



## Dear LSN Supporters

One of the questions I was asked at my interview for the post of Director of the Living Spirituality Network was: *Is there any such thing as bad spirituality: is there any aspect of spirituality that you would exclude?* It's a question that has come up quite frequently ever since. I've thought about it a lot too, not least on hearing the telling disclaimer on the answer-phone message of the Glasgow Ignatian Centre: *We are not the Glasgow Spiritualist Church!*

My memory of my answer in the interview is that I used the analogy of the healthy human body as a self-regulating organism, which can, on the whole, be trusted to recognise and take in what it needs, and to discern and expel what is not good for it ... it's when intake is excessive, over-restricted or manipulated that problems arise. Interestingly, when I told that story at Scottish Churches House in Dunblane, at an event chaired by Elizabeth Templeton, who had asked the question in the interview, she remembered a different bit of my answer: the bit where I suggested that true spirituality is both disciplined, and costly, much more than fluffy feelings and scented candles.

As our explorations in spirituality become more and more wide-ranging, there is a concern to develop guidelines and criteria for assessing the relative health and authenticity of the various spiritualities on offer. This is clearly an important area, but also one in which it's important not to draw boundaries too hastily, too judgementally nor too tightly. To do so runs the risk of cutting us off from much that is

not only creative, imaginative and life-enhancing, but which can open up new ways of understanding, experiencing and relating to God. On the other hand of course, as Alison Webster's article in this newsletter highlights, it's an area in which wisdom and discernment are also very necessary. Perhaps it's more helpful to look for broad guidelines and principles rather than tightly worded lists of what's in and out, acceptable and unacceptable.

It's also vitally important to acknowledge that spiritualities often only become recognisably *healthy* or *unhealthy* in the complex interaction with an individual's personality, circumstances and history. Because of where I was in my life at the time, the most profoundly damaging spiritual book I've ever read was the classic *Holiness*, written by JC Ryle in the nineteenth century and much vaunted, (certainly 20-odd years ago!) in certain evangelical circles.

So, in this edition of *Living Spirituality News* we're beginning our exploration of healthy and unhealthy spiritualities. It would be good to have your thoughts and responses so that we can go on developing our thinking on the issue, especially as it's a subject that we'll return to in two major LSN events, one in Durham and one in Salisbury, planned for Autumn 2005.

Thank you

Eley

## 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 is an initiative of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (registered charity number: 259688)

The 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, the Milton Keynes Churches Council, and Churches Together in Britain and Ireland.

### BECOME A FRIEND OF LSN:

#### Sponsorship scheme:

The Living Spirituality Network needs an assured annual income to help us plan for the future and to enable our work to continue to grow. We are grateful for the generous support we receive from individuals, groups and communities, but in the present climate funding is often short-term and for specific projects. In order to put the core activities of the Network on a more secure, and sustainable, financial footing, we have launched a Friends scheme. If you believe that our work in helping people to explore the meaning of spirituality is important, please consider becoming a Friend of the Living Spirituality Network. There are three levels of commitment: Friend (£30 pa), Sponsor (£75 pa), and Patron (£150 pa). Please contact the office for details.

*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. A large type version is available on request.

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## Bad Karma

*Alison Webster is Adviser for Social Responsibility in the Diocese of Oxford, and author of Wellbeing (SCM Press, 2002)*

Eva\* had to give up her job running a restaurant and wine bar. Though an excellent manager, Eva could no longer stand the long hours and the extreme stress of dealing with customers who used the toilets to 'do' cocaine, and who binge drank and beat one another up at closing time. Proximity to such senseless violence became intolerable for one who had been traumatised by various kinds of violence in her own past. Unemployed, with a mortgage to pay and a child and a husband to support (he was too lazy to get a job), Eva resorted to working as a carer for an exploitative private company who paid her just £5 an hour.

Exhausted, unwell, and reflecting on her experiences, Eva - influenced by a range of 'alternative spiritualities' - suggested to me that it was because of her 'karma' that she was going through such tough times.

'Perhaps,' she said, 'there are some lessons I need to learn through this.' At the same time, she expressed relief that her husband had finally got a job - though she noted, with a certain chagrin, that he is earning more than she is, though he has no qualifications and absolutely no experience. But unlike Eva, he is a man and he is not from Eastern Europe.

I am extremely worried by this analysis of 'karma' and the spiritual worldview it suggests. It seems to me to heap self-blame and guilt onto Eva, who is already stretched to breaking point by a malign concatenation of structural inequalities:

prejudice against her as a foreigner in the English workplace; sexism in the employment system, and acute shortages in affordable housing, to name just three. Her situation has nothing to do with 'karma', but everything to do with social injustice.

This is not the first time I've encountered individualistic spiritualities that blame vulnerable individuals for bad things that happen to them, and I consider them profoundly dangerous. This is where homespun philosophies of self-actualisation can come badly unstuck, though there is plenty of victim-blaming in mainstream religions too.

The individualisation of one's personal fortunes completely negates the most obvious fact about being human: that we are social beings - dependent upon the actions of others for our wellbeing, and responsible for the good of others through our own choices and actions. We are never wholly the authors of our own successes (though we prefer to believe that we are), and - whilst personal agency and responsibility are very important - there is always much that is out of our control. This is called human interdependence.

If we're looking for criteria by which to judge the various spiritual insights that come our way, we could do worse than ask ourselves: where is the corporate, justice dimension? How are we helped towards an understanding of the complex system of institutionalised inequality and discrimination of which we are all a part? Spiritualities that don't help with that, don't help us much at all.

*\*Not her real name*

## By Their Fruits

*Eley McAinsh is Director of the Living Spirituality Network and Producer of Something Understood, Radio 4's weekly spiritual anthology*

The ancient pagan mid-summer festival of Lughnasadh marked the point in the year when people reaped what they had sown and celebrated the fruits of the mystery of nature. So fundamental are they to human life and survival that images of harvesting and fruitfulness still resonate deeply within us, despite our dubious dependence on supermarkets and the fields and orchards of distant lands. Such images run like a common thread through Old and New Testaments, and through the sacred texts and teachings of most, if not all, of the world's major faiths. They are also common to many of the non-traditional, eclectic, emerging spiritualities of the day.

In considering some possible hallmarks of *healthy* and *unhealthy* spiritualities, two complementary sayings come to mind. The first, the warning in Matthew against false prophets:

*Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits.*

And the second from Galatians: *The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.*

The first affirms that there will always be some visible, palpable outworking of a person's spirituality, for good or ill, but the second, at least taken out-of-context as I've done here, suggests a rather soft, pietistic spirituality to be the ideal, almost, indeed, the *privatised* spirituality about which so many are concerned today.

Gerard Hughes, in his latest book *God in All Things* suggests four guidelines for distinguishing true spirituality from false: the *Intrapersonal*, the *Interpersonal*, the *Social* and the *Environmental*.

He argues that while the first, the *Intrapersonal*, is very important because it is the way in which we relate to our own inner selves, to our moods, feelings, emotions and mental states, the others must also be given due weight. Suppose, he writes, that you were to ask me how I pray and I was to tell you that 'My prayer time is the most important and precious time of my life. It fills me with peace, joy and delight. I pray frequently and never fail to be helped by it.' Would it necessarily follow that my spirituality is sound?... In order to answer that question, he suggests, we need to look beyond the intrapersonal to how we relate to those close to us, to society more widely, and to the environment. The quality and commitment of these wider relationships are crucial indicators of the health or otherwise of our spirituality.

Gerard Hughes is writing specifically about Christian spirituality, though arguably his guidelines apply more broadly. Marie McCarthy, in her article in Blackwell's Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology outlines six tests which could also be applied to any *authentic* spirituality, Christian or otherwise: *contemplative awareness; effective action in the world, which works towards the healing of the world; community, because spirituality is not an isolated, privatised, individual affair; a disposition of openness, especially an openness to the new and unexpected and to a future that would be different; non-dualistic thinking and acting, and discernment.*

Of this last test, *discernment*, McCarthy writes: *A final mark of authentic spiritualities is that they generally offer a set of guidelines and practices for discerning the path we are being called to follow. They invite us to put our lives in dialogue with the tradition through prayer, reflection, meditation, individual and group guidance and other practices. They encourage attentive listening, an awareness of how we are being*

called and where we are being led. In this sense authentic spiritualities are marked by a sense of obedience to something or someone larger than and beyond oneself.

I suggest these tests apply, with deep insight and precision, to authentic spiritualities both within and beyond the traditional religions. They apply, for example, to the spirituality of many who experienced such damage within their original tradition that they have pursued their journeys in quite different directions. They would apply also, for example, to the un-named, eclectic spirituality of the hugely popular, if improbably named, Oriah Mountain Dreamer, author of *The Invitation, The Dance and The Call*. The tests would apply to the spirituality of Thomas Moore, author of the, again, hugely popular *Care of the Soul and The Soul's Religion*, and to that of the American Buddhist Master Jack Kornfield, author of *The Path With Heart and After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*.

These writers all stress, throughout their work, the importance of the discipline of a daily spiritual practice in grounding one's spirituality and in the development of deep discernment.

But while the application of Marie McCarthy's tests admits a number of contemporary, non-traditional spiritualities to the fold, it also highlights a range of spiritualities which might not, by way of contrast, pass the tests.

Many of the new, or recently rediscovered forms of popular spirituality which feature so heavily on the mind/body/spirit shelves (along with the occult material at one end and the undemanding, quick-fix manuals at the other) might be described as non-incarnational and neo-gnostic. Such spiritualities employ similar language: the vocabulary of spirit and enlightenment for example, but while there is much talk of the importance of the heart as opposed to the head, it seems not, in reality, to be a heart of life and muscle and blood, a heart of passion and pain, that is meant, but one of filigree and air...

Kenneth Leech in *The Sky is Red: Discerning the Signs of the Times* warns of the dangers of increasingly prevalent gnostic spiritualities. Contrast, if you will, the features he describes with Marie McCarthy's tests and Gerard Hughes' guidelines.

By the early 1970s, Leech writes, I had become aware of the emergence of new forms of gnosticism, in both Christian and non-Christian forms. Historically there have been three features of gnostic spiritualities. First a concern for enlightenment, self-awareness, gnosis,

involving the acquiring of insight and spiritual power. Indeed the gnostic sees salvation primarily in terms of enlightenment... Secondly, the division of humanity into initiates – those who are in the know – and the rest of us, the common herd. ... Thirdly, a deep suspicion of the flesh and of matter, and a tendency to locate the source of evil in the material world and its structures. ...in recent years, it seems to me, that the resurgence of gnosticism has been much more pronounced, an increasing amount of it now taking place in the Christian church. ...This has done great harm to the whole notion of spirituality.

I said in my Letter to Supporters in this edition of Living Spirituality News that I think it's important not to try to draw boundaries around spiritualities too hastily, too judgementsally nor too tightly. But I do think there are boundaries to be aware of.

Thomas Moore has the following, to me helpful, warning in his *The Soul's Religion*:

The spiritual realm can have a strong attraction that may lift you out of the doldrums of everyday struggles, but it can also destroy you by taking you too far from reality... Spirituality finds depth in the descent into the soul rather than in flights of inspiration and enthusiasm. In this way it serves life, and the birds offer encouraging moments of bliss. In recent centuries it seems we have generally forgotten this lesson in the spiritual life. We admire the flight and try to avoid the descent or judge it to be pathological. But if spirituality is not in and of this world, the chances are, it's neurotic. ... By going down into the depths of the soul we find the raw material for a grounded spiritual life, and we discover a different quality of vision, deep forms of prayers and meditation, and a highly individual call to ethics.

Suggested reading:

Gerard W Hughes: *God in All Things* (Hodder & Stoughton)

Kenneth Leech: *The Sky is Red: Discerning the Signs of the Times* (DLT)

Terry Tastard: *The Spark in the Soul: Spirituality and Social Justice* (DLT)

Marie McCarthy: Article in *Blackwell's Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*

Thomas Moore: *The Soul's Religion* (Bantam Books)

## Farewells

Our former Chaplain, Paul Renyard has passed on the sad news of the deaths of three long-standing members of the organisations and communities which gave rise to the Living Spirituality Network.

Henry Lefever died on 7<sup>th</sup> August. He was the last-surviving original Trustee of the Farncombe Community and co-leader, with Paul Renyard, of the Kent Group. Paul writes of Henry: 'He was one of those unsung heroes of the Church who always took the lowest place and ought to have been promoted to the highest!'

Horace Dammers died on 23<sup>rd</sup> August. He was the former Dean of Bristol and an important member of the Bristol Group who often took Retreats for Fellowship. He was a considerable force in discussion about the future of the Farncombe Community and at one time even thought of taking on the House for the Little Gidding Community, which he had helped to revive.

Kathleen Higgins died on 2<sup>nd</sup> September. She was for many years a great stalwart of the Fellowship of Prayer for Unity, and an ex-sister of the Church of South India.

May they all rest in peace.

## Bookshelf

Some new titles which might be of interest to LSN Supporters:

David Tacey: *The Spirituality Revolution – the emergence of contemporary spirituality* (Brunner-Routledge) £14.99

This new book by the Australian David Tacey was described in *The Tablet* by David Hay (author, with Kate Hunt, of the report: *The Spirituality of People who don't go to Church*) as one of the first creative responses to the seismic social change of the past 10 years, a decade in which there has been such a shrinkage in the meaning of 'religion' and an expansion of the term 'spirituality'. There are significant parallels to be drawn between what has happened in Australia and much of Western Europe and North America. *The Spirituality Revolution* recognises that we have outgrown the ideals and values of previous times and reveals an image of the spiritual situation of our era. Recent discoveries in physics, biology, psychology and ecology have, arguably, begun to restore status to previously discredited spiritual visions of reality and this book claims to illustrate ways in which we might uncover a universal spiritual wisdom that could transform our splintered world.

Michael Kirwan: *Discovering Girard* (DLT) £10.95

This is an introduction to the life and thought of René Girard. Girard's work has become hugely influential in literature and cultural studies but it is in understanding the relationship between religion and violence that his theories have created the greatest impact. Girard's work, particularly on scapegoating, with its implications for theories and doctrines of Atonement, is seen by many to be key to a completely new understanding of Christianity.

John Skinner: *Sounding the Silence* (Gracewing) £7.99

John Skinner trained for 13 years as a Jesuit and then joined The Times in Fleet Street for a short while. In 1990 he became a full-time writer and lecturer with a special interest in the English mystics. His latest book is an invitation to silence. Inspired by the Carthusian tradition of silent prayer, he seeks to offer this intense experience to anybody seeking to engage with their own inner reality and with a deeper experience of God. In his introduction to *Sounding the Silence* John Skinner writes: *Although for me personally, it is Christ who is the mainspring of my prayer, I conceive this Silence to be common to us all. For the universal language of mankind is our very being: to sound the Silence at the centre of our day-to-day existence is to seek to be fully alive.*

Patrick Purnell SJ: *Imagine* (Way Books) £7.00

Eley McAinsh writes: I was introduced to this collection of poems inspired by the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius by the Bishop of Bath and Wells, the Rt Rev Peter Price, at the annual conference of the Spiritual Exercises Network earlier this summer and have been enjoying it ever since. I'm struck by the poet's reflections on the imagination in his introduction to the collection: *We change, he writes, not because of doctrinal argument or moral persuasion, though both have their place, but because the imagination calls us into a new future and offers us an incentive to change. Imagination offers us images and pictures of how the pieces of our lives could fit together in a completely new way. And if anyone is up very early on Boxing Day, they'll hear one of the poems, called simply, 'Mary,' in Something Understood on Radio 4. Becoming is a winter occupation ... is the haunting first line, and the last.*

Monica Furlong: *Prayers and Poems* (SPCK) £8.99 Reviewed by Alan Horner

The introduction to this book, written by Clare Herbert, is an integral part of it, showing how the author's life is the cradle of her concerns. Monica Furlong's writing always demands our attention. Here is the honesty we have long associated with her, with memorable phrases and flashes of humour to a purpose. The presentation is helpful; with only one item to a page, there is an implied invitation to be unhurried in using it. The book would be a useful resource to take as a companion on a retreat. In addition to the poems and personal prayers, there are Eucharistic prayers which are harder to assess without actually using them. They offer some interesting variations to more familiar liturgies, but it is a little odd and distracting to have each line beginning with a capital letter, though that is often customary in poetry.

Joy Mead: *Making Peace - in practice and poetry* (Wild Goose Publications) £7.99 Reviewed by Alan Horner

Joy Mead's book is also hard to assess, since it is offered for group use, though individual use is also possible. Five sessions are suggested, but with the recognition that longer time may be required. Some readers might be put off by the word poetry but they should not be, for although some poems are included and suggestions made for experiments in verse, the book is more about image and language and how we use them to talk about relationships at every level. Language is not only expressive but creative and 'peace making in practice' in this book is not so much about activities to undertake as attitudes to foster. The book is perhaps let down a little by the poor quality of the photographs included by way of illustration but it is in a distinctive and pleasing format with clear print.

Also received for review are -

*Watching for the Kingfisher* by Ann Lewin (Inspire) £6.99, being *Candles and Kingfishers* and *Flashes of Brightness*, brought into one volume with some additional poems, and with an improved binding. The first is an established favourite for many people; the second was reviewed on publication in this Newsletter.

*Whispers of Love* by Pat Marsh (Foundery Press) £4.95

A collection of simple prayers and reflections, simply expressed.



## Pinboard

Many communities and retreat centres throughout Britain and Ireland will be holding special Advent events and quiet days. Here's a small selection, but for further information on local events please check in *Retreats*, the annual publication of the Retreat Association (0845 456 1429 or [info@retreats.org.uk](mailto:info@retreats.org.uk))

15-19<sup>th</sup> Nov, The Open Gate, Holy Island, Berwick-upon-Tweed, St Hilda's Tide Pre-Advent Retreat – Inviting the Fulfiller of our Potential, led by Ray Simpson. Contact 01289 389222 or [bookings@theopengate.ndo.co.uk](mailto:bookings@theopengate.ndo.co.uk)

2, 9, 16<sup>th</sup> Dec, Glasgow Ignatian Centre, Advent Prayer – ways of praying with Advent themes. Contact 0141 354 0077 or [iscentre@btopenworld.com](mailto:iscentre@btopenworld.com)

10-12<sup>th</sup> Dec, Turvey Abbey, silent weekend sharing the experience and the beauty of the Advent Liturgy with the Turvey Communities: an oasis of peace in the pre-Christmas rush. Contact 01234 881432 or [SisterLucy@turveyabbey.freeserve.co.uk](mailto:SisterLucy@turveyabbey.freeserve.co.uk)

11<sup>th</sup> Dec, Sisters of St Andrew, Edenbridge, Kent, Advent Mystery – a quiet day in Advent in painting and poetry. Contact 01342 850 388 or [team@standrews2.freeserve.co.uk](mailto:team@standrews2.freeserve.co.uk)

### Other events:

4<sup>th</sup> Dec, Sowerby, Thirsk, N Yorks, Centre for the Study of Theology and Health Research Day. Contact 01845 522580 or [holyroodhouse@centrethirsk.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:holyroodhouse@centrethirsk.fsnet.co.uk)

6-10<sup>th</sup> Dec, The Open Gate, Holy Island, Berwick-upon-Tweed, The New Monasticism – Desert, Celtic and Contemporary Insights. Contact 01289 389222 or [bookings@theopengate.ndo.co.uk](mailto:bookings@theopengate.ndo.co.uk)

7-9<sup>th</sup> Jan '05, London Colney, St Albans, Christians Aware Annual Conference, on Faith and Environment. Contact 0116 254 0770

15<sup>th</sup> Jan '05, Glasgow Ignatian Centre, A Faith that Does Justice – a day of reflection for those who work for Justice and Peace, with Joan McGeough FCJ. Contact 0141 354 0077 or [iscentre@btopenworld.com](mailto:iscentre@btopenworld.com)

19-21<sup>st</sup> Feb '05, Cold Ash, nr Newbury, Berkshire, Women's Poetry & Spirituality Weekend, with Nicola Slee. Contact Gillian Limb, 42 Gordon Avenue, Winchester, SO23 0QQ

24<sup>th</sup> Feb-6<sup>th</sup> Mar '05, Edinburgh, 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Edinburgh Festival of Middle Eastern Spirituality and Peace, bringing together artists, scholars, grassroots spiritual activists and speakers from the Sufi, Druze, Baha'i, Ismaili, Zoroastrian and other lesser known spiritual traditions, in addition to representatives of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Contact Neill Walker, 0131 331 4469 or [njwalk3300@hotmail.com](mailto:njwalk3300@hotmail.com)

15-17<sup>th</sup> Mar '05, Alnmouth Friary, Northumberland, The Wisdom of Years, exploring positive and negative aspects of ageing, the Christian journey in the second half of life, and prayer and spirituality for older Christians. Organised by Simeon and Anna: an Ecumenical Project Exploring Spirituality in Ageing. Contact 0191 259 9024 or [simeon.anna@btinternet.com](mailto:simeon.anna@btinternet.com)