

Introduction

I often feel fed up with faith. So much said in the name of God represents a God I do not believe in or want to have anything to do with. The public religious discourse is narrow, bigoted and judgemental. I cringe when I hear these attitudes from my Christian colleagues who believe they are speaking for God. Often I wonder how much these purported followers of Jesus actually know about him.

I could renounce my faith or try to start a new variant, but that seems unrealistic. I am stuck. Stuck because the truth is that my faith is my lifeblood. It has nourished the very foundations of my life and made me who I am. I have written before on hope; this is my attempt to do justice to faith.

I see that this is true in so many others who are part of this faith, the largest worldwide religious community. Like me, they have been touched, changed and given purpose by their faith. So, though fed up with it, I realise that without the Christian faith and its spirituality of connection to others I cannot live meaningfully. I have Buddhist, Muslim and Hindu friends who share this feeling about their respective faiths. They too feel caught: needing the beauty and meaning of their faith in order to

be their best selves but also wanting to shed the violence done in its name. I cannot speak for them, but what follows is my spirituality, which has emerged from my faith story. Carl Jung said the lack of meaning in life is a soul sickness, the full extent and import of which we have not yet begun to comprehend. I wonder what Jung would say about our age if he were alive today. I suspect he might diagnose even more soul sickness. Most of us are much more affluent than the people of Jung's time, but now we see mass epidemics of depression and anxiety disorders, high suicide rates, family breakdown and addiction. Why, when we are affluent, are we not flourishing?

I think soul sickness is the right term to describe what we are facing. Maximising wealth can never change the nature of the beast: we are animals who need meaning and purpose. Equally, maximising happiness as the goal of life is not working for most. To approach life with the question 'What can I get?' rather than 'What can I give?' is to mistake happiness for purpose. This is a chronic mistake that results in many unhappy individuals. Happiness is not the goal, but rather a by-product of a deeper sense of purpose.

We all need something more than just the material in order to find meaning. Spirituality is the exploration of that hunger. At its essence spirituality is about a relationship and connection to something bigger — something transcendent. It inevitably involves faith. For me, without a spiritual connection to God I struggle to find a deeper connection to who I am, to my neighbour, to the stranger, and to the world around me.

To speak of spirituality can seem irrational when the norm is the secular. We mean at least three things when we speak of the secular: firstly, the falling away of religious practice and belief. Secondly, the emptying out of religion and faith from public spaces. Thirdly, the move from a situation where everyone believed in God or some higher being to one in which belief in God is understood to be one option among others (and is now the least plausible); it is no longer the default setting. This is a profound change in our democratic society, but I think we still have beliefs and even a spirituality that is hardly secular and yet shapes our behaviour, policies and votes.

I resent both religious fundamentalists and secular fundamentalists. Both come to the table with their minds made up. Both are willing to exclude the other from the conversation if they do not surrender their position. As Rumi said, 'Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and right-doing there is a field. I will meet you out there.' My faith says God is inviting us to that field, no matter how sure we are that we know the truth. It takes a certain faith to walk out to that field.

In my study there's a whimsical picture of me at eighteen. I look into those eyes and wonder at how my faith has changed. I see someone then who was more focused on the internal than the external; someone who wanted not only to *do* good, but to *be* good. There was a clarity that I had to surrender to something outside myself to gain strength within myself.

I have tried to keep a journal as part of my spiritual disciplines since I was seventeen. When I look at my

entries for November 1975 I am shocked to discover that for the day after Prime Minister of Australia Gough Whitlam's dismissal — a momentous national political event — there is nothing recorded about it. My focus was on an inner struggle around my envy of someone else and diarising my failure. And I come from a family interested in politics!

It has made me think of faith with the analogy of the growth of a large tree. Inside the trunk are rings, which tell of the tree's growth over many years. Each ring attests to a stage along the way. As I started to live more externally the next rings were about wanting to conquer the world and to focus on how things worked. I wanted to know how to develop my professional skills and gain worldly success rather than focus on why the world existed or my character and calling. All this took place in a culture that encourages self-promotion and material success. I later realised that the next rings I added to my tree of faith were less about internal criteria and integrity and that I had strayed from a deeper inner purpose to self-purpose and pride. But these rings are still part of the same tree. I still have a strong faith and my accumulation of years has not obliterated the God experience.

I have always been suspicious of a formula called 'the stages of faith' that suggests a religious progress upwards beyond fundamentalism to more tolerance and less dogma until finally the early faith is quietly dropped altogether. In my understanding it is the same tree of faith with added rings. The styles of my faith may be different but I recognise in myself the same faith.

As Martin Luther King Jr said, 'Faith is the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase.' To me, 'faith' or 'trust' are words to describe the rubric underlying life: our meaning-making drive, if you like. To gain a sense of meaning, we need words and symbols to give shape to the profound mystery that we are to ourselves. I also openly acknowledge I have a particular faith alliance — the Christian faith — and this will be part of this book, of course. But faith and spirituality as concepts cover more than the particular and personal. They must be tested in all areas of life. They are tested in the ambiguity of power and ethical choices, and it is this larger faith dimension, and the questions it raises about all areas of life, be they personal, communal, political or global, that drives me.

There are three great imponderables: the universe, the self and the other. Faith opens up the possibilities to speak of these mysteries. We all need a faith story that makes sense of all three mysteries to understand why we are here and what it all means. Reason and science can only take us so far and must yield to myth to satisfy our hearts. As a child I devoured CS Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* and was lost in wonder when it was first read to me. Lewis spoke of his shift from atheism to Christian faith as a way of satisfying his longing for a hint of another world. His Christian friend JRR Tolkien taught him that, just as speech is an invention to describe objects and ideas, so myth is invention to understand truth.

But the faith breakthrough for Lewis came when Tolkien agreed with his rational scepticism that there

are plenty of death and resurrection stories in Norse literature and Greco-Roman myths, and that there is nothing unique about the Christian story as it too is just myth. Tolkien replied that these stories in other times and other cultures are not untruths but fragments of light. He explained that such myths occur in different cultures and different times because they are fragments of the true Myth that speaks of God becoming human. This true Myth strangely resonated with the glimpses of intuition in the convinced atheist Lewis: intuition of another world, a deeper truth than the naturalistic or materialist world view of his atheism.

This true Myth also undergirds me as I seek to understand the universe, self and others.

Beyond our shores

I well remember the first disaster I was sent to by World Vision — it was in Darfur, Sudan in 2004. I was so overwhelmed by the war, brutality and systematic rape of so many women in the huge refugee camps that I collapsed in tears at the large press conference held when I returned to Melbourne. The surreal civility of home set me off when describing the evil I had seen.

But despite my best efforts, we failed to raise much money. The human brain seems wired to only deeply respond to innocent suffering through natural disaster. Suffering due to war does not excite us or prompt generosity because we think, ‘Well, they should just stop fighting.’ But the suffering inflicted by war is just as real.

I was reminded of this when I spoke about Australia slashing its overseas aid program to the lowest level in our history. I was on television comparing how another conservative prime minister, in the UK, had done the exact opposite and maintained the UK’s contribution at the level all rich nations have promised to the world’s poor: 70 cents for every hundred dollars of the gross national income. In my view this was a lifesaving promise; you do not break promises to those whose

lives are dangling by a thread. Australia, which is much richer per head than the UK, with much lower public debt, had just cut its aid level down from 34 cents to 22 cents for every hundred dollars. Prime Minister Cameron had resisted similar measures, saying, 'We will not balance the books on the backs of the poorest.' That was courageous leadership and a demonstration of true conservative values. I was making the point that we in Australia had become a nation of shirkers. Shirking our share of the international responsibility for the nearly 1 billion who go to sleep hungry each night, and shirking promises that we as a rich nation had signed up for. Of course, I received a barrage of tweets — mostly angry ones, saying something to the effect of 'why should we look after anyone else; we should look after our own'.

But the debate was suddenly cut short by the plight of Pistol and Boo. Johnny Depp had flown into Queensland to film the next *Pirates of the Caribbean* film, bringing his family and his two terriers, Pistol and Boo. Because they'd arrived on a private plane they'd avoided our customs rules and Depp's dogs slipped quarantine. At the same time as I was arguing for increased aid, our agriculture minister, now the deputy prime minister, went ballistic, saying, 'I don't care whether or not he has been twice voted the sexiest man in the world, he can bugger off and get those dogs back to California within forty-eight hours or I will have them euthanised.' Well, the uproar that followed dwarfed the Twitter outrage that I had been subjected to. Within an hour

there was an online petition from thousands of Aussies demanding that Johnny's dogs be spared, and the media could hardly have been more frenzied if a president had been murdered. Any concern for refugees or African lives now at risk due to Australia's cutting 70 per cent of its aid there, or for poor Asian countries where there was a 60 per cent cut in our programs, evaporated. No, the news of the night was the fate of Boo and Pistol.

We are often more wired to help animals than humans because they are innocent — particularly puppies! But all suffering is suffering. William Wilberforce, who tirelessly fought indifference to slavery and helped to abolish the slave trade, also helped establish the RSPCA, fighting against animal cruelty. His Christian faith did not discriminate between human and animal suffering.

Self-esteem is not enough

The self-esteem culture aims at success and churns out a lot of aphorisms about ourselves as own saviour; e.g., 'The best place to find a helping hand is at the end of your arm.' While self-love can be liberating and exhilarating, we can never find lasting meaning and resilience in life's trouble if we think we are the centre. Whether we believe in God or something else, we need transcendence beyond ourselves. Expecting and attempting great things only for ourselves is a recipe for despair and soul sickness. The beginning of true faith and robust spirituality is the realisation that it is not all about me.

Neither is attempting great things a straightforward path. I want young people to spot the nonsense in the popular belief that 'you can be whatever you want to be'. Few of us can be Nelson Mandela or Mother Teresa, although we can choose to share in their wider vision.

We need to sniff critically at the self-realisation gospel preached by most of the gurus. I get furious at the shallow message of positive psychology thoughtlessly pumped into young people. I know at school-presentation nights (and I speak at a lot of them) it's basically the same kids who win the prizes every year.

What messages are we giving to the rest — keep trying and you might receive the encouragement prize? Yet I know there are kids not being applauded on the stage who have in truth travelled a greater distance in effort and improvement than those pulling off the award.

Instead of trying to be whoever you want to be, attempt to be what God made you to be and it will be better for you and the world. Stop comparing up, as there is always someone who seems to be doing better. Compare down and you will immediately realise how blessed you already are. Question what success really means and you will discover it is in being true to your own potential and knowing your inner purpose, which is much more solid ground. Competition has its downsides and feting the winners narrows the exquisite joy in just participating. What is wrong with being ordinary? Much better to be ordinary, even struggling, but fulfilled.

Teachers of Gen Y kids tell me how the ‘you can be whatever you want to be’ mentality is smashing these kids’ resilience. It infects their attitude to everything they try. Failure is shameful. How do they know what’s worth doing without a wider purpose? With parents who have sacrificed so much requiring them to succeed, this generation is under pressure. They must succeed or their self-identity is at risk. But this can be paralysing.

I hear these teachers tell me that study is no longer a soul-inspiring search for a life worth living rooted in the great traditions of philosophy, religion and culture’s transcendent stories. Instead, students are anxious and demand specifics from their lecturers. They simply

want the best grade; the outcome, not the process, is everything. But wisdom teaches us that we learn much more in the process than in even well-graded outcomes. We learn much more from our failures (if we respond to the lesson) than we do from our successes.

When I started at university if you were really smart you might do philosophy and literature in an arts degree; if you were a plodder you did commerce or a business degree. We felt sorry for those students, as it was only glorified counting! Now look at the prized degrees; it's certainly not an arts degree. Now, if you are really smart you have an MBA in business.