



The Necessary Game

Personal writings 2015

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migration

It felt like the right time to move on, to the next stage, to a new space. I've emigrated from *The Clay Pit's Hearth*, where I have been blog-dwelling since 2009. As much as I have enjoyed my time as a cricket – my daemon, surely – it is time for me to explore blogland a bit differently, a bit more seriously.

Blogging began as a bid to bring writing back into my life, to rediscover a voice that had gone very quiet. Here's what I wrote in April 2011:

I set myself a challenge at the new year, to fit writing into my life somehow, even if I must use a crowbar to do so. Not just keeping a journal – I've done that for 27 years, and while that's of course the ideal place to put my thoughts and impressions, it is mainly a formless stream, without shape or conclusion.

From the vantage point of here and now, I'm questioning something that I didn't question then. Just what did I mean by "that's of course the ideal place to put my thoughts and impressions?" Why did I assume that keeping my thoughts and impressions to myself – in a private journal – was the ideal place for them to be?

It's only a few years ago, and I can remember clearly how uncomfortable, how unusual – how dangerous – it felt to express myself in a space that could be seen by others. I can remember how hemmed in by expectations I felt, like a thick maze of thorns through which I must navigate. The only way to do it was to grab a sharp mental object (no that's not a typo) and start slashing, start carving out that space for myself within myself.

In *Unspeakable Things*, Laurie Penny describes the different responses men offer her when she tells them that she writes:

I've recently been experimenting with answering 'fashion' rather than 'politics' when men casually ask me what I write about, and the result has been a 100 percent increase in phone numbers, business cards and offers of drinks. This is still substantially fewer advances than I received when I gave the truthful answer that what I wrote was: 'sometimes, in notebooks, just for myself'.

Keeping yourself to yourself: that's considered attractive and safe. Using one's voice to speak out and firmly maintain one's own perspective: that's offensive and threatening. Simply staking out the space we fill by existing, speaking in our own voices: why is this treated as a privilege that women are discouraged from exercising? It's a *birthright* – but in order to claim it we must pay the price of social reprobation.

Not just women.

This past week armed forces brought tanks and guns to silence public protests against racial segregation and discrimination in Ferguson, Missouri. First Nation elders crossed police lines on Burnaby Mountain to protest Kinder Morgan's trans-pipeline expansion. An Old Bailey trial considered whether security guards really couldn't hear Angolan Jimmy Mubenga repeatedly saying "I can't breathe" when they restrained him facedown in an

aircraft seat for over 30 minutes, during a deportation flight which ended in his death. There's a hell of a lot of people in this world whose voices are unheard, discounted and silenced, often through physical intimidation and violence.

So I am stepping into 2015 determined to add my voice more coherently, more stridently to the growing roar of dissent. I've been dissenting in my own way for years and years, stepping off the expected path, mingling at the edges, following my wits and my heart and my conscience and my curiosity and my idealism.

My cynicism chafes at the futility of playing the game. (And what is a cynic but a disappointed idealist?) However: I'm a serious lady, and I understand that for all its futility, it's a necessary game.

Trite but true: it's not whether you win or lose. So how shall we play?

2 December 2014

get behind the grassroots

Rosa Parks holds a mythical place in the U.S. civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. She became an icon of quiet determination and personal dignity, refusing to move from her seat on a bus to make space for a white man. She was arrested for this defiance of the city's ordinance, and thus triggered the Montgomery bus boycott, which lasted for over a year and brought racial segregation firmly into the American national consciousness.



What many people do not know is that Rosa Parks was a committed and steadfast activist for civil rights for two decades before her arrest. She had committed other acts of defiance: drinking from white-only water fountains, and refusing to enter buses by the back door as was a customary and derogatory expectation placed upon black bus riders. She had for years been the secretary of the Montgomery branch of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and just months before the arrest had attended a two-week-long programme in political activism at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee.

For years, Rosa worked tirelessly as a volunteer for the NAACP and as a church leader. In *The Rebellious Life of Mrs Rosa Parks*, author Jeanne Theoharis makes it clear that by the mid-1950s, Rosa had grown weary of the challenges she faced and the lack of solidarity within the black community of Montgomery, Alabama. At that time, there were internal class divisions between middle-class, educated black professionals and the poor, largely uneducated black working class. And like any community, there were internal politics between individual personalities and the petty stratagems of power play.

Yet her decades of activism had furrowed the political ground, so to speak. When she was arrested, the black community responded with discipline and resourcefulness, organising the bus boycott and a complex campaign of lift-sharing, fundraising and media publicity. Her gratification was immense, and she commented on her joy that hundreds of people had gathered to protest her arrest when she made her first court appearance, that thousands joined the boycott and the subsequent formation of the Montgomery Improvement

Association, a group dedicated to the cause of desegregation. The various factions within the black community came together in solidarity, and carried the movement forward in the face of discrimination, harassment and outright violence by the white establishment.

One of Rosa's most admirable qualities was her continual refusal to take personal credit for the protest. In interviews and speeches, she repeatedly contextualised her own role as merely one individual among many. She understood deeply that the movement was a collective endeavour belonging to the entire community and that no individual held greater value than another for their part in its efforts and success. In her own words, Rosa reminisced: "Whatever my individual desires were to be free, I was not alone. There were many others who felt the same way."

We have much to learn from this courageous and dedicated woman activist. She gave a lifetime of service to the cause of civil rights, and she saw real progressive change take place over the course of that lifetime.

Is it that complicated?

Reading further into *The Rebellious Life of Mrs Rosa Parks*, we learn that once the Montgomery bus boycott was underway and the movement grew, the men took the lead. They took the lead, and the centre of the stage, and the spotlight too, leaving women to the footnotes of history's pages. While women contributed a massive amount of the labour and networking that fuelled the movement and led to its ultimate success, the men took the lion's share of the credit.

Martin Luther King's natural gift for inspiring oration and leadership is undisputed, and his role as the movement's spokesman an unsurprising development, given his talents. But like so very many great figures of history, he stood on the shoulders of a multitude of people whose uncredited work and tireless dedication were the engine that drove progress.



There is an interesting article available to view on the *Teaching Tolerance* website (a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center) entitled *Sexism in the Civil Rights Movement: A Discussion Guide*. Published in 2007, it looks into the issue, but really without any true examination; indeed the document is mainly an apologia for the movement, sidestepping the

question of sexism as “complicated.” For example, Point #4 (Women contributed significantly to the Civil Rights Movement) continues the evasive and undermining mythologising of Rosa Parks as no more than a tired seamstress: “For many, Mrs. Parks had faded into the background, spending the years subsequent to the bus boycott working in a sewing factory in Detroit.”

Well, no, actually. She spent the years subsequent to the bus boycott travelling around the country giving talks and fundraising for the movement, and contributing inestimably to its national consequence. Her move to Detroit was financially motivated because she had lost her job following her arrest, and her diligent campaigning went unpaid. Meanwhile, the male leaders of the movement drew stipends from the funds that she had raised! She volunteered her time and energy out of her fundamental and lifelong commitment to political activism. Yet even *Teaching Tolerance*, while aspiring to support “those who care about diversity, equal opportunity and respect for differences,” seems all too willing to recast her involvement as incidental and symbolic.

On August 28th 1963, Rosa joined in the legendary March on Washington. Theoharis writes:

As magnificent as the day was, the lack of recognition for women’s roles was readily apparent, and Parks was increasingly disillusioned by it. No women had been asked to speak.... After the rally’s completion, no women got to be part of the delegation that met with members of the Kennedy administration. Dorothy Height observed, “I’ve never seen a more immovable force. We could not get women’s participation taken seriously. “

The fiftieth anniversary of the March on Washington took place in 2013. It is too late to change the fact that at the time, women’s participation was not “taken seriously.” But that was then, and this is now. As Rosa herself once reflected,

“When the oppression they had to endure was thrown off and they began to stand up, to be vocal, be heard, to make known their dissatisfaction against being treated as inferior beings, it is my belief now... that we will never go back to that time again.”

Let’s not go back to that time. Let’s set the record straight about women’s participation in the civil rights movement – and women’s participation across every other realm of human endeavor.

Here and now?

Rosa Parks serves as an American icon of its historic black civil rights movement (as opposed to its *current* movement of civil disobedience exposing racial injustice and prejudiced police profiling) and she inspires people all over the globe.

Rosa’s life illustrates a principle which has quite a lot to do with the here and now. It asks us to consider: how do we engage with organisations, whether formal structures or informal gatherings? How do we retain ownership over our contributions and ensure that we are acknowledged and credited for what we bring to both processes and outcomes? And how do we connect our individual actions, day after day, with collective endeavours to bring about

social change?

How does social change happen? Is it an external process, in which we redesign systems and reengineer the functionality of our institutions and structures? Or is it an internal process, a personal transformation of hearts and minds? Or is it both, one impossible without the other: like a combination of two ingredients which together create a chemical reaction?

Social change happens when relationships change, and relationships change when our expectations change: the expectations we hold of others, and indeed the expectations we hold of ourselves. This is the transformative impact of personal empowerment.



A new year has just begun, and the potential for social change bubbles up and over the edges of 2015 as though uncorked from a chilled bottle. Will you take a glass, and join the march? Will you get behind the grassroots? Will you tap into the best part of your human potential and contribute to a better world?

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5 January 2015

pure signification

“It’s just pure violence and pure barbarism ... trying to give it more signification [sic] than that would be a mistake.” French citizen, quoted in respect to Charlie Hebdo killings

(*Guardian* blog 7.1.15)

In *Self Comes to Mind*, neurobiologist Antonio Damasio explores the brain’s process of creating mind and consciousness. He places his theories squarely inside the context of evolution and what he terms ‘biological value.’ The purpose of the mind, he suggests, has only ever been aligned to the ultimate pursuit of every cell in the universe: to preserve the healthy existence and reproductive potential of the organism. Single cells and bacteria do not possess mind, but they do possess a drive (how? from where?) to move and to consume and metabolise and to pass on their DNA.

Our brains are composed of millions of interconnected threads of neuron cells which communicate via electrical and chemical pulses. Different parts of the brain have evolved as particular areas of network tasked with specific function – not just in humans but in all living creatures with neural systems. The human brain reflects a unique capacity for language and consciousness, and to what degree we share this with other living creatures is one of the questions driving Damasio’s work. What exactly is it that’s going on in our skulls anyway, and how does the brain’s network of signals lead to perception? What do we mean by “meaning”? What do we mean by “signification” – that is, significance? How does our brain bestow significance upon the flood of information we take in through our senses?

Damasio offers a useful concept: that of “images.” We tend to think of images as visual – just another word for pictures – but Damasio extends the meaning to include any product of the brain’s sensory system. Experiences of hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and internal sensations such as pain or pleasure as well as the states we call emotions – we generate these experiences via particular patterns of neural activity responding to the information we have received from our external environment. The pattern of activity signifying a distinct experience – the sound of fingers tapping on a keyboard, for example – creates an “image.”

We swim constantly throughout an ocean of sensory data regarding the world within as well as beyond the bodily ‘self’ and – using an entirely unique combination of nature (DNA) and nurture (lifelong accumulation of experience) – our brain selects and organises which data to acknowledge and/or respond to. The outcome of the selection is individual perception.

Emotions – a particular combination of physical responses arising in response to given information – originate in the brain; well, in the mind. Our emotional “image” must also involve perception: the mind’s selection (conscious or unconscious) of the information to which it will respond. Emotions cannot be separated from our capacity to learn – they are one of the methods by which we combine new information with existing systems such that new connections and patterns form. Thinking and feeling do not arise separately: they are aspects of the same process. Likewise brain and mind are inseparable. The physical brain, the conceptual mind, the emotions which shape our perceptions and their physical

manifestations within our bodies: these are all occurring simultaneously and interdependently.

If the self exists entirely as the result of a unique combination of DNA and learning, what does this imply for us beyond our current existence? Just what do we mean by “soul?” Is it an essence or even substance, or is it rather an entirely unique pattern of cells reflecting an entirely unique set of biological and experiential information? If we understand soul as being bound up implicitly with the embodied self, what does this imply for concepts within our inherited spiritual traditions? Life after death? A paradise of cherubim and virgins?

The murderous attack at the office of Charlie Hebdo last week illustrates the sharp edge of the transition we must make in order to evolve – not just spiritually, but psychologically, socially, culturally. Fundamentalist expressions of religious dogma display nothing so much as a mind writhing with fear, trying desperately to maintain control and impose an outdated and simplistic degree of consistency across the sprawling, surprising and essentially uncontrollable world in which we find ourselves.

The control-based worldview sits squarely within cartesian dualism, framing mind as separate from body, spiritual as separate from material. It has led over the centuries to a complex manipulation of the natural environment that has resulted, among other astonishing feats, in the power to capture pictures of our neurons firing as vivid bursts of colourful display upon fMRI screenshots. We have brought ourselves here, to this particular point in the evolution long game: we with our collective wealth of intelligence and curiosity. Where do we go next?

Return to the quote about the attack in Paris: “It’s just pure violence and pure barbarism.” Is it? Is it that simple, that definite and definable? Is any human action “pure” anything? Misguided, ironic, hating, desperate and incredibly pitiful – violent, yes, and perhaps even barbaric depending on one’s relationship with the ideas of civilisation and morality – but probably not pure in any commonly-used sense of the word.

Our words are limited; they only contain so much of a particular type of meaning, for any particular person, and they only create a particular type of image in each person’s mind, a particular pattern of neurons firing. Language successfully facilitates an infinite combination of those limited and particular elements, carrying us into a new realm or dimension of comprehension, and from there allowing us to explore and convey all the patterns and conceptualisations and ideas of our perceptive, reflective, imaginative minds.

So why would giving any human act “more signification” than “pure” anything be “a mistake?” What if limiting our understanding to the parameters inherent in language is the mistake we are making? What if defining our words is the mistake? What if the full spectrum of phenomena regarding our experiences contains a dimension of meaning and a potential form of communication which lies beyond how our brains currently process and work with the ocean of data in which we swim?

Language brought us into a new era of human cooperation and discovery, it propelled our evolution toward larger brains and facilitated the creation of world culture. Yet we also know how inadequate language can be in capturing and relating the full breadth and depth of an experience. We know how one word can mean different things to different people. And we know too fully well how one act can mean different things to different people as illustrated by the words they use to describe it: a brutal and intolerant killing to one person

is a courageous declaration of defiance to another.

What if our next challenge in evolution is to explore and communicate beyond the precision of words? We couldn't even pin this new experience down into something so specific as a dimension or a paradigm – those are just words, after all. If we could go back to our ancestors, to those who lived prior to the development of language, and tried to explain what the future was like – would we be able to do so? Without using language? What if our descendents will be experiencing life in a way which cannot be expressed by our current stage of consciousness and within the limitations of language?

17 January 2015

Pandora's Love for Anti-fascist Amateurs in a Rising World of Soulmakers

In between long stretches of buried-under-with-work I have been venturing out of Edinburgh to explore the world beyond.

Like a traveler in a story, I've been walking a crooked path and meeting mysterious allies along the way who tell me which tree to seek out, which apple to choose, where to plant the seeds that I must shower with my tears, when to return for the treasure that awaits me. With my spear to protect me and my piccolo to carry my wishes up to the moon, an alligator witch by the roadside has sent me on the path to the left and I've crossed a threshold that has worked magic upon me.

In January I joined a heartfelt group of thirty or so Rising Women, gathered to attend a short course together at the lovely Schumacher College in Devon. One of the figureheads of this growing movement is the author and activist Scilla Elworthy, a renowned and respected campaigner for nuclear disarmament in particular and for peace and non-violence more broadly. The principle upon which *Rising Women Rising World* is founded? Quite simply, that political activism must be intimately and steadfastly concerned with compassion, forgiveness and love – otherwise it amounts to little more than pissing in the wind.

I remember a previous work colleague used to hide himself behind that “If you're not outraged you're not paying attention” slogan. He stoked and stirred as much outrage as he could. But that's the easy part. There's enough injustice and deliberate malice in the world right now to fuel outrage to the end of time. He stoked and stirred, he surely did – but he never actually unlocked Pandora's box.

The story of Pandora's box has become a touchstone for me. Pandora disobeyed instructions, expectations. She used her own initiative and her personal power to turn the key and unleash the chaos, the myriad ills of the world – she took them on and invited them into her space. She allowed them to be. She didn't deny their existence or seek to protect herself from the fear and confusion which had been pushed right out of sight. She took a dangerous risk. She probably pissed a lot of people off in the process. But only by taking on such a risk and such a burden upon herself did she learn what lay in the deepest darkest corners of that terrible box: the voice of hope.

I believe that Pandora's box lies within each of us. We display it on a table looking grand and severe, trying to impress the world and ourselves with a brave demonstration of will and control and rational sensible towing-the-line. We pride ourselves and measure success by how neat and tidy we have made our lives seem, how far into the shadows we have managed to set aside all our ugliness and weaknesses and personal flaws.

I think it's fair to say that I opened the Pandora's box inside of me a few years ago. It took me many years to reach the point where I could do that: cross the expanse of the room, hold the key steady, turn the lock, lift the lid. The chaos I invited into my life was painful indeed, to me and to those around me. The dust has mostly settled now. Then in January, quite unexpectedly at the Rising Women course, I most vividly and viscerally heard the voice of

hope speak to me, felt it as personally as if it were my own heart beating. I'm still feeling – a bit gingerly – into what I experienced and trying to translate it into the context of my own life. Which leads me to my recent visit to London.

On Friday I had the great pleasure of attending an event (*Love Amateurs*, 14 February at the Freud Museum London) organised and chaired by a friend of mine, a beautiful, vivacious and wicked-clever woman who opened the page to the question of love. What is love and why is it so difficult to open ourselves up to it? The discussion touched upon the different forms of love: warm agape, delightful philia, dependable storge, and tantalising eros. We're all amateurs, my friend proposes – improvisers and learners. Of course we love already, but the potential we hold within us is so much greater than what we tend to use. Why is it so scary? Well, duh: vulnerability and exposure of course, making our toes curl with the most acute discomfort and even shame. Of course it is easier to keep all our flaws inside the box. Push it into the corner, keep it locked. You won't see my torso in a bikini, no way, nohow.

So then on Saturday, I went along to the *Never Again Ever* cabaret event where other friends were performing in a Songlines Choir spinoff session. They were fab – even if they themselves felt their own high benchmarks unmet (musicians, tsk.) *Never Again Ever* is a repudiation of genocide – that extreme and terrifying outcome of unchallenged racism, fascism and hateful intolerance. It is a callout to activists everywhere: don't just stand by and watch. Protect public space for everyone, for every person who has arrived here alive in this world as unexpectedly as you yourself did and holds an identical birthright to their life. Don't allow prejudice and fear to do your thinking for you, don't close off your heart from its vast potential. Don't permit that, not ever, never again ever.

I'm home now, and London is already fading into just another memorandum on the calendar, another pocketful of ticket stubs and crumpled receipts, another tube map to stash among the take-away menus and out-of-date Filmhouse programmes. Back to work – with eyes set on my next excursion out into the big wide world, down to England for the next scheduled *Soulmakers Gathering*. If you are free the last weekend of May, why not join us there?

One of the friends I stayed with at the weekend collects small broken things. Her shelves hold a vast array of fine antique china pieces – teacups and saucers and shepherdesses and thimbles and sugar bowls – all of them chipped or cracked or with rubbed-off painted edges. Lovely and loved, beautiful small broken things.

17 February 2015

all faith and all I believe

*This world's a messed up place, our favourite act a fall from grace. Resurrection – isn't it a myth?
– Amy Rigby "Like Rasputin"*

There's no other word for it: blessed. That's how I'm feeling, nearly giddy with the joy of it. Yesterday evening I had dinner with a new friend – beautiful, vibrant, heart swimming in passion and story. Our girltalk inspired her to tap into her clearly vast feminine wisdom and offer me a perspective that pulled me up short, frankly. I found myself in unexpected self-examination and came up from the dive holding a realisation – a humbling realisation, I should add.

I had been telling her about my desire to conquer a particular fear which has governed so much of my life. This fear appears to me as a dragon: fire in its belly, breath crackling more fiercely than on a hungover morning before I've reached the toothpaste. Slaying the dragon has served me well as a recent quest, leaving me in a good place, feeling sound and strong and ready for anything.

My lovely new friend, however, has offered me a different spin on it. "Do you really want to kill the dragon?" she asked me.

Can you ever really kill your fears? What would we be without that fire burning within us? That fire eating out our insides with dread or remorse or shame or fury, that same fire fuels our passion and courage and our desire to learn; it keeps the coals burning with patience and forgiveness and resilience; it keeps the ember of unconditional love glowing within us.

My beautiful new friend then offered me another image, with which my heart danced: we can ride the dragon, she reminded me, reach out to it, play with it, perhaps to some extent even tame it.

I belong to a growing and blooming network of women rising up to take our birthrightful place in the world, and the dragon-riding goddess Kwan Yin inspires us. "I learned that her full name means 'she who listens to the cries of the world' and that she has vowed to remain in the earthly realms until all other living souls have completed their own enlightenment." (S. Elworthy)

This round table of rising women, supported and held by the men in our lives, offers another version of the hero's quest. No need to slay the dragons in this difficult and often painful world; we instead might learn together to tame the dragon, play with it, ride it and ultimately fly upon it.

So back to that dragon I referred to earlier – my own particular dragon with whom I've recently been jousting. My friend's image brought home to me the realisation that I'm as much a dragon to others as they are to me. I've burned a fair few knights with my fierce and crackling fire, have left third degree burns on some of the people whom I love best. I'm not powerless by any means.

Again: an ice-cold bucket challenge of shame washes over me. I breathe deeply, find my ground. Listen carefully for the distant snap of ember, watch that tiny spark fly up from it. That tiny spark is me riding the dragon.

22 February 2015

on methodology

Last night a friend came over for dinner. She's in the process of completing a Master's degree in art therapy and must produce a research proposal. She had mentioned to me how daunted she felt with the challenge of even making sense of the assignment, particularly the section on methodology.

I've jumped the academic hoops of two master's degrees; research methodology does not daunt me, though I do find the whole process pedantic and tedious. Anyway, I offered to help her get her head round it, however I may, so she came over for dinner last night and we looked over her work together.

Her topic is interesting: it's to do with gender and how this relates to the therapeutic relationship. More specifically, she's looking at children with absent fathers and whether their therapist being male or female has any discernible influence on how the child relates to the adult.

As we talked through her questions and ideas, I could see where the problem was (well, at least I think I did.) She seemed to be conflating the intellectual material of the thesis with the structural process of the proposal. She was writing up her critical analysis with a conclusion in mind, based on what she had laid out in the literature review. Methodology was becoming entangled with analysis.

Eventually here's what I told her: this isn't the research. It's just the proposal. You don't have to have any conclusion about what you are presenting. The point of the proposal is to describe why you think your idea is worth exploring, what you've learned about it already, how you found the information that you're including, and what kind of context the information you've found is providing you as your starting point. The methodology describes how you plan to undertake the research and discover your own conclusions. The point of the research proposal is to set the stage, and to prove that you can jump through those pedantic, tedious hoops that academics love so much.

Her topic is close to her heart, connected to her own life. Her motivation in choosing her topic was basically personal. And that, I suggested, is where you're getting off track. Your heart is pulling you right into the actual work, because that is what you're interested in – but this isn't the right stage to do it. Right now you have to step back and just set up, as best you can, the background and the intention of your proposal, and demonstrate the integrity of your project's potential. And then wait for the research panel to send it back with their red ink on it. It's just a game. A necessary game. It's not for fun that we play it, but because it's necessary that we play it.

Fast forward to this morning, which followed a broken and disturbed and disturbing sleep. By dawn I was muddled and on edge, with a wee touch of danger in the air. I did what I thought I should, but oh, there's that brutal word again: should. *What should I do?* "Should" is a heavy yoke to carry on one's back, that's for sure.

Someone – call him a guardian angel – very kindly reassured me that deep breaths would help me come back to myself. So I settled into some meditation, and some Rumi. I opened the page randomly and here's what I found:

ONLY BREATH

Not Christian or Jew or Muslim, not Hindu,
Buddhist, sufi, or zen. Not any religion
or cultural system. I am not from the East
or the West, not out of the ocean or up
from the ground, not natural or ethereal, not
composed of elements at all. I do not exist,
am not an entity in this world or the next,
did not descend from Adam and Eve or any
origin story. My place is placeless, a trace
of the traceless. Neither body or soul.

I belong to the beloved, have seen the two
worlds as one and that one call to and know,
first, last, outer, inner, only that
breath breathing human being.

~

There is a way between voice and presence
where information flows.

In disciplined silence it opens.
With wandering talk it closes.

25 February 2015

what would Jesus do?

*I was looking for a new religion
one where no one got pain
we'd sit around and talk to each other
I wonder what we'd say?
House of Large Sizes, "Death Buggy"*

What would Jesus do if we lived our lives in a state of bliss, rather than this tawdry baseline of "normal" mental health? What would He do if we no longer needed to factor in His comings and goings to account for our salvation? He'd be out of a job, Him and His frocked minions.

If there's one thing I've learned in the past few weeks, it is this: NO BLISS ALLOWED.

That grass-always-greener bank on the other side is a savings and loan holding all our uncashed wishes and aspirations. How do I know? Only this: I've journeyed up a dark mountain and back down again to a light-filled valley. I've unpacked my inner treasure chest of personal wealth, plucking out a living with an angel by my side. I've been a soulseeking soulmaker, trekking through the Pointless Forest. I've become a rising woman, standing up to be counted, number tattooed across my arm.

These various wanderings have taught me how totally and utterly unwelcome the world at large regards souls, awakenings, imaginings, unlockings and unpretendings. Much, much more comfortable and safely predictable for us to fill up our days in a daze: ticking lists, numbing our minds with a painkiller of choice, and offering up prayers to The Saviour Who Is Not Us. Hanging there in His ghoulish agony on a crucifix of human making, bearing all those sins we don't and won't forgive ourselves for.

What would Jesus do? Turn tail and run for higher ground, that's what. NO BLISS ALLOWED.

15 March 2015

5D

Is it the case that the human body, mind, feelings, soul, and spirit are all one, interacting constantly – and the entire package is what we experience as consciousness?

S. Elworthy, *Pioneering the Possible*

And I opened my heart to the whole universe and I found it was loving. the Byrds, *5D*

First dimension: a single point

Second dimension: a line

Third dimension: an object in physical space

Fourth dimension: an object in physical space throughout moments of time

Fifth dimension: ah now... what could it be?

We create our individual minds via the bio-electronic signalling of our brains, in 3-dimensional space. Our minds root themselves in the moment, in the present, but they also project backward through memory and revision, and forward through postulating and projecting. So our individual minds could be considered 4-dimensional in a way that other living creatures aren't – those other creatures without what we commonly call conscious thought.

Our brains operate through the activity of individual cells which connect through unique sequences of electro-magnetic synapses. Each sequence creates an "image," and these images are what we commonly understand as thinking and feeling. We think and feel within the bounded structure of an individual body and mind.

What if our individual minds are like our brain cells themselves: a single entity which interacts with others, creating an exchange of energy that in turn fires in sequences of imagery, creating a larger pattern of which we ourselves are unaware? After all, do our individual brain cells understand all that we experience through our body and mind? Or do they stick to their own business, their own cellular boundaries and their own tasks of firing or not firing with the cells with whom they have contact?

What if the fifth dimension is a collective experience, about which we can only glimpse our own wee part?

When a person delves into the state that we call psychotic – well, call it an acid trip or call it madness, either way it is a first-hand taste of what lies beyond our normal awareness – are they existing in the fifth dimension?

Hang on: trips like these can be good or bad. I've experienced both: walking through hell itself with a furious ember of shame and regret burning itself into me; and walking through heaven itself, held closely by guardian angels and feeling utterly, completely loved, loving and buzzing in bewildered bliss at the connections I realise have been surrounding me all along. Presumably my mind flavours its trips with whatever it finds going on inside me anyway, and creates an entire journey's storyline around it. Heaven or hell, all of my own

making, and my mind filtering out the information which doesn't fit the given plotline.

So when we meditate or go into states of mindfulness, we are focusing ourselves intently within our third dimension. The third dimension is neutral territory, without the imaginings we invent using past and future as fuel. When we recall the past in order to learn or use our judgment, or anticipate the future with expectations and plans, we are moving into our fourth dimension. Past and future are forever out of reach, never to be touched. And when we interact with other individual minds, via our senses – gazing into another's eyes, listening to another's sounds and words, touching another's skin – we create (positive or negative) charges of energy and contribute to the sequences that form images of information in a collective consciousness. We contribute and belong to and participate in 5D, whether we are aware of it or not.

Well, it's just an idea.

*Oh how is it that I could come out to here and be still floating
and never hit bottom and keep falling through
just relaxed and paying attention?*

the Byrds, 5D

1 April 2015

plotting

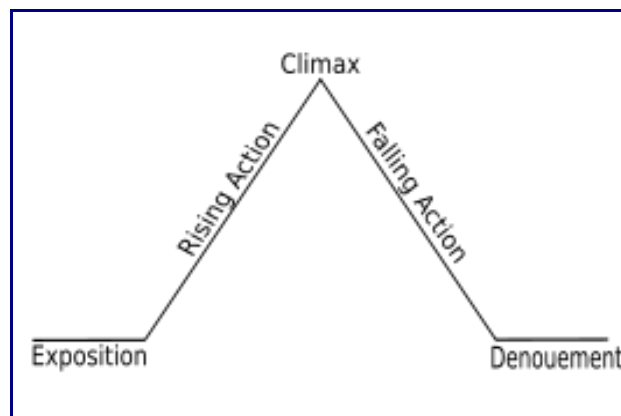
What happens when we use the metaphor of dimension to explore life's meaning?

First dimension: a point in space. A point made, what's your point? An event, an incident, a distinction.

Second dimension: a line. A series of points one after the other, connected. Do they follow a direction? Are the points plotted out along a line, in your life's plotline?

Let's interject here with the literary notion of plot, which is "defined as the events that make up a story, particularly as they relate to one another in a pattern, in a sequence, through cause and effect, how the reader views the story, or simply by coincidence." (*Wikipedia*)

How they relate to one another. So a plotline could be considered a series of points (or events, eg individual distinct happenings) that relate to one another. In literary theory, Freytag's Pyramid outlines the way plotted points together create story:



Third dimension: an object moving through physical space. A plotline fleshed out, with details and descriptions that give it shape. Is the story cumbersome, bloated? Is it lean, swift? Is it following a clear direction or is it blundering around without purpose?

Fourth dimension: an object moving through time. Well now we're back to Freytag. How does a visual diagram of plot compare to one living through one's own life story? The pyramid is flat, bare, succinct. One's life is rich, messy and organic.

Fifth dimension: connection. Observers, readers, listeners share in the story: the plotline evokes emotion and physical response (have you ever cried during a film, or shivered with goosebumps of horror at some grisly or unnerving news account?) Shared emotion and shared meaning create a distinct pattern of imagery within the fifth dimension. Our collective unconscious takes note. And begins to awaken.

Our collective self is awakening, it is blinking and yawning and stretching. Our collective self is taking stock of what has been happening while it slept. There is a stench upon its breath. ("Does the sin taste bitter in your mouth? It must." J.Bowles, *Two Serious Ladies*)

I remember once reading a tip for tackling morning breath: keep a bowl of apples by your bedside. When you wake up, with your mouth dry and ugly, take a bite from the apple. Nature's best cleansing remedy for all those sins upon your lips: take a bite of the apple, as did Eve, and follow the plotline from there. Take a bite of the apple and feel the surge of the deep feminine welling up within you.

But the deep feminine is not always quiet. When roused, it is fiery, as consuming and as unstoppable as lava pouring from a volcano. The deep feminine roars like a lioness... as powerful as a massive serpent or a mysterious current that sweeps all within it. It is powerful because it comes from the heart.

(S. Elworthy, *Pioneering the Possible*)

2 April 2015

on the politics of religion

Those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion is.
Mahatma Gandhi

I recently skyped with a relation, a dedicated Catholic who involves himself with the more honourable aspects of the institution: scholarship and social justice. I don't for a minute deny that Christianity has some gold stars connected to it. But so do other religions, and so do secular institutions. Just as there are atrocities committed by people in the name of the very same institutions, both religious and secular: imprisonments, torture, oppression, murder, not to mention the appalling misogyny forming their bedrock. All because of the single driving motivation behind these belief systems: control of others. Mind control, belief control, mental and physical control.

About ten years ago now, a local Baptist church slipped a promotional flier through the post slot on our door. It was an invitation to their Easter service, and here's how it framed its compelling offer: "It doesn't matter how good a life you lead. If you don't believe in Jesus Christ you cannot be saved."

You couldn't make it up if you tried. My daughter sat bewildered on the couch watching me rant in fury at the nasty hypocrisy of this so-called invitation. At six years old, she didn't see what the fuss was all about. She didn't understand what my own life experience had been, to trigger such a reaction. When I was six years old, I was already deeply indoctrinated in Catholicism. At six years old, I had been baptised (twice: once by a doctor at birth and again by a priest in a public ceremony.) I had been to Sunday mass already hundreds of times. I had seen a good fair share of Davey and Goliath cartoons and been read stories from the red-covered, gilt-lettered children's bible and book of saints on my bedroom shelf. And I'd been primed for my First Communion ceremony, learning all about the body of Christ and dressed in a pure white frock to demonstrate my pure white soul, cleansed so squeaky clean by the blood of the saviour on the cross.

At six years old I already felt immense shame inside myself for my mere existence. I remember that long walk up the church aisle at First Communion, me and my tiny classmates; I remember feeling confused, faking my way along with what I had been informed was fully expected of me: to believe and to obey. I remember acutely how much unbelonging I carried in my heart, as I walked through that oppressive, oppressive scenario.

My experience of religion – offered to me by parents themselves indoctrinated – is that it has nothing to do with love and everything to do with fear and power and control. If I have achieved anything worthwhile in my life, it is to have clawed my way out of that worldview, and discovered my own truths, my own beauty, my own beliefs and faith. And I can share this with the deepest full-hearted joy: I'm not pure white. I bite the apple and I sin, oh I definitely sin. I'm as holy as can be.

6 April 2015

I get cross

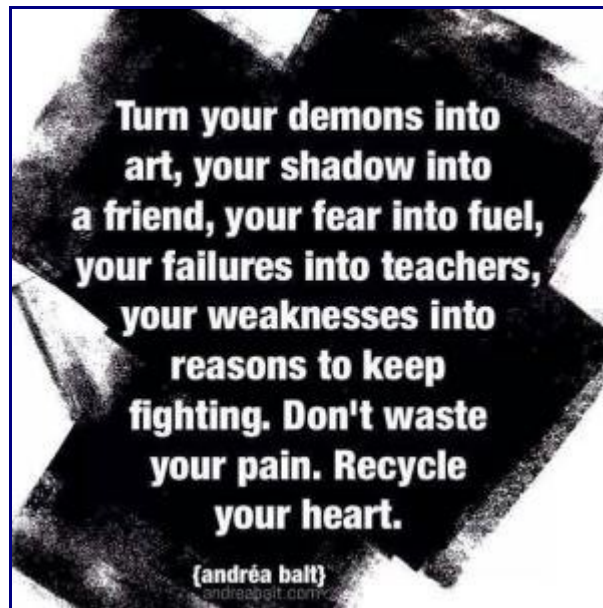
I get cross about Christianity. It's like a thorn in my side. And yet there are many Christian people whom I like and also love. I don't mind that they believe things I don't believe. In fact I'm happy for them, if it makes them happy, gives them solace or otherwise works well for them. As long as I'm not subjected to evangelism, I have no reason to be bothered by anyone else's spiritual choices.

This year however, Easter riled me, far more than it usually does. Usually I just ignore it and try to avoid the obnoxious marketing onslaught that fits in between Mothering Sunday and the spring gardening season. Yet this year, it really got under my skin. The promise of salvation which forms the cornerstone of Christian faith, this outrightly contradicts my own growing conviction that the salvation promise is a disempowering parlour trick preventing us from fulfilling our collective human potential for goodness. I've been questing and encountering my own spiritual experiences over the past several years, and a recent chapter is still unfolding, one which resonates with significance for me.

Now, there are some important people in my life who think nothing of expounding upon their own beliefs and spiritual assumptions. I more often than not just keep my mouth shut when I'm being told something which doesn't fit my own beliefs. In fact, I more often than not suppress my own views, in order to maintain the illusion of peace. One of the most overwhelming lessons I've learned as a girl and woman has been to swallow my voice, my own perspective, my own validation as being as worthy as anyone else to form ideas and hold opinions.

Yet these same people to whom I listen have been unwilling to consider my perspective other than through the lenses of doubt and disdain. For the most part I'm not even asked. My experiences have been assumed without question to be illness, weirdness, and irresponsible madness; my soul-seeking social groups have been dismissed as cults; the thrill of immense bliss has been dismissed as nothing more than biochemical mania which demands medication. In short: my own truths have been outrightly disrespected, or in some cases just subtly and smugly mocked.

That's where the anger comes from. It's a spasmodic reaction to people in my life who are unwilling to see me as anything other than an obedient young girl of their own embroidered memories, or a coerced personality of their own making. It stings, frankly, to be pigeonholed as ill by people themselves clearly riddled with their own forms of mental and personal unhealthiness.



Earlier today I came across this image on Facebook, along with a comment about turning anger to art. That is obviously where this needs to go. Writing a blog post like this lets off the steam, but what I need to do is leave those people to it, leave them to their own devices and their own dismissals, and channel this anger I've got into something beautiful.

11 April 2015

the shape of my tongue

*I run from body. I run from spirit.
I do not belong anywhere.
I am not alive.
Do you smell the decay?
You talk about my craziness.
Listen rather to the honed-blade sanity I say.
Rumi, (excerpt) "The Shape of My Tongue"*

My friend and I recently discussed what is meant by "holding space." Our ideas ranged from the emotional (whereby a struggle is patiently endured and its repercussions respected) to the prosaic (whereby one's excess baggage is set aside, perhaps never to be reclaimed.) I wonder: is our short lifespan here on earth merely a holding space?

A few years ago I experienced a delusion in which I believed I had died. It lasted for several days – talk about your valley of darkness. Bits of my life (let's call them my sins) piled up and cluttered around me at my feet, ankle deep and rustling with faint menace. My senses flooded with regret at the missed connections of my life, the lost opportunities and the constant failure to meet expectations. It seemed as though I were being watched, and tested, and judged. Every step involved an invisible hoop to be jumped, and not a single one did I manage. Impulsive, yearning for redemption – desperate, even: *take me, I'm yours* – I tried over and over and over to do the right thing, but every attempt landed at my feet like a crumpled-up piece of paper, adding to the sinister rustling. I kicked through the rising tide, splashing my sins this way and that, holding on in my muddy untranscendence.

More recently, I experienced a delusion in which I believed I was being held in a divine embrace. Nothing I thought or felt or did could be wrong, because everything was right. I lay back and floated freely through an exquisite story of my own making, embroidering details into the plot with the most beautiful colours of thread. The world around me was utterly safe, utterly forgiving and loving. I brushed menace aside with an affectionate smile, a soft caress. This time, I jumped each hoop with ease. Impulsive yet grounded, yearning yet wholesome, calm and accepting, I chose the longer queue, the servants' door, the average life, the mundane challenge. *Take me, I'm yours*. Beyond reached out for me, but I held onto my muddy untranscendence, clicking my tongue against the roof of my mouth and listening to the bells chiming their response.

I do not belong anywhere. This holding space is where I live. Delusional illusions of vision-blind fusion: is any of it really real? How do we *know*? How *can* we know?

Here's what I think, just now: I think this holding space is where I am we, and where we find our balance. The errant fling of the bike wobbling back and forth in empty space, as the gear-teeth find their bite and the centre of gravity surges forward and the wheels spin toward the future. Neither damned nor saved, just simply holding and at the same time moving, spinning, surging... I think our untranscendence is transcendent in its muddy splattered squalor. It makes me laugh. The shape of my tongue on the roof of my mouth feels like love riding past me on a bicycle, ringing its bell and splashing me with my paper sins.

blessings



*The leaf of every tree brings a message from the unseen world.
Look, every falling leaf is a blessing.*
– Rumi

There is a lovely large tree across the street which I see from my window. Its leaves have started to turn to their deep rich red. Soon they will fall and scatter the pavement. Other trees have already begun to shed: in the park near my home lie clumps of fallen leaves, blown across the footpath, clogging up the grass.

This year the summertime brought me a stormy and difficult patch to navigate. I lived minute by minute through an almighty endurance test, struggling through daybreak, holding on for dear life until evening, retreating so gratefully to my bed at nightfall. The present absorbed both past and future: mere survival dug in its heels in deep slow motion, and all other activity fell away, far too overwhelming to touch.

With a cheeky tinge of irony I find myself stirring back to life just as the world around me is drawing itself away into autumn. Every day I feel stronger and more able. Every night I sleep more easily. Every minute offers its own grip on the past and the future. Every falling leaf is a blessing.

27 September 2015

crazy wisdom

A few weeks ago I had the pleasure of hearing a talk given by Matthew Fox, a liberal Christian theologian from the USA. Fox subscribes to what he calls Creation Spirituality which is “based in ancient Judeo-Christian tradition, supported by leading-edge science, bearing witness for social, environmental, and gender justice.” He’s based in California, by the way – no surprise there. And he believes in angels. In fact, he mentioned them when I saw him speak: the invisible spirits in the room with us, his own guardian angel behind him in top hat and tails.

Now, as far as I know, Matthew Fox has not been saddled with any mental health diagnosis, has not been prescribed olanzapine or amisulpride to dampen and contain his hallucinatory visions, has not been sectioned by a mental health team and hospitalised against his will. But he does believe there are invisible spirits in the room with him, and he does believe in the supernatural communication offered by the traditional Christian mystics – Julian of Norwich, for example, and Meister Eckhart.

Context matters. Indigenous cultures around the world make space in their communities for shamanic traditions: mystical journeying, oracle visions and communication with the spirit realm. Phil Borges offered a fascinating TED Talk about this and chronicles his discoveries in the beautiful *Crazywise project*. Some other sources on this topic include:

- What a Shaman Sees in a Mental Hospital (on themindunleashed.org)
- Shamanic Perspectives on Mental Illness (on theicarusproject.net)
- Walking the Shamans Path (on successfulschizophrenia.org)

In our secular, science-worshipping Western society, we denigrate magic and mysticism. They’re sidelined into New Age flakiness and treated as nonsense. I’ve been there myself; let me explain. I was raised in the Catholic Church, drenched with ritual and dogmatic instruction throughout my childhood. When I grew up, I reacted against this deeply and identified as atheist. I remember in my explorations reading two significant books – *The Demon-Haunted World* by Carl Sagan and *Straw Dogs* by John Gray – both of which affected me deeply and coloured my thinking. Other things were going on for me, such as emigrating far away from my network of family and friends, raising a child as a single parent, and contemplating with personal attention the imbalances and injustices of modern patriarchal culture. Life delivered record levels of stress which accumulated and then escalated into real distress, and this spiralled eventually into madness.

I’ve been ‘mad’ twice now – and handed a psychological diagnosis of bipolar disorder. Okay that’s fine, I’m in good company with the millions of people sharing this particular label. I take medication to keep me grounded in the ‘real’ world and I admit with all honesty that the drugs have helped me to feel much better than I did in the years leading up to the initial breakdown. But much, much more importantly, my mental health has been inseparable from my spiritual journeying.

In my initial psychotic episode, I experienced becoming what I think of as ‘born again me’ and along with this I now strongly identify as agnostic, unaffiliated to any religious tradition. Wikipedia defines agnosticism as: “the view that the truth values of certain claims

– especially metaphysical and religious claims such as whether or not God, the divine or the supernatural exist – are unknown and perhaps unknowable.” It’s that “perhaps” which I’m drawn to. To me, our great challenge is to surrender the demand to be certain.

In the second episode of madness, I experienced what I think of as a revelation of connection and a vision of human evolution. I’ve written about it once or twice, and I have since been exploring and reading about other people’s versions of this idea. My explorations led me to Matthew Fox, as well as Rupert Sheldrake, Scilla Ellworthy, James O’Dea, Bruce Lipton, Barbara Marx Hubbard (and wow, if Barbara Marx Hubbard is not New Age flakey, I don’t know who is.) To me, our great challenge is to have faith – not in God, but in ourselves.

Today is #worldmentalhealthday and I’m celebrating it with my guardian angel, who wears DMs and a gorgeous red dress from Horny Toad. I may be agnostic but I do believe this: our mental health is inseparable from our spirituality. Whatever *that* means.

10 October 2015

free space

It's been several years now since I read David Marquand's *Decline of the Public*, but it seems more relevant than ever. Marquand argues the case for

three interconnected propositions. The first is that the public domain has its own distinctive culture and decision rules.... The second proposition is that the public domain is both priceless and precarious – a gift of history, which is always at risk.... The third proposition is that, in Britain, the last twenty years have seen an aggressively interventionist state systematically enfeebling the institutions and practices that nurtured it, and that it is now in crisis. (pp.1-2)

Marquand published *Decline of the Public* in 2004, and since then the crisis has grown more acute. Two public cornerstones – the NHS and the BBC – bend under ever more strain and struggle to remain viable. Meanwhile the benefits system, the humane face of the state, crumbles under repeated attack and death by a thousand cuts. The crisis is real, and unabating.

At the end of my street, there is an elevated rail track; the east coast line runs frequent commuter trains to East Lothian and even more frequent express trains to London. Like ants to sugar, the train line attracts billboard hoardings. It is the only thing that I hate about my neighbourhood. I hate, hate, hate billboard hoardings.

Many years ago, in fact around the time that Marquand published his book, the police ran a crime crackdown ad campaign in my area. Walking my daughter to primary school one morning, she noticed one of the billboards and asked me innocently, "What's kerb crawling, mummy?" Really: I hate billboards. I hate advertisements of all kinds, whether in the pages of magazines, commercials on television and in cinemas, on bus shelters or billboards, on public transportation... need I go on? Don't even get me started on the shill factor of branded clothing. I believe that advertisements have the right to exist but that they should be seriously and vigilantly regulated, and sequestered into their own dirty little space in a dark corner somewhere. I believe that public space should be free of logos, jingles, straplines and all forms of mercenary manipulation.

So imagine my delight when I stumbled upon this: brandalism. This brilliant creative project "is the biggest anti-advertising campaign in world history." Art trumps commerce, creativity trumps greed, and beauty trumps the visually venal.

The crisis of the public domain is real, and it is scary, but it can't trump the human heart. Why only just recently, at the end of my street, near the rail bridge and on the wall just a stone's throw from the billboards, this lovely message blossomed into life:



10 October 2015

on clarity

Over the past week there has been a word recurring in my mind, at random moments. I don't know what to do with it and so I bat it away and try to ignore it. But this word is persistent; it sneaks up on me when I don't expect it, and announces itself with determination: *clarity*.

It's taunting me, because I feel anything but clarity in my present circumstances. There's plenty on my plate – and none of it bad – but it feels directionless. Clarity is defined as 'the state or quality of being clear' – and that is precisely what I am not, just now. Life feels blurry and out of focus; I don't have a plan and it feels precarious. I take each day as it comes, with no clear sense of where I'm headed.

the single word clear... [has] more than sixty meanings, many of which have to do with freedom: free from obstruction; free from guilt; free from blame; free from confusion; free from entanglement; free from limitations; free from debt; free from impurities; free from superstition; free from illusion; free from doubt; free from uncertainty; free from ambiguity; and so on. And, of course, its ultimate meaning, which is "able to serve perfectly in the passage of light."

Rachel Naomi Remen, *My Grandfather's Blessings*

Able to serve perfectly. When I was in that altered state of consciousness, only a few months back, I felt as though I were serving a higher purpose. I followed my gut instincts and placed my trust utterly beyond myself. That's what insanity is: letting go of self-control; letting go of self; letting go of control. Losing oneself and immersing oneself in the experience of a visceral state of connected flow. It was as though I were using a sixth sense, one that had lain dormant and was awakening to the world in its connectedness – a different version of reality.

What is reality, anyway? Isn't it a construction that our brains put together out of the vast flood of sensory information in which we swim? What if that connectedness I experienced was also reality? Just a different version of reality, no less real than the version we currently hold when we exercise only five of our senses?

Service is not the same as servitude. This is a lesson I have been learning and which still occasionally chafes at me with lingering mistrust that my gifts will be ignored, dismissed, or worse still, abused. Servitude grows out of a twisted derivative of the masculine impulse for power through action. Service on the other hand grows out of the feminine impulse for power through surrender, in which *power within* reaches out to others in mutual respect, and reveals the connection that is always there under the surface.

In *Conscious Evolution*, Barbara Marx Hubbard proposes that humanity is on the cusp of a new stage of its evolution. She points out that when natural systems reach a critical point of disequilibrium, the tendency of the system is to make a quantum leap into a higher state, one of greater complexity. This is the natural pattern followed over billions of years of evolution in which matter has formed itself into lifeforms and ecosystems and cultures.

Hubbard argues that we may now be embarking on a stage in which we consciously co-create our own evolution. For my own part, I think there's a dangerous streak of control-

freakery in her theory, cloaked as it may be in a starry-eyed New Age package. Her vision of the future very conveniently ignores the damage we wreak through our desire to remain in control. And anyway, co-creation isn't a future endeavour; we already co-create our evolution and our collective future, through the mechanism of personal choice.

However I do wonder if our human evolution may involve surrendering to that sixth sense, the one that allows us to see, hear, smell, taste and touch our connectedness – a sixth sense that is currently misunderstood and labelled and stigmatised as insanity. It sounds crazy because it is crazy – but what if we just don't understand yet what crazy is? The last great leap of human evolution involved the development of language, which created a vast and complex arena for connection with one another. What if our next great leap involves the refinement and flowering of intuition and synchronicity?

And on that note: my inbox this morning held a new post by my friend Tony, reflecting on a question of purpose. I wonder if my meditation on clarity is actually a meditation on purpose. Tony writes “I want to help. I want to belong.” and those words from his heart speak the same words from mine. I too want to help and I too want to belong. Perhaps if we open ourselves to that sixth sense, if we allow ourselves to let go of self and let go of control... perhaps what we realise – what we

real-ise

– is that we *are* helping and we *do* belong.

Am I making myself clear?

28 October 2015

bye bye birdie

Once again I am recrafting the space where I write. **The Necessary Game** has been fun to play and it worked for me at the time I set it up, only just over a year ago. But there's a bit more water under the bridge now (2015 was quite a year) and necessity has lately been tugging at my sleeve and pointing me onward from this particular weigh station. I'm trusting my gut that it's time to move – so please join me over at juliamacintosh.uk where I will be writing from now on.

15 January 2016