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NEWS AND VIEWS FOR MINISTERS

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Spirituality



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Contents

EDITORIAL

Marg Schrader 3

ARTICLES:

Meeting Jesus..... 5

Clare Lind

Spiritual Care of Clergy 7

John Franklin

Spiritual Practices..... 9

Sharon Ross Ensor

Words Out of Silence..... 12

Bruce Hamill

Postlude 15

Bruce Hamill

The Use of Prayer in Stressful Situations..... 16

Geoff New

Science and Spirituality..... 18

Nicola Hoggard Creegan

REVIEWS

Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer 21

Reviewed by Andrew Dunn

God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity' 23

Reviewed by Graham Millar

Faithful Marriages 26

Tayyaba Khan

COLUMN

If Anyone is in Christ, the New Creation Has Come 28

Ray Coster, Moderator, Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand

You've Got to Serve Someone 31

Martin Baker, Assembly Executive Secretary

Editorial

Marg Schrader, Wellington Presbytery

I guess all of us in ministry know a sense of God calling us to the task. For some of us this comes as joy, for others fear, and for people like me completely “out of the blue”. Of course then we have to go through the process where the Church prayerfully discerns the reality of the call.

I wonder how many of us now have that same sense of knowing the voice of God? How many feel bereft of that closeness, that tender whisper? I am aware in my own ministry, and in the ministry of so many I work with, that there are periods when ministry seems like a long hard slog and the sense of call and of responding to that deep voice within, has long since gone, or life is so busy that taking time out to pray and to listen falls down the list of priorities.

I have just read an interesting book called *Sensible Shoes* by Sharon Garlough Brown. It is the story of four women who join a spiritual journey group for six Saturday mornings. One is a pastor whose senior pastor insisted that she takes nine months away from the parish and so she goes to this group. Doris is a good minister and has helped many come to a deeper relationship with God, but she has forgotten how to look after herself and how to listen to God for herself – in fact she is scared to do so because there is so much stuff she has pushed down underneath her busyness. She describes it as like a toxic waste dump with a doily over the top. The book is about how with the help of an excellent spiritual director, she and the other women look at their perfectionism, their early abusive history and their grief, in the loving light of God.

I wonder how you listen to that still small voice? This issue of *Candour* is about the many ways we as clergy open ourselves to God and the resources that are there for us. We know God comes to us in so many different ways and we each need to find our way to be still and listen. For some it is pottering in the garden, for others listening to music, walking on the beach, working in the shed or tinkering with an engine. I am presuming most of us as a basic, spend quality time in prayer and reading the scriptures although even that fades when the pressures mount.

I believe we also need someone with whom we can speak about our experiences. I am aware that the Church asks us to have monthly supervision and in our three-yearly review we are asked about our faith; this is important, but I personally need someone to ask me the God questions. Some good supervisors do that. Questions like “How do you experience God in this?”, “Have you talked to God about this?”, “Are you listening to your dreams?”, “What is the image of God that you are working out of?”

For many of us, deep work needs to be done as we journey through life and let go of some of the more unhelpful images of God or parts of our theology we grew up with that no longer make sense. One of the very helpful concepts for me was discovering the “stages of faith”. Many – like James Fowler – have written about these. It helped me see that my doubts and angst were really part of the amazing yet difficult journey that we who are choosing to walk this path, are on. Leonard Cohen so wisely says: “there is a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in”.

As we let go of some things that have been important we come to understand at a deeper level some of Jesus and Paul’s sayings about needing to die to ourselves; sayings which meant nothing to me at an earlier stage. The beauty of all this is that the further we go on this journey, the more we recognise God in all things: we experience God’s overwhelming love and this sense leads to a growing love for all people and all of creation.

I remember the day when I was introduced to ways of praying other than the very formal method I grew up with and learnt at theological college. I felt as though all my Christmases had come at once. Thank you to the Catholic Church for holding that treasure for us.

To me, spiritual direction is a gift beyond compare! I meet monthly with a person I trust implicitly. He is like a midwife to me, birthing me into an ever deeper relationship with God. He helps me open myself to God and clear away debris, some of which has been there since early childhood. This of course often leads to a new sense of call.

One of my deep joys is to go off on a silent retreat where I can let go of all the busyness and listen again at depth, be challenged, comforted, held, given new direction.

“Journey in, journey out” is a basic metaphor for the Christian life. It is as we go deeper into God and into who we really are, that the call to act becomes clearer – the call to be that person through whom fruits of the Spirit are made manifest in works of justice and mercy. It seems to me that often the call is to let go of some asks that we have said “yes” to so we can respond freely to the deeper call of God on our lives.

We need help. One of the ways open to us here in New Zealand is the work of Spiritual Growth Ministries (SGM) which was birthed in the Presbyterian Church.

In 1980, John Franklin, Minister of St Andrew’s Gisborne, while on retreat at The Church of The Saviour in Washington DC, sensed a deep call of God to work with others in deepening people’s experience of God. Imagine his delight when he returned home to discover a letter from the national church parish development and mission department asking him to establish a ministry of spirituality. As Lester Reid the director said: “we had a church that had a deep sense of spirituality, but it seems that it is being overtaken by a need to go, go, go.”

John quickly found that in Gisborne there were three others with a similar sense, so a team was formed. They soon offered a series of retreats and workshops on spiritual life. In 1988 The SGM program to train spiritual directors was formed with Sr Mary Concannon – a Dominican Sister – as coordinator. Since then the work of SGM has grown to involve an amazingly ecumenical group coming from right across the theological spectrum and the churches. Forty-one people have trained in the last two years, and of them only one was a Presbyterian. This year of 20 trainees, there are none!

The feedback from clergy who have done this course and from their parishioners is that it has transformed their preaching, making it more relevant to people’s lives, and their pastoral work, helping them sit more easily with people’s pain.

This issue of *Candour* is from a wide cross section of clergy with their own unique takes on what God has been doing in their lives, and I hope you find it helps you see your own story in God more deeply.

www.sgm.org.nz Spiritual Growth Ministries

www.acsd.org.nz Association of Christian Spiritual Directors. Contains a list of directors by geographical area



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Meeting Jesus at the Edge of the Desert

Clare Lind, Wellington Presbytery

*We sat on the step
And I gave you my water bottle.
You looked like you needed it.
We sat.
You drank.*

*'Leave some for me,' I said. "It's a hot walk home."
You smiled.
Your body was tired,
Your eyes full of energy,
And your face, the face of love.
You were a man who knew his direction
And how it might be done...
And how it must not be done.*

*Well here beside you is a woman seeking clarity.
That's me... Seeking clarity for the next stage, my Lord.*

*So we talked, you and I,
And I asked about the thermals of grace.
"Notice where they occur," you said.
"Be guided by your love for God,"
And pray.
We walked back together,
And I wrote a list,
Which was full of wise and useful things...
A long list with too much detail,
For all you really said was
"Notice, kneel and pray."*

C. Lind

No doubt you too have travelled with God in some hairy places. Reflecting back from further down the track, the places that have scared the wits out of me have in the end been the places of deepest growth and most obvious grace. In some ways it has been easier to stick close to God in the rough bits – I wouldn't dare do otherwise. But how does a person stay in touch with that relationship in the ordinary, when things are not so much hard as busy? ... Terribly busy... With a busyness that is often propped up by some ill-formed thought that I am doing this for God. How does a person sustain ministry for the long haul, when their tendency is to let expectations crowd out the relationship that gives them their deepest energy and health?

I wrote the above poem when I was on a week-long retreat at the foot of the Rimutaka Incline in the Wairarapa. It was Lent and Morning Prayer had been a devotion on the Temptation. It ended with a meditation about meeting Jesus as he emerged from the wilderness. On the afternoon of what was a fiercely hot day I had taken my water bottle and gone to sit and pray on a stile near the beginning of the track into Cross Creek and the Incline.

The retreat centre was on a farm and it wasn't uncommon to see hawks. Unless you're a small rodent, the flight of a hawk is beautiful to watch as it rides the winds. There is not much wing flapping, just a lot of watchfulness. That is what gave rise to the phrase "the thermals of grace". They are those times in ministry where our energies mesh with the energy of God and something beautiful and powerful emerges, and it is obvious that we are caught up in a work that is not our own. The outcome far exceeds the effort.

I have, as you probably do, a number of spiritual practices – church attendance (which rather comes with the job), Bible reading etc. "Notice, kneel, pray" has become a shorthand for three practices that are an important part of my making space for God in ordinary time. For me, "notice" is a morning walk somewhere in the neighbourhood. It has become space to walk off the chatter in my mind and to begin to notice my surroundings. As I notice my surroundings I am drawn beyond myself and almost always into some acknowledgement of God. My morning walk is space for God and me to greet each other.

"Kneel" is a practice of sitting still and in silence. My father used to get ribbed about how long he took to write a page to the woman he loved, the woman who became my mother. To give expression to a deep relationship is to come up against the clumsy inadequacy of words. I've found that the same thing happens with a relationship with God. The words may come out in a gush to begin with, but after a while they peter out, and there is just the reality of the relationship and the deep silence that picks up where the words leave off. I have come to see that silence as a place where God's Holy Spirit is moulding me. I don't know how. I don't know in what ways exactly. All I know is that love is at work and my stillness and silence is my agreement to that work.

My take on "pray" is a form of journalled prayer. I stumbled on to it when I was trying to work my way through some writer's block. In a book called *The Artist's Way*¹ I came across a practice called "morning pages". The idea is that you sit down for half an hour each day with pen and paper and you just write whatever comes into your head. I started writing about whatever was on top and fairly quickly I discovered it turned into prayer. I was doing "dear God" rather than "dear diary". This is a practice I do frequently rather than daily. I write to God about things that are coming up in the family, the parish or Presbytery, pastoral concerns (I'm careful not to use names) sermons etc. Because I write more slowly than I think, and I have half an hour to fill, I find that this form of prayer is more considered and pastoral than my prayer might be otherwise. I've found, too, that as I've written to God about situations and what is troubling me about them, sometimes wisdom comes.

There are bound to be other ways to interpret "notice, kneel, pray", but these are mine. Through them I have tried to structure into my ministry, places that remind me that the work I do is God's far more than it is mine.

¹ *The Artist's Way*, Julia Cameron, Tarcher/Putnam, New York, 2002.

Spiritual Care of Clergy

John Franklin*

I was talking to a young man, recently ordained, who was having to make some adjustments to his habitual behaviours. His behaviour in a previous profession had been to organise it, get on with it, manage it, fix it, and move on to the next challenge. He was completely action oriented, and had a track record of some significant achievements. But now he was disturbed by one of his ordination vows. He was asked, "Will you be constant in prayer and study?" And his response was, "I will. God give me imagination and perseverance."

With the gift of imagination he had begun an intentional practice of prayer, the prayer of waiting on God, and praying for the parish, and the community. And he had begun to read scripture with a listening ear (rather than a student ear), and material to stimulate and inform his emerging practice of ministry. But, he felt guilty. "This prayer and this reading is all very well, but everything within me is telling me I should be *doing* something!" He was after all in a parish that needed help to realise that it is the 21st century, and needed to think beyond self preservation and be available to be God's mission outpost in the community. It was a big job, and he could do it.

But he was given perseverance, and with the help of his spiritual director, he was able to see that while prayer and reading may not look like doing anything, it was doing something significant for him as the spiritual leader of this faith community. The time taken for prayer and reading was keeping him earthed in God, and reminded him of his identity and his role as an agent of the Kingdom, an ambassador of Christ. They reminded him that he himself had no ministry. The minster was Jesus Christ, and without full availability to him, he was just in another helping profession.

Here is a man in the freshness of early days who is attending to his spiritual care. But through the years I have seen others in supervision and in spiritual direction who have become drained by the demands of parish life. Passion has evaporated, and they are just preaching the sermon, visiting the sick, and attending the meetings because they have learned the skills and that's what they do. The malaise here is the result of becoming rooted in ministry and not rooted in Christ, so effectiveness becomes more important than faithfulness, especially when the pressure is on to grow the church, or even save the church.

But rooted in Christ! It seems to me that none of the clergy self-care seminars and lectures I have attended have ever emphasised that. It is indeed critical to have rest days, manage stress, build close relationships outside of your sphere of work, attend to boundaries, especially sexual ones, and observe confidentiality. These are all important. But at rock bottom, whose is the church, whose is the ministry, whose is the word, the healing presence, the forgiveness? Not ours. So I think the first step in spiritual care for clergy is to attend to the One in whose name we are ostensibly doing all this. The question, "Will you be constant in prayer and study?" is saying, "Will you take time to consciously remember why you are doing this, and for whom, and be open to an empowering beyond your natural energies?" To live into this question is to be open to personal and professional health.

Spiritual care

Spiritual can mean pretty much anything these days, but by "spiritual", here we are talking about our connectedness to the vine, remembering that in his affront to the human ego, Jesus says, "Without me you can do nothing". Spiritual direction attends to our connectedness, and supervision attends to our living it out in our work environments: "The spiritual life is not a do it yourself project". But for our spiritual care, we also need friendship; we need community as pastors, says Timothy Jones. We need friendships with others who understand this calling, its demands and joys, its challenges and privilege. Our health significantly benefits from friendships where we can tell the truth. And as a call to truthfulness, Richard Foster's Renovate program suggests these kinds of questions for friends in ministry:

- Are you faithful in prayer and scripture study - beyond sermon preparation?
- Do you give priority time to your spouse and family?
- Do you plan and take rest?
- Do you conduct your financial affairs with integrity?
- Do you expose yourself to any explicit sexual material?
- Have you just lied to me?

We have the Psalms naming, and inviting us to name, the whole range of human emotion before God. And we can name them and be honest with the friend too. And in it all, we can remind one another of the God who cares for us all, whether we overeat, drive too fast, lose our cool, make too many appointments, or plough through our day off. With another's care, over time, we can stay real in our calling - friends who will point us back to Jesus. And none of this can happen in a lecture or a seminar on clergy spiritual care.

Spiritual care of clergy

Who takes responsibility for the caring? It's not usually the parish or the employing agency. A spouse may. And, as we are saying, friends can play a huge part. But I believe that the responsibility lies with the individual. We each have a life, "fearfully and wonderfully made". (Ps 139:40) We each have the awesome experience of being alive at all! We are each in charge of this life that we have. And this life has experienced a call to a specific task in the church which is Christ's agency in the world. Is this life to be returned to its Maker lived to the full according to Jesus' promise in John 10.10? Or will just the dregs be returned? We are each responsible for the life that we are.

Mercy and grace are bigger than anything, but I believe we are called to take responsibility for our spiritual, mental, emotional and physical health, for visibly and invisibly they affect the people to whom, and with whom, we minister. We are called to authenticity, to transparency, as bearers of Christ presence, and these qualities are the fruit of staying deeply connected with our Source, with those whom we love, and with those with whom we share this privileged thing we call ministry.

So, as an act of spiritual care and mutuality in the joys and challenges of service, may we be able to speak this health to one another in full sincerity: "God fill you with truth and joy".

Suggested reading

Lynne M. Baab, *Sabbath Keeping* (IVP Books, 2005)

Tilden Edwards, *Living Simply Through the Day* (Paulist Press, 1977)

Tony Horsfall, *Working From a Place of Rest* (BRF, 2010)

Andrew Purves, *The Crucifixion of Ministry* (IVP, 2007)

Andrew Purves, *The Resurrection of Ministry* (IVP, 2010)

Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor* (Eerdmans, 1989)

Richard Rohr, *Breathing Under Water* (St Anthony Messenger Press, 2011)

Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church* (HarperOne, 2007)

Flora Slogan Wuellner, *Feed My Shepherds* (Upper Room, 1998)

**John is a spiritual director and ministry supervisor, and is chaplain to the Anglican bishop of Dunedin.*

Spiritual Practices

Sharon Ross Ensor, Wellington Presbytery

At the beginning of his book, *Finding Our Way Again*, Brian McLaren wonders whether Christianity has placed too much emphasis on faith being an assent to a system of belief and has lost the balance between that and the necessity for it to also be a way of life.

"Without a coherent and compelling way of life, formed in community and expressed in mission, some of us begin losing interest in the system of belief, or we begin holding it grimly, driving more and more people away from our faith rather than attracting them toward it" (pg 4)

Perhaps part of the issue for us is that we are in new territory as Church. We have moved beyond Christendom, where Christianity was one of the main pillars of society. In that paradigm, church-going and citizenship went hand-in-hand and the values of our faith were echoed by the values of our surrounding society. We are now on the edges of that society – and in a quite precarious place in regard to our future – with much of our security, comfort and smugness having been stripped away.

Just a few decades ago God's mission was seen as something which happened "way out there" – usually overseas – that we sent other people to engage with on our behalf. We supported them with our prayers and donations, we gathered to listen to their stories and offer encouragement when they returned on furlough. Now we recognise that God's mission is right here on our front doorstep, in our neighbourhood and we are all called to join in.

Our current context is both uncomfortable and exciting for us. Our song and our prayer easily echoes the psalmists: How do we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

So much has been stripped away that it is perhaps easier to see what it is that we are called to as a community gathered around Christ; discovering God's transforming work within the ordinary and everyday life of our world and joining in on it.

The recent emphasis on spiritual practices offers us a way to grapple with the question of our identity as followers of Christ in this changed and changing environment. There's a sense in which our current environment is not a new story for the Church. Back in its early life the Church found itself in a similar situation, living on the edges of society, without a voice and marginalised.

Alan Roxburgh in his book, *Missional Map-making*, observes the patterns of those early Christians. They transformed their world, he says, through cultivated practices and habits that shaped them as communities of faith, such as meeting together for worship, sharing food, remembering the story of Jesus, hospitality, pledging to keep the marriage covenant, caring for widows of the dying and sharing with people in need. They created a parallel culture which formed the way they lived in their communities and in doing so they created a new DNA which eventually transformed the world.

Roxburgh says that we know about these practices but have largely lost the ability to practice them. There is a massive need, he says, to form habits that re-create a Christian identity – as we remember "God's agency in the world and that our location is within destructive social practices... that desperately miss God". We can follow the model of the early Christian community who intentionally cultivated practices and habits that shaped them as communities of faith; becoming the light on a hill that Jesus spoke of.

Brian McLaren says there are three purposes of spiritual practices:

- **To intentionally develop our character** Here's a nice quote from him:

"In a wild world like ours, your character left untended will become a stale room, an obnoxious child, a vacant lot filled with thorns, weeds, broken bottles, raggedy grocery bags and dog droppings. Your deepest channels will silt in, and you will feel yourself shallowing. You'll become a presence neither you nor others will enjoy and you, and they, will spend more and more time and energy trying to be anywhere else... Well tended, your character will be a fragrant garden, an artist's home, with walls and halls full of memories and beauty, a party with live music and good jokes and pleasant conversations in every corner. You'll be good and deep company for others and yourself." (p. 11)

- **To be awake to life around us** Helping us to not just wander through life inattentively, but to pay attention to what is happening around us – the moments of grace, the places of compassion, the invitations to gratitude for all that we have.
- **To be aware of God's presence in our lives and the life of the world** Simon Carey Holt in *God Next Door*, says that "spiritual practices... are practices... undertaken intentionally and routinely to facilitate the transforming presence of God in our lives". As we ground ourselves in such practices we become more aware of God at work in the ordinary and everyday, drawing us to look outwards to "the other".

There is no standardised list of spiritual practices. Every book on the subject has its own list. McLaren reminds us, though, that there are seven ancient spiritual practices common to the major Abrahamic faith traditions:

- **Fixed-hour prayer** Regular time set aside for prayer in order to ground ourselves in our relationship with God. There is a sense, too, in which this connects us with others in the faith community around the world, both now and throughout history, who we share this practice with, particularly when the prayer is formalised via a prayer-book.
- **Fasting** Intentionally forgoing food or shopping or technology or... in order to remind ourselves that we are not enslaved to our appetites and desires. Fasting can also be a pathway to increased compassion and action on behalf of the majority of people in the world who do not have a choice about whether to forgo even the basic necessities of life.
- **Sabbath** Literally, to quit, have a break. Eugene Peterson has written about the dual purpose of Sabbath-keeping, of praying and playing as conveyed in Exodus 20:8-11 and Deuteronomy 5:12-15. In Exodus (and Genesis 2:2-3), Sabbath is an opportunity to remember our place within creation and to give thanks to the Creator. Resting then becomes an acknowledgment of God's abundance and ours. In Deuteronomy Sabbath-keeping is a reminder of our humanity and the humanity of others. We rest in remembrance of our freedom and we celebrate it. Sabbath-keeping then becomes an act of living into God's alternative reality. It is both an affirmation that we and others are freed from being "commodities for the machine" and that there is One, who has, who is and who will continue to bring about that freedom.
- **Sacred meal** The meal reminds us both whose we are, and who we are as we partake in it, recognising what taking part in the feast calls out of us in the living out of hospitality, generosity and reconciliation.
- **Pilgrimage** Interrupting our usual routines with an intentional experience of discomfort, dislocation, exploration and adventure, believing that God has things to teach us on the journey. Pilgrimage is a reminder that often in scripture when God is experienced anew, people are on the move, out of their normal routines and comfort zones. The increased interest in pilgrimages, like the 800km Camino de Santiago on the one hand and a localised labyrinth walk on the other, are testament to the power and pull of pilgrimage.
- **Observance of sacred seasons** Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, Ordinary time, Season of Creation...and all the markers in-between, like Ascension Day and All Saints Day, bear witness to the rhythms of our faith and the story we live into and pass on to our children.
- **Giving** An offering prayer which I have regularly used in worship (the source of which I have forgotten) goes like this: *"Ever-giving God, You are the source of all goodness and love; with joy we bring our thanks. We return these gifts to you from our abundance. All that we give, we dedicate to your glory. All that we keep, we commit to your care, For we are only stewards of your bounty. Bless what we give and what we keep, For all is your creation. AMEN."* The practice of giving (and it doesn't just need to be money) is a reminder to us of the need to hold our wealth and possessions lightly, to remember our place within the world and our ability to make a difference for others, to remember the One who gives unconditionally to us and inspires us to live in the same open-handed way.

These ancient practices are important for us to continue to explore and make our own. In more recent years other intentional practices have been developing around things, like eco-care, solidarity with the poor, hospitality and connecting with the neighbourhood. In and through these practices we continue to discover what it means to be people who are sent to be Jesus' people in the ordinary and everyday, looking for God already at work in those places and joining in!

Book list:

Brian McLaren, *Finding our Way Again*, 2008, Thomas Nelson.

Alan Roxburgh, *Missional Map-making*, 2010, Jossey Bass.

Simon Carey Holt, *God Next Door*, 2007, Acorn Press.

Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles, The Shape of Pastoral Integrity*, 1999, Eerdmans.

Also recommended:

Lynne Baab, *Sabbath Keeping*, 2005, Inter Varsity Press

Michael Leunig, *Short Notes from a Long History of Happiness*, Penguin

Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, 2009, Harper Collins

Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 1991, Harper, San Francisco



Knox Centre Music Scholarships 2014

Each year, the Knox Centre offers six music scholarships to encourage and equip young musicians and vocalists in the conduct of public worship. Each scholarship consists of an expenses-paid two-day workshop on music and worship at the Knox Centre, plus a cash grant. Applicants must be under 30 years of age. The next music and worship workshops will be held on Thursday 4th and Friday 5th December, to coincide with the Samstock music festival, which runs from the evening of Friday 5th until midday on Sunday 7th December.

Applications for the above scholarships will close on **30th June 2014**. Enquiries can be directed to the Principal of the Knox Centre principal@knoxcentre.ac.nz. To apply for the scholarships, write a letter of application to the Principal detailing the nature of your involvement in music and worship, and include with your letter a reference from your Minister.

Words out of Silence: Report from a Seven Day Silent Retreat

Bruce Hamill, Southern Presbytery

For about two years prior to my first silent retreat, I was half conscious of my need. That may be a polite way of saying I knew something was wrong but spent most of my time in denial. I had been intensely involved, both practically and theoretically, in issues of church leadership and mission church. However I was reminded quite gently but directly by an astute church leader that theoretical engagement and spiritual life (not to mention spiritual leadership) can come apart. He observed that my leadership would require developing “spiritual authority”. At that moment I knew deep down that he was right and I knew that my spiritual life was empty. My lack of confidence was not merely a personality issue.

Late in 2012 I read a couple of interview articles by the brilliant theologian, Sarah Coakley, entitled *Prayer as Divine Propulsion*. In these she argued that prayer, according to Jesus and Paul, is more a process of self-displacement (thy will be done, we do not know how to pray) and the re-ordering of desires (asceticism) than “punctiliar requests”. These articles made it very clear what I needed to do. So when the opportunity arose to go on a Seven Day Silent Retreat led by John Franklin and Judith Anne O’Sullivan I said “Yes” in spite of all my fears and my prejudices about the contemplative tradition.

From Feb 9–15th at the En Hakkore retreat centre in the hills overlooking the Maniototo I went into silence to “learn to pray”. By the time I decided to go I was quite looking forward to it. However, I’m really not sure how ready I was to trust the process, since I had brought along nine books to read (just in case)! Were they going to be God-stoppers or distractions? However, not all of them were solid theological tomes and I had consulted some trusted friends who suggested taking things I could read devotionally rather than analytically. As it turned out one of their books proved to be a wonderful guide for the journey. I slowly and reflectively made my way through the 13 short but rich chapters of Ronald Rolheiser’s *Forgotten Among the Lilies: Learning to Love Beyond our Fears* (Doubleday: 2005), recording entries in my journal as I went.

Apart from the brief advice about praying in silence, we were not given a lot of instruction. One comment from John Franklin stayed with me for the whole week: “There is nothing you have to do, but whatever you do, do it in the presence of God”. So I set out learning to quiet my mind with its constant chatter, to take in my environment, and to live with simple questions. My main question was simply “Where are you, Jesus, in this situation?”

I had always thought of doubt in two ways. There is doubt that questions the adequacy of various beliefs (critical thinking) and there is doubt that is a more pervasive fear of believing (a paralysis of commitment). I have always prided myself on fostering the former and avoiding the latter.

However as time went on I was very conscious that the latter was also a part of me – perhaps a part that I preferred to dissociate myself from, and so could move in and out of. Sometimes I found myself feeling sceptical about everything I was doing, and then I would go for a walk and find myself surprised and overwhelmed by a sense of the presence of God. Such experiences are not easily shared and die as soon as they find words. Like many people I had written poems of dubious virtue in my youth. On these walks I found myself unable to resist the joys of language again. I rediscovered a poetic voice. More on this in a moment.

En Hakkore is situated in gold mining hills, overlooking the wide panorama of the Maniototo Valley. Twenty minutes walk up the gravel road is the site of a gold town which, at its height in the 1860s, exceeded the population of Dunedin. The graveyard tells some of its stories. I wore my shoes down walking and running up and down the road. I swam in the dam and watched the sun set. And in all of this various aspects of my life floated to the surface of my consciousness, particularly my family life. Pain is probably too dramatic a word to describe the outcome. It felt like the beginning of a process of repentance which was buoyed up by a powerful sense of the presence of God. The Spirit of Jesus, the Jesus who descended into hell and through its closed doors, was moving through some fairly heavy doors of cynicism and despair.

The process and rhythm of life was powerful. The only speaking we did, apart from responses in four short prayer services each day (morning, midday, evening and night) was our half hour conversations with the retreat leaders. Our body rhythms seemed to slow down. The cooks later told us we looked like zombies, walking around in slow motion. Food tasted exquisite and all our senses were tuned to what we heard, tasted and saw. I went without shoes wherever possible to feel the earth. Encountering others was interesting. Initially I felt the adrenalin rise as I was drawn to engage with others and to anticipate conversations. I then caught myself short, remembering that I was here for another purpose. Once I was accustomed to the routine it was deeply relaxing.

The experience of silent prayer and of “practising the presence of God” led to a profound sense of my own failure in prayer. As my own hunger for prayer grew, I became more conscious of how little I had prayed and how I had failed both my family and my congregation in this respect. Sure I could say the words, but the heart of prayer - the listening - had been missing. I was struck by how patient God had been with me over my 17 years serving as a minister of the gospel.

Perhaps it is that hunger which will be the main thing I take from this retreat, for it is that hunger that will drive whatever practices I end up using to make space for prayer in my life. As I reflected on prayer I came to realise that a lot of what is often called prayer can be not only off-putting but sometimes destructive. Why is group prayer so difficult? I believe it is because we underestimate the power of the presence of other humans to drown out the presence of God. I recalled many occasions sitting in circles and listening to the fine and flowing words of others (or perhaps the pious and clichéd words of others) and feeling alternately fearful or alienated. I suspect that it is a particularly modern thing to underestimate (i) the preconscious shaping of our desires by those around us, which mean we tend to enter into rivalry with them and (2) the fragility of our identities profoundly shaped by wounds and insecurities that drive our fears and need of affirmation. It strikes me that in group prayer words can be a gift or a performance. To make them truly a gift is much harder than we usually realise. Perhaps we have to receive them as a gift. Our words need to be much more deeply rooted in our listening.

Here are some words that I experienced as gift and then structured and honed into poems – *poems from the silence*. Hopefully those who have been to En Hakkore will recognise the place in them.

Clouds over the Maniototo

There is cloudiness and then
there are clouds

Luminous like everything here
only more so
as if they have God inside.
Dark underbellies
yet screaming with laughter on top –
a gaggle of cardinals
mushrooming over the near hills

Apocalypse in slow motion
Absolution to the combed fields

Hamilton Cemetery

The water goes underground here
taking on a deeper resonance,
a lower register,
for the ministry of irrigation.

In the stillness of the evening
still moving,
a gurgling conversation with the ancestors,
watering their graves.

A prayer for the goldfield postie
dead on delivery

A prayer for the parents
killed by the death of their two-year-old
A prayer for all who come rushing still
and find water still
moving

Adoramus Te Domine

We adore you slowly
like rocks on whom water drips.
But we do not despair
for we are being re-minded.

Though a million nano-electricians
labouring over a million synapses
for a million years
would die before the promised land,
though we forget to watch and pray,
and the path to the cross winds tortuous
in the falling dark,
we do not despair,
but adore you slowly,
for you re-mind us, and we are re-membered

Help

I lift my eyes.
The stillness of the hills
is complete.

The city has become a field of grass
A concrete hearth and its companion
a sheet of corrugated iron
remember 4000 people
including 40 storekeepers
and 25 proprietors of liquor outlets
silenced by the canoodling of magpies
drenched in the electric hum of cricket life.

The hills maintain their silence.
The rocks sleep
with the dead in Christ.

The Little Digger

The little digger lies sleeping
in the paddock
lulled there by the cries of sheep
echoing their way across the landscape

Apparently it's a 'Cat'
bowed down in the valley
beneath the tall pine sentinels
as if in prayer.

The roar of the wind in the pines
is not the roar of a lion
but then neither is the roar of a lion...

Postlude: A Brief Post-Apocalyptic Reflection on “Retreat”

Hide from your left hand what your right is doing

Your good deed must be secret

When you pray, pray privately alone...

And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

My first silent retreat was a year ago. It was somewhat of an apocalypse (revelation) for me. A year later my prayer life is not what it was after the retreat. And there is some grief in that. But it is a different ball game from what it was in earlier years. So I am grateful and hopeful.

One way I have come to think of a retreat is as a “detoxification discipline”. In this it is an extension of prayer and worship. However, to see a retreat as a detox regime is to understand something about oneself that is usually hidden from the modern imagination. According to Clifford Geertz, we have an idea which is rather peculiar in the history of the world’s cultures. We think we are more or less self-contained entities. To quote Geertz’s more precise description, we imagine an individual is:

“a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic centre of awareness, emotion, judgement and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against its social and natural background¹.”

In contrast to this peculiar idea of ourselves, to appreciate the importance of retreat is to see that the world out there possesses us. We have a world inside which is not separated from the world outside and which we are not really in control of. Even when we pray alone, as Jesus calls us to, there is interaction between left and right hand. The public with all its relations and demands continues on in our self-relation. Praying alone implies more than just the physical isolation of the closet. Praying alone is a discipline of a peculiar kind.

Recent cognitive science reminds us that our relations to others are, for the most part, not mediated by conscious thought processes. Mirror neurons mean that we are shaped by others and mirror others before we are conscious of doing so. We mirror (pre-consciously imitate) both the actions and the desires of others. As Rene Girard theorised, we get our desires from our neighbours. Mimesis is the social glue that binds our powerful brains and minds together. Unfortunately this is a mixed blessing for social animals like us. Wanting what others want, produces conflict and violence. Thus to live “in Adam” – to use the language of St Paul – is to live in this violence and our history of dealing with it. In turn this violence lives in us. We are possessed, broadly speaking, by “Adam” and more proximally by local principalities and powers. The Christian mind and the Christian life is a battleground.

To retreat is to practice the peculiar discipline of prayer which attends to Jesus (rather than Adam), our first neighbour. This takes time – a lifetime – but also space, in which his victory over death’s dominion can calm our fears. Life in Adam is full of anxieties that we get so used to, and that we are hardly conscious of. To worry what others think of us and what we will say when we meet them, and what they will say to us and how we will respond and so on. The glue that holds us together in Adam is powerful. Its adrenaline is addictive.

The peace that comes from minimising our interactions with our human neighbours and spending time with a completely “non-rivalrous” neighbour affects us at all levels, it calls us to a new mode of relating to others, to a new world. The aloneness of a retreat is not time spent with oneself. That is the modern illusion. It is time spent with God the peacemaker – Jesus. It is time given over to the Spirit of Jesus who reprograms our minds and desires. It is time learning to see what our anxieties hide from our eyes.

I hope that for me my future prayer-life will involve a rhythm in which both worship (in which Jesus our divine neighbour comes close to us) and retreat (in which space and time are set aside for detoxification in prayer) are regular features.

¹ (“From the Native’s Point of View: On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding” in Keith H. Basso and Henry A. Selby (eds) *Meaning and Anthropology*, Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press p. 222)

The Use of Prayer in Stressful Situations

Geoff New, Northern Presbytery

I recently read a book which consisted entirely of first-hand accounts of those who designed, built, owned and sailed on the *Titanic*. It was a compelling read, yet one thing stood out more than any other. After the *Titanic* had struck the iceberg and the lifeboats were launched, the survivors in the lifeboats drifted just out of reach of the sinking ship and those in the water. The survivors in the lifeboats described the trauma of watching and listening to people drowning and dying around them. They described the awful chorus of screams they claimed they would never forget. They spoke of their own uncertainty as to whether they would survive. As they sat in their lifeboats trying to ward off death they asked each other if anyone knew how to pray. They discovered that there were almost as many denominations as passengers and yet one prayer united them in this life-and-death situation: the Lord's Prayer. And so they prayed The Lord's Prayer!

The Lord's Prayer is so well-known and it seems to me prayed by many as if it is worn-out and so recited without passion or heart. The way the Lord's Prayer is prayed is so often prayerless. At the end of 2013 I wondered aloud about the Lord's Prayer in a sermon I was preaching. I wondered if this was the only prayer we could pray – would be enough? The problem is we don't believe it would be. Not really. Maybe because we think it is not specific enough for our needs. Maybe because we fear that it doesn't specifically itemise that which we have our hearts set on. Yet in this sermon I wondered what would happen if this was the only prayer we prayed for a year? For a week? For one prayer time, even?

I wondered what would happen if we poured into this prayer every need we had; every request; every hope; every worshipful and praiseworthy inclination. I wondered what if – as a church community – whatever we encountered or were confronted by – our prayerful response was to pray this prayer. Using no other words – neither adding nor subtracting from the words of Jesus – we were to only take up the vocabulary of this prayer. How would that be? Would we find it impossibly limiting? Would we think that our relationship with Jesus would suffer? I suspected that our answers, objections or enthusiasm about such a proposition would reveal an awful lot about our true feelings concerning the Lord's Prayer.

If this was the only language and communication we had, we would be worshipping God in the first two phrases; calling on and inviting God to be present in this world and in our own lives at the level of personal obedience; relying on God to provide; seeking God's presence in healing our relationship with Him and others; and declaring war on sin and evil. That is a powerful way to live and act. But I suspect we would still raise objections. This is what I wondered aloud as I preached that day.

When I put this hypothetical situation to the congregation that's all it was; hypothetical. However in the days, weeks and months since that sermon, stories have begun to filter back. Those crazy people! Some had actually taken me at my word! They had the audacity to take up the Lord's Prayer and pray it as if it was the only prayer they could pray! I hadn't meant it. I was simply trying to make a point, but clearly these disciples of Jesus took it seriously. They began praying the Lord's Prayer like they were survivors of the *Titanic*. I joined them. A few stories will suffice. Stories which demonstrate that you can do a lot worse than pray the Lord's Prayer in stressful situations.

Soon after this sermon was preached, a woman from the congregation was phoned by an elderly neighbour. This elderly woman was extremely upset. She was suffering from a physical ailment and had attended a church three times for prayer for healing. It was only after her third visit that she realised that the church was a "spiritualist church". She was beside herself with anxiety and fear at what she had exposed herself to. The woman from our church described to me her own sense of bewilderment and feeling at a loss to know what to do. Then it struck her. She prayed the Lord's Prayer with her neighbour and reported that it was "powerful." These words of divine address gifted by Christ proved to be ointment for the distressed and pain-filled life before her.

A young woman, Janet, who heard the challenge in the sermon that day, later told me that she and her boyfriend were fasting and praying. On a particular occasion during this time as they prayed together, a silence descended and neither prayed for a while and didn't know what to pray. She said that in that moment she began to pray the Lord's Prayer and found herself weeping. It was poignant.

A few months later this same couple were in another situation and again the Lord's Prayer was the cry of the heart under great stress. Unknown to Janet, for months her boyfriend had surreptitiously been preparing her for the moment when he would propose on a trip to Australia. It was an elaborate plan. With his friends, he carefully created the narrative that one of the friends travelling with them had relatives involved in organised crime.

Once at their Australian holiday destination and on the big day, her boyfriend and friends unleashed their plan. It has to be seen to be believed (and yes – there is cell phone footage of it!) but the boys staged a break-in of one of their cars. Janet's boyfriend and others gave chase and disappeared out of sight. I will spare you all the details but when the dust settled it was reported to Janet that due to the "organised crime connection" her boyfriend had been kidnapped. It was a sorry saga.

And I am sure that in reading this truncated version of events, you are probably incredulous that someone could be taken in by it all. Yet these guys had really worked hard on this (including punching a car in anguish and making an apparent call to the Police). In any case, Janet and the friends who hadn't been "kidnapped" received instructions for a "meet" with the "kidnappers." As they approached the rendezvous, Janet was told to stay on the floor of the car until the all-clear was given. Remember, she was the victim of months of being fed a line and now it was all crashing in on her. I've seen the footage and there was genuine fear etched on her face.

Then she was told that her boyfriend was ok. She leapt out of the car and he was standing some way off with candles and everything arranged to ask her to marry him. She just sprinted towards him sobbing and threw her arms around his neck. He eventually went down on one knee and proposed. Janet told me that while they were driving to what she genuinely thought was a crime scene with her boyfriend held hostage, all she did on that car floor was pray the Lord's Prayer. The situation might have been fictitious but the fear and stress was a bald fact. There was only one prayer in mind.

I too have immersed myself in the Lord's Prayer as the plethora of stressful pastoral issues threatens to overwhelm. For the person telling me about "the worst news I could ever receive in my life"; for the person afflicted with meningococcal meningitis and described as the sickest person in Middlemore hospital; for the person who had offended against us as a church community; for the person with the grade four brain tumour – praying the Lord's Prayer was the Christ-inspired way to pray in such times of stress.

Jesus' prayer groans under the weight of the outworking of the story of God and God's vision for humanity. Space does not allow for a full exposition but suffice to say that the opening stanza would evoke in the Hebrew mind the Father of the Exodus. The God who delivers from slavery in all its forms, and whose name is revered.

Then in the midst of stress we ask that God's Kingdom of mercy, justice and love would replace the pollution of self-centred empires. Yet to pray that, calls forth a personal response of living in accordance to God's will and agenda. That can be awkward! Yet we desire and need God's provision. To ask God to give us today our daily bread literally means give us tomorrow's blessing today. Divine-sanctioned greed! Then the request for forgiveness is actually a demand.

We consider the Lord's Prayer to be tame but it is energetic and passionate! Jesus calling us to demand God's forgiveness "right now". Oh – and having received that to also surrender to such a demand of us from others. And finally to entrust that we will be guided in right paths and spared from the evil that desires to have us (see Gen 4:7). It's all there: reverence; obedience; reliance; guidance. We are gifted the vocabulary by Jesus. I invite you when next confronted by a stressful situation to respond with this sacred proclamation.

Science and Spirituality

Nicola Hoggard Creegan, Laidlaw College

The relationship between science and faith is one of the big “elephants in the room” in the Church today. The Church is full of people who are there because of their inward spiritual life, their reaction to God in nature, their conviction that the Spirit speaks through the Word, or their sense that moral life is more intense in a community of faith.

Faith does not exist without some level of inwardness, some subjective overall intuition that the counter-cultural things we believe are true in the deepest sense of the word. The very subjectivity of faith, frequently not balanced by much theological reflection, is vulnerable in a world dominated by the objectivity of science. Science and faith need not be in conflict. There are deep ongoing tensions, but there is also much open and informed integrative theology. Perhaps the real interface between science and faith, however, goes on at the tacit level. On one hand this is positive because awe is the beginning of faith and science can be the handmaiden of awe. On the other hand, more often, science tends to crowd out faith in vague and undefined ways that go beneath the radar.

Science lives in a different domain. It is the world of confident and supposedly objective testing, of peer review, and of evidence-based practice. Science occupies the world of money and prestige and power and funding by governments and big business. In this world, religion is increasingly marginalised. Over the last 150 years science has appeared to supplant faith, giving alternative narratives of origins, and making a vague agnosticism the default position of many educated people. Religion can be relegated to the softer, private, less demanding parts of life – along with yoga and mindfulness. Faith is moved out of the mainstream rather than contradicted by science.

It is at the level of spirituality, then, that there is a deeper level of disturbance going on. Faith is supplanted, marginalised, silenced and sometimes ridiculed. I look below at three reasons for this marginalisation and then reflect on the Church’s response.

First, the inner world of the Christian is rarely played out in public, even in novels or movies. We go to literature to discover the inner life of the contemporary or modern psyche. And in literature and movies we see deeply moving accounts of modern internal realities, but rarely religious ones.

The great counter-example to this in recent years is in the movie “Of Gods and Men” (Des Hommes et des Dieux) in which a group of Trappist monks in Islamic Algeria, caught between the vicious uprising and the brutal government prepare reluctantly for martyrdom. The story, of course, is true, and it could have been told without much reference to the inner life, but it was not. Christian spirituality was laid bare. It is not strident morality; it is the inner resistance of evil, the struggle to find meaning, and to embrace God.

Spaces of great beauty were portrayed in this movie, in the silence and ordinary communal monastic life, and in the resonant chanting of the monks; all of this taken to new levels as they wrestled together to know the will of God for their lives in tragic circumstances. Should they escape or should they stay with their Muslim neighbours and face almost certain execution? None of them wanted to die. The movie was masterful and a rare glimpse into the essential spirituality of Christian faith, mostly seen only from the outside.

If the inner life is not represented in literary form, it is also often caricatured in the media. Where religion is mentioned it is in strident form, which crowds out silence. We hear much from generally unsympathetic media about the Christian advocacy for everything from smacking to homophobia and the death penalty. Without realising what they are doing, the media present a biased picture of Christian life.

This makes all the more amazing the work of David Brooks, a blogger for the New York Times who regularly writes of the inner life of the Christian. In a recent blog for instance, he wrote of the inwardness of faith and how foreign this is to many who read about religion in the newspapers.

Second, religion begins to feel unnecessary in a world of evidence. Evidence speaks so much more loudly than faith. One of the recent books that deals to this dilemma, and speaks incidentally to the fraught science/faith interface, is Marilynne Robinson's, *The Absence of Mind*. You may know her as the author of *Gilead* and *Home*. She describes the way in which faith is undermined by what she calls "the parascientific world", by its reductionism and positivism, expressed, she argues, in certainty and boldness.

She goes on to say, when speaking about the materialism of the present age, that the Church and theology have "accommodated the parascientific world view", and in doing so theology has:

*"tended to forget the beauty and strangeness of the individual soul... But the beauty and strangeness persist just the same. And theology persists, even when it has absorbed as truth theories and interpretations that could reasonably be expected to kill it off. This suggests that its real life is elsewhere."*¹

All this speaks eloquently to the eclipse of spiritual sensitivities, in vague and unsettling ways, rather than frank tensions at the level of truth claims.

But thirdly, there may also be neurological reasons for our dilemma. This is the premise of an interesting recent book, *The Master and his Emissary*, by Iain McGilchrist, a psychiatrist and philosopher. McGilchrist delves into the question of the brain's hemispheres. His message is that all human functions arise not just out of different areas of the brain, but out of complex networks. Nevertheless we, animals and birds all have divided brains for a reason. One of the functions of the divided brain in speaking creatures is the sense of reflection upon ourselves, the recursive turn and the sense of being able to observe from afar.

Science and faith need not be in conflict.

The right hemisphere, in most people, pays attention to the overall landscape, the big picture, to novelty, and the left to the details, to language and abstraction. In our civilisation the left brain and its skills have taken over. The left brain gets obsessed over details and is very hard to derail; the left brain finds it hard to hand back the reins to the wide vista.

McGilchrist is at great pains to affirm that each side of the brain needs the other, from the most mundane task to the most religious, and he says:

*"If the process ends with the left hemisphere, one has only concepts—abstractions and conceptions, not art at all. Similarly the immediate pre-conceptual sense of awe can evolve into religion only with the help of the left hemisphere: though, if the process stops there, all one has is theology, or sociology, or empty ritual: something else... the process needs to return to the right hemisphere, so that it can live."*²

When the right side of the brain is allowed in, feeling and a sense of connection to God follow. The picture he draws up of a world in which the left brain has deceived the right brain, and taken over, is one very close to our own. Of course, in McGilchrist's language, science is done quite easily from a left brain perspective, though its full imaginative heights also require the right's skills, but religion requires input from the right.

1 Marilynne Robinson. *Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self*. Terry Lecture Series. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010, 32-33.

2 Iain McGilchrist. *The Master and his Emissary: the divided brain and the making of the Western world*. New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2010, 199.

Conclusion

How do we respond to this deeper level of misunderstanding between science and faith, to the ways in which science has eclipsed faith, subsumed it under its own reductionist rubric and caricatured it? One answer is that there is also much in science that leads to awe and contemplation of mystery and paradox, though space precludes much examination of these aspects of science here.

Another response may lie in the contemplative core of the Church, which is perhaps a vehicle for renewal in the future. We must make, curate and safeguard spaces that nurture the inner life and the inner beauty that is so vulnerable in a scientific world. There is perhaps a hunger for this level of contemplation. The Benedictine Sisters of Mary, Queen of the Apostles in Missouri, have topped the Classic Charts recently. Their average age is only 29. And monasticism, once on the margins of the Church, is seeing a revival.

Christian spirituality ... is ... the inner resistance of evil, the struggle to find meaning, and to embrace God.

Sarah Coakley speaks of three levels of practice of Christian community. These are the “purgative, illuminative and unitive”. The purgative, is standing against the world and forging a different identity. We are all familiar with this sometimes strident form of faith.

The second level of community is being “open to the world in hospitality and counsel and mediation”. At this level there is less need for opposition, and more grace to invite the world in to be transformed and to transform the community itself. The third level is that at which one might aspire to participate in the trinity itself.

A meditative heart is only seen at the end, at the third level, coming “to full conscious appropriation only after years of painfully purgative faithfulness to practices that had only hidden efficacy... Human responsiveness to the divine could have different shades or depths through a lifetime of graced interaction with divine love.”³

Coakley’s response is not a particular answer to science of course, but she advocates a spirituality that can begin to revive the inwardness that is so easily undermined by our scientific worldview.

³ Sarah Coakley. “Deepening Practices: Perspectives from Ascetical and Mystical Theology,” in *Practicing Theology*. Ed. Miroslav Volf & Dorothy Bass. Eerdmans, 2002, 78-93,

Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer

By Richard Rohr

Reviewed by Andrew Dunn, Northern Presbytery

Richard Rohr - Franciscan priest, writer, lecturer and retreat leader - is a leading exponent of contemplative Christian spirituality and action. He lives in New Mexico where he leads the *Centre for Action and Contemplation* at Albuquerque. I keep finding new excerpts of his talks on Youtube.

In the chapter, *Everything Belongs*, Rohr begins with the inherent unmarketability of things contemplative in our modern world and church.

How do you make attractive that which is not?

How do you sell emptiness, vulnerability, and non-success?

How do you talk about descent when everything is about ascent?

How can you possibly market letting-go in a capitalist culture?

How do you present Jesus to a Promethean mind?

How do you talk about dying to a church trying to appear perfect?

This is not going to work (admitting this might be my first step).

To get into the heart of Christian spirituality there's a lot of letting go, unlearning, unbuilding of old patterns, in order to be in self, in God, in Christ, in the Spirit; naked and open to their presence and lively grace.

In "*Centre and Circumference*", his next chapter, Rohr states, "We are circumference people, with little access to the centre. We live on the boundaries of our own lives ... confusing edges with essence, too quickly claiming the superficial as substance". And in ministry there is much that drives us out to the circumference and keeps us there in the pressures, sheer weight of the work and leadership and the unsubtle demands for results. So, says Rohr, we need to journey to the centre, the core and find ourselves and God again there. Says Rohr: "contemporary Westerners have a very fragile sense of their identity, much less an identity that can rest in union and relationship with God." (p21). Prayer in the early stages is quite simply a profound experience of that core of who we are, as Paul says, '*hidden with Christ in God*' (Col. 3:3).

How's this for a gem: "Prayer is not primarily saying words or thinking thoughts. It is, rather, a stance. It's a way of living in the Presence, living in awareness of the Presence, and even enjoying the Presence" (p31).

One of my own discoveries is that prayer not only becomes a stance but an attitude, a frame of mind and heart that nourishes and stimulates each day and night. I've even come to talk about *the contemplative platform* out of which everything flows including ministry, relationships, enjoyment of God's two books (Scripture and creation) and of life itself.

"The contemplative secret is to learn to live in the now" and in the chapter, "*Ego and Soul*", Rohr explores the challenges our egos pose for this reorienting and deepening. He asks Einstein's question, "Is the universe friendly?" and entices us with the thought that true religion - deepening presence - assures us that we live in a benevolent universe of radical grace where we do not need to be afraid' (p69).

Another: gem "True contemplation, true religious experience, dissolves the fortress of "I" by abandoning its defences. It looks out from a place of perfect simplicity. ... if you know this simplicity once it is enough for a whole lifetime" (p88).

In "*Cleansing the Lens*", Rohr offers many thoughts on doing something about theological and religious stance issues that blur the lenses by which we see God and grace and truth. He's more interested in discovering if something is true than whether it fits the current ideology by which we determine the okay-ness of things. "The Gospel is not a competing idea. It's that by which we see all ideas in proper context". Rohr insists on 'wiping the mirror clean', on seeing things as they are, on starting to move in fresh and deepening ways. In contemplative prayer we move into a different

realm, he says. It is not an arena of merit, of reward and punishment; it is a real place of pure grace and freedom".

Chapter 5 - "Don't Push the River" – begins with this quote: "Nothing is more practical than finding God, than falling in love in a quite absolute, final way. What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything. Fall in love, stay in love, and that will decide everything." Pedro Arrupe. S.J. (General of the Society of Jesus).

As with so much in his writing, Rohr crystalises everything in the simple heart of the message.

"There's a kind of knowing, a kind of powerful conviction, that comes from spiritual emptiness ... from letting go and living out of the beginner's mind. We call this knowing 'faith' ... a very spacious way to live because it alone can include contradictions. Faith is the only way of knowing that is patient with also not knowing." (p123-4)

Hence the small mind of western theology can analyse and quarrel over the details of true Eucharist and who has the right priesthood and so on - as if we can explain mystery. We need a bigger mind than that allows, and this he finds in the experience of deeper relationship with God and the discoveries of grace and forgiveness.

"Forgiveness is God's entry into powerlessness, as we see in the image of the cross. When we get into Presence, we find someone not against us, but someone who is definitely *for* us!" "Someone else is holding me", say the saints. "Someone is believing in me. Someone is with me more than I am with myself". Cf. Eckhardt, "God is closer to me than I am to myself."

And, strangely perhaps to our ears, says Rohr, "the great ones (of all faiths) are in agreement: the mystical Jews, Christians, Muslims and Hindus – at that level the language is the same. God is a lover." (p135). The difference is this: we Christians are the only believers in a full, concrete, and physical enfleshment of God. We call it the 'incarnation' and we call him 'Jesus'. Indeed, Jesus is the great synthesis for us, the icon of the whole mystery - all at once. "In his body lives the fullness of divinity, and in him you find your own fulfilment" (Col. 2:29). This is the "still scandalous tradition of the enfleshment of God". Isn't this dangerous stuff, that we find the heart of the mystery of life and faith 'hidden with Christ in God'? Well yes, it always has been and always will be as with the Gospel itself. So we have avoided the scandal of the Incarnation to avoid God 'in his most dangerous disguise': this material world.

The 'river' is the flow of God's providential love, the Holy Spirit flowing in us and around us and taking us along – so don't be afraid. "Faith does not need to push against the river precisely because it is able to trust that there is a river ... flowing and we are in it." (p143). The awareness of being in this river is the best antidote to fears of all kinds.

In this way of being in life there is no place for the old dichotomies of sacred and secular. Everything belongs together and everything is infused with the presence of God and grace. Hence it leads to engagement with the great issues of the day. Rohr concludes with his vision of the contemplative way of seeing and being. It's clear that this is no small vision but an all-embracing stance in the challenges of living and being a disciple of Jesus today.

Our tendency to get caught in cul de sacs along the way – philosophical, theological, societal or personal – is challenged and freed by contemplative spirituality and theology which keeps us living in the now. The lively, freeing energy of the good news in Christ keeps demolishing our safe havens and securities. The Gospel keeps inviting us into the fresh thinking and freedom of journeying with God.

There's an edginess about this book. There's no simple sweetness here, no easy devotion. There are touches of Gospel challenge and cross-centred living. An incident early in my teenage years comes to mind when my missionary call was taking shape. I was at a meeting where John Deane (Principal of BTI) was speaking about the call to mission. His daughter, her husband and little children were home from India on furlough and she told her father about their appalling situation in the village where they lived and worked. The only house they could rent was built over the village cess pool with all its stench, flies and diseases. "Father" she said, "I can't live for Him there." "No", he said, "I understand. But you can die for Him there!"

Rohr's invitation is as challenging as that. The contemplative way - the way of mystics and saints, of Jesus and Paul - is no easy ride but a call to follow our Master daily, cross carrying and all, whenever and wherever that leads.

Chesed and shalom be yours.

Rohr, R *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer* (The Crossroad Publishing Company; Revised and updated edition edition, 2003) ISBN: 0824519957 (192pp)

God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'

By Sarah Coakley

Reviewed by Graham Millar

God, Sexuality, and the Self is a catchy title, but do we need another systematic theology treatise on the Trinity? In particular, is this dangerous ground for a feminist theologian? Sarah Coakley is a Professor of Divinity at Cambridge. She has written on the spiritual senses, on pain, on religion and the body, on philosophy, and on spirituality and gender. This recent book is the first volume in a series of four which she has planned. In each volume she is using her method of "theologie totale", which includes political and theological analysis, fieldwork observations, aesthetic perspectives, and deep ascetic contemplation. The whole series is titled *On Desiring God*, and individual volumes after this one will be *Knowing Darkly*, *Punish and Heal*, and *Flesh and Blood*. The different artistic focus in each of these will be poetry, music, and liturgy.

In this first volume, Coakley places great emphasis on her method. The preface, prelude and first two of seven chapters present the arguments for this method. It is worth reading through this in order to appreciate the more lively chapters which follow. As the blurb says:

"The goal is to integrate the demanding ascetical undertaking of prayer with the recovery of lost and neglected material from the tradition, and thus to re-animate doctrinal reflection both imaginatively and spiritually."

Chapter three of *God, Sexuality, and the Self* looks at the patristic tradition in the work of Origen and Athanasius. Contemplative and charismatic prayer are most likely to engage the non-rational desire for God, and there are implications here for sexual expression too. Biblical resources, especially Romans 8, and the way these theologians interpreted and applied them, are closely examined. Coakley sees an alternative approach to the Trinity "which gives strong priority to the Spirit in prayer". This has a mystic quality which uses erotic images for God. The more dominant linear visions of God seemed to support the hierarchical structure of the Church.

This prayer-based theology of the Trinity, which challenged the orthodox view and was therefore sidelined, is now examined in a modern setting by some fieldwork in two charismatic groups. One of these is an Anglican church, and the other an independent breakaway of that church. Chapter four "The charismatic constituency: embarrassment or riches?" uses findings from fieldwork not specifically about theological understanding. Coakley is impressed by the spiritual seriousness and theological commitments and divergences of these groups. She speaks about:

"...tension between biblical directives about the subordination of women, on the one hand, and a 'mystic' Trinitarian model earthed in prayer that might somehow transcend and destabilise such subordination on the other".

Now another surprising direction for systematic theology emerges. By examining iconography she again discovers that "art, gender, politics, and theology" are entangled, and she talks about "coded and subliminal messages about normative relations in society, church and family". Thirty-nine artworks from the third to the late-twentieth century are pictured and discussed, with varying lessons drawn which pale "in comparison with the irreducibility of their visual instantiation".

Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine of Hippo were giants of the eastern and western traditions. The author argues that, for both of them, their "Trinitarian thinking was undeniably rife with a 'gender subtext'... and both were engaging profound... with the 'messy entanglements' of sexual desire and desire for God". The difficulty of having "inner trinitarian radical equality" is not solved by either East or West, and women face the choice of either "desexed equality" or "sexual subordination".

I found this book challenging to understand at first reading. However, many gems became underlined, and gradually the importance of approaching theology from a profoundly contemplative stance became attractive.

The last chapter, "The primacy of divine desire: God as Trinity and the 'apophatic turn'", looks to the works of Dionysius to provide analogies: How can the Trinity be One and experienced by humans as an invitation to participate in the divine ecstasy?

"When humans come... into authentic relation with God as Trinity through the Spirit, their values and orders of 'hierarchy' change; they are not imitating God thereby, but rather being transformed by ecstatic participation in the Spirit."

In a Coda, Coakley gives six theses about this sort of contemplation, the last of which is that "contemplation presents us with a Trinitarian model of power-in-vulnerability". I found this book challenging to understand at first reading. However, many gems became underlined, and gradually the importance of approaching theology from a profoundly contemplative stance became attractive. So much has been written and felt about the Trinity, and so many different periods have reflected their understanding of sexuality and gender that a more holistic approach from a contemporary perspective is exciting.

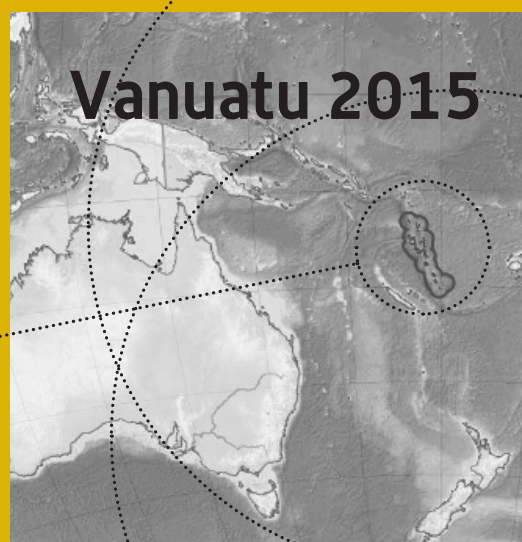
This is not just a treatise on the Trinity, but a new way of integrating worship, Christian life, gender equality, and sociological analysis in a way that honours desire – for God, and for human partners. Theologians need to recognise the importance of this volume, and Christians thinking and praying deeply into their faith will be encouraged.

Coakley, S, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013) ISBN: 9780521558266 (384pp)

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Jason has the following books available and if you would like to review any of these volumes, please contact him at: jasongoroncy@gmail.com

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Cornelius Ernst, *Multiple Echo Explorations in Theology*

Hans W. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ, Expanded and Updated Edition*

Jason Goroncy (ed) *Descending on Humanity and Intervening in History: Notes from the Pulpit Ministry of P. T. Forsyth*

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Stuart Lange, *A Rising Tide: Evangelical Christianity in New Zealand (1930–1965)*.

Kate Malcolm, *Pastorale*

Peter Matheson, *Argula von Grumbach (1492–1554/7): A Woman before Her Time*.

William R. McAlpine, *Four Essential Loves: Heart Readiness for Leadership and Ministry*

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Bob Eyles, Editor

Faithful marriages

Tayyaba Khan*

You would think that being single in the 21 century would be a liberating status to hold. Religious expectations around marriage have seemingly evolved and society is not expecting you to be courted in the traditional ways of the past. The standards around your parents assisting you to find a potential soul-mate are no longer the norm, and certainly in the West there is more acceptance of those who choose not to be married.

There is a theological dilemma in the situation described above – particularly for communities of faith. Almost all religious communities put great emphasis on marital courtship, and sharing of one's body, mind and soul in the sanctity of a sacred bond. In Islamic communities around the world for example, marriage continues to hold a deep significance in practice linked to one's spirituality and safeguarding of faith. In a survey conducted by *singlemuslim.com* in 2010, one third of those who took part looked primarily for piety and religious compatibility in their potential partner.

Where the advent of Islam brought to light the importance of girls in a culture where they had none, it is also a faith that advocated for the rights of women in education, economic empowerment, and the right to vote. These very empowering values of the faith have however, brought about a gap that highlights the power dynamics within the Muslim world when it comes to gender. Though marriage continues to hold prominence in practice, Muslim women, certainly in the US and the United Kingdom, are seeking answers to why it is so hard to find a compatible partner.

Some Muslim women are electing the co-wives status. Islam allows for a man to marry up to four wives with conditions, and Muslim women who are finding it increasingly difficult to find a partner are coming to accept this arrangement to avoid the life of singledom. Islam also allows for Muslim men to marry people of the book (Christians and Jews) as long as they are practising of their faith, however this practice is not applicable to Muslim women.

This option however is unacceptable for some and so they turn to find their answer in interfaith marriages. Historically all major religions have either forbidden or strongly disapproved of interfaith marriages. The core concern of such marriages lies in one party not holding the same beliefs as the other and the impact on the children born in such marriages. This approach challenges the very notion of religious conversion and assimilation, a tenet of most faith communities.

Those who choose to follow this path are often ostracised from their own communities. If faith really is a personal relationship with God, why is it that society finds it hard to accept that both partners could remain adherent to their distinct religions yet find the solace of companionship with each other? Do these relationships work out in the long term?

Sara and Tom* are an example of many couples who have found companionship with each other while holding strong to their individual beliefs. Sara is Muslim, and Tom is Christian. They met at University and found similarity in their worldviews.

Sara believes their relationship is strong because they are both tolerant towards each other's faith. "When we accept each other for who we really are, it is easy to build a life together. We know our acceptance and tolerance isn't lip service". Tom agrees that their relationship represents a pure form of acceptance of faith diversity that is unique in today's society. "How often do you find couples like us who have not let go of their faith, but are married and not struggling in the relationship".

Their challenges come from their communities who do not agree with the choice they have made. Sara sadly ponders on family who haven't spoken to her since she got married, whilst Tom refers to the passing comments from fellow church goers who often slip in the need for converting Sara to the "right cause". Sara and Tom both agree they could not imagine living this life with anyone else. Sara struggled to find a partner from her own faith community, while Tom struggled with finding someone who held similar values to him.

They both assert their relationship has not impacted allegiance to their faiths. The question then becomes, are interfaith marriages really a cause for concern or the answer for peace and resolution in today's conflict-driven world?

*Names have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals.

Editor's Note: Tayyaba is a young Muslim woman, born in Pakistan and came to New Zealand at an early age. She has worked for the Ministry of Ethnic Affairs and for Refugee Services in Brisbane. She has been very involved in interfaith dialogue in Auckland and has participated in many interfaith youth events, and was invited to contribute to the last *Candour* edition on Marriage but unfortunately the piece arrived too late to be included in the November edition.



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If Anyone is in Christ, the Creation Has Come

Ray Coster, Moderator, Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand

Over the years I have found a few people that I consider my mentors. One or two I meet with face to face, but more mentor me through their writings. One of those people is Dan Reiland. Most times he has something special to say to me about day-to-day ministry and my spiritual well-being as a minister. In the thoughts that follow I acknowledge much inspiration from Dan Reiland.

When I became Moderator, I said that I had one gift to bring to the Church and that was the challenge for us all to live with a resurrection mind-set – or to live in the power of God’s presence and the presence of God’s power. I can think of no better way to motivate the Church in mission than this.

A scripture I love that speaks of a resurrection mind-set is: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Cor 5:17) This is the most liberating spiritual experience I have ever had – the inner knowledge, assurance, conviction that in Christ I am a new creation; I am free from condemnation (especially self-condemnation), from guilt, shame, feelings of failure and all those other feelings that strive to pull me down. The resurrection mind-set give us a clean slate, a fresh start and the motivation to share “the Good News, with great joy, to all people” as Samuel Marsden said when he planted the Gospel of Jesus in the soil of this land 200 years ago.

This is the most liberating spiritual experience I have ever had – the inner knowledge, assurance, conviction that in Christ I am a new creation; I am free from condemnation (especially self-condemnation), from guilt, shame ...

There is something in all of us that loves a fresh start. As ministers we need this in our spiritual life. This is key to a good spiritual life. Sometimes it seems to me that we over-spiritualise the spiritual life. I think being spiritual is meant to be natural and joyful. Let me share a list of ten things that I think can help us be naturally spiritual in our ministry.

1. Laugh more

Ministry can be heavy and relentless. It’s important that you take time to rest and play and laugh often! The Kingdom of God is a place of joy!

2. Lead boldly

Your church will never realise all that God has in mind without bold leadership. Taking risks is inherent in the very nature of leadership. I don’t mean reckless abandon, but a prayer-based sense of faith that compels you to take the necessary risks and lead boldly! Don’t hold back!

3. Exercise regularly

Exercise daily in some way appropriate for you. You will feel better, think better and enjoy life more when you are fit. A little exercise goes a long way in the spiritual life.

4. Love deeply

Jesus modelled this for us. Truly caring about people is at the very heart of what we do as Christian leaders. Sometimes it's difficult to love when people resist change, complain, and even threaten church leaders. But nonetheless, we care! It's not something you or I need to "work up", it's something that is in us and stirred by the Holy Spirit. Lean into love!

5. Pray fervently

I truly believe that prayer is the most powerful force in the world. It changes people's lives and life circumstances! Stop complaining and pray more... with passion! Today as I write this article I am grieving the loss of my good friend Catherine Hollister-Jones who died this morning. I have never met a person so passionate about prayer as Catherine. For her it was pure joy, not work or effort.

6. Listen attentively

Listen to the voice of God more than anything else. Food feeds the body, but what feeds your spirit? As I read scripture it seems to me that the answer is the voice of God, "People do not live on bread alone, but every word the proceeds from the mouth of the Lord". (Deut 8:3)

7. Read quickly

I am a slow reader. I always have 3-4 books on the go at the same time and a list a lot longer than that waiting to be read. I have never learnt the classic speed reading skills but what I now do is quickly assess if a book is worthy of reading, and second, quickly find the best parts of the book I read them and skip over other bits. It works for me.

8. Give generously

Generosity never gets old. This is not just about the financial stewardship of all that God gives you, but a global approach to a generous life: generous with your time, your ideas, your church resources etc. Share your best with your colleagues.

9. Empower freely

Empowering others is at the epicentre of how you practice leadership and spirituality. As a minister there are few things more important than developing and empowering leaders to help carry the ministry load at your church! Raise up new leaders!

10. Serve joyfully

How long have you been in ministry? Do you carry the same joy as when you first started? Leadership can make you weary. It can discourage you and cause you to want to throw in the towel. What you are doing is worthwhile! When you are discouraged, remember your calling and that God is with you! Even on the very difficult days where happiness eludes you, you can still possess a sense of deep inner joy and peace. God will never withhold that from you.

May you and your ministry and spiritual leadership be blessed in 2014.

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Applications close 18 April 2014.

You've Got to Serve Someone

Martin Baker, Assembly Executive Secretary

What is it that captures us as men and women, as groups and communities and even nations, and leads us to do the most wonderful things? I think about stories of individual courage – hardly a summer goes by, and this one has been no exception – when we hear of someone risking his or her life, without a moment's thought, to save a complete stranger from a dangerous rip or a fast moving river. There is an adrenalin rush, self-preservation is forgotten, and someone acts with courage!

I lie on my back and gaze at the stars, wonder at the selflessness and generosity of so many people of faith that I know, ponder the horizons in a Rothko painting or reflect on the convictions of the innocents who face persecution and death because of their faith in Jesus. It strikes me that the most real things of all are also the most indescribable, and they are also the things that only some prayer, song or act of thankfulness to our creator, can provide even the most minutely adequately response.

I have read Richard Dawkins, Hitchens and others of the “new atheism” movement. I lack the intellectual depth to argue against such “pillars of rationalism”, except to be clear in my view which contrasts significantly with their assertions of God's non-existence. No matter how rationalistic views may confront the teachings of orthodox Christianity, what I fear most about things of faith and belief, is that they do not emerge from the diatribes of an oxford don, but from evidence of the overwhelming power of some beliefs and ideologies which allow individuals and communities to inflict unspeakable harm on others.

A couple of months ago I read perhaps the most troubling book I have ever read, Timothy Snyder's *Blood Lands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*, published in 2010. The book details (it's a long book and it details a lot!) the mass killing of around 14 million non-combatants by the regimes of Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union and Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany between the years 1933 and 1945. Most of these died outside the two regime's respective concentration camps and in an area that today contains Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, Russia and the Baltic States.

One of Snyder's important arguments is that we should never resign ourselves to the temptation to – for want of a better word – “conceptualise” these events. The 14 million deaths are 14 million stories of individuals who lived lives, people who wrote letters, scratched messages, and sang or cried, before they were executed. The people who did the killing also had stories. Some of the executioners were people who had lived their lives as neighbours, friends and even colleagues of those who, one day, they felt justification in killing.

I would not want to attempt a definition of “spirituality”, but it must be something to do with the words, thoughts and deeds which express the things that are of most profound importance to our sense of meaning, identity, value and purpose. If this is the case, then praying to Jesus as sovereign in our lives is expressing a desire not only to follow him on a journey of discipleship; it is also saying what we are not going to do, who or what we are not going to name as sovereign, and naming the people or ideologies whose particular forms of discipleship are not going to be instrumental in defining the course of our lives.

“Rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's”, can perhaps be taken a number of ways, but what happens if it is all about choosing between different claims to sovereignty, different understandings of power and authority? For Dawkins and his colleagues to champion the values of a secular society almost seems a negation of the fact that we all have beliefs, and those beliefs have an associated spirituality which is manifest in behaviours and decisions.

The terrors we witness, the moral and ethical ambiguities of our present age, along with the need to celebrate and cherish the goodness we see about us, suggests to me that it is more vital than ever to articulate and affirm and invite others to experience, the spirituality which describes our faith and beliefs as Christians. It is not an internal otherworldliness that defines our spirituality but a sacramental and sacrificial expression of the faith and beliefs which we see as being ultimately significant.

There is a prophetic role for us as preachers to name those beliefs and their spiritual and tangible manifestations which undermine God's purposes for creation, and which cause suffering of so many of the innocent in our local and global community. More importantly we are called to proclaim a faith in a God who offers us all the choice of life.

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