

## Having read *Falling Upward* [R.Rohr] *again*

The first half of our life is to create a container for the second half. This is prompted by the ever present question during that time: *What makes me different? Who will be with me?*

The task of the second half is to find what's in the container! The container is not an end in itself, it exists for my deeper and inner self, which I know very little about. Sadly, too many keep on repairing the container and never *cast their nets into the deep* – Jn.21.6 – to bring in the huge catch that awaits them.

We tend to spend so much blood, sweat and tears on the first half, that we seem not to be aware that there is a second half; or that there is much more quality living to do. As if: *The old wineskins are good enough!* – Lk.5.39 – even though Jesus tells us they cannot hold new wine.

The second half has new wine, and by then there *should be* new wineskins – tried and tested ways of holding our life together. This means something radical is needed with the container – it has to be allowed to die, having served its purpose well.

Various traditions have tried to express this metaphorically: *beginners and old-hands; milk and meat; letter and spirit* – Peter, when you were young... now you are old – Jn.21.18. Both halves are necessary – Grace works on nature. God has no grandchildren!

*[Have you ever gone to a family gathering and you were known as so-and-so's daughter or son? Maybe they even introduced that way. This is Aunt Sally's grandchild, people might say. Wouldn't you love to be known as one of God's children? When they see you, wouldn't it be great if because of what you say and how you act that you are clearly one of God's children? A lot of times if someone doesn't know you, they think they know you by who you hang around with or who you are related to. God wants us to listen to him and to behave in such a way that there can be no doubt that you are God's child]*

No one can do our travelling for us. If the first half is not done, we will never see why it is necessary. How sad it is to see people who never grow-up and remain self-important in old age. On the other hand, some people on the first half of the journey tend to see true elders as *not with it*. Because they can't understand what they have not yet experienced.

Those who have passed through the first half and are in the second tend to be patient in their understanding of those who are in a *not yet* experience. True immersion in the second half includes a positive first half. If they don't include the first half, they are not yet in the second.

The first half issues tend to be concerned with *identity, security and sexuality/gender*. These don't just occur, they take over. So much so, that generations are caught up with protecting these boundaries, as life's main task. In our formative lives, we are so self-preoccupied we are overtly either defensive or offensive [*or both at the same time*], leaving little room for genuine friendships. Seeing concern for the planet, for example, as a waste of time. Yet, recognising this is what we all need. *Good fences make good neighbours* – Rob. Frost; presuming we don't just build fences; we need, at times, to use gateways to takes us beyond.

We need boundaries – identity, safety, a degree of order... We also need to feel special – some successes, response, recognition... or we will spend life demanding them. I have to have an ego structure *in order to let go of it* when it has served its purpose. It has served its purpose when I feel content to be me, just as I am – the way God loves me.

In the second half, I have no need to assert, defend or prove identity. I am just as I am, and that is enough. This is often called *salvation* – it is the way God loves me, and I'm in tune.

In the first half of life, success and looking good are centre stage. Security is an issue – note the high military budgets – at the expense of education, health and care for the poor and infirm. Religions tend to make truth claims that are absolute, and that is why we want them!

We need various certitudes, insurance policies – but we must not let them takeover, and keep us from growing. Jesus was so aware of this – how many times do we hear him begin with *do not be afraid?* [365 times it occurs]. Many homilies seem never to move beyond this point, and so never challenge it.

Preoccupation with order and control, *the rules say – the I'm in charge mentality* – no wonder Jesus says: *life is more than food and drink, and the body more than clothes* – Luke 12.23. Too much defensive behaviour means too much offensive behaviour in the first half of life. See it in the urge to correct, to highlight others' mistakes, the need to grumble. Things Jesus never did.

Human behaviour is neither defensive nor offensive. *More upset comes from people taking offence than from those intending to offend.* True self is very hard to offend.

## **Steps and Stages**

There are discernible stages in human development. Abraham and Sarah, the Exodus of Moses, Jesus' four kinds of soil... all affirm that growth as direction. We can only understand the early stages from the wider perspective of the latter. Which is why societies were led by *elders*. Without them expect gang warfare and suicide bombers.

There is a symbolism between immature groups and immature leaders. Which is why democracy is not the best form of government, just the safest. Simply being old doesn't mean being wise. To have grown *in wisdom and grace* – Lk. 2.52 – needs patient and inclusive behaviour; which is why we are able to transcend and include.

Those i/c in all religions are always forgiving and inclusive [Pope Francis]. Jesus the Jew criticises his own religion the most – yet never leaves it. Mature people or never either/or, but always both/and. *No problem can be solved by the same consciousness that created it* – Einstein. God moves us forward by the regular appearance of such whole [holy] people.

From our own level of development, we can only comprehend people just a little beyond where we are; which is why those well beyond where we are appear, invariably, to be wrong, and deserving of exclusion [Inquisition]. How else explain the killing of the prophets? As well as rampant racism. Being *civilised* does not mean being truly human; Hitler loved animals and classical music!

If change and growth are not programmed into our spirituality, warnings about fear and fanaticism, our religion inevitably worships the status quo – heed Jesus' first words in his ministry: *The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent [change] and believe in the gospel* – Mk.1.15, Mt.4.17.

Sadly, his words didn't have much impact on Christian history. Resistance to change is virtually universal. Many *religious* people love the past more than the present. Most of organised religion is still in the first half of development. We receive and pass on what we are prepared to hear. Yet the animal kingdom is determined by the ability to change and adjust – those that don't become extinct. Which makes unkind such comment as: *Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you* – Mt.7.6.

## **God and religion**

We are already in union with God [*we can't get away from God*]; but it is hard to appreciate this when we have no positive sense of identity and have little depth of religious experience. This is why the first part of life is about the externals: *formulas, rituals, getting it right...* [*cf. Mt.23.13-32*] creating rules for validity and invalidity.

Good Pope John XXIII' working brief: *In essentials unity, in nonessentials freedom, and charity in all things*. A good description of the second part of life.

We can't cope with this in the first part of life, we can't cope with it. The authentic experience of God always burns but never destroys:

*There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up. Ex.3.2.*

The authentic experience of God is always too much – it only consoles our true self, after it has replaced our false self. There is no *fast-food* religion. The first part of life, so to speak, is creating a proper stable in which the Christ can be born.

Sadly, we get side-tracked, and remain fixated about who has the best stable, and never get to Christ being born within. Nowhere in the Gospels does it say that Christ must have everything *en-suite*. As life begins, that the right stable is all that matters.

## **The Journey**

Today, a hero is daring, muscular and for himself. The *classic* hero, goes the distance, whatever it takes, and has plenty left for others; this heroism serves the common good. The first instance might be a celebrity, but never heroic.

A hero/heroine must leave home, leave the familiar; something that usually doesn't happen in the first half of life. [*Today, many are in their 30's before they leave home*]. If I am intent on building my own salvation project – or religion, or house – I won't want to leave it.

Once I leave my comfort zone, my journey discovers more and more life: *The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you* – Gen.12.1;

*'If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters – yes, even their own life – such a person cannot be my disciple – Lk.14.26.*

When he called the disciples, Jesus is talking about journeys to people who are already settled, and religiously settled. He is not talking about new systems, or religious denominations. He was talking about simply being-with and sharing.

### **First Part of Life**

There isn't a human culture that doesn't value some sort of law, tradition, morality or boundaries. These provide us with the wherewithal for security, continuity, predictability and identity – ideally shared with us, rather than a do-it-yourself setup.

Without something to bounce off, something to rebel against in youth, we will never develop a healthy sense of self. We need to struggle with rules and regulations before rejecting them. My internal values need to come face-to-face with external values, if I am to develop a sense of self that realises, at times, other values better serve life, than my own very good values. For which I'm challenged – from within – to voluntarily die to self.

The early part of life is controlled mainly through impulse, tradition and family loyalties, along with a basic nod to authority. Without such a presence we end-up with a pick-and choose morality, when under pressure. This ends up badly, inevitably, when building on sand.

We can't start from zero, entirely on our own. There are plenty of mistakes we don't need to make, and some that we do! We not only need to avoid falling, but, when necessary, learn how to fall. Children are not helped by preventing them from *necessary* falling. Watch an infant learning to walk, falling-over, but always getting up again to try again.

Law and tradition seem to be necessary both to reveal and to limit. We will never flourish in a totally open field – some order is needed. Maturity happens when, instead of the need for order coming from beyond us, it emerges from within. This is the foundation for going the extra mile – and not simply settling for what is laid down.

Without laws, like the ten commandments, life would be chaotic. What if you can't rely on people to tell you the truth? Or, not steal from you? What if *I love you* between partners was allowed to mean nothing?

Without laws, life would be anarchy and chaos – which would multiply with generation after generation – Babel Gen.11.1 – note how schools today have to introduce parenting classes for pupils poorly parented. So much abuse is prevalent in people with poor relationship skills. We need limitation situations and boundaries for healthy growth.

### **Conditional and unconditional love**

Millions have signed up for one or other ideology [*Communism, fascism, terrorism, capitalism*] often in rebellion against oppressive systems. However, building on negative foundations produces a negative building. "isms" don't produce love environments.

They are mainly head theories coming from a small ego. Without Elders, history is formed by Juniors reacting, overreacting, to protect their own privileged status. There is a lesson here from the Native Americans, who insist on asking: *what would be good for the next ten generations?*

It is said [Fromm] *the healthiest people, and who grow up in the most natural way, are those who, between their two parents, and early authority figures, experienced a combination of unconditional and demanding love.*

Any law, correction is another word for conditional love. Scripture has both the conditional and the unconditional about God – like Deuteronomy and John’s Gospel. The only real biblical promise is that *unconditional love will have the last word.*

Experience shows that we do need fences to hit up against. They help us internalise our own deeper values. S Paul says *What shall we say, then? Is the law sinful? Certainly not! Nevertheless, I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, “You shall not covet”* – Rom.7.7.

### **Healthy Tension**

Many people thank hard-line figures in their upbringing – usually later in life! Many others have suffered abuse. This is where creative tension is needed, in which both law and freedom are essential. Jesus said – 7 times in a row – *The Law says... but I say...* Mt.7.21-48, in which he says *I’ve not come to abolish Law, but to bring it to completion* – Mt.7.17. Sadly, few believers actually live this – as yet. Very few have been taught *how to live* law and freedom together.

We tend to rush to judgement, demanding certitude before we tend to let things teach us. This is not the way of wisdom – but is typical of attitudes in the first part of life.

In the West we can’t build prisons fast enough, or have enough recovery groups. Why? The presumption is against law and authority. Tradition or limits have not been vote catchers since the Reformation, the Enlightenment or the rise of democracy [*all of which were necessary*]. The ego cannot be allowed to be in total charge. It would leave us victim to too many options.

### **Poor early part of life**

Misuse of Law, custom and authority has damaged human history. Most wars and genocides have been waged by unquestioning following of domineering leaders. There is a certain protection following orders, even if it leads to evil. We resist leaving our own securities. Yet the Gospel constantly asks us to leave *home, family and nets.*

*Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him*

Mk.1.16-20.

*Keep the rules and they will keep you* – was the horrendous advice often given. We must first eat the fruit of the garden, so we know the taste – and what we are missing if we stop eating it. Seeking out rules to be our guide is never the way to intimacy with God; rather does it set-up tribalism. This has us believe that by beating the *other side* we are making progress.

We end up with seeing genuine self-knowledge simply as psychology, love as feminine softness, critical thinking is disloyalty, law, ritual and *what father says* has become a substitute for divine presence and honest relationship. Spiritually speaking these are dead-ends.

### **From ego-centric world view to soul-centric**

After WWII, some Japanese communities saw that many returning soldiers were not prepared for re-entry into society. Their only id was a *loyal soldier* to their country. They needed something much wider to be good citizens.

They devised a ritual in which each soldier was publicly thanked and praised for loyal service. Then an elder would stand and announce something like: *The war is over! Your community needs you to let go of what has served you and us well, up to now. We need you to come back as a man, as something beyond a soldier.*

This is the kind of closure we all need in all the transitions in life. Because we have lost any sense of need for facing such transitions. No one shows us the stunted world view of the early part of life, and so we continue with more of the same.

In the West we are ritually starved, and so differ from most of human history. Even our Sacramental rituals are dedicated to keeping us loyal and inside the flock, and obedient to our leaders. The State also wants loyal citizens, not thinkers or critics, or members of the bigger world. No wonder there is so much depression and addiction.

Such loyalty is that of the elder son, brother of the Prodigal – Lk.15.25 - His loyalty and meritoric attitude keeps him distant from healthy celebration. What a comment of first stage religion – from

### **Jesus.**

There is a similar message in the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector – Lk.18.9, where the obedient one is shown to be in the wrong. Both these individuals are loyal supporters; what the Church tells us to be – Jesus says they both missed the point. Loyalty gets us started, teaching us to look both ways before crossing the road; to avoid addictions, to say no to self. We need such lessons to get us started – but we must not insure against losing such behaviour.

But if this critical voice, which has kept us safe thus far, is not let go, there is no room for the voice of God. Loyalty is the voice of my early authority figures – my ability to voice shame, guilt warnings and boundaries.

But isn't: *after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave* – 1Kings.19.12 – the voice of God, a voice that gives us power instead of taking our power away.

Loyalty helps us make black-and-white decisions. In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante lets go of Virgil, who had accompanied him through Hades and Purgatory – knowing that only Beatrice could lead him into Paradise. In the first half of life we fight the devil and get the illusion of winning – in the second half of life we always lose, because we are fighting God! The Ego hates losing, even to God!

There is a deeper voice, the voice of God, we need to learn to hear. It will make sounds like trust and risk – so that we have the something strong enough to contain real life, which is full of contradictions and challenges. Wholeness [*holiness*] is paradoxical, holding in proper tension, the dark and the light of life. Which, inevitably, means moving out of our comfort zone.

Letting go of my own security system can feel like exile, even a form of dying. *I said, "In the prime of my life must I go through the gates of death and be robbed of the rest of my years?"* - Is.38.10.

So I will need a new security system - *I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh* – Ezk.36.26.

All Mythologies point to places like *Hades, Sheol, Purgatory, the realm of the dead* – maybe they are not so much alternatives to heaven as *the way to get there!* Even Jesus descended into hell. The new life means instead of being ego-driven, we are soul-attracted. Jesus descended into hell and only on day three did he ascend.

God has to undo our illusions, secretly. Which has us move forward in ways we do not understand – as ever is with the working of Grace [*Mystery; You raise me up*]. *Sin happens when we refuse to keep growing.*

## **The Tragic**

Jesus and the Prophets were very much at home with the tragic in life. Life has never been a straight line. It is characterised by exceptions and disorders, rather than by perfect order. Life is both loss and gain, death and resurrection, Winter and Spring.

Faith blends with trust, so strong, that it allows us to cope with a world that has death in it. Faith includes reason, but is much greater. Faith is not just about solving problems, sorting things out; it is mainly about reconciling opposites.

Just as something having tragic consequences does not necessarily make it untrue; nor is something which pleases necessarily true. Faith embraces what logic can't hold.

Most of us were formed by believing everything had cause and effect – *if... then...!* Whereas, we are now respecting our world having loss and renewal, even violence – continually breaking the rules of reason – something larger than logic. Nature is more disorder than order, with multiplicity rather than uniformity – the greatest example is death.

Nature is far more disorder than order – more diversity than uniformity. We learn far more from the exceptions than by trying to make everything fit. People who are on the edge of what is called *normal* have much more to teach us than the normal.

Jesus had no trouble with exceptions – he sought their company, lived and dined with them – no tradesman's entrances for him. Sadly, we and the Church too prefer answers to problems. Jesus is never a *one-size-fits-all* person.

Every time God forgives, God is saying God's rules don't matter as much as the relationship God wants with us. *Franciscan thinking* says this specific individual person or thing, is always God's work and cherished in its uniqueness, its oneness, not its uniformity, which delights science but never faith.

The story of the universe and our human story are the interplay of the rational and non-rational, the conscious and unconscious, nature and nurture. Forces of good and evil play-out their graces and tragedies, bringing tragedies, mistakes and failures; which, in some way, is meant to lead us forward, usually in humility. Kings and Presidents, Popes and Clerics are not noted for apologising [*pace Pope Francis*].

The Gospel accepts the tragedy of life, but it is Good News because it shows us how we can actually grow. As Jung said: *where you stumble and fall, there you find pure gold*. Gospel faith includes the problem as part of the solution; it forgives failure and integrates falling to reach wholeness.

Jesus is never upset by sinners – only with those who do not think they are sinners! Jesus' ability to find a higher order inside constant disorder, is the heart of his teaching. This is why the living Gospel heals and renews whatever it touches. *Religion is about getting you back into the unified field, where you first started!*

## **The Turning Around**

In the reality of Grace, sin and failure become the raw material for the experience of redemption. How few seem to live this – settling for the negative sin-centred ways. *I know God is love and forgiving – but I'm not worthy!* I know it – but do believe it into a living *experience*? *Organised* religion is not noted for being inclusive, or being at home in diversity. And yet a pluriform world is the only world there is.

Sin and salvation correlate. Salvation is not sin bypassed. Salvation is sin turned upside down and used for our benefit. The same passion that leads us away from God, can lead us back – to discover our true selves.

So many lesser loves are steps to Love. Note what Jesus says to the woman condemned of adultery: *her sins, her many sins, must have been forgiven, or she could not show such love* – Lk.7.47. It seems her former attempts at love have become stepping stones to *such great love*.

Sadly, the Sacrament of Reconciliation has become a work of *sin-management* instead of *sin-transformation*. We blame the victim – all the while worshipping through a victim image of God. We have not taken to heart: *the unclean spirit returned to a house well-swept and clean, the last state becomes worse than the first* – Lk.11.24. We do not carry the cross, but are expert in forcing our cross on others.

Scripture offers no thoughts that are always true – we have four Gospels that appear not to be in sync. Yet, somehow, God is with us, we are never alone. God's job description is one of constant forgiveness.



Living in time, connected to the past and future, prepares us for necessary suffering, by offering us a way through. The tragic in life is not unbelief, pessimism or cynicism – it is simply reality; which calls for a lot of forgiveness. Faith is trusting reality [*not our version of it*] which comes from God, and must, therefore, have goodness in it.

## Stumbling

*God is both sanctuary and stumbling stone...*

Is.8.14.

*We would rather be ruined than changed –*

Auden.

Sooner or later an event happens to all of us which we can't cope with – a death, a severed relationship... and we stumble and flounder; as we cope with loss. This is the small pathway, the narrow gateway, through which Grace suggests a radical change. *Lord grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change...*

There is no practical reason for leaving my comfort zone – unless I simply have to! The invitation has to be unexpected, else I'm still in charge; and I will see only what I expect to see. Failure forces me to look elsewhere. Which involves stumbling and falling under the unfamiliar. See Paul on Damascus Road, where he hears: *why are you kicking against the goad?* – Acts.26.14.

Paradoxically, we don't find something until we lose it and miss it [*it has become real*]. Failing, losing, is the pattern of our everyday lot – yet they lead us home! [*Grace reconciles opposites*]. In this way we don't recover what was lost, but discover a new self in the process. S Francis in his youth was king of fashion and all good things, a spendthrift – until he realised that all was gift, and fell in love with the Giver, and didn't need the gifts, for which he was ever grateful.

This experience Jesus calls *living water* – Jn.4.10. For him, crucifixion was that absurd but necessary symbol. Jesus must be crucified, not just die, or there is no resurrection. We need to taste our own insufficiency and discover a larger source that is infinitely more than sufficient. S Francis learned not to kick against the goad [*the leper*] but to embrace and kiss it. The first part of life is to help us become aware of this – and freely welcome liberating grace [*not simply good luck*] – truly is it: *there, but for the grace of God!*

## Necessary Suffering

So much suffering comes into the world mainly because *legitimate suffering* is not accepted. Church membership, doctrine and morality often bring us to boiling point. Before the truth sets me free it often makes me miserable. To be critical of organised religion from within, not through culture and rationalising, is legitimate and healthy. We need to be inside to unlock, and not outside hurling stones!

The great lesson needing to be learned is that we are not wholeheartedly living the Good News. If we were, there would be much more and obvious change. The Church is only one and true when it points beyond itself, to the one, true Mystery, with its universal invitation.

### **Creation is Groaning** – Rom.8.22.

Creation itself, the world of nature, already believes and lives the Gospel pattern of death and resurrection unknowingly. *Nature believes in necessary suffering* as its life-cycle – the dying of the sun so all things can live, the changing seasons; the plants and trees, along with the violent animal world of predators and prey. Only the human absents itself from the dance of life and death.

Necessary suffering is part of the daily round, and, seemingly, without question. Nature accepts loss and inefficiency, short life span as the price for life.

This creative tension between wonderful and terrible has been immortalised by Hopkins:

*A beacon, an eternal beam. Flesh fade, and mortal trash  
Fall to the residuary worm; world's wildfire,  
leave but ash: In a flash, at a trumpet crash, I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am,  
and This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond, Is immortal diamond.*

There are only two subjects in literature and poetry – *love and death*. Only what is limited and dies, grows in value. If we lived forever, it is said, we would never take life seriously, or learn to love what is. Reality, creation, nature [*what has been called the first body of Christ*] has no choice re necessary suffering. It holds and resolves all foundational energies within itself.

The *second body of Christ*, the Church, unlike the first, has the freedom to say yes or no. Most of the time, especially regards dying, failing to admit mistakes, it has been no. Seen in the sexual and financial scandals. Yet, God is willing to wait for and empower free will, allowing a free yes. Love only happens in the realm of freedom.

We avoid daily dying – but the Church enlightens us re death and resurrection – belonging together; offering us a supportive community. Like any parent, the Church has taught us to see universal goodness – originating from and leading to *only God is good* – as Jesus told us.

In a sense, the Church is the first cross Jesus was crucified on, as we manage and mangle its message; our inability to receive his *whole* body – simultaneously dead and very much alive. The Church has never persecuted me. The Gospel is my wedding partner, telling me the truth, loving me through things, till I arrive at somewhere good, open and welcoming.

### **Hating Family**

Jesus' words... surely he can't be serious? Is he undoing the fourth commandment of Moses – *honour your father and mother!* This commandment is necessary for the first part of our lives, and possibly forever. As we grow/mature, we are often at odds with family and what culture expects from us. Even Jesus' family thought he was crazy – Mk.3.21.

What passes for morality/spirituality is the way everybody we grew-up with, thinks. Without real determination, most of us never move beyond. We might react negatively, rebelling against it – but not many react positively. *Jesus is trying to push us out of the family nest.* It takes a big push, and

considerable doubt to have us flex our wings, to fly into the unknown. To move beyond family of origin and local church, is a path not well-worn. If this step is not taken, home eventually leaves us!

Great religious leaders leave home, set out on pilgrimage – see Jesus' life, Francis and Clare... We are being urged to leave home *in order to find it*.

Does this apply to the family called Church? Jesus speaks of necessary suffering as *losing life in order to find it*. In early life, we establish a self we believe to be real. This is a self-constructed me – but the real me is what my Creator envisaged in loving me into existence. I need to *discover the face I had before I was born*. God never began to love me – there is no beginning in God! So, who was God loving before I was born? What is the face I had before I was born?

For my spiritual life to have meaning it has to address this. Listening to conversion stories consistently shows a golden thread – *being told* what this is will never suffice, I need *to experience* something. Francis says this is the area of the Spirit active within us. To become a lover of the one who has always loved me – without any beginning – I need to start from me where I am, to notice a deep down hunger, to let it surface until becomes what I desire with all my heart.

We are created to be lovers – not just to be kind – but to relate as equals eager to celebrate the difference we make; this is the mature childhood we are challenged to grow into. The infantile world is hierarchic and we spend most of our lives in there. Church structure is hierarchic for the most part – authority and obedience are more to the fore than equality through love. Not that this structure is loveless, but it operates within safety zones, with little room for risk or adventure – essentials for love among equals. We are discovered by love when we experience an equal who is in no way the same.

Sounds good – but does this cause problems? By definition God cannot have an equal! Does this mean there cannot be love between us, as God cannot find an equal? God can be kind, compassionate – but cannot love! It seems that we are confined to an infantile experience of God – an authority/obedience experience. There's no one God can abandon self to as an equal. However, kind and benign God might be – are we destined for master servant belonging.

Modern atheism rejects God, not because God is contrary to human well-being – but is against human freedom – I am forever a creature. *This is the God rejected by the Old Testament and then by Jesus*. The most revealing statement Jesus made is – *the Father loves me!* Indeed, his identity is precisely that – the beloved of Abba! God cannot love a creature as such because of the built-in inequality. When Jesus, truly man, says the Father loves him he is revealing a reality in him beyond creaturehood. To say that the Father loves him is to say he is divine.

But where does this leave us? S John tells us: to all who believe, he gives power to know God as Abba – as an equal. Christ rose from the dead not as an individual human being – but as the new humanity. Whoever accepts oneness with him through believing is taken up into his one identity – truly man and truly God – no half measures.

We are no longer creature/Creator, but the beloved of Abba – his by nature ours by Grace. We are given equality through the common humanity we share with Jesus. Without this equality we would remain under law – obeying the Master's excellent rules that promote human flourishing – forever servants of the Master: ...and by him we cry Abba/Father... *now if we are children we are also heirs, heirs of God, co-heirs with Christ; if we share his suffering we also share his glory...* Rom.8.14.

## Home

Life is meant to lead us upward into increasing intimacy with the reason we were created, to return home – I was created without my consent in order to return willingly with my yes. Somehow the end of my life is in the beginning. There is the drive to leave the nest, and discover what a fuller life can offer – at the same time, there is ever the desire to return home. Implanted within us is the desire for what God desires to give us.

It is a pity that we use the term *homesick* in a negative way – something sad or nostalgic. We are actually *sent* and *drawn* by the same force [*Cosmic Christ alpha/omega*]. What appears to be *past* and *future* is the same home. As Ps.90 says: *a thousand years are like a single day; a single day like a thousand years.*

To be aware of this is to know the activity of the Spirit within. The Spirit keeps us safe wherever life takes us, with the assurance we are going home; *Thou hast made us for thyself, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee* – Augustine.

The experience of this longing is what we understand by soul. We are created with soul – we don't receive it by any religious process, or from the bishop. Our end is already in our beginning, and it makes itself felt as longing, until we get there. All the bishop can do: *For this reason, I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands* – 2Tim.1.6.

The Good News tells us: *hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us* – Rom.5.5. We are reassured:

*I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you –*  
Jn.14.18.

It is the mission of the Spirit to lead me from home, where I was created without my consent, out to experience life leading me back home, with my consent – delighted to be me, for you! The Holy Spirit is more for you than you are for yourself. This is what hope means – I don't have to do life on my own, or even to make sure I've got it right. Life will be *done to us*, as it was to Mary – we share the same Spirit.

Living in our modern times means discovering how the sciences are confirming many of religion's deep intuitions. That the universe is shot through with spirit. This has many names – *evolution, DNA, hardwiring* – all of which are ways Nature is renewing itself, from within. God seems to have created things that continue to create and recreate themselves from within. It is not a one-time Creation.

*Life has given you the beautiful voyage / Without her, you would never have ventured out / With the wisdom you have gained on your journey / With so much experience now / You finally know what life means –*  
From Egyptian Poetry.

## Amnesia plus...

*It is the whole of nature, from the beginning to the end, that is the image of God – who is.*  
Greg. Nyssa

Life is becoming who we already are; a self we do not know! It is the task of religion to guide us in this. However, it usually makes the mistake of turning us into a worthiness contest – *Lord, I'm not worthy...* through belonging to the right group, practising the same rituals, believing in the right things. All these have a purpose; they are *means* never ends. Peter warns us: never to confuse these with our *ability to share the divine nature* – 2Pet.1.4.

*I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth –*  
1Jn.2.21.

Wordsworth expresses it:

*Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting; / The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star, / Hath had elsewhere its setting / And cometh from afar; / Not in entire forgetfulness, / and not in utter nakedness, / But trailing clouds of glory do we come / From God, who is our home: / Heaven lies about us in our infancy! / Shades of the prison-house begin to close upon the growing Boy, / But he beholds the light, and whence it flows, / he sees it in his joy.*

Mature religion is ever trying to liberate me from the prison cell of my false self. Spirituality is more about unlearning than learning: *I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven* – Mt.18.3. Jesus said this in response to the ambitious apostles – asking *who is the greatest?*

Our faith is built on the faith of the apostles – yet they hardly ever get the point on Jesus' teaching; God uses them because, like us, they were little children. We are all beginners when seeking Truth.

## Heaven and Hell

Any discovery of our union with God, is called *heaven* in most religious traditions. Its loss is called *hell*. When I don't know who I really am, I push enlightenment into a possible future reward-and-punishment system, where anyone hardly ever wins.

The yardstick for owning my true self is awareness that heaven is now, and its loss is hell – now! False religion says life is an evacuation plan for the next world. Living truly in the *now* of life is Kingdom living; but only when we let-go our smaller kingdoms! Heaven is *realised intimacy* with God now and hereafter.

Everyone is in heaven when we have plenty of room for communion, and no need for exclusion. The greater the desire for inclusion, the more intense my heaven. Was Jesus referring to this: *In my Father's house there are many rooms* – Jn.14.2. The more we exclude, the more hellish and lonely is existence – now.

How can anyone enjoy perfect happiness [*heaven*] knowing that loved ones are not there? Remember, our prayer is *on earth as it is in heaven!* If I accept a punitive notion of God [*sending to hell*] then the

universe is absurd where most people end up being more loving than God. God does not, cannot exclude – but misusing our freedom, allows us to exclude. This is hell.

Logic says this has to be a possibility – no one is in hell unless by individual free choice. The Church has never declared a single person to be in hell. Jesus healed anybody desiring it – no *terms and conditions apply*. Why would Jesus' love be unconditional while he was in this world, and become conditional post resurrection? *Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children* – Eph.5.1.

Life moves towards diversity on its way to unity. My selfish self prefers a life of merit in a world of winners and losers, to a life of Grace, where worth and merit lose all meaning [*Lord, I'm not worthy!!!*].

### **Keep it Simple in a New Way**

I started life predictably, pre-Vatican II; reasonably law-abiding; supported in a stable family; accepting liturgical traditions – and I was content. Then I grew in experience and education, became aware of and attracted by what I understood to be Franciscan, and left the nest [*Garden*]. There was no going back, even though life was easier as a child.

Gradually, I became aware of a bigger garden, as predicted in Rev.21.1 - *Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away*. I found myself living without a country, yet at home wherever I found myself.

God became bigger – loving unconditionally, without any exclusions. *Out of many one*, gradually became real – everything owes its origin to the one God, so that everything already belongs.

*"We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Saviour of the world."* – Jn.4.42 – so that *everything that rises must converge* –  
Chardin.

If we are created in the image and likeness of God, then whatever good, true and beautiful things we experience in our world – we are seeing what God sees.

### **Anxiety – Doubt**

Religious belief is a vote for some purpose and direction in the universe. Faith *in any religion* is saying somehow that God is one, and God is good, if so, then all reality must be that simple and beautiful. It is healthy to carry some anxiety/doubt [*like Thomas or Mother Teresa*]. People who are certain protest too much, are trying too hard. To hold the full mystery of life is to endure its other half – death and doubt. To hold anything fully is to hold that part of it which is still mystery and unknowable. I am still a mystery to myself!

In early life, we do not have enough experience of wholeness to include all of its parts yet. The enthusiasm for life and more life in the early years is hard to let go – unless we are aware that there is something more and deeper ahead, a tested happiness. We need elders to tell us of this, *those who are already there*.

Wisdom lives happily with mystery, doubt and unknowing. Yet it is true that unknowing is a form of knowing. As Eliot puts it: *We had the experience but missed the meaning. And approach to the meaning restores the experience in a different form, beyond any meaning we can assign to happiness.*

In the second part of life, we are not *demanding* our right to *the pursuit of happiness*, or that others must have the same experiences. We are creators of meaning, and finding meaning in our experiences is the shape of happiness and contentment. If I succeed in forgiving myself for being imperfect and failing – I can now do it for everybody else. If I haven't – I will pass-on my sadness and judgemental attitude.

## Happy Sadness

*Happy sadness* surfaces in the latter years of life. There is still darkness – but now with a capacity to hold it creatively, with less anxiety. There is less need to entertain the negative, rushing into judgement and to blame others. Genuine living requires prayerful discernment – not knee-jerk reactions. There are new responses now – none of them predictable. Law is still important, but is not our guiding star, not even close. It has been wrong too many times.

Now – the Beatitudes speak louder than the 10 Commandments. Yet, we never find monuments to the Beatitudes outside the Law Courts, as we do with the 10. The Beatitudes are not much use for any war or consumer situations. Courts of law are necessary for the first part of life's institutions. Later, it is the desire to influence change, *having experienced change myself*.

The change – I don't have to stand-out, or be better than anyone else. Life is now more sharing than being the Lone Ranger. Identity is no longer a problem, God has seen to that. Peace and light now comes from within. I don't have to prove anything – I no longer *deserve*. I *desire* to pay-back to the world for all it has given me, realising that from my very beginning, I have been given-to. God is no longer tribal.

*You were with me, and I was not with you. The lovely things kept me far from you, though if they did not have their existence in you, they had no existence at all. You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness.*

Augustine

*But it does not matter much, because no despair of ours can alter the reality of things; or stain the joy of the cosmic dance which is always there.*

Merton

In the latter part of life, we will not have strong opinions, as we allow reality to sadden and delight us. Because we no longer need to change others for us to be content, we are ever more likely to change people – though we do not need to! We have moved from *doing into* being.

This is human life at its best. Human integrity influences more than anything else. But it is a heavy load, even though no other way of life makes sense in my desire to be fully alive. Gone forever is the divide between what I do and who I am. There is no longer need to impress. Note this change in grandparents who now find delight in simply being with their grandchildren - and others. Such is the enfleshed humanity of God – Jesus the Christ.

## Shadowlands

*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it –*  
Jn.1.5.

But there is also darkness. I am now realising that the face I have so long presented, though not bad or evil – simply isn't true; it has been manufactured by me, with good intent – but is not the face I had before I was born. My shadow side is what I have refused to see about myself and kept others from seeing. Status has served me thus far – but now is dying:

*if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness! –*  
Mt.6.23.

I need to become aware that *my self-image* is no more than that! In a matter of seconds, I can create a self-justifying scenario of blame and hurt. Jesus says – *don't go there!* My self-image is not lasting – it issues from my mind and my desiring – and only succeed in hiding my life as belonging entirely in God, as in Col.3.3.

Dealing with my shadow side is humbling – not necessarily humiliating. I need to reach the stage where I am no longer surprised by my surprises, nor humiliated by my humiliations. My shadow reveals a great deal of half-heartedness – prevarications and deceit. We have become masters of denial. My shadow side breeds hypocrisy [*playing a role rather than being real*]. Generally speaking, everybody else can see my shadow – I need to learn what everybody else knows – except me!

A *whole* person has no "I" to defend; his/her "I" is one with the I AM of God, which overrules any need for self-hatred. Such a person has no need *to be right*; content to be in right relationship. Love holds tightly. Such a person knows that the major enemy is *me* ... This is not to despise my *me*, but to see beyond it. It is natural, coming closer to the Light, to see more and more of my shadow. This makes truly whole [*holý*] people, humble. Sin and shadow are not the same.

Missing this point has cost much effort in avoiding sin, when it is the shadow side that requires attention: *even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light – 2Cor.11.14*. Reluctant to see evil in my *persona* [*identity*], I disguise it as good. *I'm only doing this for your benefit!* The name *Lucifer* means *light bearer!* Evil always makes darkness look like light, and light like darkness. Signs of the shadow-side surfacing: any over-the-top reactions or denials, and hear the cock-crow, like Peter!

Grace lets us see that:

*Life is Grace, it is freely given without charge or mortgage and it is there to be enjoyed. This is Jesus' mission to urge us and to make it possible for us to live well, to enjoy the journey... from such limited living will eternal life emerge. Life leads us to God, and the quality of living provides intimacy with God throughout the journey. We can anticipate the arrival with all the enthusiasm proper to eager travellers.*

Once faced, my real hidden self leaves nothing to be anxious about – because I'm now not afraid of being seen as I really am – no need to hide my nakedness.



## Depression – Sadness

There will always be some degree of sadness – but it now is a *happy-sadness*, no longer a mysterious inner anger!

This is different from depression: many depressed people refuse to take risks, never move outside their comfort zone or face-up to *necessary suffering*; so, their subconscious knows they have never lived – or loved! *First there is the fall, then we recover from the fall. Both are the mercy of God* – Julian.

## Something New

*Learn and obey the rules very well, so you will know how to break them properly* –  
Dalai Lama

As we move into the second part of life, the world grows larger – but the circle of really close friends gets smaller, but more intimate

Institutions are concerned with membership, policies and procedures for hiring and firing... These are *ego* needs, not *soul* needs. When problems arise, the tendency is: *In the real world... The bottom line is...* such statements avoid the Gospel by side-lining soul-wisdom. – which is seldom practical and efficient. The bottom line of the Gospel is that we must first die to self in order to rise to genuine human vitality.

There is need for a healthy tension between ego and soul. We have to eat and drink, find housing and clothing – we also have to ask *why!* Am I to plough my own furrow, or is there something *beyond* – something that I long for *with all my heart?*

Impatience results when we see our ego needs as *ends*, rather than *means*. Soul wisdom opens us to the reality of the beyond – that we die in order to live. The knock-on effect of missing this, is that we settle for being *churchified*; settling solely for the system.

Rules are only valid when they serve life, not themselves. Note how much energy and attention is making sure we toe the line in liturgical matters. Advocating a return to Latin [*which Jesus never spoke; and was the language of the oppressors*] while the world is facing unparalleled disasters.

Ego, and most institutions demands tit-for-tat values; whereas the soul swims in the sea of abundance, with room for everyone. Grace and freedom cannot always be organised. *You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot* – Mt.5.13.

Soul values are yeast and salt to grow groups up – and Jesus does not ask us to be the whole meal, but the quiet presence that makes the kingdom real. This is why all institutions need people who have moved from the first aspect of life, which was largely and rightly, self-focused – just two-or-three will be enough to keep us from being totally self-focused.

Without such folk – even two-or-three – the poor and deprived have no chance. This is what Jesus meant by carrying the cross – for others.

## Loneliness and Solitude

There is a loneliness when you say *yes* and everybody else says *no!* A reminder to be ready when old groups and friendships, even Church no longer speak to you in the way they used to. But this is helped when I discover a new ability to be alone and to be happy! The cure for loneliness is solitude. Once this is *experienced*, it brings oneness with all that shares reality with you; is somehow present and not just past.

As life moves forward, we need opportunities to unpack all that has been given us. As Jesus went away, just to be still and know. Life stimulates, but it needs to be processed; and little things that have happened start to become significant. Silence is the only language big enough to include everything – nothing is lost.

There was a time when poets like Hopkins, Eliot and Lady Julian were just names for me, but now speak and attract more than my contemporaries. This emerging reality/Church is not something I join or invent, it has always been there – now I'm becoming aware of it. Every group of oppressed people has to learn different levels of belonging to survive.

What is happening is a moving away from dualistic thinking, into *both-and-thinking*. This is not an over-night happening, it emerges gradually as we realise we can integrate the negative from what we used to exclude. – or, as Jesus put it: *forgive enemies* both within and without. I no longer need to divide into right and wrong, good or bad, for or against... It just *is*. What is happening is that my too small and petty self is making way for God to get through to me.

The dualistic mind *compares and competes, condemns and crucifies...* It is the source of violence needed to protect democracy. Whereas *non-dualistic* thinking, which is usually side-lined in the early days of life for the sake of setting boundaries and exclusions. Such thinking is OK for the quick-fix mentality common in youth, but proves increasingly unhelpful for real life situations.

Sadly, we become so attached to such thinking, that it becomes a sorry substitute for objective truth, when we don't see things as they are. The negative, the mysterious, the problematic are off-loaded elsewhere – to allow for ready-made answers.

All this usually re-visits as life progresses, now as a friend and teacher. *Doers* become *thinkers, feelers* become *doers, thinkers* become *doers...* We all move forward to places we have regularly avoided for many years – and begin to understand why Jesus welcomed the *outsiders*.

Non-dualistic thinking presumes we have first mastered dualistic thinking, and found it insufficient for really big issues – love, suffering, death, and God and any notion of infinity. So, we need both. Truth must teach us on its own terms, and doesn't thrive in dualism.

Initially, we can't manage the imperfect, nor the tragic in life; which means there is no loving in-depth loving. Where *either-or* dominates, change is unlikely. Such thinking traps us in information; dealing with facts by agreeing or disagreeing – *I'm right... you are wrong...*

Isaiah describes wisdom: *The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him — the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord - 11.2.* Paul teaches: *To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the*

*utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit - 1Cor.12.8-9.*

Wisdom seeks to change the seer first, and then what is seen will take care of what is seen. Wise people see the unified whole – not just the parts.

### **Falling Upward**

Too many people see the second half of life simply for dealing with health issues and letting go of physical living. However, such falling can become falling-upwards, into a world where the soul finds its completion, and thrives through living with the big picture.

This is gain, not loss. If we meet one, true elder, we see how true this is. Such radiant people, in their human fullness, are common. And they have reached this state against the odds, and with not a little suffering: *Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them – Jn.7.38.*

Great people come to serve, not wait to be served. The 12<sup>th</sup> step in the Program *Until, and unless you give your life away to others, you do not seem to have it yourself in depth.* Good parents show this.

Many have loved me for who I wasn't – as well as many who rejected me for the same reason. By contrast, many have loved me for who I really was – with a love that redeemed me. Many have rejected for the same reason, pointing-up my shadow side. Yet, this said more about them than about me.

Beauty and goodness are truly in the eye of the beholder. Good people will mirror our goodness, which is why we love them. Just as not-so-mature people mirror confusion, and are hard to love. It is those people who respond to the *real* me – good or bad – who truly help me on my life-journey. Help by mirroring the real me back to me.

The important question is always – *is it true?* – not *who said it, was it the Bible, or the Pope?* Tough or otherwise, the real question remains – *is it true?* Hopefully, we have, at least, one friend who says or reflects it as it truly is.

S Clare [1194-1253] used the mirror as such a friend to reflect her spiritual life: *Sit before the mirror and let light mirror you.* She knew that spiritual gifts are always reflected gifts. Jesus tells us *the lamp of the body is the eye, if you are healthy, your whole body will be filled with light – Mt.6.22.* It takes a life-time to see well and truthfully, because the ecstatic mirroring of youth needs the honest mirroring of life-lived, to prepare me for the totally compassionate Divine mirror.

God is fully aware of our frequent stumbling and falling – and while they feel catastrophic, it is *business as usual* for God, who says to us: *let's see how we can see the goodness hidden there.* Failure and suffering are great equalisers. Commitment flourishes through suffering – see it present in bereavement. There is a wonderful communion in human pain, in fact much more so than in joy. Unlike transient joy – whereas pain/suffering are long-lasting.

Gospel genius combines problem and solution together – no exclusion; and then dying becomes rising. My small self can't easily see this, being caught up heavily in tragedy. So much so, that sadly, so many young, put an end to such painful living.

The gaze of God receives us exactly as we are, without any suggestion of judgement or bias. It is this perfect receiving that transforms us – being received and welcomed exactly as we are; it is for us simply to receive and return the gaze. Prayer anticipates this.