

BLOGGING – A CREATIVE WAY OF EXPLORING SPIRITUALITY & SPIRITUAL FORMATION?

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“...People can and do use popular [communication technology and] media culture as a way of working on their own spirituality, [so as] to constitute meaningful symbols [and resources] for themselves and their communities... Popular media culture is an imaginative palette for faith...”¹



I've had a blog for over 4-years.² 'A "blog"? 'What's that, you ask?' A **web-log** is a frequently, or indeed infrequently updated web-based journal. It's an easy-to-use online 'tool' that allows one to publish on the world-wide-web.³ The author of a blog is often referred to as a "blogger." Blogs and blog content are as diverse as the people who create and post to them.

While not wanting to over-romanticise blogging⁴ I do want to explore something of my experience that blogging can be a *creative*⁵ way of exploring and discussing spirituality.⁶ Blogging can provide a means of responding to God. Indeed, theologian Susan J. White suggests, "technology [and the use of technology] can become sacramental. It can become a bearer of the self-giving love of God to a broken [and searching] world."⁷

Blogging offers a means through which God touches, forms and shapes persons.

The Spirit, in life-giving ways, blows inside and outside of cyberspace.⁸

"Being somewhat of a miss fit in my local church scene... [blogs] provide spiritual input that would otherwise be completely lacking. The blog posts I read can challenge me to grow as I relate to them and the questions they pose" (David).

¹ Tom Beaudoin: excerpted [and adapted] from an interview with Tom in the September-October 2006 issue of *Crucible*.

² Can be found @ <http://prodigal.typepad.com>. For nearly four years it was an individual project. More latterly it has become a collaborative "practice" with Alan Jamieson.

³ One can publish personal thoughts, reflections, images, video, music and hyperlinks to other online content.

⁴ There are things about "blogging" that can be challenged; for example, its tendency to accentuate liberal Enlightenment commitments to the autonomous individual; or its tendency toward superficiality, i.e. there is a substantial risk that one is broadened but never deepened – one 'skips' over the surface of things.

⁵ I understand the term "creative" as having to do with thinking, acting, and working in an imaginative way typically characterised by a high degree of innovation, originality, and divergent thinking.

⁶ In this context I'm thinking of "spirituality" as being "Christian Spirituality."

⁷ Susan J. White, *Christian Worship and Technological Change*, p. 129.

⁸ A play on a couple of lines from NZ poet James K. Baxter's *Song to the Holy Spirit*.

However, before we get underway, I found it interesting (and peripherally related to this reflection) that the media accompanying a recent piece of research, from the US-based *Barna Research Group*,⁹ noted that there was one area in which the spiritual activities of twentysomethings outpaced their predecessors: “visiting faith-related websites [this would include blogs]... While shunning traditional church attendance” they offered an opinion that this might be “an indicator of the impact that the internet may have on the evolution of the 21st century church.” This trend, they say, “may motivate churches to provide more online presence, access and interactivity.”

Re-Mixing Spirituality – A Spiritual Practice?

I wonder if blogging has the function of allowing us to attend to the lengthy rhythms of the creation of a self...and to the growing sense that our practice of blogging is related to the larger natural, social and spiritual rhythms of being formed as a distinct people of God...? ¹⁰



Blogging can be a contemporary spiritual practice, a creative component of a personal (or communal) “rule” or *rhythm*. It creatively recovers and re-mixes several traditional “practices” such as: study, journaling and self-examination,¹¹ discernment,¹² community, *lectio divina*, spiritual friendship, pilgrimage, the sharing of resources, encouragement, guidance and prayer. Like more traditional formational practices, blogging too requires intentionality and discipline.

I have...found blogging a powerful tool for continuing conversion. As Augustine wrote, “*I am the sort of man who writes because he has made progress, and who makes progress by writing.*” - Augustine, Epistle 143.2-3.¹³

Len Hjalmarson affirms my own experience when he says, [Blogging] “requires that we genuinely listen to our own lives... and to the lives of others... and that we reflect intentionally on what we are learning...”

He continues:

“At times I will begin to write a [post] and realize I don’t have enough information, or enough clarity, or enough of a personal foundation to articulate the message. This sends me to other resources... friends, books, prayer... and becomes another pathway for growth. At other times I realize I haven’t lived enough into the subject, and I either park the idea or write about another aspect of it. There are times when I feel profoundly inadequate for the task... [profoundly in need of the creative Spirit].”

⁹ The accompanying media summary was titled: *Most Twentysomethings Put Christianity on the Shelf Following Active Teen Years*. It was dated 11th September 2006.

¹⁰ *Re-mixed* from a 1991 statement by Delbert Wiens. His context was **not** “blogging.”

¹¹ Blogs, however, unlike traditional journals are very much in the public domain.

¹² Recognising and responding to God.

¹³ Sourced from Canadian, Len Hjalmarson who blogs @ <http://www.nextreformation.com/>

Blogging as Wandering – Opening to the Mystery of Transformation

With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling we shall not cease from exploration...¹⁴

Mike Riddell writing about “cybermonks,”¹⁵ in what he calls an exercise in “poetic imagination,”¹⁶ has re-mixed the Celtic monastic practices of wandering and dispersion. He makes several points which I in turn have re-mixed with reference to blogging. Why? Because Mike’s points are useful for helping us understand why some Jesus-followers choose to inhabit what Gerald May describes as an “unknown wilderness, full of mystery and endless possibility.”

1. Bloggers, often as a response to the DIY impulse, are wanderers who travel freely “wherever the Spirit might lead.” They take creative responsibility for their Jesus-shaped formation by making use of the resources, technology and grace that cyberspace makes available.¹⁷



2. These monks were creative innovators, “largely self-resourcing” and self-motivated. So too are many bloggers who creatively and innovatively resource their and others spirituality via globally interconnected e-highways, byways and even waterways. Their individual blogs are missional and spirituality outposts to which ‘pilgrims’ can ‘travel’ in order to nourish and resource their journey toward God.
3. Contemporary bloggers, like Celtic monks of old, relate as a loose, geographically dispersed network of wayfarers united by shared interests, needs and journeys. They keep alive a sense of common purpose through the interactivity of writing “letters,”¹⁸ personal friendships, and occasional visits. Spirituality resources and creativity, the fruit of cyber-pilgrimage, are generously shared and available 24/7.

¹⁴ T.S. Eliot, *Little Gidding*. This is the byline of our blog, *ProdigalKiwi(s)*.

¹⁵ I re-imagine Riddell’s notion of “cybermonks” as referring to “dispersed network” of so-called ‘monks’ or bloggers located in far flung “cultural outposts” who are supported, and encouraged by their being connected with others via web based communication technology.

¹⁶ See his excellent essay *Beyond Ground Zero: Resourcing Faith in a Post-Christian Era*. Available online at <http://homepages.ihug.co.nz/~mriddell/> See under “Articles.”

¹⁷ For an interesting reflection on DIY Spirituality & Pop Culture see Philip Johnson’s paper of the same title. It can be found online here: <http://emergingchurch.info/reflection/philipjohnson/index.htm>

¹⁸ Read: e-mail, MSN / SKYPE conversations.

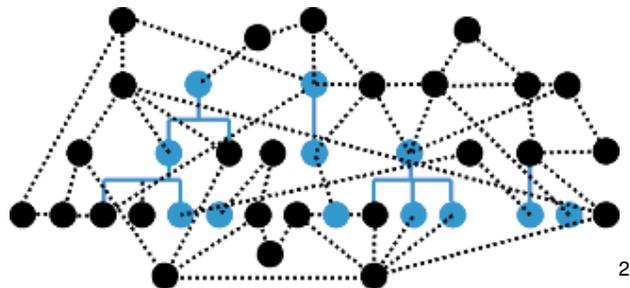
Formed in a “Web of Conversations”¹⁹

“I have been thinking for several years about the power of contemplative presence in this unexplored expanse of people-connections. What new meanings might it bring to spiritual community, guidance, and support?”²⁰

To varying degrees blogs facilitate “people-connections”²¹ – they gather community, community which includes other bloggers and those who, while not having their own blogs, become regular visitors. Again, Gerald May is a helpful ally when he shares his own experience:

“In this environment I have found people gathering for dialogue and support concerning exactly the issues I was seeking: contemplative spirituality, mysticism, spiritual formation, [and] the heart-journey with God. I have discovered that people in this setting often share more intimately and are more vulnerable with one another than in most face-to-face encounters.”

And, while blogging can be individualistic, an outworked commitment to conversation across differences and cultures, to friendship, to sharing,²² and to traveling and keeping company together, means that for many bloggers the experience of a type of community afforded by blogging is a crucial element in their spirituality, spiritual growth and formation.



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Len, whom I’ve already quoted above, wonders if perhaps blogging provides a rich opportunity to convert “loneliness into a solitude that can be shared” with fellow pilgrims, “cyber-monks,” and wayfarers more generally?²⁴

¹⁹ Reworked from a statement by sociologist Niklass Luhman who said, “*Community is a network of conversations.*”

²⁰ Gerald G. May talking about cyberspace.

²¹ For more on online community see the summary document of the University of Southern California’s 2007 Digital Future Report: “...*Internet users also report that the Internet helps them make new friends, both online and off. Internet users, on average, have just under five contacts online who they consider to be “friends” but have never met in real life, and almost two friends in real life that they originally met online...*” Available online here: <http://www.digitalcenter.org/pdf/2007-Digital-Future-Report-Press-Release-112906.pdf>

²² Stories, experiences, questions, responses to questions, learning and spirituality resources.

²³ Diagram by Steve Collins.

²⁴ Quote attributed to Henri Nouwen, “The mystery of love is that it protects and respects the aloneness of the other and creates the free space where he can **convert his loneliness into a solitude that can be shared.**” Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*. New York: Doubleday and Co, 1975

In other words, I'm formed to some degree as a consequence of the creative ways that web-technology allows me, from the quiet 'backwaters' of a small town in provincial New Zealand, to connect nationally and globally with others; to share (out of my solitude) and have shared with me, spirituality resources. I'm formed in part as I'm encouraged to *work* at deepening those places touched at the nexus of my life, blogging, the lives of dispersed others, and grace.

Finally



Psychiatrist, spiritual accompanier and cyber-contemplative Gerald ("Jerry") May died April 8 2005 at the age of 64, and while he has already appeared a couple of times in this brief article, I've so appreciated his wise input into my Jesus-following journey that I thought it more than fitting that he should gift us the final two paragraphs:

"I...have found spiritual guidance happening in rapid, surprising, and profound ways in cyberspace, both in group settings and one-to-one. There's something about this new means of communicating that seems to give the Spirit extra freedom to fly... More often than I can count, I have been moved to tears by people's heart-sharings scrolling across my screen and deeply gratified that something I've contributed has touched them as well. People who have known me in other settings tell me I'm different online: more free, somehow more myself."

"In the wilds of cyberspace, as in the wilds of forests and mountains, I feel the free energy of contemplative presence, openly and unabashedly enjoying the endless flow of life divine, willing to laugh and cry, to be still and to dance, to be moved in any way and to whatever end the Spirit of God desires. That's how I want to be--and hope [we] will be--in cyberspace and physical space, in inner space or outer space, wherever we find ourselves."²⁵

Want to Give Blogging a Go...?

- For a free online blog tool (good for those starting out), try *blogger*.
<http://www.blogger.com/start>

Further Reading

- For an interesting article on spiritual direction and the internet, try Gemma Simmonds, *Spiritual Direction and Cyberspace*, 2000. Online at:
<http://www.theway.org.uk/back/40Simmonds.pdf>
- Robert L. Kinast, *Sacred Space and Time in the Computer Age*, 2000. Available online at:
<http://www.theway.org.uk/back/40Kinast.pdf>

²⁵ Gerald G. May. All quotes are taken from his article titled *Cyberpresence*. It appeared in the summer 1995 issue of the *Shalem Institute* newsletter. Vol. 19, No.2, 1995.