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"Scream at God, cry out..."

When I was in my first year at university, my dad died suddenly and unexpectedly. A year or so later, I was asked to write about the experience of that loss for a new book on grief. The purpose of the book was to present in an honest way stories of young people dealing with the loss of a parent. It was to show people's personal experience of God in the midst of the grief and how their faith impacted their journey through it. The idea was to provide hope to others faced with devastating losses. Not a false hope that denied the struggle and pain, but the hope of a way through it. So, I wrote my story.

I had grown up in a Christian family. I found that the death of my dad, while painful, did not significantly challenge or alter my faith in God. Dad's heart had failed. Shit happens and suddenly it happened to me. It sucked and I hated it, but I could accept it. I'm not saying it wasn't hard. The loss was huge and it did raise questions about God and caused me to consider in a new and real way whether I actually believed for myself all I had grown up knowing. And I did find that God seemed painfully absent when things were most difficult. But the foundations of my faith were not hugely shaken. I stayed involved in church, started a law degree, and had the hope of life after the loss.

One of the main reasons for that hope was my relationship with my boyfriend who had gently become an incredible support after the death of my dad. We had become

best friends and were completely in love. He became part of the family and he was my future.

By the time the book was finally published several years later, my world and my faith had been utterly shattered, and everything I thought I believed in profoundly challenged. Some of the things I had written about God as part of my story for the book were no longer true for me and had a hollow, meaningless ring to them. I recoiled at the thought of them being published.

A few years after the death of my dad, my boyfriend killed himself. My heart broke into a million pieces that day and an all-consuming blackness exploded into my life. There are no words for the devastating impact of that death. Apart from the rest, my faith crumbled. Everything I thought I believed in came crashing down around me. This was no heart failure. Suicide is an entirely different thing. The way I understood things, a death by natural causes wasn't inconsistent with a loving God. But the kind of despair and hopelessness that drives a good, loving and vibrant person to actually kill himself, where does God figure in that?

The faith in God that I had was simply not a comfort. It seemed to me the whole thing would have been far easier to deal with if I didn't believe in a God at all. C.S. Lewis said after the death of his wife, "Talk to

me about the truth of religion and I'll listen gladly. Talk to me about the duty of religion and I'll listen submissively. But don't come talking to me about the consolations of religion or I shall suspect that you don't understand."

I found God's silence deafening.

The bible offered no comfort. All I found there was a record of broken promises. "He will not let your foot slip"; "A bruised reed He will not break"... There are hundreds of them. I could draw no comfort from those promises. No matter how much I wanted to believe it for myself, it hadn't been true for my boyfriend. He was a bruised reed that broke tragically. Time after time I discarded the bible in anger, agony and frustration.

I couldn't pray. Pray for what? The day before my boyfriend died I knew things were hard. That night I prayed that God would stay close to him and give him the strength to get through the next day. So simple. So specific. So vital. That prayer still haunts me. I trusted God with the most important thing in my life. How could I ever pray again believing that it might make a difference? Or worse, what if it did make a difference? That would mean sometimes God answers prayer and therefore chose not to answer my prayer that night. The implications of that were too devastating to accept.

My faith was paralysed. What kind of God abandons somebody in that most desperate of moments? My boyfriend had loved life and loved God, and God had just let him go. I didn't know how I could ever trust God again. Anyway, what did it even mean to trust Him? Doesn't it mean that you hold on to Him as best you can and trust that when things get so bad and you're struggling to maintain your grip, that's when he keeps a tight hold of you? If you can't trust Him for that, what else matters?

I stopped going to church. At first it was just because I was in no state to go and simply couldn't face it. Then my anger

and confusion with God settled in and it was an active choice not to. Over time, I felt like I just slipped away from my church unnoticed and my anger spread. I considered other churches but the longer I stayed away the harder it was to try and go again. The few times I went I just got irate and upset because I couldn't reconcile what I was hearing in church with what had happened in my life. Church and the God that I found there were completely irrelevant to what I was dealing with.

Even though most of the time I felt like I was crying out into a void I didn't really ever stop believing in God. Actually, there were probably times when I did, there was just so much emptiness. But mostly it was more that I felt like I didn't understand the true nature of God and how He interacts with the world. I couldn't accept there are things we will never understand and we just have to accept them and trust God. That would have been to deny the enormous impact of what had happened, to pretend it somehow didn't matter because after all God's got it all under control and He must have His reasons. No way was I settling for that. I needed to understand more than I did before trust was going to become an option again.

After a couple of years I joined a group of young people trying to pursue their faith outside the confines of church. When I first left church I had no idea there was a growing number of people doing the same thing, for different reasons, but all trying to maintain a relationship with God while coming to terms with issues surrounding church and faith. It was useful to be able to talk about things with other people who were also questioning aspects of God and of the Christianity they had been taught to believe. I never talked about the suicide though. It was too painful and too personal.

Even more valuable to me over this time was being able to talk with someone about all of it. Not just the big questions about God but also the horror and sense of abandonment that was the cause of it all.

A person I trusted and came to highly respect, and who freely gave me their time on a regular basis. This church figure gave me the freedom to say what I needed to say without judging and without trying to provide all the answers. Without suggesting I needed to return to church in order to find what I was looking for, they provided options and caused me to think about things in new and different ways.

Now, nearly 5 years later, I do sometimes go to church. But I still find it hard. I am still wary of prayer and I still struggle to draw from the bible anything I can cling to with the kind of certainty I once believed came from placing my life in God's hands. I still get angry at God and I still ache for the loss of a life that had so much promise. But somehow, I think more than ever, I believe in a God who above all else is utterly loving. And that provides a more compelling reason than anything else I can think of for pursuing a relationship with God in the face of doubt.

I strongly believe that doubt is not indicative of a faith that is weak. 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.

In the midst of all the useless platitudes I was offered when my boyfriend died, as people tried to make sense of it and tried to defend God, the most comforting and empowering thing anyone said to me went something like: "Scream at God, cry out to Him and let Him know you're angry and disappointed ... but remember the man hanging on the cross."

If you would like to respond to this or any other articles, either privately or for publication or if you would like to tell your own story or write something for the newsletter, please email: spiritex@xtra.co.nz or send to Jenny McIntosh, Spirited Exchanges, PO Box 11551, Wellington.

Book Review

Finding Hope Again

Journeying through sorrow and beyond

By Peter Millar; Canterbury Press; Great Britain; 2003

I wonder if this book should come with a warning something along the lines of it being guaranteed that it will take you into the depths of your own losses and pain. You cannot help but be moved by what is written on these pages.

But what can be equally guaranteed is that you will be richly rewarded by reading it. and beautifully worded quotes that touch into the heart of suffering.

It is not just a bunch of words but profound insights into what the journey through sorrow is like, written by a man who, himself is on the journey, following the sudden death of his wife. Peter Millar enhances his own learnings and insights by drawing on the stories and experiences of others. There are also many powerful

This book validates and embraces the pain experienced but helps us to integrate it and move beyond it to hope and life again.

It gives us a heightened awareness of and compassion for others who suffer in our world. It even helps us to make choices and take risks we might not have thought possible previously. One quote that expresses this, from Davna Markova says:

“I will not die an un-lived life,
I will not go in fear
Of falling or catching fire.
I choose to inhabit my days ,
To allow my living to open to me,
To make me less afraid,
More accessible,
To loosen my heart
Until it becomes a wing,
A torch, a promise.
I choose to risk my significance:
To live.”

It highlights the value of ‘going on the journey *through* sorrow’ instead of avoiding it or going around it and in the

God’s Blessing

I bless the poverty in your heart, that knows its own emptiness, because that gives me space to grow my Kingdom there.

I bless that in you that touches others gently, because everyone responds to gentleness, and gentleness can capture even hardened hearts.

I bless that in you which grieves and aches for all that is lost or can never be, because that is my opportunity to comfort you with my, much greater, love.

I bless that in you which longs and strives after your own deepest truth and after truth for the world, because even as you pray I am constantly satisfying these deep unspoken longings.

process uncovers the hidden treasures found there. It suggests that by going on this path we become much more compassionate people, more open to others and aware of our mortality thus giving us the desire to live life to the full and make it significant for others.

Jenny McIntosh

If you are interested in purchasing a copy of **Finding Hope Again** please contact us at the address at the bottom of this newsletter. Cost as yet unknown. We are anticipating a limited supply of these in the near future. Alternatively you can order them through a local book dealer.

I bless you every time you show mercy and forgiveness, because that is like a little window in your heart opening up a space for me to enter and to heal.

I bless the purity of your heart, because that is the elusive centre where your deepest desire meets mine. That is where we meet face to face.

I bless the peacemaker in you - that in your soul which seeks the peace that passeth understanding, even at a great cost.

I bless even those things in your experience of journeying with me that feel like persecution and misunderstanding because they are the proof that your faith is no illusion.

Margaret Silf

(Cited in Peter Millar’s ‘Finding Hope Again’, p177)

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