Dear LSN Supporters

Two poets, two reflections on Story. Michael Symmons Roberts, interviewed in the Church Times in September, spoke of the inadequacy of atheism to answer the questions raised for him by his studies in philosophy. That was part of the journey, he said, but then I was drawn to the power of Christianity to connect with and make sense of life, love, joy and grief. The Christian story makes more sense of them than any other I heard.

More recently, the Poet Laureate, Andrew Motion, was reflecting on his childhood in a radio programme called A Sense of Home. Speaking of family memory and anecdote, he described how, as he grew older, Everything turned into a story, and was nothing to do with me any more.

I've been thinking a lot about story recently, and as always happens when something is on your mind, you suddenly start finding it everywhere. Our poets' thoughts about story are significant, for they highlight both the power of stories and the weakness of stories. Their power lies in their ability to give meaning to experience: to connect with and make sense of life, love, joy and grief. But the weakness of stories is that they can, eventually, cease to connect meaningfully with experience. They turn into mere stories which have nothing to do with me any more.

On Christmas Eve 2007, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, wrote about the Christmas story in The Times. Christmas ... gives us a story, he said. For the Archbishop, the key to the story is that when Jesus is born, something completely new is introduced into human history and change begins to happen. Crucially, he continues: The Christmas story doesn't try to explain how it works. It just says: 'Now that this story, Jesus's story, has started, nothing will be the same again'. So we're not being asked to sign up to a grand theory – just to imagine that the world might have been changed.

By contrast, over time, the Church has not only devoted itself to trying to explain how it works, but has demanded that we do sign up to a grand theory – further stories of the Church's own devising – that we must accept in order to belong, even long after they have nothing to do with us any more.

Peter Rollins, whose new book The Fidelity of Betrayal – Towards a Church Beyond Belief features in Bookshelf, recently wrote in his blog (www.peterrollins.net/blog/): The main problem we face today is that the wider church has lost the belief that there can be a universal call to re-configure the basic coordinates.

We are, by our very nature, meaning-seeking, meaning-making creatures. We need to create stories which have everything to do with us, and by that I don't mean stories in which we are always at the centre of the drama, but stories which connect and make sense of life, love, joy and grief. A few people today, spiritual progressives both within and beyond the traditional churches, are responding to the call to reconfigure the basic co-ordinates. They are, thank God, beginning to create meaningful new stories in the light both of contemporary experience and of the something completely new which happens when Jesus is born.

With warmest good wishes for Advent, Christmas and the coming year,

I'll tell you a story

about Jack-a-nory;
and now my story's begun.

I'll tell you another
bout Jack and his brother;
and now my story's done.

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Story & Meaning: first thoughts ... by Eley McAinsh

This is an extract from a talk called **Knowing, Unknowing and the New Spirituality,** given at the Retreat Association Conference in May. It has prompted a lively and continuing conversation with my fellow speaker, Abbot Christopher Jamison of Worth, and with a number of others. The thoughts expressed here, and the questions explored in subsequent conversations will be developed further over the coming months and revisited at our Gathering on the theme of **Story & Meaning**, on 16th May 2009. I would love to hear from anyone who would like to join in the conversation!

If one aspect of unknowing in the new spirituality is the unknowing of mystery, another aspect is more prosaic – that is unknowing in the sense of 'un-doing': un-doing in the sense of un-doing old assumptions, old formulae, old stories, old certainties. Such un-doing is central to the new spirituality.

Let's take stories. It's received wisdom today that stories are very important. Stories are the means by which communities and individuals construct a sense of history, identity, meaning and value. The hitherto marginalised and voiceless are encouraged, absolutely rightly, to discover and tell their stories. As they do so, they are often utterly transformed, finding a dignity, power and purpose that has previously been denied them.

But I question an over-reverential attitude to Story, which I often encounter today. It's the tendency to think of stories almost as spells, to think that if you simply go on telling the old stories – or even telling the old stories in new ways – they have some kind of inherent, self-evident, magical power to convince. Those who think in this way fail to realise that stories are above all about giving meaning to experience. If the stories fail to connect with experience, they cease to carry meaning and eventually become obsolete. They become fossils – interesting and important records, but no longer living and dynamic; no longer fulfilling their primary purpose.

Simon Small's quietly brilliant book From the Bottom of the Pond has already been reviewed in Living Spirituality News (Spring 08). In it he says: There is nothing intrinsically wrong with stories, as long as we do not confuse them with truth. The measure is whether they are helpful or unhelpful. Some stories point beyond themselves to reality itself. They also become great vehicles for love, creation and growth. At their best, this is the gift of religious stories. But [even these] are only vehicles, to be discarded when no longer needed. Stories are unhelpful when they point deeper into illusion and away from the experience of truth.

It can be immensely painful and frightening to let our cherished stories fail, for as we do so, we stand, in Simon's words, on the edge of the void. But Although we let [our stories] fail, he says, we do not do away with stories for all time, for we need stories to live in the world ... we rest on the edge of the void while new stories emerge that will be helpful, that will reflect more clearly the truth of existence. We let them fail so that in times to come we understand stories for what they are: not the truth, but pointers to the truth.

This is where the new believer stands – on the edge of the void: the old stories have unravelled and she waits for the weaving of the new. But if individuals involved in the new spirituality stand at the edge of the void, we do so also as a community. Religiously and culturally, We are, as David Tacey has said in The Spirituality Revolution, caught in a difficult moment in history, stuck between a secular system we have outgrown and a religious system we cannot fully embrace. The literature of the new spirituality is full of references to thresholds and emergence, and the stirrings of new stories.

One person who is concerned to write new stories is Claire Henderson-Davis. In her book After the Church she revisits a number of central Christian stories: The Fall, The Incarnation, The Trinity ... Early in her book she says If I hang on to a literal reading of the story as a direct communication from God, a bulwark against all change, I cut myself off from the possibility of real engagement, from encounter with the unknown and the other, from which my story protects me. Later she says: We all have limited vision, and cannot help but judge what lies outside our vision by the categories we already possess. But in order to move beyond our present limits, we have to allow the possibility that it is our own vision that is deficient, that it is we who are lacking.

Or, as Labi Siffre once put it in a little poem called The Courageous Ape: The only religions worthy of respect/ Are those commencing/ with the following text: 'Brothers and sisters/ believe me when I say/ we have, at least, a fifty-fifty chance/ of being wrong./ Now, let us pray'.

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A New Christian Story?

One of the groups I'm involved in as Director of LSN is the Spirituality Co-ordinating Group of Churches Together in England. At a recent meeting one of our members circulated a WCC statement of the key elements in an authentic Christian spirituality (1984 WCC Consultation on Spirituality for Our Times). Towards the end of my talk at Swanwick I posed the question: How Christian is the New Spirituality? and answered by saying It depends what you mean by Christian. Thinking about what we consider to be the key elements in a Christian spirituality for the 21st century helps us work out what we mean by Christian: how we tell the Christian story in a way that connects with our experience and need for meaning. Again, I'd love to know what, for you, are the key elements in a Christian spirituality for the 21st century.

In the Beginning by Kenneth Steven

In the Beginning is a new poem by the Perth-based poet, novelist and broadcaster Kenneth Steven. His collections include Columba, Iona, Wild Horses and his latest, Salt and Light. Inspired by the landscape he inhabits, and by the Celtic Christian world, some of Kenneth's poems re-create the early Celtic days in Ireland and Western Scotland, while others are concerned with the finding of God's presence in our lives amidst the ordinary and the everyday. His publisher is Saint Andrew Press and you can find out more about him at www.kennethsteven.co.uk

There was nothing but everything
A robin opened the jewellery of his throat
The moon grew and ballooned the skies
A horse ran through a starlit field
Somewhere a stream sang its own song
Primroses broke from the dark to open their eyes
And someone came barefoot into warm sunlight

Used by kind permission of the poet

Remembering Thomas Merton

10th December 2008 is the 40th anniversary of the death of Thomas Merton. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, will speak at a special event in London, organised by the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland. There were still some tickets available (£12) for this event as we went to press. For further details contact Stephen Dunhill on 01363 772816 or the margin@virgin.net

One of the most important spiritual figures of the 20th century, Thomas Merton died in Bangkok (electrocuted by a faulty fan while at a conference for Christian and Buddhist monks and nuns) on 10th December 1968. This was also 27 years to the day after he arrived at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, age 26.

One of Merton's associates at the monastery at Gethsemani wrote that whatever Merton was doing, whether talking or writing on prayer, monastic life, liturgy, the psalms or on civil rights, peace and war, nuclear disarmament or ancient cultures, he was expressing the fullness of the nature of contemplation. For contemplation for Merton was not simply one aspect of life, still less some esoteric phenomenon attainable by only a few in life. For him, contemplation was the fundamental reality in life. It was what made life real and alive. It was what makes us to be truly human. In one of his last works, The New Man, Merton wrote that contemplation is the perfection of love and knowledge, and 'the highest and most paradoxical form of self-realization, attained by apparent self-annihilation.' His radical voice for faith

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and humanity continues to echo in the world of mystical and spiritual writing.*

Rowan Williams will also speak about Thomas Merton in a special edition of Something Understood (Remembering Merton) on 14th December (BBC Radio 4, 06.05 and 23.30 and for the following seven days, via 'Listen Again' on the BBC website).

When we were making this programme it quickly became clear that we would be missing a vital element if we didn't include Merton's own voice. For anyone interested in Merton recordings, as well as his writing, Jeannette Cantrell, Director of The Bardstown Art Gallery and Thomas Merton Books in Bardstown, Kentucky (www.thomasmertonbooks.com) has an enormous collection of cassettes and cds for sale, and is extremely helpful in responding to enquiries.

*With apologies that there is no reference for the quotes here: I've searched, and searched but cannot find which of the 149,000 Merton sites I found them on! If anyone recognises them I will be more than happy to acknowledge where they came from.

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 Willen Library. For further information contact the LSN office, or the Librarian, Barbara Merrifield, on 01908 242693, or library@thewellatwillen. org.uk. In addition, we have just added to the library two sets of cd recordings from the **Marcus Borg Conference**, held in April at the Centre for Radical Christianity in Sheffield. These are also available for borrowing, at the cost of post & packing.

Sara Maitland: A Book of Silence (Granta £17.99) I was irritated but intrigued when Sara Maitland said in an interview with the *Church Times* that the one thing which makes her angry is 'spirituality'. Unfortunately, the interviewee didn't ask her to elaborate! Strange, then, that this stunning new book, described by Rowan Williams as A serious, important and deeply engaging book, describing with equal honesty the risks and resources of silence, reflects such a profound and challenging spirituality.

John O'Donohue: Benedictus – A Book of Blessings (Bantam Press £12.99) How poignant that this latest book by John O'Donohue was published so close to his sudden death in January. But his death somehow lends deeper resonance to much of what he explores here. Towards the end of the introduction, for example, he wrote: When the heart is ready for a fresh beginning, unforeseen things can emerge ... Beginnings are new horizons that want to be seen; they are not regressions or repetitions. Somehow they win clearance and become fiercely free of the grip of the past. What is the new horizon in you that wants to be seen?

Mark Davis: Breathing Spaces – Creating Spiritual Conversations in Groups (Rockpool Publishing £8.99. Available from www.conversare.org.uk) Mark Davis is a long-time friend and supporter of LSN and spends much of his time encouraging spiritual conversation. This beautifully-produced book (with a wonderful treasury of photographs by Ged Barrow) offers group leaders and facilitators a way of accompanying people gathered to explore the spiritual dimension of life.

Celia Deane-Drummond: Eco-Theology (DLT £19.95) Celia Deane-Drummond is one of the foremost scholars in the field of Christian eco-theology and here she provides a comprehensive and critical resource book for both students and general readers. One of her academic peers comments: This volume provides an erudite overview and a balanced assessment of the state of the debate ... and a clear sense of direction for further reflection ... she weaves the Hebraic texts together with cosmic Christology, feminist views on Sophia, and the pressing need for responsible decision-making in science and in civil society.

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Abbot Christopher Jamison: Finding Happiness – Monastic Steps for a Fulfilling Life (Weidenfield £12.99) Abbot Christopher's first book, *Finding Sanctuary*, written to accompany the 2005 television series *The Monastery* was, like the series, a phenomenal success, selling, to date, almost 30,000 copies in various formats. Now Abbot Christopher goes much deeper and, for me, has written something significantly more satisfying. Taking on the *mind*, *body*, *spirit* obsession with quick fixes and short-cuts, this is a brilliantly helpful book for anyone seriously intent on living the spiritual life: accessible but deeply insightful, compassionate but profoundly challenging.

S T Georgiou: Mystic Street – Meditations on a Spiritual Path (Novalis £13.50) Mystic Street is the maple and gingko-lined lane which Steve Georgiou took to evening mass at St Albert's Dominican Priory while he was studying for his doctorate at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. It's also the title of this charming – in a good way! – collection of observations, anecdotes, reflections and images. Often touching, sometimes deeply moving, each short chapter is a meditation that is in its own way fresh, arresting and wise. I particularly appreciated the hoodie and the prayer card, the flying apple, and the hummingbird.

Dave Tomlinson: Re-Enchanting Christianity – Faith in an Emerging Culture (Canterbury Press £9.99) At a certain point in my life, Dave Tomlinson's earlier book *The Post-Evangelical* helped save my sanity. More recently, as any regular reader of this newsletter will know, I've also been greatly encouraged by David Tacey's *The Spirituality Revolution – The Emergence of Contemporary Spirituality*. Now Dave Tomlinson has written this new book in direct response to David Tacey's challenge: *The yearning for sacredness, spiritual meaning, security, and personal engagement with the spirit are the primary needs and longings of the contemporary world, wrote Tacey. ... our secular society has given birth to a sense of the sacred, and yet our sacred traditions are failing to recognize the spiritual potential. Tomlinson's reply may not be as theologically radical as some might wish – he insists, for example, on describing himself as progressive orthodox and says he does not want to reinvent Christianity – but his longing, from within the institution, for the re-enchantment of Christianity, and his suggestions as to how that may be achieved, are well worth attention.*

John Hetherington: Reshaping Christianity – Mysticism, Spirituality and Global Faith (Free to Believe £2.50 + 50p&p from Rev Martin Camroux, 35 Arundel Road, Cheam, Surrey, SM2 6EU) The Kendal-based author, John Hetherington, quotes both David Tomlinson and David Tacey in the first few pages of this new booklet. Other writers familiar to LSN – Gordon Lynch, Marcus Borg, Adrian Smith, Eckhart Tolle – also feature in this helpful reflection on the growing significance of new forms of spirituality within Christianity as well as in other faiths.

Peter Rollins: The Fidelity of Betrayal – Towards a Church Beyond Belief (SPCK £10.99) Peter Rollins was our guest speaker at the LSN Gathering in 2007. He had recently published his ground-breaking and highly-acclaimed first book How (Not) to Speak of God. And here is his second book, which, for me, is equally challenging, equally exciting. You may not agree with him, but he certainly makes you think when he asks: What if one of the core demands of a radical Christianity lay in a call for its betrayal ... and what if fidelity to the Judeo-Christian scriptures demanded their renunciation? In short, what would it mean if the only way of finding real faith involved betraying it with a kiss?

Gethin Abraham-Williams: Spirituality or Religion – Do we have to choose? (O Books £11.99) Do we have to choose between religion and spirituality, asks Gethin Abraham-Williams, in this thoughtful, wide-ranging and generous exploration. No, he argues emphatically, to choose would be disastrous for we need both: compassionate religion, realistic spirituality. Compassion and realism are the hallmarks of this book. Abraham-Williams is sympathetic to those who struggle with religion and who find respite, hope and energy in the new spirituality. He recognises the great strengths of spirituality, and its potential to help us address some of the most pressing issues of the day. But he is also an eloquent apologist for religion,

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wearing his considerable experience and learning lightly, and calling vividly on anecdote, story and poetry to make his case.

This is a challenging and provocative book, beneath the warm tone and ready accessibility. At times I felt that we'd be on opposite sides of an argument, but the more attentively I read, the more it seemed that our meaning and intention are actually very close, it's language that gets in the way. As one who struggles with religion in its institutional manifestation I was particularly struck, and challenged, by the chapter on the relationship between believing and belonging. Ultimately, he argues, belonging encircles believing, because believing is not about holding to a set of propositions, but about trust in God, a God for whom belonging was and always will be unconditional and unlimited. I will carry that challenge with me.

Phyllis Tickle: The Great Emergence – How Christianity is Changing and Why (BakerBooks £12.99 approx) A thin book with a big title! I've never met Phyllis Tickle but since my early days at LSN I've been grateful to her for a clever quote: Religion, in the popular imagination, she said, is still that other thing: that thing with doors and windows, clergy and tax-exempt status, moral expectations and social implications. Now I'm attracted to this book by the title of chapter 2: Cable of Meaning: the Loss and Discovery of a Common Story, and Brian McLaren says the book offers a sweeping overview of church history and locates us in a moment of great opportunity and challenge. To some, this analysis will come as a rude awakening, and to others, as a dream coming true.

Barry Cottrell: The Way Beyond the Shaman – Birthing a New Earth Consciousness (O Books £11.99) I've surprised myself by including this book in Bookshelf. The title stirred some barely buried prejudices but then, guilty at my reaction, I began to read and found myself intrigued and informed. The author's exploration of the history of shamanism, and its contemporary relevance in an age in which we can struggle to remember who we are and how to reconnect with the Earth, is lucid and persuasive, even for one so prejudiced!

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

Advance notice! Gathering 2009

Our LSN Gathering 2009 will take place on 16th May at the Carrs Lane Church Centre in the middle of Birmingham. The theme will be *Story & Meaning* and further details will be provided, along with booking forms, in the Spring edition of *Living Spirituality News*. We hope as many of you as possible will be able to join us, and help us to make this day exciting, inspiring and enjoyable.

Advent

Many retreat centres and religious communities have special retreats and quiet days for Advent. Here is a small selection of those known to us. Communities and Centres closer to you will almost certainly have similar events planned.

December

6: Glasgow Ignatian Centre: God Among Us, with Tom McGuinness & Magdalen Lawler. Quiet day for Advent. Contact www.iscglasgow.co.uk or admin@iscglasgow.co.uk or 0141 354 0077

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- 8: Fife: (also 13th Dec, Leith) Bearing Gifts Advent Art and Prayer. Soul Marks Workshops with Carol Marples. Contact admin@soulmarks.co.uk or 0131 669 2431
- **12-14: Turvey Abbey, Bedfordshire: And the Desert Shall Blossom.** A silent weekend sharing the peace and beauty of Advent with the Turvey Communities. Contact Sr Lucy on 01234 881432 or see www.turveyabbey.org.uk
- **13: Benedictine Centre, North London: Waiting for Something to Happen** with Dom Laurence Freeman. Contact retreats@bcsuk.wanadoo.co.uk or 020 8449 2499
- **12-14: Loyola Hall, Prescot, Merseyside.** Advent weekend with Edna Rowlands. Contact www.loyolahall.co.uk or mail@loyolahall.co.uk or 0151 426 4137
- **18-22: St Beuno's, North Wales: Midwinter Birth A Triduum.** Silent retreat, including creative workshops with members of the St Beuno's team. Contact www.beunos.com or secretary@beunos.com or 01745 583444
- 13: Tabor Carmelite Retreat House, Preston: God Comes Tomorrow. A celebration of Advent in song and praise with John Bell of the Iona Community.

 Contact www.carmelite.org.uk or tabor@carmelite.net or 01772 717122

December – other events

- **12: London: Desiring the Real** evening with Dom Laurence Freeman at the London Christian Mediation Centre. How to discover what we really want in a culture driven by fantastic desire and illusion. Contact www.wccm.org or uk@wccm.org or 020 7833 9615
- **5-8: Othona Community, Dorset: The New Universe Story** with Diarmuid O'Murchu. Contact www.othona-bb.org.uk or mail@othona-bb.org.uk or 01308 897130

January

- 14: London Centre for Spirituality: Exploring Christian Spirituality with John-Francis Friendship and Margaret Leckenby. Wednesday evenings until 24th June.

 Contact www.spiritualitycentre.org or info@spiritualitycentre.org or 020 7621 1391
- 22: London Centre for Spirituality: Restoring the Soul of Leisure Work-life balance in the 21st Century with Dermot Tredger. Contact as above.
- **31: Turvey Abbey, Beds: Lectio Divina Conversation with God.** Listen and speak to God through this ancient practice of praying with scripture. Contact Sr Johanna at dayevents@turveyabbey.org.uk or 01234 881432
- **31: Othona Community, Dorset: Forgiveness** with Marcus Armstrong of the Well Community at Willen. (see www.thewellatwillen.org.uk) Contact www.othona-bb.org.uk or mail@othona-bb.org.uk or 01308 897130

February

21-22: London Centre for Spirituality: Aramaic Jesus and the Sufis with Neil Douglas-Klotz. Contact www.spiritualitycentre.org or info@spiritualitycentre.org or 020 7621 1391

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28: Foster Place Retreat Centre, Holmfirth: Responding to the Peculiar Questions: a year long course (8 full day sessions, finishing on 28th February 2010) in listening, with members of the Foster Place team. Contact Dorothy Walker on d.walker42@btinternet.com or 01484 680342

March

Again, many retreat centres and religious communities will hold special events for Lent. A comprehensive list of such centres and communities is included in *Retreats*, available from The Retreat Association. Contact info@retreats.org.co.uk or 020 7357 7736

6-8: Turvey Abbey, Bedfordshire: By Desert Paths. Silent weekend exploring Lenten themes. Contact Sr Judith on 01234 881432 or see www.turveyabbey.org.uk

21: Wisdom House, Romsey: The Spring Equinox with the Green Man. A day with artist Peter Clare, who specialises in spiritual painting. Contact www.wisdomhouseromsey.co.uk or reception@wisdomhouseromsey.co.uk or 01794 830206

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.

Contact us at:

The Living Spirituality Network, The Well at Willen, Newport Road, Willen, Milton Keynes MK15 9AA Telephone: ++44(0)1908 200675 email: spirituality@ctbi.org.uk

Staff: Director: Eley McAinsh Administrator: Win Kennedy

Design: Madeleine Frances **Printing:** Murrays the Printers 01908 326560

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Registered company no: 5661787.

Registered charity no: 1113299. Registered Office: 3rd floor Bastille Court 2 Paris Garden London SE1 8ND