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Interiority and Recovery (Mark 1. 9-15)

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Towards the end of last year, Neville spoke with me about a book he was reading. It's called *Upturn: A Better Normal After Covid-19*, and it's edited by Tanya Plibersek, deputy leader of the Australian Labor Party. The book is comprised of short essays by leaders or commentators across a range of fields from industrial relations to agriculture, from energy policy to education, health care and the arts. There are First Nations and migrant contributors, scientists, actors, politicians, journalists and business people. All are exploring how the 'recovery' from the Covid-19 pandemic both calls for and opens opportunities to reform (even transform) Australian society. For those of you Zooming in from other countries, I imagine a similar literature is beginning to emerge in your context, though I'm conscious also that in some places the immediate crisis is still consuming and, perhaps, the possibilities for life 'after Covid' feel pretty remote. Even so, I hope these reflections may be relevant for us all.

In terms of policy direction, I find myself in strong agreement with much of this book's progressive vision. But – and this is why Neville wanted to talk about it – there is, strikingly, no religious voice included at all. Not only is there no essay by an official representative from any tradition – no bishop, imam, rabbi, or rinproche shows up! Even more strikingly, apart from the chapter by First Nations contributor June Oscar, there's no sense in the essays that religious communities, faith-based world views, or spiritual practice have a distinctive part to play in generating the 'better normal' to which the essays aspire.

It's not hard, of course, to understand why this is so. In liberal Western democracies, religion has long been confined to the private sphere and when it does appear in public it's, all too often, in reactionary or polarising ways. Not helpful, when you're looking to remake the fabric of society. And because there's no cultural

literacy concerning the distinction between mature and immature expressions of faith, these reactionary tendencies are assumed to be intrinsic to religion itself. Compounding this issue are the revelations of institutional abuse that have eviscerated any moral authority the churches (in particular) once had in our society. What Dietrich Bonhoeffer said of the German church in the 1940s holds true for us too: 'Our church', he wrote, 'which has been fighting in these years only for its self-preservation, as though that were an end in itself, is incapable of taking the word of reconciliation and redemption to ... the world. Our earlier words are therefore bound to lose their force and cease'.¹ Like I said, it's not hard to understand why, in a book like this, there's no exploration, seemingly no consciousness even, of a spiritual dimension to the process of recovery and societal renewal.

All the same, it's a striking absence. According to the 2016 census, more than 2 in 3 Australians follow a religion or have spiritual beliefs, and it's widely recognised that one of the consequences of lockdown has been a rediscovery for many people of something like an 'inner life'. Many have taken up spiritual practices and found support in online communities of faith. Questions are being asked about meaning. People are looking for fuller communion with others and the natural world in the wake of this crisis. There's an appetite for living into a different vision for being and becoming human. The contributors to *Upturn* are responding, at least to some extent, to this appetite – imagining the possibility of an ecologically flourishing planet and a truly just society. Yet the question they do not ask is whether we can address these issues at the necessary depth without engaging some form of spiritual work, without some recourse to the wisdom traditions of the world.

Yet again, what *would* it mean to posit this view? What actually is missing from the pages of this book? The more I've thought about it, the harder it becomes to articulate! If you read a fair amount of 'spiritual' literature, you often come across the assertion that spiritual transformation and social transformation are necessarily

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, intro. Samuel Wells (an abridged edition) (London: SCM Press, 2017), p.105.

interdependent. Richard Rohr, for example, has said: 'There is a deep relationship between the inner revolution of prayer and the transformation of social structures and social consciousness. Our hope lies in the fact that meditation is going to change the society that we live in, just as it has changed us'. This is the kind of thing I say. But the question I think we need to engage more deeply is what, in practice, this really means.

After all, the authors of *Upturn* have proved perfectly capable of coming up with a vision (apparently without reference to spiritual practice or the lived experience of faith) to which many of us could commit. They're engaged in seeking to realise this vision by means of dialogue, persuasion, coalition building, community organising, and systemic and legal reform. Nothing too glamorous or miraculous, just incremental steps worked at patiently and dedicatedly that make real differences over time. If there is an interiority, a recovery of the spiritual dimension of life that is necessary for the emergence of 'a better normal', then what does this amount to? How does it matter? If we can't respond to this kind of question, that will be why no contribution was invited from a religious figure, or even from a contemplative church!

Tonight, we mark the first Sunday in the season of Lent. And Lent is traditionally a time when we respond to the call to go deeper. We refocus on the centre, we turn back to what is essential. This is the meaning of 'repentance'. The passage we just heard tells of Jesus' baptism and wilderness sojourn, his total immersion in the absolute reality of God. When he bursts into public consciousness, he calls others into that same awareness and immersion. In Greek, as many of you will know, the word translated as 'repent' or 'repentance' is 'metanoia'. 'Meta' means 'changed' or 'beyond' and 'nous' means 'mind', 'intellect', 'intelligence'. We're to go beyond habitual, unconscious ways of knowing and being, to 'change our mind', so as to be more wholly responsive to the presence of God's justice, truth and power in our midst. 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news'.

But what does our turning at this level make available, make possible, for us and for the world in which we live? What new goodness and grace does it enable? These are questions I'd like us to explore this Lenten season. Because if we believe, if we intuit (at least), there is something about our prayer, our faith, our radical turning to God that matters for the life of the whole, then it also matters that we can help others recognise the difference this makes, that we can name what's missing when it's neglected or ignored. That we can contribute a chapter, so to speak, or even write an introduction, to the literature of recovery.

How to begin? Well, let me offer an invitation to a collaborative venture! This week, I invite you to seek to practice prayer and availability – as you do every week! To listen beyond the self; to be aware of ego-ic and limiting habits of mind, and open to Another. In other words, to be alert to, immersed in, what I'm calling the 'spiritual dimension'. And at the same time, notice how this practice, this awareness affects your way of being, your experience of yourself and your circumstances – your work, your relationships, your vision. What happens? What do you notice and how do you act?

I'm not interested in whether you're good all the time; whether you live up to what you think a spiritual person should be like. I'm interested in us together beginning to explore the connections between our faith and spiritual practice and how we live. To work at articulating how it affects what's possible in our various spheres of family, school, surgery, farm, veterinary clinic, government department and the like. And let me know, what you find and what you are wondering about. I'll be seeking to do this too. For my hope is that our Lenten journey not only draws us deeper into the heart of God, but will help us more fully manifest our part in realising 'the better world our hearts know is possible'.