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**PILGRIMAGE AND THE PROPHETIC CALL** (Isaiah 43:16-21)

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In many people's lives there are various phases – and I like to think there have been many in mine. When Susanna asked me to do this talk, I immediately thought of the idea of Pilgrimage and the Prophetic path – as they have been themes in my life over several decades.

One of my favourite quotes that I used in the beginning of a book I wrote that was published in 2004 – called *Steps to Life* – is the famous Dante opening from *The Divine Comedy*:

*'Midway this way of life we're bound upon, I woke to find myself in a dark wood, Where the right road was wholly lost and gone. Ay me! How hard to speak of it – that rude and rough and stubborn forest! The mere breath of Memory stirs the old fear in the blood; it is so bitter, it goes nigh to death; Yet there I gained such good, that to convey the tale, I'll write what else I found therewith.'*

That famous opener has been used by other authors since, as I'm sure you're aware – but it encapsulates what is a common thread in the human spiritual journey – desolation followed by a path to enlightenment.

I began studying screenwriting about a decade ago, and wrote my first script in 2010. Ironically this took place after several traumatic events in my life that occurred just before that time. Those events were in succession:

The death of my boyfriend, and then my spiritual director – a former Jesuit – both within two months of each other. At the same time – I had a bitter property issue to deal with which involved seeking legal advice, whilst also coping with a lot of haranguing from several people in relation to the matter. I eventually got an offer from someone to buy my property on the one year anniversary of my boyfriend's death – the timing in itself I now view as prophetic - and embarked on a pilgrimage of sorts in November that year – (the anniversary of my spiritual director's death) - a long drive down the East coast and beyond. These events were a significant synchronicity for me - they coincided with me also finishing grief counselling - and the process symbolised a movement from tragedy – into a new phase – the embodiment of a slow seeping light. Although I felt quite distant from God at that time – and for the next couple of years – indeed I avoided church altogether during that period - I did feel propelled by the call to do and be something else. I couldn't articulate it – I just

knew I needed to keep moving – so I didn't settle for a while – moved house a lot -and wrote that first screenplay.

In regard to screenwriting – people in that industry sometimes ask – what are your six key scenes? I was asked that by someone, after I'd outlined my first story and then told him about it. Well for me – when I was asked to give this talk – I immediately thought of the analogy of six life phases – Desolation /crisis /grief – Emptiness – the slow pilgrimage –a turning point – re-enchantment – and finally, finding the prophetic path. Part of the Isaiah reading that we just heard, also particularly speaks to me:

**\*No need to remember past events no need to think about what was done before**

**\*Look I am doing something new**

**\*Now it emerges; can you not see it?'**

Those six phases I mentioned could be used as an analogy – or could even be condensed into four:

For example: Tragedy - Pilgrimage – Conversion and Renewal/ Prophetic Mission

It doesn't matter. The point is the same. New life can come out of tragic or difficult events.

There had been other similar pilgrimages in previous decades – like in the early 1990s when I went on a religious search – again after a very difficult time in my personal life. Drawn to the inherent mysticism and ritual of Catholicism, I then became a Catholic – despite some of my misgivings about institutionalised religion; and that religion, in particular. In quick succession, I studied a theology degree with the Marists of an evening, and started hospital chaplaincy during the day. All these events took place seemingly outside my control but – as we have often heard - it's the still small voice...and I felt compelled to continue....

The pilgrimage and the finding of a prophetic path continued. In 2014 I was privileged to meet Franciscan priest Fr Richard Rohr in Sante Fe, New Mexico at a Spiritual Directors International convention. Richard had kindly endorsed an American revised edition of my previous book- now called '*12 Steps to Spiritual Freedom*' and was one of the speakers at the convention. Other speakers included Buddhists and a former Jesuit, his wife, and his Jesuit priest brother, who presented their research findings on Near Death Experiences, and revealed a common report of those having near death experiences - the idea of the 'life review'.

Santa Fe was another significant milestone in my life – because it further highlighted the movement to new life, and a prophetic call to try to capture what I had seen. New Mexico and particularly Ghost Ranch in the mountain ranges of New Mexico, where I attended a retreat, have been the haven of many artists, writers and spiritual searchers. The artist Georgia O'Keefe lived and worked there for many years. The area is considered to be a 'thin place' – a place where the line between the material world and the spiritual word is said to be very thin. It has a history of high occupation by the indigenous American Indian

population, – and also by Mexicans. Once again, I found myself experiencing the profound presence of the Other.

Desert environments have always spoken to me – even as far back as 1984 when I was at a stopover in Amman, Jordan – long before I ever entertained any interest in Christianity - I looked out of my hotel room at the desert and saw something I can't describe there. It was a feeling of the transcendent I can't explain – and I certainly wasn't Christian at the time – just slowly waking up.

So where else has my own pilgrimage and prophetic journey taken me? During lockdown I did an online course on Mary Magdalene with Cynthia Bourgeault, which was life changing, and highlighted Magdalene's role – as a beloved disciple and the Apostle to the Apostles in Jesus' ministry. I have also studied and explored the recent scholarship around women disciples – and indeed tend to agree with Cynthia – that there weren't so much as 12 disciples – but around 70 – many of whom were women who provided for Jesus out of their own purse, as well as taking on spiritual leadership roles in the early Christian community.

From my research into contemplative spirituality – the work of Richard Rohr, Cynthia Bourgeault, Thomas Merton, the Benedictine monastic Bede Griffiths, Sufis like Rumi and other mystics who speak such wisdom – It seems clear that the Heart is the centre of who we are. Everything comes out of the heart in both the mystical and monastic context. I have learned to listen and watch out for the signs along the way. The Benedictine and Jesuit traditions - particularly Ignatian discernment - have particularly informed me – but so has psychology and contemporary spiritual programs that are free from religious dogma. All these things contribute to the whole.

I realised on Holy Saturday this year that it was the 30-year anniversary of my conversion to Catholicism – an anniversary with mixed blessings – as well as some difficult life events – such as the death of my sister - but a chance to reflect on the many highs and lows in my faith journey, - including desolation and disillusionment with the institutional churches - and what has happened to them over the past 20 years. Yet I haven't thrown the baby out of the bathwater in dealing with my occasional dismay or cynicism towards institutionalised religion– or the world around me for that matter. As Cynthia Bourgeault has referred to in regard to her own spiritual journey: I've just replanted myself in a bigger pot. I am still part of the institutional church – but I view it through a much bigger lens. I also love the ecumenical and contemplative gifts of places like Benedictus that help feed and enrich the spiritual hunger of myself and so many people. Certainly, the Spirit is awakening and calling many people to different forms of inclusive community worship.

Having worked with various communities like the HIV community up until a couple of years ago- and also having now worked in a multi-faith context at a university for the past seven years – I have also opened up to the spiritual framework of other cultural and faith traditions. I attend Muslim Friday prayers most weeks as part of my job – and I will never forget the first time I had the liminal experience of hearing the beautiful Call to Prayer- something that has stayed with me always. I also love the idea of the word Islam meaning 'submission to God'. It is true I think what they say – when you are prostrate before God – you are closest to Him/Her. As the

research I mentioned before also suggests, I also like the Hindu idea that when we die, we have a life review where we get to assess how we did in our lives – the good and the bad – again, like reviewing those key scenes from a movie.

In closing, I particularly love Rumi's poem *'This Being human is a Guest House'*, and the idea of accepting both the good and the bad in our lives: As he says; *'Be grateful for whatever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.'*