

ISSUE 28

faith

INITIATIVE

EMBRACING DIVERSITY

I am careful not to confuse excellence with perfection. Excellence, I can reach for; perfection is God's business.

Michael J. Fox
The Springs of Contemplation

MADE FROM THE ONE LIGHT
Faith and Disability

RECONCILING MALI'S FUTURE
Religious Extremism

THE EXISTENCE OF OPPOSITES
Good and Evil

WINNER:
SHAP AWARD
2011



‘Uluru, the magnificent mountain, is like a giant natural storehouse for many Dreaming stories. Every part of Uluru is explained in myths and legends... To the Yankuntatjara people, who lived, and still live, in her shade, Uluru is home and a spiritual place.’

On 19 July 1873, the surveyor William Gosse sighted the landmark and named it Ayers Rock in honour of the then Chief Secretary of South Australia, Sir Henry Ayers. Since 1993 it has been dual-named combining the traditional Aboriginal name and the English name.

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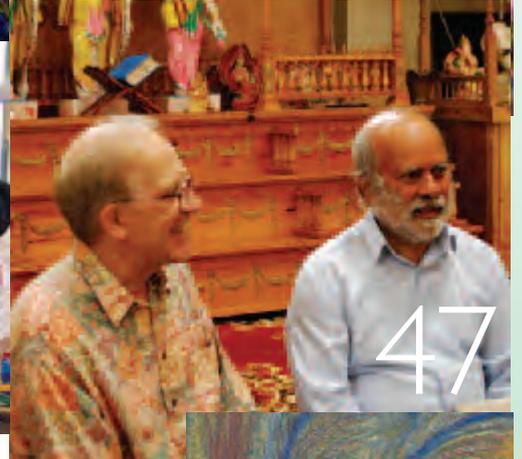
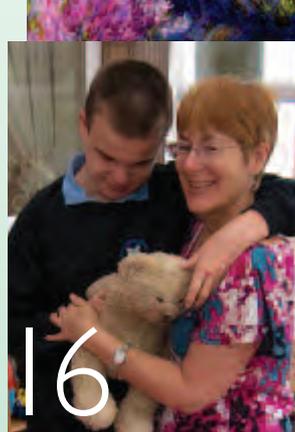
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editorial

Travelling recently in Australia I have become much more aware of the richness of Aboriginal culture, and the intriguing beauty of its creation stories known as Tjukurrpa or Dreamtime. Viewed through the short lens of human rights legislation, it is hard to conceive that a few decades ago the people and their traditions were all but obliterated from what the rest of the world recognised as Australian culture; deemed to be primitive and irrelevant to modern life – a fate suffered by indigenous people around the world. There is still much pain being experienced by members of the Aboriginal communities because of the devastating nature of their dispossession which embraced all aspects of life, their land, including their sacred sites, their families, their language and their heritage. The stifling of one people, and their cultural and religious identity, by another is an on-going phenomenon often conveyed through the pages of this magazine. In this issue we feature the story of a Jewish family fragmented by the anti-Semitic onslaught of the Nazi regime in Eastern Europe, and the bravery of a mother who fought for the survival of herself and her daughter. The experience has created a legacy of stoic resolve that has filtered down through the generations, culminating in a mindful celebration of the freedom to be who they are. We are also given an insight into the current situation in Mali by Celeste Hicks, who describes the turmoil inflicted on the spiritual lives of the people by religious extremists: jihadist groups that seek to crush the more moderate Malian way of life by imposing a radical version of Sharia Law and banning all forms of cultural entertainment and religious practices that they deem to be un-islamic. Whilst I may have a heartfelt sympathy with people suffering such oppression it is impossible for me to put myself in their shoes, to fully know the nuances of their daily lives. That is why their stories, individual and collective, need to be told, and, as a fellow member of the human race, I need to listen. And so it is with disabled people, I cannot truly know how it feels to be marginalised and even ignored and pitied for being perceived as different. It is therefore with gratitude that we feature a contribution by Kuli Kohli who, born with cerebral palsy, opens a window onto her life saying: “Sorrow or pity is not what disabled people want, what they need is encouragement, positivity and opportunities to experience life to the full...” In speaking so candidly, and passionately, from her own experience Kuli is adding her voice to those who feel dispossessed of the freedom to flourish, and is demanding, with them, and for those who cannot speak for themselves, the right to be acknowledged, valued and understood.

Heather Wells

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www.faithinitiative.co.uk

Initiative Interfaith Trust

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Trustees: Heather Wells, Lorna Douglas and Emma Winthrop.

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 Magazine

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Aim: The aim of Faith Initiative Magazine is to open windows on the beliefs and practices of world religions, in the hope that this will foster understanding and reduce 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, illustrations and responses so that the magazine reflects the religious communities it seeks to serve. Editorial guidance can be obtained from

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Issue 29 Themes:

- Religious Fundamentalism
- Sacred Heritage

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Back cover: Poem *A Swan in Winter* by Rebecca Bilkau

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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,
London ISBN 184308 973 7

The spiral logo was designed by Caroline Jariwala for Initiative Interfaith Trust



THE CALL OF THE SOUL

To help all Mankind

This world is a wonderful creation of God. There are innumerable human beings, belonging to different faiths. Actually, every faith has certain rules and regulations based on moral values, which lay down the guidelines to lead a life of purity, truthfulness, compassion and empathy. I respect all the faiths; however, I am a firm believer of Sikh faith. The teachings of Sikh Gurus have greatly influenced my life. I will explain some of these, which are relevant to the subject.

sB mih joiq joiq hY soie]

iqs dY cwnix sB mih cwnxu hoie]

'One Divine light pervades everywhere in each cell of every particle. This Divine light illumines every human being.'

And

Avil Alb nUru aupwieAw kudriq ky sB bMdy]

eyk nUr qy sBu jgu aupijAw kaun Bly ko mMdy]

'He created all mortal beings. From one light, the entire universe came into being.

So who is good and who is bad.'

Sadhu T.L. Vaswani was a great scholar. He imbibed the spiritual thoughts from various religious scriptures and concluded that

"He who worships and adores the Divine, must have love for the Divine and he who has love for God cannot live a life of complete seclusion and solitude. For Love of God and love for neighbour go hand in hand. Such a love mixes and mingles with people and attends to their needs."

Service of mankind and all creatures become Sewa when it is performed without any personal gain like money, name and fame. Utmost importance is given to Sewa in Sikh faith:

ivxu syvw iDRgu bQ pYr hor inhPl krxI]

'Without Sewa, the feet and hands are of no use.

And everything else which we do is futile.'

According to Albert Schweitzer:

"Whatever more than others you have received in health, natural gifts, working capacity, success, a beautiful childhood, harmonious family circumstances, you must not accept as being a matter of course. You must pay a price for them. You must show more than average devotion of life to life."

For doing selfless service the true servant should have the following qualities. According to Sri Guru Granth Sahib:

mwn AiBmwn mMDy so syvku nwhI]

qq smdrsI sMqbu koeI koit mMDwhI]

'One who is influenced by praise and blame is not God's servant.'



To emphasize further Guru Nanak Dev quotes:

syv kIqI sMqoKle 'OI ijn@I sco scu iDAwieAw]

En@I mMdy pYru n riKE kir suik®qu Drmu

kmwieAw] En@I dunIAw qo Vy bMDnw AMnu pwxI

QoVw KwieAw] qUM bKsIsI Aglw inq dyvih cVih

svwieAw] vifAweI vfw pwieAw]

'Those who serve are contented. They meditate on the Truest of the True. They do not immerse themselves into Sins, but do good deeds and live righteously in True spirit of Dharma. They burn away their bonds of the world, and eat simple diet of grains and water. You are the Great

Forgiver; You give more and more each day.

By His greatness, the Lord is obtained.'

The men and women who can imbibe true philosophy written in religious books and in the books written by other philosophers become very much sensitive to needs of less fortunate people. If one's religion actually enters one's soul, it must express in humanism. The person who remains in constant presence of God, knows His God resides in every human being rather than in every creature. For him God worship and God's service is Mankind's worship and Mankind's service. Such people can well imagine the feelings of blind people. They understand that the blind cannot see the faces of their loved ones, they cannot enjoy the beauty of nature, the splendor of painting, sculpture and architecture, so sensitive people become the eyes of the blind and ears of the deaf. They strive day and night to fulfill their needs. In India, such people have started schools for the blind and the deaf and some people have started rehabilitation of the adult disabled persons by giving them vocational training.

Here I want to quote an example of a pious man, the founder of my Institution, **Pingalwara**. His name was Bhagat Puran Singh. He took the miseries of the world as his own misery so he would not take rest. Aversion, humiliation and worst difficulties would not stop him from rendering service to homeless, destitute, sick, disabled, mentally ill, infirm and old people. He had all the qualities of a true servant i.e. humanity, contentment and control of five evils. He was an epitome of self-denial, self-sacrifice and self-abnegation. For him the service of mankind was spontaneous flow of spirituality i.e. love of God. Service of one disabled child assigned to Bhagat Puran Singh made him think about hundreds of such children and others. The result of this thought proved to be the origin of **Pingalwara**.

Pingalwara provides care, shelter, treatment and affection to persons suffering from physical as well as mental disabilities. To explain the plight of the blind, here I wish to explain an incident at my institute. One blind lady, Kamla, came to Pingalwara Institution with three children, she said that she was in search of her husband who was also blind. He had been teaching in some institution for the blind. He fell ill, so he left her in her parental home with their three children. However, he did not return and her parents were unable to support her and their children. Rather she was asked to leave her parental home. She could not find her husband. Now she is in Pingalwara with her three children (who have no disabilities) and studying in the Pingalwara School. A music teacher has been appointed for her and another blind resident of Pingalwara.



due to superstitions, proper medical treatment is not provided to these patients

Deaf children and women are more unfortunate. They are cut off from conversation and social life, often shut up in the prisons of their own mind. Deaf people are often shunned as it is difficult to enter into communication with them. Sometimes some people do marry them, but after a period of time they are abandoned on the roadside as destitutes. There are a number of deaf women in our Institution because they cannot tell the address of their homes. We have tried to find out about their relatives through newspapers and television but have not been successful. In Pingalwara we have a number of deaf children, and recognising their plight, Pingalwara has started a School for the Deaf: also installing BERA Machine for testing the hearing capacity of small children.

In India now, rather than the familiar extended family, we have many more nuclear families. For reasons linked to the socio-economic situation the number of psychiatric patients is increasing and it is difficult for these nuclear families to look after them as three to four persons are needed for the care of one patient. Moreover due to superstitions, proper medical treatment is not provided to these patients. Due to a lack of care and facilities such patients often leave their homes, sometimes boarding trains or buses to reach some distant place. In such cases women can be sexually abused, contracting many diseases and or becoming pregnant. They finally reach Pingalwara in a very bad condition. Men also get injured, suffer fractures or diseases due to lack of shelter, food and clothing.

Similar is the plight of children with learning difficulties. They are abandoned around religious and public places and ultimately reach Pingalwara. We have a school for special needs children. With the help of physiotherapy treatment and the use of our sensory room such children improve their mental condition. They now actively participate in Special Olympics and excel themselves in the field of sports.

Some people suffering from physical disabilities, having faith in God, take the disabilities as the 'Will of God' and have an inner power to overcome the problems faced by them. Sometimes they prove themselves to be better qualified and experienced than physically abled people. Many abled body people thank GOD for His blessings, when they see a disabled person, realizing how fortunate they are. This kind of awareness can allow people to develop compassionate and altruistic qualities helping people to carry out God's Will. For Divine Bliss, one must do service of mankind as Emerson has rightly said:

"The deepest need of our souls to feel ourselves the benefactors of mankind".

Guru Nanak says:

nwnk nwm cVHdI klw qyry Bwxy srbq dw Blw]

'The name of The God keeps one in high spirits and obeying His will one wishes the welfare of all.'

To love is to know Me,
My innermost nature,
the truth that I am.

Bhagavad Gita 18.55



Christ in the Modern World

THE VISION OF VATICAN II

Good preachers and theologians have always seen the necessity of relating the Christian message to people's experience and to their hearts and imagination; for 'Without vision the people perish' (Proverbs 29:18). One who saw this very clearly was John Henry Newman. For instance, when discussing the insufficiently considered question of how Christianity conquered the Roman Empire, he finds the solution in the success of its early preachers in conveying the image of Christ: 'It is the Image of Him who fulfils the great need of human nature, the Healer of its wounds, the Physician of the soul, this Image it is which both creates faith, and then rewards it' (*Grammar of Assent*, ch.10, sec.9).

I believe that the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) sought to convey such an image of Christ to the modern world, and that its teaching is visionary, in the sense that it appeals to the heart and the imagination and inspires hope. When he announced early in his reign that he was calling a council of the Church (that is, a meeting of all its three thousand or so bishops), Blessed



Pope John XXIII spoke of promoting 'the enlightenment, edification, and joy of the entire Christian people' (I think that we should particularly emphasize joy here), and shortly afterwards expressed his desire for a 'new Pentecost' for the Church. And in his opening speech in 1962 John said that the Council desired to 'show herself to be the loving mother of all, benign, patient, full of mercy and goodness toward the brethren who are separated from her.'

Of course, for people who lived through those times memories of the Council are inextricably linked to memories of Pope John himself and of the effect he had on the world. Right from his election as pope in October 1958 he presented a new image of the papacy by projecting his own kindness, holiness, joy, and openness to all people. In her book *Men in Dark Times* (1968) Hannah Arendt (a German-Jewish philosopher and refugee from Nazism, who had no particular religious beliefs) presents a moving sketch of John, and suggests the question of how it could be that in the middle of the twentieth century, a century of horrific evil, a saint came to occupy the throne of St Peter.

But what was the vision of the Council? Turning to its documents (which number over 500 pages!), I think that there is a unity to be found. We can summarize the message of the main documents as follows:

- I. God has revealed Himself to the world in the person, work, and teaching of Jesus Christ. Thus Christianity is not in the first instance a religion of the book or of personal enlightenment, but a movement of his loving disciples.

2. The Church is that movement, and its function is to follow Christ by showing him forth to the world, and to preach and practise his teaching. If he is truly manifest to people, this is the first answer to unbelief.
3. The liturgy, which is the prayer of the Church, should also show Christ, and all Catholics should understand it and participate in it. Hence the Mass in particular may need reform.
4. Likewise Christ is manifested in Scripture (the 'book of the Church'). Hence its study should be at the heart of preaching and theology, and also inspire and nourish the prayers of all.
5. The Church is not a fortress, or an ark onto which a lucky few clamber, but it is the pilgrim 'People of God' journeying in the world and seeking His Kingdom, and a 'sacrament of salvation' (that is, a sign and an instrument of it).
6. Within the Church there are different roles (priests, bishops, and so on), but they are all of *service*. Moreover, *all* its members have priestly, prophetic, and kingly (i.e. working for the coming of the Kingdom) roles; and all are called to holiness.
7. The Council stresses the importance of the local church, centred round its bishop; hence it allows for some decentralizing, permitting local customs and variations, e.g. in the liturgy (though not in essential doctrines).
8. The Church seeks the union of all Christians, a union partly realized already in their common baptism.
9. The Church recognizes what is good and true in all religions.
10. The Church seeks to read the signs of the times, and to bring its message to bear on the world's problems. It is a leaven in the world. But this requires it to dialogue with the world and to learn from it.

This is my attempt to give a conspectus of the main teaching of the Council. But even if I have got it right, it obviously raises a huge number of questions. Is it visionary? Those who have been brought up from the start in post-Vatican II Catholicism might say it is just basic Christianity, though perhaps not yet fully realized in practice. Others might ask whether it is feasible, or might not warm to it at all. They might think that it is too redolent of 1960s optimism, or even dismiss it as bourgeois European mid-20th century Christian Humanism.

I think that I can only go on at this point by being more specific; and I will do so by concentrating on particular areas, especially the Council's teaching about the person of Jesus Christ and the light this sheds on the question of how the Church should relate to the world. But first I think that I should make some comments about the style of the documents.

Pope John said that the Council would not issue in any condemnations (as previous Councils had done): it was to be a pastoral Council. Earlier Councils often used abstract and impersonal language, sometimes bringing in technical philosophical or theological terms. Because they usually met at times when the Church seemed to be threatened by heresies,

they sought to win arguments and to issue condemnations. But Vatican II did not seek to refute enemies, but to find common ground and to hold up ideals. As John O'Malley says in his book *What Happened at Vatican II* (2008), 'The final documents are more intent on winning assent to truths and values and on raising appreciation for them' (p.306).

For example, right at the beginning of one of the most important documents, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (also known by its Latin title, *Gaudium et spes*), we read

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.

The first part of this long document seeks to present what might be called a philosophy of Christian humanism, with chapters on the dignity of the human person, the community of mankind, and human activity in the world, all leading to a meditation on the role of the Church in the modern world. Then

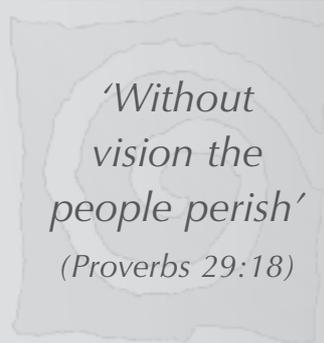
there follows in Part 2 further chapters on particular issues like marriage and the family, economic development, war and peace, and politics, in which the principles discussed in the first part are applied to practical problems. Importantly, each of the chapters in Part 1 ends with an appeal to the significance of Jesus Christ. Thus ch.1 'The Dignity of the Human Person' includes a discussion on atheism, and ends with a statement that God's grace may work in the

hearts of all people of good will, and that Christ died for all, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit somehow offers everyone the possibility of being associated with the Easter mystery (sec.22). Similarly, ch.3 'Man's Activity throughout the World', after distinguishing between earthly progress and the growth of Christ's Kingdom, nevertheless says that all the values of human dignity, brotherhood and freedom, and indeed all the good fruits of our nature and enterprise, will be found 'but freed of stain, burnished and transfigured', when Christ hands on to the Father 'a kingdom eternal and universal.' This theme, of Christians anticipating now the end of things, is found right at the end of Part 2, where we read

The Lord is the goal of human history, the focal point of the longings of history and of civilization, the centre of the human race, the joy of every heart, and the answer to all its longings.

Hence Christians journey, united and enlivened by the Holy Spirit, toward the consummation of all things (sec.45).

This is heady stuff! Yet if we ignore it or dismiss it as too flowery, we may suffer what the poet Paul Claudel called 'the tragedy of a starved imagination'. In practical terms, people who disregard the heart and the imagination may miss a lot, and so end up being self-limiters.



Something More

Spirituality has become something of a vogue word but what does it mean? My Oxford dictionary only lists the word as a derivative of 'spirit', which comes from the Latin *spiritus* meaning 'wind' or 'breath'.

Other definitions given on the internet denote:

1. Devotion to metaphysical matters, as opposed to worldly things.
2. Activities which renew, lift up, comfort, heal and inspire both ourselves and those with whom we interact.
3. Religion minus the dogma and minus the need to control others.
4. Our beliefs about what ultimately exists, who we fundamentally are, and our place in the greater scheme of things".

It is particularly significant however, that in recent years the term has been taken up by members of the medical profession, who feel that 'spirituality' is the best word they can find to recognise that "something more" in the human psyche.

In 1999 members of the Royal College of Psychiatrists founded a Special Interest Group (www.rcpsych.ac.uk/spirit) "to provide a forum for psychiatrists to explore the influence of the major religions, which shape the cultural values of psychiatrist and patient alike". This coalition of like-minded doctors (which now has nearly 3,000 members) holds that spirituality is of very great importance and requires due consideration by both doctor and patient.

The spiritual aspirations of persons not identifying with any one particular faith are held to be of no less importance by members of this group, as well as the viewpoint of those who hold that spirituality is independent of religion.

In a survey some years ago, 92 per cent of the psychiatrists taking part agreed that religion and mental illness were connected and that religious issues should be addressed in treatment. However, only 48 per cent said they often or always asked patients about their religious beliefs. A more recent study of 316 psychiatrists found that 58 per cent of the sample reported a religious affiliation. There is a puzzling, apparent discrepancy between psychiatrists holding that there is an association between religion and mental illness, yet not inquiring into it.

The Special Interest Group is concerned with acknowledging the spiritual history that is expressed at every mental-health consultation and (where appropriate) to take spiritual values and beliefs into account in planning treatment and management.



For further reading on the subject I would suggest you see *Spirituality and Psychiatry (2009)*, edited by C. Cook, A. Powell and A. Sims (RCPsych Publications).

Other interesting material can be found on the website: www.religioustolerance.org

Philip Barron is a freelance journalist and a member of the Society of Friends (Quakers). This article was first published in part in the Quaker magazine 'The Friend' 12.7.12

The Rag Doll

To Fellow Rag Dolls Living With Cerebral Palsy

Silk, linen, velvet, cotton, wool;
 Made from all sorts; textures, fabrics,
 Buttons, ribbons, hips made from zips,
 Whoops-a-daisy and falling to bits.

Her heart is made of golden fluff,
 Her smile is stitched shining bright,
 Now and again she's not there, quite,
 Her spirit shines like ultra violet light.

Droops, dangles her limbs and neck,
 Durable to all types of wear and tear,
 Broken, damaged here and there,
 People stare; she just does not care.

Battling, juggling impossibilities,
 Shining diamond sequined eyes,
 Always ready to give you a surprise,
 Like a cartoon, she'll always survive.

Has trouble with her physical being,
 Words tangled in the laces of her head,
 Still figuring out what you have just said,
 Jerking, jolting to the day she's dead!

Editor's note: The poem 'The Rag Doll' was written by Kuli for this magazine and we are delighted to report that it has been well received in public performances by her Reader in her home city of Wolverhampton.



Made from

Sikhs believe that the soul is immortal and the body is temporary – it doesn't matter what one looks like physically or what one's status is; we are all equal. A quote from the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji signifies this and asks us to recognise this truth:

*“jaanhu jot na poochhahu jaatee aagai jaat na hay.
|| 1 || rahaa-o.”*

“Recognise the Lord's Light within all, and do not consider social class or status; there are no classes or castes in the world hereafter.
|| 1 || Pause ||”

(Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, 349).

A further reference to the teachings of saint Kabir Sahib:

*“aval alah noor upaa-i-aa kudrat kay sabh banday.”
ayk noor tay sabh jag upji-aa ka-un bhalay ko
manday. || 1 || .”*

“First, Allah created the Light; then, by His Creative Power, He made all mortal beings. From the One Light, the entire universe welled up. So who is good, and who is bad? || 1 ||”

(Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, 1349).

In an ideal world these views would wipe out discrimination at all levels including disability. However the reality is harsh.

The Asian community (including Sikhs) regards disability with abhorrence. It continually refers to it as a punishment for the previous life because of karma; a life no one can remember. This results in people with disabilities being ignored, used and abused. And they struggle to carry out activities able-bodied people do without hesitation, for example: going out, driving and using public transport, going to university, having relationships, finding a life partner and getting married, owning a home, cooking and carrying out daily chores, having children, having hobbies and interests, getting a job etc. Disabled people

within the Asian community are regarded as less likely to achieve these life skills and objectives due to the lack of encouragement, support and awareness.

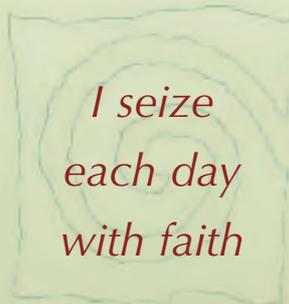
The community continues to put disabled people down or feel sorry for them. Sorrow or pity is not what disabled people need. What they need is encouragement, positivity and opportunities to be able to experience life to the full. The sacred words of the

Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji feed the soul to purify our minds, so that we are able to give humanity our best service, as servants. Sikhism has three main objectives: to keep God in mind at all times through meditation and prayer; to provide a free and humble service (sewa) to all; to make an honest living through offering a labour of love while sharing with others and giving donations to those who are less fortunate. This philosophy only works if we are willing to learn and apply the

knowledge to our lifestyles. Just chanting the name of God will not make any difference. People with disabilities need to be valued, acknowledged, loved and understood.

Being a 42-year-old Sikh Asian woman born with mild cerebral palsy is extremely daunting, especially living in an Asian community. I recall my mother saying, “When you were born in India with no medical support, you were regarded as a double negative: a girl and disabled. People said throw “it” in the river, who'll marry her? She'll be a burden on you for the rest of your life.” Life changed when I migrated to England with my parents at the age of two. I went to a “Special School” where I was with other children with disabilities. I gained a lot from that school, because they offered opportunities I would not have otherwise had in an ordinary Asian household or school.

I was very timid and shy when I was with people, particularly when visiting friends and relatives as well as community celebrations such as weddings and parties. Visiting the Gurdwara was an ordeal. I hated it because people just used to stare at me, making me feel unimportant, alienated and an invalid. Some people still stare at me now. I was referred to as “handicapped”



the one Light

- a word I despised. Other children teased me saying, "Why do you walk like that and talk like that?". I never answered their questions because I didn't know myself. My parents didn't think it was important because when I told them my apprehensions they said it was my fault and I shouldn't let it worry me. My younger brothers and sister were able-bodied and never understood how I felt. They too would make fun of me and gang up on me. This led to continual depression and anxiety.

I went to mainstream school at the age of thirteen. This was quite a shock as I was on my own in a secondary school full of able-bodied children. I loved this and wanted to mingle with my classmates. I was very mischievous and wanted to explore my new world. I tried to do everything I could and wanted to do the things the other children were doing. Many children started to behave as if I had no disability at all, and the awareness of disability at the school grew as they increased the intake of children with disabilities.

Outside of school, I tried to do all things that were expected of an Asian girl but found it very difficult and distressing when I realised I could not. I had a passion for writing prose and poetry. I wrote for pleasure as well as relief. The things I could not express via speech, I wrote down on paper. I gained some qualifications but was very disappointed that I was not able to attend university; my parents believed I would not be able to manage alone. Then an opportunity came to work for Wolverhampton City Council, where I work to this day.

I experienced an awful time while searching for a life partner. My parents and I made mistake after mistake. I suffered dreadful heartbreaks and heartache. Nevertheless, I married a lovely man my parents had found for me. Now I have a home, a husband, three beautiful children and lovely people in my life. I am a published poet/writer and I have written a novel about living with disability, which I am hoping to get published.

My struggle through life continues, as I am expected to

provide as a mother, a wife, a daughter-in-law and a full time worker who should give to her family and job her best on a daily basis. It is an ordeal as I am not like able-bodied mothers and I cannot do many things that are expected of me like making chapattis, cooking full meals, shopping and carrying out daily chores. I cannot plait or tie up my children's hair. There are many tasks I wish I could accomplish; this lack of independence causes frustration and anger. However, I do try. I seize each day with faith and a positive attitude and it feels effortless because help always comes to me - i.e. I have a good husband and in-laws who are always willing to help. I am thankful for the determination and encouragement God has put in me to fulfil my dreams and goals.

I know that some people are not that lucky. I have many friends with different disabilities, who are struggling through each day. Asian families tend to ignore their disabled children's desires and think that they do not have feelings

like able-bodied people do. I am proud of the western world where most people with disabilities are taken seriously - for example the Paralympics. How many Asian/Sikh people were encouraged to take part?

My conclusion is that disability is the problem of the whole of society. Our community doesn't encourage people with disabilities enough - their personal issues and problems are not taken seriously and are kept hidden. We all have disabilities to an extent; the visible disabilities continue to be a problem. Ignorance of disability is in our roots and this will take many generations to grow out. It all stems from a lack of education, understanding and awareness. I believe that being a good Sikh means to be a devoted learner, sharer and applier of knowledge. The words of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji have given me strength and confidence to make me love myself no matter what people think. The journey is not easy but if we all work together, we can build a bridge of encouragement and acceptance - this will provide a better life for everyone.

I recall my mother saying, "When you were born in India with no medical support, you were regarded as a double negative: a girl and disabled."

BEYOND

the visible

God looks beyond the outward form and seeming inadequacy at the core of each individual. Allah, the Islamic name for God is the Creator of an all-inclusive humanity of which disabled people are in essence an equal part. From the dawn of Islam (AD 610-632), there is evidence of disability awareness and anti-discriminatory practice among Muslims.

By reflecting on the disposition of the Creator of the universe it becomes clear that our obligation to Him includes consideration to those who are disabled.

Allah states in *The Qur'an* that He alone has the power to preside over our life. Decision and judgment over matters belong to Him. He sanctions certain privileges to some while not to others. He will recompense with eternal happiness in the after-life where He bargains the essential elements that make life happy, and replaces happiness with apparent misfortune. Disability therefore is not a defect but part of Divine Wisdom, the purpose of which may be incomprehensible to us as Divine dimension is different from human dimension. Our obligation as creature is to be accountable to the Creator; to live our life in total submission to His Will and worship Him; and serve His creation for His pleasure.

We can serve by acting with conscience, care, integrity and responsibility towards creation; regard our earthly existence transient and prepare for the after-life with our spiritual potency and good deeds to the best of our ability and individual circumstances. Milton's sentiment expressed in '*Who best bear His mild yoke, they serve Him best*' echoes Islamic philosophy of 'sabr'/patience and submission to Allah's Will.

The Qur'an alludes to people with incapacity. One of the most revered prophets for Muslims is Moses / Prophet Musa (*pbuh*). He had a speech impediment. Narratives that relate to Moses are awe-inspiring and substantiate that Allah chooses him for His mission; grants his prayer; and reiterates His favour to him. The following verse, although it recounts a particular piece of Islamic history is a reminder not to be neglectful or dismissive of people based on their outward appearance or circumstance in life. **"He frowned and turned away, when the blind man came to him. For all you know, he might have grown in spirit or, taken note of something useful to him..."** (80:1-8). Here the blind truth-seeker was worthy of attention just as any

other, and had the spiritual potential to receive guidance.

In the matter of religious obligations laid out by Islam, certain exemptions apply in the context of reflective, mentally challenging and physically demanding duties. Islam absolves people with mental health problems from mandatory religious duties because religious duties apply only to those who can understand the meaning of their act. Hajj or the Pilgrimage to Makkah (Mecca) is one of the five pillars of Islam and mandatory only for those who are financially able to do so, able-bodied and of sound mind. If a disabled person has the financial means and is eager to perform the Hajj there are special facilities now to adapt to their particular needs. Hajj encapsulates 'bodily' worship more than any other form of worship because it is physically a demanding and tough journey to undertake even for able-bodied young people. Today it is possible for wheelchair users to perform Hajj but before the introduction of technology to assist pilgrims, Ethiopian ground stewards who are generally very tall and of strong physique used to carry elderly pilgrims on wooden platforms rested on their shoulders to enable them to observe certain rituals of pilgrimage.

There is no barrier for an Islamic state to call those with impairment to high office and perhaps the best modern example of this is in the elitist society of Saudi Arabia.

Abdul-'Azīz ibn Bāz, a man who, having battled with eye illness from the age of sixteen, lost his sight at the age of forty. However, he served in several important positions within society at different times. These included an educator, District Judge, President of important Assemblies and Councils, Chancellor of the Islamic University of Madinah, Chairman with Ministerial rank at the Department of Scientific Research and as the Head of the Council of Senior Scholars. He received the King Faisal International Prize in 1981 for his service to Islam and finally served, with high honour, as the Grand Mufti² from 1992 until his death in 1999.

Looking back over early Islamic history we find evidence that The Prophet Muhammad (*pbuh*) did not discriminate against those perceived to be disabled. Masjid al-Quba or the Quba Mosque is the very first Mosque in the history of Islam, built on the outskirts of the city of Madinah. The Azan (Adhan) is the Islamic call to ritual prayer (called out from Mosques) and a 'Muezzin' is the caller of the Azan. The very first 'Muezzin' of

people tend to contrast disability with ability in the same way they would contrast imperfection with perfection

Islam was Hazrat Bilal, a black slave originally from Abyssinia / modern day Ethiopia who had speech impediment. The Prophet Muhammad (*pbuh*) appointed Hazrat Bilal the first Muezzin of Quba Mosque for his melodious, clear and commanding voice. Bilal also had the honour of being one of The Prophet's notable companions and announcer of other important messages and instructions to the public. The fact that he had a speech impediment did not go against him.³ The Noble Prophet also tasked a blind man called Ibn Makhtum to lead⁴ the congregational prayers in his absence from Madinah.

Although there may appear to be an increasing acceptance of disability these days generally, people tend to contrast disability with ability in the same way they would contrast imperfection with perfection. In Islam, the concepts of perfection and imperfection relates to good and evil, righteous and sinful, piety and impiety respectively. Piety in the Islamic sense is a loaded concept that combines God consciousness; devotion to obligatory ritual worship; leading a life of purity and goodness; and submission to the Will of God with patience and humility. Therefore, imperfection relates to impiety and moral aberration, not to physical capability and condition or mental inadequacy. According to *The Qur'an*, those who refuse to see the obvious or reject God and HIS stated path of righteousness are the ones afflicted with spiritual blindness, deafness and dumbness that are intrinsic rather than physical. Their senses become impervious to Truth as they are furthest from Divine Grace. Translator of *The Qur'an*, M. Yusuf Ali explains that

according to our respective dispositions either we allow our faculties to receive knowledge and marvel at God's creation or deliberately deaden our faculties through a perverse intention to deny it.

"Those who reject Our signs are deaf, dumb and in total darkness..." (6:39); "God has sealed their hearts and their ears, and their eyes are covered. They will have great torment." (2:7) "... you cannot make the deaf hear your call when they turn their backs and leave. You cannot lead the blind out of their error. The only ones you can make hear you are those who believe in Our revelations and devote themselves." (30:52-53)

The Qur'an commands justice⁵ and compassion between people and giving others from own sustenance; spurns arrogance and conceit and prohibits sarcasm and belittling of others.⁶ In verse 4:36 partially quoted here: **"Be good to ... the needy..."** Allah commands social justice and charitable acts by listing all segments of the society from family members to neighbours and strangers. 'The needy' refers to a broad category of financially deprived and socially disadvantaged people in our midst.

That disabled people should enjoy equal human rights and have immunity from negative, derisive and less significant treatment and benefit from welfare activities of philanthropists and benefactors are a given. With Islamic States rest an obligation to ensure that every citizen whether Muslim or non-Muslim and of whatever physical or mental ability receive social, economic, medical and political protection.



Pupils participating in a cultural event hosted by the Society for the Welfare of the Intellectually Disabled. Photograph courtesy of Mrs Sajida Humayun Kabir, First Vice President, National Executive Committee, SWID, Bangladesh.

Qur'anic quotations used: *The Qur'an*, Translated by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, Oxford University Press.

¹ From John Milton's sonnet "On His Blindness" Last sentence reads: 'They also serve who only stand and wait'.

² Mufti is an Islamic scholar who can interpret Islamic law and Islamic jurisprudence.

³ Hazrat Abu Bakr, the Prophet's friend and the 1st Caliph of Islam had the means to buy Bilal from his tyrant owner. He bought Bilal and then made him a free man. It is worth mentioning that The Qur'an abolished slavery.

⁴ An 'Imam' leads a congregational prayer.

⁵ "Say: My Lord commands righteousness." (7:29);

⁶ "Believers, no one group of men should jeer at another, who may after all be better than them; no one group of women should jeer at another, who may after all be better than them; do not speak ill of one another; do not use offensive nicknames for one another. How bad it is to be called a mischief maker." (49:11)

Abiding love

Society has been challenged to recognise the social, cultural and civic rights of people with disabilities as equal members of society, and to progressively remove barriers to the exercising of these rights. This has been the result of campaigning action by pressure groups and individuals, as well as growing social awareness of the need for equality of opportunity for all. *Valuing Difference*¹, reminded us that God loves us as we are and that includes those who live with disabilities – saying it is up to us to put this message of inclusion into practical action so that the contribution of each member is respected and nurtured.

This is not something new. When Jesus said, “love your neighbour as yourself” Matthew 22:40), he was quoting the Torah: Leviticus 19:18. The same point is repeated in Leviticus 19:4: “love [the stranger] as yourself”. In the Judeo-Christian culture, this became known as the Golden Rule. The Talmud tells a story of Rabbi Hillel, who lived around the time of Jesus. A pagan came to him saying that he would convert to Judaism if Hillel could teach him the whole of the Torah in the time he could stand on one foot. Rabbi Hill replied, “What is hateful to yourself do not do to another. This is the whole Torah, go and study it; the rest is commentary” (Talmud Shabbat 31a).

This concept, this belief, that God loves us and that we should love others as we love ourselves is a theme that permeates world religions. The big question – always – is how do we love? In what ways am I/can I be loving? Is it just a question of not doing something to someone else that we don’t want done to us? And, how do we know what love is? In the words of a father of a severely handicapped child, “I never knew what love was until I was loved by someone who could do nothing for me but love me”.

Society has made a lot of progress in recent years in recognising the ability of people with disabilities to love. There is a greater respect for the rights to inclusion of people with disabilities. These rights include their access to faith and worship settings and communities – and a shift in attitude and understanding is taking place. There is a greater awareness of the importance of access and inclusion of all.

I have spent the last year or so writing a resource for those engaged in faith formation for people with learning disabilities². The resource aims to help people with learning disabilities reach their fullest capacities as human beings by learning more about themselves and celebrating their lives. These are qualities which have become increasingly recognised as central and more extensively accepted as normative in recent times - a most welcome and positive development. Previously, an exclusive approach to people with disabilities resulted in questions and deliberations about their suitability to participate in their faith. Much of the argument to exclude disabled people related to their incapacity to know or think as it was perceived able people could.

But one of the wonderful discoveries that has emerged from a greater inclusion and diversity is our recognition of the wide variety of ways there are to know - particularly in the context of faith which demands the fine tuning of all our faculties, not just our reason. My hunch, which I share with many others, is that the faith-knowledge of disabled people is often stronger and more profound with its few words or concepts than its articulated and reasoned alternatives.

One of the most vital ingredients to good work with people with learning disabilities is ensuring integration into our faith communities. They often have less opportunity to mix with



Teresa and David Tunnell

*“the faith - knowledge
of disabled people is often
stronger and more profound”*



other, non-disabled people locally than their peers. Children with learning disabilities may attend a special school which might not be local and they may not know many other children of their age. Adults who have learning disabilities may be living away from home. Their caring staff are not necessarily of the same faith and are often curtailed in taking them to worship services through lack of numbers.

Stable, long-standing friendships help us to learn trust, love for others and enjoyment of creation and life given by God. Friends we choose to be with, to share with and who choose to be with us help us to experience the presence of God in our midst. A faith community is one way of enabling people with and without learning disabilities to share friendships. If we don't have companions in our faith communities and have relationships with them, it is be much harder to develop any sort of relationship with God. This companionship with other people who are of the same faith is not only about enabling people to go out and to be present at events. It is much more significant than that - it is about friendship.

Most people have 'friendships of choice' or 'friends'. If things go wrong, our friends are sympathetic, concerned, and interested. They will listen, help out, and seek help from others. If things are going well, they will be interested, pleased and will share the good experience – and they do this for personal reasons, not because they are paid to do so. A 'circle of support' for a person with learning difficulties is what happens when their friends get together to co-ordinate their efforts to help. The people in the circle do the things that come naturally to true

friends for the person at the centre of the circle. They listen – not in the way that people do when consulting, but in the way that friends do. They solve problems by thinking together, bouncing ideas around, checking things out, and by going back to the drawing board over and over again. They pull in favours, put themselves out, and use their contacts. Sometimes they act together, and sometimes each person works alone. They celebrate success with us, and they commiserate when we fail.

When people of the same faith form this circle of friends, they can be enormously influential when it comes to faith formation. The process of selecting and using resources and activities is a very important part of faith formation; and a group of friends will have insights to what resources they might use most effectively. If the person at the centre of the circle cannot respond well to speaking and listening – or to pictures and storytelling unsupported by the use of other media – it is imperative to find materials and items that will gain their attention and interest. Once motivation is achieved and that person is engaged, relaxed and happy, it becomes more possible to introduce a theme and mediate a message related to the aim of a formation session.

A teacher told me about a 9-year old boy called Tom, who is on the autistic spectrum. The teacher was preparing Tom and his brother for their First Holy Communion - and she was working with them in their home. When she went to meet Tom for the first time, she arrived before Tom came back from school. He normally goes to the computer immediately when he returns home; but on this occasion, his mother introduced him to the catechist first. He kicked and screamed and threw himself about and the mother had to lie on the floor and wrap her legs around him to calm him down. He was unable to hear anything the teacher was there to say because his normal routine had been disrupted. When the teacher returned to their house for the next session she worked with his brother first while Tom went to the computer upstairs; and, after a short time, he came down of his own accord to find out what the catechist and his brother were doing. In order to be effective, we have to inhabit the world of the person with learning disabilities. We have to allow them to teach us about their world – and our materials need to be tailored to them.

The way we can do this is to make a collection of items and materials which, in relation to the range of people in your group, have the potential to:

- interest, motivate and engage the person with autism and/or severe and complex learning disabilities
- arouse pleasure, joy, security and calm for the person
- elicit surprise, curiosity and wonder in the person
- provide opportunities to relax and still the more frenetic, hyperactive people
- help to gradually expand the range of materials the person is willing and able to give their attention to
- provide opportunities for the person to discover and reveal likes and dislikes, preferences and intolerances and
- provide opportunities for structuring peer-awareness, interpersonal tolerance and turn-taking activities

In addition, every item and material you choose should have the potential to form a link or bridge to exploring a theme, or mediating a message, relating to the stated aims and areas of learning you have identified. Your own resourcing skills and style will evolve alongside your knowledge and experience of the distinctive needs and behaviours of a wide range of students with autism and complex learning disabilities.

The heart of the message we give in faith formation is “God is love”. Christians will quote the New Testament: “God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1 John 4:16). Jews will quote the Old Testament, which speaks about God having an *almost unbelievable love* for people. The Hebrew word “habab” is used in Deuteronomy 33:3 in relation to God’s attitude to His people: “Yes, *He loves the people...*” William Wilson says “habab” means to *cherish with tender love, to hide in the bosom, to love fervently, and so to protect*³. Continuing, he asks, “Do you believe God loves you with a tender love, wishes to hold you closely, loves you fervently and will protect you despite the troubles you experience in life?”

A volunteer who was working one summer with children with disabilities under quite stressful situations tells this story: “There was one teenage girl with Down’s syndrome who would always come to cuddle me when I felt completely exhausted. To be honest, I thought she was the last thing I needed and I was irritated by what I understood as her constant demand for attention. However, after one very difficult morning, whilst I was receiving yet another hug from this girl, I suddenly realized that she was ministering to me. After I had given everything to others she came along, as regular as clockwork, and filled me back up with God’s love and comfort. After that I thanked God for her presence every day.”⁴ Here was a heart that knows how to love.

I invite you to think again about the father of a severely handicapped child I mentioned at the beginning of this article, who said, “I never knew what love was until I was loved by someone who could do nothing for me but love me”. People who work with people with learning disabilities have many stories like these to tell. This work, indeed, is an opportunity to walk on holy ground.

Photographs by kind permission of Teresa Tunnell who writes:

It is so true that people with learning and social disabilities need to be fully included as each one has their own gifts to bring to the community no matter how disabled they are.

Diana Klein is a pastoral theologian, a writer and editor. Her book “Symbols of Faith” will be published shortly.

¹ *Valuing Difference*, The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, 1998 (<http://www.cbcew.org.uk/document.doc?id=70>)

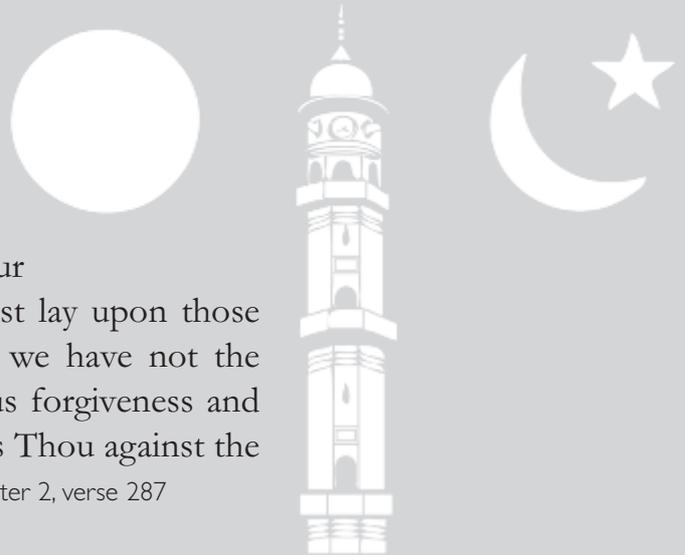
² *Symbols of Faith*, Diana Klein, to be published in 2013

³ William Wilson, *New Wilson’s Old Testament Word Studies*, Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, MI, 1987, p 260

⁴ *Opening the doors, Ministry with people with learning disabilities and people on the autistic spectrum*, Guidelines of the Church of England, 2009.

One COMMUNITY

“Allah burdens not any soul beyond its capacity. It shall have the reward it earns, and it shall get the punishment it incurs. Our Lord, do not punish us, if we forget or fall into error; and our Lord, lay not on us a responsibility as Thou didst lay upon those before us. Our Lord, burden us not with what we have not the strength to bear; and efface our sins, and grant us forgiveness and have mercy on us; Thou art our Master; so help us Thou against the disbelieving people.” - Holy Qur’an, Suhrah Al Baqarah, chapter 2, verse 287



The most important central unit in any society is the home and the family. However, due to modern day pressures and lifestyles, many families today feel that their lives can be curtailed or burdened with the responsibility of having to look after a family member that is disabled, particularly if the family and the individual do not receive practical and emotional support.

Islam teaches that any disability that limits a person’s movements, senses, or activities, whether a physical or mental condition, should be met by kindness:

“And worship Allah and associate naught with Him, and show kindness to parents, and to kindred, and orphans, and the needy, and to the neighbour that is a kinsman and the neighbour that is a stranger, and the companion by your side, and the wayfarer, and those whom your right hands possess.” - Suhrah Al Nisa, chapter 4, Verse 37.

From this verse we can recognize that a Muslim should make his or her kindness so comprehensive as to include in its scope the whole of mankind, including those, both far and near, abled, and disabled.

Hadrat Abu Hurairah (May peace of Allah be upon him) relates that the Holy Prophet said:

He who removes from a believer his distress in this world will have his distress of the Day of Judgment removed by Allah. He who eases the hardship of another, will have ease bestowed upon him by Allah in this world and the next. Allah goes on helping a servant so long as he goes on helping his brother.

Hadhrat Nusrat Jehan Begum (May peace of Allah be upon her) was the wife of Hadhrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (May peace of Allah be upon him): her name, Nusrat Jehan, meant ‘Helper of the World’. Hadhrat Amman Jan’s kindness was not limited to the orphans she welcomed into her home. She would also routinely provide a dinner for them on a weekly basis, personally helping to cook the meal by making fresh “rotis”. Her granddaughter Sahibzadi Amatul Mateen recollects that the guests of these dinners included disabled children. Hadhrat Amman Jan (May peace of Allah be upon her) would lay out a large tablecloth for them on the floor, (all her children routinely ate like this at home). It is touching to learn that the smallest, most frail children would be served first.

The right to life is a basic human right, as is the right to live that life without being treated in an inhumane or degrading way: disabled people possess the same right - to be educated, to be liberated and to have freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

All kinds of rights, as prescribed by Islam, derive their significance from the moral and spiritual values of Islam in which they are firmly embedded, and on which they are founded. Disabled people are not exempt from these values - they are for the whole of mankind. These values are, in turn, based on the concept of the unity of God. No other view of rights has ever been able to provide such secure foundations for them.

And know that this community of yours is one community, and I am your Lord. So take Me as your Protector. - Suhrah Al Mu'minin, chapter 23, verse 53.



*“I thank God for my handicaps,
for through them I have found
myself, my work and my God.”*

Helen Keller

Helen Keller (1880 - 1968)

Helen Keller was born in Alabama USA. When she was 19 months old she became ill possibly with scarlet fever or meningitis and was left deaf and blind. Helen was the first person that was deaf and blind to gain a Bachelor of Arts Degree and she went on to become a successful world author and speaker, often speaking out about matters of inequality in particular the treatment of people with disabilities.

Interfaith Encounter Association

Mission Statement:

The Interfaith Encounter Association is dedicated to promoting peace in the Middle East through interfaith dialogue and cross-cultural study. We believe that, rather than being a cause of the problem, religion can and should be a source of the solution for conflicts that exist in the region and beyond.

A report on two encounters of the IEA Reut-Sadaqa Interfaith Encounter Group

December 19th 2012

The theme of our meeting, coming just after Hanuka and just before Christmas was 'Light'.

Louis, a Franciscan friar spoke about how John's Gospel speaks of Jesus as the Light, and the Light to the World, which is a central message of Christianity. But he went on to say that Jesus taught that he would rather serve than be served and so serving is what brings light into the world. Lighting candles is important in rituals, especially at Easter when the light is shared out to all from the Easter Candle: also candle light is important at Baptism.... The Arabic word for light 'Nur' is mentioned numerous times in Qu'ran with different meanings and in different contexts but always in a positive way. If a person strays from the right path, then Allah may take away His light from the person's life.

Ruth mentioned that greetings often refer to the light. Abdallah, however, said that there is no specific use of light or candles in any Muslim rituals: near his house on Mount of Olives there is the cave of a holy woman where Sufis come to pray and light candles, but that practice is very specific to Sufism.

Nathanael then brought texts to describe the historical origin of Hannukah using scripts from the Book of Macabees and the Talmud. Since non-Jews in the group had never seen Hanukah candle lighting, he had brought 2 hanukiot and we lit them and sang blessings and songs, as one would on the holiday. Shining with the lights off, they created a magical glow. Lights and candles play a very important role in Judaism. Shabbat candles are lit by women; the end of Sabbath ritual, Havdalah, always includes a special candle with many wicks twisted together: every synagogue has an 'eternal lamp'. Creation begins with the creation of light, and there are many mystical commentaries on the original light, the hidden light, and how the Torah is compared to light...

As we had entered so deeply into the meanings of light, we felt it only appropriate to examine the companion theme of 'darkness'.

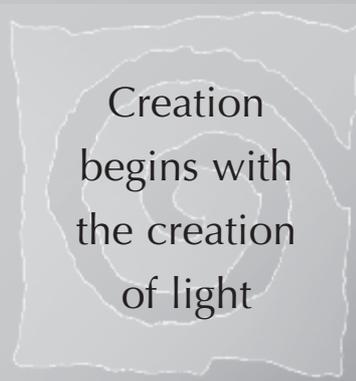
January 15th 2013

The topic was Darkness and overall what was striking was the theme of the movement from darkness to the light.

Islam identified darkness with ignorance, for example the period before Islam is called a period of darkness. Darkness itself is not seen as a dangerous or independent force.

In Christianity, darkness is a key element in mysticism as in the work of St. John of the Cross, and the dark night of the soul before the dawn of redemption. In the Bible account of creation, darkness is created first and light is created out of the darkness. One of the plagues is a tangible darkness but this is often seen as metaphorical darkness in which people could not see each other. Some Jewish rituals must be performed in the dark: blessing of the new moon; end of Sabbath 'Havdallah'; search for last bread before

Passover...all with a small candle and so it is said, a tiny candle may illuminate a giant darkness.



"...a tiny candle may illuminate a giant darkness..."

listen. CAN YOU HEAR THEM?

Striking midnight, bells announced to the world that 2012 was over and a new year had begun. Despite our multi-media communication channels the ancient tradition of bell ringing remains. In Scotland “the bells” take centre stage at New Year. “Where will you be for the bells?” or “Who are you seeing the bells in with?” will always be asked. It would confuse anyone trying to translate the Scots language. We say “seeing the bells in” when of course, we don’t see the bells, we hear them.

School bells signal the beginning and end of the day for children all over the world and bells are embedded in many cultural and spiritual traditions. The clanging of church bells have soothed many communities with their familiar sound, timeless reliability and reassuring presence for centuries. They have the power to remind us, to move us, to warn us, to unite us and to call us.

When I was ten, my family home was near Glasgow University. I loved the novelty of the university tower bell ringing out every 15 minutes. The first ‘clang’ signaled quarter past the hour and every 15 minutes the bell continued to sound. During my teenage years, I was allowed the freedom of being “within earshot of the bells”, probably a mile radius from home. The university bells were an extension of my mother’s supervisory skills. I remember dreading the final 15 minute warning, knowing that the end of that day’s play was drawing near and I had to sprint home. There was no excuse for losing track of the time when the bells performed their community function. And to say that I didn’t hear them meant that I had wandered out of earshot and the permitted mile boundary.

Keeping time was one of their many functions. On Sunday morning the peal of the bells would ring out to call the congregation to prayer. Bells bouncing joyously on a Saturday announced a wedding at the university chapel. Solemn bells with a slower tone, muffled tone, resonated sadness for mourners attending funerals.

More recently, millions of people in Britain felt the presence of bells at the opening of the Olympic games. Martin Creed’s genius idea to ring all the bells across the country on the morning of the opening ceremony was joyous and uplifting. And on the evening of the opening ceremony, Bradley Wiggins struck a massive bell to let the games begin. The bell was inscribed with words from *The Tempest* “Be not afeard, the isle is full of noises” which Kenneth Brannagh delivered to the watching world.

The Olympic bell is Europe’s largest bell (2 metres tall and 3 metres wide and weighs 27 tonnes). It was made at the

Whitechapel Foundry in London, Britain’s oldest manufacturing company, which was established in 1570. Whitechapel also made other world famous bells including Big Ben and the Liberty Bell, America’s iconic symbol of independence in 1752.

They have the power to remind us, to move us, to warn us, to unite us and to call us

Where many features of previous centuries have long gone, bells continue to be written about by authors, poets and songwriters. Shakespeare uses bells as symbolism. Macbeth listens intently and hears ‘the bell invite him to kill Duncan’. Victor Hugo’s famously penned the hunchbacked Bell Ringer of Notre Dame. Hemingway’s title: *For Whom the Bell Tolls* was borrowed from a John Donne Meditation written in the 17th century when tolling church bells would have been a regular feature of daily life in England. Donne’s reflection gently reminds us that when funeral bells toll for one person, they toll for us all.

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend’s or of thine own were: any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls: it tolls for thee.

The children’s nursery rhyme, ‘Oranges and Lemons’ is estimated to have been written around in the 18th century and can still be effortlessly retrieved from archived childhood memories. The rhyme evocatively describes famous City of London church bells and gives a clue as to their different messages:

*Oranges and lemons
Say the bells of St Clements.
You owe me five farthings,
Say the bells of St Martins.
When will you pay me?
Say the bells of Old Bailey.
When I grow rich.
Say the bells of Shoreditch.
I’m sure I don’t know.
Says the great bell of Bow*

The rhyme refers to famous London churches. St Clements is in Cannon Street and today a special service is still held in the church and the bells play ‘Oranges and Lemons’. St Martins Orgar is on St Martin’s Lane, where money lenders used to operate. Opposite the Old Bailey is St Sepulchre where a bell

was rung to announce executions. This bell can be viewed in the church today. At midnight before a hanging at Tyburn, a bell would be rung at St Sepulchre's and the bell ringer would solemnly pronounce the following poem:

*And when St Sepulchre's Bell in the morning tolls,
The Lord above have mercy on your souls.*

We can only imagine the chilling fear that the ringing of that bell would induce. The bells of Shoreditch could be the bells of St Leonards, which had twelve bells and the great bell of Bow, is of course, the bell of St Mary le-bow on Cheapside.

The famous line from the film *It's A Wonderful Life* George Bailey's daughter reminds us that 'every time a bell rings an angel gets his wings', making a subtle connection between bells and the spiritual realm.

It is in the realm of the sacred where the ringing of bells first began, and it still maintains a strong presence in many different faiths.

The ringing of the Sanctus bell in the catholic mass invites a moment of reflection to acknowledge the symbolism of the coming of Christ in communion. For centuries, the Angelus bell used to be a call to pray the angelus, which was prayed in Roman Catholic and Anglican churches three times a day.

Thousands of Buddhist temples in Japan have huge bronze bonsho (sacred) bells. Some are ancient, dating as far back as 752. Bonsho bells are cherished and revered for their physical and symbolic power. One is larger than the Olympic bell, weighing more than 30 tons, it is double the weight of Big Ben and the world's largest bell. A bonsho is housed in an open wooden tower not hidden in a belfry. The bell is struck on the side by a tree trunk, suspended by a rope, sometimes by a team of up to 20 monks.

The Japanese, like the Scots, announce New Year with bells and bonsho bells sound out the old year and welcome the new. Each Old Year is rung out with 108 booms - one for each of the 108 Buddhist defilements. The sentiment is that the sins will be carried away by the sound waves.

Casting large bells in bronze has a high chance of failure and often monks will sit aside the casting process, chanting and praying for the new bell being cast, believing that the resonance created by their collective voices will be absorbed by the sacred bell, demonstrating their faith in the sacred power of sound.

Many Japanese poets, inspired by bells have immortalized them in haiku, stories and songs.

*I never intended
To grow old
But the temple bell tolls*

In Britain today, many bell ringers have neither spiritual nor sacred reasons for bell ringing. For some, it is to carry on centuries of family tradition. For others, it is a communal activity, weekly exercise or a focused practical and physical activity to clear the mind. The poet John Betjeman was a bell ringer. One of his children's poetry books was entitled *A Ring of Bells* and his autobiography *Summoned by Bells*. His poem *Bristol* pays tribute to the ringers in an oil-lit belfry and the centuries old art and science of bell ringing.

*Ringers in an oil-lit belfry - Bitton? Kelston? who shall say?
Smoothly practicing a plain course, caverned out the dying day
As their melancholy music flooded up and ebbed away...
...and an undersong to branches dripping into pools and wells
Out of multitudes of elm trees over leagues of hill and dells
Was the mathematic pattern of a plain course on the bells.*

Weather Notes

by Rebecca Bilkau

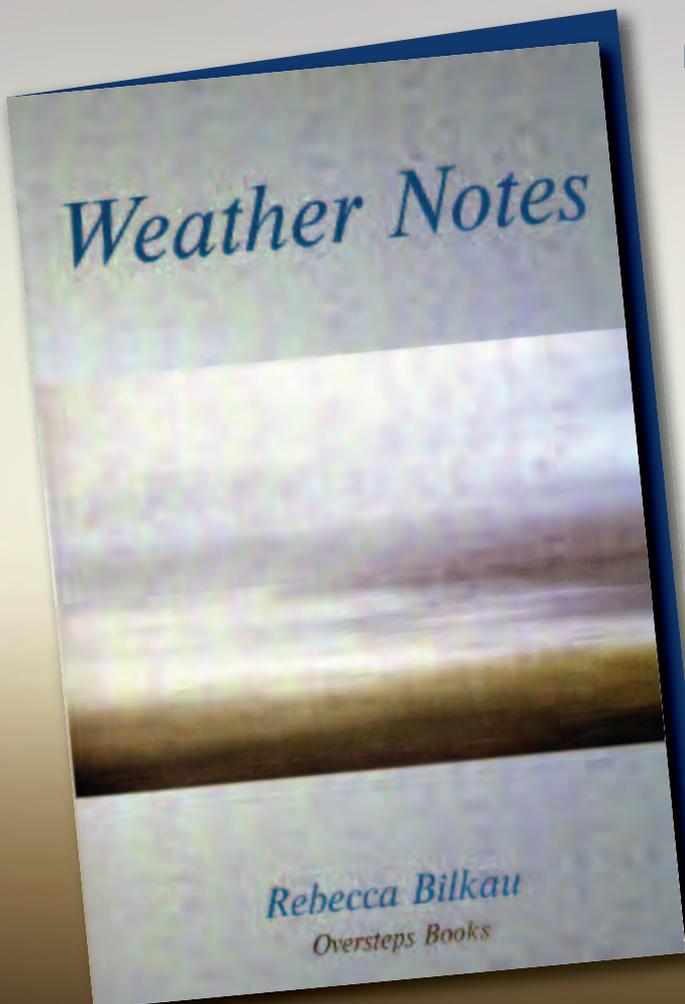
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Rebecca has been Poet in Residence for Faith Initiative Magazine since 2006, generously sharing, with our readers, her observations on the fragility and the beauty of life.

Weather Notes is her first published book of poems and a delightful collection it is. These are poems that take the reader into detailed moments of a lived life, dealing with quite ordinary experiences and turning them into extra-ordinary moments of insight and revelation. They convey a keen awareness of how our lives flow and converge with the inner and outer worlds around us, suspending reality for a fleeting moment in time and space.

Through her poetry Rebecca alerts us to the profound nature and uniqueness of our humanity yet she also beautifully articulates that which seems to go beyond our ken, touching on the unseen workings in our lives that we often sense but cannot easily articulate.

One of my favourite poems from the collection is *Inheritance* because I feel it challenges the idea of our own unique identity. It links us in a physical way to the countless people from whom we are descended, and who still manifest themselves physically through us to become us.



Inheritance

My grandmother left me her hands. Each time
I see mine, apt to despise their fitness
for nothing but labour, Nan's echo nags me;
You must be a duchess, not ours, she says.

Her knuckles were sore from the fight to keep
us nit-free, clean-nosed, fed and, come hell or high,
respected. She kept things in their place, did Nan:
pans, religion, us. She scorned adornment,

flaunting my schooling was paste-ruby tarty.
She talked straight, but never open. If she
admired my mum's triumphal rise, I hope
she let on, in the end. Surveying our hands I hear

her fret: *Honestagod, all that thinking
and your still on the fence. I had to jump
to conclusions. No time. But I watched you
tracing the path of the planets. Chance your arm,*

catch a star for me. And I think: leave me be
I'm out of my depth or they're out of my reach. But
hark the herald, she's at it again:
where's your hand?

Look, there are moons in my palm.

Rebecca Bilkau



OF

INSTANTANEOUS EVENTS

For me the process of drawing and painting is a meditative experience. I paint in order to discover, explore, and express the relationship between my inner being and all that surrounds me - the environment, the world, the universe. It is during this creative act that I find myself to feel closer to the divine presence, the numinous, God.

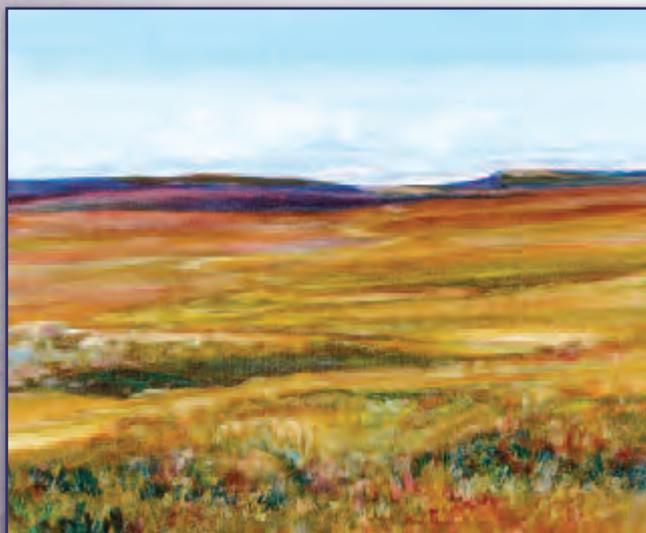
I have been walking and exploring the moors for some years, drawing, painting and taking notes. The more time I spent up on the moorland with the calls of curlew and lapwing, the more I rediscovered my true relationship with the changing of the seasons, the turning of the earth, and the more passionate I became about caring for our precious jewel of a planet.

I feel strongly that if only we could regain total consciousness of our connection to the earth, physically, psychologically and spiritually, we would want to act in harmony with the natural world instead of merely plundering it as a commodity. We would thus shift our attitudes from our own desires to the earth's needs, helping us to act more creatively and live more compassionately, recognising our place as an integral part of an interdependent body. All living things are unique, precious, expressions of God.

My paintings, experiences, thoughts and stories of walks all came together into a book 'Climb up to the Moor'. I also asked a wide range of people to write about their associations with the moorland: poets, scientists and ecologists, local people who use the moor including landowners and gamekeepers. I hope that by doing so I have enabled them to listen to each other's points of view.

The climate change debate is high on the agenda now. We have created a touring exhibition using the collection of paintings and adding text panels, which combine both factual information and my more meditative insights. We realised its potential for spreading the message of the importance of moorland conservation. Those of us who watch television programmes about ecology and conservation are usually already interested and fairly well informed. Through the medium of painting we hope to reach a different audience, not to preach but to raise awareness. We hope to bring the moorland into towns and cities in the form of this exhibition our intention being:

- to highlight that our peat bogs are as important for capturing and holding carbon as the earth's rainforests
- to raise awareness of the diversity of the upland environment
- through the experience of the exhibition, invite wider audiences to deepen their own individual encounters with nature



What a contrast between the wide space up here and the busy life down in the valley. I, like many people I suspect, spend my life going from task to task, to entertainment and back, from one occupation to another; not allowing for any spaces in between. Making more spaces in my life, wide open spaces in which I can just BE - be where and as I am, would enable me to absorb and receive from my environment as happens up here on the moor - instead of always doing and giving out. Perhaps with a better balance between doing and being, giving and receiving, my existence may become more sacred, precious, valuable.

LANGUAGE



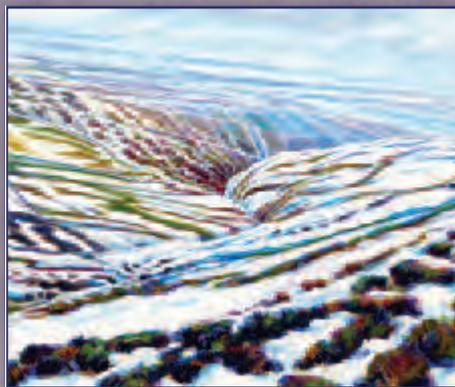
I'm in the process of reviewing my life, where I've been and where I might be going, and this high drovers road is becoming symbolic of my journey.

Remembering how long it took to put in place all these rocks, peat, heather, and grasslands, my own problems pale into insignificance. All this space... all this time... I am just a speck spending but a few seconds up here.



... this afternoon I escape again to solitude. A fall of snow bedecks the scrub; the sky is clear and the sun sinking low.

As the minutes pass the sky is gradually transformed from cerulean to palest of greens, from yellow to pink to deeper cobalt and mauve. All reflect on the snow - painting it deliciously and delicately a myriad of soft colour. The glowing moon reveals itself as the heavens darken, and stars begin to sparkle out. Our earth floats amongst them, a precious living jewel.



Up here is limitless spaciousness, where I can breathe away all stresses and strains, and expand my mind.

Walking along this track has always felt like turning the earth around with my feet, watching the shapes of the landscape change: the grandeur of the high fells, the rugged ravines, and the sweeping windswept spaces. I've spent the last ten days with many different groups of people, and just now it feels as though there is only my presence here and now, in harmony with the landscape.



The heather is in flower. These last few days of warm and sunny weather have encouraged the little plumes and towers of buds to open to the bees. A row of hives has been brought up from the valley so the bees have a shorter distance to travel whilst they harvest and store away the sweetness for winter. What abundance!

How much we rely on bees... how much the whole complex system of life on earth relies on bees... without them visiting blossoms the whole year through, and in so doing cross-fertilising the majority of all plant life, our fruits and crops would fail. And yet bees' numbers are declining all over the world, vast numbers of them are sick. Has our use of pesticides and herbicides caused this? Is it our industries sending poisons into the air that has affected their health? Have we gone just that much too far in upsetting the balance and interdependency of living things?

In many cultures water is used as a symbol for spirit. With this in mind I contemplate the journey this water has taken from the watershed, and that it will make from here down to the sea, and remember a quotation from Khalil Gibran: 'Life and death are one even as the river and the sea are one'. I recall times of feeling 'enspirited', and other times of drought and doubt. I know that, even when feeling disconnected, there remains deep within me a flow that connects me to 'all that is', seen and unseen. I recognise that the path of my spiritual journey can sometimes merge with that of others; at other times is unique to me; can take me flying into rainbows, or deep into subterranean passages.

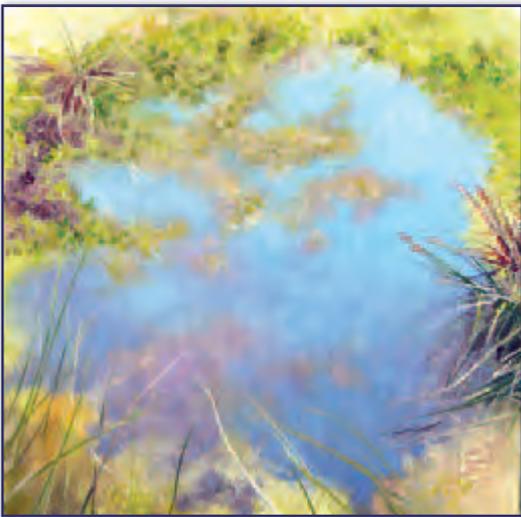




Sun & Shadow

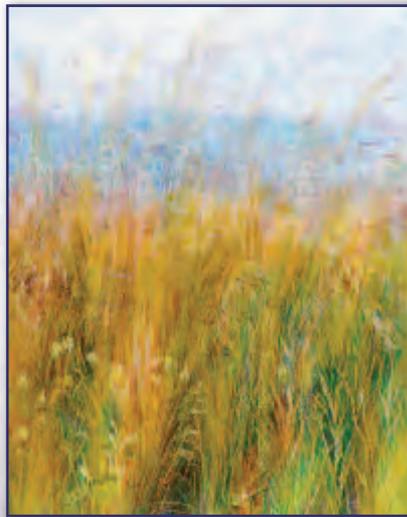
Climbing, I shed all troubles and complications, and am overtaken by a profound sense of timelessness. I become aware of the simplicity and 'is'ness of the present moment, but also of the complexity of the interdependence of all things. I feel a surety that life will continue through a dependency on the wisdom of the Earth.

'You can feel the soul of the countryside through the soles of your feet.'



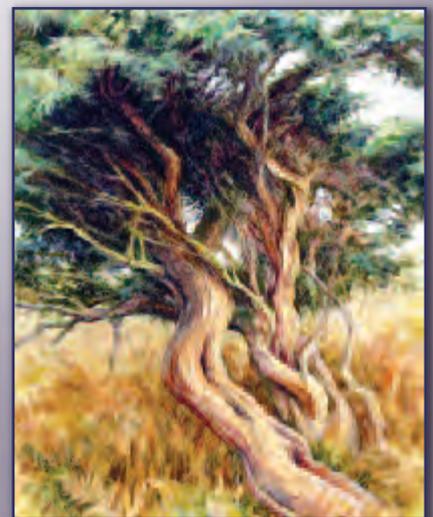
Bogpool

Painting done, I revisit the small deep clear pool just below the scar, where a myriad of tiny insects perform their mating dance. Voracious water boatmen skim across the surface, sensing with their feet the tiniest movement of a midge as it lands or surfaces. Water beetles rise and sink on clear bubbles of air. No gripping has been done here so insects abound for the growing chicks, the balance of flora and fauna intact. The weed is bedecked with bubbles, which bounce back up when I poke my stick down to assess the depth. It does not reach the bottom. Generations of sphagnum have built up around the overflow to cause the basin to sit higher than its surroundings.



Grasses

Graceful and tall, the pollen-heavy grasses hang still and the sun creates glowing haloes around the flowering reedheads. Ground ivy glows purple in the dewy grass and the thistles have grown upwards and outwards. Buttercups and daisies scatter the short nibbled turf, together with white clover; thyme, milkwort and tormentil. I am struck yet again by the contrasts between the infinite and the intimate, millennia and milliseconds that I find and experience up here: the great expanses of earth and sky, the detail of tiny flowers; the eons of time behind the creation of the landscape, and sudden fleeting speed of instantaneous events.



Juniper

There are male and female junipers. I choose one and sit with her, drawing her, dancing with her curvaceousness. As I work the wind picks up, reminding me that the year is coming to an end: an icy blast on one side of my face and body, warm glowing sun on the other. How many years has this ancient being stood here experiencing... what extremes of weather? Strong earth and solid stone lie beneath me, into which tough roots delve to find sustenance and support. Infinite space moves above us.

Great Circle

Six. First light. Three Chinese pensioners tread out a gravel circle. A slurred run between stopping to raise hands, clapping without sound, as if applauding every absence.

The women are padded for greys, the chilled half-light finding its way between buildings. The man stretches with care against a blue bicycle stand. A red car passes, then the first silver tram

glints through a gap in the prised open oyster dawn. The runners continue to circle, lifting slow hands, moulding something from air, letting it float. They could be anywhere, Ottawa, Bangkok,

they are all the runners, wherever footfalls thop, tread circles, pound. Whenever new breath hangs on last night's air. They prove the path goes on into infinity, returns to show the world is round.





Finding the Courage

The action group Woman's Voice, based in Lancashire, organised an event in Blackburn to coincide with International Women's Week (March 2013). The focus of the gathering was 'Violence against Women' and 120 women from many different backgrounds attended.

The event was chaired by Ruby Hussain and Wendy Smith, both trustees of Woman's Voice. There was also a panel made up of representatives from Lancashire Constabulary, Crown Prosecution Service, AMT and Ramsbottom Solicitors, WISH Centre (Women's Aid), two speakers, and two members of Woman's Voice.

Ten stories written by five Asian women and five by non-Asian women were printed in a booklet and given to each member in the audience. Through story-telling the women expressed their pain, their desires, their dreams, and the journey they undertook to turn around their shattered lives.

The event saw two young women, one Asian Muslim and the other a non-Asian, tell their stories of pain and reconciliation. Their narratives touched the hearts of many in the audience, and moved others to tears, but ultimately, the satisfaction of knowing that both these young women subsequently achieved much in their professional and private lives gave the greatest pleasure – especially knowing that it is they that control their lives not their violent partners.

Samina (her name has been changed) had an arranged marriage at a very young age and was taken to Pakistan where she endured physical and mental torture. As a young, married woman, aged 17, she was aware that only she could take on the responsibility of sorting out her own problems and predicament: no one else around her would help. To cope with her situation Samina started to make up stories in her head, to create a fantasy world, and each day would convince herself that she was going to work. This was her way of escaping the impact of the violence and maintaining her sanity. She said the most damaging part of her experience was that she was not allowed

the freedom to 'think' - something that she had always just taken for granted - and for an intelligent woman, this was worse than a slap in the face.

It was only through her inner strength - a belief in herself - that she managed to escape back to the UK and today her story is a beacon of hope for many.

Beverley suffered violence from her boyfriend, who was constantly under the influence of alcohol, and would use Beverley as "a punching bag". She was also badly burned by him, leaving

her today with both physical and mental scarring. Beverley became pregnant at a very young age but sadly due to her personal circumstances the baby was given up for adoption. Although she is still sad about the loss of her child, and disappointed at not yet achieving her dream to be a nurse, Beverley is bright and optimistic about her future. We hope that with the right help and support, she will eventually realize her dream.

*...the most
damaging part of
her experience was
that she was not
allowed the freedom
to "think"...*

The opportunity was offered for members of the audience to ask questions of the two women about their experiences, but more importantly, to focus on how they found the courage to break from the violence: what worked for them, and who helped. The Question & Answer session was important because many in the audience did not have the confidence to openly ask these questions themselves.

Woman's Voice believes that whilst we may try to understand the problems, we need to look for answers too, therefore, the "how" question was extremely important in this event; how did these women break away from their violent relationships, what methods did they use, who did they approach and what worked for them. Through their responses many present in the audience were able to relate some of their own experiences and emotions to that of the speakers. We believe that the event provided information that may be of help to individuals, and enhance the knowledge of the service providers for their work at grass roots level.

For further information please see: <http://www.womansvoice.info/>
Anjum Anwar MBE is Chair of Woman's Voice

Photo: Chris Seddon and Ruby Hussain of Woman's Voice

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THE HOUSE OF SONG & THE HOUSE OF DECEIT

*“There are, at the beginning, two spirits, . . .
In thought, word, deed, they are two:
the good and the bad.” (Yasna 30.3)*

This translation of part of the oldest Zoroastrian text, the *Gathas* - ‘poems’ ascribed to the ancient Iranian spiritual teacher Zarathushtra - presents a clear division between both the origin and the impact of good and evil. This division is said to operate across the ‘world of thought’ and the ‘world of material existence’ - that is throughout the metaphysical and physical spheres of existence. The ancient Iranian context for this distinctive vertical split between good and evil has been alluded to by external commentators since the time of the ancient Greeks, beginning with the historiographer Herodotus.

The *Gathas* and subsequent Zoroastrian texts praise Ahura Mazda, whose name translates from the Avestan as ‘Wise Lord’, for establishing all that is orderly, good and life-giving in both realms (*Yasna* 28.2, 43.3). Attributes or abstract qualities of Ahura Mazda that work throughout both existences to promote order (*asha*) and to bring benefit, include ‘beneficent inspiration’ (*spenta mainyu*), ‘right-mindedness’ (*armaiti*), ‘good thought’ (*vohu manah*), ‘readiness to listen’ (*sraosha*) and ‘good religious insight’ (*daena vanguhi*). These qualities become elevated to entities that are ‘worthy of worship’ (*yazatas*) in their own right.

In contrast, the essence of evil is epitomized in the ‘spirit’ or ‘inspiration’ that is destructive. Evil is construed as being attached to all that is maleficent and inherently deceptive, leading to the ‘worst things’ (*Y* 30.5). The *Gathas* refer to certain ‘old’ or ‘false gods’ (*daevas*) who are part of the continuum of evil. These unnamed *daevas* are collectively condemned as deriving from the negative abstractions ‘evil thought’, ‘deceit’ or ‘the lie’ (expressed in the Avestan word *druj*), and as bringing harm to the ‘good life and undyingness’ generated for humanity by Ahura Mazda (*Y* 32.3, 5).

Whereas the activity of Ahura Mazda and those who follow the orderly, just path is based on wisdom, the *daevas* and their ‘follower who promotes the lie’ (in Avestan, the *drugvant*) that threatens the cosmic order are said to be incapable of clear discernment.

In the *Gathas*, Ahura Mazda, is presented as ontologically superior, with no immediate opponent: rather, the ‘evil one’ is directly opposed by the beneficent spirit, *spenta mainyu* (*Y* 45.2). Ahura Mazda, as the generator of all things good and of all life, cannot at the same time cause that which is evil or ‘not-life’.

The two are mutually exclusive, and this incompatibility in essence maintains the unqualified goodness of Ahura Mazda, while accounting for the presence of evil in the world. In later Avestan texts Ahura Mazda is in effect placed in direct rivalry to the ‘evil spirit’, a designation that translates the Avestan term Angra Mainyu. One Young Avestan work, the *Videvdad* (‘laws for keeping away the *daevas*’), describes each of the good Iranian lands created by Ahura Mazda as being devastated by Angra Mainyu with some kind of plague or vice: for instance, one region is assaulted with a harsh winter, another with agnosticism, and yet another with sorcerers (*Vd* 1.2-3, 8, 13).



The notion that a destructive impulse can corrupt life itself, through threatening the very existence of humans and the rest of the living world, offers a profoundly original understanding of the nature of evil. The *Gathas* and later Avestan texts refer to a future time in which such detrimental intrusion will be dispelled, and an ideal state of wonderful perfection and incorruptibility will be restored, towards which the world is already moving (Y 30.9, 34.15).

The concept of dual cosmic principles in direct opposition to each other continued to develop into the Ancient Persian period (c. 550-330 BCE), and was known to the Greeks. Aristotle is said to have identified these two first principles as ancient, original to the Persians, and as substantively different from each other. According to Diogenes Laertes, Aristotle related that the *magi* (the religious experts of the Ancient Persians) held that there is a good spirit (*daimon*) called Oromasdes, who was to be identified with Zeus, and a bad spirit called Areimanios, identified with Hades (*Lives of the Philosophers* 1.8). Diogenes remarked that Aristotle's contemporaries Eudoxus (the astronomer and friend of Plato) and Theopompus of Chios also knew of these two universal principles. In his essay *On Isis and Osiris*, Plutarch mentions Theopompus' account of the Magian teachings concerning the struggle between these two opposing powers, which would conclude with Hades being 'left behind'.

By the time of the Zoroastrian Middle Persian texts of the ninth and tenth century CE a more systematized hierarchy of good and evil had developed, including the qualities and characteristics associated with each. One such text, the *Bundahishn* ('Creation' or 'Foundation'), describes in great detail the conflict between the two and its resolution, beginning with the story of Angra Mainyu's desire to infiltrate and to overcome the good, perfect existence generated by Ahura Mazda through disease, darkness and death. The *Bundahishn* cosmogony outlines how the all-knowing Ahura Mazda purposely crafted the worlds of thought and of living beings to serve as a confined time and space within which the essential antagonism between good and evil can be resolved. In the *Bundahishn*, the final period of renovation begins with the resurrection of the dead and the reuniting of the soul with the body, and culminates when the rottenness and harm of evil has been dispelled, and the rule and omnipotence of Ahura Mazda is established 'for ever and ever' (Bd 34.7-32).

In the meantime, the stink of evil lingers. Old Persian royal inscriptions of Darius I, Xerxes, and Artaxerxes II refer to evil as 'foul-smelling', like food that has spoiled. The same concept of putrefaction is used in references to Angra Mainyu as the 'foul spirit' in Middle Persian eschatology (Bd. 34.27).

Passages in the *Gathas* urge all humans to develop good thought, so that they may discern what is 'really real' (*haithya*) from that which is false or delusion, and to speak and act accordingly. Both men and women must work to acquire the wisdom necessary to distinguish between good and evil, and to exercise their responsibility in determining, through their thoughts, which is the best choice of words or course of action (Y 53. 5, 6). Actions deriving from good thought, good understanding, and right-mindedness are the markers of the *ashavan*, the person who upholds order and integrity (Y 34.10, 14). In contrast, those who have minds clouded by deceit and confusion are motivated by self-interest, greed, and anger.

In the Avesta, Zarathushtra is identified as the first human to actively assist Ahura Mazda in overcoming evil. He is the first to recite the most powerful prayer, the *Ahuna Vairya*, and to combat the *daevas*, forcing them to go underground (Y 9.14-15). The advent of Zarathushtra marks a turning point in the cosmic struggle between good and evil, setting the scene for the final period of conflict, and the ultimate separation of the two, with Ahura Mazda as the victor. In the interim, the purpose of human existence, following the model of Zarathushtra, is to be an ally of Ahura Mazda, constantly choosing the side of good, and thereby diminishing the grip of evil.

Avestan texts describe how those who have lived according to good thoughts, words and deeds will arrive in the 'house of song' and realize the 'best things', and how those who pursue bad religious insight and thoughts, bad

words and bad actions will end up in the 'worst existence', where the song is one of lamentation, in the 'house of deceit', where the food is rotten!

The Avestan ethos appears to have been a central feature of ancient Iranian praxis. Herodotus observed that, alongside the necessary skills of horse riding and archery, the ancient Persians were also taught to speak the truth, and regarded telling lies as shameful (*Histories* 1.136). The Achaemenid king Darius I (r. 522-486 BCE) makes these same claims for himself on a rock inscription at his tomb. According to Herodotus, Ancient Persian morality was based on the balance of a person's good and bad deeds - which he terms 'services' and 'faults' (*Histories* 1.137).

The Zoroastrian idea that all humans must be constantly alert to make a conscious choice between the two trajectories of good and evil - and to live with the consequences - was a significant contribution to the development of human ethics. The trifold Avestan maxim *humata, hukhta, hvareshta* (Y 36.5, 35.2), - 'good thoughts, good words, good deeds' - remains a key Zoroastrian tenet.



This article includes material from Jenny Rose's two recent books: *Zoroastrianism: An Introduction* (I.B. Tauris, 2011) and *Zoroastrianism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Continuum, 2011), as well as from her chapter on the early Zoroastrian conception of evil for the forthcoming six-volume *History of Evil* edited by Charles Taliaferro and Chad Meister for Acumen Publishing.

Image: Zoroastrian children performing *kusti* prayers at Navjote ceremony. © Photographs provided under copyright by Paurushasp Jila.

Struggle towards Synthesis

The concept of opposing natures or opposites is fundamental to the nature of creation. Creativity is happening continuously in every corner of the known and the unknown universe. Every minutest fraction of existence struggles with or co-operates with its 'neighbour' to produce a modified third party. It's that old equation: thesis creates its own antithesis and that in turn produces a new synthesis. We know it as evolution. Evolution is continuous creation.

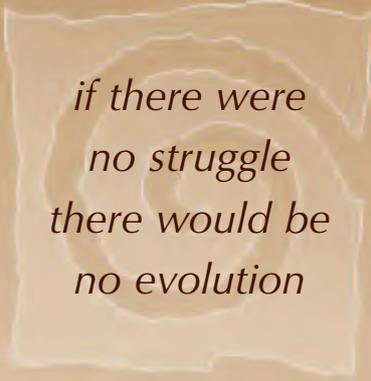
We also know that at one time humankind did not exist and now we do, so we assume that evolution is inherently progressive and has some benign end product in mind. Envisaging that end product is impossible. Humankind presently exists primarily in its physical state and is only just becoming truly aware of consciousness within and around it. A future existence may be wholly consciousness and perhaps there are existences beyond that, so with remarkable wisdom humankind has said that the end product of evolution is fundamentally unknowable. Of course, being human we nevertheless attempt to define the end product, God, in all sorts of anthropomorphic or human ways.

So, 'the present time' is always a time of imperfection striving for perfection. Hence the importance of living fully in the present moment, and being part of that striving. Why do we ask ourselves the question: 'Is God responsible for the imperfection (evil)?' when God is within the imperfect situation striving to be born as the ultimate synthesis? Perhaps because with our present very immature awareness of consciousness we have stereotyped the ultimate end of evolution, God, as being present now as all-powerful when it isn't. It is present as the life spirit being continuously born and reborn in the synthesis which is still immature or imperfect in itself but is questing after divinity. Does that mean that the ultimate end product, God, does not exist in the present moment within time and space?

Creativity or struggle is always present and if the end product is 'good', then the struggle is with 'evil'. The two words can be taken as representative headings of two categories of opposites, although even 'opposites' can be too strong a word. The facilitator which ensures that the outcome of the relationship, or struggle, is creative is the life spirit whose work is expressed as love. Love can pre-determine the outcome of evolution but only outside time, and that is beyond our ability to comprehend. Within time the progress of evolution may be very uneven. Evil can triumph if good people do nothing; a seemingly wayward meteorite hitting the earth can wreak havoc. The life spirit needs

the co-operation of its environment; the fertilised human egg cannot be born of its own volition.

In our present media-conditioned world there is the problem that 'evil' is over-portrayed as an independent force which needs to be destroyed. But it is fundamental to the universe that everything is used in creating each new evolutionary synthesis; nothing is lost; nothing escapes time and space. Everything, including our idea of what is good, is transformed into a new synthesis. In our personal lives we may go the other way and try to ignore the power of evil, but that's not going to help the right synthesis to be produced. The life spirit loves everything. Love, not power, has to transform violence into nonviolence. Why else should we Christians be told to love our enemies? Why are forgiveness and reconciliation considered to be fundamental to continuing human existence except that this is how the universe works?



*if there were
no struggle
there would be
no evolution*

My spiritual journey has left me within the Quaker fold for more than thirty years and that's because the Quaker Way is conceived as living in the present moment. Quakers are remarkably up to date in their thinking and doing because as participators in the Christian mystical tradition we listen to what that life spirit is 'saying' to us now. And the 'saying' comes in the language of the twenty-first century and relates to the culture and the science of the twenty-first century. Of

course, much of science is provisional and our language and writings are inevitably culturally conditioned, so in our listening we struggle with all these factors... but if there were no struggle there would be no evolution. In our listening we are waiting for the right synthesis to make itself known to us. Quakers live by the faith that their listening gives them and not by the certainty that specific words of belief may appear to offer. Perhaps the 'opposites' of faith and belief are already producing a new synthesis which may have a more universal acceptance?

There is no escaping the existence of opposites. How can you know what is good except that its opposite exists and thereby enables you to define what is good? And the transformation of opposites into a new synthesis is necessary to arrive at that future which is the next present moment. Depicting those opposites as good and evil is to take two positions at the extremes of an infinite range of so-called 'opposites'. It's simply the headline which leads us into an understanding of how evolution or the birthing of the divine is happening. And what form that birthing ultimately takes is way beyond human conception.



JUST WORDS...

“What is good and what is evil?...

Sometimes it’s not as easy as you think to tell them apart.”

While thinking about the subject of good and evil, the first thought to enter my mind was the above quote from Anthony Horowitz’s *Return to Groosham Grange* (1999). The book ends with the character discovering that good and evil are just words and that those who are considered ‘evil’ are really just different. It’s a children’s story so obviously the moral is relatively simple, yet it is a moral that has managed to stay lodged in my subconscious for more than ten years.

We are all familiar with good and evil, be they people, actions, thoughts, or spoken words. A child can read a book or watch a film and easily tell the difference between the good character (protagonist, hero, babyface, goodie) and the evil character (antagonist, villain, heel, baddie). The reader or viewer is convinced to support the “good guy” because what they want, believe or do is right. Conversely the villain is bad or wrong. The hero helps where the villain seeks to harm and from a young age we are conditioned to believe that the good guy always wins, because this is how we are supposed to act. We must always be good and never evil because evil is wrong and evil never triumphs. A positive message to be sure, yet an extremely simple message which fails to answer a very important question; just what is good and evil?

The simplest explanation for defining good and evil is that the hero is always right. They are positive role models who can be brave, selfless, intelligent or funny - anything that can convince others to support them. They aim to help others, sometimes to their own detriment. They save lives, they help those who cannot help themselves and they try to make the world a better place. All very good indeed. We all like to see good triumph over evil because it makes us feel... good. We have all been conditioned with rules and morals on how to be good and by acting according to our morals we do what is right. A good deed whether it’s as extreme as rescuing an infant from a burning building or simply throwing some loose change into the

collection tin outside the local supermarket, is good for whoever benefits from it and also makes us feel good about ourselves. We do good to feel good and to make others feel good.

That’s the simple half of the story. The motivation behind being or doing good is hardly a mystery. The motivation behind everything we human beings do is because we or someone else gets some kind of good out of it. It is almost impossible to imagine a person who would willingly do something with the intent of making themselves feel “bad”. So why would a person be evil? Based on everything we’ve learned since childhood, evil is wrong. From a religious view, evil represents everything that should not exist. Why then, would someone aim to do something that would negatively affect others? What motivates evil?

Murder? Rape? Terrorism? There’s no question that such acts are evil. But are all forms of antagonism evil? Is it evil to frighten, threaten or harm someone else? It’s certainly not good but can a ten year-old bully in the playground really be compared to a serial killer or a terrorist? No.

One is a child trapped in the growing pains of the early social development that we all go through in our own school days. Children fighting, teasing, mocking each other, though far from a pleasant experience, is as natural as the sun rising each morning. It simply just happens.

A terrorist on the other hand is not a mere child who doesn’t know better. They commit far worse crimes and are old enough and mentally stable enough to have a motivation. They believe that what they are doing is right. Whether their reasons are religious or a personal desire for revenge, they have their own view of good and evil and have convinced themselves that the atrocities they commit are justified. *Evil is created by motive.* Every evil act has to come from an intention that outweighs the individual’s morals. A person who commits murder or terrorism could only do so if they believed it was warranted and therefore there can be no evil without intent.

*Evil is the
product of
chaos*

With that in mind good and evil become subjective. They have no broad definition; rather they are interpreted by the individual. So now the world is not simply divided into heroes and villains but into individuals with their own morals and intentions. Thus the issue becomes far more complicated.

Adolf Hitler believed he was right. Joseph Stalin believed he was justified. Osama Bin Laden did not see himself as the villain. To those individuals, good and evil were drastically different to how we perceive them. If they ever questioned whether what they did was good or evil, they could only have overcome their doubts with the most powerful sense of intention and the strongest conviction that they were right and that what they were doing was in some way good. That doesn't mean for a second that they were right or good but they had to believe in their minds and hearts that they were. Only then, could they have allowed themselves to commit the sins for which they are remembered. These are instances where evil was born from intent. Where there could be no evil without motivation. So what of the stories where evil seemingly has no purpose?

Take the tragic case of Adam Lanza, who killed twenty children and seven adults, including his own mother, late last year in Newtown Connecticut. The most commonly asked question coming out of that horrific event was simply; *why?* What could motivate a twenty year old to do such a thing? What purpose could he possibly have been filled with that convinced him that his actions were justified? It's hard to imagine anyone in the right state of mind who could think of such an awful idea and believe that it is right.

We cannot claim to know what went through Lanza's head that day. My guess was that he was not in the right state of mind and that his evil could only be the result of insanity. However this contradicts the idea of its origins. Evil spawned by insanity cannot be justified by a sense of purpose and therefore we must now consider evil as something unnatural. Something born, not out of intention, but from confusion. Evil is the product of chaos.

In the end, there is no conclusive answer to what good and evil are, other than two opposing entities. One which is considered right and the other believed wrong. We all have our own view of what is good and what is evil and it varies from person to person, age to age, and faith to faith. Good and evil are created by the individual and we are all unique. What is good? What is evil? All that can be said with certainty is that good and evil are, in the end, just different.

“But God knoweth. And ye know not.”

Surah II, verse 216¹

The concept of good and evil has always baffled human beings and it is one of the central principles upon which most belief systems are built. It is claimed that we all come to earth with an intrinsic knowledge of what is good and what is evil or sinful. We are taught to choose between good deeds for the good of humanity and our own souls and bad deeds which only cause harm and suffering. I wonder, however, since we all come down with the consciousness of what goodness and evil consist of within ourselves, why do terrible things like the Holocaust happen, or wars which take place all over the world for reasons which do not stand up to scrutiny. Every day we are shown some new disaster, act of aggression and injustice and are constant witnesses of man's inhumanity to mankind and to God's creation. Why again, do some cultures choose to cause pain and suffering to animals and consider this part of their tribal and national ethics? They even teach their children to carry out the massacre of whales and dolphins without giving a thought to the pain and terror that they are engendering².

There are various passages in the Qur'an which refer to good and evil and to the fact that we human beings are not in a position to decide what is good and what is evil. Our knowledge is limited and the only knowledge not subject to limitations is with God. The Qur'an clearly states that God is the only authority to decide between good and evil.

*“..But it is possible
That ye dislike a thing
Which is good for you,
And that ye love a thing
Which is bad for you.
But God knoweth.
And ye know not.”*

Surah II, verse 216³

This surely holds true for us as individuals when difficulties befall us such as serious illnesses, death of loved ones and those overwhelming strokes of fate which one reads of every day in the newspapers. Very often, years later people realize that what happened to them at a certain time in their lives has led to their spiritual development and turned them into quite different human beings. However, when people are massacred and tortured without pity in wars and uprisings, when innocent

creatures are herded into bays and slaughtered every year and people derive enjoyment from this, I really wonder whether we do, in fact, have an innate knowledge of good and evil or right and wrong. Are some people born evil, like, for example, Hitler or Stalin or have they come under the influence of Shaitan (the devil)? There are many Surahs in the Qur'an which tell the story of Shaitan's or Iblis' (Lucifer's) fall from Paradise because he refused to bow down to Adam. His pride in his opinion, that he was better than Adam, caused him to be cast out from Paradise. In Surah A'raf Shaitan says:

*‘Because
Thou hast thrown me out
Of the Way, lo! I will
Lie in wait for them
On Thy Straight Way:
Then will I assault them
From before them and behind them,
From their right and their left:
Nor wilt Thou find,
In most of them,
Gratitude (for thy mercies).’⁴*

Surah VII, verses 16-17

Perhaps knowing what is good or evil has more to do with consciousness: that those whose consciousness is more developed through prayer, meditation and other spiritual practices are more aware and more empathic regarding the sufferings of others, whether people or animals and thus, the choice between good and evil comes more naturally to them. The Sufis, the mystics of Islam, do not refer to 'good' or 'evil' or to 'sin' as such, but rather to 'heedlessness' - of not being conscious of God at every moment. Thus, our Way is a method to bring more intensity and 'God-consciousness' into every facet of daily life. Islam teaches us that we should eschew Shaitan, who whispers in our ears in order to make us commit sins and that we should also fight against our own lower self, our *nafs*. We should try as much as possible to keep up our prayers and spiritual exercises and do good deeds to help others in need. The ultimate goal is to become perfected spiritually through belief in God and worship of Him. Whatever brings a person closer to God will surely benefit him and whatever brings a person away from God will lead to His anger and to that person's going astray. Nevertheless, there are many good people in our society with no particular belief, who care about their neighbours and who would not think of doing anything



*Perhaps it is
through fear that
mankind commits
dreadful acts*

unkind or unethical. There are also others belonging to indigenous tribes with their own form of ethics and beliefs who are intrinsically good people, naturally kind towards animals, respectfully caring for the ecology and who would only kill when in need of food and not primarily to take part in blood-thirsty festivals.

When one reads of all the calamities, wars, revolutions and terrible events in the daily newspapers it is hard to remember God's mercy and that we are constantly surrounded by angels who look after us in all our ways. It is important, however, to 'hold onto the rope' and be in communication with these beings through prayer and awareness. To worship our Lord and do what is right, according to the scriptures, whatever they may be. All religions give us guidelines about what is right and wrong and they all have similar values. Basically all of them give us the same message: Love. God is love, God is merciful, Ar Rahman. If we concentrate more on love than on fear, for the message given by the angels has always been 'Do not fear, be not afraid...'. Perhaps it is through fear that mankind commits dreadful acts. If we could tap into that absolutely unlimited love which is always there: if we could only concentrate on that, then terrible deeds like shooting innocent children in schools or fighting for one's particular dogmatic view of what religion teaches would not occur.

I recently read an article on Sophy Burnham's blog 'sophywisdom'. It was about a book which she recommended, *Proof of Heaven* by Dr. Eben Alexander. He is a neurosurgeon who contracted a terrible brain disease. He lay in a coma for six days, his brain completely dead and not registering anything at all. His doctors were convinced that he would not survive and yet he recovered completely. He was certain throughout his experiences that this illness and his ultimate recovery were given to him so that he could come back and tell others about what he had seen. He was completely transformed from a hard-headed scientist to a complete believer. He wrote about his near-death experience, of the wonderful music, beauty and colours and of feeling the complete, unconditional love of God. Having returned and within a short time totally cured, he reminds us that if we remember to pray and to meditate, we can feel this love all the time. If we were more aware of the love of God which envelops us at all times and if we were not subject to fear, especially fear of what we do not understand, we would all have more compassion and understanding for our fellow human beings. Through more awareness the state of our planet and inter-relationships between human beings would improve.

Everything is inter-connected. The saints and the mystics have always understood this phenomenon. If we were able to experience this state we would be less heedless and more empathic towards our surroundings and our brothers and sisters, whether human beings or animals.

'I saw the earth as a pale blue dot in the immense blackness of physical space. I could see that earth as a place where good and evil mixed, and that this constituted one of its unique features. Even on earth there is much more good than evil, but earth is a place where evil is allowed to gain influence in a way that would be entirely impossible at higher levels of existence. That evil could occasionally have the upper hand was known and allowed by the Creator as a necessary consequence of giving the gift of free will to beings like us.

Small particles of evil were scattered throughout the universe, but the sum total of all that evil was as a grain of sand on a vast beach compared to the goodness, abundance, hope and unconditional love in which the universe was literally awash. The very fabric of the alternate dimension is love and acceptance...'⁵

Image cited in 'A Book of Angels' by Sophy Burnham: 'Dante and Beatrice among the Circle of Angels' by Gustav Doré. Engraving. 19th century.

¹ *The Holy Qur'an*, Text, Translation and Commentary by Abdullah Yusuf Ali

² I am referring to the regular massacre of dolphins and whales by the Faroe Islanders off the coast of Denmark, and by the Japanese.

³ *The Holy Qur'an*, Text, Translation and Commentary by Abdullah Yusuf Ali

⁴ *The Holy Qur'an*, Text, Translation and Commentary by Abdullah Yusuf Ali

⁵ *Proof of Heaven*, Page 83, Eben Alexander, M.D.



Flowing Energy

My spiritual journey began when I took up Tai Chi over twelve years ago: although I was not fully aware of it at the time this was a significant milestone on a path of exploration and spiritual fulfillment. With a background in ballet I was attracted to the graceful and flowing movements of Tai Chi without fully understanding their deeper meaning, yet I felt drawn to learn more. I found that this ancient Martial Art focuses on harmonizing the Yin and the Yang, creating balance and harmony, stillness and movement - opposites working together, constantly moving and changing.

Tai Chi means 'supreme ultimate' and before this there was 'Wu Chi' - no ultimate, or nothing. From Tai Chi, the supreme ultimate, comes the two forces/energies of Yin and Yang - the feminine and masculine. Most people are familiar with the Tai Chi symbol - the Yin is the black with the white dot (representing an element of Yang within the Yin) and the white is the Yang energy with the black dot (representing an element of Yin within the Yang).

Whilst people know of the graceful movements of Tai Chi what they don't know is that these movements are made up of many martial applications/self-defense techniques, and they came first. Unfortunately some practitioners choose not to learn this part, including myself in the early stages. The style I now teach, and train in, focuses on the martial aspect, as well as the style and grace of the hand forms. I realise that if I had not

learned the martial movements underlying the forms, it would be like reading a poem that you sense is beautiful, but cannot grasp the meaning of the words.

In the last few years I have explored the spiritual aspect of Tai Chi and learned of its roots in Taoism. My current Sifu Master is well read on the subject and this has drawn me to learn more about Taoist teachings. Cheng San Feng is classed as the founder of Tai Chi in the 14th Century. However, it was the ancient Taoists in the Wudang Mountains of China who would have been the predecessors to that, perhaps as far back as the 7th Century.

The Taoists studied the way a turtle breaths

The Taoists studied the way a turtle breaths because they were looking for a way to develop longevity, and the turtle lives for a very long time. They discovered that it expands its lungs and diaphragm length ways up and down the body, because its hard shell stops it from expanding the lungs outwards. In expanding the breath up and down the body, the turtle's breathing is slowed down

and this in turns slows its movement. This is the essence of what is practiced in Tai Chi and Qi gong/Chi Kung. By slowing down the breath with relaxed movements, harmony is created between the breath and the body, and this in turn brings the mind into harmony with the breath and movement - thus creating a state of calm relaxation. This is why people find Tai Chi so beneficial, all movement is done in a relaxed way, no tension, no locked joints - for health of mind and body – and excellent for all ages.

Tai Chi opened me up to a renewed sense of my own energy, feeling it within myself and also in my hands - sensations and feelings I hadn't had before. I became more curious of these experiences and this led me on to explore the practice of Reiki, a Japanese healing technique for relaxation, calmness and wellbeing. I discovered that the founder, Mikao Usui had a background in Shintoism and Tendai Buddhism: his energy cultivation techniques came from the Shinto training, and the spiritual teachings for the system came from Buddhism.

My spiritual journey has therefore embraced Buddhism, and four years ago a friend introduced me to Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, which follows the Thai Theravada woodland tradition. I started to go to their Meditation workshops and found their training extremely beneficial. Now I regularly teach Tai Chi to people staying on their silent retreats, and have become more involved than I ever imagined I could. I have found Buddhist teachings extremely helpful in dealing with emotions and thoughts, through the power of insightful, mindful and Metta (loving kindness) meditation.

The Reiki Principles/Precepts have elements of traditional Buddhist precepts and Reiki means universal energy. It is a technique using your intent and yourself as a channel to let energy flow through you for the highest good for yourself and others, and all that is. The concept is that if we work on the self, we are helping all, because the belief is that we are all connected and part of the same energy in the universe as a whole.

I will never forget my first experience of Reiki treatment: there was physical and emotional release – all without the Practitioner touching me, it was like an energetic spring clean. I started reading up on auras, Chi Ki, Prana, Chakras and energy, and inexplicably felt drawn to healing. I took courses in healing systems other than Reiki before deciding to learn The Usui Reiki system, and take my Reiki Evolution training in 2006. I hadn't expected to start teaching immediately but my tutor said "not only when the student is ready the teacher appears, but also when the teacher is ready the student appears". Hence over the last four years I have had students from all walks of life, and some of them have been my greatest teachers. It is a privilege to be part of a student's healing journey, especially to assist him or her in opening up to the energy, and being on that journey with them in a nurturing and supportive way as they grow and develop. To teach what you love is a great gift.

Healing has helped me through some of the darkest moments of my life, and best of all it has brought me wonderful friendships with like-minded people, acting as a support network and guiding me through my own development. It is an invaluable tool I will have for the rest of my life.



If I look back at the various teachers I have worked with over my life, the ones I remember the most and consider with the highest regard, have been passionate, great communicators and inspirational. I am in gratitude to them. With their guidance I feel that I have come full circle on my spiritual journey. Discovering Tai Chi triggered a series of events that have led me into Reiki, Taoism and Buddhism and enabled me to realize the universal energy within. It has been a wonderfully organic and natural process that has helped me to be true to the person I am.

Catherine runs Reiki & Reiki Drum courses in Bedfordshire and teaches Wudang style Tai Chi in Herts, Beds and Bucks areas. She also regularly teaches Tai Chi at Amaravati retreat centre and offers Reiki & Tai Chi at Keech Hospice, Luton.

For more information please see her website and e-mail address below:

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Sustaining COMMITMENT

“The Buddhist Sutras were available only in Chinese, and Tetsugen wanted to publish them in Japanese. After ten years he had enough to complete his project, but at this time there were floods and famine, so he spent the money on relief of suffering. By the time he collected enough money again, an epidemic engulfed the country and once more he spent the money on relief of suffering. After twenty years, at his third attempt, he finally published the Sutras. The Japanese say that he published three sets and that the first two invisible ones were even greater than the last.”*

*Tetsugen Dōkō 1630 – 1682

A Buddhist Story

To commit ourselves to good deeds, to undertake work that will support and help others, is an expression of our deep humanity that feeds through to enrich and nourish us in so many ways. Tetsugen was deeply aware of that. He sacrificed the publication of important Buddhist sutras so that he could reach out and touch peoples' lives in a profound and practical way. His act of generosity was a courageous and heartfelt move that can inspire us to think about our own actions and the resulting impact they can have on others. But in doing so we must not simply focus our attention on the large scale, grandiose acts that tend to win over people's hearts and minds, for it is also the tiny, every-day, unnoticed acts that are also of value and merit. But whatever the scale and nature of our good deeds - our acts of giving - there appears to be at least three stages involved, starting with that of awareness...

Many bad deeds are committed in ignorance. We take a certain course in life, perhaps not really thinking fully about the impact it could have, and before long something quite unintentionally spills out to negatively affect other people's lives, and even our own. Ignorance can beset us all in our actions and behaviour; ignorance about higher life values, ignorance about our commitment to others. Any positive action that we undertake is a product of awareness. Awareness precedes all our affirmative actions, it is the energy that informs all that we do to secure spiritually infused ends. And without this awareness, this perception of better understanding, we will remain trapped, held back, unaware of the higher calling that can secure the very best from us.

*Awareness...
is the energy
that informs all that
we do to
secure spiritually
infused ends*

Once we know what appropriate action to take, in any given situation, we should commit ourselves to its implementation. With the engagement of commitment, we will transform our thoughts, ideas and plans into the expression mode, a decisive form that mirrors back to us all that we wanted to achieve. Where bigger issues are concerned this may very well involve us in substantial, personal change. It may necessitate the need to enter a new phase of our life, a new arena that we have never entered before. This may make us feel uncertain, uneasy, scared even about what we are trying to do but we must go forward. To pull back at this stage would diminish all the good that we are capable of producing and, importantly, restrict our spiritual growth and aspirations.

Unfortunately there are no universal rules, policies or procedures that we can follow to help us decide, clearly and concisely, what is the right thing to do in any given case. Each situation must be judged on its own merits, hopefully after full reflection, and if possible,

open discussion with wise counsel, then we can act.

Much of what we do, our everyday actions, are at the micro end of the scale: habitual, ephemeral, not necessarily requiring support and maintenance because they generally have no long-term implications, although they may still need the benefit of reflection and evaluation from time to time. At the macro end of the scale however, with bigger action plans, there is likely to be a need for support and evaluation to see them through, especially if there exists possible long-term ramifications. But whatever the scale of our actions, if we decide to ignore this process then we run the risk of losing impact, of not achieving

our desired outcomes that we originally hoped for. Too often we can decide on a plan only to be pulled away later into distraction and forgetfulness. Or we can oscillate between a keen enthusiasm and a dull apathy. Many things enter into our lives to intentionally, or unintentionally, undermine our strategies and we should be mindful of this. But provided we reassess our situation and firmly underpin again, what we have set out to achieve, then in time, we will meet with success. We must always remember the spiritual law that says whatever we so give, so shall we receive. Therefore if we are charged with positive motivation, giving of our very best, how can we possibly fail!

A great example of someone who sustained a vision through to its realization is Nelson Mandela who joined the African National Congress in 1944 and started to participate in a long, determined and concerted campaign of opposition against the segregation and discrimination of Apartheid Rule in South Africa. In 1964 he was arrested and charged with sabotage and conspiracy against the State. Before the commencement of his defence trial Mandela made an impassioned speech from the dock. This was the closing paragraph:

“...During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.” - Nelson Mandela - April 20, 1964

Mandela was sentenced to life imprisonment. He was eventually released from Robben Island at the age of 72,

after serving a total of 25 years. Yet on release, he still continued his campaign of opposition against the injustices and inequalities of the South African Government - such was the vision and determination that he had sustained over all those difficult years. Eventually he helped form a new, democratic government and for the very first time in South African history, the indigenous black community was allowed a democratic right to vote. Supported with a wide consensus, Mandela assumed the Presidency. In honour of all that he had achieved in his struggles, Mandela received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993.

“A Zen Master’s life is one of continuous mistakes.”

Dōgen Zenji 1200 – 1253

Trying to do our very best is not always easy. So many variables conspire to undermine, too often, our intentions and plans. We get knocked off course by extraneous forces that build up to challenge our direction. We also knock ourselves off course. Recognizing that the path we tread is often a difficult and arduous journey that inevitably involves making many mistakes, is a lesson that confronts us all. But provided we can reflect deeply on our direction in life, and act in accordance with our spirit based beliefs and values, then the path will deepen despite all our continuous mistakes.

JOURNEY LONG,
JOURNEY WELL...

FAITH IN EVERY FOOTSTEP



Image © Sarah Thorley

Faces peered out of windows and heads turned as about a hundred people, some carrying placards of the symbols of the various religions, wove their way through the busy High Street and quiet back roads of Tooting. These were people of different religions - and none - walking and talking together as they visited seven places of worship. We were generously welcomed at churches, Hindu and Sikh temples and Islamic centres. We listened to sacred words in Sanskrit, Arabic, Gurmukhi and English accompanied by cymbals, harmonium, organ, flute, guitars, drums and Gospel music. We were privileged to be present at the blessing of a newborn baby and at a vibrant and colourful wedding in the Hindu Temple; at the impressive discipline of midday prayers in the Islamic Centre; at a peaceful reading of the Guru Granth Sahib in the Sikh Gurdwara; at the exuberant singing of Gospel songs with the black Pentecostal congregation. At the Shi'a Islamic Centre, we were taken on a photographic pilgrimage to the sacred Shi'a shrines in Iraq and the day ended at an inspiring multi-cultural Mass in the Roman Catholic Church packed with Christians of many nationalities. Conversations between us raised many questions and hopefully some barriers were breached and some learning and trusting and healing begun. "Well! I never knew all this was in my back yard!" one local resident who joined the walk was heard to comment.

For the last fifteen years an Inter Faith Walk like this one has taken place in a different location every July in south London, organised by *The South London Inter Faith Group (SLIFG)*. For all participants, local or not, 'religious' or not, it's a unique chance to enter buildings we may often have walked past but not dared to enter and a chance to talk with and to learn from people whose religion and culture is different. With respect and openness, with words and footsteps, we tread on each other's holy ground, to discover what we have in common - and how we diverge. We are able to ask, in this spirit of respect and friendship, about issues in other religious traditions that we may find difficult; questions we've always wanted to ask. There are moments of revelation, sharing and joy and of course there are

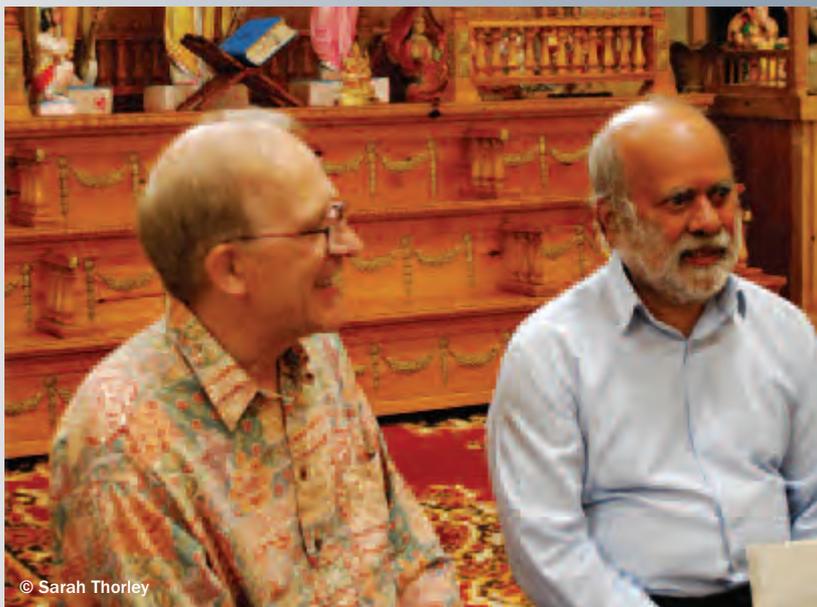
moments of confusion and pain, when differences open up wounds - sometimes between people belonging to different branches of the same religion.

At the end of the day, we may be exhausted but for many it has felt like a pilgrimage through which our own spiritual journey, or search, has been enlightened and enriched. We have perhaps learned from the wisdom of other faiths, been touched by the example of other believers, and maybe shed some of our preconceptions and stereotypes. And there is always the hope that the sight of people walking and talking together, quite obviously of different faiths and traditions, will serve as a witness to the local community that people of different religions can come together in peace despite what the media so often portrays.

For 2012, the year of the Olympics, the SLIFG dreamed up an ambitious plan. Members and other contacts in each of the thirteen South London boroughs were asked to organise their own inter faith walks all on the same weekend. The SLIFG would co-ordinate and act as a contact centre and generate publicity. The response was magnificent!

On the weekend of July 14th and 15th 2012, twenty three churches, seven Hindu temples, fifteen Islamic Centres, five Buddhist temples, four Sikh gurdwaras and eight synagogues were visited by about 400 people of different faiths, or none. Twelve inter faith walks took place that weekend from Kingston in the west to Greenwich in the east and from Southwark south to Croydon. New friends were made, new thresholds crossed, new insights gained, more understanding achieved. We walked and talked together, witnessing on the streets to the Olympic spirit of friendship and cooperation, and appreciating our diversity. So many people opened the doors of their sacred places to pilgrims and strangers, with warm welcomes and generous hospitality and a great willingness to share.

Ganesh Lall who, with other members of his community, had generously cooked a meal at the Caribbean Hindu Temple in Lambeth, for fifty soaking wet, but very enthusiastic walkers commented: "I was so happy on Saturday; our temple came to life and I personally experienced religion in action. We were all blessed."



© Sarah Thorley

What can you do in a day? It can be no more than a taster, a glimpse, but it is a beginning, a seed, a friendship made, a misconception righted.

We always hope that each walk will be the beginning of something more – however small. A synagogue, mosque and church are talking about a table tennis group for their young people; the church located next to the Hindu temple will invite each other to one of their festival occasions; the inter faith walk route has become an annual faith walk for the children in their last year at a local primary school; someone on a bus or in a local shop, will meet someone they recognise from the walk - things are found in common, contact details are swapped and a relationship develops; you meet someone with a similar local concern or problem – a link is made and cooperation follows. This can be so important when problems arise – that people have already met and developed a trust and can be confident that support will be found. Two significant incidents come to mind – the shooting of Charles de Menendes in Stockwell and the desecration of a synagogue in Streatham. In both cases, much comfort was found in the care and concern shown by local ‘inter faith’ people.

I’d like to end by paying tribute to Brother Daniel Faivre. The original inspiration for these walks came from my participation in the (ongoing) annual Westminster multi faith Pilgrimages for Peace initiated in 1986 by the remarkable and much-loved pioneer of inter faith relations, Brother Daniel. He lived for 28 years in Southall and died in 2007. Those gathered to install his memorial plaque last December were urged in the spirit of Brother Daniel “to continue to build bridges of friendship to other religions, to heal past wrongs and to foster trust between individuals and communities”. That indeed is the spirit behind these walks of discovery and faith.



© Sarah Thorley

This year SLIFG celebrates 30 years of inter faith dialogue and engagement and Sarah has been an active member for 26 of those years.

A ‘roving exhibition’ and DVD film of the 2012 inter faith walks will be launched at Southwark Cathedral on June 16th at 6.15pm.

For further information please contact Sarah: thorleysarah@yahoo.co.uk

Please see Westminster Interfaith website for this year’s pilgrimage on June 8th www.westminsterinterfaith.org.uk

SLIFG website: <http://www.southlondoninterfaith.org.uk>

All shades of *faith*

For many ordinary Malians, the last year has seen their spiritual life take something of a battering. For a country which once prided itself deeply on its moderate and tolerant form of Islam, alarmist newspaper headlines calling it West Africa's Afghanistan have been hard to swallow.

What went wrong? When in March 2012 soldiers from the national army stormed the presidential palace in Bamako to protest the treatment of troops who had been sent to the north to deal with a Tuareg rebellion, it seems they had little intention of launching a coup. But terrified, the former president Amadou Toumani Toure fled, and as the soldiers and politicians squabbled about what next, a complex alliance of radical jihadist groups over-ran the north of the country. For the next 8 months they set about imposing their version of Islam, which included stoning a young unmarried couple to death and cutting off the hands and feet of a number of robbers.

The Islamists' assaults on Mali's culture by the alliance of three groups – Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Mujao and Ansar Dine, seemed to come from a text book description of how to declare a jihad in the 21st century – they banned music, dancing, smoking and football, and smashed up several tombs of

Sufi saints in the ancient city of Timbuktu, claiming that the veneration of saints was un-Islamic. This act was filmed on mobile phones and quickly appeared on You Tube where comparisons were made with the Taliban's blowing up of the Bamiyan Buddhas. Historians and bibliophiles around the world waited anxiously for news of the thousands of historic manuscripts which have been in Timbuktu since the 15th and 16th century, when the town was an important trading crossroads and a centre of Islamic learning in West Africa.

When France launched an intervention in northern Mali in January 2013 to reclaim the territory from the Islamists, for several days the fate of the manuscripts was unclear. Thankfully today we know that the most precious and beautiful have survived, as local people, who understand too well their emotional and historic value smuggled them out from official libraries into private homes. The French operation has successfully cleared the Islamists out of the three main towns in the north – Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu, although battles are still continuing between the most determined and French and Chadian forces in mountainous desert region in the extreme north of Mali.



© Photograph courtesy Celeste Hicks

But what does the future hold if elections due in July are unable to deliver credible politicians who can respond to Malian's need for reconciliation and meaningful development? The country remains one of the poorest on the planet with a literacy rate hovering around 30% and a terrible problem of unemployment amongst young people. Many analysts have deep fears that if years pass without the creation of a genuinely participative democracy which can help to eradicate poverty, some of the radical ideas the Islamists in the north espoused could start to look more attractive to the youth. The Islamists may have been set on the back foot but they have proved they are committed to their project – some of them have lived deep in the harsh Sahara desert since the early 1990s when they battled the Algerian government.

Most ordinary Muslims in Mali will tell you that the country is famous for its tolerance; Islamic practises exist alongside animist traditions such as worship of ancestors and fetishes. There is a small community of Christians, and many people who call themselves Muslims are not strict about alcohol consumption or praying five times a day. Most people cannot read Arabic and get their interpretation of the Qur'an from sometimes questionable Imams. Famous Sufi preachers such as Usman Haidara practise a kind of hybrid Islam which includes some mysticism and benediction.

But in recent years – well before the take-over of the north by the jihadists – religion has started to play a bigger role in society. In 2009 an attempt by the secular government of Toure to update the country's family code, regularising traditional marriages and changing the laws of inheritance in favour of women, was decisively rejected by the population who felt it was an attack on their Islamic values. Religious leaders were able to get supporters out onto the streets to demonstrate in numbers that politicians could only dare to dream of.

While the religious leaders today are calling for reconciliation and the rejection of the worst excesses of the Islamists, Mali's High Islamic Council is run by figures who identify themselves as Wahabi, or Salafist. In this interpretation of Islam the veneration of saints, worship of fetishes, drinking of alcohol and of course the status women, are all much more strictly and conservatively viewed.

Malians are proud of their heritage, and most are determined to defend their pluralistic approach to religion, the so-called 'moderate Islam' of sub-Saharan West Africa. But they have also been deeply shocked by the events of the last year. While most people soundly reject the kind of violent imposition of sharia law the jihadists were advocating, there is certainly a need for representatives of all shades of faith to sit down together and decide what role and shape the future Islam will take. Without dialogue and reconciliation, the famous tolerance and mutual respect Malians have for each other may come under threat.

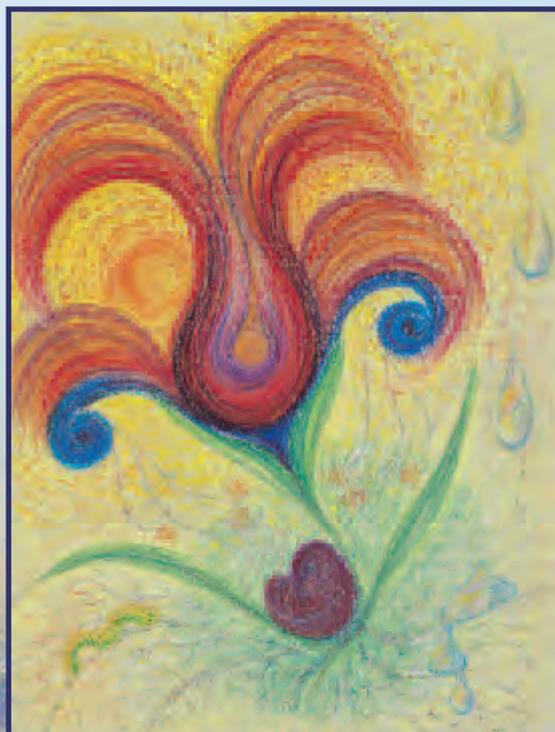
“what does the future hold if elections due in July are unable to deliver credible politicians who can respond to Malian's need for reconciliation and meaningful development?”

Returning

My return to art, in mid-life, after a career spent teaching English overseas and as a university social science researcher in the UK, was inspired by learning to meditate. In January 2000 I was at a crossroads in my life, knowing I needed to make changes, but not sure what direction to take. Looking for something to brighten up my Friday evenings, I enrolled on a 'meditation and healing' course. I knew that meditation can lead to life changes but was completely unprepared for what was to come and had no idea of the impact it would have on my life.

The course tutor was trained in Buddhist practices, but drew on a range of spiritual traditions. In the first class, having been introduced to a simple 'light' meditation, I found myself sitting in floods of tears, which continued for 48 hours. Subsequent sessions were less dramatic, but I continued to find the process deeply calming, relaxing and refreshing. I later discovered my capacity for visualisation. Through 'guided fantasy' we were gently encouraged to explore an imaginary space where an image, word or phrase, pertinent to each of us, might emerge. I found that whatever emerged always seemed very relevant for me. I noticed that my dreams, too, were becoming increasingly memorable and meaningful.

Meditation is not about 'going anywhere' or expecting anything to happen; it is not about 'doing' anything at all. However, I often noticed that, during my regular practice, as I sat in stillness, an image would emerge, momentarily. I also found that, if I had a problem and asked for guidance from within, an image would appear, during meditation or dream, as if in response. I was stunned by the clarity and power of these images. As I discovered my own inner world, full of strange creatures, objects and symbols, the world outside also appeared more colourful and interesting. I was particularly drawn to water: long hot baths, walks by canal or estuary, the sound of underground streams. It was as if an intuitive, poetic part of my inner being had awoken from a long sleep, filling me with a child-like sense of wonder and renewed appreciation of life.



Recuperation (oil pastel)

*...an intuitive,
poetic part of
my inner being
had awoken from
a long sleep...*

to *Life*

As time went by, I felt an increasing need to express my inner visions through art. I began reading about art-making for personal development. One day I found a long neglected box of oil pastels and began the first of a series of paintings, using a circular format for images inspired by meditation or dream, and a rectangular format for those emerging through the spontaneous expression of intense feeling, directly onto paper. I often painted immediately after meditating. It always happened very naturally, with each image appearing to create itself, unlike work I had done in the past where I had been overly worried about 'getting it right'. When it felt complete, I would position the image so that I could pay it serious attention and let it speak to me. Each image seemed alive with energy and intense personal meaning. Working with images in this way was completely new for me and felt quite magical.

Returning to creativity played a vital, integral role in helping me return, more fully, to life. Discovering my own mythological landscape opened my eyes to some of the ways in which the unconscious imagination can give metaphorical form to emotional energy. Having become interested in the work of Carl Jung and archetype theory, I also understood that there is never one simple interpretation. An image can be viewed from many angles; it may resonate differently for each of us, evoking a wide range of thoughts and feelings; furthermore, our responses may alter over time, as we see it and make sense of it in new ways. This expressive and reflective process may at times feel difficult or confusing but can also be experienced as enriching and enlightening, bringing a sense of release, recognition, clarity of insight or spiritual refreshment.

My journey through meditation into art helped me come to recognise and value my own inner resources and inspired a passionate interest in the relationship between creativity and wellbeing. I eventually went on to retrain in art psychotherapy, working with patients, carers and bereaved family members at a cancer day care centre. This enabled me to extend and deepen my understanding of work with images, while maintaining respect for the essential mystery of the process. My own art has continued to develop. These days, I find myself drawn to the beauty of small organic forms, wide skies or the play of light on water. When I became ill myself, a few years ago, I found sculpting in soapstone particularly therapeutic. Art-making continues to offer space for expression and contemplation; I continue to find it absorbing, surprising and inspiring.

Fiona Ormerod

Fiona is not currently working as an art therapist, due to illness, but is happy to offer help in setting up 'art for relaxation' support groups. Her first solo exhibition, 'Fruits of the Earth' was held at Brantwood, Coniston in 2011; she has also exhibited in London with The Pastel Society and The Society of Botanical Artists. Some of her images are available as cards or prints.

To get in touch, please email mail@fionaormerod.plus.com or visit her website: <http://fionaormerod.artweb.com>

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Wave (oil pastel)



Resurrection (oil pastel)



Essence (oil pastel)

A Swan in Winter

But after all, it wasn't a twig snapped
by the weight of snow. No. A swan
cracked itself from the solid shallows
and scraped across the ice that used
to be home. Its end feathers were crimped
by spiked crystals. As it moved it carved
smiles into the steeled water, the joke
a secret from everyone but the governor
of winter and rivers. It was a year long,
that yard to the quick of the estuary's flow,
and every step, the swan frayed more hoar
to fringe to the ragged shackle of its tail.

Shocked, I tested pleas on the mighty,
weighty winter air. Let webbed feet,
unsuited to this terrain, fail so it slips
to the shelter of the rising tide, feed,
lift its neck, be the swan I didn't notice
again, albeit saved by the crafty darts
of my concern. The swan paused, hefted
its new self from side to side, its neck
a crumple of exhaustion. Something screeched,
silently. It wasn't the swan. Rising,
it swished its icicles and moved away,
refusing me the thrill of pity.

Rebecca Irvine Bilkau