



Dear LSN Supporters

Stuck in Friday evening gridlock between White City and Park Royal I edged close enough to the car in front to read the small print beneath the personal registration number. The owner of the sleek, pale gold Maserati sports car had a neat line in self-deprecating humour: *Wot mid-life crisis!* it said.

Mid-life is one of the many personal thresholds that can tip us into deep spiritual crisis, with or without distracting indulgences. Cecilia Goodman in this edition of *Living Spirituality News* lists others: bereavement, redundancy, separation and divorce, serious illness, retirement, any unexpected and unwelcome change. These can all leave us reeling, peering at finger-posts which, in Cecilia's graphic image, have suddenly become illegible, and grappling for handholds as we begin to fall. But, as she suggests, if we have the courage to stay with the painful, often lonely, disorientation, it can lead us into new healing and transforming depths.

On a broader canvas, crisis vocabulary drives the news agenda at every level. The 24 hour immediacy of ever more ingenious technology, the endless speculation and comment, the accumulation of horrific images and unanswerable questions, leave many of us feeling confused and helpless. As one of our most thoughtful journalists, Madeleine Bunting, wrote in her Guardian column recently, *Those who might have a sense of responsibility feel utterly powerless.*

At our Gathering in June, one participant echoed just this dilemma when she asked how can we know, in the face of so many pressing needs and so much blatant injustice, where we should direct our energies? How, in the midst of unrelenting crisis, can we respond responsibly? It's a question which haunts me, and I'm sure many if not all of you. I don't have the answer, but maybe there is the beginning of one here, in two writers whose thoughts I find helpful.

Ronald Blythe in his book *Divine Landscapes* writes: *Solitude is not a luxury, a form of spiritual escapism. It is a necessity if our action and commitment to justice is to be pure and authentic. Radical action follows radical contemplation. Solitude is necessary to preserve us from superficial activism, from exhaustion, from fanaticism.*

And in his now classic book on the spirituality of Meister Eckhart, *The Way of Paradox*, Cyprian Smith wrote that Eckhart believed: *If we want to be good and useful members of society it is very important that we enter the depths of ourselves, discover God in the Soul's Ground, and learn to act from that centre.* Meister Eckhart gives us the fundamental formula for tackling our urgent communal, social and political problems: *It is simply this: if you want to change the world, change yourself.*

Not an answer, as I say, but a legible signpost.

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

Eley

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Deeper into God by Sr Cecilia Goodman CJ

If you read the Summer newsletter or took part in this year's LSN Gatherings in London or Durham, you may remember that one of the key suggestions was that we are, as contemporary spiritual seekers, called to *Depth*; called to resist the lure of the trivial and the transient in order to listen more attentively to what theologian Paul Tillich called **the voice of ultimate concern**. But sometimes it can seem that there's little help available to us as we seek to dwell in depth. That's why I was so struck when I heard a recording of this lecture by Sr Cecilia Goodman, Director of St Bede's Pastoral Centre in York. She gives us a profound insight into the meaning of dwelling in depth, drawing on her personal experience, her wide reading in the Mystics, and many years of directing and accompanying others on their spiritual journeys.

Very often the Dark Night – The Night of the Spirit explored so graphically by St John of the Cross – appears in the form of a crisis of faith. It is often precipitated by outer happenings: mid life, a bereavement, divorce, a shift in family or work patterns, major illness, retirement; all times of insecurity and upheaval and times when perhaps we turn to God more than ever before – and find God missing. This Night is the most unsettling and hardest time in the whole spiritual journey – a time when we are in fact closer to God than we have ever been, yet feel further away and more confused and uncertain than ever.

Perhaps the one absolute statement that can be made of this spiritual stage is that it is a paradox. Our head that informs us that all is loss, confusion, and emptiness, while at a deeper, far less accessible level, we are driven by a powerful longing for a God we know of but cannot name or even quite believe in at any level that makes rational sense.

The problem is that we are unused to operating at this profound level. Our educational system discourages intuitive knowledge, and our churches do not often teach much about the traditions of the spiritual journey. Our inner confusion is intensified by an outer lack of spiritual support, and while psychological helps are often invaluable at this time, they cannot deal with our spiritual hunger or blindness. Often well-meaning friends and advisors fail to realise (or are frightened of) the depths of this spiritual darkness and encourage us to distract: to cheer up or walk away from God. But at the very deepest level of our being, distractions leave us sadder and lonelier than ever.


So, what is going on? What is this crisis of faith about?

If we look back we can see that somewhere we cross a line in our spiritual journey: the earlier stages of prayer were largely activated by ourselves. To some extent at least we could feel in control and we could recognise the landscape. God was known to us in ways that made human sense – a feeling of warmth and peace, a desire for God, a desire to live with integrity, a feeling of belonging and love within a community.

But as we cross that line, we move into what the French writer on mysticism, Garrigou Lagrange calls *Infused Contemplation*. From this point, all is gift from God. However hard we may try we cannot achieve these deeper levels of divine encounter. Our earlier stages of prayer demanded that we applied ourselves, took the initiative (or so it felt) and moved towards God; now what we are asked to do is much more difficult. Our task is now to move into a seemingly more passive or co-operative role, while God draws us more and more deeply into this relationship. We are no longer in the driving seat – and that can feel as if we are not even in the car!

At precisely the point when we lose the plot, when we become increasingly confused by our reactions to all things spiritual and often struggle to pray at all, we may be entering into the deepest level of our relationship with God so far. But because it is a new landscape we cannot understand or feel safe in it and hence the crisis of faith.

This stage of the spiritual journey can be found in the writings of almost everyone who has chronicled their relationship with God. The language and the detail vary according to the culture and temperament of the writer but whether it is from the fourteenth century or the twentieth, we find experiences of this often sudden shift into confusion, loss, and even distaste for all things previously valued and loved for their ability to connect us to God.



This is truly a time of crisis – the Chinese characters for *crisis* are made up of the characters for *danger and opportunity*. All too often the moment is dangerous simply because there is no one who can stand beside us and encourage us to stay with the dark and the unknowing. We walk away fearing that despite our deepest longings there is no God and nothing makes sense any more spiritually.

It is opportunity because if we dare stay with it, learn to read its landscape and not to be frightened of the paradox, we will eventually come to that place of union with God that we so long for.

St John of the Cross explains this shift beautifully in a letter to a Carmelite nun: he talks of the fact that in the early stages of our spiritual journey God enters into our world in ways we understand, the things I spoke of earlier: a feeling of warmth, a sense of God's presence, the ability to do good, peace, conviction, faith. But as our relationship with God deepens we are invited into God's own self – a landscape without familiarity and seemingly even without God, though in actuality closer to God than we have ever been.

This profound shift from the familiar to the Divine is so unlooked for, so alien to our past ways of identifying the spiritual that we flounder. We assume that we have lost the way, strayed from God, yet the opposite is true. It is as if we have to throw away all our security in the known way and walk into the darkness if we are to continue to follow God at these depths.

The Night of the Spirit is the moment when we have to let go of our controlling understanding of the spiritual landscape. The familiar signposts reassuring us of our good progress have all vanished, or perhaps are still there, but the writing is illegible.

This time is very different from times of depression or despair, different too from times when we have simply lost interest in God or all things spiritual, though the nuance is subtle. But it is very difficult for us to believe in the goodness of this confusion, and the age-old teaching that it is important to have a companion on our spiritual journey is never truer than at this time. Often it is only hearing ourselves talking to another that unearths the longing deep within and reminds us that we do still want this spiritual quest. We usually need the confidence of another to keep us faithful to this bewildering relationship with God.


The Night of the Spirit will overtake each one very differently, but each time it will do so in a way that makes us feel that this is nothing whatever to do with God but rather is brought on by our own inadequacy or failure, simply because it penetrates so deeply into the areas of self that most frighten and defeat us.

I think the best way to describe both our prayer at this time and the energy that keeps us searching is that of *longing*. This longing is strange and barely discernable to the conscious eye, but somehow compels us forward even when so much rational and emotional thought persuade us of the futility of our spiritual journey. It is as if simultaneously we are able to say *I don't know if I believe in God – even I don't believe in God – yet God is all I really live for*. This may not make much sense to those that have not chosen this journeying and often makes little sense to those of us who have – and yet I think in some deep, wise place within us, we know the truth of it.

This longing is now the primary element of our response to God – yet we hardly know what is going on and seldom value the ache within us enough to call it prayer. That, perhaps, is our downfall. Simply because we do not value the longing we do not stay with it long enough to explore it or understand it. Yet if we can take the time to understand it a little more, we begin to find encouragement – literally the courage to stay – to pursue this unfamiliar form of prayer. Gradually we will begin to trust the longing a little more, to find within the ache of it and the darkness, some glimmers of hope, of peace and of light. Never enough, we feel, but enough to keep us there – and that is all that matters.

The familiar prayer of our past has little to offer us, but just as Elijah was given the cakes in the desert, so we too can find crumbs of nourishment in our desert places. All that is asked of us is to co-operate with the emptiness, to trust that even if we do not know what is going on, God does, and in God's hands, such emptiness is not only safe, but profoundly good.

An extract from the 2001 Mary Ward Lecture entitled 'Crisis of Faith – Danger or Opportunity' used with kind permission.



Poems of Celtic Spirituality by Kenneth Steven

I often marvel at the way my two areas of work, LSN and Something Understood on Radio 4, feed each other in the most satisfying and creative ways. The poet Kenneth Steven recently contacted Something Understood because he felt his work might be well-suited to the programme. Before I'd had a chance to read any of it, I was involved in a day at St Bede's Pastoral Centre in York. In the course of the conversations that day, one participant described a delightful chance meeting with the poet on the island of Colonsay in September. Small world! as we say. Now, having read some of the poems and listened to Kenneth reading his work on a haunting CD called Sanctuary, I thought LSN supporters who don't already know the poet might enjoy discovering him.

Kenneth lives in Dunkeld in Perthshire. He is not only a poet, but a children's author, novelist and translator, and he has made a number of highly-regarded radio programmes. His poetry collections include Columba, Iona and Wild Horses. This poem, Clonmacnoise, is from his latest work Salt and Light which is largely inspired by the Celtic Christian world. Some of the 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

Clonmacnoise

Wrapped in the wool of winter
The fields breathed with frost

Even the Sannon confused
Searching in ribbons through the fields

The sun straining to see
Life a single frozen eye

We came to Clonmacnoise
Fifteen hundred years too late

Crows in the ivied silence of round towers
Gravestones bent as though in penitence

Chapels fallen in upon themselves
Like broken faith

And yet I could imagine
In the once upon a time of Ireland

Men awakening to break the wells
To bring in steamings of white water

Keeping the turf fire's glow
Storm after December's storm

Here where they had caught God's light
(So fragile, yet alive for ever)

To bear it bright
Out into the dark places of the earth

Wrapped in the wool of winter





Closer Encounters with the Sacred

David Tacey, author of *The Spirituality Revolution: the Emergence of Contemporary Spirituality* was in the UK briefly this summer to give two lectures at the Annual Conference of the Guild of Pastoral Psychology, held in Oxford in August. This is a brief quote from his first lecture, *Closer Encounters with the Sacred*, which complements Sr Cecilia's thoughts on dwelling in depth.

We seem to be moving further away from religious traditions, and from the habits, forms and structures of the past. Our homecoming is clearly not back to the past, but to the spiritual depths of our own being. It is a coming-home to ourselves, through a process of gradual self-realisation and awareness. However, as we move further away from the traditions, we appear to be moving closer to them at the same time.... Our exile is away from the external forms that nurtured our ancestors, and our homecoming is toward the mystical depths that give spirit and life to the tradition.



Bookshelf

The Well Library has undergone something of a transformation in recent months, under the professional direction of Librarian Barbara Merrifield. Readers may be interested to know that all the titles mentioned in the last issue of *Living Spirituality News*, and all but one of those listed below are now available for borrowing (for the cost of postage) and in future Barbara will select titles from each edition to add to the library stock. For further information contact the LSN office, or library@thewellatwillen.org.uk

A recent visit to Vancouver, and an excellent spirituality bookshop there called *Vine & Fig* (www.vineandfig.ca) had me pushing the limits of my baggage allowance as I stocked up on interesting American and Canadian titles. If you would like to buy them, rather than borrowing them, and have difficulty finding them, the Centre Bookshop (details below) will almost certainly be able to help.


Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan: The First Christmas – What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Birth (HarperOne US\$26.95) In *The First Christmas* two of today's top Jesus scholars join forces to show how history has biased our reading of the nativity story as it appears in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. As they did for Easter in their remarkable book *The Last Week*, here they explore the beginning of the life of Christ, peeling away the sentimentalism that has built up over the last 2000 years to reveal the truth of what the gospels actually say. They show that the Christmas story, read in its original context, is far richer and more challenging than we imagine.

Beverly Lanzetta: Emerging Heart – Global Spirituality and the Sacred (Fortress Press Can\$21.50) Professor Ursula King writes of this book: *Emerging Heart is an immensely moving account of Lanzetta's own spiritual experience combined with probing reflections on the mystical heart of world faiths, the significance of inter-religious dialogue, and the reality of a newly emerging global spirituality. An inspiring vision inviting to daring ventures.*

Bruce Sanguin: Darwin, Divinity, and the Dance of the Cosmos – an ecological Christianity (CopperHouse Can\$ 27.95) Weaving together the latest scientific understandings of the universe, with biblical narratives and overlooked strands of the Judeo-Christian tradition, Sanguin creates an ecological and truly evolutionary Christian theology. This book – and the work of integration it suggests – represents a fundamental challenge to our theological models. It also represents a rich opportunity to become re-acquainted with the Spirit of God moving in and through the very dynamics of this unfolding universe.

The following two titles are spirituality workbooks which can be used by individuals or groups to give direction and inspiration to their spiritual exploration and journeying.

Sally M O'Neil and Suzanne K Seaton: Pilgrimage of the Soul – Thresholds to the Mystery (Soaring Eagle Publishing US\$17.00). Hal Zina Bennett writes of this book: *Finding one's authentic self has always been a journey with few guides and even few maps to chart the way. The irony is that since we are each unique, we are the only ones who will ever know this territory intimately. So we are destined to be our own guides and our own mapmakers. It is not an easy task. Recognising this, the authors have provided exactly what we need to chart our unique paths.*





Mary Ruth Broz & Barbara Flynn: Midwives of an Unnamed Future – Spirituality for Women in Times of Unprecedented Change (Acta Publications US\$14.95).

This book is from women who are passionate about exploring their role in shaping an *unnamed future*. Using the image of the midwife, spiritual directors Mary Ruth Broz and Barbara Flynn have developed a series of reflections and rituals which can be used by individuals or groups of women coming together to deepen their own spirituality and uncover new life in age-old spiritual insights.

Mary Oliver: Thirst (Bloodaxe £8.95)

Mary Oliver is a hugely popular American poet, best known for her acute and lyrical observation of nature and beauty and a deep but understated spirituality. This new collection introduces two new directions in her work. Grappling with grief at the death of her beloved partner of over 40 years, she strives to experience sorrow as a path to spiritual progress; grief as part of loving and not its end. And she also chronicles overtly for the first time her discovery of faith. At the recent celebrations to mark the 10th Anniversary of The Well Community in Milton Keynes, where LSN has its office, the new Bishop of Oxford, John Pritchard quoted one of the new poems, *When I Am Among the Trees*, to moving effect.

And two titles from nearer to home!

Neil Paynter (ed): Gathered and Scattered (Wild Goose Publications £11.99)

Daily readings for four months from a wide range of contributors within the Iona Community, including John L Bell, Ruth Burgess, Ian M Fraser, Kathy Galloway, Tom Gordon, Peter Millar, J. Philip Newell and Jan Sutch Pickard. These prayers, songs, poems, articles and liturgies reflect the concerns of the Iona Community and can be used for group or individual reflection and are intended to inspire positive action and change in our lives.

Philip Roderick: Beloved – Henri Nouwen in conversation (Book and CD: Canterbury Press £9.99)

Henri Nouwen, one of the most deeply loved spiritual teachers of recent times, reflects on themes that were central to his life and thought in this rare new and previously unpublished interview. *Beloved* records a treasured conversation, recorded by Philip Roderick in 1992, in written and spoken form. The CD enables us to listen to Nouwen as he speaks about transforming loneliness, escaping the tyranny of busy-ness, the essence of prayer and choosing to live in ways that, moment by moment, remind of who we are: the beloved of God.

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). It's a great place to browse, a calm oasis in the midst of the City, and a good place to meet for a quiet conversation. A mail order service is available, with free post & packing within the UK, and searches are undertaken for out-of-print and American titles.





Pinboard

Advance notice!

12 April 2008 Sheffield: Marcus Borg on Jesus – Uncovering the Life, Teachings and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary. The hugely influential American theologian Marcus Borg will be speaking at the 2008 conference of the St Marks Centre for Radical Christianity in Sheffield. Contact Adrian Alker, 4 St Mark's Crescent, Sheffield, S10 2SG, email adrian@stmarkssheffield.co.uk or call 0114 267 0363

12-15 May 2008 Swanwick, Derbyshire: Minding the Gaps. The Retreat Association Conference, held once every four years. In 2008 keynote speakers are Abbot Christopher Jamison, Dr Gordon Lynch, and Eley McAinsh. Further information from The Retreat Association at www.retreats.org.uk or info@retreats.org.uk or 020 7357 7736





27-29 June 2008 Durham: Radical Amazement – Responding Contemplatively to the New Universe Story with Judy Cannato. A conference at Ushaw College for those involved in faith accompaniment. Contact St Antony's Priory at durhamstant@aol.com or 0191 384 3747

Integral Spirituality: An opportunity to meet regularly in a small group to learn, explore and grow. Integral Spirituality, based on the work of Ken Wilbur, pays attention to the evolving stages of individual, social and cultural development that, in combination with different states of awareness, shape and form our relationship with God. This group will run weekly for three terms, from January, at the Benedictine Centre for Spirituality in Oakwood, North London, facilitated by Jonathan Males. For further information call 020 8449 2499

December

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.

1: Glasgow Ignatian Centre: God Among Us. Quiet day for Advent. Contact www.iscglasgow.co.uk or admin@iscglasgow.co.uk or 0141 354 0077

1: Edenbridge, Kent: A Time of Waiting. Quiet day for Advent with the Sisters of St Andrew. Contact thecentre@sisters-of-st-andrew.com or 01342 850 388

3: Sarum College, Salisbury: Travelling with the Wise to the Crib. Advent retreat with Sr Mairead Quigley. Contact www.sarum.ac.uk or hospitality@sarum.ac.uk or 01722 338508

8: Sarum College, Salisbury: Advent Sacred or Secular. A day of exploration and quiet reflection with Janet Lake and Sue Langdon. Contact as above.

3-7: Community of Aidan & Hilda, Lindisfarne. Advent retreat on Holy Island. Contact www.aidan.org.uk or admin@ca-and-h.demon.co.uk or 01289 389249

14-16: Loyola Hall, Prescot, Merseyside. Advent weekend with Kath O'Brien and Eilish Curristin. Contact www.loyolahall.co.uk or mail@loyolahall.co.uk or 0151 426 4137

15: Tabor Carmelite Retreat House, Preston: In Silence & Peace. A quiet day of stillness with Jennifer Holden and Eugene McCaffrey. Contact www.carmelite.org.uk or tabor@carmelite.net or 01772 717122

January

11-13: The Othona Community, Dorset: Clutterbusting – your New Year resolution? How can we stop drowning in 'stuff'? A weekend to understand how clutter affects us and explore ways of dealing with it, led by Tony Jaques. Contact www.othona-bb.org.uk or mail@othona-bb.org.uk or 01308 897130

19: Glasgow Ignatian Centre: Desert Spirituality. An exploration of desert themes using images, scripture and art. Contact www.iscglasgow.co.uk or admin@iscglasgow.co.uk or 0141 354 0077

19: Sarum College, Salisbury: Rumi Storytelling Workshop. Why did the teachers of the past - Rumi, Buddha and Jesus – tell stories? Explore the healing and spiritual tradition of storytelling with Ashley Ramsden. Contact www.sarum.ac.uk or hospitality@sarum.ac.uk or 01722 338508

25-27: Sarum College, Salisbury: Spirituality and Healthcare. An experiential and reflective retreat for all health practitioners to explore their own spirituality and that of those they help and support, with Revd Prof Stephen Wright. Contact as above.

February

1-4: The Othona Community, Dorset: King Arthur at Candlemass. Master storyteller Anthony Nanson explores Britain's greatest story, the epic of King Arthur and uncovers what this cycle of tales can mean for us and our world today. Contact www.othona-bb.org.uk or mail@othona-bb.org.uk or 01308 897130



7: (and 6 March, 3 April, 1 May) London: Awakening Consciousness. A series of four lectures organised by the Guild of Pastoral Psychology. The first lecture is Synchronicity and Awakening Consciousness by Roderick Main. Contact rob@macdonaldmedia.co.uk or 020 8204 0175

22-24: Turvey Abbey, Bedfordshire: By Desert Paths. Silent weekend that explores Lenten themes through participation in the Divine Office and the practice of Lectio Divina. Contact Sr Judith on 01234 881432 or see www.turveyabbey.org.uk

26-28: Sarum College, Salisbury: God rid me of God. An exploration of our understanding of God in the light of this famous prayer of Meister Eckhart, led by Elizabeth West. Contact www.sarum.ac.uk or hospitality@sarum.ac.uk or 01722 338508

March

6-15: Iona: Individually Guided Retreat with the team from the Glasgow Ignatian Centre, held at the Catholic House of Prayer on Iona, and open to people of all denominations and none. Contact www.iscglasgow.co.uk or admin@iscglasgow.co.uk or 0141 354 0077

12: Sarum College, Salisbury: Two Women Facing Death. An exploration of the spirituality of Julian of Norwich and Ety Hillesum, led by Canon Melvyn Matthews. Contact www.sarum.ac.uk or hospitality@sarum.ac.uk or 01722 338508

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.

We have changed the format of Living Spirituality News in response to new postal charges. Going from A4 to A5 will save the Network several hundred pounds each year and we hope the smaller print will not cause inconvenience. **A large type version is available on request.**

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