

# **The Communication of God through His Creation**

by

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## The Introduction

I have a confession to make. I know the answer should be “in church”, but when asked the question, “where do you find God?” my answer, at the risk of getting rapped over the knuckles by the Sunday school teacher in my head, is outside ... in the bush ... at the beach ... wandering over the rocks. That is where I find God. Extracts from my journal provide an indication of this.

*“I have a sense of the beauty of the green today ...it was very soft and peaceful...a good valley to spend the day!” (August 2000)*

*“...sat in the sun for a couple of hours. I really felt the sun was God’s gift to me - as well as the dancing clouds.” (August 2000)*

*“I feel blessed to be in this beautiful creation. God is abundantly lavishing His love on me, and then the sun pops through and the warmth on me is another reminder of this.” (October 2001)*

As someone on ‘The Way’, I wonder about this experience. I wonder if Christians through the centuries have had similar experiences? I wonder if fellow present day journeyers experience God through His Creation, and if they do, in what ways this occurs?

As a Spiritual Director in training, I wonder about the implications of my experience. Can I encourage others to use creation, God’s Creation to help them experience the Creator?

I wonder!

## The Question

The purpose of my research is to explore if and how God communicates with others in a natural setting. I wanted to examine if this occurred in the present day as well as explore the literature and search for this experience in the Biblical and Christian tradition.

Specifically, *‘I wanted to find out if and how God communicated while individuals were in a natural setting.’*

If individuals did in fact hear from God, I then wanted to discover *‘what it was about this natural setting that enabled people to hear from God.’*

These two questions form the basis of this research paper.

## The Traditional Wisdom

The following examples of Biblical wisdom and Christian tradition would indicate that God has used His Creation to communicate with people throughout the ages.

In the Old Testament, David had an awareness of his place in the universe after reflecting on Creation:

*“When I look at your heavens, the work of your hands, the moon and the stars which you created - who are we that you should be mindful of us, that you should care for us?”* Psalm 8:1-9<sup>1</sup>

We are told in chapters 38 and 39 of Job, that God answered Job’s questioning “*out of the storm*” (38:1)

Jesus often used natural metaphors to communicate a message to his listeners. These ranged from the provision made for birds in terms of food and clothing (Mat 6:26), reflections on seeds germinating in different soil types (Mat 13:1-8), the miracle of seeds growing to maturity (Mark 4:26-29) to Jesus comparing himself to a grape vine (John 15:1-17)

Paul has an understanding, as recorded in Romans 1, that the “invisible attributes” of God can be clearly seen and understood through the created, “tangible” things of the world. In fact he warns that we have no excuse for misunderstanding who God is since the purpose of these created things is to point us towards God:

*“For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his Eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse (Romans 1:20)*

Since Biblical times many of the dominant worldviews have minimised or negated the importance of the created world in spiritual awareness. Platonism, for example, “distrusted all that is natural”<sup>2</sup>, and saw ‘spiritual value’ only in the abstract. The scientific revolution led by Francis Bacon (1561-1626) sought not to understand and find God through Creation but to manipulate creation and bring it under human control.

Despite often negative world views as to the place of creation, and a generalised belief in the Western church that “nature . . . is counted of no worth on the soul’s journey to God”<sup>3</sup>, there have been strands of Christian thought that have valued creation and viewed it as a means to experience God.

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<sup>1</sup> All Biblical quotes are taken from The New International Version, (Zondervan Bible Publishers, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1984)

<sup>2</sup> P.DeVos, C De Witt, E. Dykema, V. Ehlers, L. Wilkinson. Earth Keeping in the Nineties. (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1991) p197.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid* p302.

The Desert Fathers, although using wilderness as a reactive place of escape from distraction rather than pro-actively seeking to embrace God through their new environment, still discovered God in that natural setting.

The medieval mystics experienced a deep sense of God's goodness through His creation. Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) speaks of experiencing the immediacy of God in creation (which she refers to as 'the word') as she writes:

*The Word is living, being, spirit, all verdant greening, all creativity.  
This Word manifests in every creature. Now this is how the spirit is in the flesh -  
the Word is indivisible from God<sup>4</sup>.*

St Francis of Assisi (1181-1226), perhaps the best-known mystic, was famous for his connection with the things God created:

*"Francis ...loved not only his fellow-men, but all his fellow creatures –birds, beasts, fishes and even creeping things - for in each one of them he perceived the handiwork of God"<sup>5</sup>*

Julian of Norwich, (1342-1413) when contemplating a Hazel Nut saw three things:

*The first is that God made it; the second is that God loves it; the third is that God preserves it. But what did I see in it? It is that God is the Creator and the protector and the lover. For until I am substantially united to him, I can never have perfect rest or true happiness, until, that is, I am so attached to him that there can be no created thing between my God and me.<sup>6</sup>*

The Celtic Christians "had a deep sense of the goodness of creation and the presence of God in it."<sup>7</sup> Much of their writings, prayer and worship focused on connecting with God through Creation.

The Eastern Orthodox tradition has embraced creation and seen the redemption of the whole of creation as an integral part of God's plan. They emphasise the importance of relationship with others and the connectedness all of creation has. Orthodox Scholar Paulos Gregorios writes:

*"The creative energy of God is the true being of all that is; matter is that spirit or energy in physical form. Therefore, we should regard our human environment as the energy of God in a form that is accessible to our senses."<sup>8</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup>Gabriel Uhle (ed.). Meditations with Hildegard of Bingen. (Bear & Co, Santa Fe, NM, 1982, p49) as quoted in Earth Keeping in the nineties, p142.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Clissold. The Wisdom of St Francis and His Companions. (Sheldon Press London, 1978) p41.

<sup>6</sup> "Showings", p183 as recorded in: Gloria Durka. Praying with Julian of Norwich. (St Mary's Press, Winona, 1989), p42.

<sup>7</sup> Earth Keeping in the Nineties ... p139.

<sup>8</sup> Wesley Granberg-Michaelson (ed.). Tending the Garden. p90 as quoted in Tim Cooper. Green Christianity. (Hodder and Stoughton Publishers, London, 1990), p155.

In the last century C.S. Lewis stated that God has chosen to use nature to allow us to connect, if only in a limited way, with the glory of God:

*“Nature is only the image, the symbol; but it is the symbol Scripture invites me to use. We are summoned to pass in through Nature, beyond her, into that splendour which she fitfully reflects.”*<sup>9</sup>

Current day writer Paul Hawker is gaining increased recognition in Christian circles for his research into everyday peoples religious experience, much of which occurs in a natural setting. He recounts one of his experiences:

*“I watched the setting sun cast colours onto my clouds - pinks then golds with purples out on the far edges. It was so beautiful I held my breath so as to capture the consummate peace of this exquisite moment. There was no great voice, no burning bush, but internally something “clicked.” I had a deep, clear sense, a fragment of awareness, that all before me had been created, and that this creation somehow accommodated me... A warm feeling grew inside me, a knowing that I was enjoyed as much as I was enjoying the moment”*<sup>10</sup>.

Tim Cooper, an English Christian Environmentalist identifies Creation as being sacramental in nature: *“The sacramental principle may thus be extended to the whole creation, which is seen as the outward, visible sign of an inward, spiritual grace.”*<sup>11</sup>

As we have seen, from Biblical times, it is possible to trace a thread of Christian teaching and experience, even in the face of opposing worldviews that acknowledges the goodness of creation, and the ability to use this creation to deepen an experience with the Creator.

## **The Method**

To provide a practical opportunity to answer my ‘questions’ I chose to place a group of people alone in the wilderness for a period of time, and encourage them to look for examples of God communicating. Following this experience I interviewed them to discover if God had communicated, and how he had chosen to do so. The interview was also used as an opportunity to help the participants explore and deepen any experiences of God that may have occurred during the solo experience.

I followed a standard format throughout the interview process. I firstly asked the participants to recount their ‘solo’, to give a report of what happened for them. I allowed them to tell their story without interruption. I then asked the participants if God had communicated. Following some clarification and unpacking around this, I went back to any incidents that I perceived involved possible religious experience and encouraged them to reflect some more on these events, to wonder about the feelings, and where God

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<sup>9</sup> C.S. Lewis. The Weight of Glory (A sermon first given at the church of St Mary of the Virgin, Oxford, June 8, 1941) published in Transposition and other Addresses. (Geoffrey Bles Ltd, London, 1949) p31

<sup>10</sup> Paul Hawker. Secret Affairs of the Soul. (Northstone Publishing, Kelowna, BC, 2000) p20

<sup>11</sup> Green Christianity... p164

was in this event. I finished by asking them to recall the factors that had enabled God to communicate to them, if this in fact had happened.

The group I worked with was relatively homogenous<sup>12</sup>. It consisted of seven people, four male - three female, ranging from the age of nineteen to twenty-eight years of age. They were all professing Christians and had all been raised in 'Christian families'. The participants were all of European descent. They enjoyed the outdoors and were willing to pay money to be cold, tired and hungry for a holiday weekend.

The seven participants were individually given their 'spot' just above the bush line on Mt Hauhungatahi, on the Central Plateau. It was a cold but still and clear Saturday afternoon in June. They carried warm clothes, a sleeping bag, some snacks and a tarpaulin with which to construct a shelter. The participants were given an article on contemplation and a New Testament and were asked to observe what was happening outside and within them. They were told they would be picked up sometime the following morning.

The experience had some limitations in terms of achieving my goal. Although the group spent three days together in Creation, the period of the "solo" was relatively short (about sixteen hours) and included a period of night-time. This limited the amount of observing and contemplating that was done. The weather was very cold, which meant there was a large element of 'survival' involved in the experience. While this could provide fertile opportunity for Religious Experience, Abraham Maslow would tell us that while people are dealing with issues of basic human necessity there is little concern for 'self actualisation' or spiritual awareness.

Throughout the research I found myself questioning if particular incidents the participants reported were in fact from God. I have chosen to take their observations at face value, as seemingly likely that they came from God.

To get a more definitive answer as to whether any specific experience is a religious experience I recognise a process of discernment is needed. It would seem to the author that the discipline of Spiritual Direction could play a key part in this discernment for many directees, and in fact one of the key roles of the Spiritual Director is to aid in this discernment process.

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<sup>12</sup> I understand working with a homogenous group provides the ability to more accurately draw generalisations for others who share the same traits as that group, whilst limiting the ability to draw conclusions to those outside this group.

## The findings

### a) The communication

After interviewing the seven participants it was apparent that God had communicated through nature. At the end of the interview process, six out of seven of the participants had recognised God's communication.

While all the participants had individual and unique experiences, I was aware that there were similarities between the experiences. For the purpose of analysis, I have drawn together the similar experiences and will quote the participants verbatim to highlight these.<sup>13</sup>

#### 1 God communicated metaphorically

While some participants were observing their external surroundings, they made connections to situations in their life that had a similarity to the observed surroundings. Some participants made this connection during their solo period, while some of the connections were only made during the interview process. Examples of these metaphors follow:

- i) *"...Waking up in the morning ...and not wanting to get up because it was cold, just feeling safe and secure, and not wanting to go...that is probably a metaphor, not really wanting to go out."* (G)

As can be deduced G became aware of the metaphor during our interview. The conversation continued to discuss what in her life, G didn't want to 'go out to'.

- ii) *"I could see the glow of the sun, but I couldn't get in a place where I could see the sun ... I loved the glow but hated the fact that I couldn't get into the glow."*

After some reflection in our interview about how God communicated, B stated:

*"I wanted to go and stand in the glow, cos that was like God."*

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<sup>13</sup> I have received permission to quote the participants. I have assigned them a letter and changed identifying features to protect their confidentiality.

iii)

Interviewer: Were there times you would say that God communicated with you?

A: *Up where the snow is there are small bushes, but further down there are shrubs and smaller trees going down to the tree line. I was thinking it is all so different, all for a purpose, different purposes. I thought that was amazing that God would create all these different areas. So everything had its place and purpose.*

I: So did that relate to bits of your life?

A: *often my life is in disorder ... it was a reassurance. (pause)*

I: Was there a message in that for you?

A: *I thought God is pretty powerful to control all this, so if I rely more on God than myself, my world would be a little less chaotic.*

## **2 Creation was recognised as a gift given from God**

As the participants observed and contemplated their natural surroundings, they became aware that the scene they were viewing had been given to them as a gift from God. Almost all of the participants recounted this experience:

i) When contemplating on creation, B stated:

*“This is God’s gift for me, this is beautiful ... it was almost like... God was my guide, pointing things out to me.”*

ii) *“There is nothing else to do...just sitting there in wonder at the sunset and the mountain, and like, wow, this is Gods creation, and He can see me here.” (G)*

iii) *“I thought the sparkling frost on the inside of the tarp was amazing... ‘wow, God’s made a cool planet.’” (C)*

iv) *“...So to turn around and see the most excellent sunset just drifting down and through the clouds...two contrasting things, you’ve got the cold frigid mountain, and you turn around and the warm sunshine, so I was feeling quite lucky, and quite in awe as well, considering I could have been stuck anywhere in the world.”*

I asked: “so tell me what was happening for you at that time?”

*“This is so natural it is awesome ... and then (thinking) that God made it.” (E)*

v) *“When looking at mountains... (I) had a sense of ‘this is here for me.’” (A)*

### 3 The gift was internalised

For some participants, their recognition that Creation was a gift from God was internalised into a felt presence of peace, calm and love. These feelings were identified as being from God:

- i) While recounting her experience G stated *“It actually got a bit emotional”*

Later in the interview I went back to that statement and G was able to identify what the emotion was. After some thought she recounted being *“overwhelmed by thoughts, God’s grace and love for me.”*

- ii) *“I was just looking up at these stars, in the middle of no where, I thought that was Primo, and I felt really calm, really at peace, I just started praying, like we are talking now, like God was right next to me...like a mate.”(E)*
- iii) *“Just looking at the sun setting on Taranaki, and then looking back behind and seeing the purple glow on Ruapehu, I thought ‘wow this is amazing’, and at that point in time I had a feeling that this was God showing me how much He loved me by providing me with this amazing view and this magnificent sunset...” (A)*

I asked the question ‘so how was it that you knew God loved you by looking at the sun setting?’:

*“I guess sitting there ...you would describe it as feeling warm inside ... felt like had been given a gift from God ... “I didn’t feel alone ... God felt close ... I felt safe.”*

- iv) *“I guess it gave me a kind of relaxed feeling, just took some of the weight off my shoulders ... it is kind of like peace I suppose ... I hadn’t actually thought about that, but because we have been talking about it (that experience of peace) I kind of feel that now. (F)*

### 4 Participants had an ‘awareness’

Although none of the participants recognised an audible voice from God, a number of them had ‘realisations’ or had ‘something in their head’ give a specific message. Participants gained a deeper understanding of their life experience:

- i) In response to the question, “so you felt God communicating through the sunset?”

*“Yeah just that...this is my creation, I have got it under control, just rest in this, enjoy my creation.” (G)*

- ii) *“God often communicates with me through realisations ... I realised I was really busy in my life, was thinking a lot about that, and was frustrated how busy my life was ... because it was a time that we were supposed to think about God, I realised how many things are going on in my life, and how many distractions there actually are.” (F)*
- iii) *“God was saying to me to stop just thinking about these good things and act on them.” (G)*
- iv) *“I just felt forgiven, I had this feeling that ...everything is going to be OK, like not to worry about a house, or my job or anything, that God was going to be there, it was going to be OK.” (E)*

## **b) The Enablers**

It seems God spoke to the participants while they were in His Creation. What was it that allowed God to communicate? Or perhaps more accurately, what was it that enabled the participants to hear?

Three factors seemed to be reoccurring for the participants in my research. I have called these ‘enablers’ and they were: being alone, having time and observing beauty.

### **1 Being alone**

F observed that for him *“space, then time were most helpful things to hear from God, second thing is the outdoors environment ... you can go into your self a bit, the outdoors can provide space and time.”*

G suggested *“The fact that you were alone, meant God would communicate with you a lot, it focuses your mind a lot... there are no distracting things. I found myself drawing inwards, so the alone factor as well as the nature factor.”*

When asked what it was that enabled God to communicate to him, B responded, *“By giving me that space on my own, I had time to think.”*

### **2 Time**

During his interview G acknowledged, *“There is nothing else to do...just sitting there in wonder.”*

B recognised *“By sitting still and looking at things, you have time to contemplate what you see.”*

### **3 Beauty (God's creation)**

There was a spectacular sunset during the period the participants were by themselves. All of the participants connected with this piece of natural beauty and this was helpful for all but one participant in connecting with God. As a result of 'gazing in wonder' participants felt loved, worshipped God, reflected on life and had experiences of forgiveness.

## **Application**

It would appear that God had communicated to my small sample of people in a natural setting. He communicated metaphorically, through giving a 'gift of beauty', through giving certain feelings, and through an 'awareness' of God or their life situation.

It appears to the author that both the content of the findings as well as the process of uncovering the experiences (i.e. the interview process) have applications for spiritual directors and the process of spiritual direction.

The following applications are not new insights to the practice of spiritual direction, however I believe they are worth noting in that they proved beneficial in a controlled experiential situation. Therefore these applications may be seen as confirmation of the current practices and principles of spiritual direction.

- i) A spiritual director needs to listen for religious experience in the life experience of the directee.

It was apparent in my research that people are not always conscious of religious experience when it is occurring. At the beginning of the interviews I conducted, three participants claimed to not have heard from God. By the end of the interview two of these participants could clearly articulate what and how God had communicated. It seems this change had occurred by going back to reported experiences and encouraging the participants to spend some more time with these events. The events I encouraged the participants to go back to were chosen because I perceived they might contain communication from God for the participant. Although I initiated the focus on specific events, it was ultimately the participants (directees) responsibility to decide if communication had occurred.

- ii) A spiritual director can help find significant parallels in the seemingly natural events and observations of a directee's experience.<sup>14</sup>

It appeared in my research that God communicated through a 'parallel-type process'. The participant observed, or experienced an event, and this paralleled a message or event that needed to be drawn to their attention. Often this parallel came into awareness through the process of reflecting on the event. An example, earlier quoted, was when G was reflecting on her struggle with getting up:

*"...Waking up in the morning ...and not wanting to get up because it was cold, just feeling safe and secure, and not wanting to go...that is probably a metaphor, not really wanting to go out" (G)*

In this case, the metaphor was recognised because I led G back to the event and allowed her to retell her story. This example proved to be a significant insight for G and allowed a sub-conscious feeling to become conscious.

- ii) A spiritual director can help focus communication from God by helping to make connections between specific events in a directee's experience.

It appeared that if God had a message for a participant, He often chose to communicate that message in a number of different ways. There were at least two participants who during their interview became aware of the same message resurfacing in different forms. To continue the example with G, previous to the "getting up metaphor", she had experienced some emotions of guilt around not doing what she felt a passion for. At a different time in the solo experience she had also had a sense that God was saying, "don't just think about these good things but act on them". G had not made a connection between these three events. During the interview she became aware of the link. This obviously brought this message into focus and G was in no doubt that she needed to make a decision about her response to this message.

- iv) A spiritual director can help a directee re-live and deepen religious experience.

For many of the participants it was when they were invited to remember the experience, to reconnect with the feelings and thoughts that had occurred that they discovered God in that experience. They also often experienced the same feelings again in the interview as they had during the event. An example was when F was recalling looking at the stars and thinking about how big God was and that He had everything in control. He remembers having a sense of peace. During the interview, he again experienced that same feeling: *"because we have been talking about it (that experience of peace), I kind of feel that now"*.

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<sup>14</sup> This point is in some ways a sub-point of the first application. It focuses on one specific type of communication the director may need to be listening for.

- v) A spiritual director can encourage a directee to put ‘enablers’ in place in their lives, to allow God to speak.<sup>15</sup>

As has been recognised, being in a situation which meant the participants were alone, had a period of time with few distractions and could experience beauty enabled them to more clearly hear God’s communication. In my research situation, being in Creation enabled this communication to occur. It is interesting to note however that none of the three “enablers” are specific to a natural setting. It is possible to be alone, to take time, and to observe beauty in many situations. It may not always be possible for a directee to engage with creation, it may however be possible to put in place “the enablers” which may enhance the possibility of a directee hearing God communicate. Encouraging a directee to do so may therefore be an important role for the director.

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<sup>15</sup> Henri Nouwen has used the term “Spiritual Disciplines” and defined these, as “the effort to create space to allow God to speak”.

## Summary

I began my research questioning if God communicated to individuals in a natural setting. If it appeared He did communicate, I was interested in discovering what forms this communication took. I would then also wonder, what it was about nature that helped this communication to occur.

My reading indicated that the Biblical account has many examples where individuals experienced the communication of God through His Creation. Both Jesus and St Paul validated this experience with their teaching.

It appears that elements of the Christian tradition have always recognised the validity and experience of God communicating through nature. However, there have been periods of time when the mainstream thought of the Christian church paralleled the prevailing worldview and minimised the place of nature.

My research involving a small group of people indicated that they too experienced God while in a natural setting. All the individuals had different experiences, however some common themes occurred. They reported experiencing God while observing their inner and outer worlds. This occurred through discovering metaphors, observing beauty, experiencing feelings, and gaining an 'awareness' of God or themselves.

The factors which the participants indicated as being important in experiencing God were being alone, having time, and observing beauty.

It became apparent through the research that the interview process, which in many ways paralleled a spiritual direction session, had an important role in confirming the experience of God communicating.

As I continue my journey and head into the bush, stroll the beach and wander over the rocks in an attempt to commune with my God, I will do so knowing I follow in the footsteps of the Biblical characters, of Jesus Christ, of the Christian Fathers and Mothers and of my fellow pilgrims. I am assured that God can indeed be found in these places. I can encourage those I journey with to discover the God who lives within and the God who can be found out there!

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