

CONVERSATION PIECES

*contributed by some of those who have before now
been part of conversation groups at Retreat House Chester*

After a 'stay-at-home' Easter, four reflections are offered here on the invitation RHC has always made to 'Experience different ways to develop our reflective nature', and what that might mean in our own experience now that we find ourselves living differently.

Take time with what is said here. Maybe print these out and add your own notes in the spaces. What do you find for yourself in this? Maybe share responses with someone you can talk with.

My parents had no faith heritage and they decided not to baptise me as a baby because they didn't want to hinder my faith journey when I was older. So as a teenager I started to attend a youth club at a small evangelical fellowship. This is where my faith journey began, where I encountered Jesus and gave my life to Him. There were no icons or incense, just a simple wooden cross at the front of the church. However all my life I have felt drawn to a more traditional expression of Christian worship and experience. For many years I have included liturgy in my own reflective times, using prayers written many centuries ago, feeling deeply connected to the words used to help express my own feelings, thoughts and desires.

Then 18 months ago I left the church I had been attending and started to worship at the Anglican church in our village. I felt the Holy Spirit was leading me there. A couple of weeks before we self-isolated I asked my vicar "why do people cross themselves in church?" She talked to me about it and I remember thinking that I couldn't see myself expressing myself in that way.



Abbey Island, County Kerry

Then at the beginning of April I started using a devotional that encouraged me to say, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen" and to make the sign of the cross. The experience of doing this has brought profound comfort to me over the last few weeks. I say the prayer very slowly and I very purposefully touch my head, my heart and my shoulders. As I touch my forehead I imagine my Father touching my mind, as I touch my heart I imagine Jesus touching my heart, and as I touch my shoulders I imagine the Holy Spirit touching my shoulders. I say imagine, but I would go further and say that I "experience a touch". This gesture has gone from being something I thought I would never do to something that is so profoundly comforting that I can't imagine not doing it now.



I feel as if this combination of beautiful weather combined with the slowing of the pace of life have made my prayer life into something different. About a week ago (I don't need to count the days just now or even know the date) I decided again to take my prayers outside. I went to sit in a quiet space in the garden next to a fairly large flower bed which I have been working on. In fact, it could probably not be described as a flower bed until I had done a lot of work of cutting, clearing, digging, planting and finally watering nearly every day.

I was praying with the passage describing Moses encountering 'the burning bush'. I wanted to use an imaginative approach to place myself in that holy place. This was just not 'working' for me that morning. Suddenly (and I mean suddenly), I knew that my 'burning bush' was the flower bed next to which I was sitting. I knew about the life that was teeming within it. I had encountered the animal life as I dug, the plant life as I came across roots and bulbs and I had seen the outcomes of my planting and re-planting. Shrubs which were dying in dark cramped places had a new surging life, the tiny plants which I had put in and watered everyday seemed now to be spreading out and gaining strength.

As I sat and took in my 'burning bush', it was poetry which helped me to express my very strong feelings:

"The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measure.

It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth in numberless blades of grass and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers.

It is the same life that is rocked in the ocean cradle of birth and death, in ebb and in flow.

I feel my limbs made glorious by the touch of this world of life

And my pride is from the life-throb of ages dancing in my blood at this moment."

(Rabindrath Tagore)

There is plenty of time to stop and be still in one place at the moment. There is the opportunity to focus on living in the present moment; to close eyes and listen to all the different sounds we can hear around us; to focus on our breathing; to look attentively and notice what is around us – the blossom on a cherry tree for instance – making me think of Dennis Potter when he was interviewed when he had terminal illness and coming to the end of his life he saw the blossom from his window and instead of saying

"Oh that's nice blossom" ... last week looking at it through the window when I'm writing, I see it is the whitest, frothiest, blossomest blossom that there ever could be, and I can see it.....The fact is, if you see the present tense, boy do you see it! And boy can you celebrate it."

As part of our morning routine of sitting quietly for 15 minutes we have been finishing with reading a poem and reflecting on it. Something like R S Thomas' 'The Bright Field' which contains the lines:



Life is not hurrying on to a receding future, nor hankering after an imagined past

.. words which have resonated with the idea of trying to remain in the present. We remember hearing at RHC it's like Moses turning aside to the miracle of the lit bush – remaining in one place in the presence of the sacred, the holy, just as Moses was required to take his sandals off, not moving on. There is, for us, in the present situation of lockdown, an element of gift and opportunity to respond to the invitation to stop, and be still and live in the present moment.

Gardening in this beautiful weather has been particularly enjoyable. The physical tasks lend themselves to reflection – the mind is occupied by the physical and this is liberating for the imagination. A recent free-write exercise on the prompt of "where do we find a fierce and obstinate centre within" during this time led to writing about the joy taken from seeing a clematis planted last year grow vigorously each day and striving to get taller as it climbs up a frame. It revealed the significance of gardening as a metaphor.

Reading on mindfulness and prayer has helped us learn about these things. At the beginning of the pandemic, for example, I found the idea of observing thoughts such as anxiety really helpful - noticing my emotions and seeing them from the outside as though they were a person who had walked in to the room - helpful in getting a wider perspective. Wider perspective comes too through writing and sharing something through this 'conversations' exercise, feeling we are helping to build community even though we can't meet at the moment.

These chances now for reflective experience mean a huge amount to us as if lots of things have come together - an integration. Partly to do with, for example, becoming one with nature/ the world through our breathing. The air that is outside becomes part of us through breathing. We are intimately connected. Of course in the context of coronavirus this is a double-edged sword too.

'we had the experience but missed the meaning' TS Eliot

Having worked from home since lockdown, 'stopping' for Easter meant I felt quite suddenly dislocated, not knowing where to pin my attention. Cleaning the house and tidying up outside helped me 'live in the present moment' – but I was aware of needing a sense of *meaning*. What is this life-changing world event we're living with? What does it mean?

Unsurprisingly, I had no answers. But these questions were playing out in the context of Easter – a time which, for me, has meaning. It's also a story all about experience – it's all there: love, care, companionship, isolation, agony, betrayal, loyalty, accusation, anger, denial, humiliation, cruelty, despair, confusion, fear, courage, amazement, joy, wonder. Love. God and humankind in it together.

So I found some meaning by engaging with others who were exploring reflectively the meaning of this experience. I sat with Easter liturgies and an Easter retreat online – from somewhere I know well and trust – and through these heard others' reflections. I was aware too of many other simultaneous viewers and listeners, a community with people I didn't know in ordinary ways but with whom I was somehow now connected. I valued too reading the reflections of others online and in print. For a number of weeks my intake of words had been largely news reports. However informative, depressing or uplifting such reports are, they hadn't answered my need for *meaning* in these times. Now, the words of others who spoke of depth and at depth about the world's current experience meant more to me. No ready answers, but a reflective engagement with 'something more'. And I noticed how my own reflections need and benefit from the reflections of others, and how fruitful it can be when we are reflective together.

But if I am to bring anything to the table of shared reflection, I need to be reflective myself, rather than simply rehearse the words of others. In the evening of Easter Saturday, alone in the garden (such a wonder and a privilege in these times), for a short time the world felt intensely alive – and in that there was Peace. I need to recognise that experience.

Alongside others and alone, these reflective experiences have mattered to me in these weeks. Meaning is *both* beyond *and* within, and both are needed.



reflection and depth – Chester Meadows