

The Voice

A Quarterly for prophetic and artistic imagination
 Number 28 ISSN 1444-3708 Autumn 2011



The Art of Grief

CMN recently launched the documentary film of the Network's theatre production 'Prophet and Loss' at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image. The DVD was launched by the Rev David Pargeter, Executive Director of the Commission for Mission in the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania. This is the text of his speech.

Few words can adequately describe the great gnawing emptiness that comes with the experience of grief. An emptiness that threatens to engulf and consume all possibility of joy and every glimpse of light.

However, sometimes words mixed with other forms of media get very close. And in this, we are grateful to the artists of every generation and of our own who are sensitive enough to their own feelings and to the feelings of others, that they can create experiences that speak for us and to us. Like interpreters, artists listen into and observe life. They have a way of hearing what we cannot say, then speaking to us in ways that we can understand.

In every medium, artists have tried to capture the depth of feeling that grief generates within our individual lives, our families, our workplaces, our communities and our countries.

Through words, sounds, shapes and images they have pulled us into spaces that many people would rather avoid. They can be confronting.

We know that death and grief are normal punctuation marks in the unfolding scripts of daily life but the experience still surprises, shocks and rocks us, sometimes to the very foundation of what it means to be human.

Over time, artists have focussed on this universal theme and brought to us fresh appreciation of what it means to live as compassionate members of a community.

THE VOICE

is published
by the
**Creative
Ministries
Network**
- an agency of
UnitingCare
Victoria and
Tasmania

Street Address:
15 Cromwell Rd
South Yarra Vic

Postal Address:
P.O. Box 362
St. Kilda
Vic 3182

Email Address:
admin@cmn.
unitingcare.org.au

Website: www.cmn.
unitingcare.org.au

Tel /Fax:
(03) 9827 8322

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Death and grief have always been the subject of much dramatic art.

Some of our most profound music has come to us in the form of the Requiem. Who can listen to the opening movement of Mozart's Requiem in D minor and not be emotionally drawn into the composer's own experiences of sadness and grief; made all the more evocative knowing that he died before completing this magnificent work.

Who can look at Michelangelo's first Pieta of a young Mary cradling the crucified body of her son Jesus. That great slab of cold marble transformed into a piece of static emotional drama. Young Mary, so forlorn. Lost for words. Detached almost bewildered. Unable to hold the lifeless form of her crucified son yet feeling the unavoidable burden of his life.

There is a scene in Shakespeare's King John which seems to reflect some of the Bard's own grief at the loss of his only son Hamnet, at the age of 11.

We can hear in this play the depth of his understanding of grief in a short exchange between King Philip, Cardinal Pandulph and Constance:

CARDINAL PANDULPH to Constance:
You hold too heinous a respect of grief.

CONSTANCE replies:
He talks to me that never had a son.

KING PHILIP
You are as fond of grief as of your child.

CONSTANCE begins her short but profound soliloquy:

*Grief fills the room up of my absent child,
Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me,
Puts on his pretty looks, repeats his words,
Remembers me of all his gracious parts,
Stuffs out his vacant garments with his form;
Then, have I reason to be fond of grief?
Fare you well: had you such a loss as I,
I could give better comfort than you do.
I will not keep this form upon my head,
When there is such disorder in my wit.
O Lord! my boy, my Arthur, my fair son!
My life, my joy, my food, my all the world!
My widow-comfort, and my sorrows' cure!*

A sentiment so beautifully re-captured by W Auden and repeated in Four Weddings and a Funeral. Who can forget these words:

*Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.*

*The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood.
For nothing now can ever come to any good.*

And this dramatic quest of the artistic interpreter and translator continues. Here, within this DVD we are presented with something very special and very different. Real people speak and their stories are quite beautifully respected and re-presented.

This is no pastiche. Through dramatisation the uniqueness of their stories is honoured yet rendered sublimely universal.

Some, if not many moments in this film will touch you deeply, as their stories become our story. Other moments will distract you as you re-connect for a little while with some distant but ever present memory of loss.

Some moments will remind you of just how fragile life is and in the background sits the story of how the thoughtlessness and carelessness of people responsible for the safety of the workplace, kills people.

I have lost several friends, family and colleagues through workplace accidents, and I appreciate the value and the integrity of the stories honoured through this DVD .

To the individuals and families who honoured their loved ones and themselves by telling their stories I want to say thank you.

To all the artists who brought this piece of work to life I want to say, God has blessed you. For it is indeed a blessed piece of work.

And to the people who had the courage to think about having a go at this topic - Shalom.

Book reviews

Love as call and gift

Seeking the Sacred: transforming our view of ourselves and others

Stephanie Dowrick, 2010, Allen & Unwin, \$32.99

Reviewer: Margaret Neith

I usually approach personal self-help books with caution lest they simply exhort me to “think positive thoughts”, “do one kind deed every day” or “say such-and-such a mantra over and over again and my life will change”, or offer me other gratuitous and usually unhelpful advice.

“Human beings thrive in the presence of love. We grow more loving where love is present. ... Love is also health-giving, restorative, curative.”

So it was with trepidation that, while on holidays recently, I decided to read “Seeking the Sacred: Transforming our view of ourselves and one another”. A few years ago I had read and enjoyed Stephanie Dowrick’s earlier book “Forgiveness and Other Acts of Love” so I was interested to see how her thinking had developed and what insights she had to offer someone like me - a 63-year old, not “religious” as such, but nevertheless pursued by imponderable questions such as “Why do bad things happen to good people?” and “What should I be doing with my life?” and “Is this all there is?”

Stephanie Dowrick is an “interfaith” minister, which I understand to mean that she draws upon many different faiths, philosophies, poetry and religious writings to form her spiritual identity and to help her live her own life in a loving and meaningful way. She is also a trained psychotherapist and conducts spiritual retreats. Stephanie’s writing is also informed and enlivened by her own interesting life story, and anecdotes from friends and colleagues.

Stephanie divides her book into five themes – reverence, identity, love, “do no harm”, and transformation. The heart of her message is about “the call to know love as the ground of our being, and to honour our gift of this life through the way that we live it.” Stephanie sees life as a truly wonderful gift. We honour this gift by the way we live our lives and particularly by the way we treat others. Every person also has an inner world or self-

awareness. Our inner world is vitally important, especially in this busy and noisy society where there is so much competition for our attention. Our inner world exists to be discovered and nurtured – and our inner journey or ‘seeking the sacred’ can lead to a sense of belonging, security, of being loved, of appreciation, and of inner peace.

Some of her insights include “We cannot relieve our own pain by causing pain to another” – and that “War is never anything but a wholly unintelligent and morally indefensible response to the differences in perspective or action that bring conflict about.” She believes that “Human beings thrive in the presence of love. We grow more loving where love is present. ... Love is also health-giving, restorative, curative.” She also believes that “When a religious teaching leaves out love, it ceases to be religious. When a spiritual teaching sentimentalises love, it ceases to be spiritual.”

This is not a dry, academic text. Stephanie emphasises that her book is about the ‘ordinary’ real world and every-day happenings and relationships and how, if we reach out with love to others, we will get closer to finding the sacred in our own lives. Her book held my attention, and gave me a sense of inner peace just knowing that there are people like Stephanie trying to share her life’s learning and insights to help us explore the hard questions and to live our daily lives with love, courage and dignity.

Food, sex and politics: a vision for Christian community

Song of Songs: a multi-faith exploration of Divine passion and love,

Anneke Oppewal, 2010, Charleston, SC, USA.

Available from Uniting Church Resources, David.Caldecoat@victas.uca.org.au

Reviewer: John Bottomley

Anneke Oppewal practices what she preaches in her highly original little book, *Song of Songs: a multi-faith exploration of Divine passion and love*. In just 120 pages Anneke packs a feast of five engaging sermons on our Hebrew scripture’s *Song of Songs*, original art by local artist Isaac Longbon, multi-faith perspectives

from Jewish and Islamic writers and poets on her book's themes, soul-stirring prayers, and a selection of mouth watering recipes evoking tasty images from the 'Songs'.

This diverse material hangs together because it is driven by Anneke's deeply felt theological vision for Christian community, and her integrity as a person who seeks to live out her vision. Anneke's reading of the 'Song' takes her to the heart of how the church today is called to respond to the deep desires of what it may mean to live an authentic human life.

The sermons build from week to week over five weeks. Week one reads the 'Song' from a Christian context, linking the many images to their place in Christian imagination. The following two weeks reflect on the 'Song' in the light of the allegorical sermons of the 11th century monk, Bernard of Clairvaux. The account of Bernard's awareness of the movement from intimate embrace to the emptiness of aloneness in the rhythm of love, and the unfolding stages of God's kiss on our human searching is quite beautiful.

By week four, Anneke's voice comes to the fore. She describes the sexuality in the 'Songs' as "free, unrestricted play between two people longing for each others' body, and for intimacy in a physical sense." It is a delightful celebration of sexuality grounded firmly in the Biblical witness. However, what is truly liberating is Anneke's juxtaposition of this Hebraic view against the context of the early first century Roman view of sex as part of temple worship of idols, their offering of food at the temple to appease the gods, and the patriarchal order of family relations. Christian worship that valued the body as God's temple, that drew inspiration from the 'Songs' celebration of mutuality of love, and shared the sacramental food as the first fruits of sharing with the poor was a revolutionary enactment of a radically different politics to the dominant political order of the Roman empire.

The series concludes with a sermon on gardens, an engaging metaphor for the necessary inner journey needed to sustain the challenging vision Anneke proclaims for Christian community.

Each sermon is enriched by another perspective.

Rabbi Fred Morgan's introduction to the *Song of Songs* and Mark Pedersen's article on poetry, mystical love poetry in the Islamic tradition, and excerpts from the famous Muslim poet Rumi are particularly fine contributions.

They also illustrate the benefits Christians have to gain by entering as Anneke has into such grounded multi-faith dialogue.

This book demonstrates great faith and courage, and is an invitation and challenge to other ministers to similarly share the fruits of our labours. The whole church would be enriched by other displays of such faith and courage.

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What hope for our dying Church?

For more than 25 years, the Network has developed its vocation for ministry in and to the world of work. This ministry has been strengthened by the Board's reflection on prophetic ministry. In this article, John Bottomley reflects on a reading from Isaiah 41:1 - 9 and the connection between the Network's vocation and the future of the church's traditional residentially-focused ministries.

Life is ebbing away

Over the past twelve years, I have found a new joy in ministry in mentoring younger ministers. Since 1998, more than 20 ministers have visited my office for regular supervision. They each book an hour per month with me to reflect on their experience of ministry. It is rewarding when my response to their concerns helps them to consider a different way of looking at things, or my support encourages them to take a risk in faith to address the challenges they face.

But I feel a deep sadness at the sameness of the issues they bring to me, and the unchanging nature of the spiritual struggles they face. It is as if the life of the church is ebbing away, and the spirit of so many of these ministers is dying with it. For some, this experience is confusing, for some it is wearying, some are angry but

cannot see how they will live if they leave the ministry, a few are at peace with the chaos and uncertainty they see around them, and another few have been depressed and receiving psychiatric care. What is to be said to them? What is God's word of hope to a desolate and despairing people?

Laughter in the face of darkness

This is the question we come to at the beginning of Isaiah Chapter 42. What is God's word of hope to a desolate and despairing people? The book of Isaiah lays the ground for its answer to this question in the closing verses of the previous chapter. You may remember this portion of Isaiah is addressed to Israel in exile in Babylon for 70 long years - long years cut off from their homes, cut off from their temple and, they believed, cut off from their God by the victorious Babylonian gods that had overseen their long captivity.

The last section of Isaiah chapter 41 depicts a legal battle in the heavenly courts, with the Babylonian gods on trial before the God of Israel. "Set forth your case, says the Lord; bring your proofs, says the King of Jacob". (41²¹) In prophetic imagination, the Babylonian gods are challenged in the court of heaven to show their power to continue holding Israel captive. In a daring poetic assault on the Babylonian gods, the God of Israel speaks mocking in the court-room trial: "Tell us what is to come hereafter, that we may know that you are gods; do good, or do harm, that we may be afraid and terrified" (41²³).

Right there, in the midst of their oppression and captivity, Israel hears a prophetic voice daring to laugh in the face of Babylon's imperial power - "You, indeed, are nothing and your work is nothing at all; whoever chooses you is an abomination." (41²⁹) Isaiah then publicly announces things are about to change, saying Babylon will be defeated by a Persian invasion from the north - "I first have declared it to Zion, and I give Jerusalem a herald of good tidings." (V.27) Poetic Isaiah turns finally to his people to deliver the final judgement on the Babylonian gods - "No, they are all a delusion; their works are nothing; their images are empty wind." (41²⁴)

"One morning, one worker invited me to share his morning tea. When he took a Salada cracker cheese sandwich from his lunch-box and broke it before me, I experienced Christ's presence in the broken bread. I knew for the first time that God was not only in the congregation on Sundays, but also in the world of work."

This Isaiah is in the spirit of a lone Chinese protestor in Tiananmen Square standing before the might of the Red Army tanks and by this gesture of poetic boldness declaring the Communist Party's power is a delusion, their works are nothing, their images are empty wind.

God's word of hope first dares to cut down to size what appears to be absolute in its oppressive power - it laughs at this power, mocks it, pours scorn on it, and in calling it to account, declares it morally and spiritually bankrupt. God's word of hope to a desolate and despairing Uniting Church is precisely the same - it is a word that reveals the forces, the gods that have held us captive and robbed us of spirit these long years are as nothing, a delusion, indeed, they are empty. But what are these forces, these gods of modern Australia that have robbed the Church of its life and spirit?

A scouting report from a front-line

To answer this, let me backtrack even further. In 1983, after nine years in suburban ministry, I took a research job at the Williamstown Naval Shipyard. I was researching occupational health and safety for the unions, and gradually became friends with some of the workers there. One morning, one worker invited me to share his morning tea. When he took a Salada cracker cheese sandwich from his lunch-box and broke it before me, I experienced Christ's presence in the broken bread. I knew for the first time that God was not only in the congregation on Sundays, but also in the world of work.

I heard Christ calling me to ministry in the world of work, and I learned that Christ was concerned for justice and dignity for all people in all walks of life. For more than 25 years now, this has been my calling. And after 25 years of seeking to minister in Australian workplaces, I have met many of the gods of modern Australia. I have met the forces that enslave some people in greed and others in busy-ness. I have met the gods of success and wealth and status that seduce and entrap the souls of many, robbing them of life and spirit. I have met the idols of competition and efficiency that drive others

into stress, and depression, and heart attack. I have met the forces of fear that hide in bureaucracies and shelter behind policies and procedures.

In the workplaces of our society, I have met most of the forces or gods that the ministers I mentor now struggle with in their congregations. The gods that diminish work for so many now exercise their power in the life of the Uniting Church. Many ministers find these invisible forces daunting, at times overwhelming.

Today, you too know these gods and their soul-destroying intent. You have seen them drain life and spirit from your midst. But listen now to the promise of prophetic Isaiah - the power of the gods is defeated. Their force is nothing - merely the shadow of images filled with emptiness!

A new spirit for a renewed mission

Trusting in this poetic promise, are you now ready to join with me in listening at last to this first servant song of Isaiah chapter 42? We have too often listened to these words individually through the lens of the gospels' association of them with the person of Jesus.

But Isaiah's servant is a people, Israel, a community of faith that desperately needs to be lifted up from its captivity and despair.

Today, this also is our need as a Church. This is you and I together - we need to hear that God has a future for us, that the burden of our past is not only lifted, but that we have a mission to fulfil. And this is what Isaiah declares God says to you and to me - "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations" (43¹).

What precious words of grace and forgiveness. The past and its pain is finished, and you - we - have been given a mission, the mission of bringing forth God's justice on earth.

When I first grasped that Isaiah addressed me as part of a community, I realised I was being called to change my 'Lone Ranger' approach to

ministry - of working on my own in anxious isolation from the wider church.

In June last year, I asked my Board to circulate a discussion paper on the Uniting Church's need for a new mission to the workaday world. I reached out to people I barely knew, and some I had only heard of to consider together our calling as a community. This is the calling of God's servant - "He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street," says Isaiah, but he will pay attention to those who are vulnerable or marginalised - "a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench, he will faithfully bring forth justice." (42³)

Purposefully, carefully, quietly I met with and discussed our Board's intention for this new mission, and always with an eye to how we may engage with others to bring forth justice. It has been a life-giving conversation and growth in faith.

Recently the Executive Director for the Synod's Commission for Mission asked me to draft a proposal for his Board to initiate a new mission for the Synod to address the world of work.

"When I first grasped that Isaiah addressed me as part of a community, I realised I was being called to change my 'Lone Ranger' approach to ministry - of working on my own in anxious isolation from the wider church."

Isaiah declares it is God "who gives breath to the people upon the earth and spirit to those who walk in it." (42⁵) I am grateful for the spirit that breathes life into our spiritual

struggle against the gods of modern life that deliver injustice to many in their work and homes.

I am grateful that my former ways of working in isolation may be coming to pass, and that "the new things" God promises may now spring forth beyond my ministry and my need to keep control. God's word of hope has this ultimate assurance - that the new thing God is doing may be trusted to the one "who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it." (42⁵)

From today - know that you are God's chosen. God's soul delights in you. Trust in this life-giving promise, and God's justice will engage you in God's life-giving mission, a mission that builds the church in life and spirit, a mission of justice that will be a light to the nations (42⁶).

The Cheapest Thing!

Thaya Thiagarajah, poet and witness to Sri Lanka's suffering.

“The prize of this is very cheap!
It is a faultless and spotless one!
So fresh and attractive to keep!”
Shouted the advertising one.

The burning blazing sun above,
The hot dusty sand beneath
Within the empty cramping stomach
My heart melted to watch this sight!

The viewers all gathered around
As the advertiser raised her voice
The sales woman's eyes widened
With the expectation of a high prize!

“The money she needs so urgently
Is the fare for her to cross the sea
To forget the present suffering indeed!
Now, the prize is almost free”
No viewer turned out to be a buyer

Heard I, neither bidding nor bargaining
No movement, not even a whisper,
But the silence, that was straining.

The desperate depressed 'sales mother'
The tired, unpaid advertiser
The 'unwrapped' pearl that she held
Made me wonder whether it was real.

Deep in the forest of 'Jeyapuram'
The widowed refugee woman
Had hardened her heart to sell
The 'gift of God', her child!

Though my purse the prize contained
Though I had a womb that's barren
Though I had a heart with compassion
To own the child I was reluctant!

Should my passion rob her companion?
Should I rob the identity of the infant?
Should I undervalue the prize of the
innocent?
I left with heavy heart and with confusion!

Prophet & Loss

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Fifth Monday Faithful Conversations

These evenings are an opportunity to share life and faith around themes from the Network's Directions Vision. Each evening is focused on the life experience of participants, and is integrated with reflection on a biblical text. The dates for 5th Mondays in 2011 are:

30 May

Surrender: Through Jesus the Crucified, we seek to walk with people who suffer today, and learn how to be companions in healing, justice and reconciliation from our reflection on this journey.

29 August

Joy and love: Friendship with the risen Christ evokes friendship with those we serve, and delight in the present moment.

31 October

Joy and love: We are grateful for all that life brings to us, finding God in all things and discovering our incorporation into a movement to wholeness.

Share a meal from 6.30 for a conversation beginning at 7.00 p.m. All welcome.