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Call and Response-

'Don't make yourself a goal to stay alive. Make yourself a goal to stay human.'

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In 2003 as a disillusioned journalist and political advisor, Donna Mulhearn, a believer in the power of non violence, left Sydney for Baghdad and joined a team to be a human shield to protect sites such as water treatment plants, power stations, communications centres. These centres were crucial to the life of ordinary innocent Iraqis.

Each day she was challenged to recite the St Francis of Assisi Prayer:

'Lord make me an instrument of your peace
Where there is hatred let me sow love
Where there is injury, pardon
Where there is doubt, faith
Where there is despair, hope
Where there is darkness, light
And where there is sadness, joy.

O divine master
Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console
To be understood as to understand
To be loved as to love
For it is in giving that we are pardoned
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Donna says this is a radical prayer and she dares anyone to say it. She emphatically says don't pray this prayer if you don't mean it,

She says you don't make yourself a goal to stay alive , you make yourself a goal to stay human.

What have been and are my spiritual crucial centres ?

I begin my journey with the words by Joyce Rupp :
'Gathered together am I
From a history-held-mystery
A bundle of memories am I'.

In 1950 my parents Gizella and Emil Koro and my two sisters arrived in Sydney as migrants. They had spent 4 years in a displaced camp in Auberach, Germany having fled the horrors of the Russian army storming, plundering and raping their beloved Hungary.

I was born in Cowra, where camp accommodation had been organised for families who had fled Europe after the aftermath of World War 2. My father was sent to Nelson Bay for 3 years to complete a government contract for newly arrived migrants. My mother was left alone with her children in Cowra. When my mother went into labour with me she was taken to the Cowra birthing home. After my birth she was told to return to the camp with me in her arms. She walked 5 klms back to the camp. She was treated by the hospital staff like she was an alien. No compassion, a victim of racism and ignorance.

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My family spent 7 years in migrant camps before my mother saved enough money from her children's government allowance to put a deposit on a house. Harold Coates, an independent minister in the NSW parliament, went guarantor for the loan for my family.

I was raised a Catholic, steeped in the mass, the rosary, the mystics, the saints. I dreamt of becoming a stigmata for Christ. A significant day in my life was my first Holy Communion. I was dressed in white wearing a veil, and wore a pair of new shoes which were not hand me downs! I totally believed I was receiving the body of Christ in the Host at communion. It was a a holy moment.

Because my mother had graduated as a teacher in Sopron, Hungary, she was appalled by the low standard of qualifications for teachers in the Catholic school system at that time. I was consequently sent to a public school. Not long afterwards she got a visit from the Catholic priest ex-communicating her from the church for her defiance. She was no longer allowed to take holy communion. At my ordination in 1996 my mother courageously stepped out of the pew and took communion in the Anglican Cathedral in Bathurst for the first time in 45 years. Incidentally she started the first Preschool in Lithgow having lobbied 'party politics' and got a government grant. I had helped her write her speeches.

At the age of 10, I asked my mother for a Bible for my Christmas present, after having read a book called 'Mary Jones and her Bible', gifted to me by my 4th class teacher Anne White, a devoted Baptist. That was the beginning of my journey into 'the cloud of unknowing'. It was an introduction into future unexpected encounters with the Holy Spirit - moments where I would experience my body fused into that which is inexplicable.

I was a social activist in my late teens and twenties. When I was pregnant with my first child in 1974, I travelled into the eastern bloc countries under communist rule, smuggling in medical supplies, US dollars, illegal western literature and Bibles, and making contact with the Underground church and political dissidents. I worked for an organisation called 'The Voice of the Martyrs'. I experienced a faith that the western world could not begin to understand. It was born out of suffering. It was a New Testament church whereby they totally relied on the person of the Holy Spirit. The underground church's goal was not to stay alive but to be human shields for the kingdom of God.

I became a spokesperson for the release of Russian Jews from the Soviet Union in the 1980s. I witnessed the doors opening and the mass exodus of Russian Jews fleeing the reign of anti semitism. Having seen the play 'One day in the life Ivan Denisovich' by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and witnessing first hand the spiritual darkness in communist east Europe , what Solzhenitsyn experienced in the GULAG was translated in the play. He says the way to maintain human dignity is not through outward rebellion but through developing a personal belief system. In the play, we see Ivan in a Siberian prison camp. Ivan sees his goal is to remain human under forced labour where disease, exhaustion and starvation prevailed. He learns about friendship, compassion for animals, the promises we make, and the things we will do to help someone in need. Solzhenitsyn believed in justice. He thought human beings were, in their basic nature good, but that social circumstances could distort them, ruin them. This play was deeply cemented in my psyche. I experienced the fear and oppression on the Ukraine border in 1974. A 6ft

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Russian officer armed with a rifle and interpreter ordered me out of my van. My belief system told me to see the officer as a human being not my enemy.

When you have hundreds of American dollars stashed in the doors of your van and under the rubber lining of the van's flooring and inside a corset you are wearing, destined for political dissidents and persecuted believers, you face the reality that you have made yourself a target for prison, to be forgotten, to be tortured. You swallow the names of your contacts that are on rice paper. You vow not to betray. You become a human shield for humanity.

In September 1997 I was knighted into the Hungarian Order of Vitez and received the 'Knighthood of the Cross' in Budapest, Hungary. In 2012 I inherited my fathers' Hungarian knighthood as well. The joke amongst my friends is that I'm a 'double dame' and as the song says 'there's nothing like a dame....'

In 1996 I was ordained a deacon in the Anglican Church of Australia. My calling was to be a deacon in the workplace where my ministry was being a 'worker-clergy'. It was a ministry on the coalface. In other words it means 'doing the work involved and maintaining your secular job, in real working conditions, rather than planning or talking about it. I was very much influenced by the writing of Simone Weil and her attention to better understanding a community where the absence of God was evident in the physical and spiritual poverty she experienced working on the factory floors in Paris. She saw suffering as it arose in the sacrifices of human and divine love, as a necessary fact of life, neither to be rejected nor invited. For her it became a way of overcoming the human penchant for self-centredness. Simone says 'if we forgive God for his crime against us, which is to have made us finite creatures, He will forgive our crime against him, which is that we are finite creatures'.

In my professional working day as a children's librarian and deacon in the workplace I have always remained outside conventional methods. It allowed me to use the inner creativity in my soul. It is where God says 'May I have this dance'? There is an intimacy, a connection into God...a Pandora's box - that when you open it up, you discover creativity spilling out. It is where the artist picks up the instrument and makes the music alive through the touch of her fingers, her mouth, and reveals the sensuality of God. It is the area which few Christians dare to enter as theological fundamentalism over the years has tried to kill the creative sensuality of God in our humanness.

This 'pandora box', this 'pearl of great price', is only liberated as you dare to step outside of the cage, transformed through choosing 'not to stay alive' but 'to stay human'.

Visual images become creative forms of communication for me. They teach me how to use my intuition, my discernment and then use that knowledge through the sensual gifts of God. In the film - 'A Beautiful Day in the Neighbourhood' - Mr Rogers, played by Tom Hanks, is deeply sensitive in the way he communicates with children. Instead of nihilism, hopelessness and violence, the film is about Hope. It is subtle, melancholy and deeply felt in its sensitivity. He used worn out much loved puppets dialoguing with children, asking questions and listening to children's responses. His questions always had hidden meanings as he delved into understanding the naivety and innocence of the child. One child asked him 'what do you do with the mad that you feel when you feel so mad that you feel you would bite it'...

Mr Rogers is not a figment of one's imagination. He was an ordained Presbyterian minister who saw his church in the television studio being broadcasted to children all over the USA. In his final speech in 2002 at Dartmouth College he instructed his audience to

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remain silent and think about someone who had influenced them. He was a human shield of compassion and authentic love for children.

I chose books to read to children that would create 'A Beautiful day in the Library'. The books were to echo the reality of what was happening in our global village.

To name a few: 'My Dog' by John Heffernan; a story of real war seen through the eyes of a child as he searches for his family. His only companion was his dog.

'The Violin Man' by Colin Thompson, a story of lost dreams in the aftermath of the death of his ballerina daughter Marietta. It is his violin and music that comforts his pain.

'Lost and found' by Oliver Jeffers. It is a tale of friendship found, lost and regained.

I was able to translate the essence of these books imitating Jesus telling a parable. You can stop at pages and let children explore. Let dialogue happen. Find out how the child is thinking and why. Wait for responses. Don't rush, listen. Let the child interpret the illustration.

It was a unique opportunity to expand a child's understanding of literature and life. It opened up their feelings, their emotions, their curiosity, their imagination and their spirituality. The children began to hear the 'universal voice of love.' My church was the presence of the Holy Spirit bringing HOPE in the Public Library. It was a place where I felt I belonged to a community. A place where I was valued, but mostly it was place where God had sent me on a mission.

My testimony is not my theology nor my qualifications. My testimony is seeking and sharing compassion in a world gone deaf and mute, using Voice when appropriate, using Silence when appropriate.

In Psalm 84 it says 'Blessed are those whose strength is in you,
Who have set their hearts on a pilgrimage
As they pass through the Valley of Baca
They make it a place of springs.'

Baca is the Hebrew word for weeping. As you to pass through and experience the Valley of Baca - 'the Valley of Weeping' - you learn you don't have to stay there. It is a season. And the pilgrimage in that valley brings you to a spring, a 'spring of tears', that turns into 'a fountain of compassion'. It is an inner transformation. You see the motionless Christ on a rock slab, dead, bound in cloth

waiting for the Father to resurrect him. He is covered with the Fathers' 'spring of tears' that turns into the human 'fountain of compassion'. It is in the tomb whereby Father God shouts again - 'This is my beloved Son, whom I am well pleased'.

The tomb was and is a crucial centre in my life. It was my meeting place with Father God.

I am a mother of two adult children, Jonathan and Amy. Being a mother is a crucial centre of my life, just as Jesus was a crucial centre of Mary's life.

Sholem Asch, a Jewish Writer of the early 20th century, wrote a book called 'Mary'. He writes a scene where Mary is at the foot of the cross.. 'and suddenly the mother's body shuddered... her eyes directed at a point in space, her lips open and mute..... they saw her pale suddenly, a violent gasp wrenching her mouth , then they saw her smile, her eyes filling with tears....her hands reached out trembling , and from her smiling lips, softly and tenderly, fell the familiar words... Tinoki, tinoki'.

The meaning of this word Tinoki in Hebrew is 'suckling'. Sholem Asch leaves us with the image of the human Mary offering her breast at the final hour.

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Gerald Manley Hopkins translated a poem called 'Lost, All in Wonder' by Thomas Aquinas. He speaks of the sacrifice of blood by the mother pelican. In the poem in medieval bestiaries, the mother pelican was said to pierce her own breast in order to feed her starving nestlings with her blood....'

Aquinas writes : " Bring the tender tale true of the Pelican;

Bathe me Jesu Lord, in what the bosom ran - blood whereof a single drop has power to win,
All the world forgiveness of its world of sin'.

Jesus, Mary's suckling, pierced his own breast to feed us, his 'starving nestlings'.

From the valuable lessons I have learnt from the knitting together of spiritual soul friendships, I have understood the spiritual androgynous characteristics of the triune God - the female/male. These include the blending of assertiveness and analytical skills with communal expressive traits of empathy and subjectivity which then have led me into levels of soul creativity and mental health. We are all made in the image of God. Jesus had this amazing capacity to weave in and out of his highly developed male/female traits. He is the essence of being 'truly androgynous'. This is indeed a fulfilment of Jesus being completely human.

My introduction into the Benedictus contemplative meditation was fortuitous. It was at a time when I had finally chosen to retire from full time employment and begin to search for a deeper vision into the shadows of my soul. For the first month of attending the Zoom 5.30pm meditation I spent each session slowly letting go. I can remember telling my soulmate that all I wanted to do was cry. I wasn't in pain, I wasn't emotionally disturbed, I wasn't lost. I was experiencing the freedom of self and ego being silenced in silence. I remember distinctly a meditation where my soul was being plunged deeply into a waterfall. I kept coming up for air, gasping. It was unfamiliar of how the flow of this water was controlling me. I began to fight it. I just wanted to stay alive. It was a sudden realisation of just how much there was still a part of me wanting to 'stay alive' holding onto my ego, rather than 'staying human.' Benedictus is where I also wrestle with God. It is in contemplative prayer that I see into the mirror of my soul and it reveals the reality of my souls' condition.

I have two significant paintings in my house. One called the 'Red Tree' and another which I recently purchased called 'Conversations under the Red Tree'. The artist is a Russian/Australian, Jew, Greg Hyde.

I found the first painting in an art gallery in Paddington. I wrote to the artist sharing with him the meaning of the painting to me personally. His comment was: 'I always paint for a particular person...I don't know who that is.... When they find the painting it is the inspiration for me to continue to paint'. He thanked me for finding the painting. My latest acquisition, 'Conversations under the Red Tree', speaks to me of how contemplative prayer has taken me into the red dominion of that which is unknown but significantly visible and bold. It speaks of sacrifice, danger and courage. It exposes my vulnerability, that part which is human. As the psalmist says in our reading tonight : 'Come listen, all of you who fear God; let me tell you what he has done for me. I cried out to him with my mouth, his praise was on my tongue. If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. But God has surely listened and heard my prayer . Praise be to God, who has not rejected my prayer or withheld his love from me.'

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Daily I look at another painting in my study which is named 'The Eye of the Storm'. The artist is Rod Pattenden. It is where Benedictus takes me ...right into the 'eye' of the heart of God. It is where I am 'Lost, All in wonder', I enter a sanctuary where I can leave behind the pollution of anxiety, pain, violence, hatred, misunderstanding, condemnation, church rivalry, political discord and ego. Each day I ask God to breathe compassion into me, remembering that my goal is not to 'stay alive' but to 'stay human'.

The prophetic echo of God's love says - do not think that we are immune to human suffering, that we can bypass the 'Valley of weeping', do not think we will not be betrayed by the very ones we have sat with at the table, do not think we will not be reviled and spat upon, scourged mentally, psychically and physically beyond recognition. Jesus tells us 'We are to take up our cross daily', but when you enter into 'the eye of the storm' and have been transformed in the 'fountain of compassion' you hear Jesus saying - 'take up your neighbour's cross as well'.

As it is written in Revelation 12: 11 - 'They overcame him by the blood of the lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death'.

Donna Mulhearn says 'don't make yourself a goal to 'stay alive', make yourself a goal to 'stay human'.