

# CONVERSATION PIECES

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

RHC has always made the invitation to 'Connect – spirituality and daily life' and 'Connect – with one another'. These contributions below consider what 'connection' might mean both during and after these times when 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.

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As restrictions start to lift and some of us can connect again with society (not our family unfortunately, as we live with a vulnerable adult), I find myself reflecting on the last two months of isolation.

I have often thought over the last two months how my life has resembled the monastic way of life, cloistered away from society.

But I also think of the connections that have been made too. My church now meets via Zoom on a Sunday morning and is making connections with families who have never been inside our church building, but live in our village and attend the Zoom service. We have a homegroup/bible study group that meets once a week via Zoom, which has helped us to connect and build relationships. We have connected with our neighbours, who have offered to help with shopping and posting letters or parcels. I have connected through phone calls with friends from RHC (a fond abbreviation for Retreat House Chester), some I know well, others not so well (but know them better now).

At first I focused on all I had lost, but reflecting has helped me to see what I have gained and connections that have been made.

What has been a beautiful blessing in my life in the last two months, has been reconnecting with God. In the last three years my faith has wavered, teetered, and floundered. But thankfully never run aground. At the beginning of lockdown I realised how small my God had become, how I thought He was completely ineffectual in this crisis. I was sinking and sinking fast. But I reached out, just like Peter did when sinking, and just like in the account of Peter, immediately Jesus reached out and grabbed my hand. We reconnected. Not that He had ever gone anywhere, His first words to me were "I am with you"; it was me who had disconnected. So living a cloistered lifestyle, disconnected from the world around me, meant I could reconnect with my friend and Lord. If anything I'm quite content to stay cloistered a little longer...



*where connections are made*

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Although lockdown was and is difficult there are aspects of it that we may want to keep. Being told to stay at home has meant more opportunity to reflect and to notice things around us. We are less easily diverted and have to dig deeper into our own resources – we have more than we realise.



connection & support on the Meadows

I've appreciated the comfort of a routine such as finding time to meditate in the morning. The silent prayer which begins with focus on the breath and breathing – Fr John McLuckie in his blog *Pointvierge* (24 March 2020) says it connects us to all living things including those who are struggling to breathe – making us more compassionately aware of them. Time to be silent and then to practise *lectio divina* or other spiritual reading has felt like a good beginning. And to do this in companionship with one another has been great.

It has helped too, as part of the daily routine, to have some practical task – gardening; housework; clearing clutter; exercise – all of which help relieve anxiety and allow time to think creatively, allowing the words read in the morning to be digested.

Then in the evening the opportunity to reflect – whether by using the *examen* or a writing/journaling exercise – helps to encourage thankfulness for and accept the difficulties of the day and – on a weekly basis – to get an overall sense of journey/pilgrimage. I'd like to hang on to as much of all this as I can.

Life won't be the same. I would imagine people will interact more cautiously outside to begin with. Connecting with people in the street, in shops and at church will be done with more reticence. During lockdown, technology helped us feel connected but only goes so far. I've connected with people – possibly more reflectively and thoughtfully via email and Zoom but missed the human contact/conversation, the nuanced silence.

I've missed the liturgy – the music, the smell of incense, the participation in the eucharist and hope I appreciate them all the more. I've missed being able to visit a church and to be still there. It all serves to remind me that the physical is an essential part of the spiritual. Above all I've missed the encouragement of others in living contemplatively - the most important of all the Church's (and Retreat House in particular's) treasures.

We've been encouraged to stay at home to listen and to watch as Spring unfolded around us. For a while we were more attentive. And we learned to live in the present. We have also reflected more upon what we really need. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew has said that the roots of humanity's flawed relationship with creation are spiritual and he invites us: 'to replace consumption with sacrifice, greed with generosity, wastefulness with a spirit of sharing, an asceticism which entails learning to give, and not simply give up' (quoted in *Pointvierge* 22.May 2020)

Stay contemplative – enjoy the present moment – find God everywhere.

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During the past several weeks I have been immersed, for the first time, in the writings of Julian of Norwich. I have surprised myself because previously I have tried to find meaning in her writing but without success. Now I feel that, living as she did, she must have something to say to us at this time of "lockdown".

Living, during the late 14<sup>th</sup> century, in her single room, or cell, built onto the walls of the Church of St Julian, Julian of Norwich had three windows.

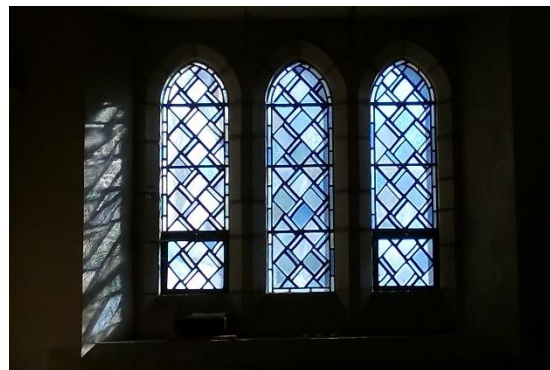
*"...one looked on to the sanctuary of the church; one communicated with a maid who ran errands and attended to simple household task; the other window ...was where the woman (i.e. Julian of Norwich) received those who came to ask for counsel" (Obard 2008 page xi)<sup>1</sup>*

Clearly, the first window represents the connection with God. For me, looking back, this period has been very significant in many ways in developing my relationship with God, and it would take much too long to describe that development. However, I am in no doubt that I would not have seen this change occur except in a period of retreat (or lockdown!), during a slowing down of the pace of my life. The question I want to ask myself is: can I see this only as a period of temporary retreat or can I possibly re-organise my life in order to sustain some aspects of this slowing down?

Obard sees the window through which Julian meets her maid as that window through which she/we share in our common humanity, our human fears, hopes, challenges and gradually develop self-knowledge. In the quietness and solitude of these weeks with a loosening of demands on my time, I have learned some things about myself that surprise me. I love gardening, I love long periods of silence, my husband and I revel in very simple walks close to home. I am capable of organising my house if I have time (!! ) and, again with time, I can meditate comfortably for longer and longer periods of time. All of these things surprise, but what I am coming to ask myself at this time of transition is, what have I learned that I shall be able to carry with me into the "normal" world which we are expecting to enter?

For Obard the third window looks out to those who come for counsel "where she offers hospitality to those who seek from her a word that will guide, help, heal" (p73). It is an opportunity to share the compassion which matters so much to her. The question I am asking myself here is, can I only share compassion and counsel by returning to all the activities I was involved in before the lockdown, and is this compatible with the slower pace of life I may wish to maintain?

All of this feels very egocentric at a time when many, many people are suffering in all sorts of ways. I do not want that to be the case. So, I find I have to ask myself, has this been a frustrating interlude halting the, hopefully, good things I have been trying to offer in the world or has it been a very important opportunity for me to grow in my Christian faith and begin to see my place in the world in a different way?



*three windows at Ampleforth Abbey*

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<sup>1</sup> Obard, E.R. (2008) *Through Julian's Windows: growing into wholeness with Julian of Norwich*, Canterbury Press, Norwich

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If one word has been closer to me than other words this season, it is the word 'gentle'. I've loved this word for a long time – for years. I love that it is connected to the Latin word 'gens' meaning 'people' or 'clan': those who were 'gentilis' were from the same clan. For me, 'gentle' means treating other people *as people*, all of us from the same clan. Treating them tenderly, generously. Tender them with generous gentleness. And do the same for yourself, as one of this clan of humanity. 'Gentle' is about being human.

Words are not always a mirror of reality, and I wouldn't claim this gentleness as my most common way in my relationships – or connections - with others or with myself. Ironically, gentleness is hard. But I have seen it and known it around me this season, and I believe it's there. This season, in some way, in how we have connected, people have been gentle, with others and with themselves. We have discovered something of our humanity.

I hope we keep this gentleness close.

I find the hard screen and the harsh light of video calls lack the gentleness I mean. Of course, we can be – and are – kind and loving and connected through our screens – but *gentle*? I'm not so sure. A 'gentle breeze' is *felt* – there's something physical about gentleness. Our flesh feels it.

As a breeze moves gently, so can we. This season, I have loved gardening. It has been slow – slow movement in a small patch of land. In slowing myself in this earthy setting, I have learnt to move gently and discovered a little of what gentleness is, and what my humanity is, without even trying.



*a gentle breeze on the Greenway*

When I recognise gentleness, something within me responds. I am reminded of images of gentleness – as I write, the *Pieta* of Michelangelo, where Mary cradles her dead adult son Jesus across her lap, as gently as she cradled him as her baby, two figures hewn of the same stone. In that gentleness, is her strength. From the hard marble, the sculptor brought gentleness, finding the movement and the breath of the stone. And the stone responded. *I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh*, as Ezekiel tells us of Yahweh.

From these hard times, I want to find gentleness. I want a heart of flesh in place of a heart of stone – though that brings with it all of human feeling. And in my heart of flesh I want to find God already there, longing for connection – the God who came as one of our clan. Gently.