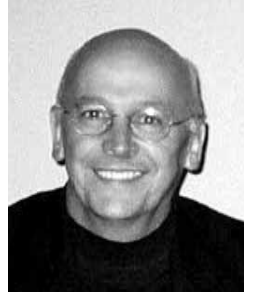


# A LETTER FROM LAURENCE FREEMAN OSB

DIRECTOR OF THE WORLD COMMUNITY FOR CHRISTIAN MEDITATION



*Dearest friends,*

An AA meeting has many similarities to a meditation group. I recently attended an AA group in London to help me prepare for a day on “addiction and grace” that I am to lead soon at our new retreat centre in London. It was a cold wet winter evening but the room was filling up fast. Some looked like newcomers, tentative, even a little anxious. Others were relaxed and at home. It felt as if everyone felt they had to be there but no one had a sense of obligation. The meditator who brought me was telling me that he had joined because he was alcoholic but had stayed in the fellowship because it had become for him a spiritual path. For many others there that evening too it was clearly more than just a way of dealing with a personal crisis or of controlling a life-threatening illness. It was community and a kind of weekly or, for some perhaps therapeutically addicted to the cure for addiction, even a nightly Pentecost.

There is a clear structure to an AA group but also a minimum of formality. As I listened to the opening guest speaker and then to the spontaneous contributions from the floor, each beginning with the mantra “I am (Jane or John or...) I am an alcoholic” and the supportive response “Hello, Jane...” I saw a simple formula of what human beings always need and construct for their important events: ritual. Most impressive to anyone who goes to many meetings, community or otherwise, was the level of trust at this gathering and its rituals. In most meetings fear and suspicion rise in the mind as soon as the opportunity for self-disclosure is presented. You can see the person disappear behind their inner defences. Anyone who has lived in community knows how often members who seem to be friendly and open before the meeting can clam up in a fearful, negative silence as soon as the conversation starts going somewhere serious. After the meeting you may hear a lot from them, whispered in a corner, but when it really matters for them to speak they are overwhelmed by fear and isolation. It is a tragic fault in many fear-ridden Christian communities. Not so at an AA meeting. The level of mutual trust and affection is almost supernatural. Of course, it is also true that once you get people talking about themselves it can be difficult to stop them. But in fact the contributions at the meeting were free-spirited, open-hearted and disciplined. There was self-disclosure *and* courtesy, a rare combination anywhere. Kindness and courtesy and a true spirit of listening created a kind of group mentoring – reflecting the important role of the personal sponsor in the one day at a time Twelve Step program.

## HEARING AND SPEAKING

Newcomers felt supported and encouraged but there was no force or compulsion to speak. *Where the spirit is there is liberty* echoed in my mind. And after a while I realised who else was there – ‘the advocate... the spirit of truth who will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority but will speak only what he hears.’ As I write this I don’t fully understand what ‘will speak only what he hears’ really means but at the AA meeting, at moments, I did. It was the kind of understanding that can only be experienced in the moment of truth itself. When the combination of elements that makes for the emergence of truth has dissolved the experience and its felt *meaning* recede to the intellect. There they are again confused with many doubts and questions. In the moment of the spirit there is no need for any questions. I think that the Spirit’s speaking is linked to so deeply to its hearing because this is how human communication happens. If we do not listen to what others are saying then what we speak cannot be truthful. It is ‘just me speaking’. The truth is a large, inclusive

*“Where  
the spirit is  
there is  
liberty.”*

communal event not a private or a closed-group possession. Truth resides in the whole and we have to share in the whole before we can know the truth that sets us free from the illusion of our separateness.

Some contributions during the group that evening were cries from the heart. Men and women, young and old, well-dressed and shabby, refined and rough speakers, all sorts, spoke out of an anxiety that their recovery might fail and their lives collapse again. Sometimes we need simply to say what we feel, to express our fear of the future or of ourselves. There can be truth in that too. Other contributions came from people who had learned from their experience and had something to share, the “word” of wisdom that the disciples of the desert elders used to hunger and ask for. Crossing the desert of their isolation they would come into the presence of their teachers and simply say “Father, give us a word.” Perhaps today we have forgotten what it is we are really thirsting for. We try instead to quench our raging need for truth with many different kinds of addiction. We are looking for ‘some thing’ that will satisfy us and remove the ache of what is, in fact, our ineradicable God-hunger, our innate need for pure love, for transcendence and for wholeness. No *thing* can match or substitute for God. No name, no formula, no security of group-belonging, no other god.

One such elder at the meeting spoke in a way that commanded

respect and special attention. He had the mellow manner of someone who had not only found the way to recovery but also understood what recovery meant. He had modesty and a sense of humour, which are usually signs that truth is somewhere in the neighbourhood. He spoke about the virtue of doing nothing, the strength of not trying to achieve anything. And he seemed to know from his experience that this was at the same time both harder than trying to be good or whole or wise and also more effective than trying. Do nothing – understand what that means – and you do everything you can do; and the rest follows. It was a short contemplative teaching of rare insight and expression. What he said could have been applied to the saying of the mantra itself.

### THE JOURNEY OF HEALING

The redemptive insight that led to AA becoming the most powerful and global transformative spiritual movement of modern times is that when the thirst for God is denied or avoided we fall into sickness. Accepting this explains the necessity of turning to God – the ‘higher power’ of the twelve steps – as part of our healing. This turning – which becomes most explicit in the eleventh step of the program – is not just solving a problem so we can get on with our lives. It is what our life is all about. In the same way, you may begin to meditate to acquire its observable benefits; but when you understand what it is about you continue because this simply is what *you* are all about. In business language it is about “getting your priorities clear”. But this contemporary managerial dialect that we all slip into today to make ourselves sound more convincing misses the deeper levels of truth. It is not just about a quick recovery so that we can get on with life. Healing, which arises from real insight into the nature of our disease, is itself the journey.

The AA group ritual and the Twelve Steps themselves are not frightened to speak of God although the personal contributions at the meetings are refreshingly free of God-talk. That means they can be open to what is beyond religious boundaries – humanly not just ecclesiastically ecumenical. The Greek word ‘oikumene’ means simply everyone everywhere, the whole world. Religious language has colonised it. All spirituality is ecumenical in this sense and the 12 Step Program is a true spirituality. Nevertheless it is interesting to realise that its founders came from and were formed by the Christian faith in particular. Maybe this has something to teach Christians as we see our religious institutions go through their intense and turbulent de-construction. As churches either dwindle into extinction or clutch at fundamentalist solutions there need to be Christians listening to each other rather than condemning each other as AA meetings show. They need to be asking the questions of the day with patience and waiting for a response from the spirit of truth before pre-empting it with yesterday’s answers. In AA, with its minimal level of structure and maximum focus on purpose, there is a lot for the churches to learn about how to practice and release the message of the Gospel today.

It may indeed be that God is what we seek and that we become sick when we seek anything else. It may be that God is also the

healer of that sickness. And if that is so then the problem and its cure, the wound and its healing may be far more deeply interwoven than we have been led to imagine. Rumi said that ‘your defects are the way that glory gets manifested.’ St Paul, in recovery from his religious addiction, said that where sin is grace abounds all the more. And when Jesus was asked why a man was born blind from birth – who had sinned, the man or his parents? – he went beyond the mechanical explanations of karma. “He was born blind so that God’s power might be displayed in curing him.”

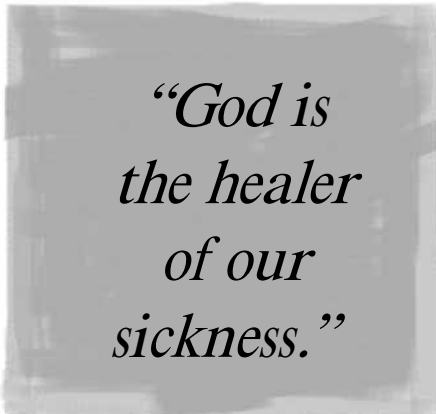
### RELATIONSHIP AND WHOLENESS

We are not healed so that we can just get on with life, and pursue other false gods who will get us in the same trouble as before.

This dead-end attitude has led in modern times to the general abandonment of the important ritual of healing in catholic tradition called the sacrament of reconciliation or confession. Like many today, when I look back to how I was introduced to it it can seem at times to have been a subtle form of religious addiction. You sinned, got forgiven and felt relief so you could go out and sin again. There was a mechanical rather than organic nature to the ritual and then it could never lead into the only experience that really changes us for the better: self-knowledge. As usual with addiction, a mind-game program had to be installed to keep up the delusion. When the game is finally exposed the addiction has to collapse because all addiction is a misplaced attempt to heal. Truth then emerges and when truth is found and felt, not just pre-packaged or force-fed, it sets us free.

In recent years the now denied use of general absolution penance services became popular and evidently touched a deep therapeutic need in people by expressing a healthier understanding of the meaning of sin and forgiveness. The communal, group context for this powerful sacrament broke with what many felt to have been the privatised, isolated guilt and co-dependency of the darkened confessional. The communal penance service did not deny the need for the individual dimension but it allowed the experience of healing to be felt first in community. The mere individual must first be transformed by community into a real person before healing happens.

Truth enters through the door of paradox. It is a paradox worth exploring that the famous ‘anonymity’ of AA creates such a powerful, redemptive fellowship whereas the formalism and institutionalism of so much church worship and sacramental life drive people in search of community away from the sacred myth-telling of their ritual. Myths are the stories that tell the truth more totally than ordinary words can do. But myth only makes sense in the context of ritual. De-ritualised they are like fish on a fishmonger’s slab. They become ‘mere myth’ in the derogatory sense it has for most people today. But rituals can only provide the right context for the myth if they respond to the deeper needs of the people involved, such as our twin needs today for community and contemplation. A ritual that has sunk into a legal obligation or a dull and deadening repetition dies



*“God is  
the healer  
of our  
sickness.”*

and brings the power of myth down with it into the graveyard of history. In community we are healed of the disease of isolation which is itself a symptom of illusion.

The proven 'placebo effect' in medical research is often dismissed by those practising the bio-medical model of healing. But even that model acknowledges that the mind is a major player in the healing of physical illness. How much more must our whole experience of truth, arrived at through the dispelling of illusion, be part of the total health that is the real meaning of the word 'sanctity'. If we accept a holistic approach to healing and see healing not just as a means to a goal-oriented end but as the end itself we are better positioned for the revelation of truth. We are more likely truly to know God than set ourselves up to speak for him. This was St Paul's radical conversion. After acting as the most repulsive of fundamentalist fanatics, persecuting the new sect of Christians, he did not become just one of them. He did not replace one fundamentalist addiction for another. Instead he began a wholly new departure, the journey into the *oikumene* of God. Sin for him, therefore, no longer meant the guilt-laden breaking of purity codes or of ritual correctness. It was the state of the divided self. He now saw that this division explains all lack of love because it creates a radical dysfunction *in* the essential human capacity to love. Paul was concerned with the work of building and sustaining the only too human community of local churches in which the healing of the spirit could best work. But, like any Christian who really *hears* the words of Jesus, he had also broken through into a bigger picture, a more universal understanding of relationship.

#### ATTENTION AND INTENTION

Every relationship, like every action or thought, is significant. It is either healing or destructive.

No relationship can be dismissed just because the person does not seem part of *my* immediate world or not important to *my* objectives. To ignore another person is to wound them as well as to incapacitate ourselves on the path to wholeness by succumbing to our illusion of separation. To listen to others – this listening is the healing dynamic of the AA group – is to pay attention to them; and the act of paying attention is a loving deed. It makes a difference to all who are involved in the act and that difference *is* the healing. Often, though, we feel, we simply can't. We just don't have time to pay attention to everyone. We need someone to pay attention to us as well – 'what about me?' And, with some people or groups, it seems hardly worthwhile anyway because they seem so hostile or coldly indifferent towards us.

Attention – not intention – is the true heart of prayer as well as the secret life of every human relationship. However, pure attention, beyond intention, does not mean we don't know what we are doing. Attention is not a glazy-eyed gaze. And we do need a motivation, however imperfect it may be, before we can make the sacrifice of self that is involved in all true attention. The laying down of our life happens as we turn the searchlight off ourselves, even for a moment, forgetting ourselves so that we can be re-remembered to the other. But if we cannot

pass beyond intention to attention prayer and relationship suffer retarded development. We get stuck. Relationship then becomes exploitative, like poetry we feel 'has a design upon us', or preaching that bullies us or any attempt to manipulate, or a politician's distortion of truth, or a religious platitude that dehumanises. Attention purifies prayer and all other forms of relationship of the initial investment the ego makes in it for its own self-centred benefit. *What am I going to get out of this?*, the ego automatically asks whether it is when we meet a person or when we sit to meditate. Intentionality, all our hidden agendas, especially the ones we hide from ourselves, has to yield to the more simple and purifying bond of connection. It is attention that makes motives pure.

The disruption of our faculty of attention is stress. So when we seem overwhelmed by all the demands upon us to pay attention, to respond to the needs or to listen to the self-communication of others – and when there seem just too many others to deal with – the trick, as the wise speaker at the AA group understood, is to do nothing. Not to shut down, evade, move away, seek distraction. But to be silent. The doing nothing is the work of silence.

Healing has many paths and is life-long. It has its steps and stages and its reversals and setbacks. But it is a single path that leads through time, over peaks and through valleys, beyond the illusion of separation to the experience of connectedness and wholeness. To heal is to adapt continuously to reality. The unity of the path, and the continuity of the connection to it, *is* the present moment. To live in the present moment means simply to be on the path and in unbroken connection with it. When this continuous adapting becomes natural, truly conscious and spontaneous, and when we are not

applying ideology to the process but just letting it happen, we are under the influence of wisdom. We are responding to what Cassian called the 'unseen guide of the mind'.

#### THE POWER OF SILENCE

Silence is the fullest communication. When we are silent we can speak and hear knowledge that in other media it is impossible to communicate. Silence alone allows us to pay attention to the whole inter-connected web of being and to receive the attention it is graciously paying to us. If the spirit cannot speak except what it hears, we cannot hear unless we know that we are being spoken to.

We get hints of this in the chemistry of human relationships whenever we feel the healing and unifying power of silence. It may be the silence of lovers after their bodies have spoken to each other. Or the silence of friends who are tasting the gift of each other at the deepest level. Or the silence of enemies who have been surprisingly touched by a moment of forgiveness and reconciliation and who have seen that they are connected at levels deeper than those at which they have wounded each other. Silence at this degree of consciousness is more than thought. It is not the usual 'seeing in a glass darkly'. It is knowledge itself. Such spiritual knowledge does not produce the certainty of the

*“The act  
of paying  
attention is a  
loving deed.”*

fundamentalist who is unable to open his mind wider than his existing beliefs and securities. It is the certainty of faith. Faith then has a quite different meaning. Not something that can be enforced or policed. It is not the yardstick of group-belonging or the standard of conformity. It is the bonding power of relationship, the sustained attention to another in an act of loving contemplation that perfects and redeems the broken person. Faith integrates the person by bringing to consciousness the ground of being, the simple truth that we are not alone, that we live and love and breathe within the inclusiveness of divine relationship. "All things have their being through him."

The first step to silence is to listen. At the AA group the loving trust among its members is expressed in this patiently open-hearted and non-judgemental listening. When we feel we are being listened to in this way we find the power to speak without fear. Then we can also listen to ourselves. We may also be surprised by what we hear being spoken in us deeper than our words. We may revise what we have just said because we are seeing something more clearly because we know it has been listened to. We are freed from the prison of a script that we felt condemned to repeat ad nauseam. Silent listening of this quality is not about mere words. It is also tested by the proof of action. One night at the group I visited a young person had come in the throes of his first struggle with his demon. He had lost everything to his addiction including his job and friends and his home. He had nowhere to sleep that night. Before the meeting ended three people, previously strangers to him, had offered him their homes.

## RELATIONSHIP WITHOUT CLINGING

The Desert Fathers, who had read and understood the Gospel, also understood how it is always relationship that is healing. Solitude taught them that and sustained them in the life of their communities. They knew that relationship grows through listening. They also knew what demons were. Not just the demon of drink: actually, they were more conscious of the demon of gluttony which, in our age of eating disorders, with almost half the population already obese, we can appreciate.

Addiction is merely the tragic consequence of mistaken identity. We thought this substance or this activity would help us find what we were looking for. In fact it turned out to be a demon masquerading as an angel of light and now we are hooked. Our thirst for God has become diverted and we are drinking poison instead. When Cortez, the 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish invader, first arrived in Mexico he seemed to the Aztecs like the fulfilment of their religious prophecies. They embraced and welcomed him and found to the cost of their whole culture that it was too late.

We always clutch at our imagined redeemers, unaware that no true redeemer allows himself to be clung to. "Do not cling to me... I have not yet ascended to the Father." The true healer allows relationship but does not allow the relationship to become an addiction. By the early Christians Jesus was seen as a physician of the soul of humanity rather than as the founder of a new

religion. His deeper meaning – and all those levels of identity opened by his question 'who do you say I am?' – were to be found in the freedom he offered those who learned from his gentleness and humility. This was possible especially for those who accepted the light yoke of his friendship. To surrender that freedom for another dependency is to fail to recognise him. "He was in the world; but the world, though it owed its being to him, did not recognise him", is as much a warning to us today as a description of what happened during his temporal life. It still applies more to the Christians who turn him into another god or idol than to those true seekers who do not yet know how to understand him. He could not be clearer: he offers himself as a way which, at its deepest level, can be understood as one with the goal itself. "To believe in me is not to believe in me but in the one who sent me. To see me is to see the one who sent me" (Jn 12:44).

The paradox in these words is easily dismissed. We prefer rational, definable certainties. It is also easy to laugh away what seems to challenge our familiar ways of thinking and perceiving reality. But what if those familiar ways of perception are actually inverting reality? What if what we call freedom is in fact addiction? What we call peace is in fact violence? What we call happiness is in fact suffering?

The desert teachers understood that to face the harsh truths of our illusion and dependencies is the fruit of the labour of many temptations. It is also a good part of the meaning of this joyful season of Lent. They called it wrestling with the demons but they knew that the demons are inside us. We merely evade the struggle by projecting them outside. The integrity of the person, our freedom to be ourselves

and to love others, is perfected by the testing that we embrace each time we sit to do the work of silence. Much happens when we do nothing.

So may Lent be a time when we deepen our meditation and so may it also be a time of simplification and liberation for us all.

*"Addiction is the tragic consequence of mistaken identity."*

With much love,



Laurence Freeman, OSB