

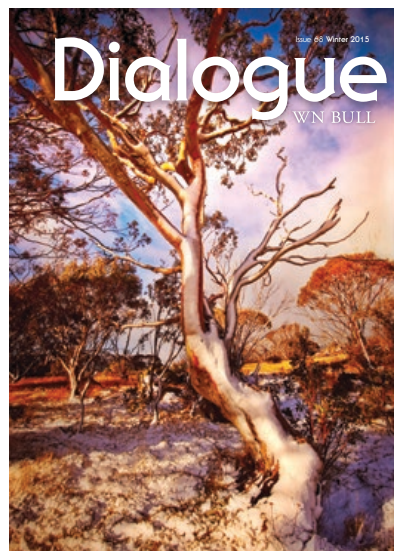
Issue 68 Winter 2015

# Dialogue

WN BULL







# Editorial



Richard White

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It's a beautiful Winter morning, the shortest day. As children we were used to our father announcing, 'today is the shortest day', as he did in December with the longest day. It was an annual ritual and an idiosyncrasy we joked about, this fascination with the mid-point of the year's cycle. The other thing about this announcement in Winter was that tomorrow the days would be getting longer!

The days are getting longer, brighter, warmer(?) and this change begins in the midpoint of the year, when it feels like the shorter, darker, colder days will stretch on forever. The ritual of the annual 'announcement' is a reassurance. There is hope that we will be warm again, or, as one article puts it 'we will smile again'.

In the midst of acute and intense pain, ritual and tradition provide a reassuring, limiting protection. Sheryl Sandberg describes a grief that took her to a place where winter-like darkness and cold threatened to hold her still and forlorn forever. The Jewish tradition of mourning, Shiva and Sheloshim, provided that limiting and protecting ritual.

The little stories by Erica Greenop and Cecile Yazbek capture this human experience of the losses that seem to hold us bereft and time stands still. The beauty of these stories is that the authors' creative imagination does another essential kind of holding; they hold us in human experiences that we too often lose in our distraction and pain. And, this being able to stay with our human experiences, wondering and awe-struck, enlarges our hearts and capacity for compassion, for those who suffer and for ourselves.

Personal grief is put in a wider context by Leigh Bowden's article 'Refugees and Me'. The Germans have a word, Weltschmerz, which means 'the world's pain'. Whatever the original meaning, I think of a cry coming from our common humanity at the sights and stories and statistics of fearful, desperate people fleeing their homes, in the millions.

Richard White reflects on the way in which a dog can get under our skin and into our lives and the price we pay for this attachment in 'A Dog and a Prince'. The poem from 'Poet's Corner' takes up this theme.

Allowing thoughts about dying to become part of our musing can transform the lighting of the daily fire as in 'Watching the Fire on a Cool Autumn Morning'. Rob Greenop's story about his mother 'Finding Peace' is another 'mini odyssey', one of those journeys we are making all the time, with ups-and-downs, joy and pain, and discovering the Grail (to mix my metaphors) of human kindness and friendship again and again.

Wishing you warmth and comfort this Winter and the realisation that the shortest day is the beginning of new life.

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*Snow Gums Before and After Snow*  
Steve Turner





# GRIEF AND AN ABILITY TO SMILE

written by Richard White

Writing about grief is understandable for a magazine produced by a funeral company. A reader is prepared for such discussion. Knowing the topic means we have a choice to leave this reading alone, for another time, or, not at all. 'Life wasn't meant to be easy', but it wasn't meant to be sad, either. Or, is there meant to be sadness in life, some of the time?

When people ask me what *Dialogue* is about, I say something about the breadth and depth of human experience, especially the depth. There's a saying by the French writer, Leon Bloy: 'There are part of the human heart that do not exist until suffering enters and brings them into existence.'

‘There are parts of the human heart that do not exist . . .’ We know what this means. We know people who seem shallow or superficial. We may have been shallow and superficial ourselves at times.

There is something safe about being shallow, talking about the weather, the neighbours, the footy, the scandals. We avoid the forbidden topics of dinner parties – religion, politics and sex, not to mention death and sadness. Then, something happens – and, something is always happening – and we slip off our raft or fall out of our lifeboat and plunge into the depths.

'There are parts of the human heart that do not exist . . .'  
This moment, this phone call, that news report, this  
diagnosis, that car crash . . . and we discover parts of

ourselves, deep roots of loving and connection, longings and clutchings at life, dreams and hopes half-hidden, half-shaped.

With good luck, grace, the help of friends, surprising courage, we learn to swim. We may even, for a time, free-fall or whatever you do in the depths and go deeper. There are monsters to be found but also wonderful, surprising things.

“ There are part of the human heart that do not exist until suffering enters and brings them into existence.

Mary Oliver's book of poems, *Thirst*, is a blessed reminder of the importance of grief in the growing to wholeness. As the back cover description puts it, 'Grappling with grief at the death of her beloved partner of over forty years, she [Mary] strives to experience sorrow as a path to spiritual progress, grief as a part of loving, not its end.' Then, there's the poem 'Heavy'.

That time  
I thought I could not  
go any closer to grief  
without dying

I went closer,  
and I did not die . . .

The poem continues with a reflection on the importance of friends, particularly Daniel ('brave even among lions').

‘It’s not the weight you carry  
but how you carry it –  
books, bricks, grief –  
it’s all in the way  
you embrace it, balance it, carry it  
when you cannot, and would not,  
put it down.’

Mary did not put it down. Through 'practice' she learnt to balance it. Balance what, though?

It is not so much 'balancing grief' as balancing life and death, joy and sadness, falling down . . . down . . . down and coming, getting, swimming up . . . up . . . up. It is this sort of balancing that creates a human being, that enlarges the heart, that makes us who we truly are.

No one looks for these descents and these sadnesses. We do not have to look for them. They find us inevitably and in their own good time.

There is an art and wisdom in this balancing. First, there is a break-through, as Mary puts it,

Have you heard  
the laughter  
that comes, now and again,  
out of my startled mouth?

Where does this laughter come from? How is it possible? There is a scene in Trish Broadbridge's book *After the Wave*, an account of her surviving the Tsunami in Thailand in 2006. Trish had returned to the Thai beach where her husband, Troy, had drowned on their honeymoon.

It was a relief for Trish, six months after the event to be away from the public and private grieving of her home town. She was without Troy and the heavy bleakness still enveloped her on this pilgrimage to the place where he died. Then, she met the children on the beach.



These laughing village children, from a place still littered by marks of destruction, surrounded her, stranger, hardly a tourist in that mess, a new and different face, for them.

And, they were laughing, in surprise, in affection, as children do. To her surprise, Trish caught their mood and she, too, laughed.



What does laughter mean for someone who is grieving? I think it is about re-connection on a quite profound level. We talk about laughter as ‘levity’, which means ‘lightness’,

“ Sadness and joy are connected. They are part of the rhythm of our lives. There is that quality of surprise and newness, something of the child, that arises after deep sorrow. ”

seemingly the opposite to depth, the quality discovered by sadness. But, lightness can also mean bright, light-shining and revealing. Lightness both enables us to see and produces the response when we see. The children’s laughter both opened Trish’s eyes and lifted her mood. Children so often break through our moods and our fears and our defences. They can embody and show forth

innocence, welcome, hope. The sun still shines; people still smile; the world is still good. Sadness and joy are connected. They are part of the rhythm of our lives. There is that quality of surprise and newness, something of the child, that arises after deep sorrow. There is a passage from Stephanie Ericsson’s book *Companion Through Darkness* that captures well this connection between sadness and joy. Stephanie’s husband died suddenly in another city. Stephanie was pregnant with their first child. She was utterly devastated. The book is a record and reflection on her process of grief.

I honestly believed I would never be happy again. I could not have been further from the truth. But how could I have known then what I know now? How could I have known that sheer despondency would make my moments of happiness so much sweeter? How could I have known that months of despair would lay the groundwork for years of contentment? No, there is a time when we don’t believe that we will ever be happy again. And when a smile peaks out from inside, it is a surprise.



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# THE END OF SHELOSHIM AND EXPRESSIONS OF GRATITUDE

written by Sheryl Sandberg

**Editor:** The following article appeared on Facebook on June 3, 2015. The author, Sheryl Sandberg, is the Chief Operating Officer (COO) for Facebook. Her husband, David Goldberg, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Survey Monkey, died as a result of an accident on May 1, 2015.

Today is the end of sheloshim for my beloved husband—the first thirty days. Judaism calls for a period of intense

“ Let me not die while I am still alive. I would have never understood that prayer before losing Dave. ”

mourning known as shiva that lasts seven days after a loved one is buried. After shiva, most normal activities can be

resumed, but it is the end of sheloshim that marks the completion of religious mourning for a spouse. A childhood friend of mine who is now a rabbi recently told me that the most powerful one-line prayer he has ever read is: “Let me not die while I am still alive.” I would have never understood that prayer before losing Dave. Now I do. I think when tragedy occurs, it presents a choice. You can give in to the void, the emptiness that fills your heart, your lungs, constricts your ability to think or even breathe. Or you can try to find meaning. These past thirty days, I have spent many of my moments lost in that void. And I know that many future moments will be consumed by the vast emptiness as well.



But when I can, I want to choose life and meaning.

And this is why I am writing: to mark the end of sheloshim and to give back some of what others have given to me. While the experience of grief is profoundly personal, the bravery of those who have shared their own experiences has helped pull me through. Some who opened their hearts were my closest friends. Others were total strangers who have shared wisdom and advice publicly. So I am sharing what I have learned in the hope that it helps someone else. In the hope that there can be some meaning from this tragedy.

I have lived thirty years in these thirty days. I am thirty years sadder. I feel like I am thirty years wiser.

I have gained a more profound understanding of what it is to be a mother, both through the depth of the agony I feel when my children scream and cry and from the connection my mother has to my pain. She has tried to fill the empty space in my bed, holding me each night until I cry myself to sleep. She has fought to hold back her own tears to make room for mine. She has explained to me that the anguish I am feeling is both my own and my children's, and I understood that she was right as I saw the pain in her own eyes.

“ I have learned gratitude. Real gratitude for the things I took for granted before—like life. As heartbroken as I am, I look at my children each day and rejoice that they are alive. I appreciate every smile, every hug. ”

I have learned that I never really knew what to say to others in need. I think I got this all wrong before; I tried to assure people that it would be okay, thinking that hope was the most comforting thing I could offer. A friend of mine with late-stage cancer told me that the worst thing people could say to him was “It is going to be okay.” That voice in his head would scream, How do you know it is going to be okay? Do you not understand that I might die? I learned this past month what he was trying to teach me. Real empathy is sometimes not insisting that it will be okay but acknowledging that it is not. When people say to me, “You and your children will find happiness again,” my heart tells me, Yes, I believe that, but I know I will never feel pure joy again. Those who have said, “You will find a new normal, but it will never be as good” comfort me more because they know and speak the truth. Even a simple “How are you?”—



almost always asked with the best of intentions—is better replaced with “How are you today?” When I am asked “How are you?” I stop myself from shouting, My husband died a month ago, how do you think I am? When I hear “How are you today?” I realize the person knows that the best I can do right now is to get through each day.

I have learned some practical stuff that matters. Although we now know that Dave died immediately, I didn't know that in the ambulance. The trip to the hospital was unbearably slow. I still hate every car that did not move to the side, every person who cared more about arriving at their destination a few minutes earlier than making room for us to pass. I have noticed this while driving in many countries and cities. Let's all move out of the way. Someone's parent or partner or child might depend on it.

I have learned how ephemeral everything can feel—and maybe everything is. That whatever rug you are standing on can be pulled right out from under you with absolutely no warning. In the last thirty days, I have heard from too many women who lost a spouse and then had multiple rugs pulled out from under them. Some lack support networks and struggle alone as they face emotional distress and financial insecurity. It seems so wrong to me that we abandon these women and their families when they are in greatest need.

I have learned to ask for help—and I have learned how much help I need. Until now, I have been the older sister, the COO, the doer and the planner. I did not plan this, and when it happened, I was not capable of doing much of anything. Those closest to me took over. They planned. They arranged. They told me where to sit and reminded me to eat. They are still doing so much to support me and my children.

I have learned that resilience can be learned. Adam M. Grant taught me that three things are critical to resilience and that I can work on all three. Personalization—realizing it is not my fault. He told me to ban the word “sorry.” To tell myself over and over, This is not my fault. Permanence—remembering that I won't feel like this forever. This will get

“ One of my favorite cartoons of all time has an elephant in a room answering the phone, saying, “It's the elephant.” Once I addressed the elephant, we were able to kick him out of the room. ”

better. Pervasiveness—this does not have to affect every area of my life; the ability to compartmentalize is healthy.

For me, starting the transition back to work has been a savior, a chance to feel useful and connected. But I quickly discovered that even those connections had changed. Many of my co-workers had a look of fear in their eyes as I approached. I knew why—they wanted to help but weren't sure how. Should I mention it? Should I not mention it? If I mention it, what the hell do I say? I realized that to restore that closeness with my colleagues that has always been so important to me, I needed to let them in. And that meant being more open and vulnerable than I ever wanted to be. I told those I work with most closely that they could ask me their honest questions and I would answer. I also said it was okay for them to talk about how they felt. One colleague admitted she'd been driving by my house frequently, not sure if she should come in. Another said he was paralyzed when I was around, worried he might say the wrong thing. Speaking openly replaced the fear of doing and saying the wrong thing. One of my favorite cartoons of all time has an elephant in a room answering the phone, saying, “It's the elephant.” Once I addressed the elephant, we were able to kick him out of the room.

At the same time, there are moments when I can't let people in. I went to Portfolio Night at school where kids show their parents around the classroom to look at their work hung on the walls. So many of the parents—all of whom have been so kind—tried to make eye contact or say something they thought would be comforting. I looked down the entire time so no one could catch my eye for fear of breaking down. I hope they understood.

I have learned gratitude. Real gratitude for the things

I took for granted before—like life. As heartbroken as I am, I look at my children each day and rejoice that they are alive. I appreciate every smile, every hug. I no longer take each day for granted. When a friend told me that he hates birthdays and so he was not celebrating his, I looked at him and said through tears, “Celebrate your birthday, goddammit. You are lucky to have each one.” My next birthday will be depressing as hell, but I am determined to celebrate it in my heart more than I have ever celebrated a birthday before.

I am truly grateful to the many who have offered their sympathy. A colleague told me that his wife, whom I have never met, decided to show her support by going back to school to get her degree—something she had been putting off for years. Yes! When the circumstances allow, I believe as much as ever in leaning in. And so many men—from those I know well to those I will likely never know—are honoring Dave's life by spending more time with their families.

I can't even express the gratitude I feel to my family and friends who have done so much and reassured me that they will continue to be there. In the brutal moments when I am



overtaken by the void, when the months and years stretch out in front of me endless and empty, only their faces pull me out of the isolation and fear. My appreciation for them knows no bounds.

I was talking to one of these friends about a father-child activity that Dave is not here to do. We came up with a plan to fill in for Dave. I cried to him, “But I want Dave. I want option A.” He put his arm around me and said, “Option A is not available. So let's just kick the shit out of option B.”

Dave, to honor your memory and raise your children as they deserve to be raised, I promise to do all I can to kick the shit out of option B. And even though sheloshim has ended, I still mourn for option A. I will always mourn for option A. As Bono sang, “There is no end to grief . . . and there is no end to love.” I love you, Dave.





Maggie is sick and she is still undergoing tests. Maggie is a King Charles Spaniel who belongs to Sue. I have known Maggie from the time she was just a developing idea in Sue's mind.

'I'd like a dog', was the way Sue put it. If you are living alone a pet provides company and a welcome when you come home. Puppies or kittens have a sense of play that brings delight and stirs the sometimes forgotten parts and enjoyment in all of us. I could understand perfectly why Sue might want a dog. But, pets also give rise to an awareness of responsibility for another being. And they may bring out the best in us.

There are countless stories about the relationships between human beings and animals. Almost without exception the person becomes more human through contact with a bird or a cat or . . . a dog. In Paul Gallico's story, *The Snow Goose*, which tells of the rescue of thousands of British soldiers from the beaches of Dunkirk in 1940, it is

the bird who is the source of blessing. She also plays her part in the transformation of a frightened young girl and a disabled recluse.

Antoine de Saint-Exupery's parable *The Little Prince* also expounds on the relationship between human beings and "nature". In that story, the Fox shares his wisdom about friendship with the young boy, explaining that a relationship with an animal involves responsibility, " ... if you tame me, then we shall need each other. To me, you will be unique in all the world. To you, I shall be unique in all the world ...". On his small planetary home, The Little Prince has developed a relationship with a Rose. Ties have become established between them. The Rose, his Rose, has developed uniqueness in his eyes. There is

no other rose like his Rose. He learns that the Rose has changed his life and he recognises that with this relationship comes responsibility.

We might acquire a pet as a companion or a distraction, or as a play mate for a child, but as the RSCPA reminds us, 'Pets are not just for Christmas!' With the relationship comes a duty of care and a sense of responsibility. There is the dawning realisation that the wellbeing of this creature is important to me and I am important to it!

“ When the Little Prince returns to his inter-stellar home, the Fox tells him he will cry and that this is the price of friendship and of love. ”

Sue and Maggie have formed a loving relationship and that relationship extends to Sue's extended family. Sue has young granddaughters who are now old enough to have 'sleep-overs' at her house. From the time these little people began visiting and then staying, Maggie has been a prominent part of the adventure. 'Someone my own size! They love mischief and fun as much as I do!' This is what Maggie's antics seem to express when the two girls arrive. She follows them everywhere and in turn the girls play and pet their small companion.

On their most recent visit, it was a different Maggie who greeted, or failed to greet, them. She no longer played or followed them around. Maggie did what animals do when they are hurt or unwell; she hid out of the way, retreated to conserve her strength and to give her body time to recover.

In the conversations between the Fox and The Little Prince, the Fox explains that if the Little Prince tames him, establishes a friendship, he will be changed. Firstly, he will come to know the meaning of care and responsibility and then he will know too the sadness of separation. When the Little Prince returns to his inter-stellar home, the Fox tells him he will cry and that this is the price of friendship and of love. The Little Prince, who is a figure of naive innocence, is shocked at causing pain to another, especially a friend. The Fox assures him that this is the nature of friendship, the price of loving.

I well remember a clergyman, a professor of philosophy, scoffing at a reading from *The Little Prince* at the funeral of fellow academic. Perhaps I imbibed some of his prejudice and saw the story as a fable for children and nothing more.



Then, I had this conversation with Sue about Maggie and I realised that when we care for something or someone, something happens inside us. We can't remain the same, even though we may say things like 'life goes on' or 'it's only a dog!' Sue and Maggie set me thinking about *The Little Prince*. I needed this story to understand why I had become concerned about Maggie.

I've already referred to *The Little Prince* as a parable. I meant the term both in the sense of a simple story with a twist that catches the reader off-guard and invites a change of perspective and also in the Biblical sense. Jesus used parables to jolt his listeners out of their sense of security and certainty.

When Sue describes Maggie's symptoms and their trips to the vet, I feel for them both.

Sue and I, and lots of other people, are hoping Maggie will recover.





# FINDING PEACE

written by Rob Greenop

I would have described my mother as a gentle person, perhaps rather protected as a girl raised to reflect the correct values in life. Her Victorian father sent her to finishing school in Switzerland, she married well, a young doctor, and lived comfortably with her young family in Perry Hill Road Catford in South East London.

In 1939, as war clouds spread over Europe, all that changed when my father was asked to return to the hospital system to support the anticipated growing demand for emergency medical services. The surgery at the rear of our house was closed and he joined the medical staff at Kings College Hospital. Mother's contented family life was never the same again.

A few months later, as the casualties in London from the bombing increased, Kings took over the Blind Hospital

near Guildford, my father was transferred there and we made the first of many moves we made over the next two years. We left behind our home with its furniture covered in dustsheets and valuables put into storage and we moved to the quiet haven of Tyrells Wood estate near Leatherhead, not far from Guildford. There, in the Surrey countryside we could have thought ourselves far

from danger, but it was not to be. One day our peace was rudely shattered when a German aircraft, in attempting

“Several houses including ours were badly damaged. The war had literally arrived on our doorstep.”

to evade some pursuing British fighters, jettisoned its load of bombs over the estate. Several houses including ours were badly damaged. The war had literally arrived on our doorstep.

The whole estate was declared a danger zone due to the threat of unexploded bombs and Mother, my sister and I had to leave immediately. Catford was no longer considered a particularly safe place to return to, so we went to Streatham in South West London to stay with my grandparents for a few days until other plans could be put in place, my father remaining behind to continue his work. During the following fifteen years, until his death in 1955, I rarely saw him again.

It was the time of the 'blitz' and with London under constant nightly bombing raids it was unwise to stay in Streatham. A cousin of my father in Shropshire kindly offered to put us up for a few days until we could find somewhere more permanent and arrangements were made for us to move to the safety of the country as soon as possible.

With just a few clothes and possessions in suitcases the three of us set off by train on a journey with what must have been a feeling of great apprehension for my mother. Where we were going to live for the remainder of the war, and in what circumstances, must have been very unclear. She was leaving the security of her immediate family behind, and with no husband to help and support her, was faced with

any one address for longer than a few weeks. It was nearly four years before we returned to live in London and by then her marriage was no more.

The few days at the cousin's stretched to two weeks before Mother found a single room in a small house in Shifnal, our landlady remembered only as a 'funny lady with fuzzy hair'. Again the accommodation was only for a about a month - then we moved to a 'friend of friends', a local solicitor, who could put us up 'for a short period'. From there it was back to my father's cousin before moving on to stay with a more distant relative who probably agreed

“Again she resorted to walking the cold streets, going from house to house, knocking on doors of complete strangers and asking if they had any rooms to let.”



uncertain times. It was the beginning of a time of despair and loneliness for her. Over the next year life was full of worry and uncertainty as seldom were we able to remain at

to take us only out of a sense of duty. His was a very smart house, complete with servants including an elderly butler who made his displeasure at this influx of evacuees into the household quite obvious. Children were expected to be seen and not heard - I'm sure his tolerance of small persons such as my sister and I was very low, especially when my table manners precipitated a minor crisis one lunch time. Normally we were not allowed to have our meals with the adults but on one of the rare occasions that we did I had saved my biggest and best roast potato until last, then inadvertently placed my knife and fork together as though I had finished. As the butler removed my plate I reached out and liberated the potato from under his horrified gaze. I suspect he later threatened to resign. As it probably became a question of him or us, the writing was on the wall. We moved on.

So it was off again on a search for a roof over our heads. Finally, after much difficulty, Mother found accommodation for us at Kemberton Hall, in the small village of Kemberton, about three miles from Shifnal. The house was a rambling Georgian mansion owned by a businessman in the local meat industry who as a hobby bred pedigree Scottish terrier dogs. Our time there came to an end when he remarried and decided there was no longer room for us. Although we had been quite settled I don't think we regretted moving away from the noise of the kennels and the smell of the canine inhabitants. Luckily a local farmer was in need of



a temporary housekeeper so it was off down the road to Hytons Farm.

It was now January 1942 and with nowhere suitable to stay in Kemberton, Mother's search was widened to the nearby town of Wellington. Again she resorted to walking the cold streets, going from house to house, knocking on

“ Attached to the back of the house was a conservatory opening out onto terraced lawns and ornamental ponds full of tadpoles and newts. Beyond a grass tennis court was a vegetable garden, orchards, many fruit-beds full of strawberries . . . ”

a bedroom and a small sitting room on the top floor that might just be suitable for your needs - it has a gas ring by the fireplace - no kitchen, but you could use the one on the ground floor". The lady's husband, a lieutenant colonel in the army, was overseas and maybe she sensed in this younger woman standing before her that here was someone she could help in such difficult times.

Inviting Mother in she introduced herself. "My name is Peace, Edna Peace."

Prospect House was set in extensive grounds. A wide driveway swept past the front, skirted an expansive lawn before curving round towards the rear. The garden was shielded from the road by many huge fir trees and rhododendrons. Attached to the back of the house was a conservatory opening out onto terraced lawns and ornamental ponds full of tadpoles and newts. Beyond a grass tennis court was a vegetable garden, orchards, many fruit-beds full of strawberries and right at the bottom of the garden a field for the goats, chickens and a row of pig sties. After the small confined garden of our suburban house in Catford it was a magical place to live.

This was our home for the next three years, a place of refuge and security for the remainder of the war. In those times of hardship and when families were torn apart and people opened their hearts to others in need Mother and Edna established a remarkable friendship that lasted for over fifty years.

doors of complete strangers and asking if they had any rooms to let. By now, following the exodus of people not only from London but also from big cities such as Birmingham, Manchester and Coventry, accommodation in small rural towns had become nearly impossible to find. Eventually, in a small terraced house, she was offered a single room for the three of us, sharing a bathroom and the kitchen with the owner and her large Alsatian dog, an arrangement which proved far from satisfactory. I imagine the dog was higher than us in the pecking order. To say our quality of life had fallen somewhat was something of an understatement. This was perhaps the lowest point of Mother's war-time experiences. Away from the comfort and security of her own home, the support of her family and her social standing among her friends as the young wife of a doctor, once more she found herself tramping the streets to find somewhere for us to live. Our fortune, however, was about to change.

Continuing her search, by chance she arrived at the front door of Prospect House, a three storied ivy-covered house on the northern fringe of Wellington. It was opened by a lady a few years older than Mother, who, to the inquiry as to whether there was the possibility of room for a woman and two small children, evacuated from London, replied with the all too familiar 'unfortunately no'. However, there was something that caused the lady to change her mind; as Mother turned away she called her back to say "there is

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# HEARTS IN A GARDEN

written by Cecile Yazbek

Walking around my neighbourhood, similar blocks and routes I’ve walked my dogs over the past ten years, I’m taking in the gardens with the eyes of farewell. I have not decided whether, when and where to move but all around me, agents’ boards advertise development blocks and packages of land ideal for multiple occupancy, with some buildings already underway.

On the highway, five-storeys of scaffolding are being filled in by tradies in singlets and fluoro vests. In the end, it should look like the photo at the entrance to the site: ‘luxurious living, walk to shops and train’.

At the top of my street, the homestead is being stripped of fixtures and fittings by an old man who was once a small boy growing up in there. His mother with her young looks and silvery voice is long gone. I first met her more than ten years ago, early one morning on my way to the shops. She was lying down weeding after clipping the shrubby jungle – ‘these plants are alive for the birds and creatures, that’s why I keep it going,’ she told me. But it’s all lost. A

bobcat has been through her garden, cutting down large trees and churning up muddy tracks. The leafy jungle will be consumed by the concrete edifice that she dreaded. This morning, a pantechnicon is loading heavy furniture. Through the open door I glimpse an art deco light fitting: oval pearl shades on a silver chandelier. I imagine a pianola and tinkling voices.

Around the corner, I see a hedge of black bamboo, an ancient native smoke bush and a row of camellia trees. A tall shrub a few seasons back had sparkled with bright yellow pea flowers – an Easter Island native. Across the road, a pair of giant *Brachychiton albidus*, relatives of

the Illawarra Flame, litter the bare ground with pink velvet trumpets all winter. I wonder about the people who gathered these rare and special plants.

“ . . . but there, where he found the Mediterranean Blessed Trinity – olive, fig and grape – he embraced the spirit of his determined Lebanese grandfather who wielded mattock and shovel to dig home into that cold and bare place. ”

My mind flits to a town on the Great Western Plains where Professor Ghassan Hage went to look for his grandparents’ home. The buildings were all unrecognisably altered but there, where he found the Mediterranean Blessed Trinity – olive, fig and grape – he embraced the spirit of his determined Lebanese grandfather who wielded mattock and shovel to dig home into that cold and bare place.

In the street behind mine, a few weeks after the yellow DA sign went up a bulldozer growled and attacked the



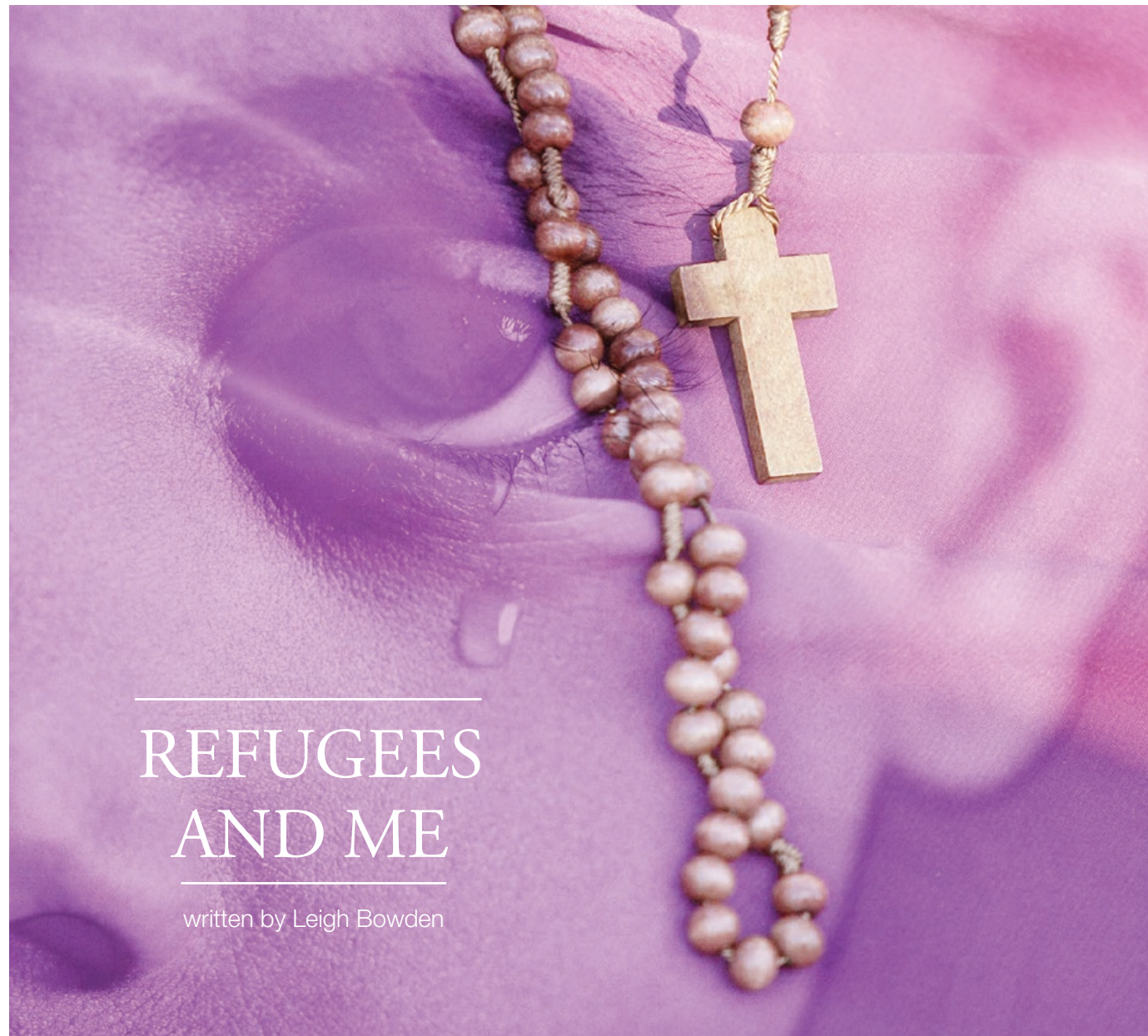
trees. Those felled giants on their sides, their roots that once reached deep into the earth, clutched at the air with long fingers. Their carcasses were carted out on the first truck. Now daily at seven, the roaring shakes our houses as giants dig beyond the rocky stratum into the sub-soil and clay. This also goes away on trucks. The geo-history will be concreted to create a subterranean car park. A hundred flats will shelter hundreds of potential customers for Coles and the train line. Their children will squash into the local school.



“ I wonder about the people who gathered these rare and special plants. ”

In my neighbourhood, a few have lived for 50 or 60 years on private land or soldier-sailor blocks. The rest of us are ring-ins of a mere decade or two. There will be no hopeful quest for our children and grandchildren to find family homes or special gardens. All will have become apartment blocks. Rather, the spirit of this place will be in our memories and perhaps in the new homes and gardens that we will construct and plant with hope all over again.





## REFUGEES AND ME

written by Leigh Bowden

There are a group of us, in our town, who have become increasingly despondent about the plight of refugees and asylum seekers – throughout the world and in our region. We meet on a regular basis to lament and to share our feelings of powerlessness but also to rant against the governments who treat these traumatised people so inhumanely. Some of us get the newsfeeds on Facebook from the Asylum Seekers Resource Centre and from the UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency). Those organisations keep us informed about the developments in refugee advocacy and suggest ways in which we can support them

We've been meeting for nearly 12 months now and all agree that although we haven't actually achieved much at least we feel a bit better having talked with like-minded people. However in an attempt to do something, The Spouse decided that we (he) could organise an ecumenical prayer service to at least pray for these suffering people, to be held during Refugee Week.

It was suggested that he take the idea to the local Ministers' Fellowship meeting and see what kind of response it elicited. He was motivated by a desire to do something. He hoped to find a common concern for the plight of refugees. He hoped, too, to find a shared belief in the compassion of God and the power of prayer. What he discovered was that it was not as simple or as straight forward as he had hoped.

The members of the churches' group raised objections that are common in the general community: refugees and asylum seekers who come by boat are 'illegals' and there are 'proper' ways for refugees to come to Australia; the present Government's policy has effectively stemmed the tide of asylum seekers to Australia; we need to protect our borders to avoid the entry of undesirables (terrorists) and opportunists; we have to be careful not to advocate an emotional response to what is a complex and world-wide issue; we must not be political.

When he told me of the response his suggestion had received, I was amazed by the disconnect between the Gospel imperative to love; that God loves everyone and the fear and agitation that was apparent when refugees were considered – even only as the subjects of prayer! Where was Jesus in this discussion?

“ I love Australia, my homeland. I would hate to be forced to leave it. As a rule, people don't want to leave their homelands, their culture, friends and families. People seeking asylum, and refugees, do so because their lives depend on it. ”

And I wondered why this group had not been hearing the stories that I had. With refugees continually in the headlines, I am hearing stories of well known and successful refugees in our own country, for example, Dr Karl Kruszelnicki, scientist; Frank Lowy, businessman; Judy Cassab, artist; Majak Daw, footballer and Anh Do, comedian and author. And we have all heard of famous international refugees – Marlene Dietrich, Marc Chagall and Freddie Mercury. Even the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama is a refugee!

It's interesting that when something is in your mind it seems to turn up everywhere.

I have been reading *Poirot and Me* by David Suchet, published in 2013. In Chapter 7 Suchet writes, “In my first scene Poirot is encountered leading a string of his fellow Belgian refugees through the local woods, instructing them on the wonders of the English countryside ... We then see Poirot leading his troop of Belgian refugees across a river

bridge, while attempting to sing the famous First World War song “It's a Long Way to Tipperary, even though their voices are clearly not up to it ... Nevertheless, it instantly conveys the group's attempt to show loyalty to their new homeland.”

“ I want to do something; I need to do something – for the refugees and for me. And I can. I can pray. ”

I never knew that Poirot was a refugee: I'd never thought about it. Apparently there were hundreds of Belgian refugees arriving in Britain in the face of the advancing German troops in 1914. Agatha Christie saw them, met some and subsequently wrote that background into one of her most famous characters.

Last night The Spouse and I watched the movie, *The Hundred-Foot Journey* (2014). Again the refugee/asylum seeker motif was there. The Kadam family ran a very successful restaurant in Mumbai. Early in the movie, a mob attacks and firebombs the restaurant over an election dispute. The family flee India and settle first in Britain, before moving to France. Papa Kadam explains to the local French villagers that the British gave them asylum. The film is a feel-good romantic comedy, but the heroes began as asylum seekers.

The Kadams and Poirot; Daw, Cassab and Dr Karl have all showed loyalty to their new homelands. I love Australia, my homeland. I would hate to be forced to leave it. As a rule, people don't want to leave their homelands, their culture, friends and families. People seeking asylum, and refugees, do so because their lives depend on it. I don't know if there are more people fleeing now than there were in the past, especially the Jews during World War II. Maybe it's that the moving, the trauma and the suffering are just more evident now with our fast and efficient media.

I do know that the ongoing exposure to the plight of refugees is causing social grief and distress. I want to do something; I need to do something – for the refugees and for me. And I can. I can pray. I can pray for the refugees – for their well-being, their safety, their strength and that they'll keep hope. And I can pray for myself and for us, that we treat refugees and asylum seekers, and even think about them, with compassion and wisdom and that our response to their needs is one of courage and love.





# WATCHING THE FIRE ON A COOL AUTUMN MORNING

written by Richard White

Our lawn-mower man, who knows everything, says there's not much wood around for fires this Winter. If I needed any encouragement, this was it. I have begun my wood-scrourging exercises.

I look enviously at old trees, dead in paddocks, and have been seen dragging a biggish branch a couple of hundred metres from its roadside resting place. It's not much but every little bit counts.

My chain saw is in fine shape, thanks to some judicious advice about sharpening the chain. I've even worked out how to start it with some consistency.

Sometimes I think I have regressed to a primitive 'hunter-gatherer' stage. There is great satisfaction in finding an unclaimed log or stocking up with a recently felled tree

for that year or so later when it will become fire-wood. Like' Joseph and The Amazing Technicolour Dream Coat', I am preparing for the equivalent of Seven Lean Years.

Get in supplies! Be prepared! Remember the winter of '58 when the fog didn't lift for two weeks! Or, the winter of '65 when the water pipes froze! Then, there's the fire itself.

There must be a word for someone who loves a fire who isn't a pyromaniac. Certainly, I enjoy lighting the fire from scratch. There's drama in seeing the catching when

the paper or pine cones set off the kindling or a substantial piece joins in the action and bursts into flame. It's that 'we have lift-off' moment and I can sometimes hear my hunter-gatherer cousins drop their fire-sticks and rejoice wildly. But, there's more to the fire than the collecting of wood and the setting it alight.

It would not be exaggerating to compare this ritual to the proverbial Japanese tea ceremony. There is a sort-of attention to detail, a fairly rigorous procedural process and a slowing of the mind, a being in the present. And, when all this is done before sunrise, with the cold seeping through cracks and crannies, there is heightened significance to the event. The warmth of the house and all who dwell within depends on us, the fire and me. But, all this is by way of preamble. Today I spent most of my time by the fire and we had one of those desultory conversations that in hindsight seem particularly important.

It was cold outside, a sub zero morning. The fire exuded warmth like one of those personalities who light up a room. Let the weather and all its moods do their worst; in here the fire rules.

I looked at the fire and it looked at me. We mused over the ways mythology and philosophy have spoken of fire. Fire is one of the four basic elements: fire, earth, air and water. For the ancient Greeks, Heraclitus in particular, fire was *the* basic substance. Why this fascination with fire?

Before me the flames were dancing, fed by twigs and

“ Then, in a shorter or longer time, it was reduced to ash, empty of life and hope. But, they had their moment of glory; they shone, they danced, they lived.

logs, soon to become ash and coals. It was a living thing, this fire, a leaping, glowing, transforming being. We were enjoying one another's company. The fire looked at me and I looked at it.

Gradually I set aside my plans for the day. It was enough to sit and be still, warm and . . . sort of listening. Those 'logs and twigs, soon to become ash and coals' held a secret. That dead wood, those logs and twigs, the deader the better, ignited into life. Then, in a shorter or longer time, it was reduced to ash, empty of life and hope. But, they had their moment of glory; they shone, they danced, they lived.

I am reminded of a poem by a Russian, Yevgeny Yeshtushenko, called 'People'. I keep coming back to this poem. There is a truth in it that catches fire each time I read it and I used it often in the celebration of funerals.

No people are uninteresting.  
Their fate is like the chronicle of planets.

Nothing in them is not particular,  
And planet is dissimilar from planet.

And if a man lived in obscurity  
Making his friends in that obscurity  
Obscurity is not uninteresting.

To each his world is private,  
And in that world one excellent minute.

And in that world one tragic minute.  
These are private . . .

Not people die but worlds die in them. . .

Poets too were fascinated by fire. While there is no mention of fire in 'People' there is this line 'and in that world one excellent minute'. It is that spark of originality, of truth, of self that reveals the person, the irreplaceable and unique one. Fire is at once life with all its energy and mystery and the spark or light that reveals and expresses the person.

This is what the fire was saying to me. By ‘say’ of course I don’t mean with words and speech. Words are OK for ideas and directions, but truth and mystery require a more powerful language. That stillness that grew sitting by the fire, in no hurry for a change, created a space, a listening. And, that’s not the right word either. It’s more than listening. It is an understanding that reaches into you and changes everything or better reveals everything. It is an understanding that holds together things that are normally separated by time or practice or fear. It has to do with my eldest niece who is dying.

In those five or twenty minutes, I came to see Anne's life and my life and all our lives in the brightness and the burning and the ashes. The flames and the warmth and the energy, the brightness and the movement and the colour held me. I wasn't thinking of 'symbols' or comparisons. I was looking at a fire and this intriguing, age-long and dangerous reality captured me as it has captured artists and philosophers and 'hunter and gatherers' from time immemorial.

It was all there, life and death, sparks and ash, achievement and decline. The compartments we human beings construct to separate life and death, to protect ourselves and others, they were all broken in that visual



experience by the fire. The glory of a life and the reality of death, alive and leaping and falling apart.

This holding together of realities we habitually separate is the work of the poet and all the artists who can set the fires and the sparks racing in us. Yevtushenko, raised in Russia under Communism, could do this with his affirmation of ‘the secret worlds’ that live at the heart of all of us. His poem finishes with a fierce sadness.

~~~~~

In a flash, at a trumpet crash,  
I am all at once what Christ is, since he  
was what I am, and  
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch,  
matchwood, immortal diamond,  
Is immortal diamond.

~~~~~

~~~~~

... they perish. They cannot be brought back.  
The secret worlds are not regenerated.

And every time again and again  
I make my lament against destruction.

~~~~~

Then, there is the poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins that along with Anne inspired this reflection, ‘That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection’. Hopkins holds together the realities of life and death, ‘world’s wildfire, leave but ash . . .’ However, his belief leads to an embracing of these opposites and a picturing of third, enduring reality.

~~~~~

‘Immortal Diamond’ could be seen as Hopkins’ *cri de coeur*, heart-felt cry, just as ‘Lament’ may have been Yevtushenko’s. For one, the ‘the private worlds’ of every human being were lost forever with their death; for the other those ‘private worlds’ like the sparrows of the Gospel, were never to be lost. Though frail ‘patch, matchwood’ they had been transformed into ‘immortal diamonds’. Human life contains a *scintilla Domini*, a spark of the Lord, as the mystics maintain; it, we, have an eternal element. At least, that is what I was thinking as I sat by the Autumn fire.



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# TWO ORDINARY PEOPLE ONE SPECIAL GRIEF

written by Erica Greenop

When I am alone, Greg and all my memories come into in my mind. I long for these moments, especially today. I don't want the phone to ring; I don't want anyone to ask me how I am, or be sorry for me or put their arm round my shoulders. I don't want anyone to come into the space I have reserved for Greg. Bill has gone to order our lunch. I shut my eyes and Greg is here as if he has been waiting. “Knock knock” he used to say when he wanted to interrupt my thoughts, even if he was sitting right there beside me. “Knock knock. Can I come in?” Just like that. Same. It's how it used to be.

I'd watch him, when he was 6, watching his snail in the shoe box on the patio. Look mum he'd say and we would bend down and the snail was feeling the air and the sunlight crept across the patio tiles up the side of the box and it seemed to stir the freedom in its soul. Or that's what we told ourselves it was doing, feeling the air. We said it was imagining freedom and Greg whispered “Do snails have souls, mum?” and his eyes searched my face wanting to believe.

We used to do our walk to look at the harbour, our favourite walk across the Bridge from Milson's Point, the Bridge Stairs down to Cumberland Street and milk shakes at the Rocks. 60 steps. We counted them. And when he was 10 we counted the steps backwards from 60. Makes it easier, he used to tell me. Counting towards the smaller number makes it seem less. And then he was 23 and I don't know how he had grown up so fast and he was home for Christmas; we were doing the steps and he said “Mum – my legs aren't walking properly. I don't think I can do the rest” and then I saw the fear in his face. But I don't want to remember the fear; I want to remember his face the way it was before he got sick, the shiny forehead and thick blonde eyebrows that clung like furry caterpillars to his smooth skin. Magnificent eyebrows. We said we could sell his eyebrows to the highest bidder and make a fortune and we would giggle like silly kids and he would put his hand on my shoulder and say “Mum!” just like that. I can hear his voice. “Mum!” Thankful that motherhood hadn't made me too sensible. That sort of voice.

The grief has been raging again, with his birthday coming up, the grief in me screeching like a demented fury at poor old Bill. But today is his birthday and the raging

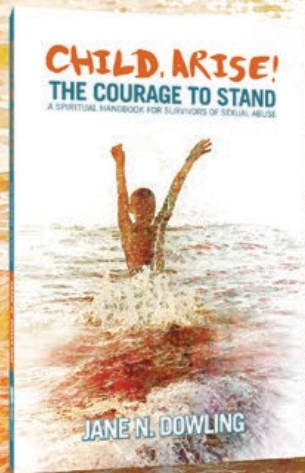
has gone. I touch my shoes under the table. I hope no-one is watching – they might think I should be shut away somewhere. Greg bought them for me with his first pay cheque. Magic shoes he said, for my magic mum. But there are tears like pinpricks in the backs of my eyes. It's never far away. 30 years old today and every day I miss him. It's over 6 years since the Bridge Stairs and the ambulance came and the fear started and the stabbing anger and the shock and the disbelief and the heartache and the screaming sadness.

“Come on love” Bill said this morning. He was trying hard to get it right. “We'll go to our cafe for lunch” so here we are and he dare not let the memories come and he gets out his phone and I shut my eyes and we are both alone.

“ And when he was 10  
we counted the steps  
backwards from 60.  
Makes it easier, he  
used to tell me. ”







## CHILD, ARISE! THE COURAGE TO STAND

written by Jane N. Dowling

*Child, Arise!* is Jane Dowling's account of the realisation of profound trauma in her life, its destructive impact and her faith-inspired recovery. It is a very personal story, detailed and articulate. On reading Jane's account I found myself understanding at a much deeper level the impact of trauma on a person's life.

The drama is there, the suffering, the darkness and the suicidal thoughts but there is also an almost indefinable quality of 'but that's not all . . .' There is no catastrophizing, if that's the word, no wallowing, no self-pity. Jane, like many people who have been abused, describes herself as a survivor rather than a victim. And, this almost clinical description of her trauma has the power to illumine the pain of one human being that makes its horror accessible to others. For this reason alone, *Child, Arise!* 'is an important book.

This is a 'faith-inspired' account of sexual abuse and recovery. Jane's faith was nurtured in a Catholic home and found later expression in her joining a religious community. As she notes, this religious upbringing and vocation were no

protection against the evil of abuse. Like so many people, Jane felt betrayed by this failure of a loving God to protect her. She went through the grief of loss of innocence and questioning of her faith.

Jane's book is particularly relevant for people who have suffered abuse in the Church and been tried as Jane was tried. It is also important for those of us who have been scandalised by what we have heard and seen in the media in recent years. Always, always Jane situates the painful events in the context of prayer. For this reason, too, *Child, Arise!* is important. It is a relevant and contemporary introduction to prayer and to the place of the Scriptures in the life of a Christian. But, is this book also of interest to someone with little knowledge of the religious world and language?

I don't know the answer to that question. However, while this book is written by a woman of faith, well educated theologically and spiritually, it is not a 'pious' book. The basis of every prayerful thought or comment is the reality of experience. Jane has a deep appreciation of the ways of the human heart and mind. There is a patent meeting of the psychological and spiritual and of the transcendent mystery and the all-too-human condition.

There is an expression 'grace builds on nature'. In other words, the events and dynamics of our human life are not overwhelmed or set aside by spiritual experiences or interventions. The Creator of human existence treats our humanity with respect and patience, as well as with provident care. Jane's account of childhood and later abuse, a time of forgetfulness then a breakthrough, breakdown and the dawning of understanding follows a pattern familiar to many sufferers of trauma. This pattern triggered thoughts from my own life.

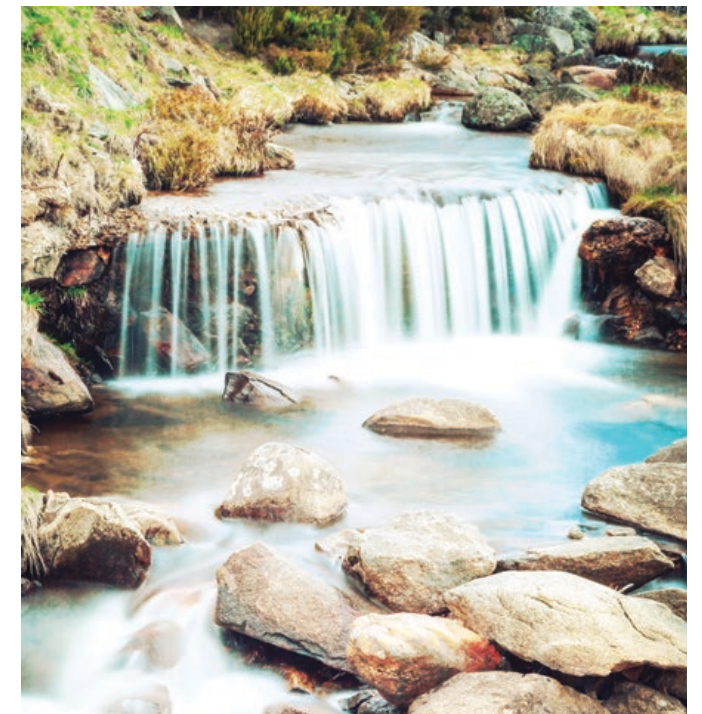
As I get older I find myself wondering at expressions or ideas that have been with me for years. Often they are a phrase or a piece of poetry and sometimes a passage of Scripture that continues to ring true and illumine aspects of my life. The two phrases that come to mind on reading Jane's book are: 'It is better to die of the truth created

“ Some of these illusions are relatively harmless, distractions and vanities that get us through the day; others are serious avoidances and denials that mar, distort and destroy our real selves. ”

by God than to live with the illusion created by myself'. Gertrude Von Le Fort. And, T S Eliot's expression from *The Four Quartets*, 'humankind cannot bear very much reality'.

Illusion does not feed the soul. This is often a hard won truth. Unable to bear very much reality, we often live with various illusions for years. Some of these illusions are relatively harmless, distractions and vanities that get us through the day; others are serious avoidances and denials that mar, distort and destroy our real selves. But, the alternative to illusion can seem like death, too painful to bear.

Jane's story is not so much about illusion as protection, that psychological mechanism that shelters us from 'very much reality' until we are ready to bear it. The light that



Jane writes about in the first part of her book in the context of the biblical statement, 'Let there be light', is described vividly in its divine origin and as a gradual, painful dawning in Jane's own experience. The quote from T S Eliot grows in significance in the context of his own life story.

T S Eliot suffered greatly in his life with his first wife Vivien who was mentally ill. Eventually, Eliot left his wife and she died in an asylum. He was later to write, as noted by one critic, "only a man who has suffered deeply could write that one of 'the gifts reserved for age' is 'the awareness of things ill done and done to others harm/which once you took for exercise of virtue'. Being able to 'bear a little more reality', the insight into how one has lived one's life, is the fruit of a life-time of living.

The breakthrough of God's truth, demanding and terrifying as it is, is so well described by Jane. Like Gertrude Von Le Fort, it was almost killing in its reality, the reality of her having been abused. But, as Jane might say, as perhaps many survivors might say, the providence that sheltered her in the years between the abuse and her realisation, also sustained her through the process of healing. Moreover, with this sustaining came courage and insight in how to respond even more creatively and constructively to the dawning truth. *Child, Arise!* is the fruit of fidelity to this dawning truth. There are warm and appreciative endorsements of Jane's book on the outside cover, the one by Father David Ranson points to the book's wider significance.

Father Ranson, who wrote the Forward to Jane's book, looks beyond the personal story to rippling effectiveness of this moving account of survival: 'This is, I believe, one of the most important books to have been written in a time of what, for the Church, is one of intense scrutiny and dark and disturbing exposure. It is an account of personal courage and gracious spirit, and a story of remarkable faith.'



# Poet's Corner

## Dog with a Cough

It's more of a wheeze now, the sound he makes. Whatever of heart constriction Or dilation, it's getting worse and he tries to tell us . . . something. At times it's just the continuous wheezing and the slow walk, standing, being wherever one of us is. Then, there's the unusual affectionate attention, a nuzzling in close, an even more insistent being-near and eyes bright and expressive. It's distressing for us and for him and he belies his condition with an even more than usual interest in food and his regular morning round of the garden, sniffing, wee-ing and checking things out. He's not well and the vet spoke of 'the next step' being another more expensive medication on which I pin few hopes. He's not fading away, dying in a conventional sense. So there's no letting go on his part or ours the ultimate reality is held at bay. He's a dog with a cough and we will all live with it until he can't.

*William Edmunds*



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