

## Spirit and religion – joining together; going deeper

*I'd like to begin by acknowledging the Nyoongar people as traditional owners of the land we're meeting on, acknowledge my gratitude that we share this land today, my sorrow for the costs of that sharing, and my hope that we can move to a place of justice and partnership together.*

I have a few main points.

That a focus on spirit, religion and God are in their different ways profoundly important.

That talk of religion and God can be dangerous and damaging.

That we should deal with that danger and potential damage not by running away from them or being silent, but by engaging in 'religious' dialogue, dialogue about what we care deeply about.

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Let me begin with my response to the question in your program: 'Why is Spirit important'?

10 years ago, in the middle of a mid-life crisis, I explored the question 'what really matters?'. My answer, as some of you know, was 'Spirit'. Spirit matters. And in all that we do, I feel, we should be trying to develop Spirit<sup>1</sup>.

### **Why is 'Spirit' Important?**

'Spirit' became important to me when I looked it up in the Dictionary. Its etymology - its original meaning - is 'breath of life'. I was very struck by this. You know what it feels like when your spirit is strong. You can feel your energy and enthusiasm; you can feel true passion and compassion; true joy and true grief; you can care about others and care about yourself. But what struck me when I read this description - 'the breath of life' - was what it looks like when we can't get it. I thought of a person drowning.

A person drowning thinks only of the next moment - just trying to stay alive rather than focusing on the wider picture. A person drowning lashes out - even at people who are trying to help them. A person drowning grabs at anything to try to get that breath back into their lungs. And a person drowning, finally, ceases to care; gives in.

A person who can't "breathe" their spirit can be like that drowning person. When my spirit is choked I can think only of the next moment, not the wider vision. When my spirit is choked I lash out at others around me, even those who want to help me; even those who love me. When my spirit is choked I consume and consume, grabbing at anything to fill up the hole left by my choked spirit. (This consumption is not only environmentally and economically un-sustainable, it stresses and distracts me from my life). And when my spirit is choked I give in, cease to care, get apathetic. Our communities are full of people feeling like this. We often feel like this ourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> for a more detailed introduction to this concept see the paper "**Social And Cultural Sustainability: Sustaining spirit in our lives, our communities, our cultures and our society**" available at [www.peoplehelp.com.au/csd](http://www.peoplehelp.com.au/csd)

If we have communities and a society where people are thinking only of the next moment, where we are lashing out at each other, where we are consuming at rates we and the planet can't sustain, and where we simply cannot care about what is happening around us, we will have communities, societies, cultures with no capital, no capacity. They will be un-sustainable and we'll have to increasingly turn to control and distraction - lifestyle TV, 'border security', wars on terror, rampant consumerism - to manage them.

So... as a matter of urgency in Australia, whether our interest is 'productivity', or environmental protection, or social justice, or the well-being of a small child, we need to answer the question 'how do we develop spirit?' And the answers need to inform all our ideas and actions; all our policy and practice, be they personal, professional, organisational or political.

But why 'develop' spirit? I understand that term, also, through the dictionary: it is the opposite of 'envelop'. When we 'envelop' something we wrap it up; when we 'develop' something, we unwrap it. To develop a community is to un-wrap the potential of that community. To 'develop spirit' is to un-wrap the spirit in a person or people - not to teach, or change, or build spirit in that person - simply to un-wrap the spirit that is there waiting.

### How?

So.....what will it take from us, as people and governments; as workers and managers to develop spirit?

It takes, I think, 4 key tasks:

1. We attend (or 'pay attention'<sup>2</sup>) to our own lives, and we are helped in this when others pay attention to the lives we have lived and wish to live, rather than the life that someone else believes we should live. When we pay attention to the experience, action and wisdom of a person they open up - 'un-wrap' - so that their spirit can breathe.

This leads to (and grows from) *spirited individuals*. (Others speak of it as 'empowerment'.)

2. We connect with others. Human beings simply can't operate in isolation, and the quality of our relationships with others will profoundly affect our spirit; profoundly affect the quality of our lives and our capacity to make a difference in the world around us. This leads to (and grows from) *love* by which I mean that force that draws separate parts towards wholeness.



<sup>2</sup> David Nourish - a friend - first highlighted, through words and through his daily being, the power of paying attention.

3. We work towards human and ecological systems that sustain all of us. This leads to (and grows from) *justice*, by which I mean a force of *equilibrium between the needs of all of us*, including future generations.
4. And we dream -dream of how we want our world to be, and act as though we can make it so. To borrow a cliché "our dreams (or visions or ideals) are like the stars; we may never reach them, but like the ancient mariner, we can guide our journey by them." Without dreams our lives can slip into meaninglessness that we must escape from through distractions like drugs, TV, busy-ness, or finding people to hate. This dreaming leads to (and grows from) *vision*. Someone wrote, a truck load of centuries ago, 'Without Vision the people perish'. Well..... we live in perishing times!

### Moving Deeper

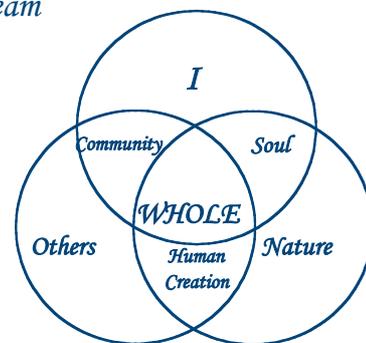
Now, I always speak of this 'Developing Spirit' in very secular terms. I suspect that this is part of its usefulness. A sports coach, a Christian or Muslim theologian, a feminist, a socialist, a capitalist will all have insights to contribute to a dialogue about Spirit. I hope that it sometimes shift people from the distractions and smokescreens that are put before us - tax cuts, border security, wars on terror, endless forms, new theories on management - to what actually matters: the spirit of each of us and all of this planet.

But today, let me move deeper; move from the secular toward the 'religious'.

And to do that I want to elaborate on one of these four elements: 'Dream'.<sup>3</sup>

As I said, I feel we should dream of our world as we would want it to be, and act as though we can make it so. And in our dreaming we should bring our attention to the **I**, to **others**, and to **Nature**. If we do this our attention will also be drawn to **soul**, to **community** (the experience of 'us') and to **human creation**, (which can be the magnificent joining of nature's gifts and human love and ingenuity - grandma's china cups, the bicycle by the front fence - or if we forget spirit, can be rapacious carelessness - a polystyrene cup, a trident missile).

### Dream



In short, we should dream of the whole. Not just the spirit of the I or self. Not just the human spirit. Not just the spirit of Nature. All of them. The Whole Spirit.

The Whole Spirit: let me go back to that dictionary as I say 'whole spirit'. The word springs from 'hail' - exactly the same base as the word 'holy'. So here I'm dangerously close to saying that in our dreaming we should pay attention to the Holy Spirit. Or, to use another word, to God.

<sup>3</sup> Elaborations for 'Attend' and 'Connect' can be found in 'Weaving Tapestries: a handbook for building communities' by Tim Muirhead.

So lets talk about God. That's about the most dangerous statement I'll ever make. Dangerous because now half of you now consider me loopy. Dangerous because the other half now have an image in your head of what I'm talking about which is, inevitably, profoundly different to mine. And most of all dangerous because God can be used to justify genuine evil.

To move this to safer ground, let me read you a poem, a bit of whimsy that holds something of what I want to say about all this. I wrote it early one morning, a couple of weeks ago, lying in my tent at Fairbridge Folk Festival.

*(In reading this please note: It is to be read in a slightly ridiculous Aussie accent except the part in italics which is to be read in a slightly ridiculous Cockney accent).*

I was lying in my tent last night  
(The missus had started snoring.  
Once she starts I just can't sleep  
and it all gets kind of boring.)

Anyway....I'm lying there,  
and I'm listening to her snore -  
And I get to thinking: "Geez" I thought,  
"I hate this bloody war!"

"I hate that it's got all bloody messy  
and all them people die  
and lose their homes and livelihood.  
I hate seeing them nippers cry.

I hate the price of petrol  
and that terrorism's getting worse  
and that a whole damn nation's  
going to hell in a hearse.

And I hate the fact that they were warned -  
old John and George and Tony.  
And the fact they keep saying we're winning -  
it seems so bloody phoney!

(See, at home when I start to think like this  
I just change the bloody channel;  
watch some reality TV  
or the boys on the footy panel.  
But here I'm in this bloody tent  
and the wife is bloody snoring  
and I just know she's not in the mood  
so I've got no chance of scoring.)

So all these bloody thoughts are starting  
to drive me really spare,

and I'm getting more and more pissed off  
with Bush and Howard and Blair.

And the thing that really irks me  
is their sheer bloody hide....  
that in all this mess they really seem  
to think God's on their side.

Then suddenly I'm thinking  
"well Geez, what if they're right?"  
(Remember, I've got no TV  
and it's the middle of the night  
and the wife's gagging on her snoring  
and I can't turn on the light  
And I'm lying wondering whose side God's on  
and it's really bloody dark)  
So I suddenly think "well bugger it...  
why don't I just arks?"

So I lie there and kind of shut my eyes  
and kind of try to look religious  
and I'm worrying that God might not hear  
'cause by now my wife sounds hideous

and I just popped the bloody question!  
Dinkum! Just like that!  
"Whose side are you on?"  
and guess what! God answered back!

It was really bloody brilliant!  
It really hit the spot!  
It was like I'm a bloody messiah!  
(though I think I'm probably not)

But lying in the darkness,  
in my over-jumbled head

I heard God's voice as clear as day  
and this is what it said.....

*'Fing is, luv, I don't give a toss'*

(It turns out She's a pom!)

*'If you fink you there's sides on this round world,  
you've already got it wrong'*

*'See, bad news....I'm a Muslim.*

*And I'm Christian. And I'm Jew.*

*And though I know they're not that fussed,  
I'm a Buddhist too.*

*I'm the Waggy and the Dreaming.*

*Kali. Shiva. Thor.*

*I'm all of these and none of these.*

*I'm the ocean and the shore.*

*I'm the mountain and the valley;*

*the pebble and the tree.*

*I'm the song, and I'm the sculpture,  
and all of them are me.*

*I'm the kangaroo and emu.*

*I'm the rain and I'm the sun.*

*And I'm that brilliant little beetle  
that feeds itself on dung.*

*So I know you like to sort fings  
into 'whose right' and 'whose wrong'  
and 'what's the best religion'  
and 'who sings the sweetest song';*

*I know you like to fink in terms  
of 'nations' and of 'race',  
but in the end your world's just one  
exquisite, fragile place.*

*So for God's sake, please look after it!*

*For God's sake, get it right!*

*For God's sake care for all of it.*

*It's all glorious in my sight!"*

.....

So I lay there in my little world  
And I thought.... "well that makes sense."  
And I listened to the gentle sounds  
of us humans in our tents.

And I said to God "Just one last thing  
while we're having this little chat;  
could you stop the missus snoring?"  
And She did!

Thank God for that.

Firstly, a few disclaimers..... My wife was not snoring and, in fact, not in the tent.  
Secondly, as far as I've been able to ascertain, God is not an English woman.

But let me deal with the issues without the frivolity of rhyme to hide behind.

### **Engaging in 'Religious Dialogue'**

Talk of God is dangerous and damaging when it feeds fundamentalism. The idea that God's on your side; that if you are right, then I, with different beliefs must be wrong; the idea that your truth is the whole truth. So many of us have been wounded by the spirit-crushing certainties of fundamentalism that we have turned away from religious dialogue. Certainly I did.

But those of us who have turned away from religion have got to answer a serious question. As we sought to throw off the constraints of religion - of God even - did we leave ourselves a moral void? Have we really created anything with the resilience or depth of Hinduism, Christianity, of Islam, or Buddhism? It is not enough to discard them as systems of power and control, or distraction. They can be that, but they have also been the basis for some of the most important movements of liberation the world has seen. They remain a key foundation of social services in Australia.

We who have strived to understand the world by rejecting these sometimes stultifying traditions have to ask each other: what do we have to replace them? Of course, we don't need to have a relationship with or belief in God to have a consistent moral position. As a non-Christian, non-Muslim, non-Buddhist, non-Hindu I still believe that I have a consistent moral position.

But look around. How are we - who are on the side of collectivism, of compassion, of environmental protection, of social justice, of peace, of civil rights - how are we doing right now? We're losing. And we're losing because we don't share clear gathering points. We don't share clear vision. We don't share a passion for something beyond ourselves. We don't put, at the centre of our dialogue, the great questions of human experience. We don't put Spirit there. We don't put God there, in all It's many meanings and languages. We get overwhelmed by all that we must stand against and try to address it in splintered, ad hoc ways.

Listen to Arundhati Roy the author of 'The God of Small Things' and a passionate activist. She said, in Sydney *"Today, it is not merely justice itself, but the idea of justice that is under attack. The assault on vulnerable, fragile sections of society is at once so complete, so cruel and so clever.... that it's sheer audacity has eroded our definition of justice. It has forced us to lower our sights and curtail our expectations."*

We are losing.

And part of what I'm saying is: perhaps those who believe in and talk about something called God have something to teach us. See, I can think of at least three really big advantages that most understandings of God share (I know there are more): When we think of God we are thinking of something very much greater than, and beyond, ourselves. When we think of God we are thinking of something that goes way beyond the possible. And when we think of God we are remembering that miracles happen. (I watch the daily miracle of a tiny seed turning dirt and water into a magnificent flower or tree. That was a miracle before we understood how it happened. And it is a miracle after we understand how it happens.)

I think these features hold the seeds of antidotes to the rampant individualism that leaves us lonely, depressed, obsessed with reality TV and other distractions; antidotes to the meaningless materialism that so damages our environment and our spirit; antidotes to this terrible apathy and disengagement we are experiencing. And maybe the idea of miracles can give us hope in this time of despair, can remind us that South Africa defeated apartheid without civil war; that the Berlin Wall came down without bloodshed at the end, that a small hard seed can turn mud into a magnificent tree.

I wonder if the answer to all this is for us - all of us - to engage passionately in religious dialogue. But I want to be careful here. Religion, as I said, can do great damage. So let me explain what I mean by religious dialogue. The great religious traditions are only part of it (albeit an important one). My dictionary shows the original meaning of 'religion' as coming from the same root as 'diligent' - extreme care - and 'negligent' - lack of care. In other words 'religious' dialogue is about care; it engages us in the question, 'what do we care about?' I have found that when you ask people that question, and give them time for real reflection, their answers are surprisingly consistent, positive, and heartfelt.

**A plan!**

So here's a thought - a 20 year plan say - for all of us who believe that humanity can do something greater, who believe that we are actually capable of caring for our planet and caring for each other. (And I include those of us who experience and place value on a relationship with God, and those of us who don't.)

Let's gather together in a spirit of 'religious' dialogue - by which I mean dialogue that explores what matters to us in the rich experience of being human in this universe. Let's listen and speak passionately of the wisdom of our different traditions - Jain, Quaker, Bahai, feminist, socialist, capitalist, humanist, and let's feel free to bring questions to those traditions, based on our own individual wisdom and experiences.

Let's, through that dialogue, develop moral positions that are greater than our own individualism, that go beyond the possible, and that insist that miracles will occur when we believe, collectively, that they must.

And with all that let's collectively call our leaders to something greater and deeper than cutting taxes, than protecting borders, than trying in vain to bomb nations into democracy or submission.

Lets call those leaders - and us as leaders - to work with us in honouring and responding to our spirit and the spirit of all things, and to the deep, awesome privilege of being human together in this glorious universe.

Thankyou.