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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

## Ongoing Reflections from the Stairway to Heaven

Two years ago I wrote an article for *Reality* magazine outlining some of the contours of my spiritual journey.<sup>1</sup> In it I used the metaphor of the return journey - away from faith and back again. At its conclusion I talked about a set of meaningful conversations I had with a woman, whilst travelling fifteen hours on a train up the east coast of the United States in late 2001. I finished the article by musing:

As I think about that day I wonder. Perhaps it was the encouragement I needed to continue the journey with God. Perhaps it gave me the courage to move from one Christian frame of reference to another. Perhaps that was when the journey back really started. Perhaps ... Ask me again in a few years time, when I've had a chance to take a few more train rides'.

Well this time last year Anne and I did take another train ride - this time between New York and Montreal. It was in the midst of a freezing, snowy, magical winter - magical, that is, until the train broke down (irreparably!!). Perhaps, then, this is a good place to pick up my story again, because this piece is no more than a progress report. What follows are a scattered group of reflections that I hope might be of help as each of you also seeks to understand your own particular journey.

In many ways it feels like the progress over the last couple of years has been as erratic as our train trip to and from Montreal. I feel at times like I am making little or no headway. More honestly, I also periodically

find myself thinking that I don't really care. Now, these are scary emotions. Well, at least they are a bit scary for me, because at heart I want to stay on the Christian journey. Along an imaginary continuum, between church attendance and church leaving, I fall somewhere in the middle (or just to the church leaving side of it). For the last three years we have almost totally disengaged from church (in terms of Sunday attendance and other involvement). This has been a liberating and necessary experience, which has given us space to relax, to catch up emotionally, and to adopt other rituals (like coffee and bagels for a late Sunday breakfast). It has been a wonderful excuse to simply stop being busy for a while. Yet just in the last month or so we have begun to talk again of the need to re-engage with church. How we will do that, of course, is a major conundrum for which we have no easy answers. If there are any of you who have been in a similar situation, feel free to pass on your wisdom!!

I continue to find the journeying motif a useful one, although how I think about it continues to change with time. Two comments in response to my original article have helped me in this. One person questioned how the journey could be called a return one, when to move away implies the impossibility of returning to the same spot. Another person used my story in a sermon, talking about it as a 'desert experience'. As I read his words (he sent me a copy), I realised he had construed the desert experience as a temporary phase, from which one returns again to one's origins.

In my reflection on these I have come to understand that my journeying is an ongoing process, and it might well involve me being in the desert for the length of my natural life. I find this an enlivening and stimulating thought, rather than a cause for dread. Historical examples of the never-ending journey abound - from the early desert monks of the 4<sup>th</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I don't want to repeat myself here, so if you haven't read it please see: 'The Journey Away and the Journey Back', *Reality* (October/November 2002), or go to [www.reality.org.nz/](http://www.reality.org.nz/)

century who embraced the Egyptian wastelands as their home, to the Celtic monks (the *peregrini*) who wandered their way across northern Europe in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries as missionaries, never to return home. For me the act of returning to church will not mean that I return to the same expectations, obligations, rituals or understandings. It may even mean a form or tradition of church quite at odds with my past. When I think about journeying in these terms, I am then less troubled by the seemingly erratic or at times ambivalent nature of my progress. It also becomes a little less scary.

Anne often says to people, in relation to our non-church attendance, that we are ‘on a break!’ (if you have been followers of the sitcom ‘Friends’ then you will understand the significance of that comment). For me, one of the wonderful by-products of ‘being on a break’ is the sense of perspective that follows. It has given me the chance to lift my head above all the hoo-ha of life and to sense the mystery of God that underpins, surrounds and suffuses all of life. In the words of that famous song by Led Zeppelin (‘Stairway to Heaven’ – oops, my mid-life nostalgia is showing!), *‘there’s a feeling I get when I look to the west and my spirit is crying for leaving. In my thoughts I have seen rings of smoke through the trees and the voices of those who stand looking ... and it makes me wonder’*.

Yet this is by no means a retreat into some ethereal other worldliness for me. If anything, I have become more embedded in the materiality of life. I am more keenly aware of the goodness of this, and of the sacramental nature of the world in which I live. This has certainly been helped by the greater degree of solitariness and solitude which I have experienced over the last five years. The net result, I guess, is that the fingerprints of God are to be found in a multitude of places, experiences, things, people and so on. At the same time, my shortcomings get thrown into stark relief, and it also becomes obvious that all is not well in the world in which we live. As I regain my emotional and physical energy with which to re-engage the world, the challenge now is to keep a balance between romantic idealisation and sober analysis or even praxis.

**Editors note:** Hugh’s first article in Reality (see footnote above for website) is an extremely well articulated account and describes many of the issues that leavers would typically be struggling with.

Gaining perspective is also helpful in one final respect. As I journey further I am less ready to lay all the blame for my disaffection at the feet of the church or of ‘evangelical Christianity’. To balance this I also realise that personality, life experiences, and life stage are all an equally important part of the equation. For me church leaving and disengagement has been part of a larger life phase in which I have been coming to terms with particular losses and struggles. In the process I think I have been able to come to a more honest assessment of who I am (good and bad), and to perceive more clearly what I have been wired to be and do. For example I have researched and written a PhD thesis in History, and revelled in the re-engagement with the academic world in which I feel a strong sense of belonging. Painful as it is, at present, I am seeking a way to vocationally live and work with a sense of integrity to (dare I say it?) how I think God has wired me to be.

As I ponder on this, and on the possible return to church, I am aware of an underlying personal tension that now marks this next phase of my life. It is the tension between the desire to continue journeying and the desire to belong.

I recently spent two weeks travelling and working in Australia. I love travel (as you have no doubt picked up), but nothing was more satisfying as walking back through the Maori carved archway for arrivals at Auckland International Airport. New Zealand is my *turangawaewae*, no matter how much I revel in international travel.

Perhaps, you might say, journeying and belonging somehow fit together – that they go hand in hand, and that is what helps make life both mysterious and interesting. In this sense returning to church may be a concrete expression of both. So the adventure continues – as does yours, in whatever direction that might be. As I said in my *Reality* article, it will probably take yet another train ride or two before I can tell you how it turns out. Bon voyage!

**Hugh Morrison**

**Life's disappointments are harder to take when you don't know any swear words – Calvin (+ Hobbes).**

## **Re-engagement**

Hugh's article teases us with his mix of journey and belonging, desert dwelling and returning from the desert, disengagement and re-engagement. It leaves open a crucial question that many people ask. This question is: Having left church and gained so much personally from a protracted time away from the frenetic activity of church when is it 'right', 'possible' or 'necessary' to re-engage? By re-engagement means being involved not simply visiting a Christian church or community. Of course in answering this question we need to remember that everyone is different so there is no simple answer. And we often not only need to consider our selves but also our partners, children and teenagers in our decision to re-engage. Despite the complexities of differing personalities, journeys and family members there may be a rough guide that we could consider.

Let me suggest it is time to re-engage, right to re-engage and necessary to re-engage when we have the energy and the internal desire to contribute into the faith lives of others. Of course 'church' may not be the vehicle for our contribution but often a church community is one site for our future contribution. While we may primarily nurture our own spirituality from the desert we need to re-engage with others in order to contribute. To grow we must give. Erickson calls this 'generativity'. It is the stage in our faith and life where continued growth is dependent on the giving of ourselves to others; the stage where we live for others out of who we are. Where we give out of the identity and spirituality God has led us into.

Let me also suggest that many individuals in our churches are waiting for people who have traversed the deserts of faith. They are waiting for those who have journeyed far and wide to encourage them to also journey beyond safe moorings. Such re-engagers make great leaders in any church community.

**Alan Jamieson**

## **A Churchless Faith**

'A Churchless Faith' has now sold out in bookshops in New Zealand and Australia and is out of print. I do, however, have copies left for sale. These are now on sale at half the normal shop price (\$15) plus \$1 postage.

## Book Review

### **Called Again: in and beyond the deserts of faith**

By Alan Jamieson. Philip Garside Publishing Ltd, Wellington; 2004

I stopped going to church a few years ago because I no longer found God at church. I realized that I had to leave to rediscover God. As I read *Called Again*, I felt that Alan Jamieson had mapped the milestones of my journey away from church and towards God. *Called Again* describes people's honest and authentic encounters with God, and raises issues about the future of the church. I think it should be read both by people within and outside church.

Five years ago, Jamieson wrote *A Churchless Faith* as a result of his PhD in Sociology researching why people leave their churches, and how their journeys of faith have continued outside the church. *Called Again* revisits some of these people, discussing how their faiths have deepened, changed, and developed since their first conversations with Jamieson.

Jamieson's respect for divergent faith journeys is refreshing. Instead of labeling as 'backsliders' those whose ideas about God and faith diverge from mainstream church, he intelligently and thoughtfully considers how 'desert times' can lead people to both different insights into God's character, and alternative ways to follow God.

*Called Again* discusses many different aspects of what Jamieson describes as 'deserts of faith'. The chapters of the book tackle issues like the desert experience and how we might come to appreciate it, the dark night of the soul and how we might face that, honouring the questions and learning new ways of exploring them rather than just looking for the easy answers, appreciating the truths out of myth, the language of prayer beyond words, embracing failure as a necessary part of growth, Christian belonging and more. Each of these chapters can be read individually as an essay on the particular issue; they also make up an integrated whole which sensitively describes faith journeys outside the church.

Throughout the book, Jamieson creatively explores many metaphors that help to paint a picture of the experiences people can have in and beyond the deserts of faith. In the chapter 'Seeing in and beyond the dark', he investigates the metaphor of darkness and

light, and illustrates how being in darkness can feel, both positively and negatively. Jamieson describes how stars seem so much brighter in the night sky in the darkness of the country, rather than in the bright lights of the city.

"It is the same with the dark nights of the Christian faith. Only in entering the darkness further, in embracing the darkness rather than running from it can we see the light that shines in the darkness." (*Called Again*, p 45)

Jamieson further illuminates deserts of faith by looking at the experiences of different people who have struggled with God. In the chapter 'Questions in and beyond answers', Jamieson examines Job's experience of feeling distant from God. Throughout *Called Again*, Jamieson's interviewees are quoted, painfully and honestly describing the desolation and loss they have encountered while questioning God and their faith. The experiences of both the biblical characters and the people Jamieson has interviewed help to validate and celebrate deserts of faith which are often devalued by many Christians.

*Called Again*, published by Philip Garside Publishing, has also been published by SPCK in the UK as *Journeying in Faith*. The Philip Garside Publishing version could have benefited from more rigorous copy editing - unfortunately the repeated grammatical and punctuation mistakes detract slightly from the message of the text.

In describing alternative faith journeys, Jamieson weaves together the thought of great theologians, the experiences and thoughts of the people he has interviewed, biblical stories, analysis of faith stages, and metaphor to create a diverse and rich tapestry. This tapestry portrays pain, struggle, joy, beauty, authenticity and growth.

**Amy Austin**

[Amy is in her mid-twenties and is part of Deep Stuff, a young adult Spirited Exchanges group. She is a primary school teacher in Wellington.]

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) For Alan Jamieson: [alan@central.org.nz](mailto:alan@central.org.nz) or [aj@paradise.net.nz](mailto:aj@paradise.net.nz) (Note change of email addresses)