

## **Just as I am: a living theology.**

St Martin in the Fields, London Saturday 14 October 2017

### ***Strength in weakness: living within the paradox***

My name is Donald and Kerstin is my wife, we live in Birmingham. I am deeply grateful to those who have made possible this link with you in the Conference in St Martin in the Fields, again you have enabled the paradox of 'absence yet presence,' to become a reality.

Fiona's invitation is to respond to a series of questions including **'Do our stories tell us something of God's story? Are we living theology?'**

I want to respond by exploring 'Strength in Weakness, living within the paradox.'

We need friends whom we trust enough to be real and honest in the sharing of our stories, including our inner stories. Some of us need mentors who help us to grow within this paradox. We are not alone in our weakness. We need each other's openness and love.

Kjell is Kerstin's cousin and Ingela is his wife, they live in Kerstin's home village in central Sweden. Kjell was a social worker until in his early 40s he learned he had Parkinson's disease. Ingela is a physiotherapist based in the local hospital. After twenty years Kjell continues to express the deep things within him through painting, writing poetry and through singing. Ingela finds herself when she gets lost in the garden, in the winter she skis in the forest.

Together they are learning the interplay of strength and weakness in their relationship, loving each other, honouring each other's needs, learning a complex interdependence.

Ingela asks, *'Why is it that Kjell only discovered such creativity when he became so ill?'* Kjell asks, *'.....**must we break, crash**, in order to understand the secret of our inner being and the strength of our weakness? Does something have to break to make the sky blue?'*

**The mystery of our humanity lies within this paradox**, not weakness or strength but rather the essential interplay of both within whom we are as human beings, within our relationships, within our communities. Here we learn what Gillian Rose describes as *'the curious alchemy of risk, hope and struggle and the growing in love while remaining vulnerable and woundable.'* (Gillian Rose- Love's Work.)

Some of you have lived the 'strength/weakness paradox' all your lives, while others of us have come to it late, stumbled into it without map or compass or vocabulary.

Some of you are carers, strong for our sakes. How to honour the weakness that lies within you?

For reasons which you may understand I have had to struggle to find and to craft words for this paradox, in the process I have almost given up.

## **Where to begin?**

I begin with my own context which continues to have huge implications for Kerstin.

I have lived with a serious spinal condition and chronic pain for over 20 years. I depend on my large gravity chair to support my body following three spinal operations. It needs to be moved from room to room, place to place. In recent years there have been two further periods in hospital, one for a by-pass in my left leg leading to a fasciotomy, a long wound remaining open for nearly four months, cared for through the district nurses. The other period in hospital came about four years later, this time in a dementia ward after becoming delirious during the onset of pneumonia.

At times, and within a variety of circumstances and encounters, I experienced anxiety, fear, rage, and being out of control. At times, I questioned if I possessed the energy and the will to continue to live through a process with many undercurrents, to wherever it might lead.

**And yet .....and yet it was within this turmoil, within this insecurity that my world cracked open and life broke through. It was within the letting go that I discovered a hidden release, an unseen movement.**

A friend wrote, 'in our fight for survival within our utmost physical weakness, vulnerability and dependency on others, our inner strength is activated.'

This is the terrain I want to explore and to do so honestly, without clichés, naivety or retrospective romanticism. What I share emerges within a 'looking back' into blurred memories of a raw, at times desolate place. My search for meaning belongs within a particular framework of interpretation. I find encouragement in the words of Thomas Merton, Cistercian monk and prolific writer, 'Do not be one of those who rather than risk failure never attempts anything.'

**So what of the nature of the emerging life that is breaking through the cracking open, the letting go?**

Each of us reaches this liminal place via different circumstances, each of us finds our own images, clothes them with our own words. This is my way and I hope there are enough resonances.

**I am as one moving into and inhabiting the foothills and, as if for the first time:**

Beginning to see vistas I have not seen before; to see familiar things differently, sometimes shockingly differently,

Beginning to experience an inner realignment; inhabit new depths in my humanity; learning the power of 'being' and of the 'being-ness of things;' reclaiming my name, my identity.

Beginning to discover an inner freedom, playfulness, openness which surprises, embarrasses, shocks others and also myself. I am learning to fly and also to crash land.

I've joined the truth seekers rather than the truth possessors, discovering fresh focus, directness, straightforwardness;

Learning the strength to be weak, strength to be gentle, strength to let tears flow  
I'm discovering that fear can be named and traced to its source, traced and faced,  
we need no longer be prisoners of fear.  
In my continuing physical and emotional limitation, I'm learning to let go old ways of  
managing, slowly finding new ways, with help,  
I'm encountering an unfamiliar yet resonant solidarity, unexpected companionships;  
surprising communion,  
I am discovering the God of life, in life,  
Learning God has made my sometimes painful body, God's own dwelling place and  
home.  
I experience more wonder, gratitude, joy, humour, I gaze and ponder more, laugh  
and cry more, cry and laugh more,  
I am held but not protected,  
I am encountering angels, angels in many different forms.

I'm startled, at times almost overwhelmed, by encounters with the weakness and  
strength paradox emerging as blood stained watermarks in the wounds and  
blessings of our times.

400,000 Rohingya Muslims, refugees fleeing from Myanmar into Bangladesh, women  
and children walking for days in desperate need of food, shelter, clean water and  
medical aid, injured and exhausted. What inner strength, resolve and determination  
within such physical weakness, what resilience!

And closer to home, similar weakness/strength watermarks among the victims of  
Grenfell Tower in Notting Hill, where we once lived and worked. Within the  
devastation and desolation, the grieving and the outrage, astonishing insight,  
measured wisdom, resolve before the forthcoming public enquiry.

Increasingly I wonder about the connections between our own bewildering yet  
**wonder-full** human experiences, 'Can this be the terrain within which God's Spirit  
strengthens us within the continuing reality of our weakness?'

Can it be true that through our weakness we are being drawn into the fundamental  
paradox of the Christian Gospel? Divine nature revealed in what the world regards  
as folly.

Can our experience of weakness resonate with the Apostle Paul's testimony?

'When I am weak, then I am strong.'

'God's power is most fully known in weakness....'

'God chooses what is weak in the world to shame the strong.....'

'Christ crucified is the power of God and the wisdom of God....' (1 Corinthians 1:24.)

Is it presumptuous to make these connections, the strengthening of God's Spirit  
within the continuing reality of our weakness?'

John Hull spoke of the disabled us 'Prophets of weakness,' 'Countercultural signs.'

I close with a poem that continues to move me deeply, written by a 13th century mystic.

There is a brokenness  
out of which comes the unbroken  
a shatteredness  
out of which blooms the unshatterable.  
There is a sorrow beyond all grief  
which leads to joy  
and a fragility  
out of whose depths emerges strength.  
There is a vast space  
too vast for words  
through which we pass with each loss,  
out of whose darkness we are sanctioned into being.  
There is a cry  
deeper than sound  
whose serrated edges cut the heart  
as we break open  
to a place inside  
which is unbreakable and whole  
while learning to sing.

And with a half remembered prayer: 'Lord help us to embrace our weakness as our greatest strength.'

And with two questions:

'How to form congregations where we are strong enough to bring our weakness, open enough to bring our different experiences of pain, and courageous enough to recognise that these could be transforming gifts?

And with Kjell's question? '.....must we break, crash, in order to understand the secret of our inner being and the strength of our weakness? Does something have to break to make the sky blue?'