



Good times and hard times

For many of us, living with Covid-19 has changed how we live. It is common to hear people say we have learned something and we cannot just go back to life as it was before the pandemic – although everyone looks forward to that time.

I recently read the moving book by Julia Baird, *Phosphorescence*, reviewed by Lorna Henry as the first item in this newsletter. I was struck by what she wrote in her introduction: “ ... are we in fact asking the wrong question - instead of how do we stay happy, should we ask how do we survive, stay alive or even bloom when the world goes dark ...” It is then that all we have learned about resources for resilience, for spirituality, about what matters most, come into focus in our lives.

I have been impressed by a common theme among friends and contacts of how important relationships are and the opportunities isolation and travel restrictions have provided both for immediate family and to reach out to others by phone, FaceTime, Zoom and Skype. One person wrote: “During recent months our family has enjoyed settling-in to the safe and secure rhythms of life at home. Spending more time together has reaffirmed our increased interdependence and how much we value each other.” Maintaining vision while dealing with hard times can be a challenge.

The 8th century BCE Jewish prophet Micah wrote a stern warning to the Jewish people of his day about the disastrous state of the nation with words that are famous: “The LORD God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah chapter 6 verse 8). Around 10 centuries later, Jewish rabbis applied the ancient wisdom to their day, combining encouragement with the challenge of the ancient prophet:

“Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief.
Do justly now. Love mercy now.
Walk humbly now.
You are not obligated to complete the work,
but neither are you free to abandon it.” - *Talmud*

Reimagine the future Life after Covid-19

The theme above was the subject of the PCNV Zoom meeting on 26 July at which Professor Joseph Camilleri OAM explored some of the profound ethical and practical questions that need our attention.

The immediate issues affecting people in Australia were considered against the background of a global power and civilisation shift that can affect our economy and security as well as how we handle this and future pandemics.

See the website for details.

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JULIA BAIRD, PHOSPHORESCENCE. On awe, wonder and things that sustain you when the world goes dark. Fourth Estate (Harper Collins), Australia, 2020. Hardcover. 310 pages

Review by Lorna Henry

Earlier this year we saw the publication of an inspiring book about life and spirituality and finding strength and meaning. Julia Baird's 'Phosphorescence' is a beautiful production, both outside and within.

We know Julia Baird as a presenter on ABC TV's 'The Drum' and as the author of a highly regarded biography of Queen Victoria. Her recently published book, 'Phosphorescence', presents us with a very personal insight into her life, her thinking and her spirituality. She has had serious health problems ('three brutal surgeries') during the last few years. Now in 2020 she has published this book, subtitled 'On awe, wonder and things that sustain you when the world goes dark'.

Julia is a keen and regular ocean swimmer. She describes in the Prelude an early experience of phosphorescence, how in her 20s at a beach north of Sydney, 'we'd run into the black sea, diving and swirling under the moon, watching a silvery, sparkling ribbon of phosphorescence trail behind our limbs. . . . These living lights became a kind of symbol of joy and abandon for me.' And then, 'What has fascinated and sustained me over these last few years has been the notion that we have the ability to find, nurture and carry our own inner light – a light to ward off the darkness. This is not about burning brightly, but yielding simple phosphorescence . . . staying alive, remaining upright, even when lashed by doubt'.

The personal writing is fresh and honest, the style of the journalist reporting the research to investigate other people and matters relating to her own experience.

The book is clearly structured in four themes.

Part One describes our need for awe, wonder and silence.

Special attention is given here to the wonder of the cuttlefish! . . . and how we need to 'bathe' in nature and why we need silence. Regarding the latter, Julia quotes Nauiyu elder from Daly River Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann, who believes the greatest gift her people can give to fellow Australians is a respect for silence, and alert, calm contemplation, called in her language 'dadirri'.

Part Two acknowledges that none of us is perfect, the world is not perfect and we give ourselves a lot of pain if we act in denial of this. As one example, Julia was enthusiastically involved in the movement for the ordination of women priests in the Anglican Church, specifically within the Sydney Diocese. Her efforts (and those of others) were futile. There is realism here and strong affirmation of unsuccessful and unpopular attempts to achieve something worthwhile, with awareness that we are probably in for disappointments.

Part Three celebrates friendship. The phrase from author Ram Dass, 'walking each other home', refers to the joy of good and close friendships accompanying us through our lives, in good times and bad, until we come to the end of life. During and after Julia's operations, this supporting presence of friends was vital, and she describes these friends as 'the crossbeams of our resilience. Without them, I honestly do not know how I would live'.

Part Four goes deeper into the author's faith, and it begins with a quote from Albert Camus: 'In the midst of winter, I found within me an invincible summer; no matter how hard the world pushes against me, there's something stronger – something better, pushing right back.' Julia now writes of savouring every detail and every moment of life, of finding a purpose, taking inspiration from people who survive the apparently impossible, and knowing how to go within in the rough times.

‘After I was diagnosed with cancer, I furlled and I grew.’

I was inspired and stimulated by this book. The first and last parts were particularly engaging, and I appreciated Julia’s honesty and directness throughout. Being brought up within Sydney Anglicanism, she had many questions and problems. However, rather than step away, she has developed a deep, sustaining faith to embrace all that life offers – or might throw at her!

Julia should have the last word.

‘My own faith is stubbornly cheerful and enduring. I can’t quite explain why, but it’s untroubled by dogma. I love the mystery, the poetry, even the uncertainty of religion. My faith is rooted in joy, and confirmed by love and lived experience.

The older I have become, the quieter my faith has become. It is a great stretching for silence, a reaching for goodness, a resting in a peace that ‘passes all understanding’.

- Lorna Henry 17 July 2020

‘The Geoffrey Epstein Psalm’

HOW THE CHURCH CAN BECOME COMPLICIT IN CHILD ABUSE AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Professor, the Reverend Gary D Bouma AM
Monash University and St John’s Anglican Parish, East Malvern

The Psalm set by the lectionary for July 5, Pentecost 5 was Ps 45:10-17. It should not be read and certainly not without critical commentary. I have renamed it, the ‘Jeffrey Epstein Psalm’. It promotes that grooming of daughters and virgins to be served up to the king who ‘desires their beauty’. This is grooming behaviour that is indictable in the State of Victoria and which clergy are called upon to report to authorities according to the Diocese of Melbourne’s campaign against child abuse and domestic violence.

Yes, it can be spiritualised, but that merely sugar coats the patriarchal message that women exist for the pleasure and pleasuring of men. I do not believe the image of the cringing offering of self before, and the sacrifice of others to, the oriental potentate presents a healthy image of men, women, children or of relationships with God.

So this bit of toxic piety, the Psalm prescribed between the set lessons, has been read or sung in Catholic and Anglican churches and whoever else uses the common lectionary; probably without comment. Saying or singing this Psalm, quietly repeats and glorifies patriarchal images of men, women and children in an almost subliminal form slipping past critical attention. Saying that this is a Psalm of David does not help either. David was the quintessential oriental potentate with well-known appetites.

This example of the uncritical use of Scripture is one more way the church can be seen to be complicit in child abuse and domestic violence.

Those with ears to hear, let them hear.

Jesus weeps, again

7 July 2020

Is there a possibility for a progressive Christian church?

Report of a PCNV working group by John Gunson

Progressive Christianity has rightly identified Trinitarian “Constantinian” theology as a principal reason why the Christian Church is a rapidly dying institution in our contemporary secular society. Much has been written by way of freeing theology from outdated theism, ancient mythologies and a messianic and incarnational interpretation of Jesus.

And have we not noticed that the churches to which we belong, and that have been the characteristic form of the church for some 1500 years, are themselves also expressions of Constantinian theology – large buildings (worship centres) for God worship rather than expressions of communities of the Jesus Way.

Perhaps this typical historic expression of church is as much responsible for the pending death of the church as is the ancient theological formulations of belief systems that progressives have been so keen to leave behind.

So, last year’s PCNV program began with two successive sessions in February and March, consisting of 6 presentations on “Possibilities for the future of Christianity in Australia”:

- “The future of denominations” by Rev Dr Philip Hughes
- “A progressive radical church” by Rev John Gunson
- “Living in a world of many faiths, cultures and ideologies” by Rev Dr Julie Hall
- “Spiritual not Religious” by Rev Dr Philip Hughes
- “Vive la difference: Friendship models for a future church” by Rev Dr Coralie Ling,
- “Living the wisdom of Jesus in a secular society” by Rev Dr David Merritt.

The two sessions from Philip Hughes presented a sociological analysis of the future society in which any future church must live. Hughes’s research led him to the conclusion that not only was God effectively dead, but that small neighbourhood groups (probably house meetings) would most likely be the only form of church with a potential future in our secular society.

Follow-up discussion group

Those attending these two programs in February and March were invited to join follow up discussion groups on any of the topics presented.

Only one group eventuated, principally to pursue further exploration of the papers presented by David Merritt and John Gunson which had a great deal in common, with both focussing on a future church following the Jesus Way, with or without God, and meeting in small groups, probably in homes. The PCNV Committee approved this follow up group as potentially helpful and accepted John Gunson’s offer to convene meetings of the group.

15 people registered to meet for continuing discussion. The group met monthly (prior to the PCNV meeting) and after canvassing the views of the participants, explored in detail the expanded versions of the papers by Merritt and Gunson which had been distributed to the participants. Meetings consisted of some 8-10 persons with somewhat irregular attendance, of which 2 or 3 indicated that they were actively involved in ‘future church’ type experiments.

At the end of last year the group seemed to have exhausted its interest in this approach to future church, and discussions ended with an invitation to participants to initiate a future church type experiment among their own friends and contacts. At present we have no feedback as to any progress in this regard.

A few members indicated a desire to continue to meet to explore alternatives to the Merritt/Gunson proposal, and one meeting was held early this year before Covid-19 shut us all down. At that meeting two specific proposals were outlined, both however involved working within existing structures of the church. It would appear that further dialogue on these proposals has lapsed, at least for the time being.

PCNV members who would like to study/use the material in the 6 papers presented last year on “Possibilities for the Future of Christianity” (which was sent to members as a pdf file) can access them

from David Merritt by email: djmerritt@ozemail.com.au They will be available on the new website soon if they are not already there.

The PCNV Committee would like to hear from anyone who is experimenting with future church. Contact by email: info@pcnvictoria.org.au

- John Gunson 20 July 2020

Avoiding theological malpractice

Wrestling with new ideas is never easy – especially when they seem to threaten a comfortable, established way of looking at the world. To paraphrase Harry Emerson Fosdick (a Baptist, BTW), “The enemy of Christianity isn’t change, but stagnation.” To celebrate and encourage the cessation of change will continue to drive young and old alike out of what’s left of the church.

But, if we embrace the core values of justice and compassion expressed in the Bible, we are compelled to stand with the oppressed and voiceless, accommodating the reality that the Spirit is flexing with our evolving humanity. For me, clinging to values that exclude and disrespect others is made even worse when they’re justified by out-of-context Biblical proof texting. It’s theological malpractice.

Rev. David M. Felten ProgressiveChristianity.org

A new Spiritual Order

At this critical time in human and planetary history, what Buddhist scholar and activist Joanna Macy calls “The Great Turning,” the world does not need a new religion or even a reshuffling of our old religions. It does not need a new church either.

What it needs is a new religious/spiritual Order.

That is to say, a community of people from varied backgrounds of belief systems (or non-belief systems) who share a sacred vow to preserve Mother Earth and to become the best lovers (mystics) and defenders (warriors) they can be on behalf of Mother Earth. A post-denominational Order and a post-religious Order. Therefore, a *Spiritual Order*.

Daily Meditations with Matthew Fox
Team@DailyMeditationsWithMatthewFox.Org

New knowledge about our bodies

Our bodies are made up of at least 37 trillion cells, and scientists are teaming up around the world to map every single one of them. A new project called the Human Cell Atlas hopes to discover what each of these cells do. And the plan is to put the information in an online database that any scientist can use. It is a massive project that will transform our understanding of how the human body works and how to treat diseases, said Shalin Naik, who is co-leading the Australian research effort.

"We need to understand what cells look like, before we understand how they go wrong or how we might improve their function," said Dr Naik of the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute. It is the most ambitious undertaking in human biology research since scientists mapped the human genome, which took 20 years to complete. – Genelle Weule ABC Science. 17 November 2017

ProgressiveChristianity.org is one of the most influential websites in the world communicating an understanding of progressive Christianity. It offers a wide range of resources used by gatherings and individuals around the world. It is noted for an inclusive approach. Earlier this year ProgressiveChristinty.org updated the 8 points which for it defines progressive Christianity

By calling ourselves progressive Christians, we mean we are Christians who...

- 1. Believe that following the path of the teacher Jesus can lead to healing and wholeness, a mystical connection to “God,” as well as an awareness and experience of not only the Sacred, but the Oneness and Unity of all life;**
- 2. Affirm that the teachings of Jesus provide but one of many ways to experience the Sacredness, Oneness and Unity of life, and that we can draw from diverse sources of wisdom, including Earth, in our spiritual journey;**
- 3. Seek and create community that is inclusive of ALL people, including but not limited to:
Conventional Christians and questioning skeptics,
Believers and agnostics,
Women and men,
Those of all races, cultures, and nationalities
Those of all sexual orientations and all gender identities,
Those of all classes and abilities;
All creatures and plant life;**
- 4. Know that the way we behave towards one another and Earth is the fullest expression of what we believe, therefore we vow to walk as Jesus might have walked in this world with radical compassion, inclusion, and bravery to confront and positively change the injustices we experience as well as those we see others experiencing;**
- 5. Find grace in the search for understanding and believe there is more value in questioning with an open mind and open heart, than in absolutes or dogma;**
- 6. Work toward peace and justice among all people and all life on Earth;**
- 7. Protect and restore the integrity of our Earth and all of Creation;**
- 8. Commit to a path of life-long learning, compassion, and selfless love on this journey toward a personally authentic and meaningful faith.**

Notes: We've heard you and in our many conversations with our readership, Progressive Christian pastors, theologians, scholars, visionaries, and in our observations and studies, we have co-created this updated version of our 8 Points of Progressive Christianity. Progressive Christianity is inherently always evolving and progressing. Please take these lightly but seriously. They are not dogma, they are simply a starting point to establish conversations and a foundation of values and beliefs that we have observed Progressive Christians generally share. It's ok if you don't agree with all the words or all the parts. We support your authentic path. You can use these in your faith communities and with family and friends to talk about what it means to you to be a Progressive Christian in today's world. Here is to always progressing!

PCNV MEETINGS IN 2020

SUNDAY 23 FEBRUARY: “Understanding Sexuality and Gender Diversity in 2020” with Ro Allen, Victorian Commissioner for Gender and Sexuality.

MARCH & APRIL cancelled due to the pandemic and planning for a Zoom meeting format

SUNDAY 24 MAY: Dr Val Webb, “Florence Nightingale: The Making of a Radical Theologian”. Zoom

SUNDAY 26 JUNE: “ Gifts of Winter” with Coralie Ling, Julie Hall and Greg Crowe. Zoom

SUNDAY 26 JULY: Professor Joseph Camilleri OAM, Life after Covic-19. An opportunity to reimagine the future. Zoom

COMING

SUNDAY 23 AUGUST: “Enchantment, Disenchantment, Re-enchantment. Directions toward the future of Christian faith” with Rev Dr Christopher Page. Zoom

SEPTEMBER, OCTOBER and NOVEMBER (AGM) are being planned.

NEW WEBSITE:

<https://www.pcnvictoria.org.au/>

After a long process with delays in development, the new website for The Progressive Christian Network of Victoria is available.

A new Home page giving an introduction to what PCNV is about includes descriptions of what PCNV offers, its goals, program, world-wide links, and an outline of how PCNV started in 2006.

Menu options for “Events”, “Resources” and “News” provide access to current and past programs and the large range of resources from 15 years of PCNV programs on biblical, theological, ethical, social and spirituality topics.

A new menu option “Join” still under development will provide ways members can keep abreast of their membership and be reminded to pay annual subscriptions. For people interested in becoming members of PCNV there will be relevant information and an online membership application form.

The serenity prayer

God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change,
courage to change the things I can,
and the wisdom to know the difference.

- Reinhold Neibuhr