



Living Spirituality Connections
Resources for the spiritual journey

NEWSLETTER SPRING 2019

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Introduction

By Petra Griffiths

We have 3 themes for this spring newsletter:

We continue with this year's theme of Human flourishing on a flourishing earth, exploring theological, spiritual and psychological aspects of this with pieces by Distinguished Research Professor, John F Haught (speaker at our event on 2 June); clinical psychologist Isabel Clarke; lay Benedictine founder of the Abbey of the Arts, Christine Valters Paintner on earth as monastery; Zoe Cuckow and Angela Sheard, two young people who have initiated eco contemplative garden liturgies, look at how St James's can be a pilgrim church on a journey towards understanding our connection with the earth; and Bruce Stanley, author of a Forest Church nature guide, introduces the practice of Sensio Divina, divine reading, as an eco contemplative exercise.

Our Brighton workshop on 8 June will take the above explorations further, exploring both practical actions for our daily lives, and the spiritual dimensions of human and earth flourishing.

Our second theme is the arts and spirituality, which is also the basis for one of our Special Interest Areas. We give an introduction to a podcast by Christine Valters Paintner on the links between silence, art and contemplation. Peter Varney then writes about the experimental creative process he engages in and how it relates to theology; and Linda Courage reflects on the ways in which personal expression through art is a source of nourishment for her spiritual journey. That theme will also be taken up at the Creative Connections Day in York on 13 July.

Our third theme is everyday sacraments. Rev Hugh Valentine speaks of the importance of recognising the sacramental quality of many of our powerful life experiences. Lois Cameron writes about the fruits of the Soul Space group which meets in Stirling, providing a unifying space for people of any faith or none to gather. We have updated the LSC website section on options for local groups activities, and have given Soul Space as one of the choices. See <http://www.livingspirit.org.uk/regional-contacts/>

Two short pieces then discuss the sense of "thin" places and say goodbye to Mary Oliver through brief quotations from her poems.

1. HUMAN FLOURISHING ON A FLOURISHING EARTH - THEOLOGICAL AND SPIRITUAL ASPECTS

Creation: The Sacramental Approach

By Professor John F Haught

The beginnings of [such a] change are now taking place in what I shall call the sacramental approach to Christian ecological theology. This focuses less on normative religious texts or historical revelation and more on the allegedly sacral quality of the cosmos itself. It is more willing to acknowledge the revelatory character of nature. It comes in a variety of theological forms ranging from what has been called “natural theology,” which focuses on the apparent evidence for God’s existence in nature, to the cosmic spirituality of Thomas Berry and Matthew Fox and their followers. It is also found, in different ways and degrees, in non-Christian religions, as well as in the spirituality of ecofeminists and some so-called “deep ecologists.”

In its typical form this sacramental approach interprets the natural world as the primary symbolic disclosure of God. Religious texts and traditions are still important, but the cosmos itself is the primary medium through which we come to know the sacred. Today the sacramental approach usually accommodates evolutionary theory and aspects of contemporary physics. It embraces a holistic view of the Earth as an organism comprised of a delicately balanced web of interdependent relationship. Rejecting mechanism, it regards the entire universe organismically, that is, as an intricate network of dynamic interconnections in which all aspects are internal to each other. Hence, it also places particular emphasis on the continuity of humans with the rest of the natural world.

Accordingly, it views our spiritual traditions not as activities that we humans “construct” on the face of the Earth, but as functions that the cosmos performs through us. According to Thomas Berry, for example, the universe is the primary subject, and humanity is one of many significant developments of the universe. Cultures and religions are simply natural extensions of the cosmic process rather than unnatural creations of lonely human exiles on Earth.

In the Christian context today I think this revisionist approach finds its most compelling expression in what has been called “creation-centered” theology. As the prime example of our second type it goes beyond the apologetic variety of environmental theology by arguing that our present circumstances require a whole new interpretation of what it means to be Christian. In the face of the environmental crisis it will not do simply to take more seriously our inherited texts and teachings. These are still important, but they must be carefully sifted and reinterpreted in terms of a cosmological, relational, non-hierarchical, nonpatriarchal, non-dualistic, and more organismic understanding of the universe. We

must pay more attention to the sacral quality of the universe and not place such a heavy burden on premodern religious texts to give us the foundations of our environmental ethic.

In Christian circles this creation-centered outlook accepts the doctrines of the creed but gives them a cosmological interpretation.

To read the full article which looks at several of the results of this re-cosmologising of traditional Christian teachings, go to:

http://www.livingspirit.org.uk/john_haught_article.pdf

This article first appeared as a blogpost in

<https://thevalueofsparrows.com/2015/08/11/creation-the-sacramental-approach-by-john-f-haught/>

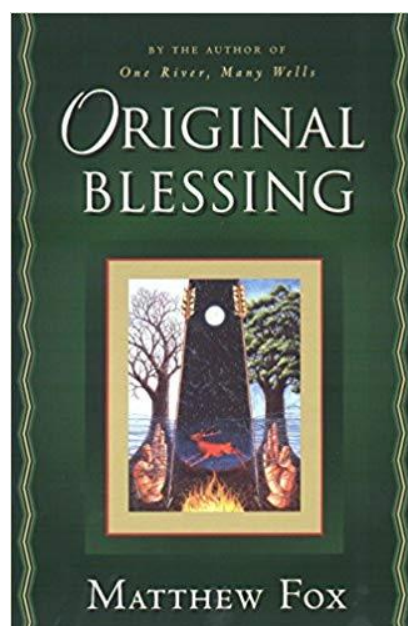
John F Haught is Distinguished Research Professor at Georgetown University. He is lecturing at the University of Winchester and at St James's Piccadilly on 28 May and 2 June 2019. See:

<http://www.livingspirit.org.uk/events/>

Professor Haught has researched, lectured and taught on the subject of science and faith for over 30 years. He has dedicated many years to the position that science and religion are seeking understanding of natural phenomena but from different, non-competing methods. He is the author of over 20 books, including *The New Cosmic Story: Inside Our Awakening Universe*: (YUP, 2017), *Science and Faith: A New Introduction* (Paulist Press, 2013) and *The Promise of Nature: Ecology and Cosmic Purpose* (Wipf & Stock, 2004).

The Eco Psychology of the four Ways of Creation Spirituality

By Isabel Clarke



How come human beings are so clever, and at the same time, so stupid? This question is vital to the joint survival of ourselves and our planet as we know it. The question is intimately bound up with the way we relate to our environment as well as to ourselves. Psychology has insights to offer on both these, closely related, issues. What our world urgently needs at this critical juncture is not only analysis of what is wrong, but direction on how to go forward in a more healthy relationship, both with ourselves and with our environment. This article seeks to contribute to this analysis through sharing recent psychological understandings of how the human being functions, and for the forwards direction, I will revisit the four ways of Matthew Fox.

Matthew Fox is a prophetic figure who burst onto the British scene in the late 1980s, with his inspiring oratory, and his book 'Original Blessing' (Fox 1983). He was at that time a Californian Dominican. His mission was to revive what he saw as the authentic tradition of Christianity, with its Judaic focus on God's relationship with the whole community; a focus on justice and a positive response to the natural world. He saw the tradition as having been hijacked by an obsession with individual piety, purity and sin. He saw ecological justice as springing naturally from this 'creation centred' Christianity. His argument that the ecological challenge is the central imperative of our time is more generally accepted today than when he first proclaimed his message. I will argue in the body of this article that Fox's central message of four ways to relate to the universe gives us a good answer to the ecological challenge, after considering some of his more recent ideas as they relate to psychology.

It is now generally recognised that we are in an ecological mess, by all but the most determined ostriches. I will return to the theme of what it is about the human being that has got us into this mess: our cleverness and our stupidity. Our cleverness is obvious in the way we have used our ability to control our environment to our own ends; to eliminate so many uncertainties and discomforts from our daily life. Our stupidity is evident in the way that this activity has increasingly entailed devastating side effects for the planet on which we, and more importantly, our descendants depend for sustenance and survival. We love our children - so how come we are content to condemn them and their children to a ruined earth?

What is the matter with people?

Something is the matter with the way we relate to our planet, to our descendants and indeed, to ourselves and each other. No-one can now dispute the facts, but can we get together and agree an immediate way forward, without feeling taken advantage of, without trying to score points?

The general irrationality of human behaviour has been noted from the time of Plato (and no doubt, before). Recent understanding of the way in which the brain is wired up enables us to get some sort of a handle on this. We fail to act in straightforward, rational ways,

because our rational, logical, faculty is only one part of the complex apparatus that is a human being, and it is not necessarily the most important part, or the one that is in charge. Matthew Fox has picked up this point in his talks (such as the one he gave to the 'Earth is Community' conference in London in September 2007. Earth is Community: DVD set available – see reference list.) Fox blames the 'reptilian brain' for our failures. I think he has grasped some of the argument, but only some. He has taken hold of one leg of the crocodile.....

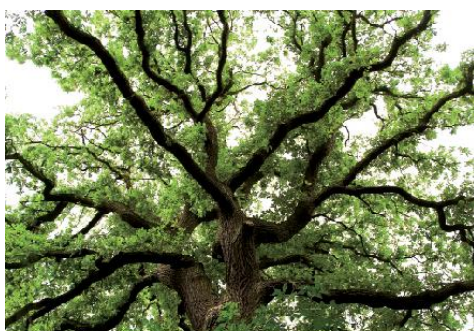
Isabel Clarke's work spans two areas: psychosis and spirituality, and clinical psychology. Both draw on the research based Interacting Cognitive Subsystems model of cognition, and both seek to bring spirituality into centre stage, founding it in cognitive and other research and theory, and regarding it as a central part of what it means to be human.

The full version of this article explores the roles of different parts of the brain, the model of flow and the intrinsic relatedness at the core of our being and all life, and the contribution of Matthew Fox's four ways of creation spirituality to enabling us to respond fully to the ecological crisis. To read the article in full go to: http://www.livingspirit.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/isabel_clarke_eco_psychology_and_the_4_ways.pdf

The article first appeared in Greenspirit Magazine. Thank you to Greenspirit for enabling us to reproduce it. For information about Greenspirit, go to: www.greenspirit.org.uk
Greenspirit's strapline is *Engaged spirituality for a living earth.*

Earth: The Original Monastery

By Christine Valters Paintner



EARTH: THE ORIGINAL MONASTERY

When I long to go on retreat, it is most often the sea or the forest which call to me. Everything in nature can become a catalyst for my deepened self-understanding. The forest asks me to embrace my truth once again. The hummingbird invites me to sip holy nectar, the egret to stretch out my wings, the sparrows to remember my flock.

Each pine cone contains an epiphany; each smooth stone offers a revelation. I watch and witness as the sun slowly makes its long arc across the sky and discover my own rising and falling. The moon will sing of quiet miracles, like those which reveal and conceal the world every day right before our eyes.

In our spiritual and religious traditions we categorize our experience in a variety of ways but often forget that the earth is the primary source of these categories.

The creatures and trees are spiritual teachers

“Believe me as one who has experience, you will find much more among the woods than ever you will among books. Woods and stones will teach you what you can never hear from any master.” St. Bernard of Clairvaux.

In ancient tradition, there were many holy men and women who were described as having a special relationship to animals often connected to embodied life. St. Benedict, for example, befriended a crow who was later said to have saved his life from being poisoned. It was said of St. Kevin that an otter would bring him salmon from the lake so he could eat. St. Brigid had a cow that accompanied her and provided endless supplies of milk. These special connections and relationships to animals were once a sign of holiness.

There is a story about St. Ciaran, one of the early Irish monks in which he encounters a wild boar who was made tame by God. “That boar was St. Ciaran’s first disciple or monk, as one might say, in that place. For That boar, as the man of God watched, began with great vigour tearing down twigs and grass with his teeth to build him a little cell.” After building him his cell, other animals came from their dens to accompany St. Ciaran, “and they obeyed the saint’s word in all things, as if they had been his monks.” I love this image of the animals as St. Ciaran’s first monks, I love that they formed his original monastic community.

The elements are spiritual directors

“How necessary it is for monks to work in the fields, in the sun, in the mud, in the clay, in the wind: these are our spiritual directors and our novice-masters.” Thomas Merton.

The elements of water, wind, earth, and fire, offer us wisdom and guidance. They are the original soul friends. Air is the gift of breath we receive in each moment, the rhythm of life sustaining us. Fire is the gift of life force and energy and we might call to mind St. John of the Cross’ image of the divine as the living flame of love which burns in each of our hearts.

To read the full article, first published by the Irish holistic magazine Network, <https://networkmagazine.ie>, go to: [livingspirit.org.uk/earth the original monastery.pdf](https://livingspirit.org.uk/earth-the-original-monastery.pdf)

Christine Valters Paintner is an author, poet, spiritual director, and Benedictine Oblate. She serves as the online Abbess at www.AbbeyoftheArts.com, a virtual monastery without

walls. She is the author of twelve books on spirituality, contemplative practice, and creative expression, including: *The Artist's Rule*, *The Eyes of the Heart*, *The Wisdom of the Body*, and *The Soul's Slow Ripening*.

Praying alongside the Earth By **Zoe Cuckow** and **Angela Sheard**



Have you ever thought about praying outside? Do you find God in nature?

As a church, how can we bridge the gap between Christian spirituality and the inherent spirituality of the earth?

St James's Church has recently won an Eco Church Gold award, and as part of this work we are keen to continue our commitment to extend our concern for the environment into all aspects of church life. Over the past year we have been experimenting with prayer and liturgy at St James's, in order to better explore and re-imagine the relationship between spirituality and the Earth. As part of this ongoing journey of discovery, we spend time on one Sunday morning each month engaged in contemplative liturgy outside in the Southwood Garden. During this time, we gather together for about 45 mins. We spend time reflecting quietly by ourselves and walking prayerfully around the garden. We share poems and prayers together and discuss what we've noticed in the garden that morning. So far, we've explored the poetry and prayers of Hildegard of Bingen, Thomas Traherne and many others. We've even prayerfully taken part in the RSBP Big Garden Birdwatch!

During our time in the garden we've noticed the Earth speaking through birdsong, the wind in the trees, or the sounds of the city waking up to a new day. As busy city dwellers, this is often for us an experience of an entirely new language. The priest and eco-theologian Thomas Berry describes this: "The universe is composed of subjects to be communed with, not objects to be exploited. Everything has its own voice. Thunder and lightning and stars and planets, flowers, birds, animals, trees - all these have voices, and they constitute a community of existence that is profoundly related."

Liturgy is a language, and every liturgical event is a contribution to an ongoing spiritual conversation about our relationship with God, our fellow human beings and our whole Earth. The word "liturgy" itself means 'the work of the people' - thus liturgy is usually seen as a very human, or even anthropocentric, activity. However, the liturgical language of the Earth is fundamentally different from our own. Our own human liturgy helps to appreciate the wonderful strangeness of the Earth, as we encounter it speaking in its own liturgical native language.

This new encounter with the Earth has the potential to change our actions towards the Earth. We can only do this by encountering the Earth as it really is. This requires us to be a pilgrim church, on a journey towards understanding the Earth but with the humility which acknowledges that we have not yet reached this understanding. Part of this journey involves being open to listening to the Earth, even if what we hear challenges us and shocks us.

Evidence shows that climate change has devastating consequences - we need to act now. However, as a church community our action needs to be grounded in compassion and love of our neighbour. At St James's, this compassion already underlies our response to the needs of vulnerable people in our community. This compassion can be extended as a community, as the basis of our response as a church to climate change. Just as our response to community needs are not purely focused on emergencies, our response to climate change must be similarly holistic, operating in the short-term and the long-term. We wonder if as a church we can somehow look beyond emergency measures against climate change to become compassionate healers in a long-term partnership with the Earth. Can we become healers who can somehow 'come alongside' the Earth to share in its experiences and feel its pain and joy? Can we renew a sense of wonder which seeks an end to climate change in order that we might experience more of the Earth's beautiful, rich diversity?

Zoe Cuckow and **Angela Sheard** are members of St James's Church Piccadilly, with an interest in eco spirituality. They are also part of Circus Spirit at St James's, an open space for people in their 20s and 30s to explore ideas, beliefs or lack of, without agenda, where people of all faiths and none welcome. The Eco Contemplative liturgies are on the fourth Sunday of each month, 9.45-10.15, followed by refreshments, in the garden at St. James's Church Piccadilly.

Sensio Divina

By Bruce Stanley

The contemplative exercise of Lectio Divina, or Divine Reading, has been practised from the earliest times of monastic discipleship – the act of sitting prayerfully with a short piece of sacred text and allowing it to speak and inhabit our minds and hearts. How does it work when reading the Book of Creation?



Reading, contemplatively and prayerfully, God's presence in the Book of Creation has been practised informally for as long as we've walked on the earth. Many of the psalms, for example, come from someone deeply connected with God in creation. Here is a first version of a more structured way of connecting to, and then possibly participating with, God's presence and Spirit in nature.

Sensio Divina

Literally 'Divine sensing', a contemplative meditation to connect and dialogue with Divine presence in a place, object or natural phenomenon (Jer 23:24) and come to a deeper understanding of God through nature (Rom 1:20).

Preparation Stage.

Take a number of mindful breaths and come to the present moment.

Let unnecessary tension leave the body.

During what follows, allow distractions to arise and fall.

Carry out the exercise with lightness and wonder and move at your own pace through the stages.

Approach and begin with humility ...

Sensing Stage

Sense the overview (rather than the detail) to begin with. Be inquisitive, use all your senses not your thinking.

Notice first impressions.

Sense the present state, get the big picture objectively with no analysis.

Begin to sense more carefully from the overview to the detail.

Take more time, allow attention and fascination to rest where it wants, savour the detail.

Using deeper senses, allow intuition and consciousness of any detectable energy to arise.

Notice any feelings and emotions that are evoked, but don't fall into analysis.

Imagination Stage

Return to the overview and this time use your imagination, creativity, analysis and narrative skills.

Image the process and succession that led to this point in time. Project into the future.

Imagine the wider ecosystem and the interactions between the elements.

Bring your focus from overview to detail.

Imagine yourself not as observer but as participant.

Take a feeling or thought or idea into contemplation.

Listen with patience and open receptivity – still your thinking.

Be aware of any dialogue that may be initiated. What is being said to you?

Spiritual Stage

Allow God to speak and / or experience God's presence.

What is being said to you?

Let your heart speak in response.

Rest in God's presence and embrace.

Return to earlier stages if you feel so led.

For Groups

If you're using this exercise for groups it is wise to give some brief instructions first. The most important thing to get across is that this requires some practice so don't expect to carry out all the sub-stages the first time – let the notes get you going in the right direction and refer to them only if you need a pointer.

If time allows it may be worth trying the exercise more than once, using the first time as a learning process rather than fully engaging at a deeper level. Bring the group together and talk about the process rather than the content of their individual exercises.

Bruce Stanley is author of **Forest Church, a Field Guide to Nature Connection** for groups and individuals.

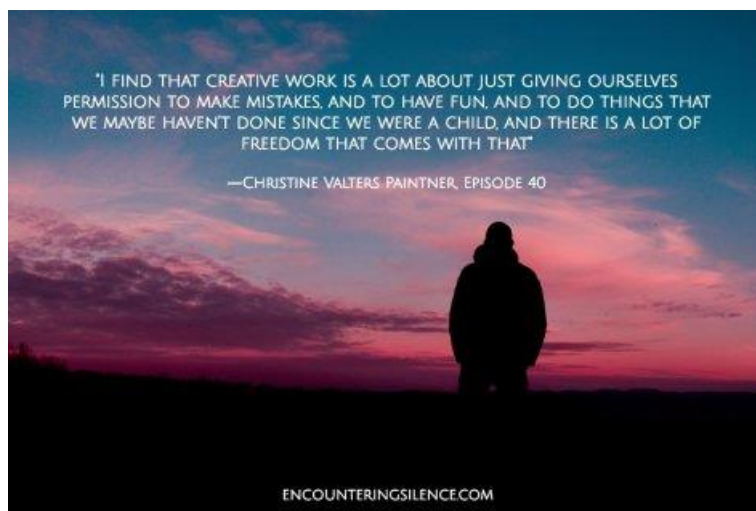
Thank you to **Mystic Christ Communities** for permission to include this article, which is on their website. http://www.mysticchrist.co.uk/blog/post/sensio_divina#

Communities of the Mystic Christ is a place for spiritual travellers of all traditions interested in exploring Jesus the Christ as a living reality and mystical guide through ancient practices and contemporary thought and experience.

2. ARTS AND SPIRITUALITY

Silence, Art and Contemplation

Christine Valters Paintner interviewed by **Carl McColman** of **Encountering Silence**



In this podcast, Christine Valters Paintner explores the intersections of silence, spirituality, contemplation, creativity, and living as a monk in the real world. Quoting Christine: “I started to realize how photography has a lot of violence in its language — so there’s capturing, shooting, taking... the way that we interact with photography is very much about seizing the movement in this kind of violent way. What if when we were with our camera, we looked at it as *receiving* a gift, rather than *taking* something?”

Drawing connections between her life experience as an introvert and her early spiritual formation shaped by Jesuit education and the wisdom of St. Benedict and St. Hildegard of Bingen, Christine shares how a silent retreat inspired her to find the silent, contemplative

dimension of artistry, poetry, movement — as well as winter time as a powerful season for contemplative rest and unknowing which is its own contribution to the creative process. She reflects on how the experience of grieving, living with an autoimmune illness, and embracing our embodied selves, are some of the many portals through which the mystery of contemplative silence has invited her — and can invite all of us — into stillness and unknowing, and into finding ourselves in the present moment.



Quoting Christine again: “When I do spend that time in silence and solitude, I am so nourished by this sense of something so much more expansive and deep and generous, that that naturally spills over into how I want to live my life..... I believe in the revolutionary power of stillness and spaciousness, and of practising presence to life’s unfolding. I believe this commitment can change the world.”

You can listen to the podcast of this interview at <http://www.encounteringsilence.com/christine-valters-paintner-silence-art-and-contemplation-episode-40/> November 13, 2018. Our thanks to Encountering Silence for enabling us to quote from the podcast.

Christine Valters Paintner is an author, poet, spiritual director, and Benedictine Oblate. She serves as the online Abbess at www.AbbeyoftheArts.com a virtual monastery without walls. She is the author of twelve books on spirituality, contemplative practice, and creative expression, including: *The Artist’s Rule*, *The Eyes of the Heart*, *The Wisdom of the Body*, and *The Soul’s Slow Ripening*.

Journey to the Centre

By **Peter Varney**

I discovered Paul Klee’s work in my teens, and his suggestion that ‘in art it is not seeing that is so important but making visible’ affirms the mystery of connectedness. The Portuguese painter Paula Rego makes a similar suggestion: ‘you are doing art to find out what the result will be’.



To be human is to be made in the image of God, our creator. We have a deep yearning to create, and also a facility to do so. This creative potential is a defining characteristic of being human. Experiencing our own creativity, and enjoying that of others, enhances our connectedness, and sense of belonging to a wider world.

For me the driving force within the creative process comes from the Spirit within, the outcome is never known. We need to accept that the future is never known. It is good to be in the place where we stop and look and re-evaluate. From there the Spirit will guide us into the right way of being.

This is an opportunity to let go, to allow myself to enter more fully into the part of my being I might never have known. The Jungian therapist, Vera von der Heydt, wrote:

‘We all have a centre of tranquillity within us ... The way we take to discover it, is nobody's concern but our own, and the only thing that matters is to go on looking until we catch a glimpse of where the treasure is. It seems as if the search is more important than the goal’.

The image above came to me from this experimental creative process. It feels good to be called to continue to experiment and to try new ways which affirm all that God has given us.

But there is more: all creation can experience *theosis*, real and transformative union with God at the end of life on earth. Human persons do not become God but participate in God's nature. In a recent article Alan McGill speculates that the human dead may through *theosis* be present in and through all things (“Envisaging afterlife in the light of the doctrine of divinisation and the co-presence of the divine in and through all things”, *Modern Believing* 2018). He suggests afterlife as a new and more inclusive mode of engagement with the physical creation, with humanity's ultimate vocation to be eternally co-present in the environment, rather than to enjoy an individualised state of blissful repose. So we may look forward to continuing to find unexpected ways to express our creativity.

Peter Varney is a Quaker and retired Anglican priest living in Norwich. His most recent research has focused on burial rites and eschatological beliefs amongst the Iban of Malaysian Borneo. He would welcome responses to these ideas (varney@waitrose.com).

Expressive arts – an inside view

By Linda Courage



A friend remarked that I seemed to know how to use art for myself. The conversation developed and formed the basis for this article. She had thought I would experience something and then make art to record it.

Using the expressive arts is an important part of my spiritual practice and I have found a spiritual home in The Abbey of the Arts www.abbeyofthearts.com Here the expressive arts and contemplative practices are used to transform daily life.

Spirituality is a complex concept meaning a wide range of things to different people. To me it is about connection and belonging to ourselves, each other, the environment, and our source. The potential of the arts to connect us and give us a sense of belonging is how I understand “the arts and spirituality”.

My working life has been spent as a teacher, researcher, and nurse. Now in my sixties, I have enjoyed various courses in the arts and retreats that use the arts. However, it is important to me not to become a professional artist, or an art therapist.

Early in my explorations of how art can connect us with ourselves I heard a prison chaplain say “Creativity is the immune system of the mind”. He described how people in the prison where he worked paint themselves off medication and into being well. He asserted that the work could and should be done without the need for professional therapists who are few and far between. Around the same time I heard a GP in a television news item, who was part of a poetry writing project in the GP practice, say “Poetry saves lives”. He was talking about the lives of health care professionals.

When I am making art I cooperate with the process and sometimes there is what might be called a conversation between me and the materials being used. The making process takes the lead. It is a dynamic and organic process which in turn affects my perception and experience of whatever is being expressed.

To read in more detail about this process go to:

http://livingspirit.org.uk/expressive_arts_linda_courage.pdf

Linda Courage is Coordinator of the Living Spirituality Connections Arts and Spirituality Special Interest Area, as well as contact for the North East and member of the Working and Discernment Group. She is coming to the end of a varied and wonderful career in nursing and science. Linda is offering a Creative Connections Day in York on 13 July. Go to:

<http://www.livingspirit.org.uk/events/>

To become part of the Arts and Spirituality Special Interest Area, go to:

<http://www.livingspirit.org.uk/sia/arts-and-spirituality/> You can also opt in to a private Facebook group linked with the Arts and Spirituality theme, if you choose to.

3. EVERYDAY SACRAMENTS

The sacraments of the everyday life

By Hugh Valentine

Baptism is associated with water: the water of the River Jordan and of the Font. Water cleanses. It represents regeneration. Yet too much of it can kill. The symbolism of baptism is indeed that we die to an old self in order to make possible the birth of a new self. Paul, in the Letter to the Romans, says we were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead (by the power of God), so we too may lead a new life. This is important to consider. The sacramental work of baptism is achieved not just by addition but also by depletion. We are to relinquish in order to receive.

The work of baptism is not only something to be repeated throughout our lives but is also to be found well beyond any Font. I hope you have found it so. And along with it, sacramental gifts: those outward and visible happenings that bring you inward, invisible change. Think of those times when you experienced joy or loss or new insight. The kind of joy or loss or insight that eclipses everything else and yields up some new, somehow more real, experience. Think of moments of connection: with your own deepest self and with others. Or aroused by art or the physical world. Think of moments when you have been brought low and have no choice but to face your own failure and poverty. We may carelessly use the cliché 'a baptism of fire' and yet be blind to the important baptismal

moments that visit our lives; moments when something within dies, to be recast and reborn.

Sometimes these moments are accompanied by tears, sometimes laughter. There's no pinning them down. Sometimes our body itself provides the waters of baptism: St Ephrem the Syrian spoke of our eyes as two baptismal fonts and of tears being the body's own baptismal waters that cleanse, heal, and renew life. We might know what he meant. What I am exploring is whether the best way of marking our remembrance of the Baptism of Christ is to use baptism as one way of understanding our lived lives, particularly those moments when through loss or love, threat and possibility, sudden insight, clarity, compassion, healing or shocking illumination we sense an important change within and something tangible without. I'm not meaning that in a trite way. And I realise the risks of even trying to describe it. I hope it might mean something, or at least be an interesting possibility to consider.

What all this focuses on is a question for anyone who wants to take the claims of Christ and of the church seriously: where does it gain real traction in our lives? Does our baptism, does participating in the Eucharist, have meaning beyond themselves? When I was thinking about this, an imagined headline came into my mind. It appeared so clearly I laughed out loud. I saw in my mind's eye a headline which read: "Priest celebrates Eucharist. No one harmed." Well, I wouldn't want anyone harmed, so rewrote it: "Priest celebrates Eucharist. No one changed." You might see what I mean. Life is short. It carries responsibility to ourselves and others and beyond. The claims and promises of the Gospel are significant. They claim to lead us into truth.

The meaning of baptism, and our participation in the Eucharist are not on a par with worldly success or a posting on Facebook. They are superior to those things, and point to the drama and sacramental possibilities of living adventurously. I have a hunch that in being open to those sacramental moments we are more likely to sense that, whatever mess we are in, we are in fact God's beloved child by adoption, in whom God is indeed well pleased. I wish such moments for you, and for me.

This is an extract from a sermon preached at St James's Church Piccadilly by Revd Hugh Valentine, 13 January 2019. The Baptism of Christ. Luke 3.15-17, 21-22. For the full version of this sermon go to: <http://www.sjp.org.uk/sermons.html>

Hugh Valentine is a worker priest at St James's Church Piccadilly. He trained in social work, including psychiatric social work, and later served as assistant Director of Social Services and Head of Children's Services. He is director of a foundation concerned with the relief of poverty.



Soul Space a time for shared reflection

By Lois Cameron

In October 2012, four people decided to set up a group where people could come together and create a spiritual space. We called it Soul Space. The idea was simple we would meet to share a simple meal and then have a time where/ we would share things that have inspired us around a particular theme. The invite went out that people were welcome from any faith background or from no faith, all would be welcome. The initial invite was through personal invitation and through the Forth Valley interfaith network. Since then it has been largely word of mouth and occasional mentions in the local paper. Over the seven years numbers have been pretty static averaging around 15 an evening though it been as low as 8 and soared on one occasion to 24.

The people who gather regularly include people from various Christian denominations, people of no professed faith, Baha'is, Buddhist, Unification Church, and occasionally we have had Muslims and Jews. Some people are frequent attenders and some come intermittently. The age range is from 17 to pretty old! We meet in the Methodist Church mainly because the four originators attend this church and the congregation has always supported the initiative. The meetings are held on a Sunday evening normally every 6 weeks.

One of our regular attenders has said 'Since first attending Soul Space meetings several years ago they have become a vital element in my spiritual calendar as a Bahá'í, offering a space in which people from a variety of religious persuasions can share both physical and spiritual food in an atmosphere where everyone feels welcome and meaningful friendships are formed.'

First of all we eat a 'bring and share' vegetarian meal. This is a time for social chat, to become acquainted with new people and catch up with old. We then move to a small room where we sit in a circle and one person acts as a facilitator. The theme for the week is always chosen at the end of the previous meeting. It is usually a word and people are asked to bring pieces of writing, poetry or music that are inspired by that theme. The themes can be generated from a single word, some examples include roots, coincidences, suffering,

grace, spring or by a phrase - examples include 'don't stand by' and the very Scottish theme of 'we're all Jock Tamson's Bairns'.

At the start of the meeting the facilitator is responsible for introductions and setting the scene and people indicate if they have brought something to share. Those who just want to listen are very welcome. The group agrees a start and end point and, one by one, people start sharing what they have brought. Soul Space is a sharing space not a debating space. Whilst comments are sometimes made, the tone is one of listening and receiving. It is amazing how often it looks like the evenings have been coordinated as ideas are extended or developed or explored from different perspectives. At the end of the sharing, a candle is lit and there is 5 minutes silence. Before we go we plan the next times theme and then go to tidy and wash up! In a time when the world is full of division, Soul Space for me is a very special place where I know and feel that there is much more that unites us than divides us.

If you would like to know about the meetings then please email the group contact **Lois Cameron**. lois@cameroncape.net

Thin places: Llangadwaladr



It was interesting to see The Guardian country diary's Jim Perrin drawing attention to the idea of thin places in his recent piece from Powys. The little church of Llangadwaladr, between Oswestry and the Berwyn hills, is equidistant between two bronze-age tumuli. The circular churchyard shows its origins as a Celtic Christian Clas (early religious community in which men and women worshipped as equals). For Jim Perrin Llangadwaladr brings to mind the thin places, or holy junctions, that offer spiritual transition between worlds.

Your one wild and precious life – Mary Oliver

Following the death of celebrated poet, Mary Oliver, in January, we close with two quotes from her poetry. The poems are available online. (We don't have permission to reproduce them here).

From The Summer Day:

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

From Red Bird:

Instructions for living a life.
Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it.

To close our newsletter, I thought I would share this thought from mindfulness teacher Sharon Salzberg, writing about uncertain times:

"I try to remind myself, every day, that I can reframe this time as a time of pilgrimage, with attendant possibilities of profound companionship, unexpected strengths, and transformation."

With many blessings from us at Living Spirituality Connections,

Petra Griffiths
Newsletter Editor and LSC Coordinator