a marker to return to when distracted by other thoughts.



### Something Different:

Trish Harris brands her yearly calendar by the name Ribbonwood. The calendar was first created in 2004 and the images come from her journals over the years. She says "The ribbonwood tree, a native of New Zealand, is known for its strong yet flexible trunk and it's 'ribbon like' branches. I love the way the tree, and its name, hold together opposites - ribbon and wood, fluid and strong, flexible and solid - as do many images in this calendar. The images and their titles come from my own journeying over several years. For me they are an invitation to pause, to open up a space inside. I hope they connect with you too."

See [www.ribbonwoodcalendar.co.nz](http://www.ribbonwoodcalendar.co.nz) for further details and ordering information.

Centering prayer begins with an intention to be with god; some practitioners of centering prayer advocate doing it twice a day, in sessions of about twenty minutes. The format is simple: choose your sacred word, or phrase, position yourself comfortably, repeat the word/phrase when your thoughts intrude during this time of prayer, and then conclude the session gradually and gently.



Though you might feel you have received insights or new understanding around the sacred word chosen, that is not the point of centering prayer - and in fact, practitioners are encouraged to simply return to the word rather than follow the train of thought.

Thought is seen as an impediment to the experience of god, which is the reward of contemplative prayer, as the author of "The Cloud of Unknowing" wrote:

*'if you strive to fix your love on him forgetting all else, which is the work of contemplation I have urged you to begin, I am confident that god in his goodness will bring you to a deep experience of himself'*

Centering prayer is not:

- a technique
- a form of self-hypnosis
- a para-psychological phenomenon
- a relaxation exercise
- a charismatic gift
- limited to the "felt" presence of God



## 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

"I wonder what it would be like if the Bible were to lose its authoritative role?....become ....a narrative, an epic story of faith and faithfulness into which we find ourselves drawn, rather than a box of principles to obey?" writes Craig Braun ("The Bible and Our Culture", Spiritex Issue 46) Craig points to a radical disjunction between church practice and New Zealand cultural values which he associates with the authoritative role given to the Bible by the church.

I sympathise with his line of argument. The church in Australia is in similar straits. The problem comes with his assumption that society should call the tune for the church. Don't both church AND society need radical critique? And where will it come from if not the Bible? The pallid values of freedom, fairness and tolerance will not save New Zealand or Australia. Where else but from the Bible will we hear of the in-breaking kingdom with its summons to the subversive values of love for enemies and forgiveness "seventy times seven"? Where else but in the church will we see a community struggling to live according to these values?

It is a caricature to suggest that the Bible is "a box of principles". Churches that use it as such will never be regenerated by it and deserve to fade away. The Bible has always been "a narrative, a story of faith and faithfulness" as well as a story of failure and restoration. Churches wax and wane in response to many factors, the biggest of which is the prevailing spiritual paradigm in its host culture. It does not take a genius to know that the current western culture could not be more hostile to the Christian message. What we do not need is a church which absorbs and reflects the host culture. That way lies a big, but ultimately feeble church.

Barbara Deutschmann, Melbourne.

### *Centering Prayer*

#### *- A Beginner*

I sit with back straight,  
feet firmly planted  
and timer set.  
Then I sink into silence.  
A melting within,  
a closing without.  
Soon a tantalizing thought,  
or an agony of itches,  
or a cough  
begging for release.  
Then the gentle word  
and a return to the still point.  
Over and over and over  
these little surrenders  
that empty me of self,  
drop by drop.  
Someday perhaps  
the longed for place  
beyond space and time;  
the total surrender;  
the loss that gains.  
But until then  
this transcendence  
of frustration  
will have to do  
and maybe that's  
enough for now.

*Ceci LaDuca, Tampa, FL*

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)**





**Leaving Church:  
a memoir of faith**

**Barbara Brown Taylor**

**ISBN 0060771747  
Harper Collins**

**Review by Maggi Dawn**

I promised myself that I would blog more of the books I read - so easy just to put them down and read the next one. Over the summer I've read a pile of books, some for work, some for review, and some just for ME! One that I read purely for my own interest was *Leaving Church: a memoir of faith* - I think I saw it previewed on Prodigal Kiwi and ordered it right away. This is the book I quoted from in my Greenbelt talk back in August. *Leaving Church* is an account of Barbara Brown Taylor's own journey into faith, ministry, and then Ordination; then her experience of life as a parish priest, first in a big city and later in a small rural town. Eventually, the story begins to track how and why she leaves the life of a Parish priest, and what are the good and bad things about that experience. I trust (given the title) that that is not too much of a spoiler.

One of the reasons I love this book is because it traces the ambivalence that any Priest worth her (or his) salt is bound to live with - loving God, loving the Church and yet being painfully aware that commitment to Church brings as many constraints as it does freedoms, as many handicaps as privileges. She puts her finger on the tension between living out what you believe you were called FOR, and living within the expectations that others have of a priest (almost invariably not the same thing!) To be a priest with any authenticity you have to be fully human, and yet very often it is the Church community that works against that necessity. Sometimes people will not accept ministry if you are not a priest, and yet they

won't accept your humanity if you are. Taylor also relates beautifully and tenderly the tension of living with a sense of calling, and the way in which that can so easily spill over into sheer workaholism and the inability to say "no".

The title, "leaving" might just as easily be read as "finding" - it's not a negative account at all, more an account of how, in order to continue a journey of faith and simply of human life, the season of ordained ministry had to be put to one side. One of the reasons I like the book so much is that - unlike so much other rhetoric that is very simplistically anti-priest and anti-institution - she treads her way between the real tensions of communities of faith and their leaders with real insight, and manages to illustrate how we are called first to be human, and only then to be ministers. She doesn't leave the Church because she doesn't believe in it any more, nor because she doesn't believe in what she has done thus far, nor does she hold the Church in any kind of contempt. Rather, she simply relates the complex reasons why at certain times a clear shift in role and direction becomes desirable, and what may be learned along the way. There are plenty of people who will give a bitter account of why they left, trashing where they have been before. It's refreshing to read someone who gives an affectionate and grateful account, despite finding it necessary to leave all the same.

I think anyone interested in Church would benefit from reading this - priests and leaders and ministers of course, but perhaps also those who take different roles within Christian communities - if we could think together about our mutual ministries and what our various roles give to the community, perhaps it would be possible to break down in some places the undesirable divide between the "professional" and the "rest" and start living as truly interdependent communities? Either that or I imagine that I and many others will eventually follow the pattern of life that Taylor has found essential.

With permission: <http://maggidawn.typepad.com/maggidawn/>