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Do Not Be Afraid: The Therapy of the Soul



Lake at Bonnevaux (by Laurence Freeman)

Dearest friends,

A letter from Laurence Freeman OSB

'Fear Not'

There is a cute idea that the call to 'not be afraid' occurs 365 times in the Bible. In fact, it is uttered about 100 times by prophets, angels, and other such trustworthy people. Yet, it is truly embedded in the deepest level of biblical, indeed of all spiritual wisdom. Fifteen times Jesus specifically commands us not to fear. Twice he asks, 'why are you afraid?' This is a wake-up call we need to hear more than ever today as we die out of one world order and struggle with the hope of emerging into a new and better one.

'Don't be afraid' is not the comforting reassurance a parent might understandably whisper to a child as a plane plunges into the ocean. It is the fundamental invitation into a new way of human existence.

Every generation believes its fears are unprecedented and so they are, because each chapter in the narrative of human life is unique. Like a clinging companion we cannot cast off, fear has shadowed humanity from its first acute awareness that we are going to die. It changes its appearance according to circumstances, but its insinuating whisper is always recognisable and often bursts in us unexpectedly. Like malicious gossip, it can't be unheard once it has been released. Research suggests that our greatest collective fear today concerns the consequences of the breakdown of institutional integrity. Trust is at an all-time low. This is like seeing the jungle invading a once neat and beautiful garden, or a young child seeing that its parents are drinking too much. We also fear terrorism and war. Increasingly we fear technology and those applying it, political instability, and economic breakdown. We fear those

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morally blind social leaders who create fear in order to deceive and control us. Because we are influenced by the media as to what we should fear, we miss what we should actually fear most: the denial of our suicidal destructiveness towards the natural world

Fear is frightening in itself because it undermines everything. We may try to evade it by pursuing achievements, busyness or entertainment. It may become so destructive that it prevents us from becoming the person we feel called to be. Fear controls us more than a physical prison. So, the biblical command is not merely good psychological advice. It is a spiritual revelation of the nature and purpose of human consciousness. Jesus does not say that frightening things won't happen or promise a life free of suffering and uncertainty. He does declare that fear is not the final word in any situation and that transcending it is the way to unlimited growth even though we must accept our natural limitations. Human beings are not created for fear but for unlimited consciousness: 'to share in the very being of God' as scripture says (2Pet 1:4).

Whenever fear overwhelms us it becomes the air we breathe and something essentially human in us dies. We find ourselves trapped in what we call hell: not an after-this-life state but a condition of existence where love and life are themselves stifled. Like air, sea or soil pollution, fear destroys the conditions for healthy life. Anything that deliberately disseminates fear for its own selfish ends is demonic, meaning that it thrives upon division and mutual contempt. Those who manipulate fear are already controlled by it themselves. Eventually they are destroyed by it. They are imprisoned in what they construct to bury and control others whom they fear. In the Christian narrative, Christ plunges into the deepest, darkest levels of hell and stretches out his hand to lift out those trapped there.

'Declaring Ourselves for Christ'

In Chapter 10 of Matthew, Jesus warns his followers that by following him they will experience rejection and betrayal.



Bere Island (Photo by Laurence Freeman)

He describes the pain that we must go through to emerge into the new world he calls the Reign of God. He is strengthening them in advance against fear, but he adds something that might seem at first to add to their fear:

'Everyone who declares himself for me in the presence of others, I will declare myself for before my Father. Whoever disowns me before others I will disown before my Father in heaven'.

It's tempting to skip over this kind of saying and look for the easier ones about love and forgiveness. Yet understood, it can be enlightening.

Those who manipulate fear are already controlled by it themselves

What does it mean to declare ourselves for Christ? Not being a religious bore or fanatic. Not religious triumphalism. Not the insecure need to prove we are right. I feel it means that we are no longer compelled by fear to hide from the deepest truth. When fear is mastered, we become transparent. We say what we genuinely think. We acknowledge what we truly believe, no longer governed by the fretful calculation of how others judge us.

Transparency of this order is neither naïve nor aggressive. It exudes peace. It expands space rather than filling it. It invites rather than compels. The courageous openness of this kind in just one person releases openness in others. When members of the Trump administration are asked in Congressional enquiries if they accept the result of the 2020 election (that Trump claims was 'stolen'), they squirm and repeatedly expose their fear of his disapproval by refusing to say what every reasonable person knows is true. This, I think, is what Jesus means by 'declaring' for him before others: fearlessly telling the truth of fearlessness at whatever cost to ourselves. We are then redeemed, not from divine punishment but from fear.

The courage of a truthful declaration against the threats of fear and repression has the power to 'put to rout the arrogant of heart and mind and tear imperial powers from their thrones' as Mary declared at the Annunciation (Lk 1:51). It makes visible the Mind of Christ. It dispels the pollution of fear and deception. The Mind of Christ – which all aspire to – is freeing because it does not orbit around self-protection. It does not need to calculate endlessly how to survive. It simply breathes deeply and loves. Fear closes and locks every gate. Love leaves every door open.

As the contemplative mind perceives, fear is not only personal, it is cultural. Entire societies and institutions can become organised around fear. Bureaucracies, governments, media, financial markets, and even religious teachings can be seduced by discovering that frightened

people are easier to manage than free spirits. The Church herself, for example, has not been immune to this temptation. Throughout history there have been periods when fear became so powerful an instrument of religious and moral control that the system was inherited by those who themselves had been imprisoned by it. The language of liberation used in the Gospel was covered over by threats of eternal punishment or excommunication. When this happened it was not because Christ teaches fear but because Christians were infected by the fears of their age. The power of fear is extraordinarily subtle. Those who are themselves afraid spread fear without understanding what they are doing. They might sincerely believe they are protecting truth, defending morality or preserving order. But sincerity alone doesn't open the gates of the Reign of God. Authenticity is also necessary to make us resonate with the truth. Yet fear easily disguises itself as virtuous. This is why discernment is needed to expose fear and why everything should be questioned. Truth is never afraid. Love has nothing to defend because it 'shines on good and bad alike and is kind to the ungrateful and the bad'.



(Photo by Laurence Freeman)

Terror on Every Side

The prophet Jeremiah described the world of his time with a sharp clarity that illuminates our own day: 'terror is on every side'. Every generation manufactures its own forms of terror. We may not live, as many do today, where daily waves of drones and missiles traumatise the brain's limbic system and create exhaustingly continuous conditions of psychological alarm.

The nervous system becomes trapped in permanent vigilance. We get used to expecting catastrophe. We wait anxiously for the next crisis. Imagination scans constantly for danger.

Neuroscience gives us a language to understand fear that earlier generations did not possess. We know about the amygdala and the body's hormonal responses. We know that fear, like love, is embodied and is awakened in microseconds before we consciously know it.

Our neurological and physical system is beautifully designed for the moment genuine danger appears. If a tiger or a man with a knife suddenly runs towards us, fear is an intelligent response. It prepares the body for action. The problem arises when the emergency system never switches off. Like a fire alarm, falsely triggered, that we have lost the password to stop. In such a world every disagreement or misunderstanding with another person becomes a threat. Every stranger is suspicious. Every uncertainty becomes overwhelming. Every silence becomes uncomfortable. We begin living as though the tiger never turned around and disappeared. Many people carry this hidden burden of fear every moment of the day and for decades. The body remains on unnecessarily high alert for dangers that are no longer really present. The teachers of wisdom who have understood and mastered the state of fear tell us, 'This is no way to live'.

Never Truly Present

Fear has another consequence: it steals the present moment. Someone trapped in fear rarely lives where they actually are. They are haunted by what has happened or anxious about what may happen. Their attention cannot rest because it is continually pulled away from reality.

As the great awakener of self-knowledge, meditation gradually reveals this to us. We discover how often the mind is abstracted from the here and now. We come to see how quickly it wanders into imaginary conversations, anticipating disasters or revisiting old wounds. Fear is remarkably repetitive. It compulsively tells the same stories again and again. The future becomes merely an extension of yesterday. This is why fearful people feel trapped in stress or paralysed by inaction. Outwardly life may change, yet inwardly old patterns repeat themselves. We lose mobility. We lose spontaneity. We lose the childlike ability to taste life as gift. The present moment is where grace appears. Fear distrusts and postpones grace because it blocks out the present.

Can we reason ourselves out of fear? Sometimes good insights help. Good psychotherapy can be valuable. Friendship, wise counsel, and loving relationships all contribute to breaking the patterns of fear and healing the wounds that started them. Yet we soon discover that intellectual understanding cannot free us. Fear lies deeper than thought. Its roots descend into the earliest layers of consciousness. The story of Adam and Eve expresses this.

Many levels of interpretation of the Fall are possible, but it clearly describes the emergence of separation anxiety. Human consciousness stirs. Self-consciousness appears. With the ego comes comparison. Comparison breeds insecurity. Insecurity produces fear. Fear generates shame.

Shame leads to hiding oneself. When God asks Adam, "Where are you?", Adam replies, "I was afraid because I was naked." God (as usual teaching by questions) asks 'and who told you were naked?' Many people with deep fear will begin to experience it as soon as they wake up each morning. Fear entered the human story as soon as we woke to consciousness.

'Original sin', then, should not be understood primarily as disobedience or moral failure but as the awareness of separation, consequent on the 'individuality' that accompanies self- consciousness. It is the beginning of suffering, but it is also inevitable and necessary. 'Oh, happy fault of Adam!' Willpower cannot heal this wound of the divided consciousness. Analysis will not dissolve it. Something more fundamental is required. Something we might call a therapy of the soul.

Without this deeper healing we seek relief, which is most easily found, temporarily, in distraction. We avoid reality when reality seems unbearable. This avoidance takes many forms. Some become addicted to substances. Others to work. Others to approval and success. Others to entertainment. Others to escapist, superstitious forms of religion.

Addiction is built into the idea of 'sin'. It promises freedom while secretly constructing a prison. The function of addiction is to avoid fear. Some approaches to prayer become escapism. We may multiply devotions, external religious activities and spiritual shopping while avoiding the transformation of consciousness which is the true purpose of prayer. This is why the contemplative dimension of religious traditions builds its teaching on the prayer of the heart. Everything else has value because it is rooted there.

The Prayer of the Heart

Meditation is ridiculously simple and notoriously not as easy as it looks. It is demanding but essential human work. We sit down. We become still. We say our word faithfully in order to detach from the stream of thought. Attention simplifies as it deepens. Nothing dramatic appears to happen. Yet we feel knowingly that we are on an authentic, right path, so we continue. Faith grows. Within this simplicity something immense is unfolding. Gently, accurately, like a skilled surgeon, meditation interrupts the machinery of fear. The nervous system gradually learns another rhythm and eventually the positive value of routine. The mind discovers silence beneath its compulsive self-commentary. The body begins to trust the present again

Fear distrusts and postpones grace because it blocks out the present

as it did in the beginning of life. Meditation is the simple way to pull out the roots of fear. Yet, oddly, something in us fears meditation itself, the stillness taking us beyond desire and distraction, the silence showing us what is beyond thought and even the simplicity that leads to union in the loss of the separate self.

Even though they may be told to expect it, everyone experiences with surprise that, beneath all the fear, anxiety, self-criticism and restlessness, there is and there has always been, unadulterated love. This discovery cannot be predicted or manufactured. It slides in as gentle, life-altering grace. Many people begin meditation for pragmatic reasons - stress reduction, equanimity, emotional balance or just curiosity. Then, unexpectedly, they encounter something more than they were looking for. They discover that the love



(Photo by Laurence Freeman)

they feared was unattainable was never absent, only hidden. This is the beginning of liberation from fear.

Receiving the Medicine

Meditation is the most universal therapy on offer. It does not belong to one culture alone. It requires no special talent. It costs nothing. Yet like every medicine, it must be taken. But just knowing about meditation is not meditation.

'Medication non-adherence' – not taking the medicine prescribed - runs at about 50%. The excuses given for it are largely the same. Admiring contemplation is not contemplation. Reading spiritual books is not the same as entering silence. All spiritual healers say that we need to practice, faithfully, patiently, without expecting instant results. Healing the conditions in which fear thrives will then unfold – gradually, because love cannot violate freedom. Grace works quietly, on

nature, through the faith connection which is a relationship similar to the trust we place in a physician.

The Outer Path and the Inner Path

The great religious traditions understand this. A beautiful reminder of this universal truth comes from Sufism where we find two complementary dimensions of spiritual life. The first is Sharia - the broad path of external action, ethical living, ritual and community life. The second is the Tariqah - the inner path, the contemplative journey into direct experience of God. These two dimensions do not compete. They complete one another. External forms without interior transformation become empty. Interior experience without ethical embodiment becomes illusion. Sacraments, worship, community, and service flourish when rooted in contemplative prayer. Without that root they eventually lose vitality. The prayer of the heart gives life to life.

A strong contemporary fear today concerns AI. Many wonder whether it will eventually diminish our humanity. These concerns deserve serious examination. Yet perhaps the deeper question does not concern the technology itself but the fears in us that it exposes. Humanity has long dreamed of overcoming its limitations. Every generation imagines that one more invention will finally conquer vulnerability and mortality. But limitation is not the enemy. We would not be human without our limitations, and we become less than human when we deny them. We become more human when we accept what they teach us about our infinite value and potential.

This paradox lies at the heart of every spiritual tradition. John Main expressed it with characteristic simplicity. 'The only way to transcend our limits is to accept them.' Meditation is precisely this humbling acceptance. We accept that attention wanders. We accept physical stillness. We accept mental restlessness and the feeling of failure. Paradoxically, acceptance of the narrow path broadens us. Resistance contracts us.

Freedom Beyond Fear

The sweetest fruit of meditation is freedom. Not freedom from difficulty or loss. Certainly not freedom from death. Rather, freedom from fear itself. This freedom transforms every relationship. We no longer need to possess or manipulate people. We no longer need to dominate conversations. We no longer need to win every argument. We no longer need to be the corpse at every funeral or the bride at every wedding.

Love becomes possible because fear is now expelled from the centre of our being. This unleashes an essential spiritual insight: the opposite of love is not hatred. Hatred arises from the feeling of rejection in wounded love. The real opposite of love is fear. Love expands; fear shrivels. Love gives, fear grasps. Love embraces, fear recoils. Love conceives communion. Fear digs prisons.

Shouting It from the Housetops

Jesus affirms with disturbing confidence: do not hide this truth of fearlessness. Shout it from the housetops. What would happen if enough people genuinely ceased to live from fear?

Perhaps and most urgently for our survival, our relationship with the natural world would change. If Confucius were to consult the I Ching about the climate emergency we are causing, he might be given hexagram 28 which offers the image of a beam whose centre is still strong but whose extremities are weak and must lead to collapse. It warns that we must change or endure certain misfortune. A revolution is necessary but need not be feared because it will not proceed by force but rather by gentle penetration to the meaning of the situation.

Fear breeds ideology but is not dispelled by ideas. Liberation begins not with the social elites but in the transformed consciousness of whoever quietly practise the prayer of the heart. Every session of meditation is an act of resistance against the empire of fear. Every time we return to the mantra, after trying to escape reality in fantasy, diminishes fear. Every pure moment of silence enlarges love's presence throughout the world.



(Photo by Laurence Freeman)

Christ does not ask us to become fearless heroes but to trust that beneath fear there is a greater power. Love casts out fear. Truth dispels illusion. Life beats death. The invitation remains the same today as it has always been. What is it? Be open. Be transparent. Be truthful. Receive the gift that is given. Let love become your way. Go into your inner room. Then, before you know it, you will discover that the prison door has been standing open all along. Do not be afraid.

With much love,



Spirituality & Society

How a Sleepless Digital Generation Rediscovered Contemplative Prayer

By Helen Francis Vaudrey *

Some of the largest gatherings on the internet assemble nightly around the sound of almost nothing.

The genre is called ASMR, a term describing the settling of the nervous system that certain sounds reliably induce. Some are near relations of white noise, others are smaller and stranger - pages turning, a microphone drawn slowly across a textured surface; and the most popular remains the oldest instrument of comfort there is, a human voice lowered beneath a whisper.

What unites them is that none of it means anything: sound emptied of semantic content, used to regather a scattered mind. Readers of John Main will recognise the mechanism: sound attended to for its own sake rather than its sense.

Between them, the microphone and the screen may be the closest thing the modern world has built to the monastic cell. Headphones enclose the listener as surely as the cell enclosed an anchorite, and a stream that offers nothing to look at asks nothing of the eye. Nor does the resemblance stop at the equipment. Is the young man who seals his bedroom door and puts the world on mute really so far from Antony of Egypt, who shut himself inside a ruined fort at Pispir for twenty years and had bread passed over the wall? History does not record whether Antony's bread came over the wall with an exasperated sigh, but the parents now posting toast through a crack in a bedroom door perhaps stand in a more venerable tradition than they suspect.

I'm familiar with this terrain because



I stray into it myself. While volunteering at Bonnevaux recently, my mind still busy after the closing night of a stirring poetry retreat led by Rowan Williams, I did what millions do: I switched on a stream to switch off my mind.

By morning, the screen had gathered a congregation. In the comments beneath the stream, strangers from far-flung corners of the globe had left small valedictions: a good night or a good morning, even prayers for the anxious, the grieving, the sleepless. Many were barely distinguishable from the petitions I had heard hours earlier at compline - except that these left a tangible trail of code, allowing tired eyes and groggy minds to internalise the incorporeal petitions in real-time.

One question about this juxtaposition followed me home to England when my volunteering ended: what if contemplative Christianity, for so long a faithful tributary of the tradition, now stands before the greatest and most receptive audience in its history.

Digital Monasticism

Researchers tracking screen habits over two decades have observed the average time spent on a single task drop from two and a half minutes in 2004 to a mere forty-seven seconds. It has become commonplace to link this fragmentation directly to the concurrent rise in adolescent anxiety, yet to lay the blame entirely on the screen is perhaps to overlook a more cyclical dynamic.

Public commentary reaches for the language of pathology when characterising heavy digital use - a problem to be solved by replanting the individual in the physical world. A term has even been coined for the solution - digital monasticism. Like much well-

meaning ministry, it treats the digital world as something to be avoided through mechanisms such as deleted accounts and foregoing the internet.

It is worth at least considering that the inverse is true - that the inhabitants of bedroom cells are not overwhelmed, but acclimatised to a pace of cognitive readjustment the physical world cannot replicate.

Raised on screens, internalising information at a rate their parents would find untenable, they may simply have traded the tactile and the sensory for the intuitive and the immediate. Nor is this mere restlessness: six absorbed hours inside a codebase or a game is concentration deep enough that the self falls silent - the state psychologists call flow, at least a cousin of contemplation.

To present such a mind with a traditional pastoral directive - to simply switch off and pray - perhaps risks a form of cognitive decompression sickness. Expecting a mind accustomed to processing vast swathes of information to drop instantly to zero input may well create a sensory deprivation that breeds a deeper restlessness.

Seen this way, the night streams seem less like noise and more like method. If zero input cannot yet be borne, then one continuous input may decompress the mind until it can come to a comfortable stop. Adherents of John Main may recognise the mantra here: the word repeated continuously until it dissolves into the subconscious. Both may sink equally deep - the difference is what lodges.

Orphaned liturgies

These practices are what I have come to think of as orphaned liturgies: descended from prayer, separated from the tradition that bore them, and still running. Programmers may recognise the term - an orphaned process is one whose parent has terminated, and which continues executing until something adopts it.

The echoes do not end at ASMR. The "lo-fi" radio stations - repetitive music looping around the clock to millions who study and work as they listen - operate on the principle of a Taizé chant: a short phrase, repeated past the point of novelty, until the mind stops listening for what comes next and simply rests inside it.

The videos of a person giving complete attention to one small task - folding, cleaning, cooking - rediscover what Brother Lawrence called the practice of the presence of God. And in the "study with me" genre, a stranger films themselves working in silence, often for hours, while thousands work alongside: the scriptorium, rebuilt on screen. Its sets are undeniably monastic - old libraries, stone corridors, rain against leaded glass. Asked to imagine the perfect conditions for concentration, a generation that has never entered a cloister keeps designing one.

The digital age is routinely described as the end of contemplative practice, if not of faith itself. I suggest the opposite is happening. A contemplative revival has already begun, at a scale no century of Christian history could match - inspired by the Church, orphaned from her, and monetised by whoever arrives first.

Adopting the Digital Generation

The opportunity before the Church, then, is perhaps one of recognition and of adoption. The orphaned liturgies need not be denounced; they might instead be greeted as the unclaimed prayer of a generation - and the contemplative community is perfectly placed for the work.

I count myself part of that community, and I will carry its work with me when I begin training for priesthood this September. The premise of my ministry is simple: the digital world is not a deviation from the divine, but an extension of it. That conviction is why I founded Vaudrey, a journal of theology for the Synthetic Age - the era now arriving, of synthetic images, synthetic voices, and before long synthetic persons living alongside us. And if the premise holds, the Word will travel there as it has travelled everywhere else: by the fastest channel of its day.

For Paul it was letters carried along Roman roads to rooms he would never enter. He closed one such letter to Corinth with four syllables of Aramaic, and they have been in transmission ever since. The comments beneath the stream are not a strange new form of intercession; they are the oldest form there is - a prayer written down and left where the sleepless will find it. Maranatha. Come, Lord.



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Poetry

Seeking the Unruly God

By John Deane
Irish poet and novelist

I was born on Achill Island, off the western coast of Ireland. As I grew, I fell in love with the unruly Atlantic Ocean, the cliffs, the birds, the hills, immersing myself in the things of this earth. At the same time, I was being introduced to an insistently watchful God, to a humanity born to sin and corruption; we walked a narrow rope-bridge high above a chasm, with Hell fuming below us. I was obedient, I followed the rules, I rehearsed the set prayers that would bring me across the chasm into Heaven.

Penance

They leave their shoes, like signatures, below;
above, their God is waiting. Slowly they rise
along the mountainside where rains and winds go
hissing, slithering across. They are hauling up

the bits and pieces of their lives, infractions
of the petty laws, the little trespasses and
sad transgressions. But this bulked mountain
is not disturbed by their passing, by this mere

trafficking of shale, shifting of its smaller stones.
When they come down, feet blistered and sins
fretted away, their guilt remains and that black
mountain stands against darkness above them

When I was sixteen and my brother Declan eighteen, he was preparing to join the Jesuits in a novitiate, far from the island. On one of our last days together, I knew my first great loss, but also my need for prayer.

The Unheard Music

And then, in our sleaky, homemade boat, out
on the lake, we both fell silent, the oars, lifted

and dripping water on the surface, soft, softly,
something incomprehensible holding us, fragrance

breathing from the heathers, the low hills embracing,
and lake-water tapping gently against the timber bones

of the craft: we drifted, a long sustaining moment
in unannounced communion, as childhood drew

nearer to the rough-rock shores and our leaning bodies
grew firmer towards the tasks ahead; until

we rowed again, oars raking against the rowlocks, silence
persisting deep within us, swelling to a form of prayer.

I, too, entered a novitiate, the Spiritans, and spent four years relishing the silence and the certainties of monastic life. The rules directed my every thought. I learned to meditate, the Ignatian way, technique and rules laid out. I was assigned to a novice from Mauritius, Maurice Piat and, as I knew French, I helped him with his English. One day he took from his pocket a small book, in French, and we read through it together. It changed my life; it was La Messe sur le Monde ("Mass over the World") by Teilhard de Chardin. I discovered evolution; I encountered Jesus, the Christ who was not only the Omega of creation, but the profound Presence in my own heart. It was love, not law. By then I had found I was not for the religious life; I left the seminary. Maurice stayed; he is now Cardinal and Bishop-Emeritus of Port-Louis in Mauritius.

In university I discovered poetry, basically through encountering the work of Gerard Manley Hopkins. I worked at it and eventually wrote a poem, based on the "Mass Over the World" of Teilhard. The poem was the first one I completed, and I had it published. It was later set to music by the Irish Folk Band, "The Chieftains". My faith and poetry were entangled.

Offertory

We offer you, Lord, in our strong, our sensitive hands
to-day this bread:
this plough and plod, soft coaxing, collecting,
the mixing and moulding, dull rumbling of trucks
till the creates all are named for those countless lands;
from our proud, proud hands, o Christ, accept this bread.

We offer you, Lord, in our soil-cracked, our swollen hands
to-day this wine:
this fall, this crush, the strain, the pain
o crumbling collapsing of flesh and the fierce
dizzy dash of the blood of those countless lands;
from our weary, weary hearts, o Christ, accept this wine.
Then give into our hands
your flesh

to melt and merge with the soil and stones,

and give into our hearts
your blood
to seep through the sweat when the world groans;

that our earth may grow through its brightest blackest parts
a sight well pleasing to the Lord of lands.

"Love God," Augustine said, "and do as you wish". Love has no rules, love offers itself and accepts the other in faith and trust; love too, is unruly. I began a regular family life, taught for a few years, then tried to work as a full-time writer. Founded Poetry Ireland, the national poetry society, and its journal, Poetry Ireland Review. I worked to reframe my faith and explore it my means of poetry. In opening to poetry, I was also opening to a new God, not the Old Testament Yahweh, but the incarnated God of love. My wife's wisdom led me to contemplation, to "centering prayer", where I still seek that unruly God. As a 'poet of faith' rather than a 'religious poet', I have been misunderstood in so many reviews, dismissed even before being read, because one does not 'do religion' in our age. I am seen as an 'outlier', I accept the role.

The Inner Room

Deep in the inner room I have been for years
stravaging, leaving it mightily cluttered; millennia,
hidden in non-being, I have slept, and will be
dropped again, into the mess. But – for now and here –

I walk a long and twisting lane, enjoying
golden leaves, fingerbone twigs, ultimate reality
always at unbridgeable distances. Sometimes
I have found myself elated, watching the friskiness

of a perfectly formed black lamb just fallen
from its mother, flinging itself about as if it owned
the whole rush-laden field it was born to, so now,

delighting in the irreversible force that drives
the seasons, I do not regret the spirit's edginess
in the clutter-room, distracted from the everlasting.

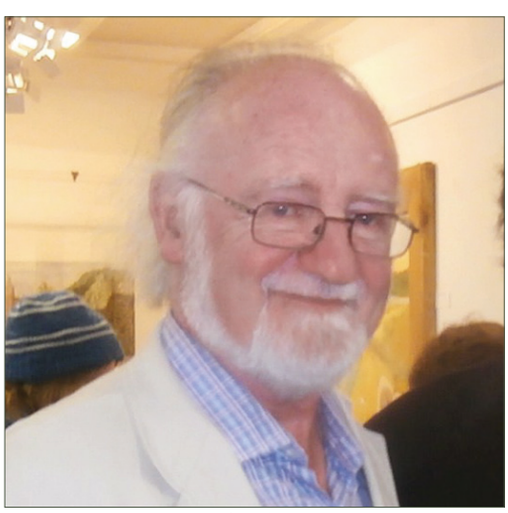
I know I have written a handful of good and prayerful poems. I feel the need for a poetry of faith to follow the evolution of our beloved cosmos and the growth in consciousness, both spiritual and material. Prayer, I am, learning, is not a nattering out of words; it is an emptying of self to find the Christ within, and to listen for the Spirit's urgings. And this, too, is the source of inspiration for true poetry. Always, the focus, the Presence, the faithful companion, is the Christ, whom I cherish and to whom I cling.

Far from the Walls of Jericho
(Mark 10: 46-52)

Though I could be blind,
sitting on the hard earth, back against the wall,
with an old-time enamel cocoa-mug at my feet,
or a fair-day peaked caipín upside down and gaping –
and I'd be listening for the clink of coin or the soft whisper
of a ten-shilling note, while the clattering of hurried feet
went by me –
or I could well be
sitting on a hard chair in the crowded accident
and emergency ward of the city hospital, waiting, hours
after the giving and taking of samples and bloods,
nurses and cleaners and orderlies scattering by
as I hoped for the steps of the doctor to arrive, the smile
of diagnosis on his lips –
but I'm not; I'm sitting
in the certainty of my living-room, eyes shut,
palms open upwards on my knees, my mind willing
for the prayer of silence: but plagued by the huzzahs
of the myriads of snattering thoughts, like gnats, all
the tomorrows and the yesterdays, listening when I can
for the whispers of the One who is passing by, who will ask:
what is it you would wish me to do for you?

A Poem for Catherine

John F. Deane, June 2026



(Photo by Mossy Carey, CC BY-SA 2.0)

(Latest publication, *Jonah and Me,* a poetry collection published by Carcanet in 2025. Carcanet.co.uk)

Books

Winning is at the Bottom

By Jim Green
Author and WCCM Oblate

George Orwell famously once wrote about sport that 'it is war minus the shooting'. In his essay of December 1945 (when the shooting had just stopped – for a while at least) Orwell was arguing against what he took to be the rather sentimental notion that sport between nations could create understanding and good will. (As I write, it's still not clear whether Iran will be playing in the 2026 Football World Cup, to be co-hosted by Canada, Mexico and the USA.)

For all of Orwell's scepticism, it's worth pausing for a moment and celebrating the bald fact that – in theory at least – sport does indeed divest itself of 'the shooting' (except, of course, for the shots taken at the goal, towards the gaps in the field, the holes in the ground, the pockets at the edge of the table). Unlike warfare, it is not the actual destruction and death of the opponent(s) that is the explicit aim of the activity.

Death, though, does feature in another equally celebrated quote about sport. Bill Shankly – legendary manager of Liverpool Football Club – once had this to say in an interview: "Somebody said that football's a matter of life and death to you; I said 'listen, it's more important than that'." Whether tongue-in-cheek or not, Shankly's words hint at the possibility of glimpsing sport's meanings well beyond the daily news fix of who's won, who's lost, who's getting sacked, whose prize money – and endorsements – are the biggest.

If we look past the shouting headlines and the online alerts of today, all the way into the deep past of sport (so deep that it wasn't even called 'sport' then) we come across the extraordinary phenomenon known as the Mesoamerican ballgame. This was a 'game' that had already been played in Central America for over 3,000 years by the time the Christian conquistadores ('conquerors' or, significantly, 'winners') arrived in the New World and were stunned to see huge, cathedral-sized ballcourts and large bouncing balls made of a magical, alive-seeming substance – rubber – that they had never seen before.

The game (or probably more accurately, the ritual) seems to have been very much operating at the level of life and death. Historians understand it as being, among other things, a kind of proxy for warfare, although in the later period, just before the arrival of the Spanish, there is clear evidence of human sacrifice. We see carved representations of the ball-players losing their heads at the end of the game. The ball itself is understood as representing the sun, and the blood spilt as the necessary tribute to ensure the fertility of the land, the continuing life, health and prosperity of the people. Retrospectively, we can only try to describe this mysterious activity within our own invented categories: ritual, sport, performance, theatre, cultural display, religious ceremony, game. Perhaps the simplest and truest thing we can say about it is that it was people finding a way to 'play' in order to deal, symbolically, with their deepest individual and collective anxieties.

Fast forward to the present day and I think it's safe to say that those fundamental anxieties are still with us. Our conscious and unconscious hopes and fears about 'success' and 'failure', about living and dying, underpin everything in our lives. And they remain part of the deep and hidden back-story of what has turned into the multi-billion-dollar global industry which we in the UK call 'sport'. ('Sports' in the USA – always going for more).


Jim Green

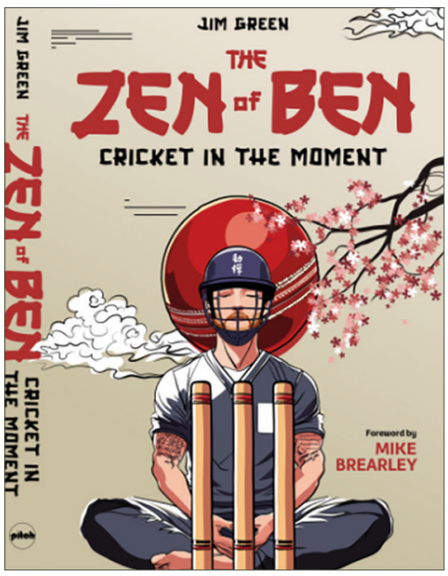
Actually, talking in billions is to play it down rather. Asking a search engine what is the global sport industry's annual worth gives you an estimate of $2.3 trillion. For context the global 'defence' industry is pitched at around $2.6 trillion. The different types of shooting are clearly converging. Given the scale of the income streams and capital involved, perhaps it's entirely predictable that 'play' in our culture has turned into this phenomenon where all that matters is winning. Not being a 'loser' seems to have spread from the White House and threatens, once again, to become the primary secular commandment.

Which is why I sat up and took notice when I heard the still recently appointed England Men's Test Cricket captain, Ben Stokes, say this before a key series against the Australians in 2023: 'We have a list of things we want to achieve, and winning is at the bottom.' This was in keeping with a seemingly revolutionary way of playing the game that had started as soon as Stokes took over as captain. It was characterised by an apparent detachment from ideas such as 'success' or 'losing' ('The fear of failure has gone', Stokes also claimed). Players were encouraged to

play without fear, to experience the joy – the playfulness – of no longer being paralysed by the dread of consequences.

Cricket commentators, journalists and pundits groped in wonder and puzzlement for a way of describing this phenomenon that they'd never seen before. One of them came up with a label – Bazball – that stuck. ('Baz' is the nickname of the team coach who has been alongside Stokes throughout this revolution). I found myself groping as well, but Bazball didn't quite cut it for me. Where I was taken by this liberating emphasis on detaching from the outcomes of your actions (always essentially uncontrollable) was to the central teaching of the Bhagavad Gita, in which Lord Krishna tells the anxious Arjuna (in effect, the team captain) as well as each one of us, that we must renounce all claims on the fruits of our action. It took me as well to the stories and the puzzling koans of Zen, designed to break through our ponderous reliance on thoughts and words, our desire to always be in control. And, of course, it took me to the words of Jesus about winning and losing: 'The first shall be last and the last shall be first'.

Eventually I was led to writing a book called The Zen of Ben: Cricket in the Moment, which turned into an opportunity to reflect on the contemplative, as well as the psychological, emotional and cultural meanings of what we call sport. The counter-cultural surrendering of all targets – all goals – when we meditate is at the heart of our practice. It is fascinating to enquire into what happens when we take that surrendering into a world still trapped in the belief that winning is all. Maybe, alongside Business & Leadership, Health & Medicine, Science, Social Justice and Earth Crisis, our community might explore a new area of outreach: Sport. Perhaps it would help us to know that prayer can be play – and play, at its most playful, can be prayer?



There will be a launch event for T*he Zen of Ben: Cricket in the Moment* at: The Meditatio Centre, London on September 10th from 6.30 – 8.00 pm

More info at https://wccm-int.org/zenofben

From the Silence

If She Turns Away

By Kate Dougherty
Meditator form the US

If she turns away from the world
Who see nothing but separation
And declares I am leaving
It all for the light

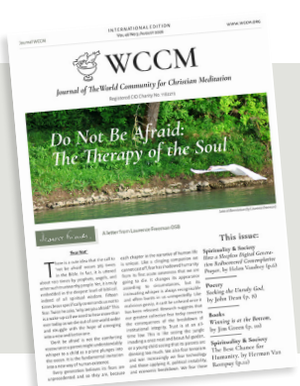
She who does not see the error
Of the mind
Where does she think she can go
Asks the heart

She wakes then in blessed darkness
That will not dawn
Until her curse is broken
She who judged the world
Judged herself as well

Until she called for help
Until the angel spoke:
Beloved, you have been loved
Since the beginning of time

Know this unfolding
Lotus in your heart
All are Beloved
All. Since the beginning of time

Rise up. Breathe
Open to all Dearheart
Fear not
Love is all



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Would you like to contribute to the WCCM Journal? Our next deadline is 10 September.

Spirituality & Society

The Best Chance for Humanity

By Herman Van Rompuy
Former European Council President. WCCM Guiding Council member



I'm not telling you anything new when I say that we live in a climate of violence and war, and consequently of fear. That is also the case in my country, across all age groups, even though the bombs are falling at least two thousand kilometres away from here. The world has become a village, even when storms rage. The reaction might be: 'seize the day' or 'seek God'. When there was war here in the past, the churches were full. That is not the case now, but there are signs that, recently, there has been a much greater need for reflection or contemplation and for silence. There are more converts among young and old alike. In intellectual circles, Christian authors are even respected. The current Pope is the most outspoken and credible defender of peace. Something is changing, though one cannot speak of a turning point in civilisation. We must read the signs of the times carefully and with an open mind.

In the midst of confusion, there is a greater need for spirituality and for values. By spirituality, I mean something that goes beyond the material, towards what gives meaning to life and death, towards what transcends us. The absence of the transcendent was and is very characteristic of the dominant culture. The crisis of religion is actually the crisis of transcendency. By values, I mean humanity, tenderness, gentleness, compassion, patience, listening, helping. Anti-values, or negative values, are aggression, cruelty, revenge, verbal and physical violence, jealousy and lying.

I read that Pope Leo's first encyclical is entitled: 'Magnifica Humanitas', magnificent humanity. I have been using that last word in almost all my speeches for several months now. I first used the word more than sixty years ago when, in a lecture just before Christmas, I quoted the letter to Titus: 'Apparuit benignitas et humanitas Salvatoris nostri', when the goodness and humanity of our Saviour appeared. The text of Titus goes on to say that we are saved above all by God's mercy. We need those three words and values today more than ever.

I spoke about spirituality and values. Spirituality alone can lead one to be out of touch or to a kind of 'Two Kingdoms' theology, where there is primarily a vertical relationship with God and one need not care too much about the horizontal realm of the world of men. A purely ethical attitude often lacks the foundation needed to remain a good person. After all, we cannot do it alone: we need a Helper to keep seeking what God expects of us.

The combination of spirituality and ethics offers the best chance of humanity. They are the two legs on which we stand and which keep us upright. The Churches must embody this union, but Church and State must remain separate. Leaders must not wave holy books around but must try to be more holy themselves. That is true authenticity. The rest is hypocrisy and the manipulation of religious feelings. President Lincoln once said that we should not say that God is on our side, but that we must be on God's side.

Meditators have a role to play in a spiritual and ethical revival. Meditation frees us from the selfish ego and makes room for the best in our Self. The mantra is not our God but a key to a door that opens onto greater inner and outer life. Meditation is both ancient and contemporary. We must not hide a burning lamp under a bushel. This admonition is well known, but that does not make it any less true.

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