

CRA: "What has been your experience of living religious life in contemporary society"?

Beautiful Imagination

In 2016 my car wheels rolled to stillness in a rural south Australian town. As I gently placed the gear stick into park, I looked up at the house I was to stay in for the next little while. The Sister inside was someone I had never met, yet as a novice on pastoral experience, she generously offered to open her home and life to me. At this moment I had a choice, I could believe in our God of beauty that calls us to live in faith with heart-felt awe, wonder, hope, surprise or succumb to fearful certainty. I exhaled and prayed with vulnerability—"honestly, what in the bi-jingers am I doing God?"

The choice to trust in what I will call 'beautiful imagination' comes through the gift of free will. This is central to my lived experience of religious life, and what I feel God is continually calling me/us to embrace now and into the future.

Just as a three-year-old exclaims "but why, but why, but why?" I have wondered, why in the seven hills should I trust the call to live beautiful imagination? It's clearly much easier to choose right or wrong, left or right. If I choose certainty, it's like I'm looking at life a certain way. But if I believe in beautiful imagination I'm living through God's divine vision as a third way. Only then can I be open to experience fullness of transformative life in relationship—as modelled in the Trinity. With every exhale and inhale I must remind my frog-in-a-sock like brain to live obedience through Ruah—the ultimate breath of the spirit that eternally longs for fullness of life for us all (Psalm 139, John 10:10). This is something I breathe, while holding in my heart awareness that if love is rejected, I must dust off my shoes and keep breathing through faith (Mark 6:11, Acts 15:51-52).

With every confused breath born of my humanity, I try to listen daily, to what stirs my heart—remembering Saint Mary MacKillop words; "*Believe in the whisperings of God in your own heart.*" As I have continued to journey in religious life I make time every day through prayer, listening—where my heart is being called today? Where have I experienced beauty? This awareness often bursts with paradox and hand to forehead moments. As Balthasar puts it, "the mystery of beauty is an insoluble paradox." (Balthasar, 1982, p. 442)

Thankfully, on that day in South Australia I trusted in beautiful imagination born through paradox. Here I was in the middle of nowhere, a foreign land, about to stay with someone I knew nothing about (true for her also). Yet, my heart was proclaiming through my soul, 'you are home'—my brain was confused, and my heart was paradoxically at peace. Essentially, I chose to believe in beauty—choosing to imagine new possibilities that I will call '*and*' (love, awe, wonder, surprise)—instead of '*or*' (certainty). *And* is only possible when I embrace the unknown—trusting in our God of beautiful imagination is another way to define uncertainty—choosing to live poverty of ego. "Real beauty invites exploration and depth; it does not shut the door prematurely to the questioner. Beauty is always ready to give more." (Ross, 2006, p. 61)

Now, stay with me, trusting beautiful imagination transformed my uncertainty into joy—things soon took a wild turn in South Australia. After taking another deep breath and reminding myself that the job of the Messiah is no longer up for grabs, I laughed at myself (thanks God for my warped sense of humour by the way). I knocked on the door....

I was soon embraced with warmth, love, and laughter. Not long after I arrived, the elderly man who lived across the street proceeded to drive directly into my parked car—dare I say it, God of surprises strikes again! Thankfully, no one was hurt (except his pride, our smashed car, and the pen that worked overtime on the insurance paperwork).

By Jane Maisey

Because of this, I remained in the town for longer than first anticipated. There were several ways our Sister and I could have reacted. Truly, “the imagination must come before the implementation” (Brueggemann, 1978, p. 45). Thankfully, through our shared faith and trust in God’s providence, we chose to live beautiful imagination in community. Despite our differences, in time we shared some hilarious pastoral experiences, intimacy through prayer, trust and ultimately relationship. In the coming days we started not to look *at* each other, but *through* each other—just as the full beauty of stained glass is revealed *through* the awe and wonderment of light, so too beauty was revealed *through* releasing expectations and embracing the unknown. God of life revealed a third beautiful way and opened us to grace.

The poet Dante describes awe and wonderment as he ascends towards God— “My vision then was greater than our speech, which fails at such a sight, and memory fails at such an assault”. (Alighieri, 2015, p. 560). The divine light / God’s ways are beyond words and images, beauty is beyond our imagination. A third way of surprise exists for us, and I’ve found that I must open my heart to trust in beauty through uncertainty—opening my heart “from the particular to the universal and ultimately to God.”(Ryan SM, 2011) Surely the ultimate illustration is Jesus’ life, death *and* resurrection?

There too have been times in religious life when my heart has felt deeply tested. Humour seems to have kept me somewhat sane through this paradoxical journey. When community members or I have chosen *or* instead of *and*, I have relied on prayer and relationship to centre my heart through listening—leading to transformation. Sisterhood, friendships, and the ultimate call to relationship remind me to be compassionate first, to interpret the signs of the times, to focus on embracing beauty that awaits to transform. “The voice of beauty helps open ourselves up to the light of truth, and it lightens the human condition helping it seize the meaning of pain. In this way it helps the healing. “ (*The Via Pulchritudinis*, 2006)

Historically we understand through scripture that Jesus was a man of imagination—his use of parables call us to imagine beauty. Furthermore, history also shows us that religious life has been lived in particular ways, it has changed, *and* I believe that it can be lived in new ways into the future. New ways, new wine skins (Matthew 9:17, Mark 2:22, Luke 5:37-39), new people, new beauty to be in awe of. I wonder, perhaps God does not imagine but is imagination itself? The only thing I am certain of is that I have no idea what God has in store for us next, *and*, I trust that the divine light of beauty will illuminate the path onwards.

I am deeply thankful to my congregation for having the courage and patience to listen to my newness. It’s been quite a ride of transformation for us. This journey too would not have been possible without the support and mentorship from Sisters and companions along this journey—revealing relationship *through* embracing paradox *and* beautiful imagination. Trusting this beauty as also led to new forms of surprising ministry, choosing, *and* has opened the doorway for us to develop new ministry within visual arts, education, and pastoral care. Religious life for me has been living transformation through relationship and vulnerability as part of one body (1 Corinthians 12:12-27).

Though my time in South Australia was short, the lived joy continues to play an infinite tune in my heart. As the old saying goes, “wherever the Catholic sun doth shine, there is music, laughter and good red wine.” Cars may smash, plans may change, relationships will grow, crosses will be encountered, *and* transformation awaits. When I trust the silent call to life that lives deep within my soul, I can be sure that the vine (John 15) will grow to bear fruit. Fruit that calls me / us to reverently hold sacred the old wine skins *and* embrace unknown beauty as we pour emerging wine into new wine skins.

By Jane Maisey

Thank you, God, what a beautiful daily invitation into a place of grace—one where I hope we can all gently roll up and park.

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