

The Christian Community
Perspectives



September—November 2015

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A spiritual outlook on life gives us a different perspective on our lives. The thought that I have an angel who accompanies me through my life, bearing my true purposes within himself even when I lose sight of them, can be a help in finding meaning in events that otherwise would be hard to cope with. The idea that communities, nations and peoples have such guardian spirits can give a similarly liberating perspective. If every age has its spirit, it must look at world events from a similar perspective. The great movements of peoples; the crises and hardships of political life—all of these can make us feel insecure and even make us doubt the wisdom of unfolding world events. If there is a spirit of our age who looks behind and beyond these events at the work we are engaged in as humanity today, the struggles and sufferings are filled with meaning. We can learn to look with the eyes of the spirit of our age, always asking ourselves: what capacities are being called upon through the events that are unfolding? What opportunities are offered even by the things that seem to have gone wrong, or to be misguided or mistaken? Having adopted this perspective, we can look at our own lives and the life of the communities and organisations in which we are involved, and ask whether we are serving the great purposes of humanity through our efforts, however small these may seem.

TOM RAVETZ

The Constant Reminder of Unseen Things

*Untold orders of angels
Whisper against our misgivings,
While departed souls keep a vigil
Reminding us of unseen things.*

*Perhaps they see the coming day
When the lion and the lamb will rest, at peace.
They witness light breaking through dark gray,
An unbridled love--at last, released.*

*We have been living in retrograde times,
The apocalypse foreshadowed, but still unperceived,
But the spirit that now transfigures our minds
Asks openly to be received.*

*We stumble forward immersed in our fears,
Yet forgiveness in surety will be fulfilled.
Like the sweet music of the dance of the spheres
A harmony will rise up over the tumult.*

*The being that lives in the heart of all things,
The primeval spirit uniting us all
Tolls a bell that constantly rings,
An intimate trust, a most timely call.*

*We will be illumined by Grace,
In spirit reborn, though in Christ we die,
To see clearly, as if face to face
All we now sense, but can not see with our eyes.*

MICHAEL FERREL

Questions that arise out of the Parable of the unjust Steward

Luke 16:1-10

Douglas Thackray

There are many different routes to ascend the Eiger wall, each one varying only slightly in the enormity of effort to get to the top. Most theologians equate the parable of the unjust steward to efforts finding a new route in such a climb. The climber, once he gets to the summit amongst the clouds and mists, has no absolute assurance that what he is standing on is not just another ridge on the way to the top. Rudolf Steiner describes this parable as 'one of the most beautiful and impressive parables of the gospel of St Luke.' We could perhaps add that its artistic creativity in the presentation of its themes shows us that Christianity has meaning beyond the narrow confines of morality as we know it, as we are led to a wider picture of life and the transformation of evil in the processes of the evolution of man.

Misunderstandings about this parable mainly hang on the Lord's having praised the unjust steward after having dismissed him from his position as his administrator. The praise comes at the point when the Lord hears what the steward did with his outstanding bills.

Now on knowing that he had been dismissed, the steward went round to those who bought their oil and their wheat from him and reduced their bills from eight hundred barrels of oil to four hundred, and from one thousand bushels of wheat to eight hundred, as a last desperate act to save himself as he recognized that he was too old to work and too proud to beg. This drew the attention of the Lord who commended him. 'You used worldly wealth to gain friends for yourself so that when it is gone you will be welcome into eternal dwellings.'

Jesus now turns his focus to rebuking the Sadducees and Pharisees: 'No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money. You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued by men is detestable in the sight of God.' In response, the Pharisees continue to mock him, considering themselves justified by the authority of the law.

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Jesus then says: 'For the people of the world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than the people of the light.' We may understand this to mean from a spiritual perspective that the Sons of Light (the Pharisees), due to their arrogance, have not developed a conscience and consequently are stuck in their spiritual development. The unjust steward is also included in the rebuke when it is said: 'if you have not been trustworthy with worldly riches, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property who will give you property of your own?'

We can understand this to mean that the Lord seeks a relationship of trust and finds that man as he is, is simply not able to be responsible out of his inner self. It is clear that some fundamental change is needed to put this right.

God has a vested interest in letting the steward off lightly because he is using other criteria than conventional morality for his judgments. We can look for similar situations in the Old Testament where deception has occurred, where God has turned a blind eye. We find that this happened with Jacob and David who despite whatever momentarily failings they might have had, were nevertheless chosen to be the leaders of the Judaic evolution which became the means of preparing for the coming of the Christ.

Despite his being dismissed, the servant is given another chance to use his talents now in a different way. The Lord can see in him someone who has the potential to use his intelligence for the benefit of the community, to make friends and become responsible. In this way he has a chance to redeem his past and be accepted into eternal dwellings. He will become a true servant of the Lord when he offers his gifts in the service of his fellow men.

*The Heart is the Key to the World and to Life
We live in our present helpless condition
In order to love one another
And be obliged to help one another.
Through imperfection we become open
To the influence of others.
And this influence from outside is the aim
That in our frailties others can and may help us.
From this point of view
Christ is surely the key to the world.*

NOVALIS

How will the future judge us?

The refugee disaster in the Mediterranean

Albrecht Schwenk

The news and images that come to us from the never ending tragedy at Europe's borders are hard to bear. Between January and April this year, 1,750 immigrants perished in the sea, and these are only the official figures. The real numbers are likely to be much larger. Greenpeace estimates that by the end of the year there will have been 10,000 deaths, as the constant stream of refugees is not abating, but ever increasing.

Does the often expressed outrage about the inhuman people-smugglers do justice to this tragedy, or is it merely a distraction? The smuggling boats are routinely overloaded, crews abandon their 'freight' on high seas, human beings are traded like goods; this all betrays abysmal cynicism. However, is the moralistically pointing finger not trying to divert the attention from the implication of the crime of its own hand?

Maximillian Popp points out in his article 'Protecting human beings, not only borders' in the German political magazine *Der Spiegel*: 'For many years people have been dying in the attempt to flee to Europe. They drown in the Mediterranean, they bleed to death at the border fences of Ceuta and Melilla, freeze to death in the mountains between Ukraine and Hungary ... we are all accomplices to one of the greatest crimes of European post-war history. Perhaps historians and judges will in 20 years wake up to this dark period. And not only politicians in Brussels, Berlin and Paris, but every citizen of Europe will have to accept the question of whether he has done anything to stop the barbarity committed in all our names. ... The EU has erected tall fences along its borders and sent soldiers and battle cruisers to keep refugees out of Europe. The death of thousands of refugees on Europe's border is not just a tragedy; it is a direct result of European policies.' Thus it is almost impossible to get to Europe without the people smugglers.

What remains unspoken is that people from Syria, Iraq, Bangladesh, Somalia, Eritrea and other African states flee their countries because it has become impossible for them to survive there. They live entirely without a future. The blame is often laid on criminal gangs, terrorists, civil wars and corrupt governments.

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However, one tends to ignore who actually supports these groups and how they arose in the first place. Often these elites originated in Colonial times and apply now to their people what was meted out to them before by their former Colonial masters. A major cause of the civil wars can be seen in the constant military interference of external powers to secure trade in raw materials. The populations are usually impoverished because global corporations put pressure on the commodity prices to maximise their profits. This in turn is supported by the governments of the rich countries that subsidise their own food production but deny the poor nations the right to do the same. Therefore the poor economies are unable to survive.

In this hopeless complexity it is moving to hear Nigerian literature Nobel laureate and peace activist Wole Soylinka's call for justice. He puts the blame equally on the Western colonial inheritance in Africa and the African dictatorships: 'Justice needs to rule for everybody, or not at all.' It does not help to accuse only one side, but even less to ignore one's own guilt.

And one has to start with oneself.



Thirty, Wassily Kandinsky

Do I work for money — does money work for me?

Alfred Wohlfeil

The current financial crisis, if you look at it closely, is a crisis of consciousness. The customary concepts have lost their power. All that can be done is to try to postpone the consequences of mismanagement by tinkering, and thereby aggravating them. The problem cannot be solved by the ideas that created it in the first place.

It is necessary therefore to think about the underlying principles of the development and task of money. As we will show here, money in fact is only a means to mediate the exchange of values that have been created through human effort, whether this be spiritual or physical. Therefore the first question is: what is the significance of human work?

Work is often understood to be a nuisance to be suffered in order to acquire the money that one needs to live. This unfree relationship to money was experienced strongly in former times through slavery and serfdom. Yet today, a large proportion of the working population of the world could be considered wage slaves.

Many things can be traced back to Adam and Eve, including the beginning of the concept of 'work'. Original sin was a consequence of the temptation, with Adam and Eve being driven out of Paradise. From then on, Eve was to bear children in pain and travail and Adam was to work by the sweat of his brow.

If we look at the positive side of the Fall of Man, we realize that the ability to recognize good and evil makes it possible for human beings to develop an independent moral judgement. They can learn from experience and are able to attempt consciously to do the good. This will allow them over time to partake more and more in world creation.

If you look at it this way, work plays an important part in the development of the cosmos. For instance, the need to eat leads to ever greater knowledge of the planet earth. We learn to distinguish between edible and inedible. We find ways to make our work easier by inventing tools. Thereby we penetrate ever deeper into the mysteries of nature and her laws. We become

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more skilled and able, and masters of the earth. This increase of knowledge and skills can be studied by observing the development of humankind from hunter-gatherer to farmer and craftsman.

An important step in this development is taken when specialisation starts to occur. In the middle ages, crafts gain in importance. Within the self-sufficient economy of the tribe, the specialized craftsman appears, who is freed from farm work to make use of his special skills to provide superior shoes, clothes or tools, while others work in the fields. This division of labour led to a new self-consciousness. Eventually the crafts people were freed of socage, that is, working for the landlord in return for being able to farm his land. They joined with other craftspeople in guilds and founded free cities. The rest of the population encouraged the craftspeople by exchanging food for their goods. The self-esteem of the craftsman surged. He experienced his ability to create something valuable for other people. This brought about a flowering in the development of the human personality. To work for others became more and more a fact of life that motivated people and brought satisfaction.

In our Children's Service this development is made apparent by describing the working of the divine spirit in nature and the human being. We learn in order to understand the world and to be able to work in it. Love enlivens human labour, and Christ is the teacher of love.

To learn—to work—to love: it could have been that simple. However evolution did not follow a straight path.

The age of industrialisation caused a massive setback to this burgeoning self-confidence. The individual worker was less and less able to involve himself in the design and production of the product and thereby to earn recognition from the customer. He had to content himself with producing only parts of a larger whole. Trade became increasingly complex and abstract, as can be seen in car manufacturing in modern times.

This led to the attitude that we only work for money. A new form of socage came about. While earlier it was the feudal lords who owned the land, now the industrialists owned the means of production and the worker was at their mercy, forced to sell his labour.

Friedrich Engels described the conditions of the working class of England in 1845. In 1848 he and Karl Marx wrote *The Communist Manifesto*. In it they raise the question of who owns the added value that comes about through investment into the means of production (factories and machines). The industrialist considers himself the natural owner of these assets, despite the fact that the workers are involved in creating the value.

As the industrialist is able to dismiss the workers he regards as surplus to his requirements, he is accused of exploitation. All this led to the labour market, and the unions' task was to make sure that labour was sold at the highest possible price. Labour became a commodity. Work was done for money. Money became the new lord, as also the entrepreneur wanted to generate as much of it as possible. The joy of working to fulfil the needs of one's fellow human being faded away.

In England, the question of whether work could be done for altruistic reasons had already been discussed a hundred years earlier. In 1776, Adam Smith, the Scottish economist, advocated an ingenious compromise in his major work *The Wealth of Nations*. For him the maximising of profits was not a problem, as in the end the whole nation benefited from the wealth created thereby. The balancing effect of the 'invisible hand' was, however, applied to a closed domestic industry. Adam Smith pointed out that the downside of the division of labour was the stultification of the work force. He gave the example of pin manufacturing, where workers are reduced to repeating only a few movements with their hands ad nauseam.

Today Adam Smith's ideas are taken out of context to support the ideology of Neo-Liberalism, as a justification for the complete deregulation of markets and the granting of unlimited entrepreneurial freedom. The division of labour is now the rule around the world. Profit maximization only benefits the large corporations and leads to ever-increasing power struggles and armed conflicts.

Individual states have long abandoned any attempt to regulate global corporations. Rather, they allow economic interests to determine political processes and agendas. The deeper reasons for the wars that are fought today lie in economic interests. The fight over resources and markets defines our lives. The individual human being subordinates himself to this system, as he is convinced that he needs to earn money for himself and his family. The seemingly irrefutable argument that he only works for his own interests makes him into a taxable egotist. He is unable to realize that he works for everybody else, just as everybody around the world is working for him. How free could each human being feel if only labour's great potential to lead to universal brotherliness was recognized!

However, we must free ourselves first of the illusion that 'money works.' The evolution of money shows clearly what money's task really is. It is a tool that facilitates the exchange of goods. The more differentiated and universal the division of labour, the greater the practical importance of money as a means of payment. Today's paper money and virtual money has in itself no

value. It represents a kind of concentrated trust that allows us to acquire value created by other human beings at any time. Value itself is created by human labour and human spirit.

In the lecture course *World Economy* (1922), Rudolf Steiner describes this value creation by saying that nature as such has no economic value. Only when the human being transforms nature with his effort does value come about, for example by mining the ore in the mountain or harvesting the apple on the tree. When the human spirit takes hold of work by organizing and simplifying it, more value is added. These two human abilities create values, called price. Price depends on supply and demand. Money makes possible the trade of products and services.

Rudolf Steiner distinguishes between different qualities of money. One of them is 'purchase money' which connects production with consumption through trade. The division of labour together with the immense productivity of machinery usually creates a surplus that can be passed on as loans or donated as gift money. Money that is not being used at any one moment can be made available to others for meaningful activities by way of 'loans.' Banks used to provide this service, lending surplus savings, for example, to an entrepreneur, who could thereby increase his profit. The general public benefited as well from lower prices and from the interest that was paid on the loan.

Such commerce, involving interest and stocks, created the impression that money worked by itself, that it increased by its own activity. This is an illusion: it is not money that works. It is exclusively the human being who creates value. However, the illusion became the foundation upon which our current financial system is built. Because of the structure of ownership, this financial system has the peculiarity that through the payment of interest, and of interest on interest, unbelievably large amounts of money are concentrated in the hands of very few. Everybody else is in debt to those very few.

This illness of the financial system is caused by the unjust ownership structure and an inadequate tax system. Here we see yet another monetary quality, that of 'gift money' which Rudolf Steiner also described in *World Economy*. He says that value created by human labour and human spirit should benefit everybody. Children, the old, the frail and ill should receive this gift money, and in addition it should also support spiritual life, ranging from education to art to leisure. If those fabulous fortunes were passed on and shared, we would not have to legislate for human rights to nourishment and shelter. There would be enough food and clothes for all of

mankind. Instead of being used through gifting, money is presently hoarded and seemingly unendingly multiplied in stock and property bubbles.

We need to rethink our relationship to money. We have to reverse our relationship: money has to serve human beings. Money has become a tyrant. In the New Testament this is called Mammon (Matt. 6:24). The erroneous belief that money works will only be overcome when we do not think that we are working 'for' money. We have to realize again that we are working for other people; only then will the situation improve. What is called 'love' in the Children's Service could indeed become common reality.

By freeing work from the illusion of Mammon we will permit money to help us develop far-reaching abilities:

We will learn to understand the world and its creative power, which is filled with wisdom.

We will develop abilities by being creative and become truly free human beings.

We will learn to pass on in a brotherly way our inner riches to our fellow human beings.

We will help by our love to transform the planet into spirit.



Birches, Wassily Kandinsky

Thank you, thief!

Tarik Özkök

A thief does not tidy up when he comes. On the contrary, he rummages through everything in order to find what he is looking for: valuables. These he then takes for himself and makes off; where previously there was something, there is now a void. That is why we don't want thieves coming and emptying our pockets or houses.

And yet stealing is not something just anyone can do—it is a skill that has to be learnt. One has to have sensitive fingertips and motor-empathy to be good at stealing or burglary. And one has to know the character and the weaknesses of the person one wants to relieve of their property.

As regards the other aspect, the 'victim' aspect, there is this: when it has happened, it is too late. But can one do anything to prevent it? Can one insure oneself against thieves? Nowadays one can insure oneself against anything, but—even if there is no escape clause in small print—insurance can only replace money. If I have been robbed of something very personal, if a particular treasure was especially dear to me, then the loss can no longer be made good with money. And if I turn to the thriving security companies and let them surround my house with high fences, install cameras and alarm systems everywhere and turn my house into a fortress, then perhaps I can soon feel as protected in there as in a prison.

But why does a thief actually steal? And why does he have to break in? Because the doors are not open and because, like everyone else, he has needs, and has no other way of getting what he needs. But why does no-one give it to him? Had we known the thief before, he might perhaps have become our friend, and then we might possibly have attended to his needs as a matter of course. Perhaps we would actually have invited him in, and he might then even have brought us a present. Maybe the thief is so badly off only for the same reason that I am doing well: as though he were the social, economic counterbalance to my affluence. Had there been some equivalence beforehand, the thief would not have had to try to establish it.

The Saviour a thief?—thus it is written! 'If you will not awake, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come' (Rev. 3:3). What does he want from us? What will he take from us if we are asleep when he comes? There is no kind of insurance against that kind of theft, that's for sure.

But what might we do, so that he does not come like a thief? Let us invite him in as a friend; let us make sure the conditions are right; let us give him what he needs in order to be able to help us. Who is fully able to do all that? And there is one more thing left to us—after-care. When we have been robbed once, we will probably be very awake and attentive in future so that it does not happen again. And with these skills we are already receiving the thief's first gifts to us.

Translated by Jon Madsen
From *Die Christengemeinschaft* November 2013

The Challenge of Youth

Aaron Mirkin

Teenagers need to be taken very seriously in our time. They bring fresh, new and authentic impulses from the spirit worlds, impulses that are genuinely needed in our time, and they long to see them incarnated into our life on earth. All too often however they meet a world unable to receive these new impulses, let alone to recognise them; and there are forces in the world today that wish to prevent the truly new and spiritual from entering the life of our times. This is a source of deep pain and frustration for young people growing up in the world today.

This deep down longing to bring the truly fresh and new into the world is experienced as a threat to the status quo, and is therefore generally attacked and suppressed. Teenagers are somehow expected to take the transition from childhood to adulthood as quickly as possible and become sensible, sorted young people who know how to toe the line. This is a terrible thing with terrible consequences. Either young people do indeed force themselves under pressure to toe the line and become little copies of the dominant adults around them, or they escape into a world of sex, drugs and rock & roll—and technologically driven media and entertainment. Either way they lose their capacity to bring the impulses they carry in their souls and thereby their mission to make a genuine difference in the world. It is our responsibility too! Not only theirs. It serves little good simply to bedevil the apparently 'fallen' world of young people today.

Young people need the opportunity to explore and experiment, but above all they need to feel that they are taken seriously and are trusted to make a positive contribution to the development of the world. It amazes me again and again how the young helpers who help to carry our annual children's camps rise to the occasion and show their capacity to be sensible and responsible in the most wonderfully creative ways. I, as camp leader, have to learn to let go every time (and bite my tongue) to make space for our young people to be able to bring the gifts that they have, and to do things in their way and not in some pre-ordained, 'that's how we've always done it' way. And they come back again year after year to offer two weeks of their precious summer holidays, with no pay, to be there for the children in our care. This touches me deeply. They have such

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Stroud, UK.*

strength and inspiration to give, and without them our camps would be nothing.

Just imagine how our congregations could be if such youthful strength and inspiration were able to flow into our work. Of course there is no simple recipe, and the camps are exceptional situations. Nevertheless, we can still ask ourselves whether we are taking enough active interest in the young people in our communities, and do enough to give them opportunities to get involved. One does have to leave one's comfort zone behind and be open to doing things differently. They are, after all, the future and have every possibility to be our teachers too.

www.cc-camps.org

Our next Youth Camp will take place
in **Stroud from the 29 March – 2 April 2016**

The Fall of Babylon

*When Babylon's false edifice truly falls,
And its rampart of broken words collapse.
We will not grieve for its tumbling walls,
Or mourn that its reign of division has lapsed.*

*For words will no longer enclose and divide,
Their meaning deception and separation.
Speech will no longer merely ornament and hide
In foreign parsing and blinding partitions.*

*Every word and thing will truly speak,
Sounding forth to name itself.
Its articulation no longer irresolute or weak:
All will then be known like tolling bells.*

MICHAEL FERREL

What is Art?

Jens-Peter Linde

A book with this title in my library about the artist Joseph Beuys asks us a direct question. How are we to answer it? Can anyone presume to know?

Let me contribute an observation which I had of Joseph Beuys in the early 70s at a conference on social renewal. He was there in his typical fisherman's waistcoat and felt hat and he was bearing his arrogance—as I termed it then—in a really annoying fashion!

Today I know that if I am annoyed by someone, it is not necessarily the fault of the annoyer, rather it is my ego which is annoyed. Perhaps this prompted me to ask myself, 'Where is your problem? Is it your own arrogance which is challenged here?' and perhaps an important change began in my soul.

Isn't this an example of 'transubstantiation' if I consider my soul as the substance in which an artistic process takes place? My soul changes just as a piece of bog-oak can become a new 'under-standing' (translated: a new 'sub-stance') if carved into the form of a candle holder.

Joseph Beuys is world-famous for widening the idea of art by developing great dynamics in the realm of 'social sculpture'. In social sculpture the social organism becomes the substance of artistic transformation, and at the same time reveals itself as the formative element itself, a being which can evolve, actively.

This artist, who was a keen supporter of biodynamic agriculture, knew that the farmer reconnects natural substances with their cosmic origin to create the biodynamic compost preparations in a process of 'transubstantiation' for the land which is in need of re-enlivening. The farmer releases the cosmic potency of the preparations into the very being of the earth via compost or as stirred spray.

This is indeed what Joseph Beuys was doing. He took ordinary substance, be it tallow in his famous 'fat-corner' (or indeed the German 'Green Party Substance'), mediated its 'transubstantiation' and, by sharing this in the public domain, potentised it as a healing medicine for the consciousness of our time.

And one more thing: in our times many rich people are looking for investment opportunities and pay great sums of money for rubbish as long as it has a 'precious name' attached to it. Thus art is traded, but also degraded.

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Joseph Beuys subverted that, for social art cannot be sold. He raised art into a community endeavour. I'd like to call such a transformation of substance a sacrament; he gave it a spiritual dimension.

Our sacraments in *The Christian Community: Movement for Religious Renewal* also transubstantiate substance which cannot be sold. These acts want to sanctify the human being him or herself who in turn may sanctify.

By participating in the sacraments, one's life can become a precious piece of art, not to be traded in for anything in the world, but gaining the potential to transform this world. Our souls are transmuted by a real ideal: that spirit comes down to earth and in turn elevates the earth to the heavens.

Everyone comes from the spirit world into life in a body and yearns for this transubstantiation—even if there are obstacles on the way, like 'mere arrogance' and such... The idea of 'religion' may in itself be an obstacle, as religion isn't seen as very 'cool'. We will have to trust that young people's inherent religiosity will come through sooner or later, and it may well be experienced first in the realm of art.

May I presume one bold answer to the question I began this piece with? 'Art is when culture leaps!' When I overcame my annoyance I leapt into a new understanding and it was the right time for me to see that Beuys' fisherman's pockets were etheric spaces to substantiate treasures of perception... and religion was a felt hat open to the stars.

Like a shaman who is priest and healer in one, Joseph Beuys is a significant figure in the consciously experienced fields of culture astir in our time. His presence worked in me. May his example work in many moments of artistic appreciation, in much transubstantiation to come. May this capacity in human souls become the true capital in a world of spirit growth.

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Michael and the Hermit

Once upon a time, a medieval legend says, a hermit left his hermitage and set out into the world. Now hermits, as we know, were people who left all human bustle behind them and sought solitude. They built their simple dwelling in a place that was as inaccessible as possible. They devoted their life to God, praying and meditating, and doing some simple work to keep alive.

This hermit had felt inspired by some words in the Sermon on the Mount that speak of concerns about eating, drinking and clothing. He had no difficulty understanding that the birds are fed by our heavenly Father, how the lilies, the grass in the fields, are clothed by God. He had become quite unconcerned about what he himself was going to eat, or drink, or wear. He was quite sure that the heavenly Father knew his needs. Encouraged by the words that followed, 'But first seek his kingdom and his justice, and all these things will be given to you,' he had gone out and had built his hermitage, in the woods across the mountains, far from the river valley with its villages, its towns and people. He had lived there quite happily, if roughly, seeking the kingdom of God and his justice.

Our hermit was sure that in living a life of seclusion, abandoning all worldly matters, he was actively seeking the kingdom of God. Over the years he also thought quite a bit about God's justice, and this is where in the end he became confused. While still living among people, he had often observed that life seems to deal harshly with some people, gently with others, and he came to question why this is. Why is it that people who already have had a rough deal get more on their plate, while others whose lives seem to flow gently onwards are spared difficulties? A solitary life may be a beautiful thing, but one has no people around to talk to, to try out one's thoughts. As we all know, one can think any thought one wants to think; the problem is whether our thoughts are valid, real, let's say realistic, or just passing fantasies best soon forgotten.

More and more, our hermit failed when he sought to find any justice in what, as he had experienced, destiny presents people with. As his doubts grew and he had no one around to help him find an acceptable answer, he decided to go out into the world again—to search for God's justice. He left his hermitage, leaving the door unlatched so that people who might pass by could find shelter if need be. Carrying his bag on a pole across his shoulder, he set out to cross the mountains.

Steadily he walked onwards, and a few days later left his own part of the woods, still following the same path. After a while, his path crossed another one. Which path would be the better one to take? While he thought about this he saw someone approaching the cross-roads, a younger man carrying his own bag: a traveller like himself. They found they were going in the same direction and decided to travel together, taking the path the young man said he knew.

Travelling onwards, they crossed one range after another, and as evening fell they started to look for a place to sleep. Luckily, behind a ridge they saw smoke spiraling upwards, and headed off in that direction. They soon came to a house, more like a small castle. Here they found only servants present, who gladly gave them a place inside to sleep; 'Our masters are very hospitable', they said, 'and turn away no one'. In the morning they were given a meal and food and drink for the road, and were even invited to have a look at the treasures the owners had collected in far away places: armour, weapons, some beautifully wrought candlesticks and even a little golden cup. Impressed and glowing after such hospitality, the hermit and his companion took their leave and set out again.

Taking their midday rest near a small brook, they opened their bags to enjoy their fare, and while doing so the hermit caught a glimpse of gold in his companion's bag- surely not the cup they had admired that morning? It was very similar, at least; his companion took it out and sat quietly contemplating it. Had he stolen it? And this after being received so kindly? Well, better not to make a fuss; one cannot always choose one's companions...

That evening the mountains they had to cross had become rougher, there were hardly any dwellings around. Just after dark, they glimpsed a tiny light in the distance. Finding their way with difficulty, they came upon a house, bleak and shuttered, its windows secured with iron staves set into the mortar. Some light spilled out through a crack between the shutters, and looking in they saw part of a table, a hand moving across with pieces that glittered. Someone counting money? It must have been an absorbing job; only after hammering long and loud on the door could they hear someone coming. A small window in the door opened, part of a face became visible and a coarse voice said no, he could not take in travellers, but they might find a place in the outbuildings. The small door window was shut again. They found some rotting straw and spent a miserable night. Astonished, the hermit found his companion insisting on thanking their host for his hospitality. And to express their thanks he presented the surly fellow with the golden cup...

To say that the hermit felt uncomfortable is putting it mildly; he decided to leave his companion as soon as they had reached the river, but there was still more than a day's walk before them.

The highest mountains to cross were coming near, looking very inhospitable. In the afternoon, they came through a hamlet, a few farms and houses huddled together under some steep slopes. Here, the companion wanted to go into a house to have a drink, but the hermit did not want to stop, having found a good walking pace. 'I'll wait for you up there,' he said. And so he did, gratefully sitting down under a tree. One could see the whole village from there, smoke already rising as people started to prepare the evening meal. Now when his companion came out of the house, he seemed to be in a hurry. That man could set a pace; the hermit soon lost sight of him as the path started to wind upwards.

But what was that, that smoke did not come from a cooking fire. No, and there were people streaming out with buckets, making a chain: a house on fire, burning down quickly now. That was the house his companion had left in such a hurry a few moments ago... Did he have something to do with this?

Feeling more and more uncomfortable with his travelling companion, the hermit vowed that this day would be their last day together. Next day they would reach the river, only one range still to cross... It was a desolate country in which they continued their journey, and were glad when they found people living there. A solitary house; perhaps they would be offered somewhere to sleep.

Coming near, they heard crying. On entering the house, they found the air oppressive. In a corner they saw a boy lying on a bed, muttering and thrashing around, a woman weeping and a man looking down on the boy, his face distorted. A very sick boy; this they could discern.

The companion took charge: 'I know about sickness,' he said. Gently, he raised the boy a little and looked at his face. Slowly, the boy became quiet and opened his eyes. They looked at each other, then with a sigh the boy turned his face away and, breathing calmly, fell asleep. Carefully letting the boy down on his bed, the hermit's companion said that he had seen some herbs nearby; he would prepare a draught to alleviate the boy's illness. Its fragrance soon filled the room, and when it had cooled down he gave the boy a few sips. The boy sighed, looked him full in the face once more, then quietly closed his eyes. His breathing had become very quiet, the hermit thought. The companion held the boy, almost as if listening; then he lowered him gently, stood up and said: 'This is all I could do to help him.'

They stayed to comfort his mother and father, and helped to bury the boy. The father then offered to guide them through the mountains, taking some short cuts known to him. It was not the easiest of ways, and they had to go single file to cross a rickety bridge while the raging river rushed fiercely far down below them in the deep ravine. The guide went first, the hermit came last. When the guide was halfway, the hermit saw his companion suddenly move forward reaching for the guide, who then toppled and fell down onto the rocks in the water. Now the hermit could no longer remain passive, his anger erupted and he went forward to call his companion to account. Reaching out to seize him, his companion eluded his grip, transforming himself into a mighty angel of light.

Averting his eyes from the brilliance, the hermit heard: 'You went out to search for God's justice. You have seen part of it. For before you is Michael, who stands before God. The cup that I stole where we were welcomed had been poisoned, and the miser shall find his life's reward in it. The poor people whose house I set fire to, will, when pulling it down, find a hidden treasure more precious than gold. The boy whom I took from this world would have grown to be a criminal and murderer, like his father whom I pushed into the abyss: a thief and murderer he was; he robbed and killed those whom he guided through the mountains. Often, what before God seems just, seems unjust in the eyes of human beings.'

The vision vanished and the hermit found himself alone, teetering on the bridge. He found it difficult to reach solid ground again. Only long after the brilliance had faded, did he set out to return to his hermitage, cured of his doubts.

This Michael Story has been retold in 'Letters to a Diaspora', after 'Michael und der Zweifler', in *Aus Michaels Wirken*, edited by Nora Stein von Baditz, 1929/1959 (J.Ch.Mellinger Verlag, Stuttgart), page 62.

ARIE BOOGERT AND ANNA MARCHANT, 1994/1997

Letter

Dear Editor,

Your June–August issue (on Membership) was absorbing and, in some ways, extremely sad. Excellent on commitment. Less so, I thought, on its intended theme.

Membership can undoubtedly provide a sense of focus to the individual concerned. It can also be helpful to others—including the priest, it seems. But there is a danger in placing too much emphasis on it. The Christian Community celebrates an open mystery, whose sacraments are best fulfilled when all participate worthily, or try to. These sacraments are not a ‘members only’ activity. Nor does membership come anywhere near defining the Church in a fundamental sense. The real Church includes all Christians who have been born, and all communities who are bringing Christ to life. They can be anywhere in the world and belong to any denomination. Membership is not helpful to this liberating perception, although it is not incompatible with it. It is too inward looking, too self absorbed. Openness and humility are more important.

As to congregational life, membership can lead to cliquishness. It can create a false sense of security, in the sense that some non-members may easily feel that others more competent than themselves are looking after the congregation’s well being. If applied as a test it can be damaging, both in the sense of turning away effective individuals, and giving priority to those who are less suited for responsibility.

There is something complacent about treating membership almost as a hierarchical rank. What matters is active par-

ticipation—what the Community website describes as ‘a sense of belonging.’ This is a matter of inner commitment, not outer form.

DAVID CAMPBELL,
EDINBURGH, SCOTLAND

We warmly encourage feedback and hope that David’s comments stimulate further discussion.

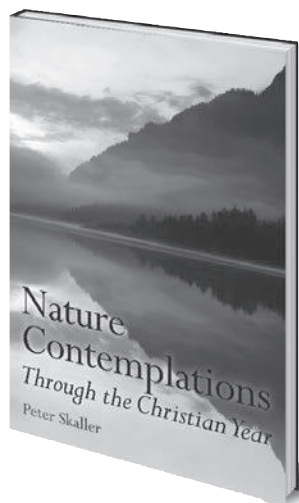
We would also like to point out that membership does have an importance that David may not be aware of in a well-established congregation such as Edinburgh. This outer mark of commitment, which as David points out cannot be a substitute for an active, inner commitment, is important for the leadership of our Community when it comes to establishing a new congregation or founding The Christian Community in a new Region. We look to those who have made the step of membership on every level when assessing whether there is a basis for our work. Although the generous gesture of our sacraments may mean that this important fact goes ‘underground,’ nevertheless those charged with the continuity of our work would be alarmed if there were a congregation with no members at all. It is for all of us to work hard to make sure that the outer and inner commitment match each other.

The Editors

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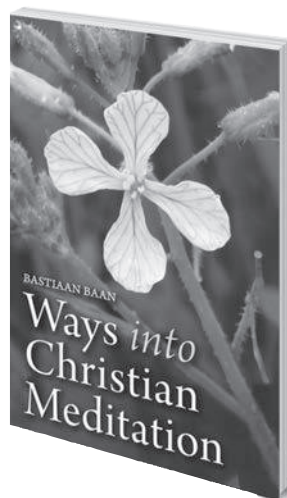
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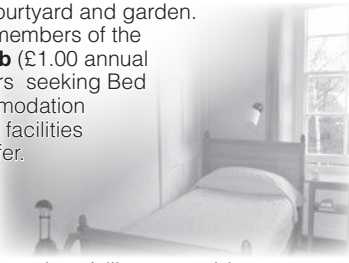


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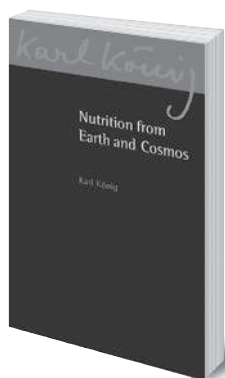
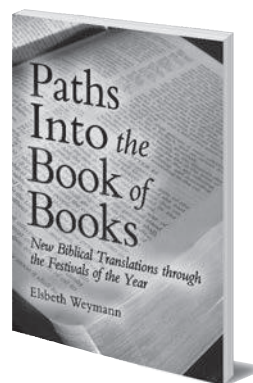
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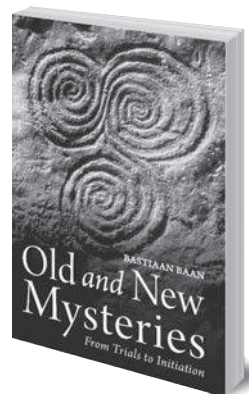
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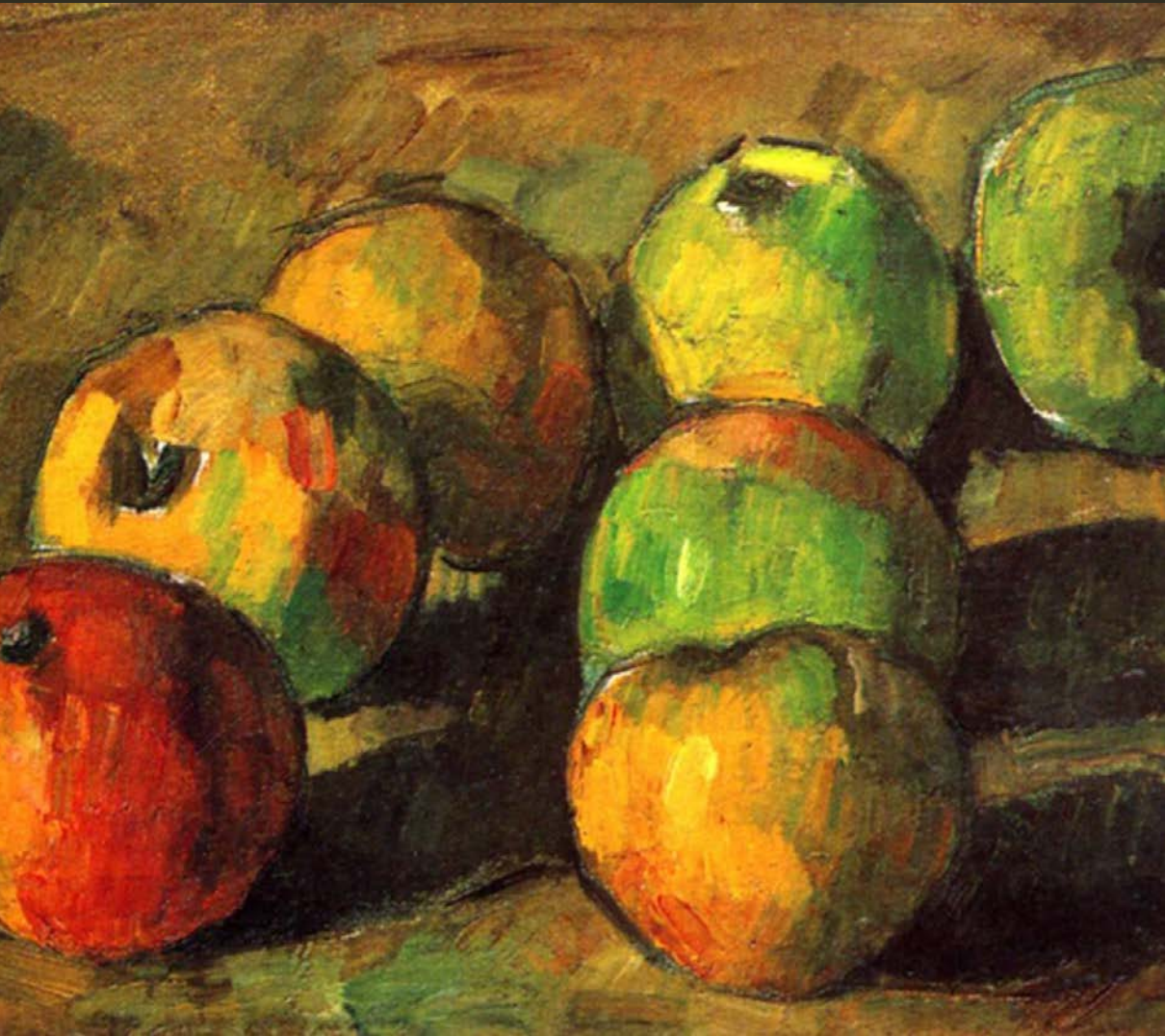
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