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Singing “*Holy, Holy, Holy*” (Revelation 4:1–8)

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“And day and night they never cease to sing, ‘Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!’”

I was seven years old. My parents took me along with them to see my brother, who had entered Ely Cathedral Choir that autumn, take part in Sunday evensong. We sat at the top of the huge Norman nave, with its massive round pillars stretching out behind us, the amazingly elaborate architectural lantern full of light, suspended above our heads in an extraordinary defying of gravity. I don’t remember the singing, or anything about the service. But I remember becoming lost in all that space with an overwhelming, but not threatening, sense of boundlessness. For the first time in my life I sensed, with complete certainty, the Other – a ‘not me’ that I was nonetheless somehow part of. I left the cathedral that day struck by a quiet but all-pervasive awe that has never left me.

To respond, you have to be called upon first, and in terms of the theme of this series of individual responses, I have to say that the above experience came as a complete surprise to me. Up to then, I had no sense of being called upon to do anything, other than by my mother in her urgings to clean up my toys. The youngest of two children, I was born into an average middle-class English family, growing up in Cambridge and, after we brothers were sent to boarding school, in the small rural city of Ely. All I remember of church before the cathedral experience was of being taken to Sunday School in Cambridge. While my mother did whatever grown-ups do, I spent a lot of time with glue and coloured pencils. My abiding memory from that time is being entranced by the line, “*The purple-headed mountain*” in the hymn “*All Things Bright and Beautiful*” which we seemed to sing every week before getting down to the craftwork. So far, so pantheist then.

Spiritually speaking, I didn’t really kick on after that first childhood experience of the numinous. This was largely because of the desiccating effects of boarding school life. It wasn’t quite like Michael Palin’s spoof of Tom Brown’s Schooldays, but there were certain similarities. Whilst boys weren’t actually nailed to the walls for punishment or hunted down by the school leopard while trying to escape, I did indeed run away home on one occasion, desperately homesick, and I did have to endure a cruelly humiliating ‘initiation ceremony’ for newcomers kindly stage-managed by the senior boys.

The cathedral environment was little better. The choirmaster felt that the best way to instill confidence in the choirboys was to cuff them across the back of the head when they made mistakes. This ensured that I actually didn’t sing a note for about 18 months but mouthed the words in as convincing a manner as I was able. My fondest memory of the clergy, meanwhile, was in attending my first Christmas party for the choir at one of the houses in the Dean’s Close. The ground floor had been re-engineered in order to house an enormous

train set, with track passing through tunnels in walls and covering most of the available ground. It was a rare delight, but leaving the warmth and fun for the cold, dark environs of the boarding house afterwards only served to underline the essential joylessness of life as a nine-year-old away from home.

It is hard to even sense the possibility of a calling to respond to when much of you is simply trying to survive. Looking back, I think that that was what I was largely doing for the next three decades or so. This is notwithstanding the grace of being gifted with my extraordinary wife, Margaret, and the beautiful soul that is our son, Oliver. They came along, and our relationships blossomed and grew together, despite my struggling with spiritual direction. I am eternally grateful for them.

I don't mean to imply that survival meant unremitting struggle. Rather, I remember oscillations between truth and falsity. Spiritual truth for me was partaking in pure simple sacredness when singing Gregorian chant or gorgeous Renaissance polyphony – something I found mirrored in their own way in listening to the music of modern artists like U2, Mike Scott and Peter Gabriel. It meant reading the semi-mystical poetry of the Romantics, my particular heroes being Coleridge and Wordsworth. But the institutional Christianity in which I searchingly partook was more about seeing through a glass, darkly. I attended various places that embodied High Church Anglicanism as their mode of worship, none of which were ultimately soul-satisfying.

It all came to a head seven years ago. I took my family back to the UK, with the intention of living there permanently. There I uncovered the ghosts of my past – first encountered through those school years and buried by psychological necessity. In their coming to consciousness, the dim certainties of my life were shaken to the core. A period of shifting chaos followed that threatened to break everything apart and the outcome was an urgent need to purge myself of much that had burdened me. With the help of a series of counsellors, this involved my coming to terms with the effects of a person who had infiltrated my childhood family under the guise of friendship. I began on the path to fully understanding that he had used his self-interested 'special relationship with God' for his own abusive ends.

Given that it was he who had championed the High Church Anglicanism that was so part of my life to that point, I found myself suddenly averse to many of its forms and professions, and I suppose I might have rejected Christianity altogether at that point – as indeed have many who have experienced what I did. Amazingly, though, and with the help of my family, many wonderful friends and those very wise counsellors, I found a way to, in Richard Rohr's words, 'fall upwards'. The nascence of this took place in the warm and reassuring environment of a community of spiritual seekers calling itself 'Home' in Oxford. It really is not unlike Benedictus, except with the silence replaced by amplified songs. Despite the noise, the community is composed of unpretentious, open, welcoming and enquiring folk who look out for each other. I found a way of being real there.

It was also in Oxford in 2011 that I first encountered a new way of relating to the world. I began practising the moment-to-moment awareness of Mindfulness, and I was introduced to the writings of Thomas Keating and began my first faltering attempts to connect to the

God-given Self within me via the method called Centering Prayer. Both practices were key to my recovery, allowing me to find a sense of space and light beyond my fragile ego, and I arrived back in Australia at the end of the year with a hunger to find a place where I could further such experiences.

There was curiosity, and some amazement, when Margaret and I discovered a month after my return that a new venture was about to begin in the local church, calling itself 'Benedictus' and promising that at its heart would be a contemplative approach to worship. Ever since that first encounter in 2012, it has been a beacon shining forth safety and certainty in my world. It has provided reminders of the truth when my life has experienced confusing detours and troubling bumps along the road. It has provided me with an opportunity to express my own wonder at the divine mystery through music making. It has been a place where the ordinary has been suffused with the sacred and been thereby transformed.

Looking back, I feel a sense of amazement and gratitude that this sacredness has broken in at key moments – that a 'door in heaven' has opened and invited me to partake in what is on the inside. And this is true to that original intuition in Ely Cathedral. Despite the damage and loss, I have felt a connection with the 'not me' that has empowered me to reach beyond. What I glimpsed as a 7-year-old was the wonder of boundless possibility. Ever since, I have felt that this ever-flowing spring of Love needs only to be trusted in order to cultivate life and transform our individual and, in the process, collective worlds.

Hence my choice of the passage from Revelation. Since 2015 I have been able to make sense of my past by helping others work through theirs in my new job as a counsellor. It has sometimes taken me to extremely painful places, but it has also been very satisfying work, allowing me a sense of getting as close as I am able to answering that question: "*What does God want me to do?*". In all those I meet I have trusted that there is a divine core that knows what is true and beautiful, and that this core is thirsting for the light. While his vision is infinitely more poetic, I think St John the Divine had a similar intuition – that beyond our ordinary lives with their missteps and obfuscations, we are accompanied by "*living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind*", ceaselessly singing, "*Holy, Holy, Holy.*"