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Voices of Hope: Australia21 and Mindfulness for Parliamentarians (Acts 17. 19-28)

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This short series on 'Voices of Hope' links to the Lenten Reflections which Sarah led on "Interiority and Recovery" and her recent series "How God Acts".

The Lenten reflections grew out of a conversation Neville Hurst, from our community here in Canberra, had with Sarah about a book edited by the Australian Federal Parliamentarian, Tanya Plibersek. Titled *Upturn: A Better Normal after Covid-19*, eminent people in their respective fields contributed chapters on environmental, social, economic and international policy issues facing Australia; and how the 'recovery' from the Covid-19 pandemic both called for, and opened opportunities, to reform Australian society. Friends on Zoom may be aware of similar conversations and writings in their countries.

As Sarah related, what Neville noticed was that "strikingly, no religious voice was included at all. Not only is there no essay by an official representative from any tradition – no bishop, imam, rabbi, or rinpoche - 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.

And so began Sarah's Lenten reflections in the weeks leading up to Easter. Those reflections raised the question – so what is it that a Christian contemplative church might have to offer into this particular marketplace of ideas – into reflection about a 'better normal post Covid-19?' Is there anything special or different that we can bring? And what's the language we might use which would gain traction; have resonance and relevance for the broader community? I'm presuming that these are some of the questions which confronted Paul as he was invited to the Areopagus to share with the intellectuals and political leaders of Athens in his time, the new

teaching that he was proclaiming. I want to return to these thoughts about Paul later.

But staying with Sarah's Lenten series. Some members of the Benedictus community wondered whether there might be another volume called for which addressed questions of values and meaning; what and how spiritual or faith-based practices might play a part in underpinning and sustaining a "new better" after Covid 19.

At the same time, it was suggested that hearing stories about initiatives in our communities would be a good way to share information and raise hope about the future; and reveal a little more about how God acts.

As a result, we heard two weeks ago from Janet Salisbury about the Women's Climate Congress and their endeavour to foster a real and respectful conversation about climate change and climate policy; and last week from Hazel Davies, the founder of Making Peas/ce, who shared the journey she has been on with First Nations, and non-First Nations, people involved with truth telling and reconciliation, using the symbolism of the desert pea. These were indeed voices of hope.

And Sarah asked me to share with you a little of the work of an organisation I have been involved in called Australia21; and, in particular, work around bringing mindfulness practices to Australian Parliamentarians and their staff – which some may think is a triumph of hope over experience, as Samuel Johnson once quipped. Australia21 is a not-for-profit company, established some 20 years ago to address complex public policy issues which didn't lend themselves to easy answers. The kind of policy issues it has tackled include drug law reform, climate change, refugees, assisted dying, resilience in Australia and what is the public good. When I joined the Board, I was attracted to the work of a fellow Board member, Dr Lynne Reeder, who had started exploring the role of mindfulness, empathy and compassion in public policy. This work attracted me because a mindful, dare I say contemplative, approach makes sense to me in the fields of politics and public policy – I think it can make a difference, and it aligned with my beliefs and values.

As this work progressed, Lynne established a national Mindful Futures Network which includes people from a variety of fields such as education, health, town planning, and various areas of business, who are involved or interested in the application of mindfulness to their profession. There are various definitions of mindfulness but in this context, we speak about “the capacity to pay attention, moment by moment, with an attitude of openness, curiosity and care, without judgement”. This work is guided by the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction, or MBSR program, developed originally by Professor Jon Kabat-Zinn at the Massachusetts University Medical Centre.

In addition to the Network, Lynne and I have built connections also with the Mindfulness Initiative in the UK. The work of the Mindfulness Initiative, based in Oxford, has involved some key Parliamentarians who were behind an All-Party Parliamentary Report back in 2015, called a Mindful Nation UK. As well as addressing policy issues, the Initiative so far has worked with over 300 members of the House of Commons and Lords and their staff in Westminster; and with Parliamentarians in some 45 countries around the world. It has developed training to support mindfulness practices, assisting with stress management, emotional regulation, and executive performance – all outcomes of mindfulness which meditation traditions have known, and which modern neuroscience research is corroborating.

Lynne and I have been working over recent years, with the support of people from the UK Initiative and an Expert Panel in Australia, to introduce the possibility of mindfulness training to Parliamentarians and staff here – in Canberra and also in the States. It has been slow and at times frustrating work, without a clear champion from within any of our Parliaments - which has been one of the keys to impact elsewhere. We have held breakfast meetings, after dinner meetings, Zoom webinars and the like. Just recently, some rays of light have started to break through. We’ll see what further transpires through this year.

There have been quite a few learnings for me through this experience.

The invitation to join the Board came unexpectedly. I have to admit that my acceptance did not follow deep thought and discernment; rather an opportunity arose, I was chuffed to receive it, and a choice was presented to me. In the choosing, things happen. John Taylor suggests that one of the hallmarks of the Holy Spirit's activity in the world is to present choice. Taylor maintains that the Creator Spirit works from the inside of processes, creating the necessity for choice; and that choice arises always from the contrast between the actual and the potential, between things as they are and things as they might be. This resonates with points Sarah made in her "How God Acts" series.

Another learning which is probably obvious but bears repeating – God typically uses our strengths and interests as we fulfill our vocation. Experience I have had with Ministers and Members of Parliament means I'm comfortable in that space and feel I have some understanding and empathy for their circumstances. It's a place where I think I can make a contribution.

In terms of the presentations we have made about mindfulness, I have been concerned at times with some of the more instrumental questions to which you feel you need to respond in order to gain some traction. For example, how much time will it take me to become mindful? What will I get from it? What are the benefits – is it stress management, improved executive performance, or something else? Where I have landed on this, is that you do need a 'pitch' in most circumstances to get a look in, to get "through the door" as it were. And if that gets you into conversation, then you can have a more expansive and nuanced discussion; and talk about how to develop an ongoing practice. And if a person sets off down the path of a mindfulness practice, then I am trusting that they will find something deeper - as well as some of the practical benefits.

One final learning is about hope. As well as belief in the importance of a mindful or meditative practice, hope for me, in this project, has derived also from the character of some of the individuals involved in the process - the agency they have shown; their commitment to their practice and their desire to share what they have

learned; and their persistence in finding pathways to effect change or open up new possibilities. One of those was a Parliamentarian in the UK (he lost his seat at the last election) who has remained a champion and leader of the Initiative in Westminster and around the world. Similarly, key people in Australia like Lynne Reeder have shown deep commitment, belief and agency. And in the case of one of our Expert Panel – when the possibility of a philanthropic grant emerged for a Consciousness and Contemplative Studies Centre at Monash University – they went for it. And now that Centre is to be established in the new year which is very exciting.

So that is some of my story and some of my learnings along the way. It is a little different to those of Janet and Hazel, but I trust it has been helpful.

In closing, I wanted to come back to Neville's original question about where are the Christian or religious or spiritual voices in the *Upturn* volume of essays? And what might those voices have to say?

In preparing for tonight, I did wonder again about Paul and how he might respond to the essays. Perhaps it would be along these lines:

Dear Tanya

Thank you for sending me a proof copy of the book you are editing. You have certainly collected a wonderful group of authors covering the full range of public policy issues in Australia. I can see clearly that you and your fellow authors want Australia to emerge well from this Covid pandemic. And as I was reading, I wondered what it was that might bring about the change to enable the community to address, in a new way, issues like inequality or homelessness or the treatment of First Nations people? What will bring about the shift? One of your authors, Rebecca Huntley, refers to the theory that the pandemic will yield a reassessment of values and lifestyle. But she says the evidence isn't bearing that out - there is a limited capacity for a pandemic to sustain bringing us all together.

I know the God-question is not fashionable to raise – and the word 'God' carries too much baggage for many. But as history shows, we humans can't live in

chaos and cannot stand meaninglessness. And one of your academics, David Tacey, argues “The sacred appears to be ineradicable because it is part of our makeup, part of who we are”. For me, the sacred is the One in whom we live and move and have our being. And this same view emerges clearly in the essay by June Oscar as she discusses the experience of First Nation people through this pandemic as they have returned to their homelands and experienced community and sacred encounter on and through their country.

So where will the wisdom come from, not just the knowledge, to guide you beyond this pandemic? As Huntley intimates, we need more than a crisis to take us deeper and be transformed.

Another of your First Nations women, your senior Australian of the Year, Miriam Rose Ungunmerr, speaks of the quality and practice of Dadirri: inner deep listening and quiet still awareness which is the gift Aboriginal people can bring to their fellow Australians. She speaks with great generosity of spirit and offers the promise of profound awakening and aliveness.

I think this is something which your *Upturn* will require – deep calling to deep in the roar of the waterfalls, as my tradition teaches.

My greetings to you and your colleagues – a handshake all round. And until we can meet again and talk further, grace and peace be with you. Written in my own hand, Paul.