

On Losing my Faith and Finding my Soul.

by Jeff Power

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains by itself alone; but if it dies it bears much fruit. John 12:24

My aim in this article is to share the experience of finding myself in a place that quite surprises me. I hope my story might offer insight to some, challenge others and provide some light in those places of darkness.

I have discovered a number of voices as I have written. One voice verges on a sort of dogmatism. It wants to cut through to the core of issues and it sounds very decisive. It is also very impatient and tends to want to hurt with exaggerated statements. There is another voice that doesn't expect to be understood and throws up an obscuring smoke cloud, a text full of holes, requiring huge intuitive leaps. I secretly think this voice desires a cult following of intellectualising initiates. Then last but not least is the voice of my soul. This voice wants to stay as close as possible to the raw edge of my experience and by doing so hopes to both clarify and articulate what the British psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas has called the 'unthought known'. Whilst Bollas used the term in a particular psychoanalytic context I take it to mean the something that we know to be true in our lived experience that has not yet been translated into thought. Sometimes it's as if the meaning seems to reside in the marrow of our bones and when it's articulated it's giving our body in its fullest sense a voice for the first time. Sometimes this may challenge our deeply held beliefs but at the same time we can have the experience of always having known this.

This voice of my soul wants to catch up to where the wild free spirit is moving and by articulating it enable others to move into new spaces of experience. This voice is often bewildered, easily lost but at the same time prepared to take some risks. I feel passionately that I am not speaking for myself.

I'll begin by briefly stating where I have come from and then attempt to spend some time articulating what I have observed from this new place.

James Hillman has written in *The Soul's Code* of how at birth we are given a destiny that is almost encapsulated in an image. Sometimes we unknowingly get a glimpse of that image. I think I had one of my first glimpses at around age seven or eight. During a primary school scripture class the teacher spoke of us all being made in 'the image of God'. This was somewhat perplexing for me as I looked around my class. How could we all be made in the image of God when we all looked different to one another? Then it came to me in a complete image. I saw God as a great wall made up of multitude of faces. Each face like a brick went to make up the totality. The dilemma was solved – we are all made in the 'image of God'. When we get to heaven we will all find our face, our image, on that wall which is 'God'. Whilst it's easy to scoff at this literal interpretation of a child, in retrospect I think it gave me a sense of destiny. These are some of my

reflections on the image, which in retrospect has worked in the background shaping who I am and my life's work.

Firstly it's a profoundly democratic spirituality in which everyone has a place and there is no hierarchy. Everyone gets to play on this tem, to belong. There are no reserves on the sidelines, no one who doesn't make the grade. Some might say it is a pagan image as there is no representation of the Trinity. This is definitely not an image of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. What is there is a fusion of material and spiritual. It makes the very abstract notion of the image of God very concrete. In my imagining the faces look like masks. The mask-like aspect is fascinating, as I can now recognise a Dionysian thread running through my life. In Greek mythology Dionysius was the dismembered god of ecstasy, madness and wine; he has been likened to Christ. He was also associated with the theatre, especially tragedy, and was often worshipped as a mask. Some of my long-standing passions include the mask as an art form, the ecstatic experience, and therapy/teaching as being an improvisational performance. At the risk of being heretical I now see in this image the polytheistic psyche that James Hillman elaborates upon in *Revisioning Psychology*.

Some might say I am making too much of a child's imagining but maybe the child saw all too clearly. My reflection on this image has emerged out of an ongoing fascination with images and the imagination alongside a long struggle to define my own spirituality. It now feels that everything that I have become and am becoming is contained in the one image. I don't recall anything else of my religious education (at least two years or more); perhaps I had all I needed in that one moment, in a flash.

Incidentally, it's been incredibly sad to discover how images and the imagination have been denigrated over the centuries in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

The things of the spirit then lay dormant until at age fifteen I had an initiatory experience. On a surfing trip I camped alone at the Margaret River for a week. I faced death in the ocean twice, spent days confined to my tent as a storm raged around me, felt like I was going crazy, read the New Testament for the first time, had big dreams and came away with a deep sense of destiny. I had no way of making sense of what had happened and no way of articulating my experience. It would be a decade before I would slowly make sense of it.

Through a series of events, I committed myself to Christianity at age seventeen and had my first contact with Fusion, a radical Christian organisation, around ten months later. I was invited to community meal and found it enjoyable but not overly exciting until the prayer time at the end, in which I had an experience that I can only describe as feeling like my chest was melting and oozing out liquid joy. Intuitively I knew that my life would be tied up with these people and so it was. I cannot begin to describe the decade I worked within Fusion. I recall at the beginning attempting to explain to my Dad that I was called to follow Jesus and that meant downing my tools (I was an electrician) and following him just as the disciples literally gave up their jobs to be with him. In reflection I am at times embarrassed by my naivete and unsophisticated literal

understanding. On the other hand I can see a huge desire to make a difference and a very authentic sense of calling that still shadows me.

People in Fusion like Mal Garvin, Bob Adams, Greg Miller and numerous others always led by example and it was a profoundly life-changing period that has left me with a magnificent legacy I will never forget. In some ways leaving was one of the hardest decisions in my life but in other ways it was easy, as other directions had opened up and the direction in which Fusion was going no longer fitted for me. As in many occasions in my life I felt like there was no choice; it was something I was compelled to do.

In retrospect I can see that I had been in an intense faith community experience that had nurtured as well as protected me from some of the harsher elements in life. A couple of years before my departure my Dad, with whom I enjoyed a very close relationship, began to slowly die of cancer. Initially given three months, he would struggle on for seven years. As the life and the person I knew slowly ebbed away over the years I think my faith too slowly died. After his third 'successful' operation on the brain tumour he was stricken with what doctors said was the worst case of shingles(on his face) they had ever seen. Utterly traumatized, he continued to die slowly for another two years, a mere shell of his former vibrant self. In retrospect, I see this as a turning point in which a sense of outrage grew inside me at a God who seemed indifferent to suffering. I could not read the book of Job without seeing exactly the same characteristics that victims of emotional and physical abuse report. If this is the Father of the Universe, then thanks, but no thanks. Alongside my idealism, passion and optimism grew a powerful sense of despair and the utter meaninglessness of life. What a difference did it make if you lived a life of love care and commitment if in the end the rug is pulled from under you and you are robbed of any sort of dignity?

The experience felt like a disembodying like having something incredibly special slowly torn apart until eventually I could no longer hold all the pieces together. I recall a time of reciting Humpty Dumpty, identifying with the sense of being unable to be put back together, and feeling profoundly broken.

At some point I made contact with my support network to state that I could no longer call myself a Christian although I considered myself still inspired by the life of Christ. I was surprised by the amount of indifference, a few people attempted meekly to inflict verses on me. The problem was I knew all the verses and all the arguments yet now it was me on the other side. In retrospect I don't know if people didn't want to understand me or I didn't know how to communicate adequately what was happening. Nonetheless my extended Christian family seemed to disappear, which I must confess was fine by me as I needed the space to reorientate myself.

Having worked as a youth worker and counsellor for a decade I decided it was time to get some professional qualifications. One semester of psychology was enough to convince me that I had avoided universities for good reasons. If ever there was a dead faith it is the scientific rationality that hovers over psychology. I went to the creative arts instead with the long-term aim of studying art therapy and found a home amidst literature and visual

arts. All the time my spirituality was in the background and would emerge in surprising ways. I think the lecturers never quite worked out where to place me. Two children born in close succession put an end to any ongoing study (for now) and again surprisingly I have found myself at Lifeline, a broadly Christian organisation where I combine some counselling with the training of volunteer telephone counsellors. Over one hundred people enter our training each year and whilst my role is to ensure they are trained as telephone counsellors I now explicitly make space to raise questions of a spiritual nature.

It's been over eight years since I 'lost' my faith and whilst it has never returned in the same way something has replaced it. I have to state clearly that I did not want to lose my faith; it just gradually disappeared and I would not encourage, in the slightest degree, anyone to follow my path. That it has happened still surprises me. Yet out of this loss has emerged my formative image of which I am deeply appreciative. Keeping all this in mind I want to explore tentatively where I am in the hope that it will be of some benefit to others thrust out into what at first feels like a place of darkness. Having to cross this sort of postmodern threshold can be awfully lonely and at times terrifying but I also believe my experience carries within it the seeds of what David Tacey has been working to articulate an Australian spirituality.

While previously I had an ongoing and vital interest in theology in its broadest sense, I find it now leaves me cold. I find it almost unbearable to read or listen to. I would agree that an intellectual understanding of spiritual issues is important but there is something especially deadening about abstract theological language. My guess is that it still works for believers in certain contexts but does not help one to make the leap outside of that context. An intelligent articulation of the raw spiritual experience is desperately needed even when it doesn't fit within our theological categories.

Almost paradoxically, the more I have distanced myself from a formal faith and set of beliefs, the freer I have been to refer to and dialogue with Bible passages, stories and metaphors. In reflection I think it's because I have no other agenda or investment and audience intuitively pick this up and don't feel threatened by the religious talk.

Again paradoxically, the more I have been open about not knowing and being prepared to live with the mystery of the sacred, the more people have come out of woodwork to share private spiritual yearning, desires and hopes. My guess is that those who want to lead need always to stay close to what they don't know or unsure of. This goes against the notion of 'certainty' that I used to hear in many churches. Certainty is attractive in the short term but so easily slides into rigidity.

Stemming from this I have observed that more often than not it is people who think they know the ways of the spirit (Christian or otherwise) that have the hardest time hearing where I might be at. My guess is that my experience is not unique and consequently many people's vital spirituality is just not seen or heard by the experts. If 'to be is to be seen' then I can only wonder how many people there are waiting for their experience to be noticed, for it to be given the breath of life. How many times have you heard of prayer for revivals and mass outpouring of the spirit and so on, yet the simple kindness of

listening to the neighbor gets forgotten? Alongside this is the profoundly difficult problem of spiritual education. Theological colleges often seem to come close to university psychology departments in their ability to kill the spirit. I think this is a core factor in our Western spiritual malaise but the issue is a huge one that I can do no more than point out.

Linked with this is something I have observed over a long period of time – something within the Christian culture that operates like a blind spot, it seems to me. It appears that many Christian men in leadership roles carry something that others perceive as arrogance. I am not fully convinced it's as simple as that and think it is a complex reaction that must be soaked up in Christian circles. It is difficult to describe, and I can only circle around it with words like defensiveness, hard edged, coldness. My original guess was that it comes from a combination of cultural elements drawn from Europe and America, from the inherent difficulty of being a spiritual male in Australia, and from the emphasis on the 'word' that feeds over-intellectualism. From my own experience I cannot help but wonder if it is a defence against a fear that cannot be faced. The fear is that I really am not that much different to the person next to me. Despite what I tell myself it can be very difficult to see what major difference Christianity makes in many believers' lives.

This sort of reflection can raise disturbing questions. In conversation with a colleague who is basically a decent, warm, caring Christian the question was raised as to whether or not one loses one's 'Christian' values if one no longer 'follows God'. The implication was that I may have lost those fundamental values of respect, compassion and so on. On reflection, I saw this as an insult to not only myself but also the multitudes who live out those values but at the same time do not give God a second thought. I can say with all honesty that I have not descended into a life of senseless debauchery now that I don't follow Jesus. But even that isn't quite right. It's more that following the honesty that I perceived in Jesus has led me to where I am. I must admit I only grow more pessimistic for the future of the church in Australia when I continue to see the same old attitudes crossing denominational borders.

Without wanting to sound overly Jungian I do think that there is the potential for a danger when we begin to side with and follow our spiritual desires. The danger is that the shadow side of spirituality (sexuality, arrogance, power and so on) will crystallize and eventually wreak havoc. In our culture it tends to be the Dionysian that is often cast in the shadow. I you know the myth you will recall that those who don't respect this god are sent into madness or horrible death. This does not come from theory but more an observation of my own life and that of many others. Again we are in the realm of paradox. If it is anything like a solution, I know that the less I have identified with 'being spiritual' the more I have found the depth of passion that I can only call spiritual. At the risk of sounding absurd, I have given up my long striving to be a spiritual person and tend to want to get on with my life and let the spirit flow through me as it wishes. Any spirituality I may have is now more spontaneous, unpredictable and less sought after. At times I struggle with not having a sense of belonging, or a group of peers, and then at other times I revel in my fluidity. I have come to appreciate the power of the fool, the

trickster and the shape-shifter. Maybe in time things will solidify again but this liminal time has certainly taught me much about the power of labels and language to create or destroy community.

In writing this I have become aware of how strong my faith is. It is a faith in a 'soul' that is far greater than my 'self'. It is a soul that has been fed richly on the Bible imagery but that is not all: there is room for other images now. Even now as I write I can imagine some who might think I am sounding as though I have spent too much time in a tepee out the back of Byron Bay. The facets that are emerging now have always been a part of my experience even when I was identifying as a committed evangelical Christian. If I were to define the sources of my current spirituality I would say: 1. Listening to my body. 2. Listening to my imagination, primarily through my own dreams but also through the arts (especially film). 3. Listening to the environment, both natural and man-made. I cannot emphasize enough how these interconnect in an ecological fashion. In a letter to an old Christian mentor I joked that I had always been a 'ratbag mystic', perhaps the nearest I get to a label. Unfortunately I don't see the welcoming mat out in many churches for ratbags or mystics.

Nonetheless for me there is no turning back. Like many others I can sense that my soul is not really mine. It is connected to the place where I dwell and to everything else in my environment. Dare I say that the great Old Land wants to dream through me, perhaps even speak through me, scary as that feels? I would like to offer leadership on this, to spell it out clearly but it's more a nagging hunch that won't leave me. Is this God? I don't know and getting the name right doesn't bother me as much. What I do know is that the new is always a shock. If I can get past the shock of something new within me, learn to accept it despite my lack of understanding and my intellectual frameworks that want to capture and pin it down, then maybe I will see it and hear it in those close to me.

About fifteen years ago I had a conversation with a young lady who was hitchhiking inland of Noosa. I enthusiastically described my work with Fusion and how there were exciting changes sweeping the churches. I honestly felt that a spiritual awakening was at the doorstep. She listened and pondered what I said and then answered rather deflatingly that 'it's sort of like the footy, if you follow it, it can be all consuming. If you don't follow it then it makes no difference and has no impact on your life.'

When I first began writing this, Easter 2000 had just passed and as a non-churchgoer the only thing of significance was Peter Hollingworth (Anglican Archbishop of Brisbane) stating that sporting groups would be in for a fight if they wanted to play on Easter Sunday. I was left with a sense of the horse having bolted. Maybe for Australia there is no going back now. Christianity will still have an influence but maybe it's dying and instead of trying to keep resurrecting it we should allow it to die. I began with the classic quote from John. It's an image that I cherished as a young Christian and thought I understood. It now has a different meaning. It was the wind of the spirit that blew and sent this grain of wheat falling down. And yes, I feel into the darkness of the earth and to die and be buried is terrifying yet the earth is also our Mother. Mums always have a way don't they? Despite all the authority of the father we can never lose that primal intimacy

of being carried in the darkness of the mother. My shell of protection has cracked open and now I am beginning to bear fruit in a way I never expected. And yes I can honestly say my essential aloneness is finally beginning to heal. I feel as if the elements and my body conspired together and it has been my mind or the *logos* that's been the last one to catch up.

I see things differently now and I sincerely hope we can all get on with noticing that there is something emerging in myriad ways right in front of us, that the 'wind blows where it wishes'; it always has. Sensitivity to the direction of the wind is first of all a sensual experience. Coming to our senses may mean we have to loosen the grip of the past, and be prepared for some surprises.