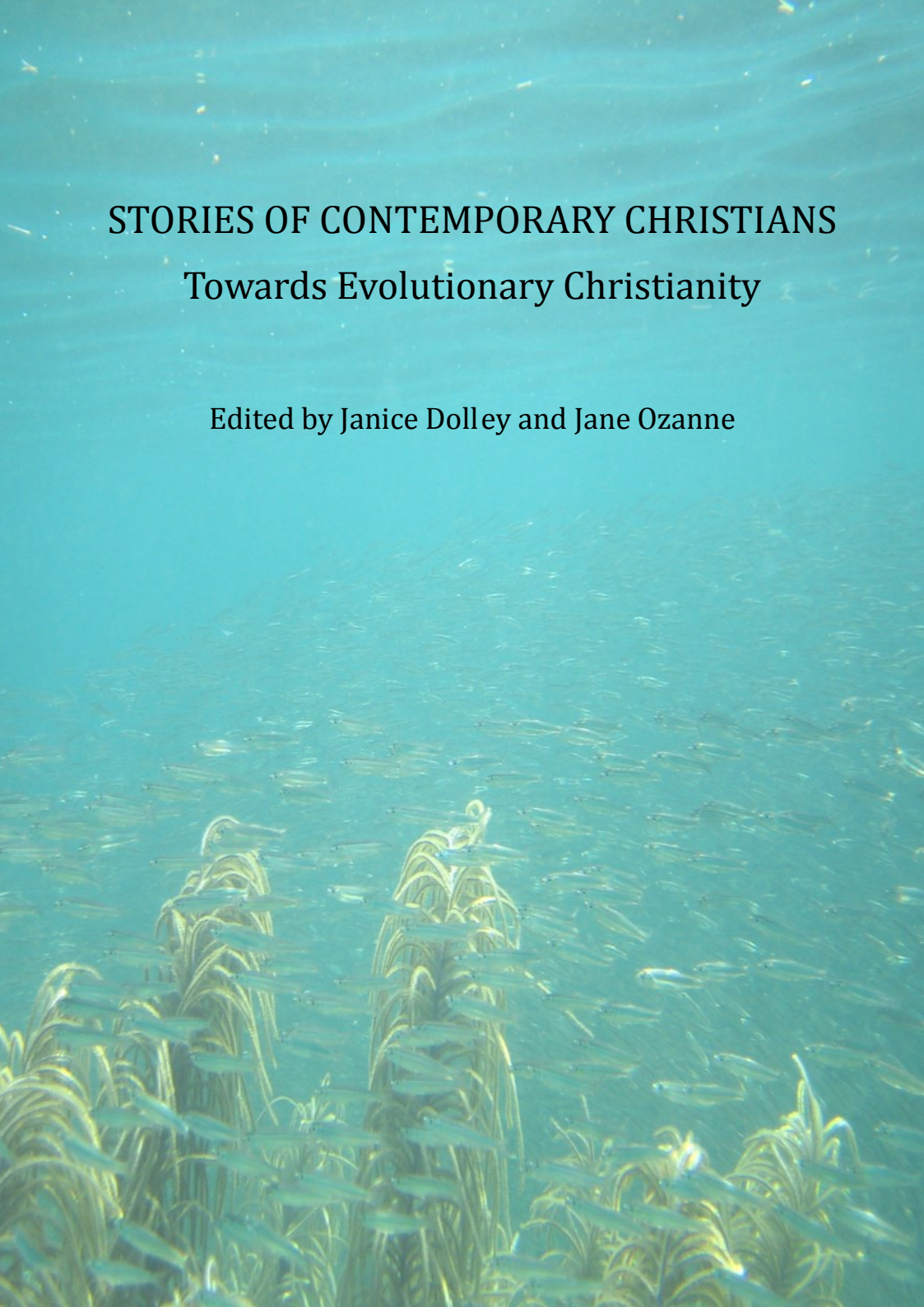


The background of the entire page is an underwater photograph. It shows a vast school of small, silvery fish swimming in clear, turquoise water. In the lower foreground, there are several clumps of green seagrass or similar aquatic plants. The lighting is bright, suggesting sunlight filtering down from the surface.

STORIES OF CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANS

Towards Evolutionary Christianity

Edited by Janice Dolley and Jane Ozanne

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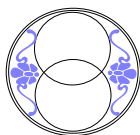
Towards Evolutionary Christianity

edited by Janice Dolley and Jane Ozanne

stories contributed by members of
Christians Awakening to a New Awareness (CANA)

This book has been updated and abridged from the
original book: **AWAKENING TO A NEW AWARENESS:**
Stories of Contemporary Christians
published by CANA in 2006

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Design and layout by Celia Storey

FOREWORD

The contributors to this book are mainly members of CANA and we are very grateful for their generosity in writing so freely of their spiritual journeys. We hope that you will find their stories interesting and inspiring and that they will encourage you in your own journey.

We have included some sections which address the emerging new awareness and highlight the themes arising out of the stories.

AUTHORS' NOTE

Where quotations from other publications are used we have referenced these where possible and retained the original language, even though in some places it may be outdated.

INTRODUCTION

Religion is concerned with the deepest aspirations of the human race; it touches the deepest levels of the human heart. But in doing this it evolves particular methods of teaching, worshipping, guiding and helping which bear the imprint of a particular society and culture. There can come a time when these methods, these outward forms, no longer answer the deepest needs of humanity.

Cyprian Smith: The Way Of Paradox

This publication is an historical documentation of the insights and struggles of people in our time to break free from the constraints of conventional religion to find the fresh air of an authentic new spirituality. It has arisen from the questioning and exploring that we are engaged in within CANA, one of the many organisations now springing up from ‘those who have fled to the margins’, from which Sr Wendy Beckett says future Christianity will generate itself. We say in CANA that ‘our collective journey has no set goal: the essential nature of our journey is one of continuing exploration in which everyone’s contribution is valued as part of the whole and none is dispensable’. This publication is part of this continuing exploration.

Whilst those in CANA are *Christians* awakening to a new awareness, this awakening is not just happening within Christianity but is part of a global phenomenon affecting all aspects of society, including politics, science, medicine, economics, business, agriculture and education. Indeed we are challenged to find new expressions of an emerging vision that is global, ecological and mystical.

This new awareness is multi-faceted and multi-layered but key aspects of it which are important to Christians are:

- an orientation towards direct personal experience of the

Divine;

- a sense of inner knowing/intuition;
- less reliance on mediators between humankind and the Divine;
- the importance of exploration;
- a spirituality which effects the whole of life; the appreciation of each person's contribution to the whole.

To understand how this translates into daily life we invited members of CANA to write about the way their journeys have evolved and how they made a transition from an outwardly-orientated Christian belief to a more inwardly-directed understanding. We asked contributors to focus more on their own experience rather than produce an intellectual analysis. One reason for this was that we wanted to show that those who have 'fled to the margins' of the institutional Church have not abandoned faith but have come to a different understanding of it, recognising that its essence is universal.

Biography itself is an important way of arriving at theological and spiritual insight. Diana Greene writes, *"Biography is inherently theological, [that] by virtue of the Incarnation every life contains the news of the gospel, [that] each one of us is a parable"*. Drawing on the insight of journalist Kenneth Woodward, she further suggests that biography can be a form of primary theology, each life transformed through faith can be an example of ongoing revelation. Biography is particularly important at this time when the former structures of meaning are breaking open; it creates a context which can provide meaning. Many are discovering the importance of hearing the stories of others and telling their own, as a tool of spiritual growth. So, we are especially grateful to our contributors who have responded with openness and generosity. Each is contributing to the developing new awareness for it is not a set path that lies ahead of us but a

call to explore more deeply the mysteries of life.

In CANA we have found that many people have not felt nourished within their local parishes and find an increasing difference between the official teachings of the Church and how they experience their faith on a daily basis. We recognise that many changes are taking place within the Church and within the evolving lay movements growing up within and alongside. However, large established institutions, like the Church, find it difficult to change at the pace necessary and are sometimes subject to vested interests which slow down or try to prevent change.

The Jesuit priest Hugo Enomiya-Lassalle, writing in the 1980's highlighted this:

Evolution presses on toward the increasing perfection of man, which should be understood in anthropological and not in a moral sense. This process never reverses itself, and we are not even asked if we want what is coming. It just happens, and religions, too, must honour this. They must join with it and re-orient themselves toward it. When a religion fails to allow this, it will not survive, even though it may vegetate for a while longer with a few adherents.

The thrust for this change is impelling us forward from within. The choice we have is to move with it or hold fast until the old forms inevitably crumble. New horizons call us to journey forward. As this priest and Zen master goes on to say:

With the new consciousness, man will become a mystic. The new man will stand on a higher step... This step will have a significance in human development second only from the evolution from animal to man.

A similar point was made by the Catholic theologian Karl

Rahner, who states in *The Practice of Faith*, “*The Christian of the future will be a mystic or he or she will not exist at all*”.

French Jesuit, biologist and visionary, Teilhard de Chardin whose work is becoming increasingly influential, postulates: “*There is for us in the future not only survival but super-life*”. This will come about when humankind evolves into living reflectively and discovers the essence of the Divine creative force: “*Some day after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity we shall harness for God the energies of love, and then, for a second time in the history of the world, man will have discovered fire*”.

There has recently been a proliferation of books by those who observe and comment on the process of the new awakening and the forms that this is taking. Some of these are listed in the booklist. This publication illustrates what these writers are saying by providing authentic accounts of what people have been experiencing in their daily lives. Collectively these are adding up to what contemporary writers see as a grass-roots spiritual revolution.

The winds of change are blowing through all established institutions, including the Church. The institutional Church has so much to offer a needy world. Unless it embraces more fully some of the changing dynamic that is under way it will be unable to nourish its own members let alone continue to be a source of love, healing and reconciliation in the world.

In the next section we will attempt to draw out some of the features of the new awareness, which most impinge upon CANA. This will be followed by accounts of people’s journeys into new understandings. Subsequent sections will look at common themes emerging from the stories, develop the characteristics of the new awareness and point to some resources for those following a similar path.

CANA AND THE NEW AWARENESS

There seems to be a new awareness that is rising spontaneously from within individual contemporary minds and hearts, sometimes in isolated situations and sometimes in relationship. Collectively, this can be seen as a “*Spontaneous movement in society, a new interest in the reality of spirit and its healing effects on life, health, community and well-being*” (Tacey).

CANA is part of this movement. It is a ‘*network of people sounding the note of a newly emerging consciousness. We support each other on our journeys of spiritual awakening, together creating vision for this new century*’.

What then is the place of religion? *Religio* – to bind back – refers to the way humanity “*connects with the absolute principle and focus of all that exists*” (Selovier) and is a way of giving shape and form to this connection. CANA is linked with religion and has been working with the Celtic principle of ‘both-and’ rather than the presently pervading principle of ‘either-or’.

The symbol which CANA chooses to use is the *vesica piscis* or ‘mandorla’ of overlapping circles, with the shape of a fish holding the connection between the two. One interpretation of this symbol is that it represents each of us as being “*a child of the earth and of the starry heavens*” (Lindsay Clarke) and that our role is to be an intermediary bringing heaven onto earth. This symbol can also refer to the union of all opposites – light and dark, good and evil, masculine-feminine, the secular and the sacred.

Of particular relevance here is another union – that of freedom and order. We need both. Many of our biographers feel that at present the Christian religion is not balancing these polarities and is engaging only with the ordered dualities of the earth and not the relative freedom of the unity of the heavens.

So it is natural that there is, at present, a focus on those aspects that have been neglected – freedom to enquire and explore the feminine, the good within apparent evil, nature as an integral part of the earth, and so on.

What has been termed the ‘spirituality revolution’ reflects:

“A secular society running on empty, restoring itself at a deep, primal source at the very core of human experience... people have outgrown the ideals and values of the early scientific era, which viewed the individual as a sort of efficient machine. We now have to revise our concepts of life, society and progress while preserving the advances that technology and science have given us” (Tacey).

At the present time a natural re-balancing is occurring and CANA is part of this. But the role that CANA in particular is asked to play is to find a creative and complementary way of inter-weaving the opposites that presently exist in order to find the wholeness that is the union of all opposites. This ‘both-and’ role is reflected in the biographies in this book. One writer speaks of being a ‘margin-dweller’ and several express the idea of ‘bridging’ or ‘linking’. For Celtic people, and for many indigenous traditions, the *“Twilight zone is where wisdom is born... it is the entrance to the twilight zone, the dimension where one acquires the ability of knowing the truth in a special way, that sacred space where one begins to trust the ‘in-between’ that alone can illuminate and make sense of the opposites in life. It means learning to face both ways at once”* (ap Iorwerth).

Thus far, as a collective, CANA has tended to focus on exploring the ‘heavens’ and sharing our findings with others. It has been as if the new awareness has been pressing for discovery and articulation through us. There is, of course, no

end to this fascinating and eternal journey.

However at the moment it seems as if another challenge is starting to make itself known as a complementary task. This is the challenge of being ‘Janus-faced’, that is, of facing not only the ‘heavens’ but also the ‘earth’.

Facing the earth implies an ethical responsibility that seems to be integral with spirituality. It calls for, as Mother Teresa said, “*Being Christ’s hands and feet on earth*”. In 2005 the themes of two events that CANA held synchronistically emerged along the lines of the need for us, as humans, to co-create the future in attunement with The Divine Source of All. We are beginning to realise that the future is not just something that will happen to us but rather something that we, collectively, must cooperate in creating.

With growing awareness that the cosmos is still evolving, many are waking up to the responsibility to shape the future, in accord with Divine Energy. The Celtic symbol of the Green Man reminds us that we are entirely dependent on the benevolent gift of the vegetable kingdoms. If we attempt to crush or destroy nature’s powers, then we do so at our peril. Part of our shaping of the future must include working with rather than against nature, to ensure that the earth does not descend into an irreversible decline.

When it comes to religion, many of the most thoughtful young adults are really post-denominational. They want spiritual experience and the ethical responsibility it implies, but they are not committed to the ‘us-versus-them’ ideology that has accompanied so much of historical religion. - Matthew Fox.

The ethical responsibility referred to by Matthew Fox is not one to be taken lightly. Our generation has inherited the outworked visions of our predecessors. “*Without a vision the*

people perish", the prophet Isaiah wisely taught, but whose visions will now prevail? Will it be that of the millions of people who uphold beauty, goodness and truth, who wish to build a new dawn of love, compassion, caring and goodwill amongst all? What part must we play in ensuring that *thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven*?

We hope that the biographies that follow will show the many different ways that people are exploring these questions and expressing the emerging awareness in their own lives.

TIM'S STORY

My journey from being a committed Roman Catholic and a Catholic priest to being a searcher of no fixed religious address, can be told in the story of a little boy who once upon a time was born in a magnificent castle. The castle was surrounded by woods and was very beautiful and very old. It was safe and could keep out intruders. Its massive stone walls were firmly built. It was clean inside, warm in winter and cool in summer. It was dry and kept out the rain and gales which swept across the woods and hammered at its walls. It had a good community spirit and most of the people who lived there were good people. Each had their place and knew what they had to do. The castle was well ordered and efficiently run. From its ramparts one could look out over the moat and the woods outside towards the far away hills.

The little boy who was born in this castle grew up to be an active member of its community. When he was young he would often stand on the walls and watch the people who lived in the woods outside the castle and gaze at the distant hills and wonder what lay on the other side. When he grew up he enjoyed being part of the expeditions into the woods and came to realise that the people outside the castle were just like those inside it. He enjoyed being with these people and being closer to nature than he could be inside the castle. Although he enjoyed living in the castle and had many friends there, he gradually came to feel that the castle had become a prison for him and that he seemed to be more at home outside its walls. He knew he had to leave.

So he went to live with the people in the woods. At times he missed the castle, the work he had done there and his friends and sometimes even envied their security. When he looked back at the castle it seemed so small compared the vast woods

and hills - it seemed to have placed there rather than having grown there like the trees. And the hills and trees were much older than the castle. The woods were not always safe and he never knew if something would unexpectedly jump out at him. There were no walls in the woods – just vegetation which people could pass through easily. He would often get muddy, cold and wet and became very aware of the changing weather and seasons. He soon discovered that the paths through the woods were not always clear because at times he could not see very far ahead – though from time to time he would glimpse open fields or mountain peaks in the distance. He made many friends on his journeys and met many fellow travellers - some of them had ideas which he could not always agree with and others were very odd or seemed to have even less idea of where they were going than he did. The castle had a deep moat of still water but in the wood there were meandering streams of running water. The castle had a plan of its layout but there was no such thing for the wood. If he looked down when he was living in the castle he saw stone floors of man-made carpets: in the wood he would see the living earth. When he had looked up from the castle he had seen the sky and stars and now in the wood when he looked up, he could see the same sky and stars which he had seen from the castle and he realised that that everyone could see the same sky and stars wherever they were. He had been so sure of where he was when he was inside the castle but now he was not so sure. Sometimes he would sing the old Negro spiritual “I wonder while I wander and I wander while I wonder”.

I loved being a priest. I had been fortunate to have studied in Rome during the years of the Second Vatican Council and so had a ring-side seat for that memorable event which seemed to me to let common sense into the church. I was gripped by its broad vision of the church being an ally of all people of good

will, its radical ecumenical openness and its portrayal of the church as primarily a community and not an institution. When I returned to England, I always had superiors who gave me my head – as a curate, in teaching theology in Allen Hall seminary, by Cardinal Basil Hume as one of his Vicars General and as a parish priest. Above all I was aware of the privilege of meeting and working with so many good, holy and inspiring people and to have the humbling privilege of being invited by so many to share their intimate moments of joy or suffering or decision. As a priest I was never able to accept some aspects of the church such as its teaching on birth control, its refusal to allow the clergy to marry or to ordain women as priests. Above all I was dismayed by the autocratic rule of Pope John Paul II which seemed to be backtracking on the vision of Vatican II with an obsession with doctrinal orthodoxy and repeated assertions that other Christian churches and religions were ‘defective in faith’.

I could probably have lived with these reservations but deeper issues about my Christian beliefs had begun to surface. One was that I could not longer accept the (Catholic) Christian claim to have the fullness of truth. Increasingly I came to believe that there are many ways up the spiritual mountain and Catholicism was just one among many such ways. And like all religions, it is a human construction with all the strengths and weaknesses of any human construction. This led to an erosion of my belief in the Christian belief that Jesus is the only and universal saviour and the unique Son of God as Christians claim. I had come to see him as one among many great spiritual teachers.

In addition I found that I could no longer reconcile innocent human suffering with my image of a personal, loving and all-powerful god. Either this ‘god’ was a sadist who permits indescribable suffering to happen or he was not all-powerful and could not prevent it. And I also discovered that I no longer

believed in the Christian notion of redemption which appeared to me to be about placating a vengeful god who demands the sacrificial death of the innocent man Jesus as the price of our salvation. This led me to dread celebrating the Eucharist: I could celebrate it as the community's memorial and thanksgiving for Jesus, but not as a sharing in the sacrifice of Jesus which Catholicism claims it to be.

So I reached a point where I could no longer in good conscience call myself a Christian or a Catholic. And most importantly, Catholics have a right to expect their priests to share their basic faith. That is why they share their confidences with them and go to confession. For me to have continued as a priest while not sharing their basic beliefs would have been to betray these good people and to have been dishonest with them.

So I left the castle. For a long time I felt very alone spiritually and would often wonder if I was off the wall and whether there was anyone else out there who felt as I did. But it was during this time that a wise lady said to me that my image of god had to die if I was to move forward. She was right. My image of god as a supernatural personal being had died. I was in a god-vacuum where everything seemed to scream at me that there was no god.

But gradually I came to realise that while the Christian image of a personal god no longer made sense to me, there is a reality in which I believed - a reality which is greater than we are, which we do not invent and which is ultimately incomprehensible. The image of this reality as the Mystery of Being and the Creative Energy in all existence, rather than a personal god, did have meaning for me. And I began to find others who were making similar spiritual journeys as I was and over time became involved in networks such as CANA, Quo Vadis, The Wrekin Trust, Greenspirit and the local Inter-Faith Forum. These open, affirming and accepting communities,

which draw on the wisdoms of all the religions and all humanity, have now become my spiritual home and my community. I have been greatly helped by discovering such writers as Diarmuid O'Murchu (especially his '*Reclaiming Spirituality*'), Adrian Smith (especially his '*God Shift*') and above all Cyprian Smith's '*The Way of Paradox*' on the writings of Meister Eckhart where I came across the magical words that "*if the eye of the heart were fully open, we would see that contraries are all contained finally in an all-embracing unity*". This was my 'Eureka' moment because it seemed to hold the key to getting beyond the impasse of our 'either/or' human and religious divisions and it also led me to understand that at the heart of the Great Mystery of Being is relationship – as Martin Buber said "*all real living is meeting. Here is the cradle of real life.*"

How do I now relate to the Catholicism of my birth? I continue to be inspired by the many good and loving Christians - and those of other faith traditions - who are obviously nourished by their religious beliefs. I still draw on much of the wisdom of the Catholic tradition - especially its notion of the sacramentality of all creation, beauty, creativity and above all love as being the signs and symbols of the divine presence. But I find attending Christian worship difficult because I feel such an outsider and find myself editing out the many bits which have no meaning for me - which is hardly conducive to a worshipping or peaceful frame of mind!. And I must confess that many of the pronouncements of official Christianity seem so petty and irrelevant (and sometimes plain wrong) compared to today's huge issues of violence, poverty and over-population - let alone the ecological threats to our planet. I find it sad, if not repellent, that the Anglican Communion is tearing itself apart over women and gay bishops and that in Catholicism there are interminable divisive arguments about the liturgy and

doctrine as if these issues are what Jesus was about - while many open minded Catholic theologians and activists constantly have to look over their shoulders to see if and when the Vatican will crack down on them.

So where does my inspiration come from now? Inspiration is a good word because it suggests the Spirit within us and our spirituality which, as Adrian Smith says, is *“that aspect of our nature which awakens us to wonder gives our lives meaning and calls us to our higher selves and is usually expressed as a relationship with the transcendent.”* For me the transcendent reality, that great Mystery of Being and Creative Energy in all being - which many call ‘god’ - is beyond our comprehension and provokes a sense of wonder, acceptance and gratitude. *“Mystery is a gift to be enjoyed, not a problem to be solved.”* It is in relationships that I can catch glimpses of the nature of this great Mystery of Being out of the corner of my eye. I believe that relationship is the basis of all reality. It is the nature of the cosmos itself at the macro/galactic, the micro/sub-atomic, the natural and human levels because everything which exists is interconnected and related to everything else. It is not surprising that many religions have described the divine as inter-personal relationship as the Christian notion of the Trinity does with its idea of one god and three persons. And relationship reminds us that reality is not ‘either/or’ nor meant to be a dualistic clash of opposites whether it be the spiritual against the material, the feminine against the masculine or this religion against that religion. But rather it is a both/and reality where there is both unity and also diversity held together by respect, acceptance and love.

It has been rightly said that nothing destroys relationship more than wanting to dominate and that is why I believe so passionately that we have to stop dominating nature - not just to avoid global catastrophe - but in order to be true to the Great

Mystery of Being itself. And in the religious sphere I am inspired by Jean Vanier's words that *"too much inter-religious dialogue begins with theology and spirituality and in a comparison of belief systems and so gets stuck. Better to ask 'what does it mean to be a human being and how do human beings grow. What is freedom, what is human maturity?'* Religious beliefs can be tackled later after the discovery of a shared humanity and the mutual acceptance of the other." Or as Bede Griffiths urged - one should be true to one's own tradition but go beyond its limitations to a greater Oneness.

My spiritual journey has been full of the unexpected and seems to have come a long way so far. I share with so many others great fears for the future of our planet, almost a despair that poverty will ever be solved or that violence will ever cease. In the religious sphere I am disturbed by the rise of divisive religious fundamentalism. But I am also inspired and given hope by what is unmistakably a new awareness and a new consciousness which is bursting out everywhere in different movements and networks which cross the boundaries of culture and religion in seeking unity, while honouring diversity - whether in the ecological, social or religious spheres. It is giving new life to ancient wisdoms and giving us new insights. I have no doubt that we are being called into a new age. It's an exciting and challenging age to enter and at times it is daunting. Now in my seventies I am grateful to have lived long enough to be able part of this crucial step in our human story.

DON'S STORY

Beginnings are important in anyone's spiritual journey, and mine were in the Midlands. I was born in Birmingham in 1952, and moved to Leicester at the age of six. My parents were fairly regular church-goers, and as such I went to a Presbyterian Sunday School until the age of nine, when the chance of swimming on a Sunday morning presented itself as a much more attractive option than sitting on the splintering floor of a cold church hall.

I had a very secure upbringing in a middle class family - which resulted in me emerging as a fairly self-contained, rather shy individual in my teens. I went successfully through the state education system, which taught me (or encouraged in me) logical, critical, rational thinking. I was good at the sciences and maths and I was always interested in how things work. I wanted to know why the world was as it was. In my late teens I could probably be categorised as agnostic, seeing the universe as a physical unit which functioned according to the laws of cause and effect. There were still questions rumbling around, however, like "What is at the end of the universe?", "How did it all start?", "Is there other life out there?", "What about other dimensions?", and "What about ghosts, UFO's, and other paranormal, supernatural events?" I discovered the science fiction genre just at the dawn of its explosion into the area of science fantasy - I read and read, picking up ideas and possibilities which fed my philosophically questing brain; I read all about the idea of other dimensions or states of being. The possibility of sentient forces or a god or gods became real.

In 1975, after I finished at University, Jayne and I were married, and in 1978 I started teaching science in a local comprehensive school in Leicester. During the next few years, we started to question the meaning of our lives and the way in

which we lived. We became involved in ecological issues and the "alternative" movement, and began to look into the existence of a spiritual dimension to life.

As time progressed, I started to breakout of the rational, western, scientific mode of thinking, and became a seeker for meaning and experience in life. I was very interested in the supernatural, and in ecology. I felt there must be a better way of living than the model offered by the British culture of the late seventies. I was looking for a harmonious way of life, a way of being where community and people were important, where there was meaning to life, something to work towards, to give direction. We both became active in the Ecology Party (now the Green Party), and visited a number of communities and people trying to live a simpler, ecologically-sound lifestyle in Britain.

At some stage in this, I read a book called *The Secret Life of Plants* by Christopher Tompkins and Peter Bird, which documented the experiments done to show that plants had a form of consciousness and responded to emotions. You may remember when you were encouraged to love your plants and talk to them. For me, it connected the natural world and environment with the world of thought, mind and emotion in a scientific way. This led me to reading about the Findhorn Community in Scotland, where enormous vegetables had been grown through following the advice of 'plant spirits', or 'devas' and 'God' speaking to members of the community. It was exciting, stimulating stuff, as it made a further connection for me between the paranormal and the spiritual.

During this time, Jayne experienced a period of mental and emotional illness, which she had suffered from since childhood, and through that illness I reached the end of my 'self', my own resources, and started to really reach out to God. I had tried everything I knew to help, along both the medical

path and a range of complementary therapies, all to no avail. In this situation of desperation, I cried out “If there is a God, help!” - and that was the awakening of my spirit. This led me to looking into such things as tree and plant spirits, pyramid power, alternative medicine, pendulum dowsing and divining, ley lines and centres of spiritual power, and the spirit within. It was the last of those which became more important for me as time went on. The world within and its connection with the spiritual fascinated me.

Jayne and I eventually met an elderly woman and her daughter who ‘channelled’, or got in touch with those they called the ‘Masters’. These masters told them about the ‘Ancient Wisdom’ which lay behind all of life, physical and spiritual. (They had three large filing cabinets full of audio tapes of the Masters speaking through them!) The Ancient Wisdom contained the secrets of life, how to progress spiritually to eventually achieve one-ness with the Ultimate Being. Part of that path was to attain Christ-Consciousness. They put me in touch with other writings which I sent off for, and tried to follow. I became interested in Helena Blavatsky and Theosophy, and read a lot of Alice Bailey’s writings, which were a mixture of eastern esotericism, Theosophy, and Christianity. For a couple of years I meditated daily using the ‘Great Invocation’ and called down the White Light, trying to reach higher levels of awareness, of Christ-consciousness.

As my reading and seeking continued, I came to a belief in God (as the Ultimate Being), in prayer, and in Jesus the Christ, but as an ordinary person who attained the full measure of ‘Christ-consciousness’, the first to do so - not as Saviour or Son of God. Accordingly, I became more interested in who Jesus actually was. A series of events led to my wife and I attending a church in Leicester on Easter Sunday 1983, where we were very moved by the love, openness and life that we saw

emanating from the people there. At the same time, I was puzzled by the life of Jesus and the meaning of the cross. I thought I had access to knowledge which went beyond Christianity to deeper, timeless truths, but what I saw was a friendly, warm, living, loving community which embodied more experientially the truths I had been seeking in 'The Ancient Wisdom' - and it all seemed to revolve around this man Jesus and his death and resurrection.

I turned to Christianity aged 30, through a combination of thinking, reading, asking questions and the influence of that loving church. Whilst on holiday in Pembrokeshire in the summer of 1983, I had a profound conversion experience of God's love and my heart was opened – and my path became that of a 'born-again' charismatic evangelical Christian. During the following 7 years, I prayed in tongues, practiced deliverance ministry, had a curse cast out of me, and had numerous profound experiences of what was termed 'baptism in the Holy Spirit', but what I would now prefer to call an experience of oneness with the divine or unitive consciousness. I always knew, somewhere in my 'knower', that my previous experience in and understanding of the New Age sphere was not wasted.

In 1989, I began to feel the call to ordination and priesthood in the Anglican Church. I gradually went through the selection process, and ended up in 1991 going to St. Johns College in Nottingham. During the theological training course, I explored all my New Age experience in a dissertation entitled *The New Age Critique of the Church - what can we learn from it?* It showed to me that I was still very interested in what is now known as contemporary or holistic spirituality and I also discovered much more about the whole breadth of spirituality within the Christian Church, especially the mystical tradition.

In 1993 we moved to Sutton Coldfield where I was a

curate in a large evangelical church, a very busy place. The following year, my sister was diagnosed with an aggressive cancer and Jayne became pregnant with our third child and started displaying signs of depression and panic attacks. In rapid succession, our first and much-loved dog died, then my sister died, our third daughter was born two weeks later, and Jayne was admitted to hospital the next week, remaining there for two months with severe post-natal suicidal depression. We came through it eventually. I survived by coping and shutting down to any threatening emotions. Two years later, I decided to have some secular counselling to unpack my own feelings around that time – I had clamped down.

In 1996, we moved back to Leicester, for me to be a team vicar in a small suburban church, which was a huge contrast from the curacy and my previous parish experience, although a similar area to where I had taught for years. Three years later, I accepted the post of chaplain at Loughborough University. It was there that I became the New Religious Movement's Advisor for the Diocese of Leicester and started looking into the whole area of contemporary spirituality again. I joined CANA and was relieved to find a group of people who were thinking along the same lines as I was, which is that Christianity has to be freed from the shackles of the medieval mindset and get back to the original inspiration of the Christ.

During all this time, I have been interested in various areas of spirituality, but found it desperately hard at times to make the time to do any serious reading. I have very much appreciated the wisdom of spiritual direction, and become familiar with techniques of counselling and psychotherapy. I have dabbled in creation spirituality, Gnosticism and mysticism, and Celtic spirituality, and I have enjoyed the insights of techniques such as the Myers-Briggs Personality Inventory. I have been drawn to the silence of contemplative

prayer and meditation, the wisdom of the mystics, and more liberal and radical theology. Moreover, I have been walking joyfully into a deeper understanding of the spiritual path, reading all sorts of other teachings outside of the church, ranging from quantum physics to metaphysics and the spiritual realms, and perceiving many connections between the two. I have increasingly felt that I want to find, or develop, a spirituality which can give a frame of reference for understanding the world as it is, including insights from all the other world faiths, and contemporary spirituality.

One of the most influential factors on my spiritual journey has been in sharing the pain and discovering purpose in my wife's mental and emotional problems. Jayne has made slow but sure progress with emotional problems which go right back to early childhood. It has been both an uplifting and a humbling experience to see someone gradually change from an emotionally damaged human being into a much more whole person. There have been times of despair and times of deep joy and thankfulness. You don't ask for that sort of experience, but it gives you a great insight into the way people work – but the more you know, the more you realise you don't know.

I now find myself in a position of Vicar in the Church in Wales in Pembrokeshire, still within the Christian tradition, but operating from a much wiser place. I respect and hold dear the traditions and theology of two thousand years, but also see that to reach a new generation, the theology of the church has to evolve to a new place, a new world. Christian theology developed when the view of the universe was three tier. Heaven was above the earth, behind the stars. Earth was depicted as having a roof, with the stars set in it, and behind the roof was where God lived, heaven. And below the earth was hell, of course. This was how they depicted it in the middle ages. We now know we live in a vast universe, so vast it is

beyond our brains to imagine. With greater technology, it is now known that there are not just hundreds of other galaxies, not just thousands, or millions, but BILLIONS of other galaxies, each containing billions of stars, each star possibly having planets around it.

This is one of the problems we have when we come to reading the bible or church doctrine and the creeds – we inhabit a totally different world view from the biblical times. Heaven is not up, it is not part of this physical universe. Hell is not beneath us. The second coming is not going to happen with Christ literally riding in on clouds of glory. We have moved on in our understanding of the nature of the world. In biblical times, mental illness was thought to be caused by evil spirits. Medical treatment was basic, with no anaesthetics or antibiotics, sewage systems were primitive, and justice systems were brutal. We no longer stay with biblical or medieval thought about everything else - medicine, science, politics, social structure – but for some reason many people think they have to stay with medieval theology that developed in an entirely different world view. To my mind, we have to interpret Christianity through 21st century spectacles. I am currently writing a book which seeks to do just that, linking up some of the new scientific insights from quantum physics and epigenetics to go beyond traditional theological interpretations of the Christ event and link with the idea of global shift that is now happening, as human consciousness moves up a gear to a new place. I think that is what Jesus who called it the Kingdom of God. We live a different world and I now stand with one foot in the Christian tradition and the other firmly engaged in contemporary, holistic spirituality, attempting to draw the two closer to each other. I'm happy where I stand, as an open-minded, open-hearted, holistic follower of the Christ, but it remains to be seen if the Church is!

GILLIAN'S STORY

Having been invited to write about my spiritual journey, I decided to focus on an aspect of spirituality which far from sums up the whole, but is so arresting that it provides very powerful pointers along the way. I decided to focus on numinous experiences – those experiences where our consciousness expands to take in powerful glimpses of that which seems much greater than the self. At such times we can feel utterly shaken and yet uplifted; or we can be drenched with some profoundly cleansing stream that leaves us forever altered. Looking back down the winding path of my life, I particularly recall seven numinous experiences. No doubt there were others, more diffuse and general. But there are seven that seem to me important, and which I shall touch on here.

The thing about a numinous experience is that it really is raw experience. Whoever is having one is experiencing something big time. Afterwards, if they so wish, they might try to find words for it and interpret it in the light of ideas known to them. When I had my first overwhelming encounter with awe and wonder – aged, probably, three – I perceived some swans flying overhead and I heard the air throbbing with the beating of their wings. There I was, experiencing awe and wonder that took me out of myself, leading me to strain towards something I longed for wholly and aching, and which remained hidden. My three-year old mind had heard of God and felt sure that I had met ‘Him’ indirectly in the swans – and oh, how I longed to meet God, as I imagined, ‘properly’.

My second numinous experience was different in that it came to me as an auditory vision. One night, shortly after I had been chatting with some other teenagers in a room we were sharing, I heard a most beautiful sound of singing. Male voices, but they were singing, I had the sense, lower than men usually

sing. It lasted, say, five seconds. After a brief silence in which I listened agog, this outpouring was followed by female voices singing, yes, higher than women sing. This second burst of sound lasted a split second only. Then it was gone. After a pause, in which the surpassing beauty of what I had heard flowed through me like a current, I demanded of my companions, “Did you hear that?!” There was no reply. It seemed they had all gone to sleep. In considering the event later, the various alternative explanations – a dream, the radio, a record player (this was the 1960s) – were all discarded because what I had heard was unlike any of them in important particulars. The only other explanation that lay within the realm of things I had heard of was ‘angels’. So I have the sense that one night, years ago, I heard angels sing.

The third numinous experience occurred in church. I was still a teenager, and I was at a school communion service in which I did not communicate because I was not baptised, let alone confirmed. So I watched all the others going up to receive the bread and the wine, and as I did so, I started to cry. I had become overwhelmed by a sense that something utterly amazing must have happened back then in history to mean that so many years later people in many parts of the world were still doing this. I could not find a way of expressing what I felt, and my tears erupted to diffuse the unresolved tension created by the intensity of experiencing something that seemed so much greater than my everyday self in my everyday world.

Some years later, as a young woman in my early twenties, I was invited to another church where a group of charismatic Christians was meeting, praising the Lord and speaking in tongues. Never had I been anywhere where the sense of the presence of the Holy Spirit seemed so strong. A few months later, I made a Christian commitment. Something inside me changed after that, and I think that this something was the

difference between agnosticism and faith. While agnosticism means ‘not knowing’, in practice it often seems to refer to a blocked state of sitting on a fence going nowhere. A person of faith might entertain doubts of all kinds, but they have at least chosen a direction.

The trouble was that I did entertain doubts of all kinds. I did not believe in the literal truth of all scripture, which was bad news in the congregation in which I found myself. I strained to come to grips with what I understood to be the core concept of Christianity: salvation. Furthermore, I had experienced three days of joy on a yoga week held in Glen Almond, so that the Christian context was not the only one that had put me in touch with Heaven – using that term to describe the experience of unremitting bliss that then suffused me. A week or so before I left that church I had an argument with one of its elders about the value and status of the Bhagavad Gita. On reading it, I had been struck by how often the figure of Krishna had reminded me of Christ. The church elder, if I did not misunderstand him, regarded the text as demonic.

So I commenced a progression towards increasing liberalism in my churchwomanship, during which progression I had the good fortune to encounter several clerics of both sexes from whom the Divine within shone forth and informed their lives. One of these suggested that I might become one of them. The idea lodged, but did not ripen to maturity in the manner suggested. Instead of proceeding to a ministerial training college, I went back to university, alongside my part-time job, and studied theology in order to see if I could understand what salvation was about. At the end of three years, and finals, I thought I deserved a good holiday and took myself to Atsitsa on the island of Skyros in Greece, to become part of a temporary holiday community. It was here that I encountered non-religious spirituality – people on a conscious spiritual path

who were not affiliated to one of the mainstream religions. I went back to university to study this phenomenon.

My postgraduate studies required that I spend a minimum of three weeks in a place that represented the theme of my studies, so I took myself to the non-religious spiritual community of Findhorn, where I met a wind that so caught my sails that seven years later I now live in that community. The 'old wine-skin' of the world view I associated with Church seemed at bursting point within my consciousness. I sought a place and a space in which it could be transcended, and where that experience could be shared with others.

My next numinous experience took place in a garden at Findhorn, where some say they have seen nature spirits. I was alone, gardening. I had been working in heavy rain, but now the sun was shining through the moist air. I had been totally absorbed by my task of transplanting a purple plant from the orange bed of the chakra garden to the purple bed when suddenly I became filled with a sense of awesome presence. As I hesitated before looking up it occurred to me that I might be about to see Pan. My mind was already equipped with this idea by the influence of Findhorn. I looked up and, instead of Pan, I beheld the face of a man I loved, radiant in the sunshine, framed by purple fronds against a brilliant sky, looking down on me as I crouched in the rain-sodden haze. As with the swans, I felt the Divine come to me again in natural form. As with all my numinous experiences, I felt inadequate to express the intense wonder and love that they engendered in me.

The seventh experience? Just this. One morning at Findhorn I sat in profound distress on the shores of the sea, and in the midst of my discomfiture I found myself reached by a conviction that somewhere (it seemed to be in the vicinity of the neighbouring village of Burghead) there was a well of joy that was always bubbling up no matter what. I later learned that

there is a natural well at Burghead.

Looking back, the major steps taken in my spiritual journey seem all to have been prepared for and initiated by numinous experiences – experiences in which I found myself in altered states characterised by joy and beauty. But the concepts I have attached to those experiences arise out of my culture. The angels I heard singing did so in the style of Western choral music. Had I been an Indian girl I assume they would have sounded different and, no doubt, I would have called them by a different name. Life is a dialogue between raw experience and culture. Starting from babyhood we find ourselves in an undifferentiated continuum of experience which, bit by bit, we learn to compartmentalise and label in the way our elders teach us. Then we consider their teachings, and modify them in the light of our on-going experience. Religions play a huge part in labelling our responses to the ultimate questions of life. Where do we come from? Where are we going? What is it all about? But then, for many of us, there comes a time when we know that we do not know, and are content to remain in the cloud of unknowing, yet still requiring the help of certain lights that light our way – each one a quality that enables us to transcend the prison of egocentricity and reach out in the spirit of Love.

CELIA'S STORY

It felt like it was in the air. Having brought up my children on Angel Delight puddings, suddenly everything new and mechanical no longer seemed right. The world appeared to be on a road to disaster. The earth's resources were running out, people's health was suffering from bad nourishment and village life was fast declining due to mechanisation, inorganic fertilisers and imported ingredients. There was a yearning for the 'good old days'.

Communes sprang up where food was grown using few mechanical aids and compost and manure were spread by hand. Vegetarianism became the alternative to battery hens and crated calves and, as awareness grew of horrendous famine in Africa, vegetable protein became a way of increasing the acreage to grow more food. Some of us seemed to be affected by a feeling of urgency that drove us to consider and embrace changes in the way we lived.

In our family we rented some extra land to grow vegetables. Chickens and geese were added though both came to a sticky end and, at a later stage, we had cattle, with three steers that became so hungry they escaped into a neighbouring cornfield. I would not give them cattle cake in the winter, as the manufacturers refused to tell me what was in it. I hadn't been so stupid, as it turned out, when the cause of Mad Cow Disease became known – cattle feed.

Well, the start of it for me was sometime in the Seventies. We went to a 'real food show' and bought an electric flourmill. A cook by training, I did catering using wholefood ingredients. One thing led to another and I was giving classes in wholefood and vegetarian cookery. There weren't many recipes in those days so I made them up, adapted traditional recipes and found how often the base of country food throughout the world was

well-balanced vegetarian food – rice and lentils, bean stew and dumplings, and so on. My family was put through the rigour of roughage. Although we never became fully vegetarian most of our meals were without meat or fish. I don't know where the idea came from – there was just an awareness that things weren't right and we needed to change. It was happening all over. I remember serving a lemon meringue pie made with a wholemeal pastry base at a rather smart luncheon. The Dowager Duchess This and the Lady That swarmed into the kitchen after the meal to ask how I had made it. They had all felt the need to take a step back and use more natural ingredients.

In spiritual terms this may not seem very connected, but I believe it was the beginning of my spiritual awakening. No longer could anything be taken for granted. No authority could be trusted. Everything had to be questioned and 'truth' reassessed. Someone came to speak to our Women's Institute about a community in the north of Scotland called Findhorn. My eleven-year-old son had been off sick from school, so he had come with me and was as enthralled as I. My husband agreed, and a month later the three of us, and our ten-year-old daughter, were on our way for an Experience Week arranged particularly for families. Change? Oh yes it changed us.

The Church talks about being born again. I suppose we were 'born again' but it wasn't in the church. It wasn't anti-Christian; in fact the Christian ethos was very much accepted and, in some cases, practised. In our group there were Buddhists, a Hindu and two Sufis. It made no difference. Morning and evening each day we were encouraged to join for meditation. There were no words, or maybe a few at the beginning, and in the stillness no difference applied. We shared each other's stories, assisted with the work of the community, dug in the garden and played in the trees. We learned to love,

to be and, most of all, to trust our intuition.

Meditation became part of our lives, fifteen minutes each morning. When the hall clock struck eight we knew our time was up. No one had taught me how to meditate. I picked it up from books and friends. I would attempt to empty my mind, still it from the jumble of everyday thought. I cannot say how successful I was. Maybe only a minute or two would be achieved but the effect was to order my life. No matter what was in the day ahead, everything would fall into place and the day would pass without the normal rush and jumble.

Sometimes I would feel that another dimension had taken over. I was able to feel the whole me. At the same time, I felt as though I was plugged into the universe. I was aware of the wholeness of life and began to live my life following whichever path seemed to open. I learned to trust my intuition, to withdraw if I felt resistance, to push through when the way became clear. We opened our home as a centre for New Awareness and people came. There was this hunger to learn, to open up our higher selves, to allow thoughts that might have been quashed in the traditional Christian Church.

An opportunity arose to work for an inter-religious group which was organising a conference in India. Circumstances had us in precisely the right position to take on this work. We had a well-equipped office, computer I could use, and a photocopier. My husband had just taken early retirement. The work took four years, with much travel and an increasing workload as the conference drew near. We had the opportunity to meet holy people from many different faiths. Some gave teachings so pure that it felt as if we might have been sitting at the feet of Jesus. Truth lies within the teaching of all the Masters; who can say one is greater than another?

My Christian background is deep and lasting. Regular Sunday worship was in my being from the age of three. I went

to a High Church boarding school where the beauty of the Eucharist left a lasting impression. Yet there is so much about 'Church' that feels alien to the simplicity of that early teacher from Nazareth. I cannot see Jesus as the Son of God any more than I am the daughter of God – and 'you and I are one'. I see the Holy Ghost as the life-force that is available to us all if we open up to its power and guidance.

I cannot profess my faith acknowledging the birth and death of Jesus without giving credence to the power of his teaching and lifetime example. I go to a Christian Church because Jesus is the teacher I best know. The beauty of the service enriches my body, though I need to close my mind to some of the words. The teaching stimulates my thinking but I would love the opportunity sometimes to question the content. The community of the Church gives me friendship but I doubt that many would understand my beliefs.

We have come to know this recent period of time as the dawning of a New Age, a time of great change such as must have happened two thousand years ago when Christianity began. During this last century psychotherapy has released the constraints of generational straight-jackets, giving us a deeper understanding of ourselves. Technology has given us the tools for increasing knowledge of humanity and all aspects of Creation. Meditation, which seems to be a common factor in all those I know who are travelling this path, has opened us to realms and experiences we had not previously known.

The Church did not always accept the mystics of old, though their language was in Christian terms. Those people I have come to know in the last forty years are using a different language. In their deep experience of meditation they are meeting not with Jesus or the Holy Spirit. Instead they are conversing with 'guides', higher consciousness and the 'higher self'. Like the Christian mystics they may achieve a feeling of

pure bliss, extreme happiness, or total oneness with nature. The only difference is that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are not part of their language.

Does this make the experience invalid? No. Jesus taught that we could all have a closeness to God such as he experienced. He never suggested that only those professing themselves as Christians could do so – he was a Jew. Typically the Church has chosen to ignore the ‘New Age’ or to write it off as pagan. To those of us attempting to remain within the Christian fold, little help or understanding has been offered. Meditation and personal growth have taken us into a new dimension evidently unacceptable to the priesthood, ministry and hierarchy of the Church. We may therefore need to find our way forward without them.

Already there are groups on a spiritual path and people have found help through them. I have particularly been helped by CANA (Christians Awakening to a New Awareness) and a Quest Group, which studied the programme under that name. Few of us want to see another institution like the Church. Our habit is to go with a flow that allows the creation and dissolution of temporary structures. What the future holds we do not know but, we are sure, each of us must be responsible for ourselves without depending on institutions such as the Church has become.

If the organism we call ‘Church’ is able to recognise the journey being taken by myself and by countless others, much of it outside its framework, then perhaps there is a future in the Christian fold. However there are many who have been so hurt by the Church hierarchy, for whom a return to that fold is unthinkable. Do we need a structure for continued development? Although I attend Church fairly regularly I am not absolutely sure that I ‘belong’ any more. I am not sure it even matters – what I must not lose sight of is the journey

itself. For this I need others to assist in the constant search for understanding, to keep me continually on the quest and not allow me to atrophy into self-delusion.

I believe each one of us has a part to play as midwives to the future. I see a need to live in closer contact with the wholeness of all being. We need to dissolve our edges, open to the requirements of everything around us. We need to work for good, wherever we are called. We need to seek the infinite wisdom within. It will guide us in all we think, do and say, so long as we remain connected to the pure source of good.

KATE'S STORY

Being asked to review one's inner journey can feel a bit like looking at a snakes-and-ladders board. The dice life throws you can be very deceptive. The big, fat juicy Six that you thought was bound to land you on an upward soaring ladder, lands up in fact on a snake, and the miserable little Two that was going nowhere in fact hits a ladder that takes you up through a couple of layers to a new zone of understanding.

My journey started in a down-to-earth C of E family – church at Christmas and Easter, and few extra Sundays in between – followed by a C of E boarding school, chapel twice a day, and three times on Sundays. The sparking factor was a mother who increasingly became a freewheeling spirit, and who shared her inner journey with me through my teenage years. So together we roamed through some more mystic writers than standard Sunday church fare – William Johnston, Bede Griffiths, Thomas Merton among them – and on towards more esoteric New Age thought – George Trevelyan, Alan Watts and Ram Dass in particular. These certainly loosened things up, and formed a basis for a wonderful companionship between us.

Then the Six on the dice was marriage, home-making and two small children. Life became full of practicalities and fun. God went out the window, except in a taken-for-granted pleasure in the quality of everyday life.

So too the Two came at around the age of 30, after a very traumatic miscarriage, in conjunction with the realisation that my marriage was no longer working. There followed several emotionally-unhappy years, but then I found myself on a ladder of picking myself up from the pain. The ladder was not the Church, with which I was not in touch and which seemed to have nothing relevant to offer. It was Yoga, which gifted me a

miraculous healing on all levels of my being, and also began to make some sense of the pain. It also led to developing in interest in meditation, healing and all things esoteric.

But the spiritual soil my tree is planted in did not want to give up its roots. As my children grew to school age I found myself wanting them to breathe in all aspects of their heritage, perhaps particularly the Old Testament. So I sent them to Sunday school. Fine with my daughter, less so with my son, by this time aged four. “Why should I go to Sunday school if you don’t go to church?” he said. So I started going to church again. I discovered a vicar who talked my language, and preached the cosmos, and the dance of science and mysticism. We ended up married, and there I was back in the church again. Snake or Ladder? – a Ladder.

I was round a turn of the spiral with a completely different understanding, and now exploring Matthew Fox, Teilhard de Chardin, and astrophysics (as best my limited IQ could manage!). The institution of the Church seemed increasingly unimportant, but the precepts of Christianity took on a new meaning and relevance. The shift, I think, was primarily away from an historically-based Jesus to an opening up of the implications of what some call the Cosmic Christ. It removed for me the limitations, the place and the exclusivity of so much traditional Church teaching.

Having dipped a little into other world faiths, especially Buddhism and Hinduism, I have never accepted the Church, or Christianity, as the only path to a relationship with God.

In essence that is where I still am, some twenty years later. The externals of the game board have taken me through a bereavement, five years alone running a retreat house in a remote corner of Scotland, and now six years married to another dog-collar! A fair mix of the Sixes and Twos. Clearly I am still connected with the traditional Church through the

necessary involvement of being married to it, though most often I feel like a subversive element. The personal challenge has been to retain a degree of inner integrity in my relationship with the Church, while at the same time being true to my own inner voice. Over the years I have found myself more and less successful with that. There have been times when I have exploded with frustration, times when I have felt “That’s it, time to sever the tie”, but never quite doing it. The frustration is always with the institution and the teachings of the Church, rather than with Christianity, in so far as I can interpret the latter for myself.

Increasingly I have come to what I call the ‘kitchen sink spirituality’, better known as ‘fetching water, chopping wood’. The externals of life are all as they were before. Yet they’re not, because everything is imbued from within with that essence which makes small daily events much larger than the vehicle which carries them. The practicalities of running the retreat house taught me that. The excitement of the early years of esoteric exploration has melted into a more background but steady pattern of living the day, and trying to make sense of the messiness and pain of the world and of human beings. I would like to *know* that All Is Well, rather than All Shall Be Well – sometimes I do, sometimes I don’t. I believe it, but I don’t always know it.

Translated into conventional terms, that has been a journey from depending on the outward rituals and rhythms of the Church (though I still go to church every Sunday), to looking at the gifts of the day as my teacher and source of inspiration. This is in conjunction with the fundamental precepts of Christianity as I understand them: “Judge not...”, “Without love all things are worthless”, “We are called to embody Christ...”. I continue to go to church, partly to support my husband, partly because I believe that in the fragility of

humanness both rhythm and discipline are important supports, even when I kick against them. I can still remember the shock of being told twenty years ago: “You don’t go to church for *yourself*, you go for all those who do not go”. Not in a holy ‘saving sinners’ kind of way, but as part of contributing to what some call ‘the prayer of the whole Church’. That phrase still has an exclusivity about it for me. I prefer to think of it as each person’s contribution to turning the Prayer Wheel of the World. That is essentially a selfless act, but of course in turn it nourishes me too.

Living where I do, in a relatively conservative backwater, there is not a great deal in the overt life of the Church to nourish my inner world. Snake or Ladder? Again, I have come to think Ladder, because it has pushed me to look within, to work things out for myself, to learn from direct experience, to find my own truth – with the help of course of many wise beings who have crossed my path, either directly or through books. There is always a danger here of arrogance, leaving the well-trod path to go up one’s own cul-de-sac. But maybe that too just gets composted in. Experience is my teacher and I need to remind myself that often the most difficult people, the most difficult situations, are the things I must need to grow and to learn. It may not be the obvious inspiration of a deep meditation retreat, or an uplifting talk, but it can be the most effective chisel to chip away at the ‘self-encapsulated ego’, especially if I am aware enough to cooperate with the process.

More obviously I draw nourishment from the natural world around me. Living in the dramatic and awe-inspiring scenery of northwest Scotland, it is not hard to feel in touch with That in which I live and move and have my being, as the seasons of light and dark, and the forceful weather patterns come and go. From the meditation too, whether it be formal ‘sitting’ or a looser kind of watching the sea and cloudscapes. Much of what

I have learned at this level has come from Eastern teachings rather than Christian sources, mainly because they were more accessible to me. In essence I do not think there is much difference in the awareness to which both would lead us, only perhaps in the detail of the scenery, through which we travel on the way.

That of course might well be questioned by much of traditional Christianity, which remains wary of anything not coming directly from the Church. For myself, I have come to trust the feel of direct experience over the voice of the expert, whose path is different from mine, despite the obvious risk here of self-delusion. I recognise that most of the great Christian mystics of the past, Merton and Chardin among them, remained anchored within the Church, and perhaps that is another reason I choose not to leave it entirely, despite so much dogma to which I cannot subscribe. This requires me to stay very quiet in most Christian company, for fear of further burnings-at-the-stake.

So the vision that moves me forward is of contributing even a small part of a monkey to the 'Hundredth Monkey Syndrome' that will enable the human race to take its next leap in the evolution of consciousness. (The Hundredth Monkey hypothesis states that, when a sufficient number of people cleave to a new idea, that idea will leap to other populations, even without direct contact). Gerard Hughes asks, when will the children of God grow up to be the adults of God? I would like to think that will happen when we cling less fearfully to our own particular dogma, when we see our truth as a facet of Truth rather than The Truth. It will happen when we stop looking exclusively to an external saviour, anchored in time and history, to save us from ourselves. Rather, perhaps, we need to start taking a personal responsibility for so much of what the New Testament guides us towards. We are called to

be Christ in the world – that merely requires the removal of all our ego, all our self-interest.

So, back to the kitchen sink, which I have found is the best classroom for learning such things. Inspired teachers, whether in the flesh or in books, continue to re-motivate me on the journey of living, but at the end of the day the homework is mine. I have a strong sense that it is more who *we are* than what we say that contributes to humanity's development. These are the shortcuts to beingness.

So I continue to travel with the Church, though the institution frequently irritates me beyond belief. Partly because I think the human race is not yet mature enough to live without institutions. I feel that at least some of us need to work for change from within rather than abandon ship altogether.

I continue to travel with Christianity because, despite all I have learnt from the East and from more esoteric ways of thought, it still provides me with the most comprehensive and inclusive philosophy that embraces light and dark, materiality and spirituality, joy and sorrow, and gives meaning through the transforming power of love to the anguish and the pain we see all around us.

Perhaps one day I will wake up embedded in the consciousness of non-duality that I know to be there but keep slipping out of. Perhaps that is the end of the journey. Perhaps that is the final ladder to the top of the board.

HAZEL-ANN'S STORY

My mother was the daughter of a Baptist minister so we joined the local Baptist Church for a while. I have vague memories of Sunday school and children's parties back in the early 1950s. However my brother wanted to join the Scouts (rather than the Boys Brigade) so we transferred to the Congregational Church when I was about six years old. My parents were active in the Church and I followed in their footsteps, the Church being a major part of my life until I moved away to go to college in 1967.

I remember feeling a certain freedom – almost a sense of relief – after I moved away. I had always been curious about other religions, faiths and beliefs and, being now distanced from the institution of the Church, I felt better able to explore. I never stopped praying and my faith in God never wavered, but I attended church on only a handful of occasions during the next decade. I started to read and explore, feeling particularly drawn to Native American spirituality and also to spiritualism.

In the late Sixties a work colleague gave me the little book *The Teachings of Silver Birch*, which gave me a whole new perspective. I was comforted by the thought of angel guardians, of the separation between life and death being only a veil, of a sense of continuity and interaction. The concept of different planes or dimensions, where time was an illusion, made sense to me.

The appeal of Native American spirituality had to do with the long view: by contrast with modern day Western attitudes, actions are directed with a sense of legacy, of the impact on the seventh generation. There is a reverence for all God's gifts and a respect for Mother Earth and all her creatures, together with a strong sense of the interconnectedness of things that resonates with me still.

After the birth of my first child, I returned to the (Congregational) Church – for moral support as much as anything else. Once more I became actively involved, teaching in the Junior Church and later becoming a deacon. However I became increasingly uncomfortable as time went by because I could not reconcile the dogma with my own developing beliefs. I wanted to worship God, not Jesus. I wanted to understand how to live my life according to the Way, not according to man-made rules and regulations. I always felt much closer to God when surrounded by nature than I ever did in church.

I then went back to reading and started exploring again. I read about Taoism, the Quakers, Native Americans, Sufism, mysticism and so forth, which greatly broadened my understanding and gave me the ‘soul-fodder’ I so craved and which I didn’t receive in church. I made a few retreats. Then I discovered the *More-to-Life* retreats, Adrian Smith and his books. He introduced me to CANA and I experienced a huge sense of relief that I was not alone, that there were other people out there searching, willing to question, uncomfortable with Church teachings, open to a new framework of belief more fitting to the 21st Century in which we live.

The break-up of my marriage in 1996 caused me to do a great deal of soul-searching and re-evaluation. I wondered how people manage who have no faith. During this time I re-visited my values, beliefs and priorities and, after a year of virtual hibernation, where work dominated my life, I emerged stronger and wiser. I sought solace in nature, my books, TM, Tai Chi and solitude, rather than from my Church. I attended services far less frequently and found no spiritual nourishment there. Meditation alone at home and my books kept my soul fed.

Then my spiritual companion and soul-mate (Graham) found me and five years later (in 2003) we were married. During this time I also trained in Neuro-Linguistic

Programming, left my job and started my own life-coaching practice. I was struck by the vibrant spirituality I discovered in these circles – so much more energy than I have ever found in church. I discovered a whole new world of awakening spirituality that inspired and challenged me. To be able to share with Graham has been a huge blessing. We have endless discussions around religion and spirituality, beliefs, values, God, heaven and hell, scripture and so forth. We have come a very long way, supported by kindred spirits in the form of friends, colleagues and teachers, through books, websites, synchronicity. And the journey goes on.

I practice TM regularly. I write regularly (those of you who are familiar with Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way* will know about 'morning pages'). I coach and also receive coaching which, for me, is absolutely a spiritual practice. Quality coaching creates a sacred space where transformation becomes possible. I am regularly humbled, amazed and inspired by my clients and celebrate the potential that lies within each of us – the God within, if you like.

I do Tai Chi as often as I can. As for nourishment, that comes from discussions and debate, from books and websites, music, prayer and meditation. We still go to church occasionally but only because many of our friends are there. We both find it pretty challenging these days – so dry and predictable.

I do my best each day to follow the message of love that Jesus brought. For me Jesus is a model, an inspiration, a mentor, a friend, a heretic. He showed us what is possible – and told us we would do even greater things. I believe we are all one, we are each responsible for our thoughts, words and actions and every thought, word and action makes a difference. I do my best to honour the values of love, gratitude, abundance and forgiveness.

My vision is of a new spirituality where people recognise interconnectedness and interdependence. This would find expression in all areas of our lives and manifest in co-operation, collaboration, peace, harmony and understanding – a new order. I am doing my own inner work on a regular basis and encouraging and supporting others in theirs so that we may become all we are meant to be and thereby transform the planet. Our children's children then stand a chance of inheriting a world where, instead of greed, war and exploitation ruling the day, nurture, respect, abundance philosophy, collaboration and celebration of diversity would provide direction.

PHILIP'S STORY

I was born in 1934, the youngest of six siblings, in a devout Roman Catholic family. I was taught by nuns in elementary school, which I hated, and I had learning difficulties. The nuns seemed inhuman to me. I felt devout as a child. My first experience of questioning came at the age of eleven. Walking by a lake with my brother I suddenly thought that God might not exist. I brushed this thought aside. I passed the 11-plus and went to a Roman Catholic grammar school attached to the Oratory in Birmingham. There was a strong Roman Catholic ethos in the school and a close link with the Oratory. I had a sense of the holy and the sacred in the Oratory Church. In contrast to the nuns of my infancy, the teachers in the school were all laymen. They seemed human; I felt at home and thrived in this environment.

In my teens I got into the habit of reading the New Testament daily. This gave me a new awareness of the relevance of Jesus in my life. The Gospel of John in particular spoke directly to my heart. I studied Doctrine and Apologetics at school. The one thing that I had difficulty with was proving the existence of God. I could not do it – the proofs seemed to be intellectual exercises that had no connection at all with the reality of God. Looking back now I think that this experience and the one at age eleven were very significant, but I did not notice at the time.

Leaving school and going to university was a time of crisis. I discovered Socrates and felt that I had met a best friend. A whole new future seemed to open up – the truth was real and could be found by questioning. Everything was open to question. Questioning everything, I was unable to learn anything that I was being taught. My life became chaotic and I was asked to leave the university. While at university I had met

Donald Nichol. He was a radical Catholic thinker who gave me the insight that all truth is one. He also introduced me to other Catholic thinkers such as Teilhard de Chardin. I now understood that truth is one and that truth is discovered by questioning. That is to say, truth is questionable and since truth is one, then all truth is questionable. It cannot be divided into questionable truth and unquestionable truth. Being questionable is an essential characteristic of truth. We discover truth by questioning it.

Truth is robust, it responds to questioning by revealing more of itself. When we stop questioning truth, then truth stops revealing itself. Truth responds to us as if it were alive. Another essential characteristic of truth is that it is self-revealing. It reveals itself to a person at their centre. It cannot be taught by one person to another. There is a saying that the truth told is a lie. When I tell another person my truth it ceases to be truth and becomes information about truth. When two people share their truths with one another, they discover that both truths are different aspects of a greater truth. There is one truth that is beyond all truths, and it cannot be told. A third characteristic of truth is that it reveals itself in the present moment. It cannot be stored. If it is recorded it ceases to be truth and becomes information about truth.

After this time of crisis I married, had children and focused on the family, work and daily living. I took religion and the Church very much for granted, although there was the reading of new books in the background. I spent 33 years working for IBM in the computer industry. What I did not realise was that I was learning a whole new way of being in the world, a whole new way of perceiving and understanding everything that would later impact my religion. I was learning how to live in an evolving universe and how to engage in the process of evolution. In an evolving universe all our traditional

understandings are turned upside down. My traditional understanding of Christianity was about to be turned on its head.

At the age of 60 I got involved in the search for Christian unity. I learned how to feel at home with Christians from other churches. In this being at home with others I came to a new awareness of the presence of Christ and the call of Christ in my life. Although I had believed the doctrine and been to Mass and Communion conscientiously, I had never had a personal living experience of Christ. I became aware of the call of Christ as a call to Christian unity. I became aware of the presence of Christ as a unifying presence in all Christians. Through this presence we are all one.

I then questioned this call to unity. Is it exclusive to Christians or does it extend beyond the Christian Church? Through an experience of being at home with people of other faiths I came to a new understanding of the call of Christ as a universal call that reverberates deep in the heart of every human being. I became aware of the presence of Christ as my true self, who I really am. This who I really am is a cosmic experience. Who I really am is a unique manifestation of the one cosmic self. Our common call is to realise this cosmic self through our way of being together in the world. I had become aware of the presence of Christ working outside the Church in the world and in other faiths.

This new awareness was exciting and liberating. Suddenly everything made sense. I wanted to engage in this work and I looked to the Church to be my support system. Although there were individuals who shared a similar experience, the higher I looked in the Church the less awareness there appeared to be. There seemed to be blindness at the highest level in the Church. With a few exceptions the priests and the hierarchy turned out to be stumbling blocks, so anxious and preoccupied with the

workings of the Church that they were oblivious to what I perceived. Their actions seemed to be at best a distraction and at worst a hindrance.

In 1998 the bishops of the United Kingdom published *One Bread, One Body*, a teaching document on the Eucharist. The hierarchy had become increasingly concerned at Roman Catholics sharing the Eucharist with other Christians. The teaching on the Eucharist and the rules about sharing it are at the very heart of our identity as Roman Catholics. To question this teaching threatens our separate identity. The document was an attempt to put the brakes on sharing the Eucharist.

I had spent a week in Taizé sharing the Eucharist daily with thousands of people from different churches all round the world. I came back with a song in my heart and a spring in my step. Two weeks later I took part in a diocesan conference on *One Bread, One Body*. The doctrine in the book and the reality I had experienced in Taizé seemed to be totally divorced. I felt a deep sense of despair in the hierarchy of my church. It seemed that I must leave my church.

This brought up very deep anxieties. I wrestled with these anxieties for a year. I went to Iona with the local Methodists and reached a decision point. I disagreed with a doctrine that was at the very heart of my own church and that defined Roman Catholic identity. In that case I could no longer in conscience say that I was a Roman Catholic. This felt like a deep loss of identity, as if I had discovered at the age of 66 that I had been adopted at birth and that the people I had thought of all my life as my parents were not my real parents. My real parents were unknown. On the other hand I was not being called to belong to any other church. My real identity was unknown. Christ seemed to be calling me to live with no church identity. Christ seemed to be calling me to be a margin dweller.

A margin dweller is not a bystander, watching the conflict. Nor do they take sides. They challenge conflict by holding open a space for peace between opposing armies. A margin dweller does not sit on the fence; they open a space in the fence for people to pass through. A margin dweller does not worry about who is right and who is wrong; they hold open a space for uncertainty between opposing certainties. By hovering on the margin of the Church I open a space of ambiguity on the boundary that challenges my church to grow. This is to grow not in number but in diversity, to become more inclusive.

My childhood faith seemed to have crumbled to dust. I had lost something that had been valuable. This opened up a space into which new insights were emerging. A new faith was starting to form. This new faith came from my life-experience. Through my experience working for IBM I had come to take it for granted that the world of technology and business is evolving. In 1980, while living in the USA, a new stream of experience began. A family crisis led me into family therapy. I discovered the world of therapy and the human potential movement. I have worked part time in this field since then. For five years I co-conducted a therapy group. I took the job because I wanted to discover if there was a reality in a group that was more than the individuals present. I came to the conclusion that not only was the group real, but that the individuals were illusions. What was real about the group was the group process. A group is real when it is growing and what is growing is the whole. The process of growing reveals the whole. Without the process the whole cannot be seen and the people seem to be separate individuals. Through this experience I have come to understand humankind as a growing whole. We all share a common origin and a common destiny. Ultimate separation is impossible.

Evolution seems to be speeding up. The rate of change at the

human scale has reached a critical point beyond which we need a new way of thinking about time, and a new way is emerging. I came across this new way when writing business strategies and when working in the field of therapy. We used to think of time as absolute and finite. We move relative to time and time is a finite resource that we are using up. Eventually we will reach the end of time and time will run out. The new way of thinking assumes that now is absolute and time is changing relative to now. Now is after the end of past time and before the beginning of future time. The past is complete and now is the opportunity to begin again. It is always now, so there will always be an opportunity to begin again.

Past time is being destroyed and future time is being created continually, here-now. The universe is being destroyed and re-created continually here-now. This is a profound natural mystery because here-now is the subjective centre of the person. It seems as if we are living in a person-centred universe. For Christians, the remote God who created the whole of everything from the outside in, all by Himself, at the beginning of time, disappears. In His place we have an intimate God who is creating the whole of everything from the inside out, through us, here-now. Since I am always here-now, this God is inescapable, closer to me than I am to myself. If the Creator of the universe is within me, then even if I lost the whole universe it would not matter. It could be re-created all over again from within.

I have come to experience the universe as a dynamic interconnected whole. Everything is changing continuously. Nothing is static. Nothing is isolated. The universe is teeming with cyclic processes that all have the same simple pattern. This is the pattern of the breath, the ups and downs of life, sleeping and waking, the ebb and flow of tides, the seasons of the year. This is the growth cycle; a wave of growth. The

cycles hold all opposites in balance and are weaving the fabric of the universe. The life of a person is a thread in the weave. All threads are necessary to reveal the emerging pattern. The growth process is self transcending, self correcting, self healing and self balancing. There is a continual interchange of energy and form. A wave of energy creates form; the form then collapses to release a new wave of energy. The one everlasting energy is expressing itself in myriad transient forms throughout space-time. The energy I take to be love. I am one of the transient forms, an expression of love. The universal process can be experienced as growth in the life of any person. The process can be trusted. We are growing in wholeness and ultimately all will be well for all of us.

My new faith helps me to make more sense of my experience of living in an evolving universe. Traditional Christianity assumes that Creation was a single event that happened at the beginning of time. It was the action of God acting alone and God created everything perfect in the beginning. The world clearly is not perfect now, there is suffering and evil. Someone must be to blame for the existence of suffering and evil, someone deserves to be punished, and it cannot be God. That is how I was taught as a child.

On the other hand, if I assume that the universe is evolving, it is imperfect because God has not finished creating it yet. It is work in progress. No one is to blame for the existence of suffering and evil, no one deserves to be punished. But there is work to be done, and we can take responsibility for completing this work. We experience this work as a wave-like process. God is creating in waves. All that God creates is good so we experience waves of goodness. Evil is how we experience the troughs between the waves; it is how we experience our need of goodness. We are all invited to collaborate in this work of completing Creation. I take the vision of Jesus to be a vision of

this completion. Jesus spoke frequently about the Kingdom. He told us what the Kingdom is like and what it is not like. The Kingdom is like a world in which the beatitudes have come true. I believe that Jesus was telling us what Creation will be like when the work is complete.

The Christianity I was taught as a child assumed that at the end of time humans will be separated, with the good in heaven and the bad in hell. Creation ends up divided. This life is a veil of tears, the good suffer and the bad have it easy. This will be put right in the next life. The good will be rewarded and the bad will be punished. That is justice. We need to be motivated in this life by the threat of punishment and the promise of reward in the next. We strive for heaven and fear hell. As Roman Catholics we receive grace from God through the ordained priesthood when we repent of our sin. If we die in a state of grace we end up in heaven, if we die in a state of sin we end up in hell. That is how I was taught as a child.

Now I see the universe as an evolving whole. Time is never-ending so there is no final separation. We will end up whole. The ultimate reality is love, and this love longs to express itself. Evolution is the process through which this love is expressing itself in Creation. We experience this process through the ups and downs of life. We get glimpses of heaven and glimpses of hell. Hell is how we experience our need of love. Heaven is how we experience the gift of love. The ups and downs of life teach us how to engage in the process of receiving what we need. God's plan is a world in which love is being completely expressed. We are co-operating to bring heaven down to earth for all. This is heaven on earth, the continuous giving of love in response to our continuous need.

All my life God has been sending teachers to teach me lessons. Each time I fail to learn the lesson, another teacher arrives with the same lesson. When I learn the lesson, then the

next teacher brings a new lesson. These teachers are my life experiences, both good and bad. Indeed some of my best teachers have been my worst experiences. The Bible is a record of God teaching people through experience. Not too long after the time of Jesus, some clever men who thought they knew everything took charge of the Church. Knowing everything they stopped learning. They stopped writing the Bible and wrote what they knew. They wrote a creed. Unfortunately in an evolving universe any creed starts to become obsolete as soon as the ink has dried. Meanwhile God continued to send teachers to those who would listen.

The advent of rapid and vivid global communications has opened up a new way for God to teach us lessons on a global scale. The destruction of the World Trade Centre, the Iraq war and the Tsunami are teachers sent by God. They helped me to see more vividly than ever before the way to be One and the futility of division and war. God can now teach us all directly through experience in a way that bypasses the traditional religions. I see this as a future trend. God will increasingly teach us directly and the role of traditional religions will decline.

JUDY'S STORY

Ever since childhood I have been conscious of a strong inner conviction that there existed a benevolent creative force behind the universe. This conviction originated, I think, in a term spent at a Roman Catholic convent when I was seven. Luckily, because I was not a Catholic, no one tried to catechise me - I was just given an attractive little booklet saying that Jesus cared for me and was allowed to absorb the atmosphere of the chapel, which I found deeply satisfying. There was *something* there that I wanted, and this stayed with me all through the rest of my school career, when prayers and hymns at assemblies failed to make any impression; in fact my overwhelming feeling about school prayers was that they were all about social control and nothing to do with true holiness.

The experience at the convent coincided with a short period when my family lived in the Kentish countryside – in what my mother, a Londoner, thought of as a grotty cottage miles from anywhere. But for me the whole of the small world within walking distance of home was deeply numinous: the orchard at the back of the house full of wild daffodils in the spring and the banks thick with primroses. The wood at the bottom of the steep lane which passed our house was dominated by a huge beech tree on a mound – so obviously a sacred place, though I could not have put this thought into words at that age. This time, which felt almost like a period outside time, before the stresses of the world impinged, was the foundation of a sense of wonder which has stayed with me all my life. It has sustained me in difficult times.

During the rest of my childhood and adolescence I searched for a context in which to understand what I felt to be the mystery at the centre of life.

At the age of seventeen a churchgoing friend introduced me

to a gentle Anglican priest named Berners-Wilson (his daughter, Angela, was the first woman to be ordained in the Church of England). Together my friend and I walked four or five miles on quiet roads through the attractive Kentish countryside early on Sunday mornings to attend communion in his church and to hear him preach about that ‘unseen hidden world which is all about us’. Looking back I can see that he would have fitted very comfortably into the tradition which we now label ‘Creation Spirituality’, a tradition which emphasises the blessings in life rather than dwelling on our sinfulness.

Somehow through young adulthood and middle age I managed to avoid contact with anyone who tried to put constraints on the development of my faith. Encountering some inspiring teachers from different Christian traditions on the way, I eventually discovered the Ignatian tradition, mediated by enlightened nuns and Jesuits who believed strongly that God meets each person where they are and that this crucial relationship should be nurtured but not impeded by what Gerard Hughes, one of my mentors, calls ‘the tyranny of the oughteries’!

It was only when I came across the Alpha course in my local church (‘three reasons to prove that God exists, one, two, three!’) that I realised with intense shock how unorthodox my belief system appeared to be. This led to several years of painful struggle in which I felt quite unable to fit into the framework of conventional Christianity. Who *was* Jesus, this person who has felt like a friend and companion? Is he merely an archetype constellated by my own unconscious psyche, as Jung seems to suggest? Why the emphasis on suffering instead of blessing, on sin rather than redemption, on crucifixion rather than resurrection? What do all these *words* theologians use mean anyway, and are they at all relevant to everyday life?

The struggle to come to find a place for my own spirituality

within a church community continues, but of late it feels to be bearing fruit. I have moved to a parish which offers a traditional communion service and find the ordered ritual deeply satisfying. It serves as a sort of 'holy noise' against which background I can experience, rather than voice, my own reaching out to God – whoever or whatever he, she or it is - and experience God's response to me. It continues to feel like a two-way relationship.

I am also enjoying helping with the children in my old parish where the church community is very family orientated, and am learning to appreciate the warmth of the welcome extended there, despite the discomfort of not being able to share the congregation's rather literal interpretation of the scriptures. Encouragement has also come from attending a workshop on 'Godly Play', a method of putting Bible stories over to children in a way which feeds their imagination and encourages the growth of their unique and individual spirituality. Instead of trying to extract the 'right' answers from the children the storyteller encourages them to explore the subject and feed back their own ideas. These ideas are treated with respect and no child is made to feel that his or her answers are 'wrong'. This attitude of respect for the way in which the Holy Spirit works within the individual child (or adult), irrespective of outer circumstances, might be a way forward for the churches in what promises to be a very tempestuous century.

A study of Jung's work on psychological types has also borne fruit as this has helped me to understand why individual attitudes to spirituality vary so greatly. Those like me who have a highly developed intuitive function have no problem in believing in the existence of something they cannot see or touch, while those who operate mainly through thinking and sensation can find this attitude incomprehensible. Jung suggests

that each of us needs to work on our less developed functions and although such work is unlikely to change our basic orientation towards spirituality it may offer hope in the future for better understanding of those whose churchmanship is very different from one's own.

As a footnote I wish to explain what I mean by holiness. For me it is close to wholeness and authenticity. It involves a strong sense of the sacred, a letting go of material and egotistical attitudes and a search for the deeper self, which is perhaps the place in which God dwells within us. But as one ponders such questions, words become irrelevant and one can only work with a deep sort of intuitive knowing which defies definition. When asked by John Freeman in a *Face to Face* interview whether he believed in God, Carl Jung answered "I do not believe, I *know*". This kind of intuitive inner knowledge is what continues to sustain me.

ADRIAN'S STORY

I write as a Catholic priest, a member of an African missionary society. What motivated me as a young man to become a missionary was the belief, current in the Church at that time, that all the 'pagans' who were not 'saved' had no chance of spending eternity in heaven. As Church theology developed – largely due to the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) – my missionary motivation changed to the aim of founding an African Church. Hell was no longer a threat for the unbaptised!

A number of experiences have, step by step over the last half century, nudged me to move from one religious paradigm to another. Let me mention a few.

I was ordained in 1955 to serve an unreformed Catholic Church. The previous seven years of study of philosophy, theology and spirituality had given me a 'package of truths' which, as a young priest, I understood it was my duty to pass on in their integrity. After seven years in England promoting interest in our African missions I was appointed to Zambia (then Northern Rhodesia) but, fortuitously, I was sent first for a further year's study at the International Higher Religious Education Institute, *Lumen Vitae*, in Brussels. This was the first year of the Second Vatican Council and several of the lecturers were advisors to the bishops participating in the council. Their views were mind-blowing. It was a complete eye-opener for me. It was as if all the previous academically dull, compartmentalised studies of theology, Bible, Church history and so on were thrown into a great melting pot and presented in an integrated form. For the first time I became excited by theology. I began reading widely with curiosity and no longer with a sense of duty. The experience launched me on a theological journey which has grown more all-embracing ever since.

The next shift in my religious paradigm came with my

arrival in Africa. I spent the first two years ‘in the bush’, living among village people. In my youth I had thought of missionaries as the ones who possessed the sacred truth and it was our duty to hand this down to the deprived pagans. It is a truism that ‘by your pupils you are taught’ – or, in Church language, ‘the evangelisers are evangelised by the poor’ – but I soon found so many of my basic assumptions challenged. I met so many thoroughly good-living people that I realised the Holy Spirit had been present among them for centuries before I arrived on the scene! I understood that there are no specifically Christian values which are not the same as the highest human values appreciated by all humanity.

My appointment in the 1970s to promote pastoral biblical work in all the English-speaking countries of Africa – some 24 countries – took me into biblical studies at a new depth. It was an enlightenment to me to discover that the concern of Jesus was not with a church but with what he referred to with the metaphor *Kingdom of God*. It is all about a way to live life more fully.

I came to recognise that the Church is to be at the service of the Kingdom and that the Holy Spirit leads individuals to the fullness of life through other churches, other religions or without religion. So my mission motivation became much broader: to promote God’s design for His world. Yes, I still consider myself as a missionary but a missionary of the Kingdom, not of the Church.

The next major influence on my mind-expanding journey occurred upon my return from Africa. I was given a year’s sabbatical and spent that doing an MA course at the Irish School of Ecumenics. Previously I had served a five-year term as one of the Consultors to what was then the Vatican Secretariat (now the Pontifical Council) for Promoting Christian Unity and for ten years as Secretary for Ecumenism

for the Zambia Bishops Conference. I had thus had a lot of grassroots experience of ecumenical matters but I felt I lacked a theology of it. During my year at the ISE we studied not only relations between different Christian denominations but between Christianity and other faiths (particularly Hinduism) and between Christianity in relation to 'the world'. It was a mind-stretching year which gave me an appreciation of how many valid paths there are to union with the Ultimate Reality we name 'God'.

A nudge of particular significance was my introduction to Transcendental Meditation as a contemplative form of prayer and the many insights that this practice has granted me over the last thirty years. Meeting with so many people who were meditators but who had no religious attachments took me into the world of non-religious spirituality.

During the last two decades I have been moving into yet a fourth paradigm. In this I experience a break with or an advance upon mainstream Church thinking. What impels and absorbs me today is to address the interface between Christian belief and the emerging new consciousness or, as some call it, grassroots spirituality. We in the West, over the last few decades, have become more personal, more individual, more self-sufficient. I believe this has come about through our widespread formal education, our economic sufficiency, our increased general knowledge and our increased choice. The result is that we have less regard for the authority either of persons or institutions. We have a freedom of expression and lifestyle which, in the domain of religion, means we feel free to 'pick and mix' what we consider helpful to our growth. We are less inclined to depend upon Church authorities to point the way.

As one who now goes about the country leading discussion days entitled *A Christian Understanding of the Emerging New*

Consciousness I am often asked to explain what is meant by ‘the new consciousness’. That is a difficult one because it is more of an awareness, an experience, than an intellectual theory. The best I can do is to describe it as a shift from an analytical way of thinking that has dominated our western thought-processes since the time of Isaac Newton – that is, we try to understand everything by taking it apart and examining the pieces separately – to a view that sees everything in its context, in terms of its relationships. It is a move from a static to a dynamic, evolving perception of reality. All is in constant change. These present times are described as post-modernism.

So today I see my role to be that of a bridge-builder between this new approach to spirituality and our Christian patrimony. I regard both my priesthood and my membership of a missionary society as a means to that end. By ‘missionary’ I mean that I feel the urge to announce the Good News of the Gospel and to highlight that it is not about the Church nor about ‘salvation’. It concerns what we are called to *become*: fully human, recognising and developing all the potential that lies within us – “*Mature people reaching to the very height of the Christ’s full stature*” (Eph. 4:13). This is exciting!

JANICE'S STORY

There was a time during the early 1970s when a rapid succession of inner experiences triggered what I now see as a spiritual awakening. It was as though a curtain was being drawn back on my then immediate reality. I could see within and beyond the limitations that my conditioned mind had hitherto set. A combination of an Anglican Church and home, a Roman Catholic convent education and my own desire to be of service, had produced a committed Christian of ecumenical and moderately evangelical kind.

I think it was a sense of being drawn to join a weekly meditation group in the next town that provided the trigger for this awakening – a process that seems to have gone on ever since! I'll describe four of the experiences that were particularly life-changing. They shifted my traditional exoteric understanding of Christianity to an esoteric understanding that has caused me to move beyond conventional religious adherence to a more mystical path. This path does not seem to find expression in contemporary Christianity, yet it echoes the insights of the Gnostics and early Celtic mystics and continually affirms the depth and truth in the teachings of Jesus before these were framed into 'beliefs' by the early Church fathers and many theologians ever since.

The *first* experience happened at the top of our own garden. I was sitting meditating, away from our children playing, when a 'curtain' was suddenly pulled aside and I saw the amazing dance of creation and knew the one-ness of all life. I experienced the cosmos not as a mechanism but as a living, sacred whole. I could see and feel a wonderfully vibrant energy flowing through everything and manifesting as the shrubs, as the insects and as me. I felt this energy as entirely loving and beneficent and knew at that moment that everything is whole,

holy. It is part of 'one stupendous whole whose body Nature is, and God is the Soul'. If only we could 'open the immortal eye of man inwards' we too would see the 'world in a grain of sand and heaven in a flower', as Pope and Blake respectively have expressed it. I have never knowingly swatted a wasp since that day!

A *second* experience was, again, during a time of prayer when the inner presence I had known as the Master Jesus started speaking within my own thinking as the 'I Am', which I now appreciate as the Cosmic Christ. My form of communication came best through writing and I wrote out the simple yet profound teachings, and produced a booklet which I showed the curate at our local church. He reacted in alarm and prayed over me, clearly assuming I was now at best 'off the wall' and at worst under the influence of the devil! Reassurance came in the form of a book from the Findhorn Foundation by Eileen Caddy, called *God spoke to Me* .(now published as *Opening Doors Within*) The messages were so similar to what I had written. They seemed to me to echo messages in the Gnostic Gospels and I started to trust what I was writing as more than just my imagination.

This part of my journey was extremely lonely; I felt isolated from my friends and could find no kinship in my local church. Eventually I met someone who was experiencing a similar deeper reality. Ursula Burton and I lived 400 miles apart but, as we explored together, each new insight seemed to come upon each of us at the same time. I recall the way in which we came to know that we had each lived many lives before this one and initially recoiled in confusion as this idea did not concur with what we had been taught. I seemed to go through a series of flashbacks to other times and even find places in this life that I recognised from an earlier time. Affirmation can come in strange ways if we hold fast to truth as it arises from deep

within us. Then one day, as we sat at breakfast together, we both saw – with an inner eye – a book come and land on the table amongst the toast, and we knew we had to write a book together.

This book took many years in the writing but was eventually published in 1984 as *Christian Evolution: moving towards a Global Spirituality* (Turnstone Books). Strange how, twenty years later, I am writing of the global spirituality emerging now, as we had seen it then. At the time of publication, Ursula was leading Ignatian retreats at a Catholic centre and I was convinced she would be asked to leave. But the book seemed to strike a chord with many people and all was well. Indeed, we received several letters, saying, “*I wept with relief when I read your book, at last appreciating that I was not alone and wasn’t going mad after all*”.

A *third* experience was during the confirmation of one of our daughters, when my father (whom I knew was ill at my sister’s house two hundred miles away) suddenly stood in front of me, clearly recognisable. I was overwhelmed with a huge sense of joy and realised that he must have died. When we got home my sister rang and said that this had happened. For several days I seemed to share a totally other dimension with him and we had some amazing conversations. I learned how he felt I had let him down by my unwillingness to discuss the possibility of his dying, which he would have found helpful. I also learned the meaning of unconditional love. I now find that the conventional funeral service unacceptably falls short of the joy I find in the continuity of consciousness, and the communication that is possible with those who have transitioned to other realms.

Ursula died in 1993 and we started to communicate within three hours of her death. We knew that we would write another book together when she was ‘on the other side’. This happened

in 1995. I went to Iona, a place we both loved, where the veils between the dimensions are thinner than elsewhere. We worked together in much the way we had before, only this was more of a mind-to-mind conversation and, at times, flowed like a ‘mind meld’. This was easier than when we had both been in the same dimension. I have not found the time since then to finish that book for publication, but Ursula is now pressing that it is time for humanity to understand the continuity of consciousness, in which birth and death are but an episode in the ongoing journey of the soul.

The Church also seems to shrink from the joy of birth and baptism, so we have asked priests that we know to conduct christenings for our grandchildren at home. This they have done in such uplifting ways. Truly, ‘In my father’s house there are many mansions’ – other dimensions of being that interpenetrate our lives, accessible to us if we can leave behind all fear and attune with higher frequencies of being.

During this time of rapid awakening I read avidly and attended as many conferences as I could. Sir George Trevelyan, who started the Wrekin Trust, was one particular inspiration. He spoke so insightfully of the deeper truths hidden within poetry, Shakespeare and the esoteric teachings of different faiths. Several times I visited the Findhorn Foundation, which seemed to me an example of living out the essence of Christianity. This foundation, of which I am now a trustee, has set out to discover and demonstrate a new vision of the divine potential within each of us and how we might work together in new ways, learn to trust the process of synchronicity – as Jung termed it – and seek what it really means to bring the kingdom of heaven on earth in a practical way. A key aspect of this community has been listening inwardly to ‘God within’ and having sanctuary at the heart of community life. I experienced the reality of the teachings of Christ – ‘Ask and ye shall

receive; knock and it will be opened unto you' – and discovered how people of so many different backgrounds were working with the same inner realities as myself.

Nevertheless, I still thought of Jesus Christ as The Way, somehow better than other ways. Then I went to India. This was a *fourth* transforming experience. From then on I knew my spirituality could never be the same again. In India spirit seems to dance more visibly through all Creation and the inner aspects of life are what life itself is really about. I can remember clearly the moment when I felt that, at last, I was experiencing a side of my own humanity that growing up and living in the West had not given me. In the West the focus is on the outer side of life. I was travelling with one of our daughters and we visited ashrams of different traditions. One of these was Shantivanam in the south, where we were privileged to sit with Fr Bede Griffiths for an hour. We explored the contribution of different faiths to the whole, the deeper meanings that lie behind the outer symbols and rituals and how a 'marriage of East and West' was the way towards the emergence of a global spirituality.

I returned from that first trip to India and engaged more actively with the growing interfaith movement. In a personal way I have been drawn to the riches of the Hindu tradition and the Sufi way, but I have also been enriched by meeting people and engaging in exchange with many other ways.

Nevertheless, by my second trip to India, I was still clinging to the notion that Jesus Christ was, in some way, more divine than the other teachers. Then came what felt like a thunderbolt from the heavens. Following exchanges at an ashram in the Himalayas, where I was staying with our other three daughters, I was struggling with this inner tension when a huge ball of light appeared to roll down the mountain and stop at my feet. It was shaped like a tetrahedron with many, many facets. A bright

light from within shone through many facets. I could see Jesus, Mohammed, Confucius, Swami Shyam (the guru on this ashram) and many others. From within the light a voice came clearly: “*I shine through many, many teachers*”. I knew that the ‘I Am’ was cosmically too vast to be contained within any one ‘son’ or ‘daughter’ of God. Ralph Waldo Trine obviously saw this well before I did!

*Let there be many windows in your Soul
That all the glory of the universe
May beautify it. Not the narrow pane
Of one poor creed can catch the radiant rays
That shine from countless sources. Tear away
The blinds of superstition, let the light
Pour through the fair windows, broad as truth itself
And high as heavens. Tune your ear
To the wordless music of the stars
And to the voice of nature, and your heart
Shall turn to truth and goodness as the plant
Turns to the sun. A thousand unseen hands
Reach down to help you from their peace-crowned
heights
And all the forces of the firmament
Shall fortify your strength. Be not afraid
To thrust aside half-truths and grasp the whole.*

In a seventeenth century insight, Shakespeare’s Polonius said: “*There is more in heaven and earth, my good Horatio, than is dreamed of in your philosophy*”. How much more has the world moved on, with quantum physics, neuroscience and research into near-death experiences and other things. Yet outside the Church the rational, materialistic view prevails and, inside, the institution resists the change which to me seems an integral part of evolutionary process. I respect the Church for

holding to the faith through dark and difficult ages, but it seems to be avoiding the transformation process that would enable Christ's values and vision to stand against Mammon's and bring heaven onto earth, in the way we pray that this might happen.

The miracle that took place in Cana was the transforming of the water of the old consciousness into the wine of the new. Maybe the small organisation, CANA, which has produced this book, is now being asked to be one of a growing number of agents of this transformation? Might the 'new wine' be the discovery of the love of the Source of All, deep within ourselves? Might the release of this love through so many be what was meant by the second coming? Might it be, as Alice Bailey put it a hundred years ago, that it is *"Humanity who is now to be the world saviour"*? These are amongst the questions I feel drawn to explore.

It is now in small groups that I find others with whom to explore the big questions. In international conferences I find a growing will to nourish the souls of children, who are drowning so much in materiality that they often seek solace in depression or drugs. I find a longing to respect and care for the soil drenched in chemicals, the air poisoned with our fumes, the seas loaded with our pollutants. I find the Prince of Wales more of a spokesperson for the way I feel than the Synod or the Vatican. Recently he quoted the late twentieth century poet, Kathleen Raine, who died in 2003: *"We are being used by invisible powers – angelic I hope – in order to bring about the changes without which this poor, beautiful earth will die – not only Nature but the soul of the world"*.

I respect that many friends still feel committed to work within the institutional Church. They, in turn, respect that I just cannot. It's as though I were someone in an earlier century knowing that the earth was round, because I'd sailed around it,

and therefore unable to relate comfortably to those who continued insisting that it was flat.

As Lindsay Clarke says, *"I woke to the exhilarating sense that the unfolding flow of life was not only larger but richer in meaning and interest than my tightly managed model of what it had been. I was learning to think with the heart"*

I can no longer look backwards at an historical Christianity. I feel called instead to listen to the summons of Christ – now, in present time. Instead of joining my local church community I feel called to be part of the many communities and small groups that have started worldwide in the last few decades and now are linking up. There's a global eco-village network, *Positive News* is being distributed worldwide and the Internet spreads news of peace gatherings and vigils within hours.

Part of my own work has been to write, with others, *The Quest* – as a framework within which people can explore their own authentic growing sense of soul. Another part is with the Wrekin Trust and University for Spirit Forum, in which we are linking up the providers of non-sectarian spiritual education, honouring the unity and the diversity, and collaborating to create a 'field' in which spirituality can be seen as an essential aspect of life and an acceptable aspect of all education.

If the 'devil' keeps us busy with the detail maybe 'God', however we perceive Him/Her, is in the events that are now 'soul-sized'. My prayer is that we can let go of our small concerns that divide. Instead, 'Be still and know that I am God'. In this way, we can develop our sensitivity, awareness and perceptive understanding of subtle dimensions, to work in harmony with the higher laws of life and play our part in a great awakening in our time.

JOYCE'S STORY

As a child I had a sense that there was a 'something' there for me when I found life was too hard to cope with. Difficult to explain, but I would put my arms around me and huddle down in bed knowing that they represented 'something' that would keep me safe. This experience I did not relate to the 'God' I was taught about at Sunday school, who was up in heaven and, as my mother was prone to say, would be looking out to see that I was doing as I was told!

I had a conversion experience in my teens around the time of Billy Graham and felt a great sense of the love of God being with and for me. As I was very shy and unsure of myself this gave a self-confidence and greater capacity to cope with the world about me.

In my early twenties my father, with whom I had a very close relationship, became ill with cancer. It was diagnosed as inoperable. He was just 53 and I found it unbelievable that he had to die. I prayed to my loving God that there would be a way to save him. I read up all I could about the then known cures, taking the latest findings to the doctor only to be told that my father's condition was too far advanced for any possibility of a cure. When he died I felt that I had let him down. I could have prayed harder – I obviously was not good enough! There was so much pain, hurt and anger. How could a loving God allow someone to suffer in such a way!

I turned away from God and Church, only entering it again when my daughter was christened some eight years later, but certainly with no wish to renew my commitment to either.

A few years on I read a book by John Robinson called *Honest to God* and one by Paul Tillich (whose title I have forgotten), on existentialism. These gave me my first insight of a God not 'out-there' somewhere but 'within'. This struck a

cord in my heart and I began to explore the possibility that my old understanding of God was erroneous – as J B Philipps wrote in *My God is too Small*.

When my daughter was ten I went back to college to obtain a teaching degree. Unable to find a place in the history department I decided to apply to the theological faculty and was duly accepted. It was to our advantage that the college had decided to write into the syllabus that year a course on comparative religion. This was a great turning point for me. Not only did I get to appreciate the diverse approaches to Christianity itself, I was also introduced to other belief systems, to philosophy and mysticism. This felt as though I was coming ‘home’ to an inner understanding that had been forgotten. I found that a God that was immanent, that was not anthropomorphised, that was to be found in the formless, spoke deep to my inside and seemed to make sense of my very early experiences as a child.

Needless to say my time at college was but a toe in the water, but it opened the floodgates of inner understanding, acceptance and remembrance. I read mystical writings from all the traditions, finding that bells were ringing inside me. Sometimes it felt that an electric current swept through me as a new insight or, as I believe, a remembered insight, came into consciousness once more.

So moving from a God transcendent to a God immanent and returning for a while to Christianity through the Ignatian exercises allowed me to ‘see’ the scriptures anew through my own spirit-led experience. This turned my spiritual understanding upside down. I just wished that everyone else could be given the opportunity to have their own God experience, rather than being told ‘about’ God. The scriptures came alive and I had no doubt that God was leading me into a far greater understanding of myself and what I named ‘God’. I did my own training in Ignatian Spirituality some years later so

that I could indeed have the privilege of working alongside other people on their own spiritual journey. At the end of my thirty days' silent retreat, which was the foundation of the training, I realised that what I had been seeking was that experience of 'relationship' between Father and Son. I was beginning to understand St Augustine's statement that "*God is nearer to me than I am to myself*" or Martin Buber, who said something like "*There is no room for I and Thou*": the three in one of the Trinity began to take on a new meaning.

Since then my understanding of God has continued to be challenged, expanded and deepened. Reading books by Steiner, Gurdjieff, Suzuki and so many others I began to discover that I was a multi-dimensional being; that my soul was not within my ego self but that ego was within soul. I began to move from an ego consciousness of separation and finiteness into soul/spirit consciousness, which is unifying and infinite. I now have a sense of a Universal Source of which I am part and which is part of me. A Creator that is not separate from that which is created but is within and without all that is.

In this way I too am part of all things. There is nothing and no one that is excluded because we are all part of the One. Yet the One is always greater – that paradox of intimate 'knowing'. Yet at the same time there is an acceptance that there is always 'more', an acceptance that our finite minds can never encapsulate the Infinite. I feel that each of the faiths is like a finger on a hand but that the unifying source is the hand itself which each is trying to express in the way that has been revealed to them. This is the joy of mysticism/spirituality which unites and acknowledges the diversity of belief, not in fear, but as an opportunity to delight in a new way in the Creator of all that is.

My dilemma now with the Christian Church is this: what is the unique role of Christ and how does He fit into the cosmic

reality of beingness in a way that does not cause separation? Christ never came to be divisive but to point the way to God through Love itself. Also, I do not see myself as a fallen sinner – which appears to be the view of the Church – whilst I acknowledge that I fall far short of incarnating this love. I believe that we have been created in love and that our purpose here is to remember this and to take responsibility for the way we connect with and respond to the God within all of Creation. Heaven, for me, is not a place to which we go after death but an ever-deepening relationship with the Divine in all things. This can be experienced now and conversion is not to a particular faith but to a way of life that is rooted in love and acceptance. This may of course be grounded in one tradition.

Another dilemma for me is the word ‘God’ itself, as promulgated by Church doctrine. It evokes a sense of separateness, a God outside of Creation to whom we pray and are subject. This is no longer in keeping with my own emerging experience of interconnected Oneness. As John Shelby Spong writes in his book *A New Christianity for a New World*, we are moving beyond a theistic God and if Christianity is to survive it has to find a language and an interpretation of Christ’s message that is both relevant and coherent with the new consciousness that is coming into being. The erstwhile interpretation that was appropriate during the time of our spiritual childhood is no longer acceptable as we move into a more adult spiritual awareness in which we accept our responsibility as co-creators - an interconnected part of a Creation that is forever in process of unfolding into a potential that is limitless.

At one stage in my journey I was praying hard to lose my sense of ego-self in order that I could better serve God’s Kingdom rather than my own. To my horror, one day I awoke to the awesome feeling that my deeply felt experience of God’s presence had gone. I was so angry: I had prayed to lose myself

and instead had lost God! All that was left was *me*. It took weeks before the sense of presence returned. But from my current understanding I see what a gift this could have been if only I had eyes to see or ears to hear. For of course there is only One – a separate God or a separate self is pure illusion. The Church's teaching on the requisite to overcome self in order to be a spiritual being is an anathema, for any separation is an illusion, and the conscious self that knows it is part of the very 'beingness' of Creation, a pure gift to be accepted with thankfulness and to delight in. D H Lawrence encapsulated this seeming divide in the following words:

I know that I am a compound of two waves, I who am temporal and mortal. When I am timeless and absolute, all duality has vanished. But whilst I am temporal and mortal, I am framed in the struggle and embrace of the two opposite waves of darkness and light.

Freedom comes about as our consciousness expands into the One, moving beyond duality and beginning to relate to the apparent opposites as choices and options.

There is a great movement towards a spirituality rooted within everyday living and at the heart of who we are. People within and without the churches are searching for a way forward that brings life and purpose. The promise of the scientific age, that it would bring an answer to all ills, has not been proven to be true. Our institutions and governments are lacking in providing a manifesto that people can believe in. The promise of affluence for all in a materialistic society is hollow and unfulfilling. Yet real progress is being made as physicists are discovering interconnectedness and accepting that the mystical traditions might well have a truth that can now be validated by science. The world of psychology is opening up to the fact that the whole person, mind, body and spirit, needs to

be taken into consideration when trying to enable a fragmented person to become whole. The medical profession, education, commerce, in fact all aspects of our material world, are awakening to the fact that bringing in the spiritual development of their employees leads to greater harmony within the workplace. This in turn means less loss of hours through stress-related illness and greater productivity.

The vision that carries me forward is the new awareness that everyone is a spiritual being, which therefore unites and does not divide, which allows for diversity and encourages each individual to reach their potential. Oftentimes people have no words to express their experience of the 'numinous' and would not necessarily call it 'religious', but they do not doubt it and other people listening to them can 'feel' that it is true.

My own nourishment comes from the seekers who step over the threshold of The Coach House where I work, from conversations with colleagues and friends as we discuss and share our own experiences and books. So many good and valid books are now being written as people try to put into words the all-encompassing experience they have had, so that other people may be awakened to these possibilities for themselves. People no longer wish to be told about God and the Source of All. They wish for and gain their own experience, which in turn activates them to take up their responsibilities for the earth, for the people it contains and the cosmic universe. This excites and enlivens me.

It is these experiences of the numinous, found in so many different ways – often in nature, through music, dance, a smile or a touch – that are liberating people from the confines of their old belief systems. Standing in the surety of their own 'knowing' they no longer fear other faith traditions or forms of spirituality. In fact they are being drawn to explore the diversity of experience with an eagerness and delight in the

possibility of expanding their understanding.

However, for others the transition is not so easy. As the new insights are glimpsed, their sense of security, bound up in their old belief system, is shattered. They had thought they were sailing with purpose across the sea of life, guided by a divine pilot, but now they feel cast adrift, without rudder, maps or pilot! Yet even these folk know they cannot return to the old understandings, which no longer fit with their own current experiences. A great deal of TLC is needed during this consciousness shift phase, as it turns one's life upside-down and can be disorientating until those new experiences become the foundation stones for the way forward.

David Tacey, in his book *The Spirituality Revolution*, speaks about his findings as he explored experiences of the numinous with his university students. Although some of the students were from a faith tradition, many were not. Yet together they were able to share and be united by those profound moments when “*time stood still and they felt themselves totally interconnected in a deeply personal loving way with all that is*”. Far from turning these young people into egocentric self-absorbed beings, it seemed to inspire them into a much greater social and environmental awareness and a sense of responsibility to the whole of Creation.

William Bloom, in his book *Soulution – the Holistic Manifesto*, has suggested a word that might be used in future for people whose faith has been opened to this wider understanding, not just as an idea or belief but as a lived experience continually challenging them to a greater self-awareness. This word is *Holist*. As he says, as holism is totally inclusive it will be possible to be a Christian Holist, Hindu Holist or Muslim Holist, or of course, just a Holist. But it is a way of defining and perhaps uniting the diverse ways in which spirituality is at present being expressed. He also points out that these numinous

experiences allow our whole body to relax and be flooded with endorphins that not only help us feel good, but are beneficial for our health and for everyone else. They enable us to be less closed-in and more open and loving towards others. So he advocates that we learn how to find the space and time to encourage and reflect upon such moments. I feel that we need to wake up more and more to these moments in our everyday living and relish them.

With our acceptance and growing understanding that we are part of the life-force – the very essence of Creation – and that we are multidimensional beings, the way our behaviour, thoughts and feelings affect those other levels of being have to be taken into account. Many people are in touch with angelic and other spiritual planes of existence. They are alongside us as we emerge into a new soul/spirit consciousness, using their energy to find a path for the increase of light needed to disperse the negativity we have built up around the planet. This heavy negativity-excess affects all levels of being. On a physical level it would be like the whole world being subject to famine, which would of course sap energy and wellbeing. On the spiritual level it is the positive, loving, compassionate energy that gives life and destructive greed and hatred that weaken it.

The more we become aware that our interconnectedness is on all levels, the sooner we can begin to take responsibility to ensure that we actually live positively and that we eradicate as much negativity as we can – even if this means turning off the television! This brings benefit not only to our own planet but to all the other dimensions – we are all part of Oneness. As our consciousness changes, more and more people are able to be in touch with these non-physical dimensions, enabling us to work together more coherently for the greater good.

These are exciting times and I feel so fortunate to be here on earth during the profound changes that are taking place. Not

an easy place to be, as we also become more open to the pain and suffering in the world, but hopefully it will awaken those of us who live in greater freedom to the role we can and must play in bringing love and harmony to this beautiful planet of ours. We are so lucky to be embodied and to have the use of our senses. May we have thankful hearts and continue to reach out to those others not so fortunate as ourselves. I feel sure that in the not too distant future humanity will see our present understanding of ourselves as two-dimensional beings to be archaic, just as we tend to see the early cave dwellers!

HEATHER'S STORY

“Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.” These words from the Shema in the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy have always spoken to me in a profound way. In many ways they capture something of my journey – Israel means ‘he struggles with God’ and my journey has often involved the struggle to believe, even to survive *en route* to a deeper awareness of the Divine Oneness, and my changing understanding of what this might mean.

So here I am, on the core group of a network called CANA, attempting to work out quite how I got here! I was baptised an Anglican as an infant, then underwent adult baptism in a Free Independent Evangelical Church after a ‘forced’ conversion at age thirteen, when a vigorous and enthusiastic preacher got me, the shy, wouldn’t-say-boo-to-a-goose teenager, to accept Jesus Christ as my Saviour. I was officially born again but the inner reality felt different.

On that night of decision, when I was told that I had passed from death to life in the space of a prayer, a rift opened up within me. Had my early faith been unreal? What felt more unreal was this ABC approach, accept, believe, commit – though I know it has been a valuable experience for countless Christians. This and other questions led me to a place where I attempt to ‘live the questions’ and even find answers – not always intellectual ones, more an inner sense of knowing, a way of being, a sense of wholeness within the reality of the Divine.

*Be patient towards all that is unsolved in your heart...
the point is to live everything. Live the questions now.
Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live
along some distant day into the answer. - Rainer Maria
Rilke.*

Perhaps on that night, so unforgettable and rather long ago now, I was in one sense born again or entering the birth pangs of a new way of being. That split in my spiritual psyche is leading, as I learn to listen to the divine voice in life, in sacred texts, in other people, to a place of greater integration and a sense of connectedness, within the sacred web of life.

As I write, I am sitting in a beautiful room in a Benedictine Abbey, beneath a painting depicting the road to Emmaus, one of my favourite gospel stories. Jesus the Christ is breaking the bread and in this act he is recognised. That story has become my story as I begin to recognise the presence of Christ where previously I could not discern him, indeed in places I was taught to believe he could not be present, and find the bread of spiritual nourishment in diverse places.

Recognising the Christ in this way has required a breaking open, sometimes painful and traumatic, sometimes gentle and joyful, as the shell of old limitations, beliefs and certainties has been pulled apart and a new order has come into place.

Two main spurs to awakening have been that both my sense of inner reality and my outward experience of life did not match the words and understandings passed to me and my propensity for asking questions and being surprised at the answers which emerged! Old certainties began to dissolve. I could no longer understand many formulations in the same way. There was isolation and loneliness as internally I felt more and more adrift from the beliefs and often the way of life of the groups I had felt so much a part of. The way sometimes seemed dark as a sense of unknowing enveloped me. Yet even in the most difficult times something would crop up to guide me – a word that brought inklings of a new direction and fresh insights.

Sporadically the right book would appear, or I would respond to a sense of inner guidance and make a new

discovery. Gradually I learned to follow this sense of being directed, to trust the Spirit within this process and to accept that, whenever I was apparently in a cul-de-sac, if I waited, trusted and opened myself, the next step forward would be revealed. I began to discover that there were many others who had similar experiences. They too were waking up to a reality shaped by inclusiveness, oneness, connectedness, a sense of sacred unity underlying Creation, and a growing mystical awareness. Guidance seemed to come both from without and within but it was always underpinned by a gentle sense of 'rightness'. Following it has led me to two particular kinds of expression of Christian spirituality. Perhaps rather appropriately these came together in the place where I am now writing.

It was here that I attended a meditation day led by Fr Adrian Smith, and through him discovered CANA. Also on that day, walking through the Abbey Church I stumbled into the Daily Offices, the chanting, that seemed such a deep intimation of eternity, a portal into another dimension of existence which left a glowing ember within, later becoming an important source of spiritual nourishment.

Through the Benedictine tradition I discovered sources of inspiration and transformation such as spiritual direction/accompaniment (an old tradition, yet a process which for me has facilitated both this growing new awareness and a deeper connection to Christ). The monastic tradition of *Lectio Divina* has provided a framework and tool for a much more heart-centred, contemplative way of coming to sacred writings. Writers such as Thomas Merton, Hans Kung, Bede Griffiths, and a whole range of books, mainly Catholic in origin, not previously within my reach, became available to me as well as the writings of Rumi, a Sufi mystic who has been an important influence. I felt drawn to the monastic ideal as a way of life

expressing a total commitment to and life shaped by the spiritual dimension of living. A sense of connection to saints and their energy developed; saints who set out before us, who still influence us from the dimension of reality they exist in now.

CANA, whilst rooted in Christianity, has facilitated an exploration of the universal truths at the heart of all religion plus new ways of understanding and experiencing the Christ-event. Christ consciousness, a greater recognition of the feminine (human and divine), spirituality which is not limited to a personal relationship with the divine but intimately concerned with our humanity, have led to a more holistic and integrated approach which I find deeply satisfying and more 'of a piece'. Particularly valuable has been the experience of a synergistic way of working which comes about, when hierarchy is minimal, the contributions of all are valued and each is connected to each other through attunement to 'the centre' rather than by position or status in a given structure.

Another growing source of inspiration is Middle Eastern spirituality. Having long experienced a strong sense of connection to the Jewish roots of Christianity, I am now becoming more acquainted with a wider understanding of the spirituality which emerges from the Middle East. Some of this comes from an exploration of the Jewish and Aramaic Jesus and from Sufi and other forms of prayer and meditation.

Much of what I have written pales somewhat in comparison to the deep inner journey of the heart that is taking place in all of this. I hesitate to speak of such things, for in any case they can barely be expressed in words. I hesitate too, because my life hardly matches up to these experiences of Christ so powerfully shattering and yet life-giving. Living in the light of these experiences and assimilating them is a long, work in progress. The journey into my own heart has sometimes led to a place

which I experience as the heart of Christ, so immense, full of love, sorrow, joy and *life* that I cannot live too close to it for very long. Through this I have come to a deeper experience of Mass/Eucharist as a potentially unifying celebration which can transcend time and space through eternal love. I am saddened that too often our experience of it is quite the opposite. In this respect the prayer of Paul for the Ephesians continues to be very significant to me.

I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

I believe that the fullest experience of love requires a synthesis of the non-dualism of union with God and the dualism of relationship with and within the Divine.

How does this relate to the New Awareness? I do not entirely know, except to say that as this journey of the heart has continued so has my journey into the New Awareness. I am but a novice in all this; many much larger souls have lived with a far greater realisation of the heart, both within and outside of Christianity. This piercing revelation of Christ does not appear to me to be quite the same as the experience of Oneness. It feels more creative and active and my sense at present is that one is an experience of something passive, the other active. Both my theology and experience are inadequate and partial. I believe that the Kingdom of God will be fully revealed when we, collectively and individually, arrive at the sacred whole.

The vision which energises my life is succinctly drawn by the late Benedictine monk Bede Griffiths who has written much on topics such as the universal Christ and the marriage between Eastern and Western forms of spirituality.

This is our destiny, to be one with God in a unity which transcends all distinctions, and yet in which each individual being is found in his integral wholeness.

Beneath the chaos and violence of our times I am becoming aware of growing numbers of people and networks who are living and working towards this vision from an inclusive perspective. They are living creatively with difference and the interplay between the old and the new. From this I see the development of spiritual centres, retreat houses and multi-faith community groups, bound together more by common purpose than by creedal statements. I believe that there will be continued growth in groups like CANA, the Bede Griffiths Sangha, the Worldwide Christian Meditation Centre and other new-consciousness movements, not just in Christianity but in other religions and in other areas of life.

Within the institutional Church, lay movements, cell churches and what some are calling the New Monasticism, will become increasingly important. The Church is beginning to move beyond former boundaries and there are signs of renewal coming from an approach that might be described as contemplation in action. Conservatism and fundamentalism are also on the rise, many seeing these as a response to the uncertainties of the post-modern era. I think there will be a huge evolutionary leap forward when both those who feel themselves to be in the new, and those whose approach is fundamentalist, stop being in opposition and seek to understand each other.

According to Yossi Klein Halevi, in one of my favourite spiritual books, *At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden*, the Shema with which I opened this story can lead to 'radical monotheism'.

If God is literally one, and all of Creation is a projection of that unified will, then every living thing exists within

the same organism, is in effect a cell in the divine 'body,' as mystics insist... so all love is ultimately self-love; all hatred, self-hate. For the radical monotheist, empathy is the only possible state of being. Human oneness isn't a philosophical notion or a moral imperative but simply a fact.

My meagre attempts to live this out lead me to accompany others spiritually, and involvement in networks like CANA, peace, justice and social work, interfaith and spiritual peacemaking. I believe that these involvements are an expression of working for the Kingdom of God. An awakening Christian, I am moving forward, living and working in hope of the time when all shall be brought together in unity and peace, when that original SHALOM, from which the world was formed, shall prevail. Each time I recite the Shema I affirm my belief that each of us comes from and lives within the same divine source and are united by a bond which transcends our differences, whether we recognise and like it or not!

JILL'S STORY

My childhood was secure and my parents exercised a strong moral code and social conscience. They believed in and practised the principle of loving thy neighbour and have spent a lifetime serving others. However, religion played no part in family life. I did, however, attend the Methodist Church in my teens (largely because of its excellent youth club), attended church regularly, taught in the Sunday school and became confirmed. This experience awakened my spiritual sense but I gained little enlightenment. I was very uncomfortable with the doctrines I was expected to believe. However, this was the beginning of a strong intuitive drive for connection with the spirit which has persisted throughout my life, despite consistent discouragement from the Church.

My spiritual search continued, somewhat erratically, at university, where I studied biological sciences. Positive spiritual experiences included the discovery of Teilhard de Chardin, and Anglican choral services in beautiful chapels. I had my one and only numinous experience too. Not so positive was the pressure put on me by my fundamentalist peers to become a 'committed Christian', largely through threats of hell-fire and damnation! Not only was I completely unable to accept the traditional Christian doctrines. Conceptually I also struggled to believe in free will at all, when my scientific training appeared to indicate that we were all determined by the complex interplay between our genes and environment.

On balance I left university no further forward spiritually. Throughout subsequent years in professional social work training, challenging work in education social work practice and management, an alcoholic partner in marriage, motherhood and divorce, my spiritual awareness was largely submerged under the struggle to survive materially and emotionally. I

nevertheless felt impelled to keep searching, unsuccessfully: I attended the local Anglican Church regularly, prayed as best I could; and continued to read and debate. But my spiritual heart was not consoled or engaged by the form of Christianity to which I had access.

However, in attempting to cope with the trauma of my husband's alcoholism and its consequences, I found spiritual enlightenment and consolation unexpectedly: in the Al-Anon Twelve Step Fellowship and in the principles of Reality Therapy built upon them (all summarised so well in the Serenity Prayer). In desperation I was driven to stop busily trying to control the situation and I let go and trusted in God. Miracles followed! My ex-husband went voluntarily into treatment. In the fullness of time, also in answer to prayer, my beloved second husband appeared! With it, our mutually-beneficial spiritual dialogue began. He introduced me to Transcendental Meditation, which I practised for some time and which provided the basis for my current Christian meditation practice.

But it was during our residence in Derbyshire in the 1990s that I took a quantum leap in spiritual understanding. There were several significant influences, a major one being the discovery of the spiritual guidance provided by M Scott Peck in his seminal books. Another was joining the local Anglican Church, where we attended a Christian Basics course to find out about contemporary Christianity. We found that nothing had changed since our youth. The course and the church were evangelical and we were told that being a Christian required literal belief in traditional doctrines, such as the Fall and substitutionary atonement. This was impossible for both of us. While still believing deeply that Jesus was a unique and outstandingly inspirational disclosure of a loving God, and wishing to continue to worship and serve God within a Christian frame-

work, nevertheless I could not believe that Jesus was the only, the complete, or the final disclosure of the Divine.

My naturally enquiring mind and eclectic reading have increasingly led me to question the exclusivity and supremacy of the orthodox Christian faith and the absolute and often literal truth asserted for the Bible and traditional Christian doctrines. Many doctrines sit uncomfortably with biblical scholarship and contemporary scientific, psychological and historical knowledge. Unfortunately, such questioning was not welcomed by the Church. We felt unable to voice our views. Despite this, and remembering Lord Hailsham's dictum "*Faith is an act of the will*", I felt impelled to make a personal and public act of commitment of faith. However, I made this commitment to God, not to Christian doctrines! Sadly, involvement in the life of the church became increasingly difficult for both of us. We were expected to keep affirming the party line.

Two wonderful things then happened. First, we discovered the Omega Foundation, a Christian Contemplative Order near Bristol which practices a spirituality of the heart. It was at an Omega Insight retreat that I found the true starting point for my inner spiritual journey. I also found the answer to the free will question, namely, that I am an open system and by opening my heart to God – Source of all Being – I am capable of a slow transformation towards greater wholeness and self-realisation. Rather surprisingly, as a biologist, this was a revelation to me and made sense of my social work practice!

The Retreat leader assured us that, whatever our personal perspective on Church doctrines, it could be voiced and would be respected. We were told of our capacity to experience intuitive insight, giving us direct knowledge of God's truth and wisdom by opening our hearts directly to His loving spirit. More significantly for me, the leader spoke of the changing nature of much revealed truth and wisdom, in response to our

own deepening understanding and the changing context. At the final office of the retreat I was happy and elated to be included as one of the 'People of God'. I knew that I had found the right inner path and looked forward to moving deeper into the mystery, however uncertain and difficult it might be.

However, the inner journey was not enough for me. Intuitively I needed to earth my spiritual awareness and to be connected to a local spiritual community where the collective spirit is grounded in the world and where I could share in serving that community. So I returned to my local church and, with my husband, set up an unemployment project. But I did not expect to find anyone there with whom to share my inner journey or my perspective on the faith.

But then the second wonderful thing happened! We discovered a remarkable group of church members who not only shared our reservations with the Church's approach but – joy, oh joy – met monthly at a brilliantly-led study group to share these reservations and to study contemporary ideas and faith frameworks. I was thrilled to be introduced to Keith Ward's *A Vision to Pursue*, books by John Spong, Richard Holloway, Don Cupitt and others. We attended conferences organised by the Sea of Faith and the Modern Churchpeople's Union. I had at last found a satisfactory intellectual framework for my Christian faith, which allowed belief with integrity.

With my intellect satisfied, I could travel on my inner journey wholeheartedly and with the support of several of the group members who had been on the path for years. We met at 7am on Monday morning for reflection and meditation and had breakfast afterwards – a wonderful way to start the week. I was also introduced to the experiential work of the San Francisco School of Psychological Studies, which understood the depth psychology at the heart of spirituality. A seminal book for me was *The Choicemaker* by Howes and Moon.

I attended several group sessions in Sheffield in which we were invited to act out characters in the parables and to share our insights. These sessions introduced me to the experience of hunting for the treasure within. It was at this time that I discovered psychosynthesis – a psychology with a soul which offers a model of theory and practice which made total sense of the ‘treasure hunt’ as the driving purpose of the spiritual journey. As well as the conscious ego-self, it posits a Higher or God Self in the higher unconscious, which is at the heart of the personality and is the place of connection with God. The journey is about integrating all parts of the personality and seeking connection with the Higher Self. For some people this connection is sudden (experienced as a conversion or numinous experience); for me and for most people it is a gradual process of spiritual awakening. My husband and I also attended an Omega retreat on psychosynthesis where we practised several exercises to develop our inner creative potential

Having discovered this relevant and inspiring approach to Christianity to be consistent, I became increasingly amazed that the Church had not shared this with its members and with the world at large. Not only was the voice of ‘progressive’ Christians not being heard within the Church, but also the spiritual needs of the community at large were being ignored. I had no doubt that if non-churchgoers had heard of this contemporary approach to the faith many would have found it of great value to them. So I wrote an article for the parish magazine about it. It was rejected. The Omega Foundation kindly published it for me under the title *Fling Wide the Gates*. Among the many who responded, Adrian Smith, a member of the CANA core group, invited me to join, which I did, so beginning a new adventure on my journey.

At the time I was struggling to write my framework of beliefs, to see how they compared with the traditional beliefs

being taught at the Alpha course I was attending. Discussing this with the core group at the CANA retreat on Iona, it was decided to work on an emergent 'creed' together. I became deeply involved with other CANA members as we shared our beliefs in the production of the CANA publication *Exploring Ways Forward for Christianity in the 21st Century* and in convening the first Round Table of like-minded groups.

Travelling with fellow CANA members has been joyous and challenging. It has opened my heart and mind to so many new possibilities. Ideas that previously I would have discounted, I am now willing to consider: reincarnation, nature spirits, astrology, psychic phenomena. But more than this, it has helped me beyond measure to enjoy travelling into the mystery with uncertainty, to cherish diversity and to travel in trust and hope.

Soon after this we moved south for family reasons and joined our traditional parish church, where our approach to the faith was discounted. Although I joined the choir and was involved in supporting the homeless, I stayed on the fringes of church life. However, I found some fellow spirits in the town and we formed a spirituality group for people of any faith (mostly Christian) or none, which meets monthly to support each other. This has been a source of spiritual growth and strength to us all as we sought to share our exciting new understanding of the faith in our churches. We arranged for Bishop John Spong to give a public lecture on *A New Christianity for a New World* which was a sell-out. It has triggered many open discussions on the faith within the local church community. Also I was allowed to initiate a small church group to explore aspects of the faith in an atmosphere of open enquiry. I now feel more at home in the church and can make a greater contribution to church life at last.

There were two important triggers for my inner journey

during this period. The first was practising the Ignatian Exercises under the supervision of a spiritual director, who was remarkable not only in his discernment and non-directive guidance, but in his total acceptance of my framework of understanding, which differed radically from his own evangelical position. For the first time in my life I experienced a deep inner awareness of God's love and forgiveness. I felt an enormous burden of guilt lift from my shoulders. I also learned to hear the inner voice and gained insight into my own motivations. I became able to discriminate between my true vocation – what I truly *wanted* to do, which brought life to me and to others – and what I felt I *ought* to do, which often brought resentment and negativity all round.

This issue became of particular importance in another crucial strand in my spiritual awareness – namely, my deep affinity with nature and, in particular, my fellow creatures. I believe passionately in the intrinsic value of all living beings. Human beings are just one particular strand in the web of life. Despite this passion and my grief at humanity's destruction of our living world, I still struggle to develop the deep ecological awareness and sense of cosmic belonging innerly, that will lead me to *want*, not just feel that I *ought*, to live a fully sustainable life. I founded an eco-group in my town and we monitored and sought to reduce our ecological impact. We found that our willingness to change our lifestyles for the good of the earth was limited. I realised that 'living lightly' entailed the selfless love which Jesus showed and required a deep spiritual transformation, which I am still struggling to foster! In an attempt to make a deeper connection with nature, my husband and I attended the Findhorn Foundation for the Experience Week. It helped, but I still have a long way to go!

While I practise my spirituality largely within the Christian tradition I am open to the insights and practices of other faiths,

since I believe that they all offer valid paths up the mountain. I have found aspects of the Hindu and Buddhist traditions of particular value in enriching my spiritual understanding and awareness. My husband and I are very committed to interfaith work and were involved for several years with the International Interfaith Centre in Oxford.

My present faith is based on reinterpreting Christianity in light of modern understanding of an evolving cosmos, of which we are an integral part. This evolution is powered and guided by an underlying creative, loving-life force which I call 'God'. Human beings are variously conscious of the cosmic life-force urging us to evolve to wholeness, higher consciousness and selflessness and to become one with God. God is a mystery, but deep in our consciousness lies our Higher or God Self, which is the place where we can transcend our ego-selves, become selfless and experience 'the love and voice of God'.

Most of us only make a partial and intermittent connection with God, but Jesus lived all the time in full communion with Him, and he expressed God's love and wisdom in his life. The purpose of my spiritual journey is to become more in touch with God and Jesus is my model for living. I believe in a fully inclusive Christianity in which the overarching principle is Love. The model which most nearly matches my understanding is that of Creation Spirituality, promoted in the UK by Green-Spirit. I value the scriptures and teachings of the Church as treasurehouses of spiritual wisdom, but I interpret many of them metaphorically, not literally.

My practice today consists of daily Christian meditation, contemplation on various wisdom texts (including the Bible and latterly the Gospel of Thomas by Hugh McGregor Ross) and occasional Ignatian exercises (under the guidance of Gerard Hughes books). I attend my local church, usually at the early service. CANA events, including worshipping with the

Grail Liturgy, are important, as are the events organised by the Progressive Christianity Network and the Centre for Radical Christianity in Sheffield. My spiritual nourishment also comes from the books I read, particularly those by Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme, Fritjof Kapra and Diarmuid O'Murchu. I am nourished too by music, poetry and nature.

What keeps me travelling on this difficult journey? My twin visions and the companionship of fellow visionaries. My first concerns the whole world: it envisages that the small-scale eco-spiritual developments now bubbling up all over the world coalesce to create a just, sustainable and peaceful world – so that humanity can cooperate fully with God in the future unfolding.

My other vision is a more local one. I dream that our local UK 'churches' will become spiritual centres welcoming equally anyone who seeks spiritual nourishment, whatever their religion or none. That these centres become loving hearts of the community, showing love to all who come to them and working to alleviate need, promote justice and peace.

My inspiration are all those people who are doing Christ's work today, wherever they are found inside or outside churches – they are the ones who, by sacrificing themselves, will save the world.

ANNE'S STORY

I first realised I was on a spiritual path after reading a book called the *Mysticism of Sound* by the Sufi Master, Hazrat Inayat Khan. It has been revised and is now called *The Music of Life*. Apart from many other changes that had occurred about that time, thirty odd years ago, that book changed my life. I felt that I must meet some Sufis and, soon after this, an ex-nun recommended to me that I go to the Sufi Centre in London. This I managed to do and I visited it for eighteen months or so.

The philosophy is all about love, harmony and beauty. At the Universal Worship ceremony they light a candle to seven religions to embrace all humanity. I took part in many visualisations, and in singing and dancing and forms of meditation. I felt as if I was part of the family and enjoyed the company and sharing with other Sufis. I took a spiritual psychotherapy course and helped the leader's wife work with some street children.

It was very different from what I had been used to. My mother would take me and my siblings to an Anglican Church very occasionally and, two or three times a year, my parents took us to stay with my father's parents who were very religious. When we were with them in Wales we were taken to their Congregational Church every Sunday as well as Sunday school in the afternoons. My father had to go to church sometimes three times on a Sunday – which completely put him off church.

The first time I meditated, visualising a golden light moving down through my body, I had a most amazing experience. I was listening to the gentle voice of an American woman on a tape and, gradually, I found myself completely enveloped by this light. It seemed to overtake my being and made me feel at one with it, as if I were power, bliss and all that is. This must

be what they call the 'I Am Presence'. I was not flesh and blood but light. It was wholeness and wonder, all in one. Although I do that meditation every day I have never had the same experience since.

I have had other experiences with light. After I moved from Roehampton I saw a golden oval shape which is what people look at when they meditate there. To them it is the source of all. Soon after that I went to the house of a Raj Yoga devotee to meditate and, looking up on the wall of her room, I saw this same shape, with a golden dot in the middle of my vision.

One very profound experience happened when I had a nap one afternoon, sitting in my chair by the window. I was coming to and, with eyes still closed I saw a beautiful red and gold circle. As I let it stay I felt an overwhelming feeling of a presence. I felt a slight breeze come through the window. It was indescribably magical. I was moved to go upstairs to find a verse I had written about the wind. As soon as I looked at the book case, even though I wasn't sure where to find this verse, my hand went straight to the little book and took it down. I opened a page at random and there it was:

Wind that whistles

Wind that howls

Wind that wakes the tawny owls

Wind that blows the dancing trees

Wind transparent all things sees.

Another experience of seeing the light happened to me one day in the Baptist Church. I was sitting at the back of the church looking at three men who had gone up to the front to receive the Holy Spirit. They had been baptised the day before and were in a group with two elders who held their hands just above the men's heads. I saw a white mist above their heads, like a small cloud. I have seen this mist above the pastor's wife,

as well, a great white mist.

Praying and meditating in the peace and silence of my room has brought me closer to God than at any time in a church. When I have felt very lonely and just talked to Him and reaffirmed my belief in Him, I have felt a very profound love being shown to me.

*When you stop to stand and stare
You can then become aware
Hope and strength are there for you
Have the faith to let them through.*

Before joining the Sufis I went to see the leader, who is a psychotherapist. I had been feeling upset because both my daughters were leaving home to live with friends. I wondered what I was going to do with my life. I was dreading their departure, but the morning after they both left I woke up feeling a beautiful peace within me. Words were coming into my head that I had not heard or thought before. They were all about creation, nature, rhythms of nature and vibration. I decided to write them down. At least, I thought, this is something I can do now. I almost forgot that I was alone. I realised I was being looked after and I didn't feel alone. I think the leader must have prayed for me.

I had been experimenting with paint and went to some classes. But it wasn't until I started Transcendental Meditation that I really felt I could paint. I felt at one with the trees and lakes, mountains and snow and began appreciating my creativity. I did find though, at that time, that I would sleep for two hours, twice a day, which didn't leave much time to do much. Within six months I gave up Transcendental Meditation and began to enjoy my days more, with more time to spare.

At about that time a friend asked me to write a tune for a song called 'Deep Peace'. Immediately I was given a tune

which I believe must have come from spiritual realms because of several synchronicities. I rushed in to play the tune on the piano and it exactly fitted the verse. Feeling elated I went upstairs to get changed as I wanted to go out and share what happened. From my room I saw a dove sitting on the cedar of Lebanon tree – a tree which symbolises happiness. This seemed especially significant as previously the friend who had sent me the verse had sent a card with a picture of a dove. It arrived the day I had an auspicious dream about a dove – but that is another story.

When I finally went out the first person I met was a nun standing at a bus stop. I asked her about the meaning of the symbol of a dove, she smiled and said it was a sign of The Holy Spirit, which confirmed to me that this tread of events had been sent to me as a gift from the divine. Of course, the dove is also traditionally regarded as a sign of peace, which fitted with the theme of the verse Deep Peace.

Various forms of meditation have helped me to overcome stress and anxiety. Over the last ten or fifteen years I have meditated using a light and love mantra which gives great peace. Dealing with many tragedies and difficulties has made me realise that nothing really matters except love and the knowledge that God is there to help, and life is what *you* make it. With a little help one can get through everything. It says so in the books of wisdom. It has been easier to come to know myself and human nature, having been to the depths of despair and back again. It also helped studying the Sufis' spiritual psychotherapy (the mysticism of Islam), the Brahma Kumaris' course of inner learning and knowing the gospels of Jesus Christ. It all helped me find unconditional love, peace and contentment. The love that I was given at home as a child was the basis of my finding hope when it was needed, and contentment in later life. I have also learnt acceptance and forgiveness

from all this experience and reading. From darkness you come into light if you are positive. Hopefully one can stay strong through meditation when all around is in chaos – you make a line in the sand, remain calm and come to see that there is a reason for everything.

The fact that the Gospels of Jesus and the Sufi message are very alike in many ways is very hopeful for the future. If they were shown to be so publicly, Christians and Muslims could surely live side by side more peacefully. They do in Spain. It is easier to accept and forgive thy neighbour when you come to know and understand them. To my mind envy and greed, along with not knowing about other people's true religion and truth are the main causes of aggression in society. My search for God has been a long one but now I realise that He/She is "That from which words turn back and the mind cannot grasp".

JOYCELIN'S STORY

My journey of awakening until I was in my mid-to-late thirties I would describe as unconscious more than conscious whereas, in the twenty years since then, I know I have been consciously seeking, exploring, reflecting, sifting, wondering and, I hope, awakening.

As a child, the two most significant inputs to my spiritual journey came through my father and going to Sunday school. I don't remember much about Sunday school but I think it gave me a sense that there was something to connect with and that this was important to me in some way. My father was a doctor and a freemason (though I never understood what freemasonry was about; I thought it was to do with playing golf – but my father didn't play golf anyway! Hmm!); he was a role model of someone who lived by spiritual values, deeply committed to upholding the dignity and worth of every person, and a quiet dedication to giving of his best. Every weekend he would borrow films from a film library that we would watch on an old home projector; each week we watched a funny film, an informative film and one that was about the life of Jesus or stories from the Bible. During my secondary school days, I attended a Church of England girls school; what impressed itself most strongly upon me there was a remark by the local minister who taught my confirmation class: he railed against 'four-wheeler Christians', people who only ever came to church on four wheels in a pram to be baptised, in a limousine to be married and in a hearse to be buried. I was determined that I should either be a fully committed church-going Christian or not Christian at all; this became problematic when exploring around and beyond traditional Christian boundaries.

During my teenage years I must have done a lot of thinking although I don't remember it as such. During one or two

periods of anguish, I recall praying and feeling in response a warmth and a loving voice re-assuring me that all would be well; when I told my father about these experiences, he explained it in terms of a response from God. At about fifteen or sixteen, one night I had a very clear realisation that I believed there is something more – call it God or by another name – but that it would always be a mystery. It was not in the nature of ‘God’ that I could know what it was and if it had been part of God’s nature that we should know, then someone before me would have found out. And if all the clever and gifted prophets and teachers couldn’t find out with certainty, then it wasn’t very likely that I would. So I satisfied myself with a combination of unshakeable belief coupled with acceptance of mystery.

That resolved a great deal and I recall feeling a great sense of relief when this realisation, or conviction, dawned. I have rarely wavered from this basic tenet of belief. It began to lead me away from the idea of an anthropomorphic ‘person-out there-God’. However, eventually I began to see that it also brought some problems too.

For many years my connection with religion and church of any kind was led more by friendships than my own inspiration. In terms of church-going, I stopped going to the local Anglican Church and experimented with Methodism which I found freer as it seemed less dogmatic. Then after leaving school I dropped out of church and any conscious spiritual life for many years. Eventually, when my daughters were small, I began attending the small Anglican Church where we lived. My daughters went to Sunday school and, true to my distaste for four-wheeler Christians, they were only baptised when they were old enough to decide that they wished to be. But my church-going had become rather desultory and dropped away altogether.

Around this time a number of things happened that served to

rekindle my interest in a spiritual life, although ‘spiritual’ would probably not have been a word in common usage to me. I came across a book by Marilyn Ferguson called *The Aquarian Conspiracy* and read it avidly and was excited to find the ideas she discussed seemed to strike a chord with me. A friend, who became a soul-traveller on the spiritual journey, first took me on a short visit to the Findhorn Foundation. I came across *A Course in Miracles* in a bookshop. Another friend invited me to his wedding which was taking place in a Quaker Meeting House and I began to develop a practice of visualization and meditation.

I enjoyed my visit to the Findhorn Foundation and it must have made a far deeper impression than I realised. Eighteen months later I went back for a weekend course on *A Course in Miracles* and by the end of the weekend I had bought a half share in a caravan on the Findhorn Caravan Park – of which more later! I read and studied *A Course in Miracles* daily for two or three years and this took me far more deeply into a conscious spiritual life which began to come alive and feel real. Through visualization I discovered a rich inner world and I proved to myself without any shadow of doubt that if I got up half to three-quarter of an hour before anyone else in the family and sat quietly to read and reflect, then my day (teaching in a secondary school) went better than if I didn’t. I was also very struck by the Quaker wedding I went to and I thought that I’d try going to the Quaker meeting and see how I found it.

Of these triggers, some are still important to me although I have dropped *A Course in Miracles*. However, books have always been a very significant source of spiritual awakening and exploration and I have explored widely since then. Amongst those that have been important to me are: *Psychology With A Soul* which took me on a important journey into psychosynthesis; *The Inward Arc* by Frances Vaughan

from which I learned an empathic approach to wholeness and spirituality; *Being Nobody, Going Nowhere* by Ayya Kheema which of the many excellent Buddhist books I have read gave me a little phrase that has been of immense practical help. I have found it quite difficult to let go of things and Ayya Kheema recognised that this can be challenging and she advised her readers to “loosen around the edges”, and I learned that if I can find a way to loosen around the edges, even just a little, then I can go on until I find a way to let go more and more. At that time, I was also inspired and in-formed by the books of Bede Griffiths, Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama, John Yungblut and Scott Peck. More recently, I have been inspired and changed by the work of Eckhart Tolle, by *The Tao of Contemplation* by Jasmin Lee Cori and by two remarkable volumes of *Listening Spirituality* by Patricia Loring, the first volume on the personal spiritual practices of Friends and the second on the corporate spiritual practices of Friends and I have been amazed at the profound appreciation she has into so many different kinds of spiritual practice.

Meanwhile, I went to Quaker Meeting for Worship, enjoyed the silence and began to explore Quaker spirituality. After some two or three years I took the step of joining the Religious Society of Friends, a community which has been my primary spiritual home ever since. But I am lucky and I have an almost equally important secondary spiritual home in the Findhorn Foundation Community. Over the years I have worked at the Foundation part-time in various capacities and I have become a long-term, long-distance commuter. I find a tension and a balance between the interiority of Quaker spirituality and outward living as a committed Friend and the heart-centred rootedness in nature and abundance of the Foundation and the way in which the open heart-centre of Findhorn spirituality is sustained so that all who come can drink of the fountain that most

speaks to them.

En route, there have been too many significant and important books, events, meetings, places, travels, to include them all. But there are three that have been particularly seminal. I participated in a one-week intensive “Essentials of Psychosynthesis” which gave me a more deeply rooted sense of centre and perspective of my life as a unity in which all the things that had happened had their place and without which I would not be where I was and ready for my next step; this felt deeply wholesome. I went to an Easter conference at the Findhorn Foundation on Pierre Weil’s “Art of Living in Peace” and for many years that formed a core practice of inner peace as well as outer work developing the Art of Living in Peace too. And, for a year I participated in an intensive experiential course based on the work of Elisabeth Kubler Ross; I found this deep uncovering and working through my life difficult and I rebelled against the methodology too but I felt cleaned out and whole as if I had been through an emotional and spiritual washing machine. It was good work to do.

In recent years, my basic beliefs about the nature of life and the cosmos have been mystical in nature and without reference to a specific religious context. In particular I experienced an altered state of consciousness in meditating on the words “All is very, very well”, realising that, indeed, all is very, very well even when what is ‘happening’ does not look as if all is very, very well at all! I also gain much peace, inspiration and sense of centre from being outdoors and certain places – generally wild and open – and colour. I love colour to the point where sometimes I feel almost enraptured by it and I am fascinated by the colours of the rainbow. As I write I am eagerly awaiting delivery of a book called *The Tao of Watercolour* so I can explore this love alongside my current deepening resonance with Taoist understandings.

Throughout the last seven or eight years, however, my deepest, most extensive and ongoing encounter with Spirit has come through my involvement in the creation and writing of *The Quest...Exploring A Sense Of Soul*. Whilst this article is about my particular individual and personal spiritual journey, I can't properly describe that without reference to the profound and deep impact that my contribution to *The Quest* had on me. The idea for *The Quest* emerged from an initial meeting between Janice Dolley and myself and grew until it became a fully-fledged project of researching, creating and writing that was the most intensive and spirit-led creative group process I have experienced. As a co-author and as the editor of the book, I explored and considered contemporary movements of Spirit widely through a concentrated process of 'academic', experiential and imaginative reflection. This was extraordinary for me in itself. Additionally, as a group, we found we could transcend our own unique stories and experiences, and through openness to each other and to Spirit, we found we could meld it all into a comprehensive neutral guide to an open and awakening spiritual life. It felt as if together we shared an encounter with a Spirit that embodies a universal embrace whilst, at its heart, upholding the many ways in which we, individually, experience and interpret our own unique journey. The whole work has felt like a gift from Spirit for me as well, I hope, for those who follow *The Quest*.

About a year ago I knew the time had come to reflect on the connection between traditional Christianity and my current place on my spiritual journey. I went to a four day course at Woodbrooke, the Quaker Study Centre in Birmingham, called "Rooted in Tradition, Open to New Light". I found it hugely moving to spend four days with a group of like-minded souls and our two tutors. We were exploring what traditional Christianity means to us and the variety of ways in which we

each marry that with the new movements that critique traditional beliefs and perceptions and open new ways of understanding and experiencing. One of the most important processes that happened during the weekend was what one of our tutors called “de-toxification”, discovering and facing those things in our past relationship with Christianity that caused distress and still held us up.

I found this profoundly helpful and I met one of the ‘downsides’ of my teenage realisation about the nature of God described earlier. I had never really resonated with God as a ‘person’ and certainly not as ‘out there’. This detached me from the kind of relationship with a personal God that I saw in many Christians with a more traditional faith; I felt the absence of this kind of relationship. During the weekend I ‘saw’ in meditation that this kind of individual and personal relationship does not depend upon holding a belief in God as a person nor as out-there. Although this is still an aspect of God that I am working towards, I have no further doubts that there can be a personal relationship with a ‘no-person-God’.

Later last year I went to a follow-up weekend from “Tradition & New Light” and during this weekend we were asked to write in 30 words what Christ means to me. I wrote: “Christ means the divine still presence that is in all things. It reached an especially potent expression in Jesus, whose story I value but choose not to study in depth”. I came to a place where I see myself within a broad Christian stream but not described by the traditional boundaries.

What excites and moves me forward at the moment are:

- A daily commitment to sitting in a quiet space each day. During this time I may well read something that currently has the capacity to take me into an inner reflective space, I will still and centre myself and feel my way into my connection with my sense of soul and with the universal

God, Spirit or Presence in all things and beyond all things

- Exploring and working widely on the contemporary movements of Spirit, whether as contemporary spirituality, new ways of creating spiritual friendship and sharing amongst ourselves as diversely-faithed people, holism, inter-faith dialogue and wherever this part of my journey takes me. Right now I notice a growing interest in the tools that each tradition has developed and how these can all be offered as we collectively seek how we may create a better world
- A term of service as an Elder in my Quaker Meeting

Enjoying the outdoors, nature and colour and finding new ways in which these help me engage with the mystery of life and spirit

There are two things of which I can be sure on my ongoing spiritual journey: that it will not stand still and will be ever-changing and that at the heart is a mystery that I cannot fathom but can seek to approach and with which I can try to be in increasingly continuous alignment.

SUE'S STORY

I am so glad to be where I am today. My life has many unknowns and uncertainties but I would not go back. I want to choose the road less travelled, an open way with much unexplored territory.

Looking back ten years down the road I see someone who thought they knew what life was about. Moreover I thought I knew what God was all about. I am probably being too hard on myself to say that I was trapped in an ecclesiological system, but none the less the question that shaped my thinking was more around the 'how' of communicating and living the Gospel than the 'who' and 'what' of God.

From that ten-year perspective I would be astounded to see myself today, rarely attending a church service on a Sunday. Since childhood and particularly in adolescence, 'going to church' was always a pleasure not a duty. Regular times of quiet for prayer, Bible reflection and journal writing were the lifelines of my adult life. So what is so different today?

A large part of the difference is doubtless related to the creativity of the second half of life. As I often say to friends reaching the fiftieth watershed, "Nothing to prove, nothing to lose!" My mid-life crisis (opportunity) took off around my mid-forties. A phase of self-discovery and exploration was launched and enhanced by choosing to do some further study in the form of a Diploma in Pastoral Counselling and a MTh in Applied Theology. The former opened up life-changing reflection on my own story, especially the effects of my mother dying when I was five years old.

I reconnected with my humanity, as distinct from defining myself from my God-experience as a teenager. I saw that God makes us primarily 'human' not 'Christian'. At that stage my experience of my humanity included the death of my father and

a significant new friendship. Teilhard de Chardin's insight is instructive, "*...the overflowing tenderness of those special preferential loves which you implant in our lives as the most powerful created agent of our inward growth*".

From my MTh studies I lighted upon Iranaeus' observation in the sixth century that, "The glory of God is the human person fully alive". This felt electrifying in its liberating implications. This focus on my and everyone's sacred human origin was in no way to negate the very real experience of the heart which I had known as my Christian 'conversion' – it simply put it in another perspective: One which is proving to be deliciously more open-ended, if not loose-ended.

The shift to a more open arena was also triggered by an ecclesiastical shock. During a two-year period as a full time, paid, lay pastoral coordinator in a team of four churches, I found myself excluded from the weekly staff meetings. This was my first experience of clericalism. Shocks, while painful, can be good for the soul. For me this was the equivalent of a seismic shift. Ten years later part of its fruit is an evolving network of conversations around the country amongst those not afraid to be called 'boat-rockers'. Within that I have my personal conviction that ordination threatens the flourishing of both clergy and laity.

However I remain passionate about the worth of every one of the people of God. My shock was all the greater because, for so long, my being part of the body of Christ had been such a rich experience. This remains a reality today but not one expressed in Sunday liturgies. In my determination to 'live my adventure', a phrase I prefer to 'vocation', I have travelled a path littered with some amazing people, not all of whom would see themselves as Christian. In one sense this no longer matters. They are people from God. I relish my interaction with them. They no longer need to fit my system. I am not afraid of

difference.

Indeed one of my goals for the coming year is to track down a small number of people of other faiths and none, who would be interested in a regular conversation. A look through my current pile of books reveals a further exploration of difference and dialogue. NT Wright's and Marcus Borg's searching *The Meaning of Jesus* in such a generous spirit; Karen Armstrong's fascinating historical analysis of fundamentalism in *The Battle for God: Friends on the Way*, a life enriched by engagement with people of many faiths, and the writings of Emily Carr, the Canadian artist whose experience of First Nation spirituality is awesome.

The conviction of the creativity of difference has been one of the fruits of my belonging to an open-ended therapy group for the past five years. Here I was privileged to witness the sacredness of our human interaction, the human dynamic which images the wonder of God. Here I saw hope for the world; would that our churches held such circles of difference.

I recall the evening I attended an Iona liturgy in the ancient chapel in Bradwell. It should have been beautiful but I experienced it as stultifying. It was only as I came out of the building and beheld the sky that I worshipped. At that moment I breathed deep. Energy was outside.

Energy is a word that has become familiar as I have listened to friends in CANA. Facilitating a group which is considering creating a therapeutic centre, I find myself using the language of going with the energy of God, rather than praying for something to happen. I also recognise that some of what gave me energy ten years ago remains true today. My recent consultancy publicity leaflet describes me as aiming towards, 'the hearty singing out by ordinary people of what too often lies withering in their hearts'. I came across that sentence in a novel by Dorothy Canfield. It moved me then and it does so now.

There are differing nuances but continuing themes in my life. God is in me and I in God – we have journeyed together for a long time. I am so grateful for the people who continue to challenge me and check me and assure me that it is good to be me. I continue to meet with my spiritual director who has accompanied my journey for over ten years. She it was who asked what would it mean to take a risk in my relating to God. Listening to the self within I seek to continue to risk.

I began by saying I am grateful to be where I am today. In practical terms that means living in a beautiful house that is not mine and being partially dependant for my income on the gifts of Christian friends who believe in the journey I have chosen; not knowing what kind of home will be mine in a year's time. That too is energising.

*O God
Who am I now?
Once I was secure
In familiar territory
In my sense of belonging
Unquestioning of the names of my culture
The assumptions built into my language
The values shared by my society
But now you have called me out away from home...*

from *Celebrating Women*, editors Hannah Ward, Jennifer Wild, Janet Morley, SPCK, 1995

THEMES FROM THE BIOGRAPHIES

Change is always challenging. When the call to change, inner or outer, comes in our lives - our first response is often to recoil and experience a surging preference for our 'home harbour' – whatever that might be. We fear leaving the harbour for unknown seas. But as the call increases its strength, then we sniff the air of the new with interest, even excitement, in much the same way as small animals emerge from their sleepy winter burrows at the call of spring. All the biographers that we have included write of change in some way and seem to engage on the journey in an open and exploratory manner. Having made the shift from old thought forms many find a simplification and resolution of things that were puzzling.

Many suggest 'enquiry' and 'big questions' needing answers was what drew them – 'the open way with much unexplored territory'. There seems then to come a point in the journey where there can be no turning back – "*I want to choose the road less travelled*" or "*Venturing the risk of greater vulnerability and difference*". Another concludes that amongst her only two certainties is the conviction that "*it will not stand still and will be forever changing*".

This change inevitably leads to a changed relationship with the institutional Church which, like most big institutions, seems reluctant to make a profound change. In CANA we find a continuum of connection (see diagram on next page):

The progression ends either with a departure to find fellowship with other kindred spirits through local groups, network communities or electronic links, or a return to the institution with the benefit of greater awareness than before. As T S Eliot put it:

*At the end of all our searching
We return to where we started*

And know the place for the first time.

From this point of knowing it seems that exploring in such an avid way ceases and people move into a place of being and of evolving, along with the rest of evolution. An early aspect of this journeying often seems to be a lonely period when support is hard to find and former friends might even be hostile to another's apparent departure. Some even write of being exorcised and prayed over for heresy!

In CANA, which started in the early 1990s, we chose the name partly because that was what we were, "Christians Awakening to a New Awareness", and partly because Jesus' first miracle, at CANA, symbolised for us the transformation of the 'old wine' into the wine of new consciousness. So what is this new wine and what are its hallmarks as exemplified in CANA?

From reading the biographies it seems that the 'new consciousness' is based on a direct experience of the Divine – as one contributor says, "*It is an awareness... not an intellectual theory*". Essentially this awareness is of an underpinning 'oneness' in which everything is interconnected and every person and creature has its place within a stupendous whole. "*I have come to experience the universe as a dynamic interconnected whole. Everything is changing continuously... there is a continual interchange of energy and form.*"

Whether one reaches this awareness through a mystical approach, through quantum physics or an intuitive knowing, there can be no turning back from the 'issues' of separateness that humans have created in religion, politics, economics – all aspects of life. Indeed, whether they use this label or not, most of the biographers write of holism and one writer shared the need for a label such as 'holist'.

This new awareness changes the way people apprehend 'God'. The image of a transcendent man in the sky that

permeates so much ecclesiastical language, shifts to understandings such as *'the ultimate reality'*, *'a benevolent creative force behind the universe'*, *'the divine, percolating all things'*, *'presence in all things and beyond all things'*, *'the creative mind'*, *'the one about whom naught may be said'*. Each expresses this in his or her own way.

It also changes the way people see 'Jesus Christ', which is often a point at which church attendance becomes problematic. *"I saw Jesus' life as a model of surrender to the Christ consciousness"*, *"I now refer to 'Jesus the Christ' and can no longer say the Creed, as my faith is not based on the fact that he was born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried, and on the third day he rose again and ascended into heaven. To me this historical particularity is not what it is about."*

An important aspect of the 'new consciousness' seems to be connection with the beauty of nature, finding 'energy outside' in nature generating 'a sense of wonder' and that 'the beauty, the silence of the mountain and lakes, the call of the curlews, seemed to speak to a deeper part of my being than the church services'. As Wordsworth says *"To me the very meanest flower that blows can give thoughts that oft lie too deep for tears"*. This inevitably brings an ecological imperative which expresses at a personal level as a shift to using natural non-chemically based products at home, a more conscious use of cars and planes, and for the more activist to campaigning on the issues that fill our daily media. The writers in different ways try to live with sacred reverence for the earth.

Nature is just one of the sources from which the biographers draw. Key books are high up the list, which is why we have gathered these up into a resources section. People, role models, surprising encounters also play a part. As Albert Schweitzer said,

...we have each of us cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flames within us. If we had before us those who have been a blessing to us, and could tell them how it had come about, they would be amazed to learn what passed over from their life into ours.

In a recent survey of CANA members, it was found that nearly half the respondents valued sharing with others, as what they appreciated the most. They asked CANA to arrange more opportunities for this. Several biographers highlighted the importance of conversation and the influence of other inspirational people in their lives. Informal conversation, exchange through *'interweaving patterns of influence'* and through relationship with *'my brothers and sisters in this amazing global family'* seem to provide the nourishing fellowship - or *sangha*, as Buddhists call it. This can be hard to find sitting in the straight lines of pews. In this same survey, what people valued about their connections through CANA above all was the openness they found.

All appreciated the atmosphere in which new discoveries could be shared. Apparent heresies could be explored without fear of judgement or dismissal. Published authors on the new grassroots spirituality write of the importance of open minds and loving hearts, of authenticity of personal experience and the cessation of reliance on external authority. Our biographers seem to exemplify these characteristics and find their validation from sharing with others.

This 'withinness' derives from meeting God in the silence. Most biographers refer to a key role that meditation played in their awakening and still plays in their lives. Somehow a meditative silence lifts our minds out of the mundane level to a more heart-centred consciousness that has not been previously available to our everyday awareness. The old adage 'a family

that prays together stays together' might now be replaced by one along the lines of 'a family that shares silence together finds a new level of togetherness' and the truth of 'When two or three are gathered together in My name, there shall I be in the midst'.

This need for connection through silence was demonstrated by Jesus, who used to 'go up the mountain alone'. No doubt he physically removed himself from the crowds but he also ascended the levels of consciousness to reach the place where 'I and the Father are one'. Several biographers refer to the part a visit to the Findhorn Foundation played in their awakening and how, there, perhaps for the first time, they discovered a process of attunement with each other and with the inner presence of the 'beloved'. CANA also starts its meetings with 'attunement' in silence and then with sharing, and it is amazing how people coming together in this way can leave behind the rush and tear of their journeys and move into a shared inner space from which relatively harmonious accord and decision-making can flow. Would that synods, governments and boards of directors started their meetings in a similar way!

This silence also seems to be a key to '*going with the energy of God*', '*following the flow and noting synchronicities*' and of '*listening to the inner voice*'. Jesus said, "*My sheep know my voice*": was he giving us an inner clue within the outer metaphor of a shepherd calling his sheep?

Discovering the reality of an inner dimension is a key aspect of the new consciousness. "*It felt as if I was coming home to an inner understanding that had been forgotten.*" Likewise, the discovery of multiple dimensions of transcendence through what biographers describe as 'peak experiences' – experiences of the numinous – where our consciousness expands to take in powerful glimpses of that which seems much greater than the self. "*It is these experiences of the numinous... that are*

liberating numbers of people from the confines of their old belief systems.”

For some it is through these experiences that the presence of angels becomes more than a biblical reference. Angels are seen or sensed as real and also seeking our conscious cooperation, *“They are alongside us as we are emerging into a new soul/spirit consciousness, using their energy to find a path for the increase of light needed to dispense the negativity we have built up around the planet”*.

A related transcendent discovery is the reality of the continuity of consciousness beyond death and the very real presence of loved friends and family who have passed on. One writes how, after her father’s death *“I seemed to share a totally other dimension with him and had some amazing conversations”*.

These (to us) new dimensions of awareness bring an inevitable conclusion that *“to me truth seems multi-faceted”* and *“when two people share their truths with one another, they discover that both truths are different aspects of a greater truth”* and that *“there is one truth beyond all truths and it cannot be told”*. This richness of truth often stems from encounter with people of other faiths. A number of biographies testified to helpful influences from other faith traditions, which have enriched their own understandings and spiritual practices. Several mention experiences of Eastern religions; others mention the spirituality of the Middle East and in particular the Sufi path. *“The fact the Gospels of Jesus and the Sufi message are alike in many ways is very hopeful for the future.”*

One biographer says, *“I read mystical writings from all the traditions finding that bells were ringing inside me. Sometimes it felt that an electric current swept through me as a new insight or, as I believe, a remembered insight, came into consciousness once more”*.

Another wrote her discovery that *“Truth lies within the teaching of all the Masters; who can say one is greater than the other?”* Another explains, *“Through an experience of being at home with people of other faiths, I came to a new understanding of the Call of Christ as a universal call that reverberates deep in the heart of every human being”*. And another describes her image that *“we all of humankind, stand under the crystal dome of God’s love. His light pours in through that dome, covering everyone with rainbow colours in all hues and shades. Each one of us is covered by these colours – but some have more than others, depending on where each stands under the dome. I see that humankind has built walls to enclose the colours, instead of sharing them with each other... no one creed or belief has all the answers... we should all be drawing together towards the centre of the dome where the light is purest and strongest”*.

Several authors mention the lasting impression that childhood in a Christian home and early experiences in church have made, often from a sense of holiness that came through the Mass or Eucharist . One mentions that early attendance of church *“awakened my spiritual sense but I gained little enlightenment and was very uncomfortable with the doctrines I was expected to believe”*. One biographer writes that her consciousness of *‘a benevolent creative force behind the universe’* seemed to emerge from absorbing the atmosphere in the chapel of a Roman Catholic convent, at the age of seven. Whilst disillusionment with dogma and creed later set in, these experiences were lastingly important. Many continue to find a valued sense of belonging to a community through attending church and others find nourishment through rituals and liturgy, despite the discomfort with ‘literal interpretation’.

Many of the biographers write about love. *“I was filled with an abounding, energising love for everyone which was not*

simply a soft, gooey emotion but had practical manifestation"; "This evolution is powered and guided by an underlying, creative loving force, which I call God... in which the overwhelming principle is love"; "I find a heart-centred rootedness in nature"; "I felt this energy as entirely loving and beneficent". Often these experiences of love came about through a connection with the world of nature and often through the experience of Mass/Communion or other rituals. Jonathan Robinson, an Anglican priest and CANA member, is developing contemporary, contemplative ways to celebrate Eucharist and other liturgical services in a way that recognises the love and unity which underpins the whole Cosmos. (see booklist).

Christ's injunction to 'Love your neighbour as yourself' was an active principle in the early Church, but is it still? Certainly the Christmas 2004 tsunami generated a wave of love and compassion around the planet on a massive scale. Maybe its wake-up call to us was to open wider the heart of humanity and create a culture of love that disregards creed, gender and status and embraces all within it. This wave might sweep away the pain that difference has caused in the past and carry us forward into the new.

In the leaflet produced by CANA for potential members it is stated that, *'CANA members have in common a wish to discover and live by spiritual principles, to care collectively for the community of life and to seek the truth at the heart of all religion'* and certainly this has been borne out over and over again in the biographies.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NEW AWARENESS

Something is happening in our world. We are conscious of it all around us. We are now on the verge of one of those mental and spiritual leaps which have happened before in the history of mankind, eras when the corporate mentality and spirituality of man shift and expand and new vistas and interpretations of the Universe open up.

F C Happold

The biographies all point to signs that our ‘corporate mentality and spirituality’ is indeed shifting and that ‘new vistas and interpretations of the Universe’ are opening up.

Such a global and potentially all-embracing awareness is difficult to define, and perhaps that is the first characteristic – its relative non-definability. Since the shift is part of what Frank Tuoti and others would see as a shift away from the ‘mental age’ to a mystical age, which by its very nature is something which cannot be grasped by deductive, analytic reasoning alone, perhaps it will always defy a precise definition. And the nature of definitions can be to solidify and inhibit growth, a problem that many are finding with creeds and doctrines.

So here we will not attempt a definition but outline a few characteristics of the new awareness that are of particular relevance to Christians, whilst not forgetting that the emerging consciousness is a feature of the post-modern world which is beginning to affect many, if not all aspects of social life on planet earth. What follows then is not an exhaustive or definitive list and we invite feedback which, in its turn, can help the process of emergence.

As mentioned above, a useful starting point can be found in the writings of Frank Touti, who sees this process as the

emergence of ‘mystical consciousness’.

Our embarkation into the Fourth (spiritual) dimension (Einstein’s term), wherein the noteworthy achievements and accomplishments of the Mental Age will not be discarded but, rather, integrated into the new consciousness, thus raising the existing consciousness structure to a new and higher level.

Mysticism is about the path to union with the Divine, rather than an intellectual understanding. Without this direct experience and living reality religion will become an empty shell of doctrinal statements, creeds and theological debate.

For any who may be struggling with the mystical nature of this new awareness it may help to do the following exercise. Take time to still yourself and relax, then reflect on and allow the following words of Meister Eckhart to take you where they will: “*The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me*”.

Author, psychologist and medical intuitive, Dr Caroline Myss, is increasingly finding signs of what she calls ‘spiritual madness’ as she tours and lectures around the world. Spiritual madness is the term she uses to describe the journey of the contemporary mystic, into the darkness and mystery of God. For her the call of the contemporary mystic is to follow Jesus’ injunction to be ‘in the world but not of it’. She stresses the need to be as psychologically developed as possible, with a strong ego which is surrendered to the divine mystery. She asserts that the call is no longer to retreat from life in order to live in union with God, but to live a life of union within all the challenges of life. Mystical experiences are no longer limited to those in monastic environments but have to be assimilated into living in the ordinary world. She sees two particular catalysts of this new spiritual consciousness, namely the exile of the

Dalai Lama from Tibet and Vatican II. These events released Eastern and Western Mysticism into contemporary culture, partly through making hitherto secret and sacred texts and teachings available to the general public.

Others see that we are entering an Age of the Spirit, where humankind will become less absorbed by material concerns. Robert Muller, former Deputy Secretary General of the UN, goes as far as to suggest that unless we enter a spiritual age, humankind will not survive the rising forces of destructiveness and disintegration.

Here we shall examine what we understand to be the key features of this shift.

1. Interiority

There are many facets to the greater sense of interiority which is a fundamental aspect of the emerging awareness.

- *Emphasis on oneness and interconnectedness within the cosmos*: the findings of modern science and the understandings of mystics seem to be converging in this respect. There is a growing awareness of the web of connection, not just on earth but throughout the universe and between material and non-material realms. This sense of interconnection is often experienced inwardly through meditative or contemplative practices. Heaven and earth are no longer seen as distinct entities and there is increasing focus on what once may have been termed ‘the hosts of heaven’. There is a greater awareness of the importance of conscious human cooperation with other dimensions of being. Concomitant with this, work on near-death experiences and some people’s inner experience of contact with those who have died is leading to a growing awareness of the continuation of consciousness beyond death.

- *Growth of meditation and contemplation*: these are largely wordless, silent and sometimes imageless forms of prayer leading to union with the Divine. Related to the emphasis on these forms of prayer is the importance placed on direct experience of God. At the same time there is a growing appreciation of prayer involving the body, such as sacred dance, chants which set up a resonance within the body and other forms of ‘embodied’ prayer.
- *New relationship with time*: practices such as meditation and mindfulness together with scientific discoveries are creating a new awareness of time in many people. Einstein’s theory of relativity was an important catalyst in thinking about time, enabling us to understand ‘*not the origin of the cosmos in space and time, but the origin of space and time themselves*’. Present moment awareness has become an important spiritual practice for many. See for example the work of Eckhart Tolle. For some the NOW moment is an entrance into a new dimension. CANA member Philip Sheppard succinctly describes this: “*Eternity is not a long time, it is no time at all. Now is not a small piece of time, it is another dimension of reality, rather like width is not a small piece of length.*”

Awareness of being in the present moment seems to have two corollaries – a greater sense of being within the body but also a sense of all time being one. Eternity and the present some how are wrapped up with each other in a way which is inseparable.

Our task is to concentrate on the present moment and on its demands, because it is here, and here alone, that time intersects with eternity. The aim is to become detached from time and space, and to cast them into the eternity of

God. In doing this we are actually fulfilling the purpose of the Incarnation; for God did not become Man so as to enslave us to history but to free us from it..

Cyprian Smith

The present moment speaks to us through all the five senses of our physical selves, through our emotional selves and through our hearts and our minds. We are beginning to realise that, without the surrender of the self to the present moment of God, our spiritual practices, helpful though they may be, will not lead to the transformation of living and consciousness, nor to union with the Divine.

Until I try to let go of self and surrender to God in every moment of every day, my true spiritual life has not really started. - Cyprian Smith.

- *The role of intuition:* greater emphasis is placed on the role of intuitive knowledge that is heart-centred. At one time we learned to access our minds through the ‘left’ part of our brain, which relies on analytical, cognitive and rational processes. Now we are also aware of the need to access the intuitive, relational and imaginative ‘right’ brain. This has been the domain of the poet, the artist and the visionary but today we are finding a greater acceptance of the insights of an intuition which comes to us not only through the head but also through the heart. Eastern traditions have referred to the wisdom of the ‘heart-mind’. In the West we are now rediscovering the significance of intuition and are learning to trust the truth of our own inner authority rather than the traditional outer authority of handed-down interpretations. As Joan of Arc said in G B Shaw’s version of her defence against the accusations of heresy by the church, “*What other judgement can I have but my own?*”

Frank Touti offers the following caution about intuition:

“We must not, however, mistake temporary ‘feelings’ or fleeting sensations for intuition. Intuitions come from a place much deeper than that. They are not whims or passing fancies; they carry a certain reality, a certain integrity, a certain urgency, a certain truthfulness.”

2. Rediscovery of the Feminine – both human and divine

In the West today the masculine aspect, the rational, active, aggressive power of the mind, is dominant, while in the East the feminine aspect, the intuitive, passive, sympathetic power of the mind is dominant. The future of the world depends on the ‘marriage’ of these two minds, the conscious and the unconscious, the rational and intuitive, the active and the passive. - Bede Griffiths

In these post-women’s liberation days, when much has been achieved in terms of equality of the sexes, there are still many imbalances to be worked out. However it can be seen that the feminist movement has led to a greater appreciation of the Feminine in spiritual life. Three aspects of this are a greater respect for Mother Earth/Mother Nature (see 6, below); a recognition of feminine aspects of the Divine; the growing role of women and of feminine qualities in spiritual life. The Sacred Feminine is recognised as an experience of overwhelming love.

The experience of the Mother, of the mother aspect of the Godhead, of the Motherhood of God, is an immense, vast, constantly expanding experience of the presence of calm and blissful unconditional love as the ground of being.

Andrew Harvey

The sacred Feminine is being rediscovered in concepts such as Holy Wisdom and the Old Testament Hebrew word for the Spirit of God (*ruach*). The roots of both of these are feminine and we are beginning to understand that the Old Testament

Shekinah, Glory of God, is yet another expression of the feminine principle within the Divine. The Greek *Hagia Sophia* (another name for wisdom) also embodies the feminine principle. The Trinity or Godhead has for centuries been regarded as masculine, but the rediscovery of the qualities of the Sacred Feminine is essential for the greater personal and communal integration necessary for the development of the new awareness.

Within more New Age circles importance is placed on the Goddess tradition. This has an equivalent within Christianity, where some are beginning to see Mary, the Mother of Jesus and Mary the Magdalene, in this light. The last few decades have also seen the development of feminist theology, the ordination of female priests in some reformed churches, as well as a surge in calls for female ordination in the Roman Catholic Church.

Recent research and discoveries (of ancient texts, etc) are leading to reassessment of biblical women. Mary Magdalene and other women supported Jesus financially, travelled with him throughout his public ministry and were entrusted with teaching, revelation and witness. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is being accorded the status of an important teacher in the early church. Margaret Starbird, Anne Johnson, Old Testament scholar Margaret Barker and Harvard School of Divinity professor, Karen L King are just a few of a growing number of authors casting new light on the role of women, in a religious and spiritual context.

Jung argued the need for the integration of the masculine *animus* with the feminine *anima*. Without this, humanity will not find ways forward based on non-violence and cooperation. The cycle of violence and domination will continue to threaten the future of all. Jung also suggests that without the marriage of masculine and feminine qualities humankind will not find union with God.

3. Enlarged interpretative framework

Humanity today yearns for a bigger picture than our currently subsumed perceptions which entangle us in webs of religious minimalism. We yearn to reclaim the deep, primal sacred story of our evolving universe; of planet Earth as our cosmic home; in the diverse and magnificent array of life-forms around us; in the largely untold story of the evolution of spiritual consciousness within humanity itself; and, finally, in the contemporary desire to create a one-world family characterised by love, justice, peace and liberation. - Diarmuid O'Murchu.

From a context for personal faith comprising the local village or town and its environs, the context for today's seeker is now a 'global village' and an expanding universe. The growth of cosmology is very significant in focusing our attention on our place – not just on planet earth but also within the wider universe. Peter Coles, in the preface to *Cosmology: a very brief introduction*, explains that “*The subject matter of cosmology is everything that exists, and seeks to place all known physical phenomena within a single coherent framework*”.

Many regard this age as something of a golden age in cosmology, as the pace of discoveries increasing our understanding of the origins and nature of the universe is so rapid. These discoveries impinge on our awareness and we begin to see things in a wider perspective than ever before. The earth is no longer seen as the physical centre of the universe, which in turn is no longer seen as static but as evolving and expanding. This can lead to the recognition that our apprehension of truth and the answers to ultimate questions might also be evolving rather than fixed, requiring an acceptance of the provisional nature of our beliefs.

Cosmology stimulates questions about the place of planet earth and of humankind within it. All of the above necessitate interpreting knowledge in the light of a much bigger picture. A holistic spirituality cannot be solely about individual salvation but must take into account the ‘salvation’ of humankind and indeed the future of the cosmos. This has led many awakening Christians to an emphasis on the Kingdom of God, inspiring them to work for this, beyond the confines of the Church, believing that eventually the Kingdom of God will be brought about within the whole cosmos.

Adrian Smith sees this as a shift in orientation from being concerned mainly with Church activities and religious behaviour to a concern for all human behaviour and everything God has made, seeing the latter as being the concerns of the Gospel. His book *A Reason for Living and Hoping* has inspired many with this emphasis on the Kingdom of God.

With globalisation come pluralism and knowledge of other religions and spiritual paths, leading more people to a search for the universal truth at the heart of the world’s religions. Consciously and unconsciously there is cross-fertilisation as ideas permeate religious boundaries. Many are finding nourishment in the teachings and practices of other faiths. Charles de Foucauld’s Christian faith was inspired by Muslim devotion: “*Islam has disturbed me deeply. The sight of this faith, of these souls, living in the continuous presence of God, has made me aware of something greater and more true than worldly preoccupations.*” (Quoted by Laurence Freeman in a talk on Great Solitaries).

Paradoxically, as the interpretative framework expands there is also a growing desire to focus down, to go back, both with regard to a new appraisal of Jesus the Christ and with regard to being more rooted in and connected within the natural world, as sharers of the same ecosystem rather than as the dominant

pinnacle of Creation. The longing to go back to roots of the Christian story often has at its heart the search for authenticity and simplicity and the desire to re-interpret the message and life of Jesus in the light of current understandings and recent discoveries, emphasising his humanity and the cultural context of his times.

4. A new way of doing things – grass-roots change

Change is born at the grassroots and what is giving power to this source of change today is 'networking'. The power to forge our future lies in the large number of ordinary people, with their inventiveness and enthusiasm, pooling their ideas and resources... By networking, power is exercised horizontally. This is the new force shaping world opinion and bringing about change.

Adrian Smith (A Reason for Living and Hoping).

From changes in awareness, leading to greater individual and collective maturity, new ways of being and doing begin to emerge. A particular feature of this is the growth of networks. Whilst some groupings grow into fully fledged organisations, many develop as networks. Indeed, networks – personal, local, national, international – are one of the features of contemporary life. Networks develop through connection, through shared interests and concerns, through the seeking out of other kindred spirits on a similar wavelength. Networks then grow into meta-networks. One network started by CANA from fringe Christian/spiritual groupings is now called Meta-Net (www.meta-net.info); another for those involved in spiritual education of a non-sectarian kind is the University for Spirit Forum (www.ufsforum.org). Each constituent network has a slightly different focus or place on a spectrum, ranging from near-orthodox Christianity to different levels and foci of embracing the developing new awareness.

Networks operate through a synergistic process. This word derives from the Greek *synergos*, to work together, and results in outcomes that are greater than the sum of the contributing parts. New and more fluid structures are evolving.. In CANA we have functioned with a core group of those willing to participate, where ideas are pooled and a developmental process generated. Others connect to this by acting as a coordinating point in a region or taking on a specific function. There is no hierarchy. Each person plays a different role and each is trusted to act in alignment with the whole.

The Internet has accelerated the growth of networks and made possible instantaneous international connection so the networking process is not only used by small pioneering organisations but is also becoming the less hierarchical and more inclusive modus operandi of some businesses. One term that has been adopted in developing this way of working is ‘chaordic’, that is, a cross between the chaos in natural systems as expressed by the theories of quantum physics and the hierarchical order of man-made systems such as in the military or government.

Chaordic organisations are self-organising and self-governing. They operate not through hierarchies of authority, but through networks of equals. It isn't powers of coercion that make them effective, rather it's clear, shared purpose, ethical operating principles and responsibility distributed through every node. - Dee Hock

Dee Hock used these principles of chaordic organisation to rescue and build VISA into a flourishing global entity. Such organisations, whether CANA at one level or VISA at another, are powered from the periphery and unified from the centre. This makes them flexible and compatible with the developing human spirit. Organisations developed along these lines give

greater validation of each individual within the collective and naturally place less emphasis on authority figures and the institution itself. They are also compatible with ecological systems and the needs of the biosphere. They use and harmonise conflict and they foster diversity, complexity and change.

Whatever form the church of the future will take, it will possibly need to be organised in the ways Dee Hock sets out: *“Purpose and principles, clearly understood and articulated, and commonly shared, are the genetic code of any healthy organisation. To the degree that you hold purpose and principles in common among you, you can dispense with command and control. People will know how to behave in accordance with them and they’ll do it in thousands of unimaginable, creative ways. The organisation will become a vital living set of beliefs.”*

Within the institutional church, changes in line with this are becoming apparent, with the development of new liturgy and forms of worship by the grass-roots membership, a greater emphasis on lay involvement, increasing recognition of our common humanity and a growing desire to be more inclusive and in touch with the needs of humankind and planet earth – through networks which engage with peace and justice issues and the wider community.

5. New language of spirituality

As new levels of awareness are accessed so new language is coined. This may be taken from other faith traditions – such as *karma, dharma, satsang, ashram, Tao* or *ahimsa*. It may also be taken from working with subtler dimensions – such as ‘synchronicity’ – a term introduced by Carl Jung, used to denote apparent and spontaneous coincidence; ‘focaliser’ is used for the role of someone coordinating the energetic level of a group. There is indeed the need for a common language since the adoption of certain terms can have a ghettoising effect, as

their users are able to discuss things in a way that is not accessible to others.

Some words move into the mainstream. ‘Spirituality’ itself is a word which has gained in usage in the last few decades, although its meaning is quite loose – spirituality can still be confused with spiritualism. ‘Meditation’, which used to be the province of cloistered nuns and monks, is now the common parlance of the popular press, albeit with an altered meaning. Still others need fuller explanation – ‘vibes’ were once the province of Sixties flower people, so ‘vibration’ was dismissed as a term whereas, in fact, it often refers to a ‘note’ or ‘tone’ around which people cluster into a network. Other words like ‘God’ are often seen as representing an outdated concept of Ultimate Reality and are being replaced with terms such as ‘the Divine’, the ‘ground of being’ or ‘Sacred Unity’.

The language of paradox has become important. Some would say that the spiritual journey is comprised of paradox. Cyprian Smith, in his analysis of Meister Eckhart (a 14th Century German mystic whose ideas are gaining in popularity) asserts that the highest truth transcends the Principle of Contradiction (which suggests that a statement cannot be both true and false at the same time). Therefore the highest truth is paradoxical because it holds opposites in tension.

This is a feature of the new awareness, the recognition of being able to hold opposites in tension: the Cross is a perfect symbol of the tension between opposites, and the all-embracing unity in which they are reconciled. For Meister Eckhart as well as for many today: God is everything, yet nothing; distinct from Creation, yet indistinct from it; there is a tension between action and contemplation, withdrawal and involvement, silence and speech, being and nothingness.

6. Creation spirituality and ecology

Many people today are calling for modern religion, and specifically Christianity, to be re-imbedded in the cosmos, so that religion might become a real force in providing the ethical and spiritual energy for the critical task of reversing the degradation of the earth. - Vincent Rossi (Eastern Orthodox environmentalist and theologian, quoted in an article by Margaret Barker).

This takes two main forms. Some of those people working so hard to protect the seas and its creatures, the forests and their biodiversity, the atmosphere and the integrity of the soil are doing so because they can see that the route being pursued by vested corporate interests is also the route to possible human extinction. Others awaken to the mystical one-ness of all life and the beauty of the natural world, drawing nourishment and a sense of union from this. Sometimes this translates into personal and collective lifestyle choices to care for the earth.

Creation-centred spirituality, Green Spirit and deep ecology movements are among those entering a new awareness of the need to embrace both these approaches. They represent a shift from seeing the Divine reflected in Creation to seeing God as immanent within each cell of nature, and that we need to respect and uphold the sacredness of the environment. Many are re-embracing Mother Earth/Nature in the concept of *Gaia*, which sees the earth and eco-system as a living system deserving of our utmost respect.

The indigenous traditions have long held this knowing. *“What man does to the earth he does to himself”*, said Chief Seattle to the colonisers moving west across native lands. For if *“the world is one stupendous whole, whose body nature is and God the soul”*, as Alexander Pope put it, then each time we pollute, and in other ways treat the earth in negative ways,

maybe we are doing this to the ‘embodiment’ of God. The new awareness is beginning to grasp that deep ecology and contemporary Christianity need to walk hand-in-hand.

Ultimately the New Awareness is about a new level of integration and human maturity necessitated by the rapid changes of the last century. A fully aware person will live life from an inner sense of being which, paradoxically, is a more universal self, yet fully individually owned. “*He is in a sense a ‘cosmic’ and ‘universal man’*” (Thomas Merton). The New Awareness is about combining the journey towards union with the Divine, with becoming fully within and identified with the whole of humanity, yet without becoming ‘of’ it. Instead of separation from the world, the New Awareness calls for a full engagement with it from a perspective of interiority which can unify the many faces of truth ‘in a dialectic or an insight of complementarity’.

With this in mind we hope this book contributes toward a deepening of understanding of the unity underlying the diversity of our world. This understanding is so much needed in the seeming battle between faith and what some call ‘godlessness’- between faith and mammon. An enormous agenda shift is hinted at by biographers who mention the need to work with nature and contribute to saving the earth. The age old battle for the hearts and minds of humanity is being played out in a new context of risked planetary annihilation. The ecological and humanitarian issues of our day could be a unifying factor between people of all faiths and cultures. Whatever the differences may be between orthodox doctrine and the position taken by people in CANA it is these larger issues that really matter. We hope that this book may make a contribution to the urgent need of our time for the peoples of the world to wake up to the underlying one-ness of all life and our deep interconnectedness with God and with each other.

POSTSCRIPT

Even as we finish writing this a new horizon beckons us onward both in individual and collective ways. What is pressing through the biographies is a growing awareness of the universal consciousness and the 'I Am' that is within us all. By digging deeper into the 'sweet well' of Christ's teachings we find our identity no longer through our individual journey alone but by learning to explore and express 'the four-fold song', which comes as an insight from the Judaic tradition:

We truly sing the song of our 'self' - through a deeper awareness of who we really are, our soul starts to sing.

We then sing the song of our tribe - our family, our nation, our religious or other groupings. We express our identity in more communal terms.

As awareness expands and our hearts and minds open we find ourselves singing the song of all humanity. We begin to recognise the Oneness that connects us all.

The fourth song we sing is the song of the Cosmos - connecting us to all life and the multi-dimensions of reality.

Maybe we need, individually and collectively, to explore how we are called to express the four-fold song, beautifully and harmoniously, and what is the deeper thread that runs through all levels and continually beckons us on?

A thousand unseen hands

Reach down to help you to their peace-crowned heights,

And all the forces of the firmament

Shall fortify your strength. Be not afraid

To thrust aside half-truths and grasp the whole.

Ralph Waldo Trine

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth...

John 16 vs 12-13 NRSV

BOOKLIST

This booklist covers many of the books mentioned in either the biographies or text of this publication. For a fuller list of recommended reading please see the CANA booklist, available from CANA Publications.

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This book tells the fascinating story of sixteen Christians or post Christians who are struggling to make sense of Christianity in the light of the present day understanding of the scriptures, and in a time of increased spiritual awareness.

Anyone moving forward on their particular spiritual journey, and feeling uncertain of their place within traditional religion may find solace in reading the stories of fellow travellers.