

A Torch and A Thermos (an allegory)

Spiritual speleologist Anam Cara goes in search of a more woman-inclusive God

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This special interest project contributed to my
Spiritual Direction formation training with
Spiritual Growth Ministries Aotearoa New Zealand.

Any reference to 'directee' may be extended to include the general reader on
their spiritual quest.



Kia ora! Talofa! Malo e lelei! Hi!

My name is Anam Cara and I absolutely **love** exploring.

I'm a spiritual speleologist who delights in navigating spiritual landscapes, squeezing into caverns and grottoes where refreshing ideas are lurking.

Would you like to join me on my next adventure?

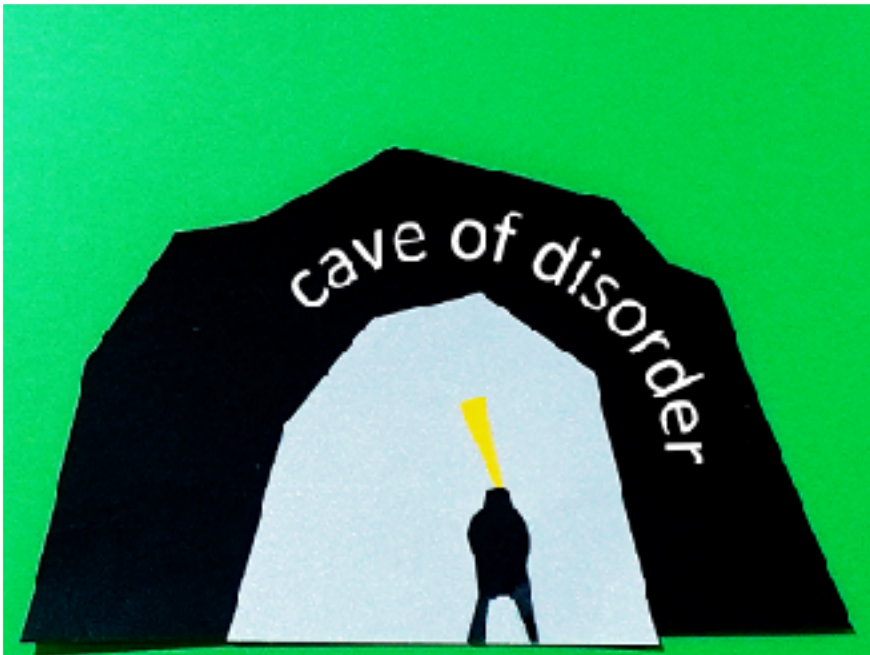
Until recently I've been camping out with a group of like-minded people near the Forest of Certainty, a softly undulating paddock populated with rows of pinus radiata and native seedlings. It's also known as the Forest of Order. Bordering this is our campsite, protected from the wind by dense foliage.

I came across an early map, drawn decades ago by a cartographer called Fowler, where it referred to our campsite as a Synthetic-Conventional space. It's always been a safe and comfortable campsite to be in, with secure fencing and loads of friendly people to sit with. We would regularly mill around the campfire sipping mulled wine and toasting marshmallows in honour of our community's founder, Yeshua.

It was always a warm and inviting space to camp in, until... well, I stumbled across a poem and a strangely illuminated cave by the river.



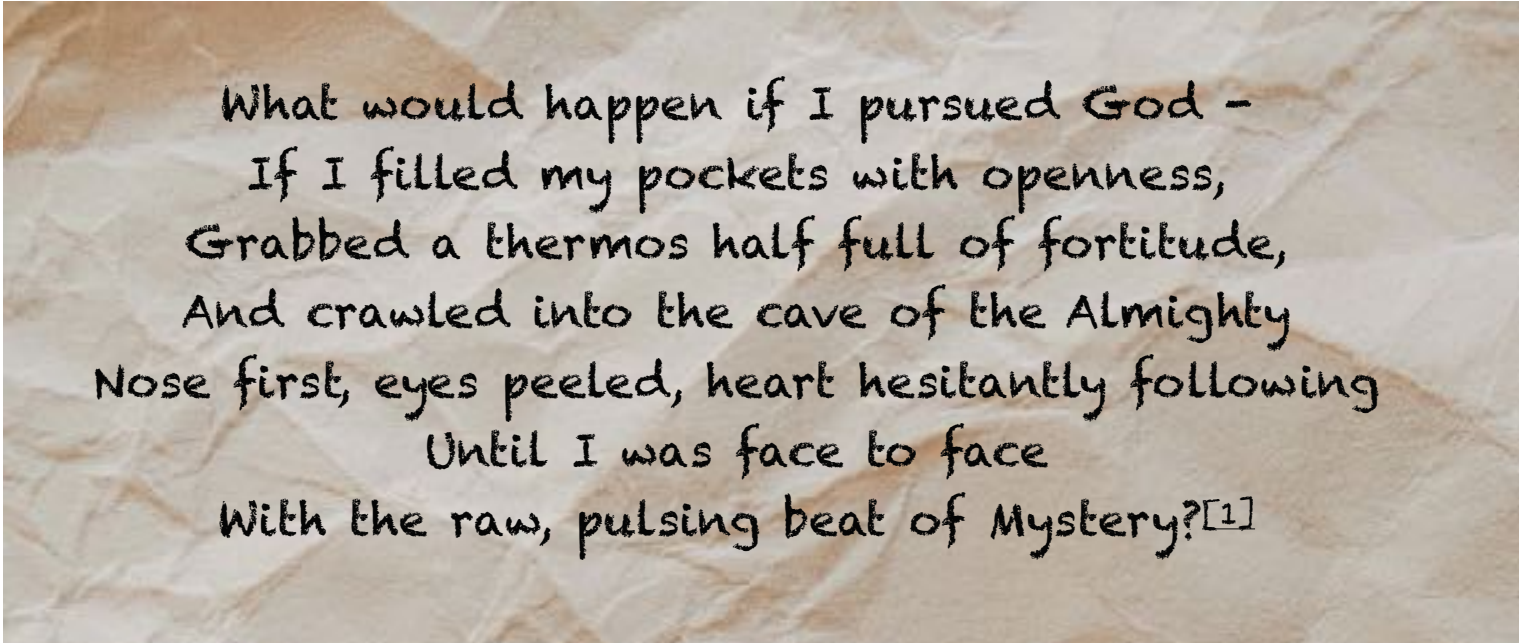
I'd not noticed the existence of the cave before, although it surely is an ancient part of the landscape here. Its rock-face entrance is covered in lichens that are lightly spritzed by the mist from the nearby Waterfall of Discovery. I was so surprised at the cave's appearance – or, more accurately, my noticing it – that I stumbled over a dip at the entrance. “Dangerous place,” I thought, as I rocked back and forth, nursing a grazed knee.



I nearly hightailed it outta there but something caught my eye. Tucked discreetly in a dry crevice near the entrance of the cave was a note, reminiscent of the prayer requests Hebrew men and women wedge between blocks at the temple remains in Jerusalem, that Holy City where our founder lived and died ...and somehow lived again. I read the note and it set me on this adventure, one that I hope other spiritual speleologists may wish follow.

So I proceeded forward, into the seeming gloom of that mysterious cave in the hill.

The first part of the note said:



What would happen if I pursued God -
If I filled my pockets with openness,
Grabbed a thermos half full of fortitude,
And crawled into the cave of the Almighty
Nose first, eyes peeled, heart hesitantly following
Until I was face to face
With the raw, pulsing beat of Mystery?^[1]

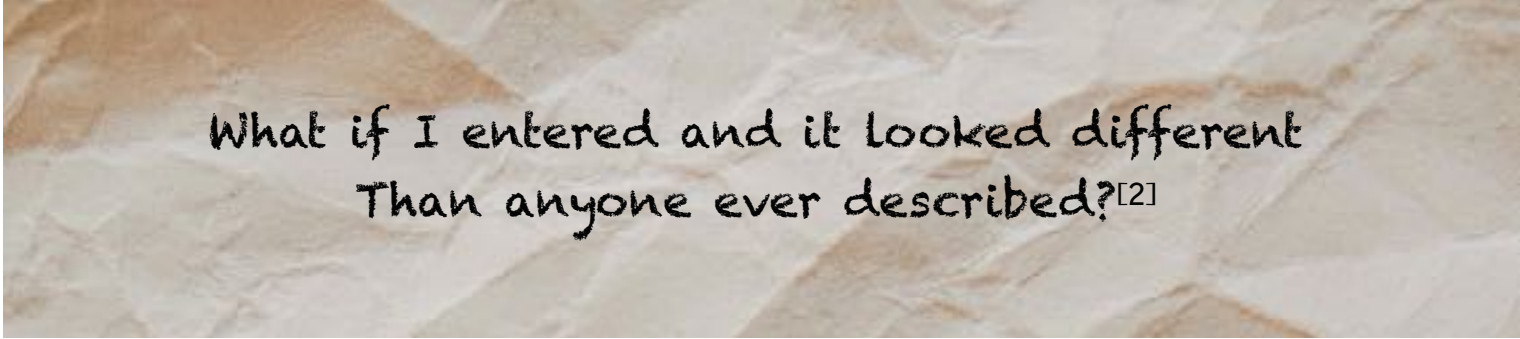
Now I wouldn't say I'm an expert speleologist but, during the past two years in particular, I've gained more confidence and skills. Watch out, Dora the Explorer! I've been drawn into deeper and deeper cave systems and navigated more expansive and somewhat challenging terrain. I've even had the opportunity to guide some other explorers, all while working towards my official accreditation as a spiritual guide.

At the cusp of this adventure, pondering on what might be revealed, I bent down to re-lace my tramping boots. I checked my water bottle, made sure my headlamp worked and readjusted my backpack. Each footstep I heard myself take in that rocky terrain was an expression of trust and an active form of prayer. My lungs drew a deep breath - inhaling Ruach's life force for courage - and I crossed over into the coolness and stillness of the dark.

Silence.

It took a while for my eyes to adjust, my heart to slow its racing, and for the quiet to become a contemplative embrace. If I was to navigate this cave system successfully, my spiritual and physical senses would need to attune themselves to the surroundings.

The poem spurred me on.



What if I entered and it looked different
Than anyone ever described?^[2]

As is often the way with spiritual speleology, it's best not to panic when you first enter an internal cave system. I've learned from past adventures that, at some point, you notice helpful navigational features of what appears to be an unfathomable interior landscape. You have to let your jitters subside and take your time sensing the best way forward. Pertinent features of the interior landscape can then become more obvious.

Not for the first time my eyes detect the bioluminescence of *arachnocampa luminosa mystica*. More commonly known as the New Zealand spiritual glowworm, it's the larva of a species of fungus gnat. That all sounds rather squeamish, prosaic and rather earthy - but, oh, the gentle reassurance these tiny messengers give when you first enter the dark. These seemingly mundane little creatures can create beauty, such beauty, especially when seen en masse (often only appreciated from a vantage point further on). Tiny navigational love-bulbs, I call them! Spiritual message-emitters that invite us to trust, notice spiritual tracks and patterns, and encourage us to move another step into the interior.



I walk towards these tiny harbingers of the Holy. How might they help me encounter the “raw, pulsing beat of Mystery” as this adventure unfolds?

As I enter more fully the space beyond the cave entrance, I am forced to stoop. To avoid head-butting the ceiling, I shine my headlamp upwards and that’s when I notice something etched in large letters on the rocky roof. I make out a phrase: “Our Father in heaven”.

I realise my legs and back are starting to cramp and I’m motivated to find a place to resume a standing posture. My living glow-sticks point the way to the next cavern. I obligingly follow.





Thermos stop *(sustenance for the journey)*

"[L]anguage is a social phenomenon so it is always ... of a particular time and place. Language about God, while usually based on biblical texts, tends to reflect the social mind of its time and place. ...[Notions] of God are entangled in all kinds of cultural assumptions."^[3]

"Our images of God have consequences for how we behave."^[4]

"We need to be continually discarding old, dysfunctional ways of thinking about God and discovering new, more creative ones."^[5]



Shining the torch *(questions to cast light into exploratory spaces)*

Who or what has helped form your notion of the Divine?
What is influencing you now?

In your spiritual direction work, what notions of God might be or have been problematic for your directees?

Is it your experience that the way human beings "understand, image and name the Divine has enormous implications for our spiritual, emotional, mental and social health"?^[6]

I step into the next, liminal space. The halo of my torch bulb traces patterns on the walls and I notice this cavern is larger than the first. A loud squawk draws my attention to a far corner, where the speckled plume of a hen comes into view. My feathered cave dweller is sitting comfortably in a snugly constructed nest, nudging numerous chicks under her wing for warmth.



“What on earth are you doing in here?” I ask.

“Oh, I’ve been here since the first century; I’m a metaphor for God and I was written into Matthew’s gospel,” she says. “You might also want to greet my cave companions in the corner opposite, the mother eagle and sow bear^[7]. They’ve been here much longer than my chicks and I.”

My gallinaceous female companion went on to explain how the Hebrew and Christian scriptures include a number of feminine descriptions of God, to illustrate an attribute of the Divine in a relatable way. Our forebears (excuse the pun, she quipped, in front of the burly grizzly) also referred to God as a midwife, woman in labour, and a breastfeeding mother^[8].

“These are remarkable descriptions,” says the hen.

“You might also be surprised and encouraged to learn that the Old Testament closely associates God with wombs and fertility^[9] and many of God’s names and attributes – such as El Shaddai, whose root word means ‘breast’; and rahamim, God’s mercy – have linguistic and associative links with the feminine. Depicting certain activities, such as providing food for Israel (as Moses’ demands of Yahweh in the book of Numbers), also connected God with what the ancient Hebrews deemed a motherly activity^[10]. The father of the prodigal son that Jesus depicts in the well known New Testament story also ‘breaks cultural stereotypes’^[11] and acts in a motherly way.”

“But if you want a closer encounter with the feminine, come and meet Sophia.”





Thermos stop *(sustenance for the journey)*

"Feminine metaphors for God can be especially valuable if our [spiritual] directees are struggling with the often patriarchal structures of the institutional Church or are working through the distress of abuse by a male perpetrator...."^[12]

"Men too may find in the feminine images of God some respite from 'warrior' or 'king' imagery... and reinforce the nurturing, compassionate side of themselves which may have been submerged in a 'macho' culture."^[13]



Shining the torch *(questions to cast light into exploratory spaces)*

What pronoun(s) do you use personally and professionally when referring to God? He/she/it/they or Godself or _____?

How does referencing God in this way influence attitudes and behaviour? Faith development?

In what ways are you a role model or influencer when it comes to reinforcing or challenging certain images of God?

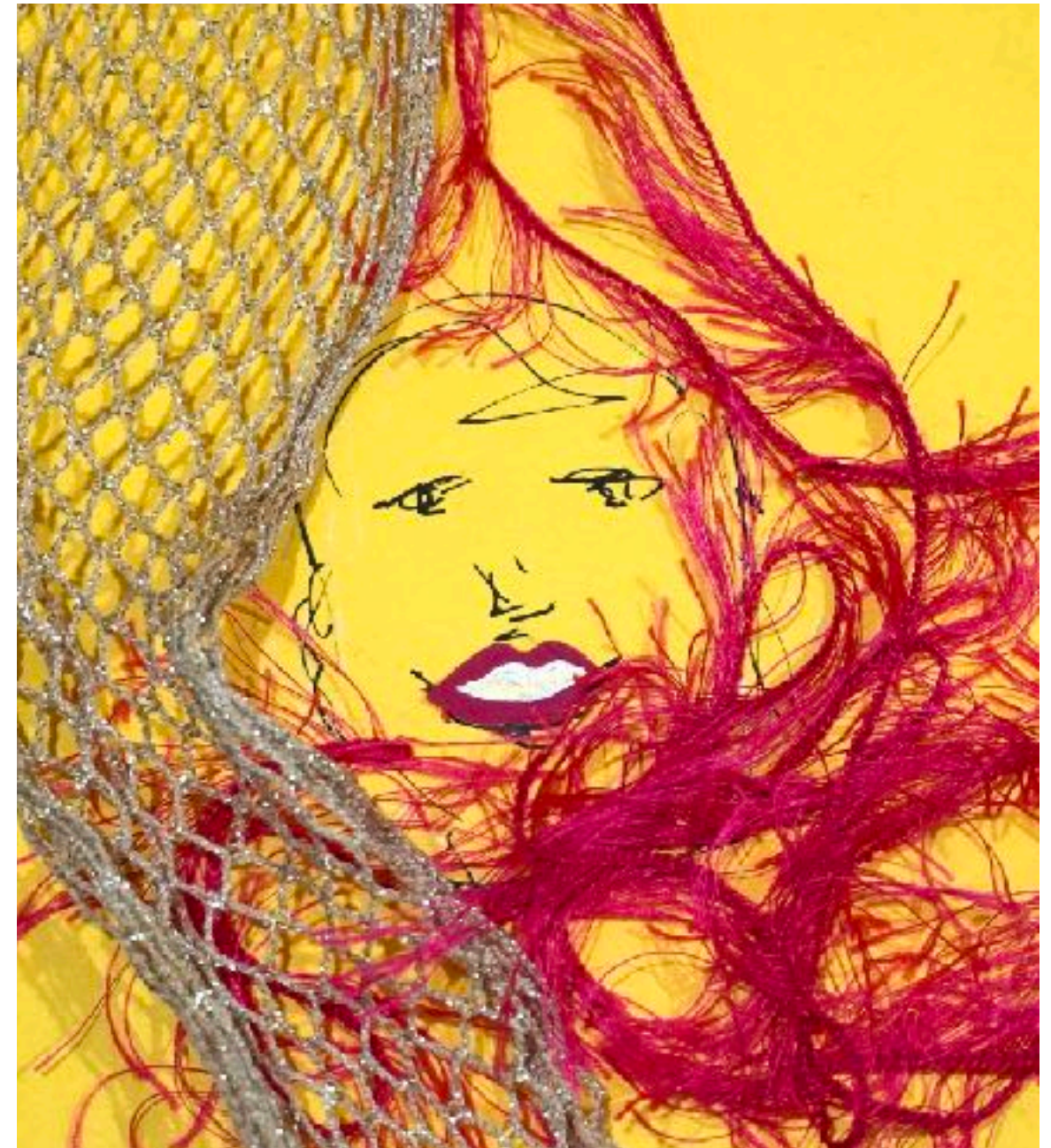
I follow my newly acquired feathery and furry friends into an elongated tunnel. As we trek along, forming a narrow line, I notice my companions become silhouetted by red light. Wafts of fragrant air tickle my nose. (Is it earthy, aromatic frankincense, that symbol of holiness?). We emerge into a space the size of which I find indeterminable; my spatial perception is overpowered by an intensely vibrant light edged in pomegranate red.

I'm aware of squarks and growls of recognition. The conversational pleasantries allow time for my eyes to adjust and I register the dazzling occupier of the cavern.

"I bet you haven't heard much about me, especially in Western church circles," laughs Sophia, a.k.a. Holy Wisdom, as she embraces us one by one and offers mint tea. She's bedecked in a little red dress embellished with intricate gold embroidery.

"L'Chaim! To Life!" she exclaims, as she lifts a pottery tea cup to her lips – which, by the way, are accentuated with a glossy lipstick that, in some contexts, might be marketed under the name 'Superbly Scarlet'.

"My cousin Logos gets more of the limelight, but we are both part of Yeshua's whakapapa," says Sophia, as she offers us laughter, warm hospitality and a theological insight or two.



She explains how the past 50 or so years, in particular, have seen radical changes in the design and fit of navigational gear, to allow women and other speleologists to explore more freely.

In Sophia's stash of equipment, I locate a more comfortable backpack. I fill a thermos with her invigorating tea.

It's then that Sophia offers me some caving tips and explains the likely contours of the tunnel system ahead.

"Feminist speleology is characterised by critique and deconstruction^[14] of existing maps, and by the discovery of lost caverns of women-centred stories and points of view^[15]. Then, as you glimpse the proverbial light near the end of the tunnel" - she laughs at her own witticism - "you'll likely need to reconstruct or revise^[16] your pathway onwards, so you can embark on new adventures."

"It's challenging but exciting stuff!" she says encouragingly.

We discuss the possibility of stalagmite obstacles. I notice Sophia sighs when she talks about the prevalence of masculine God-language in institutional and public cave-settings. She muses about the need for a smidge of bravery and long-life torch batteries.

"Why is it seen as more acceptable to refer to the Divine as a hunk of rock than as a mother or female, like me?" she laments.

It obviously gets Sophia down and she expresses concern that we might be 'idolising' some of our God-pictures and language^[17], to the detriment, she suspects, of some people's spiritual development.

I know exactly how she feels, I say.

At that very moment the lyrics of a pop song reverberate in our ears and space, bursting through from the rock tunnel ahead. My companions follow me into the next cavern, where we meet a rock singer and the Archbishop of Canterbury.



Thermos stop (*sustenance for the journey*)

"[V]erbal images of God in liturgy, preaching and catechesis [religious education] – along with visual images in art – have forged a strong link in the popular mind between God and maleness. ...[Because of] no alternatives, these images are often taken literally."^[18]

"The further removed from the historical Jesus the more likely a [Biblical] writer is to talk about God as father."^[19]

Instances of father language per gospel: Mark: 5 times; Luke: 5 times; Material common to Matthew and Luke: 9 times; John: 117 times.^[20]

"[Female metaphors release] divine mystery from its age-old patriarchal cage so that God can be truly God – incomprehensible source, sustaining power, ... holy Wisdom, indwelling Spirit, the ground of being, ...the holy mystery that surrounds and supports the world."^[21]



Shining the torch (*questions to cast light into exploratory spaces*)

"The Scriptures are not simply sources of theological reflection but themselves are examples of theological reflection."^[22] To what extent do you understand Scripture in this way?

Scripture, tradition, reason and experience^[23] can all inform spiritual understanding and practice. How do you/your directees value each of these? Which does your/their faith tradition most value? Undervalue?

What insights are contemporary Biblical scholarship and the contributions of social sciences and other fields offering your spiritual direction practice? Are they in alignment with your experiences of God?

When my tribe of explorers emerges into the adjacent cave, which shimmers in colours of mercurial silver and purple^[24], we come face to face with American singer Ariana Grande. Her sultry voice and lyrics “You’ll believe God is a Woman” reverberate around us.

In juxtaposition^[25], we see the head of the Anglican worldwide church, Archbishop Justin Welby, waiting patiently – but wearing a slightly pained facial expression – for the diminutive singer’s last note to dissipate down the corridor we’ve just traversed.

As we listen to the rest of the song, I wonder about the extent to which Ariana is making a deep theological statement (although it’s a very sensuous song so maybe there are some spiritual pointers to the marvels of incarnation and embodiment), but by this stage my interest in the Archbishop’s response is piqued.

“God is not male or female,” he says when all’s quiet. “God is not definable.”^[26]

While I (and the author of the poem I’m carrying in my pocket) would wholeheartedly agree with his considered point of view that no gendered word or single metaphor can wholly encompass the Deity, I feel for Sophia and her female troupe. She gives me a sideways glance. My hen friend’s feathers are a bit ruffled, too.

Sophia reads a media article that’s stuck to the wall. It seems 41% of British Christians concur with the Archbishop and other religious leaders that God’s not gendered, yet there’s still a significant percentage of Christian pollsters (36%) who think of God as male.^[27]

When we learn that a mere 1% of people surveyed imagine God as a woman^[28], Ariana walks off in a huff. I feel a bit deflated, too, and the uplifting colour palette of the cave vanishes in an instant.

“It seems unfair that male images don’t get the sustained criticism that female images do, when apparently both are to be seen as inadequate depictions of God,” I speak into the gloom.

I reach into my trouser pocket for the sustenance of a barley sugar and feel the comfort of that crumpled piece of paper with the poem on it. I read out the next lines to anyone who cares to listen:

What if the cave was too large to be fully known,
Far too extensive to be comprehended by one
person or group,
Too vast for one dogma or doctrine?

Would I shatter at such a thought?
Perish from paradox or puzzle?
Shrink and shrivel before the power?^[29]

“Are the risks too great to go on?” I ask of hen and bear and eagle.

“I think it’s time for a trip to the library,” chuckles Sophia, who gestures us into a side cavern lined with shelves and a miscellany of containers, some adorned with gems and gold leaf.

Words burst forth all over the place: nouns and verbs and sentences sprawl up to the ceiling and tumble like ringlets to the floor. There are handwritten ideas in ancient-ink script, the parchment smelling of a wisp of ovine (and urine, adds Sophia, as she wrinkles up her nose and explains the transformation from sheep skin to writing material). In a very un-Dewey like catalogue system, so-called controversial books with soot-singed edges sit alongside popular podcasts bursting with speleologists’ tales of journeys to the feminine Divine.

I investigate the collection. The barley sugar in my mouth slowly diminishes, but my resolve inversely strengthens.

“Come on cave explorers, there’s more to uncover yet!” I say. The glowworms overhead respond with a flash of purple.

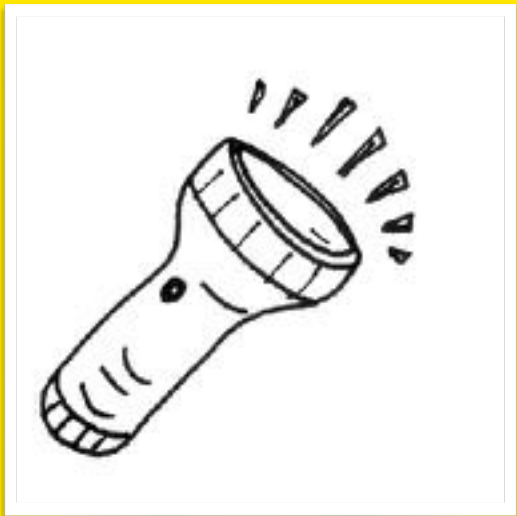




Thermos stop *(sustenance for the journey)*

“While we may believe that terms such as Father when applied to God have been completely redefined by Jesus and do not mean that God is male, this clearly is not understood by those outside of the church – and ... sadly, by many inside the church. The constant use of the pronoun ‘him’ in referring to God reinforces this concept. For many women this is a barrier to their coming to an understanding of God as primarily love and experiencing the accepting grace that comes through Jesus Christ by the Spirit”^[30].

“Many people say, ‘I don’t think of God as male, even though I use male terms for God’. This is psychologically not possible. Our brain, memories, and language do not function in this way. ...[W]hen we use the word Father for God...we draw upon and use our existing information about human fathers, what psychologists call cognitive schemas, in order to describe God. ...[T]he exclusive use of the masculine pronouns ‘he’ and ‘him’ for God has the same effect.”^[31]



Shining the torch *(questions to cast light into exploratory spaces)*

How has spiritual work with women affected your understanding of Imago Dei (being God’s image bearers)? Their understanding of it? In what way does all creation reflect the image of God?

To what extent is the ‘gender balancing’ of God-concepts a social justice issue? Or a spiritual necessity for many, both in and outside the Church?

How might a relational or Trinitarian view of God impact our experience and descriptions of the Divine? (seeing God as dynamic, diverse, communal, etc).

What insight might society’s embrace of gender diversity (or non-binary sexuality) offer the religious sphere in terms of God descriptions?

In the middle of the next cave we become fascinated by a video projected onto the rock-face. It plays in a continuous loop, depicting a woman holding a bunch of lashed twigs and sweeping her house in a systematic manner. She keeps saying “I have to find the lost”. It seems she’s intent on finding something of immense value to her.

The drachma drops and I realise we are witnessing something special. Yeshua tells us about this womanly God in one of his stories. All of a sudden, like a hologram, the formerly ethereal woman steps from the screen and beckons me to follow her through a rocky archway.

I turn to my assembled friends to thank them for safely accompanying me here. They realise I must venture into this part of the cave system on my own.

I follow the female figure (Godde? G*d?) into a grotto where an underground stream forms a crystalline pool. The Woman sits down on a flat aspect of rock that overlooks the water. She smiles and invites me to sit alongside. The rock-seat is surprisingly comfortable and feels the temperature of my own skin. A hint of lavender and peppermint sits on my tongue, reminiscent of a brand of chocolate that I’m rather partial to. The sensations make me feel less nervous and dissipate thoughts of imaginary monsters lurking beneath the watery surface.

Encouraged by the warmth and compassion in the Divine Woman’s eyes, I lean over the pool, rather gingerly at first.

“What do you see?”, she asks.





“Everything shimmers and isis more... vibrant somehow,” I say haltingly, attempting to describe what I’m experiencing.

“Our reflections merge somehow,” I add, because we seem less separate and distinct in the pool image.

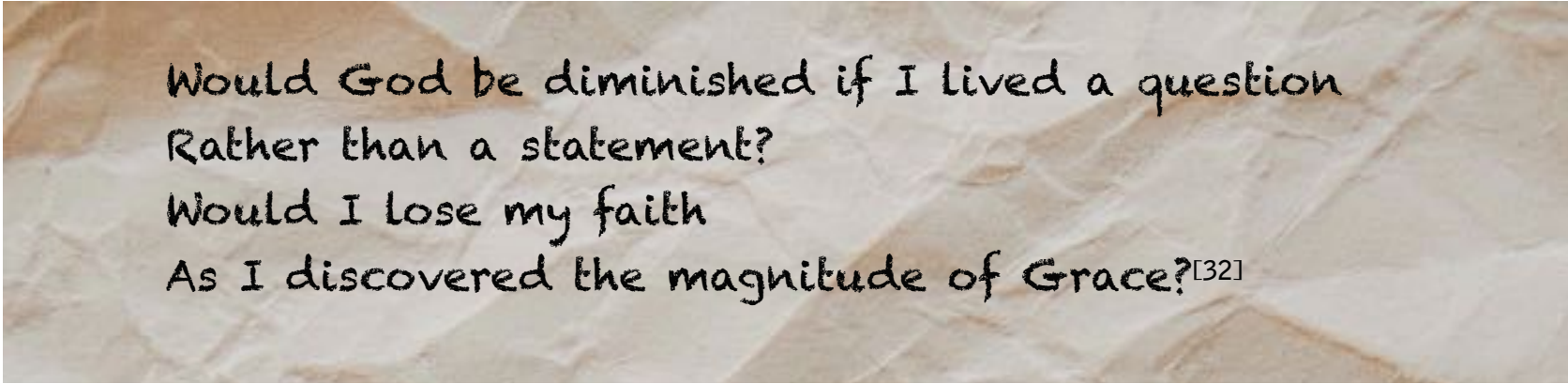
“Ah, then we have truly found each other at last,” says the Divine Woman.

At that moment (which feels momentous but is also proving hard to rationally process), the sow bear breaks through the outer cave wall and gives me a scratchy bear-hug.

“God’s within you, God’s within you,” she chants, lifting me enthusiastically off the ground.

“A spark of God is within you and all creation, too,” I reply, returning the compliment despite feeling the internal rumblings of a whole lot of theological questions.

Questions, questions, questions. Just like the poet:



Would God be diminished if I lived a question
Rather than a statement?
Would I lose my faith
As I discovered the magnitude of Grace?^[32]

I’m suddenly grateful and Grace-filled.

Hen, her chicks, mother eagle, sow bear, Sophia, the Divine Woman and a whole bunch of soon-to-be companions (I might also have glimpsed Ariana at the back of the group) guide me outside.

We emerge into the sunlight and the scene before me is verdant and eye-catching. The old campground seems a-ways away off now and I notice a nearby signpost pointing to a new settlement called Reorder. We amble along this path together, seeing more caves and signposts in the distance.

On a grassy slope at the new campsite, I relinquish my backpack and take a long snooze in the sun. I need to recoup my energies for another adventure! Being a spiritual speleologist is hard yakka and, if you’re up for it, takes you to the edge and beyond of known maps and cave systems.

O, for the willingness to explore
To leave my tiny vocabulary at the entrance
And stand before you naked
Stripped of pretenses and rigidity,
Disrobed of self righteousness and tidy packages,
Stripped of all that holds me at a distance from you
And your world.

Strip me, O God,
Then clothe me in curiosity and courage.^[33]

* * *



Thermos stop *(sustenance for the on-going journey)*

"[Re]claim menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, motherhood, and menopause. Doing so as Christian women means asking what these experiences tell us about our experience of God...." [34]

"[W]omen are fully capable of symbolizing the whole mystery of God in as adequate and inadequate way as male images have done." [35]

"The ... struggle for women's equal human dignity is the context for yielding a growing treasury of female icons of the living God who acts womanish: outrageous, audacious, courageous.... As transformative action it seeks to make whole whatever demeans and violates the human dignity of women." [36]



Shining the torch *(questions to cast light into exploratory spaces)*

How can spiritual directors help women (and people identifying as non-binary) have their "full sexual identity affirmed being in the image and likeness of God"? [37]

How might moving beyond dualistic thinking (and the labelling of behaviour traits as 'feminine' or 'masculine') free up our re-imagining of God? Ourselves?

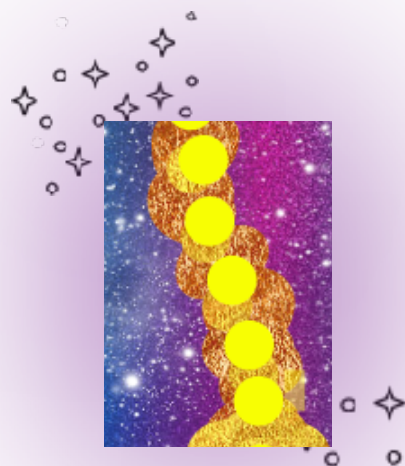
What invitations are there in this material for your spiritual direction practice?

The End ... or is it just another beginning?

Postscript: In passing, I hear Sophia discussing Yeshua's gender and if it has any relevance theologically. But that's an invitation to a whole'nother adventure!

Footnotes:

1. First stanza of Cynthia Langston Kirk's poem *Stripped by God*. Quoted in *Living the Questions: The Wisdom of Progressive Christianity*, p 9.
2. *ibid*, the next lines of the poem.
3. Sinnott, Alice M. "Bible Images Give Shape and Voice to God Language", chapter 5 of *The God Book: Talking about God Today*, p 61.
4. Darragh, Neil. 'Where in earth is God?', *Word & Worship* Summer 2019-20. p 10.
5. *ibid*.
6. McBride, Trish. "Expanding the Metaphors", chapter 18 of *The God Book*, p 219.
7. Deuteronomy chapter 32 and Hosea chapter 13 respectively.
8. Psalm 22; Isaiah 42; Psalm 13 and Isaiah 49 and 66 - respectively.
9. Bulkeley, Tim. *Not Only a Father*, p 20.
10. *ibid*, p 23.
11. *ibid*, p 45-46.
12. Pickering, Sue. *Spiritual Direction*, p 46
13. *ibid* . In this example, Pickering is taking what might be considered a dualistic approach to traits ('strong' traits are considered masculine and 'softer' traits are feminine). Johnson, for example, uses the term 'womanish' in an attempt to avoid/challenge the gendering of traits that is often prescribed/assumed by our culture.
14. Gonzalez, Michelle. *Created in God's Image*, p 88. Gonzalez describes a "tripartite" method that includes, firstly, a "hermeneutics of suspicion": what she describes as a critique and deconstruction of historical Christianity.
15. *ibid*. The second is a "hermeneutics of retrieval" , which Gonzalez describes as the recovery of the lost history of women.
16. *ibid*. The third is what Gonzalez calls "reconstruction of Christian categories" and a "revisioning" of tradition.
17. Bulkeley, Tim. *Not Only a Father*, p 117. Bulkeley warns of "reducing" God through human language.
18. Johnson, Elizabeth A. *Quest for the Living God*, p 98.



Footnotes cont.

19. Bulkeley, Tim. *Not Only a Father*, p 41 quoting from a prior article he wrote.
20. *ibid*, p 41 quoting the data of Mark Keown. The figures of Joachim Jeremias quoted on page 8 of the Presbyterian report by Annette Hannah et al list the comparable statistics as 3, 4, 4, and 100. Interesting difference but not material to the point being made.
21. Johnson, Elizabeth A. *Quest for the Living God*, p 99.
22. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, quoted by Gonzalez, in *Created in God's Image*, p 16.
23. Gondalez, Michelle. *Created in God's Image*, p xiv.
24. Purple being a feminist and ecclesiastical colour.
25. This fictitious interaction between the Anglican archbishop and Ariana Grande mirrors a Guardian newspaper article in which the journalist wrote a fictitious interview with the archbishop discussing the title of Ariana's song (found at <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/news/latest-news/archbishop-canterbury-reflects-god-father-who-loves-me-unconditionally>). See footnote 26 for source statements.
26. The Archbishop of Canterbury gave a series of lectures at St Martin-in-the Fields in Trafalgar Square, London, which are referred to on his official website (found at <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/news/latest-news/archbishop-canterbury-reflects-god-father-who-loves-me-unconditionally>).
27. The YouGov poll data is taken from the *Guardian* article mentioned in footnote 25. Original source data at <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/lifestyle/articles-reports/2018/09/06/only-1-british-christians-believe-god-female>
28. According to the YouGov poll mentioned in footnote 27, a total of 3% believe God has a "different human gender identity"; 19% said they don't know.
29. Next stanza of Cynthia Langston Kirk's poem *Stripped by God*. Quoted in *Living the Questions: The Wisdom of Progressive Christianity*, p 9.
30. Introduction to the report "Inclusive or Exclusive: God or Man at the Centre of the Universe?", page 2. Introduction written by Kevin Ward.
31. *ibid*, p 5.
32. Next lines of Cynthia Langston Kirk's poem *Stripped by God*. Quoted in *Living the Questions: The Wisdom of Progressive Christianity*, p 9.
33. *ibid*.
34. Fischer, Kathleen. *Women at the Well*, p 39.
35. Johnson, Elizabeth A. *Quest for the Living God*, p 109.
36. *ibid*, p 109-110.
37. Fischer, Kathleen. *Women at the Well*, p 54.



Resources spiritual speleologist Anam Cara used in her exploration for a more woman-inclusive God:

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Johnson, Elizabeth A., *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (Continuum International Publishing Group, New York, 2007)

“a captivating journey”

“an immersive experience”

“wear[s] its theological heft lightly and playfully”

“applause”

*- comments from special interest project assessors
Spiritual Growth Ministries*

