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The place of questions...

Paula, a young adult who attended the Deep Stuff group in Wellington a few years ago, had previously held a deep commitment to her faith and participated fully in her church, in leadership and in the discipling of others until her 4th year at varsity when she left church frustrated and disillusioned. She was struggling with issues that later she discovered many others also struggle with but no one talks about.

“I have so many thousands of questions regarding my faith, scripture, God, church etc. they are genuine questions which have had me in tears of frustration over the last couple of years.”

These questions drove Paula to read and attend seminars and discussion groups in her search for “honest discussion with people who aren’t scared to ask the big questions”..... “I long to talk with someone who won’t throw out Sunday -school lines like band-aids. Who won’t think I’m a borderline Christian or spiritually ‘not in a good place’ if I dare to doubt.”

Although she had many questions she wasn’t actually after answers – “I’m not looking for a clued-up person who will make everything clear for me, because I am quite sure they do not exist. I would love someone to feel comfortable talking to me and bashing ideas around, even if they’re not ‘theologically sound’. It would be good to know that other Christians were secure enough to be real with me, to be vulnerable and to join me in my search for spiritual reality.”

Unfortunately this wasn’t what she found among Christian people – “I got a shock. I found that people don’t like difficult questions, they aren’t safe and they aren’t nice, and it is much better to pretend that everything is OK than to ask ‘dodgy’ questions. My experience has been that if no pat answers are available, the question is usually disregarded. Some people were honest, saying they’d rather not think about such questions, that they’re comfortable the way they are, that I should just have faith or pray more for answers or as one significant church leader kindly warned me, ‘if you rock the boat too hard it will flip over.’

In a world full of questions what Paula found was a church that only had answers. Paula is not alone in this discovery. This is what often makes it difficult for people to remain in their church. One man put it thus: “You just don’t question. If there was a doubt there you get rid of it.”

In EPC¹ churches it would seem answers hold a very important place while questions are generally treated with much greater suspicion because who knows where unanswered questions could lead people. In this sense EPC churches tend to share a different ethos to that espoused by the popular culture as illustrated by Cmdr Cisco in Star Trek – “It is the unknown that defines our existence; we’re constantly seeking not just answers to our questions, but for new questions. We are explorers.”² While the wider culture may be encouraging and fuelling people’s

¹ EPC denotes evangelical, charismatic, Pentecostal types of churches

² Cmdr Ben Cisco; Deep Space Nine, Star Trek

questions and exploration of issues, faith and spirituality, the ethos in EPC churches tends to discourage open voicing and discussion of faith and life questions.

Mary Tuomi Hammond, an American minister who works with people she calls 'dechurched' says: "If people cannot speak openly in church and ask their questions, express their doubts, tell their stories – they will go elsewhere to find authentic community and support."³

The 'basic' or fundamental questions of faith and life are not to be feared or shied away from but through grappling with these very issues a context is created from which faith can grow, identity can be strengthened and belief matured. The questions themselves can act as stepping stones for our journey. Without the opportunity to wrestle with these questions people at certain points of the Christian faith are effectively denied the very stepping stones they need to move forward.

When we confront the questions that go to the very core of our faith and will not go away we inevitably find ourselves at a crossroads and at those crossroads we have before us three options. Option one is *dogmaticism*, where we reinforce our faith stance from any doubt by shoring it up with points of evidence and appealing to external authorities or learned figures. Metaphorically, we dig our heels in and ignore any evidence to the contrary, even when our personal experience may have provided such evidence, as we hold onto our faith believing what we always have believed despite the emptiness or shallowness these beliefs now convey. Far too often this is the road to growing

inner resentment and a closing down to much of the reality of life. It is also often the path continuously chosen by the most vocal stalwarts of faith in EPC churches. Having chosen not to explore their own questions they remain the most unwilling to allow the questions of others to be heard.

The second option is a form of *reactionism* where the power of doubt and the lack of answers take over and the tenets of faith are cynically withdrawn from. People who had grown up in churches and may once have believed in God, in an orthodox Christian sense, now reject such a belief taking on a new fundamentalism regarding their new non-theism which can now often be held to as strongly and rigidly as the Christian fundamentalists they ridicule. The options for dogmaticism or reactionism represent two polar extremes. There is, however, a third option. It is the decision not to retreat to simple answers

“Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves... do not now seek answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”
Rainer Maria Rilke

(dogmaticism) or non-answers (cynical withdrawal) but to live with the discomfort and the tensions of not knowing. In this direction lie gateways to the wonder of

mystery and a paradoxical faith that holds powerful seemingly opposite truths.

It takes real courage to face the possibilities laid out and not try to attach ourselves to any one before we even begin the journey of doubt. As Veiling, a writer on faith in the post-modern context, puts it: “there are times when we need to lose our way in order to be brought to a place where the question can emerge, it is not this lostness itself that sustains us, rather, it serves to point

³ Hammond, M.T. Restoring a Damaged Faith in *The Other Side*; May & June 2000 p43

us in a new direction to find another way.”⁴

It is the same with the probing, irreconcilable questions of faith, where faith and doubt are not seen as the antithesis of each other, but are the two sides of the same coin. Often greater doubt precipitates greater faith. It is certainty not doubt that is the antithesis of faith.

In many evangelical circles it seems there is an unnecessary fear of questions. The fear appears to be, if we leave a question unanswered people might head off in the wrong direction. Yet it is often only when we are free to make a choice that we are able to do so. Only when we have real choice are we able to fully choose the best. It is when we are not given choice that we are most likely to rebel. Entering the realm of doubt and questions means entering a very vast expanse. An expanse that God invites Job into. God only answered his questions with bigger questions but in so doing God had spoken to him personally and Job was free to move on with a new trust and his unanswered questions.

Neils Bohr, Nobel prize winning physicist says while “the opposite of a true statement is a false statement, the opposite of a profound truth can be another profound truth.”⁵ This leads us into the realm of paradox. Bohr argues if we want to know what is essential we must stop thinking the world into pieces and start thinking it together again. Profound truth is the stuff of which paradoxes are made. To quote Parker Palmer – “the poles of a paradox are like the poles of a battery: hold them together, and they generate the energy of life; pull them apart, and the current stops flowing. When we separate any of the profound paired truths of our lives, both poles become lifeless spectres of

themselves – and we become lifeless as well.”⁶ Relying on the reductionist approach of much modern religious study feels at times like the person of Jesus, the mysteries and otherness of God, the wonders of the trinity and the paradoxes of the scriptures are being placed on the operating table and dissected blood vessel by blood vessel, nerve by nerve, organ by organ until the life-blood has long since drained away.

Paula: “I still have many questions. But I have discovered something of the beauty of mystery, of things that are ‘too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.’ I feel that my spiritual journey was one that required me to die on the inside in order to truly come alive to God, a God that was a lot bigger than I’d ever imagined, giving me a new understanding of the verse: ‘Unless a seed falls to the ground and dies it can bear no fruit.’”

And as we wrestle with our own questions the following words of St John of the Cross may be worth holding on to:

To come to what you know not
You must go by the way where you
know not . . .
To come to what you are not
You must go by a way where you are
not.⁷

Alan Jamieson and Jenny McInosh

**May the Spirit
bless you with discomfort
at easy answers, half-truths and
superficial relationships so that
you will live deep in your heart.**

Interfaith Council for Peace and Justice

Cited in Peter Millar’s ‘*Finding Hope Again*’, p 192.

⁴ Veiling. T.A (1996) *Living in the Margins: Intentional Communities and the art of Interpretation*: Crossroad; New York.

⁵ Palmer, Parker. (1998) *The Courage to Teach*; Jossey-Bass; San Francisco. p62

⁶ Palmer p65

⁷ St John of the Cross *Ascent of Carmel*, Book One 13.11

Excerpt from **The Book of Job an essay by G.K. Chesterton** in A Motley Wisdom: the best of G.K. Chesterton. Chosen and introduced by Nigel Forde; Hodder and Stoughton 1995 p181

All the human beings through the story, and Job especially, have been asking questions of God. A more trivial poet would have made God enter in some sense or other in order to answer the questions. By a touch truly to be called inspired when God enters it is to ask a number more questions on his own account....

This is the first thing to notice about the speech of God, which is the culmination of the inquiry. It represents all human sceptics routed by a higher scepticism...It is the root and reason of the fact that people who have religious faith have also philosophic doubt... In dealing with the arrogant asserter of doubt it is not the right method to tell him to stop doubting. It is rather the right method to tell him to go on doubting, to doubt a little more, to doubt every day newer and wilder things in the universe, until, at last, by some strange enlightenment, he may begin to doubt him/herself.

...The other great fact...is that other great surprise which makes Job suddenly satisfied with the mere presentation of something impenetrable. Verbally speaking the enigmas of Jehovah seem darker and more desolate than the enigmas of Job; yet Job was comfortless before the speech of Jehovah and is comforted after it. He has been told nothing, yet he feels the terrible and tingling atmosphere of something which is too good to be told. The refusal of God to explain his design is itself a burning hint of His design. The riddles of God are more satisfying than the solutions of people.

Job puts forward a note of interrogation; God answers with a note of exclamation. Instead of proving to Job that it is an explicable world, He insists that it is a much stranger world than Job ever thought it was...The poet has....contrived to let fall here and there in metaphors, in the parenthetical imagery, sudden and splendid suggestions that the secret of God is a bright and not a sad one....

We still have available a few copies of Peter Millar's **Finding Hope Again: Journeying through sorrow and beyond**

Peter is a minister, ex-warden of the Iona community, has lived in a number of countries, including India, among the poor and marginalised and is a political activist.

This book traces his journey through grief after the sudden death of his wife drawing on the stories of others in their own grief times and the collective wisdom from such experiences.

You can purchase these for \$31 incl. postage, from Spirited Exchanges, PO Box 11551, Wellington

Paradox II

God of distant mountain-tops when you're crying in the plain
God of storm-tossed seas when you're drowning in the rain
God of lightening, thunder
God of suffering, pain
God of blinding sunlight when your hope is gone again

Robbie Titchener

Note from editor: Many of you who receive this newsletter will have found resources (books, articles, poetry, you may even have written your own stories etc), that have helped you find the way forward in your faith journey. If you think these could be useful for others and would be willing to have them published in this newsletter, I would love to hear from you. My email and postal address are printed on the last page.

Book Review

Soul Making: the Desert Way of Spirituality

By Alan Jones; Harper, San Francisco 1989

"I don't claim to be a mature believer, but I do insist that I *want* to be one." writes Alan Jones, Dean of Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, in this fascinating book on the role of the desert in soul making. As the title and quote suggest this is no ten point plan to greater Christian maturity, but is an exploration of the hard road of the desert of faith. The author claims:

"It seems to be a maxim of the spiritual life that no-one undergoes spiritual or psychological growth and change *willingly*. We are either dragged into it kicking and screaming, or circumstances force us into the next scene of the human comedy. Ironically the institutional church is often an obstacle to spiritual growth. As we have seen, it has something of an investment in keeping its members in an infantile state."

He goes on to suggest that 'probing doubt is the handmaiden of faith' and that maturity comes by being a small

child, being truly broken and having faced our own death. "The more we refuse to look at our own death the more we repress and deny new possibilities for living," says Jones. There are no short cuts. The empty space within us - our own abyss - can become the dwelling place of God. Only the desert provides the environment for soul making, says Jones.

Beginning with a visit to St Macarius monastery in the Middle East, Jones describes the unequalled power of the desert in soul formation. This book is a mixture of personal journey, thorough theology, the fruits of psychology and many pithy quotes

and stories from spiritual leaders in history. Little quotes like “we are all victims of victims”; stories like the vengeful old lady who brought fresh flowers to lay

on her husband’s grave every day reminding herself as she went ‘oh he so hated flowers’, to a fresh look at the writings and thoughts of Freud.

The book deals with what it means to follow Christ; to live our lives not by trying to imitate Jesus life but by living our own destiny with acceptance and to our maximum. It looks at the role of tears and the reality of sin. It looks at Many Christian’s obsession with heaven and hell and asks why so many seem so keen on the idea of hell, if not for themselves, at least for others. “Christian orthodoxy”, he says, “requires that I believe in the logical possibility of hell (utter lostness / damnation). It does not require that I believe anyone is there. There is nothing to prevent my

Also on sale at the reduced bargain rate of \$13 (incl. postage), is Alan Jamieson’s book, **A Churchless Faith**.

This book gives a wonderful map for those who are struggling to make sense of where they are on the faith journey. It is based on research Alan did with 108 people who had left evangelical, Pentecostal and charismatic churches and gives help and insight for the way forward. A ‘must read’ for both church leavers and others wanting to understand what they themselves are experiencing or others may be going through

Also available from Spirited Exchanges, PO Box 11551, Wellington

In the final section, the depths of the trinity are explored and the huge place of community and loving others is unpacked. “Soul making can be described as the liberating movement from being individuals to becoming persons. The doctrine of the trinity begins to come alive for us when we can say with all honesty, ‘I cannot be without you, and we cannot be without them (the trinity).”

For those in the difficult places of Christian faith where their faith is being pulled down and their sense of the way ahead undermine, this exploration of the desert tradition of faith is a very profound guide. I found this a very rich book - one that I intend reading again soon. **Alan Jamieson**

**Remember, as you read and as you live,
nothing is ever simple.
Nothing,
The more is looks black and white,
The deeper you should dig
To find the grey.
Grey sounds dull,
But it is the colour of the mind.**

Lynne Reid Banks quoted in Millar D. Seeds for the Morrow, Day Eighteen

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** (note change of email). For Alan Jamieson: **aj@paradise.net.nz**