



Sophia is a feminist spirituality centre concerned with the development of women's spirituality, justice and care for the environment.

SoundingSophia gives a new voice to women sharing Sophia's aims.

In this issue we celebrate and focus on "GIFTS".

Celebrating our 10th Anniversary

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EDITORIAL

In this tenth anniversary edition of **SoundingSophia**, we are delighted to print some of the speeches made at the Twilight Ritual held in April to celebrate the gift of **Sophia** itself. **Sophia** has made our magazine possible, and enabled us to record women's voices speaking out of their own rich experience.

This edition, with its focus on "Gifts", is as varied as any. Interestingly, a number of women looked at the topic with reference to the turmoil and pain of living. Marianne North writes of the insight her own experience of pain has given her into the pain of others. Anne Hanson adds to her ongoing exploration of suffering caused by cancer: *"In hindsight, the crisis and subsequent emotional upheaval aroused the resources of my healing system and released creative potential"*. Maureen O'Connell looks back on a time when the institution she trusted got it wrong - and describes the difficult process of maturation: learning to trust her own gifts. Judy Schmid explores the damage caused by childhood and marital emotional abuse, and the long and painful way she had to travel to discover her healthy self. Raelene Muschamp takes us further into her journey, with, again, the discovery that trusting her deepest and sorely tested self has led her to new confidence and peace.

A repeated insight that emerges is the need for patience, to stay with one's experience even when it's painful, in order to come to riches glimpsed ahead. Beth Flenley's comment gives us a powerful image:

Now it is winter and I have been acutely aware of a cosmic lesson in patience...this process has a time span of its own and cannot be pushed.

On a more cheerful note, women celebrate their families, especially the gift of new, young lives. Gifts we find in the land, our society, our own physical bodies (the latter sometimes an equivocal gift, as Elaine Lee amusingly notes!), are appreciated. Annie Gleeson gives salutary attention to the quality of the gifts we offer each other, whilst, like others, revelling in the bounty she receives. Many gifts await the thoughtful reader of these pages!

Margaret Cain, Fiona Johnston, Jenny Wightman

TWILIGHT RITUAL: CELEBRATION OF SOPHIA'S ANNIVERSARY

*On the 7th of April 2001, people of the **Sophia** community gathered to celebrate and remember our ten years of growth. During the evening, four women spoke generously of what Sophia means to them, and Margaret Cain evoked the nature of Sophia's many forms in an inspirational speech under the Moreton Bay fig.*

When the student is ready, the teacher appears - and I guess I came across **Sophia** soon after its inception here, so for me it has been a growthful association of almost ten years, and **Sophia** has been a teacher to me in many ways.

My main learning has been to a new depth of gentleness - I would come here thinking I was peaceful only to find new levels of depth and stillness to be plumbed. I am grateful to the women here who have modelled and facilitated that.

I am also mindful of the courses run here and their effect on me. The first course I came to was of an evening, and when I was leaving in the dark, I tripped on the roadhumps outside, landing heavily and skinning my knees and elbows. I'd just finished reading **Sophia's** charter on the wall and was still mulling over the word that had particularly struck me - "patriarchy". That fall marked a symbolic collapse for me of the perimeters of patriarchy, as an understanding of its constraints and dimensions dawned in my consciousness. But it was also the beginnings of something new in me - a claiming and honouring of the feminine, a process that has continued over these ten years and restored balance into some of the more heavily weighted events in my life.

So **Sophia** is for me a place of transformation, unfoldment. It is an oasis where I come to drink of knowledge, to be refreshed, share in friendship. It is a sanctuary where I have been able to take shelter, to grow, heal and discover so that I can, in turn, take that into the world.

My special thanks to the women whose inspiration began **Sophia** and to those same women and others whose love and service have given so much to so many of our lives.

ANNA LULKA

If I'd been asked a year ago what **Sophia** meant to me, I would have made a different response to the one I make tonight.

A year ago **Sophia**, for me, was a place and a space for women - warm, welcoming and comforting. Today it is still the same space and place but now I feel that I have glimpsed **Sophia's** soul.

In 2000 I had set out to write a simple, historical account of **Sophia**. It wasn't simple. Women's lives never are. My task became a journey that took its own course and led me in unimagined directions and to places deep within myself.

I became immersed in **Sophia's** story. I rejoiced with the women who dreamed brave new dreams, crossed boundaries and set out to create **Sophia**. At the same time, I felt the sadness of those who generously relinquished other dreams so that **Sophia** could come into being. On this journey I was privileged to speak with Indigenous women and to have the issue of 'whiteness' opened up to me in such a challenging way.

Sophia's story is of vision and steadfastness, sorrow, perplexity and frustration, but above all it is a story of love and reconciliation.

Thank you **Sophia** for that precious glimpse of your soul.

LYN VON DER BORCH

I was raised a Lutheran, with its view of women limited to "Kinder, Kirche, Kuche" – Children, Church and Kitchen. I left, and wandered for many years in a spiritual wasteland...

Through Margaret Cain and thea Rainbow I found a spirituality that *embraced* women, and I was fed. thea introduced me to the goddesses of history, which still live in and through us today.

Opening to the Goddess meant being enriched by:

- deity in women's form
- loving the earth and body, not just the sky and mind
- celebrating cycles, the wheel that turns and returns, not just the upward sloping straight line
- revelling in myths and stories, symbols, inner meanings, the unconscious and intuitive.

Sophia is comfortable to me. It is, in broad unspecific ways, simpatico. I don't feel I have to shut up and hide my light. **Sophia** accepts me.

And I love the feeling of **Sophia** – the energy of its space which is both physically and spiritually open. I am grateful that **Sophia** exists, for it feeds my soul....

ROSANNE DEBATS

As a young Anglican woman I was privileged to participate in events and courses at **Bethany**. At this time my longing was to be ordained as an Anglican priest in a context where they didn't exist. My connection with the **Bethany** community helped nurture my longing despite my struggles with the institutional church.

After ten years away from South Australia, I was blessed to discover **Sophia**, which has been a sanctuary of support and hospitality enabling me to find my voice and reclaim my passion.

Through my involvement with the Justice Circle and through Basket Weaving, I have developed friendships with Aboriginal women and deepened my journey in the process toward reconciliation.

I give thanks for the richness of **Sophia** - for healing, for valuing spirituality, for inspiring mentors and friendships.

ALI WURM

*Anna Lulka: Anna is the daughter of refugee immigrants from the Ukraine, arriving here as a child in 1949. She now reads daily newspapers on RPH Radio for the print handicapped. Her spirituality is the mainstay of her life, and **Sophia** is an important part of this*

*Rosanne DeBats: I have undergone a number of transformations over the years, moving out of quicksand to greater groundedness. I now hold the vision of a Global Wisdom Society, and am trying to help it come into being, currently by helping with financial planning at **Sophia**.*

*Lyn Von der Borch: Lyn is married with five adult children and five grandchildren. She completed her B. Theol in 1996, and went on to do a BA (Hons) in Women's Studies, for which she wrote a history of **Sophia**, completed in time for our tenth anniversary celebrations.*

Ali Wurm: Ali is an Anglican priest currently the assistant curate at St. Saviour's Parish, Glen Osmond. She is passionate about the creative power of spirituality as a liberating resource for social and individual transformation.

In ancient times and now, people imagine Sophia as the earth herself, a dancing woman engaged in a creative act of movement and rhythm, a flowering of life. The wise and Holy One sustains wind, earth, fire and water and these sustain her. She is the one who draws aside the veil of appearance to tell of the secret essence, the world soul.

She is the dance of creation. Sophia also resides in the Hebrew spiritual tradition, she sings in her Song of Songs a glorious celebration of her abiding presence at the heart of life. Emerging from that same tradition, Jesus became, for his community, Sophia visible among them, in the way he lived and loved. They called him the Sophia of God.

In every century and in every generation, the people look for signs of Sophia in the life they live and in the culture they both inherit and create. Today, people see and feel Sophia in thousands of different places and forms. This wonderful Moreton Bay fig tree with its deep roots, its great leafy branches bound to the trunk and its superabundant fruit can speak to us of her. It surely stands as both witness to an unfolding history of this land and as symbol of the **Sophia** space now celebrating ten years of growth and fruition.

Today's ritual journey in community brings us here by these roots. See how they tunnel into the earth in search of nourishment. Moreton Bay fig trees have been in this land long before white settlement. Aboriginal people's roots are deep in this soil, and more recently, our roots too are part of this place. Standing as we do on common ground we take strength from the wise counselling of Aboriginal people in their kinship with the land. We gratefully share their inheritance. We also receive the land from the original Irish-Australian Dominican sisters who, in 1868, came and drew their sustenance from this earth, and gave their shape to her. Upon these two foundations a new community began a journey together ten years ago, when women and men gathered in ritual to celebrate a beginning. They were eager to give new shape to the work of creating opportunity for full expression of human life, especially addressing women's needs. They wanted to have a place to listen to each other, to hear the wisdom traditions giving shape to life, to acknowledge their own wisdom and the wisdom of this land, and to help each other heal their brokenness.

See the great trunk of this Moreton Bay fig tree, how she holds herself, to strengthen her ability to carry many branches. This second trunk - so robust that it might have lost balance and fallen away from the roots and been lost to us. Instead it has thrown itself a lifeline back to the main trunk. Together these two stand to offer a home and canopy for birds of many kinds and for our comfort. It may also serve as an image of reconciliation, reaching out, creating and sustaining wholeness.

See the various branches of the tree, so abundant and leafy. See how they overshadow the labyrinth, an ancient symbol and tool for contemplative being. These branches speak of the variety of activities at **Sophia**, activities that have grown in number, and in their shape and process, over ten years. In that time women and men have found a brief resting place or a home both to be heard in and to hear, for each activity shares common purposes, to meet Sophia/Wisdom and to create our world with her.

Sense the sap, the life-blood of this tree, moving up and outwards to nourish her branches. Sap empowers them to fling figs merrily, with gay abandon, upon the earth, daring *people* to do as they will, and reminding them that what comes from the earth has its final home there too. It images the great life-cycle deep in the law of all creation. The life sap of **Sophia** derives from each person who participates in any of a variety of ways in her work. Sophia's struggle and deep achievement is in a spiralling, non-hierarchical movement of energy between women and men caught up with each other in the sacred dance of life.

As in ancient times, we have among us women and men with gifts of every kind, who live these gifts in a community which struggles for many things: to live real and compassionate relationship, to respect and share of themselves and others, to strive to make a more just world for all humans and other earth creatures. All who come and share in **Sophia's** life are the carriers of the sap that enables Sophia's presence to grow.

Indeed **Sophia** rejoices in all the women and men, too many to name, but whose names are recorded in **Sophia's** history; those who have come and given shape to the unfolding of her wisdom. For we speak of Sophia, the dancing Spirit, the One who unveils essence and is there in the deeps of our creative being, who surely wants this work to live.

Sophia lives from within and draws herself through to the very tips of the tree of visible life. It is not easy for her to flourish in a culture where competition and champions vie with good and bad financial outcomes for news space. However, flourish she will in the movements of the people, and as some of **Sophia's** feisty women take on the task of planning a financially viable future, she is there. Even hard things, like the sustenance of the tree, she fills with enjoyment, creating good relationship and sharing her wise self. For Sophia this place has become a living organism, and she is ready for the responsibility of finding her way to stand freely in her own environment, as does this magnificent Moreton Bay fig tree.

*Margaret Cain: Margaret is a member of the community at **Sophia**.*

NO, NOT A MIDLIFE BUT A 60+ CRISIS

BETH FLENLEY

We've all seen those glossy advertisements featuring a very attractive, fit couple in their retirement with apparently no financial worries and living 'the good life'.

And we all know from our own experience or from friends that it is only *one* picture of retirement. Not everyone has someone to share it with, not everyone has no financial worries, not everyone has their health or is able to live an apparently carefree life.

Yet it is a powerful image and one that seems to 'colour' questions that retired people are often asked. There is the assumption, so often, that life must be infinitely better now that you don't have to go to paid employment every day.

Well, yes, although I enjoyed my working life very much, it *is* better. But it is not without its own challenges. When I first retired six years ago, it was blissful to wake up each day and decide what I would do for the day. Re-designing the garden was both absorbing and deeply satisfying, once the initial anxieties about 'what to put where' were sorted out! Then came some voluntary work, quite demanding in its own way, together with more active involvement in our church. And because there was still a family of four working adults at home, there was a household to care for as well.

Throughout these last six years, I have 'kept my hand in' doing a little casual teaching and, more latterly, writing learning materials. The money is very handy but I also enjoy the work. However, last year, this work took over, and what was supposed to be some part-time work became a solid year of full-time work. Too much! Time to take stock again.

And in a new environment. My husband has retired, we have sold the family home and have spent these last two years settling into a much smaller home, setting up yet another garden and getting used to being around together.

So what do I want from retirement? After six varied years, I am still not sure. Is it that, after many years as daughter, wife, mother, and professional person, I haven't had time or taken time to stop and find out?

This past autumn, the Cosmos forced me to stop. A bleakness descended, out of which came the cry - 'there has to be more!' But what? For several weeks I was conscious of being in a kind of limbo or paralysis with little energy to get involved in anything else. I had to stay with it.

I found myself reading the autobiographies of older women. How do they spend their days? What are some of the things that give them pleasure and

meaning? How do they find balance between 'doing' and 'being'? How do they overcome their fears? Where is the balance for them between solitude and company?

Ninette Dutton's recent book, **Home**, made a lot of sense. Here was a woman of energy, of creativity, for whom family and gardening are passions. Of special importance to her are her creativity and commitment to her work as an enameller, her love of nature, her independence as a traveller and the joy that her garden and simple pleasure give. I was inspired by her courage in sharing so deeply and honestly her quest.

I took comfort in the fact that she was seventy before she became a grandmother, and yet, even though living two states away, had a precious bond with her granddaughter, Molly. (Yes, at nearly sixty-four, and having had four children, I have no grandchildren, nor any immediate prospects.)

I love the dedication in Barbara Blackman's book **Glass After Glass**: "This book, dedicated to my mother, Gertrude, Olson Patterson, 1891-1987, is my humble offering to St Peter at the Pearly Gate, who, I have on good authority, has only one question: Did you have fun?"

Some years ago now, when I first began self-development work, two questions were asked: "What do you see on your tombstone and is it what you would like?" As a One in enneagram terms, they were easy for me to answer:

Here lies Beth. She worked hard.

But what I would like is:

She found joy.

And how do I find it? What gives me joy? This was one of the issues I needed to work through and obtain greater clarity about, so that I could ensure that there were joyful experiences, as well as being more open to those joyous moments which just arrive unexpectedly. But behind this was the larger question of how to spend what remains of my life. I knew that being busy and occupied wasn't the answer. There had to be more.

Slowly, slowly, there has come a growing sense that the key for me at this time is to be open to whatever life presents - that I don't have to try to cram in all the things that retirement is supposed to be about. Just let go and allow things to unfold, to evolve. Delight in all the lovely, satisfying moments and share in the pain of humanity, in whatever form it presents. Life just IS!

Throwing an I Ching and receiving the hexagram 'Receptivity' helped:

By allowing itself to be acted upon by the light power of the sun, the receptive power of the earth gives birth, nurtures, and brings to completion the life principle generated when the two come to meet each other half way...

A part of our receptivity is to let things happen by allowing oneself to be guided by the moment. We keep attuned to the 'opening', times of light...and to the 'closings', times of darkness. Receiving this hexagram is

a challenge to perfect one's receptivity, humility and patience. (Commentary by Carol Anthony.)

So, to use the intellect and the emotions to explore choices and possibilities in life, but in order to be receptive and attuned to the 'openings' and 'closings', to listen more and be guided by that divine source of inner wisdom - intuition.

Our back garden has been a very visible symbol of this process. Aware that it wasn't 'right', that it was too busy and cluttered, I struggled to work out what to do, how to change it. I wanted so much to put it right during autumn, when the ground was still warm. But the energy wasn't there; nor were the solutions.

The struggle was compounded by the knowledge that this time, it **had** to be right. We couldn't afford to keep on doing this. Finding a garden consultant who charged very reasonable rates has provided the answer. But two months later after what has seemed endless delays, we are still only on the verge of re-planting. Much has been taken out, and in its place, a radical new design involving a paved area.

Now it is winter and I have been acutely aware of a cosmic lesson in patience, of having to deal with times of opening and times of closing. This process has a time span of its own and cannot be pushed. But the new design looks great, if bare, at the moment. Planted up and taking off in spring, the back garden will have been transformed in a way I never thought possible. Hooray!

Ninette Dutton's words give me hope:

All my life I had felt that I was preparing for something to come. Now I reached a point of culmination. I could do what I liked in this season of fulfilment and I was triumphant.

I have not yet reached this 'season of fulfilment', but I am grateful for the gifts of this autumn. I am grateful, too, for two other lovely gifts of retirement and aging, the first being that life is lived at a slower pace. Delicious! The second is that there is no longer any pressure to establish or prove myself. In fact, as one wonderful older woman friend once remarked, "You can even be outrageous if you choose!"

Beth Flenley: It has been good to discover that although each stage of our life may have different contexts, each continues the journey of living, doing and being.

TOUGH COOKIES

ANNIE GLEESON

The hydrangeas outside my window
have stamina.
Deep candyfloss pink
they contravene the rumour of blossoms and butterflies
which last but a day.

Drooping on cloudless summer days,
they brighten with a cool change,
nod heavy heads,
and continue (unsheltered by shadecloth)
to brighten my daily view.

GIFT BASKET

ANNIE GLEESON

■ ■ ■ **A**ngeli, two years old, racing around taking a Father Christmas role amongst her extended family. Multiple present-giving later, asking hopefully - "More?" Not wanting extra for herself, but even more abundance in the joy of giving.

Myself, aged eight, with my best present ever, a pink plastic hoola-hoop, perhaps the closest material symbol of my most cherished gift - dancing.

A sixty-year-old woman at a bus-stop, sharing about her recent birthday: not one of her three sons showed much interest. One said casually he'd call in around 5pm to take her out to tea. No phone calls. No cards from the family in the letterbox. Then her son turning up, and taking her to a huge surprise party with all her friends and family, and being presented with a ticket for an around-the-world trip. She would have preferred, she said, to have been remembered earlier in the day. And what she really wanted was not a lavish holiday by herself, but for her sons (who were always so busy) to spend a bit more time with her when they called in. To do a few things around the house; it was getting harder to manage these days.

Mother-of-pearl moments at Pt Willunga beach: a mantra-ray's languid dance; a glimpse of the tip of the wreck of the Star of Greece; a perfect miniature Camelot sculpted in sand; a whale's song sounding like an elephant roar, as she lifted her head out of the water; being caught in the amber glow of the

cliffs at sunset.

In the bush on a summer evening, a lover unbuttoning my blouse, slowly easing my bra straps off, unwrapping me for the first time.

Gifts to myself: extension of tendon, and consciousness, in a slow yogic "Salute to the Sun"; the agony/ecstasy of a cold shower; consuming crime fiction with Haigh's coffee-pecan slab.

Annie Gleeson: Annie teaches and is a reflexologist part-time, and lives communally full-time. She is warmly appreciative of the giftedness that Sophia brings to her life.

ONE JOURNEY AMONG MANY

JUDITH ELISABETH SCHMID

Anyone who has a Ph.D. or a degree can write a book with a good chance that it will be taken seriously. But what about your average stay-at-home mum, who has no qualifications or degrees, and just lives life moment by moment; who has overcome depression, panic and anxiety attacks, and domestic violence. Will you take her seriously?

This article (which I hope is the beginning of a book) is by a mother, homemaker, healer, poet and artist who is telling you about her journey through life. You may be able to identify with some of her feelings, emotions and experiences: everything has to do with life and living. Maybe along the way you will trust and understand yourself a little or a whole lot better, as I have come to do. You might just realise that life is a miracle, and that you are part of this miracle, as I now feel. Our lives are in our hands and we are responsible for the choices that we make. This is the gift of new understanding that was given to me through years of suffering, and which I now wish to share with you.

I have always trusted my intuition. Things usually go wrong when I don't follow its voice. I now cherish it as a precious guide, but this story tells what happened when I lost trust in that instinctive part of myself. I have great

admiration for all the wonderful, strong and capable women who, no matter what life throws at them, have the courage to keep going. I am writing my story to help other women who are or were in a similar situation to mine, to encourage them never to give up hope. I believe that there is always hope, and that there is a God, always there beside us, to see us through our trials and tribulations. It is up to each one of us to stand up for ourselves, for our beliefs, and ask respect for whatever choices we make in our lives. We need to be appreciated for the wonderful women that we are. We have to let go of the suffering and failures of the past, and move forward with strength and courage to live our lives to the fullest.

Everyone's life is a journey. Each journey is unique, each journey is special, and each journey in the end is to find oneself. I am in this world to learn from others, and maybe to teach them a little too, if they can hear what I have to say. I am here to raise my three beautiful children as caring, compassionate and thoughtful human beings. I am blessed to share my life with them, and the chance we have to learn and grow with each other. No matter what, we are going to be OK, and love is really all that matters in the end. This is my story of adjustment and survival.

I was born in Switzerland on the 27th June 1967. My parents divorced when I was seven years old. I felt the loss of my father as I was never really close to my mother. I don't want to dwell on my childhood too much, but I think I need to write a few words about it so that you get a better picture of where I am coming from.

I didn't have an ideal family situation growing up. My mother always favoured my brother as long as I can remember. He is two and a half years younger than me. Everything changed with his arrival. During those early years I spent a lot of time with my auntie, my mother's older sister. Between the ages of two and five I used to spend a few weeks at a time with her. When it was time to go home to my mother, I used to scream because I was unwilling to go back to her. I guess my parents' divorce affected me in a big way. I was always close to my dad, a real daddy's girl, so when he moved out I felt his loss immensely - and over the years I only saw him on a few occasions. I felt abandoned. During the years I lived with my mother she often threatened to get rid of me, so I lived with a constant fear of abandonment. This showed in rebellious behaviour, and when I was twelve, my mother put me in a children's home because she was unable to cope with me. I stayed there until I went to live with my dad and his second wife, at fourteen. This wasn't a happy living arrangement. There was a lot of tension between my stepmother and myself. I never really felt at home there. Very early on I had to rely on myself and my own strength.

Despite this disastrous immediate family, I am fortunate to have had many special people in my life. If my parents weren't there for me, someone else has always reached out to me and loved me unconditionally. This unconditional love has sustained me through my life. I can't be grateful enough for all the special people I have known: my auntie, friends, teachers, the parents of some of my friends...the list is long.

A couple of years later, my mother was planning to migrate to Australia. She asked me if I wanted to come along. I said yes. To me moving to Australia was going to be the adventure of a lifetime. I have never regretted that step, although at times I was incredibly homesick. We arrived in Adelaide in January 1985. Between October 1986 and December 1987 I went back to Switzerland twice. In January 1988 I returned here for good, and started living with my defacto partner, who is also the father of our three children.

Looking back now, and figuring out why I picked my partner, it seems to me that I was familiar with his pattern of behaviour. It reminded me of the way my mother had treated me as a child: kind when it suited her and by the same token, unkind when it suited her. I thought he was a mature, loving individual who would treat me well. As I said, the true implications of his behaviour weren't apparent in our courting days.

I guess verbal abuse was part of our relationship from the start, as was his gambling addiction. I just didn't realise at that time what an impact they would have on our lives. In August 1989 our first daughter Aimee was born. I became a stay-at-home mum instantly. There was never any talk of me returning to the paid workforce. As far as my partner was concerned the kitchen and laundry were where I belonged. Caring for our children was solely my responsibility. I resented being treated like a cook, washer-woman/laundry maid and doormat. He never had any intention to tie himself down to a commitment to me or his children. He did not want to marry me, even after the birth of our third child. He intended to keep his freedom, but also with hindsight, I think that by not marrying me he had continuous power over me. He knew how frightened I was of being abandoned, but he, probably intentionally, never gave me the feeling of belonging, of being home, of feeling safe.

For years I felt homesick for Switzerland. For years I felt I didn't belong anywhere. I felt that I wasn't good enough - good enough to be married. His gambling addiction became more apparent over the years. As the financial pressure increased to provide for a family of five on a single income, so did his gambling. He always believed he could win a few hundred dollars to pay for all the little extras. It didn't work out that way. More times than not he lost, and not just a few dollars here and there. Usually the losses went into hundreds of dollars.

From the time Aimee was born I kept a separate bank account where the family payments from Centrelink would go. This was my saving grace over the years. I tried to save that money for emergencies. A few times he got hold of my card and emptied my account and gambled the money away. So I changed the account and kept my card hidden. He was very angry about this, but as he didn't know where I had hidden the card, he couldn't do anything about it.

Through a redundancy package he received in 1992 we were able to pay off the mortgage. This loosened the pressure a little, but the bills and living

expenses remained. He owned trotting horses over the years as well, and he always thought he would strike it rich. For years on end we just lived from week to week. It wasn't really living. It was existing and hoping for better times.

When I approached him about his gambling he would always get angry and deny that he gambled. He would always say that everything was my fault, that things didn't go well because I came from a broken home. He slowly stripped me of my self-esteem. I started to get depressed. I kept going for the children's sake, and because his mother put pressure on me to keep the family together at all costs. She herself was a victim of domestic violence. In her day it was accepted as normal, especially in Italian, Greek and a lot of other European families. She didn't know any better. She was too scared to walk away, so she expected me to stay and live my life as she had done.

For years I fought with myself over what I really wanted to do and what was expected of me. My self-esteem gradually became non-existent. I lost the drive and determination to live and fight.

For years our whole lives revolved around whether he won or lost at the TAB, the football syndicate at work, or anything else he gambled on. If he won, he was happy, for a while. If he lost, he was unbearable. He would become abusive and violent and smash things around the house. We lived in constant terror.

The first time I started to make arrangements to leave him was in April 1994, a few months after our third child was born. I had contacted the people from the Domestic Violence Support Service and a social worker came to my house. I even went to see a solicitor. But I could not go through with leaving him. I wanted to keep the family together and the thought of raising three small children alone really scared me. So I kept going for another five years.

I always felt that the year 2000 would be my year of change, and I guess this belief sustained me and gave me strength. The children and I finally left on the 21st February 2000, with the help of the Domestic Violence Support Service.

But before that, in June 1999, my life reached a crisis point. I was a prisoner in my own home. I wasn't allowed to have any friends. He cut all contact with my family. I was not allowed to do anything without his consent. The years of physical, emotional and mental abuse started to manifest in my body.

I have always been an extremely healthy person. Back in November 1998, the healthy depression started to become an unhealthy one. To me it is healthy to have normal ups and downs according to circumstances. Unhealthy depression is being severely depressed for days on end, where physical symptoms also occur, such as insomnia, unexplained pain, panic and anxiety. My dream about love had crumbled away before my eyes. I had no feeling left for this man anymore, yet I kept convincing myself that I had to stay with him, no matter what, because I took on myself the guilt of our failure. The first

physical symptoms started to appear. In October 1998 I started to get this nagging pain in my left breast. Sometimes the pain would be there for days, a deep throbbing ache. Then it would lessen a little for a few days, then return again. I didn't tell anyone about it - my partner would have only ridiculed me, and so would his family. I didn't want to tell my family or friends. When I did mention it to a close friend, she said that it might be hormonal. I was so scared that I couldn't bring myself to see a doctor. I felt so alone.

In January 1999 I dreamed this incredibly real nightmare. Death was there in his long black cloak. He had a terrible grin on his face and told me I would die in about six months. I was shaking when I woke up. For weeks I couldn't get that nightmare out of my mind. The fears intensified. I was becoming a physical, mental and emotional wreck. I filled my days with activities to distract me from the ongoing nightmare inside me. I took a course, I helped out at school, I tried to get away from the house as much as possible. The pain in my chest remained, I started to lose weight, my hormones played up, and at times the anxiety and panic were so severe that I thought I would pass out.

Terror was my constant companion. I felt that I was slowly going round the bend. My partner kept telling me I was mad. I tried to find a logical explanation for my symptoms. I started to think that it might be breast cancer. At that time, all I heard on TV, all I read in newspapers and magazines, was about breast cancer. Other possibilities were anaemia, a thyroid problem, or possibly early menopause. Every morning I woke up in a sweat.

By the end of March I was in such a state that I couldn't go on any longer. I needed to know whether I was going to live or die. I went to see my doctor. She did several blood tests and she examined my breasts. She said they felt a little lumpy and suggested that I have a breast scan. That was it! I was beside myself. I lived through a week of sheer terror, almost losing my mind from fear of what the scan would reveal. My partner told me I was irrational. He did not want to hear about my fears.

The scan revealed two small cysts in my left breast. Quite a normal occurrence in women. Some women get them, others don't. Was I relieved? Of course not! How did they know these cysts were not cancerous? How could these doctors just brush it away as nothing, when my body showed so many other symptoms of being unwell. My doctor kept saying that I was suffering from depression and needed to be medicated.

I went to see one of the top breast surgeons in Adelaide, and even he was unwilling to drain those cysts. He suggested that I have another scan in about six months. That was too much to bear - I wanted to have the results now! A month later, feeling dreadfully physically ill, I went to the Modbury Hospital Emergency Department. I was seen by a young female doctor who told me that I was neurotic, depressed and a hypochondriac, and that I should go and see a psychiatrist. So I left the Hospital with yet another referral letter. My partner, when he picked me up, said, "See, they all think you are mad!" By that time I wanted to leave this cruel, abusive man more than ever. I will never

forget what he said to me when I asked him for a reassuring hug. He said, "No. I am not going to hug you, go away, you make me sick. Hugging makes people emotionally dependent. Go and find someone else to hug." And virtually in the same breath he said, "If you ever commit adultery I'll kick you out."

I sank deeper into my depression. I wanted to die - anything to bring this torment to an end. The last three weeks before seeing the psychiatrist I just spent in bed. I was unable to get the children to school. I barely managed to pick the children up from school. I couldn't care less about housework or cooking anymore. I managed to have a shower every day and then return to bed. I barely ate anything. My partner couldn't wait for that psychiatrist's appointment, and the chance to get rid of me. He needed to feel that his family was inferior

to him, so that he felt more powerful - but perhaps a wife in a mental hospital would have satisfied him as much as when I was at home. He came along to the appointment and said to the psychiatrist, "Sort this woman out, she is mad." He gave a wonderful performance of being the worried partner. The doctor seemed to be convinced by his performance, although by then I was clearly showing signs of severe illness. I did get admitted to a psychiatric hospital, on a voluntary basis. Just as well - otherwise I might have been put away for good. I felt at the time that they were all against me.

The diagnosis was severe depression and deep psychosis. I was put on a high dosage of anti-depressants and tranquillizers immediately. I asked the psychiatrist how long I had to be on medication. He told me a year for sure, possibly for life. That was the turning point. I wasn't going to swallow tablets for a year or more for an emotional problem. Two days later I insisted that my partner picked me up and took me home. The hospital wasn't the place for me to be. I had no idea how I was going to cope once I returned home. I just knew I had to pull myself together somehow.

When I got home, the house was a mess. Dirty dishes everywhere, toys, the laundry basket overflowing with dirty washing. Where was I going to find the strength to deal with all these demands? However, life returned to 'normal'. I resumed my duties as housekeeper and doormat, and swallowed my medication unwillingly. I coped well with the daily tasks of taking care of the children and the household chores but the medication made me feel like a zombie. I knew I had to find an alternative, wean myself from the tablets, and find support somewhere. I joined a panic and anxiety support group. This helped me to grow stronger within myself once more. In August 1999 I weaned myself off the medication. It took about two weeks before the side effects subsided and another month or so before my body returned to normal. I didn't tell the doctor, the psychiatrist or my partner that I wasn't on medication any more - I felt they would get angry with me, because they all seemed to want to control me.

My life was once again in my own hands. With the help of the support group

and the love and understanding of a few treasured friends, I found the courage to deal with life once more. In December 1999 the last violent incident occurred. My daughter's friend was over that afternoon and became a witness to my partner's violent behaviour. Needless to say that child was traumatised for a few weeks. This incident was the final straw. I knew I had to leave. I couldn't wait for a next time: next time he might break my neck.

With careful planning and help from the Domestic Violence Support Service, we finally moved out of the house on the 21st February 2000 - ten years to the day from when we moved in. How uncanny! I have always had a strong feeling about patterns and timing, and this vindicated my intuition.

The last time I closed the door of that house I felt an immense sense of freedom. With time, my children have realised that their mother made the right decision. There was a lot of healing to be done, but we were safe and well. Life has become the beautiful miracle that it can be once more. I have no regrets. Those ten years taught me my biggest lesson so far - that my life is in my hands - and I have learned it well, because it gave me back the precious gift of myself.

Your fiery image is printed
on every fibre and drop of me.
Your kiss called forth my living breath,
your quickening blood stirs through my limbs;
my soul rests and grows, full of your milk.

The curve and chaos of my body
show forth the complex fullness of you.
Your song has echoed through my weary bones
bringing ever new life into my depths.
I have worked as your apprentice
bringing forth in pain-red heat.
You have whispered secrets to me.

You have never been far from me -
my loyalty has kept your church alive, your children fed.
Since you formed me and called me into being,
placed me in my mothers womb,
how could I not yearn for you?
My whole life's purpose to desire your dance, which,
sweeping me up, infuses all with meaning.

Yet some would doubt
that you could gift me
with your call.

*Stef Rozitis: in recent years I have undergone so many changes that I can't easily define myself. Thanks largely to **Sophia** and to many strong women, I have learned to be proud to be a woman, and am still learning to be true to my calling.*

My gift did not come wrapped
takes up too much of my bed
and all of my time.
Presses against me and snuffles -
puppy-like.
My gift did not come wrapped,
no bows, no ribbons, no frills;
a tiny package, not even clean.
Grubby bow-shaped sucking mouth
drops dummy,
tiny fingers fumble to retrieve.
My gift did not come wrapped
but has wrapped me
around those tiny fingers
which now rub sleep
away from eyes
that teach me to forget myself.

Tanya Griffiths: At 40 I have exchanged a self-indulgent lifestyle of making art for washing nappies: the urban Madonna. It's hard work, but children are our most precious resource, and the gifts of parenting consciously far outweigh the sacrifices.

“...**m**y gift to you.” These words came so unexpectedly. They came from deep within my being. I knew I had not spoken them. I remember where I was. I remember what I was doing. For one incredible moment I felt vindicated. I should explain...

In my early twenties, I felt called to join Holy Cross Community of Dominican sisters. This fact in itself is an ongoing gift in my life and I have enjoyed opportunities to develop strengths and gifts in my self that I readily acknowledge and will always appreciate.

However, at the time I began my journey as a member of the Dominican community, the friendships I enjoyed in my late teens “*withered and died on the vine...*” In Sydney, I was geographically removed from my Adelaide friends. As well, I internalised mixed messages about relating and friendships, which were to have a profound effect on me in the years ahead.

I freely chose celibacy and understood this meant life without a loving partner and the experience of giving birth and having my own children. I knew I was not choosing to live life without any loving relationships. Nor, as a Dominican sister, was anyone asking me to. But at that time, a young woman in my twenties, I was encouraged to live in community without developing strong attachments to anyone - within the community or beyond it.

I became very hurt and confused when I was asked to write to a dear friend and tell her not to write to me so often. This pretty much killed off a loving relationship at a time when I was feeling the pain of separation from family and friends in Adelaide.

I was told about the ‘*dangers*’ of particular friendships and felt worried about being seen to be too friendly with anyone. I remember being frowned on when I linked my arm with another young sister as we walked down to the Parish Church for Easter Celebrations. It seemed even loving gestures were out!

These mixed messages about friendship and relating left me feeling anxious and empty. I was constantly putting emotional feelings on hold. It seemed I couldn’t have any close friends within the community and little chance of nurturing any friendships beyond it.

During my twenties and early thirties, I was caught up in teaching and studying, with the usual commitments to supervising weekend sport and care of young students in the Boarding School. I seemed to get by on my own, in a fiercely independent sort of way!

But the impact of living a celibate life seriously began to hit me when I reached my mid-thirties. By then I could appreciate that earlier warnings about '*particular friendships*' were given in good faith, but did little to enhance the gift of friendship in my life. Whenever I got close to anyone I would feel incredibly guilty and worry myself sick about it. I would say to myself, "*This is not fair. I have given up having a partner and children- that's more than enough! I'm not prepared to give up loving friendships as well.*"

I began to value the gift of friends in my life, to savour the times I was made to feel special and to risk being a friend to others. I had to smash through a few twisted notions about getting too close to anyone. I began to realise what a gift it was to feel energised by the love of others. Most incredible of all, by loving myself and making decisions to nurture and enhance my own life, I felt more myself; more true to myself - and better able to relate with warmth and love to others.

When I reflect on God's love for me, I know this love has been conveyed to me through loving family and friends. They have all been **GIFT** to me.

Intuitively, I have always known that friendship is a gift. Why it happens, or with one and not another, is a mystery to me. But I'm glad I challenged and fought the fears and anxieties that gave me so much pain about being close to others through the years. I was determined to hold on to life-giving relationships in the face of anything I read or heard to the contrary.

Those responsible for my early formation, as a young woman vowing celibacy, were probably over-zealous in seeing that I didn't run off with anyone, male or female. I understand that. But for my part, I just wanted to give meaning to my life, not only in what I did but in my love for others. So loving relationships have become **GIFT** for me - more so since hearing those words "***my gift to you***" after a particularly long and painful struggle to nurture loving relationships against all odds.

This is what I meant earlier when I said I felt vindicated. On hearing these words "***my gift to you***" I felt my judgement to cherish the special people in my life had been vindicated. Every fibre in my being knew it...it was **GIFT** to me when I finally heard those powerful words from within "***...my gift to you.***"

P.S. It is not surprising, then, that my parents, Doreen and Jack, my sisters and brothers, Trish, Terry, Phil, Denise and Bernard, sixteen O'Connell grandchildren and twenty O'Connell great-grandchildren are **GIFT** to me. So are my Dominican sisters and so many of the Sophia community. Dear friends beyond my family and community are **GIFT** to me. So is my life... So is this beautiful planet and the country of my birth, Australia.
ALL GIFT TO ME

Maureen O'Connell has been a Dominican sister for thirty-eight years - eighteen of these spent teaching/working with young people with intellectual disability. After eight years in Dominican leadership, Maureen continues involvement in facilitation/adult education and is a member of the Sophia community.

A MILLION REASONS TO BE GRATEFUL

ANNE HANSON

Health and healing are of universal concern. There are countless theories, philosophies and modalities available to guide people in their journeys. The individual meanings of health and healing will reflect our uniqueness and where we are in life. For some, health and healing entail recovery of the soul, for others- peace of mind, physical health, right relationship, a comfortable death, and so on.

There can be an intrinsic relatedness between opposites such as health and illness; at times to know one is to know the other. The myths and rituals of some ancient cultures embody this wisdom. Generally, illness was seen as an imbalance, and for some it was seen as an initiation into transformation. Intuition was more honoured, and there was acknowledgement of the mystery of life inherent in incarnation. Knowledge was not just something gained passively, or projected onto individuals. Rather, knowledge acquired through experience was honoured, and shared. In stillness, the voice of the spirit/intuition may be heard.

It seems to me that yesterday's consciousness and connectedness with illness has been to some degree lost, traded for technological solutions and external interventions. There is no doubt that the technological and scientific advances of the last twenty years have been enormous. Each system has its own richness and resonance. I have a personal appreciation for the great value of sophisticated modern diagnostic techniques and research studies. Medical and surgical interventions for breast cancer bought me time to explore the deeper meaning inherent in my journey. Yet there is evidence of imbalance when scientific advances, spiritually numb, negate traditional abilities and wisdom. We need to graft our new wisdom onto the old.

Perennial wisdom, compassionate care, indigenous and folk-healing traditions, dance, rituals, writing, people, music, dream work, prayer (the sacrament of self-care), nature, and meditation are all tried and potent medicines which can assist in mobilising rich inner resources of body, mind and spirit.

Intuition can be understood as the quick flash of knowing that springs from a deeper than conscious source and resonates through the body. The physical body is the environment through which intuition integrates our experience of life. Developing a relationship with my intuition continues to open a path to private and sacred truth, signposts for the direction of my journey, and vital nourishment.

Hearing other people's stories, their lived experience, can be deeply nourishing for the soul. The stories from our souls need to be heard and witnessed. What others say about their truth can assist me in finding my truth. Recipes for healing remain other people's solutions, albeit they may provide some pointers. There are no *formulas* for growth, life recovery or healing. While common threads may appear throughout people's healing journeys - e.g. meditation practices, healthful diet and spiritual journeying - no therapy reproduces particular health outcomes. It remains important for me to search within for the seeds of my own truth, rather than take someone else's truth on board.

Questioning things that I have been taught or taken for granted also allows me to live an examined life. Releasing the accumulation of perceptions, beliefs and opinions that are no longer life-sustaining for me allows a deeper connection to understanding myself. It has been necessary to reform my opinions and beliefs in order to live as an individual. Each of us comes to our knowledge differently and uses it differently.

It has been an important part of my healing journey to change my attitude towards the experience of illness, health and healing. Holding the same attitudes toward illness will ensure that I continue to feel its onslaught in the same way and detract from healing. Whilst cancer attacked my spirit, mind, emotions and body, it was communicating something very deep within me that needed to be heard for healing to occur. Discovering this partner in my healing within the cancer itself, communicating with it, taught me where I had become lost in my journey. I engaged cancer as both teacher and guide to assist me in my development. I began to live *in* the process rather than be lived *by* it.

Today, my healing has more of an emphasis on self-care. Self-awareness is the beginning of wisdom and the pre-requisite for self-care. For myself, awareness and meditation are fundamental to the deep change that is inherent in healing. I continue to refine my meditation practice, being open to knowledge that lies deep within the subconscious, rather than pursuing self-directed agendas. Awareness of the *quality of what I bring* to what I do and don't do provides a compass for deeper understanding. Pursuit of self

awareness demands continuous exploration and energies attendant on the full nature of thoughts, feelings and sensations.

Recognition of our uniqueness is part of the awakening to a greater sense of respect and reverence for the uniqueness of all life. Yet as individuals, we are all of one flesh, sharing humanity, connected to the season's cycles as we are to the ebb and flow of blood pulsing through our bodies. Each individual, each aspect of our lives, is deeply connected to each other and to that which is beyond.

We are the sacred vessel for life: life lives itself through us. Our bodies enable us to accomplish our purpose in life and express our substance and hold us on the earth. Our energy is our aliveness: the river that carries the meaning of our daily life. Unearthing my body's wisdom, honouring my intuition, becomes my doorway to awareness beyond the *whys*, and into the experience of *who*. Rationality can paralyse, but understanding can lead to awareness of the sacred, unknowable and mysterious. Listening directly to life, aware of the bounty within, leads me to a devotional relationship with life. In this context, surrendering to the 'I don't know' phrase is empowering, and humbling, and acknowledges the inherent mystery in life.

Direct experience of nature has been a most powerful influence in my healing journey. Nature has a mysterious and subtle influence upon our feelings, providing a precious expression of the creator, in seasonal cycles, life and death, beauty and devastation. My human potential for rebirth and death mirrors nature. Listening with the ear of my heart to the harmonies of nature connects me to the life source.

Cancer caused chaos, despair, loneliness, pain and fear. Whether this surfaced because of cancer, or was released by it, I do not know. In hindsight, the crisis and subsequent emotional upheaval aroused the resources of my healing system and released creative potential. Engaging cancer created new mind/body pathways and set up new lines of communication. Heightened awareness, intuition and self-compassion demanded a more authentic approach to living. Using creativity to tailor ways of being that sustain my living, listening to my own desires and acting to fulfil them was and is fundamental to building my new identity.

Recognising how precious my life is has been one of the greatest gifts of cancer. Coming out of the dark, out of experiences that are unimaginable, gives new knowledge of the body's perils and potentials. Beyond choice, I was steered through the darkness, the uncharted province, by a strength greater than my own. Cherishing my expression of life and rejoicing in the miracle of creation is the harvested fruit of a season of darkness.

Commitment to living my life means giving up rigid ideas about how the world should be and accepting how it is in the fullness of creation. There is a growth that comes from surrender and appreciating that life offers inexplicable experiences. It requires trust in the process of life unfolding.

Healing becomes a ceaseless process of relationship and rediscovery, moment by moment. The more I feel I come to know of healing, the more it moves me towards that which in truth is unknowable. Living fully requires an appreciation of paradoxical mysteries that blend light and darkness into the grandeur of what human life can be. The dance of life continually shifts its tempo, rhythm and form; living the response is pro-life. Yesterday's healing revelation can easily become today's prison unless I construct for myself a creative relationship to life.

The mystery of healing is beyond my knowing. All I know is that I had cancer and now I don't- and for this I am deeply grateful. My life continues to take a steady and fruitful rise with continued work on misplaced attitudes and perceptions. I am grateful for a blessed lifestyle, abundance in rich friendships/relationships and family, for a satisfying and challenging job, for the wonders and awe of life itself: the most precious gift.

One life
seeing, hearing, feeling,
each moment potent,
every day a thousand opportunities
to live life fully:
a million reasons to be grateful.

Anne Hanson: Anne is passionate about dance, connecting with people witnessing women's stories, being in the forest with canine companions, Kienan and Toski, and tasting life in all its manifold flavours.

CELEBRATING ST BRIGID

These haiku-style poems came from a workshop on the theme of Brigid, held in conjunction with this year's Brigidfest in February and facilitated by Judith Haines.

ON SANITY

ALICE SHORE

White snowdrops rising
harbingers of renewal
cycles of healing.

*

Come and play afresh
among the primrose yellow
take heart from Brigit.

*

TO BRIGID

JUDITH HAINES

Robes white, blue mantle
the holywells reflecting
healer and ash tree.

*

FIRE

JUDITH WESTON

Pulsating darts of flame
enlivening all life forms.
Sacred fire still burns.

*

WINTER WOMAN

DAWN COLSEY

Brigid at the hearth
tends fire for food, for warming,
kindles heart's embers.

*

Alice Shore: a child of spirit, wandering in the flame of soul and helped by haiku, St Brigid, and all poetry on the search for truth within our experiences on Mother Earth.

*Judith Haines: I have convened the Women's Poetry Circle at **Sophia** for six years and am currently writing an Honours thesis on women's spirituality in contemporary Western society. These two interests happily converge from time to time, adding deeper meaning and exploration to both projects.*

Judith Weston: retired from teaching, but not from life as a happy volunteer. I have two adult sons. I enjoy writing, particularly in a workshop environment.

Dawn Colsey: The joy of being able to write is a gift in itself!

AN IMPORTANT OCCASION

VALERIE WITT

Christmas - a time of sharing and the re-establishing of relationships - and this year it brought the awaited cards and letters containing warm thoughts from friends and family, a miracle in itself. But on top of this, something special happened on this particular Christmas.

This story really began in 1952 when my mother brought my sister, aged fourteen, and myself, fifteen, to Australia. It took five weeks by boat and the thrill of discovering a new world was very real. The thought that we were leaving behind our English family: all those connections, family myths and stories that go into making the legend of a family group, did not weigh heavily on our minds. However, as time has passed and the thrill of the new dropped away, the dearth of family connections, places and celebrations began to have an effect, and brought a sense of loss, for me at least.

My sister and I both had children in the years following our arrival. Our husbands were migrants so they did not bring us other family groups. As the years passed, we started to settle - my sister with her family in Darwin, and I came to Adelaide to be close to one daughter, although at that stage the other daughter was still in Alice Springs.

My children had both married, and started to have children of their own, so an extended family group had begun, but sadly some were many kilometres away from others.

So the gift of this Christmas 2000 was very important, as the Darwin families came to Adelaide, and the Alice Springs family came to Adelaide, and for a few wonderful days we were all together. Suddenly one became aware of this young Australian family that was growing before our very eyes- cousins and second cousins joining together.

After this great gathering I was delighted to feel that Australia had become a home- not just a place to live. I am sure many new Australians can understand my joy and excitement at this beginning: some new myths and legends on the way!

Since that time we have welcomed two more little people - my younger daughter produced twins. Two more to add to the family, bringing, like the others, their own particular personalities and possibilities. A fulfilment of potential that started with our mother's decision so many years ago.

Valerie Witt: coming with joy to her new life in a new century.

I COME TO YOU WITH ARMS FULL... *MARIANNE NORTH*

We are given this life, it is up to us, and each other, how we live.

There are different ways to live. We have choices. The choice of sticking a needle up our arm, waging war, hurting ourselves and each other. The choice of ignoring the world's pain while we live tiny, disconnected lives. The choice of living only for ourselves, or of grappling towards a larger life, embracing of the whole.

We forget the stillness at the heart of the Divine. We forget our humanity. We forget what it means to be human, to be divine. We breathe the same air. Divinity lives in us, too, and in each other.

I'm in the business of pain. It's how I earn a living, working with troubled people. Violent and wounded men, who struggle to live within the limits of their choices, costly choices. It has cost their victims, their families and themselves dearly. Many lives are changed. The offenders cannot go back, to before it happened. It is how it has to be. It is the other side of doing work with survivors. I remember the women and children as I invite the men to account. While I remember their humanity too.

Life is a gift, accept the gift, use it wisely and with passion. Please don't squander your life. If you hurt another you hurt yourself too. Don't you see how we are all joined? Don't be fooled by the separate skin. We are all part of

the whole. There are those who would give almost anything to have another chance, whose lives are ebbing away.

One man, a client, assumed I had led a sheltered life. I said, "Don't assume, because I sit across from you, that I've had it easy." Pain has cracked me open. There is courage in living through suffering and not giving up on life. Pain has also tempered me: I know I can survive almost anything. Suffering has its own timing and integrity, if we go with it. The gifts of adversity.

See the gifts in each day. Tiny, heartfelt offerings or the grander gifts. The rainbow, sighting the dolphin, three swans swimming the ocean, the pelican feeding or flying. Then there are the human offerings. The exchange on the bus, the man from the snack bar carrying my groceries. A work colleague giving me organic tea. Praising a scent or colour, or a job well done. Gifting myself, not wanting to hold back. To be open and not bracket myself against strangers or beauty or life.

Tragedy has taught me what's essential. What matters now. Shedding the unnecessary. When my brother was unconscious from his assault, I wanted to scream at the inanities of overheard conversations. One morning, waiting for the gym lift to open, a woman became irate because the staff were three minutes late. I turned to her and said: "In the whole scheme of things what does it matter. It is inconsequential." What I didn't say is "My brother almost lost his life. Value your life now."

The day my brother regained consciousness I laughed and cried. I shall never forget that moment. The nurse asked him who I was. He said, "My sister". He had come back... The first time he walked again was like his first steps. He was in the hospital gym; I approached the mother of a young woman who had lain unconscious in Intensive Care, near my brother. (Who I thought was dying, and was now walking). We introduced ourselves - I'd wanted to speak to her before. Her daughter, I could see, was doing OK. We spoke of it being quite a journey. Pain had isolated us, now it forged a recognition. I was thrilled with the newness of it. I saw life through fresh eyes. To rejoice at an adult walking. Such simple, profound pleasure. The meaning of seeing him, and the young woman, walk, after their journey close to death. My brother was given another chance. I am grateful.

Now I am working and living an ordinary life. The memories have softened, so has the trauma. While I don't wish to revisit that time, I've retained some teachings. The gift of life. To embrace life and never, ever, take it for granted. It can be taken, so swiftly and unexpectedly. In order to function in the world, to get up, eat, work, pay bills, we maintain illusions. (That we, and those close to us, are safe. The world is an orderly place. Things won't change. We won't age, or grow frail, or die.) To live is to suffer. It is part of being here. Being here is still wonderful. So are our lives.

I am the gift. I come to you with arms full of a tender and savage beauty. Take my gift, my offering to you. Take it now...

Marianne North: I am forty and a Social Worker, doing Probation/Parole work. I love writing. I also love the sea. I love books, at the moment, children's books. My nephew likes Winnie the Poo and Koala Lou, 'I do love you, Koala Lou.' I am enjoying having money. Having choices is liberating. I have graduated three times, each one has been different. Each one has been a celebration.

FITTED UP

ELAINE LEE

It seemed somewhat of a luxury! Since my retirement from teaching, I've been indulging in a few little luxuries - well, actually, quite a few! I've also been gently reminding myself that expectations about my appearance, attitude and abilities, can afford to be nudged into a more mature framework.

'Lingerie' seems such an old-fashioned word - and the little lingerie salon had the atmosphere of genteel refinement that should have set alarm bells ringing, but I bundled through the doorway, my clothes smudged with scars of pastel from the morning's Art Class.

Pretending to be interested in the array of lace and satin confections, it was a while before I noticed that the rack was home to only the smallest of garments. Well, I could be purchasing something for my daughter, couldn't I? The shop owner couldn't know that she has an only marginally smaller bust than her well-endowed mother.

My island of isolation was not to remain intact; interruption approached. The woman minced forward, lips pursed, to ask if she could help. Well, she could - but, as things turned out...she didn't.

Before long, I was herded into a minute change room and asked if I knew my bra size. Mistake number two: I should have remained silent or just responded with my name and date of birth. The expression of disbelief that flickered across Madame's face was reminiscent of my own, on hearing that a student's homework 'was eaten by the dog'.

Measured, corrected and sweating with confusion, I plunged into something 'a little larger'. My bust was described as: 'not only large but also heavy'!

I longed for escape. A much younger woman, in the next cubicle, seemed to be having similar problems. We called out to each other in sisterly affirmation, as Madame de la Brassiere darted backwards and forwards from her stock to her awkwardly shaped clientele.

“There is nothing I would be happy for you to take!” she announced. ‘Happy!’ How could she use that word in the confines of a torture chamber? At least her statement propelled me to the counter, where my name was registered in the black book with the promise that contact would be made, “When something suitable comes in”.

Across the road was a little café. I’d been there often but never before had I breathed such a sigh of relief on entering its sacred portals. I sat at a little table by the window, ordered a strong latte, opened my book on Buddhism and contemplated a baked potato filled with coleslaw and topped off with extra sour cream.

I looked at my fellow diners. My size and shape didn’t seem out of the ordinary. Had I over-reacted? Was this Post Menopausal Response or Retirement Syndrome?

Back to the Buddha! No doubt there would be some words of wisdom there. I was not wrong. Acceptance and non-attachment to the past tenderly blended with the hot coffee. Beautiful!

The ample smiling woman who waited on tables wobbled towards me, “You did say extra sour cream, didn’t you dear?”

“Yes, oh yes!”

POSTSCRIPT: a few weeks later, I braved a perfectly ordinary bra shop in a perfectly ordinary shopping centre. I was told by a charmingly ordinary young assistant that she had plenty of garments in my very normal size. Do you know, I wasn’t even vaguely insulted to be considered ordinary. Extraordinary!

Elaine Lee: “You don’t have to do everything in the first year of retirement!” This comment from my friend reminded me to cherish this time. A time to write, paint, direct plays, be with my parents as they travel into their nineties - and reframe my thoughts, as my sixties dawn.

ISMAEL'S FIRST AUTUMN

EDA HAMILTON

Born in Europe's winter,
how confusing to find
himself in autumn
before he has greeted spring.
He took it in his stride,
(although he does not stride)
and watched the windy gusts
dislodge the leaves, offering
him a moving panorama
that sent his tiny body
into paroxysms of excitement.

Birds flew low to entertain.

He gazed in rapt attention
at the wonders in the garden.
I told him that the poplar was
my favourite,
and introduced him to
plants and trees by name.
He looked so knowing
for his four months,
and I will tell him,
when he is a botanist,
where it all began.

*Eda Hamilton: Becoming a grandmother has taken Eda to a higher plane
where life is even more exciting and rewarding.*

WALKING BACKWARDS

EDA HAMILTON

We had miles of conversation
my sister and I
as we walked the London streets.
Heads together, we hungered
after each other's thoughts,
opinions and love.
We lamented childhood's
squandered opportunities
when we were pitted
against each other -
only as adults
did we discover
our true relationship.
How fortunate for us
that this is so and we
can celebrate and exchange
in our miles of conversation,
leave sentences unfinished
and easily pick up our
interrupted flow.

*Eda Hamilton: Becoming a grandmother has taken Eda to a higher plane
where life is even more exciting and rewarding.*

THE GIFT OF SELF

RAELENE MUSCHAMP

The title of this story sounds self-congratulatory - or maybe it sounds a lofty idea. I mean it to be neither of these things. A number of years ago, to contemplate something like this would have been the farthest thing from my mind. Once, the notion of my self as a gift would have been almost repugnant to me; but I have changed. Many things have happened to me over the past decade. Life has a tendency to do this! Where once I feared how people looked upon me - as out of the ordinary in several ways, notably as a Christian lesbian - I can now hold my head high.

My embarrassment at not having a nine-to-five position of employment seems so trivial now. I fell in the freezer at my place of work, which left me with permanent damage to my neck and back. Losing my home due to financial difficulties and lack of resources was no small thing either. The five years it took to eventually free myself from Workcover and all the legalities that go with it, were horrendous at the time.

I was often asked by prospective friends, on a first meeting, the familiar questions, from which I would shy away. "What line of work are you in, Raelene?" Seeking a way out, I would keep my distance. "Have you any children?" "Are you married?" When I think of these questions, I am still staggered that, in today's communities, we need an immediate answer to them. Why do we - when we could just look at a person in front of us as another gift that has been placed on our journey?

I do not want these thoughts to sound like a lecture either, but more and more I am prepared to open myself to others. In so doing, I have found an honest vulnerability in the other person. My past visions of having to attain some prominent position in the community, (whatever that might be) have been replaced with quiet serenity. These days I am more prepared to listen and take an interest in another's perspective on life, or what life has dealt them. In so doing, it enables me to appreciate what a gift they are to the community. During conversation with them, there comes a time when they turn to me and, with genuine anticipation, wish to hear my story. Although some are shocked, most people are interested to hear how a Christian lesbian operates in our society. As I stand before them, keeping eye contact, they are surprised by my self-assurance. It has also become easier, I explain to them, since I have my partner journeying with me.

There will always be opposition, and sometimes in the most unlikely places, but I don't compromise myself any more. To be true to yourself, when you see and clearly feel the other's discomfort, takes some discipline. It is then that I remind myself that the problem is theirs, not mine. This may sound like a

cliché, but the more I 'let go and let God', the more confident I become. The lover of my soul has used me, and my partner, just as we are. There has been no need to seek approval from any direction, especially from those directions I have tried in the past. Now - I am simply here! My gift is to show those around me that you can indeed love and worship God, and also be an open lesbian in the community.

Raelene Muschamp: Three months holiday to Queensland, finishing up in Noosa, has been an inspiration. So - my partner and I have decided to go back to the birds, the bush, and clean, clear water.

BEYOND THE GARDEN WALL

SALLY BYARD

I grew up in houses,
made of weatherboard,
bricks and stone.
I grew up in houses,
built in cities, large and small.
Tasmanian, Victorian, South Australian,
parsonages all.
Houses shared with father and mother,
two sisters and a brother.
These houses contained and
constrained us
until each moved and broke away.

At nineteen I broke away
and discovered the world of love,
relationship and sexuality.
I stepped from the house
and walked into a garden
... unaware...
A garden with trees and plants,
shrubs and flowers and paths.

I walked those paths alone
and with men.
With David, Alan, Paul,
Colin and another Paul.
We walked, we talked,
we held hands.
We slept, we held each other,
touched, laughed, thrilled,
melted and sang.

Until, one day,
I met you,
I saw you,
I felt your presence deeply.
I lifted my head
and looked about this garden
I had lived in, loved in, walked in
for thirty years.
I looked... and saw...
a wall around the garden,
a high stone wall
I had never noticed before.

My eyes followed the wall
to a gate
set in stones,
and shut.
Knowing you,
holding you in my heart
I walked to the gate
and pushed it open.

It opened easily
and I walked through
to see, to smell, to feel...
a garden I had never imagined
or dreamed of
on the other side
of the wall.

My heart sinks and leaps
with fear and joy,
apprehension and exhilaration.
Is this for me?
Will she come with me
or will it be another?

This garden waits and beckons,
luxurious.
Moist earth, green leaves,
creeks, waterfalls and pools,
ferns, flowers and bushes.
Blooms delicate and vigorous,
pale and bright.
Layers and depth, folds and foliage...

I wait here at the gate,
fingertips tingling to touch,
hands and palms spread to caress,
arms open to hold,
cheeks poised to brush.
Tongue, lips and mouth
ready to taste, to feel, to press.
Press, press and taste
the wonders, the wonders
of this place beyond –
beyond the garden wall.

Sally Byard: Sally was born in Hobart, grew up in Victoria, and lives her adult life in SA. At 49, with her children almost grown, she found a new lease of life and began living in a more wild and free and brave manner – walking, writing, painting, camping alone, contemplating, dreaming – experiencing and exploring the deep psyche. Time at Sophia has become a part of this process.

THE GIFTS OF THIS LAND

DAWN COLSEY

It was a warm afternoon in early summer, just right for me to take my daily fitness walk in the peace of Morialta Conservation Park, an easy ten-minute drive from my house. I use the roadway, from the entrance gates up to the kiosk - so safe, with little car traffic - mostly other walkers and cyclists, and a flat surface, almost entirely shaded by eucalypts. (Roger, my husband, *runs* on the hillside track above the road *and back*, while I do my routine thirty minutes!)

I soon overtook a small woman wearing joggers, and was concerned that she was walking *with*, instead of against any possible traffic.

"A beautiful evening for a walk," I called to her. "Beaudiful!" she replied, with a hint of an accent. Greek, I wondered, Italian? My linguistic ear pricked up, but I could not help wondering about this woman walking alone - such an Aussie thing to do - why was she not at home preparing the pasta or mezes for her family?

I did not have to probe. Maria soon volunteered much more than her name and her Italian background. "From Roma, Darrleeng." Her affection was warmly forthcoming. Perhaps my comment about Italian, "Una bella lingua!" may have helped. She seemed glad to talk as we puffed along together and beads of sweat marked her lovely smooth skin. I could not believe that she was seventy!

"Thirty-one year I work in-a Calvary Hospital, darrleeng, thirty-one year, and every year they ask me and my husband for a Christmas lunch or dinner. It's-a very nice. Thirty-one year!"

"What work did you do there?" I had a feeling it was not nursing. "I cook, darleeng, I cook, thirty-one year." I could feel the love and pride which she had put into this life task, and was so glad that they still showed their appreciation.

"My husband, six year ago, he has heart trouble. Very bad. They fix him. Stainless steel, you know?" "Ah, a new heart valve?" I suggested. "Yes. He was very ill. Now, he live six year, thanks God," she added, raising her hands and eyes in a prayerful gesture of gratitude.

Maria also expressed her love of the local native birds, and the koalas, which she often sees - "Oh, the mamma and her bambino, sooo beudiful. I love them, darleeng," and she pointed out their particular eucalypt to me.

She was so happy with her family - a son and daughter, both successful in professional careers. She herself longed to return to live in her beloved Italy, where she has visited eight times on holiday since she came alone to Adelaide to marry her husband. "But our life is here, Mamma," she reported her children's conversation. "Don't go!" She had yearned to be with her own mother, who had died at one hundred years of age, just two years before. But Maria's life, a brave and purposeful one, is here, too.

She sowed much food for thought in me. What gifts this land gives us! A little, healthy woman from a city of ancient ruins, pine trees and bustling crowds, pursuing fitness, and loving the natural world where she has made her life, far from her origins; raising her family with not a single relative to support her but her hardworking husband. She was not naïve. She walked on the left because an oncoming car had once almost knocked her down on a corner on this very road. She knows there are odd people about, like the boys who had begged her for money for the bus when she fortunately had no purse with her.

But these are just everyday minor troubles. I felt so thankful that she knew she was safe to walk alone, and to share her happy life story with a stranger.

LIZARDS, A SNAKE, A BOAT ETC. JENNY WIGHTMAN

A review of Jennie Teasdale's **Exploring Australian Spirituality: A Resource Package*** (The Flinders University and Adelaide College of Divinity, Centre for Theology, Science and Culture, 2000)

I come to the pleasant task of commenting on the Exploring Australian Spirituality package of booklet and CD Rom as a tabula rasa - unfortunately I did not see the original art exhibition held at the Adelaide College of Divinity in 1998. This is unfortunate because I think the best use of the CD Rom would be to recall to mind what was clearly an exhibition full of diverse and stimulating art works. However, there are several other uses to which the package, put together by Jennie Teasdale, lends itself. I sadly cannot aim at fair treatment of all works, however, because some are reproduced in too small a size for them to communicate clearly without recourse to the original.

However, the CD Rom allows the possessor to revisit particular works repeatedly, without the tiredness attendant on taking in more than 128 originals in a gallery! It offers a chance to theorise about what is on offer here through repeated easy viewing. And some works are so striking and sheerly pleasurable that I feel spoiled to have them in a private gallery just for one.

I was most struck by the frequent explicit reference to the native Australian landscape as a focus for spirituality. I am passionately interested in spirituality, especially those forms emerging in Australia, and with an amateur interest in art, found much to think about. The booklet is a valuable addition to the artworks, including as it does Rosemary Crumlin's and Lowitja O'Donaghue's thoughtful and provocative introductions, and Jennie Teasdale's deceptively simple analytic summary of the directions explored by the artists. Her comments are always generous, open and thought-provoking, enticing us to think new thoughts and to bring our own experience to bear as we look at these works. The work of these three women adds more weight to David Tacey's pronouncement that:

all the vital energy of our time and place is with the feminine spirit, and we must accept its cultural and religious leadership.

(ReEnchantment, HarperCollins, 2000, p 103)

While James Strong's contribution in compiling the CD Rom is clearly essential, leadership does seem to be with the women. (A small point on the booklet - I would have found it helpful if the same list of contributors and their works included on the CD Rom under "Gallery" had been printed here for quick reference.)

It is pertinent that women created more works in this exhibition, by a large margin, than men. Perhaps this no longer surprises us- though it is well to remember that we *would* have been surprised a short generation ago. With women's present freedom to create in the public eye, they (whom we also know to still occupy most of the pews) bring into the open spiritual experience which seldom finds 'church' images enough. Men also feel free to find spiritual depth in unusual images, and I find it a cause for rejoicing that both show equal willingness to search for their own individual subject matter. For me, the most powerful works are those which show a rootedness in this country, a consciousness of connection with it. Many artists show widespread awareness of white invasion of Indigenous Australia, and frequent desire for reconciliation. Some, in trying to honour Indigenous spirituality, come dangerously close to the appropriation of culture, which Lowitja O'Donoghue rightly warns us against. It is heartening to see contributions by indigenous artists as well: reconciliation in action, and these, of course, refer to the natural world which is intrinsic to their spirituality.

By far the greater proportion of all the artists look to nature for their inspiration. While blue is traditionally a spiritual colour, blues, ochres and reds recur so often that it appears that the landscape is seeping into our psyche. Objects are often made of wood and stone, also recalling our landscape. The inland, and occasionally the ocean, strike me as the richest source of spiritual inspiration in this exhibition. Theologians aware of ecology are drawing attention to the importance of our knowledge of the natural world for our own spiritual development. Sallie McFague suggests that it is appropriate in our day to explore the image of the earth as God's body: not only does the earth desperately need our care, but we suffer from the diminution of imaginative stimulus in being removed from the wonders of nature. Paul Collins in ***God's Earth*** (HarperCollins, 1995), also argues that nature is where people in our time will find the transcendent.

I want to draw attention to six works in particular, because they fascinated me. Many others deserve mention, including Janet Ayliffe's wonderful swan in "If I take the wings of the morning"; Jasmine Corowa's earth seemingly pregnant with the serpent in "Sky"; Leanne Nearmy's bold and arresting use of shape in her linocuts of Australian Christmases held outside; Chris Reid's "Strive", a startling carving of a new-born hand emerging from a mallee root; Sheila Blair Stoner's sensitive photos of tumbledown buildings in the countryside; Di Teasdale's intriguing photos of the microscopic composition of rocks; Robin Sinclair's richly abundant wool work of the ancient symbol of the "Tree of Life".

And, I'm sure, there would have been others had they been of a size and nature to be appreciated in the CD Rom format.

Since imaginative stimulation is perhaps the greatest pleasure of such a collection as this, I want to share the pleasure I found in six particular works. The first is Yvonne Ashby's "Untitled" composition, showing very lively lizards against a deep soft red ground in its lower section, and serene tree-trunks rising from them against a paler sky. One pale lizard has climbed up a tree - the others certainly look capable of it. Seed capsules scatter down from above, together with the odd gum leaf. I find here the expectation that intense life- Australian life- will emerge into the serene forest. The soft ochres, sepias and pale trunks rising create a sense of growth but without chaos and without sentimentality. Deeply hopeful and delightfully Australian.

Another work, closer to ecstasy than hope, is Rita Broadway's "From Darkness to Light", a boat on a night sea. Her simple symbolic white boatshape with its reflection is in the centre, surrounded by white stars and reflections of stars, against blues which vary from deepest and richest night sky to vivid aqua water nearest us. Her colours are the major source of excitement. Light is incandescent in her rendering, and concentrated in the explosive stars, while her blues capture the mystery of impenetrable, indistinguishable sky and sea. Such a painting asks us to explore layers of meaning, beginning with the richly symbolic boat.

Another extraordinarily powerful work is Leigh Marshall's "The Red Serpent". Just as Yvonne recalls Indigenous spirituality with her lizards, so Leigh does with the serpent- yet both are seen through western eyes. The red serpent in its mystery and power might be traced back to the sacred pythons of Greece or Sumeria. It slithers across a pale blue serene sky, over a flooded Australian landscape dominated by a stalwart red flowering tree, fecund and splendid, surrounded by the aspiring yaccas. The symbols individually suggest the presence of spiritual power, and put together to form this surreal landscape, it becomes unforgettable.

A very different work is Lidia Groblinka's uncoloured woodcut of "Home". The power here comes from its deliberate ambiguity. A lovingly detailed solid two storied house, complete down to the bird on the chimney and the welcoming woman at the door, stands on a sunflower, of which the stalk disappears into a sea of absolutely identical boring box houses, with the merest glimpse of flat desert beyond. Her recognition of the loving familiarity we can feel for our own home, our own vivid life, in all its particularity, contrasts with the perception that to others, it may seem just another of the soulless boxes in a soulless landscape. Is it? She makes us explore our relationship to others, question our automatic responses.

The last two works I want to mention each use traditional religious images, and yet in a startling way that again makes us think. Sabine Deissen and Mark Hewitt both present images of Christ. Sabine, in her angular, anguished charcoal and blue pastel figure of "Christ Grieving at the Misdeeds in His Name", hides his face from us. This Christ is racked by an enormous but

totally human sorrow, which is perhaps more startling - and moving - to us than the traditional crucified figure. Mark, on the other hand, presents a baby seen through a basic window of real wood, wrapped in a real flour bag, set against real corrugated iron. The baby's face is a photograph of a real baby, his halo a paper cut-out. In doing this, Mark avoids the heavenly trappings of Luke's pleasant fiction, and confronts us with new life in a deliberately unromantic form, which re-vivifies the traditional symbol.

One overwhelming impression given by this CD Rom is of diversity- of styles, materials, and understanding of spirituality. It is a heartening and valuable contribution to our awareness of the rich exploration of spirituality which is becoming a salient fact of Australian life.

Jenny Wightman: It was a joy to work with this package during my winter in my mallee hut - courtesy of a miraculous solar panel!

*The resource package is available via email from: teasdale@a011.aone.net.au, or fax: 83709683, or from the Open Book bookshop. All proceeds go into further research into spirituality; especially into the projected biennial art exhibitions. The cost is \$25. A copy is available for loan from the **Sophia** library for members.

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