



UNDER THE GREAT CROSS

**Sustaining and Sustainable
Spirituality in Australia Today**

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This article by Anne McPherson is the first of three articles to help us prepare for the Wellspring Gathering to be held at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, March 4 – 6 2005.

An integrated and engaged spirituality

Do you ever think “Oh, no! Not another article on spirituality. Not another conference on Australian spirituality”? And yet it seems we have to come back again and again to these topics and to continue to explore and define, experience and practise spirituality in an Australian context.

“When we get our spiritual house in order, we’ll be dead. This goes on. You arrive at enough certainty to be able to make your way, but it is making it in darkness. Don’t expect faith to clear things up for you. It is trust, not certainty.”¹

I think it is important to remember that the word ‘spirituality’ never appears in the Bible, and indeed only came into common use in the last century. This is because culturally and historically the separation of sacred and secular, religious and social is relatively recent. Spirituality has been defined as the relationship between people and God, and this relationship has certainly been part of human experience from time immemorial.

Last year Wellspring Community went on a pilgrimage to the Centre of Australia, to the spiritual heart of the country. Next year we will be gathering in Canberra, the political centre of Australia. Both of these journeys and gatherings are attempts to explore and deepen and contextualise our spirituality, our relationship with God.

Fifty years ago and long before I visited the beautiful Isle of Iona, I was attracted to and inspired by what I read and heard about the Iona Community. The characteristic that had the greatest impact on me was the apparently seamless meeting of faith and life, that has been described as the interconnectedness of work and worship, prayer and politics, secular and sacred. And I suppose ever since then I have tried to hold these *ying* and *yang* aspects in balance in my own life, and have searched for – and occasionally found – a community of people who shared the tension and rewards of this holistic view.

For me, this has always been an ecumenical experience, and almost always at the edges where church and wider community touch and interact. When I went to work at the World Council of Churches in Geneva in my early twenties, I thought I was broad-minded and experienced. After all, I had a Scottish university degree, had lived and worked in the great city of London, and this was my 5th time in continental Europe. My parents both left school at 15, had lived and worked all their lives within a 20 mile radius of Durham in the north-east of England, and had never travelled outside of the UK. What I discovered, sometimes painfully, was that I was both naïve and narrow-minded, very English and very Anglican but that, once I stopped being defensive, I was able to share in a richness of tradition, culture, spirituality and thinking that I could never have imagined. In those days the headquarters of the ecumenical movement was still in a large chalet which housed the General Secretary, the library, the Faith and Order Department, and the meeting and worship room. A separate substantial building was home to Finance and Administration, and Inter-Church Aid and Refugee Service. Other buildings on the site were used by world denominational bodies, and at the edge in a wooden barracks were the offices of the more radical Departments of Youth, Laity and Women. Here we talked about living on the edge, and taking risks. (The WCC Publications Risk Series originated in that milieu.)

Perhaps I took this all too seriously because from arriving in Australia in 1962 to my retirement in 1993 most of my family, work and social life was outside the church, though I maintained a sometimes tenuous connection. So I needed a spirituality that sustained me 'out there in the world'. For many years AWD (Action for World Development), a movement of people working

for peace and justice out of their Christian faith, provided an 'Iona'-type experience for me, until the Wellspring Community began in 1992.

I think it is one of the main callings of Wellspring Community to sustain people spiritually in their various contexts, in their action for justice and peace, and in their attempts to share the gospel good news with those who yearn for respect and hope and joy in their lives. If, as members of the body of Christ, we are to be incarnate in the world, our spirituality has to be contextual and engaged, as Norman Shanks, a former leader of the Iona Community, points out:

"The truth is that spirituality is not something that is abstract or detached from the everyday realities of life, the range of human situations and experiences to which it is related. Spirituality is essentially contextual, as indeed is the whole discipline of theology. Nothing can be seen or fully understood apart from the context out of which it emerges, which inevitably shapes and influences it. The insights may have a degree of timeless significance, elements of the process may be universally instructive, but they are also products of particular experience and it should not be assumed that it can be transferred elsewhere or applied to another person or situation without a measure of critical reflection and adaptation."²

He goes on:

"It is of course ultimately a matter of balance. To see spirituality in terms of engagement – with God, with one's inner self, with other people, with the issues of life – over against the tendency, too frequent in contemporary culture, to see spirituality as escape, essentially about self-fulfillment apart from concern with others and the world about us, is not in any sense to diminish the significance either of a regular personal devotional discipline or of the importance, within our own lives, of withdrawing occasionally from the busy-ness and demands of people and situations around us for solitary reflection."³

Kenneth Leech, an Anglican priest who has worked in the East

End of London, expresses it this way:

“Christian spirituality is thoroughly materialistic, incarnational, earthy and fleshly. The genuineness, the reality, of our spiritual claims has to be tested out amidst the dust and dirt of the back streets. Spirituality cannot exist in a vacuum, in some esoteric private realm. The compartmentalising of ‘spirituality’ and ‘spiritual direction’ as disciplines in their own right, carefully separated from other compartments, has done considerable harm in the recent past. It is an urgent task to bring spirituality back to earth, back to the common life: only then can it be Christian.”⁴

A lot of the current interest in spirituality, evidenced in bookshops and in seminars, seems to me to focus on spirituality as escape. Most of us look forward to ‘time out’, to retreats, rest and refreshment, and opportunities for spiritual renewal. This is of course valuable and can help us to rebalance our lives. But our spiritual selves are not separate from our physical, intellectual, emotional and social selves, and our wholeness depends on their integration. I remember a parish group who, instead of going on an annual retreat, went to an annual advance. I think this was to remind them that the purpose of the time out would be realised when they returned to their everyday situations. When you come down from the mountaintop of transfiguration, there is an epileptic boy waiting to be healed.

“So many of us go off on retreat, to a place in the country, to the seclusion of convent or a monastery. We seek the way ahead, our particular vocation. But the answer is not there. Any retreat director worth his or her salt will tell us it is back where we came from. Clarity, yes, renewed energy, yes, but all must be worked out where we live and work.”⁵

Kenneth Leech reminds us that:

“‘Spirituality’ can be a dangerous diversion from the living God, from the demands of justice, from engagement with reality. It can be a form of illusion ... Today ‘spirituality’ is marketed as a product in competition with

others, on the station bookstalls. It belongs to the area of 'private life' ... Spirituality is widely seen not as a way of living in every sphere but rather as a sphere in its own right – the spiritual dimension."⁶

Sustaining spirituality

My concern is to develop a spirituality that will sustain us in our various contexts. Before and during the Canberra Gathering in March 2005 others will be exploring that in terms of an Australian spirituality, and of a spirituality of place. I want to look more at a spirituality that sustains us in the long struggle for justice, that enables us to keep going when it all seems pointless and the goal seems unachievable. Most of us have experienced the anger and despair of an unsuccessful political campaign: to prevent the war on Iraq, to release the children of asylum seekers being held in detention, to have the Australian government say 'sorry' to indigenous people for past wrongs. Some of us have also shared the heartache of families battling the overwhelming forces of drug or alcohol abuse, of family and institutional violence, of preventable but potentially fatal disease. What enables us to enter into the suffering and despair of individual people and of communities and of the world? What sustains us in these dark times? What enables us to hold fast to the truth and gives us the courage to continue to speak out against evil? How do we put down deep roots and draw sustenance from the unseen? How do we rekindle in each other God's gift, not 'a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of sound judgement'?

"I so often hear the concept of spirituality restricted to prayer and the devotional life, [but] it must be related to all the points at which our spirits strive with God's Spirit seeking life for the world. It covers the hearing of cries, the depth and quality of response; capacity for discernment, resilience and availability; concern for the neighbour; and a readiness to muck in. Since the Holy Spirit's concern is for the whole world, the command to be alert and stay awake and help others to be equally watchful lest we be taken off guard when a day of decision comes, is addressed to all ... Spirituality has to do with wrestling in which the inarticulateness of cries and

responses is no barrier, because it is not the capacity to get things sorted out rationally which is decisive, but a fruitful wrestling to live in imaginative obedience to God's will ... Spirituality concerns the depth, the rooting of our action and reflection ... has that in it which can deal with blows and setbacks ... is developed normally in community ... Through reliance on the Spirit there can come that alertness which allows people to see afar off what consequences stem from present actions or what may come out of the blue disconcertingly, so that vulnerable human beings may be prepared – and have a chance to stand, not fall.”⁸

“If Christians are to survive in the political arena, with all its threats to human dignity and commitment, they will not only need the discipline of intellect and will. They will need spiritual resources which will enable them to sustain hope and integrity. They will need a spirituality which is not geared solely to the private and inward realm.”⁹

“During these years my ministry began to undergo some powerful changes. Much of it was ‘despair work’, entering into and sharing the darkness of others, not seeking to shatter that darkness with artificial light. There were many ‘fundamentalists’ who attempted to do this in a way which was cruel and insulting to the depth of pain and the seriousness of the inner struggle in which people were involved. It was important for me, if I was to be a true pastor, to learn the place of silence and creative listening, and to avoid the temptation to offer clichés and simplistic words. But this called for a process of slowing down and for the cultivation of inner stillness. So I began to see the danger of a frenzied activism, of overcrowding both of my timetable and of my mind, of overwork and its resultant tiredness. Many of us whose lives are taken up with social action of various kinds tend to overload ourselves, filling our weeks with too many projects and giving in to a kind of self-inflicted violence which kills inner wisdom. Yet it is wisdom and discernment, more than anything, which we desperately need in responding to crisis situations.”¹⁰

I look, too, for a spirituality that is a source of joy, that enables me to celebrate in community, even in dark times – perhaps especially in dark times. While I am encouraged and empowered by an incarnate God, a God who is here with us in the midst of the pain and uncertainty, I am also lifted up by a transcendent, timeless and indefinable God who is beyond as well as within, and by a vision of a heavenly realm beyond our present experience.

I think the words of so many Negro spirituals show this transcendent quality in the midst of the despair and apparent hopelessness of slavery:

Over my head I see freedom in the air
Over my head I see victory in the air
There must be a God somewhere.

Swing low, sweet chariot,
coming for to carry me home.

I'm on my way to Canaan land,
I'm on my way, great God, I'm on my way.

It is also reflected in many of the South African freedom songs. And in the old hymn that I only hear sung these days at Aboriginal funerals

I will cling to the old rugged cross
and exchange it some day for a crown.

But, of course, it is not just the words that are significant, but the fact that people you would think have so little to sing about, sing so heartily and so magnificently. With the civil rights movement in the sixties, we all seemed to recover our voices, confident that 'We shall overcome some day'. By comparison the endless 'What do we want? When do we want it?' chants of the last 20 years fail to produce this transcendent quality. Can we again sing our faith in the face of despair? Gerard Hughes in 'God of surprises' reminds us that God is at work in all things and therefore in every experience of our lives, in both joy and sadness, peace and agitation. He says that it is characteristic of God to give true happiness and spiritual joy.

“True happiness and spiritual joy does not mean living on a perpetual ‘high’, but may be compared to the ballast in a ship. With ballast the ship will roll in a storm, just as a person capable of true happiness and joy will feel pain in a crisis, but the storm will not capsize the boat which will quickly right itself, even when struck by a wave. Similarly, true happiness and spiritual joy does not mean living on a continuous high, unaffected by grief, sadness or loss, the pain of others, but it does mean that we shall not sink into despair under the blows, but will recover peace and tranquility when the storm is over.”¹¹

Sustainable spirituality

For me sustainable spirituality is available, accessible, and affordable. That means it is internalised, something I can carry within me, and draw on, often unconsciously – a reliable reserve of discerning insight, compassion and strength. Of course the contents of this well must be treated with respect, kept clean, not abused or wasted, even though it is renewable. It can be replenished through local everyday encounters. In some ways it is a radical spirituality that doesn’t carry with it a lot of baggage, and it is a simple spirituality that can be shared by people with different intellectual abilities. My spirituality cannot depend on going on pilgrimage to Jerusalem or Iona or Uluru, nor on being in a place of worship or a place of scenic beauty, nor on a guru or spiritual director. This is not to deny the value of all these things at certain times.

Prayer is certainly part of spirituality. Charles Elliott in his book ‘Praying the Kingdom’ talks a lot about a political spirituality.

“There can be no spirituality without action, without politics. ... I hope it has become apparent that prayer for the Kingdom is a political statement. ... If prayer for the Kingdom points ineluctably to the proper integration of spirituality and politics, it points no less clearly to mission. ... The coming of the Kingdom foresees a total transformation of the cosmos.”¹²

He goes on to explain how prayer, politics and mission interact at four levels: the individual, the local, the structural, and the cos-

mic. Prayer can permeate political stances, and political experience can inform prayer. Athol Gill, who also makes a strong connection between prayer and political action for justice, sees renewed strength and rekindled hope coming from our relationship with God:

“The fight for justice will not be won overnight. It is a long hard struggle and those involved may not live to see the fruit of their labours, let alone that day when justice shall flow like a river and uprightness as a never-ending stream. In the early seventies the opportunity for justice seemed to have dawned as many committed themselves to work for the poor and it seemed that substantial victories were won. Today, under the power of transnationals wealth and the military industrial complex, the possibility for justice seems as far removed as ever. Not surprisingly, some have given up the fight. Others have learned from bitter experience that those who wish to continue in the struggle must be prepared to pay a heavy price, both in their own lives and in the lives of their families and friends. There is no doubt that they are en route to the Promised Land, but the journey through the wilderness is long. God provides streams of prayer and communal spirituality in the desert, but the mistake that some make is to anticipate both a short-cut across the wilderness and a saving of time by not stopping at the streams. While continuing to be involved in God's mission of justice in the world, the worshipping community finds strength for its messianic lifestyle as it comes before God with empty hands and broken hearts and rediscovers the crucified and risen Jesus in its midst. Strength is renewed and hope is rekindled in the presence of the One who suffered and died for his convictions and was raised for the liberation of the world.”¹³

Emilio Castro, when he was General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, wrote:

“Prayer is the most down-to-earth exercise human beings can practise. Prayer is encounter with God, to which we bring the concerns of the whole of creation and to which God as Father, as Creator, as Sanctifying Spirit,

as motherly Protector, is also bringing his care, his passion, his love for all of created reality.

So this prayer to the Spirit, far from being an escape from reality, brings us back to reality equipped with a deeper vision, a greater commitment and a higher hope.

A perennial source of ecumenical controversy is the fact that this down-to-earth engagement with reality may lead to what is called (often critically) political involvement. To put it in terms of the subject of this book, what is the connection between praying ecumenically for the relief of victims of suffering and injustice and offering diaconal aid or making public declarations and denunciations or supporting with financial and other resources human rights groups and liberation movements?"¹⁴

Many people have written and spoken of their unexpected encounter with God in everyday interactions with people, especially the poor and frail:

"It was the very ordinary life of this obscure London street which brought home to me the common-ness of grace, and the ordinariness of spirituality. I think I went there believing that I was bringing love, bringing intellect, bringing care, possibly bringing Christ, to the deprived Cable Street community. I came to see that it was I who was deprived, that it was I who was in need of their love and care, that Christ was to be found there and did not need to be brought in from outside, and that until the fundamental truth of God's presence and activity in the midst of the oppressed and downtrodden is recognised, all pastoral ministry and all religious life will be unreal."¹⁵

Commenting on Matthew 25, the parable of the sheep and the goats, and John 13, the account of the feetwashing, Kenneth Leech continues:

"What these passages are teaching us, and what I think I was learning in Cable Street, is that the true and living God is not encountered directly. Unlike the idols, God

is not seen face to face. But God is known, recognised, loved and served in lowly service of those who are made in God's image."¹⁶

Margaret Hebblethwaite in 'Finding God in all things' writes"

"Finding God in all things does not mean only finding God in beautiful things. Of course, when we are in the presence of something beautiful, be it a sunset or a relationship of love, we can relate that back to the divine beauty, of which it is a pale reflection. ...

But in the bad and ugly experiences too we can find a way to God. That sounds harder, and yet people often feel closer to God when they are in need."¹⁷

Donal Dorr describes his experience of spirituality as a call both from within and beyond, but that the call also demands a response from him:

"From a personal point of view, my spirituality is that which from within me and beyond me calls me to be more authentically human, more fully all that God has destined me to be. I say it is a call that comes from *beyond* me because as a Christian I believe that the Holy Spirit speaks to my spirit, inviting me to a fulfillment beyond all my imagining. But the call also comes from *within* me because the Spirit does not remain outside but moves and moulds me, so that the voice of the Spirit becomes my own inner voice as well (cf Rom.8: 16). This joint call of the Holy Spirit and of the deepest part of my own spirit is an invitation to me to respond. And, if I chose to answer authentically, my response will have two distinct moments: - a contemplative moment' for instance, allowing myself to be moved by the beauty of nature, or by the mystery of another person, or by the experience of solidarity with people who are poor or powerless. - an active moment; for instance, helping poor people or working to promote peace, or to care for our planet.

My spirituality is more than just a call; it also includes the power or strength to respond. So it might be described

as that which leads me beyond my present limitations towards what I am called to be.”¹⁸

Finally, I think that our spirituality becomes sustainable when we are open; open to the unexpected and to new experiences, open to uncertainty and change, open to people with different traditions and values, people of other cultures and different theological understanding

“There is a pattern detectable in Jesus’ encounters: a glimpse of the reign of God is given, followed by a role in bringing that realm closer. At the very moment of the miracle, something is asked in return. In recognising Jesus for who he was, people recognised themselves anew, discovered truth in their own lives.

Is it possible that this reciprocity is the pattern not only in our encounter with God, our glimpses of the transcendent, but also in encounters with strangers and our adventures into strange territories? Every *other* is a mystery, persons of other cultures, other creeds, other ways of life. Foreign lands are mysteries, as are new experiences, unfamiliar aspects of creation. Every *other* is a new face of the hidden God, a new incarnation of the Christ we seek, a new manifestation of the mystery of divine creativity.”¹⁹

Conclusion

So let us continue to explore and develop our own spirituality, but let us make sure it is never separate from our Australian context or from our daily life and work. Let us rejoice in the opportunities to meet with God in special holy places and in places of natural beauty as well as in suburban and city streets, in offices and other workplaces, and in the kitchen or the backyard of our homes. Let us be open to God in our quiet times of prayer and meditation as well as in our encounters with people, especially those who are disadvantaged in our society and those who are ‘strangers’. In these ways we can continually replenish our spiritual reserves so that we will be sustained and nourished on the way.

1. Flannery O'Connor in a letter to Louise Abbott, quoted in Daily Dig, email inspirational quotations from Bruderhof Communities
2. Norman Shanks: *Iona God's energy; the spirituality and vision of the Iona Community*. London, Sydney, Auckland, Hodder & Stoughton, 1999. p. 6
3. *ibid.* p. 149
4. Kenneth Leech: *The eye of the storm; spiritual resources for the pursuit of justice*. London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1992. p. 148
5. Joan Puls: *Seek treasures in small fields; everyday holiness*. Mystic, Connecticut, Twenty-third Publications, 1993. p. 99
6. Kenneth Leech: *The eye of the storm; spiritual resources for the pursuit of justice*. London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1992. .p. 3
7. 2 Timothy 1: 7
8. Ian Fraser, quoted in 'Iona God's energy' by Norman Shanks, p. 169
9. Kenneth Leech: *The eye of the storm; spiritual resources for the pursuit of justice*. London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1992. p. 134
10. *ibid.* p.156
11. Gerard W Hughes: *God of surprises*. London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985. p. 137
12. Charles Elliott: *Praying the kingdom: towards a political spirituality*. London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985. p. 146
13. Athol Gill: *Life on the road; the gospel basis for a messianic lifestyle*. Homebush, NSW, Lancer Books, 1989. p. 244
14. Emilio Castro: *When we pray together*. Geneva, Risk Book Series, WCC Publications, 1989. p.73
15. Kenneth Leech: *The eye of the storm; spiritual resources for the pursuit of justice*. London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1992. p. 146
16. *ibid.* p. 147
17. Margaret Hebblethwaite: *Way of St Ignatius; finding God in all things*. London, Fount/Harper Collins, c. 1994. p. 215
18. Donal Dorr: *Integral spirituality; resources for community, justice, peace, and the earth*. Marynoll, NY, Orbis Books, 1990. p.270
19. Joan Puls: *Treasures in small fields; everyday holiness*. Mystic, Connecticut, Twenty-Third Publications, 1993. p. 100

