



issue 35

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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

## Doubt

"If knowing answers to life's questions is absolutely necessary to you, then forget the journey. You will never make it, for this is a journey of unknowables - of unanswered questions, enigmas, incomprehensibles, and most of all, things unfair."

Madame Jeanne Guyon

I grew up in a loving Christian environment where believing in God was as natural as believing in my next meal. Not only my family but most of the adults I knew were Christian. When I was a teenager there came a point where I decided to make a personal response to God. I still remember the unexpected joy that followed that private, middle-of-the-night commitment.

My parents might have described themselves as evangelical but they didn't bother me with that label and they showed respect for people of all faiths. Some of the other Christian adults in my world were rather more narrow. Good people go to heaven, bad people go to hell was satisfyingly clear to a small child. Only Christians go to heaven and everyone else, good or bad, goes to hell - that message was much more discomfiting. That discomfort perhaps caused the first crack in my confident, taken for granted faith. I felt uneasy about what I thought I was supposed to believe.

At university I plunged happily into Christian Union and uncritically swallowed every piece of teaching I received. I had huge respect for older Christians and anything they endorsed I believed too. Francis Schaffer was big in those days and a strong advocate for Christians to do the hard thinking and evaluating of contemporary culture. I certainly never thought of evaluating *his* writing from a

critical perspective. If Schaffer said the Bible was God's "verbalised, propositional revelation" then that was what it was, even if I had no idea what he meant by it.

With these assumptions I went straight from university to a theological College. For the first time I began to look at the Bible critically. It was not so much that I started asking questions as that questions were forced upon me. I didn't like the process. Part of me wanted to ignore what I was reading and hearing and continue with my happily uncritical trust in God and the Bible. At the same time I've always valued truth and facts. I wanted my faith to be based on reality.

I think *uneasy* best describes my faith for the next few years. After I left theological college I shoved my doubts to the back of my mind but they continued to rumble disturbingly. I found it wasn't really possible to continue in a heart relationship with God while my mind was unsatisfied.

There came a point where I had the time and opportunity to do some more philosophical reading and thinking. I finally looked honestly at my questions. It was an unsettling process, even frightening. There was no revelation, no burst of light, no emotional event at all that I can remember, but I found myself in the end with a sense that my faith did make intellectual sense. I

didn't have the happy trust of childhood but I felt I had enough to be going on with.

If my first struggle with doubt was intellectual the next came through my emotions. At a time of family crisis I felt completely abandoned by God. One of my children was suffering and I couldn't help her. The last straw was such a little thing. I was travelling, my plane was delayed and I had to sit up all night in the airport. Distraught as I was over my child's situation this seemed too much to bear. I knew I would have given anything to protect and comfort my daughter. If God, supposedly all powerful, didn't care for me in my depth of misery, then this wasn't a God I could be bothered with. My faith snapped. Maybe God hated me. It seemed much more rational to conclude that God didn't exist at all.

Life had to go on even if God no longer had a place in my world. The trouble was, my husband and I were involved in Christian ministry. If I had lost my faith would both of us have to give up our jobs? We were bringing up our children in a Christian home. How could I deal with them now? Even the happy family tradition of holding hands to say grace before meals became a dilemma. I didn't want to pretend to pray. I didn't want to overturn our whole lives either.

Giving up church wasn't an option. For the sake of my husband's job I kept going, but avoided sitting through a service for months by always being the one to take the children out.

As the months went by I felt I was settling into a world of no God. But a disturbing thing happened. As unbelief became my default position I began to be assailed my doubt yet again - doubt as to whether God might not exist after all. When I had called myself a believer I'd often had doubts -

sometimes fleeting, sometimes troubling. Now the doubts were going in a different direction. I'd lost faith partly because when I called for help I'd received no answer. I began to wonder if I might regain faith because I needed someone to thank. Where before I'd noticed evidence that pointed to God's non-being, now I found myself noticing evidence that seemed to support the likelihood of God.

In the course of a long journey - which still continues - I came back eventually to a position where I can describe myself as having faith. But I have learnt something about myself. I am a doubter. That's my nature. I have moments when I can affirm with confidence, with heart and mind together, that I believe in God. At other times the whole concept seems not just unlikely but irrelevant. I could default back to unbelief - but I know I'd still be a doubter.

Some of the questions that once troubled me aren't a problem any more. I don't worry about contradictions and inconsistencies in the Bible for example because I'm no longer trying to do the mental gymnastics required to accept it as the verbally inspired word of God. Other questions to which I once had clear answers (who goes to heaven for instance) are now enigmas. I say 'I don't know,' about a whole lot more things.

I'm a believer more of the time these days because I believe in a bigger, less comprehensible, totally unclassifiable God. I've got a bit better at trusting my own experience of being with this God and much less reliant on other peoples prescriptions about how and what I should believe. I believe, and I doubt.

*Adrienne*

I strongly believe that doubt doesn't indicate a weak faith. Doubt is inevitable. It's human and it's honest. To have the freedom to voice that doubt without being judged is so important. To have the courage to explore the doubt, that is what gives faith its strength. Faith has to be dynamic, not static, because life grinds on and its experiences continually mould us. Our faith has to be able to incorporate what we experience of our world otherwise it is based on nothing that has any meaning to us.

*Anita McIntosh*

## Book Extract

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. Put very simply, stretched out before us are three options.

Option one is *dogmatism*. We reinforce our faith stance against 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 as we hold onto our faith, believing what we have always believed, despite the emptiness or shallowness these beliefs now convey.

Far too often this is the road and a closing down to much often the path continually question, by the most vocal churches. Having chosen not they remain the most questions of others to be

The second option is a form power of doubt and the lack tenets of faith are cynically grown up in churches and God in an orthodox Christian taking on a new their new non-theism which strongly and rigidly as the ridicule. The options for represent two polar extremes.

There is a third option. It is simple answers (dogmatism) withdrawal) but to live with tensions of not knowing. In this direction lie gateways to the wonder of mystery and a paradoxical faith. It is the way of Ricoeur's second, or willed naivety. It is the way of mystery. A mystery that holds powerful, seemingly opposite truths together.

I have been going to the same spiritual director for six years. He has been an ordained Catholic priest for 40 years. I've come to respect him greatly as a man of faith and huge insight. He has said to me more than once: we all face our own set of doubts and in them people of faith often seem to follow one of two paths. Either they become the 'rule keepers' or the 'people of mystery'.



to growing inner resentment of the reality of life. It is also chosen – question after stalwarts of faith in EPC to explore their own questions unwilling to allow the heard.

of *reactionism* where the of answers take over and the abandoned. People who had may once have believed in sense, now reject such a belief fundamentalism regarding can now often be held as Christian fundamentalists they dogmatism or reactionism

the decision not to retreat to or non-answers (cynical the discomfort and the

extracted from *Called Again: In and beyond the Deserts of Faith*

by Alan Jamieson

Philip Garside Publishing 2004. p53.

Let us live with uncertainty as with a friend. To feel certainty means feeling secure; to feel safe is unreal, a delusion of self. Knowing we do not know is the only certainty. Letting the self be lost into Christ.

Michael Leunig

## open dialogue – a space for reader response

Each newsletter gives space 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

### ***Mental Illness and Faith: from two angles***

*My entry into the realm of mental illness and faith came young. I had no idea how it would come to almost take over my life. I was fourteen. A minister's kid. Happy and keen to share my Christian faith with those I came across. The world was full of promise and I believed that God would keep me safe from harm. I thought I was bullet-proof. I was one of those people who could get on with anyone, and perhaps that's why I came to \*\*\*'s attention.*

*\*\*\* was a man in his thirties who suffered from schizophrenia. I caught his attention and I became his obsession. For the next fourteen years he stalked and harassed me. No matter what I did and where I went, he knew where I was, what I was doing, and whom I was with. He would always track me down. His schizophrenia meant that he was in and out of psychiatric hospitals. I would pray for him to be admitted again because then I would get a break from his attentions. That didn't always work though and at one point while I was still at school, I received a letter from him. Nothing unusual in that but this letter was different. In it he told me that God had commanded that we should be together for life and that I should marry him. He was very clear that this was God's will and that if I didn't obey God on this, then bad things would happen to me. As I said, I thought I was bullet-proof so bad things were not going to happen to me. Well not anything more than \*\*\*'s attention. For fourteen years I lived under the grip of \*\*\*'s mental illness. I really only got away from it when I finally left town, got married and changed my name. Then I was free. Or I thought I was free. God had rescued me. I had clung to the Bible when it said that if I had faith and did not doubt, then I would be freed from the torment I had gone through. But the story doesn't end there. I wish it did for everything got worse when my own mental health became a problem. Only a year later I became depressed and suicidal. I was anxious and*

*stopped eating. Going to church became too hard for me. I couldn't relate to the joy being celebrated. I stopped going altogether when a stranger told me to smile and said, "it's not that hard". She had no idea! A number of Christian friends, who criticised my actions and decisions as to appropriate treatment, also did not help. I was diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Anorexia Nervosa and I felt there was no place for me at church. It seemed to me that obviously my faith had not been enough. I also began to wonder whether those bad things that \*\*\* had threatened would happen to me if I didn't obey God's will to marry him, were finally happening. Many years of pain have followed. Various drug overdoses including two life-threatening suicide attempts, more hospital admissions than I care to remember, self-mutilation, substance abuse, starvation of food and anything good in my life, multiple courses of electro-convulsive treatment (ECT), and large doses of many different medications. Those close to me loved me, cared for me, and prayed for me long after I gave up; but none of it brought the healing I had grown up believing would be mine. Years of different types of psychotherapy have also followed. Through it I have come to identify various ways in which I was hurt and abused, both as a child and as an adult. The child in me simply expected God to protect me from harm. As a suffering adult I still expected that God would protect me and save me from harm. I thought that even when I could no longer pray, that the prayers of my friends and family would be heard and answered. It felt like a double whammy to me. I had prayed so long to be saved from the effects of \*\*\*'s mental illness and now it was my own mental illness I wasn't being saved from. . I believe that \*\*\* struggled to find a place for his mental illness in the Church and that was part of why he latched*

onto me. I cared about him, and at fourteen, I didn't realise the problems that would go on to create.

I am slowly coming to the realisation that perhaps I will always struggle with mental illness. It's been twelve years now. And it still hurts. Some days it is still intensely difficult to just keep taking the next breath and to stop myself from actively pursuing an end through death. I still don't know whether it is possible to put the broken pieces back together again. I'm working on it.

Although I haven't totally figured it out yet and often I am not convinced of it, maybe God hasn't forsaken me. I don't know and he hasn't

explained himself to me yet. Maybe he never will. At the moment I don't see a place for me in Church and I know that is a disappointment to some. I simply don't fit anymore. Actually I admire those with mental illnesses who are still in the pews. That takes guts. Whether it's schizophrenia, depression, eating disorders or any type of mental disorder it is hard to claim the joy so many want you to hold onto when you just don't feel it inside.

Jayne Holland  
July 2005

### **A further response on the issue of homosexuality and Christian faith.**

I was grateful for the letter in the last newsletter by Amber Strong and Nathan Parry. I confess to being dismayed by Briar Whitehead's letter about gay people, and also felt it was a little out of step with the 'wondering' spirit of spirited exchanges. Briar's letter made me feel tired - such certainty takes some effort to combat, and frankly I feel I have had a lifetime of battling on such issues. It felt like "oh no, here we go again.....!!" Thanks Amber and Nathan for taking the effort to put your 'dis-ease' with Briar's article into writing.

And well done on the Spirited Exchanges Facilitator Weekend. I suspect a good case study for such a weekend would be how do we respond to the spirited exchange over gay people and christianity. As Amber and Nathan point out, "It's essential in a debate to have a range of opinions, but this letter wasn't presented as an opinion but rather as fact. We saw potential for the abuse of power within the stance of that letter, such as we have become sensitive to within the evangelical church." There is an art in learning how to encourage true spirited exchanges, and to discern when opinion is being disguised as fact, and how to handle this creatively.

Rosemary Neave

#### **Greenbelt Festival 2005**

Jenny will be away in the UK and US from August 16<sup>th</sup> until October 1<sup>st</sup> at the Greenbelt Festival and follow up work with Spirited Exchanges.

If you want to contact her or to notify change of address, you may do so by email on the same email addresses as below. Please understand that responses may be a little slower. Postal mail will not be answered over that time.

**upcoming topics include:** faith stages, mission, and singleness. If you would like to write in relation to one of these topics please email [spiritex@central.org.nz](mailto:spiritex@central.org.nz) We welcome your stories and experiences.

## **Book Review**

***The Way of the Dreamcatcher: Spirit Lessons with Robert Lax: Poet, Peacemaker, Sage.***

**By S. T. Georgiou. Foreword by Brother Patrick Hart, OCSO.**

Novalis, Saint Paul University: 23 Main Street, Ottawa, Canada, 2002.

Paperback - 288 pages with 32 pages of colour photos and artwork.

**Reviewed by Paul Fromont.**

***If you find a man who is constant, awake to the inner [movements of God], learned, long suffering, endowed with devotion, a [holy] man – follow this good and great man even as the moon follows the path of the stars.***

Adapted from *The Dhammapada* translated by Juan Mascaro. Quoted in the introductory pages to *The Way of the Dreamcatcher*.

**This book is a veritable storehouse of treasure.** Within days of it arriving in the post it had been read and in parts reread. I first came across it just after its publication in 2002, by way of online excerpts from interviews between the author, Steve Georgiou, and American poet/mystic/"boatman" Robert Lax (b.1915). Sadly I only purchased a copy in 2005.

Lax, the lifelong best friend of Trappist monk Thomas Merton, moved, in 1963, to the Greek Islands of Kalymnos and Patmos (the latter from whence St. John wrote his *Apocalypse*). Lax spent the last 35 years of his life at Skala on Patmos, before rapidly failing health lead to his return to Olean, New York (his place of birth). Shortly after that return, Robert Lax died peacefully in his sleep on the 26<sup>th</sup> September 2000, funnily enough, the feast day of St John the Divine, already referred to above. He was buried in the Friar's cemetery, near St. Bonaventure University, New York.

The foundation upon which this fascinating book was written was a 'chance' meeting and conversation in 1993 between Georgiou and an unknown Greek man on Patmos. The Greek man's insistence that Georgiou should find a sage called "Pax" led him to a life-changing encounter with Robert Lax; an encounter that was to grow into a wonderfully textured friendship between a young man in his mid-years and a holy mentor in the twilight of his earthly life.

At the heart of this book's "**Spirit lessons**" or "**Spirited exchanges**" is a spiritual friendship shared between Georgiou and Lax. One reviewer called the book a "liturgy of encounter."

***A true teacher has no need to call the seeker; he lets the disciple come.***

A Buddhist proverb. Quoted in the introductory pages to *The Way of the Dreamcatcher*.

***The Way of the Dreamcatcher*** is divided into four main sections. Each section, introduced by Georgiou, is effectively a discussion between the author and Robert Lax on the topics of: *Origins* (Lax's), *Craft*, *Art*, and *Spirit*.

The conversations are truly inspiring. Lax navigates the terrain of his life and we are gifted the wonderful privilege of "soaking in" the fruits of Lax's life-long orientation toward the love of God, love of the other, and love of Creation.

I couldn't single out a "favourite" chapter; each is so different and so rich: from Lax sharing something of his life; to his practice of, and perspective on poetry and writing more generally; to art, its nature and effects; and on finally to his spirituality, at once both Christian and thoroughly ecumenical. To listen in on the conversations is to sit at the feet of a life-weathered sage. To listen in on the conversation is to both realise and lament how absent from ones own life and church experience are similar such persons.

If you're a wayfarer, if you're searching, or if you're longing to grow deeper you'll want to slowly read, savour and meditate on this book. *The Way of the Dreamcatcher* will both nourish you on the journey and deepen you as you search. Read this book if you want to catch glimpses of Thomas Merton. *Finally, read this book if you're a writer, poet, artist, mentor, or spiritual director.*

So much of such value is woven through its pages. It's a book I'll keep returning too.

For more of Steve Georgiou's story, you will find it in this Feb. 2005 interview: **Finding My Religion – Steve Georgiou on his faith and mentor, minimalist poet Robert Lax.**

<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/gate/archive/2005/02/15/findrelig.DTL>

This review was first published on the Prodigal Kiwi blog of Paul Fromont and Alan Jamieson, and is used with permission.

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)  
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