

Not reduced to silence by the darkness

by

Tony Pannett

"Yet I'm not reduced to silence by the darkness, nor by the Mystery which hides him." [*The Book of Job, Ch23:17*]

The religious life, the spiritual life, is often seen as a journey. This analogy of a journey seems to occur in all the major religious traditions. Certainly it is frequently used in the Christian tradition. Were not the first followers of the risen Christ called 'Followers of the Way'? The very basis of the Buddhist teaching is the Four Noble Truths, the fourth of which is stated as "The Noble Truth of the Eightfold path leading to the cessation of Dukkha." *Dukkha* is often translated as 'Suffering' but better rendered as 'Unsatisfactoriness'. The analogy, the metaphor if you like, has a powerful hold upon us. Is it because the spiritual journey is often seen as co-terminous with our physical life? We are born, we experience childhood, we mature to adults, become middle-aged, elderly and then die. Well, most of us fit in with that pattern as this is what we expect in our prosperous first world country. Others of course may not be quite so fortunate. Usually any deviation from this pattern is seen as tragic or a failure of our current medical intervention and medical knowledge. The linear nature of this appeals to our idea of progression, and of course to our experience of journeys themselves.

Is there anything wrong with this analogy?

Like most things in our spiritual life it is paradoxical. So I'm going to say "Yes and No". It might be helpful to state it in a different way. We set out on our journey from the Mystery - by being born, and end it by dying and returning to the Mystery. The great religious teachers, poets, mystics and sages alike remind us of this Mystery and of our origins and of our being surrounded, contained, within it.

Where do we come from?

Where were you before you were born? or in the Zen Buddhist tradition – what was your original face? These questions were not meant to be ‘answered’ but to be contemplated, maybe used as meditation or for prayer. These teachers similarly speak of the purpose of this physical incarnation in this world and the realisation of our true nature by reminding us of our eternal life now, to be experienced, perceived, moment by moment in the living out of our ordinary lives. This NOW moment is frequently pointed at by Jesus in many of his parables. The eternal in the now. I am sure you know that the word ‘eternal’ here does not refer to length of time but the quality of experience. It is this ‘quality of experience,’ making real, or realisation what truly is, that point to the limitations of the metaphor of a journey of linear progression. This making REAL is the only worthwhile task. All else is at best bound to lead to disappointment, at worst to despair. So the metaphor of journey, co-terminous with our physical, biological life is - or can be - hampering. In other words, enlightenment, salvation, is not to be seen as something we achieve at death (or after), but to be realised NOW.

I have been powerfully reminded of the limitations of this metaphor of a journey by events and experiences that have come my way in the last four months. The first was the news I received just after I had returned from a wonderful two weeks walking holiday in various parts of England. This was the news that a young man I had known for almost ten years had committed suicide. He was just coming up to his 29th birthday. Reading through his letters again, and reflecting on our conversations over the years, I realised that we need something else other than the ideas of progression. Something other than ideas of who we are and what our so-called value is, and perhaps more importantly, what other people tell us we are.

His mother and sister came to see me and brought with them a quote from Henry David Thoreau's ‘Walden’. I found it totally relevant and so I will quote it:

‘Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed, and in such desperate enterprises? If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.’

As they were leaving, the young man’s sister said to me: “I believe that my brother achieved in his short life all that he could achieve”. Yes, maybe he did. There are many today who fall behind the staccato beat of our present age and walk at a different pace. Maybe we can walk with them? All of us here have experienced something beyond the reductionist view so current today. We need to be what was described in a leaflet I picked up in the library called “The New Metaphysical Art: cartographers of spiritual insight and desolation.” Yes, we need new maps, and we can be the map makers, provided we can share our insight and desolation.

My second experience came about ten days after learning of the event I’ve just mentioned. A person who had been a member of a Therapeutic Community where I had worked 25 years ago, and who is now a senior manager in the Social Services wrote me a letter in total despair. He had been accused of a serious crime which was alleged to have taken place sixteen years previously. It became clear as the weeks went by that the allegation was totally false, motivated because the accuser was himself in a very tight spot. Suffice it to say that the negativities that we had worked so hard to dispel in our community with this fellow needed to be worked through again. In the middle of this came what I can only call the finding of a letter by divine intervention. This letter would have completely collapsed the case had it come to court.

We really need to see beyond our negativities and those of people who lay these negativities upon us. A refuge in our heart is necessary. Fr. Bede Griffiths says this very well in one of his writings:

Despair comes from the ego. We are centred on our ego; when the ego is getting all that it wants, we feel happy. When it is frustrated, we feel despair, but in each of us there is a deeper self, where we are totally free from depression - if we will open our heart and mind. Awareness of this deeper self emerges and our whole situation can change, in a moment.

My third example I heard just over a week ago while listening to a tape of a talk given to the Guild of Pastoral Psychology by Fr. Benedict Ramsden, a Russian Orthodox Priest who runs a community for extremely disturbed psychiatric patients in his own home in Devon.

It concerns a young man called Raymond who was referred to the community by a consultant psychiatrist as a last ditch hope. If he failed here, his destination was Rampton or Broadmoor, two of the UK's top security psychiatric hospitals.

This fellow had a long history of aggression and violence towards people and things in general. He was heavily on the top dose range of the anti-psychotic drugs. It so happened that the hospital wanted him to arrive at Fr. Benedict's on the day the whole community were going on one of their expeditions - a routine thing that everyone participated in. This day was to be the caving expedition on the edge of Dartmoor. So Raymond arrived and joined the group who were all previous patients from psychiatric hospitals, some of them, perhaps most of them, with long histories of illness and hospitalisation.

The group was led by Fr. Benedict and a Royal Marine skilled and trained in working with groups in these caves.

All went well until they came to the last hurdle in these caves which was a very narrow passage in which each person had to squeeze through on their own, encouraged by the marine at the far end and Fr. Benedict at the beginning. Raymond was the last to go through to be followed by Fr. Benedict, the marine being at the other end of this very narrow passage. Half way along, some several feet away from either the beginning or the end, Raymond got stuck and refused to budge.

He screamed, he shouted, he cursed, he swore, he cried, but would not move. Gentle persuasion didn't work, encouraging words by the Royal Marine and Fr. Benedict had no effect. This continued for almost two hours,

Eventually, Raymond, tired, exhausted and not a little frightened, began to move forward. He found it not as difficult as he thought. Now relaxed, his body moved easily through the cave tunnel. He emerged quietly at the other end. As soon as Fr. Benedict had also come through the passage, Raymond threw himself at him, sobbing uncontrollably. "I did it, I did it" he shouted through his tears. This was to be the beginning of his healing.

What he discovered was a letting go. A letting go into the unknown. Becoming small in order to discover one's largeness. This required a letting go of something that was, in his case, destructive,

painful, and clearly causing suffering to himself and others, to something greater and yet unknown. The mystery of clinging to the known with all its pain and suffering, rather than letting go into the unknown with its release is a common phenomenon in all our lives. But when we experience a letting go similar to Raymond, this is real experience. This cannot be denied. This is no manipulated sensation . . . which we're very good at today, often in the religious field as well. So I come back to my text from the Book of Job:

"Yet I'm not reduced to silence by the darkness, nor by the mystery which surrounds him."

It's easy to talk about letting go, entering the darkness, but if we're honest, it's painful. In meditation we can confront and work with this pain. We can see it for what it is, mainly fear, or fear of fear. When we are silent, with silent body and silent mind, we perceive something of this mystery. There is an alternative reading to this text; the Hebrew being obscure and at times contradictory . . . two Bibles agree on the alternative reading and it is simply the negative of the other.

"Yet I'm silenced by the darkness and by the mystery which surrounds him".

This will not trouble us, for we have heard much at this conference of paradox, Meister Eckhart in his writings continually pointing us to it. So, living at the heart of each moment, we will come to realise as my great teacher used to say:

"We're not here to solve a problem, but to serve a Mystery".

Amen.

[This paper was taken from the text of an address given by The Revd. Tony Pannett at Mass during the 11th. Conference of the Eckhart Society at Plater College Oxford in August 1998.]