

Men's Group - The Holy Fool

Most recently the group has looked at male archetypes – king, warrior, magician, lover - and considered what of the different faces of the masculine have attracted us at various times in our lives. Do we let the four parts of our soul mutually regulate and balance one another? We have reflected on wholeheartedness and exhaustion in the midst of the everyday and also upon the topic of the Holy Fool, which **Pete Edwards** brought to us from Os Guinness' book, *The Call*.

"The term *fool for Christ* comes from Paul's letter to Corinth - where the apostle is writing to fellow-Christians and with a deep irony...Paul's word for "fool" is the word from which we get our word "moron". Used by Sophocles of Antigone's insanity, it is strong and insulting. Clearly the Apostle himself was used to being accused of being mad - by the Athens intellectuals and the Roman Governor Festus in the presence of King Agrippa.

"But all these examples pale beside the supreme foolbearer in Scripture - Jesus himself. Dismissed by his own family as insane, Jesus finally stands before the Roman Praetorian Guard and is made an object of derision. He who is about to bear the sin of the world first bears the folly of the world. Dressed up derisively with a purple robe, a crown of thorns, and a reed sceptre, Jesus becomes the mock king with deliberately ludicrous regalia..."

We therefore may ask ourselves, in what ways am I called to renounce self-interest and independence (white martyrdom)? In what ways am I being countercultural, heaven focussed (looking beyond)? How do I feel about accepting injury, welcoming it as "sharing in Christ's suffering": Do I need to be so defensive?

And finally

From the far star points of his pinned extremities,
cold inched in—black ice and squid ink—
till the hung flesh was empty.

Lonely in that void even for pain,
he missed his splintered feet,

the human stare buried in his face.

He ached for two hands made of meat

he could reach to the end of.

In the corpse's core, the stone fist

of his heart began to bang

on the stiff chest's door, and breath spilled
back into that battered shape. Now

it's your limbs he comes to fill, as warm water
shatters at birth, rivering every way.

Signposts to a clearing

The earthquake has just hit Japan. I am watching a tsunami of mud and water sweeping relentlessly through streets and over fields, carrying cars and lorries, buildings and boats bobbing on unremitting waves of destruction. It is awful and awesome. It is one of those rare moments when the word awe captures our open-mouthed, speechless silence before the immensity of an event. The immediacy of the aerial images stand alongside those horrific moments when the Twin Towers in New York collapsed in crowd-choking clouds of dust.

Where is God? Does God initiate this kind of event? Does God observe at a safe distance? Does God control or fail to control? Does God somehow participate in it all as victim and fellow-sufferer? Questions fall into confused silence.

Somewhere in that silence I am carried beyond the questions of a puny mind trying to make sense of it. I am confronted by power beyond all human power. I am witnessing a rebuke to my illusions of control. I lift up my eyes and admit my blindness where all is darkness.

Ancient words echo from a Psalmist who did not edit God out of disasters, but heard disturbing echoes of God. He speaks of the earth quaking and shaking and trembling and dares to speak of a God who "parted the heavens and came down, dark clouds were under his feet." (Psalm 18:8).

God is an awesome God who sometimes is to be found only in places of disruption and darkness. We prefer to seek our God in places of peace and light, but to edit him out of the tsunami is to miss a moment of awe that might lead us to places of awe-filled worship (even with our unanswerable questions) unknown in the place of gentleness and quiet.

Coracle exists for those who have felt the impact of some internal tsunami or shaking of their foundations, when God seems to have departed. What is being swept away? What will remain? Could God be coming down in the clouds darkness rather than taking his leave of us? In the long silence of the darkness, we do not know.

After the shaking and the darkness the Psalmist was brought into a "spacious place". There is a spacious place beyond the darkness, still waiting to be discovered. Coracle is one signpost to the clearing.

What might that look like for the devastated people of Japan? Pray for them. God is there.

Peter Neilson, Chair of the Coracle Trust



*The crown of thorns, Jorge Breu;
Ecce homo, Lovis Corinth*

*Descending theology:
The Resurrection, Mary Kerr*

Source: Poetry (January 2006).

Pencaitland retreat, 15th January – Thinness

Recently, I have become fascinated by thinness, perhaps unconsciously a little fearful of it as well. When we are very young we have no barriers, we are thin skinned, but as we grow older through childhood and into adulthood, we perceive the need to become thicker skinned, in order to provide protection, security, often for understandable and sensible reasons. We learn to reject and to fear hurt and vulnerability. But somehow we also lose something. We create a mask, which hides our real self, as a means of projecting a construct of our self to others that makes us more acceptable, more liked, more hidden, or whatever. Yet as we grow older again, our thick skinness becomes thin skinness, literally. And it seems to me that this should be the natural way, as we mature, to become psychologically and emotionally thinner as well. Not that we need or should revert to a naive state, because this can be harmful, even stupid. There are many situations where it would be inappropriate and unwise for me to be too exposed. So it becomes a kind of intent, a state, a place to reside in, which is also wise and discreet. And it is important, crucial, because I want to become more human, not less, and it is by my humanness, and perhaps not by my spirituality, that I become connected to others, the world and to God. My vulnerability and transparency become strengths not weaknesses. And I learn to live in today, at the moment, laying all down, gradually, for something greater, which seems to me to be the foundation of all true wisdom and maturity.

At the Coracle retreat, a picture by Odilon Redon of a sailor and companion in a small blue sailing boat with a bright yellow sail in choppy waters, alongside an insightful and engaging commentary by Sister Wendy Beckett, captured my thoughts for a while:

"At first we hardly see the sailor, still less that she has a companion. Both are lost, hidden, secret within the boat's blueness, the colour of heaven. The two – because the mystic heart is never alone, an angelic Presence, the hidden God, is always with her – do not steer the boat, do not even try to direct it. They sit surrendered, allowing the Spirit to take them where He chooses. The sea is not still for the one who prays, it heaves and is turbulent, but the tossing of the boat is part of the mystic journey."

It is the outward stress that makes the surrender of trust vital. The sail alone catches the full brightness of God, and it is that brightness, overhead, not tangible, that dominates the picture. But the brightness binds the sailor, she cannot see where the Spirit is taking her, and she leans back, at rest, content in His spiritual choice. It is not in the minutiae of daily living that she abandons choice, but in her prayer. The daily living is the choppy sea, but her prayer is the deep faithful blue of the boat, the bright loving gold of its sail, all that bears her forward in a power not her own."

I find the thought of thinness is about letting go and allowing the Spirit to take you wherever it will, because surrender is the taking down of barriers. And that requires more, rather than less, courage and faith.

Ian Stewart

Inns on roads, islands on seas



What is Coracle?

Coracle Trust is a small charity based in Edinburgh, that seeks to support churches, working ecumenically with small groups and individuals to offer physically and spiritually hospitable contexts for sharing questions, learning together and prayerfully reflecting on faith in and through life transitions as spiritual companions.

A need for inns on roads, islands in seas,
Halts for discoveries to be shared,
Maps checked, notes compared;
(A J S Tessimond)

We also seek to offer retreats, workshops, spiritual direction and resources that assist prayer and reflective practice.

Looking ahead—some events. We are currently looking towards:

- † Exhibiting at the Solas Festival near Biggar over the weekend of 24–26th June 2011
- † Producing a booklet on transitions in faith and introducing the work of the Trust
- † Offering an Autumn retreat on 3rd September at Greenhope near Duns in the Borders. A Spring retreat is to be announced.
- † Offering a Quiet Day for ministers
- † Offering a Senses day for adults and children at St. Abbs Head on Saturday June 4th
- † Setting up a speaker event and/or panel discussion on the topic of 'What nurtures faith development?'

Keep an eye on the website for further details.

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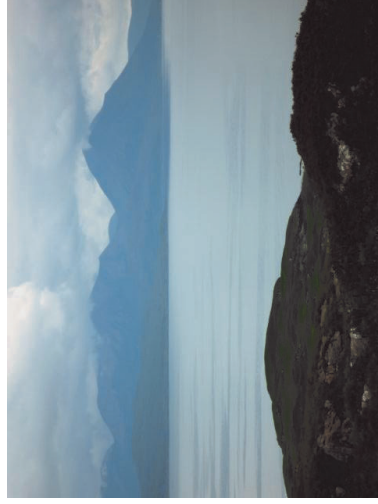
"a safe space", "a place of friendship", "a liberty to think and discuss freely", "space for exploration", "space to receive", "seeking sacred space", "companionship on the journey", "an open space to grow", "a place to think and discuss freely", "travelling light", "space to receive", "seeking sacred space"

The Two Halves of Life group

-choosing to follow a different path

The Art of Journeying

In Psalm 139 King David writes about God's loving omnipotence and gracious omniscience. During times of transition with their painful loss of direction and unsettling doubts such reminders can be beacons of orientation and life giving sustenance on an otherwise confused and sometimes frightening journey. And yet, journeys are as much part of life as the stations between journeys, the hazardous travelling as much as the resting in a safe haven. In a way, the art of journeying consists of the ability to find rest and peace while keeping moving – perhaps even finding fulfillment in the moving itself. In Matthew 11 Jesus invites people to come to him with their heavy burdens and weary souls to find rest. This is not a static, lifeless rest, but a journey with a light load and easy tasks, a stroll like a Sunday afternoon walk.



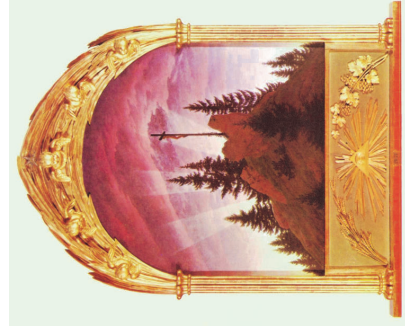
The transition from the first to the second half of life is a departure from the certainties of material and professional success, a leaving behind of the identity found in activity and achievement, a letting go of society's most popular aims and expectations. This is not a voluntary transition as the earlier transitions from childhood to adolescence and adulthood were. The expectations and challenges and aspirations are different, both external and our own. We experience the costs; will there be any gain? What will the gains be? Where is the journey going?

The developmental psychologist Erik Erikson describes this phase of individuation as leaving the age of generativity (or stagnation, where the crisis has not been resolved) with its fruitfulness in caring, and moving towards self-integrity and leading to wisdom; this at the risk of meeting despair, the crisis of self-integrity. Similarly, in Fowler's Stages of Faith it represents the place, where the Paradox (= side belief) is tolerated and possibly embraced for the first time (stage 5), occasionally leading to a Universal Faith, also called "enlightenment" (stage 6).

However, while there are "Inns on Roads and Islands on Seas", these are not places to settle, and the journey continues to a greater and more powerful transition, when we finally take the hand of him who leads "in the eternal way" to a home which is also the home of the Universe.

Stephan Helfer

A Meditation on the Cross of the Mountains



With its tabernacle frame, it's easy to view this painting by Caspar David Friedrich as a historical anomaly in a long and hallowed tradition: contemporary critics accused the artist of sacrilege for allowing a landscape to creep onto the altar'. However, they failed to take into account the loving relationship between God, man and nature that has been celebrated in rituals such as Mass, for millennia.

Besides, this wasn't a head painting to be judged on traditional grounds, but a heart painting, part of the Romantic tradition that was a reaction to the soulless rationalism of the 8th century. It depicts an evocative moment that brings focus and emotional intensity to our experience of nature.

There's symbolism here: the unshakably firm Cross embedded in rock; the spire-like evergreens; the Trinitarian triangle and all-seeing eye of God that embellishes the frame. But we miss the point of the painting entirely if we don't let it work its silent, contemplative magic. The power of this painting lies in the way it reads us. It's a gilded soul mirror; and a friend on my personal journey from head to heart.

Tom Ingrey-Counter (Senses group)

E-Reflections — weekly reflections via email. A Lenten sample.

The theme this year has been The Everyday which sandwiches our daily Lent E-Reflections. If you would like to receive these then **contact us**.



The gifts of Life

Birth is a miracle. Birth brings into being a new creation, where before none existed. Birth brings life where before there was non-existence.

The Psalmist tells us
 "Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
 In your book were written
 all the days that were formed for me,
 when none of them as yet existed." (Psalm 139)

Our second birth is a miracle. We are a new creation. When we are born again, something new comes into being. We enter into a new life, which, being of the spirit, carries no threat of death. Birth and life are gifts of God, bestowed upon us without need or desert.

What does it mean to us to have this gift of life, both temporal and eternal? How shall we spend our days? What will be our legacy?

Refreshed and invigorated by the wind of the Spirit, let us place our hands in hers; let us dance in the spiralling wind, soar in the life of the spirit; let us fly on the breast of the wind into new birth.

Jane Denniston

Senses Group—One step across a ditch

One of my favourite things as a child was lying awake - falling asleep really - with my open, silent face next to the breathing, gently flapping canvas wall of a tent, the memory of constellations still huge and immediate, with all the grass and earth smells filtering through the wall of breath, so that it was like lying with your ear to the world, with magical permission to just lie there and listen, to stems of grass clicking and shifting, people talking quietly, campfires rustling in the dark, and the far-off collapsing roar of the sea finally merging with your breathing as you fell asleep.

Notice how 'I' became 'you' in that paragraph. Every time I look back at myself in this way I am acknowledging that I am not identical to myself, that, in the words of poet Juan Ramon Jimenez:

I am not I.
 I am this one
 walking beside me whom I do not see,
 whom at times I manage to visit,
 and whom at other times I forget;
 who remains calm and silent while I talk,
 and forgives, gently, when I hate,
 who walks where I am not,
 who will remain standing when I die.

I am incomplete, incoherent, cracked: I meet myself coming back. One day I could hardly find my self at all, just a few old habits, some stuff, some clothes, and it seemed that I had drifted so far from the centre of my own life that I hardly recognised myself. It went on.

Instinctively, along with the child I remembered being, I sought permission, and put my ear to the world. I went for a walk on the edge of a formal plantation of spruce trees, not the most inspiring of landscapes perhaps, the air between the tall straight trunks thick with a gloomy silence. Separating me from the forest was a ditch like a wet quilt stitched with lady's bedstraw and viper's bugloss, bright tense little flowerheads slick with dew, their stalks all tangled with sharp scented grasses. It was only once I crossed the ditch and stepped in between the trunks that I could smell the resinous fierce life of the trees. Dark shaggy serrations echoed away from me, like the hides of beasts who sleep standing close together, or the contours of unpredictable ideas thrusting up from the back of my mind. It was something to do with feeling excluded and invited at the same time, and how taking that one step across the ditch completely altered my perception of the place and of myself, and I'm not going to try to explain it, for it was sacramental and holy, but after days of absence I returned to myself, in a moment of revealed brightness at the edge of the woods.

This is one way of saying that when I'm depressed nature has a healing effect on me, not so much closing the gulf in my soul but inviting me onto its threshold.

Stephen Wood

Photo by Nigel Chadwick



Motherhood, God and Theology group

- finding God in and through motherhood

A shared humanity

The work of the Dutch priest and scholar Henri Nouwen has a special resonance for me in my work as a teacher of children and young people with autism and learning disabilities. For the last ten years of his life Nouwen lived as a member of the *l'Arche* community in Toronto (www.larche.org). Each community consists of homes where people with disabilities and their assistants live together, sharing life in a spirit of mutuality. *l'Arche* believes that people with a learning disability *often possess qualities of welcome, wonderment, spontaneity and directness and are a living reminder to the wider world of the essential values of the heart.* Nouwen's last book, finished two weeks before his death, is entitled *Adam: God's Beloved.* It is the story of Nouwen's friendship with Adam Arnett, a young man with severe learning disabilities for whom Nouwen helped to care as a member of the Toronto community. Over time, Nouwen came to realise that, despite the mental and physical limitations of his life, Adam had an innate spiritual availability which he was willing to share with those who could be fully present to him. Nouwen wrote:

Adam was my friend, my teacher and my guide: an unusual friend because he couldn't express affection and love in the way most people do; an unusual teacher, because he couldn't think reflectively or articulate ideas or concepts; an unusual guide, because he couldn't give me any concrete direction or advice.

Nouwen describes Adam as *really there for me, listening with his whole being and offering a safe space to be.* Nouwen later reflects on his own 'disabilities', such as feelings of abandonment or despair, and comes to understand that he is essentially no different from Adam: *our poverties had touched each other.* He describes Adam as having brought him closer to God than any book, professor or spiritual director:

Adam was 'the most vulnerable person I had ever known, and at the same time the most powerful.'

Nouwen is at pains to point out that Adam was not a 'special angel' but simply one person among many others. Nouwen's record of his journey with Adam where they discover their shared humanity is honest and, ultimately, liberating.

It has also been my journey.

Shelagh Laird



Illustration from the book cover,
Sarah John