

# Refresh

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# Resistance



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## Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| How deep and how wide: a sermon by <i>Diane Gilliam-Weeks</i>      | 3  |
| The concrete wall by <i>Heather Kelly</i>                          | 5  |
| Fighting with God: a theology of resistance by <i>Geoff New</i>    | 7  |
| Jonah's resistance by <i>Jo Anastasiadis</i>                       | 11 |
| God wore down my resistance: a psalm by <i>Diane Gilliam-Weeks</i> | 15 |
| Resistance to intimacy with God by <i>Andrew Pritchard</i>         | 16 |
| My bubblewrap by <i>Marilyn Wilkinson</i>                          | 18 |
| Lifting the lid by <i>Hannah Rowan</i>                             | 19 |
| Resistance or resistance? by <i>Lesley Ayers</i>                   | 20 |
| Resistance to Change by <i>Maggie Quinlan</i>                      | 23 |
| A fable of resistance and surrender by <i>Adrienne Thompson</i>    | 26 |
| I don't want to be here by <i>Jenny Chisholm</i>                   | 29 |
| A real-life resistance parable by <i>Jill McLeod</i>               | 30 |
| Resistance to truth by <i>David Strang</i>                         | 31 |
| Spoonbills by <i>Andrea Williamson</i>                             | 33 |
| God, by whatever Name by <i>Pam Gordon</i>                         | 33 |
| Discovering God as God is by <i>Benno Blaschke</i>                 | 36 |
| What we have to give   | 41 |
| Books and music for the contemplative journey                      | 42 |
| SGM News   | 44 |
| The Last Word  | 45 |
| Rest as resistance by <i>Fran Francis</i>                          | 46 |
| Contributors   | 48 |



© Diane Gilliam-Weeks

## How deep and how wide: a sermon

by Diane Gilliam-Weeks

So...since we are strengthened by the dwelling of Christ in our hearts...  
since by this we are rooted and established in love...

Paul prays that we might really know...  
how wide and long and high and deep  
is the love of God... revealed in Jesus Christ...

He prays...that we might know it ...  
not just as a head thing...but from experience....

that we may be filled up... with the fullness of God.

This is so important I'm going to repeat it...

So...since we are strengthened by the dwelling of Christ in our hearts...  
since by this we are rooted and established in love...

Paul prays we might really know...  
how wide and long and high and deep  
is the love of God... revealed in Jesus Christ...

And he prays we might know it ...  
not just as a head thing...but from experience....

that we may be filled up... with the fullness of God.

This is so important...that today I'm asking you  
to explore your understanding of the depths of God's love...

and because everyone learns differently...  
we're going to do this exploration...of the depths of God's love...  
using more than words...we're going to use images and feelings. As well.

So now's it's time to pick up your boards and your paper and crayons and get ready.  
And please remember... this is not about art –  
It's just about putting crayon to paper...like you were four years old.  
Everybody ready?

1. First I want you to draw an image of what God's love might look like...anything at all...take your time.
2. Now write some words that describe that love.
3. Then choose a feeling colour. Write some feelings that go with your image of God's love.
4. Do you notice anything surprising or something you want to add to the picture?
5. Now put yourself in the picture, is there any dialogue, anything you want to say? Put that down too.

**the primary thing we have to  
repent is our resistance to the  
fullness of God's love**

So since we're strengthened by the dwelling of Christ in our hearts, and since we are rooted and established in love, Paul prays we might really know... how wide and long and high and deep is the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ...know it ...not just as a head thing...but from experience...so that we may be filled up with the fullness of God.

It's the scandal of grace revealed in Jesus that God's love is not a point system.

You are what God wants...warts and all. God's love comes first before we can be perfect. And when we truly allow ourselves to be loved by God...we are transformed by it!

Maybe the primary thing we have to repent of is our resistance to the fullness of God's love...our refusal of God's grace.

Because we refuse to accept how deep and wide and unconditional...God's love is.

What good news that really is.

Or maybe we don't really believe in grace... maybe we don't really trust that God's love for us and for others can't be limited by our imagination.

You know, people generally resist love... and loving... out of their fear of rejection and disappointment. And sometimes it's because they're unable to forgive...

Maybe they're unable to forgive God!

Maybe they've spent a life time trying to stop the flow of God's love because they feel unworthy. Because of our pride...release and surrender to God's love don't come easily. Maybe our greatest sin is our resistance to God's love...

Now spend some more time with your drawing.

6. Show some of the ways you might resist God's love...for you.

7. What might you need to do about this?

8. Now give your picture a title.

If God is love...and we're made in the image of God...then with God's help maybe we can actually learn to receive God's love for us in all its fullness. Maybe we can learn to rest in God's love. Maybe our broken images of God would be healed.

And were we filled up with God's love...well maybe then... we'd be able to love others from a place of wholeness...maybe then we'd be able to see how much God loves them... whether they know it or not...

and how costly that love is. How amazing that grace is.

## The concrete wall

by Heather Kelly

I remember, oh how well I remember – but why was I there in the first place?

I really can't recall. Though I suspect even then 'the Call' was beginning to break through to my consciousness.

I was attending a retreat, something radical in the Parish at the time. I don't know what I expected – but late in the afternoon of the first day I found myself drawing a picture. I have no memory of the instructions, but my image had a sun in the top right corner with beams radiating outwards and downwards.

In the centre, I drew a wall. Some of the sunbeams were getting through the wall and some were stopped by it.

In the lower left hand corner, I sketched my best attempt at a daisy. Only a very few sunbeams were reaching the flower. The daisy didn't look too healthy.

As I drew, I became aware the sun was my symbol for God, the flower was me, and I'd erected the wall because I was afraid. Afraid of what God was wanting me to do and be.

In drawing the wall, I tried to convey concrete blocks – hard, stone, a solid unbroken mass. I was more than slightly afraid. Why? Because I knew God was love. I knew that He loved me.

While it took a great many years for me to clarify this in my head – later that retreat weekend – this 'knowing' unexpectedly and inexplicably moved from my head to my heart. And I wept – again without warning.

The 'happening' was the laying on of hands and the intentional prayer of friends. It was a 'wow' experience.

Thirty-five years later the ministry I now practise grew from that experience – as did more active, covenanted parish ministry.

I adapted a popular Christian chorus from years back to reflect this:

Something beautiful, something good,  
all my confusion God understood.  
All I had to offer was fearfulness and strife  
but He made something quite beautiful of my life.

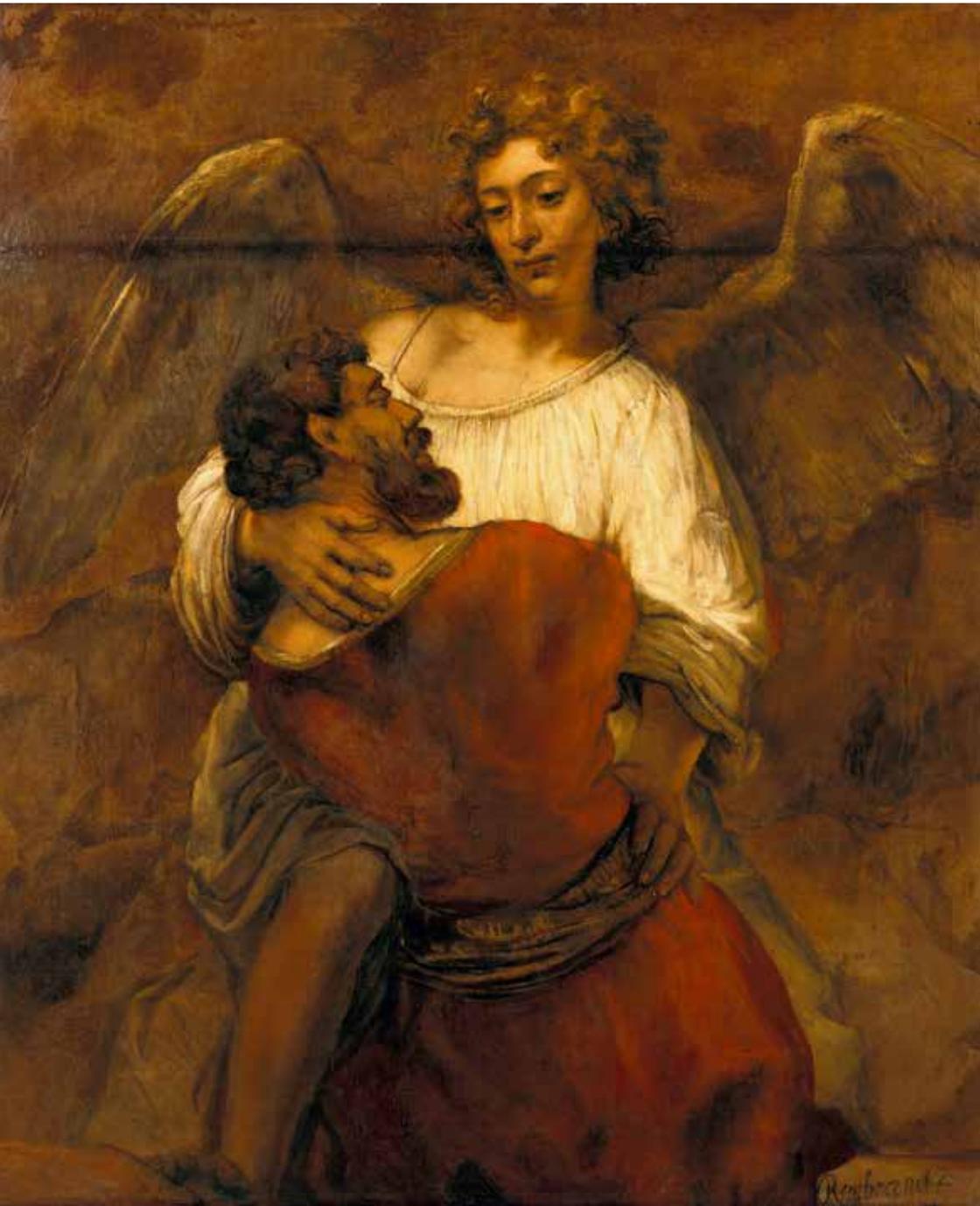
**I'd erected the wall because  
I was afraid.**

Why did I resist?

I knew God loved me, but only when I felt the experience of that love did my resistance melt away.

My fearful struggle was gone.

My wall crashed into oblivion.



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## Fighting with God: a theology of resistance

by Geoff New

### Genesis 32

That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok.

When they were safe across, he sent over all his possessions.

So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw he couldn't overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man.

Then the man said, 'Let me go, for it's daybreak.'

But Jacob replied, 'I won't let you go unless you bless me.'

The man asked him, 'What's your name?' 'Jacob,' he answered.

Then the man said, 'Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.'

Jacob said, 'Please tell me your name.' But the man replied, 'Why do you ask my name?'

Then he blessed him there. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, 'It's because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.'

The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip.

One Sunday morning, years ago in the church I was pastoring, I happened to be dedicating a baby. As is often the case, friends and family who wouldn't normally come to church, joined us for the celebration.

I remember I preached about Jacob and Esau – a sermon I dubbed 'Family Fights.'

Right after the service, a woman visitor strode purposefully up to me and declared, 'That sermon was just for me! I haven't spoken to my brother in years. He swindled me out of our inheritance. But I'm going right home to phone him and I'm going to say, "You're a liar, and a drunk and a cheat. But you're my brother and I love you!"'

Well, I have to say – I was feeling pretty good about my sermon at that point. But she hadn't finished: 'Then I'm going to say, "And this is the last phone call you're ever getting from me!"'

Sigh. Oh dear.

Resistance – I guess it's holding on to the right that 'I'm right.' And when we square-off against another human being, we fight to exercise that right – we resist them.

But what if we think we're wrestling with a person, only to discover we've been looking into the face of God? Awkward.

You might suppose Jacob's wrestling with God shows the fine art of resistance – the well-crafted human capacity to fight back. But you'd be missing the point.

resistance – the  
well-crafted divine grace  
of 'fighting-with'

Genesis 32 actually offers a theology of resistance – the well-crafted divine grace of ‘fighting-with’.

The story begins on the eve of Jacob’s reunion with his cheated brother, Esau. At this point, there’s nothing to suggest their meeting will be anything but revengeful.

Mysteriously, Jacob divests himself of everything dear to him. Who knows why? Maybe he senses something about to happen. Sometimes the Spirit does that – drawing us aside and to.

Come to think of it, something similar happened to me after I’d been married a couple of years. I had an uneasy sense God wanted to say something to me. A friend made the astute comment that when God wants to speak, God sometimes draws us to the mountain of God.

A few months later, my wife went into premature labour with our first child. We were holidaying in Whangarei at the time. The air ambulance flew us to Christchurch where we remained for weeks on end with a baby born three months early.

But our home was in Auckland!

It’s a long story, but during that time I realised just how spiritually bereft and impoverished I was. The experience proved revolutionary.

‘Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil’ (Luke 4:1-2).

#### **A theology of resistance: there is stripping-away**

Now Jacob’s story doesn’t say why he ‘took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok’. Is this a Titanic moment – women and children first into the lifeboats? Some kind of noble gesture on Jacob’s part?

We already know his road to life, love and family has been fraught. To be sure, Jacob hasn’t always helped matters – but by and large he’s a man who loves his family, albeit some more than others.

Yet here we have a unique moment when ‘Jacob was left alone’ (v24). Until now there’s always someone else in his story – but now there’s a stillness. An aloneness. Maybe even an emptiness. A shadow, if not darkness.

‘He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry’ (Luke 4:2).

#### **A theology of resistance: there is separating-from**

Then the fight begins. Scripture doesn’t say who started it. But given the rest of the Biblical witness: God spoke first (Genesis 1), chose first (John 15:16), acted first (Romans 5:8), loved first (1 John 4:19) well – you draw your own conclusion.

But whoever is to blame, the struggle begins. And it’s no coincidence the colour of struggle is the colour of night.

The blush of dawn does arrive – eventually. Perhaps reminiscent of the first creation story, ‘And there was evening, and there was morning – the first day’. (Genesis 1:3) Or ‘weeping lasts for a night and rejoicing comes in the morning’ (Psalm 30:5.) And ‘Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw the stone had been removed from the entrance’. (John 20:1)

Jacob’s story and his struggle hurt. His hip is wrenched. Pain and light dawn simultaneously.

The Man – our God – hurts the hero of the story. Is that allowed? The narrator doesn’t bother to answer – stressing instead that Jacob doesn’t know when he’s beaten.

He holds on. He clings on. The Man wants it all to be over for it’s daybreak.

But Jacob resists.

The devil said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.’ And Jesus answered, ‘It is written: “People shall not live on bread alone.”’ (Luke 4:3-4)

**there is light, the face-of-God,  
and there is suffering. Always a  
most confounding concoction.**

#### **A theology of resistance: there is struggling-with**

Next Jacob does something extraordinary.

The lesser being demands something of the Greater as though the lesser were in the Greater position. Seriously – did Jacob suffer a blow to the head? Here he is with a dislocated hip and acts like he has delivered the knock-out blow! ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me’, gasps Jacob.

Now it gets personal.

The Man asks for Jacob’s name and proceeds to transform his DNA. The one who was consistently self-absorbed and deceptive becomes ‘the one who struggles with God and humans’. The naming is both present and future – forth-telling and fore-telling. A blessing.

Jacob also bestows a name – he calls ‘the place Peniel...because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared’. Names are the minutes taken from meetings with God.

The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, ‘I will give you all their authority and splendour; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. If you worship me, it will all be yours.’ Jesus answered, ‘It is written: “Worship the Lord your God and serve him only”’ (Luke 4:5-7).

#### **A theology of resistance: there is starting-afew**

Finally the episode draws to an end – for now. ‘The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip’. In these few words, there is light, the face-of-God, and there is suffering. Always a most confounding concoction.

Here in this short story we find the raw materials for one of life’s maddening mysteries: ‘I’m in pain and the only ones at the scene of the crime are me and God. What just happened?’ Somehow blessing and pain are joined at the hip; even when it is dislocated.

The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. ‘If you are the Son of God,’ he said, ‘throw yourself down from here. For it is written: “He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.”’ Jesus answered, ‘It is said: “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”’ (Luke 4:9-12)

#### **A theology of resistance: there is suffering-because**

Now what was an intensely private encounter between God and one of the children of God becomes part of the fabric of community faith. The encounter is honoured. Habits are formed. ‘Therefore, to this day Israelites don’t eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle’.

A story of resistance becomes a story for redemption.

‘When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time’ (Luke 4:13)

‘Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him’ (Matthew 4:11)

#### **A theology of resistance: there is sharing-in**

I wonder when and how your story of resistance might be told; and how it might lead to resilience and redemption for others who are wrestling in the night?

A version of this article appeared in “The Voice: Fighting the God of Love”, Stimulus (Vol 23:3, Nov 2016), 32-33.



## **Jonah’s resistance**

by Jo Anastasiadis

In case you haven’t read Jonah in a while, here’s a quick recap:

God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach against it because of its wickedness, but Jonah runs away in the opposite direction, sailing for Tarshish (possibly in Spain). God sends a storm that threatens the ship. The sailors throw Jonah overboard, as Jonah tells them to, so the storm will calm, and it does immediately. God then provides a great fish which swallows Jonah. Inside the fish, Jonah prays, remembering his anguish as he was dying and his cry to God for help.

The fish then vomits Jonah onto dry land. Jonah goes to Nineveh and preaches against it, saying the city will be destroyed in forty days. The king of Nineveh calls everyone in the city to repent and call on God.

**rather than enter a dialogue  
with God, Jonah flees**

God sees their repentance, has compassion and doesn’t destroy the city. Jonah is displeased and expresses his anger to God, ‘Isn’t this what I said when I was still at home? That’s why I was so quick to flee, I knew you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.’

In reply God asks Jonah, ‘Do you have any reason to be angry?’

Jonah appears to ignore the question and instead goes outside the city to wait and see what will happen. As he waits Jonah suffers in the heat, is cooled by the shade of a miraculous plant, and then suffers even more heat when the plant suddenly dies.

Jonah's anger is now so great he declares to God, 'I'm angry enough to die.'

Now God gives Jonah a view of Nineveh from God's perspective: 'You care deeply and are so upset about the death of a simple plant you never even tended. Why then can't I be concerned about the fate of 120,000 people?'

### Reflecting on the story

Jonah's first response – when asked by God to go to Nineveh – was to up-sticks and run away. Jonah absconds, we later learn, because he knew God was gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in love; a God who relents from sending calamity.

At that time, Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire that had conquered and subjugated Israel for half a century. Perhaps Jonah suspects God might spare Nineveh and doesn't want that to happen. Maybe Jonah wants to see them punished instead!

So – rather than enter a dialogue with God, Jonah flees. Once at sea, Jonah discerns God's hand in a storm that blows up and links it to his running away. But have you ever wondered why Jonah didn't just say 'turn the boat around' instead of 'throw me into the sea'? Did Jonah initially believe he should be punished for running away from God?

But suddenly, as he sinks into the sea, Jonah remembers God's grace, compassion, and love. Maybe God might relent and save him, despite his running away! And God does, indeed, show grace to Jonah.

Another interesting thought strikes me. Considering God's voiced concern at the end of the story for the people of Nineveh, did sending the storm have anything to do with punishing Jonah – and everything to do with God's love?

What if it's out of love that God asks Jonah to preach destruction to Nineveh?

When we read the prophets, how often do we think God's warnings of destruction are prompted by God's love – God's longing to see people saved rather than destroyed? This possibility leaves me with an uncomfortable question: am I avoiding something God's inviting me to do – and because of that – could I be denying someone else an opportunity for blessing?

I also notice Jonah's honesty before God. He doesn't mince words. His anguish and despair are very real. He doesn't sugar-coat his displeasure or anger at God. Jonah is very real and God listens.

Jonah's anger doesn't put God off. God still accepts Jonah. God's response isn't condemnation. God doesn't say, 'You're wrong to be angry.' Instead, God asks:

'Do you have a right to be angry?' It's a serious request: 'look at it – name it.'

God invites Jonah to look deeper. While Jonah may view Nineveh as an enemy deserving punishment, going deeper he might ask, 'I wonder how God views Nineveh? After all God's, asked me to warn them. Maybe God sees something in them I don't see.'

And indeed later God names for Jonah, God's love for the people of Nineveh.

I don't know about you, but for a long time I struggled with the idea that it was ok to express any anger to God – let alone my anger at God. Then something happened I couldn't ignore or suppress. I'd trusted God in a particular situation, and God seemed to betray that trust.

It took some time before I could even tentatively talk about my anger at God – with God. Even longer before I realised I heard no criticism of my anger, no judgement for being angry – God was simply listening to me.

Then one day in church, I was struck by a request from God: 'Will you forgive Me, Jo? I'm so sorry you were hurt. Will you forgive Me?'

Through this I heard a tremendous ache in God's heart for me. And I was really surprised. Did I really sense God saying this? Shouldn't I be the one asking God to forgive me? I am, after all, the one who's been angry at God!

God's request, however, tugged my heart towards God and I began the process of forgiving. A lot later, I realised God never judged my choice. God only sought to reconnect and re-establish the relationship between us that my anger was eroding.

I could also see that forgiveness is about choosing to give up my desire for 'pay back' for being hurt. I'd been hurt by God's apparent betrayal. In asking me for forgiveness, God was asking me to give up my desire to hurt God back. Ultimately God called me to love once again.

I wonder if this was also part of the call God placed before Jonah – to let go of his yearning for retribution against Nineveh. Although we're not told Jonah's reaction to God's revelation, his encounters with God were recorded as a lesson for future generations. That suggests to me Jonah was deeply impacted by what God told him.

'Perspective' changes how we see things.

### Some questions for reflection:

Is there anything I'm running away from talking about with God?

Is there something I've done for which I don't believe God will forgive me?

Is there something God's calling me to for the sake of others?

Is there anything I'm blind to about God's heart for others?

Are there any feelings or thoughts I think aren't right to express to God?

If honesty with God requires honesty with myself first, am I willing?

What of God's heart, might God be trying to reveal to me?

Where do I need God's perspective?

Is there a call for me to forgive someone for the sake of love?

How might God be inviting me to look deeper?

*This reflection on Jonah's encounters with God were created for this year's annual SGM retreat at the Magnificat Community.*

## God wore down my resistance: a psalm

by Diane Gilliam-Weeks

Halleluiah!

I simply wanted to be still and enjoy the presence of God – soak up more love

And so I waited

And waited

And waited

God's silence and stillness prompted me

Wore down my resistance

to look at myself again

with fresh eyes and different questions

So with reluctance – to expend myself

I extended myself

And found new treasure in those dark disturbing places

where I lay traps for myself

How else can I avoid them?

What love beyond imagining

gently led me to discover them

Breaking down my resistance

with silence and stillness.



## Resistance to intimacy with God

by Andrew Pritchard

If you think you've never experienced resistance to intimacy with God - try this.

### *Washing His Disciples' Feet*

Just before the Passover Feast, Jesus knew the time had come to leave this world to go to the Father. Having loved his dear companions, he continued to love them right to the end. It was suppertime. The Devil by now had Judas, son of Simon the Iscariot, firmly in his grip, all set for the betrayal.

Jesus knew the Father had put him in complete charge of everything; that he came from God and was on his way back to God. So, he got up from the supper table, set aside his robe, and put on an apron. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the feet of the disciples, drying them with the apron. When he got to Simon Peter, Peter said, 'Master, you wash my feet?'

Jesus answered, 'You don't understand now what I'm doing, but it will be clear enough to you later.'

Peter persisted, 'You're not going to wash my feet - ever!'

Jesus said, 'If I don't wash you, you can't be part of what I'm doing.'

'Master!' said Peter. 'Not only my feet, then. Wash my hands! Wash my head!'

Jesus said, 'If you've had a bath this morning, you only need your feet washed now and you're clean from head to toe. My concern, you understand, is holiness, not hygiene. So now you're clean...' After he finished washing their feet, he took his robe, put it back on, and went back to his place at the table.

Then he said, 'Do you understand what I have done to you?'

### **Contemplative Exercise**

Imagine one of the feet on the facing page is Jesus' foot and the other, yours.

What do you want to say to Jesus when he offers to wash your feet?

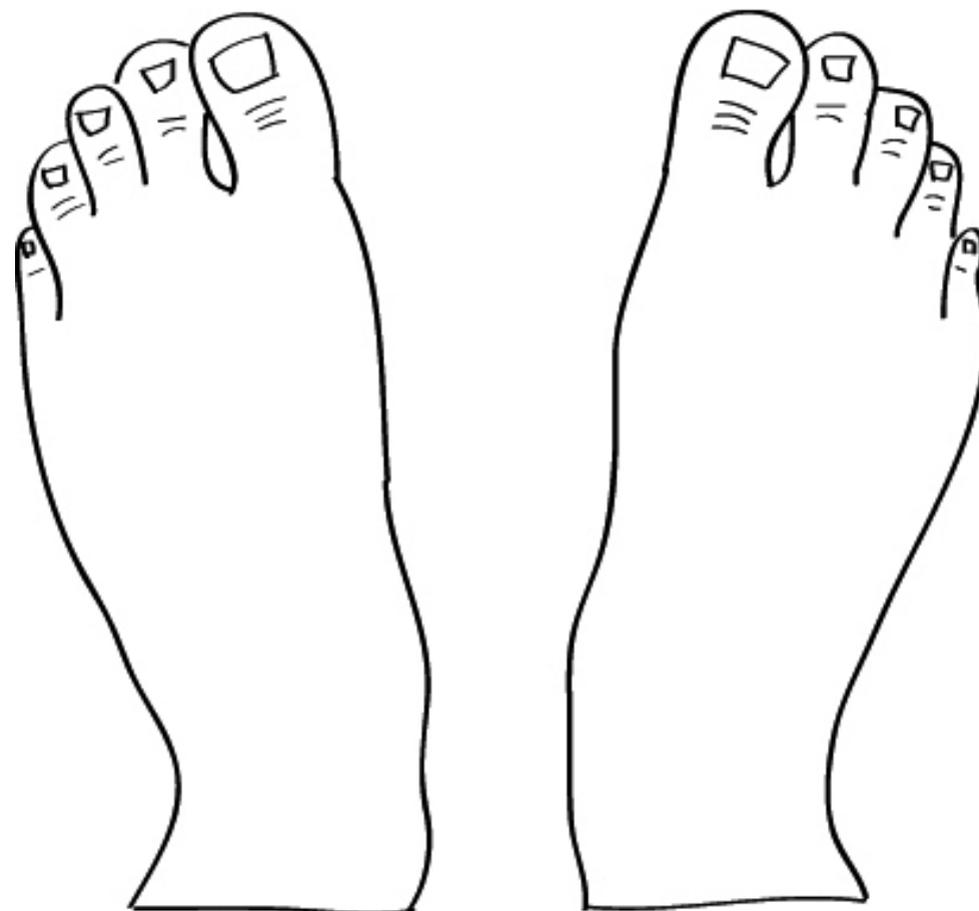
What does he say back to you?

What might you say to Jesus about washing his feet?

How does he respond?

You could write these conversations on to the page.

*Adapted from a reflection by Andrew Pritchard at the 2017 SGM annual seven-day silent retreat in February.*



## My bubblewrap by Marilyn Wilkinson

I love wool.

I love its feel. I love what I can create with it. It is divine. I want to connect with it.

If you look at wool through a microscope you see tiny barbs. Because of these, wool is easy to spin and easy to felt. It's made to connect! Yes, I can even say made to connect with me – it's my woollen garments that keep me most warm in winter.

Let me tell you a little about felting. First, I lay out layers of specially prepared wool. Then I use some water and a little soap to agitate the fibres by rubbing and rolling until they connect and form a piece of fabric.

Sometimes I need to stop the fibres connecting – like making a bag and wanting the edges to felt, but not the centre. To do that I need to use what's called a 'resist'.

And what I use is bubblewrap.

I love words as well.

After all they're used to connect and connecting is at the heart of living fully. I love the way words can connect me to others. I love the way words can connect to a deep spot within me. I love playing with words. I love creating with them.

But wait – Ecclesiastes 3 comes to mind. For everything there is a season...a time to speak and a time to be silent. This is the catch. Words are fine in the right place but too often they just come blurting out or my inner record just keeps playing –

When what is needed is silence.

My school report at age 7 said 'M...talks too much'.

I have to smile  
I have to see  
that words still have a grip on me!

Certainly, over the years I've learned to temper how much I talk, but it's the inner chatter that still causes me concern.

So words are both my friend as well as my foe. As my foe, they're my bubblewrap. More often than not they stop me connecting deeply with my true self, with others and with God. They float up and become my resistance.

Try as I may, my bubblewrap is hard to get rid of. It's determined. It won't crumple.

It just pops back.

But I too am resolute, as I have a goal beyond wool and words. That's why I take time out each day to put everything aside and be truly silent in God's presence.

## Lifting the lid by Hannah Rowan

Sometimes  
stuff happens  
that doesn't make sense  
that jars and hurts

I pushed it down  
Into a manhole  
Put a lid on it  
stood on the top  
'I'm okay' I said

Which I was  
for a while  
Until the seepage began  
The unexpected overflow  
of emotion, nakedness  
and pain

Gentle Holy Spirit  
bringing to light  
that which I had tried to forget  
and could not face alone  
Together we found a new way

Opened the lid  
moved the sludge  
examined the contents  
let them speak

Felt the feelings  
Acknowledged the anger  
Wandering wonderings

A glimmer of light  
A handful of hope  
A letter from heaven  
Comfort & love

*"You will seek me  
and you will find me  
when you search for me  
with all your heart"  
Jeremiah 29 v 13*

## Resistance or resistance?

by Lesley Ayers

I've been reading a few books set in Europe during the Second World War – fiction and non-fiction. Two things stood out:

First, how Hitler and his values could seep into an entire country's mentality. Many decent people believed his lies and were blind to what he was doing. They revered him so much that, in their eyes, he could 'do no wrong'.

Second, the importance of significant groups who showed resistance to his twisted values. There are many examples. In some cases, individuals provided hiding places for Jews and other persecuted groups. Nations like Denmark staged great actions of corporate resistance doing all they could to protect their Jewish citizens. In France, the resistance movement gathered disparate groups determined to combat the indifference of Vichy France.

Maybe that's why, when I saw the topic for this edition of *Refresh*, my mind went to ways I could be part of a present-day Resistance – much needed in our deeply troubled world. Jesus' teachings and values have always been counter-cultural.

Now they're needed more than ever.

Commenting on what's happening in the world today, Director of the Bauman Institute in Leeds, Mark Davis, recalled the phrase 'banality of evil' coined by Hannah Arendt, a Jewish political theorist in the '60s reporting on the trial of Adolf Eichmann – who claimed he was 'simply doing his job'.

Davis asserts, 'If evil is banal – a set of ordinary, mundane decisions day by day – then maybe we have to start living differently day by day.'

Romans 12 in *The Message* is now my daily 'Resistance' passage: 'So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life - and place it before God as an offering...don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out.'

Our current western culture certainly isn't one I want to adjust to. A world dominated by what *Washington Post's* Sarah Kaufman calls the 'grace gap'. In her book *The Art of Grace*, she writes 'Our impatient, fragmented, competitive society conspires in many ways against gentleness and understanding...Popular culture stokes delight in humiliation and conflict.'

This is so counter to the values of Christ, so cruel and vindictive. It's obvious there's a spiritual and moral battle going on. Resistance is needed!! As I ponder what being part of God's Resistance would look like, I realise I'm already a 'signed up' member, albeit with a very small role, in a much greater movement.

But now I need to face the fact that my focus in this article may, in a way, be part of my own resistance to God.

Do I take time to be still and really listen? Was facing my own resistance to God too threatening? My delight in research, in learning, is a good thing, but can also lead to great diversions.

The poet, Denise Levertov, ably describes this in her poem *Flickering Mind*

....'I stop  
to think about you, and my mind  
at once  
like a minnow darts away,  
darts  
into the shadows, into gleams that fret  
unceasing over  
the river purling and passing'....

So, forgive me Lord, for my flickering mind. Help me overcome my resistance to spending time with you, to listening to you. For only then can I be an effective member of your life-giving, grace-bearing, light-bringing 'Resistance'.

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## Resistance to Change

by Maggie Quinlan



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Importance  
Qualifications  
The WOW factor  
Knowledgeable leader  
Part of the elite  
Perfection

To these I cling  
I cannot let them go  
But God says 'Let go'  
Do you love me?  
I am love  
Let me show you  
Feel the touch of my heart's compassion  
Spend time with me  
Listen to my wisdom  
Smell the perfume of my goodness  
See the beauty of my creation  
Taste my word  
The world needs love, not status

Stardom  
Strong individuality  
Centre of attraction  
Uniqueness  
Popularity  
Charisma

To these I cling  
I cannot let them go

But God says 'let go'  
Feed my sheep  
Not alone, but as a church family  
Proclaiming the Gospel is a shared vision  
Confess your brokenness and vulnerability  
Accept forgiveness

We all need each other  
To love and care for one another  
Live in the 'body' as servant leaders  
That the world will see that we love  
one another  
That we come in the name of Jesus

Power  
Control  
Leadership  
Maturity  
Experience  
Independence

To these I cling  
I cannot let them go

But God says 'let go'  
I will take you where you would rather not go  
Discern where God is leading  
Discover the mind of Christ  
Who in deep humility and great love  
Emptied himself to death on a cross  
You love Jesus deeply  
Then learn of him; follow him  
You are his servant  
Which means self-denial; becoming small  
That the world might know  
the loving heart of God



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## A fable of resistance and surrender

by Adrienne Thompson

Once upon a time a child was growing up in a little house, on the side of a mountain, not far from a great, wild forest.

When Ada was four years old she had an argument with her mother – as even a four-year-old can do. Cross and defiant she ran across the paddock towards the forest. Her mother watched from the window, knowing she wouldn't go far.

At the edge of the forest enormous trees loomed over Ada. The morning sun slanted through their leaves and made patterns on the ground. Ada stepped into the pattern of sun and shade. Soft moss was under her feet. A little further in, the roots of a large tree seemed perfectly shaped to be a seat for a little girl. Ada sat down. She leant back against the tree and felt calm and happy.

As she sat there she heard a mew.

A small black kitten came prowling out of the forest. It stepped straight up to Ada and rubbed against her legs. She stroked its soft fur.

'Hello,' said Ada. 'Who are you?'

They were both too young to know that kittens don't talk.

'Hello,' the kitten replied. 'I am Tari.'

The child and the kitten ran to Ada's house together.

'What have you got there?' asked Ada's mother.

'It's a kitten. It's called Tari. Can I keep it?'

'Oh, I think so,' said her mother, stroking the kitten's ears.

Ada played with Tari and Tari played with Ada. They explored the edges of the forest together and Ada would bring back sheaves of wild flowers in spring, and glorious sprays of berries in autumn. Her parents delighted in these but at the same time they were a little concerned that Tari would lead Ada into danger.

'Don't go too far!' her mother would call. 'Don't climb too high!' her father would warn.

But despite these injunctions they'd sometimes see the girl and the cat climbing nimbly in tall trees, or clinging precariously to a slippery rock by a waterfall, and they were afraid for their daughter.

Ada grew older and bigger and so did Tari. Indeed, sometimes Ada's parents looked at Tari and wondered. Surely it was larger than a normal cat? But they could easily dismiss their fears because they saw Tari less frequently now. Ada was more likely to be giggling with her friends these days than following a cat into the forest.

By the time Ada settled down and married a fine young man they assumed that Tari was gone for good.

Ada didn't often think of the cat, but neither did she forget it. In fact, she still saw it from time to time. On her wedding day, it briefly circled her and her husband as they emerged from the church. Sometimes as they lay entwined together Ada was certain she could hear Tari purring from under the bed.

One day when Ada was expecting her first child a black cat came and sprang on to her knee as she sat wearily in a kitchen chair. 'You're Tari, aren't you?' she said. The cat purred. The baby within Ada kicked energetically. Ada laid a hand on her belly and a hand on Tari and felt the life that throbbed in each of them.

Tari was a presence in Ada's life, though she did not see it often. Sometimes when she was inventing stories for the children the black cat would come and purr at her feet. Occasionally when she sang in the shower Ada would be disconcerted to glimpse a black, furry face in the bathroom mirror. And on rare occasions when she walked alone in the forest, Tari would meet her there, prowling silently at her side.

Time went on. Ada's children grew and found homes of their own. A restlessness stirred within Ada. One day she returned to her house to find a black cat stretched out in the sun in her living room. 'Tari!' she exclaimed. 'You've grown!' Indeed, the cat was now the size of a panther.

'So have you,' said Tari.

'I'm not sure we've got room for you in our house,' said Ada.

'Then get a bigger house,' replied the cat.

'Don't be ridiculous!' said Ada.

She mentioned the problem to her husband. 'Well, we could move to a bigger house,' he said cheerfully. (He was a kind and generous man.) 'Now you're being ridiculous too,' said Ada, crossly. She stroked Tari's sleek flank.

It was true that Tari took up a lot of space and needed a lot of Ada's attention. Some of her friends were a bit irritated she spent less time with them these days. Her house and garden were less well tended. But sheaves of forest flowers reappeared on the kitchen table. The neighbours would find a bagful of mushrooms on the door step. In the wildness of Ada's garden, rare birds could be heard to sing.



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**Her parents delighted in these but at the same time they were a little concerned that Tari would lead Ada into danger.**

But Tari grew bigger still.

Once again Ada seriously began to doubt she could continue to give the cat house-room. Everywhere she turned she saw its black fur. Its growls made her uneasy. Its mews disturbed her with strange dreams and longings. She knew she needed to take control of the situation, so she built a stockade for Tari. It was near her home, but separate from it. Tari was safe within its high fence and Ada visited the cat regularly.

Ada no longer walked in the forest with Tari, but sometimes she would put a lead on it and promenade in the town, at once enjoying and feeling a little uncomfortable with the attention they drew.

'Now I can do my proper work,' said Ada. Her house and garden were clean and tidy. She volunteered at her local community centre. Her friends met her for coffee.

'Aren't you glad I got rid of the cat?' she asked her husband. He looked at her kindly. (He was a kind and generous man.)

'I miss Tari,' he said.

'But you have all my attention now,' said Ada, hurt.

'I never wanted to be everything to you,' said her husband.

It was a long time since Ada visited the stockade. She walked there slowly. But when she arrived, though the fence was intact, there was no great cat within its boundary. Tari had gone.

Ada looked at the empty stockade. She said out loud, 'Well! That's all for the best, really.' Her voice sounded thin and flat in the echoing emptiness.

Ada stood there for a while, and then began to walk home. The path seemed to have grown much longer somehow. She walked quickly at first, and then more slowly, and then she stopped. She turned around and looked toward the forest.

It was winter. The sky was grey and bleak with looming clouds. The forest looked grim and dark. Ada stood still for a long moment. Then she began to walk tentatively back towards the forest. She could not have said why.

Ada came among the trees. She stepped deeper into the quiet bush.

Raindrops dripped off the leaves onto her face. It grew darker. Gradually she became aware of a deep breathing – in and out – steady and rhythmical, quiet, yet impossible to ignore. Ada trembled.

Ahead of her was a black shape. Tari's face emerged out of the dark forest. Its eyes were on a level with her own. She stretched out a hand and dared to stroke the great neck. Tari's fur was as sleek and soft as ever but under the skin its muscles rippled with power. She felt Tari's warm breath lifting her damp hair.

Ada looked into Tari's eyes and they walked deeper into the forest together.

## I don't want to be here

by Jenny Chisholm

I don't want to be here.  
I was chased here  
The demon Age snaps at my heels.

The doctor is kind and gentle  
Does she understand my resentment?



I walked down by the stream  
and the water whispered and gurgled,  
shouted and leapt over rocks.

That was last week, last month, last year.

Where I parked  
the stream runs under the road  
in a culvert.

I don't want to be here.

## A real-life resistance parable

by Jill McLeod

When I came on the scene, the 92-year-old lady (I'll call her Jane), almost blind, very deaf, badly diabetic, and very, very, very independent, was lying on her back in the doorway between the kitchen and bathroom of her small apartment.

'Lift me up! Help me!'

She was yelling at the willing nurse who'd come from the Aged Care Home in answer to Jane's alarm. The nurse was doing her best, but Jane was squashed in the place where she'd fallen, and her writhing wasn't helping.

Feeling sorry for them both, though thinking to myself that Jane looked like a cast sheep, I said, 'Jane, it's Jill. Be still while the nurse calls an ambulance, and I'll stay here with you.'

'No ambulance! Not the hospital! Get me up!'

The litany continued as she tried to grasp whatever she could reach and do it herself.

Soon the paramedics arrived – I have a feeling they'd been called to Jane before! Quietly and firmly the young man and woman (it took both of them!) scooped Jane from the floor and gently seated her on a handy chair.

'I am NOT going to hospital! I'm diabetic! I need my food!' Jane's strong will kept her going. 'I live my own life!'

I was impressed by the firm but soothing tones of the paramedic as he began to check her condition; the nurse and I grinned at each other, and went our separate ways, knowing Jane was in safe hands.

Whenever I visualise that scene I learn much about resistance – about myself. In fact, it reminds me how often I too have wanted to 'do it myself'.

My memory of this event is very salutary, and a continuing call back into the safe, gentle and loving hands of Christ.

Everyone who meditates on this real-life parable may take to heart something for themselves.



## Resistance to truth

by David Strang

Lenore, my beloved wife of fifty-two years was experiencing TIA's (Transient Ischaemic Attacks). There was little doctors could do to prevent these mini-strokes recurring every few days. The result was a gradual loss of cognitive and motor skills, and self-control.

Why my wife, why not someone else's loved one? What had she done – or I – to deserve this?

*'When my thoughts were bitter and my feeling were hurt, I was as stupid as an animal; I did not understand you.'* Psalm 73:21-22 GNB

My Christian background had never been tested to this degree. What became clear is that before I could turn my anger into an inner peace, I needed to strengthen my relationship with God.

I embarked on re-educating myself. I read a dozen contemporary books by well-known Christian authors. It was goodbye to my Sunday School thinking and let's get into a new, fresh way to accept a loved one's death. Easier said than done!

I tried praying in the spirit. A long time ago, I'd been blessed with the gift of speaking in tongues. But because of embarrassment, I only use this spiritual gift on my own when I can't find the words – especially for difficult prayers involving life and death.

I prayed many times this way about Lenore – but saw little or no improvement in her health. Life seemed spiritually empty.

In the midst of all this, unbeknown to me, God was working a miracle, or two, or three. Gradually I noticed my thinking was changing – from what God could do for me to what I could do for God.

My doctor, full of apologies, explained Lenore was living on borrowed time. She'd probably die of a major stroke. I should turn my unrealistic optimism into realistic acceptance. My feelings were awfully confused, but I sensed God was telling me the truth. I cried.

The books I'd read exposed me to a depth and breadth of information I'd never encountered – and threw up a brand new subject called 'contemplative prayer'.

Was this a 'here today...gone tomorrow' Christian fad, and did it come with a money-back guarantee? How incredible. Lenore's 24/7 care was nearing its end and testing me to the limit, yet I was drawing closer to God. Wow!

At this time, it became increasingly difficult to watch a wife, mother and grandmother fight so courageously to do what the medical staff and care-givers expected, and yet

I should turn my unrealistic optimism into realistic acceptance.

she was losing the battle. Lenore became increasingly frustrated and tearful at her helplessness. She expressed a wish to die to several people, including me.

I felt Lenore had lost the will to live. I knew I should prepare myself for her inevitable death. I began to feel sorry for my resistance and the anger I'd earlier shown to God.

Eagerly I sought more information on contemplative prayer, but the end came as the doctor predicted – and I'd run out of time.

Two very difficult years for Lenore and the family ended on June 3, 2016 when she died peacefully at Ripponburn near Cromwell. Two days after the funeral I felt a ghastly emptiness...she wasn't coming back...I'M ALONE, WHAT NOW?

God took me by the hand and clearly told me what to do. I'd already read about it in one of the books.

Words can't describe the impact my 'first time' contemplative prayer session had on me. It was a bit like the disciples must have felt when they first met up with Jesus after his death on the cross. An inner peace filled my body.

*Yet I always stay close to you, and you hold me by the hand. Psalm 73:23*



## Spoonbills

by Andrea Williamson

Spoonbills feeding  
on the harbour's edge,  
plumed marching girls  
in rhythm and row.  
Some break ranks,  
wheeling right and left,  
following an inaudible call  
to deeper water,  
tastier morsels,  
heads like metal detectors,  
sweeping side to side,  
searching constantly  
for buried treasure.

The spoonbill in me  
knows where the treasure lies,  
hears the call to go deep,  
to be constant.  
Why do I,  
despite this,  
so often dabble  
on the edge,  
forsaking fulness  
for familiarity,  
relationship  
for ritual?

## God, by whatever Name

by Pam Gordon

When I first read 'resistance' was the theme for this edition of *Refresh* – my initial reaction was resistance. I had no desire to write on what I initially saw as a negative topic. Then, after a few days of mulling it over, I thought I would explore this notion. Bear with me while I first get the reasons for my resistance off my chest!

How come we've had World Wars where both sides pray to the same God for victory? Why has such hatred and violence existed between Protestant and Catholic, Jew and Gentile, Christian and Muslim? How can atrocities be executed in 'the name of God' as well as acts of love and kindness? Think of the Inquisition: 'Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.' (Pascal).

Jesus teaches non-violence, forgiveness, and love your enemy – yet Christian nations become invaders and warmongers. Consider the near genocide of indigenous peoples in Australia, and North and South America – and the resultant amassing of fortunes. Consider the killing fields of Vietnam, Bosnia/Herzegovina, and the Middle East, in our own life time.

Yes! I say, resist the judgmental God of the Old Testament, the God of vengeance. (As Confucius says, 'Those who want to take revenge should dig two graves'). Resist the trappings that often go along with God-centred religions; the hypocrisy, the fundamentalism, the exclusivity, the judgmentalism, the rigid dogma, and the rituals that have become meaningless.

So – obviously – resistance or lack of resistance to God depends on our understanding of who God is. Is there a 'God' I *can* believe in, whom I can *not* resist?

I can't just *decide* to believe in God, even if I realise it's in my interest. I can't feign belief, even if the logical benefits outweigh the costs; I'm unable to compromise my integrity. I'd rather be an honest agnostic than a calculating hypocrite. Clearly, a God 'out there' does not suffice.

Where to from here? Where do I find my joy, my awe, my wonder, my peace? What life experiences, what wise spiritual teachers have the answer?

In 1989, while trekking in the Himalayas, locals greeted me with 'Namaste'. I learned it means, 'the spirit within me acknowledges the spirit within you'. Or in Hindi, 'I bow to the divine in you'. This brought home to me an understanding of God (Spirit) within.

More recently I've learned this 'God within' is always there within each one of us. We just need to become aware. This 'divine indwelling' doesn't have to be sought for or earned. It doesn't depend on a belief system that excludes those who don't conform.

As Richard Rohr says, 'You cannot *not*, live in the presence of God. Feeling God's presence is simply a matter of awareness, of enjoying the now.'<sup>i</sup> This awareness allows us to look beyond ego, to the divine Presence within everyone. It makes it easier to see Jesus in 'the least of our brothers and sisters'. (Matthew 25:40) It's a way we can deeply connect with one another and with ourselves. It's this union that sustains and gives joy. I think Ram Dass' explanation of Namaste given as a blessing at the end of my yoga class captures this:

'I honour the place in you where the entire universe resides. I honour the place in you of love, of light, of truth, of peace. I honour the place within you where if you are in that place in you and I am in that place in me, there is only one of us.'<sup>ii</sup>

Another way I find joy and peace is in nature. I sense the wonder of natural beauty around me – as a manifestation of God – and I deeply appreciate the science and wonder of evolution. I'm able to hold these two seemingly paradoxical viewpoints. And as a lover of the environment, I know what we profoundly value we'll protect.

I'm grateful for life itself and all of this.

I've come to see God, Spirit, Love, as one and the same. Even though the word 'love' has often been corrupted and debased, it's still acknowledged as a powerful force – an energy that flows through us and can work wonders. Love transforms. As the Buddha taught, 'Hatred doesn't cease by hatred, but only by love; this is the eternal rule'.<sup>iii</sup>

i Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs*. Crossroad Publishing Company, 2003

ii Ram Dass and Stephen Levine, *Grist for the Mill: Awakening to Oneness*, 2014

iii Gautama Buddha, *The Dhammapada: The Sayings of the Buddha*

With Stephanie Dowrick, I question why religions founded on love and generosity have become so overlaid with tribalism. I resist their extravagant claims to exclusive truths that privilege the few and abandon the many. Nevertheless, I believe that beauty, truth, love, and hope still flourish. 'Let us risk the notion that goodness is our basic nature.'<sup>iv</sup>

God, by whatever name - Spirit, Presence, The Divine, The One, The Light, Gaia, Source, Mystery, Life, Love - God *is*.

Is Life then, a great 'School of Love' where we practise being patient, kind, forgiving, generous, compassionate – in a word – loving? If so, how do we learn to *be* these qualities?

*Refresh* readers are most familiar with Christian contemplative spirituality. A practice mirrored in other major faiths. The Four Paths of Yoga ('Yoga' meaning union with God): being of service to others, philosophy and study, contemplation and devotion, and self-discipline leading to union – are actually one path – the path of love. They're practised according to temperament or at different stages of life.

In his book *Beyond Religion*, the Dalai Lama describes a process of 'educating the heart': first through hearing and learning, followed by reflection leading to deep conviction, and internalised through contemplation. He understands compassion to be the foundation of wellbeing – arising in empathy and resulting in action.<sup>v</sup>

I see a common theme running through all these and feel I'm on my way. Still there are many more questions in me than answers. I do take comfort in Mary Oliver's poem:

*The man who has many answers  
is often found  
in the theatres of information  
where he offers, graciously,  
his deep findings.*

*While the man who has only questions  
to comfort himself, makes music<sup>vi</sup>*

I love making music!

I question why religions  
founded on love and generosity  
have become so overlaid with  
tribalism.

iv Stephanie Dowrick, *Transformative Appreciation*. Interfaith Uniting Church, Sydney. YouTube. July, 14, 2016

v The Dalai Lama, *Beyond Religion - Ethics for a Whole World*. Random House, 2011

vi Oliver, Mary. *A Thousand Mornings*. Penguin Books, 2012

## Discovering God as God is

by Benno Blaschke

As a full-time contemplative engaged in practice 'on and off the cushion', three years ago I embarked on PhD research that aimed to include the voices of Christian and Tibetan Buddhist contemplatives in scientific debates on the fundamental nature of consciousness.

I felt called to educate myself further – by the need I perceived in science to integrate insights from contemplative practice and experience into discussions on the nature of consciousness.<sup>i</sup> The required field work meant 'radical participation' in Christian Centering Prayer, including an intensive retreat at St Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado – home of Thomas Keating. My subsequent findings challenge current academic thinking on how 'the presence of God' is or can be experienced.

I moved from Austria to NZ in 2006 to study religion and philosophy. After a few years of study, I became a *Mind and Life Research Fellow* (2011 and 2012<sup>ii</sup>). I quickly realised I needed further training in the empirical sciences. So I continued my training in psychology with a focus on cognitive and affective neuroscience.

Serendipitously, a nascent discipline called 'contemplative science' was gaining a foothold in academia. While still in an embryonic stage, this active new field is finding its way into well-known universities.

My training in religious studies showed me that, by and large, contemporary scholarship resists the possibility that contemplatives from different traditions can have experiences similar in content and structure.<sup>iii</sup> This apparent lack of universal contemplative experience is believed to compromise the validity of religious experience in general.

A typical argument rests on the notion that 'mystical experiences' are conditioned and fully determined by prior religious indoctrination.<sup>iv</sup> Consequently, it's thought practitioners enact in a contrived manner religious ideas given to them by their respective traditions.<sup>v</sup> This line of reasoning has led most religious studies scholars to believe experiential data derived from contemplative states of consciousness have no bearing on discussions about the fundamental nature of human consciousness.



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It's in this milieu I started my doctoral research in 2014 through Victoria University's department of religious studies. The working title was *Contemplative Responses to the Sense of Self*. I first saw this to be a comparative study of living Buddhist and Christian contemplative traditions. My point of difference with existing research was that my work would rely on actual reports of contemplative practitioners rather than inferences made from ancient religious texts which contain little description of practitioners' experiential vantage point.

So, for the first time in the history of the academic study of religion, I set out to obtain faithful and reliable descriptions from contemplatives for the specific purpose of considering thorny questions about religious experience. At the same time I was motivated to create a relevant data base for theoretical work in the science of consciousness. To realise this goal, I had to train in state of the art methods (e.g. the *Explicitation Interview Technique*<sup>vi</sup>) recently developed in consciousness science. This was a very exciting aspect of the work.

By the end of my data collection phase I'd interviewed 35 teachers and long-term practitioners across the *Pointing Out Way Tibetan Buddhist Mahamudra and Christian Centering Prayer* traditions. This yielded a database of over 1200 pages of transcripts with over 560,000 words. And while I originally conceived this project as a comparative study, the PhD dissertation only allows for 100,000 words! This forced me to narrow my focus.

I decided to report on material from only one tradition. Today my thesis is entitled *Consciousness of God As God Is: The Phenomenology of Christian Centering Prayer*.<sup>vii</sup> I had two reasons: first the qualitative data gathered from Centering Prayer contemplatives were most surprising (and possibly upsetting) to received views held by scholars in the philosophy and comparative study of mysticism; second, Abrahamic traditions have received less attention by the academic community in the field of contemplative studies/science.<sup>viii</sup> I consider my study a necessary corrective to such bias because it brings a well-established and living Christian contemplative tradition into dialogue with the mind sciences already engaged in by other contemplative traditions.

My presentation of practitioners' experience is guided by a complete map of Centering Prayer's (Keating School) contemplative path. I also include: (1) a delineation of the levels of consciousness (ordinary, spiritual and divine) and the identification of each level's unique content (coarse, subtle and very subtle/divine presence); (2) definitions for each type of 'self' (false, true and separate-self sense); and (3) an outline of the three

i Evan Thompson, "Neurophenomenology and contemplative experience," in *The Oxford Handbook of Science and Religion*, ed. Philip Clayton (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 226-36.

ii <https://www.mindandlife.org/>

iii Stephen S. Bush, "Concepts and religious experiences: Wayne Proudfoot on the cultural construction of experiences," *Religious Studies* 48, no. 1 (2012): 101.

iv Steven T. Katz, "General editor's introduction," in *Comparative Mysticism*, ed. Steven T. Katz (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3-12.

v Robert M. Gimello, "Mysticism and Meditation," in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 193.

vi Maryse Maurel, "The explicitation interview: Examples and applications," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 16, no. 10-1 (2009): 58-89.

vii The title was inspired by my main finding and Fr Thomas Keating's thinking on the subject, which he condensed into a book title for one of his most recent publications. See Thomas Keating, *Consenting to God as God is* (New York: Lantern Books, 2016).

viii Louis Komjathy, "Approaching contemplative practice," in *Contemplative Literature*, ed. Louis Komjathy (New York, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015), 33, 57.

major phases: Stage One – the beginning phase, which includes the sacred symbol; Stage Two – one of spiritual attentiveness including absorption in seated prayer; and Stage Three – the intermediate phase, characterised by infused recollection, prayer of quiet, prayer of union and prayer of full union; and Stage Four – the advanced phase, in which practitioners experience abiding union states – in and outside of seated prayer – through transforming union; and Stage Four – the spiritual goal identified as unity consciousness.

While there is a lot to be said about Centering Prayer, especially about its 'path-oriented' system of training,<sup>ix</sup> I will focus on one experiential finding that concerns how practitioners in my study experience 'God's presence'.

The first thing I would like to share is that the way God's presence manifests in contemplative experience appears relative to the level of consciousness operating at the time. For example, if a practitioner is immersed in ordinary day to day experience, then experience appears exhausted by 'coarse-level' content specific to that level of consciousness – thoughts, feelings and sensory information processing.

Practitioners started talking about 'God's presence' when they experientially accessed a deeper level of consciousness, identified by Keating as 'the spiritual level of awareness'. Access to this level of awareness typically occurs during seated prayer and while in a state equivalent to contemplative prayer as classically defined by St Teresa of Avila – specifically 'prayer of quiet'.

In prayer of quiet, practitioners talk about God's 'unfelt' or 'unseen' presence and point to various ways God manifests in their experience. Here they point to 'subtle-level' content including interior stillness, interior silence and interior spaciousness. David Frenette identifies these features as the way God's formless presence manifests at the spiritual level of awareness. He considers this level content to be 'God's' stillness, spaciousness and silence.<sup>x</sup>

There's still a deeper level of consciousness reported during seated prayer and in states of consciousness equivalent to classic union identified by St Teresa as 'prayer of union' and 'prayer of full union'. In such union states, practitioners either touch on or are completely immersed in what Keating calls 'the divine level of awareness'.

Many respected teachers of Centering Prayer consider this divine level of awareness to be the deepest possible centre of our being and the centre of God: the place *where God is*. Here practitioners describe a 'sense of presence' equivalent to their subjective sense of existing (I refer to this as 'very subtle' content). This 'sense of presence' appears to be an *experiential primitive*, that is, a basic feature of experience that does not include

any additional ingredient that might identify this 'sense of presence' or 'awareness of existence' as being specifically 'of God' or 'of the individual God', as defined in classic Christian theology.

Consider what Joseph, a 68-year-old contemplative from a small town in the South Island of New Zealand, has to say about the way he experiences the divine level of awareness at a time when he also remains aware of his natural environment (I call this 'world-involving' union with God):

'It came completely unbidden. I don't remember having any thoughts or heart-movements. Suddenly this awareness of this huge, huge, vast sky above me just resounding like some magnificent organ. What arises within me [in the interview context] is the echo of a feeling of complete exhilaration: a sense of profound excitement and a profound sense of belonging. It's interesting all these decades later it's still so clear – a sense of the unity of all things and the sense that I am part of that unity. In later years I kind of talked about it this way, as saying that, you know, 'In my baptism I was caught up into the Holy Trinity and each person of the Holy Trinity just throws me around.' And this sense of exhilaration, playfulness...it was in my body inasmuch as I felt bigger than I was, and it was a sense of in-the-fullness-of-my-body. Like it's impossible to differentiate my body from any other part of this experience. I mean it was all of me in this...The presence is what it really was and it was experienced like the sound of this cosmic organ celebrating the unity; like a sense of vibration; like a sense of the stars that were like organ pipes sounding something; and the sense of presence enfolding me.'

Here, Joseph points out that the way he talks about his experience, specifically through the concept of the Holy Trinity, is not an experiential primitive but an interpretation of his experience that emerged many years after he had the experience in question. As Joseph and I continued to explore his experience, he further clarified other theological aspects of his own account. He said, 'In my Christological world view, and my framing, it was kind of like the Christ in me that was expanding me to make room for 'Christness', which is what I think I mean by that sense of unity and connectedness.'

The latter 'sense of unity and connectedness' is what Joseph puts forward as the real experiential primitive (or ingredient) of his experience.

Joseph's clarification – of the distinction between his experience and the language he uses to talk about it – is echoed by many practitioners in my study. Specifically, practitioners report an experience of God's presence at the divine level of awareness that does not include specific 'God-identification' elements. Rather, God's 'unseen' and 'unfelt' presence-absence (as it is often referred to in negative theology) is encountered as an *unidentified reality*.

This renders union states reported by the Centering Prayer practitioners in my study experientially 'non-theistic' as most religious studies scholars and theologians would use the term.

ix I acknowledge that Rev Dr Cynthia Bourgeault, who is the founder of what I call the Wisdom School of Centering Prayer, disagrees with the Keating School's approach that outlines a path which relies in part on the familiar road map of classic Christian mysticism. See Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Heart of Centering Prayer* (Boston, Massachusetts: Shambhala, 2016), 1-8.

x David Frenette, *The Path of Centering Prayer* (Boulder, Colorado: Sounds True, 2012), 81, 83, 91.

This discovery about how Centering Prayer practitioners experience God's presence in contemplative prayer and in the higher reaches of the Christian contemplative journey brings me to my theme of *Discovering God as God is*.

Both Keating and Frenette discuss how important it is to meet God on God's terms and not by way of images we already have of God. Keating asserts 'as we climb the ladder of consciousness...our idea of God expands...'xi Thus, Centering Prayer is designed to transform consciousness over time in order to come to a consciousness of God as God is.<sup>xii</sup>

I recall how Rachel, a 66 year old retired teacher from Oregon, described how her relationship with God changed over time and through practice. She said, 'My *image* of God has eroded over time with Centering Prayer. I realised, 'Nothing is left.' It wasn't like, 'Damn, there is no God.' The image and the thought was, 'No THING'."

Conversation with Rachel showed practice over time had revealed a new dimension of God's formless nature. To discover God in this way, she had to allow practice to grind away her resistance to God as *God is*. This did not come to her easily and without grief. I consider this overarching phenomenon in my study to be the foundational activity and central message of Christian Centering Prayer.

Today I understand the 'sense of presence' described by Centering Prayer practitioners to be coterminous with God's presence-absence, i.e. the manifestation of 'God in His Divinity' as, and at the centre of, human consciousness. Therefore, though union states don't appear to be theistic in the sense most religious studies scholars and theologians require, we should not conclude that union states are not of God. Rather, they are practitioners' consciousness of God *as God is*. As a senior Centering Prayer teacher from Cynthia Bourgeault's Wisdom School says: 'Divine presence or 'presence' – just call it presence. All presence is divine.'

If what I have observed in my project holds true, then the attempts made by mainstream religious studies scholars and theologians to construct a unique theistic mystical experience that is different from experiences of contemplatives in other traditions is misguided, and the possibility remains open that contemplatives across traditions can have experiences of the sacred (the 'really real' <sup>xiii</sup>) that are similar in content and structure, and thus universal.

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xi Thomas Keating, *Intimacy with God* (Snowmass, Colorado: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2012), 69.

xii The *Cloud* points to this phenomenological project by urging the practitioner to take the following approach: "See that nothing remains in your conscious mind save a naked intent stretching out toward God. Leave it stripped of every particular idea *about* God (what he is like in himself or in his works) and keep only the simple awareness *that he is as he is*. Let him thus, I pray you, and force him not to be otherwise." See William Johnston, *The Cloud of Unknowing* (New York: Image Books, 1996), 138.

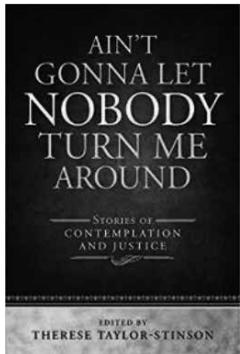
xiii Bryan Rennie, *Reconstructing Eliade: Making Sense of Religion* (Albany, NY: The State University of New York Press, 1996), 17-26.

## What we have to give

The message of hope the contemplative offers you...is not that you need to find your way through the jungle of language and problems that today surround God: but that whether you understand or not, God loves you, is present in you, lives in you, dwells in you, calls you, saves you, and offers you an understanding and light which are like nothing you ever found in books or heard in sermons. The contemplative has nothing to tell you except to reassure you and say that if you dare to penetrate your own silence and risk the sharing of that solitude with the lonely other who seeks God through you, then you will truly recover the light and the capacity to understand what is beyond words and beyond explanations because it is too close to be explained: it is the intimate union in the depths of your own heart, of God's spirit and your own secret inmost self, so that you and He are in all truth One Spirit.

*From Thomas Merton: I Have Seen what I was Looking for  
Selected Spiritual Writing by Thomas Merton and M. Basil Pennington p 230.*

## Books and music for the contemplative journey



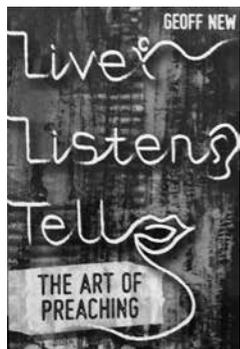
### ***Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around***

Stories of contemplation and justice, Edited by Therese Taylor-Stinson. CPI Publishing, 2017. This second volume from Spiritual Directors of Color Network addresses contemporary issues of racism and contemplation. Following on the ground-breaking anthology *Embodied Spirits: Stories of Spiritual Directors of Color*, this new book continues to fill a void in the world of contemplative spirituality. *Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around* tells the stories of members' encounters with 'othering' and disparaging treatment and the call to action that follows. This volume seeks not only to give voice but to seek peace and healing for the unresolved trauma that continues to separate us in a world where resurgent racism and bias against those whose colour, nationality, religion, gender, or sexuality are seen as 'other'.



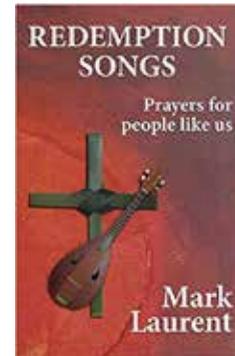
### ***Talk of Treasure* by Jane Carswell**

Makaro Press 2016. Reviewer Lester Reid, editor of Shalom Lyrical and literary, *Talk of Treasure* is a compelling memoir about how to be a writer, and more simply - how to be. Before you open Jane's latest book, catch the spirit of the cover. It's a glimpse of the interior treasure - words selected carefully from the top shelf, crafted and melded into a journey of stumbling blocks and stepping stones. The overall result like a skilled artisan taking a piece of rough kauri, shaping it so the grain shines out, the knot becomes a feature and as we feel its shape and smoothness, it warms to our touch. Like kauri, *Talk of Treasure* rewards us with clarity, freshness and beauty. A work of art with a New Zealand aroma. A Benedictine oblate, Jane's story reminds us that the inner creative impulse will push us to step over self-doubts and shove obstacles aside - treasure exists. Orders to [www.makaropress.co.nz](http://www.makaropress.co.nz) \$35.



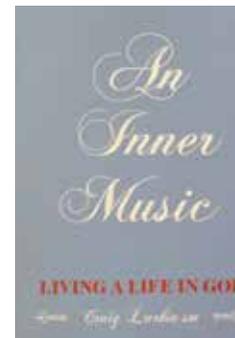
### ***Live, Listen, Tell: The Art of Preaching* by Geoff New**

Langham 2017  
The art and science of using Lectio Divina in the process of sermon preparation. One reader says, 'It's like learning to tune in to God's wavelength with freshness and transforming power.' Geoff New is Dean of Studies at Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership in Dunedin. A small book but a big read. Orders to [geoff@knoxcentre.ac.nz](mailto:geoff@knoxcentre.ac.nz) \$10 + shipping.



### ***Redemption Songs: prayers for people like us***

by Mark Laurent  
Philip Garside Publishing 2016 Three Jewish men inspired Mark to write this book. King David the psalmist, Leonard Cohen the songwriter and Jesus. This modern-day Psalmist has walked the agonising paths of aloneness. 'Those whose hearts have felt the nails, whose tears have fallen in the garden of darkness, will find words to bring hope and courage. How beautiful, how rare to find a man prepared to show such vulnerability and openness. But just as the depths are lived, so also are the peaks. *Redemption Songs* will be a breath of fresh air, comfort and encouragement to those who find that the Jesus walk is a mixture of highs and lows. Mark has shown us a heart which longs for the heart of God, and the heart of God which longs for us.' writes Anna Johnstone, author of *The Jesus Walk*. Joy Cowley says, 'Mark Laurent's "psalms" are a conversation between head and heart, full of wisdom and truth. We read the wisdom, recognise truth, and hunger for more. They are lovely and I think many people will identify with them.'  
<http://pgpl.co.nz> \$23 available also in electronic formats.



### ***An Inner Music: Living a life in God***

by Craig Larkin. Fitzbeck Publishing 2016  
Marist priest, Craig Larkin, draws on a deep knowledge of twenty Christian mystics through the ages to bring us insight and food for reflection from their liberating and joyful experience of God. A wonderful way to get to know the practice and inspiration of these great teachers who contributed so much to our contemplative life today. Orders through the Marist Provincial Centre at Cerdon in Wellington (04 499 3060 or [www.smnz.org.nz](http://www.smnz.org.nz)) \$40 + 5 shipping.



## SGM News

Imagine a community centre in any Kiwi town. An ordinary day. A room of ordinary people. It's not church but people are discovering prayer. Finding peace. Joy. Meaning. God.

If you've dreamed of reaching ordinary people and working with our unique Kiwi spirituality, we want to talk to you. It's our dream too.

To get the ball rolling, SGM is offering a fixed-term contract for an innovative self-starter with a contemplative orientation to develop accessible day or evening 'taster' events for the spiritually hungry – or curious.

There are plenty out there.

The future of this project will of course depend on outcomes and the availability of funding.

If this IS you – you'll be aligned with the ethos of SGM and energise a team of like-minded people to take what you've developed and get this outreach happening in *their* towns.

Want to know more? For a full description of the role contact Spiritual Growth Ministries Convenor, Mike Wright Chaplain@tekotago.ac.nz.

### **New Formation Programme Special Projects on the web!**

*A Christian Earth-Centred Spirituality and Spiritual Direction* – Sr Mary Maitland

*A Lay Woman's Reflection on Marist Spirituality and the interface with Spiritual Direction* – Bev McDonald (This project has also been published in the September 2007 issue no 13, of *Presence International Journal of Spiritual Direction* www.sdiworld.org )

*An Introduction to Focusing* – Lynne Brown

*Aspects of Samoan Indigenous Spirituality* – Emanuela Betham

To access search the special interest projects section of the SGM website on the spiritual direction menu. <http://www.sgm.org.nz/spiritual-direction-special-interest-projects.html>

## The Last Word

Many *Refresh* readers are involved in spiritual direction in one way or another. As we walk with God and one another, we will all encounter some form of resistance to divine guidance and grace. I hope you will wrestle vigorously with the challenges to resistance in this edition. Of course we could also devote an entire separate edition to resistance in the political context – and maybe we will! Fran Francis article on *Rest as resistance* is a taster for things to come.

You'll also find in this edition – what is for me – the very exciting contribution contemplatives are making to the emerging science of consciousness. Benno Blaschke's PhD research on the contemplative experience of God is sure to overturn some tables in the temple of academia. I look forward to the scholarly reaction.

There's a lot of my work included in these pages so that's certainly enough from me for now!

*Blessings*

*Diane [dianegw@actrix.co.nz]*

## Summer 2018 Refresh theme 'Mortality'

**Deadline Sept 28, 2017**

It's said that one of the things which drives our search for God and meaning is *memento mori*, remembering we have to die. Even the incarnate Christ demonstrated that none of us gets out of here alive. So how does our contemplative practise and perspective shape the journey toward death – our own and as we companion others? Considering the inevitable, how might we articulate a present hope to a world overwhelmed with news of death? What is a good death? How might we re-imagine death?

### **Guidelines for writers – please, please, please!**

keep contributions to fewer than 2000 words

use single quotation marks

be conversational in style

use conjunctions wherever possible

use endnotes instead of footnotes

use inclusive language wherever possible

ensure any images you send are larger than 2MB.

## Rest as resistance

by Fran Francis

A couple of years ago, I grabbed a book that smacked me between the eyes and resulted in a life-giving shift when I let it have its way with me. Brueggemann's *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now* was that book.

In 2014, while staying with friends I had time to kill. Browsing their bookshelves, flipping through stacked on tables and bench-tops – out of all the fascinating offerings – I found one I couldn't resist. A slim book, readable in an afternoon, on a Californian patio with hummingbirds for company. Ah! *Sabbath as Resistance*.

I'm not much of an activist. Activists scare me. Life is a series of battles for them. They want to recruit me to their cause. But I'm the one who sees the protest on TV and wonders how these people knew to show up. I'm not even close to being in the loop for that kind of action.

So, I think it was the implied subversion of the title *Sabbath as Resistance* that drew me in – and maybe a little unacknowledged tiredness.

I needed the God who says, 'My presence shall go with you and I will give you rest.'<sup>i</sup> That rest was proof the Hebrew people now belonged to a king-like God – who liberated them from slavery under a god-like king.

Rest is the defining feature of this liberating God and it is utter gift.<sup>ii</sup>

God's vision of rest included everyone, even working beasts, a radical statement of equality and equanimity. God. Is. Not. Anxious.

Choosing to rest is an act of resistance against the 'confiscatory' gods of this world with their 'insatiable systems of production'.<sup>iii</sup> 'Make bricks, slaves! I don't care how, just give me bricks now!'

How many of us live like brick-making slaves? Yet we feel guilty for stopping; for not allowing ourselves to feel 'our noble tiredness' as Mr Curly puts it in his wonderful letter answering Vasco's question, 'What should we do and what should we have?' We should do nothing and *have* a rest.<sup>iv</sup>

To live contemplatively is to be an-chored (*without* restless movement) and to live from *sabbath* rest. Jesus took hold of sabbath and after he was done with it, the sabbath wasn't a day anymore but a person. Jesus is our sabbath. He isn't merely Lord of it; he is the One in whom we rest. 'Come to me...and I will give you rest.'<sup>v</sup>

i Exodus 33:14

ii Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now. Brueggemann, Walter. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 2014. p40

iii Brueggemann. pp2,5

iv The Curly Pyjama Letters, Penguin Books

v Matthew 11:28

Resistance is a spiritual practice, yet all resistance movements depend on contemplation for sustainability.<sup>vi</sup> Justice and compassion are replenished by rest. Brueggemann says, 'We are made in the image of the resting God. God himself is 'refreshed and recovers a full sense of "self" (*nephesh*) in the act of stopping work to reflect on it all and revel in its goodness.'<sup>vii</sup>

My favourite church window expresses it as a little beach towel with a simple stick figure relaxing on it.<sup>viii</sup> That's God. Resting. Resisting.



vi <http://divinity.yale.edu/news/janet-ruffing-understanding-winds-spirit-21st-century>

vii Brueggemann, p. 7

viii Nigel Brown's Creation window, Seventh day, Holy Trinity Cathedral, Parnell, Auckland

## Contributors

**Diane Gilliam-Weeks** is a spiritual director and Editor of *Refresh*. In retirement from parish ministry she has developed contemplative mornings and working afternoons to follow her passions and respond to invitations she senses from God to serve the church and community.

**Heather Kelly** is one of the younger residents in an Invercargill retirement village. There she endeavours to live a ministry of pastoral care to her fellow residents. She writes for refreshment and finds the process energising.

**Geoff New** is a contemplative whose new book *Live, Listen, Tell: The Art of Preaching* is reviewed. In 2015, Geoff was appointed Dean of Studies at the Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership (Dunedin). Prior to that he was the minister of a Presbyterian church in Papakura for 17 years.

**Jo Anastasiadis** is a born and bred Wellingtonian, wife, mother of grown children and spiritual director. She enjoys the outdoors, particularly walking on the beach, taking time out for retreats, and using her creativity in relationship with God.

**Andrew Pritchard** is self-employed in spiritual direction, supervision and adult education. Andrew & Lynn have been part of Shalom Christian Community on the Kapiti Coast for over 30 years ago. Leisure pursuits include golf, reading and working with wood. Andrew is an associate of Southern Star Abbey, at Kopua. He's actively involved in SGM's Spiritual Directors Formation Programme.

**Marilyn Wilkinson** is a Kapiti Coast grandma who, with husband Peter Dallas, is learning to cope with the challenges and gifts which come with older age. Walking in the bush, swimming in and walking by the sea, delving into the garden, creating with wool and words – and reading authors who stretch her, are all blessings she savours.

**Hannah Rowan** lives beneath the Tararuas in the beautiful Horowhenua. She loves school chaplaincy, spiritual direction, and spending time with friends and family.

**Leslie Ayers** is married to John and lives in Tauranga. She's grateful to be living near both sea and bush. Writing is central, yet interwoven with hospitality, grandparenting, walking, swimming, reading and time with friends.

**Maggie Quinlan** is a part-time GP and Pastoral Care Coordinator at Papakura Wesleyan Church. She has two children and three grandchildren. She enjoys the outdoors, looking after her menagerie of animals, dancing, singing, mosaicing, poetry writing and photography.

**Adrienne Thompson** offers spiritual direction and supervision in Karori – to this she's added blessing things and people – a baby, a marriage, several houses and some offices so far. With her husband, she loves exploring remote roads in their camper van – especially if they lead to bird sanctuaries. She belongs to Stillwaters, a wacky, wonderful faith community in inner-city Wellington.

**Jenny Chisholm** is learning to adjust to the ageing process – using poetry. She hopes the really important things she loves to do won't have to be left behind – like walks by the stream, and the drive to her other happy place 600 kms away. The one sustaining thing is being able to welcome the presence of the spirit we call God – by that stream, or in the garden, or 'at the kitchen table'.

**Jill McLeod** and her husband Alec live very happily in Tararu Retirement Village, Thames. They're grateful for e-mails and Facebook which keep them up-to-date with grandchildren ranging from twenty-two years to ten months old. The surrounds of the sea, bush, gardens, and fellow Villagers give them much pleasure. The journey continues in unexpected ways, including new electric scooters!

**David Strang** is beginning a new life. His interests include swimming, biking, gardening and making jigsaw puzzles of New Zealand scenery and wildlife. Playing piano and organ for church and the elderly provide therapy and new friends. He's grateful to God to discover that after losing his wife – life goes on.

**Andrea Williamson** is a Methodist presbyter, Police chaplain and spiritual director. She loves spending time with her family and friends, writing poetry and fishing with her husband and best mate, Pete. Andrea is grateful to God for every day and tries to live each one to the fullest.

**Pam Gordon** has always appreciated New Zealand's beautiful natural surroundings and feels blessed with friends and family. Since retiring, when she had time between grandchildren, Pam created a labyrinth.

**Benno A. Blaschke** lived a full-time contemplative life for two years before entering academia to study consciousness from different perspectives, including religion, philosophy, psychology and cognitive and affective neuroscience, which he did for 11 years. During this time, lectured at Victoria University of Wellington on the philosophy of mysticism and contemplative neuroscience. He's now a vote analyst in the justice team at the NZ Treasury, focusing on Treaty of Waitangi negotiations and settlements. He's about to complete the oral defence of his PhD in June 2017.

**Fran Francis** is an extrovert contemplative, married to Vic for thirty-four years and mother of four young adults. She and a friend established *Solace*, a creative spiritual direction and retreat practice and after twenty-five years co-pastoring in the Vineyard Movement of Churches Aotearoa with Vic she is now the National Co-ordinator of the SGM Spiritual Directors Formation Programme.

