

Introduction

GENESIS

“*Getting Out of the Way*” began with no over-arching plan. It first started to ferment in my mind during conversations with my sister one evening, when we were talking about the number of clichéd terms that are used in religious and spiritual circles. We became aware of the number of phrases such as “Jesus died to save us”, which can be rattled off without much inkling as to what they might actually mean, or what it is trying to be said.

A few months later I was asked to write some reflections for Advent liturgies. People seemed to find them helpful, and so when Lent came around I was quite happy to write some more. This provided some basis for working on material – and this book has grown from there.

There is also a lot of material that has been refined and thought through during my classes at Australian Catholic University (thanks to the lively student debates!), or in the process of giving retreats. As well, there has been much reflection following the privileged experiences with people who come for one-to-one spiritual direction. To all these people I am deeply grateful.

This book is not meant to be read right through like a novel, nor is it a work of research out of which scholars can glean erudite minutiae and forage for forgotten facts for footnotes. Rather, it tries to bring together many of the common themes of the Christian experience, by weaving them around the common theme of transformation – and what that means in the day to day.

PERSPECTIVE

“*Getting Out of the Way*” speaks from the framework of the Christian experience, yet its application is much wider than this. Rather than looking at what makes the Christian journey different, this book looks at what enables the Christian Adventure to be a bridge to understanding *the experience of being human*.

It is not meant to be a catechism, nor a work of apologetics, nor a detailed explanation of theological understandings. It tries to ask the question, “*So what?*” That is, it wants to go past the clichés to get to the kernel of it all, so we can begin to experience a *reconstruction* of worldview, rather than the worldview of deconstruction, with which we seem to have fallen so much in love in the West – to our peril.

The writing has not always been easy: it was a challenge for me sometimes to ask myself as I looked at the blank computer page, “*When you boil it all down, what does this or that really mean? And who cares? And why might they care?*” Yet I thoroughly enjoyed the challenge.

OBJECTIVES

“*Getting Out of the Way*” is now my third book. Following the contemplative approach of “*The Track Back*” (1993) and the metaphorical explorations of the Journey in “*Drinking Deeply*” (1999), I can see in hindsight where this book has been moving. The first reflections were penned about six weeks after 11 September 2001, and I began to awaken more and more to

the relationship between blindness and violence, fear and hatred. The revisions to the text were completed in the same week as the first anniversary of the Twin Towers.

As I reflected in the midst of feverish “white hats and black hats” media coverage, the more I realised that this link between one’s own fear and its projection onto others (including systems such as capitalism, terrorism, Christianity, governments etc etc) had to be explored. If the message of Jesus does not say something about what we do with the overwhelming fear within all of us, then it does not say anything helpful at all. If God is not to be found in the struggle with the darkness and the dance with joy within all our hearts, then God is not to be found anywhere.

As in *“Drinking Deeply”*, I would like to thank my mentors for their encouragement and companionship that has enabled the reflections here in *“Getting Out of the Way”*. I have been and always will be grateful for the ways in which my parents opened up and encouraged the awareness of the sense of the sacred: without a sense of the cosmos being enchanted, there is only pragmatism, greyness and the boring question “What’s in it for me?” I am also grateful to the support and love of Bill Wray, my stepdad. A special thank-you goes to June Davis, my spiritual director of twenty-something years, who has taught me to ask the question which I journey through with my own directees: *“How is God trying to bring life out of this mess?”* I also wish to thank Richard Rohr OFM for his continued inspiration. I am appreciative to Paula Egan, Lauren Daniels and Sarah Steele for reading the text and offering helpful suggestions.

Whilst writing, there has been a great sense of sharing the great story of “climbing down” which the saints of all traditions have found to be the only approach to “get out of the way”. As Meister Eckhart said so long ago, “let God be God.” It has been a pleasure to experience the Journey that is shared with so many who have gone before me.

Patrick Oliver

*All Saints’ Day
1st November 2002.*

Beginnings and Endings

The refrain has rung throughout the ages:

"The end is nigh!"

Our imaginations may call forth
long-bearded slightly insane and burning-eyed monks
who ardently preach that there is little time.
And indeed they are right.
They *always* have been right,
for the end *always* has been nigh.

We are so used to thinking that
there must be a beginning before there is an end –
We start at the beginning of a book
and work through to its finish;
we watch the movie from the opening titles
to the closing credits.
Yet when it comes to matters spiritual,
the pattern is quite the reverse:
there must be an ending
before there can be a beginning.

To begin adulthood, we must leave adolescence;
to begin adolescence, we must leave childhood;
to begin childhood, we must leave the womb.
to begin being pregnant, we must leave being virginal.

Everything which is to come needs that which has been;
there is no way around it.
So the crazy prophets have been right all along:
the end is always nigh,
for the end is the place for the new to emerge.

"Stay awake!" implores Jesus,
for he comes continually;
his second coming
is a present continuous tense event.
It is simple to search for a date in the future;
it is harder to be a "seer" in the now.
It is easy to hope to be delivered from the mess;
it is harder to prayerfully ponder
where God may be buried within the mess.

Lately, we have experienced the ending of a world –
a world that seemed relatively safe and somewhat secure.
Now, blasted away in terrorist attacks,
we are catapulted into uncertainty.
The Jews of Old Testament times
also experienced this desolation,
when their Temple,
which they said God would never allow to be destroyed,
was in fact flattened at a time of national desolation.

This can help to remind us that nothing lasts forever
save the faithfulness of God.

Nothing – no national security, no wealth,
no amount of military might –
can ensure our survival,
save this God who is forever coming.

God will not be stymied:

the light that is perpetually threatened with extinction
is only obscured a little longer.

The light is obscured, but not extinguished -
no more than the nightly stars behind the clouds.

Meanwhile, continually – and sometimes imperceptibly –
an awareness of the Kingdom drips through.

Sometimes it takes the breaking down
of our cherished walls

for a second coming to take place.

When we see from the bottom up we can see rightly –
when we have no reason to impress,
nothing to defend and no one to attack.

The more we have, the more we hoard,
and the more we feel the need

for bigger and bigger armaments

to shield what we think we couldn't *possibly* do without.

The more we have to protect, the more we have to defend.

We are slow learners, and we take a while to get it –
it's been two thousand years now, and counting.

Yet the light will forever shine in the darkness,
and the darkness cannot and *will not* overcome it.

Watching, Waiting and Wondering

Where would we be without the three Big W's:
watching, waiting and wondering?
Without them, there would be no cause for celebration,
no glad tidings that can tell us of grace.
These three w's are the acid tests
of a living breathing heart
that does not try to pump religiously congealed blood, and
that does not wall out the surprises of God.

Yet not much is mentioned in the media
Of the virtues of watching, waiting and wondering.
They seem to be triplets destined to be spurned
by a society that wants what it wants *now*.
Yet do we really know in the first place
what we truly want?

Who can teach us what it means
to watch, wait and wonder?
It is the powerless people, the biblical "anawim",
who if we think more than a few seconds about it,
are all of us.
Ultimately, none of us have the slightest power
to stretch a second of our life –
as Jesus reminds us in the Sermon on the Mount.

When we say yes to watching, waiting and wondering,
we are taken into a space of intentional powerlessness.
In this kind of powerlessness, we refrain from
presuming we already know the answers,
that we already know what's best, and
that we already know how things *should* be.

This intentional powerlessness
describes the spiritual meaning of virginity.
It is a space in which we acknowledge that
we cannot cause new life to happen
by our own huffing and puffing efforts.

Perhaps we have played the game of trying to "make it"
all our life –
collecting badges, winning tokens, striving
to have the last word, to be right, to be needed,
to be different, to be lethargic, to be clever, to be strong.
So long as our governments continue to believe
that political ends justify any means,
and that the only real way to resolve international conflict
is through a military solution,
then we should not be surprised
when individuals do the same.

In our overly pragmatic and purposeful world,
it is not easy to watch, wait and wonder
because it seems a waste of time.
Perhaps the hardest thing
in becoming familiar with these triplets
is that they let us know
that the girders with which we have underpinned our life
are very flimsy indeed.

The triplets do not indulge with the false comfort
of letting us rigidly fill the timesheet of the day
and the calendar of the years.
They tend to uproot what we are expecting -
all so we can make way for the impregnation of Hope.

Fear and Faith

The phrase and the sentiments “*Do not be afraid*” are repeated literally hundreds of times in the scriptures. Why would it be mentioned so much if it were not a perennial characteristic of the human journey? Why would God, an angel or a prophet continue to say this phrase unless somewhere deep inside us *we are all afraid*? Unless somewhere deep inside we prefer to say “no” to the invitations to life?

Fear cannot be rationalised away, and is the primary locker-upper of the human spirit. Sometimes, fear has been called “*prudence*” when prevailing authorities have not wanted threats to its status quo. In political circles, fear can adopt the pseudonym of “*righteousness*”.

Slick slogans can drive us into our tribal corners where we must prove our political party, our country, our way of thought to be the *right* one – so the other will be exposed as the *wrong* one. Fear blocks the chance to genuinely listen to another.

The Cistercian monk Thomas Merton reminded us that “*my life is not about me.*” By this, he meant that how others see us or how we are going does not define who we are. We could take this further and say that “*My life is about who I am in the Great I AM – that is, who I am in God.*”

It is only from this space of knowing who we are in God that we can say a full “yes” to God’s invitation. To say “yes” is to agree to go with what life brings us. This is not meant passively, so we become reeds swaying in the breeze. Rather, it involves asking the central question “*What is being called out from me in this situation that moves me towards greater deeper life?*”

That is, can I let go of what others think, of my petty protective policies and beloved boundaries, to risk the embrace of life with all its uncertainties? We may have all the power and money in the world, yet we can still be deeply afraid. After all, Herod with all his clout was fearful of a Baby.

Saying "yes" is to trust that
although the way might be tentative,
never never will I perish.
It is a risky universe.
Yet although we are not shielded and sheltered
from pain and suffering,
the universe is ultimately secure
because we can never be outside the womb of God.

The necessary tension between the two realities
of being open to hurt and yet being ultimately secure
brings forth the chance for creation of soul.
In this stance our virgin soul grows pregnant,
and we become mothers of God for the life of the world.

