

THE VALUE OF GOD-FOCUSED TIMES.

.... which are

- mini (maximum 3 hours)**
 - guided**
 - theme orientated**
 - small group centred (maximum 12)**
- to facilitate participants meeting with God in rich and grace-filled ways.**

by

COLLEEN MOUNSEY

A Research Project submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Spiritual Directors' Formation Programme of Spiritual Growth Ministries.

Introduction

During the past year I have desired to learn whether a brief, focused, time with a small group of people, can provide a genuine, life enriching experience of God. There are seasons of our lives when it is difficult to take ‘time out’ for Retreat - of a day, a weekend, or longer to focus on ourselves and God.

Is there another way?

I propose there can be time in a full schedule to connect deeply with God through mini “God-space” or “Treat-time” experiences.

“What are they?” you ask.

They are brief periods of time, a morning, afternoon or evening, not more than three hours, in which a small group of people are offered the experience of becoming more aware of God and their relationship with him.

Over the last year I have experimented with providing such opportunities. Out of that limited experience, and the feedback I received from participants, it seems there is a great longing in people for more of this type of God space.

Each experience was linked around a theme, and I planned the time, and guided participants during the introduction and closure, while providing ‘free space’ for personal time with God.

The introduction period, enabled participants to transition from activity to rest, from busyness to stillness and openness to God’s presence. It also gently led into the theme of the time together.

By creating a relaxed atmosphere of acceptance, trust and openness, participants are invited into a deep sense of being on ‘holy ground’ with God. ‘Tuning in’ to God is facilitated for each of us in very different ways, so I endeavoured to provide a rich kaleidoscope of avenues through which people may sense, feel, hear, connect or come alive to God.

Our home, set in over an acre of parklike surroundings, including large trees, abundant birdlife, and flowers, with bridges crossing the stream running through it, provided a peaceful and beautiful natural environment for those who feel close to God through creation. It also provided space for people to wander and be alone.

For others who are drawn to God through music and prayer, a worshipful atmosphere was created, through carefully selected inspirational music.

People who love social interaction, and find their spirits uplifted to God through deepening relationships with others, found the time over refreshments, and the sharing of experiences during the closing time a highlight.

By choosing to bring food, and helping prepare tea and coffee during refreshments, others, through acts of service, felt close to the heart of God, during the time together.

Still others need intellectual stimulation, something for their minds to study, reason through, and think about, as their minds are what opens them to God and his truth. Provision was made for this need with questions, and a reflection sheet, offered for those who desired during time alone. This was linked to material presented during the opening session, and on the theme of the experience.

For others having time alone to reflect, to meditate, contemplating God's presence is what draws them to a place of deep adoration. The central, time alone, offered this.

For still others symbolism and rituals are what help them draw near to God, so these were incorporated. Unfamiliar with symbols, one young person commented "I don't see why we have to light a candle to let God into the room. You can just ask him to fill the room." So the experience also provides learning opportunities, to look at different forms of prayer.

An element of surprise, an unexpected treat, or gift, for others, brought a response of delight, making them aware how precious they are to God, and the love he wants to shower on them.

The power of God's word, reading, meditating, and allowing it to speak as the Holy Spirit quickens it in relevant ways to their situation, is another avenue through which an individual may become aware of God's love, and care, for each detail of life.

Those who come alive to God through their creative gifts, feeling a deep connection with God as they use their creative energy, found, in making things, drawing, painting, writing poetry, during the free space, provision was made for this.

To make the time a rich opportunity for each individual to deepen their relationship with God, as many of these ways of opening to God and experiencing him, as possible are offered during the space of the time together.

Our primary way of connecting with life may be visual, auditory, or kinaesthetic, so in planning a programme, each of these ways of learning are included.

How do I prepare for these events?

My starting place was seeking God for a theme, which then became the focus for discovering music, poems, stories, scripture, activities and surprises which would open our hearts to God. Ideas sparked as the Spirit inspired. I usually gathered too much material which needed discerning pruning to fit the time available, or, keeping as options to choose, as the wind of the Spirit moved during the time we shared.

In one, God-space event, I needed to explain more clearly the link, in choosing this story, or this song, to facilitate people making connections with the theme.

On the first occasion I felt I offered too much material. There is a fine balance between offered selections and silence to create an atmosphere of unhurried invitation.

Here is the programme I prepared for one event.

THEME: Our Faith Journey.

TIME: Three hours. (9am –12noon)

PROGRAMME OUTLINE :

(I find it helpful to have this on a white board for participants to refer to.)

- 1. Welcome:** Practical Details, eg Facilities,
Explain the purpose, and boundaries of this time.
This morning is a brief journey, as part of your total life, which may be perceived as a journey.
- 2. Light candle:** (a form of invitation prayer) Asking God to give us light in our journey.
- 1. Read poem:** “Come and Find the Quiet Centre” Shirley Murray.
- 4. Music:** “When It’s All Said & Done.” Jim Cowan (‘Revival in Belfast’ *Hosanna Music*)
- 5. A Reflection:** Changes on life’s journey. We’re all in a different space.
Our journey takes us through many changes in terrain and weather. Our journey in God too, takes us through different experiences and emotions, though it’s not so clearly perceived.
eg : when misty/foggy – closed in and damp, we can’t see far or clearly.

when night – dark, alone, seems black and fearful, the light appears gone.

when sun shining, sky clear blue – we feel alive energized, eager to enjoy life.

when desert – dry, dusty, barren, life hard work, joy has vanished.

when tempestuous – crashing waves, thunder, lightening, wild wind, the elements fiercely angry.

when the way is difficult, obstacle filled, rugged, uncertain, exhausting.

Where are you today? How is it for you?

6. Poem/Reflection: ‘Walking in the Himalayas’ Eddie Askew (‘Slower than Butterflies’ p34)

7. Provisions for the Journey: Invite people to choose a package. (A small box containing a Bible verse [of encouragement for the journey] & a chocolate.)

At some stage of your journey today you may choose to open your package.

8. Poem: *Footpath*, The Prayer Tree. Refresh, Summer 2004-5 Vol 4, No 2.

9. Music: “I know you by Heart.” Eva Cassidy (‘Songbird’ *Hotrecords*)

10. Story: “The Carpenter and the Unbuilder.” (David M Griebner)

11. Reflection Time: (50minutes- 1 hour)

Explanation: Time to be outside alone.

Ask God to draw your attention to what he wants, you to notice, to reveal, to speak to you.

Stay with it, examine, feel, reflect. Let your mind and spirit be open to God and receive from him. You may wish to take the reflection sheet related to the story. (boards, felts, pens/pencils available to use.)

You may want to respond to God in some way, drawing, poem, picking/ gathering something.

If desired, bring back what you discover, you may wish to share it.

12. Set time to return for Refreshments:

13. Sharing Opportunity:

14. Music: “You Raise Me Up.” Brian Kennedy (‘Dreamcatcher’ *the best of Secret Garden*)

15. Footprints: Handout of a ‘footprint’ upon which the recipient may like to record a significant thought, impression, word, picture, from this time, to take with them for further reflection.

Participants were encouraged to record their responses to these experiences in the form of a questionnaire following the event. The questionnaire was adjusted for each occasion to include the contents of that specific experience. Other helpful feedback was given in the opportunity for sharing during closure, including ...

- A woman, who had lost her 23year old son in an accident several months earlier, expressed, with deep emotion and tears, that she had received hope again.
- One man felt God spoke to him, through a reflection on mountain climbing, and the surprise of a mussel-shaped chocolate, which spoke to him of his need for more muscle in his journey with God.
- Another woman was deeply ministered to through scripture - a word that God would provide her rest if she “came away to rest awhile” and wrote her response to God in a poem.
- A number of participants responded how ‘spot on’ their Bible verse was. (This was entirely God ordered, as each chose their little box, without knowing the contents, of a Bible verse, and a shaped chocolate, provisions (spiritual & physical) for the journey. It was inspiring to see how God chose the appropriate verse for each person. Sometimes it was different wording of a verse which brought fresh insight.)
- God, through creation, touched another woman and revealed spiritual truth to her as she experienced the shape, and the effects of the wind, in the trees at night. Sharing with her symbolically how his enfolding love can protect, and give peace.
- A relatively new Christian, felt God drawing her to another part of the garden, where in the dark, he showed her a tree covered in white blossom.
- One woman was conscious of God stirring her spirit through the words of a song, while another felt really blessed over refreshments, having space to talk, and time to share with a friend.
- One participant had found the story quite significant, and read out several passages that applied to her life, which she had reflected on.
- One of the men found expressing his feelings on paper as a painting, opened a fresh approach to awareness of God.

The questionnaire feedback was also insightful, as I invited people to be totally honest.

The questions focused on :-

- a) whether the person had experienced this kind of guided time with God before.
- b) what was found helpful. (In the latter questionnaires, I itemized the components, asking for the first five to be listed in order of significance in connecting with God. I actually found that people gave a more accurate description of what they found helpful, when left to express it in their own words rather than just ticking a box.
- c) what was unhelpful.
- d) how the time was meaningful to them.

- e) whether they would appreciate time like this again.
- f) comments or suggestions.

Initially, the greater proportion of participants had little previous experience of this kind of time with God. I found that surprising, but realized we live in an isolated area, where these opportunities aren't frequent. For those from Anglican or Catholic backgrounds, who had, this was different, being shorter than a day retreat.

I was also aware that, involvement with Spiritual Direction, is what alerted me to the significance of our experiences of God. For *"Without religious experience there can be no spiritual direction."*¹

It is a different approach from what is provided "in Church."

What did people find helpful?

The highlight for most people was having time out/ quiet space/ time alone in stillness with God, and the environment, which contributed to that, with comments like *"I felt I was in a part of heaven with God."* *"Time out with God was the highlight – no interruptions."* *"the private space to myself in the programme."* *"time out with the Lord in the beautiful garden."* *"to walk around amongst trees, birds and flowers."* A 14year old found, going outside, seeing native birds, and being able to draw helpful. *"Sitting in the quietness and meditating on the beauty and wonders of Christ"* was another comment. As I felt this was the purpose of the event, to facilitate people connecting with God, it was encouraging that they found this aspect the most valuable.

Music was rated the next most helpful for opening to God. Yet each experience brought different responses. On another occasion the music wasn't mentioned as being significant.

The opportunity for sharing experiences at the end, ranked high, and became one of the highlights for me, as I marvelled at the special ways God ministered to people. It was often an emotional time as participants shared their personal discoveries. This seemed able to be more intimate with a small group who had made a connection with each other, as well as God, during this brief time. I became aware that this component, towards the end of our space, as how many shared, and how much they shared, made the finishing time unpredictable. However as this sharing, both affirmed for the participant what God had revealed, created a bond among those present, and is the basis of spiritual direction, I felt it was vital to maintain.

¹ Barry. W., Connolly. W., The Practice of Spiritual Direction. New York : Harper Collins, 1982. p 8.

The Bible verses received were felt to be inspiring, with responses of *“I found the scripture verse the most impacting.”* *“...the creativity of the little bags made quite an impact on me-particularly the so appropriate verse.”* (which was inside the bag.)

Comments like appreciating *“having the day organised for me”* *“being put at ease”* *“your gentle steering”* during the opening session, and *“I feel like a little girl about to receive a present! But at the same time feel a little bit scared and vulnerable”* surprised me, yet as I reflect on the ‘newness’ of the experience for most, they were unsure what was going to happen, when they came.

Unhelpful aspects mentioned, were practical details, or personal preferences, such as - having to wait too long for refreshments, not being able to make out the words of a song listened to, or *“I would have liked to read the prayer through first...I wasn’t sure what I was reading. Need to digest it.”* Such comments were valuable for me in assessing how these things might be done differently another time.

These comments, *“Time restraint - I could have spent longer away from the group.”* *“Quiet time I felt too long – suggest 30-40 min. max.”* raised a valid issue - how to meet each individual’s felt needs, as both comments were made about the same event. I found by offering a flexible return time for refreshments, participants could use however much of the ‘alone time’, they felt comfortable with.

The way the Winter/ Darkness event was advertised as ‘Treat-time with God’, two people found misleading, so attended with very different expectations for the evening, and took time to adjust and settle their spirits into what was offered. Had I used ‘Time with God’ it would have been more helpful wording, as for some, looking at our spiritual winters, was not a ‘treat’.

Personally, the development of these times for others, has been a rich learning and growing experience in God. From the practical aspects of how to plan and organise the time, how to use my creative gifts to enhance the experience for participants, and how to remain sensitive to the Holy Spirit and the movements of grace, during the actual event. Acknowledging too, our total dependence on God, in sovereign grace, to meet with us, as we seek to draw near to him.

Participants too, found it meaningful, reflected in comments like, *“It has dug deep...drawn me closer to God. Reassured me of His love.”*, *“Time to ask questions of God without any interruption. Able to focus & listen...and get answers.”*, *“Soaking in Jesus. To just BE!”*, *“Gave me time to face my grief.”* and *“This was my first “retreat” it was a new experience for me to connect with God.”*

It has, shown me the great need people feel to be offered times like this where in a safe and structured context they can open themselves to God. This heartfelt desire was expressed in responses like *“a real gift from God touching all of our lives in different ways”* *“could we have more of this!”* *“Yes, you bet!”* *“Absolutely, YES more people should be able to have the opportunity to do this!”* *“Yes please, I feel this has been ‘just perfect’.”* *“May many many others have the opportunity to be part of the same blessing.”*

The only negative response, came from a man, saying “No not really.” to having time like this again. He added *“too feminine for me.”* and concluded with the acknowledgement *“Don’t know about other men, but I find I am closest to God by myself.”* I value this honest comment, and have grown to appreciate the vastly different ways God reveals himself.

Very encouraging are comments like, *“a significant amount of time alone with God – something I rarely achieve. I need to try this more often!”* *“The need to programme in & discipline retreat time reflecting on where I am up to...”* *“It’s made me more aware to have time out..... to go inside, to see and hear what God is saying.”* which show that these experiences stir a desire to create space for God like this, themselves.

Finally, for people who have never heard of spiritual direction, it gives some idea of what it is, and how it feels, talking about their experiences of God, and invites the possibility of pursuing it further, for their personal spiritual growth.

Bibliography :

- Chapman. G., (1992). The Five Love Languages. Chicago : Northfield Publishing.
- Cowley. J., (1989). Aotearoa Psalms. [Zealandia] Waipukurau : CHB Print.
(1996). Psalms Down Under. Waipukurau : CHB print.
(2002). Psalms for the Road. New Zealand : Catholic Supplies (NZ) Ltd.
- Dunn. A., Editor (2003-2005) Refresh. A Journal of Contemplative Spirituality. Volumes 3-4 Plimmerton : Spiritual Growth Ministries Trust.
- Housden. R., (?). Retreat. Time Apart for Silence & Solitude. Harper Collins
A full and fascinating look at the various types of retreats held worldwide, in both the Christian, and other faiths.
- Huggett. J., (1986). Listening to God. London : Hodder& Stoughton.
(1989). Open to God. London : Hodder & Stoughton.
- Isaac. S., (2002). Tauhara The Growing of an Educational & Spiritual Centre. N.Z.:
Cliff Press.
- Johnstone. A., (2004). The Freedom Walk. Christchurch : PMP Print.
- Miller. G., (November/December 2002 Issue 28) Reflections Finding your devotional pathway. Auckland : World Vision Leadership Letter and Reflections. Citing –
Thomas. G., Sacred Pathways.
- Nouwen. H., (1992). The Return of the Prodigal Son. London : Darton, Longman and
Todd.
_____ (1981). The Way of the Heart. London : Darton, Longman and Todd.
- Rupp. J., & Wiederkehr. M., (2005). The Circle of Life. The Heart's Journey Through the Seasons. Notre Dame : Ave Maria Press.
- Warren. R., (2002). The Purpose Driven Life. Grand Rapids : Zondervan. Citing
Thomas. G., Sacred Pathways.

Colleen Mounsey
bmounsey@xtra.co.nz

From mid 2006
66 St Thomas Rd
Crookes
Sheffield S10 1UX

UK.