

A Threeway Conversation in Tertiary Chaplaincy

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Introduction

In my work as a tertiary chaplain I find myself in a multi-layered conversation, firstly with the university at a local, intimate level; secondly, existentially and situationally with my God; and thirdly with those traditions I draw upon to inform my theological reflection, including Scripture, other reading and the shared experience of others.

At the time of the chaplaincy engagement described in this paper, I happened to be reading texts by the Christian scholar of the Hebrew Scriptures, Walter Brueggemann:

Deep Memory Exuberant Hope – contested truth in a post-christian world. (Fortress 2000)

Cadences of Home – preaching among exiles (Westminster John Knox 1997)

So they have influenced how I have made theological sense of this chaplaincy engagement.

Walter Brueggemann has written extensively exploring the Biblical material to do with *the Exile* of Israel following the destruction of Jerusalem around 584 BCE. I share his interest: how a disenfranchised, dislocated people were not only able to survive in a radically changed environment, but *thrive* (Cadences p3); the metaphor of Exile may well provide rich insights for a response to parallel situations in the West today (Deep Memory p 59), particularly in large institutions like universities.

The initial context for this paper was as a contribution to a seminar on perspectives on evangelism presented to theological students.

As Brueggemann points out (Cadences p6, 85, Deep Memory p13), the word for gospel or "good news", which Christians often talk about in this context, originated in Second Isaiah. "Good news" came out of dislocation:

*How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings **good news**, who announces salvation... (Isa. 52:10)*

This "good news" was an announcement to the exiles that Jahweh was doing a new thing (Isa 43 :19), that it was more expansive than they had ever imagined and that Jahweh was calling them into this new world.

This is also the context into which Jesus spoke when, quoting Isaiah, he declared his ministry mission statement, also at a time of national oppression, Palestine being occupied by the Roman military:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has chosen me to bring **good news** to the poor...
to proclaim liberty to the captives...
to set free the oppressed... (Isa. 61:1)*

So how does "good news" emerge within the modern university? The story I share here is highly qualified because any attempt to illustrate chaplaincy is constrained by confidentiality. Although I have the permission of the main players in this story, I offer it reverentially and with respect to each. For every life and every lived moment is holy.

In keeping with the multi-layered conversation in which this chaplain inevitably finds himself, I tell an edited story from my chaplaincy, and in the telling, juxtapose some pithy Brueggemann

(necessarily edited) quotations (in italics), and make theological connections between the story and the text.

A Three-way Conversation of a Tertiary Chaplain

The dominant reality among us is a narrative of violence:

- *The myth of scarcity, the driving power of market ideology – thinks that bread must be guarded and not shared.*
- *A breakdown of connections, severing elemental social relationships – thinks that each is against all, with no ground for community.*
- *Unacknowledgement of voices “from below” – thinks that silence can authenticate the status quo*

(Deep Memory pp 6 - 9)

In September of 2002, a 40 year old scientist at the university took his life. He was much loved, a high achiever and had been suffering from depression.

I only found out because I ran into the Head of Counselling who suggested that I immediately "get up there". So I went straight to the one person I knew in that School, acquainted through previous Uniting Church connections. He introduced me to a circle of grief-stricken friends immediately affected. I listened to their grief one by one. Finally I introduced myself to the Head of School. I wanted her to know that I was available to listen and support her and her staff through this tragedy. I ventured that I would at least make myself available in the staff tea room regularly each Wednesday morning and that, each week, before returning to my office, I would report to her. She appreciated this offer and saw it within the context of meeting the religious needs of her staff (but I got the impression she may have thought it was unlikely anyone would be interested.)

Comment:

Universities have been profoundly affected by economic rationalism. They are competitors for "market-share" and make decisions around "self-interest" and "bottom lines". Students are "clients". This is the context - profoundly secular and, according to Brueggemann, inevitably violent.

In the Bible, the Jews in Egypt were the first to be forced to do more with less, in the brickmaking business. Perhaps this story runs parallel to our context. The "myth of scarcity" shifts consciousness from "common wealth" toward competitive individualism. The resulting breakdown of community is dis-empowering. Individuals have little confidence to speak about the deep nuances within them – "or is that just me?"

*Our bewildered, numbed, despairing society lacks ways of thinking and ways of speaking that can give us remedial access to the crisis, that can (1) go deep into the crisis and so avoid **denial**, and (2) imagine past the crisis, and so avoid **despair** enacted as abdicating silence.*

(Deep Memory p 59)

Any suicide asks questions of those left behind.

There were those who adopted a stoic response – these questions are best left to themselves - scientists are not good at dealing with these emotional issues.

On the other hand there were those who believed that the death was meaningless unless relevant issues behind it were exposed and dealt with – and *they had issues!*

The Head of School was caught between these two responses. Her intuition was to find a way to deal with any perceived contributing issues transparently but this did not seem to receive encouragement from her colleagues ‘upstairs’. She certainly didn’t want to create a chaotic, no-holds-barred, free-for-all in an attempt to bring issues out into the open. She didn’t want to initiate anything counter-productive.

In the case of individual staff facing stress or psychological difficulties, the university will fund two sessions for affected individuals with an external psychologist. But there does not appear to be any university corporate grief/trauma management strategy.

On top of her own grief, the Head of School would have to find her own way to deal with the aftermath.

So, initially caught between two responses, at the official level, the paradigm of privatisation and silence reigned. And I could feel a reactive undercurrent among some of the staff.

Comment:

The Biblical exile literature suggests that trauma must be faced honestly and recovery means going through it, not around it.

For example, the book of Lamentations, part of the Hebrew canon, but rarely read by Christians, is “R-rated” literature – extreme violence. It is constructed as acrostic poetry. This indicates it was meant to be memorised and recited. So the traumatised Jews did not seek a way around the trauma, in denial. They made a point of recalling their trauma in great detail through their recitations, despite the fact that their whole identity and religion had been profoundly called into question. (eg The God who had made a covenant with them, never to leave or forsake them, had abandoned them! (Isaiah 2:6, Ps 22:1, Lamentation 5:20, Isaiah 54: 7,8)).

My prayer was that the Head of School would take note of her intuition and risk giving permission for the hard questions to be asked, disempowering the silence; and then lead the staff to imagine new, life-giving contexts for their work.

It strikes me that the most important fact about preaching in the contemporary U.S. church is that the proclamation of the gospel is no longer a privileged claim. That is, it can no longer assume or appeal to a broadly base consensus that dominates our culture. By that, I do not refer to the fact of pluralism that is unarguable, nor to the loss of institutional clout of the church, nor to the erosion of the social authority of the pastor, though all of these realities are surely important. Rather I refer to the recognition we must face that construal of the world without reference to God is intellectually credible and socially acceptable as it never has been before in European-American culture.

(Deep Memory p 19)

One young academic decided to resign in the face of the suicide – he didn’t want to go the same way. He was glad of a conversation with me and I was able to extend to him my friendship and support as he began this time of transition.

I think this conversation contributed to the necessary break with the stereotype that had the chaplain boxed as “religious” – understandable since most would identify the chaplain with a

priest or minister of a parish or congregation – or perhaps Father Mulcahey in MASH! It was a break because it was not expected that this person, perceived by the staff as “non-religious”, would want to talk with me, identified as “religious”. That he did, and that he valued the relationship so established, provided an illustration that I was there not just for the religious needs of the few – the initial perception. I was there for the spiritual wellbeing of all – individually and as a community of scholars.

Comment

The important word that Brueggemann uses that helped me here is “privilege”. In another book he says we may no longer see ourselves as **privileged insiders**, expecting to have influence through status or position. But nor should we accept being considered **trivialised outsiders**. This understanding of refusing to be trivialised has given me backbone for my evangelical work on the campus and presents me with a major challenge to re-negotiate the role of the chaplain on the campus.

On the face of it, it would appear that I have no place in a seemingly self-sufficient secular university system. Religious thinking is excluded from the mind of the university.

But perhaps the christianity that has been excluded, may well be the kind that deserves to be excluded.

A hermeneutic of suspicion, in the end, is not a cerebral, cognitive matter. It is rather a deeply existential matter that concerns woundedness that cannot be covered over by impervious triumphalism. Israel knew that, and therefore insisted that the reality of suffering-protest-suspicion belongs not only to the life of the faithful, but to the life of God. Suspicion is an act of faith to enter into the act of suffering that gives the lie to theological triumphalism. In such a practice that does not need to protect God and does not fear to enter into the texts that voice protest, we may become more responsible Friday-Sunday people who know about truth and pain, about strength and weakness, about new life out of death. The canon insists upon such a horizon for faith. The God who hides in the canon knows about this horizon of life and is not scandalised by it.

(Deep Memory p 57)

The conversations with the Head of School reached new depths and found new freedom as I continued to drop in to share my perceptions following my “rounds” with the “circle of grief”. I would like to think this was because she saw that I was prepared to enter into the pain of this trauma not “from above”, as if I had “answers”, but “from below”, in solidarity with her and the staff. One morning she remarked how she had begun to look forward to this little weekly break from routine and the open discussion together.

From the beginning and at different times I found myself prompted to try to convey the nature of my involvement, assuring her that my engagement with the School and herself was without “religious” agenda – that propensity to be always looking for opportunities to convince others about belief. I felt it was important to provide her with an apologetic for chaplaincy, to be clear about its boundaries and to be completely transparent in the relationship. My engagement, I said, was to support any effort toward wholeness. This clarification was in fact the only assertion I remember making during our conversations, unless I was asked an opinion – though later I will admit one initiative.

The catchphrase “nurturing spirit, building community”, which we had adopted as a Multifaith Chaplaincy Service mission statement, provided a touchstone for me in these interactions.

Comment

A hermeneutic of suspicion understood as an “act of faith to enter into the act of suffering” is a rich and constructive concept for a chaplain. This is discernment framed within a value field that necessarily excludes the arrogance of triumphalism. It demands empathy and compassion. The very act of solidarity with the suffering of the other is an evangelical act – it is truly liberating and life-giving. (Luke 4: 18)

The university mind is trained and conditioned in a hermeneutic of suspicion. That’s how research works. This hermeneutic must necessarily be also directed toward the activity of the chaplain herself. Just as the text indicates that God does not need to be defended, so the chaplain makes herself vulnerable to scrutiny within the pastoral context itself. In doing so the religious “safety” of the other is ensured. To enter into the suffering of another with an ulterior, hidden motive, no matter how noble, is, in my opinion, a denial of the nature of God as revealed in the life of Jesus. The university is not unaware of such religious abuse.

The maintenance of oddity – which creates freedom for life, energy for caring, and joy through the day – is the first task of the preacher.

(Deep Memory p 10)

Over the next six months my initial odd, embarrassing presence in the tea room became more accepted. Actually no-one took advantage of the opportunity to talk with me about the suicide as such– why I was ostensibly there – but privately some confided that it was good that I was there and *available*.

Incidentally I found myself in contact with some international postgraduate students with their own set of issues, referred on by staff or by other concerned students. And I continued my “rounds” with the inner circle as they coped with their grief.

Four Indispensable Conversations among Exiles

*1. Instead of taking our rage and indignation at loss down that path of brutality, I imagine the church knows from Israel about grief and rage addressed to God, for it is (perhaps) precisely God who is busy terminating privilege and certitude. The model speech practices of ancient Israel that may break denial are **the speeches of complaint and lamentation, that dare to say out loud how overwhelming is the loss, how great the anxiety, how deep the consequent fear.** (Lam 1:2, Ps 137:9, Ps 79:4, 12) The utterance is not merely a catharsis, though it is that. It is also a practice of prayer that is honest and courageous. These speech practices offer an opportunity for brutalising loss to be turned into an act of faith that may in turn issue into positive energy. These speech practices provide a way to do something with our brutalising rage at loss so that it does not escalate into anti-neighbourly hurt.*

(Deep Memory p 61, 62)

During one of our early conversations one of the “circle of grief” had suggested to me that he would be interested in a “men’s group” if it were formed. He too was a young scientist, obviously thinking about preventative action in the light of what had happened to his colleague. This prompted me to think about what might be happening among other young, male academics around the campus. I had already observed a cultural gap between the “young guns” and the “oldies”, who seemed more stoic in their approach to the stresses and strains on academic life. So I convened a lunch with the young scientist and another young academic from a different

discipline, with whom I had been having contact. Both were able to share their stories of struggle and means of survival. They agreed to meet again, this time with yet another young male academic from a different discipline, invited caringly by one of the original pair. More struggle and survival stories!

Comment

These lunches were simply an opportunity to allow lament. They were a kind of prayer meeting, where the depths of despair were given air, in the words of the text, to “dare to say out loud how overwhelming the loss, how great the anxiety, how deep the consequent fear”. Such deeply personal conversations I take to be rare in such a competitive environment, yet they are, according to Brueggemann “indispensable” to the health and wellbeing of the participants and hence contributory to wellbeing in the life of the university.

*2. The second speech practice about which this ancient community of dismay and disorder knew concerns **the disciplines of order and holiness**. It is the sacramental voice of the priests (identified in scholarship as “The Priestly tradition”) – that insists that in the confusion when old patterns of meaning are destroyed, one may resort to liturgic construals of ordered holiness.*

So the creation poem of Gen1:1-2:4a is an exile liturgy that affirms the goodness of an ordered world under God’s governing blessing. As such it is a counter-liturgy, because it affirms precisely those aspects of life governed by God that seem remote from the lived reality of these displaced people... these folk would not give in to their circumstance.

(Deep Memory p 62, 3)

Six months after the suicide, the School was preparing to go on its annual, beginning of year retreat. The Head of School was still undecided about whether, or how to go about dealing with the suicide fallout. I suggested that the Head of Counselling might have some ideas for a way forward. Privately, and in conversation with my chaplaincy colleagues, I hoped she would take the risk of setting up some kind of mechanism whereby staff could, if they chose, get their grievances out into the open so that they might be acknowledged and dealt with. One evening, reading a book recommended by a chaplaincy colleague interstate on our national chaplaincy email list, I was struck by the pertinence of the following quote, which, after some soul-searching, I eventually decided to email to the Head of School. I expressed my hesitancy to do so, lest she feel any pressure from me to go in the direction I hoped, though I’m sure she knew my mind!

The traditional model of change – willed to the Western world by the Stoic philosophy of Greece, the patriarchal values system of Rome, and the ascetical tradition of Christianity – calls for the dogged endurance of pain. This is a “stiff upper lip” standard that represses hurt and sacrifices the self. It arises from male-dominated societies that measured the worth of a man by the amount of pain he could endure. In such cultures women, arbiters of the feelings of humankind, were simply left to wail their weakness away and endure. But with the loss of feelings comes the loss of the right to be human, to change, and to grow. The whole process of coming to wholeness through being willing to take the learnings of the past to the challenges of the present shrivels in the face of denial. In the traditional view, struggle required one of two things: that what could not be endured be changed or that what could not be changed be endured. Missing from the lexicon of options was the notion that we ourselves could do more than endure: we could be transformed by the possibility of new beginnings.

The essence of struggle is neither endurance nor denial. The essence of struggle is the decision to become new rather than simply to become older. It is the opportunity to grow either smaller or larger in the process.

(Joan D. Chittister *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope* Eerdmans 2003)

I received a phone call from Counselling a few days later. The Head of School had been in contact with them. We confirmed that one way forward might be for one of the external psychologists to work with the Head of School and the retreat planning committee, to develop a process to get any unresolved issues aired and actions decided as part of the retreat process.

A smiling Head of School and a positive air in the staffroom, the Wednesday after the retreat, said it all.

Comment

In the face of “confusion when old patterns of meaning are destroyed, one may resort to liturgic construals of ordered holiness” - so the construction of the retreat program for the School as “a counter-liturgy” was critical for the future effective functioning of the School. It was the decision of the Head of School to “become new rather than simply to become older” that permitted the careful construction of the retreat program. It was a risk. It was a step of faith. It was an irreversible test of her intuition.

The beginning point for holiness that recovers and reorders life is indeed sabbath – holy time – not legalism and “blue laws”, but also not frantic, feverish, self-indulgent entertainment. The priests envision, in heaven as on earth, a restfulness that makes neighbourly communication possible, apart from the impositions of production and consumption. Sacramentalism is a cogent alternative to despair, an awareness that even here and even now, God’s demanding and assuring presence pertains.

(Deep Memory p 64)

Early in my “rounds” I was impressed by the number of staff and postgraduate students who showed care to each other. But one person in particular struck me as having special gifts - the qualities I would expect of a good chaplain. So I was not surprised to find that soon after the funeral she had arranged for biscuits to be served with morning tea on Wednesdays (I’m sure it wasn’t because that was the day I visited!) and pot plants started to appear on the tables. Then I heard that the Head of School had allocated money for a refurbishment of the staffroom.

At first I thought that “just rearranging the deck chairs doth not a Titanic save!” But now I saw that this intuitive move was a statement - that “we value you having a break, we value the informal chatting around the table, the networking, the sense of community”. Intuitively the School was making a statement about the boundaries to work, against a culture that, unspoken, would seem to reward achievement even if it meant working weekends.

Comment:

I didn't appreciate the spiritual significance of the move to renovate the staff room until I saw the connection with this text - the initial intuitive response to upgrade the staffroom was a response to do with Sabbath. The liturgy of morning tea is a Sabbath act. It is a routine break from the demands of work to engage in "a restfulness that makes neighbourly communication possible". The intuition to re-establish the importance of morning tea, underlined with renovations, was a positive response to the suicide - a regrouping and a re-valuing.

*3. The third speech practice that this community of abuse and selfishness knows about is **the practice of imagining a neighbourly transformation**. Dislocation carries with it a temptation to be preoccupied with self, to look out only for number one, to flee the hard places of community formation for the sake of private well-being. One can see that*

among us; public responsibility is on the wane while even the most privileged desperately work to improve their private estate. Against this inclination, the tradition of Deuteronomy relentlessly thinks of society as a neighbourhood and enjoins attitudes and conduct and policies that enhance neighbourliness. Deuteronomy insists that life in the economy must be organised for the benefit and well-being of widows, orphans and undocumented workers, that is, immigrants.

This response to dislocation is to insist that the maintenance of a public economy of compassion and justice is a way beyond despair. (Deut. 24: 17-19, 15:1, 7-8)

Deuteronomy knows that dislocation is a time in which amnesia (forgetting their own times of vulnerability) is a powerful temptation. It is, however, a temptation that must be powerfully and intentionally resisted.

(Deep Memory p 64)

Well into the first semester of 2003, the Head of Counselling caught up with me as we were passing and said, “You know what we really need is a university wellness program”. She had been thinking. I was struck by her visionary thought. Could some of us get together to imagine what a university committed to wellness might look like? And could this Science School be a pilot study?

It turned out that the Head of the School was also excited by the concept. Soon she was sounding out people in her network. And soon we were meeting – Health and Counselling, Occupational Health and Safety, the Uni Gym – talking together about what we might offer and support together - a walking program to prepare teams for the City-Bay Fun Run-Walk with corporate T-shirts and family barbecues at the finish... an art competition...all ideas the Head of School could put to her social committee.

Social Committee! The Head was aware that in the past this stood for a “Happy Hour” and drinks on Friday afternoon. Nothing wrong with that but she knew she would have to re-invent the expectations of the committee if it was to support the emerging vision of wholeness.

Then, only recently, another word, this time from a UCA colleague, resonated with me – *resilience*. “Andrew Fuller at Latrobe has been doing some research into this.” (Latrobe is a sister Uni to Flinders and we have cooperative arrangements). I dropped in to the Head of School, in between her meeting schedule, to pass on this word *resilience*. It resonated with her as well. So back in my office I got on to one of my support group who trawls the Web for me, to see if he could find more information.

Comment:

The Deuteronomic historian, writing from exile, insists on neighbourliness. It is a vision of wholeness, the bottom line being the wellbeing of the weakest and the most alienated. Within such a complex institution the formation of new alliances that share something of such a vision and are looking outward to serve others is a great sign of hope.

*4. The fourth practice of speech in this community of abandonment and despair concerns the news of God, **which creates new social possibility beyond the shrunken horizons of defeat and submissive docility.***

The exiles in Babylon faced an empire that seemed to circumscribe and limit and dictate everything, not unlike the ways in which the all-pervasive military consumerism among us seems to circumscribe all of life. The exilic community of ancient Israel came within a whisker of being able to imagine its future only in the terms permitted and sanctioned by

Babylon, a sure program for despair and diminishment. Into this scene of shrivelling comes the prophet of Isaiah 40 –55, the one who funded Handel's Messiah and who introduces us to the word "gospel", the news uttered among exiles. The same sort of liturgical utterance is offered when Jesus of Nazareth came to say, "the kingdom of God has come near; repent (turn around)" (Mark 1:15). He just said it, and some believed and began a new trajectory of existence. Everything begins in the utterance. This poetry invites the exiles to host a large "Otherwise" that amounts to an emotional act of civil disobedience.

(Deep Memory p 65, 6)

This is about where we're up to in the continuing story, except that the Head of School, having read the first draft of this paper, and I are looking forward to continuing our conversation.

Comment:

The realisation that "Gospel" originates with Isaiah's boldly imaginative proclamation to the exiles is salutary. Such a gospel springs from a context of dislocation and the brink of despair. It is spoken and enacted within the context of suspicion and suffering. It is recognised in honest, intimate speech practices that break denial and stoicism, laying a foundation for new life. It affirms time-honoured, life-giving practices like Sabbath. It is neighbourly. It engages the imagination to envision an alternative future that is wholistic and joyful. All this informs the way Jesus went about his mission.

Concluding Observations

I conclude with some thoughts about the kind of tertiary chaplaincy I am engaged in that have emerged during this period.

1. The Christian chaplain goes about her task *informed* by understandings from Scripture. They do not constitute the primary discourse of the chaplain as such.

The role of the Christian chaplain is rather to stand, as it were, in both these worlds – the revealed truth of God in the Bible and the realities of the present situation – to translate, enter into conversation, between them - though of course the presenting situation is really *one* world. It is not the imposition of one world upon the other but a genuine conversation that is undertaken in common language, both striving toward a vision of wholeness, which I take to reflect salvation.

2.

"The preacher is not called upon to do all the parts of public policy and public morality, but to give spine, resolve, courage, energy and freedom that belong to a counter-identity."

(Cadences p 12)

The role of the chaplain is not to do what the university does. It is a role that is undertaken "from below" unless otherwise called upon or authorised. It is a double movement – of empathetic engagement and timely withdrawal - engagement that is mindful of imposition on the other and is always ready to withdraw - withdrawal that is not forgetful, but hopefully space-creating for the other. This requires a maturity that understands and resists the temptation toward ego satisfaction fed by images of "success" and "leadership" and the tangible achievement of "doing things".

Chaplaincy may provide an opportunity to engage in a conversation that the university might not otherwise have. This may have little or nothing to do with the other's religious affiliation.

3.

In a culture that has learned well how to imagine – how to make sense- of the world without reference to the God of the Bible, it is the preacher's primary responsibility to invite and empower and equip the community to re-imagine the world as though Yahweh were a key and decisive player.

(Deep Memory p 2)

In the past, a university might see its chaplain as someone like the Governor-General – mute and accommodating and wheeled out for those formal occasions when it is reassuring to know that one has one.

But it is clear from the story of the Exile that the God of the Bible was at work *outside* Israel's perception, causing prophets like Jeremiah, who had this very message to bear, to have a very hard time! Jesus too declared God's preferential love for Pagans and outsiders and was given a hard time by the in-crowd (eg Luke 4: 16-30). So indeed, if a chaplain's task is "to invite and empower and equip the community to re-imagine the world as though Yahweh were a key and decisive player" then it is also clear that this task necessarily requires the chaplain to invite and empower and equip the community to re-imagine Yahweh. I submit that this is a process, not so much driven by propositional debate, but, for the Christian chaplain, by actions of compassion and healing.

4. If the context of the chaplain is exile then the lived reality of the chaplain defies a neat ordering or a simple telling, consisting as it does in chance conversations and unlikely alliances within an oppressed community. Just as the Book of Jeremiah is pretty unreadable to western minds – a jumble of texts out of order, probably because that jumble paralleled Jeremiah's context - it is probably reasonable to expect that a tertiary chaplain's life will be chaotic and spiritually and emotionally demanding.