

SPIRITUAL GROWTH MINISTRIES TRUST
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**Archived Articles From 2000 Winter issue
of Spiritual Growth Ministries Newsletter:**

The Presence of God:

Exploring Our Mystical Traditions

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*Prayer and theology are
inseparable. True theology is
the adoration offered by
intellect.*

*The intellect clarifies the
movement of prayer, but only
prayer can give it the fervour of
the Spirit.*

*Theology is light, prayer is fire.
Their union expresses the union
of the intellect and the heart.*

- Olivier Clement -

EDITORIAL

by Andrew Dunn

The presence of God is a vast and fascinating area to explore - and in this Newsletter, and the next, we open it up and have a look around! What we're looking at here is the area of experience of God that is known as *mystical theology* or *mysticism*.

In some circles today mysticism has a bad press. In fact it is an excellent term to describe the ways in which people are met, touched, blessed, cleaned out or drawn forward into the practical aspects of what St Paul describes as *union with Christ*.

We do this with a brief exploration of the territory, poems which expand our view of the presence, articles about mystics and a sizeable piece by Kerrie Hide of Canberra in which she describes St John of The Cross' Dark Night poem and applies it to the experience of ageing; book reviews also feature.

In the Summer 2000 Newsletter we will take the theme further with more biographical pieces and a fuller discussion of the *kataphatic* and *apophatic* ways of experiencing the presence and the absence of God.

Thankyou to all who responded so generously to our *Friends of SGM* appeal. We appreciate your help and offer you another opportunity to do the same with this issue!

We also thank the contributors to this issue of the Newsletter. We are delighted with so much fresh material. Kerrie Hide's article was delivered as a lecture at an Aged Care Chaplains Conference in Canberra in January and she has given us permission to print it here.

Every blessing as you read and absorb this discussion on the huge and limitless subject of God's presence among us.

FEATURE ARTICLES

Embraced by Agape by Andrew Dunn

Christianity is in the first place an Oriental religion, and it is a mystical religion. ... Our roots are in fact religious and artistic, and therefore non-rational, or rather supra-rational. (Barreau in Clement 2).

Barreau adds that of all Oriental religions Christianity is the best and most complete, and mysticism is as necessary to humanity as science, if not more so – because humans are mystical beings.

O lord, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you (Augustine of Hippo).

Our scientific and rational view of the world does not satisfy the deepest reservoirs of life. As Jesus says, *One does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.* (Matt. 4:4). *Christian mystics are those whose spirituality bears the deep marks of the revelation received from God ... For mysticism is an existential attitude, a way of living at a greater depth* (Barreau).

Birds fly, fishes swim and humans pray. (Clement 4). This crisp statement from the early Church sees prayer as natural to us as air to birds and water to fish. It is not strange, therefore, that at the core of life and faith is the desire for God, for love and for union and communion. Essential Christian faith addresses these desires in a non-rational and experiential way when it says that we know God by grace alone through faith alone - and that is a gift of God (Cf. Ephesians 2:8).

A MYSTICAL FAITH:

Mysticism appears and reappears throughout the history of Christian devotion and theology in both the Eastern and Western Church, and in both Catholic and Protestant streams since the Reformation. Briege O'Hare said, *Christianity is an oriental and a mystical faith, more complete than any other form of faith. Mysticism is as needful for humanity as science, and yet more so... for we are mystical supra-rational people* (Friary Retreat Centre, Auckland - 15.12.96). One writer has said recently that to survive in the third millennium Christians will need a deep sense of the immanence of God (Michael Mitton), while another writes that they will all be mystics (Karl Rahner).

THE WORD ITSELF:

The word *mysticism* is a problem for many. It sounds a bit spooky, other worldly, out of touch with the real things of life. Yet this is not the intention of the word. Mystics are earthy people, in touch with reality and the joy and pain of life. As one writer points out, many more mystics have died young in years (through ill health, the struggle of being different and persecution) than those who have been applauded (Bruno Borchert. *Mysticism*. pp 48-49). So the experience is anything but unreal.

The Middle English work *Mystike* means *figurative* or *secret*. It refers to ways of seeing and understanding beyond the surface or immediate.

Teresa of Avila puts it well: *When picturing Christ ... and sometimes even when reading, I used unexpectedly to experience a consciousness of the presence of God of such a kind that I could not possibly doubt that he was within me or that I was wholly engulfed in him. This was in no sense a vision: I believe that it is called mystical theology.*

Evelyn Underhill, the early 20th century English writer offers a broad definition:

Mysticism is the art of union with Reality. The mystic is a person who has attained that union in greater or less degree; or who aims at and believes in such attainment (*Practical Mysticism*. Eagle 1991. 2).

A mystic dares to take the path of true seeing - Briege O'Hare (Poor Clare Sister).

Some writers see it in ethical terms - that is, in the quality of the Christian life we live (cf. Catherine of Sienna. We print an article on Catherine next issue).

Borchert sees mysticism this way: It's like being in love which settles down to love and loving. *Replace the words 'being in love' with 'mystical experience', and you have a rough and ready description of mysticism in general* (*Mysticism*. p.4).

St John writes, *Some of you have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love (agape), and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them* (1 John 4:16). Abiding in God and in God's love is the heart of St John's view of how the Christian life is to be lived.

Bernard McGinn cautions against tightening the definition too much. He prefers to talk about *the presence of God*. This allows for the breadth of ways in which God is known and met amongst us: *Thus we can say that the mystical element in Christianity is that*

part of its belief and practices that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God (1:xvii).

NEW TESTAMENT MYSTICISM:

It is intriguing that of the New Testament writers it is John and Paul who reflect the mystical pathway most directly. Why just these two? It's a clear indication of the various types of spirituality in the New Testament. John's understanding (and that of his community) of the unity between Jesus, his Father and all believers is pristine mystical insight. *The Father and I are one* (John 10:20). *I in them and you in me* (John 17:23). He also links Jesus to Yahweh and being itself: *"Before Abraham was, I am* (John 8:58), and to the way to God: *I am the way, the truth and the life* (John 14:6). St Paul, however, is regarded as the first great Christian mystic. His letters are loaded with the concepts, insights and the language of mysticism. All his *in Christ* glimpses, his union language, his marriage imagery, his belief that all things were made by Jesus and for him, and that in him all things hold together (Col. 1:17), his intimate language of love (1 Cor. 13), his stately view of God's love (Eph. 3:12ff), his profound meeting with Jesus on the Damascus road, his visions and deep theological understanding, and not least his tenacious search to attain the resurrection. This is the language of mysticism. Andrew Louth (DOCS) sees New Testament mysticism as referring to the inner knowing of God as revealed in Christ, and that is what Paul explores. He describes it as *the mystery* which is revealed in Christ Jesus. At the heart of Christian spiritual theology and devotion is this same exploration of the inner knowing of God in Christ. Those who don't hold the two together (knowing God in Christ) search for different mysteries than the founders of our faith.

GOD'S GIFTFULNESS:

One way into the deeper experiences of God that open up through prayer is the God-given experience of "an immediate, direct, intuitive knowledge of God or of ultimate reality attained through personal religious experience" as *mysticism* can be described (Mircea Eliade - Encarta article *Mysticism*). This richly exploding expansion of consciousness and its vision of the unity of everything in the love of God is the faith place many are drawn to as their explorations deepen. I don't know why it happens for some and not others, or indeed of varying depths for many people, but a common factor in the experience is discovering contemplative prayer. My conclusion through listening to many personal stories is that it is a gift of grace that comes to some people who are open and thirsty for deeper pools of quiet water.

It's not an extra blessing for the especially devout. In fact, it's often a difficult and painful thing to live with in the initial stages of discovery, the cause of much inner tension and struggle while at the same time being an entry into clear love and deep joy. We also need to note that there are wide variations in the form and content of mystical experience. Yet it is a central human experience and introduces us to living in the love of God as naturally as birds use the air, and fish the water as their natural environment. The mystical way arises out of, and focuses on experiences of the love and presence of God, as the biblical writers suggest - out of God's great giftfulness.

CENTRAL THEMES:

Mystical experiences are as many and varied as the people of God. Julian of Norwich received all her *showings* in a day or so, and spent the rest of her life exploring them. Teresa of Avila made her discoveries throughout her life's journey. John Calvin found biblical teaching and spent the rest of his life writing and teaching about union with Christ our life. Dag Hammerskjold was met suddenly, caught unawares, as it were. A modern experience of showings began after a rich charismatic experience. A young woman mystic of today has been seeing and experiencing the presence of God from childhood. So we can't generalise as to how it should be or will be. However, some central themes in the deepening discoveries of God's presence are these:

1. It is much more a matter of seeing profoundly, of glimpsing something huge rather than of emotion, ecstasy or constantly feeling high, although emotions can be deeply stirred. *A deep layer of reality rises to consciousness ... a deeper level of our being which is, in fact, the deeper level of reality in all things* (Borchert 7). Mysticism in this sense is an *expansion of consciousness*, of seeing beyond the immediate.
2. A changing personal perspective. There is an overwhelming discovery that I am no longer simply an observer of creation and the universe but a created and integral part of it. There can also be a cosmological shift as well, that is that one catches a glimpse of this galaxy and the next and on and on as one sees more fully and becomes a precious part of all that God has made as a participant.
3. Mystical experience is *all-embracing*. Feelings, mind, imagination, understanding, will - the whole of one's being is open and touched by the discovery that love is the basis of everything.
4. The discovery of a *unity consciousness*, that is that all things are connected. From the fragmentation of ourselves and our world comes the discovery that everything is part of the whole of creation and that God is in it all but not contained there. *My spiritual awakening was the day I saw and know I saw all things in God and God in all things* (Mechtilde of Magdeburg. b. 1210).
5. Creation is discovered as a revelation of God. Through nature many mystics meet God and grace and love. Nature mysticism is important for an increasing number of people today and as such becomes a significant way of spiritual experience and growth. (Cf. Psalm 19:1-4).
6. Jesus is discovered as Christ the living, creative Word of God (John 1:1), the ultimate source, the origin of God's creation (Rev. 3:14) in whom all things consist (Col. 1:17). He is the Word made flesh who dwelt among us (John 1:14). We too are flesh so we are in God. Our minds alone can't grasp these deep things - only God-given insight can see them.
7. There is often a profound shift in understanding. The words, concrete images, symbols and language of faith (even the cherished foundational concepts) are replaced by a largely imageless and wordless knowing. This means that as the swimming proceeds into

the depths of new realities the earlier rich words of faith, the lively images by which we described it and the language by which we talked about begin to empty and sound hollow and inadequate. This is the shift from the *kataphatic* (seeing God in symbolic form - words too are symbols) to the *apophatic* way of knowing (i.e. the experience of God without symbols - as in a presence in the darkness). Or, as Eugene Peterson describes it, praying with our eyes closed rather than open!

Many of us stay with the *kataphatic*, open eyed way of praying all our lives; and that's a rich, nourishing and very full way of knowing the presence of God.

8. Whichever way we are taken along the way (the kataphatic or apophatic) it involves a shift from the limitations and fragmentation of words and symbols to the hugeness and the interconnectedness of everything. Always it's a movement into a greater view of reality than has been seen before. Often it's a movement into God. Usually there's an overwhelming sense of the over-arching and never-endingness of agape, the love that is God (1 John 4:7 - "God is agape"). This is not only huge (as in everywhere, here and there, near and far, immediate and encompassing eternity) but also intensely personal as it embraces me with eternal love, loves me into life and love and links me into the love of the Trinity, and therefore into God as God is. *In-sight* lets us plumb the depths within. *Out-sight* let's us see beyond to eternity.

9. Our own desiring, our yearning for love, union and nourishment come from God. *God's love really is the source of our desiring* (Janet Ruffing. *Presence*. 1.1 1995). We discover that our sexuality as well as our spirituality come from the same source and are God's beautiful gifts! (Cf. Gerald May *Will and Spirit*; Scott Peck *Further Along The Road Less Travelled*). It's intriguing how often the deepening spiritual understanding is couched in terms of human love and romance (cf *The Song of Songs*).

CURRENT RENEWAL EXPERIENCES

Finally, what modern forms of experience of God fall within the mystical? What of Charismatic experiences (the Holy Spirit's touch, tongues, words of knowledge, spiritual warfare and so on)? What of the Toronto Blessing's "carpet time" and other forms of ministry? What of Pensacola's deep repentances and calls back to God? What of the various renewal experiences of our present time? Where do they fit into the experience of God's presence we are discussing here?

My suggestion is that they are particular and unique experiences of God's presence. However, just as the early Charismatic blessings of the 1970's and 80's lead many people to explore their place in the wider setting of contemplative prayer (Cf Joyce Huggett's *Listening To God* and other writings on prayer) so the more recent types of renewal need to be set within the wider context of God's presence. To do otherwise leads to the dangers of focussing over much on the particular blessing itself, of becoming locked into a constant round of trying to repeat the experience, and of trying to manipulate oneself and others towards a particular end - and that's not of grace, nor of the love of God. As happened to so many charismatic churches who thought they only needed to repeat again and again the same music, choruses, actions and language in order to retain the blessing, and became locked into ever decreasing circles of worship and experience, so the more recent (and indeed the future forms of renewal that will inevitably come) must keep turning to the greater truths of God's presence among us in order to be saved from themselves and their exponents.

THE PASTORAL CHALLENGE

What do these deepening experiences of God's love and presence mean for us in our churches? How do ministers, priests and pastors cater for the many people in our congregations who move on beyond the milk of the Word to deeper meat and need encouragement in their explorations and discoveries? How do we provide adequate worship and fellowship for them? I suspect that many of those Alan Jamieson describes in his work on church leavers are folk who are exploring beyond the safety flags of our congregations' parameters. How do we hold them and bless them in their journey with the love of God? That's a huge challenge.

In the next Newsletter we explore in greater depth the presence of absence experienced in the *apophatic* way of faith.

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Mysticism is simply the experience of Grace. It occurs within the framework of one's normal, everyday life and within the experience of faith. Therefore, it is correct to say that mystical experience is not specifically different from the ordinary life of grace that is open to everyone (the contrary is Gnosticism).

Richard McBrien.

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Birds fly

Fishes swim

Humans pray

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MYSTICAL MOMENT

by Rosemary Blackwell

Where surf is rough
and sun is hot,
West Ohope beach,
my favourite spot.

Trees and greenery
cascade down cliffs
towards the sea ...
down onto the level
where lovers walk
joined hand in hand,
where breakers surge
and two worlds merge,
surf and sand...

no, three!

Sky and sea and land.
the third a mystery
ethereal, otherworldly
vague empty space,
yet the backdrop
against which the other two
take their place;
the mysterious "other"
closer to me than father or mother,
friend or brother ...
the very air that I breathe.

Lord your beauty
everywhere I see,
a video of life
rolling on ...
I have captured
but a frame
of something
that shall never
be the same;
for this vision of sight
has caught a fragment
of light,
a glimpse of the garment
of your glory
scattered through your universe
and held
for one brief moment
in verse.

* * * *

PRESENCE by John North

Sensing the presence of God has been at the heart of evangelical theology and experience.

"Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Saviour?" This implies a time and place when such an event took place and also usually a "feeling" element to the transaction a la John Wesley "I felt my heart strangely warmed."

The Bible was to be believed, but for evangelicals there was more: God was to be personally experienced. And afterwards? It was assumed that a Christian would grow in faith, love and obedience, but how this process would happen was not always clear. The stress on the beginning often meant that little was said about the continuation.

The charismatic strand of Christianity offered a way forward with their promotion of the "second blessing" and the baptism and infilling of the Holy Spirit. These events too were often accompanied by strong emotion and ecstatic experience. If it happened, you knew you had encountered the life-giving Spirit of God in a life-changing way.

And afterwards? Did one move on or seek to repeat such wonderful encounters with God? The trouble was often the law of diminishing returns. As Tournier puts it:

"Take for example the case of a man who was once roused by the powerful inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Now he strives, by disciplining himself to retain the old spontaneous ardour. But he fails....."

The spiritual life consists only in a series of new births. There must be new flowering, new prophets, new adventures - always new adventures".

Without rejecting the value of past experiences, some move on to the contemplative mode of faith. The same axiom undergirds these three positions... that God may be personally encountered in experiences which involve heart, mind and spirit... "I know whom I have believed..." But God's presence is encountered in different ways on the contemplative journey. The poet, T.S.Eliot expressed it:

*"I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you.
Which shall be the darkness of God.....
I said to my soul, be still and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing..."*

(From East Coker)

The "Presence" is most experienced in solitude and silence. Listening becomes more important than talking. Instead of moving from one high moment to the next, the pathway is often experienced and described as darkness or desert.

Among evangelicals, there was a saying, "If God seems far away, guess who moved". But the contemplative is more likely to ask: "In this dry period, what is God saying to me? Is God asking; "Do you really want ME or just my gifts? Will you trust ME and love ME even if there are no emotional highs?"

This sounds like God's tough love urging us to grow, depending not on special experiences but on God alone.

There is a similar demand on our minds. Christianity is sometimes presented as providing answers to the big questions of life, and there is a lot of truth in this assertion. But as we move further through life, there seem to be more questions for which there is no neat answer. In many ways, life becomes more mysterious and once again we hear the "Presence" addressing the question to us:

"Are there many things you do not understand? Are there many questions and few neat answers? So you are looking through a puzzling mirror, seeing only in part? Will you still love Me and trust ME even if you haven't got all the answers?"

There is also a difference with regard to our wills. In some chapters of life we are called to strive and search and knock and storm the heights. But as the years go by, we increasingly see that our best efforts achieve little in terms of spiritual growth. Gradually we become readier to let God be "the power at work within us..." We realise that listening, receiving and trusting are the means by which we allow God to transform us, not with a quick zap, but through a life-time process. We are ready to believe that in darkness or desert, God is near. Without ecstasy, we know more deeply than ever before that love which will not let us go. We know whom we have believed and are convinced that He is able to keep what we have committed to Him.

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In your prayer time, rid yourself of everything that harasses you ... be an ignorant and simple and at the same time a pensive child ... Banish tricks and devices and behave like a child just weaned from its mother.

Evagrius of Pontus.

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THE ETERNAL LOVER

by Joy Cowley

Stop!
 You look in the wrong direction!
 I am not two thousand years distant
 but right here beside you,
 my shoulder against your shoulder,
 my hand resting on the back of your neck,
 my breath mixed with your breath
 in the same nowness.

How could you miss me?

Forget the history and politics
 that make truth small.
 They are not important enough
 to be pursued or rejected.
 Turn with the eyes of your heart
 and see who has not left your side
 since your soul took human journey.
 Say my name in our own secret language
 and remember what we have always been
 to each other.

Lean on me Beloved.
 Trust to die in my love.

* * * *

Get rid of the notion of measuring desserts. Replace it with generous unconditional love. Realize that God is *closer than breathing and nearer than hands and feet*. Feel absolutely safe with God who loves us into being and sustains us always. Relax the need to grasp at life. Let go anxiety and trust, be confident. ... This is the faith that overcomes the old world (1 Jn 5:4).

Beatrice Bruteau.

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HOLY DARING: TERESA OF AVILA – Carmelite

by Sheila Pritchard

Teresa of Avila was an earthy mystic. I like that! She was a "feet on the ground" woman in more ways than one. She was an astute organiser, reformer and administrator. Not many women in 16th century Spain travelled widely and bravely called to account both men and women in religious orders which had grown slack. Teresa did! She was a force to be reckoned with and not everyone appreciated her energy and her deep passion for the very best in a life devoted to the love of God.

She also had her feet on the ground in her understanding of a life of prayer. She knows from her own experience that it is a journey through many stages – most of which require discipline and costly commitment. Her images of the seven rooms of the Interior Castle make clear and practical what is involved. For Teresa the love of God was such an overriding passion that no cost was too great, no discipline too demanding to hold her back from the supreme experience of deeper intimacy. Even in the experience of the inner rooms of the castle Teresa is a discerning and down to earth woman. About those who try to generate emotional ecstasies and call them spiritual depths she has this to say: *So they get into their heads that it is rapture they are experiencing. I call this plain stupidity, for it is nothing else but wasting their time and destroying their health.*

An earthy woman, yes! And also a true mystic. Teresa's own experiences in prayer took her to heights and depths that most of us have yet to discover. This enabled her to teach others so profoundly and to discern so astutely what was genuine and what was not. She was adamant that daily life is the place where the authenticity of prayer is seen. Intimacy with the Beloved will be shown in lives of love. The ecstasies of spiritual marriage will give birth to Christ-like character.

Teresa had an intuitive grasp of what we would now call the psychology of human development. She made it very clear that self knowledge was essential in the spiritual life. *Knowing ourselves is something so important that I wouldn't want any relaxation ever in this regard, however high you may have climbed into the heavens....* Life for Teresa was a wholistic affair. Knowing God and knowing oneself go together. As this happens life is lived more fully and exuberantly. For Teresa that's what it is all about. The direct experience of God (which is what mysticism is) leads to what Jesus called *life to the full*. John 10:10.

Don't get the idea that Teresa sailed along with endless energy and delight. She suffered a great deal both with ill health, opposition from others and her own spiritual struggles. Yet through it all she describes herself as a woman so deeply in love that there was not a moment when she was not sustained and drawn forward by the Beloved. Teresa's own words are a fitting conclusion: *Let nothing disturb thee; let nothing affright thee. All things are passing. God alone abideth. Patience gaineth all. He who hath God wanteth nothing. Alone God sufficeth.*

GOOD BOOKS:

Houston, James (ed).

A Life Of Prayer – an abridged version of all Teresa's main writings. Multnomah Press. 1983.

Welch, John. **Spiritual Pilgrims: Carl Jung and Teresa of Avila.** Paulist Press. 1982.

Bielecki, Tessa. **Holy Daring: An Outrageous Gift To Modern Spirituality From St Teresa, The Grand Wild Woman of Avila.**

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PSALM 139 by Sheila McGrath

God, I've come to know you as a mother
big enough to hold the whole world
in the humps and hollows of your lap.

As I lay there in contentment
I watch you knit me into life
using a circular needle
made from number eight fencing wire
and yarn drawn from the finest, softest merino
to the roughest, coarsest binder twine.

I am amused as you drop a stitch here and there.
You assure me that if you made me perfect,
I would never get to know your Son.

There are knots on the outside
where everyone can see them:
on the inside there are light, lacy patterns,
lumpy bits, loose threads and slipped stitches.

Sometimes, I look into your knitting
and I am afraid
because I see the darker side.
Yet again, you turn me towards the light
and I know you will never cast me off.

* * * *

God's mystery - Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Colossians 2:2-3

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SO THE DARKNESS SHALL BE THE LIGHT: Ageing as a Dark Night by Kerrie Hide - Canberra

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel of the tribe of Asher. She was a great age having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. (Luke 2: 36-38)

Envisage the statue of a Jewish woman, time worn and wrinkled, carrying in her being all that she had been and done. Her conception, birth, life and experience, achievements and mistakes, her living and dying radiate from her. Named as a prophet, at the great age of eighty-four, she has discovered and claimed her place in the temple, praying night and day. A prophet at peace, at home in the temple, she embodies wisdom found in contemplation in the light of day and the dark of night. Anna had learned how to claim the night. In the Hebrew tradition darkness or night was often used as an image of danger. It expressed fear and anxiety (Gen 1:2). Yet paradoxically God created darkness (Isaiah 45:7), darkness and night were times for dreams, (Gen 28:11) and times

for visions (Dan 7:7). Luke's sketch of Anna implies that her prophetic role, her life of prayer and her embodied wisdom came to fruition because of her ability to claim the night.

THE DARK NIGHT

I come to this topic of the dark night from the perspective of a Christian theologian originally orientated towards the Mystery within Catholicism and informed theologically through the writings of Julian of Norwich. What I hope to offer in this paper are some insights into the Christian contribution to the human journey envisaged as night. Through reflecting on the writings of John of the Cross, the most influential and memorable contributor to this theme, I will show how the dark night is not simply a quaint title of an old Spanish poem no longer applicable to contemporary living. The dark night expresses our unique and universal reality. It must be negotiated. Australians gazed into the dark night at the turn of the century. Filled with hopeful anticipation for a new day, the brilliant kaleidoscope of exploding colour illuminated the darkness. We all journey into the night one way or another and if we are to embrace the grace of ageing we must claim and be at home in our dark nights.

John of the Cross, 1442 - 1591, was a Carmelite, a mystic, artist, poet, theologian and reformer. Theologically he falls within a long tradition of negative or apophatic mysticism which has its literary and metaphorical roots in NeoPlatonic thought, particularly the writings of Plotinus. This way of expressing theology reaches back to early Christianity. In Acts there is reference to Paul announcing to the Areopagus that he had insight into the one venerated as the "Unknown God". (Acts 17: 16-34). Pseudo Dionysius probably a 6th Century Syrian and the unknown 14th Century English author of the *Cloud on Unknowing* continued this distinguished tradition. John contributes significantly to the tradition of negative theology because he recognised that the unknown God not only transcends all created things but freely enters into the fabric of this world and is compassionately present in the experience of suffering. He attached such great importance to the presence of God in the lived experience that he mapped out a typology showing how God draws us to union, to be one with divine love through the experience of night. His poem *The Dark Night*, composed in 1585 expresses in metaphor an essential dynamic of the human journey to become one with God or experience divinization. In 1586 he wrote an incomplete commentary on what the key images of the first three verses of the poem mean. In book one John describes the experience of twilight or the night senses, while in book two he explicates the experience of midnight, or the night of the spirit, and dawn, the time of union with God in love brought to fulfilment in the beatific vision. John's account of the dark nights, though not specifically linked to age, are uncannily similar to what people undergo in the multiple experiences of loss and detachment that ageing necessarily brings.

THE NIGHT OF THE SENSES

The images used in the first verse of John's poem *The Dark Night* create a vignette of the basic story all humans live, a story of love, a story of grace, a story of God transforming us and drawing us to completion:

*One dark night,
Fired with love's urgent longings
- Ah the sheer grace! -
I went out unseen,
My house being now all still. (1)*

In this first dark night, fired with love's urgent longings, though the fire never goes out, it is a cold dry desolate numbing experience. The way is steep, the weather sharp, the night dark and long. The house is still, but not at peace. It is a time when the senses become sedated - there is a dulling of the eye and ear, the souring of taste, a malodour of the nose, the deadening of the touch. The imagination becomes desolate, discursive analysis and synthesising of ideas is impossible. This is a time when the loving presence of God liberates us from our imperfections. We begin to examine our lives, relive and reframe our hurts and engage in the process of forgiveness - forgiving others, forgiving ourselves, being forgiven. A woman describes the experience:

It was a dark, cold time. I felt I had lost everything that was familiar to me: my marriage, my home, my job, my country. I felt surrounded in a penetrating greying darkness that suffocated colours as they attempted to dance. Shadows of the past loomed. Painful memories emerged and cried out to be attended to. I felt unloved and unlovable. I wondered, had I come all this way for nothing. I couldn't pray. There were no images, nothing to whisper to me of the Mystery I had felt so close to. I felt empty. God seemed to be absent. And yet the longing was urgent. I went out unseen. I knew I could not turn back. (2)

John expounds upon the desolation "it (the sensory part of the person) remains deprived, dry and empty, and thus, while the spirit is tasting, the flesh tastes nothing at all and becomes weak in its work. (3) The night of the senses is a time of transition, of growth and transformation. It is a time of learning detachment, of letting go of past ways of being and knowing to learn how to respond to divine love in new and richer ways. The night of the senses aligns the senses to our desire for the transcendent. It teaches us how to gather our experiences and reshape them into meaning. The night initiates an invitation to enter the darkness, to let go of tired, restraining images of God. The night enables us to move beyond our knowing, into unknowing, giving us a glimpse of the limitlessness of divine love.

Consequently, the night of the senses results in a renewed sense of Mystery with a deeper appreciation of the human journey from God to God. There is a sense of what is not of God being annihilated as God leads us towards a more harmonious relationship within the Godhead. Humility increases. A more reverent knowledge of self and God develops, which creates a softer more open disposition. John describes the result:

as one liberated from a cramped prison cell, the soul goes about the things of God with much more freedom and satisfaction of spirit and with more abundant interior delight.... Its imagination and faculties are no longer bound to discursive meditation and spiritual solicitude, as was their custom. The soul readily finds in its spirit, without the work of meditation, a very serene, loving contemplation and spiritual delight. (4)

The night of the senses frees us and beckons us to the blessed darkness of the holy beyond. It enables us to be more attentive to the loving presence of God dwelling within us calling us to union with God's self.

Thus the night of the senses exposes a painful appreciation of the opaqueness of human existence and the obscure "why" that we cry out in the face of suffering, failure, illness and incompleteness. John's explanation of this night does not deny or glorify human pain and tragedy. He takes these limiting experiences seriously, seeing them as times of transition, times when we learn greater wisdom and discover more about loving.

THE NIGHT OF THE SPIRIT

The experience of encountering the Beloved in serene, loving contemplation attained as a result of the night of the senses, enables us to walk more securely and draws us into midnight, the night of the spirit. The darkness and concealment expressed in the second verse of the poem take on new meaning:

*In darkness and secure,
By the secret ladder, disguised,
- Ah the sheer grace! -
In darkness and concealment,
My house being now all stilled; (5)*

The more opaque darkness of the night of the spirit invites us to deeper loving. It calls us to surrender more completely into the life of the beloved by entering the dark region of unknowing through spending time in silence.

A woman describes an experience during the night of the spirit:

I felt desolate, numb, colourless, surrounded by a deep darkness. My old ways of knowing dissipated. I felt betrayed. Plagued by doubt in myself, my career choice, my sense of trust, my friends, "tears were my steady diet - day and night I cried out "where is God?" Gradually I came to an awareness that all colours exist in opaque darkness; bright life giving colours made iridescent through wisdom, mellow comforting colours made soft through happy memories and peaceful times, wild angry colours tinged with shadows of regrets and unsolved grief, deep painful colours that still didn't reflect the light of divine love. I saw myself as an empty earthenware vessel, open, longing, desiring, loving, waiting to be filled with the overflow of divine love. Touched by love the colours merged into an earthen harmony and I came to know that I was filled with an abundance of divine light. Fired in the kiln of divine compassion, agony and ecstasy became one. (6)

Throughout the night of the spirit, along with a contemplative awareness of the steadfastness of divine love, a corresponding feeling of abandonment, fear, struggle and a profound sense of our incompleteness surface as we experience a deep re-patterning of our lives. John explains:

And it is true, for when a person feels safest and least expects it, the purgation returns to engulf the soul in another degree more severe, dark and piteous than the former and which lasts for another period of time, perhaps longer than the first. He thereby thinks that his blessings are gone forever. (7)

Paradoxically, however, this purgation purifies and frees our desire. Our "gods" die. Now the presence of divine love calls us beyond all that we have known. John likens this night of the spirit to the effect fire has on wood:

The soul is purged and prepared for union with divine light, just as wood is prepared for transformation in to the fire. Fire, when applied to wood, first dehumidifies it, dispelling all moisture and making it give off any moisture it contains. Then it gradually turns the wood black, makes it dark and ugly, and even causes it to emit a bad odour. By drying out the wood, the fire brings to light and expels all those ugly and dark accidents which are contrary to fire. Finally by heating and enkindling from without, the fire transforms the wood into itself and makes it as beautiful as it is itself. (8)

Though we undertake an appraisal of life in the night of the senses, this time of conversion and renewal is more extensive. We are wounded, touched and impassioned until deeper levels of the intellect, memory and will are transformed.

GARMENTS

Grace abounds. John shows how God is with us in this night of the spirit through the grace of the theological virtues, faith, hope and charity. These virtues impart an obscure wisdom that absorbs and engulfs us. They protect and free us from what is not of God. John uses colour to give expression to his theologising, suggesting that we wear garments of white, green and red virtues.

The first garment, **faith**, is white. Faith is the inner pure white tunic, close to the heart. When we departed on this journey of night we walked in interior darkness, but in the night of the senses the whiteness of faith gives us light for the journey. Faith prepares us for union with divine wisdom by emptying and transforming the intellect in an atmosphere of unknowing. Faith mocks our inadequate attempts to confine the mystery. Faith engenders a wonder at not knowing.

The second garment, **hope**, is green. This life giving green garment enfolds us in the greenness of living. The greenness of hope protects us from a world where God is forgotten. It detaches us from our memory until we remember in new ways that help us anticipate God's ways and keep our eyes on God. Hope free us to remember who we are in the essence of our being and to anticipate where this dark journey will lead us.

The third, outer garment, is **charity**. This elegant, red toga of charity reflects our loving. Charity increases our desire for the Beloved. It refines our will. It teaches us new ways of loving that is a purer more inclusive Christ-like manner of loving. Charity centres the full thrust of our desire on loving God, self and others.

The sheer grace of faith, hope and charity strengthen us and enable us to advance by the secret ladder towards union with God.

DAWN

As dawn approaches ten delightful effects of the dark night emerge. The soul longs for God, searches unceasingly, performs good works with fervour, constantly pursues God with or without consolation and has an impatient desire or incessant thirst for God. The soul experiences touchings from God as it runs swiftly. It cultivates boldness, lays hold of the beloved without letting go and burns gently in God until it finally sees God clearly in the beatific vision. The fervour of the third verse becomes paramount:

*On that glad night,
In secret, for no one saw me,
Nor did I look at anything,
With no other light or guide
Than the one that burned in my heart;*

The night of contemplation guides and carries us towards God along the way of silence and solitude. The poem finishes:

*This guided me
More surely than the light of noon
To where he waited for me
- Him I knew so well -
- In a place where no one else appeared.*

*O guiding night!
O night more lovely than the dawn!
O night that has united
The lover with his beloved,
Transforming the beloved in her Lover.*

*Upon my flowering breast
Which I kept wholly for Him alone,
There he lay sleeping,
And I caressing Him
There in a breeze from the fanning cedars.*

*When the breeze blew from the turret
Parting his hair,
He wounded my neck
With his gentle hand,
Suspending all my senses.*

*I abandoned and forgot myself,
Laying my face on my Beloved;
All things ceased; I went out from myself,
Leaving my cares
Forgotten among the lilies. (9)*

A SONG OF HOPE

In the end the dark night becomes a great song of love to God, a hymn of praise no amount of suffering can silence. The poem foretells a time of compassion and of peace when all is well and where we can leave our cares forgotten among the lilies.

Thus the dark night is a guiding night, a night of hope more lovely than the dawn. Our task as we age is to negotiate these dark nights so that ageing draws us into a "third dark night", a time before dawn where we are free and ready to find rest in divine love.

IMPLICATIONS FOR AGEING

In this brief depiction of the complex experiences of the dark nights we can see that while the dark night involves pain and suffering, it becomes an icon of hope. It teaches us how to be hopeful as we face our dark nights and journey towards God as we age. While I am not suggesting that this apophatic or negative way is the pathway that all people should take, ten implications emerge that can enlighten a community's understanding of ageing.

First, John envisages the journey to God as a dark night where we encounter times of great pain and suffering, but he never blames God for suffering. Suffering is a result of the human attachment to things that are not of God. It is a result of the human condition's incompleteness and loss of union with the divine. Although God is intimately involved in the experience of suffering, enabling us to let go of all that is not of God, it is not God who is the initiator of suffering. The image of God as the beloved drawing us into the night and leading us towards divine embrace, enables those who suffer to find comfort in the knowledge that they are not abandoned in suffering. Too often Christian theologians resort to blaming God or human beings for the experience of the absence of God. John teaches us about paradox, about absence and presence, about darkness and light.

Second, we must find a way to face, live with and experience suffering. If suffering is repressed or denied superficiality and cynicism develop and destroy passion for life. Unprocessed pain and anguish lead to bitterness or resentment. They distort our

appreciation of divine involvement in human experience. Furthermore, if we cannot lament our condition with God with empathetic human beings, we can become swallowed up by apathy or even destroyed. In contrast suffering can be the condition for creative growth and transformation, if the experience is fully appropriated within our hearts, honestly faced and directed towards good, directed towards God who is love. In a world that is not educated for the inevitable darkness that we will face John provides symbols that can help us face, live with and express our suffering in a way that can lead to change in our understanding of its meaning. Facing darkness can bring us to new vision.

Third, John's way of embracing life's trials as integral to our journey to God does not support the idea that suffering is good for us and therefore has intrinsic value in itself. On the contrary, suffering pain and loss are to be eliminated. In no sense does John condone the inhumane suffering experienced through war, greed, jealousy, poverty, illness or ageing. Rather he looks to the pain and suffering that inevitably accompanies human existence in order to gaze at this suffering in a new way - to gaze at suffering through the loving eyes of God who seeks its elimination. He shows us how to use these stripping experiences of detachment as a way that can lead to holiness.

Fourth, John believes that the wisdom of God can give meaning to what is meaningless. He describes how to face existential powerlessness, finitude and limits by surrendering to mystery through "unknowing" and "unloving" until the full thrust of knowing and loving is re-centred on God. He warns us that our "gods" must die, the dark night of God's absence endured, so that God can be rediscovered, and a deeper sense of relationship with divine mystery owned. John offers a way of entering into and staying with the uncontrolled and unpredictable margins of life so that we may discover anew the mystery of God.

Fifth, John provides us with a model of redemption that focuses on the innate human desire for the divine. Rather than giving sin centre stage, he focuses on love by emphasizing that the desire for God, for union, for oneness or divinization is what forms the beginning, end and heart of the redemptive process.

Sixth, rather than envisage the decline of energy levels and body functions as a process of diminishment that leaves human beings destructively empty, John invites us to see ageing as an opportunity to strip away the non-essential until we become totally empty and ready to be filled with divine love. The diminishment of ageing provides opportunity to learn about loving. The multiple losses we experience can provide a catalyst to grieve, reframe and detach ourselves from all that prevents union with God.

Seventh, for the elderly and seriously ill the stripping of eyesight, hearing, memory, speech and ways of knowing and being can be intense. Vulnerability can overwhelm us. The way of the dark night demonstrates how to open ourselves to the loving presence and care of God even in times of perceived abandonment. Being familiar with stories from Christians who know this experience can reassure, energise, and give us courage in the unknowing we experience as death approaches.

Eighth, too often Christianity has over emphasized the value of doing, interpreting success in terms of quantified achievements. Central to the task of ageing is the ability to find value is simply being, to cultivate simplicity. We cannot enter and pass through our dark nights to dawn without an ability to be still and silent. John teaches us how to trust the process when at times we feel we are not getting anywhere.

Ninth, John gives prominence to the presence of grace and the role of the theological virtues. His colourful imagery prevents these classic Christian descriptions of grace from becoming static in doctrine. He shows how the presence of grace through faith, hope and charity is responsive to our suffering teaching us the value of detachment and the paradoxical nature of life.

Tenth, John's metaphor for life as a dark night does not encourage passive conformity to the status quo. It teaches us how to respond creatively and actively to the pain that comes with ageing. The fruits of the dark night are compassion and a desire to work fervently for all that is of God. Darkness educates us how to feel with others and to become open to receive others.

At the age of eighty-four Anna became a great prophet, praying in the temple night and day. In the night she recognised divine wisdom. As the darkness of the past century becomes more opaque this century, it is time for the ageing Christian community to embrace the dark night as a great song of love. T.S. Eliot captures the complex dimension of this reality in his poem East Cocker:

I said to my soul, be still and let the dark come upon you
Which shall be the darkness of God...
I said to my soul be still and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
For love would be love for the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But faith and the love and the hope are all in waiting. We wait without thought, for
you are not ready for thought:
So darkness shall be light, and the stillness the dancing. (10)

* * * *

BY THE ALBANY KAURI
by Andrew Dunn

Giant Kauri
Rooted firmly
Standing squat and solid tall

Astride your humus heap
Beside the creek's refreshing flow.

Peeling bark's
Cleansing fall
providing material
for your nutritious compost.

My Friend,
Christ in me,
I live no longer
for I have died -
crucified with you.

You live in me, kauri-like,
roots spread wide,
feeding upon the detritus of
my repentings, forgivings, cleansings, dying.

Grow Kauri, grow !
Grow your life in me,
Through me.
For the world.
Enjoy your life in me!

THE ONE

by Joy Cowley

There is no separation,
Peel back the strip of water
and see the oneness of the land
that lies beneath it.
Feel the same pulse
in the roots of northern kauri
as in the kelp beds of the south
and know the Heart
that lies behind it all.

We are not separate,
you and I and they,
born of the land and returning,
sharing its life, its breath,
its song of rejoicing.
How rich and beautiful
are the many faces
that come from the One!

Separation is the illusion.
What is known by every tree,
every bird and blade of grass,
we learn step by slow step
in the journey together,
as we gift each other
with the extra vision
that we call love.

So come then beloved.
Peel back the strip of water.
Peel back the land itself.
Go beyond skin and language
and the knife edge of ideas
and embrace the shining reality
of the Oneness of all being.

The kingdom is truly within.

* * * *

PSALM 40 - *The Message*

I waited and waited and waited for Yahweh.
 At last he looked; finally he listened.
 He lifted me out of the ditch,
 pulled me from deep mud.
 He stood me up on a solid rock
 to make sure I wouldn't slip.
 He taught me how to sing the latest God-song,
 a praise-song to our God.
 More and more people are seeing this:
 they enter the mystery,
 abandoning themselves to Yahweh.

Blessed are you who give yourselves over to Yahweh,
 turn your backs on the world's "sure thing"
 ignore what the world worships;
 The world's a huge stockpile
 of Yahweh-wonders and God-thoughts.
 Nothing and no one
 comes close to you!
 I start talking about you, telling what I know,
 and quickly run out of words.
 Neither numbers nor words
 account for you.

Doing something for you, bringing something to you -
 that's not what you're after.
 Being religious, acting pious -
 That's not what you're asking for.
 You've opened my ears
 so I can listen.

So I answered, "I'm coming.
 I read in your letter what you wrote about me,
 And I'm coming to the party
 you're throwing for me."
 That's when God's Word entered my life,
 became part of my very being.

* * * *

BOOK REVIEWS**THE MYSTICAL SENSE OF THE GOSPELS****– A Handbook For Contemplatives***By James M Somerville.**Crossroad Publishing. 1997.***Reviewed by Bev Milne**

Now and again I read a book or article and it touches a truth very deep within. One can feel the essential rightness of it. Yes, I say deep within. Oh yes. It articulates a truth I somehow knew, but as yet I have not formulated in words. James Somerville's book "The Mystical Sense of the Gospels" is such a book.

Part One of the book deals with the general aspects of the contemplative life. The topics covered include the desire for contemplation and the stages of spiritual growth, followed by an examination of the problems that arise along the contemplative path, such as trials of faith and difficulties connected with the practice of wordless prayer, including a helpful discussion on depression, discouragement and the dark night. Also a chapter on "The God who hides". The five chapters of Part Two on the humanity of Jesus - the temptation, his humility, his understanding of the human condition as far as his disciples were involved and a very interesting chapter on Jesus and the feminine where James Somerville examines the role of women in the Gospels. The first

two chapters of Part Three carry us beyond the cross and death to what the New Testament tells us about resurrection, immortality and divinization. The book finishes with a chapter on the unity of the contemplative experience.

The vast majority of stories and admonitions which Jesus proposed can be read on the more obvious moralistic level and they usually are so understood and preached. When Jesus speaks about hidden treasure, the pearl of great price, or about seeking first the kingdom of heaven, he is not talking about joining a particular Christian church or denomination, but about the contemplative path. James Somerville explores reaching for transcendence and the secret of the kingdom.

Most of the approaches to Jesus succeed in missing the "open secret" of the Gospel. The call of the Gospels is to recognise the primacy of the interior life and the kingdom within. After all the moralistic and scientific approaches to the Gospels have been taken into account, what emerges is a mystical document, a kind of map or blueprint for the development of the interior life. What then is the kingdom which Jesus preached declaring that it was at hand? It is neither a place nor an organisation nor a church, but a transcendent dimension of being. It stands for a new way of seeing. When we develop a mystical consciousness, our entire perception of reality changes. James Somerville even goes so far as to say: "Unless a teacher has had some personal experience with contemplative prayer, with the mystical angle of perception, such a person's view of the kingdom is bound to be faulty".

James Somerville also outlines the difficulty a contemplative can experience in worship. He says: "Very few sermons dwell on the interior life with God. ... Consequently, people may belong to the visible church but may still be only at the threshold of the kingdom. ... Because the love of God, and not God's vengeance, is the primary concern of a contemplative's life, they have long since left behind any kind of obsession with sin and punishment. The very purpose of the Gospel is to awaken people to their true nature and vocation and help them realise who they are. Self-realisation brings with it a God-realisation and an awareness of who we are, children of God and participants in the divine nature. The life, teaching and death of Jesus had as their primary goal the assurance of this truth. The proper function of preaching is to awaken in the hearer a lively awareness of this other, transcendent dimension of our constitution. This is not something we acquire by faith and grace. Rather it is faith and grace that enables us to realise our true nature as divine offspring". James Somerville does not downplay the role of evil and has a frank discussion on this topic.

This book is more than just a search of the Gospels. It gives possible alternative and deeper meanings to issues at the heart of the Christian faith. It explores the humanity of Jesus, including the meaning of the Cross. James Somerville gives a mystical interpretation of the meaning of the Cross which might come closer to the mystery of Jesus and his own experience. He says, "Some people see the death of Jesus as a painful payback to God for human wickedness" and goes on to say how he interprets it from the mystical viewpoint. James Somerville says: "The Gospels are primarily spiritual documents, with a background history, that teach us how to live and love."

Some of what James Somerville writes is startling, viewing issues from a quite unexpected angle. Some chapters are exploratory and frankly speculative. Some readers may find them unsettling, while they may broaden horizons for others, whether by questioning old assumptions or by casting new light on venerable traditions. We may find ourselves at total disagreement with some topics. However we react to this book, it challenges us to think about what we really believe and to have a fresh and stimulating look at the Gospels in the light of the contemplative experience.

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AMAZING GRACE: A Vocabulary of Faith

*Kathleen Norris, Riverhead Books,
New York. 1998, 384 pages. \$32.95.*

Reviewed by Susan Werstein

"Christianity, after all, is rooted not in doctrinal formulation but in the person of Jesus Christ."

Poet, literary critic, theologian, Presbyterian lay woman and Benedictine oblate, Kathleen Norris' recent autobiographical work once again stuns the spirit as well as the senses. With it she won the Association of Theological Booksellers' Book of the Year and Best General Interest Book Awards for 1998.

In this volume, she recalls her own return to the Christian church after many years away. She found it was the language of Christianity that most distanced her. Norris writes a series of essays on "the scary words" of Christian faith, and translates them into the language of life. Words like "judgment" "faith" "dogma" "salvation" "sinner" and even "Christ" are so abstract that their meaning for her was obscured or lost. She bridges that distance through her gift of seeing the impact and meaning of language.

In defining what it means to have faith, she uses the metaphor of an infant learning to say "yes." "An alert human infant beings to build a vocabulary, making sense of the chaos of sound that bombards the senses. Addressed by another human being, the baby pays attention with its whole body, often waving arms and legs in response... Eventually the rudiments of words come: often "Mama," "Dada," "me," and the all-powerful "NO!" An unqualified "Yes" is a harder sell to both children and adults. To say "yes" is to make a leap of faith, to risk oneself in a new and often scary relationship. Not being quite sure of what we are doing, or where it will lead us, we try on assent, we commit ourselves to affirmation.... The vocabulary of faith begins."

In this simple analogy of an infant learning to say "yes," Kathleen Norris gently starts us on a journey defining doctrines into human form. Using exegesis, tradition, theology and linguistics, she paints pictures of life so that all may hear the message of Christ in a new way.

Take for example her essay on "Perfection" where Matthew 5:48 is the central verse. "Perfectionism is one of the scariest words I know... a serious psychological affliction that makes people too timid to take necessary risks and causes them to suffer when, although they've done the best they can, their efforts fall short of some imaginary, and usually unattainable, standard. Internally, it functions as a form of myopia, a preoccupation with self-image that can stunt emotional growth... The word that has been translated as "perfect" does not mean to set forth an impossible goal... It is taken from a Latin word complete, entire, full-grown... To be "perfect" in the sense that Jesus means it, is to make room for growth, for the changes that bring us to maturity, to ripeness. To lose adolescent self-consciousness so as to be able to make a gift of oneself, as a parent, as teacher, friend, spouse..."

In addition to the essays on doctrines there are biographical turning points in her own and others' lives scattered throughout the book. One is entitled: Conversion: The Feminist Impasse. In it she simultaneously affirms the value of feminist theology while showing its limitations. Then, she transcends the pros and cons with a more incarnational approach. "My initial appropriation of the Christian religion, which in its early stages often felt like a storming of heaven's gates, had been based on a fallacy, on the notion that religious faith could provide me with a coherent philosophical system. Feminist theology especially had seemed a safe place in which all of my stances could be argued and defended, as in an impregnable fortress. But I found I could not breathe there; I found no room for mystery. I am surely not the first or the last Christian to seek to forsake the fallibility inherent in Jesus' incarnation for a certainty... It was the false purity of ideology I had to reject, in order to move toward the realistic give and take of community... I could learn to look to the strong women of the congregation who often seemed to incarnate a central paradox of the Christian faith: that while the religion has often been used as an agent of women's oppression, it also has had a remarkable ability to set women free."

In her previous book, *The Cloister Walk*, Norris indicates that one difficulty the church has today is a lack of metaphor. Fundamental literalists argue with abstract liberals. What is more true to the incarnation is a grasp of metaphor — the realisation that Word is always beyond word, but includes it. (As an aside, Norris' essays on Jeremiah and the Psalms in *Cloister Walk* are two of the most valuable devotional exegeses I have ever read.) This basic approach is continued in *Amazing Grace* where the incarnation's metaphors open the mystery of faith.

For a work of art as well as a pastorally sensitive and theologically challenging text, Norris' *Amazing Grace* provides the preacher with sermon illustrations, the seeker with a fellow traveller and the sage with a worthy peer.

* * * *

WHO MOVED MY CHEESE?

Spencer Johnson. Vermilion. \$19.95 at Whitcoulls.

Reviewed by Penny Horton.

If there is one constant in this age of uncertainty it is that *change is inevitable*. If this hackneyed saying only makes you feel overwhelmed and irritable, then I have the book for you. **Who Moved My Cheese** is affordable, will take you less than an hour to read, and will help you anticipate change, adapt to change quickly, and, dare I say it, enjoy change!

Who Moved My Cheese is a story about change that takes place in a maze and involves two mice, Sniff and Scurry, and two little-people Hem and Haw. Sound infantile?? Well it's not. The book is laced with pithy statements or Truths which the characters discover in their journey through change. For example, *IF YOU DO NOT CHANGE, YOU BECOME EXTINCT* or *NOTICING SMALL CHANGES EARLY HELPS YOU ADAPT TO THE BIGGER CHANGES THAT ARE TO COME*, and (my personal favourite) *WHAT WOULD YOU DO IF YOU WEREN'T AFRAID?*

It's a simple story which, taken seriously, can have a big effect. So if you feel that your mechanisms for adapting to change at work, at home, or in church are just about all used up, be encouraged – buy this book. It's being used in the commercial world with a workbook and seminars to effect change. And it's not without its usefulness for those journeying spiritually!

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AFTER HEAVEN : SPIRITUALITY IN AMERICA SINCE THE 1950'S

Robert Wuthnow. University of California Press 1998. (NZ Price not known)

Reviewed by Graeme Ferguson

Robert Wuthnow, the Professor of Sociology at Princeton University, is a trusted guide into the patterning of religious life in the United States. In *After Heaven*, he has brought into sharp focus the stages of the religious journey in the last fifty years from a

community of dwellers into a company of seekers. He does this by a combination of acute insight into the changes we have lived through, with a series of in-depth interviews with 200 people who discussed their religious quests with his interviewing team. The result is profoundly satisfying. I responded with a heartfelt "yes" to his interpretation. He unpacks much that has been bewildering. He steers us through recognisable changes. He is in deep conversation with people for whom religious practice is at the centre of their lives. His balance of insight and reportage is quite brilliant. This is a book that people involved in the practice of spirituality will value. The last chapter will deeply affirm their leadership.

Wuthnow begins by contrasting a spirituality of dwelling with one of seeking. People move from the security of a sacred place to the ever new experiences of seeking. Temple religion becomes tabernacle. There is less security and fewer constraints. The call at the end of the century is to a "commitment to live faithfully in uncertain times" (S.Benedict). Symbolic messages replace rites and people are on a search for community rather than living as members.

He goes on to analyse the 1960's and the impact of the freedom movement on spiritual formation. People who left their spiritual homes at that time have since found it difficult to return.

The mid 70's and 80's saw a "desire for discipline". People wanted order and clear guidelines for their lives and reassurance in the midst of change. They sought "the good life in an uncertain world".

Wuthnow's discussion of the experiences of mystery and miracle especially those of angels in the late 80's and 90's is fascinating. In uncertain times, people retreated inwards and in the privacy of their private experience encountered beings who could comfort and protect. The thin line between assurance and superstition is well dealt with as are the signs of alienation from the world.

This leads to an analysis of the spirituality of the inner self where for people to gain coherence for their lives, they must make it themselves.

The surprise in the book lies in the last chapter. Wuthnow is not content to be an observer. He is clear what is required for a restoration of the strength of the spiritual way. Seekers after all remain as transients. There is a need for engagement with the heart of God. He advocates an intentional practice of the spiritual life. He affirms the place of spiritual direction. He wants people to be deliberate in their communion with God. People need to be able to discern the heights and depths of the love of God, and live within them. A person comes to know who one is, the practice is rewarding. It is important that it is within a tradition and that it is deeply interlaced with the other parts of one's life. It is a wise call to the practice of the Christian life.

This is truly a fine book. It left me concerned that at the points in the last 50 years that have given me freedom or granted me insight, they are still only stages on the way. Wuthnow says there is still much more to learn as we practice the Christian way intentionally, taking time and energy to engage more deeply with God.

* * * *

CONTEMPLATIVE CRITIC

By Henri Nouwen

Originally published as "Pray to Live"

Liguori/Triumph, Missouri 1991 \$22.95

Reviewed by Murray Hewitt.

This book caught my eye for a number of reasons. I recently became interested in contemplation, so I was on the look out for books. Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen were names that had been floated around; this book had both writers. Also the discovery that Merton's father was a New Zealander had warmed me in some patriotic way, and that he died in quite a bizarre accident being electrocuted by a fan after getting out of the shower. The main bit of interest was the title of the first chapter "From Sarcasm to Contemplation". I knew sarcasm really well but contemplation was a bit of a stranger. Contemplation brings with it ideas of peace, gentleness and compassion. Things that are really attractive but elusive. Oh yeah, and the book was only on hundred and fifty pages long too!

John Eudes Bemberger says in his introduction that this book gives us a "brief meeting with Merton and it is a refreshing encounter". This was my experience.

The book is in two parts. The first titled "For Instruction", and the second "For Meditation". In each of these sections the chapter headings are exactly the same, From Sarcasm to Contemplation, The Way to Silence, Conquering Solitude, Unmasking the Illusion, Discovery of the East.

The first part of the book is Nouwen talking around these themes using quotes from many of Merton's writings. He tells some of the story of Merton's journey in contemplation and gives a warm reflection on what the Christian contemplative can learn from the Buddhist's experience of silence and solitude.

This quote from the first chapter was one of the significant sections for me:

Distant perception leads to razor-sharp observation, which can lead to cynicism and bitterness; but it also can give rise to generous contemplation which is the source of real care and human concern.

It seems many people's experience is to get sarcastic and bitterly critical of the society around them. There is much to feel sad about and to get angry about. But this often leads to bitterness and judgement, and often tension and conflict between people. Nouwen explains this lesson from Merton, that through contemplation and silence you can find the honest concern for others, rather than righteous noisy judgement. To add to this, righteous anger can cause a person to become intense and serious rather than peaceful, humble and loving.

Thomas Merton is an honest observer. He is inspiringly articulate at explaining the messiness of situations and the complexity of social issues.

One example of this is found in the chapter "The Way to Silence", where Merton recalls a profound conversation with two men in uniform that he met in the streets of London during the Second World War. Merton had gone to bombed-out London to write a personal journal about the war. He recalls in the high point of his rave,

Do not ask me to explain the fleeing soldiers who were found shot to pieces with their packs full of impossible pictures of big rubber women all legs and breasts and red underwear and big white grinning heads. I do not understand any of these things they live by, or seem to have died for.....

Another part I would love to end with is the chapter "Discovery of the East", where he explores his interest with some Buddhist teachings.

...Christians and Buddhists can equally well practice Zen if by Zen we mean precisely the quest for direct and pure experience on a metaphysical level, liberated from verbal formulas and linguistic preconceptions. On the theological level the question becomes more complex...."

This book is refreshing for those who want an introduction to Thomas Merton and contemplation. Particularly if you are, like me, genuinely wanting a richer spiritual experience and find it difficult in your Pentecostal or Evangelical traditions to find any models for spiritual growth and development. I'm sure those who are in other Christian denominations will appreciate Merton and Nouwen's insights and experiences too. I'll leave you with a quote from one of Merton's influences, Chuang Tzu, who was one of the greatest Taoist's from 550 to 250 BC.

*...When the shoe fits
The foot is forgotten,
When the belt fits
The belly is forgotten,
When the heart is right
"For" and "against" are forgotten.*

* * * *

THE HIDDEN

by Joy Cowley

From Psalms Down-under. Used with permission.

Everything has its roots in God.
In the greening of the tree,
the music of falling water,
the surge of the incoming tide,
the rise and fall of seaweed,
the barking of seals on a rock
the dive of the humpback whale,
the I AM is manifest.

Everything is contained in God.
In the smoke from a driftwood fire
the wind sharpening leaves of flax,
the shadow of trout in a moonlit stream,
the first fall of snow on mountains,
the kingfisher flying to her nest,
the I AM is moving.

Everything speaks of God.
In the winner's shout of celebration,

the laughter round the dinner table,
 the child's cry of pain in the night,
 the groan of a woman in childbirth,
 the sigh of a man's last breath,
 the I AM is heard.

God is everything's secret.

* * * *

BOOKS and RESOURCES

The Presence of God - A History of Western Christian Mysticism. Bernard McGinn.

SCM Press 1991. Four volumes: The Foundations of Mysticism; The Development of Mysticism; The Flowering of Mysticism; The Crisis of Mysticism.

The Roots of Christian Mysticism. Olivier Clement. Eng. trans. 1993. The Cromwell Press.

Mysticism - its history and challenge. Samuel Weisner. Maine 1994.

Mysticism - the development of humankind's spiritual consciousness. Evelyn Underhill. Bracken Books London edition 1995.

Practical Mysticism. Evelyn Underhill. Eagle. Surrey. 1991.

Guidelines To Mystical Prayer. Ruth Burrows. Dimensions 1980.

Christian Mysticism - the Art of the Inner Way. William McNamara. Element 1981.

The Mystical Sense of The Gospels. James Somerville.

Learning From the English Mystics. Alison Fry. Grove Spirituality Series 68. pp24. \$9.95.

Dictionary of Christian Spirituality. Articles *Mysticism; Nature Mysticism.*

Mysticism. Mircea Eliade. Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia.

MUSIC

Poetry of John of The Cross. Sung by Paul Gurr. Cassette by Spectrum Pub. Victoria.

The Mask and Mirror. CD. Lorena McKennett. Includes The Dark Night in song.

Songs of Women Mystics. 3 cassettes by Briege O'Hare. Women's Song of God; The God of Love; Taste The Hidden Sweetness. All with word booklets. Best source Pleroma, Otane NZ. 0508 988 989.

Creation Waits. Songs by Briege O'Hare. Cassette and CD + words. Pleroma.

Dance Peace - dance to the Mystic. Betty Wendleborn. Otaru Music Recording. NZ.

The Music of Silence. David Steindl-Rast. CD and book. Harper 1995.

Sequences and Hymns by Hildegard of Bingen. CD. In French. HMC901497.

Canticles of Ecstasy. Hildegard of Bingen. CD. In German. Deutsche Harmonia Mundi.

* * * *

I doubt ... therefore I might be. I am loved, therefore I am!

Bruce Hamill - Email signature.

* * * *

... this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Colossians 1:17.

* * * *

SGM TRUST NEWS

Our Workgroup meeting in March was a good time of fellowship, thinking and praying about the future. As usual our work is not standing still and the future is a challenge. We want to keep on the front edge of the wave of God's will and way for this work and that keeps us on our mettle.

We see further developments of our regional groups with more responsibility for the work resting there.

The process of working out our GST liabilities and settling all the payments and repayments with Inland Revenue has been interesting and lengthy. We have received utmost courtesy from all their staff - apart from one computer programme that keeps up a regular flow of threatening letters! The upshot of it is that our liability each year will not be great but we must file the returns and charge the GST on Retreats - and that's a pain for us all. We hope it won't cause a sharp decline in registrations!

Mary Concannon takes an overdue study leave this year and leaves for California on June 30th. She will be away for six months on courses, retreat and rest. Heather Pearce will be keeping the Training Programme Office at Arden House, Dunedin, running smoothly in Mary's absence, as indeed she does in Mary's presence!

Our Newsletter is growing in size and with two issues on *The Presence of God* we are moving into fresh territory and, we trust, meatier material. If you have any suggestions of subjects you would like us to tackle in the future please drop a note to the Andrew Dunn.

Our next SGM Workgroup and Trust meeting is at Albany, September 9-11. Please continue to pray for us and with us in this work.

FRIENDS OF SGM APPEAL

We have been delighted by the response to our appeal letter in the Summer 1999 Newsletter. Your gifts have helped our finances significantly. Thankyou for them.

As a non-profit organisation we are dependent on gifts from our friends to help us each year and so we are sending you another friendly letter to ask again for your help and prayers. Please give it some thought and a prayer and respond as you are able. We appreciate all the support from folk throughout the country. If you would like to make a regular contribution by automatic payment or direct credit please contact Carole Hunt, our Administrator.

COMING RETREATS AND EVENTS:

TARANAKI - Sept 7-9

Two day retreat at Wilkinson's Castle. RegFee \$15 + Cost \$80 + GST \$11.90.
Contact 06 758 3111.

OHOPE - Sept 14-17

Three day Pathways to Prayer Retreat. RegFee \$15 + Cost \$145 + GST \$20.

Contact 09 535 7353.

WELLINGTON - Sept 20-24

Four day Springtime Retreat.
RegFee \$25 + Cost \$170 + GST \$24.40. Contact 04 659 5229.

AUCKLAND - Oct 13-20

MURIWAI Seven day Wilderness Retreat. RegFee \$15 + Cost \$195 + GST \$27.50. Contact 09 535 7353.

GORE - Nov 10-12

Two day God-space Retreat. Cost
Reg.Fee \$15 + Cost \$35 + GST \$6.25.

Contact 03 208 6139.

TONGARIRO NATIONAL PARK

Nov 15-20

Wilderness Experience.
RegFee \$10 Cost + \$180.

Contact 09 415 9686.

AUCKLAND - Jan 5-12 2001

Seven Day Silent Retreat at Oasis, Albany. Reg.Fee \$25 + Cost \$395 + GST \$52.50.
Ph. 09 535 7353.

VAUGHAN PARK, NORTH SHORE**- Jan 15-28 2001**

Two Week Spirituality Event and Retreat.

Cost approx. \$1000. Contact Life NZ Trust, 31 Cameron St, New Plymouth.

A TWO WEEK SPIRITUALITY EVENT AND RETREAT**Vaughan Park, Long Bay, Auckland. January 15-28 2001.****CELEBRATING LIFE !**

A Journey into Wholeness

An experience of welcome, acceptance, freedom and discovery is offered in January 2001

Based on a proven programme formulated in the USA by Dr. Morton Kelsey together with Abbot David Geraets, O.S.B., it opens hearts and minds to the source, the creativity, the wonder of the human spirit.

From January 15 - 28 2001, Abbot David plus two very skilled members of The Monastery of The Risen Christ, California, are coming to facilitate this enriching course. It is designed for New Zealand people who are keen to experience living in a caring, worshipping Christian community where their souls are refreshed and given guidance, their minds stimulated and expanded, their bodies well cared for, plus plenty of opportunities for healing.... a comfortable, balanced, enjoyable time.

Abbot David is internationally recognised for his work both in the Catholic Charismatic movement in USA, and for his establishing the Pecos Benedictine Monastic community of men and women where, following this model, a school for spiritual directors has been presented since 1978.

This special opportunity is open both to people who are interested in spiritual direction and those who seek greater personal understanding and growth towards wholeness.

The Cost: Sponsorship is being sought in order that the cost per person be kept under \$1000.

The numbers that can be accommodates are limited. If you are interested in attending, further information and application forms are available from:

Life New Zealand Trust
31 Cameron Street
New Plymouth

SPIRITUAL DIRECTORS TRAINING PROGRAMME

Here's a wonderful way to companion people in their journey of faith and life.

Our Spiritual Directors' Training Programme recovers the ancient arts of spiritual companionship and presents them in ways that can be adapted to pastoral work, retreat work, spiritual formation, discipling and on-going spiritual guidance.

It's a demanding and rewarding two year course you can do alongside your work, offering:

- six written modules on spiritual direction
- a research project
- supervised giving of spiritual direction
- 10 one-day workshops
- a week's live-in training at Waikanae (first year)
- a weekend workshop (second year)

There are spiritual direction ways

- of preaching and teaching.
- of pastoral visiting.
- of small group leadership.
- of discipling new Christians, excellent for beyond Alpha.
- of encouraging the prayer life of people.

Our programme encourages these developments beyond the course itself.

Full details from:

Carole Hunt,
SGM Administrator
2 Judkins Crescent, Howick 1705
Phone 09 535 7353

Email: sgm@clear.net.nz

Applications for 2001-2002 close 7th August.

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**Christ thanks those who do not know to whom they are giving bread.
Simone Weil.**

* * * *

LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

Rosemary Blackwell works with Auckland Philharmonia and in spiritual direction in Auckland. She is planning a shift to Houchen House, the Anglican Retreat Centre, Hamilton as a staff member later this year.

Joy Cowley is a writer and retreat leader, living at *Arohanui*, Fish Bay, Marlborough Sounds.

Andrew Dunn lives and works at *Oasis Retreat and Study Centre*, Albany.

Graeme Ferguson is minister at St David's Presbyterian Church, Khyber Pass, Auckland.

Murray Hewitt is a youth worker at Windsor Park Baptist Church and Odyssey House Drug Rehabilitation Centre, Auckland.

Penny Horton works in Tauranga as a nurse and spiritual director.

Kerrie Hide teaches theology at the Australian Catholic Univesity, Signadou campus, Canberra.

Sheila McGrath of Temuka works in the Temuka Catholic Parish and is training as a spiritual director.

Bev Milne is developing a quiet garden retreat at her Ngawaru deer farm near Tauranga and works as a spiritual director.

John North is a Baptist minister and spiritual director in South Auckland, and is an ESL teacher.

Susan Westein is minister at Roslyn Presbyterian Church, Dunedin.

Sheila Pritchard lives and works at The Light House, Torbay, North Shore City, as a spiritual director, MBTI presenter and retreat leader.

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