

## Paper for TSSF S & P Alnmouth 30 September to 4 October

### Formation through hard places and into a further journey and deepening vision

Hard Places covers an enormous area and I have come to the realisation that the whole world is a hard place and that life itself is hard and perhaps one of the hardest things to do is to accept the reality of this. The world is not perfect and neither am I or any of us. This is how it is, so I should not expect perfection of myself or anyone else for the world contains tragedy and beauty, light and darkness at the same time! In his song, 'Anthem' Leonard Cohen sings of this and I have brought this photo and words with me to remind me of this. The words of the chorus are as follows:

*'Ring the bells that still can ring, forget your perfect offering, there is a crack in everything, a crack that lets the light in'.*

And this of course includes us – we too are cracked, cracked pots, earthen vessels, but the light can and does shine through the cracks in us. For me, as a perfectionist this is good news – I/we do not have to be perfect to be loved, chosen and called by God, or worthy enough or good enough. Jesus chooses the most unlikely of people for his closest friends as we know. I am also reminded of Richard Rohr's words too that God comes to us disguised as our life so there is no place where God is not, and God is indeed present in both the light and in the darkest of places.

In reflecting upon some of the uncomfortable realities of our spiritual journey and the tasks we face, in particular in the second half of life, or the further journey as Richard Rohr calls it, I have brought with me one of my favourite children's stories, 'The Velveteen Rabbit' to illustrate this – I expect many of you know it! It tells of a Velveteen Rabbit, given as a Christmas present to a little boy who loves him for all of two hours and then abandons him for other toys and left in the toy cupboard. Here is an extract from the book:

*'The poor Rabbit felt very insignificant besides the more expensive and superior toys who snubbed him and pretended to be real. The Rabbit didn't know what real meant. The only one who was kind to him was the Skin Horse who was so old that his brown coat was bald in patches and showed the seams underneath and most of the hairs in his tail had been pulled out to string bead necklaces. He was wise for he had seen a long succession of mechanical toys arrive to boast and swagger and by-and-by break their mainsprings and pass away and he knew they were only toys and would never turn in to anything else.*

*'What is Real?' asked the Rabbit one day. Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick out handle? 'Real isn't how you are made', said the Skin Horse. 'It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time and not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.' 'Does it hurt?' asked the Rabbit. 'Sometimes', said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. 'When you are Real, you don't mind being hurt'. 'Does it happen all at once, like being wound up', he asked 'or bit by bit?' 'It doesn't happen all at once' said the Skin Horse. 'You become'. 'It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen to people who break easily or have sharp edges or have to be carefully kept. Generally by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand..... But once you are Real, you can't become unreal again. It lasts for always.'*

The profound insights of this story remind me of my story and Richard Rohr's book entitled 'Falling Upward, A spirituality of the two halves of life'. Did you find yourself identifying with either of the two characters? Dare I ask who identified with the rabbit... or the skin horse... or both? Well, the new rabbit reminds me of the beginning of our life's journey. He does not know what real is or means. He does not know that **he** is not real; nor how he can become real. The skin horse represents the one who knows a little bit about this because he has knocked around for a long time and been knocked about a lot through his life-time and lots of outer bits of him have dropped away. But having still been loved for a very long time he has learnt discernment and wisdom as a result. There is also that sense of movement that the rabbit will make towards becoming real and wise too, guided by the kindness and wisdom of the skin horse.

The picture below of two empty cans, painted by Myfanwy Franks, reminds me too of the two halves of life and the two journeys in life we are invited to make by God.



This is also described by Richard Rohr together with the stumbling blocks which can slow or even prevent us from taking this further journey. He says that the first half of life, which is necessary, is about creating our container, our outer identity through achieving our goals and ambitions, and establishing boundaries and so on. There is also a further journey to make, which not everyone finds for one reason or another and this second journey opens up for us when we begin to discover and become aware of the real contents that the container is meant to hold. Jesus implies this in Mark 2.22, when he says that in order to hold the new wine we need new wine skins. This new container will also have the capacity to gradually stretch so that it can hold all that God wants to create and do in us and so that we may identify and become one with our true self rather than our needy and self-centred egos. The second half of life container can hold much more than structures and laws as we move from '*a survival dance to a sacred dance*' to use Rohr's words again. The first container is more about me, my individual ego needs; the second container is about God and what St Paul can eventually describe about himself that 'It is not I who lives, but Christ who lives in me'

This second journey can begin at any age, but is often opened up with a loss of some kind and with it a degree of pain – symbolised for me by the sharp edges of the cans which has been opened.

**What sort of loss are we talking about?** For me it means that like these cans, these containers symbolising ourselves can be full of us, (baked beans and wind!) and our attention seeking egos, which need emptying out if they are to be filled with God. We have to get out of the way and let God in and let God love us in the darkest of places in ourselves and do his work in us. Among other things it is in stillness and silence, in contemplative prayer that we are awakened and gradually become aware of our wounds that need healing, befriending and loving and which can block us in moving forward and which we can then inflict on others if unrecognised.

It of necessity may often involve a loss of some kind, what we might call 'home' but not just in a literal sense, but on many levels - leaving behind things that are no longer helpful for our further journey; those things in which we felt safe and secure in our lives up to now – it is a movement away from the known into the unknown, away from past certainties even of our belief systems and practices that we were taught as children, but are no longer helpful for our later journey.

This further journey can also be triggered by a transitional and painful life event, and losses such as bereavement, retirement, ageing, health issues and so on; something that perhaps takes us out of our current way of life and sets us off in a new and unexpected direction. All this is not easy to embrace and painful to face. It is a loss of home and innocence and all that that represents, but through which we may find we have begun to see in a different way and our inner sight and vision grows like the removal of cataracts that have blurred our vision up to now. Some of us know about this.

The following story of two monks might demonstrate the difference for us between a first half of life person and a second half of life person:

Two monks, having made their life-long profession of poverty, chastity and obedience, also included a rule never to touch a woman. One afternoon, as they were taking a long walk by a river, they saw a frail woman struggling to cross the river, where she usually did so as to take the short cut home. On this occasion however the current was too strong for her. Seeing this, one of the monks went over to help her and carried her across the river and returned to rejoin his fellow monk. Some three hours later, the other brother spoke, ' Brother I thought we had made a vow never to touch a woman?! 'Dear brother', the other replied, "I put the woman down three hours ago, you are still carrying her!"

Finally, a poem entitled 'The Artist' by Janet Tweedie who suffers dreadfully with bi-polar disorder movingly illustrates her own journey and struggle in her dark place to a degree of light and wholeness:

I know the art of suffering  
and so became an artist.  
Despised for my mind,  
like Jesus crucified  
spat upon by the crowds.  
I know the piercing beauty  
immortal like the sky,  
yet ever changing ever  
beautiful. I know darkness  
til there are no greater depths.  
Then rises a poem  
as pure as snowdrops

piercing the sullen ground  
after winter's barrenness.  
I know the body's failure,  
its brokenness,  
like shattered hands  
that paint the most  
poignant pictures.  
I am an artist  
searching for a life  
beyond this life.  
In death I leave my poems.

**Possible questions for group discussion might include:**

Can you name any losses/ hard places/millstones/stumbling blocks/dark nights that have affected your relationship with God for better or worse? What impact have they made on your prayer life? And has anything new happened or changed in you as a result of a hard time or struggle in your life?

Can you name any hard places in prayer itself that have become a stumbling block for you and why? Is the way you pray today different from when you first started out?

What do you think about the idea that we grow spiritually much more by doing it wrong than by doing it right, or as Cardinal Newman put it that 'we walk to heaven backward'? And would you agree that the 'way up is the way down'? What does this mean to you?

What do you feel about the place of imperfection as the pathway to holiness? Or the way of the wound as St Therese of Lisieux was to call it? Can the desire for perfection also be a stumbling block on our journey to maturity? Is perfection desirable or possible?

Do you think that fear and avoidance of pain and failure keep us from our own spiritual depths and therefore spiritual wholeness?

What might be other differences between the first journey in life and the second and what may prevent us from taking this further journey?

How might we recognise someone who has taken this further journey?

**Gabrielle Ayerst October 2013**