

ISSUE 42

faith

INITIATIVE

EMBRACING DIVERSITY

**“Acts of kindness never die.
They linger in the memory,
giving life to other acts
in return.”**

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

The Magnanimity of the Human Spirit

Keynote: Ela Gandhi

Working for the Benefit of all Humanity

The Role of Religion in Society

The Sky Above Us

Faith and the Artist

WINNER
SHAP AWARD 2011

I'll Be a Hummingbird



This is a story that I heard from Wangari Maathai founder of the Green Belt Movement in Kenya which plants trees, encourages protection of the environment and the defence of women's rights. It is a story that has always touched my heart.

In the story of the hummingbird there is a huge forest that is being consumed by a fire. All the animals run out of the forest and are standing transfixed as they watch the forest burn. They feel very overwhelmed, very powerless except for a little hummingbird who says, "I'm going to do something about this fire". So she flies to the nearest stream, takes a drop of water and puts it on the fire. She flies up and down, up and down, up and down as fast as she can. In the meantime, all the other animals, much bigger animals like the elephant with a big trunk that could bring much more water, are standing there, helpless and they are saying to the hummingbird, "What do think you can do? You're too little. This fire is too big! Your wings are too little and your beak is so small. You can only bring a small drop of water at a time." But as they continued to discourage her, she turns to them and without wasting any time she says to them, "I'm doing the best I can".

Every day we are faced with numerous problems and sometimes we can feel completely overwhelmed. My work may just be a drop but I am doing the best I can, going up and down, up and down, up and down. I bring news from the forest, collect financial help for the guardians of the forest – the native or original peoples, participate in interreligious conferences, and work to wake those that I meet wherever I go.

My spiritual name is Hummingbird Woman of the Thunderbird clan. My role in this life is to be a bridge. A bridge between those of the city and those of the forest, between those of the south and those of the north, between those of different religions. My role is to wake people up, just as the hummingbird is asking all the animals to wake up and do the best they can.

Athamis Bárbara

Athamis Bárbara Barbosa is a Brazilian shaman. She is a healer and teacher. She has chosen to make the people of the city aware of a way of life that integrates inner change and the preservation of the planet. She lives with her family in Rio de Janeiro and has a centre, Nowa Cumig - Centre for Native Traditions, where she works and receives indigenous people to share their healing techniques, traditional knowledge and handicrafts. She can be reached at Nowa Cumig on athamis.vivencias@gmail.com

Photographer of Hummingbird: David Rose



04 **EDITORIAL** - Heather Wells

05 **KEYNOTE**
Ela Gandhi - *The Magnanimity of the Human Spirit*

07 **POEM**
Haleh Razii-Ryall - *Beyond*

08 **YOUNG VOICES**
Heather McDaid - *Get Wisdom Get Insight*

10 **TRIBUTE TO RABBI LORD SACKS**
Marcus Braybrooke - *Healing a Fractured World*

11 **THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN SOCIETY**

11 John, Lord Alderdice - *The Stories and Symbols We Live By*

14 Allan Forsyth - *A Universal and Dynamic Phenomenon*

16 Eda Molla Chousein - *Walk the Talk, Don't Talk the Talk*

18 Gunnar Stålsett - *A Time of Critical Crossroads*

21 **POEM**
Martyn Halsall - *Visible Music*

22 **INVITATION**
Gordon MacLellan - *100 Celebrations 1000 Prayers*

24 **REFLECTION**
Rebecca Irvine Bilkau - *Sunday's Child*

26 **LANGUAGE OF ART**
Linda Murgatroyd -
Creativity and Love Inspire Practical Action on Sustainability

30 **INTERFAITH ANNIVERSARY**
Charanjit AjitSingh - *Capturing the Imagination*

31 **SUBSCRIPTION FORM**

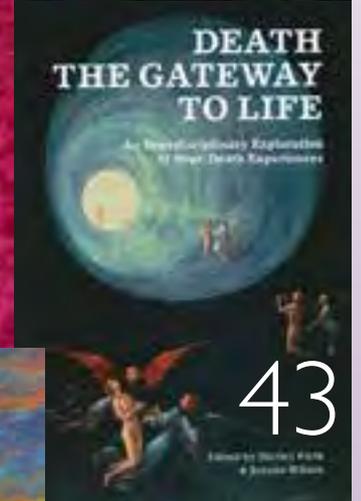
33 **INTERFAITH ENCOUNTER**
Ravinder Kaur Nijjar -
First Assembly on Women, Faith and Diplomacy

34 **NARRATIVE OF OUR TIME**

34 Jonathan Wittenberg - *Love The Stranger*

36 Dorothea Williamson - *Compassionate Communities*

38 **SPIRITUAL INSIGHT**
Umm Hanie' Rebler - *When Souls Meet*



40 **INSIGHT**
Shiban Akbar OBE - *Stepping out of the Fold*

42 **BOOK REVIEW**
Lorna Douglas - *Death the Gateway to Life*

43 **NEW BOOK**
Edited by Shirley Firth & Joanna Wilson -
Death the Gateway to Life

48 **FAITH AND THE ARTIST**
Judith Bromley - *The Sky Above Us*

editorial

As I write this the first batch of the Covid-19 vaccine is being rolled out to some of the most vulnerable people in our society, and a small ripple of joy is coming across the airwaves as newscasters can at last impart some good news to listeners. There is light at the end of a very dark tunnel, but I feel we have to view it with some humility as we are the first country to receive the vaccine, and many poorer countries will have to wait considerably longer before they see their glimmer of light. The devastation that the pandemic has wrought on many of our societies across the globe, has brought humanity to a crossroads, says our keynote writer Ela Gandhi. In the face of difficult challenges we are asking ourselves the great philosophical questions: "Who am I?" "What is the meaning of my life?" and "What is my relationship with other people and the Universe?". These are questions that constantly hang in the air, but in the current context the answers we are drawing from our experiences reveal the fragility of our individual lives, and the strength of our interconnectedness as members of the human race. It is the latter realisation, suggests Gandhi, which ultimately will enable us to survive and even flourish because it inspires in us a deep rooted generosity of spirit. From her home in Durban, South Africa, where she is isolating, she has observed and supported the coming together of her community on a scale never seen before. She has noted the bravery of those on the front line, and the kindness and generosity of others who have reached out to those in need – the homeless, the poor, and the lonely. She says that from the confines of her home she has truly witnessed the purpose of life, and the magnanimity of the human spirit. It is precisely these great philosophical issues that Heather McDaid, our 'Young Voices' contributor, is eager to explore. In her final year at High School her chosen subject, and the one she finds most stimulating and challenging, is Religion, Morality and Philosophy (RMPS). Her disappointment was profound when she discovered that she was the only student in her school to choose the subject, and consequently it would not be available to her. She believes that educational opportunities, to stimulate the interest and curiosity of students to this important subject, have been missed because of the lack of qualified teaching staff. I find this quite shocking. How then, I wonder, will these young people gain knowledge and understanding to fully appreciate the richness, and the complexities, of our multi-cultural world. How will prejudice in all its forms ever be overcome if vital opportunities to expand young minds are not taken.

Heather Wells

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www.faithinitiative.co.uk

Initiative Interfaith Trust

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Trustees: Heather Wells, Lorna Douglas
and Charanjit Ajit Singh

Object:

The promotion of religious harmony by: Providing educational resources and information to promote a better awareness of the causes and consequences of inter-religious tensions and conflicts; and educating the public in the diverse nature of religious belief.

Faith Initiative: Embracing Diversity Magazine

Editorial Panel

Editor: Heather Wells

Co-Editor and Design Consultant: Lorna Douglas

Editorial Team

Charanjit Ajit Singh

Shiban Akbar

Sr. Maureen Goodman

Umm Hanié Rebler

Jehangir Sarosh

Poet in residence: Rebecca Irvine Bilkau

Aim: The aim of the magazine is to open windows on the beliefs and practices of people of different faiths and cultures: to foster understanding and reduce racially and religiously motivated violence.

Statement: Whilst the contents of this magazine will always be in accordance with the 'object' of Initiative Interfaith Trust there will be freedom of expression.

Invitation: We invite you to contribute articles, poems, letters, artwork and responses so that the magazine reflects the religious communities it seeks to serve.

Editorial guidance can be obtained from

**Heather Wells, Slyne Hall, Slyne with Hest,
Lancaster LA2 6BE**

Email: hf_wells@yahoo.co.uk

Issue 43 Themes:

1. Faiths tackling racial inequality
2. Community action inspired by faith

Front cover image: White Chrysanthemum nurtured and photographed by Yuan Liu

Back cover: Quote: Albert Einstein 'What I Believe' cited The Quotable Spirit p182 ed. Lorie & Mascetti 1996

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SPIRAL: "This is an ancient symbol that reminds us of the womb and the protective mothering nature in all of us. It takes us from the broad sweeps of the outer life to an infinitely small centre where we cease to exist."

Cited:
Mandalas: Spiritual Circles for Harmony & Fulfilment
Laura J. Watts (2002) Pub. Hermes House,
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The spiral logo was designed by Caroline Jariwala for Initiative Interfaith Trust

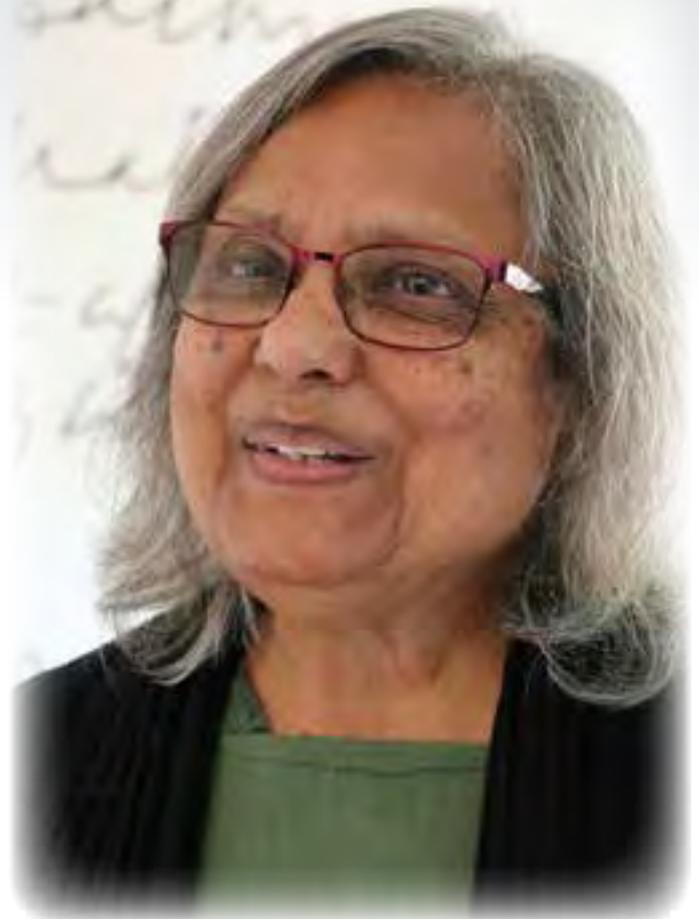
The Magnanimity of the Human Spirit

Humanity is at a crossroads. We are all seeking answers to the important questions that face us at this critical time such as who am I, what is the meaning of my life, what is my relationship with others and the Universe, what is my purpose on earth and how am I expected to fulfil that responsibility? The last six months has jolted us into facing up to these challenges and accepting the hard reality of how little we really know, and how important it is for us to work together across all barriers to both find the answers to these questions and meet the challenges of the Covid 19 pandemic. As Gandhiji would say, how far are we from discovering the Truth. Indeed one stark reality has been indisputably confirmed and that is that our lives are fragile yet interconnected. We are not invincible. No amount of armaments, wealth, or perceived superiority of race, colour, creed, class and gender can protect us from being infected by the Coronavirus, but clearly the work of the brave who plod on with compassion and care will be rewarded. James Shirley says in the last stanza of his poem, **Death the Leveller:**

*Your heads must come
To the cold tomb;
Only the actions of the just
Smell sweet, and blossom in their dust.*

I had just returned to my home in Durban, South Africa from Rome in February 2020 when the lockdown measures were announced. Being almost 80 and having asthma, I was advised to remain in my home where I live alone. But quickly I began to use my telephone and computer to great advantage. I could communicate with my family and others.

This technology enabled me to support, from my home, the many brave frontline workers helping to round up the homeless people in the City and provide shelter, food, clothing and other essential facilities to them: train them to observe the basic precautions to safeguard themselves and those around them: offer programmes and counselling to them and rehabilitate those addicted. This was a wonderful collaboration among the different faiths working together, serving meals, restoring the dignity of these hitherto invisible mass of homeless people. Youth workers and artists came together to help entertain the younger population among them, and we saw a beautiful camaraderie developing here, and a process of change taking place. They tell us some wonderful stories of how addicts have been rehabilitated, and how some budding artists have been identified in the last 6 months. Yes, everyone can change. Here I saw from the confines of my home the purpose of life.



My attention was drawn to the overcrowded little makeshift homes in various peri-urban areas. Here people had lost their source of income as commerce and trade were affected by the shutdown. There was shock and desolation written on their faces. But quickly community organisations sprung up, soup kitchens were established and they were able to receive groceries and other provisions from various sources and supply food to those in need.

While this was happening the people were able to identify a small patch of unoccupied land here on which they began to grow their own vegetables. Others began to sew masks and help the community to safeguard themselves. Their dignity was restored.

Others who had regular incomes looked at their budgets and found that staying home meant saving on petrol costs, entertainment costs, cost of gifts and eating at home rather than eating out. This amount could easily help at least a few of the millions who had no income. The idea of solidarity, sharing and caring was seen in action here.

There is also the base side which often receives most publicity. Covid 19 elicited anger, impatience and prejudices that are harboured by a few of the many law enforcement officers. While many of these men and women “peace keepers” responded to the call of duty with compassion and bravery, there are a few who used indiscriminate force and tarnished the image of the many. As black people, poor people, people of other faiths, castes, and race became victims of the harsh actions of the security forces, the concerned masses of people came together under the banner of the Black Lives Matter movement. They drew attention to these prejudices harboured by people, both within the security forces, within others in positions of power and in the community, who condoned these actions by their silence. This movement has helped to not only highlight police brutality but importantly the huge class, race, ethnic, religious and gender divides that we are living with.

While the base side of human nature is emerging on the one hand, there is a rise in the magnanimity of the human spirit on the other. While wars and violence are being waged, a large number of ordinary citizens are beginning to look at new ways of living within our communities. War and violence are based on the belief that some people are just unacceptable, and have no right to live, and therefore they should be killed; and others following them should be made to suffer by making their survival difficult, if not impossible, through applying strategies such as the scorched earth strategy, replacing fertile land with burnt out land, where nothing can grow. Nuclear bombs are made with that notion in mind. The evidence remains as a proof to the base nature of man.

Nonviolent activists, on the other hand believe that all human beings are born in the image of God, and that every person therefore has a good side and a bad side within them.

The task of the nonviolent workers is to encourage and appeal to the good side of each person in order to build a better society, and a better world, in which all can live happily.

Society needs to come to terms with this fundamental difference between activists who perpetrate violence, and those who promote nonviolence. For it is this understanding that will have the affect of transforming violent movements into nonviolent movements, and in helping to effect a real transformation of our society.

Another reality is that of the beautiful sight of our earth suddenly blooming, as carbon emissions are seen to be drastically reduced by the affects of the lockdown resulting in less travel, and close down of both large industries and mining activities. We see animal and bird life suddenly visible and free as we remain in lockdown. The atmosphere is clearer.

Here we see a clear message that we need to stop exploitation of the earth, conserve our scarce resources, take care of the environment, live simply, slowly and make way for more people to enter the economy. These are some of the ideas expressed by our great leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Leo Tolstoy, Edmund Burke and other humanist philosophers.

In summary some of the basic lessons for us to work on are:

1. to ensure that the Sustainable Development Goals are met as soon as possible
2. that quality education and quality health care for all is prioritised
3. that education and training is aimed to meet the challenges of life, not just the needs of industry
4. that community food gardens are established in every neighbourhood.

I believe that interfaith collaboration can help us strengthen acts of solidarity and revive a keener understanding of the purpose of life. This will enable us to help reduce the inequalities and raise the standard of living of all the people, without seeking government enforcement. Faith based organisations can help build peaceful, responsible contented societies which are physically, mentally and spiritually strong.

“The idea of solidarity, sharing and caring was seen in action”

Ela Gandhi

The Honourable Ela Gandhi was born and grew up at the Phoenix Settlement the first Ashram established by Mahatma Gandhi in Inanda, South Africa. Presently retired after serving 9 years in the South Africa Parliament representing ANC; worked as a social worker in the Child Welfare field, and an activist in the movement against apartheid. She served 8 years under banning orders of which 5 years were under house arrest. She presently serves as Chairperson of Gandhi Development Trust and Phoenix Settlement Trust, Co-President of World Conference on Religions for Peace. Honorary doctorates were conferred on her by the Durban University of Technology, University of KwaZulu Natal, Sidharth University and Lincoln University. She is the recipient of many awards, local and international.

Beyond

**Beyond the horizon, lies a hidden sky
Where hatred and wars,
Lies and deceit,
Have burnt their trace,**

**Beyond the prying eyes,
Where only patience
Kindness and tolerance form,
A visible pattern of an old figure
with gentle caress remain**

**Our heart lifts,
Our hands join,
Our voices rise
Our gazes brighten
To a future that can
Only belong to us children
Whose time was cut short
By sticks of blindness and
plague of hearts.**

**In this place, we are given
Back our burnt space.**

Haleh Razii-Ryall has been a teacher of Modern Languages for 20 years working in the state, and most recently, independent school sector. An activist promoting inclusion and diversity of languages and cultures both locally and internationally, her poems speak to that experience and is the personal journey of a BME woman in the UK. Although personal in experience, they are global in intention. She strongly believes that world peace starts with culturally aware young people. That this insight is not sufficiently appreciated, shared or acted upon with the tragic results we have seen around us, should be a source of increasingly massive concern.

Get Wisdom Get Insight

The Importance of studying RMPS:
Religion, Morality and Philosophy





The academic subject 'Religion, Morality and Philosophy' (RMPS) is one that causes much division within the classroom, stimulating debates and disagreements: but, to me, this is what makes it so interesting and intriguing. Religion, morality and philosophy are three key aspects of life. They join hand in hand to create the multi-cultural world in which we live. However, the

insights gained through the study of RMPS provides knowledge and understanding of religious faiths and beliefs that allows for classroom discussion with integrity and respect, without judgement. That is why it is so important to cherish the subject.

RMPS is a huge part of my life and is one of my main interests: I feel certain it will contribute to my future. The differentiated views and opinions played a key role in the initial reason the subject caught my attention, and the subject allowed me to realise my interest in culture and values. At first, due to a lack of teaching staff, RMPS was the subject most people dreaded at the beginning of the week as we didn't learn anything other than how to read out of a textbook. As third year approached I was hesitant to attend the classes because of the misfortune we had with teachers and lessons. However, when I discovered we would be taught by qualified teaching staff I was ready to give the subject a go and try my best to understand and enjoy it.

After about a month I began to realise that I had a great interest in studying morality, philosophy and religion. This proved to me that with the correct teaching RMPS is a subject not to be ignored, or pushed aside. It is interesting and unique. The teaching of the subject is important and calls for qualified staff. How else will pupils gain the knowledge they need to fully understand and respect the views of others, and so help overcome the causes of hatred that lead to Islamophobia and xenophobia.

As the end of my third year at school approached, I was asked to pick my subjects, immediately I enthusiastically chose RMPS, and from there on out I worked extremely hard on all essays and projects with 110% commitment and effort. I loved every moment of it and was extremely excited to undertake the coursework for fourth year with just as much enthusiasm and willingness as the previous year. When the lockdown was announced and home-schooling was the new normal, I undertook many RMPS projects and activities.

However, the transition between third and fourth year was one which I will never forget. I was informed the day before the transition that the RMPS class was not running due to a lack of interest: I was the only person who chose RMPS in my local authority area, for National 5 or Higher. I was extremely upset and I shed a few tears as there was no other way for me to take the subject. Actually, I was enraged that I was being deprived of

a full education in the subject of my choice because others had made different choices, and as a result of this I will receive only one period per week of RMPS for half of the academic year – and that is solely due to the fact that it is a mandatory subject. This is by no means fair to myself, as I was expecting to be taking RMPS as a National 5 exam, and now I am made to take another subject in its place. One period a week for half the year is totally insufficient, and does not give me enough time to explore in depth the various concepts or topics which can arise.

RMPS ignites a spark of curiosity in me and makes me want to learn more. For example, in the area of Morality I developed my interest in medical ethics and animal ethics throughout third year. The subject of *In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF)* really interested me, and this was the first subject on which I wrote an essay. We held classroom debates and listening to the opinions of my peers, that contrasted with my own, made me truly consider the whole concept of views and beliefs.

The subject of Religion is a complicated one with many different views and values to consider: especially as most people believe their religious views are the right ones. This concept alone makes it a subject that is intriguing and exciting. Religion is what shapes

many cultures, contributing to many aspects of daily life including architecture: this in turn inspires tourism. However, there are places such as Mecca which are considered Holy, and only open to those of a specific religion. It is insights such as this that makes religious studies so unique and fascinating.

It is Philosophy however, that interests me the most. The whole idea of complex questions such as "how did the world begin?" and "what is the purpose of life?" are what really get me thinking. Questions such as these can be interpreted in so many ways. One that really caught my attention was "why does suffering exist?," and it is this question that I ended up exploring, and writing about, for hours for my school topic. I studied different perspectives, and developed my theory that suffering exists to bring us together: for example during the global pandemic we began to help each other by doing little things such as making a phone call, or doing the shopping for others. Social status became less important. Philosophy is what brings the whole world into question. Many theories are written or spoken of, but none have ever been proven to be correct because the questions being asked are so complex that it is almost impossible to find a definitive answer to any of them.

In conclusion, RMPS is a very big part of my life. It is subject that I enjoy and love to explore. Morality, Philosophy and Religion are what create the world we live in and subsequently contribute to human behaviour and actions. Morality builds conscience which allows one to differentiate between right and wrong, without it there would be no safe world or society in which we can live. RMPS is what allows difference and uniqueness to be celebrated and acknowledged, this is what makes the world a fascinating place with many different cultures, people, beliefs and values which all come into play when we try to discover who we are as people and who we want to be in the future.

I love RMPS and everything it has to offer and that is why I was devastated when I was informed that I would not be given the opportunity to take it as a National 5 exam or as a subject throughout fourth year. This in the long term will affect my future education and eventually my career choices.

"Philosophy is what brings the whole world into question"

"I was the only person who chose RMPS"

HEALING A FRACTURED WORLD

One of the smallest books on my shelves, which I particularly treasure, is the Orthodox Jewish Daily Prayer Book. It is signed, with good wishes, by Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi. I also have many larger books of which he was the author. Many of them emphasise the important role that faiths should have in shaping a better future. The small book and the larger books illustrate Sacks' ability to be a dual citizen.

'We are,' he wrote 'members of a distinct faith community and at the same time we share a common citizenship with people of every faith and belief, in our national life and as a global citizen. Social cohesion and multi-culturalism are not in opposition. By being true to one's own faith one learns to respect the faith of others, and discover that beyond our rich diversity, we share the moral values which flow from a belief in One God.'

His scholarship and width of reading ensured that he was one of the few people of faith to be taken seriously by leading scholars and politicians, who would usually regard religious belief as irrelevant to their work. This was recognised in his receiving the Templeton Award in 2016, and also being made a member of the House of Lords. Former Archbishop Rowan Williams, in his review of Sacks' book *The Dignity of Difference*, said of him, that "He outlines a set of theses aimed at nothing less than a basis for a religiously sensitive society".

Jonathan Sacks grew up not far from Stamford Hill, a centre of traditional Jewish life, and went to a small synagogue or *shul*, where most of the members were poor immigrants. "In fact" he says, "the first time I was a regular participant of a United Synagogue was when I became its rabbi". His first school was a church school. From his secondary school, he won a scholarship to Cambridge - the first in his family to go to university - where he gained a first class degree in Philosophy.

Sacks planned to be an accountant, but his life was changed by the Six Day War in 1967. Like many Jews, he feared another Holocaust and spent the time praying in a synagogue. "I felt" he said, "that I was joined by a bond of fate with Jews in Israel and with my fellow Jewish students." The following year he visited the USA and met Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the revered leader of the Lubavitch movement.

"Things are going wrong" the rabbi said, "Will you help to put them right?". The meeting was transformative, not only because he decided to become a rabbi, but also he grew a beard and wore a *kippah* (skullcap), symbols of his commitment. He also met Elaine Taylor, a radiography student. It was love at first sight. "A few weeks later" he said, "I bought a ring at Woolworths and got on one knee at Oxford Circus".

Leadership of the very diverse Jewish community was not always easy, but as Chief Rabbi, Sacks soon became a well-known figure, thanks to his writing, lectures and brilliant contributions to *Thought for the Day*.

Sacks, from the first, developed warm relations with leaders of other faiths. He deplored religious rivalry and said, "The fact that the great universal monotheisms have not yet formally endorsed a plural world is still the un-exorcised darkness at the heart of our religious situation". "Together" he insisted, "we are called to Heal a Fractured World".



Revd Dr Marcus Braybrooke is a former Director of the Council of Christians and Jews and is Joint President of the World Congress of Faiths. His new book *Meeting Jewish Friends and Neighbours* has just been published and is available from Amazon.

Photograph kindly provided by the Office of Rabbi Sacks.

The Stories and Symbols We Live By

Some thinkers question whether there is really such a thing as religion. They argue this is a modern social construct that does not have any real meaning outside Western thought patterns. They cite the problems of inclusive definition and maintain that many societies do not even have a word for religion. However, this is based on a misunderstanding. Since the Enlightenment, religion has been defined as a personal set of perspectives and behaviours that ought to be confined to the private sphere. The most severe form of this view is found in the principle of *laïcité* in French political culture. This came both from the challenge of the primacy of Reason, and the associated problem of containing the potential conflicts between and within communities because of their different perspectives about what is a good way of living and relating.

The Irish theologian, J Ernest Davey took a different approach. He defined religion as *“the most ultimate, the most real and the most compelling form in which we conceive the social*

or universe relationships and obligations of our lives; and in the case of those who may be called non-religious it is only necessary to invert the form of the sentence; the most ultimate, real and compelling form in which they conceive their social or universe relationships and obligations is their true religion.” In other words, from the time when human beings developed the capacity of conscious reflection on their condition they engaged in a conscious relationship with the rest of creation. This ‘way-of-being’, was not individual, but shared and communal.

The problem arises when it becomes clear that there is no unanimity about what is ‘the good’ and such differences about how life is to be conducted could either be maintained by the community as a whole, excluding any offender, or the most powerful person in the community could make the decision about what was ‘the good’ and impose his will. Those who wished to differ would have to either depart and form another community or engage in a conflict that would threaten the integrity of the group.

There are things that will always be outside the bandwidth of our human capacities especially when we are considering meaning and purpose

When this approach was no longer acceptable, the next solution was to create a split between the public and private spheres so that you could believe what you wished, but your behaviour had to accommodate to group norms. This was a very different situation from those societies or communities where there is no need to have a special word for religion since there is nothing in life that falls outside its purview. There is no secular in such a community because all of life is infused with an appreciation of the sacred. In a sense the solution of privatizing issues of purpose, meaning and ultimate questions created religion as a separate domain.

Thinking about religion, especially in the West, has focussed very much on what people believe and on the observance of rituals and behaviours and how they are explained. Many religious people fall into this misunderstanding. When theologians started to find it increasingly difficult to match the findings of science with biblical accounts of the life of Christ, they decided that the problem was that the

account of his life had been corrupted by generations of retelling the story with an increasing supernatural overlay. They thought that to really understand Jesus they needed to peel back those layers, scrape away the accretions of history and demythologize the stories to reveal the 'real' Jesus. They believed that myths were stories about things that never really happened, and so to find the true historical Jesus the mythical elements need to be removed. However, myths are not stories about things that did not happen. On the contrary, they are symbolic stories about things that happen all the time and give us profound insights into eternal, real-life human dilemmas. Demythologizing the stories simply empties them of much of their meaning. They need to be understood neither as inaccurate history nor as primitive science, but as something more like poetry that conveys true messages about the human condition. This is true in the Abrahamic faiths, the Dharmic religions and any of the other wisdom traditions.

*What was necessary was to accept
that there was a plurality of perspectives,
but also to seek commonality of needs*

One reason why humanity developed this highly symbolic way of speaking and behaving was that we necessarily have a very limited and modest capacity for understanding and relating with the universe. The more we learn about it, the more we appreciate that our understanding is restricted to a narrow bandwidth that does not, for example, include the very small or the very large, just as the bandwidth of our sight or hearing is also limited to those things that our senses can perceive. There are things that will always be outside the bandwidth of our human capacities especially when we are considering meaning and purpose. Since this is so, the only way that we can think about, talk about and engage with such matters is in a symbolic way. We tell stories that convey some element or aspect of the mysterious reality that transcends our capacities.

Thinking about such matters is only one aspect of our engagement or relationship. We have also developed ways of behaving which assist relationships. These ethical boundaries enable us to relate to other human beings and we have rituals that help us to express our relations with the wider creation too. If we have no boundaries to our behaviour, we will quickly run into difficulties with others with whom we live, and indeed with nature more generally. While different ethical or moral boundaries have developed in different societies at various times, all societies have found the need to establish some set of boundaries. To dismiss these as arbitrary or foolish is to fail to understand the fundamental necessity for boundaries to contain us if we are to guard us from ourselves, and to protect all of us from foolish or destructive aspects of each other. The actual boundaries will change from time to time, but the need for them does not diminish if society is to function.

However, we not only engage or relate through how we think and in the ways that we behave, but also in how we feel. When we look up at the mountains and feel a sense of awe, we may try to convey that sense in words, in paintings or music, but we will experience it in how we feel. This is the kind of transcendent experience to which we may apply the word 'religious' if we think in such a way, and however we differ in our description of it, whether we understand and speak about the mountains in scientific, artistic, or religious terms we will be conveying an experience of awe that is common to us all. Without such experiences our lives would be thin and feeble.

I have been referring so far mostly to how we manage to construct our lives as individuals but of course we cannot survive except in community. The human baby will not live for any length of time without some more or less caring relationships, and throughout our lives relatedness is a hugely significant driver. Religion is about how we think, behave and feel about our human existence, not only as individuals but as communities, and those practices that we describe as 'religious' almost always involve someone else, whether the here-and-now presence of another person or a transcendent experience of relatedness that goes beyond.

So while the external observation of religion has tended to consist mainly of observing external actions - rites, conventions and modes of behaviour - and studying religious beliefs, doctrines and structures, these are the issues on which we tend to differ, not only from religion to religion and from place to place, but also from one time to another time in our own religious communities. There are however other elements which are common to us as human beings, especially what we call 'religious experience', the need for ethical boundaries, and the shared practices that enable us to relate together.

When I was dealing with the violent conflict in Ireland, some of those who were involved in politics were keen to focus on the differences in the ways our communities thought, behaved and related. While these were often characterised as religious differences they were more accurately understood as differences of identity and allegiance. The differences were real and resulted in disturbed relationships between Protestants, most of whom identified and felt allegiance with Scotland or England, and Catholics

for whom the rest of the island of Ireland represented their vital relationship. These were competing conceptions of 'the good' and no solution could be found by seeking the victory of one perspective and the defeat of the other, or indeed of both. What was necessary was to accept that there was a plurality of perspectives, but also to seek commonality of needs. This was also the approach of the recently deceased, John Hume, the leader of constitutional nationalism in the North and winner, with the unionist leader David Trimble, of the 1998 Nobel Prize for Peace. John often spoke about working together on common social and economic challenges – "spilling our sweat instead of our blood" he called it. The outcome of this approach was the pluralist political settlement of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement – even the name represented the two differing perspectives. This kind of pluralism is neither multiculturalism nor relativism. It is a recognition of different ways of engaging or relating with the world. Protestants and Catholics have different ways of thinking about problems and how to deal with them and both needed to be given respect.

What then is the role in society of those who appreciate this central significance of those elements of life and living to which we apply the term 'religious'? It is perhaps to explore an understanding of how the meaning of our lives and the universe we inhabit can only be appreciated in symbols and stories and to be modest about our understandings, appreciative of the richness of experience we can enjoy and especially to take seriously how we need to conduct ourselves in relation with others and with our world – doing justly, loving mercy and walking humbly with God.



Commemorating the Good Friday Agreement 20 years on: Irish Taoiseach (PM) Bertie Ahern, centre front; David Trimble, centre back; Lord Alderdice, 2nd left back row. Sadly, John Hume was too ill to attend.

John, Lord Alderdice is a psychoanalytic psychiatrist who was drawn to politics by the need for a healing process in his native Northern Ireland. As Leader of the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland he was one of the key negotiators of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, then first Speaker of the new Northern Ireland Assembly, and subsequently one of four international Commissioners appointed by the British and Irish Governments to oversee security normalization in Ireland. An appointed member of the House of Lords since 1996, and Convenor of the Liberal Democrats in the Lords during the Conservative/Liberal Coalition Government, he is currently one of the Deputies to the Lord Speaker of the House of Lords.

A UNIVERSAL AND DYNAMIC PHENOMENON

As far back as records go, religion appears to have played a significant and influential role in the life and development of human society. The founders of three of the four most popular faiths in the world (Buddha, Jesus Christ and Muhammad) all appear at, or very close, to the top of any lists of the most influential people in human history. The last 200 years, however, have brought about a level of change which has totally transformed that society on an unprecedented scale. We live in a new landscape with different challenges and needs compared to that of the comparatively recent past. Religion itself has been transformed by this rapid development and has responded to it in diverse ways. In some countries organised religion continues to control the primary levers of power but in most parts of the world it has seen a diminishing and more marginalised role.

A common view in the west is that religion belongs to a more primitive stage in humanity's development and that the processes of education and development will gradually bring about its steady decline. A prominent view has also developed which recognises the powerful motivational forces

still at work in religion, but which sees them as a dangerous threat to the development of a progressive and peaceful civilisation, concluding therefore that religion's influence on society needs to be carefully limited and controlled. Another view values the role that faith and spirituality can bring to an individual's health, well-being and motivation to contribute to society, but does not see a collective role for it in the public space.

The view that religions have of their own role in society also varies greatly. Some promote an exceptionalist view of their own faith and limit their engagement strictly. Some strive to preserve or regain the privileged status they previously held while many are working to find their place in an evolving landscape.

The pace of global change over the last two centuries is clearly set to continue and even accelerate in the immediate generations ahead. What is indisputable is that the role of religion in society is also changing rapidly and remains very significant. So a question that naturally emerges is:

What role can and should religion play for the betterment of humanity?

A coherent, impelling and radical response to this question can be found in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892), founder of the Bahá'í Faith. Bahá'u'lláh defines religion not primarily as a belief system with an associated set of rituals and practices but as a phenomenon much more universal and dynamic:

“The purpose of religion is to establish unity and concord amongst the peoples of the world; make it not the cause of dissension and strife.”

“Religion is ..the chief instrument for the establishment of order in the world, and of tranquillity amongst its peoples.”

“[I]s not the object of every Revelation to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself, both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions?”

This perspective is in many ways diametrically opposed to the commonly-held opinion that religions divide people into mutually incompatible groups. It is certainly true that there are plenty of examples both in history and in current society to justify the divisive case. The religious wars between Catholic and Protestant in 17th Century Europe are estimated to have wiped out up to 1/3rd of the population of Germany. Any analysis of the recent tragic story of Iraq would surely see the divisions between Sunni, Shi'a, Christian

and Yazidi communities as contributing significantly to the turmoil and violence there. There is no shortage of examples to point to.

On the other hand, look at the immensely positive legacy that the phenomenon of religion has brought to humanity. Our modern commonly accepted concept of justice and equality before the law owes arguably more to Moses and the Ten Commandments than to any other single development in human history. Buddhism had a powerful and positive impact on the cultures of Asia which brought tolerance, compassion and a transformative approach to life to millions. The life and teachings of Jesus promoted the quality of love for others in a way that transformed society for the better. It inspired communities to care for others charitably and made barbaric practices like gladiator fighting completely unacceptable. The religion of Islam united the previously warring and brutal tribes of Arabia into a great civilisation whose achievements in learning, medicine, the arts and philosophy were unprecedented. And these are just examples of which, again, there is no shortage.

Religion, then, is a powerful force which can motivate and bring people together, but which in the wrong hands can be used to bring great harm.

“By their fruits shall ye know them”

If the interaction between religion and the wider society is to be a fruitful one then there needs to be a new narrative around it. The following quotation from the Bahá'í writings indicates a key criterion:

“Religion should unite all hearts and cause wars and disputes to vanish from the face of the earth; it should give birth to spirituality, and bring light and life to every soul. If religion becomes a cause of dislike, hatred and division, it would be better to be without it... Any religion which is not a cause of love and unity is no religion.”

This is not a means by which to make an absolute judgement on any faith. Each of the world's faiths has a multifaceted impact on the world and there are progressive and regressive forces at play in all of them. However, it is interesting to consider how this perspective might influence how government and society in general might engage positively with faith organisations and communities, whilst also holding them to account. It is also a powerful question for faith communities to ask of themselves as they strive to put their principles into practical effect.

Working out the implications of the above is a complex process which will evolve over time but it is perhaps worth mentioning one aspect of fundamental importance. Almost

all religions share a similar story of their founding - there is a group of people who made a conscientious individual decision to follow a path which was opposed by most of their compatriots at the time. They made a choice and humanity has benefited from that choice. Surely, in a world where universal education is within reach, the time has come when the right of all people to be allowed to freely choose their faith or belief system, whatever that is, must be recognised. If religions purport to teach the truth then why should they be afraid of allowing and encouraging those within their community from examining it for themselves and being left free to follow their own conscience.

The current crisis precipitated by the coronavirus pandemic is challenging all of us. One of its distinguishing features is that it impacts every person on the planet and it requires altruistic unselfish responses to ensure the well-being of all. Faith communities have the proven historic ability to reach out to people of all backgrounds; to motivate selfless sacrifice for the common good and to provide a unifying vision of the value of every human life. In our interdependent world it is an opportunity for all such communities to vindicate their values by bringing people together in ways that are of benefit to all of humanity.

Walk the Talk, D



This article is based on my personal experiences as a young woman of faith. It reflects my studies, work experiences, and listening to and helping other young people of faith just like myself. Since the COVID-19 lockdown, I have been attending numerous online interfaith events and discussions organised by faith groups, as well as reading a number of books about the relevance of religion in today's society.

Religion can be defined as the belief in spiritual beings. More broadly, religion in society can be defined as a system of beliefs and customs with the help of which a group of people confronts the most important problems of human life. Being a religious person suggests two things: first, the belief that evil, pain, confusion, and injustice are basic facts of existence; and second, that a number of specific practices and related formal beliefs express the belief that humankind can ultimately be saved from these events by facing them together.

To provide a different perspective however, I would like to pick up on a quotation from one of the books I have been reading which illustrates Lenin's understanding of religion in society:

"Religion is one of the varieties of forms of spiritual oppression, which everywhere and always weighs on the masses of the people, who are crushed under the weight of a relentless work on behalf of others, under misery and loneliness. The weakness of the exploited classes in the struggle against the exploiters inevitably breeds the belief in a better afterlife, just as the weakness of the savage in the struggle with nature breeds the belief in gods, devils, miracles, etc."

(Lenin, "Socialism and religion")

This approach of Lenin to the question of the role of religion in society gives the objective interpretation to a social phenomenon whose existence alone does not make sense of its essence. It is a dominant phenomenon in class societies, and in capitalism, despite the enormous development of the productive forces and especially of science. Despite the fact that human activity now has all the conditions to deal with the roots that gave birth to it, that is, the society, that contains more than one person and it is collective, has overcome the impossibility of dealing with natural elements and phenomena. Where people can interpret the laws of nature, to submit them harmoniously to their own action, to resolve in their favour their opposition to nature. People know the root of their very existence, the origin of living matter, their own origin, as well as the whole 'kingdom of life'. But the roots of religion are so deep that they reproduce the phenomenon. And the reproduction of the phenomenon cannot be interpreted outside of the class relations that prevail in class societies, and in capitalism. As one of the basic elements of the superstructure, religion is used by the bourgeoisie to maintain its own socio-economic system. It essentially plays an active role in supporting and perpetuating human-to-human exploitation, thus strengthening its own class interests. Without this interpretation it is impossible to deal with religion, from the point of view of the class interests of the working class, and basically from the point of view of the meaning of its class struggle and the fulfilment of its historical mission, which is none other than the overthrow of capitalism and building socialism. In order to build a strong society, the understanding of the role of education in diverse societies and how the education system continues to be shaped by social, political and economic factors, is extremely important. Using the knowledge is critical to address a broad range of themes, issues and ideas including gender, alternatives to schooling, mental health and wellbeing, institutional racism, climate change, global warming, sustainable development, environmentally-sound initiatives, and many more. Two of humankind's most ancient endeavours 'Religion and Education', have long had a close relationship. Historians and social scientists have written about this relationship and about how the two may influence each other.

*To provide a different perspective...
a quotation from... Lenin*

Don't Talk the Talk

Objectively, the historical development, the work of the popular masses, of the exploiting social classes and strata, no matter how law-abiding, without the knowledge of the laws that govern it and the conscious action according to these laws, cannot proceed to the revolutionary leap, for the transition from capitalism to socialism. Therefore, in the context of the unrelenting class struggle, the ruling class has its own weapons in order to delay the historical development. Objectively, then, the transition from a lower to a higher society, and for our time from capitalism to socialism, requires the conscious revolutionary action of the popular masses, which without confrontation with any phenomenon that stands in the way of society moving forward, this course is impossible. This also applies to religion, as one of the aspects of social life. Without its all-encompassing enlightenment as a phenomenon, but also the emergence of the difficulties it creates in the class struggle, such a struggle cannot be carried out.

Religion as a phenomenon and an integral part of the superstructure is one of the most difficult issues in terms of its nature and essence. On the one hand, it is one of the most active elements of the superstructure. It is also an institutionalised entanglement with the state strengthens its relatively independent action through the religious organisations, as well as through the state and its institutions. From very young ages such as schools and pre-school education, to the level of institutions of power, there is nothing that is not intertwined with religion (for example the oath). On the other hand, it comes from far away, from the past of History, maintaining, from the still outdated socio-economic formations, a position as an integral element of the action for the formation of the social consciousness.

Social consciousness, consisting of ideology and social psychology, is reproduced by the ruling class on both of these levels. Religion from the time of its emergence operates on both of these levels. In this respect it acts as a powerful ideological and psychological weapon of subjugation of the popular masses and can maintain its action in force, since its adaptability, with the contribution of the ruling class at a time, in the transition from one society to another, is also the best means of endurance. Religion, like any social phenomenon, is subject to the laws of class struggle. In all class societies, from slavery to capitalism, it was found in the field of controversy, as an element that focuses on the basic question of philosophy, namely which is the primary, the 'Matter' or the 'Spirit', the 'Is', Or 'Consciousness', which are the basis of the two main opposite directions in Philosophy, 'Materialism' and 'Idealism'. Thus, between Materialism and Idealism, religion supports

idealism and relies on it. Idealism as a reactionary philosophical direction, demands in the field of the class struggle of the working class and its allies ideological confrontation, in order for this struggle to be carried out effectively. At the same time, any controversy that may arise between religion and the state in societies should not be impressed. In today's world this may exist, but it concerns particular people, in the context of their relatively independent action, which needs a way to help people live and build their future, to re-instil values in society and to stop the decline of people.

Religion plays an important role in the process of social and economic development. In most societies, religious beliefs strongly shape the political and economic institutions, and hence either hamper or spur overall development. However, despite its potentially important role for prosperity, religion has been a neglected area in development policy and development cooperation. Given the relevance for development, it also seeks to provide policy recommendation for development policy and development co-operation. Furthermore, the religious institutions throughout the world also play a major role in helping the disadvantaged, such as the Positive Faith Actions of worldwide religious institutions, the Quaker Movement and Slavery, Foodbanks run by the Trussell's Trust Charity and the Cambridge Environmentally-sound mosque, which these are just a few of them. Today, a good example of Positive Faith Actions of the People from different religious beliefs or non-religious beliefs, could be the Black Lives Matter 2020 Campaigns, that presented evidence of deep-seated racist practices common within major faith organisations. These actions presented also, that there is a lack of governance and transparency within religious traditions and faith institutions. The young people in particular experience serious difficulties at times when we attempt to engage with the work of faith institutions. Among young people there is uncertainty about the future, as a result of the developments concerning COVID-19 and Climate Change. As a young person, and as someone who is passionately concerned about sustainable development issues, we need to move society to a sustainable way of living, through the truth and spiritual and personal values in our lives, but also in the lives of others. In order to reduce the injustice in life and help others alleviate today's world afflictions and to gain new strength as individuals.

Faced with the new world challenges, faith communities need to be the change that they want others to be. In other words, they have to walk the talk, if they are to make a lasting positive impact.

A TIME OF CRITICAL CROSSROADS

**“GLOBAL
DEFORESTATION
IS A CRISIS OF
EXISTENTIAL
PROPORTIONS,
WE EITHER DEAL
WITH IT OR
LEAVE FUTURE
GENERATIONS
A PLANET IN
ECOLOGICAL
COLLAPSE”**

Working for the protection, restoration, and sustainable management of tropical forests is a moral imperative and a spiritual duty of all humanity. Spiritual resources, moral voice, and social influence of the world’s religious leaders in their faith communities are especially critical to this work. The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative (IRI) is a new instrument or mechanism to spearhead interfaith and joint indigenous efforts on saving the planet’s remaining rainforests. It is at the heart and centre of the struggle for a sustainable climate.

The IRI presents itself as an international, multi-faith alliance that brings moral urgency and spiritual resources to scientific, political, and diplomatic efforts to end tropical deforestation. On this platform, the rights of faith communities are intimately intertwined with the rights of indigenous peoples and other rain forest dwellers who have through all ages been the indispensable guardians of the rainforests as their existential habitat.

The vital linkage between tropical deforestation and climate change is a scientific indisputable fact. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) had, as a basis for the Paris agreement, given the world up to 2030 to limit global warming to 1.5 degree Celsius if we are to save the earth from floods, extreme heat and drought, leading to acute poverty for millions of people.

The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystems Services (IPBES) joins this depressive forecast by reporting an alarming decline in nature and ecosystem services. More than half of plant and animal species on the planet are contained in tropical forests.

On the affirmative side for a rain forest strategy is the science-based agreement that forests are the only safe, proven, natural solution for carbon capture and storage. Tropical deforestation is a major source of greenhouse gas emission: the burning of forests, as we have seen recently in the Amazonas and California, and the vast peat areas in Indonesia, has released the carbon stored in them into the atmosphere where it is transformed into toxic carbon dioxide gas. Data shows a loss of tree coverage equivalent to the combined size of France, Germany and UK in the last decade.

“RAINFORESTS ARE THE LUNGS OF MOTHER EARTH. THERE IS NO REMEDY OF AN ARTIFICIAL BREATHING FOR HER”

Forest protection is also a human rights issue. Those who inhabit these forests find themselves on the frontline in the deforestation crisis, threatened by illegal logging and mining, agribusiness, and government policies. Hundreds of indigenous environmental defenders have been killed over the last few years protecting their lands and livelihood.

Global deforestation is a crisis of existential proportions, we either deal with it or leave future generations a planet in ecological collapse.

My engagement in the climate issue, and in particular the rainforest topic, has been inspired by my understanding of God as Creator, and a spirituality honouring our habitat as Mother Earth. The concept of the *Tree of Life*, found in various expressions in many religions, is a metaphor for the essential relationship between Humanity and Nature. The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative is built on this ancient wisdom, in a deep understanding of the sacred duty to protect the *life of the tree*.

The most urgent humanity issues of our generation include the climate crisis, the suicidal nuclear threat and the insane arms race, the entrenched global poverty chasm and continued discrimination related to race, cast, gender and age. Among these, the threat against the climate of our sphere has more than anything galvanized a united front across religious and cultural divides.

The potential of the climate issue to bring together religious and spiritual forces often preoccupied with their differences was witnessed in Paris in December 2015, when leaders and activists of many religions and faiths presented their testimony at the world climate summit.

Through theological statements, accompanied by liturgies of prayers and acts of promise, their participation contributed to the historic outcome of this world event. The voices of faith leaders like Pope Frances through his encyclical *Laudato Si*, and of other scholarly presentations from Muslim, Jewish, Buddhists, Hindu and other religions blended into a scientific, moral, and spiritual testimony.

Thus, in Paris, the mythical paradigm of the “Tower of Babel”, representing human conceit, confusion, and chaos, could be seen as

eclipsed by the “Tower of Eiffel”, in this context a sign of humility, unanimity, and love. The virtues of reason, faith, and conscience witnessed to the sacredness of protecting Mother Earth and all her creatures.

The Government of Norway’s Initiative for Forests (NICFI) dates back to a climate conference on Bali in 2007. The Prime Minister of Norway, now NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, launched here an ambitious vision for saving the forests. This led to the initiation of a long-term project in tropical forest countries to the tune of billions of Norwegian Krone. These countries, which cover 70 per cent of the rainforests of the world are: Peru, Colombia and Mexico of the Amazonas region, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Indonesia.

This audacious project triggered the engagement of faith-based participation. Gradually, the Norwegian Government had come to realize that the ambitions of saving the rainforests could not succeed without the active participation of leaders and communities of faith in the respective countries, combined with day to day collaboration of indigenous leaders and communities.

In January 2017, I was invited, as Honorary President of Religions for Peace, to advise the Norwegian Ministry on Climate and Environment on the feasibility of collaboration between state, civil society, and religion in promoting and protecting rainforests. Besides reaching out to Religions for Peace, the idea of a religious component to the programme, was discussed with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). Here, full support was given to approaching religious leaders to boost the protection of the rainforests issue.

Within only a few months, organizational matters were addressed and agreed upon. The office was lodged, first within UNDP in New York, then in UN Environment Programme (UNEP). An international steering committee was established with representatives of government, civil society, inter-faith, academic and indigenous groups.

Major faith-based organizations came together in the initiative: Religions for Peace, GreenFaith, the Parliament of World’s Religions and the World Council of Churches. Important academic support was given by Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology and Rainforest Foundation Norway had already established close collaboration with the Ministry. The Norwegian Ministry of Climate and Environment as the sole funding agency, and UN Environment Programme as the multilateral global partner, are represented in the steering committee as financial and organizational guarantors of the programme. Importantly the Rainforest Foundation Norway is a lead humanitarian agency in joint work with indigenous people for the protection of rainforests. The Vatican supported the initiative in a consultative process around implementation of *Laudato Si* but did not join formally.





Thus Interfaith Rainforest Initiative was launched at the Nobel Peace Centre in Oslo, Norway on June 19, 2017. The Nobel Peace Prize to Wangari Maathai from Kenya in 2004, and jointly to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and climate activist Al Gore, in 2007, on display among Nobel laureates in the adjacent hall, helped casting the rainforest issue as a matter of peace and human rights. The presence of His Majesty King Harald of Norway, who is known also for his engagement for a sustainable climate and for the human rights of indigenous peoples, sent a message not only to the people of Norway but also to heads of states worldwide.

The opening session was fittingly opened by a yoik, the traditional song of the indigenous Sami people of Norway, and rounded off with a photographic exhibition, titled *Genesis*, by the Brazilian photographer and champion of nature, Sebastiao Salgado.

“WHERE WE BEGAN WITH CONCERN, WE CONCLUDE WITH HOPE”

The launch was well covered in the international media and was followed by a two-day brainstorming and planning meeting at Lysebu, on the hillside above Oslo. Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist and Taoist religious leaders participated, together with indigenous representatives from Brazil, Colombia Meso America and Peru, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Indonesia. It was challenging, as tensions were felt among the representatives of different faiths, and between religious leaders and indigenous representatives about their spirituality. Nevertheless, at the end there was an embracing of this diversity in a consensus to work together as equal partners for the sake of the rainforests.

Having agreed on fundamental principles of cooperation and on the working title of ‘initiative’, the basic structures were established. Two-level working modus was also adopted; one international and the other national and local in the programme countries. The global would focus on high-level mobilization of religious and spiritual leaders, communication and advocacy in policy making forums, media campaigns, manuals and production of educational material, and even speaking points for services in churches, mosques, temples etc. The national level component was designed to meet the challenges on the ground in the selected rainforest countries, and to build day-to-day working alliances between faith and indigenous leaders. On the community level, plans of action would

advance policies and concrete programmes of action that protect rainforests and the livelihood of indigenous people.

Specifically, the IRI aims at bringing the leaders of religions and indigenous peoples to act together with governments, civil society, and business to stop exploitation and vandalism of the rainforests. It is the shared conviction that inspires and sustains this alliance that without the rainforests the world is lost. Rainforests are the lungs of Mother Earth. There is no remedy of an artificial breathing for her. Destruction of rainforests by fire, unsustainable deforestation, human greed, accelerates the climate crisis, spells loss of life for the tropical forests and their dwellers, and ultimately for the entire biosphere.

The fruitful encounter in Norway, and the creation of a fresh initiative was to be followed up by a programmatic statement entitled the ‘Faith for Forest Declaration’. A brief text, the declaration was developed during a lengthy process engaging the secretariat and the international steering group. It was unanimously adopted by the World Assembly of Religions for Peace in Lindau, Germany, in August 2019. In the proceedings of the Assembly, the topic of rainforest gained traction in the section: *Advancing Shared Well-Being by Promoting Integral Human Development and Protecting the Earth*.

“We begin from a place of profound concern for the state of the worlds’ rainforests, which are the sacred trust, and irreplaceable gift and essential to life on Earth”.

This is the opening line in the ‘Faith for Forests Declaration’ presenting the ‘Interfaith Rainforest Initiative’ (IRI) to the world.

Together with the Brazilian indigenous leader Sonia Guajarara, it was my privilege to present the *IRI Faith for Forest Declaration* to a plenary of more than 1000 men, women, and youth from 125 countries. A month later, on 23rd September 2019, the Declaration, and its action point on IRI, was presented to the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, at his climate Summit in New York. Guterres warmly welcomed the Declaration and saw the commitment of people of faith worldwide to save the rain forests as strengthening the efforts to halt climate change, and promote human rights and world peace: aims that are so central to the agenda of the United Nations.

At this critical crossroads, the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative signals faith, hope and love, in the words of the closing paragraph of the Faith for Forest Declaration:

“Where we began with concern, we conclude with hope. We acknowledge that tropical deforestation can be stopped. We are guided by a shared reverence for nature and resolve that, together as people of faith and part of one human family, we can end tropical deforestation.”



Bishop Stålsett alongside Sonia Guajarara at 10th World Assembly of Religions for Peace in Lindau, Germany.

Dr Gunnar Stålsett is Bishop Emeritus of Oslo, Church of Norway, Honorary President Religions for Peace.

Logging truck photograph (page 19) provided courtesy of **CIFOR (Center for International Forestry Research)**
 Photograph of Bishop Gunnar with Sonia Guajarara provided courtesy of **Christian Flemming**

VISIBLE MUSIC

*Each footstep takes us further into deep past,
leaving the tarmac road for the farming gravel
till it runs to grass, well-trodden to prehistory
where some might shed their shoes, sense holy ground.*

*Moor drafts succeeding language, gathered wildness,
world rimmed by lope of ridges, glimpse of ocean.
In circles, shafts of stone, monolith signposts
predict cathedral cities' spires and cloisters.*

*Prophecy, then, that three tall stones should shadow
five thousand years as mother, son and spirit;
or tomb, globed like the world, should hold a body
coiled in a slabbed womb like a question-mark?*

*Rumours and over-hearings: visible music
is scored through harp-stringed sedge or noted down
where sea-wind song-lines through a boulder wall.
Quick crochet notes re-phrase starched cotton grass.*

*Curlew's concerto grants a gift of tongues,
its notes quick-quick before its rubbled stream
reveals low profile, fleet, as summoning rain.
Now, like those earlier people with their settling ards,
some time to stand, and some to move away.*



This poem is taken from *Visible Music* (published by Caldey Press), a collection of 74 poems about a Christian's experience of cancer. The poems track the illness through diagnosis, treatment and convalescence, and investigate the interaction of religious faith with serious illness.

This title poem is set on Machrie Mhor on the Isle of Arran in Western Scotland. The symbol of the curlew is adopted as the wild and healing presence and potential of the Holy Spirit in Christian theology.

The photograph shows the similar prehistoric formations at Callanais, on the Isle of Lewis.

100 CELEBRATIONS

WHEN YOU LOOK AT THE WORLD AROUND YOU,
WHAT DO YOU CARE ABOUT?
WHAT GIVES YOU INSPIRATION?
WHAT WOULD YOU CELEBRATE?
WHAT WOULD YOU SHARE?
WHERE DOES YOUR HOPE REST?

Those are the questions that start CelebrationEarth! discussions. We ask people to look at their relationship with the natural world, exploring what inspires us to act, what gives us the hope to keep going and how we can share our stories with other people. In Issue 41 of this magazine, we invited readers of Faith Initiative to get involved in CelebrationEarth! Now, we would like to offer some new activities to take the celebration to your own homes.

CelebrationEarth! is a project based on hope. Despite all the environmental crises, despite the anger and despair, we need to remember that there is still so much beauty in this world and that there are a lot of successes in environmental action. Across the country, across the planet, there are people working to change the way they and their communities live in the world. CelebrationEarth! reminds us that we live in a world worth celebrating and works on the principle that for environmental change to really take root and to become sustainable it needs to be anchored in love and hope rather than anger. We also believe that people learn best from other people, by working together, listening to other people's stories and that inspiration comes from faith, passion and creativity. CelebrationEarth! invites people to pause, to reflect and remember that we live in a world that is worth fighting for and to find the next steps for themselves and the communities they belong to.

Throughout the spring and summer of 2020, CelebrationEarth! was working towards a gathering at St Albans Cathedral where groups could share experiences and find new partners to work with and new inspirations to act from. We were gathering groups from widely different perspectives. There were faith communities and artists and environmental organisations ranging from local drama groups to county wildlife trusts to specialist organisations like Bats in Churches, Froglife and the Bumblebee Conservation Trust. In the end, as the Covid-19 situation continued, it became increasingly clear that we could not assemble the company we had hoped for and that even a small gathering might put participants at risk. We changed direction. Representatives of our key communities were interviewed and the film company *Off The Fence* put together a remarkable series of interviews and films that explore the relationships between different faiths, creativity and environmental action and nature. In one film, we meet Cambodian Buddhist Monks who have been ordaining trees to protect their forests. In another, there is a solemn recitation of lost species in a small church in Oxfordshire. We meet Tanya Steele, the CEO of WWF UK, talking about 8 Billion, a new initiative inviting anyone anywhere to share their own environmental story. We see tall tree puppets dancing in a wood in Buxton and meet the local people who made them and who composed the beautiful poems that echo through their film.



1000 PRAYERS



CelebrationEarth! is about action. Moments like the films will, we hope inspire people, and remind them that anyone can be active, that environmental concern and a readiness to act comes from the heart first. Emotion, faith and spirituality inspire action as much as a more formal scientific awareness. We are concerned that faith and science work closely together to give passionate, informed activity. Then we invite people to stir creativity into the mix, using art to explore emotions, to investigate issues in unexpected ways, to find striking, engaging, and perhaps provocative ways of telling a project's story.

Now, we are widening our invitations to act. There are plans brewing for events at different venues across the country in 2021, connecting centres of activity and inspiration, lighting beacons of hope and action. We know there are many groups out there doing wonderful things, from church groups to Mosque associations, from schools to youth groups: planting, building, digging, talking, lobbying. We would like to share 100 Celebrations. We'd like to promote 1000 Prayers. We'd like to hear from people about what they are doing, what you are doing. You might come to this as an individual or as part of a group. You might work from a determined faith perspective or as artists, or as a local community group or as determinedly atheistic activist. Passion, inspiration and a sense of joy and wonder at the world are found in many places and expressed in many ways!

Despite restrictions, lockdowns and distancing, there are still celebrations of the natural world going on out there. We encourage people to take an idea and turn an everyday event into a celebration. Try building into your plan:

Time for people to **reflect** upon what they are doing and why this matters to them

An opportunity to **share** those feelings with others if they want to

A chance to **look ahead**, shaping an idea of what they would like to do next

On our website we are listing ideas as they come in.

In October, there have been plans for Apple Days.

In November the Remembrance of Lost Species Day on 30th

is suggesting requiem services,

recitations, reflection and resolution activities.

In December,

there are proposals for Advent Spirals created out of natural materials outdoors and walked as a service or as a meditation on each Sunday of the month. Another proposal suggests making rosaries on the ground out of river pebbles or shells, with each piece denoting a prayer or perhaps becoming a line in a mantra or your personal poem and recited as the pattern is laid in place.



The possibilities are as diverse as our environments and as wide as our imaginations. CelebrationEarth! invites, and challenges, readers to create their own celebrations, designing an event that matters to you as individuals or as groups. If readers of Faith Initiative do create their own celebration, we'd love to hear about it: as an event for our 100 celebrations collection, perhaps. A more personal prayer or a reflection or just a diary entry describing the activity and your feelings could become one of our 1000 Prayers.

Like the natural world, CelebrationEarth! grows and changes, evolving to meet new situations. We believe that this earth is a wonder, is a source of joy and profound inspiration. With our 100 Celebrations and 1000 Prayers we are offering people a chance to share their own wonder, joy and celebration of this beautiful world.

Gordon MacLellan is arts and education coordinator for CelebrationEarth!

Photo credits:

Buxton Tree puppets, contemplation, IMG_0329, IMG_0201: c/o Adrian Rhode

All others c/o G MacLellan

Emails: admin@celebrationearth.org | Facebook: [@celebrationearth](https://www.facebook.com/celebrationearth) | Twitter: [@celebrationerth](https://twitter.com/celebrationerth)

Website: www.celebrationearth.org. On the website there is a page linking to the films mentioned above. The blog describes latest activities and there are pages for 100 Celebrations, 1000 Prayers and resource options.

SUNDAY'

I was too old to cry when I learned
we un-fathered babies were stored,
unseen and unheard, in an attic,
like trunks not wanted in this voyage.
Maybe another.

Allowed, for a twilight hour,
nursing from the girls who bore us.
Snatched away again for the night.
Or life.

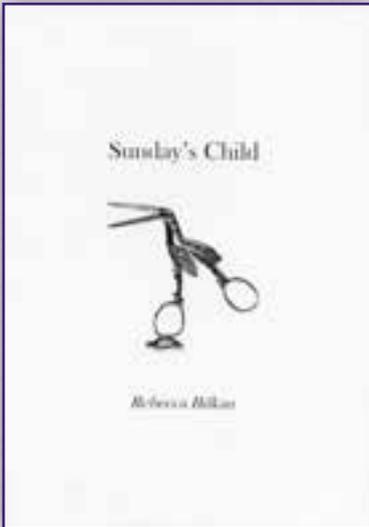
Infants confuse easily. Too many
cuddles from the girls who incubated us
could be unsettling when we met
our Proper Mummies.

Ma told me this looking the other way –
into the narrow times she defied,
tried to wipe from her diaries.

Records she didn't keep.
The silence is still rasping.

She kept me.

S CHILD



I can't remember when I first wondered *what are we here for?* Picturesque though it would be to say it was the first time I saw a dead robin, the first time I fell out of love, the first time I realised that my idea of utopia wasn't universal, but I can't.

I do know that on November 5 1984, I confirmed my Buddhist practice. This provides the answer that has driven me since: we're here to be the best versions of ourselves that we can be, and to bear witness to the world we see around us – not just the good things, but the inhumane

realities too. If I don't engage with those things, I tacitly agree to limiting my understanding of life and therefore myself, and my capacity to combat injustice, misunderstanding and apathy. Not at an international level, but with the quotidian difficulties of equally workaday people like me. If we take the trouble to attest that our lives are no more, or less, special than anyone-else's I reckon we knock a couple of corners off ourselves, and bash down a few walls as well.

Sunday's Child falls into that category. It grew out of an earlier poem, where I imagined the night of my conception: two unmarried kids colliding under a summer moon (I'm a March baby). In the piece, I tried to take care of those youngsters – I wasn't particularly circumspect in my teens myself – and set them free. Not from parenthood itself, but from all the terrible trouble they must have got into, and maybe carried with them all their lives. When I read it to an audience of strangers I heard a couple of gasps, but it was only later that I discovered the cause. Someone wrote about the reading in her blog. She was relieved that someone had addressed illegitimacy so openly, and from the child's point of view. It was the word *relieved* that got me.

I started to try to think about my childhood, my mother, my birthplace, some of the questions that had always prodded the back of my mind. We didn't speak about them at home. My mother was sent to a home for unmarried mothers and their babies a good stretch before I was born. Whether the original plan was to give me away, I shall never know. Certainly, nobody ever tried to pass me off as the child of another family member, so I suspect it was. But my mum was cut from determined

cloth, and we stayed together. When I was ten, she married a fabulous, intelligent, brave man who adopted me, and whom I called Dad. Our lives changed dramatically: I had a brilliant education and a pretty lucky life, really. Eventually I established contact with my genetic father, who is now a kind and valued friend. Happy End.

Except those first years didn't go away. To be illegitimate in the fifties was to be less than. It was to be a shame and a cause of shame. It was to be put in my place by other children who could win any argument over me because I 'didn't have a father'. It was to be, later, confused when I had to fill in official forms: what was your maiden name? I had two. It was to feel other, to feel different, and to feel that I had to try harder to justify my existence. Mind, I could be just cut out that way.

But when I learned that other people who had been born in similar circumstance had similar concerns; when I read more and more about what our mothers had been through, I learned to stop wincing, stop pretending this had nothing to do with me. It did, and it begs some questions.

What makes one small human being, a baby, more, or less, legitimate than another? What, actually, is legitimacy in this usage? Does it imply that an infant is outside the law for being born? And if they are outside the law what then? Are they licensed to carry a life out under their own law? Or are they outside the protection of law when it comes to, oh, let's not beat about the bush, money?

Marriage is of course the legitimizer. I'm not going to tread on that hallowed ground here, but I would say that if a child is born outside social constructs, that does not make it less of a child, less of a human, less of a contributor, less than a potential asset to the world.

Of course, in the recent past, illegitimacy was less overtly frowned upon, hardly discussed. In the eighties and nineties many partnerships provided the framework for family life, without mention that the parents weren't married. But, judging by the reactions to *Sunday's Child*, the stigma may have gone underground, but it hasn't disappeared. Plus, there is a swing to the right, a lurch to conservatism. Neither are traditionally places of shelter for women and children who don't conform to certain norms.

So, I'm bearing witness in this book, that a baby is a baby is a baby; don't push it into a box where it's somehow OK to allow it fewer rights, less respect, a shrunken potential, just because of the circumstances of its birth. This goes for all children of course, not just the ones born outside the cultural norms that I grew up with. Let the baby grow up to fulfill its unique potential, assist it to do so. It might turn out to be a scholar, a king, an icon, a genius, or turn out to be a Buddhist who writes poetry. Raise the child to know that every single human being has the potential to reveal the qualities of compassion, wisdom and courage. Every. Tiny. One.

"WE'RE HERE TO BE THE BEST VERSIONS OF OURSELVES THAT WE CAN BE, AND TO BEAR WITNESS TO THE WORLD WE SEE AROUND US – NOT JUST THE GOOD THINGS, BUT THE INHUMANE REALITIES TOO"

Creativity and Practical Action

**Consider something that you love -
a place, a person, an activity:**

How will it be affected by environmental
breakdown in the coming decades?

Do you know how your lifestyle
might contribute to that?

What steps, small or large, could you take
to help reduce the threat to what you love,
and become part of the solution?

What help might you need?

What's the first thing you might do about it?

LANGUAGE

and Love Inspire on Sustainability

These questions are the starting point of the **LovingEarth Project**, which aims to help people engage with the issues of environmental breakdown without feeling overwhelmed.

The Project uses a creative, hands-on approach to enable reflection and contemplation on how to take care of that which we love; and ultimately to be good ancestors as we pass on the responsibility to the next generation. The Coronavirus pandemic is changing how we live our lives, and maybe for many it is an opportunity to reassess their priorities, re-evaluate what is really important to them and discover how positive changes can help bring about a more sustainable future.

The project invites people to share their hopes, their fears and their sorrows about the climate crisis as we see it today, in the creation of a textile panel. We have found that the creative process of planning, designing, cutting and sewing the textile panel has provided space and time for deeper reflection on the environment, and the subsequent message the designer is wishing to convey: as such it is a journey of self-discovery. The textile panel created can be sent to join others in a travelling exhibition to encourage reflection and inspire positive action by others.

The project was started by a small group of British Quakers in 2019. Since then it has developed in several directions, with the support of the Quaker learning charity Woodbrooke and the Quaker Arts Network, and is engaging a wide range of groups and people of different faiths or none.



Woods in the Lake District



Prayerful Upholding



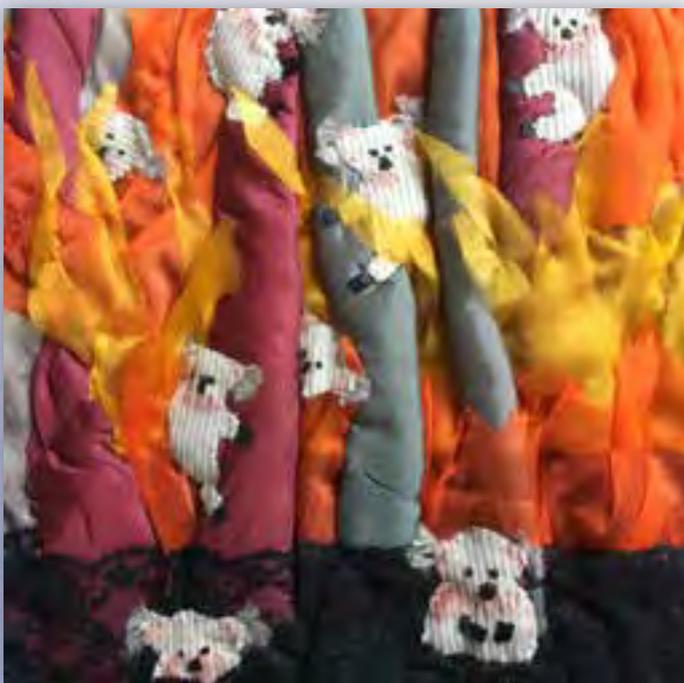
Waste Not, Want Not

Contributions to the textile project are invited from everyone. We sincerely hope that more people of different faiths, cultures and countries will join us in celebrating the things that they love in our wonderful but fragile world, in a creative way that allows for individual expression.

Textile panels can be made in any style or materials, provided that the final panels are a standard 30cm x 30cm square: detailed guidance is available on the website. Finished

panels, and short accompanying texts can be sent to the project by post, and many can already be seen online.

The website also provides videos, documents and online links to support those wishing to participate. These include a guided meditation and videos about some textile options. Online chats for panel-makers and face-to-face events can provide opportunities for sharing successes, challenges, questions and inspiration.



Wildlife Powerless in the Face of Raging Bush Fires



London

Small displays and workshops have already been held in a number of venues as well as online; others are in the pipeline and we encourage groups to take Covid-safe initiatives, seeking our support where necessary.

We hope to show the textile exhibition in Glasgow, at the time of COP 26 talks in November 2021 and then it will go on tour for a few years. The project is largely led by volunteers and further offers of support and publicity would be welcome, especially among different faith communities.

We know that radical change is needed if the worst effects of climate breakdown are to be avoided, and that the current pandemic is exacerbating climate anxiety and loneliness. The **LovingEarth Project** has already helped many people through building spiritual resilience, understanding and confidence. We hope it will continue to inspire in the months and years to come.



School Climate Strikes

Panels are displayed anonymously. Many of the panels and their accompanying texts from the project are displayed at www.lovingearth-project.uk/gallery
An introductory video and meditation are at www.lovingearth-project.uk/resources

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Editorial Note from Heather Wells

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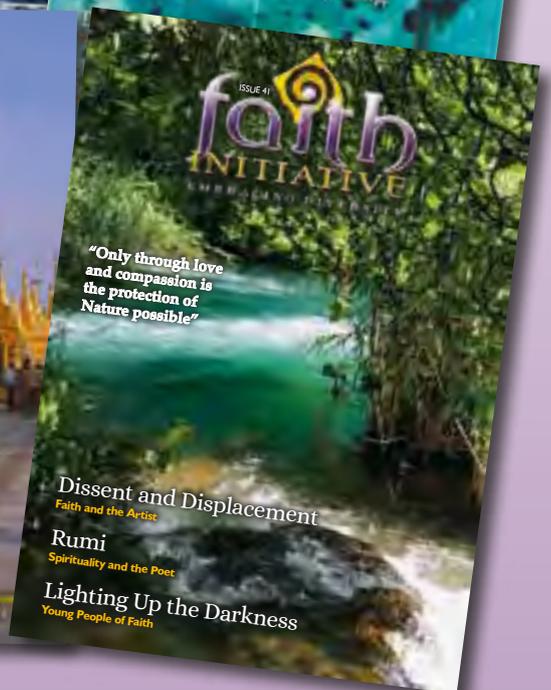
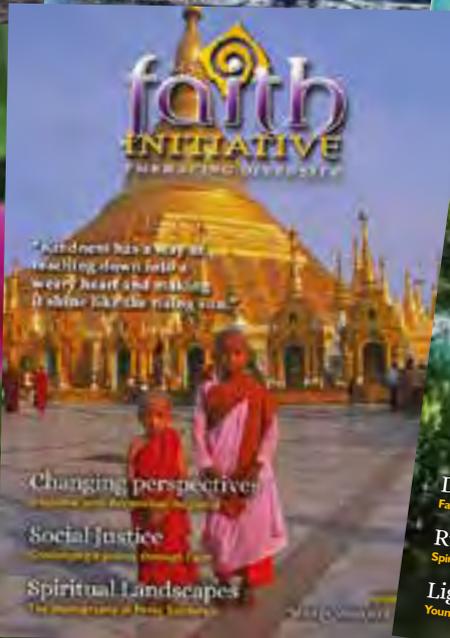
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First Assembly on Women, Faith and Diplomacy

Keeping Faith and Transforming Tomorrow



The first Religions for Peace World Assembly on Women, Faith and Diplomacy in partnership with Ring for Peace and supported by the German Federal Foreign Office took place virtually from 10-13 November 2020 in Lindau, Germany. Despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic over 600 participants, including 250 religious leaders, diplomats, and civil society representatives from around the world, gathered remotely, and with a small number in-person.

The assembly, titled “**Keeping Faith and Transforming Tomorrow**” focused on the nexus of women, faith and diplomacy; giving prominence to women’s respective roles and contributions at the local, national and international level; and highlighting their leadership.

Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel opened the virtual assembly with a welcome address, stating that it was a “double joy” for the host nation, celebrating Religions for Peace 50th anniversary and the role of women in peacebuilding: “We must not leave room for extremists who, in their inhuman blindness, abuse religion to sow discord, and undermine our peaceful coexistence,” she said, “peace is only durable if women are involved in the process.”

UN Secretary General António Guterres sent his warm wishes for a successful assembly and said: “Around the world, women of all religions have a long history of working for peace in their communities and countries. Too often their efforts are marginalized, and they are excluded from formal mediation efforts. Today, faith leaders have a more important role than ever in building peace through interreligious dialogue. But without women’s full participation and leadership, that dialogue is incomplete, and peace is less sustainable.”

The virtual event continued over four days, with a mixture of expert and lightning talks, interactive breakout sessions which focussed on a range of topics such as: the role of women of faith in peace building; protecting the Earth; discussions on hate speech; combating racism and anti-Semitism; women’s leadership in inclusivity and diversity; fighting gender based violence; the importance of values-led education; and many more.

Speaking at a session the German Minister of State, Michelle Müntefering said: “We know that women around the world engage for peace and human rights. We know that diversity strengthens innovation, efficiency and sustainability. We know all of this, and still progress is happening at a snail’s pace”.

Sister Agatha O. Chikelue, Co-Chair of the Nigerian and African Women of Faith Network said “If women are excluded from peacebuilding because of lack of capacity, then it is the responsibility of religious leaders to build that capacity and get them involved”.

Rebecca Bellamy and myself, representing Religions for Peace UK Women of Faith Network, led a workshop titled: ‘The Role of Women of Faith in Protecting the Earth’. The workshop showcased examples of inspirational women, sharing videos of Venerable Master Shih Cheng Yen and her recycling movement; a call for vegetarianism; and a video about the achievements of Nobel Peace Prize winner Professor Wangari Maathai, who led campaigns to protect land, and a movement of mass tree-planting in Kenya. A Muslim perspective was shared by Dr Husna Ahmad who built the campaign for a Greener Hajj; she later shared key suggestions for a successful campaign. My own contribution to the workshop included a Sikh perspective, telling of how the Sikh community worldwide has been very active in planting trees globally.

The session concluded that faith communities should consider carefully and make changes on the environmental impact of celebrating festivals, particularly working towards the reduction of waste through scriptural and religious understanding. Religious Leaders need to take a two-fold approach looking both personally and collectively, to help protect the Earth through influencing policy decision making at a local and national level. COP26 next year is an opportunity to work together to propose solutions that will be much stronger from a multi-faith position. There are great opportunities for innovative partnerships between communities, businesses and governments promoting cyclical economy, with responsible consumption and thoughtful recycling, that will have a more powerful global impact.

The videos and the subsequent discussions inspired workshop participants to think about the concept of a cyclical economy, turning recycling into products that benefit communities. It also encouraged participants to consider the bigger picture: that whilst they may consider their steps in protecting the environment to be small, when connected with others of a similar mindset, the impact is much greater.

On the morning of the final day of the Assembly a multifaith prayer session on ‘**Hope, Resilience and Peace**’ was led by the Chair as well as members of the coordinating committee of RfP UK Women of Faith Network. Sikh, Baha’i, Jewish and Hindu prayers were read by myself; Dr Maureen Sier, Director of Interfaith Scotland; Karen Maxwell, Board of Deputies of British Jews; Dr Lakshmi Vyas, President Hindu Forum of Europe respectively.

Participants from the UK included Cinde Lee, Olivia Fox, Karen Maxwell, Lakshmi Vyas, Rebecca Bellamy, Varsha Dhodia, Eda Molla Chousein, Mark Owen

All recordings from the 1st Assembly on Women, Faith and Diplomacy can be accessed through the following link: <https://wfd2020.ringforpeace.org/videostreams/>

love

THE STRANGER

“I’m not getting the voucher, can you help me”...

Several times a week I receive a call like that from an asylum seeker who picks up my number from the phone message at our synagogue. I pass on his or her details to our drop-in centre as quickly as possible. For all I know, he or she has nothing whatsoever to eat. Sending vouchers by SMS is the most many support centres have been able to do since the onset of Covid and lockdown forced them to close their premises. One lady called me from the queue at the supermarket till: she couldn’t download her money. I asked to speak to the attendant and offered to pay with my card. “We’re not allowed to do that”, the cashier explained. How devastating and humiliating it must have been for that woman to have to leave her few groceries behind and walk out of the store empty-handed.

Hunger is all too real in our society today, as the ongoing need for food banks shows, and refugees and asylum seekers are among those most likely to suffer. If some were scraping through with great difficulty before, daily subsistence is an even greater struggle now. Parents in particular have had to make impossible decisions between essentials: how does one choose between face masks, hand sanitiser and food?

Covid lockdown and the hard winter ahead affect us all, but far from equally. They hit the weakest and most marginalised hardest, and asylum seekers and refugees are already at the

edge of society, hanging on physically and emotionally day by day, rather as some of them had to cling onto the sides of flimsy dinghies in their desperation to escape persecution. All our faiths, as well as our basic shared humanity, tell us that we have a responsibility to care for them. Never in recent years has that help been so badly needed, or so challenging to provide.

Accommodation can be an even harder issue than food; at the best of times it is difficult for refugees to find safe shelter. My wife was contacted by Crisis about a lady who needed a place for a few weeks. Unsure if our spare-room was currently free, she asked where the woman would sleep if we didn’t have anywhere for her. “On the busses” came the answer. R. came to our home that night and stayed for three weeks.

That was before lockdown; Covid has only made matters worse. I recently received an email from a family of four:

“Help us! We’re in a tiny flat with broken window, broken toilet, broken table. My children sleep on the floor. My son is depressed. He wants to take his life. I have pain and trauma.”

Whatever chances this family may previously have had of finding better accommodation are even more limited now, when all local council services are hard pressed and, because of the dangers of the pandemic, organisations like **Refugees at Home** find it hard to locate new hosts.

“IF MY LIFE IS CUT SHORT, DURING THIS CRISIS, THEN I GAVE MY LIFE FOR A WORTHY CAUSE. ALSO MENTIONING ME AS A REFUGEE MAKES ME FEEL PROUD OF THE CLAN I BELONG TO ‘THE REFUGEES’, WHICH UP TO NOW DO NOT GET THE RESPECT & THE TREATMENT THEY DESERVE...”

At least that family has somewhere; others have been on the streets. At the start of lockdown local governments were required to take urgent action to provide shelter for the homeless. On the one hand this meant that evictions from **National Asylum Support Service (NASS)** accommodation were on hold, though it is feared they may start again even as I write. On the other hand, what was provided has often been inadequate. People with no connection to one another have been forced to share rooms, against government health advice, leaving many asylum seekers feeling unsafe.

An added factor is that such accommodation often has poor or no Wi-Fi. This has a disastrous impact on the ability of refugees to keep in contact with their families and makes it extremely difficult to access any form of assistance, virtually all of which has had to go online. With cafes closed during lockdown and public libraries shut, there has been nowhere else to go for internet access. This has forced many people to spend their extremely limited money on phone data packages, if indeed they have any over after buying food. One teacher working with refugees reported that 'Many groups I've worked with have gone from having 50+ participants in their weekly English conversation clubs to just 3 or 4 on the online equivalent. This digital divide is experienced by many other marginalised groups and means that refugees lag further behind their peers.' Children are particularly affected; even when their schools have offered online activities, they often haven't had the means to join them.

All these factors deepen the isolation of people who are often already struggling with loneliness and depression. As well as providing food, clothing and medical and legal advice, drop-ins are a haven for contact, solidarity, understanding and friendship. But few if any have been able to re-open for more than the most basic provisions. Without psychological support, and in a renewed environment of collective anxiety, victims of persecution and torture face the danger of being traumatised once again: of re-living mentally, alone and without companionship, the terrors of the treatment to which they were subject in the places they fled, and the horrors they underwent on unimaginably dangerous journeys.

A young man from Africa told me about his experiences; although he's remarkably positive and resilient, they must haunt him every day:

"In the desert they give you no food. At the sea there is a tiny boat; they put in two hundred people. If it rocks, they throw you out. You must be with a family to help you then. I was alone; I said to another man... 'We will go together'."

A therapist working with refugees told me of her concern that: "...with services cut, people have been unable to go about as before so have little to distract them from feelings of sadness and distress." This and re-traumatisation must be the fate of many more people than can ever accurately be known. It's not just psychological care but also basic medical attention which is hard for refugees, and many others, to access. Asylum seekers often suffer from serious injuries inflicted by torture, or as the result of long and terrible journeys, and have to endure ongoing pain.

All these added hardships apply to those who are already in the country. For those seeking asylum from persecution, getting to the UK has been even more difficult than before. As one of the founders of the organisation **Our Second Home (OSH)** to support young refugees reports:

"All the safe and legal routes to seek asylum in the UK have been closed since lockdown. The only way to enter is through dangerous and irregular methods that rely on traffickers and smugglers, such as crossing the channel. Lives would be saved if the government was focused on reopening these, rather than scapegoating migrants."

As Lord Dubs, himself a 'Kindertransport' child, has repeatedly insisted in the face of government non-action, we have a special responsibility to help unaccompanied minors who have no one to stand by them. Britain has historically had a good record of welcoming the victims of persecution, a positive reputation we should work to maintain.

Refugee Action summed up the situation in a recent report: The current crisis 'exposes a system characterised by standard performance, fragility, an inability to withstand change and a tendency to lurch from crisis to crisis.' (www.refugee-action.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Wake-Up-Call-2020.pdf)

But there is another side to refugee life during Covid and lockdown which should not be ignored. Many recent asylum seekers are making remarkable contributions to our society including to our health services. An A&E doctor originally from Afghanistan, who was hosted for 243 nights through Refugees at Home while she re-qualified, wrote of how *"As a frontline doctor, I feel honoured and proud working alongside wonderful NHS staff during these trying times and contributing to the wellbeing of my community."* A man from Sudan, also hosted by Refugees at Home and now working as a porter in a London hospital wrote, *"If my life is cut short, during this crisis then I gave my life for a worthy cause. Also mentioning me as a refugee makes me feel proud of the clan I belong to 'The Refugees', which up to now do not get the respect & the treatment they deserve..."*

The Hebrew Bible, and many other religious texts, as well as the UN Charter to which the UK is a signatory, teach us that we have an obligation to support refugees seeking asylum from persecution. In the Torah the injunction to love the stranger is repeated over and over again.

But this is not a one-way affair. Our societies also have a lot to learn about courage, humility and endurance from refugees, who overwhelmingly seek only the safety to create a better future for themselves and their children, and to make a contribution to the society which offers them this opportunity. Hosting refugees in my home has often left me reflecting on how much I have, and how much I take for granted.

If we are in a position to offer help in any way, it is our responsibility to do so.

Compassionate Communities

“Their burden of worry is huge, and lockdown has aggravated that situation”

We all remember the refugee crisis in 2015 when over a million migrants and refugees crossed into Europe, and our European governments refused to respond. Fortunately a few cities in the UK took the initiative to help where they could and City of Sanctuary UK was born. It now supports a network of over one hundred local and grassroots groups offering a welcome to people who have fled violence, war and persecution.

Lancaster is one of these cities and it has now, after five years, around twelve partner organisations providing support to people in need of safety, combined with the help of its generous and kind citizens. We have around 150 refugees: women, men and children of different faiths and cultures. All have had to leave their homeland, and most of them have had a harrowing journey to get here. Some have been in prison and been tortured, but their arrival here to safety still means uncertainty, and a painful separation from their loved ones and their cultural roots.

The government provides the cost of their accommodation plus £37 per week, but they are unable to access free English classes for their first six months in the UK, and they cannot work. It can take up to three years until they get an interview with the Home Office, when it is decided whether they are to be granted the status of a refugee. Once given that status they are allowed to work and set up home in a place of their choice.

Until that time, when they are still considered to be asylum seekers, their burden of worry is huge, and lockdown has aggravated that situation. Their loneliness has led to despondency and despair.

In March 2020 our usual weekly drop-in sessions with free lunches; our EastmeetsWest meetings for women and children; and our Sewing Circle all had to stop. Legal advice and advocacy was only possible in limited ways with the help of Global Link, and our WhatsApp group for the community was a vital source of support. Luckily the Bike Project was still offering its service, and the Claver Hill Gardening Project kept going. The local food banks kindly delivered boxes of free food, and we tried our best to come up with innovative ideas like handing out plants to tend, and organising small walking and cycling groups. Our ten English classes, run by professional teachers who volunteer

their skill and time, went on to Zoom, and kept the community connected. We delivered course books, stationery and homework - and the lunch drop-in eventually transformed into an hour of conversation on Zoom. Slowly we are getting back into classrooms with grateful smiles everywhere.

The pandemic has highlighted how the wider city community can build truly amazing networks of assistance and support, and hopefully every member of our refugee community has experienced the precious feeling of being cared for.

In all our different faith traditions the care of others is central. As we don't live in large families any more sharing support with those around us becomes crucial. I remember that when one of our men fell sick, others from his country came immediately and brought food and provided him with company. If an acquaintance of theirs has a bereavement they travel long distances to pay their respects.

In my work with members of our community I have often felt humbled by their consideration, and have learned how their cultures see this as a normal way of being. Bonds between family and friends are most valued and a priority. Hearing about one of our volunteers visiting her mother in a local care home sent them into shock. It is natural for them to look after close family and open their home to them. Respect for elders is paramount and even when taking people in my car the oldest person is always expected to sit in the front.

Being uprooted from their traditions causes much suffering for our asylum seekers, and those given refugee status, and we are glad to say that they have built different communities in town... look out for the gathering of our Sudanese men close to the market, listen to the laughter of our south American friends in the local cafe and smell the delicious food our Kurdish friends have prepared for their community, and everyone in town, in their new take-away.

Lancaster is a City of Sanctuary and a safe haven for our asylum seekers and refugees, and for us as volunteers our new friends provide a deep well of learning and reflection. Their warmth and gratitude are our reward, and their humanity is nourishment for the soul.

“In my work with members of our community I have often felt humbled by their consideration...”

Tales of Small Things

I am an Eritrean Refugee and I live in Lancaster. During this lockdown I learned and experienced lots of things. The first three weeks were very stressful, I really missed my friends and my English tutor terribly.

Being a refugee and very distant from home at this time was very challenging for me, because I was very worried about my family. I was also very worried for the long term effects that this virus could have. My thoughts were with those who have lost family and friends to this terrible virus.

As time passed I regained my optimistic side when I started focusing on the small reasons of why the lockdown was good. I tried to remain positive for 2 months, but I still felt very lonely, frustrated and I was getting distracted easily. When I went outside for a walk, there was always the worry of getting or spreading the virus.

It had also positive sides. This lockdown taught me:

- to always be grateful and thankful for what I have, and live for the day.
- to appreciate the smaller things in life, we take for granted.
- I have also learned how to deal with uncomfortable thoughts and feelings in new ways during hard situations.
- And importantly it has taught me that the presence of humans is the meaning of life:

Humans serving others, helping and supporting each other, that's what we are here for...

The best and main part was that this lockdown taught me that the core values of life are: KINDNESS, GENEROSITY, LOYALTY, SOCIAL CONNECTION and COMMUNITY.

Sofia

I am from Kosovo, I came here to the UK 2 years ago. Before that time I was studying. My big dream is to be a successful and rich woman, to help vulnerable people.

You wake up one day, prepare yourself to go out as usual, but now they tell you that you should stay home because a virus is affecting the country outside and that this is the only way to help, to stay home.

I learned that we can't control everything that happens out there, but only what happens in here, and that I can manage my time as I want. **I learned that in small daily actions it is also possible to find joy.**

This situation made me see the people that need us close, and this time has helped me learn to value and miss those places where I have already been, those moments that I have already lived and all the things I have done.

I increase my environmental awareness and I know that when all this is over it will be one more teaching that I can apply out there.

I assimilated this situation and I started to enjoy my time at home, stopped wondering what is going to happen next. What am I going to do today. I started doing things that I liked, spent more time with the girls who live with me. I watched more documentaries, I studied more things. I took advantage of my time in this quarantine and I improved my eating.

I learned that when all this is over no one will come out as how they came in. This is where I stopped feeling desperate or impatient, and I started to feel more powerful and to be kinder to myself.

I began to value myself in health and stop making plans for the future. I realized that life can change from one day to another. We don't want to forget how we have felt during quarantine or what we have managed to do. Today it happened to us, tomorrow maybe it will happen to our next generation - our children.

Jona

I am an asylum seeker. I migrated to the UK five months ago. Do you have any thoughts on migration? You might imagine a group of ducks flying happily due south, a beautiful picture, but not a true one. I will try to give you a more realistic image of migration.

When you migrate for any reason, without considering your age, your education and your financial ability there is the same situation:

You can't speak in your own language. You can't eat your local foods. You can't go to familiar and favourite places. You can't see your family and your close friends, even your best friend (if you migrate alone as I did).

You can just talk to them on the phone or by video call (fortunately I'm talking about migration in the modern world).

You can't touch them, you can't hug your mother, you can't go out and have fun and do exciting things late at night with your friends. I mean you have a virtual family and friends. Without feeling the warmth of your father's hands or the nice smell of your mother's hair. Let's be clear: you are alone.

What feelings do you have, hearing this? What are you thinking? **Do these descriptions remind you of something? Something that you have become familiar with in recent times? "Lockdown"**

All of what I'm going to say is that humans have had an experience of migration during these days of lockdown. Migration from society to themselves - to the inside.

Yes, we have to be alone but it's not bad news. We can self-reflect and rebuild. I know some people who are discovering things about themselves that they didn't know before. Some people have changed. They have become creative, or have learned artistic skills or have restarted activities which they had given up for a while.

People who live with their families have had more time for being with wives, husbands, and children. This is a good opportunity for having better relationships.

But some people have become sad or disappointed in life and the future. We are different in our outlook and abilities, naturally, but I think we should all make the best of what we have.

In my opinion, what happens for you depends on you. **You can choose to surf the wave of your difficulties, or sink into them.**

So far humans have survived the ice age, world wars, and even fast foods. This time it's COVID-19's turn: let's face it head-on.

Maya



When Souls Meet

Hazreti Mevlana

*'Happy the moment when we are seated in the palace,
thou and I,*

*With two forms and with two figures but with one soul,
thou and I.'*

Mevlana!

In preparation for teaching us to turn, our Sheikh had given a series of talks about Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi. Rumi was a theologian and mystic who taught at the university in Konya, Turkey during the reign of the Seljuk Sultan Kaykobad II. He was much respected and revered by Konya society. Originating from a Sufi background he was drawn to Sufism, and had studied for a time under a Sufi master called Burhanu'l-Din of Tirmidhi. He became a Sheikh in his own right. Maulana or Mevlana, as the Turks call him, means 'Our Master'. He was born in Balkh in 1207 but left there as a young child when his father travelled first to Mecca and then throughout the Middle East, fleeing from the Mongul hordes. Eventually, in 1228 the family was invited by the Seljuk Sultan to settle in Konya. Rumi's father, Baha ad-Din Walad, a Sufi in his own right, was a theologian and jurisprudent who was offered a position as teacher of Islam there. His son Jalaluddin took over his position after his death in 1231.²

There are different variations to the story about the momentous meeting between Jalaluddin Rumi and the wandering dervish Shamsuddin Muhammad Tabrizi, called Shams-i Tabriz, (the Sun of Tabriz). Rumi's whole life as a theologian was completely turned upside down by this meeting of overwhelming magnitude. One story relates that Jalaluddin met Shams when he was coming out of the *madrasah*, followed



by his students and scholars. Shams is said to have been dervish of the Qalandar tradition with strong roots in Shamanism. He had been travelling around the Middle East looking for someone who could, as he said, 'endure my company'. Upon meeting Mevlana, he asked him, "Who is greater, Muhammad or Abu Yazid al Bistami?" Rumi answered, "What sort of question is that? Of course, Muhammad is greater!

He is the Seal of the Prophets! Every day he passed through many different stages and asked God's forgiveness for the previous stage. But Bayazid was in awe of each stage which he reached, thinking it was the supreme one." Bayazid is related to have once uttered in ecstasy, "Praise be to me. How great is my Majesty!" when he had reached a state of God-consciousness. The orthodox interpreted this utterance as blasphemy³. (Abu Yazid or Bayazid was a 9th century Persian mystic who was known as 'the first of the drunken Sufis'. He reached such states of rapture that he felt he was in complete unity with or annihilation in God⁴). The Prophet Muhammad's prayer to Allah was, "We do not know You as You deserve to be known".



When he understood how profound and outrageous Shams' question was, Rumi is said to have fallen from his camel onto the ground in a faint.⁵ The two were so enraptured by mystical love that they went into retreat and meditated together for months. They were inseparable. Jalalu'ddin was totally consumed by the fire of love for his soul mate (whom he saw as the perfect image of the Divine Beloved)⁶, as well as by his greater love for God.

*'I was the country's sober ascetic,
I used to teach from the pulpit -
but destiny made me one of
Thy handclapping lovers.'*

Rumi.⁷

As a consequence of this meeting of destiny with Shams and his intoxicating love for him, Rumi turned away from dogmatism and became a lover of God and humanity. Through Shams, Rumi was able to experience direct knowledge of God. Again, it was owing to his devotion to Shams and his worship of God that he attained to ecstatic states. He began to turn in a whirling dance with his arms outstretched in the streets of Konya. Some say it was Shams who taught him how to turn, and that this turning comes from sacred dances of the Shaman tradition⁸. Another version relates how he was walking in the goldsmiths' market one day, and upon hearing the rhythm of the goldsmiths' hammers he began to whirl. He heard the Name of Allah everywhere, and saw Him in everything, being completely carried away by love.⁹

1 R.A. Nicholson, *Rumi: Poet and Mystic*, P. 35, from the *Diwan*, S.P. XXXVIII.

2 Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, P. 311-2; William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love, The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi*, Pp. 1-2

3 Cyril Glassé, *The Concise Encyclopaedia of Islam*, P. 75-6.

4 Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, Pp 47-49

5 Annemarie Schimmel, *Ich bin Wind und Du bist Feuer*, P. 18-19.

6 William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love, The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi*, P. 4.

7 *Ibid*, P. 3. From *Diwān-i Shamsi-i Tabrizī*, No. 22784

8 Shakina Reinhertz, *Women called to the Path of Rumi*, P. 9; Mehmet Önder, *Mevlana Jelaeddin Rumi*, P. 63.

9 Ira Friedlander, *The Whirling Dervishes*, P. 56.



(The Mevlevi Order, which was founded after his death, carried on this tradition of turning and the Whirling Dervishes are now very well-known in the West. When they turn they recite the Name of Allah which inspires the heart, bringing inner peace). One of Jalaluddin Rumi's sayings, often quoted by the Sufis, states, 'Whatever distracts our hearts from the contemplation and remembrance of our Lord is a veil.'¹⁰ Mevlana's words

still hold a message for us today, more than seven hundred years after his death, and, indeed as a consequence of many new interpretations of his work he has become very popular in the West.

Shams-i Tabriz and Jalaluddin Rumi remained inseparable for a couple of years, sitting together in spiritual communion. Shams was a great Sufi and *majdhub* (madman of God), who had reached a very high spiritual station. Some say that he was the *qutb* or pole of his time. The people of Konya were shocked and outraged that their most respected scholar and doctor of the Law was consorting with this wild-looking, wandering dervish, to the neglect of his family and pupils. Mevlana's *mureeds* were extremely jealous of the time their master spent with this seemingly irreverent and outrageous vagabond, who certainly didn't appear to adhere to dogma and rituals. They became hostile and actually threatened Shams, telling him to leave Konya.

Shams went to Damascus without a word to Jalaluddin Rumi. Mevlana was heartbroken and sent his son, Sultan Veled, to look for him. A tremendous outpouring of his heart in poetry took place throughout the period after he met Shams, particularly when he was so completely overwhelmed with sadness at the loss of his soul mate. After some time, Shams arrived back in Konya, accompanied by Mevlana's son. The reunion of the two soul mates was such that 'one did not know who was lover and who was beloved'¹¹. They spent their time

meditating, sitting knee to knee in a cell, and communicating from heart to heart about the highest of spiritual questions.

This became so unbearable for his disciples that they called Shams out of Jalaluddin's house one night. From that night onwards, he mysteriously disappeared and it was not known what had happened to him. Jalaluddin was inconsolable. His son tried to comfort him and alleviate his worst fears that Shams was dead. It is suspected that he was murdered by Mevlana's disciples who are said to have stabbed him and thrown his body down a well. All that was found at the time were some drops of blood in a garden, but the body had disappeared. A tomb was built over the place where Shams' body had been buried. In the fifties, a Seljuk grave was found by the Director of the Mevlevi Mausoleum.¹² This was thought to be the tomb where his murderers had buried Shamsuddin. As a result of his grief at the loss of Shams, Mevlana wrote passionate lyrics collected in his great work *Divan-i-Kabir*. He even wrote Shams-i Tabriz's name to his verses, as an act of humility, describing his love for him, but quintessentially for God, his longing, ecstasy and desolation.¹³ It was owing to his states of bliss in his high spiritual station and his despair, that he whirled in the streets of Konya.

One day, Mevlana and one of his disciples, Husamuddin Çelebi, were walking in the vineyards. Husamuddin, who was devoted to Mevlana, encouraged him to write a new work in the Mathnawi form. From the folds of his turban Mevlana smilingly produced a piece of paper upon which were the first eighteen lines of the Mathnawi, 'Listen to this reed forlorn...' From then on, Jalaluddin Rumi composed and recited his great work of teaching stories in rhyming couplets which Husamuddin wrote down until Mevlana's death. The Mathnawi consisted of more than 25,000 verses.¹⁴ Rumi's literary accomplishments were tremendous. Not only did he write the *Divan-i Kabir* totalling 35,000 verses under the influence of his consuming love for Shams, but he also wrote lyrical poetry and his 'table talks' called *Fihi ma fihi*.¹⁵

*'Daylight, full of small dancing particles
and the one great turning, our souls
are dancing with you, without feet, they dance.
Can you see them when I whisper in your ear?'*

Rumi¹⁶

Whatever distracts our hearts from the contemplation and remembrance of our Lord is a veil

¹⁰ Ibid, P. 36, quoted from the Mathnawi.

¹¹ Annemarie Schimmel, *Ich bin Wind und Du bist Feuer*, P. 21, quoting from Sultan Walad, *Waladnâme*.

¹² Mehmet Önder, *Mevlâna Jeleleddin Rûmî*, P. 100-107.

¹³ William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love, The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi*, P. 4.

¹⁴ Mehmet Önder, *Mevlâna Jeleleddin Rumi*, P. 130-3; William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love, The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi*, Pp. 5-6. Annemarie Schimmel, *Ich bin Wind und Du bist Feuer*, P. 38-40.

¹⁵ Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, P. 315-6.

¹⁶ Coleman Barks with John Moyne, *The Essential Rumi*, P. 37, a variation of Rumi's Quatrain No. 702/556.

Stepping Out of the Fold

Did you know that from the 1920s women of Afghanistan were not veiled, and that they were free to wear western style dress, including mini-skirts in the 1970s? They were a visible presence in universities, and were active in other public spheres. This historical fact, and the circumstances that brought about a change in the status of Afghan women is almost always ignored by the media.

Afghanistan is not a country with a typical political history. Multiple foreign invasions have brought untold human suffering, and colossal social and economic destabilization. Reading up on the country's history will tell you that the Russian invasion of 1979 had Russian military personnel firmly rooted in the country's landscape for 9 years, leaving approximately 2 million civilians killed (and millions more fleeing as refugees to neighbouring countries). It was this incursion that triggered the creation of a rebel force, the Mujahideen, and subsequently, the Taliban with its extreme religious and cultural ideology. The USA invaded Afghanistan in 2001, and more recently this ongoing situation has been recorded as 'the longest war in American history' [The Economist]. Afghanistan is also a country torn apart by civil wars and internal tribal feuds fuelled by foreign power structures.

Culturally, under the influence of the Taliban, Afghanistan is now a deeply patriarchal society where girls and women are largely invisible from the

educational and societal spheres, and the workforce. They are under a peremptory guardianship, and visible only in public in head-to-foot veiled covering – the burqa. Furthermore, with invading 'alien' armed troops having free access to rural neighbourhoods and urban residential areas, the fear factor amongst local people is not misplaced. Overly protectiveness of female honour has become the norm, and this has sealed the fate of female Afghans as nameless and unrecognised in public.

With an unstable political system, a severely fractured national infra-structure and eroding social institutions, as a consequence of foreign invasions and insurgency, the position of women and children has regressed to the point of being totally restrictive and tragically neglectful. However, progress now seems a possibility. After a 3-year campaign by women's rights activists, the Afghan government, in 2020, amended the law to include mother's names on their children's birth certificates; previously only the father's name appeared. This has huge symbolic and practical significance for every woman, including those who are divorced and widowed. Using the social media hashtag **#WhereIsMyName** – initiated by Laleh Osmany - women activists campaigned for women's identity to be enshrined in law. In the aftermath of the announcement Sonia Ahmadi, an activist said: **"I feel like a bird in a cage whose door has just been opened, achieving the dream of flying in the sky."**

Since 2002 **'Afghan Connection'**, a UK charity, has been successfully providing quality education to rural Afghan girls living in impoverished remote areas. The different educational initiatives include training primary and secondary female teachers in the locality. **'Afghan Connection'** has funded the construction of 46 schools serving over 75,000 children to date: and their cricket projects have made a difference to over 100,000 children in 22 Afghan provinces. This has been possible because they run their projects in a culturally sensitive manner.

"CLIMBING A MOUNTAIN IS LIKE STRIVING FOR EQUALITY. IT IS HARD, IT FEELS IMPOSSIBLE. BUT YOU CONTINUE DOING IT AS YOU KNOW IN THE END IT WAS ALL WORTH IT"

Afghan women are however strong, and there are many inspiring accounts demonstrating that some women can negotiate their way to achieving their ambition within a fraught and perilous social order:

Fatima Sultani from Kabul is a regular Afghan teenager who had a somewhat uncommon ambition. In Abdul Wahed Sultani, she found a very supportive father who continues to inspire her. Poised to face any challenges, she managed to turn her goal into a reality. A mountaineer, she is a member of **Hike Ventures Afghanistan**, an independent group of hikers who explore the undiscovered beauty of Afghanistan and rely on their own initiatives for building up resources and provisions for their exploration. In the words of Fatima Sultani: **"Climbing a mountain is like striving for equality. It is hard, it feels impossible. But you continue doing it as you know in the end it was all worth it"**. In August 2020, at the age of eighteen, Fatima Sultani climbed her country's highest mountain, Nushaq peak, which is 7492 metres (24,580 feet) above sea level. She made history for being the youngest woman ever to achieve the crowning glory. Mount Nushaq is the second highest peak in the 800-kilometre-long Hindukush mountain range. Famous for its breath-taking view of snow-capped peaks, Hindu Kush is also notorious for being known as a killer mountain region for having claimed many lives due to its inhospitable terrain, coupled with harsh weather conditions that renders navigation through it difficult. Fatima told Reuters: **"My main goal is to show the world that Afghan women are strong and can do the most challenging work that men do."**

Hanifa Yousoufi, also from Kabul, was the first Afghan woman, at the age of 24, to conquer Mount Nushaq but her circumstances were different from that of her teen counterpart. Hanifa is from an impoverished and illiterate background whose sense of duty towards her family obliged her to work as a cleaner to assist her father who tried hard to make ends meet. Hanifa seized the opportunity to turn her life around when a friend introduced her to **'Ascend Afghanistan'** an organisation that focuses on mountaineering as a means of empowering women, founded in 2015 by Marina LeGree, a former Nato employee. Hanifa joined the group in 2016 and despite being a complete novice to the world of sports or even fitness training - ran a marathon in 2017 prior to preparing to climb Nushaq. The day before her team set off for the Nushaq expedition, fighting had broken out with the Taliban nearby. Though anxious, her team remained undeterred. She says: **"I did this for every single girl. The girls of Afghanistan are strong and will continue to be strong."** Despite struggling with altitude sickness and frostbite in one of her toes, Hanifa was determined to muster up her strength to complete her descent after reaching the summit. Hanifa is one of approximately 70 committed members who meet six days a week to train as mountaineers. Their project coordinator is Freshta Ibrahimi, who is also from an impoverished background but has earned the respect of her team members for her dedication. Young women aged between 15 and 22 were the first group in 2015 to train and complete a 17-day trail climbing three peaks - all above 4,876m. Their particular feat was to scale the heights of an unconquered peak which they subsequently named 'Daughters of the Afghan Lion peak'.

The Afghan women's basketball team is another success story of social inclusion and engagement in public life, where women play in a proper court watched by an unsegregated crowd. Some of the players wear headscarves while others do not, but all wear basketball gear adapted to Islamic reserved clothing. In the words of a player the women demonstrate 'unity, peace and love' through their performance. Run by the Afghan Olympic Committee, the team was formed by US troops after the invasion in 2001.

Afghanistan's national women's wheelchair basketball team is an inspiration to disabled girls around the country. Their uniform to date is more reserved and they all wear headscarves. The programme is supported by the International Committee of the Red Cross that has built courts, arranges practice space, provides equipment as well as covers taxi fares for players who require a ride to the sports venue. The team won its first international tournament against Thailand at the 4th annual Bali Cup International Tournament in Indonesia in 2017. They played against strong women's teams from India, Indonesia and Thailand. **"I'm glad to have won such an honour,"** said team member Nilofar Bayat. Jess Markt, the team's American coach, who trains wheelchair basketball teams for the ICRC and first visited Afghanistan in November 2009 says, **"They're one of the greatest sports stories that I've ever been associated with. I'm incredibly proud of them."** With 120 women wheelchair basketball players in Afghanistan, many of whom have disabilities due to birth defects, polio or war-related injuries, the sports have made a welcome difference to their lives.

For more rights to be accorded to women, the Taliban has to see eye to eye with any moves taken by the Afghan government. This can only be achieved by the support of the International Community: the harsher the criticism about Afghan women's conservative attire and lifestyle by foreign voices, the more opposed the Taliban will be to changes. This opposition will be supported by other patriarchal figures in the community who believe that the incognito status of women in public is essential to maintaining their honour. Culturally, women are perceived to embody the honour of the family, and any transgression on their part is deemed to bring dishonour and shame on the family, especially on the males: this can be life threatening for women. Indeed, some of the women who have stepped out of the fold and joined the police, politics, journalism or sports have been subject to life threatening consequences vis-à-vis being shot at, or blinded by stabbing: actions that are sometimes carried out by members of their own family.

Foreign institutions have to be aware that insensitive interference in Afghan cultural affairs can provoke a reaction that endangers the safety of Afghan women. Ideally when powerful men negotiate, they should be well-intentioned and well-informed, with all parties meeting as equals, and listening with open minds. Exclusion of Afghan women in these negotiations however, will undoubtedly make progress extremely slow, if not halt it all together. But hope lies in the grit and determination of Afghan women. We have seen examples of how they have broken cultural barriers, and I believe that with guidance from their fellow activists Afghan women will themselves help bring about a fairer and more equal society. The winds of change will finally blow in their favour.

DEATH THE GATEWAY TO LIFE

An Interdisciplinary Exploration
of Near-Death Experiences

Edited by Shirley Firth & Joanna Wilson

This book *Death, the Gateway to Life* explores near death experiences from an interdisciplinary perspective, based on the conference papers “Is Heaven for Real?” held at the University of Winchester in the summer of 2016.

The book is split between, Part One: The Nature of Consciousness, and Part Two: Spiritual and Religious Perspectives. The two distinctive parts allow this fascinating subject to be made more accessible to the reader by cleverly weaving the science with the spiritual.

Near Death Experiences (NDE's) are often downplayed in our society and delegated to the realms of the supernatural, and therefore not 'real'. Indeed, many people have experienced an NDE, but would never widely talk about it for fear of being ridiculed, or considered mentally compromised at the time of the experience. Yet throughout history most cultures and religions have reported NDEs in some shape or form.

The very first chapter in the book by Dr Pim van Lommel challenges the more sceptical view of NDEs by grounding the experience in the results of four scientific studies carried out on people who survived cardiac arrests. He challenges current medical concepts on the relationship between the brain and consciousness by saying: “...our brain seems to have a *facilitating, and not a producing function, to experience consciousness.*”

In some ways this chapter sets the context of the other chapters. I found myself constantly reflecting back to it as

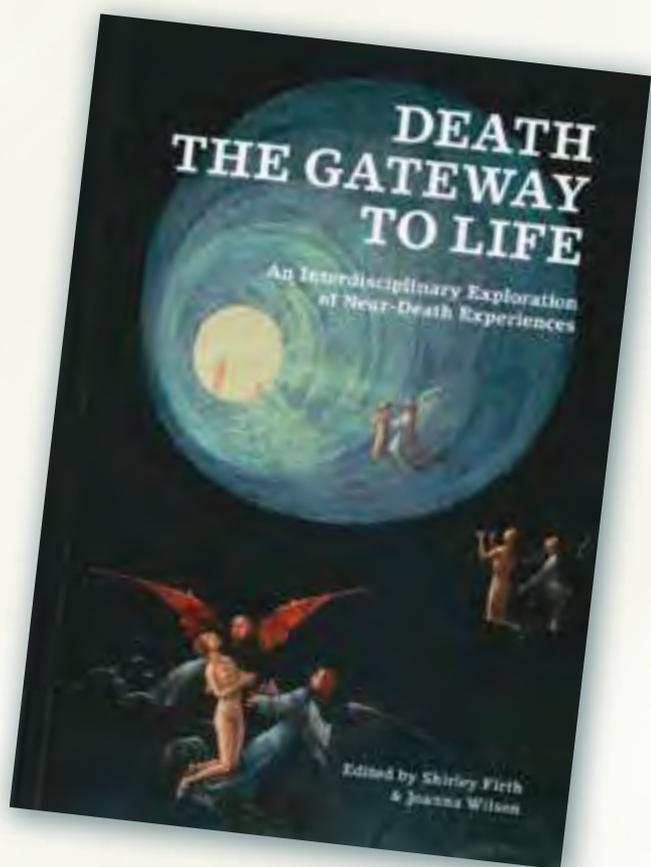
it seemed to anchor and ground the other chapters in the here and now. One of my favourite chapters however, is by Marianne Rankin which explores NDEs and Religious or Spiritual Experiences (RSEs). Many of the stories told are from the Alasdair Hardy Religious Experience Centre at the University of Wales, Trinity Saint David. These stories were collated and analysed as a study to better understand the individual experience. As a collective they give insight into the reality through which these experiences are viewed, and as to whether science and spirituality are given equal weight.

Is there life after death? It is one of the oldest ultimate questions that humans have asked themselves through the ages. As a teacher of Religion, Morality and Philosophy (RMPS), this question is possibly the one that engages the most interest and response from pupils. Some of the stories shared around this subject are quite profound. There is always a sense however, that in order to explore this subject fully the student must step outside the realms of our learnt understanding of reality. This book challenges our understanding of this learned reality, and opens the mind to new wider possibilities experienced by our lived lives.

The extract that follows is by kind permission of its author, Dr Shirley Firth. This is the final chapter of the book and draws on the other chapters, as well as matters that arose from the original conference that participants wanted to explore.

Death, the Gateway to Life: An Interdisciplinary Exploration of Near-Death Experiences

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CHAPTER 7

What Happens Next?

Shirley Firth

After Effects

Returning to 'life' may seem barren after what has occurred, and the individual may find it difficult if not impossible, to communicate what has happened. Relatives may not be sympathetic or find it hard to deal with the changes. Marriages break up if one partner has changed radically. One of Sartori's informants felt completely out of joint after his NDE, as his new moral perspective made him resentful and he had a sense of being a misfit (Sartori, 2014, pp. 25–29).

On the plus side, there are often greatly enhanced feelings of joy, of sensitivity to others, a deeper interest in spiritual matters and in almost every study, a lower interest in organised religion, except perhaps in the USA. Van Lommel provides a valuable discussion of changes in religiosity after NDEs (Van Lommel, 2010, p. 58). They often have a feeling of a new or increased purpose in life, although it may not occur very early on. Many became much more aware of other people's needs, more intuitive and caring (Van Lommel, 2010, p. 46ff.).

A number find themselves with enhanced paranormal abilities. They may be able to 'tap into' people's thoughts. A curious finding has been changes in the person's electromagnetic field, which means they cannot wear watches any more, or go near certain kinds of switches. An African nurse not only had problems with watches, but also found she could not tolerate the cinema, as the screen seemed to be jumping at her and the lights made her nauseated. Another man found his hearing became so acute he could hear conversations across a noisy room and now has to 'keep up his filters' (Sartori, 2014, pp. 39–45). Some individuals find they have a new healing ability, although they may be shy of demonstrating it. Both Moorjani and Benedict were healed of their life-threatening cancer after their NDEs.

Finally, subjects claimed that this was a 'peak experience' which transformed their attitude to life. Sabom states: 'For the terminally ill or dying, the effect was usually to focus attention on living for the "here and now" and away from a preoccupation with death and fear of the unknown. Tanya Garland's NDE, in Appendix II, did not have the frequently described features, apart from the OBE, but the experience was nevertheless transformative.

The NDE did not, however, cause these individuals to deny the reality of approaching physical death or wish for its hastened arrival. To the contrary an intuitive acceptance of both life and death appeared to help people to cope with prolonged and repeated illness and disability, and also with the death of loved ones. A Vietnam veteran, who had a remarkable out of body experience when he lost both legs and an arm in a battlefield explosion, said later,

I don't go to funerals. I don't send flowers. I don't tell people I'm sorry. Somebody tells me that somebody died and I say we should be happy. Why don't we have parties at death?... They left for a better life, a good feeling... I'm not afraid to die. I firmly believe everything happens for a purpose... I live and play and work as intense as I do because I realize the very next instant I could be gone and I might not come back into the body that time... There is something after life. It is a good feeling. (During the NDE) I think I was at total peace with myself. I didn't want to come back... It was not void of life or feeling, because it was a beautiful feeling and it was a life. Whatever life it was, whatever form we were in, we existed.

Sabom, 1982, pp. 178–9

“OTHER SUBJECTS ALSO SAID THEY WERE MORE CONSCIOUS OF THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MIND RATHER THAN THE BODY, AND HAD A NEW OR ENHANCED DRIVE TOWARDS SEEKING KNOWLEDGE”

Another aspect of the NDE is gaining knowledge, although the content of this is not always recalled afterwards. Sartori describes meeting Rajaa Benamour from Casablanca, whose intense NDE included a life review and took her back to her own birth. She had ‘also a more extensive review of the birth of the whole universe. She also described experiencing knowledge at quantum level that she didn’t previously have. She now studies quantum physics at University. Her professor ‘stated how puzzled he was about Rajaa’s level of knowledge of quantum physics... not even he understood some of what Rajaa was writing but her work had since been confirmed by recent papers that had been published in physics journals’ (Sartori, 2014, pp. 4–5). Other subjects also said they were more conscious of the importance of the mind rather than the body, and had a new or enhanced drive towards seeking knowledge. Van Lommel provides a fascinating account from an experiencer who was delighted to find he no longer had mobility problems and there was no space-time. He understood why cancer had occurred, and,

Why I had come into this world in the first place. What role each of my family members played in my life... and in general, what life is all about...

That very same moment, in a split second, I gained access to a wealth of knowledge, a complete knowing and understanding. All knowledge... I understood the origins of the cosmos, how the universe works and why people do what they do.

Van Lommel, 2010, p. 34

The experiencer was shown how evolution worked in terms of its ultimate goal, ‘mathematics, electronics and quantum physics’, but was not allowed to retain this. Alexander was also given an understanding of the cosmos, of ‘dark energy and dark matter... and far more advanced components of our universe that humans won’t address for ages’. However, such understanding is not confined to NDEs. In Chapter 4 Marianne Rankin cites one report from a religious experience in the Alister Hardy archive:

The following morning when I awoke I had a sudden experience, for into my mind poured knowledge (which knowledge has remained with me ever since). I knew that the love and service of mankind was the will of God for mankind. That we are to love all... My whole outlook on life changed from that time.

The similarities between the transcendental and numinous aspects of NDEs and Religious and Spiritual Experiences (RSEs) are so great that we need to explore both. In her book, *An Introduction to Religious and Spiritual Experiences*, Rankin does include some examples of negative ones, but the mystical experiences are of greatest interest in this context. Journeys like Alexander’s may be rare, if not unheard of, but the descriptions of very specifically religious ones, like Storm’s are typical also of non-NDE numinous experiences. The mystical ones, which include different forms of knowledge, of the physical cosmos but also include the intuitive knowing, jnana, of ultimate reality. Benedict and John Wren-Lewis both had atypical experiences. Wren-Lewis simply awoke from his grave illness to find his consciousness was completely changed, as described earlier in this chapter. Benedict, however, managed to stop the process as it began:

As I began to move toward the light, I knew intuitively that if I went to the light, I would be dead. So as I was moving toward the light I said, “Please wait a minute, just hold on a second here. I want to think about this; I would like to talk to you before I go.”

To my surprise, the entire experience halted at that point. You are indeed in control of your near-death experience. You are not on a roller coaster ride. So my request was honored and I had some conversations with the light. The light kept changing into different figures, like Jesus, Buddha, Krishna, mandalas, archetypal images and signs.

I asked the light, “What is going on here? Please, light, clarify yourself for me. I really want to know the reality of the situation.”

He was informed telepathically that his beliefs influenced his experience. As he already had a negative view of the planet he asked for further clarification. In a magnificent mandala he was shown 'how beautiful we are in our essence, our core'.

The human soul, the human matrix that we all make together is absolutely fantastic, elegant, exotic, everything. I said, "Oh, God, I did not know how beautiful we are."

At any level, high or low, in whatever shape you are in, you are the most beautiful creation, you are.

I was astonished to find that there was no evil in any soul. I said, "How can this be?"

The answer was that no soul was inherently evil. The terrible things that happened to people might make them do evil things, but their souls were not evil. What all people seek, what sustains them, is love, the light told me. What distorts people is a lack of love....

Then, like a trumpet blast with a shower of spiraling lights, the Great Light spoke, saying:

"Remember this and never forget; you save, redeem and heal yourself. You always have. You always will. You were created with the power to do so from before the beginning of the world."

In that instant I realized even more. I realized that WE HAVE ALREADY BEEN SAVED, and we saved ourselves because we were designed to self-correct like the rest of God's universe. This is what the second coming is about. (in Appendix IV)

He was healed of his cancer and the remarkable scientific knowledge he gained enabled him to 'be closely involved in the research area of Quantum Biology' and genetic structures.

However, not all returns are so positive. A longing to go back sometimes leads to depression, or leads to thoughts of suicide. The experimenter may feel rather superior to those without the experience.

"HOW BEAUTIFUL WE ARE IN OUR ESSENCE, OUR CORE"

Implications

Finally, what are the implications of all these extraordinary experiences? What does the NDE tell us about death? If the bulk of the NDEs indicate what it is like to die, this knowledge could be used to help the dying overcome their fear and anxiety and may indeed be of considerable comfort to the relatives, especially if the death was difficult and painful. For Satori, it has enhanced her appreciation of love and compassion and drives her to continue in her nursing work, determined not only to help patients understand their experiences but also approach death in a calm and serene way. Fenwick, in his chapter, also picks up this theme. An appreciation of NDEs helps carers and practitioners to understand the transition that dying people are making, and be more open to their experiences:

During this [time] recurrent trips to the transcendent and meetings with dead relatives and spiritual beings, help the process. Light, love and support permeate this area. As the dying become more used to this they give up everything. No longer are there any decisions, attachments weaken and the ego starts to crumble. There is no future, only just now. The family are let go and the persona dissolves. This is the Hero's journey, where the individual dives deep into himself, roots out the obstructions of attachment which limit his own spiritual development and the transcendence shines through.

The dying person has now entered non-dual consciousness, has lost everything that tethers him to this world and is ready to go. His experience teaches him that he will be met at the threshold and helped to cross.

Fenwick, 1997, p.193

My own parents, at the end of their lives, made a pact to help one another cross the river, a metaphor from John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. My mother had vascular dementia, and he cared for her heroically. An ordained minister, she retained a deep spirituality to the end, with many strange visions about God, Jesus and the Holy Ghost (which she said she had never figured out). On one extraordinary day she 'cut the cords', with gestures and encouragement from me. There were 12 – the total number of the immediate family – and asked whether my father would let her go. She woke him that night and asked if he would help her cross the river. He said, "If I go first, I'll help you cross, and if you go first, you can help me cross." My father had also made a covenant with God that he would live to see me receive my doctorate, which he did, to the day. For the following six weeks, my mother seemed to live in two worlds, and there was a sense of her having left the body some time before she stopped breathing. We were fortunate that this was at home, and I was able to talk her into the light, an idea I had from Laura Huxley.¹

¹ An idea derived from Aldous and Laura Huxley's experiences, but without drugs! 'One of his ideas is that tripping may ease the passage into that good night – advice he famously took on 22 November 1963 when he asked his second wife Laura Huxley to give him LSD. "Light and free you let go, darling; forward and up," she whispered to him as he drifted away. "You are going forward and up; you are going toward the light." I used these words for my mother (SF, 1995). *The Guardian* 26 Jan. 2012.

***“PEOPLE’S LIVES ARE CHANGED,
NOT JUST BECAUSE THEY BELIEVE
THERE IS LIFE AFTER DEATH
(A FEW CONTINUE WITH THEIR
AGNOSTICISM ON THE SUBJECT),
BUT BECAUSE THEY SEE THEIR
RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS,
AND THE PHYSICAL WORLD, IN A
COMPLETELY NEW WAY”***

For Van Lommel:

It often takes an NDE to get people to think about the possibility of experiencing consciousness independently of the body and so realize that consciousness has probably always been and always will be, that everything and every body are connected, that all of our thoughts will exist forever, and have an impact on both ourselves and our surroundings, and that death as such does not exist. An NDE provides an opportunity to reconsider our relationships with ourselves, others and nature but only if we continue to ask open questions and abandon preconceptions.

Van Lommel, 2010, p. 330

Once one realises that consciousness is not brain dependent, with which all the researchers in this book would agree, it lays open possibilities about continuity after death. But what effect will this have on traditional theology, psychology, and philosophy? Does this take us back to Cartesian dualism, or move us into a more complex world in which everything is ultimately an element of one energy and/or consciousness? The idea of the brain transmitting, rather than producing consciousness is not new, and is reflected in the writings of Henri Bergson, C.S. Schiller and William James, as David Lorimer and Pim van Lommel show in their chapters. Lorimer adds to this his concept of empathic resonance, which is the capacity to enter the mind of another, and feel what another is thinking through telepathy. Thought

is powered by consciousness, and is very powerful, enabling us to create, so that we are co-creators with the Universal Mind, powered also by a dynamic ethic, determined by love.

In Advaita Vedanta, the Ultimate Reality, Brahman-Atman can only be described as Being, Consciousness and Bliss. However it is important to note that within Advaita, Ramanuja rejects the extreme monism of Sankara and argues that although Brahman underlies and contains everything there is still some difference so that worship of God is still possible. We, and the entire cosmos are God’s body, yet distinct (Radhakrishnan, 1931, p. 543ff). Nirvana, for Buddhists, is not born, uncreated not made. In the Tibetan tradition this is the Ground Luminosity. Tillich talks about God as the Ground of our Being. From the scientific perspective, it is perhaps Quantum Physics, which is probably the most helpful way to view the phenomenon. Here the boundaries between observer and observed become fuzzy, according to conditions. David Bohm sees reality as a seamless whole, the implicate enfolded order, but manifested as the explicate unfolded order: the mind may have a structure similar to the universe, and in the underlying movement we call empty space, there is actually a tremendous energy, a movement. The particular forms which appear in the mind may be analogous to the particles and getting to the ground of the mind might be felt as light (Rimpoche, 2002, pp. 352–55). Somewhere Logical positivism goes down the drain – pity Ayer is no longer around for such discussions!

When Moody's book first appeared the chaplain of a well-known public school told me he couldn't accept it as it contradicted Christian ideas of judgment. What would be the point of faith (whatever was meant by this) if you already *knew*? Where are notions of guilt and punishment and repentance? Where is the sting? Is this Being **too** NICE? Too LOVING? Ideas about resurrection of the body need a new way of thinking if consciousness survives the death of the body, especially if ultimately everything is one.

It is the subsequent transformation, among other features, such as the sense of oneness with other beings and awareness of a greater Reality than oneself, that makes the Fenwicks and Carol Zaleski and others suggest that the most fruitful way to regard these experiences as fundamentally religious, akin to other types of religious experience. The Fenwicks points out that it confirms their faith for only a few – for the majority it is a spiritual awakening, not religious in a narrow, conventional sense (Fenwick, 1997, p. 193). The fact that such a distinction between religious and spiritual is so often made in writings about NDEs and in the literature on death generally, seems to be an indication of the impoverishment of much of our religious thinking to day. People's lives are changed, not just because they believe there is life after death (a few continue with their agnosticism on the subject), but because they see their relationships with others, and the physical world, in a completely new way. John Wren-Lewis, a scientist, whose previous scepticism towards mysticism and what little he knew of the NDEs was shattered with his own experience in the Far East, found that the significant thing was the recognition of a normally unrecognised depth-dimension in consciousness itself, a dimension of intense aliveness that makes ordinary worldly existence seem like a mere play of shadows.

William James suggested that the criteria for evaluating healthy-minded religious experiences should be not where they came from, but the pragmatic test of their "fruits for life": they should display immediate luminousness... philosophical

reasonableness and moral helpfulness'. Zaleski, in citing this, says that if James were alive today, 'He would find the naturalistic theories of interest to the extent that they fill in connections, correlating visions of the other world with structures and events 'on the hither side', but he would not allow the pursuit of explanations to rob individuals of their 'right to believe in what they experience' (Zaleski, 1997, p. 144).

If NDEs teach people something about the *value* of life, the *value* of other people, of the environment, of kindness and compassion, and give them a sense of meaning and purpose in life; they are significant in the same way that James 'healthy-minded' religious experiences are. But Michael Grosso perhaps is correct when he says on the subject of validity: 'a mass of such accounts with congruent claims, must, after a critical point, begin to count as a special consensus. Is it possible that those who come closest to experiencing death know by acquaintance more about it than the rest of us do?' For Wren-Lewis, the normal human condition is eternity consciousness.

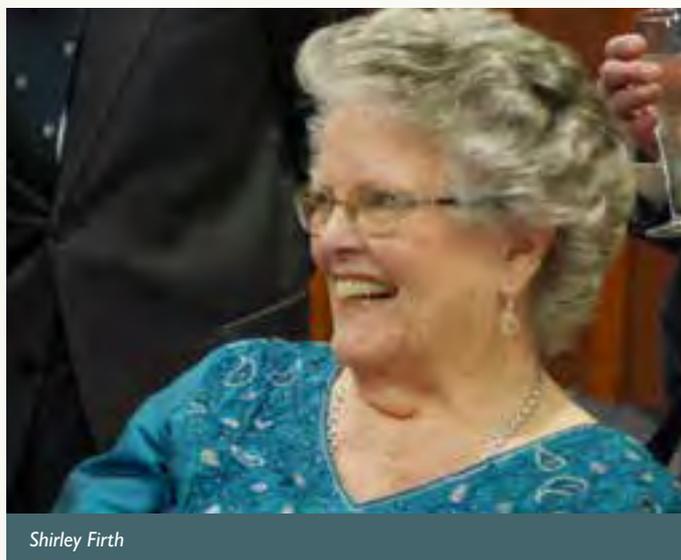
It is striking that the recent books on the NDE, by Alexander, Storm, and Moorjani, as well as Benedict's extraordinary account, all carry the essential message about Love as the very being and heart of the inner universe. Parti writes about the primary message during his experience, and our last words quoting the words of Raphael and Michael, also cited by Lorimer:

You become surrounded by a powerful entity of energy, of pure love and intelligence, and this pure love is the base reality, the underlying fabric, of everything in the universe. It is the source of all creation, the creative force of the universe.

Michael continues:

Enlightenment comes when a person realises that love is everywhere and is the only thing that matters. Yet most don't reach that realisation until they leave the Earth. The ones who come back remember the purpose and presence of love and everything.

Parti, 2016, p. 59



Shirley Firth

Faith and the Artist



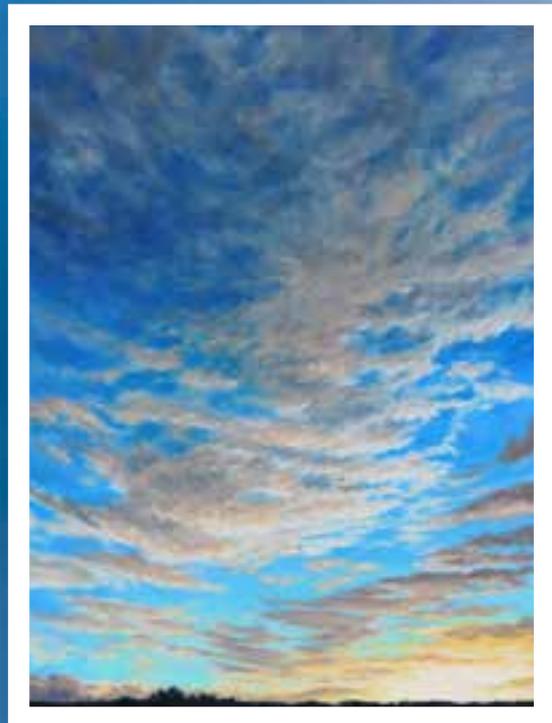
The Sky Above Us

Having lived, walked and worked in the Yorkshire Dales for over 40 years, I know and understand the landscape intimately. I look to recognise the atmospheric perspective of distance across fells and dale, and of course - overhead. I work from photographs as a starting point, but the paintings are not just copies of a frozen moment in time. I work with fluid paint, energy and passion to capture the movement and essence of the spatial relationships of colour and form to create a unique image. The finished paintings stand alone in their own presence.

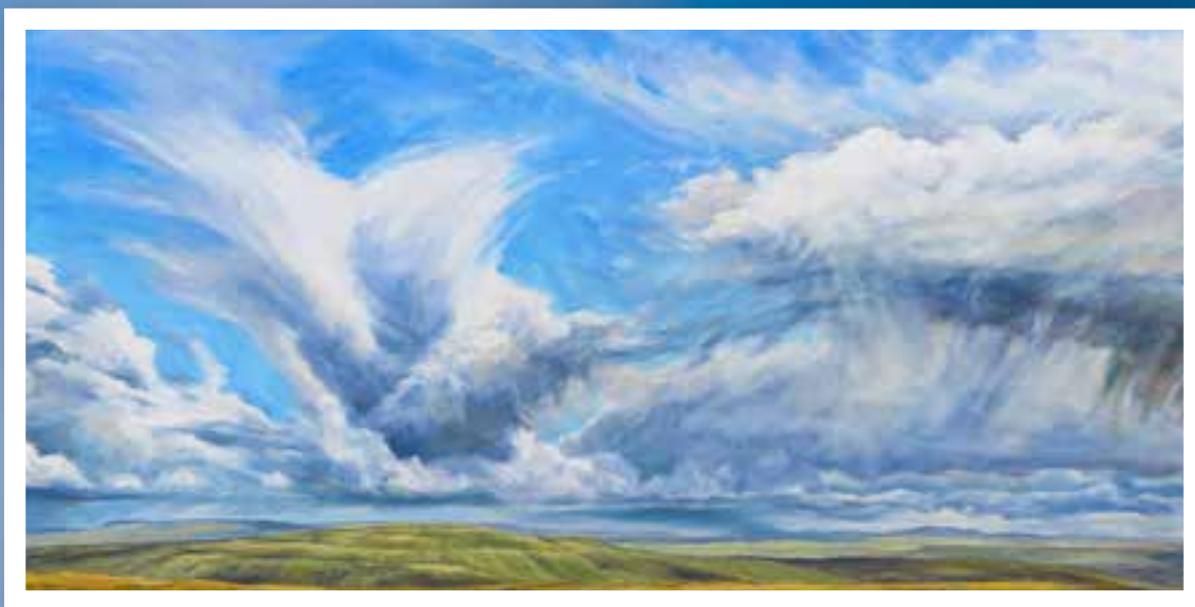
I have two different approaches to my painting. There is my more representational work which springs from my passionate love of the landscape around me, and then I take a more exploratory 'playing' with watercolour approach, which I do in an attempt to express my spiritual journey. In 2012 I published a book of paintings and writings titled *Climb up the Moor*, which highlights the importance of moorland.

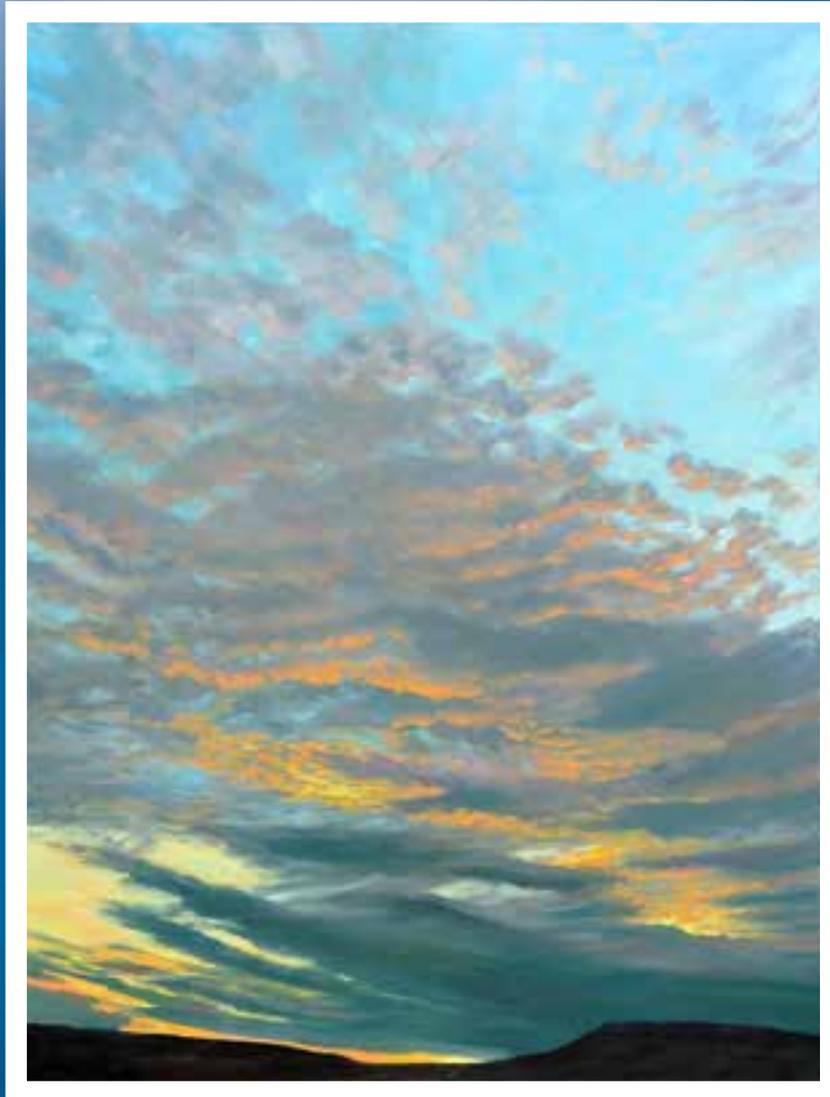
I subsequently used the paintings as a touring exhibition to draw the attention of people to climate change, and also our spiritual need for wild open spaces. After a successful three years, followed by a break, I considered that my next project may be a study of water: or that it may become more abstract, like the journaling watercolours. However, I was drawn to look up at the sky – at the time I didn't know why, but I have often thought of clouds as God's abstract painting in the skies.

I spent some time observing clouds constantly moving, and then, when the pandemic took over our lives, I noticed how quickly the skies had become plane trail free. I almost became obsessed, and I didn't know why... I just had to paint skies. I had already been invited by Tennants of Leyburn to exhibit there this October; way before Covid 19 came along but of course, there were times when I didn't know if this would ever happen because of lockdowns and restrictions.



*We all live under the same sky
and during lockdown many of
us came to value, even more,
the patch of sky above us*





When the exhibition actually became a reality, during the last two weeks of October, I realised why I had been led to do these paintings. Yes, they bring our minds to climate change, but they also worked as an uplifting and healing energy for people that I had not expected. We all live under the same sky and during lockdown many of us came to value, even more, the patch of sky above us. The interaction of the elements - air, water and fire - create amazing shapes, patterns and colours all around our floating planet. The feedback from the exhibition spoke of the openness, clarity, movement and freedom of the paintings being a panacea against the restrictions and fear of lockdown: 'exhilarating', 'mind blowing', 'liberating', 'it was a breath of fresh air', 'it gave me a sense of freedom', 'I felt as though I was

standing on top of a hill'. I feel privileged to have been able to give that sense of release to so many people just when it was needed most. We managed to bring the paintings back home just in time before the second lockdown!

Thanks to the work of people like David Attenborough and Greta Thunberg we are becoming more conscious of the impact our actions are having on the natural process. We are now recognising that extremes of weather is a reality, and these are becoming more and more challenging. Many of us are changing the way we live to try to combat the changing climate. Let us love and identify with our planet home with a passion that fires us up to act with a positive and creative energy.

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*"The most beautiful thing we can experience
is the mysterious.
It is the source of all true art and science"*

Albert Einstein (1879 – 1955)

TISSUE PAPER COLLAGE: THE ANGEL GABRIEL (GABBY) is reproduced with kind permission of the artist Judith Bromley Nicholls.

In her design the artist has sought to support campaigns of 2020: the angel is black and female; she has rainbow wings to celebrate diversity and to thank the NHS, care workers and key workers; her green dress represents the artist's passion for the planet, and her concern over climate change: the angel is heralding hope for a green renewal.