

Awakening

A Spaceforsoul publication

July 2021

People of the earth

We are pagans at heart, 'people of the earth', people with a deep-rooted longing for communion with the natural world. Particularly in Western society, however, we have lost the close connection with nature that our ancestors had. Humanity and nature have become estranged. Many of us no longer live in direct contact with the earth. Furthermore, we no longer see the Divine as being inherent in the natural world as, for example, our Celtic ancestors did. We have forgotten that nature is an echo of the beauty of the Divine. It awakens us to the Divine presence.

Nature has always been a powerful path to the sacred for me. It is in a sense my 'church'. When I am walking in the natural world, it is as if I am returning to my natural element. I feel more alive and more deeply connected with my spiritual self than I do anywhere else. On the wall in the room where I write, there is a photograph I took of the woods overlooking the lake at Stourhead in Wiltshire. John O'Donohue writes of 'the sanctuary of... a place in nature where your mind and heart find rest'. For me, Stourhead is that place of sanctuary. It is shelter for my soul .

Visiting Stourhead for the first time took my breath away. A lake in the trees. How hauntingly beautiful. I remember the first day I went there as if it were yesterday. When I caught sight of the lake for the first time, I stood for a while and wept. I felt so at home and at peace. Though I had never stood on this shore before, I had the strangest sense that I knew these waters, that they remembered and welcomed me. The lake drew me to it and I longed to immerse myself in its quiet depths, to abandon myself to its ebb and flow, to let it carry me with it where it would.

Now more than ever, there is a pressing need for us to re-ignite our 'love affair' with Nature, to re-learn how to live in communion and harmony with her

rather than exercising dominion over her. We need to embrace what Martin Buber calls an 'I-Thou relationship with her, to move away from the objective, analytical stance of the scientist towards a more mystical and contemplative way of relating to her.

When we commune with nature, we open ourselves - body, mind soul and spirit - to the essential interconnectedness and oneness of all life. We awaken to the beauty and sacredness of the natural world. We enter into its mystery. We come to 'know' it in an experiential, intuitive way, in a way that opens us more fully to all that it has to give us. When we approach nature with such an attitude of awe and reverence, moreover, there is often a surprising sense of being welcomed and sustained by it. The philosopher, Henry David Thoreau describes an experience of such communion very powerfully:

'In the midst of a gentle rain... I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature, in the very patterning of the drops, and in every sound and sight around my house, an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me... Every little pine needle expanded and swelled with sympathy and befriended me.'

I too have known the 'sweet and beneficent society' of Nature. As I have walked barefoot on her sacred ground, I have felt her healing touch. As I have immersed myself in her tender beauty until my senses are overflowing, I have known her peace. As I have walked amongst her whispering trees, I have sensed her ancient wisdom. She is for me the face of the sacred mystery that is the Divine.

Kaitlyn Steele

Progressive voices: Richard Rohr

Richard Rohr is an internationally renowned American author, spiritual writer and Franciscan friar. He has published over thirty books and numerous recorded talks and daily meditations. He is also the founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation, an educational nonprofit organisation which seeks to introduce people to the contemplative path to inner transformation.

Rohr was born and grew up in Kansas. His father was a wheat farmer who was hit hard in the 1930s, both by a period of severe dust storms that hit the so-called Dust Bowl in the Great Plains and then by the Great Depression. Nonetheless, Richard describes himself as having had a happy childhood. The Rohrs were a devout family and so he was educated at a Catholic school run by nuns. For him, this was a positive experience. 'I don't have any nun horror stories,' he told one interviewer.

At the age of fourteen, Rohr came across a particular book that changed the direction of his life: 'The Perfect Joy of St. Francis', a novel about the life of the saint. It was then that he decided to become a Franciscan friar. He joined the Franciscans at the age of 18 and was ordained as a priest nine years later, apparently clad in hippie vestments! As a young priest, he often led retreats for teenagers. His talks were recorded and then turned into books which became so popular that he became a kind of 'Christian celebrity'.

Rohr had come of age during the progressive era of the Second Vatican Council when Catholics were beginning to question and challenge aspects of traditional Catholic doctrine and to call for the church to become more engaged with the wider world. As a novice, he had also worked for a time in a Native American Indian community in New Mexico. Though the community was largely Christian, its people also followed traditional religious practices such as the simple practice of greeting the sun just before dawn, a meditation ritual that dates back hundreds of years. This experience helped him to recognise that the Divine can be found through the rituals and practices of religions other than his own.

Many of Rohr's followers are millennials who no longer claim affiliation with traditional religion and for whom the church is no longer relevant. He sees his popularity with them as flowing from their deep spiritual hunger and their search for a message which is relevant to them. It is also in part the consequence of his willingness to challenge conservative Christianity which he describes as a 'toxic religion'. He has come to be known as a



'fearless critic' of some aspects of conservative Christianity, a stance that inevitably got him into trouble with the church. According to Rohr, during the early seventies, a group of local Catholics secretly recorded his sermons in an attempt to have him excommunicated. While the attempt failed, the attacks have persisted over the years as Rohr has continued to preach his radical message. Some Christians have even branded him a heretic. 'I'm too old for them to bother me anymore', he says.

In his writings, Rohr has addressed a wide range of themes such as the integration of action and contemplation, peace and justice issues, male spirituality, the enneagram, eco-spirituality and the journey of inner transformation. It is, however, his most recent book 'The Universal Christ' that is most important to him. He sees it as his 'end-of-life book', in which all his 'big thoughts' have come together. In the book, Rohr distinguishes between the person of Jesus and the Universal or Cosmic Christ, the spirit that suffuses everything in the universe and that has been and still is present in all cultures, civilisations and religions. Jesus, he says is the incarnation or embodiment of that spirit. Rohr also preaches a radical inclusivity. According to his teachings, you don't have to follow Jesus or practice the tenets of any formal religion, you just have to 'fall in love with the divine presence, under whatever name.'

These are teachings that will undoubtedly live on after Rohr dies. His progressive voice speaks powerfully to a generation that has lost faith in the church but is, in part thanks to him, regaining its connection with the Universal Christ.

Progressive perspectives: What is prayer?

'Prayer is the song of the heart.'
Kahlil Gibran

Prayer is perhaps the most common – and some would argue the most powerful and compelling – spiritual practice that people engage in. There are many different ways of praying. Prayer may be private and individual or communal and corporate. It may be spoken aloud or 'in the mind', chanted or sung, silent and wordless. It may be ritualised or formal such as the Muslim ritual prayer known as *salat* or the Christian Lord's prayer. Or it may be natural and spontaneous such as colloquial or conversational prayer in which we communicate with the Divine in our own words.

Defining prayer

So what is the experience that we are seeking to describe when we talk about being engaged in prayer? The word 'prayer' is notoriously difficult to define, in part because it means different things to different people and in part because different forms of prayer are experienced in different ways.

For those of us who believe in a personal god or goddess, it is the primary channel or medium through which we relate to the Divine. For many of us, it is, as Kenneth Pargament puts it, 'the vital ingredient that cements [our] ongoing relationship with God'. Alternatively, prayer may be a way of reaching a higher plane of human consciousness. It may be a means of connecting with our spiritual centre or 'Higher Self' or it may be a way of awakening our innermost 'Buddha nature' and enabling us to tap into the source of love, compassion and wisdom that resides within us.

Is it possible then to arrive at a definition which is broad enough and inclusive enough to capture these many different forms and experiences of prayer? One of the most inclusive definitions of prayer I have come across is that offered by Peter Gubi. He defines prayer as a process of 'encounter, connection or communication with' the Divine. Prayer, as he sees it, is 'I' engaging directly with 'Other', whether the 'Other' is seen as some energy force or being that is 'other' or 'more' than the self



or as another 'higher' dimension of the self. Jane Vennard also defines prayer in a very inclusive way when she argues that our definition of prayer should be expanded to include all forms of spiritual practice. She believes that thinking about prayer as just one form of practice amongst many others introduces an artificial distinction:

'Giving up the traditional categories freed me to expand my old definition of prayer to include all spiritual practices. I was also able to explore the idea that all spiritual practices could be experienced as prayer.'

Most of us are perhaps likely to see prayer in a more traditional way, but whatever meaning it may carry for us, no definition can hope to capture what we experience as lying at the heart of prayer – its fundamental essence – which is profound, mysterious and deeply personal. Something is inevitably lost in the process of definition.

The experience of prayer

When people are asked to describe how they make sense of their experience of prayer, there are a number of key words that surface repeatedly – words like awareness, experiencing, connection, communication, conversation, communion or intimate fellowship, presence and encounter. It seems clear from this that prayer is often experienced as a relational act.

Some of the most profound and most beautiful words that have been written about the experience of prayer come from the writings of John O'Donohue. In his book, 'Eternal Echoes', he spoke of prayer in a number of different ways: prayer as

ancient longing, prayer as presence and prayer as being. Prayer, he said, is 'the most beautiful poem of longing'. When we pray, we voice the deepest longing of the soul and this voice of longing 'reaches outwards and inwards to unearth our ancient belonging. Prayer is the bridge between longing and belonging.'

To enter into prayer is to remind ourselves that we are 'from Elsewhere', that we are restless pilgrims who wander the earth knowing that, however good life may be, there is always something missing. Beneath the many different longings of the human heart, there is a deeper, more ancient longing, a longing that has always been there and that always will be there. There is a depth of aching in our souls that never ceases to call to us, an eternal longing that has 'its own light, hunger and energy', a longing for 'the Great Belonging'.

Sometimes before I begin to pray, I listen to a beautiful version of Jewish song called 'Shalom Aleichem'. It is a poem sung by Jews every Friday night as part of the traditional Shabbat meal which signals the arrival of the Jewish Sabbath. I love the sound of the Hebrew words, the soulful voice of the singer and the haunting music which is imbued with such profound longing that it brings tears to my eyes. It is as if the ancient longing that I hear so clearly in the words, the music and the voice resonates with the deepest longing of my soul to come home to the Divine.

O'Donohue also described prayer as 'the art of presence'. As I see it, it is not that prayer takes us into the Divine Presence for we are always within it and it is always within us, wherever we are and whether or not we are aware of it. Prayer is not a reaching out to a far distant God. It is 'the stillness of pure attention to the Divine' in which we bring the fullness of our presence to an encounter which takes place deep within us. Prayer clears our vision so that we might see with 'the wild eye of the soul', that we might recognise the Source and Ground of our Being and remember that it is within the One that 'we live and move and have our being' to draw on the words of the Apostle, Paul. In that sense, prayer is an act of recognition and remembering.

Sometimes when I pray, however, I experience it as more of a struggle to be present – a struggle to still my mind and stay 'in the now', to find the off switch that will shut down my 'monkey mind' as the Buddhists describe it, to let go of all that distracts me from the Divine. Sometimes it is a frustrating experience of absence, a silent 'waiting on God', a reaching into the

Divine that is imbued with the deepest longing of my soul but seems not to bring me what I seek. What I have come to understand is that this too is prayer.

Finally, O'Donohue spoke too of what he called 'the prayer of being'. He made a distinction between prayers – 'the sequence of holy words with which we attempt to reach God' – and inner prayer which is 'a deeper and more ancient conversation' that takes place deep within us. He believed that our deepest prayer happens 'in our nature.' Such prayer is, he said, the activity of the soul. Below the outer layers of our personality, the soul is always praying:

'At its deepest level, creation is continuously at prayer. The most vital and creative prayer is always happening within us even though we never fully hear it. Now and again we catch the echoes of the music of inner prayer... In this sense, the inner life of each person is prayer that commences in the first stir of the womb and ends with the last breath before return to the invisible world.'

Pray as you can

There is a well-known spiritual maxim which urges us 'to pray as you can, not as you can't.' What matters is not what prayer methods we use or even what we experience when we pray, but that we cultivate a natural and authentic prayerfulness of the heart. There is no such thing as a right or wrong way to pray. When we pray authentically, we are being true to who we are. Such prayer is the prayer of the heart. It flows from our innermost being and is not constricted by others' rules, demands or expectations.

We pray in the way that we do because we cannot meaningfully pray otherwise. And that is precisely why there are so many different ways of taking ourselves onto holy ground and of entering into a living relationship with the Sacred Mystery to which the soul is so powerfully drawn. In her poem entitled 'Prayer', Mary Oliver, encourages us to:

'...just pay attention, then patch a few words together and don't try to make them elaborate, this isn't a contest but the doorway into thanks, and a silence in which another voice may speak.'

Kaitlyn Steele

Discovering the mystics:

Hildegard of Bingen

Hildegard of Bingen is a mystic for our time. Her 12th century works offer insight, wisdom and guidance on the issues the world is facing today. Earth care, mindfulness, self compassion, feminism, healthy masculinity, healthy diet, wholesome living, speaking truth to power, working for justice and so much more - all of these feature in her life and teachings.

Being the tenth child of a noble family, her parents dedicated her to the church at birth. At eight years of age, she was sent to 'Jutta' an anchoress at the Benedictine monastery at Disibodenberg, who provided a religious education to girls of noble birth. The monastery was of Celtic origin which is evidenced in Hildegard's thinking. After Jutta's death, Hildegard was appointed as Abbess of the emerging convent at age thirty eight. She went on to found two more convents in her lifetime.

From as early as three years of age, Hildegard experienced visions she believed to be from God. Feeling unworthy and uneducated, she shared these with only a few people. However, at forty two years, she believed that God told her in a vision to write down and share what she had been shown. With the blessing of the Bishop and subsequently the Pope, this became her life's mission. She even went on preaching tours, a radical step for a woman in her time and setting.

The author of ten books, she wrote Biblical commentary, recorded her visions, produced a manual on natural medicine and an anthology of her poetry. She is the first woman known to have written an opera. Her music and hymns are still held in high musical regard. She supported the texts with illustrations which were a combination of recorded visions and prophetic art.

Hildegard had a deep understanding of human nature. Using art, she shows the inner struggles people face. She paints the 'blue man' to demonstrate the human need for compassion and to be compassionate. Her paintings of the 'red man' indicate humanity's common origin, alluding to all being formed from the earth by the creator. Matthew Fox tells of sharing some of her illustrations with a Jungian therapist who remarked that Hildegard was 'the most mature person he'd ever seen'.



Contrary to the theology of 'original sin', she proffered 'original wisdom'. She pictured it as each child being born with a folded golden tent of wisdom and life's journey was to see it set up and established.

Although living in a patriarchal system her visions gave her the voice to speak of the need for balance. She saw God as having Sacred Masculine and Divine Feminine qualities and taught that these qualities could be nurtured in individuals for wholesome living and relationships. She painted and spoke of God encircling and surrounding creation as contrasted to ruling over it.

'Veriditas' is a word she coined to describe the greening, life giving energy of the Divine. Whilst she believed that humankind was the pinnacle of God's creation, she also had profound insight into the interconnectedness of all of life and the responsibility to use earth's resources wisely. She even gave a warning, *'God loans all of creation to humankind for our use: the high, the low, everything. If we misuse this privilege, God's Justice gives creation permission to offer humankind a reminder.'* Perhaps drawing on her Celtic beginnings, she saw the 'Green Man' as a protector of mother earth.

Hildegard had a cosmic sense of connection to the Divine, humanity and all of creation. This gave her confidence to challenge injustice, inspire responsibility, and encourage abundant living in her time. Perhaps she can do the same for us today?

Meryl White

An article by our Patron, the Revd.
Dave Tomlinson

Imagination, not nostalgia

While leading an event at Cambridge University, I spent an hour in the college bar with a dozen students. None were churchgoers or particularly religious. But we enjoyed a stimulating conversation about spirituality and popular culture, and I was impressed by their perceptive observations. Toward the end of our conversation, I asked, 'So, what do you think about *Christian* spirituality?' – a real showstopper. After an awkward silence, one young man replied, 'Hmm! That's interesting, I've never thought of putting those two things together.' And I left, thinking *this* is precisely the church's problem: so many people with genuine spiritual feelings and aspirations never imagine that the church or organised religion is somewhere to pursue them.

For centuries 'spirituality' and 'religion' were synonymous – if someone was considered 'spiritual', they would naturally be religious; the two things belonged together. But all of this has changed. A disconnect has occurred, and now hordes of people who might identify as 'spiritual' are not in the least religious.

'Spirituality' is, of course, a slippery term. It can mean many things. Personally, I see spirituality as a form of intelligence – the intelligence we use to generate meaning and purpose to life. It's what motivates us to forge values and principles and to put them into practice, even when it hurts. It's the urge to move beyond ego and self-interest, to live from values instead of prioritising personal comfort or gain. I know atheists and non-religious people with truck loads of spiritual intelligence, religious folk with not-so-much.

So, as I say, here lies a significant problem for the religious establishment: overall, people are no less spiritual today, but they are a whole lot less religious. In principle, churches could (should) be centres for spiritual growth and enrichment, but this isn't how they are commonly perceived. Indeed, when most people hear about religion, they either yawn, with visions of dreary church services, or picture oddballs on street corners with banners and tracts trying to get everyone 'saved'. Or worse, increasingly, they think about suicide bombers or fanatics, killing and maiming in the name of God!



After a wedding I conducted, a marketing executive (a relative of the bride) told me bluntly: 'As a brand, religion is fu**ed! You're gonna have to reinvent it, Dave.' I think I told him that that was above my pay grade. But he was right. Even apart from reports of child sex abuse and the like, the public image of the church is depressingly grim.

People ask me all the time if faith has a future, if organised religion will be around in fifty or a hundred years' time. I'm not sure about organised religion but I'm positive that spirituality has a future because it's something deeply embedded in the human psyche; we long to make sense of life, to feel that our being-here has significance; we instinctively reach for something beyond ourselves – in nature, art, science, and relationships. And most people want a better, more humane world. And so long as these instincts are felt, there will be faith in some form. God will be in people's lives by whatever name.

The question is, what sort of faith is needed in the 21st century – and will we be brave enough to allow faith to evolve, not just in style but also in content to reflect a changing world with evolving insights and sensibilities? The British philosopher Stephen Toulmin said we have a choice between two attitudes toward the future: that of imagination and nostalgia – it's a choice between *facing* the future and *backing into* it.

And there are many flashpoint issues to focus the mind on that choice: sexuality, abortion, assisted dying, cosmology and evolution, morality and the meaning of 'sin', multifaith relations, climate change and our relationship with the planet, the nature and shape of church life, not to mention the very notion of 'God' and how divinity can reasonably be understood in the 21st century.

Meanwhile, faith communities mostly tend to be conservative and slow to adjust to changing

circumstances. They also tend to be conformist: so, to fit in and feel like you belong, you need to believe certain things, behave in certain ways, follow the rules – spoken or unspoken. And for someone like me with what I call *a conformity deficit*, this really doesn't work, because while I strongly believe in the importance of community, community today needs to be inclusive and progressively minded, not insular and reactionary. Which is why for ten years Pat and I stepped out of mainstream religion to create space in a south London pub for disaffected pilgrims like us – and others with no church background who hungered for a faith they could believe in. And in a similar spirit, during lockdown, I created the Holy Shed, an inclusive online space for people to explore a broad, progressive faith and somewhere to belong without needing to conform.

Am I saying that the conventional model of church is done and dusted? Not at all, but it needs to change – quickly! I spent nearly twenty years as a parish priest in North London, working with a community committed to exploring what faith and church can look like in today's world. I was lucky to have a virtual blank canvass to work with – no backlash from existing church members manning the trenches against any sort of change. But I believe renewal and reform is possible anywhere in the church, given the will and resolve to press forward. And I believe the inherited model of church has many benefits – not least wonderful buildings if they can become an asset instead of a liability.

But even assuming some conventional churches will be brave enough to make the necessary changes, I believe we also need new models of community that are less bound by the past: not ignoring the vital wisdom of the centuries but less obliged to conform to the old orthodoxies. I'm not opposed to tradition, just to traditionalism, which is primarily a state of mind that stultifies change, which insists on preserving beliefs, practices, and rituals as they have always been. In faith terms, traditionalism is deep-frozen religion, a relic of the past. Living tradition, on the other hand, is a vigorous conversation (sometimes, argument) between past and present, which may include continuities with what has gone before but is never bound by them. Real tradition doesn't consist in pre-packed orthodoxies – unquestionable beliefs and doctrines – but a treasure trove of shared speech and symbols, a living community of revelation and dialogue that nurtures diversity and thrives on critical questioning.

If the church is to survive and flourish in the 21st century, it cannot be a place of hand-me-down information about God and faith. We need 'laboratories of the Spirit' – places where we can explore issues of faith and spirituality with openness, imagination, and creativity. In an era when fundamentalist certainty on the one hand, or wishy-washy moralism on the other, appear to many outside the church the only options on offer, we need hotbeds of passionate diversity, schools of independent thinking and believing, spirited settings of debate and difference where multiple integrities can co-exist in friendship and love.

Imagination, not nostalgia! I'll drink to that!

The Revd Dave Tomlinson

Dave Tomlinson is a retired Church of England priest, the author of seven books and a passionate promoter of progressive Christian theology and practice. He has been variously described as 'a distinctly alternative clergyman', 'a liberal evangelist' and after taking the funeral of the trainrobber, Ronnie Briggs a few years ago, 'the villain's vicar'. Never one to shy away from controversy, he set up a church called 'Holy Joes' in a pub, wrote a book entitled 'How to be a bad Christian...and a better human being' and preached on one occasion at the controversial non-religious community known as the Sunday Assembly in London, a community which was in part inspired by his book. He is currently broadcasting on a Sunday night once a week at 6.30 pm from what he calls his 'Holy Shed'. You can follow his broadcasts here:

<https://www.youtube.com/user/revddavetomlinson/videos?app=desktop>