

# *Transformation*

## *Alan Keeler - Study Leave 2014*

### ***1. Introduction***

I wanted to be refreshed and to look more deeply into how people become Christians and grow in their faith. By 2014 I had been in full time Christian ministry for twenty four years. In 2014 I had been the vicar of a suburban church for eight years. I really felt I would benefit from a creative break. The church I serve is great and to be the vicar is a true privilege. But it has its demands both in terms of energy and needing to address issues not least in growing in numbers and maturity. I have always seen making disciples as a key dimension of ministry but had always wanted to do this in a better way. The Study Leave was taken during the months of March to May which gave me absence from my parish for the season of Easter and the Annual Parochial Church Meeting.

In discussion with the Rochester Diocese Training Office I planned three months of Study Leave around study, retreat and holiday. I did not want to leave the family home for any extended period as my wife and I have a disabled daughter and I am a part of caring for her. I was very grateful to the congregation of my church to support me in doing this. Living at home and yet not being drawn back into the concerns of ministry requires some planning and practicalities; not least with telephone and email. I am particularly grateful to my very wonderful and able wife who has fielded issues that have arisen.

### ***Study***

Although my subject for study was making and growing disciples I had always been uncomfortable with what I saw as a principally educative method. Churches have found a lot of value in using courses such as Alpha, Emmaus and the like. I have often found people reluctant to relate to their faith in a setting where they are being taught. I have also found people will act as critics of the event rather than participating as learners. I thought I would look at discipleship as transformation and actively look at myself as someone to be transformed. I would engage in a number of activities which I was not familiar and indeed outside of my comfort zone.

I am not a particularly physical person not having been interested in sport or dance. So I decided to do a course in ballroom dancing. I had never been to a football match and asked a friend if I might attend. I saw that Help For Heroes run a rehabilitation programme called Battle Back which sounded transformative. I met the wife of a prison chaplain and thought it would be worth seeing how prisoners seek to be reformed. My daughter Laura invited me to join her on a scuba diving course and I accepted.

Along with activity I also wanted to do some reading. I began with *Teaching to Transgress* by bell hooks just because I liked the title and the reviews that I read looked like addressing the whole person and not just 'learning stuff'. Although I have my doubts about courses, the Church of England began to publish *Pilgrim* in 2013 and the approach looked novel, participate and spiritual. I wanted to spend some time looking at this.

### ***Retreat***

The retreat element of Study Leave is to be an opportunity for spiritual growth. I planned a couple of days away at the beginning of the leave and a couple of days towards the end. But I also wanted to pay attention to my private prayers and to look at types of churches that differ from my own one.

I had been told that there was such a thing as New Monasticism. The aim of living a more declared form of life under a rule of life looked very interesting. I chose to spend some time with the moot community who are based at St. Mary Aldermary in the city of London.

## ***Holiday***

I went to Berlin with my wife and youngest daughter for five days in April. The three of us went to Oxford for a week in May to see the city and catch up with friends. We also took the following week as a staycation.

### ***'What are you doing?'***

This was a familiar question I was asked during preparation for the Study Leave and during it. I was very pleased with how interested people were in my approach. The idea of transformation and the activities I had planned genuinely interested people. Quite a few asked me to let them know how I got on. I write this document with a view to giving it to a number of people and making it generally available. Who knows, there maybe even a book and film to come! But then again maybe not. But what I do know is that I have been transformed and I hope what follows will not only flesh that out but have a fruitful impact on my future ministry.

## ***2. Retreat***

Leaving the familiar practices of parish ministry means actively seeking alternative places to worship. In short what do you do each day and what do you do on Sunday? In terms of daily, the clergy of the Church of England are to say morning and evening prayer. It has always been something I have done with a heavy heart. We each have our own temperaments. For me the one size fits all has always been rather dull. This is a really serious state as worship is a keystone of relating to God and surely this should be better.

Through the Study Leave I took more time in what is known as 'centring'. This is the practice of preparing oneself to pray. I paid attention to breathing, a regular opening prayer, a mindfulness exercise with the body and a review of the previous day. All of these are pretty standard and I supply a more details description in an appendix. What I would say is this was truly wonderful and I made myself do it even if I did not feel like it because it did transform me from worried, anxious and distracted into calm and open to pray. I also used the prayers for the day but in a shorter form with a concentration on the Bible readings and intercession. An app on a smartphone<sup>[1]</sup> is really great for this as you do not need a prayer book, Bible and lectionary. Just one click and you are away.

The actual times away were largely doing the above but with a time and a space that were very special. I have never been all that bothered with retreats in the past. But this will be part of my ministry for the future both personally and facilitating events in the parish.

For Sunday worship I visited the moot community on half a dozen times. I was struck by the hospitality, friendliness, simplicity yet depth of worship and youth (mid-twenties to early forties) of the congregation. The building is classical and beautiful. The West end is open with comfortable sofa style seating and a coffee bar. It is used through the week as a drop in for city workers and church meetings. The society of the church is welcoming and generous. Services end with a visit to the pub that helps people get to know each other. There are activities/services with meditation, Taize, Eucharist and yoga. I also attended a couple of community councils. These were open and the discussions were intelligent, practical and fun. Moot does have issues to deal with not least money. But as a 'fresh expression' there is something very fresh there.

My Sunday worship also included a range of local churches and traditions. It was good to be welcomed and see alternative ways of doing things. There are many churches in good heart.

## ***3. Holiday***

Perhaps the unexpected pleasure was having so many evenings in. This was both about time with my wife and being refreshed. Long days and late evenings are very draining in parish ministry. Actually I am not a workaholic, I do take my day off and annual leave. But it could still be better and healthier. However

another issues is that with a disabled daughter I need to need to be there to release my wife from so much direct care. More resolutions for the future.

One of the real joys of holidays was to visit people who I have not seen for a long time. There was the vicar and his wife of the church we attended when first married. A work colleague who was a mentor to me as a young Christian who encouraged my vocation. A past spiritual director. Dear friends who were in a Bible Study group when we were first married who are now both ordained. The 'long time' ranged from twenty seven years to two. But for each there was such a sense of sharing in our faith, delightful memories and expectation for the future. Somehow life seemed very large and strong.

## **4. Study**

### ***Activities***

I began with a ten week course in ballroom dancing. Dancing has never been an enthusiasm for me and I thought I would be most uncomfortable. In a way I was disappointed. Largely I felt quite at home. The most frustrating thing was remembering the moves. I attended as an individual and dancing with partners I had not met before was actually quite enjoyable. The people who came as couples seemed to find the experience more difficult. Perhaps only one had really wanted to attend and perhaps they knew each other well enough to be unrestrained about their troubles. The main thing I learnt that although I am an introvert I have gained a lot more confidence in dealing with people than I realised.

My football friend supports Millwall. I remember Millwall from my school days as I grew up locally. On a Monday morning the louts of the school would tell everyone about their adventures at the match at Millwall on Saturday. It was not a peaceful story. The match I went to see was very important. It was near to the end of the season. Millwall were in danger of relegation and every goal was vital. The crowd were socially mixed and good natured. Personally I find football disappointing, so much effort and so little result. A good match might gain five goals, honestly. So I watched the match and thought it, well, disappointing. But for the regulars it was totally different When the action got close to a goal they could not sit still. I refrained from asking a fellow to sit down as he was obscuring my view, I had to stand too. When the action did not lead to a goal the crowd commentary was vulgar but also extreme in another way. I heard someone say they felt they were being tortured. They felt such deep frustration. Someone else said it was so unfair, as if just playing strongly won you the right to a goal. People hold a great deal of value for faith and church but rarely have I heard anyone express their feelings in such a clear way. The score was nil-nil, a frustrating match and no help to stave off relegation.

I visited the Help For Heroes recovery centre at Tedworth House<sup>[2]</sup> in Wiltshire. Help for Heroes are one of the three agencies that rehabilitate injured service personnel. The others are the MOD and the Royal British Legion. I was told that the latter two agencies have a great investment in facilities and clearly defined programmes. Help for Heroes arrange themselves around three phases Inspire, Enable and Support. The approach is centred on the person to be rehabilitated. They need to be inspired because they are the prime motivator and beneficiary of their rehabilitation. The enabling and support is arranged by using the facilities that are most easy to access. This might mean a residential facility like Tedworth House but the last thing Help for Heroes wants is to own more facilities than necessary. So they seek the best available in the community. They have a very keen eye on the goal which is about people and rehabilitation. Having identified these ends they arrange for the means to achieve them. There is also an understanding that progress may take several steps. To inspire is a difficult but crucial task that will take time, tact and activities to get people on the path to real participation.

I contacted the chaplain of Wandsworth Prison and I was invited to the final session of a restorative justice course. Restorative justice seeks to present offenders with the victim's perspective of their actions. People often understand this as offenders meeting the actual victims of their crimes. In practice this is rare. The course was called Sycamore after the account of Zacchaeus in The Gospel of Luke chapter nineteen. They give the material a Christian base even though the participants are of other faiths or none. The last session

which I attended had about twenty offenders and it was for them, if they wanted, to share with an audience what the course meant to them. All but one spoke, they shared about beginning to realise what their victims had suffered and also how their families and friends had suffered too. The course had included input from a couple who run the Chris Donovan Trust<sup>[3]</sup>. Chris was eighteen when he was murdered. From this experience his parents Ray and Vi have a powerful testimony of what being a victim of crime is like. They have a ministry to help offenders rehabilitation through restorative justice. The participants in the Sycamore course spoke of being very moved by Ray and Vi's story and work. This expression of restorative justice is a great testimony to the power of the personal. Yes, justice is about principles but when these are expressed in the realities of people's lives, particularly where suffering is involved, the effect is very great.

Learning scuba diving involves a proper course, not least because there are real dangers involved. My daughter was going to visit a friend in the Cayman Islands. The course involves two parts. She was going to do the introductory weekend in Wimbledon and the four open water dives in the Cayman Islands. I joined her for the introduction and then did my open water dives in Snodland. Well it gets the job done. We had a pack of information to work through in the week before the course. There was a course book and DVD to cover which had many assignments to complete. The introduction was two days with theory in the morning and practical work with diving equipment in a swimming pool in the afternoon. The theory is straight forward, the equipment and diving are great fun. The thing that really struck me was the management of dive depth and times. When you swim under water the blood absorbs nitrogen. The deeper you go and the longer the time the more nitrogen is absorbed. If too much is absorbed when you surface it will be released from the blood like opening a bottle of fizzy drink. The bubbles of nitrogen produced are painful and in extreme cases fatal. This is called decompression illness. There is a second danger in that if you dive too deep the nitrogen affects the thinking in the brain, producing hallucinations, this is called nitrogen narcosis. It is very important to plan your dives for depth and duration to avoid these perils. My reflection on this is that the stresses of life are like nitrogen being absorbed. The trials of life can be endured for too long and we can become disorientated in our thinking and relationships. I wrote earlier about days off and annual leave but I think there is work to be done on self management and leadership to ensure stress is dealt with well.

### **Reading**

*This is a rather brief round up of the books and ideas that struck me. It really requires a solid piece of writing but for now it gives a flavour of what excited me.*

I picked up *The Power of Habit*<sup>[4]</sup> just because I liked the blurb on the cover; 'Why we do what we do and how to change'. Charles Duhigg describes many very practical situations where learning has happened through experience. I liked the approach of Starbucks that they are a people business selling coffee and not a coffee business selling to people. It is first about relationships with customers and then selling them things. I also found Duhigg's description of how the London Underground fire at Kings Cross in 1987 came about. The working practices of the company were so tightly arranged around particular activities that responsibility for safety fell between everyone and was not actively pursued. Both of these relate very directly to how an organisation can be misdirected or blind.

I like the writing of Oliver James and *Office Politics*<sup>[5]</sup> outlines three personality types in narcissist, psychopath and machiavel. He describes how these can come together in what he called triadic types. The main theme is that 'nice' people can be so forbearing that truly horrible people are not challenged and make life miserable or worse for those around them.

I had really wanted to look at *Teaching to Transgress*<sup>[6]</sup> by bell hooks. I had read a little about hook's approach to educating people beyond the usual confines of the classroom. Her main focus was with empowering women and black people. Through this the penny finally dropped with me about the importance of politics in a wide sense and the need to see the depths of the issues we deal with and the courage and practicality to make a difference.

bell hooks mentor was Paulo Friere and his seminal work was *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*<sup>[7]</sup>. I read of his work in oppressive Southern American societies. He begins with a very human understanding of oppression. All the people involved are to be treated as subjects, people with value, personality and intent. They are not to be treated as objects just to be manipulated. He describes how oppressed people are to be released from 'housing the oppressor within them'. The oppressed can unwittingly assume that oppression is the only way to live. They must be released from this delusion even while oppressed and be able to take power without in turn becoming oppressors. Friere also identifies the way much education is what he calls a banking model. This means merely depositing information in the recipients. Oppression is overcome by dialogue between mutual subjects. It is not about transmitting information but engaging with people who you treat as subjects and being transformed oneself. This dialogue is to be both word and actions. Words without action are chatter and actions without words is just activism. The sphere of this work is political engagement and transformation of society.

With the theme of politics definitely now of interest I read *God's Politics*<sup>[8]</sup> by Jim Wallis. The situation for the book is very much the United States. The subtitle of the book is 'Why the American Right gets it wrong and the Left does not get it'. This summarises the way religious people can pick the wrong targets for their faith and secular people do not engage with the values that underpin people's actions. Wallis writes about the run up to the Iraq war and the intense efforts of a huge faith coalition to present an alternative. The subtitle of that section of the book is called 'When did Jesus become pro-war'. He says we need to be peace makers not peace keepers. In a similar way he looks at other dimensions of American life and asks 'When did Jesus become pro-rich'. There is a need not just to care for the poor but ask why they are poor in the first place. He also asks 'When did Jesus become a selective moralist' and seeks to get the church out of its ghetto of simplistic sexual ethics. With regard to the right and left of politics he seeks to a bipartisan commitment with a non-partisan cause. The aim being to see the issues that face the whole of society and not being drawn to one side of the politics. At one point when people were simply passing blame around he simply asked 'who is responsible here?' The point being that even if some issues some people got wrong the community leaders all held responsibility and were the people who need to make a difference.

I also read Martin Buber's 'I and thou'<sup>[9]</sup> which from his own point of view develops the area of treating people as subjects that Paulo Friere wrote about. I also read Gordon Oliver's 'Holy Bible, Human Bible'<sup>[10]</sup> which was helpful in seeing the connection between the social issues I had been reading about and the resources in scripture and using them wisely. Michael Sandel's book 'What money can't buy'<sup>[11]</sup> was a very grounded book about the ethical issues of putting a price on everything. He tells the story of a playgroup that had parents picking their children up late. They did this with a sense of shame. The playgroup decided to fine people for lateness. The lateness got worse and people no longer felt guilty as they saw the fine as a fee for additional time.

Although my main interest was not in courses I looked at the Church of England's course called 'Pilgrim'<sup>[12]</sup>. This is a major resource with new elements still being published. The approach is very open in as much it uses liturgy to enable a wide devotional participation. There is the use of scripture in a reflective group method; really the traditional method of Divine reading. There are visual and audio resources to lead into issues and provide a teaching content. Much of this is readily available on the Internet<sup>[13]</sup>. There is such a good structure and support that I think that many confident people in church would be able to run a course with the people around them.

## ***5. Final Reflections***

My Study Leave was about transformation and if there was a short way to express this it would be Jesus saying that he came to give abundant life.<sup>[14]</sup> There are many reasons why we settle for less. Some times we settle for what is usual, sometimes we cannot see the options and sometimes we are manipulated out of what is our right. I have returned with joy from my study leave and feel very energised to continue in my vocation. My hope and prayer is that my ministry will enable many other people to find the life Jesus seeks

of and indeed Jesus himself. I would also like to spend some time writing a more thorough account presenting what I have learnt on my Study Leave.

### ***Appendix - some simple spiritual practices***

Many people complain of difficulties in prayer because their minds wander. Spiritual writers describe ways to centre ourselves in preparation for prayer. I found the following useful.

Situation - finding a place that is quiet and comfortable to sit. Sitting with a good upright posture, the legs not crossed and the hands in the lap.

Breathing - three or so deep, slow inhalations and exhalations.

Familiar, memorised prayer - using a favourite item that links with one's breathing, see below.

Bodily awareness - taking time to pay attention to one's body one part at a time, see below

Review of the day - bringing to mind the events of the previous twenty four hours, see below

These practices connect us with ourselves in a wide way and affirm that God is with us in the here and now, body, mind and spirit. I have found these profoundly calming and comforting.

Please, please, these are things I found of help. Do not follow slavishly. Try, adapt and play with what is described and if it is not you do not worry.

#### ***Memorised prayer***

This example uses familiar parts of St. Patrick's Breastplate

The prayer can just be read but if memorised is readily available where ever we are. This scheme uses a pattern of saying alternate lines as you breathe in and out.

|                    |  |
|--------------------|--|
| <i>breathe in</i>  | I arise today though a mighty strength     |
| <i>breathe out</i> | The invocation of the Trinity              |
| <i>breathe in</i>  | Through belief in the threeness            |
| <i>breathe out</i> | Through confession of the oneness          |
| <i>breathe in</i>  | Of the creator of creation                 |
| <i>breathe out</i> | Christ with me                             |
| <i>breathe in</i>  | Christ before me                           |
| <i>breathe out</i> | Christ behind me                           |
| <i>breathe in</i>  | Christ in me                               |
| <i>breathe out</i> | Christ beneath me                          |
| <i>breathe in</i>  | Christ above me                            |
| <i>breathe out</i> | Christ on my right                         |
| <i>breathe in</i>  | Christ on my left                          |
| <i>breathe out</i> | Christ in the heart of all who think of me |
| <i>breathe in</i>  | Christ in the mouth of all who speak of me |
| <i>breathe out</i> | Christ in the eye of all who see me        |
| <i>breathe in</i>  | Christ in the ear of all who hear me       |
| <i>breathe out</i> | I arise today though a mighty strength     |
| <i>breathe in</i>  | The invocation of the Trinity              |
| <i>breathe out</i> | Through belief in the threeness            |
| <i>breathe in</i>  | Through confession of the oneness          |
| <i>breathe out</i> | Of the creator of creations                |

### ***Bodily awareness***

We can imagine that our true selves and prayer is about words. But we are complete people and knowing our bodies is very valuable. The following is a way to know our bodies. This scheme again uses a pattern of breathing to structure the attention. The aim is to think of each part of our body. If we find there are tensions or pains they are to be passed over in this exercise and come back to them, later.

|                    |                             |           |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|-----------|
| <i>breathe in</i>  | Toe, heel, ankle            | Monday    |
| <i>breathe out</i> | Calf, knee thigh            | Tuesday   |
| <i>breathe in</i>  | Pelvis, abdomen, chest      | Wednesday |
| <i>breathe out</i> | Shoulders, upper arm, elbow | Thursday  |
| <i>breathe in</i>  | Forearm, palm, fingers      | Friday    |
| <i>breathe out</i> | Neck, head, mouth           | Saturday  |
| <i>breathe in</i>  | Head, neck, back            | Sunday    |

(In particular the straight alignment of the body)

A refinement is to follow up the exercise by concentrating on one particular part of the body each day as indicted by the day in the week on the right of the table

### ***Review of the day***

Starting at the beginning of the previous day recalling each event one after the other. It is good just to remember the ordinary. If there had been exceptional or difficult things pass over them and include them in later prayer.

*Revd Alan Keeler*

*6 July 2014*

- [1] The Church of England has an official app for iOS and Android devices called Daily Prayer
- [2] <http://www.helpforheroes.org.uk/how-we-help/recovery-centres/tidworth-wiltshire/>
- [3] [www.chrisdonovantrust.org](http://www.chrisdonovantrust.org)
- [4] The Power of Habit, Charles Duhigg, Random House Books 2013
- [5] Office Politics, Oliver James, Vermilion 2013
- [6] Teaching to Transgress, bell hooks
- [7] Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Paulo Friere, The Continuum Publishing Company 1970
- [8] God's Politics, Jim Wallis, Lion 2005
- [9] I and thou, Martin Buber translated by Ronald Gregor Smith, The Continuum International Publishing Group 2004
- [10] Holy Bible, Human Bible, Gordon Oliver, Darton Longman and Todd 2006
- [11] What money can't buy, Michael Sandel, Macmillan 2013
- [12] Pilgrim, Church House Publishing beginning in 2013
- [13] <http://www.pilgrimcourse.org/the-course>
- [14] John 10.10