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Help!
Just help
It's harder than I thought

Decisions now made surround
me in consequences
As thick as fog at night
Dark and lonely, uncertain

Deep, deep seas!
It's time to sink or swim
Andrew Wheatley

Shipwrecked

Reading "Scream at God, cry out..." sparked off in me recognition of many of the feelings, frustrations, and questions described by the writer. I too have journeyed from identifying with ideas and concepts of God learned in the church, to abandoning them in a time of crisis because they no longer fitted into reality.

I grew up in Kenya, and was introduced to the church as a teenager. Being one of a minority of white people, I already had difficulty feeling I belonged. However with encouragement from my mother, I joined the choir, heard the salvation message, responded, and enjoyed a special friendship with a Ugandan woman refugee. I was confirmed in the church before I left Kenya to go overseas to study. Having attended a formal and somewhat "dry" style of worship in Kenya it was a shock to discover the Pentecostal way of doing things. I learned about the Holy Spirit and grace which revolutionised my Christian thinking. I also started going through some emotional healing though I did not fully understand it at the time. Part of me liked this new style of church, part of me was seeking for something more.

Church did not feature much in my life for the next few years after returning home from overseas. Meeting my New Zealand husband-to-be changed the course of events. After getting married

and having our first son we moved to New Zealand permanently. Wanting to have the "ideal Christian family" I'd read about in so many parenting and marriage books, I was happy to attend church and build the Christian foundations for my family. Although my husband is a believer, I found we had different ideas and ways of approaching things and after our second child arrived I realised I was trying to maintain the ideal image that I thought was expected of church going families, but underneath it just wasn't real. I grew spiritually and started to work through some big issues in my life at a time when the church I was in started to collapse because of division in the leadership. I became involved in trying to help save the church because it had become one of the crutches I was leaning on. I saw so much potential there for a better church and was devastated when the split happened and part of the congregation left.

My disillusionment with churches only increased and a change of job for my husband and a shift to another town solved my problem of what to do regarding the church. I was not in a hurry to join a church here and after a little "shopping around" we settled on the one I still sometimes attend. Gradually as the children got older their desire to attend got less, as did my husband's and I continued to struggle with disillusionment and loneliness in a place where I was supposed to belong and be able to be real.

A severe episode of clinical depression left me unable and not wanting to set

foot in church again. I could no longer hide behind masks. A few people there were my lifeline for a while and I struggled enormously with feelings of guilt and doubt about it all. Just as the writer of the mentioned article said, I too “found God’s silence deafening.” It was unbearable at times and I did “scream at God and cry out” and more, because I was so angry, confused and had lost hope in a loving God. I had to begin to reassess my views on healing, suffering, illness, pain, faith and spirituality.

For me too, the Bible and prayer became meaningless and are areas I still struggle with now, a year and a half later. I could not and still cannot reconcile some of the teaching about victorious living with my experiences. My view of God has changed, is changing and what I once held onto no longer supports me.

Through spiritual direction, sharing with



others in the same predicament and reading about others’ journeys of faith, I have learnt that this is a normal process of growth; to redefine and rediscover our beliefs.

I still maintain links with my church, because I have a group of women who know and support me and vice versa, and it gives me some credibility for the Christian work I do in the community. I would like to help instigate change in the church, but I am no longer comfortable

with that being my only expression of my faith. I see myself in the sea with others who experience similar shipwrecks and have to abandon ship to find new life rafts.

Perhaps we take with us something from the old ship that is still part of us, leaving behind what is not, but we do not lose our faith, rather grow into new dimensions in it.

Abandoning Ship...

For many leaving the church is very much like abandoning ship. For some it is more of a felt choice, a decision to leave and make their way alone and for others it is more like finding themselves jumping for a life raft as the ship lists and sinks. For those in the first category there is more time to consider the options for the way ahead, but others find themselves thrust straight into a life raft and it is more like just trying to survive - for a while anyway.

Either way this is the beginning of a new journey into unknown territory that brings with it the need for new ways of thinking and operating, maybe even a new language and certainly new metaphors. It can feel an incredibly isolated and lonely place to be in, people can feel scared and misunderstood, but it also can have a tinge of excitement and anticipation once the storm has settled.

I am reminded of the pointers for those jumping ship and making their own way found in ‘A Churchless Faith’¹ and draw on these below.

- The need to get one’s bearings, to relive and work through what has led to leaving, what is going on internally. This will take time and it is important not to try and hurry the process or ‘do’ things in order just to regain a sense of equilibrium. It will be rocky for a while. It may well include expressing anger at what life on board the ship was doing to us, articulating even if only to themselves the pain, disappointment and maybe even abuse they felt on board. It is also important to work through the grief around leaving the community and people that have been very important. There was a time when there was

¹ Alan Jamieson, 2000. *A Churchless Faith*. Wellington, Philip Garside Publishing Ltd. Used with permission.

a mutual journeying with these people, now it is very separate to them. A spiritual director or a group of others who have also abandoned ship can be an invaluable anchor through this process.

- In the process of coming to accept the loss of the community and individual friendships, there is also a process of dis-illusioning. What were once thought of as values almost exclusively of the church, such as 'community' for example, or caring and compassion, are now seen in other places outside of the church and often accompanied by a greater acceptance of people. Horizons are being broadened. What were thought of as close friendships at church may not have continued and this can be incredibly dis-illusioning and painful. What were these friendships based on?
- Finding the way ahead - assuming the goal is to continue and deepen one's faith in God. It is a journey through the pain, doubt, confusion and questions to a new appreciation of God at work. It needs to be said that this is a process and can take some considerable time. The book of Job offers us a rough guide to what lies ahead.

In Job, we meet a man who has a firm faith and works hard to keep it that way. Yet, despite this, circumstances throw him and his faith into disarray. He hits the wall - his old trust and beliefs are now replaced with unanswered questions and deep doubts. Although his friends raise all the orthodox teachings of his community of faith, he cannot accept them, they simply do not connect with his new experience of life and he is not prepared to compromise that discrepancy between what he previously accepted and built his faith on and what he has now experienced. Job increasingly gains the courage to voice this to his friends and to God. It is a time of critically unpacking his faith and an angry search for the God who seems to have disappeared.

- Pushing through the wall - finding a bigger meeting with God. The wall, the term used by Hagberg and Guelich in their book called *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith*, is a significant encounter. It is the place where a new layer of transformation occurs. It is a place where mystery lies, "a mystery that ultimately defies explanation but includes discomfort, surrender, healing, awareness, forgiveness, acceptance, love, closeness to God, discernment, melting, moulding, and solitude and reflection."²

The journey through the wall includes four phases - awareness, forgiveness, acceptance and love. It begins with becoming **aware** of the lies we have accepted about ourselves and our families and the myths of life that were never true. It means finding out who we are as opposed to who we would like to be or others want us to be and realising we have lived like that for some time. This is often accompanied by feeling of loss, sadness, and anger.

The second phase involves us being able to **forgive** ourselves and others. It means a new encounter with the grace and forgiveness of God that brings us to an **acceptance**, a place of being able to embrace and have compassion on our own humanness, failures and sexuality. And the last phase of the wall involves a new emergence of **love**. Love for God, ourselves and others, different from what we've known before, founded on a deeper transformation in our lives.

We see this outworked in the life of Job. Job's perspective and relationship with God changes and by the end of the book he has made a major shift, He is humbled and softened and has become more aware of and inclusive of himself and others and has come to a new understanding and experience of God. There is pain and struggle, yes, but there is a place beyond the wall that brings new life and growth in ways unimagined before.

Jenny McIntosh

² Hagberg, J O & Guelich, R A 1989 *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith*. Dallas, Word Publishing. p120



NAKED CRABS



At the seashore, every pool and puddle left by the retreating tide seems to have a crab in it. Little ones scuttle sideways, squeezing under rocks, peeking from a patch of seaweed, occasionally venturing out to nibble on unwary human toes.

Now and then, you may see bigger crabs, in deeper, safer pools. With ponderous majesty, they wave huge claws as a warning to stay away.

On the beach, shells of crabs lie washed up by waves. Some are from crabs that died. Others are simply discarded, a dwelling too small for its growing occupant. That's how the crabs grow bigger - when their shells get too tight, they split the shell open and grow a new one.

I've never talked with a crab. But I imagine the process of splitting open a shell must be painful. I'm sure that until they grow a new shell, they feel terribly defenseless and vulnerable. Because that's how we humans feel when we are crack open our shells.

Our shells aren't visible, like crabs. But they are there, just the same - shells formed by years of habit, shells that protect us from other people, shells that are the roles we play as parents, or children, or bosses, or employees.

Every now and then, we crack open and emerge into a new world, quivering and defenseless.

Teenagers do it as they become adults. No wonder they are crabby sometimes. Adults do it as they learn to quit running their kid's lives. Or when they get laid off at work. Or when a partner dies and they have to start over again, alone. When an investment fails, when a dream disappears. In all these traumas of life, a shell is being broken. A new vulnerable life is started.

Like a crab, the longer that shell has been growing around us, the harder it is to break open, to start again. The more painful the breaking becomes.

Some of our shells we have worn for generations. Our Christian faith can be a shell handed down through the generations. Some faith shells are worth keeping. Others may have become prisons - shells so encrusted with the barnacles of the past, so burdened with trailing weeds, so constricting, that we can no longer move when God calls.

No one looks for painful experiences, in life or in faith. To avoid pain, we may prefer to stay locked into shells that no longer fit very well, rather than risk the vulnerability of cracking them open.

But when a crab's shell becomes too thick, too protective, too tough to crack open and start again, then the crab can't grow any more. That's when it dies.

So do we.

* James Taylor

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** For **Alan Jamieson: aj@paradise.net.nz**