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THE SOMETHING MORE (Mark 2:13-17)

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I've been a writer of songs for many years and one of the things I've long known is that songs will only come to life and completion if I've followed the "light" – the promptings - the quiet and the loud promptings of the heart. Intuition is a gift that we all have and which exists to point us to the important - to that which needs to be unveiled and followed. Just as art comes to life through more than logic, so too I believe, does faith. We have an encounter – an experience – and then a relationship. We can measure the quality of this relationship in the degree to which our lives change for the better. And the better being - the experience of inner freedom, joy, and knowledge that we are in the process of becoming our best selves.

I love that little account that we've just heard from Mark's Gospel. Jesus teaching by the shifting sea, moves away from the crowd to encounter Levi. Many of the crowd that had listened to Jesus by the water would have been transfixed by his words - but it's likely that some would have been perplexed, hostile or even indifferent. The seeds of the Spirit get cast widely like millions of eucalypt seeds that drop after a bushfire. When we are fortunate and our soil is ready – when our soil is seared, harrowed and disturbed – we can be ready to receive a new seed of fresh life.

Perhaps for Levi – as a tax collector and therefore social outsider – his heart was good and ready to receive the Light evident to him in the person of Jesus. Levi left his tax booth and followed him – in fact invited Jesus into his own house for a meal. Levi chose to draw close and listen - just as Andrew and another of the Baptist's disciples responded to the invitation to spend some time with him – to "come and see". I wonder whether Levi's heart was burning and attentive as he sat and listened? In my imaginings, in the presence of Jesus, I like to think that Levi would have felt he had come home to himself. Accepted as he was and recognised as he was – loved, warts and all. When we experience that kind of loving acceptance we have tasted the "kingdom of heaven" and we grow - just as a plant grows - towards the light.

All of our conversion stories will be different. I want to briefly share a significant point of conversion for me.

Around 40 years ago I had come to a point in my life where I knew I was not interiorly well – I was lacking the "something more". It was a time when I had come face to face with my own self-centeredness, vanities and immaturity. My first marriage had recently ended and coming out of this I carried a deep sense of failure. Face to face with my shortcomings I didn't like what I saw and recognised that my view of myself as a "good person" was open to question.

At this time I was taking a break from teaching and working as a musician in hotels around Hobart. I had a regular Friday afternoon gig in the University Bar and one day a poster on the wall advertised a travelling evangelist – John Smith of the God Squad. So after my gig was over I entered a little lecture theatre nearby and listened. In Quaker terms, John Smith “spoke to my condition”. He spoke of a spiritual and psychological malaise - an underbelly to our materialistic culture and began describing the “something more”. It was the possibility of seeing the world freshly – of looking up into a bigger sky. I was affected by his message but not ready to walk to the front when the altar call came. I took his safer suggestion – to find some time and quiet space to kneel, settle and simply speak out into the silence and ask that if God was indeed real and present might God be revealed to me?

In my home the following night that is indeed what I did. There was no blinding light though I did experience a lovely sense of peace. What changed for me quite mysteriously was that the Gospels, which had up to that time felt dense, archaic and impenetrable, were suddenly alive for me. I received a thirst to read and dwell and understand as far as I could what they meant and what they might mean for me.

My appreciation of Scripture has stayed with me over the years and the practice of Lectio feeds me to this day. This practice for me is one of becoming still - then taking time to dig and dwell deeply and prayerfully on a short piece of Scripture - then taking a word or phrase or insight back into silent prayer. Along with a welcome feeling of being centred, it has been an unexpected source of inspiration for my songwriting practice. When our hearts are touched, captured and still then indeed we can find our particular something to say, that needs to be said.

Another mysterious gift that followed my prayer was that creation – sky, ocean, trees, birds, flowers – everything - felt alive and new. I experienced a hope and fullness and a sense that I was whole – or at the very least was in the process of being made whole. This appreciation of environment is of course not confined to people of faith but for me I associate it with that time and my particular experience of conversion. Again – as Scripture became a pool of inspiration for song – so has the natural world in all its wild and marvellous complexity. I live in a beautiful part of Tasmania – by the water – and this environment has inspired many songs and many paintings over the years. Both practices have become prayer for me and later I’ll speak a little about that process for me.

Over the years I have been nourished through many friendships, faith communities, retreats, books, silences and celebrations but my faith found its best garden – its deepest place of belonging and learning within communities of L’Arche. Many of you will know of L’Arche and its mission of announcing the gifts of people with learning disabilities to the world. These gifts are revealed through mutual relationships forged through time spent together in community life – finding God in the ordinary.

Who could believe that the simple act of peeling carrots for the evening meal alongside a Core Member (a member with intellectual disability), or turning over the compost pile with another, or simply sitting in silence with a prayer companion who can't speak with words – who could believe that this can be experienced as a time of deep prayer and meditation – where the heart is simply filled with a sense of the presence of God?

My second conversion occurred not so long after the first. I'd been cajoled into volunteering at a recreational centre for people with intellectual disabilities – to lead music and drama sessions. I remember standing nervously outside the front door of the centre, wondering why on earth I had said yes to volunteering. Then I stepped inside and a man called Craig came to me, asked me my name and said "John, John it's good to meet you. Come and have look at this". He led me to a car with a flat tire and said "Look – look! How on earth are they going to fix that John?" From that welcoming moment I felt an incredible sense of being in precisely the right place alongside the right people. The lack of pretension and the honesty, pain, courage and joy simply filled my heart.

Two of the people in my drama class were living in the very new L'Arche Community in Hobart and I was invited – in a way just like Levi – to come and sit and have a meal and it was sitting at the table for the evening meal and witnessing the deeply tender and respectful exchanges between assistants and core members, that converted me again. The assistants were men and women whose desire was to share life and grow through living alongside and making home with the Core Members. It was about being with rather than simply doing for. It was an experience of the "kingdom of heaven" for me.

The amazing thing about communities like L'Arche, is that over time all of us, with and without disability become aware of being loved just as we are – it is the slow action of love. That was 1988 and in the years since I have experienced those kingdom of heaven moments over and over again in L'Arche Communities here in Australia and in many countries around the world. I will always give thanks for what I've received through L'Arche.

What was it like for Levi to experience the breaking of bread with Jesus and to be welcomed without judgement and to see Jesus rejoice in his company? Isn't that the most powerful gift we can receive? To sit with another and to rejoice in each other's company. We are loved and so we grow.

I love to write songs. I love the prompts that come in the night – that often force me out of bed to write that particular line down. To sing the lines over and over again is prayer. It's all prayer. The songs I like to write are songs that point to the "something more" – the unnamable. I try to do as Tim Winton does, "to keep the rumour of God alive". I don't want my songs to be songs of doctrine rather songs of yearnings, intuitions, observations, thankyou's and questions. Sometimes I collaborate with another writer or writers. I love that too because we each call out of the other

something more that we wouldn't know we knew, without the other. My friend Noel Davis has been a significant collaborator. His little poem Complete Me is now a song. I want to share that song of ineffable yearning now. It was one of Noel's last poems and he never heard the recorded version.

Knowing that we are all welcomed and loved - may we all grow into our own completeness. I invite you to be still and rest in this little prayer song.

The song COMPLETE ME

<https://benedictus.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/John-Coleman-and-the-Lovely-Boats-09-Complete-Me.mp3>