

Dear LSN Supporters

At the top of the stairs in my flat hang two Tree of Life paintings. Intricately drawn and subtly coloured in the soft tones of dilute cow-dung, they are the work of poor village women in rural India and depict one of the most enduring images, not only in ancient Hindu mythology, but in the creation myths of every culture, faith and continent across the globe. In all its many representations – from Yggdrasil in Norse mythology to the totem poles of Canada's First Nation Peoples, from ancient Armenia to the Maoris of New Zealand, in Jewish and Christian tradition, to name but a very few – the Tree of Life is a moving and evocative symbol of both the source of all life, and the interconnectedness of all life.

My paintings are simply framed in dull gold, not unlike the gold leaf that the celebrated geneticist Professor Steve Jones and some of his colleagues at University College London want to use in a 60ft high depiction of another Tree of Life, on a college wall in Gower Street. This is not the tree of ancient myth, but an inkdrawn sketch in one of Charles Darwin's red leather notebooks; a sketch which in 1837 set out, in sapling form, his theory about the evolutionary relationships between different species. As Graham Lawton wrote in The New Scientist (24.01.09): The tree-of-life concept was absolutely central to Darwin's thinking... Without it the theory of evolution would never have happened. ... Ever since Darwin the tree has been the unifying principle for understanding the history of life on Earth.

I love that science and spirituality share the same creation symbol at their very heart, and I love that so many writers on contemporary spirituality are drawing on the language and imagery of evolutionary science as they share their experience and insights. We stand at an evolutionary juncture, writes Anne Hillman*, called to awaken to a new kind of love. We are at the dawn of a new consciousness, adds Wayne Teasdale*, a radically fresh approach to our life as the human family in a fragile world. But I also worry about the tone of some such pronouncements. Visionary and inspiring, yes of course, but sometimes so sweeping, so expansive in their claims, that they lose their critical, questioning edge.

Unlike some of his followers in the last 150 years, Darwin was touchingly hesitant as he began to formulate his great theory. Above his little sketch he wrote two words: *I think*. Two words suggesting a humility, a provisionality, that is always missing in fundamentalists of both scientific and religious bent.

Today, in the scientific community, the battle rages over how far Darwin's Tree of Life hypothesis is still valid. It's possible, as Graham Lawton explained in his article, that the Tree could become biology's equivalent of Newtonian mechanics: revolutionary in its time, but ultimately too simplistic to deal with the messy real world.

The Astronomer Royal, Martin Rees, writing on What the future looks like for The Guardian, said: Ever since Darwin, we've been familiar with the stupendous time spans of the evolutionary past. But most people still somehow think we humans are necessarily the culmination of the evolutionary tree. No astronomer could believe this. But Professor Rees does share the belief of many of today's writers on spirituality when he argues that this century is, nevertheless, uniquely special. It's special, he writes, because It's the first [century] in our planet's history where one species – ours – has Earth's future in its hands, and could jeopardise not only itself, but life's immense potential.

That, in all its immense and awe-inspiring complexity, is the scientific and spiritual challenge of our day. I think.



In This Issue:

- Pondering the Mystery: Bridget Hewitt
- Mysticism and Contemporary Spirituality: Eley McAinsh
- The Giver of Life: Kenneth Steven
- Bookshelf
- LSN Gathering 2009
- Are we still friends?
- Pinboard

Pondering the Mystery: Bridget Hewitt

Bridget lives in Northumberland and is working on a dissertation on Thomas Merton, to complete her Master's in Christian Spirituality from Sarum College in Salisbury. She is a wife and mother of grown-up sons. She enjoys her home and garden, which she shares at times with groups of spiritually searching young people and adults. She loves wild places, mountains, sea and silence ...

A young lad, aged about 15 or 16, came recently, for the first time, to a youth group that I run. He was not from a church background but had been told by friends about the discussions we have, and was interested to come along. As we talked he looked at me and said *But you believe X!* With a grin of both amusement and dismay I assured him that I did not – exactly. *But I thought that's what Christians believe...*, he said. And the discussion continued.

This exchange echoed others that I have had over the years. I once met someone in the street who had that week attended a group I'd hosted: I just loved that group, she said, It was great – just where I'm at – but ... is it Christian? Contrast that with an experience I had recently in a very different sort of group, where a pronouncement was made that As Christians we believe A, B & C! Bemused faces and some uncomfortable squirming all round the room.

So, What IS Christian? What should one believe to call oneself Christian?

More and more, I know less and less how to answer those questions. I feel less and less that they're even important questions, yet, with increasing intensity, I'm drawn into an ever more compelling relationship with the Divine Mystery that I call God, as revealed in the man Jesus, and in countless others through the centuries.

It's a Great Adventure. It underpins and motivates the very essence of who I am and how I try to live. I might find travelling companions in any of the great world religions or beyond their boundaries. This is an in-between land; a land without clear borders, with misty, uncertain edges; a land of infinite possibility. It's a land of story and strange tales: tales of seas parting to allow escapes from slavery, of burning bushes not burnt, of water turning into wine, of glorious visions on mountain tops. It's a land in which words from the Bible sing within the depths of my heart, their meaning and message ever changing, ever probing, ever offering new insights far removed from the words on the page. It's a land conjured in the hidden-ness of poetry, the nuances of music, the magnificence of great vistas, the fragility of beauty and friendship.

But how does my life in this land fit with my continued attendance at church? I know that I'm lucky, and certainly I'm grateful, to be part of a local church community that's large enough and open enough to let me live (at least at times!) in this in-between land. But even with the freedom and flexibility I do enjoy, there are times when I wonder if the moment has come to leave. So far, I haven't, and I haven't because, despite all the tensions, I find – in the liturgy and the music, in the old, old stones that have heard and housed so many life stories, in the candle light casting its shadows - that this church still offers silence and space, still provides glimpses of the great cosmic drama that we're invited to enter. It's a drama in which the loving arms of a Father stretch out in eternal embrace of a wandering son or daughter; in which the Divine Presence at the heart of the universe is offered in bread for all; in which innocent and self-giving love is betrayed and killed, but ultimately transformed. In this drama we are invited to stand at the edge of hope, at the edge of emptiness, and to see, in fleeting moments, the whole world shot through with glory impenetrable, before which we tremble with tears and awe.

Is it Christian? It's a gift far, far bigger than any box that we can put it into.

I the . En den - genere would be from . - being Wellin

Mysticism and Contemporary Spirituality: Eley McAinsh

Before I started work on this talk for the Alister Hardy Society London Group meeting on 5th May, I had little idea of the controversy – and sometimes even personal prejudice – that permeates discussion of mysticism and spiritual experience. The history of mysticism is rent, it seems, with disagreement – different disagreements in different ages. One enduring tension is between those whose definition of mysticism is strict and exclusive, and those who paint it in broad and democratic strokes. In the first view, mystics are extremely rare and specially gifted individuals who see visions, hear voices and experience strange states of consciousness; in the second, mystical experience is a transforming gift, available to anyone attentive enough to receive it. Another tension is between pre- and post-Enlightenment understandings of mysticism – with some writers going so far as to suggest that there is virtually no continuity between traditional Christian mysticism and the new mysticism, as the experiential knowledge of God. Mysticism is about experiencing God, or the Sacred, or Spirit as real. As David Steindl-Rast has said: 'Rightly understood, the mystic is not a special kind of human being; rather every human being is a special kind of mystic.' ¹ This extract is from the end of the talk.

Some contemporary interest in mysticism may be purely phenomenological – a detached interest in a category of human experience, across time and tradition. Most contemporary interest in mysticism, however, is more engaged, more urgent. It arises either from a need to explore and validate our own experience of the sacred, or from a longing for a kind of experience of the sacred which is missing from our cultural, political and religious life, and is grieved.

I've suggested that contemporary mystical experiences and insights are being gifted to us to nourish, strengthen and direct us in our response to the urgent needs of our extraordinary times. I've suggested that these experiences and insights are part of an evolving, dynamic sacred tradition ², and that they offer us a way to participate in transformation: personal, social, political, ecological, and theological. As Dorothee Soelle has said in her book The Silent Cry – Mysticism and Resistance: What really happens in mystical union, is not a new vision of God, but a different relationship to the world – one that has borrowed the eyes of God.

I use the word 'gifted' very deliberately, because mystical experience has always been about gift – or grace. This is not experience for its own sake, nor experience that can be grasped or manufactured or guaranteed. It is, both classically and today – though some critics may doubt this – about love for God and knowledge of God.

Some contemporary seekers may well be guilty of interposing their own filters when they read of the mystical experience of the past. I'm not in a position to adjudicate when Rowan Williams accuses Matthew Fox of working very hard to make [Meister] Eckhart a prophet of late-twentieth-century Californian eco-feminism ³, but I like the example!

But it's unnecessarily reductionist, not to say curmudgeonly, to suggest, as some writers do, that today's mystics cannot read and relate to their forebears, sharing both love for God and knowledge of God across the centuries. Here is Beverly Lanzetta, writing in *Emerging Heart – Global Spirituality and the Sacred*:

In the context of my life I have been blessed so meet to many sojourners along the way who have aided my journey. My first and sole companions were the mystics, whose voices reached a place in my soul untouched by daily events. John of the Cross and Ibn al'Arabi seemed to know me better than any living person I knew. So did Teresa of Avila and Mirabai. They spoke to a depth of reality that I lived in and struggled to express. The questions they posed, and the insights they had into life, reached into a dimension of consciousness that I can only describe with words of reverence and praise. Perhaps most comforting and healing was their unabashed love for the Divine, and their intention to devote their lives in adoration of this one, most necessary reality.

References:

Marcus Borg spoke on *Mysticism and the Christian Path* at the Centre for Radical Christianity in Sheffield last April. A cd of that lecture is available to borrow from The Well Library.

1. David Steindl-Rast quoted by Beverly Lanzetta in Emerging Heart – Global Spirituality and the Sacred (pub Fortress Press)

2. Following Gordon Lynch's argument in The New Spirituality – An Introduction to Progressive Belief in the 21st Century (pub IB Taurus)

3. Rowan Williams quoted by Rupert Shortt in Rowan's Rule (pub Hodder & Stoughton)

I thin The Giver of Life: Kenneth Steven I see a man coming towards me Across the edge of the shore where light Breaks and cries in an endless voice. In one hand he carries water, fresh and clear In the other earth, rich and crumbled. Where he stoops in the pale shadow He brings forth to the treeless land a sapling Gently presses its roots in the soft ground. between A J D. a Mingling the earth and water for its strength, he says: eletion. C+B. T. This is the life I give for you, for storm and calm, For harvest and drought, for spring and winter, RAD Grow for the light of the world. to hitacho a tonto be 9hu con Used by kind permission of the poet. formed. - being white

Bookshelf

Readers may be interested to know that wherever possible all the titles mentioned in the Bookshelf section of *Living Spirituality News* will now be available for borrowing from the Well Library. For further information contact the LSN office, or the Librarian, Barbara Merrifield, on 01908 242693, or library@thewellatwillen.org.uk

The first three books are all related to the theme of mysticism and contemporary spirituality, and all come highly recommended.

Joel S Goldsmith: Practicing the Presence – The Inspirational Guide to Regaining Meaning and a Sense of Purpose in Your Life (pub HarperOne £11.99) This is a reprint of a book first published in 1958 – so sought after was it before the reprint, that a second-hand copy was for sale for £90! A lovely gift from my friend and former t'ai chi teacher, Jenny Sandler, Goldsmith's book has been an important influence in her spiritual life and remains enduringly relevant today. Goldsmith writes: The student of spiritual wisdom cannot go through [her] his day, satisfied that [s]he has read some truth in the morning, or that [s]he is going to hear some truth in the afternoon or evening. There must be a conscious activity of truth going on all the time ... Whether we look out at forms of nature such as trees, flowers, or oceans, or whether we are meeting people, we find some measure of God in each experience. We train ourselves to behold the presence and activity of God in everything around us and to abide in the Word.

Anne Hillman: Awakening the Energies of Love – Discovering Fire for the Second Time

(pub Bramble Books £18.95) Professor Ursula King rhapsodised about this book at a recent day conference entitled Pathways to Contemplation. Hillman's title comes from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who said: Someday, after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides, and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of Love, and then, for a second time in the history of the world, humanity will have discovered Fire. Among a number of high-profile endorsements, Brian Swimme says of this book: Anne Hillman completes Teilhard de Chardin's work by providing the next step – a pathway to the most significant transformation humanity has ever undergone. She shows how ... the energies of Love can ignite us and, once we have caught fire, how to embody its '200,000 volts' in our lives.

Wayne Teasdale: The Mystic Heart – Discovering a universal spirituality in the world's religions

(pub New World Library £14.50) This book was recommended a year ago by LSN supporter Gillian Howell and I'm sorry it's taken me so long to follow up Gillian's suggestion, for this really is an excellent book.

Drawing on his extraordinary experience as an inter-religious monk and mystic, Brother Wayne Teasdale explores what he calls *interspirituality* – a genuine and comprehensive spirituality that draws on the mystical core of the world's great religious traditions. Through scholarship, stories, and personal practice, Teasdale demonstrates that the final goal of authentic spirituality is realising our true nature as mystics.

Annie Dillard: Give it All, Give it Now – One of the Few Things I Know About Writing

(pub Welcome Books £18.99) Not so much a book as beautiful piece of inspirational artwork. Regular readers of this column will know how indebted I am to bookseller Elaine Perry in Vancouver

(www.vineandfig.ca) for her up-to-the-minute knowledge of the spirituality book scene. This 'book' is another of Elaine's recommendations, and features words by Pulitzer-prize-winning author Annie Dillard and artwork by Sam Fink, in an extended meditation on generosity and creativity.

Rupert Shortt: Rowan's Rule – The Biography of the Archbishop (Hodder & Stoughton £9.99)

Fortunately this excellent but weighty biography is due out in paperback in July. It's a very good read. Sympathetic but not uncritical, Shortt spends a lot of time on church politics, but far more illuminating is the insight he gives into Archbishop Rowan Williams' own faith development and profound spirituality. In particular, through extracts from the Archbishop's writings and talks we learn much of deep value about his understanding and experience of prayer.

Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan: The First Paul – Reclaiming the radical visionary behind the Church's conservative icon (SPCK £8.99) The two best-selling authors of The First Christmas and The Last Week have joined forces once again to present a new understanding of the apostle Paul, who was, they claim, far more radical than many realise. Publishing to coincide with what Pope Benedict has designated The Year of Paul (29.06.08-29.06.09), their hope is that we can get Paul out of the Reformation world and back into the Roman world, to see him properly as contrasting not Christianity to Judaism or Protestantism to Catholicism, but Jewish covenantal traditions to Roman imperial theology.

Frank Parkinson: Science & Religion at the Crossroads (Imprint Academic £8.95)

Many LSN Supporters enjoyed Frank Parkinson's booklet *Religion without Fairy Tales, Science with Soul* (still available from the LSN office) and those who did will enjoy this expanded collection of essays even more. Parkinson believes that both science and religion are at a crossroads as current paradigms break down, but he looks forward to a more creative and sustaining relationship between them in the future. Speculative, intriguing and challenging!

Kenneth Steven: Making the Known World New (pub Saint Andrew Press £9.99)

A new collection of short essays and new poems, about faith, the environment and creativity itself, by the popular Scottish poet Kenneth Steven.

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).

LSN Gathering 2009

We very much hope that you'll be able to join us for our LSN Gathering on **3rd October** at the Carrs Lane Church Centre in Birmingham. The theme of the day is **Story and Meaning** and the speakers will be Gethin Abraham-Williams, author of *Spirituality or Religion: Do we have to choose?*, and Eley McAinsh, Director of LSN. For further details, and booking form, please see the enclosed leaflet, or contact Win Kennedy in the LSN office at spirituality@ctbi.org.uk or 01908 200675.

Are we still friends?

We are so grateful to all of you who have responded to our question Are we still friends? Win has been inundated with replies and we have been hugely encouraged by your comments and also your generous donations. If you haven't yet replied, we'd still love to hear from you, by email, phone or post. If you've lost the form enclosed with the last newsletter, please contact us for another one. A number of people have said that they would prefer to receive the newsletter by email, or to read it on the website – if you think this would be your preference in future, again, please let us know.

Pinboard

July

2-11: Iona: Individually Guided Retreat with members of the Glasgow Ignatian Spirituality Centre team. Contact admin@iscglasgow.co.uk or 0141 354 0077 See www.iscglasgow.co.uk

3-5: Douai Abbey, Berkshire: Monos Annual Conference – Monastic Rules Ancient and Modern. An exploration of the recent resurgence of interest in monasticism as a tool for Christian living. Keynote speaker Fr Terence Kardong. Contact Anthony Grimley at info@monos.org.uk or 01455 845390 See www.monos.org.uk

4: Edenbridge, Kent: Who and What do I believe in? Exploring/developing my personal creed, with Sr Christiane Lehair and the Sisters of St Andrew. Contact thecentre@sisters-of-st-andrew.com or 01342 850 388 See www.sisters-of-st-andrew.com

10-12: Oxford: Into the Silent Land – intensive workshop with Martin Laird. Further details and booking at www.thestillpoint.org.uk or Stillpoint, PO Box 788, Oxford, OX1 9HF

11: Tabor Carmelite Retreat House, Preston: The Challenge of St Therese Today. A celebration of the life of Therese of Lisieux. International Carmelite Forum. Contact tabor@carmelite.net or 01772 717122 See www.tabor-preston.org

13-18: Holy Island: God In Nature, holiday retreat (week 1) led by Graham Booth. Contact opengate@aidanandhilda.demon.co.uk or 01289 389222

14-17: High Leigh, Hoddesdon, Herts: Perfect Freedom – Liberal Faith Today and Tomorrow.

Annual Conference of the Modern Churchpeople's Union, chaired by John Saxbee, Bishop of Lincoln. Speakers include Geoffrey Rowell, Keith Ward, Lucy Winkett and Jonathan Clatworthy. Contact conference@modchurchunion.org or 0161 633 3132 See www.modchurchunion.org

14-17: St Beunos: Music Meditation – a retreat using classical music to lead you into meditation, with Mark Argent. Contact secretary@beunos.com or 01745 583444 See www.beunos.com

22-25: Holy Island: God in Nature, holiday retreat (week 2) led by Graham Booth and Paul Swinhoe. Contact opengate@aidanandhilda.demon.co.uk or 01289 389222

22-27: St Beunos: Film Retreat – let your story interact with the carefully selected films on this silent retreat. Contact secretary@beunos.com or 01745 583444 See www.beunos.com

26-1 Aug: Othona Community, Dorset: From Artroom to Bonfire – a week of art, craft and pottery workshops for all ages with Robbie Spence and Clare Palmer. Contact mail@othona-bb.org.uk or 01308 897130 See www.othona-bb.org.uk

August

2-8: Othona Community, Dorset: How 'Green' Things Work – If we are to limit climate change, we have to co-operate with nature, not fight it. But how do the clever things that help create a 'green' lifestyle actually work? Led by teacher and environmentalist Chris Lord, using science and imagination, technology and poetry. Contact mail@othona-bb.org.uk or 01308 897130 See www.othona-bb.org.uk

3-12 and 13-22: Salamanca, Spain: Individually Guided Retreats at the Scots College, with members of the Glasgow Ignatian Spirituality Centre team. Contact admin@iscglasgow.co.uk or 0141 354 0077 See www.iscglasgow.co.uk

9-15: Othona Community, Dorset: Space – The Final Frontier? A week with astronomer Roger Noble, to coincide with the year's best 'shower' of shooting stars. Contact mail@othona-bb.org.uk or 01308 897130 See www.othona-bb.org.uk

10-14: Holy Island: Springboard into Creativity with Mary Fleeson of Lindisfarne Scriptorium. Contact opengate@aidanandhilda.demon.co.uk or 01289 389222 See www.lindisfarne-scriptorium.co.uk

10-15: Loyola Hall, Merseyside: Changing Direction? An affirming retreat for people in their 30s and 40s. Take time to consider the direction your life is going – look at relationships, spirituality and decision-making, with Eilish Curristin and Edna Rowlands. Contact mail@loyolahall.co.uk or 0151 426 4137 See www.loyolahall.co.uk

13-16: Hawkwood College, Stroud: Green Days of the Dancing Stillness – a poetic writing holiday retreat with yoga and dance. Contact info@hawkwoodcollege.co.uk or 01453 759034 See www.hawkwoodcollege.co.uk

14-16: Colvend, Dumfriesshire: Scottish Gathering – Celtic Spirituality. Songs and stories, saints and soul friends. The Community of Aidan & Hilda. Contact James Gatherer at 01556 630255 or jamesgatherer@btinternet.com. See www.aidanandhilda.org

24-27: Glastonbury: Discovering the Hidden Jesus – in the holy places of Glastonbury and in the deep places of our hearts. Leaders Richard and Margaret Deimel. The Community of Aidan & Hilda. Contact studley.vic@virgin.net or 01448 831112 See www.aidanandhilda.org

28-30: London: When God Disappears – John Main Seminar 2009 with Jesuit priest and Zen master Robert Kennedy. Contact jms2009@wccm.org or 020 8449 1319 See www.wccm.org

September

7-11: Cambridge, Norwich, Walsingham, Ely: The Way of Contemplation – an Exploration of Medieval Ways and Byways. Jupiter Trust pilgrimage 2009. Contact janedmay@btinternet.com or 01865 407490 See www.jupitertrust.org

9: London Spirituality Centre: Learning to be Astonished – an evening on the poetry of Mary Oliver with Anne Long. Contact info@spiritualitycentre.org or 020 7621 1391 See www.spiritualitycentre.org

18-20: Mount Saint Bernard Abbey, Leicester: Pilgrimage and Coracle Making. Time for reflection and the chance to make your own full size float-worthy coracle to take home. Contact Anthony Grimley at info@monos.org.uk or 01455 845390 See www.monos.org.uk

18-20: Hawkwood College, Stroud: Creating Health – Mind/Body Medicine and Mindfulness, self-help course with David Beales and John Preston. Contact info@hawkwoodcollege.co.uk or 01453 759034 See www.hawkwoodcollege.co.uk

19: Hawkwood College, Stroud: Finding a Voice. A workshop to guide you to your natural voice and innate musical ability, with Stefan Cartwright. Contact info@hawkwoodcollege.co.uk or 01453 759034 See www.hawkwoodcollege.co.uk

October Advance notice

15: Ushaw College, Durham: Living Spirituality - Fragments of the face of God. First of six daysessions through the autumn for those who wish to deepen their own spirituality or become better equipped for ministry. Contact durhamstant@aol.com or 0191 384 3747

31: London: Made in the Image of God: Creativity, Suffering and Faith, day event with Tina Beattie organised by the Quaker Retreat Group. Contact c.d.ring@btinternet.com or 01773 829060

The Living Spirituality Network

The Living Spirituality Network exists for people who are exploring the meaning of spirituality, both within and beyond the traditional churches. The Network provides supporters with information, encouragement and contacts as they seek to understand and deepen their spiritual lives. We work with a wide range of individuals, groups and communities, many of whom find themselves on the edges of mainstream church structures. For further information on the Network, and the groups and communities with which we are in contact, please contact the office for a copy of our leaflet.

Support:

The Living Spirituality Network relies on grants and donations from small communities, projects, networks, individuals and churches. Major support is gratefully received from the Society of the Sacred Mission.

Living Spirituality News is issued three times a year. If you know of anyone who would welcome a copy, please contact the Administrator. It is issued free of charge but donations of £10.00-£15.00 pa would help considerably in off-setting our costs and would be gratefully received. Please make cheques payable to: 'CTBI – Living Spirituality Network', and send them to the Administrator at the address given. If you are a taxpayer and are willing to Gift Aid your donation, please ask for a form to sign.

A large type version is available on request.

Contact us at:

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

Staff: Director: Eley McAinsh **Design:** Madeleine Frances

sh Administrator: Win Kennedys Printing: Murrays the Printers 01908 326560

LSN is a network related to Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, a company limited by guarantee. Registered in England and Wales. Registered company no: 5661787.

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