

Midwives of Change: Progressives shaping religious communities

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When I was first asked to be part of this conference, my topic had already been assigned -- an introductory address on "Midwives of Change: progressives shaping religious communities". No doubt the organizers had something in mind, but they left me alone to play with the metaphor. I *love* metaphors and this is a wonderful one that can take off in lots of directions. I have restrained myself, of course, because I am sure you don't want too many messier images of childbirth paralleled with progressive Christianity. When a short summary of my talk was required for conference publicity months before I had decided on my approach, I submitted a quote about change from the *Tao Te Ching*:

"You are a midwife, assisting at someone else's birth. Do good without show or fuss.

Facilitate what is happening rather than what you think ought to be happening. If you must take the lead, lead so that the mother is helped, yet still free and in charge. When the baby is born, the mother will rightly say: "We did it ourselves!"

I felt guilty at the time for submitting only someone else's quote, especially when the program came out full of eruditely-developed synopses from other speakers, but as I reread the quote, I could do no better than these words from the Chinese sacred text known as "The Way," written six centuries before Jesus *also* pointed out a way. Hopefully, these words have given you food for thought to make your own metaphorical connections about midwives and progressives without the distraction of mine.

Virginia Woolf's famous book "A Room of One's Own" began as a lecture on women and fiction. That topic had *also* been given to Woolf and she *also* wondered what she would say about such a broad subject. She wrote:

I should never be able to fulfil what I understand is the first duty of a lecturer - to hand you after an hour's discourse a nugget of pure truth to wrap up between the pages of your notebooks and keep on the mantelpiece forever." ⁱ

Woolf decided on a particular focus that had been engaging her. I will do likewise, focussing on the *variety* of midwives and their methods. As Woolf said:

One can only give one's audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions as they observe the limitations, the prejudices, the idiosyncrasies of the speaker .. it is for you to seek out this truth and to decide whether any part of it is worth keeping. If not, you will of course throw the whole of it into the wastepaper basket and forget all about it. ⁱⁱ

I have been so looking forward to using these words of Woolfe's to begin a speech!

So to the quote: "*You are the midwife, assisting at someone else's birth*" it says. This is not about our convictions or certainties. Midwives are neither the one giving birth to something new, nor the ideas birthed. They are merely assistants of change. "*Do good without show or fuss*" it says. Midwives do not need to create a new systematic theology and badger everyone into believing their creation. Instead, we offer good common sense from our experience that can speak for itself in the situation. "*Facilitate what is happening rather than what you think ought to be happening*", it says. I love this one. It is about the mother and child doing what they need to do according to their natural instincts. "*If you must take the lead, lead so that the mother is helped, yet still free and in charge*", it says. We are to assist someone else's transformation without imposing control as to what should be

the final result. What is the goal? "*When the baby is born, the mother will rightly say: "We did it ourselves!"*" So many good lessons in a gentle statement!

What then is the change that progressives wish? Although many here are old hands at this conversation, we have not done a good job if there are *only* old hands at this conference! These gatherings are safe places where people can explore their questions often *for the first time*, and engage the progressive Trinity -- what Rev. John Smith calls doubt, deconstruction and discovery. So, as first speaker today, I will offer a brief sketch from my perspective of the progressive momentum so we are all somewhat on the same page. Note that, while progressive *Christianity* gave birth to these conferences, many in other religious faiths also challenge problems in *their* traditions.

Progressives loosely agree on a few things. Our label 'progressive' is not one of them, but we live with it until a better one comes along. Progressives recognize that new scholarship, changes in our contemporary world, and our personal experiences have challenged understandings of the universe, God, Jesus, the Bible, Church and humanity - challenges to be investigated with honesty. Jesus is recovered as a Jewish sage advocating a non-violent alternative empire to that of the Roman Caesar. Whatever we call God or the Sacred is re-imaged as within our interconnected universe, rather than an interventionist Being controlling from outside. Progressives insist on personal intellectual integrity, listening to their reason and experience in conversation with traditional teachings and contemporary scholarship. They challenge religious communities where belonging and obedience are given a higher value than honesty and critical reflection. They resist claims that Christianity is the only or best religion and seek interfaith connections as an avenue to peace, global understanding and spiritual transformation. They advocate the full participation of women and gay-lesbian-bisexual-transgender people in all avenues of life and have a strong commitment to social justice and the care of our planet. Progressives seek creative worship and spiritual vitality beyond limits imposed or ordered by the traditional church and its dogmas. Religious traditions are not static entities but living traditions and vast reservoirs of potential interpretations. Certain doctrines become

dominant, not necessarily on their eternal truth or superiority, but on how they deal with the questions of the age. We are a new age with new questions demanding new answers.

Although there have been similar movements down the centuries, this current global momentum is in relative infancy. Anthropologist Victor Turner invented a term for the place where I believe progressives currently stand. In his research on initiation rites in indigenous cultures, he described a *liminal* period as the transition stage between separation from a previous state - childhood - to a stable post-initiation state where people are "expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards." In this liminal period, people are "at once no longer classified and not yet classified".ⁱⁱⁱ I believe any premature attempts to systematize or formalize progressive thought will truncate it and produce shallow roots. Remember that it took four centuries for creeds to be laid down in the early church and, once declared, they dampened creative thought rather than assisted its continuing evolution.

While some progressive groups *have* drafted affirmations, there is worthy resistance to universal statements creating another set of belief boundaries, however elastic. Many groups began as lay-led and lay energized groups, formed because of an inability or refusal of church leaders to engage their questions. They provided places for laity to read and discuss without censure. According to Rev. Dr John Bodycomb, such groups rest on three propositions, "No question is off limits; no literature, institution or professional caste is above criticism; and no formulation of the faith can be considered definitive".^{iv} These groups are also not homogenous within themselves or across the progressive label. Some focus on historical Jesus research, others concentrate on living out Jesus' vision, others explore new liturgies, others work on social justice and eco-theology and others pursue interfaith conversations. You will see this diversity at this conference.

What has held progressives together to this point has been a general agreement about what they *reject* more than uniformity about what they are. Since I move and think mostly in progressive

groups these days, I become lulled into their discussions where no bounds are set in terms of belief -- until I stumble across something that reminds me of where so many people *still* sit, exemplified by a recent note from my missionary cousin to his supporters "in the cause":

These are dark and evil times in which many of our political leaders happily go along with homosexual "marriage" and the mass murder of unborn babies, while vigorously protecting flying foxes!! Floods, cyclones, volcanoes, fires and earthquakes fail to awaken them to the fact that God could open his fingers a little and *really* let such natural disasters rip rather than restraining them as He does! How much does God need to allow or make happen to get the attention of our nation? ^v

Many of us may have held such attitudes in our youth but have moved beyond this and encouraged friends and family on this journey. The usual question comes up whenever I speak - "We have failed the next generation -- our children no longer attend church, but what will we tell our grandchildren?" At a recent presentation, however, as murmurs of agreement went around the elderly hall, one younger person spoke up, "You didn't fail us. You gave us what we needed -- permission to think for ourselves -- and we did!"

If these are changes progressives seek, what about the midwife metaphor? Throughout history, midwives have cared for women during pregnancy, labour and between pregnancies, working in partnership with the woman. Midwives have been accorded different status and treatment at different times in history, from highly-trained professionals to village women using herbal remedies. In the Middle Ages, medical professionals and the church forced many midwives out of their craft, accusing them of witchcraft in league with the devil, hence the horrifying murders of so many women across Europe. Later in history, midwifery became more structured and, by the early 20th century, more regulated. Today, the training, status and duties of midwives vary

significantly in different countries, but in some tribal areas still, midwives are seen as shamans with a divine calling to perform varied rituals to keep patients safe.

There has been a great variety of midwives for progressive religious thought. Undeniably, the early midwives were biblical scholars, in particular the Jesus Seminar who made their findings available to lay people, "not with the low mumbling of incoherence," Professor Emilie Townes says, "but in language they understand". Discovering more about the historical Jesus required new understandings of God and traditional doctrines. Once we could wriggle free of an infallible church, a literal inspired Bible, a supernatural Jesus as cosmic pawn for our salvation and other time-warped dogmas, we could trust our own reason and experience. Once an external Being no longer intervened in the world, manipulating and judging our every move, we could imagine some activity *within* the universe, whether called Life, Presence, Love or simply personal conscience.

This evolution of thought continues, as evidenced by a lively email debate this year amongst some progressive enthusiasts around the globe. Other presenters may refer to this, but let me simply say there is *variety* in how they imagined the Sacred. While all rejected the external interventionist God, many used terms such as the sacred, mystery with a capital M, something more, or Creativity, to name the Reality behind them. Others have moved beyond a reality or entity, simply talking instead about an ethical way to live. This latter group see Jesus and his teachings as their inspiration, but a few have moved even beyond Jesus, yet use the label Christian, saying we work out our own ethics and actions simply by responding to life with justice and kindness. Some of the variations in between these positions may be more about language than concrete divisions. In our desire to describe something, we suffocate amid words in our liturgies and theologies, using them easily rather than remembering, as Professor Paul Knitter reminds us, that "the unknown part of whatever we describe is much, much larger than the known part we are expressing ...Words are not only always inadequate ... but they can be actual impediments to experiencing the Divine Mystery".^{vi} Marcus Borg summed up the email debate from his perspective: "The question of whether we make Jesus

(and the Bible) central is a question of what community we wish to belong to and address. Can we bring insights from Ken Wilber [and other philosophers and psychologists] into Christian community? Of course. Can we be Christian and shape Christianity without making Jesus and the Bible central (though not as exclusive revelations)? *Probably not*".

I believe we have to talk about this heterogeneity, something faced by *any* resistance movement that agrees on what it rejects, but is not unified as to what sort of a community it wishes to become. In the Reformation, reformers were united around critique of theological and ecclesiastical abuses in a powerful church. In time, as various reformers articulated the principles around which their emerging communities would rally, an increasing number of denominations emerged, even engaging in wars and executions over who was right. When feminist challenges emerged in the sixties, woman scholars were united around exposing theological and practical abuses of women by a patriarchal culture, validated by the Bible. In time, as different women articulated their experiences within their particular settings, whether Hispanic, lesbian or indigenous women, separate groups emerged, often with conflicting positions on the cause and nature of the problems. However, whereas reformation debates were about the *church* and feminist challenges were about *women*, this progressive discussion is about the foundational elements of a God-reality and the importance of Jesus -- hardly nit-picking stuff for a community calling itself Christian. It is about whether the baby handed to its mother by the midwife will contain the DNA of the mother -- our heritage of Jesus and his vision of God -- or whether it will be a baby by adoption -- taking the mother's Christian name without any of the family genes. Oh, what fun metaphors are!

There is a rich diversity snuggling under the one blanket called progressive. We celebrate autonomy, the independence of mind that nominates *ourselves* as our final authority in matters of faith and belief, based on reason and experience. While we receive input from *many* sources, we claim our right to choose what we believe amongst authoritative claims. The opposite, heteronomy, means passive surrender of authority to external rule, whether scripture, tradition, clergy or family,

something we have done for centuries in the church. Many of us can remember our first contacts with progressive thinking and the thrill of discovery that someone else had the same questions. The discovery that many *theologians*, who have studied the traditions at length and in depth, also asked the questions, helped us walk away from traditional doctrines without bearing a load of guilt. This process is rarely a sudden "once I was blind but now I see" experience, but a long pregnancy of chipping away layers of old truths, with recurring moments of uncertainty and fear as so much we once treasured is discarded. Such a pregnancy needs gentle midwifery.

In progressive communities, however, once such exploration begins, something like the Tour de France can happen. Some members burst from the starting block with enthusiasm and freedom to throw off everything and anything that gives them problems. All caution is swept away and they peddle off, not even looking behind to see if anyone else is coming. Such people have often long been struggling internally with doubts and only needed space and permission to speak. They include many clergy and theologically trained folk who may not have spoken out about their doubts within their institutions. In a progressive space however, they can forge ahead, sometimes dragging other members along with their particular convictions and even unconsciously despising those not keeping up - the "You don't still think *that*, do you?" syndrome. Although many groups began with faithful lay people helping other struggling laity in the absence of any clergy support, some of the theologically educated in progressive groups now assume they will work out for all the others what they should think. Peer pressure can make lay people follow a guru to an end point, even if they do not feel comfortable with this conclusion, and this can become reverse orthodoxy, albeit *progressive* orthodoxy, where certain new truths silence others.

We need to be careful in our communities that those taking first scary steps out of a traditional box are not stunned or obliterated by those more powerful voices wanting to jump forward to some definitive end. New seekers should not be evicted at the first exit if they can't ride with the dominant crowd. Despite the liminal period, human nature is such that leaders will emerge

and favour one stance over all others. Wasn't this what happened when Constantine wished a move from diversity to the conformity of creeds? We need to think carefully about what sort of hospitable communities we wish to be. Perhaps I feel this more acutely as a lay woman who struggled for much of my life against doctrines that left me full of doubts and without a safe place where these could be examined. I began theological studies, not as a career -- I already had a few of those -- but to sort out my own questions. Later, when I couldn't leave theology alone, I resolved to help others free themselves from the terrors of correct belief while not suggesting the end point they must reach.

I detected some of this issue in the email debate about the Sacred I mentioned amongst progressive leaders. A few progressive communities are excluding any God-talk, any mention of Jesus or readings from Christian scriptures. Some talk about atheist churches, and a support organization has been formed overseas for atheist clergy seeking church leadership positions in their denominations in order to continue their careers on *their* theological terms. This is similar to the London Atheist Sunday Assembly, unashamedly copying the Church of England format and launching satellite assemblies around the world -- they come to Australia in November. According to its creators, it recognizes the human need for community and asks why atheists should miss out on all the good things churches have to offer, including their impressive record on social action. Articles also appear in popular and academic journals dismissing *all* "progressive Christianity" on the basis of holding up such examples as what all progressives think. I have found it a mine-field to speak to some progressive groups with which I am not familiar because some have established walls of correctness about what language and imagery one can and cannot use about the Sacred. I personally find it over-confident, in light of the ever-expanding knowledge of our universe and the assurance from scientists that we have not seen anything yet, to make definitive claims about what is *not*, rather than be content with living with the emerging Mystery. As Carl Sagan said, "The absence of evidence is not evidence of absence". Although progressives celebrate diversity, and rightly so, I struggle with issues of hospitality when more radical positions are being championed as what

progressive Christians must think, because they do not attract or make sense to people still in churches or those taking first tentative steps into progressive communities. I am also not convinced they represent the majority of progressives. Do we all have to progress to a single conclusion, closing the conversation rather than opening it up, or will our reformation, in time, separate out into different denominations according to our theologies? The basic question is, are we as progressives trying to give birth to something with some continuity from our heritage, or are we simply creating a baby from some contemporary dust mixed with water that could equally have its heritage in AA, Rotary or the Baha'i faith. I am not being facetious - I am inviting discussion.

I have just finished a speaking tour of twelve progressive groups throughout the United Kingdom. Each met in churches with the majority of members still trying to be agents of change within their institutions, even as they do their own deliberating. Those who had left churches did so with sadness when they no longer felt they could flourish there. Many had become Quakers because of the Quaker focus on listening to the Spirit within rather than doctrines preached without. The majority focused on the teachings of Jesus and his example to inspire their way of living and appreciated this community in which they could operate. They have *not* abandoned all hope of a rumour of God, and most would have been hard-pressed, I think, to join an atheist church.

Paul Knitter, professor at Union Theological Seminary, New York, tells in his wonderful book *Without Buddha I could not be a Christian*,^{vi} how his conversations with Buddhism help him re-interpret, as an ex-priest, problematic aspects of Christianity. In this process, however, he is careful that the theological genes he is passing on are still Christian and that his reinterpretations, though very different, are not totally different from what went before. "All good theology" he says "is a matter of discontinuity in continuity, creating something new that is rooted in and nourished by the old".^{vii} Since Christianity is an *ekklesia* or community, Knitter says, there has to be some degree of community affirmation for new insights to be received by the community. Of course, the question

arises as to what we call "church". Is it the institution, our local church, our small study or working group, the church alumni or even a network across a city or the world? Hugh Mackay tells us that we all need a herd, something tribal that gives us our identity. While this was once family and church, many today find their herd in coffee shops, yoga classes and book clubs instead.

Professor Gary Bouma has defined social cohesion as "the capacity of a society or group to so organize its resources and people to produce what it needs to sustain and reproduce itself".^{viii} As we have seen in recent elections, internal conflict undermines the capacity to do this. Progressives have to find ways to maintain our social cohesion without denying people the freedom to hold beliefs important to them. We need ways to say who we are and what we think, to acknowledge our need for each other, yet gently confront those who might insist on one correct stance or attempt to eliminate or trivialize others. Like others, I have constantly toyed with an alternative title to the title progressive, and I have plagiarized a slogan from elsewhere -- "Christians without borders". When Harvard Professor Diana Eck, an expert in Hindu studies and a United Methodist, is asked how she can hold both together, she says she defines herself, not by any religious *borders*, but by who she is at her centre, a seeker after the Sacred.

Having got all that off my chest, for better or worse, let me go in a different direction on the variety of midwives. Progressives seem fairly insistent on emphasizing a way of life rather than a set of beliefs, with the Sacred, however we describe it, as a verb or activity, something we make happen in the world whenever we enact love, justice, mercy, joy and goodness. Bishop Spong's mantra is about living fully, loving wastefully and being all that we are meant to be. Others talk, not of an experience *of* Something, but about 'experiencing' -- imagery that moves us beyond the dualism of describing Mystery in relation to ourselves, to simply experiencing life, the known and that beyond human comprehension. If then, the focus is about being and becoming fully human and acting

within this world, whether we acknowledge something working within us or not, there are many, many midwives, both within religious traditions and with no links to religion.

For starters, many midwives of change work within Christianity for the same goals as progressives, yet do not label themselves thus. In fact, labelling ourselves often separates us from others who struggle for the same issues of justice, integrity and faith, albeit with different theological understandings. In my past life, I was a microbiologist researching new ways to classify bacteria. Prior to that, all bacteria were initially classified as to whether they were gram positive or negative, with other tests following, but we were asking why that one test had priority over all other differences. We applied a battery of tests with no favouring, classifying them on their overall number of similarities. In the same way, some have classified themselves as progressives first, our primary box in which to sit, but the question of overall similarities arise -- should I sit in a box with those working for justice and ecology, regardless of their Christology, or with progressives, regardless of their concern for justice and ecology? Should I sit with interfaith dialogue midwives, despite different understandings of the Sacred, or with progressives who may or may not wish to engage other religious traditions?

It is also important to recognize the *range* of progressive organizations beyond our own group. Type progressive into a search engine and a host of groups come up, many of which I have not even investigated. While they may not all agree on your progressive formula, they too are challenging the status quo and offer great resources as midwives of change. I think, for instance, of Frankie Schaeffer who helped his father Frank Schaeffer of L'Abri fame in Switzerland, initiate what would become the Religious Right in the USA. Frankie has left all that behind and is now in the Orthodox church, but he is equally challenging the traditions, even though he may not tick all the

boxes I might. All these midwives are partners and the more we link together and encourage each other in this task of moving Christianity and religious thought into the 21st century, the better.

There are also many midwives who may not yet have found their voice. Many active clergy speak of opposition to progressive stances, both from their institutional structures and from conservative lay members, such that they avoid public expression of progressive views. When a recent questionnaire entitled "the uniting church in the new millennium" ^{ix} was circulated to clergy prior to an upcoming book, clergy were asked to what extent they followed progressive theologies. Almost half said often or always. As to the importance of progressive theologians to the church, 57% said important or very important. In ranking their educational needs and interests across nine categories, progressive and emerging theologies ranked the third highest priority after general theology and biblical study. 59% listed education in progressive and emerging theologies in their first five choices. It would seem many clergy *are* paying attention to progressive thought, regardless of whether they publically support progressive groups or feel supported in this by their institutions.

And what of midwives beyond the church? Science, more than any midwife of change, has encouraged us to ponder our lives on a bigger drawing-board by showing us a universe far greater and mysterious than the universe of religion, the cosmos of our creeds, or the folly of a heaven of golden streets in the clouds. This amazing glimpse into mystery and wonder pushes us to imagine a Sacred large enough to contain such grandeur, or else to reimagine our religious claims altogether. Science also offers us hints on how to assess our claims. Science is not about immutable laws but about provisional explanations open to revision when better information comes along. Such change is seen as strength not weakness, whereas in religion it has been touted as weakness and lack of faith. We need to ingest the challenges of science, not just as a sub-theme of our progressive interests, but as a stunning midwife in its own right that must then inform all of our religious deliberations.

And what about many atheist midwives who work to create spaces for challenges to established "truth". As Sam Harris said at the Melbourne Global Atheism Convention, "Atheism in itself has nothing to offer; science, art and philosophy do. Atheism merely provides a space for conversation." The rise of new atheists has been a wake-up call, with their public annunciation of many of our own stifled doubts, and they invite us to engage in exploration beyond our religious borders. New atheism has given us the ability to step into their arguments as a place from which we can then re-evaluate our own "truths".

Although we have not had good models over the last few months, politics is also a midwife of change if our goal is to reflect theologically from the context and circumstances in which we live. Politics is a public discourse where many midwives of change meet -- ethics, economics, social justice, global action - in order to bring to birth changes in this world in which we live and move and have our being. Literature, poetry, art and music are also midwives of change, whether with religious content or not. I am constantly amazed at how novels and biographies call me to theological reflection through the inspiring lives of both real people and fictional characters. I have notebooks of quotes from novels that offer more life skills than many theological tomes. Thus I have enjoyed Prof Gary Bouma's comment about *Star Wars*. Apparently 75,000 Australians put "Jedi Knight" or some related term in a census response for religion. When some religious folk expressed offence to him, Bouma said, "Have you seen one of the movies? You get three sermons. The injunction to 'trust the force' and the blessing 'may the force be with you'; a well developed moral frame, a theological orientation, and a basis for hope all packed up in some whiz-bang kind of visual stuff. Pretty impressive and rather more engaging than the average sermon ... or Sunday School platitudes".^x

After centuries of church resistance to natural theology, we are once again reading from its leafy pages. Natural theology argues that we have knowledge of the Sacred through our capacity to interpret evidence within the universe and in human nature. The traditional argument against natural theology hinged on the fear that if God could be known in nature, what was the need for a revelation in Jesus Christ? There have been centuries of changing views, but theologian Karl Barth's opposition to natural theology, because it argued a true knowledge of God as creator divorced from knowledge of God as redeemer, set the tone for the Twentieth century. Theologian Sallie McFague began her career in Barthian theology, believing that "only the Word that reached my ears conveyed the presence of God, never the sights before my eyes".^{xi} She later became a champion of natural theology, reminding us that any theological constructions are "houses to live in for a while, with windows open and doors ajar. They become prisons when they no longer allow us to come and go, to add a room or take one away or, if necessary, to move out and build a new house".^{xii} While neo-Barthian views are strong within many Australian theological colleges, the progressive reimagining of divine creativity *within* the universe has both returned permission and, in fact, justified theologically our need to see the planet as something sacred. Such awe and wonder is not limited to a religious experience, however. Philosopher Sam Keen says:

To wonder is to perceive with reverence and love ... and in wondering we come close to the feeling that the earth is holy. Historically, the notion of wonder has been closely bound up with a religious mode of being in the world Whether we continue to talk about God is not so important as whether we retain the sense of wonder which keeps us aware that ours is a holy place.^{xiii}

Teilhard de Chardin, the Jesuit priest and scientist whose writings were suppressed during his lifetime by his religious order, grew up with an irrepressible sense of the beauty and wonder of nature from his childhood experiences immersed in the woods, rocks, trees and the sea. As a young

budding scientist, he measured everything he could find, weighing, dissecting, scrutinizing all aspects of his nature collections. These experiences set him pondering the inner aspects of life as much as their outer aspects, forming a holistic philosophy of the universe that could accommodate his experience of the Sacred, about which he wrote, "You came down into me by means of a tiny scrap of created reality [the objects of nature]; and then suddenly, you unfurled your immensity before my eyes and displayed yourself to me".^{xiv} Progressives continue to ask me at every presentation, what do we teach our grandchildren? I say to all grandparents - What about midwifing them into a passionate love for nature that can, in turn, midwife them into an experience of whatever they can call the Sacred? There is a wonderful poem by Stephen Dunn about post-Christian parents sending their daughter to an Arts and Craft week at the local church. When she came home wearing a "Jesus saves" button and singing "Jesus loves me", they knew they needed to talk. The poem goes on:

Jesus had been a good man, and putting faith
In good men was what
We had to do to stay this side of cynicism,
That other sadness.
Could we say Jesus
Doesn't love you? Could I tell her the Bible
Is a great book certain people use
To make you feel bad? We sent her back
Without a word.
It had been so long since we believed, so long
Since we needed Jesus
As our nemesis and friend, that we thought he was
Sufficiently dead,
That our children would think of him like Lincoln

Or Thomas Jefferson.

Soon it became clear to us; you can't teach disbelief

To a child,

Only wonderful stories, and we hadn't a story

nearly as good.

Evolution is magical but devoid of heroes.

You can't say to your child

"Evolution loves you." The story stinks

of extinction and nothing

exciting happens for centuries. I didn't have

a wonderful story for my child

and she was beaming. ^{xv}

Evolution does not have to be dry and boring. Tell the grandchildren the history of our world, not through the usual historical trinity of conquests, wars and human inventions, but through stories from the great book of Nature -- about forests, rivers, insects, trees and seasonal transformations. Stop feeling guilt about which religious doctrines to teach them and which to avoid. Anchor them deeply in *this* earth instead and let their wonder and awe lead to deeper reflection with you as a midwife, rather than a religious instructor with a bundle of information that must be passed on. A Professor Norman Habel says, we need to act as Earth beings in solidarity with Earth, not God-like beings who happen to be *sojourners* on Earth. In his beautiful book *Rainbow of Mysteries* Norman tells how ecology was *his* midwife: "Instead of being another science that let me view nature with detachment because I was a superior intellectual being with a mandate to dominate creation, ecology revealed to me who I was: an Earth being!" ^{xvi}

Progressives recognize that Christianity is not the only way, neither can we claim that it is universally the *best* way because how can one person objectively judge this and on what criteria? This has opened many people up to interreligious dialogue, but it goes further than dialogue. If the worlds' religions are on a similar human quest, albeit with different circumstances and contexts, surely they have, as midwives, something to offer us? Must we always be so arrogant as to reinvent the wheel? John Dunne's book *The Way of All the Earth* talks of "passing over to another religion tradition in as open, as careful and as personal way as possible, and then passing back to one's own religion to see how walking in someone else's "religious moccasins" can help one to understand and fit into one's own".^{xvii} This involves action, seeing how my search is experienced in a different place and shape.

Paul Knitter's passing over into Buddhism, as mentioned earlier, showed him new ways to return and remain in his own tradition. I highly recommend his book "without Buddha I could not be a Christian" but will only touch on a few things here. The Buddhist understanding of the interconnectedness of all things enabled Knitter to move beyond the dualistic Christian teaching of an infinite distance between God and the world. The idea of enlightenment as 'emptiness' at the centre -- not nothingness, but empty as being able to receive anything, new connections, new possibilities in this constantly changing, relating worldly existence -- returned Knitter to his Catholic mystical tradition.^{xviii} In John's gospel, he says, "God is *love*" *not* "God is the *father* who loves". Love as a verb is "the emptying, connecting energy that in its power originates new connections and new life,^{xix} an energy field that pervades and influences us all, calling us to relationships".^{xx} As for the Christian urge to describe God as personal, Buddhist imagery of connecting energy allowed Knitter to imagine, not a personal relating being, but a personal "sense of groundedness" that produces peace within ourselves, and a "sense of connectedness that produces caring for others". Since Buddhism does not have a concept of God but emphasises one's own work towards

transformation, its language and imagery can help both progressives who see a Reality behind the Sacred and those who do not.

Buddhists talk of enlightenment as waking up to "wisdom or understanding". Knitter experiences this in ordinary human experiences where "something extraordinary can happen as we feel ourselves connected or grounded and held by a peace that can endure even after the hype of the experience is gone".^{xxi} On a personal note, the morning I admitted my mother into an aged care facility after she had lived with us for six months, I was emotionally distraught, even though this move had become necessary. I was sitting at my computer when two impeccably white cockatoos landed on the bird feeder outside my window. They are my absolutely favourite bird despite the damage they can do to vegetation. A childhood dream of mine was to have a pet cockatoo and I had not seen them on my feeder before. It was as if they had finally found the place where they belonged. I would never call this a miracle or an act of God. In fact, calling it such would take away from the randomness and delight of being a part of this natural world, but the incident warmed my damaged heart.

By now you will realize this lecture could go on and on as my searchlight scans the inexhaustible midwives of change that impact our lives at any moment, let alone a lifetime. *Everything* is a midwife for being fully human, not just the narrow limits of certain scholarship. In every changing moment we are bombarded by a plethora of impulses - emotional, informational, psychological, physical -- all of which influence what we will be in our next moment. Within this bombardment is what we see as Sacred. We need to acknowledge this diversity of splendid import and pay attention to it all.

And so to finish: Professor Philip Clayton says:

On the one hand, theology is a never-ending quest; it calls one continually to respond in novel ways to new "horizons of interpretation", whether they come from science,

philosophy, culture or society. On the other hand, theology harkens continually back to its past - its scripture, classic figures and its traditional themes or loci - in an ongoing process of retrieval and renewal.^{xxii}

We have benefitted from people in our past, whether through liberation theology, historical Jesus study, feminist studies or eco-theological awareness to name a few. They are our own progressive apostolic succession, as it were. In any era, it has been the outspoken and the outsiders that do the groundwork for change that may not be established until a few decades later. As today's Christians without borders, we must continue to be the leaven in the bread, the salt in the soup, the light in the darkness and the midwives of change when it comes to living with authenticity in our time and place. People like us are usually in the minority and on the margins of institutions, but we crystallize our thinking on the perimeter such that, when authorities are finally ready to embrace new thinking, the paperwork is done.^{xxiii}

ⁱ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Inc, 1929, 1981), 3-4

ⁱⁱ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 4

ⁱⁱⁱ Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 94-7. Turner was researching symbolism and ritual among Ndembu of Zambia

^{iv} John Bodycomb, *Aware and Attentive*, (Richmond, Vic: Spectrum Publications, 2012), 28

^v Personal correspondence

^{vi} Paul Knitter, *Without Buddha I could not be a Christian* (Oxford: One World, 2009), 136

^{vii} Knitter, xiv

^{viii} Gary Bouma, *Being Faithful in Diversity* (Adelaide, ATF Press, 2011), 48

^{ix} Survey, "The Uniting Church in the New Millennium" by Rodney Smith and William Emilsen, 2012

^x Bouma, *Being Faithful*, 28

^{xi} Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 94

^{xii} McFague, *The Body of God*, 16

^{xiii} Sam Keen, *Apology for Wonder* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1969), 15, 211

^{xiv} Quoted in Ursula King, *Spirit of Fire: the life and vision of Teilhard de Chardin* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 77

^{xv} Stephen Dunn, *At the Smithville Methodist Church*, Quoted in Huston Smith, *Why Religion Matters: the fate of the human spirit in the age of unbelief*. (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001, 57-8

^{xvi} Norman Habel, *Rainbow of Mysteries* (Kelowna, BC: Wood Lake Publishing, 2012), 72

^{xvii} Knitter, *Without Buddha*, 2

^{xviii} *Ibid.*, 15

^{xix} *Ibid.*, 18

^{xx} *Ibid.*, 20

^{xxi} *Ibid.*, 43

^{xxii} Philip Clayton ed., *All That Is: a naturalistic faith for the Twenty-first Century* (Minneapolis, Fortress, 2007), xi

^{xxiii} Val Webb, *Stepping out with the Sacred: human attempts to engage the Divine* (New York & London: Continuum, 2010), 261