

# Awakening

A Spaceforsoul publication

July 2020

## You are therefore I am: a declaration of inter-dependence

*'No man is an island.'*

*John Donne*

One of the most important things this pandemic is teaching us in so many powerful ways is that we do not exist as independent beings. As the Jain monk, Satish Kumar, reminds us in his book, 'YOU ARE Therefore I AM', there is no 'I am', no separate, isolated, disconnected self. There is only 'we are'. Each one of us is part of a complex web of relationships, embracing not only the rest of humanity, but the whole of the natural world. We are, as Native Americans would say, Earth family.

Kumar sees the dualistic philosophy that much of the world has embraced as fuelling the ecological, social and spiritual crises that we are currently facing. It gives rise to what he calls 'the philosophy of individualism' - the illusion that 'I exist independently of the Other'. It turns life into a battleground. It places us in opposition to one another and the world around us as we seek to ensure our own survival. It erodes the sense of belonging and inter-connectedness that enables us to cope with our existential aloneness as human beings.

*'Individualism gives birth to exploitation of the weak by the strong, fights for power and wealth, subjugation of animals and nature, and the ultimate frustration of an unfulfilled and meaningless life.'*

*Satish Kumar*

Everything changes, however, when we learn to see the world through a different set of lenses, when we come to 'look at the world and see it whole' as Kumar puts it. The African philosophy of Ubuntu offers us just such a lens. The idea of Ubuntu has always existed in the oral cultures of Southern Africa, but more recently, a number of prominent African leaders such as Nelson Mandela and Bishop Desmond Tutu have brought it to the attention of the wider world.

'Ubuntu nguntu ngabanye abantu.' A person is a person through other persons. This ancient Zulu proverb reminds us that we owe our humanity and our selfhood to others. As Barak Obama put it, '... we are all bound together in ways that can be invisible to the eye'. Our being is only possible because of the being of others. We are, says Kumar, 'inter-beings... world beings... part of the anima mundi, the world soul'. What we do or fail to do affects the whole world. And so we succeed or fail, sink or swim together. We find our own good only through the common good.

Ubuntu is, then, far more than a philosophy. It is a revolutionary way of relating to and being in the world. Were we to embrace fully this understanding of our essential oneness and inter-connectedness, it would change us; it would change our communities; it would change the world. And it would enrich our lives and those of our Earth family unimaginably. It seems to me that this pandemic is slowly teaching us to see the world through very different eyes. It is a lesson we cannot afford to forget.

Kaitlyn Steele



## Progressive perspectives: In search of God

Over two decades from the 1980s onwards, the biologist, David Hay carried out an extensive research programme into religious and spiritual experience in this country. What he found surprised him. Despite the decline in institutional religion in the UK, over 75% of people reported being aware of a spiritual dimension to their experience. Whether we are religious or not, it appears that most of us believe that there is 'something there'. Something more than the physical or material reality that surrounds us. Something that lies beyond the limitations of our normal, everyday experience and perception. Something that is greater than our finite conscious selves.

It is an awareness that has existed for many thousands of years. It seems that we learnt to see with sacred eyes very early on in our human history and ever since then, religious teachers, philosophers, scientists and psychologists have been discussing and arguing about the existence and nature of this Other reality. Of what or whom are we speaking when we use such words as 'God', 'the Absolute Reality', or 'the Divine'? And if we pray, to what or whom are we praying?

Attempts to grasp hold of who or what God is are fraught with difficulty because as the apostle, Paul put it in 1 Corinthians 13, 'We see through a glass, darkly.' We may come to know it 'in part', wrote Paul, but the Divine is essentially beyond our capacity to know fully. The more we try to tie it down with our creeds and doctrines, the more it eludes us. And sadly, our religious doctrines and dogmas sometimes obscure rather than illuminate the ultimate mystery to which our sacred consciousness awakens us. All too often, we have used our minds to create a god in our own image rather than trusting our sacred experience to reveal that which transcends all of our human ideas and concepts. The god we can imagine is always a god too small.

### Ways of thinking about God

*'The truth is no one knows the nature of the sacred. The history of religious and spiritual systems is simply the story of how human beings, at different times and in different cultures, have struggled to understand and articulate their vague and intuitive sensings of this mysterious realm.'*

David Elkins



Whether we are religious or not, whether we believe there is 'something there' or not, however, all of us will have some idea or concept of God in our mind, however vague or unformed it might be. In his book, 'The God I never Knew', Marcus Borg pointed out that within the Christian tradition, there are two main 'root concepts' or ways of thinking about God: theism and panentheism.

### The god of theism

This is the idea of God that most of us in the West are familiar with and for many of us, it will be the only way of thinking about God that we are aware of. The god of theism is the supernatural God who exists 'out there'. This God is seen as separate, distinct and wholly other than humanity and the world. He (and this god is more often than not thought of as male) is generally seen as a supreme, all-powerful, all-knowing person-like being who has a degree of control or sovereignty over the natural world and the wider universe he created and from time to time intervenes in it. This person-like being is also typically seen as having 'a personality', as having particular character attributes or traits which shape the way he (or she) acts and relates to us.

In his book, 'The Heart of Christianity', the Christian theologian, Marcus Borg called this view of God 'supernatural theism' but it is also referred to as 'classical', 'traditional' or 'conventional' theism. He pointed out that it has been the dominant view of God in Western Christianity since the 17<sup>th</sup> century and is the way in which popular Christianity has most often thought about God. He argued that it is a view that emphasises the 'moreness' or 'otherness' of God - the 'out there' God - as opposed to the presence of God within us - the 'right here' God.

## The God of panentheism

*'To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
And Eternity in an hour  
If the doors of perception were cleansed  
Everything would appear to man as it is, Infinite'.  
William Blake*

There is, however, a very different way of thinking about God within the Christian tradition which is called 'panentheism'. The Greek word 'pan' means 'everything' so the word 'panentheism' literally means 'all in God'. Borg points out that while the word has only been around since the 1820s, panentheism is not a modern perspective but an ancient and traditional way of thinking about God. Indeed, it can be traced back as far as pre-recorded history.

Borg describes the god of panentheism as 'the encompassing Spirit in whom everything that is, is.' This god is present everywhere – within each one of us and in everything around us. God indwells us and the physical or material world we inhabit but at the same time is greater than it. In other words, the Universe is a part *but not the whole* of God's being. God is therefore both 'beyond' or 'out there' (transcendent) and 'within' or 'right here' (immanent). As Borg puts it in his book 'The God We Never Knew':

*'For Panentheism, God is "right here"' even as God is also more than "right here"... God is more than everything, even as God is present everywhere. God is all around us and within us, and we are within God...'*

Borg notes that while the Bible more often than not speaks of the theistic 'out there' god, it also includes themes and texts which point to a more panentheistic view of God. He argues that the clearest expression of this viewpoint is found in Paul's description of God as the one 'in whom we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28). 'We are', Borg said, 'in God; we live in God, move in God, have our being in God. God is not "out there" but "right here"...'

Within Christianity, panentheistic thinking can be found not only within the progressive tradition, but also in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, in Christian mysticism and in both Celtic and creation spirituality. There are also panentheistic strands of thought in the mystical and progressive traditions of many of the world's other

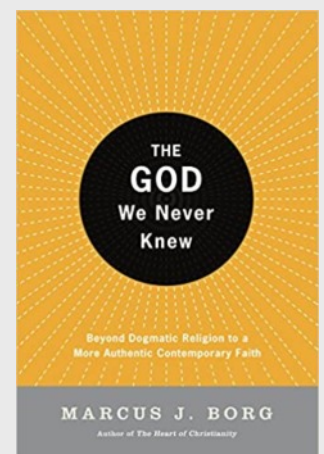
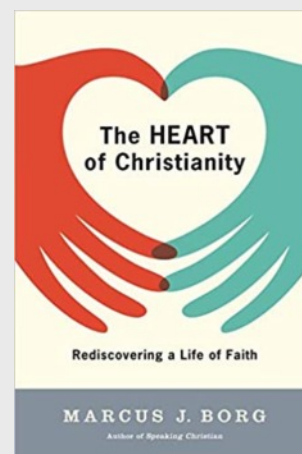
*'Divinity is the enfolding and unfolding of everything that is. Divinity is in all things in such a way that all things are in Divinity.'*

*Christian mystic, Nicolas de Cusa*

religions including Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Taoism and North American Indian spirituality.

If we were to embark on an in-depth exploration of the ways in which we think about, image and approach the God of our experience it would teach us many things. It would teach us that within many, if not all, of the world's major religious and spiritual traditions, there is more than one way of thinking about and imaging God. Indeed, theism and panentheism are only two of them. It would teach us that there is no one right way of thinking about God, that there are no 'right answers', no 'absolute truths'. There are only people trying to make sense of their spiritual experience in a myriad of different ways as they seek to immerse themselves in the mysterious waters of the sacred stream. Perhaps the reality is that there is some truth to be found in all of the root concepts of God that we have developed over the centuries.

Finally, it might bring us to the realisation that the Divine is not a question to be answered, a puzzle to be solved, an entity to be defined or categorised. It is a mystery to be encountered, a reality to be embraced. It might also help us to learn to sit with the 'unknowing' and to 'live the questions' as Rainer Maria Rilke put it, in the hope that one day we will live our way into the answers.



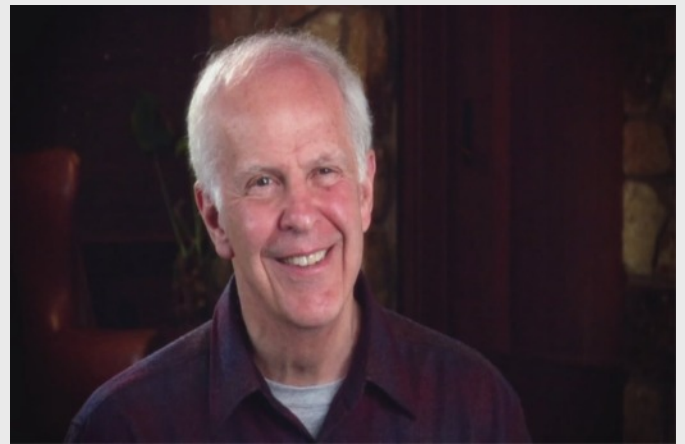
## Progressive voices: Parker Palmer

Parker Palmer is an internationally renowned American writer, teacher and social activist. Now in his eighties, he has been described as a visionary and as one of life's 'true elders'. He has focused in his writings on a wide range of issues relating to education, community, leadership, social change and spirituality. His work speaks to people from many walks of life, including those working in education, healthcare, religion and business and in community and social change organizations. He is the author of ten books including several best-selling and award-winning titles.

He is also the founder and Senior Partner of the national Center for Courage & Renewal which offers a range of training programmes, retreats and online resources for people in the caring professions, including teachers, doctors, counsellors, clergy and non-profit leaders. More recently, he has become involved in a joint podcast venture with singer songwriter, Carrie Newcomer, called 'The Growing Edge'.

Parker was brought up in a white upper middle class suburb of Chicago. Both his parents were committed Methodists. His father, he says, taught him about the importance of unconditional love, hospitality, compassion and generosity and about how to rely on 'a larger and deeper grace'. From his mother, he inherited what he describes as her 'edgy, creative energy', a gift that has stood him in good stead as a writer and teacher.

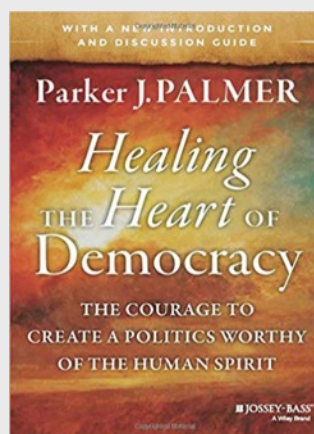
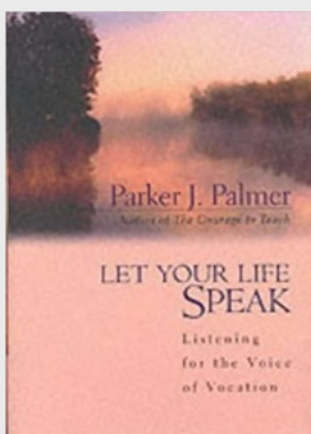
Parker was the first in his family to attend college and university where he studied philosophy and sociology and eventually gained a PhD. He then spent five years as a community worker while at the same time embarking on a career as a University teacher in sociology.



It was around this time in his life that he and his family joined a Quaker community in Philadelphia called Pendle Hill where they lived for a number of years. It was, he says, the Quaker practice of silent waiting that led him for the first time to a personal encounter with God and the realisation that until that point, 'faith and the experience of God had been an intellectual exercise.' As he began to listen to and trust his own spiritual experience, he felt his intellectual faith falling apart around him. He recognised a need within himself 'to tread very lightly all ways of naming God' and to learn to 'swim in the water of life' rather than clinging to traditional doctrines and theological formulas about God.

In his book 'Let Your Life Speak', Palmer challenges us to ask ourselves whether we are living 'undivided lives', whether we are letting our lives speak into the world in the way that only we can. He argues that the most important question we can ask ourselves as we approach the end of our lives is 'Did you live the best life you knew how? In the midst of your brokenness did you keep taking next steps towards something good? Did you forgive yourself when you fell down trying to do that? Did you get up to do it again?'

This is a man who has clearly and powerfully let his life speak as writer, teacher or activist and as such, he has much to teach us about living our 'best lives'.



*'Authentic spirituality wants to open us to truth – whatever truth may be, wherever truth may take us. Such a spirituality does not dictate where we must go, but trusts that any path walked with integrity will take us to a place of knowledge. Such a spirituality encourages us to welcome diversity and conflict, to tolerate ambiguity, and to embrace paradox.'*

*Parker Palmer*

# Exploring spiritual practice:

## The practice of community



*'...we are a tribal people and we need one another, not only for physical survival but also for spiritual sustenance as we journey together on the road to the sacred.'*  
David Elkins

We may not always think of being involved in a community as part of our spiritual practice but in most religious traditions, it is seen as being of vital importance for the spiritual life. Making our spiritual journeys without the acceptance, support and encouragement that belonging to a community can offer us is often a lonely and isolating experience. It can be very difficult to sustain our commitment to the spiritual path we have chosen when we have no one with whom we can share our experience and wrestle with the difficulties we may face along the way. Deepening our knowledge and understanding of the teachings and practices of our spiritual tradition can also be challenging when the rich resources a community can provide are not readily available to us. Some of us, moreover, may experience a longing to be part of something larger, to feel that we are rooted in a wider, ancient tradition that may stretch back over thousands of years. Some of us need to know that we are walking the same path that many others have walked before us.

The progressive Christian writer, Marcus Borg claimed that belonging to a spiritual community 'that nourishes you even as it stretches you' is vital for our growth. He described the practice of community as 'the single most important practice' that we can engage in. In part, he argued, this is because it enables us to participate in communal worship and practice. Through the sacred texts we explore together, the teaching we listen to together, the liturgy we say together, the songs we sing together, the rituals and practices we engage in together, we become more deeply grounded in our spiritual tradition. We have the opportunity too to engage in other communal practices such as the practice of hospitality, service, compassion and justice and to become part of a learning community which, at its best, can enable us to deepen our awareness and understanding of our own spiritual self and journey.

For those of us who are attempting to build a spiritual life outside the walls of traditional religion, this is a significant challenge. We may be able to find informal ways of creating community for ourselves through talking and sharing with friends or through being part of those temporary communities created by workshops, quiet days or retreats. But often, this is not enough. The longing to find a spiritual home within a larger, more established community may still haunt us. Finding such a community can, however, be very difficult. Firstly, it needs to be 'a good fit'. The kind of spiritual community that will sustain and nurture us on our journeys depends on a complex mix of factors such as age, background, temperament, personality, spiritual type and stage of psychological and spiritual development. Some of us will be nurtured best by formal liturgical worship, some by informal contemporary worship and some by stillness and silence. Some of us will be drawn to a community that has a strong focus on feeding the mind, whilst others will search for one with more of an emphasis on speaking to the heart. The mystics amongst us will be looking for a more contemplative community and those of us whose spirituality is action-oriented will be more attracted to one that has a strong focus on justice, social action and service.

As well as determining how good 'a fit' the community is for us, we also need to find a community that is healthy. The pastoral counsellor, Howard Clinebell argued that a particular religious community can be either 'salutogenic' (health-promoting) or 'pathogenic' (health-destroying). It can either enhance or diminish our

well-being. It can either foster or inhibit our psychological and spiritual growth. It can either heal or harm, liberate or oppress. A healthy spiritual community is democratic rather than authoritarian or autocratic. It values autonomy and freedom rather than obedience and submission. It is open-minded, questioning and critically reflective rather than narrow-minded, unquestioning and dogmatic. It encourages independent thinking. It is open to differing viewpoints, perceptions and interpretations. It supports and resources genuine dialogue and debate rather than stifling it. It is open to challenge rather than suppressing it. It values diversity rather than requiring conformity.

It is inclusive and tolerant rather than excluding those who do not 'fit the mould' and allows people to find their own answers and their own way. It is liberating and empowering rather than socially oppressive and disempowering. It is accepting and gracious rather than demanding and perfectionist. It is compassionate and flexible rather than rigid, legalistic and rule-bound. It values being more than doing and is not preoccupied with religious performance. It is accepting of people's woundedness and vulnerabilities rather than punishing those who fall short or cannot comply. It is loving, compassionate and forgiving rather than guilt- or shame-inducing.

### A new kind of community

In his book, 'Black Sheep and Prodigals', Dave Tomlinson argues that we need to move towards a new kind of spiritual community. He calls such communities 'laboratories' or 'universities' of the Spirit...

*'... places where we can explore issues of faith and spirituality with openness, imagination and creativity.... 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.'*

Similarly, the psychologist, David Elkins' vision of a more mature spiritual community is one of a community that does not depend on allegiance to a common belief system and is not built on doctrinal conformity. It is a community that values difference and supports diversity; that encourages a creative search for answers to the questions that really matter; that honours and respects the spiritual path that each one of us has chosen and is able to hold and support us in making own individual spiritual journeys. It is a community that does not '... [kill] the soul by forcing it into a small suffocating box', but seeks to set the soul free. Such a community, he says, would indeed be 'a path to the sacred.'

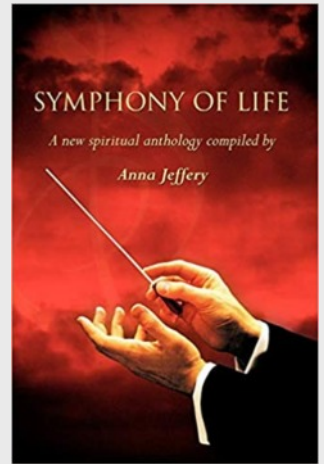
Such communities are sadly rare and are not often found within the walls of organised religion. And so, where they cannot be found, perhaps we are called to find the courage to transcend the old tribal model of community and create our own communities of freedom. We need to find a way of journeying together that empowers each one of us to be all that we have the capacity to be and to open our hearts, minds and spirits as fully as we are able to the sacred reality that enfolds us all.



WE'RE ALL IN THIS  
together

## An article by Anna Jeffery

Anna Jeffery has published three books entitled 'Five Gold Rings' in which a number of prominent people reveal their philosophy of life through the person, book, place or poem that has most influenced them; 'Symphony of Life', an anthology of spiritual writings; and 'The Gift', her latest autobiographical book. She is a member of the Spaceforsoul community.



## This way lies peace

*There is an end to grief  
Suddenly there are no more tears to cry  
No hurt nor break now  
But mute acceptance of what will be  
Knowing that each move for good or ill  
Must fit the whole  
Past comprehension  
Yet trusted in the design  
This way lies peace  
Brenda Lismer*

There are times when a piece of writing brings us to our knees in gratitude for expressing what we cannot. These hauntingly beautiful words from Brenda Lismer give timeless yet magisterial comfort so that however devastating the grief – the life-changing diagnosis, the cruel twist of fate, the missed opportunity – we are able to bear it. She sees with an inner eye and knows with an intuitive certainty that there is an over-arching Mind that is Love.

As we travel through life and come up against events that would break us, we need to look beyond them to see the lessons that will make us so that we become stronger, more triumphant human beings. With this understanding, there is no need to ask, 'Why me? Why this? Why now?' However, acceptance is one of the hardest gates to pass through. They stand proud far along the road ahead but demons block the way – demons of fear, anger, resentment, anxiety – so that reaching the summer lands ahead is never easy. It takes more than courage to pass through these gates. It takes blind faith and trust to reach the mute acceptance of which Brenda Lismer speaks.

We need therefore to look at these life-changing events with a positive mindset. Instead of a negative and defeatist attitude, we must realise that acceptance is the key with which we move from life-changing sadness to new horizons and transcendence and thus enduring happiness. The lesson or purpose behind every challenge will help us to embrace it and accept it instead of resisting, believing that everything happens for a reason. But we do not need to understand that reason or understand why something has happened. Our understanding can wait, our acceptance cannot. So instead of complaining and over-dwelling on it, we need to choose to live with it, to live because of it. And instead of staring at the closed door in front of us, let us turn our back on it and see how many windows are open all around us. As Arthur Rubinstein advocates – we should develop '... an unconditional acceptance of life and what it brings.'

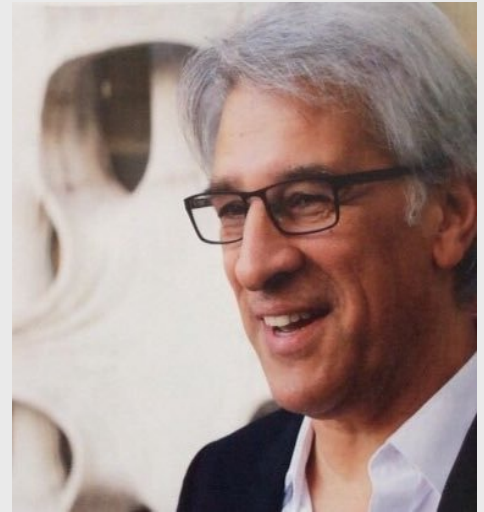
The reason for what happens in our lives and the meaning of it are incomprehensible and will probably remain so, at least during this life. Instead we must face change or disaster in the most creative way possible. 'We must accept disappointment and change but we must never lose hope,' urges Martin Luther King. For this way lies peace.

# Book Reviews

## The Lost Message of Paul' by Steve Chalke

A review by Julian Clover

'It is time for a new reformation. It is time to find a way of following Christ that offers liberation and welcome rather than control', says Steve Chalke in his latest book, 'The Lost Message of Paul'. Too often, religion 'offers freedom but delivers repression' - one of the book's key messages on how St Paul and his writings have been misused and mistranslated, resulting in shallow and unhelpful theology that is little more than a form of regurgitated medievalism.



For example, St Paul 'doesn't believe in some disembodied theology'. He doesn't believe that 'faith is an assent to a set of ethereal beliefs.' For him, 'faith is a way of living. It is a way of being.' In other words, following Christ is about changing society and bringing about a 'societal revolution'. In fact the whole idea of 'salvation through faith', so beloved of the Protestant reformers is, according to the book, very questionable. 'Sola fide' or 'faith alone' was made into a fundamental doctrine by Martin Luther (a blatant anti-semitic, apparently, and much loved by Adolph Hitler and the Nazis). However, it turns out that 'fide' is a mistranslation of the Greek word 'pistis' which is itself a misleading translation of the Hebrew word 'aman'. Any serious translation of either 'pistis' or 'aman' must recognise that the original meanings were much more about 'faithfulness' in the sense of devotion and perseverance than about faith in the sense of accepting a set of prescribed beliefs.

This reframing is crucially important. Luther translated Paul's term 'Pistis Christou' to mean 'faith in Christ', but there is a lot of disagreement about this. Translations up to his time had translated the term as 'the faithfulness of Christ' and versions such as William Tyndale's translation and the King James translation (both completed after Luther's version) use this form as well. Whether we 'believe' or 'have faith' has been greatly exaggerated by Protestantism – acceptance, salvation and grace are freely given by God through Jesus to everyone on earth. They are not a Christian monopoly. The book also deals very effectively with other issues such as St Paul's apparent misogyny and lack of inclusivity. In fact, it reframes many aspects of 'standard' Christianity brilliantly: heaven and hell, redemption and salvation, original sin, and the angry and judgemental God to name but a few.

But perhaps the most exciting part of the book is the description of the Oasis group of charities, set up by Steve Chalke and employing over 5,000 people to run schools, housing and health projects, city farms, community shops, churches and much else besides. Changing the world isn't just a theological abstraction, it's a powerful and inspiring societal revolution!



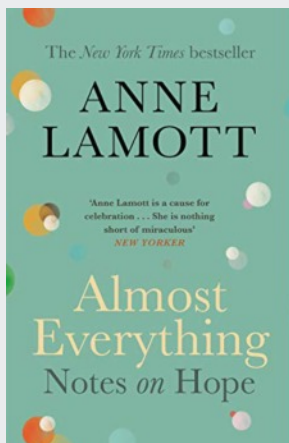
### Quotes from 'The Lost Message of Paul'

'Over the centuries, the writing of Paul has been weaponized. His words have been used to justify cruelty towards and exclusion of black people, people of colour, people of other religions, the wrong sort of Christian people..., non-believers and of LGBT people. So it is no surprise that countless Christians, aside from anyone else, feel ambivalent at best towards the Apostle and his words. For too many he is the author of structural social exclusion.'

'The tragedy is that over the centuries the Church has time and again failed to communicate, or even to understand, the core of Paul's message. Although Paul has often been presented as the champion of exclusion, he was the very opposite. He was the great includer; a revolutionary who saw a new inclusive world dawning and gave his life to help bring it in.'



# Resources for the journey



## **Anne Lamott (2019) Almost Everything: Notes on hope. Canongate Books**

The story of the author's personal journey to finding hope in the midst of a dark and uncertain world...

'Despair and uncertainty surround us: in the news, in our families, and in ourselves. But even when life is at its bleakest, Anne Lamott shows how we can rediscover the hope and wisdom that are buried within us and that can make life sweeter than we ever imagined. Divided into short chapters that explore life's essential truths, Almost Everything pinpoints these moments of insight and, with warmth and humour, offers a path forward.'

Extract from Amazon web page

## Internet resources

**The Growing Edge podcast** with Parker Palmer and Carrie Newcomer

<https://www.newcomerpalmer.com/podcast>

**An interview with Steve Chalke** about his book 'The Lost Message of Paul'

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vNF81eNeoCg>

**A Marcus Borg talk on 'What is God?'**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9I4Pk0VSOog>

## Spaceforsoul news

### **Soulspace Zoom meetings**

During the lockdown, we have been holding a series of fortnightly Soulspace meetings via Zoom on Sunday mornings at 10.00 am. If you would like to join us at any of our future meetings, you would be very welcome. You don't need to have been to one of our Soulspace meetings before, to live in the Bristol area or to be a member of Spaceforsoul. All you need to do is let us know that you're interested by contacting us at [spaceforsoulbristol@gmail.com](mailto:spaceforsoulbristol@gmail.com) and we will give you further information and send you an invitation to join the meeting. You can find out the date of our next Zoom meeting by visiting our website at [www.spaceforsoul.org.uk](http://www.spaceforsoul.org.uk)

### **Changes to our Spaceforsoul website**

Spaceforsoul now only has one website. In order to make it easier to manage, update and develop our online presence and to reduce the associated costs, we have recently amalgamated the website of our educational arm, the Centre for Spiritual Exploration and Accompaniment (CSEA) with our main website. All of the material that used to be on the CSEA website is now on the Spaceforsoul website. You will find some of it on the CSEA pages and most of the rest on the Resources pages. Have a look and let us know what you think. We welcome your feedback.