

# **“If it wasn’t for God I wouldn’t be sitting here now ...”**

## **The place of Christian spirituality in suicide prevention.**

By Phil Daughtry, June 2005.

There's something inside me that pulls beneath the surface  
Consuming, confusing  
This lack of self-control I fear is never-ending  
Controlling, I can't seem...  
To find myself again  
My walls are closing in  
I've felt this way before  
So insecure...

*(Linkin Park, 'Crawling')*

Supporting young people around issues of depression, self-harm and suicide risk has been a consistent theme in my youth work practice during the last 5 years. Australia shares with other Western, industrialised nations the social reality of an alarmingly high number of young people on medication for depressive illness, and the commonality of self-harming behaviours. In the stories of the young people with whom I work I regularly encounter the personalised reality of what the statistics suggest: an experience of youth as a wilderness sojourn in an freakish landscape of rapid emotional mood-swings, daily threats to identity, dignity and personhood<sup>i</sup>, difficult and sometimes insurmountable social obstacles<sup>ii</sup>, ambiguous, indistinct and conflicting life-direction markers<sup>iii</sup>. It can be lonely and frightening out there in the world where teenagers actually live. Friendly, supportive and truly helpful voices are experienced as far and few between. Some young people find themselves simply unable to find enough reasons or resources to continue and so resort to their final remaining coping strategy, the termination of their earthly existence.

Our Australian Bureau of Statistics tells us that a relatively small number of young people actually make this choice: one in every five thousand young men and one in

every twenty-one thousand young women, aged fifteen to twenty-five years, take their own lives.<sup>iv</sup> However, informed estimates also suggest that for every completed young male suicide, another fifteen young men attempt ‘unsuccessfully’ to take their own lives. The ratio of completed to attempted suicides for young women has been estimated at an alarming ratio of one-to-one-hundred.<sup>v</sup> Add to this the broader incidence of self-harming (cutting, burning) as a non-suicidal expression of intense inner distress and the burgeoning number of Australian young people on anti-depressive medication<sup>vi</sup> and you have a portrait of a crisis in Australian (and Western) youth culture.

In my own engagement with this crisis at a pastoral and research level I have become particularly interested in the influence and impact of spirituality in suicide prevention and adolescent well-being. This interest has developed along the following lines:

- Noticing the way in which spirituality has emerged as a factor for consideration in the social/medical science and therapeutic dialogue around suicide prevention and the broader concept of resilience.<sup>vii</sup>
- Considering the unique place of Christian spirituality within this dialogue.
- Pastoral theological reflection on aspects of Christian spirituality as factors contributing to young people’s experience of ‘risk’ and ‘resilience’.

In the remainder of this paper I will discuss these points with reference to a suicide prevention conference event and a focus group discussion with four Christian young women.

### **Theological Reflection on a Conference ‘Interrupted’**

In June of 2003 I attended the Suicide Prevention Australia National Conference – *Finding Meaning to Sustain Life: The Place of Spirituality in Suicide Prevention*. The ethos of this event is clearly articulated in the following excerpt from the conference brochure:

Spirituality, like suicide and suicide prevention, is the meeting point of many paths. For example, in medicine, mental health and the social sciences, spirituality attracts intense interest after decades of suspicion and neglect as practitioners and researchers increasingly appreciate its positive significance ... For many affected by suicidality and suicide, spirituality is providing answers to their wish that they be treated as whole people. For indigenous people ... spirituality has always been at centre stage, and non-indigenous Australia may slowly be waking up to Dreaming and its significance for all of us.<sup>viii</sup>

I find myself excited by the first implication of this statement which is that, as an active participant in a contemporary expression of an ancient and global faith tradition (Christianity), I have something to bring to the table in the broader social dialogue around mental health and human resilience. One of the highpoints of my experience of this conference was to hear some of the Christian delegates speak with intelligence, sensitivity and wisdom within the context of a multi-faith, quasi-secular forum. However, the most profound theological moment for me was prompted by an expression of the indigenous spiritual leadership at which the conference statement also hints.

The keynote address on the second day of the conference was given not by a medical practitioner, social researcher or academic theologian but by a gifted aboriginal woman who introduced us to an aspect of the spirituality of her culture. This speaker was assertive and non-apologetic about creating a counter-cultural space within the environment of a busy, highly programmed and information-heavy professional development event. She did not use power point slide shows, she did not quote statistics, she did not expound on counselling skills or therapeutic techniques. She did model for us an alternative way of being together in human community. She never quite got around to actually giving us a 'talk'. She did take the time to publicly greet, acknowledge and pay respect to the representative age and gender groups among the delegates. She did take the time to teach us the language of the traditional greeting of her tribe and to exchange this greeting with about twenty-five individual delegates. She did introduce to us a male cousin and create space for him to serve us by playing

the didgeridoo. She did invite a leading Australian psychiatric authority on adolescent mental health to come up to the stage platform, to take off his shoes, to participate in a ritual of respect and to meet her cousin personally and to exchange with him some aspect of personal story. In this way her conference address continued, not as a lecture, but as a dramatic model of alternative human existence, it seemed to me, in the spirit of the biblical prophets.

As a verbal/cognitive framework for the spiritual theatre of her keynote address, our speaker left us with a handful of what I describe as prophetic questions and statements, these were not offered systematically but rather were interspersed within her narrative drama:

Where have you come from and what is your story?

Are we here to demonstrate objectives and outcomes? Or, are we here because we are human and we show respect to each other?

The problem is not the suicides the problem is the society.

Get rid of the frames of reference and the suicides will disappear.

My message to you this morning is: 'I love you my brother, I love you my sister.'

I remember little else from the multiple talks and workshops relating to this conference but the words of our indigenous speaker have haunted me ever since. My theological reflection on these words is as follows.

The frames of reference within our culture that are contributing to the emotional distress and associated suicidal behaviours of our young people can be likened to the Pharisaic, 'one-size-fits-all', emotionally distant, legalistic and unrealistic multiple expectations that are experienced by everyday people as oppressive and life-debilitating: 'They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them' (Matthew 23:4). These frames of reference may include the intense weight of pressure that parents, educators and other adults bring to the culture they create around young people's experience of senior secondary schooling and career counselling.<sup>ix</sup> These frames of reference may

have to do with idealistic media images of economic/fashion 'norms' and physical features. These frames of reference may have to do with the almost exclusive identification within Western culture of academic/career/material accomplishment in terms of personhood and social identity. These frames of reference may have to do with the non-validation of a young persons many assets and interests ('If only you'd put half as much time into your maths homework as you do riding around on that bloody BMX with your idiot mates!').

In the midst of the dark fog of the young person's experience of attempting the multiple role-play of confusing, conflicting, sometimes impossible and often self-denying expectations, the voice of Jesus comes as invitation and call to an alternate way of being and living:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light (Matthew 11:28-30).

In this passage Jesus uses the metaphor of the individually and handcrafted yoke, the harness of partnership, to illustrate his uniquely personal and alongside-of approach to each human being. The approach of Jesus is gentle, humble and his expectation perfectly corresponds to the capacity of the approached to respond and participate in a whole new frame of reference for living.<sup>x</sup> This frame of reference, understood in the broader context of the teaching and ministry of Jesus, validates story, relationship, individuality, diversity, community, mutuality, creativity, hopefulness, mercy, space for exploration, discovery, failure and boredom as well as excitement and success. This is a frame of reference for living that finds beauty, meaning and value in the everyday, in life as it actually is rather than an oppressive idealism that forever remains beyond our capacity to reach.

'Get rid of the frames of reference and the suicides will disappear'. Christian youth workers are called to a ministry that leads young people to the transformation of their existential framework. Through both our relational presence and spiritual formation activities we facilitate counter-cultural and sacred-space moments and events.

Through participation in these moments and events young people are helped to exchange confusion, guilt, isolation and disconnection for belonging, validation, affirmation, meaning and purpose, the fruits of participation in the divine life: a Christian spirituality of suicide prevention.

**“If it wasn’t for God I wouldn’t be sitting here now”**

My theological reflection on the transformation of frame of reference, and my direct work with young people in light of this, leads me to believe that Christian spirituality has a significant contribution to make in enhancing resilience<sup>xi</sup> and, therefore, in keeping young people alive. Having said this, I also believe that not all theological frames of reference are equal. Some expressions of Christian faith can be shown as increasing, rather than reducing, risk to those vulnerable to depression and self-harm.<sup>xii</sup> A Christian spirituality of suicide prevention, will not only seek to assertively engage and to contribute to the broader social conversation and practice around youth suicide prevention. It will also become theologically self-critical and constantly seek to evaluate and identify those aspects of faith expression that are truly congruent with the Jesus who offers ‘life abundant’ (John 10:10) and the God who approaches the ‘bruised reed’ and ‘smouldering wick’ (Isaiah 42: 3) in a posture of nurture and support, gently breathing back into life that which is fragile and at risk of perishing.

About fifteen months ago I had the opportunity to do some of this reflective/evaluative work with a small panel of people whom I consider to be experts. The contributors to this discussion were aged eighteen to nineteen, with a history of participation in Christian faith community and practices<sup>xiii</sup> as well as a history of living with and surviving depression, self-harming behaviours and suicide ideation (thoughts and plans) and attempts. All contributors were female, all were known to each other and to myself all were enthusiastic about voicing their perspectives. The conversation was lively, frank and informative. The content of the conversation offers the views of only four people (of one gender). However, I found these views to be representative of many other young people’s stories that I have listened to over a number of years. What follows is a snapshot of this conversation; the contributor’s comments are identified by a single capital letter, not representative of their actual name.

All four identified a primary transformation in frame of reference, which served them experientially as a sustaining influence in their journey of managing depression and staying alive. Against the tendency of their depressive thinking, in which they self-evaluate as ‘useless’, ‘unworthy’, ‘unlovable’ and universally rejected, they experience a sense of transcendent or ‘sacred other’-evaluation, which brings to them a completely alternative, hopeful and counter-cultural message: ‘you are loved, you are worthy, your life has meaning and purpose’. Their experience of ‘transcendent evaluation’ enables them to feel something other than despair and hopelessness. At the deepest level of their experience of self it is as if a sacred candle has been lit. Its light is the light of life, its existence a validating factor pointing to the holiness not just of the sacred other but also reflecting and revealing the sacredness of self:

**W:** No matter how dark the days become,  
No matter how much the pain seems to suffocate me,  
No matter how weary I am,  
No matter how much death masquerades as the answer,  
There is always hope.  
Even if sometimes we cannot see it (a candle image was drawn to illustrate this written verse), its always there, burning steadily – the beautiful hope we have through our Lord Jesus Christ, who’s love for us is deeper than we could ever comprehend.

**S:** I find that sometimes you almost don’t have the energy and strength to hang on to the glimmer of hope, its just that thing (sense of God’s love and purpose) that’s there that stops you from doing or taking an action that is the opposite direction to hope.

The group identified aspects of recent theological studies and lectures, contemplative and symbolic prayer exercises and particular experiences of belonging and serving in Christian faith community as factors relevant to re-framing their sense of self, meaning and purpose from a perspective outside of their broader cultural and internal belief systems:

**W:** After I had quite a negative experience up here and I returned to *Q* (the home town of the speaker) I went to church Sunday morning and the message was about the fact that we are children of God and that’s what gives us our identity ... and afterwards the minister came to talk to me and he just grabbed both of my hands and said, ‘That was for you. I wrote that sermon for you. I don’t care what you’ve done, where you’ve been, you are a child of God and you are loved,’ and I’m just like, “whoa.” ... I started crying ...

**T:** Prayer can be so... releasing ... when its just you and God, its like you can just be yourself ... and you don't have to say the right words. And sometimes you just say, "Oh God you know what I mean!" 'cos it doesn't come out in words ... you can just say things that you couldn't say to any human being.

**W:** And one time I was just feeling so bad, and I'm just like, "I want to die. I don't want to be here." But I was just like crying out to God, praying with God, and gradually, I just felt better. And I felt I didn't want to die anymore and it was just amazing (laughs).

**S:** On one of our camps, we're given a stone to place in a bowl of water (a symbol of releasing pain and guilt to the forgiveness and healing of Christ) that was one of the most helpful things I've ever done, like, that was so good for me to do - especially given that the stones were black (laughs).

Threatening the nurturing, sustaining influence of the sense of transcendent, unconditional evaluation, group members spoke of the experience of certain other theological constructs as emotionally debilitating and contributing to, rather than reducing, suicidal risk. Clearly identified in this category was the idea of Christianity as 'trying harder and doing more':

**S:** ... like what I get out of sermons is all about imitating Christ and putting others before yourself, like, (if) you're not imitating Christ, who else is there to imitate but Satan? So if I can't get out of bed in the morning (because of depression), am I imitating Satan? It leaves me feeling a lot of the time that maybe church isn't the kind of place for someone like me.

**N:** It annoys me more than anything that ... I didn't feel like I could step away from anything ... because they needed me so much (in terms of voluntary service) ... I wanted to get out of there 'cos the thought of church and the people there just made me sick. I hated it; I hated it so much ... these people just expect me to be bubbly all the time.

Another very negative experience was identified with the idea, prevalent among some Christian groups, of 'diagnosing' depression and suicidal thinking as relating to demonic presence in the life of the individual. Connected to this was also the suggestion that 'unconfessed sin' has allowed an access point for the demonic spirit.

**S:** If you're feeling really depressed, if you're having suicidal feelings, you know, 'man, you're full of demons.'

**T:** Yeah, that's it.

**S:** And it just makes you feel worse. And yeah I've had some really bad experiences with that, and just been left feeling so guilty, and almost scared of yourself.

**T:** And its hard to tell someone who's saying, 'Oh you've got this demon we need to get it out of you', 'I don't need this just yet ... at the moment all I need is your care and support.'

Despite the debilitating effect of theological frames of reference such as these, on balance the young women were adamant that Christian spirituality was ultimately resilience enhancing: **S:** 'If it wasn't for (my experience of) God I wouldn't be sitting here now'. The individuals in the group presented as people with a growing confidence in their ability to discern between the spirits: **S:** 'cos Jesus wasn't like that. I know that if I met Jesus, he wouldn't be telling me that he had to cast demons out of me, he'd be giving me a hug.'

Questions could be raised in relation to the content of this discussion as to whether or not the young people's experience represents a holistic *outcome* of Christian spirituality or a therapeutic *use* of Christian spirituality as a self-help, positive psychology mechanism. From the perspective of my personal knowledge of the members of this group, I view their comments as emerging from genuine spiritual encounter and theological reflection. There is a thread within Christian spirituality that helps us to see that what makes us truly human is synonymous with what makes us truly spiritual.<sup>xiv</sup> I interpret the focus group discussion in this light. For those who can accept this positive assessment, three clear directions emerge from reflection on the comments of my 'panel of experts.'

Firstly, comes the direction of a movement towards an assertive rather than apologetic posture in articulating the sustaining value of Christian spirituality as a real factor in resilience.<sup>xv</sup> The assertive approach means an informed, confident and respectful participation in professional and informal networks of care for young people at risk. One of the expressed hopes of the discussion group was for partnership between faith practitioners and medical staff: **T:** 'There's value in that partnership 'cos medication can't give you hope, Christianity can't give you a chemical balance.' This calls for

Christian youth workers to both familiarise themselves with the language of suicide prevention and to a process of discerning the relevance of Christian spirituality within this.

Secondly, comes the direction for Christian youth workers to assist the broader Christian community to evaluate the influence and impact of some of its theological assumptions and language from the perspective of youth experience as well as informed exegesis. In short, the call is for youth work practitioners to support faith communities in a developing a pastoral theology that listens closely to the voice of the young people it attempts to ‘heal, sustain, guide and reconcile.’<sup>xvi</sup>

Thirdly, comes the direction to develop a practice of youth work that engages young people in a process of spiritual and theological formation, enabling a discerning of spirits. In other words, young people need help in being able to tell the difference between graced theology and popular religious assumption. Practices of youth work that empower young people to reflect on faith assumptions from broader theological perspectives<sup>xvii</sup>, and that draw young people into direct spiritual encounter<sup>xviii</sup>, provide a framework for a Christian spirituality that is ‘rooted and established in love’ (Eph. 3: 17). This kind of Christian spirituality is a force for deliverance against the frames of reference that cast such long and deep shadows over the culture of youth experience in Australia and other Western nations.

#### **About the Author:**

Phil Daughtry has two decades of experience in youth work. He is husband to one wife (Claire) and dad to four teenagers (Justin 19, Jonathan 17, Matthew 15 and Stephanie 13). He lectures in and offers oversight to the Youth Development Certificate (Year in the Son: [www.yits.tabor.edu.au](http://www.yits.tabor.edu.au)) and Bachelor of Arts Youth Work courses at Tabor College Adelaide, South Australia, a Christian tertiary education centre: [www.adelaide.tabor.edu.au](http://www.adelaide.tabor.edu.au)

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<sup>i</sup> The ‘simple’ act of getting through a regular school day may provide an several very real threats to the fragile self-esteem of a young person, from peer evaluation of clothing, to a public speaking assessment in English class, to an exclusion from a lunch time conversation group and so on.

<sup>ii</sup> Something such as gaining a driver’s licence may be extraordinarily difficult for young people who lack the financial resources for instruction, and/or the availability of a supportive adult and car.

<sup>iii</sup> For example, in Australia many secondary school aged young people work in casual and part-time jobs from the age of 14 or 15. At work, these young people are given adult responsibilities and are expected to communicate with staff and customers in adult ways. At school, however, young people are often dealt with as naughty children: ‘sit down, shut-up and do what you’re told.’

<sup>iv</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics Information *Paper Suicides*, ABS Cat. No. 3309.0.55.001 (Canberra: ABS, 2001)

<sup>v</sup> Mission Australia Youth *Suicide – Scope the Facts* (Mission Australia Research and Social Policy Unit, 2001); SANE Factsheets ‘Suicide and mental illness: the facts’ (SANE Australia2003).

<sup>vi</sup> In Australia, 20 000 prescriptions for anti-depressants are issued per month to people under 19 (Professor Ian Hickie, quoted in the *Age*, 10/04/04, p.1 and the *West Australian*, 10/04/04, p.8. Cited: [www.youthfacts.com.au](http://www.youthfacts.com.au)).

<sup>vii</sup> It is becoming increasingly common to encounter articles in a variety of professional journals that discuss the relationship between spirituality and general well-being, including and often focussing on the aspect of well-being we refer to as mental health. For example, see: Hassed, C.S. ‘Depression: dispirited or spiritually deprived?’ *E-Medical Journal of Australia*, 173 (2000): 545-547; Martin, G. ‘Spirituality and Suicide Prevention’, *Auseinetter*, 15 (2) (July 2002): 3-4; Larson, D.B., Larson S.S. ‘Spirituality’s potential relevance to physical and emotional health: A brief review of quantitative research’, *Journal of Psychology and Theology* Vol. 31, (1): 37.

<sup>viii</sup> Suicide Prevention Australia 2003, *The Handbook & Abstracts for the 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Suicide Prevention Australia National Conference, 12-15 June 2003*, Suicide Prevention Australia, Haymarket NSW

<sup>ix</sup> A 2001 study conducted by Adelaide University’s Centre for Labour Research and the Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Training at Sydney University was summarised by the Sydney Morning Herald in the following way:

No friends, no hobbies, no sex, no time ... The overworked Australian leads an impoverished existence, a new study of 54 families shows. It’s a life that doesn’t leave time to walk a dog, play a sport, visit a mate, or be intimate with a partner.

This is the culture of stress and pressure is increasingly imposed on Australian young people during their high school years – welcome to adulthood!

<sup>x</sup> In relation Jesus statement about the ‘easy yoke’, William Barclay offers the following insightful commentary:

‘easy is the Greek *chrēstos*, which can mean *well-fitting*. In Palestine ox-yokes were made of wood; the ox was brought, and the measurements were taken. The yoke was then roughed out, and the ox was brought back to have the yoke tried on. The yoke was carefully adjusted, so that it would fit well, and not gall the neck of the patient beast. The yoke was tailor-made to fit the beast, *The Gospel Of Matthew* (Vol 2) (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975): 17.

<sup>xi</sup> The following definition of this term comes from a recently released paper by Mission Australia: Resilience is the ability to bounce back or recover after diversity or hard times (Fuller, 2001). It allows people to overcome adversities that ought to disrupt their development and even build positively on these adversities (Lascano, 2004). The development of resilience in young people is now linked to long term success in life and the prevention of substance abuse, violence and suicide (*Developing resilience at every stage of a young person’s life* - Mission Australia Research and Social Policy, 2005), [http://www.mission.com.au/cm/resources/documents/snapshot\\_families.pdf](http://www.mission.com.au/cm/resources/documents/snapshot_families.pdf).

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<sup>xii</sup> For example, a paper by White et.al. suggests various ‘causal attributions’ to depression relating to certain ‘spiritual’ interpretations within conservative Christian congregations. These interpretations include ideas about depression as a consequence of ‘sinful behaviour’, ‘lack of faith’, ‘spiritual attack’ (often associated with the former two concepts) which contribute to a general feeling of ‘spiritual failure’. See: ‘Christians and Depression: Attributions as Mediators of the Depression-Buffering Role of Christian Social Support’, *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* Vol.22 (1) (2003): 49-58.

<sup>xiii</sup> Their faith tradition is best described as ‘contemporary, evangelical/charismatic’.

<sup>xiv</sup> For me this idea is best articulated in the spiritual legacy of Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), the former military/political career aspirant who, through a process self-awareness and spiritual reflection, came to the life-transforming conclusion that the best possible human existence is one spent in participation in God’s incarnate love for the whole of creation.

<sup>xv</sup> A number of studies are emerging that show a positive correlation between adolescent well-being and participation in Christian spirituality. Some examples are: Markstrom, C.A. 1999, ‘Religious involvement and adolescent psychosocial development’, *Journal of Adolescence*, 22, pp.205-221; Cook, K.V. 2000, ‘You have to have somebody watching your back, and if that’s God, then that’s mighty big: The church’s role in the resilience of inner-city youth’, *Adolescence*, Winter, Vol. 35, p717. Smith, C., Faris, R. 2002 ‘Religion and the Life Attitudes and Self-Images of American Adolescents’, A Research Report of the *National Study of Youth and Religion No.2*, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

<sup>xvi</sup> The four historic pastoral functions of the Church.

<sup>xvii</sup> A helpful discussion on this process can be found in chapter 1 ‘Fessing up: Owning our theological commitments’ in *Starting Right – thinking theologically about youth ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001). Here, Kenda Creasy Dean discusses three stages of adolescent theological development: *Intuitive, Embedded and Deliberate* (29-31).

<sup>xviii</sup> I personally believe that Ignatian spirituality and the essential ethos of the *Spiritual Exercises* provides a very helpful framework for this kind of spiritual formation. Ignatius’ concept of direct encounter with God in a way unique to the circumstances, psychology and personality of each individual, together with his principles of discerning of spirits, have a lot to offer contemporary youth work. For a useful introduction to Ignatian prayer, see chapter six of Baker, J. and Ratnayake, M. *Tune In Chill Out* (Birmingham: Christian Education Publications, 2004). For a more comprehensive introduction to Ignatian Spirituality see Lonsdale, D. *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear* (Rev. Ed) (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2000).