



issue 30

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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

WEIGHING UP THE HEART

Always, there are our hearts
to consider.
They are most
precious to us.

The heart is a means
of description.
It will locate
the sentiment.
Speak up
small red thing.

The heart is
the deciding factor.
Wave your arms around
see the sky bloom.

This poem was the theme of my year when I left church three years ago. It seemed to me to encapsulate the journey I was trying to embark on; a journey of solitude, deconstruction, and honesty. Of learning to listen to my heart.

“Speak up, small red thing”, I often said to myself, as screeds of other voices, narratives, ideas, and ‘shoulds’ echoed around my head. I had had enough of other people’s ideas. *Their* ideas about God, the world, my place in the world, how to be a good person, how I could best serve and follow God... It had got to

The heart lives
as a steady witness
within the body.
We would hope
for a rigorous
sympathy
for the heart to
remember
the reliable place
in which it dwelled.

Always refer back
to the heart.
It is where
the world
began.

Jenny Bornholdt

the point where I no longer knew what I thought.

As well as these voices crowding in my head, another problem was my perception of god. It had got to the point where the theology in my head didn’t match with what I felt in my heart. Even though I knew, theoretically and theologically, that I shouldn’t expect god to make my life go the way I wanted it to, I somehow couldn’t stop myself from believing that s/he should. The underlying message I received at church was that if I was a good

enough person, and if I tried hard enough to be the best Christian for my age group, god would bless me. Even though I knew this wasn't the case and didn't want to believe in a god like that, I still did. I felt as though I was trying to do the right thing and to follow god in the best way I knew but it began to feel meaningless.

The way people at my church seemed to connect with god felt so different to me. People's prayers made no sense to me. As time went by, church services became a more and more negative experience. I would feel frustrated and more disillusioned, as each week it was further confirmed to me that my faith and experience of god was very different from that of the people who spoke up at church.

I remember waking up one Sunday morning and suddenly feeling incredibly strongly that I just couldn't go to my church anymore. That it was time to stop. That was it. The god I encountered there wasn't trustworthy or loving or life-giving. Instead of trying to do "the right thing", I had to be honest with myself and those around me.

This was scary stuff. My life revolved around my church and my involvement in an inner-city Christian community. Deciding that I could no longer go to church, and eventually also that I had to leave the community group was huge. I couldn't comprehend my life without these involvements. But I somehow knew that to continue would be worse. I realized in a funny way that if I cared about god and my connection with her/him I had to leave to give time and energy to this journey. Paradoxically, I both wasn't sure if I even believed in god and I knew that god was calling me away from my Christian world to find him/her.

I had a picture in my mind of a Michael Leunig cartoon of My Curly, a character of his who travels the world not quite knowing what he's searching for. He's setting off on his own in a little sailboat, into a stormy ocean. There are a few people standing on the shore waving goodbye to him, and he's sailing off with a determined and slightly scared look on his face. I knew this was me. I couldn't see the destination, how I might get there or how long it might take, but the important thing was embarking on the journey and letting go of what was behind. I knew it was scary but I knew I had

to do it. And I had to do it alone. This was about me finding (or maybe discovering) there was no god.

So much of my identity had been tied up in my Christian world. I knew I was a good person because I helped people around me. I led small groups, ran a homework club and lived with teenagers in need. I protested for the rights of the poor and sabotaged corporate billboards. I was cutting edge. Or I had been.

Now I had to shed all of these things. Even things which I knew were still part of me and of my character. But *everything* had got so tangled up with my confused perception of god that I had to clear *everything* out until I could hear my heart.

Things felt empty and dark and hard.

They kept feeling hard.

I started meeting with a group of church leaving 'refugees', who wanted to tease out and discuss some of the issues we were mulling over individually. The ground rules of our group are really important to me:

Let god defend god. Everyone's point of view is valid. You don't have to "toe the party line". A tidy answer will not be found at the end of each discussion.

Being able to talk freely about my ideas in a safe environment felt incredibly helpful. It was okay for things to be up in the air. It didn't matter if you didn't know if you believed in god or not. It was okay to be *honest*.

The conversations we've had in this group are one of the things that have been really helpful for me in discovering a new faith. Little by little, I have felt comfortable saying that I believe in... a spirit of goodness that exists in the world... which might have something to do with our lives... a creator spirit... God (both female and male)... this god is so much bigger than we can comprehend... this god loves people in the world... this god loves me...

As I have learned to listen to my heart, and to trust and believe it, I have felt so much more able to articulate what I believe.

Recently, it dawned on me that I think I trust god again. I couldn't pinpoint when I started to feel that, or even necessarily why, but I knew I did. And that I want to follow and honour this god with my life. Crazy! With this realization came a

Let us pray for wisdom. Let us pause from thinking and empty our mind. Let us stop the noise. In the silence let us listen to our heart. The heart which is buried alive. Let us be still and wait and listen carefully. A flood of contentment. Contentment!

Saying that I believe in god again is almost a bit scary. It feels so fragile and tenuous that saying it out loud almost blows the belief/feeling away. I don't want to get back into thinking about god in the way I used to when I went to church. I like sound from the deep, from below. A faint cry. A weak tapping. Distant muffled feelings from within. The cry for help.

We shall rescue the entombed heart. We shall bring it to the surface, to the light and the air. We shall nurse it and listen respectfully to its story. The heart's story of pain and suffocation, of darkness and yearning. We shall help our feelings to live in the sun. Together again we shall find relief and joy.

a selection from Leunig

When the heart
Is cut or cracked or broken
Do not clutch it
Let the wound lie open

Let the wind
From the good old sea blow in
To bathe the wound with salt
And let it sting

Let a stray dog lick it
Let a bird lean in the hole and sing
A simple song like a tiny bell
And let it ring

How to get there

Go to the end
of the path until
you get to the
gate.

Go through the
gate and head
straight out
towards the
horizon.

Keep going towards
the horizon.

Sit down and
have a rest
every now and
again.

But keep on
going. Just
keep on with
it.

Keep on going
as far as you can.
That's how you
get there.

A Spirited Exchanges discussion forum has begun in Auckland. We have met three times to date looking at a range of topics. A good dynamic has already developed and quite a number of people have come to it. **The next meeting will be Friday 4th of Feb. 7.30pm at the Disability Resource Centre, 14 Erson Ave, Royal Oak. Anyone is welcome.**

For further information or to go on the Auckland group email list please contact Jocelyn Grantham: JG@dilworth.school.nz or phone 623 2442

Spirited Exchanges at a crossroads

This is the time when we often take stock of the year just gone and think towards the next one. At least I do, and especially so for Spirited Exchanges as it is also the time to apply for funding and think about what is ahead to work on.

I am very grateful to the two trusts (Boulcott and Dove) that have funded Spirited Exchanges over the past six years bringing us to where we are now.

Reflecting on this over the past few weeks, I think that Spirited Exchanges has come to a crossroads. It has reached the limits of its resources (financial and personnel) in relation to the need and the opportunities opening up.

Currently, there are three groups operating – two

in Wellington and one in Auckland. Next year there is the possibility of two further groups in Wellington and two more in other centres. Among other things a website is currently being developed and the newsletter distribution increases monthly.

It would seem that Spirited Exchanges is at the point of needing to go to the next level with all that involves. If we are to do this we need increased financial support and to bring others in to help with different aspects of it. This has to be done while maintaining the distinctive ethos and objectives of Spirited Exchanges.

If you would like further information or have ideas about this please feel free to email us.

Jenny McIntosh

Book Review

Prosaac

Profound Revelations of Sunday Afternoon Cycling Church

By Steven Muir

This amusing book, complete with pictures comes in bite sized, easy to read, great to enjoy aloud with others, chunks. The book looks at numerous issues in the church and wider Christian culture from the perspective of a cycling church.

Alistair Mackenzie puts it this way on the back cover – “Try to imagine church on wheels inspired by Adrian Plass and Gary Larson, and every now and then a bit of almost serious theological reflection....Prosaac is a very funny and salutary reminder of ways we Christians often set ourselves up to leave others absolutely bewildered by our antics.”

If you like a bit of humour and cynicism this book helps us laugh at ourselves. It would have been a great Christmas gift idea if you had heard about it in time! However, still time for New Year.

You can order this from: thepope@cyclingchurch.org.nz or www.cyclingchurch.org.nz or alternatively cheques for \$15/copy + \$1 postage made out to SMART Mental Health Ltd, P O Box 13266, Christchurch.

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 or jenny@central.org.nz For Alan Jamieson: alan@central.org.nz or aj@paradise.net.nz