



Dear LSN Supporters

The terraced lawns of Swanwick echoed to an unfamiliar sound: the murmured, but unmistakable playground refrain *Fight! Fight! Fight!*

Unaccustomed as I am to the role of gladiator, I was more than a little alarmed. And while my imagined opponent, Abbot Christopher Jamison of Worth Abbey*, may have been better equipped for battle, he was just as bemused as I was by the murmuring. We were there for a conversation, not a fight!

Our encounter was to be the last session of the Retreat Association's conference *Minding the Gaps*, held in May at Swanwick. Earlier in the week, Abbot Christopher had spoken on the theme *Knowing, Unknowing and the Church* and I on *Knowing, Unknowing and the New Spirituality*. On both occasions the attention in the hall was palpable and the reactions among the 340 participants strong. People were animated and passionate as they shared later in their small *Soul Space* groups, over meals and in corridors. Some were energised and inspired by one speaker, others, by the other speaker. We didn't set out deliberately to polarise, but we were saying very different things, and saying them out of our own experience, with our own passion and energy.

There isn't room here to detail those differences; that took two closely argued, 50 minute talks and many thousands of words. In summary, I spoke of my growing confidence that what is coming to be known as the *new or progressive spirituality* is, genuinely, another way of being faithful. It is, I trust but cannot know, a deeply Christian way, though many would not recognise it as such, and it is a way which involves a different kind of *knowing* and a deep, risky and creative relationship with *unknowing*.

Abbot Christopher asked *What does the Church know and what does the Church not know?* At the heart of his talk was a vigorous, but in no way defensive, defence of the Church as institution; as a God-inspired, God-guided and necessary arbiter and repository of sacred truth.

For many conference participants, battle-lines were drawn. Some seemed to want a knock-out punch, a decisive victory, for one or other *side*, when the Abbot and I came face-to-face. Others, more interestingly perhaps, wanted to find a way of believing that we were really saying the same thing; that our interpretations, convictions and experiences could somehow be harmonised.

Our conversation was brilliantly and sensitively chaired by Peter Lippiett, Spirituality Advisor in the Portsmouth Diocese. There were no punches, let alone a knock-out. There was difference, strong feeling, laughter and respect.

In the course of an hour we addressed four questions, the most important of which, for me, was *Where is God in this?* That is, *Where is God in the New Spirituality?* As part of my response I recounted a time when I was agonising over a particular situation and asking myself just that question: *Where is God in this?* A very wise friend turned the question around: *Don't ask where is God is this* he said, but *where is this in God?*

Immediately the question becomes one not about the narrowness of our own judgement, but one about the vastness and compassion of God's welcome.

As Tom Stella writes at the end of his book *A Faith Worth Believing – Finding New Life Beyond the Rules of Religion: The truth we all seek is found not in isolation from those who differ from us, but in dialogue with them.* Amen.

Go well

Eley

*Abbot Christopher's new book, *Finding Happiness – Monastic Steps to Fulfilment* will be published in October

*A prayer on a feather:
lines close enough
to lift the wing
carry the singer.*

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Knowing and Unknowing: Reflections on the Retreat Association Conference

There was a brief notice in *Living Spirituality News* last summer from Julian Towler, a semi-retired urology surgeon who was developing a ministry in spiritual direction. Having suffered some ill-health he was conscious of the need to take life more gently and was looking for a spiritual penfriend. Julian was a participant in the recent Retreat Association Conference and afterwards wrote a long and thoughtful letter, reflecting on his experience. We are very grateful to him for allowing us to share extracts from his letter with a wider audience.

Dear Eley

It was good to meet you at the conference, albeit rather briefly ... I found your talk very heartening. I started going to church for the first time at the age of 47. I have discovered many things that I thoroughly dislike about the church as an establishment and yet I feel passionate about the teachings of Jesus Christ and about my new-found ministry of spiritual direction, which I can see myself occupied with for the rest of my life. I believe you made a statement in your talk about your own sense of authenticity as a Christian, whilst feeling very uncomfortable with the church itself... I feel that I am in a similar position and it was of great comfort to me to hear you make this affirmation. I came to my Soul Space session [small reflection groups which met throughout the conference for sharing and feedback] light of heart and full of hope.

In contrast, when I reflected on Abbot Christopher's excellent presentation and thought about his statement of affirmation of the church, I began to feel quite depressed. Everyone else in my Soul Space group said how uplifted they felt after his talk; I said I felt like Eeyore and really rather miserable.

I wondered then what would happen in your dialogue with each other on the last morning. And something rather wonderful happened; you both listened to each other with respect and seemed ready to *hold* the other's point of view at times when you differed markedly, instead of dismissing it out of hand. I then thought about what we do in spiritual direction and it is something similar. We listen to the other and *hold* what has been said in a loving and non-judgemental way, trying to discern what the Holy Spirit wants for us both. ... These are aspects that in my experience, we rarely see in church.

I feel sure that there is a spirituality revolution and that if the church does not embrace it then that will be the end of the church as having any relevance in the modern world... I think also that studies by researchers such as David Hay are extremely important, with the emergence of the concept of natural intrinsic spirituality; a concept I feel I have embraced intuitively in the course of my work in medicine, meeting a huge variety of people and sensing how much goodness I encounter.

It may be that we need new stories, as you suggest, but I do agree with Christopher that there is still tremendous mileage in the old stories, as long as we are allowed to approach them in our own way and in our own time. The church very often does not seem to permit the old stories to work in this way, preferring to present them as dogma and running away from any challenge, expression of doubt or the possibility of alternative interpretation.

... I don't think the church's problems are, however, just to do with handling scriptural material in a more mature way. I earnestly believe that what we call *Christianity* differs in many ways from what God (and of course Christ) intended for us, and I think this is because much of it is of human construction. This is an area I find not infrequently comes up in spiritual direction. ... Christians always seem to have been very argumentative and they argued like stink for the first three centuries, culminating in the attempted call to order that was the Council of Nicea. The fact that the powers at the time actually managed to agree to something after three centuries doesn't necessarily mean that they got it right! Nor does it mean that we have to stop *working it through* in our own time.

Best wishes

Julian Towler

One Cloud Away From the Sky

A happy bonus from the Retreat Association conference was an introduction to the poetry of Andrew Rudd. University lecturer, Anglican Lay Reader and Cheshire Poet Laureate in 2006, he organises local reading and writing groups and is working on a doctoral thesis entitled *Church of the Imagination: Post-Christian Spiritualities in the Work of Some Contemporary Poets*. His collection, *One Cloud Away from the Sky*, put into my hand almost in passing in a Swanwick corridor, is a beautifully produced book, full of subtle and surprising work – *seriously good poems* in the words of Andrew Motion, no less. I'm delighted that Andrew has given permission to reprint one of his poems here in *Living Spirituality News*, and to use another in *Something Understood* on 21st September.

It is written

A prayer on cloth:
faded intercessions
read by rain
answered by air.

A prayer in stone-cracks
scratched by slow centuries:
stranded, smoothed
leaded with lichen

A prayer on a leaf
inscribed by sunlight
vein-mining of insects
delicate fall.

A prayer on skin:
map of touch and stretch
spirals of fingerprint
scars of years.

A prayer on a feather:
lines close enough
to lift the wing
carry the singer.

A prayer on water:
calligraphy of glitter
the long fetch
the moon's slow script

A prayer of cloud
freshly drawn across
the unending page of sky:
opening to light.

Andrew Rudd, printed by kind permission.

<http://business.virgin.net/sound.houses>

Happy Retirement

The Swanwick conference was Paddy Lane's last as head of the Retreat Association – she retired two weeks later, after 14 years in which she developed the work of the Association in many different ways. Paddy's encyclopaedic knowledge, inexhaustible energy, and un-ending attention to detail have always been underpinned by a deep personal generosity and compassion for which I, and many, many others are profoundly grateful. We wish her every blessing in retirement, but are delighted that she will continue her involvement in the work of LSN. We wish Alison McTier, the new Director of the Retreat Association, a richly rewarding time in her new role and very much look forward to working with her.

Scargill House

Supporters may be surprised to hear that Scargill House is closing its doors. The Scargill Community has, for nearly 50 years, offered a special kind of hospitality: a place to explore contemporary spirituality, celebrate human diversity and act responsibly with regard to creation and the environment. It has just announced the decision to sell the site and to create a grant-giving foundation run by a *virtual* community of members. David Baker, Chair of its trustees has said: *50 years ago, in a notionally Christian society, those values were best expressed by coming away from the hustle-and-bustle and reflecting on the world.*

In the 21st century post-modern world, those values can best be expressed by engaging with projects within our urban and rural communities. The new Foundation is an opportunity to do precisely that, and I am very excited at the path we have decided to take.

Sporting Spirit

Last summer Joycelin Dawes wrote in the Quaker journal, *The Friend*, of sport as being a rich matrix. Explaining her interest in the subject, Joycelin writes: *As I go about London, I notice that the city has a fresh vibrancy; I wonder whether we yet realise what it will mean for London to be a host city and Britain a host nation to the greatest sporting event the world holds.*

On the eve of the Beijing Olympics, and looking ahead to the Commonwealth Games in Delhi in 2010, and the London Olympics in 2012, here are some timely extracts – and pertinent questions – from Joycelin's article.

As a nation, we enjoy sport. As statistics relate, we are keen players, spectators and volunteers and sport is often a glue for conversations. Sport is prominent on the public agenda too: *More than ever, sport is a universal language and plays the role of catalyst in today's society as a means of improving quality of life and well-being* (Jacques Rogge, IOC President). The Olympic ethos and spirit emphasises building a peaceful world, equality, mutual understanding, cultural diversity, friendship and fair play. Sport is a potent ambassador: the UN Sport for Development and Peace initiative speaks of the *convening* power of sport in building a culture of peace.

... [Those who play sport at all ages and levels] attest to its personal, spiritual and holistic dimensions: the benefit for health and well-being; the achievement of excellence (a new *personal best* is as significant as winning); and the practice of discipline, focus and centring down... For many, sport brings deep satisfaction, occasional peak experiences, even transcendence when playing from a deeper part of oneself; some sports, such as martial arts, have a basis in spiritual practice. Collectively, sport enables people to experience relationship and community with others.

Thus, sport is a rich matrix of individual and group, private and public activity. It can be a focus of practical applications of equality, truth and integrity through fair play, healthy competition, leadership, discipline, co-operation, teamwork, waging peace and enjoyment. It can also be a focus for exploring and applying spiritual principles. What is our experience of encountering spirit through and in sport? How do we interpret and express spirit-led values and principles? How do we each fulfil our potential and contribute our gifts?

Sport is more than brash aspects of celebrity status, commercialism, bending rules, winning at all cost and inflated reward. The very existence of those aspects that repel us are good reason for us to foster the real potential of sport and its deepest values in society, embodying a spiritual life congruent with activities that are about the relationship of body, mind, spirit and community and building a better world.


For more information contact Joycelin at joycelindawes@aol.com or 14 Bartrams Lane, Hadley Wood, Herts, EN4 OEH

The full text of Joycelin's article can be found at www.nvo.com/thequest/articlesandreviews/


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Journey Group

We are sometimes asked if we have local LSN groups – unfortunately we don't have the capacity to organise and sustain such a network, but we are always happy to hear of local groups, and to bring



them to the attention of our supporters. David Hawthorn (Contact davidw.hawthorn@virgin.net or 020 8650 6445) has contacted us to say that he organises a monthly meeting in Beckenham, Kent. He writes: *It is a place where you can explore your inner life and share with like-minded people something of your inner journey. Each meeting includes an exercise or meditation and time for each person to share their thoughts with the group. Meditations are taken from a range of sources, including Ignatian spirituality, journal-writing guides and other spiritual books. Meetings are free and all are welcome. The group has a Christian framework but you don't have to be a Christian or religious to join us.*



Bookshelf

Readers may be interested to know that wherever possible all the titles mentioned in the Bookshelf section of *Living Spirituality News* will now be available for borrowing from the Well Library. For further information contact the LSN office, or the Librarian, Barbara Merrifield, on 01908 242693 (note new number), or library@thewellatwillen.org.uk

Lewis Hyde: The Gift – How the Creative Spirit Transforms the World (Canongate £8.99) Although enjoying its silver jubilee this wonderful book has been relatively unknown in Britain until recently. I'm grateful to Jeanette Winterton for writing about it in *The Times*. Considered by many to be a modern classic, it's rightly described on Amazon as: *An inspiring examination of the 'gift economy' which is even more relevant now than when it originally appeared ... a brilliantly argued defence of the place of creativity in our increasingly market-orientated society... An illuminating and transformative book, and completely original in its view of the world.* You can hear the author in conversation with Mark Tully in *Something Understood* – Freely Given on 28th September.


David Whyte: River Flow – New and Selected Poems (Many Rivers Press Can\$38.95 Hardback) Elaine Perry of the Vine & Fig bookshop in Vancouver (www.vineandfig.ca) introduced me to the work of David Whyte last autumn. David was a close friend of John O'Donohue, and his poetry has a profound if elusive spirituality. Several of his poems have appeared in *Something Understood* since Elaine's serendipitous introduction. He spoke at the Oxford Literary Festival in April, exploring a number of themes, including silence, vulnerability, *thin places*, and the danger of cutting ourselves off from deep and mystical sources of help and wisdom. Wonderful, haunting work.

Una Angew, Bernadette Flanagan and Greg Heylin (Eds): With Wisdom Seeking God – the Academic Study of Spirituality (Titus Brandsma Institute Studies in Spirituality Supplement 15, pub Peeters £50) Four years ago an important international conference was held at the Milltown Institute in Dublin. I was privileged to attend the event and learned a very great deal that has fed into my own work with LSN. The papers from the conference have finally been published and although they are likely to appeal mainly to academics, the collection represents an important record of the issues and questions in the worldwide study of spirituality at a particular point in time.

Adrian Alker (Ed): Together in Hope - Proclaiming God's Justice, Living God's Love (St Mark's CRC Press £4.99) Ten essays and a directory of some key organisations (including LSN) published to coincide with the Lambeth Conference. Contributors include Marcus Borg, Paula Clifford, John Dominic Crosson, Jim Cotter, Clare Herbert, Christina Rees and Keith Ward. Described by the Editor as offering a *landscape of hope for open-minded engagement with the Christian Church today*, the essays are coupled with questions for reflection and discussion and suggestions for further study, and leave the reader with a rich and thoughtful resource.

Sallie McFague: A New Climate for Theology – God, the World and Global Warming (Fortress Press £9.99) In the introduction to her book Sallie McFague writes: ... *what is the next thing I must do as a*





theologian? She goes on to outline her belief that *theology within the context of climate change must focus on deconstructing and reconstructing two key doctrines: who we are and who God is.* Endorsing her book, the environmentalist Bill McKibben says: *Global warming is as much a theological challenge as an engineering one. How do we understand God in a world where we're now dominating nature? How do we understand ourselves in a way that we might shrink our impacts?* Sallie McFague offers a lucid and powerful guide to these questions, and helps advance the field of environmental theology a giant step.

Annabel Shilson-Thomas (Ed): Live Simply – a CAFOD resource for living ... (CAFOD/Canterbury Press £9.99) A rich, practical, challenging, multi-faceted handbook, part reflection, part guidebook on how to take up the challenge to live more simply. With contributions from around the globe, the material is designed to be used by both individuals and groups.

Elizabeth Ruth Obbard: Through Julian's Windows – Growing in wholeness with Julian of Norwich (Canterbury Press £7.99) Our fascination with the wisdom of Julian of Norwich never wanes and this new book, by a contemporary solitary, explores the very modern understanding Julian of Norwich had of the need for balance to keep our spiritual lives healthy and productive: a balance between prayer, practicalities and presence to others.

John L Bell: Thinking out Loud – Collected scripts from Radio 4's Thought for the Day (Wild Goose Publications £10.99) The highly popular writer and musician John Bell has been a regular contributor to *Thought for the Day* for the past four years. Now his thoughts from the *prickly interface between faith and politics* are available to re-read at leisure, without the usual morning pressures and distractions.

Elizabeth Gilbert: Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything (Bloomsbury £7.99) Perfect holiday reading – for those who haven't yet discovered this surprising gem, Elizabeth Gilbert's account of her year of exploration and discovery in Italy, India and Bali is funny, pacey, irreverent, moving and profoundly spiritual.

If you don't have a specialist bookshop near to home, the excellent Centre Bookshop at the London Centre for Spirituality, offers a wide selection of spirituality and theology titles, plus a range of music. With coffee available, the shop is in the Church of St Edmund the King, Lombard Street, London EC3V 9EA (020 7626 5031 or bookshop@spiritualitycentre.org).




Pinboard September


11: London: Religion in Exile with Diarmuid O'Murchu. Alister Hardy Society event.
Contact johnfranklin35@hotmail.com

12: Dunblane: Poetry and Emotion: creative writing day with poet Kenneth Steven (See *Living Spirituality News* Winter 2007-08) See www.scottishchurcheshouse.org
Contact reservations@scottishchurcheshouse.org or 01786 823588

14-20: The Othona Community, Dorset: Quiet Week ... a depth of tranquillity, a quality of presence which will rest parts of you that need rest and awaken parts that have dozed off!
See www.othona-bb.org.uk Contact mail@othona-bb.org.uk or 01308 897130

21-27: Sacred Ground: Walking Week at the Othona Community. Experience some of Dorset's holy places and deepen your experience of treading on sacred ground anywhere, anytime. Contact details as above.





15-19: Ammerdown, nr Bath: Sisters of Dust, Sisters of Spirit: Feminine Wordings on God and Creation. Led by Maureen Eastman, who will draw on the wisdom of spiritual women in the whole Judeo-Christian tradition. See www.ammerdown.org Contact info@ammerdown.org or 01761 433709

25-28: Shropshire: Women Exploring the Second Half of Life. Exploration with Sheila Ward and Rosemary Ward (Sheila's book *Towards Wisdom* was featured in the Bookshelf section of our Spring newsletter). See www.sophiatree.co.uk Contact 01691 623495

26-28: Wimborne, Dorset: Relating with Earth: Greenspirit Annual Gathering. Sharing and celebration of the many ways in which we can and do relate with Earth, with speaker Tania Dolley. See www.greenspirit.org.uk/ag2008 Contact joan.angus1@tiscali.co.uk or 02392 599299

27: London: Awakening to the Now: Christians Awakening to a New Awareness (CANA) Conference. Speakers: Janice Dolley, Adrian Smith and David Storey. Contact Sue Howard, 9 Priors Road, Hemingford Grey, Huntingdon, PE28 9BT or susan.howard3@virgin.net

27: Worcester: Worlds Apart, Worlds Together: Explorations in Science, Spirituality and Psychical Research. Day conference organised by Parasearch and the Alister Hardy Society. Contact david.taylor@parasearch.org.uk or 0121 550 8874

October

3-5: Turvey Abbey, Beds: Meditation and Mindfulness: A Christian-Buddhist Weekend. Learning from each other's spiritual tradition and led by Buddhist nuns and a Turvey Benedictine nun. See www.turveyabbey.org.uk Contact Sister Lucy 01234 881432

4: St Bede's Pastoral Centre, York: The Cloud of Unknowing and the tradition of wordless and imageless prayer, three talks by Santha Bhattacharji. See www.stbedes.org.uk Contact admin@stbedes.org.uk or 01904 464900

6-9: Chalice Well, Glastonbury: Renewing Sacred Roots a retreat with Ray Simpson, Guardian of the International Community of Aidan and Hilda. Contact admin@ca-and-h.demon.co.uk or 01289 389249

18-25: Iona: Coming Home, a retreat with Stephen Wright and Jean Sayre-Adams, drawing on a wide range of spiritual practices from many different traditions in order to explore our innermost longing to connect to the Divine. See www.sacredspace.org.uk and book at www.stcolumba-hotel.co.uk

27-31: Open Gate Retreat House, Holy Island: In the Steps of the Celtic Saints. Learn from the godly lives of these men and women of faith in the context of the beauty and stillness of this thin place. See www.aidanandhilda.org Contact opengate@aidanandhilda.demon.co.uk or 01289 389222

28: London: Opening Doors to the Spiritual World. Talk by Dr Charles Whitehead. An Alister Hardy Society event. Contact johnfranklin35@hotmail.com

31-2 Nov: Loyola Hall, Merseyside: Sacred Touch. A workshop for women considering the importance of the touch of God and of human touch in the healthy development of body and spirit. Led by Edna Rowlands OSF and Pauline Myers SP. Massage will be offered. See www.loyolahall.co.uk Contact mail@loyolahall.co.uk or 0151 426 4137





November

12: St Bede's Pastoral Centre, York: Inscape and Landscape – Exploring the Wilderness with Sharon Whittington. Drawing on the work of contemporary novelist Jim Crace and Victorian Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins, to contemplate our own understandings of wilderness, both physical and spiritual. See www.stbedes.org.uk Contact admin@stbedes.org.uk or 01904 464900

14-18: Whitby, N Yorks: Wisdom for the Journey – the Spirituality of Hilda. St Hilda's Tide retreat led by Ray Simpson and members of the Community of St Aidan and Hilda. See www.aidanandhilda.org Contact opengate@aidanandhilda.demon.co.uk or 01289 389222

17-18: Mount St Bernard's Abbey, Leics: New Monasticism – Monastic Spirituality for Everyone. Contact Anthony Grimley 01455 845390 or info@monos.org.uk

21: St Bede's Pastoral Centre, York: Christ of the Celts: the healing of creation, with J Philip Newell. See www.stbedes.org.uk Contact admin@stbedes.org.uk or 01904 464900

21-23: Ammerdown, nr Bath: A Breath of Life led by Louis Hughes OP. Retreat with aim of learning to relax and allow ourselves to be breathed and prayed through by the Holy Spirit. See www.ammerdown.org Contact info@ammerdown.org or 01761 433709



The Living Spirituality Network

The Living Spirituality Network exists for people who are exploring the meaning of spirituality, both within and beyond the traditional churches. The Network provides supporters with information, encouragement and contacts as they seek to understand and deepen their spiritual lives. We work with a wide range of individuals, groups and communities, many of whom find themselves on the edges of mainstream church structures. For further information on the Network, and the groups and communities with which we are in contact, please contact the office for a copy of our leaflet.

Support:

The Living Spirituality Network relies on grants and donations from small communities, projects, networks, individuals and churches. Major support is gratefully received from the Society of the Sacred Mission.

Living Spirituality News is issued three times a year. If you know of anyone who would welcome a copy, please contact the Administrator. **It is issued free of charge but donations of £10.00-£15.00 pa would help considerably in off-setting our costs and would be gratefully received.** Please make cheques payable to: 'CTBI – Living Spirituality Network', and send them to the Administrator at the address given. If you are a taxpayer and are willing to **Gift Aid** your donation, please ask for a form to sign.

A large type version is available on request.

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