

My Journey to Spiritual Peace and Hope

By: Rev. Jim Russell

I was born in St. John's, Newfoundland. I grew up in a loving home with two brothers and a sister. My father was in business and in addition was very active in community work, giving unselfishly of his time and energy to serve on numerous boards and groups. My mother's work was primarily at home caring for us as we grew up but she also volunteered her time in hospitals and with other charitable community groups. In our family we were given lots of love but also given considerable freedom. With few restrictions we could play sports with our friends or wander the woods and fields around the small lake near our home. I drank in the beauty of nature all around me and passionately loved the freedom we experienced growing up so close to nature.

As I look back on my early life, the first spiritual influences I had were directly related to the beauty of nature. My initial spiritual experience was the experience of beauty. It touched me on a deep level and this profound love of beauty in nature has never left my soul. When I am away from it for too long, if I linger in cities too long, then my soul is poorer for it and life drains out of me until I return to the country or stand beside a lake and my soul is enthralled once again. In this spiritual experience I felt a harmony and a sense of peace with nature. In nature I communed with a reality that transcended my own life and self.

I did not receive much teaching about the Christian faith from my parents. They took me, my two brothers and my sister to St. James United Church most Sundays until our teenage years. During our teenage years it was increasingly difficult for my parents to convince us all to attend church services and we seemed to wander away from Sunday church attendance.

Throughout my teenage years I was very active in sports and spent a lot of time outdoors enjoying the natural world. As I had previously explained, I had a sensitivity and responsiveness to beauty and although I enjoyed the rough and tumble of boy hood sports, I also had an introspective and sensitive side. I enjoyed reading poetry and loved listening to the folk and rock music of the 1960's and 1970's. At that time I also began to do write poetry.

Throughout my later teenage years I had a deep inner longing for ultimate meaning and purpose in life. I searched for meaning and purpose in many areas including poetry, philosophy, Buddhism and Hinduism. I experimented briefly with drugs but nothing seemed to satisfy the deep inner longings of my heart. Because of my inner restlessness and lack of a clear purpose in life, I found it difficult to concentrate on high school and eventually university studies. I was aimless and in many ways stumbled through life like a piece of drift wood tossed about by the winds and the waves of the ocean.

In the summer of 1974 I worked on the coast of Labrador as a scuba diver and researcher with a fisheries research project. We lived on board ship and one of my fellow workers was a young man named Bill Kelly who was very interested in sharing his personal religious beliefs. Bill was so excited about his spiritual beliefs and talked with such utter confidence and assurance about his encounters with God, that I found Bill Kelly was a very hard person to ignore. At that time I was seeking spiritual truth and so I was interested in talking with Bill.

During the course of that summer I had several long conversations with Bill about God, the Bible and personal faith. Remarkably I remembered very little of the actual content of those talks but I do recall being deeply impressed by the sense of presence or something that Bill had about him. In addition he appeared to have a deep inner peace and a joyful love of life that I yearned to have. Bill shared with me his own Christian experience and spoke about his faith as a relationship with God. Bill had recently invited Jesus into his life and by this became something called "born-again". Very little of this made much sense to me but because of my spiritual thirst I was extremely interested. I believed there was a God but I had no idea how God wanted me to live. I didn't understand how belief in God could guide my life and daily moral decisions. As well I

was uncertain who Jesus Christ was. To me Jesus was little more than an intellectual possibility or philosophical theory rather than the Son of God.

I continued to talk with Bill and ask questions about God. Because of my interest Bill gave me a small New Testament which I began to read. In all my past attempts I never had much success in reading the Bible or understanding what it was trying to teach me. This new attempt was no different and so after the same old spiritual frustration, I threw the whole thing down for a while. I even became somewhat hostile to Bill and what I decided was his overheated religious faith.

I returned to university in St. John's in September 1974 half-hearted in my desire to study and discouraged in my search for spiritual truth and peace. I experienced a very hard term at university that fall. In addition I had a heart wrenching breakup with my girlfriend Deanna. I lost any peace that I did have and found it almost impossible to concentrate on my university studies or any plans for the future. All my dreams, hopes and aspirations were collapsing like a cleverly designed sand castle washing away on the beach.

Then some things happened that were very hard to explain. In later years I discovered that many people have these types of experiences but sometimes are afraid to speak about them openly because they seem like non-rational, intuitive experiences. For about two weeks I kept getting a very strong sense that I "should" talk to Bill Kelly, the zealous young Christian I met on the Labrador coast. I found this kind of experience very hard to ignore and finally admitted to myself that I really did need to talk with him. I gave in to that inner voice or urging, although in all honesty I would not have been able to say why I needed to talk to Bill.

I had no idea where Bill Kelly was at that point or how to contact him. I see now that forces larger than I were at work and one day I ran into Bill at the Thompson Student Center of Memorial University. In many ways I was greatly relieved to see Bill and said I needed to talk to him.

I knew in some way Bill was linked to my deep inner turmoil and as we sat in his house in St. John's, he looked at me and asked: "So, how is everything going?" I was torn within and part of me wanted to gloss over all my problems and say everything was going fine. But that would have been a lie for me. I was just about to pretend to be the tough, macho male and lie when another thing happened which was very hard to explain. I suddenly was given a deep flash of insight into what I was like and it wasn't very pleasant. We see many things in the mirror in the morning but we don't see with the deep penetrating vision of God. It was upsetting to have a mirror held up to myself and not be able to hide from it. In the mirror of God I saw I was a hypocrite.

I stopped fighting and surrendered. I surrendered to God that day in 1974. I felt a deep burden and pressure within my chest and I knew what I must do more than anything else in the world. I broke down and wept, saying to God: "God you take over my life now, because I have made a mess of it up till now."

This was my miraculous "Damascus Road" conversion to Christian belief. I didn't feel different or "born-again" but I knew deep within me that I had truly dedicated my life to God. I knew something else as well. I knew that I had been given enough faith to believe God would really take care of me and work out all my problems in God's own time. And truly God has taken care of me all these years since the autumn of 1974. This is in harmony with what is written in the Bible in the Book of Hebrews, when the writer, speaking of the power of Jesus Christ, says: "Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. (Hebrews 7:25 NIV)

Every day people go through stressful situations which can beat them down and challenge them to their very core. I have found over the years that when people are in these very stressful periods of their lives and things look very difficult, they are often open to hear about the hope and good news that is found in a personal relationship with God. Over the years I look back and see that some of the most meaningful and effective ministry with people has been with them in times of grief, illness, loss, divorce and separation. I have found that it is in those places where things look very dark such as in funeral homes, hospitals, and prisons, it is there that the risen Christ ministers most powerfully and shines his hopeful and healing light

upon people. I am not saying that God causes these tragedies but he surely uses them to wake us up to the reality of his presence in the world.

God used my circumstances to bring me to a point of humble surrender. He had to break through a lot of pride and rebellious self will before I could admit my need of God. Every person needs God, but we have a lot of ways of resisting him and pushing him away. Sometimes we refuse to believe until all our difficult questions about God are answered. Honest and sincere questions need to be addressed with openness and love but I find in times of crisis that list of questions gets shortened. A drowning person's questions about God get focused down to a narrow list very quickly.

This was so for a man we encounter in the pages of the Book of Acts in the New Testament. He was a Roman jailer in charge of a jail which held Paul the apostle and his companion Silas. An earthquake rocked the prison and all the prisoner's chains fell off. Assuming the prisoners had all escaped, the jailer was about to take his own life. The jailer was in deep crisis, on the edge of life but staring death in the face. When he realized the prisoners were all there, he came rushing in and "fell trembling" before Paul and Silas. This jailer was in crisis and he asked one of life's most crucial questions: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Paul knew what he was talking about when he gave him God's remedy for fallen people in crisis: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved-you and your household." (Acts 16:29-31 NIV)

When the writers of the New Testament speak of "believing", they mean more than accepting something in your thoughts. The original Greek in which Paul spoke really has a much broader meaning for the word "believe".

Paul is encouraging the jailer to "trust in, have confidence in and entrust your life to" the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.

When he said you will be "saved", Paul meant that you will receive the total gift of entrusting your life to Christ. This implies forgiveness and cleansing from your sins, being rescued from the judgment and punishment of God for your sins and being given the chance to walk in fellowship with God and be at peace with God. It also implies being given the power to be free of the bondage of sinful habits by the power of the Holy Spirit who lives in you. The gift of salvation also implies that you receive eternal life and have a home in heaven with God for eternity.

What is Christianity?

As my own spiritual journey clearly illustrates, the essence of the Christian faith is about a personal relationship with Jesus Christ rather than a series of religious rituals. I believe these deep foundational truths can be seen in the pages of the Old and New Testament as well. As a example of this we can look at the life of Abraham or Abram as he was originally known. In the Book of Genesis 17:17 this encounter with God is described:

"When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless.² Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers."

So in this biblical passage we can see the personal relationship that Abram had with God described as the kind of close relationship in which two people walk and have fellowship together.

Another good example of this is the relationship King David had with God. David wrote numerous psalms which are beautifully written poems and songs expressing his deepest and most intimate thoughts, emotions and longings to God. Psalm 42 is a good example of this:

As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, my God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When can I go and meet with God.

When we surrender our lives to the Lord Jesus Christ we become “born-again” by God’s Holy Spirit and we now actually have this same Holy Spirit living within us. We have our sins forgiven, become children of God and begin a new personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. We can now truly call God our Father. God loves each one of us with a love that is so great and amazing that it is hard for us to comprehend. As the Apostle John writes in his letter 1st John 3:1

“See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!”

To be a Christian based on the teaching of the Bible is to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and to follow his teachings. As Christians Jesus has called us to love God with our whole heart, mind, soul and strength and to love all people. The kind of love Jesus is talking about is what the bible calls in the Greek language Agape love. Agape love is an unselfish love, the love that God has for us.

Are you struggling with addictions, failure and defeat? Do you feel little hope for tomorrow? Is your life overwhelmed with feelings of shame for what you have done that brought you into prison? I would strongly encourage you to turn away from your sins, surrender your life completely to God and ask Jesus Christ to come into your heart and forgive you of all your sins. I believe God is a loving God standing ready with open arms to receive you into his kingdom of love and peace. If you make that decision please share that important decision with someone and start reading the Bible and spending time alone with God in prayer. Come out to the prison chapel and we will help you in your new walk with Jesus Christ.

This article is offered to people with the sole hope that it may help someone on their spiritual journey, just as I was also helped when someone spoke to me when my soul was in a “dry and thirsty land”. If you do, you will find in the Lord Jesus Christ the One who can give you “streams of living water flowing from your innermost being”. (John 7:38 NIV)

Jim Russell