



Why I Meditate

Nineteen meditators from around New Zealand explain how they came to this form of contemplative Christian prayer and why it is such an important part of their lives.

The writers speak from the heart. Reading these accounts you will discover common themes. The wilderness experience; time spent in a spiritual desert; seeking – sometimes for years; discovering meditation at a time of personal crisis; the failure of more traditional forms of prayer to fulfil a deep yearning to enter into a relationship with God.

Common too are the feelings of joy, and even relief, at discovering meditation in the Christian tradition. 'Being' instead of 'doing', the unexpected joy discovering stillness and silence, the excitement of experiencing a relationship that is profound and often beyond words, and the importance of the weekly meditation group.

Please read and prayerfully ponder these stories from the heart.

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Simplicity, Silence and Stillness

Twenty years ago, 1989, I was a Presbyterian parish minister in Auckland. I knew how to do most things except pray. The church expected us to have what was usually called “a spiritual life”, but they wanted to know nothing about it. Certainly there was no help in our training, no awareness of the wider church’s vast treasury of teaching and experience in prayer and spiritual life over the centuries. I remember how as students back in the late 1950s we had sometimes talked about that lack.

But in 1989 I was pretty desperate and “running on empty”. There was at that time something called the Religious Book Club, I think run by the SCM Press. Each month you received a paperback book on some aspect of Christian studies – they selected it for you, and it simply arrived in the mail. This month the book was John Main’s “*Letters From The Heart*”¹. I had never heard of John Main. I read the book while riding my exercycle, and found it riveting. This was it, for me – a pathway of prayer without the problems and superstitions and superficialities of what normally passed for prayer in parishes. John Main was describing a life of prayer based on stillness and silence, and on setting aside the voracious ego.

I was due some study leave. I phoned the monastery in Montreal and asked if I could come and stay for a month. No problem. Nobody told me John Main wasn’t there any more, and in the circumstances of a Benedictine monastery you don’t really run around asking questions. It wasn’t until I found a memorial plaque in the garden that I realised he had died. Fr Laurence Freeman was the Prior. Those few weeks were a crash course in the daily office and in the practice of Christian Meditation – we had four half-hour meditations each day.

There was one small miracle when I returned to my parish some three months later after a lot of travelling. A few of the parishioners had been curious about why I would go to a monastery, and had made it their business to find out. When I returned it was to discover that they had already started their own meditation group meeting each week. All I had to do was join it.

So began the journey, which has been typically unsmooth in some ways. Just as the monks say that their life consists in falling and getting up again, and as the rhythm of the mantra means constantly losing it and then gently returning to it in the silence, so I can look back over those 20 years and see how the trail has gone on. I was hugely helped by Archbishop Rowan Williams at the 2001 John Main Seminar in Sydney, who talked about how prosaic faith really is – a matter mostly of putting one foot in front of the other. Simplicity, silence and stillness have come to be what I most value in life. It has become inconceivable to me that I could now live any other way.

Ross - Snells Beach

¹ “*Letters From The Heart*” has been reissued as “*Monastery Without Walls – The Spiritual Letters of John Main*”, edited by Laurence Freeman (Canterbury Press, Norwich, 2006).

Nothing Changed but Everything Changed

I came into meditation about five years ago during one of the lowest points of my life. For a number of years my husband had had health problems and my daughter, a solo mother with two children, wasn't coping at all well. I remember sitting in a counsellor's office crying and trying to explain how I felt. I was totally overwhelmed by the unmet needs of my family and I felt squeezed of all my life juice, energy and colour and I no longer knew who I was or where I was going.

My counsellor was a wise man, a Catholic, and as I later found out - a meditator. After quietly listening to me I remember him repeating back what I had said but with a more positive spin. He referred to the roles I played in my family's lives and used terms like 'caregiver' whereas I was probably feeling more like a slave. He used far more noble terms than what I deserved and by using those positive terms about these roles I was able to see things through a different perspective. He put a far more 'sacred' slant on what could be - if only I had eyes to see - thus began the long journey back from a truly horrible place. I continued to see this counsellor for some months and in the meantime he was quietly feeding me information about meditation. Funnily enough this same counsellor had introduced me to meditation when I had been to see him nine years previously but obviously I wasn't ready for it. This time I grasped all the information in my two hands and in desperation 'ran with it'.

Slowly over the months my world changed. The only way I can put it is that 'nothing changed' but everything changed - it was a strange paradox. I seemed to draw water from a well within, colour and laughter came back into my life and yet the problems that had drawn me to counselling hadn't changed - they were still with me. As time progressed so did my journey into meditation; my counsellor encouraged me to start my own group in the parish.

I felt a bit out of my depth at first - I had never started anything and didn't really know where to begin. I spoke to a friend who unbeknown to me had already been to the meditation group at Massey and was finding herself drawn to it also. I can remember the two of us getting together and being very excited at what seemed a new path in our lives. We approached one of the priests in our parish; he was very encouraging and suggested that we come under the umbrella of the WCCM. This made it easier for us to access any readings and help that we needed for our group. We had got together with Fr. Peter in Massey which encouraged us further, so began Holy Cross Meditation Group about four years ago in the Friary meeting room. Our group of about 6-10 people is really fortunate that we are so close to Massey and can access help at any time - also we have our Community days at St Paul's Parish at least four times a year and Retreat weekends. I try to be available at least once a year for time out and was lucky enough to get to Fr Laurence's retreat in Hamilton earlier this year. Last year I attended Ruth Fowler's Essential Teaching Workshop and personally found it a marvellous source of growth. It gave me much needed confidence and leadership skills. It seems to me that it is essential to be in touch with other meditators - that being part 'of the Body of Christ' helps me to keep centred and to know that there are 'others out there' with me having the same difficulties but still hanging in.

In our group we encourage all our meditators to take a turn at leading. This usually consists of an opening prayer, an approved reading from Fr John Main or Fr Laurence, music and our 20 minutes meditation. Sometimes we have been known to have some quite lively discussions afterwards and because we have shared our deepest selves we have in the process become much-loved friends.

Earlier this year I put my meditation life in jeopardy. I took on the care of my granddaughter because her mother wasn't coping well. Because of my husband's health problems and mine it was a difficult time, made doubly so with my granddaughter's own unique behaviour problems. Slowly my meditation times slipped, my prayer times lessened and I found myself into my old worrying ways of trying to go it alone without the Lord. Sometimes a seemingly good thing can divert our pathways and send us into a tailspin. I only became aware of what it was doing shortly before my stay in hospital for spinal surgery. Since then we have been fortunate to access some other help for my granddaughter which has relieved me of a responsibility which I now realise was not mine to take up – if I had only listened quietly within my heart.

After my surgery I felt most vulnerable and fragile – in a way I have never felt before. My '*Maranatha*' became almost the only prayer I could say because I felt so sick – there was little energy for anything else. Heavy medication and a painful back are not that conducive to meditation but it was a timely reminder that I am not God and that I have to solely rely on Him who loves me dearly. It also gave me a compassion for the sick and dying who are unable to pray for themselves so I have added them to my daily prayers.

Three weeks along and I am feeling much better, I am 'back on the road again' rested and refreshed and eager to continue my own unique journey.

Margaret - Henderson

The Opening of a Flower

I went along to an introductory talk on Christian meditation about five years ago. I had read and studied scripture for years and become a secular Franciscan, but still couldn't find what I was searching for; the how to do it, or how to find what St. Francis had found; freedom, peace and joy.

I began the practice of meditation but it was a struggle to find the right times because I was always so busy 'doing' and I had my office and other prayers to say and things to do, so consequently meditation was a bit of a hit and a miss. I never gave up going to the weekly group meditation and told my self each week the next one will be better.

Three years ago I made a three-day silent meditation retreat with Fr Laurence Freeman and the experience of living those three days in a bubble of Love~~ God's love present in each person, and present in all of creation, and all around us, changed my life forever. This experience was God's kingdom on earth this was what I had been searching for.

The morning and evening practice became instantly built into my day and it is this that takes first priority to anything else I do. My meditation times are mostly desert experiences and always hard work, but the solitude peace and trust and the joy of living in the present moment that follows are signs of God's spirit at work within.

I am aware of many changes taking place; Scripture has new meaning particularly the gospels and St. Paul. The beauty of nature is enhanced and I no longer have the same expectations of others or myself that I once had, and I see my family members—all of them—beautiful just as they are.

John Main tells us that the best way to prepare for meditation is to do small acts of kindness to others. The practice of meditation is simple but not easy, for me it is the outward expression of my inward commitment to the presence of God's spirit dwelling in my heart. I have a long way to go yet.

The wonderful beauty of prayer is that the opening of our heart is as natural as an opening of a flower, and to let a flower open and bloom it is only necessary to let it be ~~ and if we remain still and silent, we cannot but be open and the spirit cannot but pour through our whole being ~~ and is this not what we were created for?

Jackie - Orewa

The Water of Life

I am 79 years old so my journey is a long one, but I will condense it as much as I can! Neither my parents nor their family were church goers, so I grew up a non-Christian, but I knew God; and He enabled me to learn the Lords Prayer, Away in a Manger from children's books, and John 3:16 – this from a roadside billboard. I quickly scanned it and memorised it as we passed it, two or three times a year in a train from Lower Hutt to Wellington.

In my mid-twenties I joined a philosophical group in Wellington and learnt to meditate. This made me more aware of God. Then I married and moved away and began a regular attendance at the Presbyterian Church. I lived in Whakatane for 27 years, where I became an elder and was very active, participating fully in the church and community groups including Prisoners' Aid Emergency House, and started the Food Bank. The Anglican Church there owns Titoki, a retreat house and healing centre. I sometimes went on two-day retreats and would begin to meditate, but life stayed busy and I soon gave up.

My real experience in meditation began last year when I took over the church library here at St James Presbyterian Church Waihi and donated some of my Christian books, including some on meditation/contemplation – finding God in silence. This brought me in touch with three ladies in the congregation with the same yearnings. I was reborn in the Spirit 31 years ago and was given the gift not of tongues but of silence. For a long time I did not know what to do with it. In May this year, two of us went to a two-day retreat at an Anglican centre in Hamilton. I was eager to go, I was a dry riverbed, thirsty, and in my first minutes there the water of life began to flow! It has not stopped since. We four, plus one husband, now attend an Anglican contemplative service in Tauranga once a month and have joined the weekly meditation group at St Josephs Catholic church.

The first thing I learnt was that meditation is a discipline and I now eagerly practice it every morning and some afternoons. I have found that saying the mantra *Maranatha* helps to focus my mind and to block out the stray thoughts that continually intrude. My inner life is so much richer and deeper. I thank the Lord for bringing me to this.

Joan - Waihi

John 3:16. *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life.*

The Divine certainly does work in Mysterious Ways

Husband Jeff and I have been meditating for some years now, having been part of one meditation group or another for most of the 24 years we have been together.

We were initially taught to meditate through the TM movement. It was a movement that seemingly caused Christians deep concern for a variety of reasons, however, not being a churchgoer at that time by any stretch of the imagination, it was of no concern. Also, I knew myself well enough to discern that if I paid good money to learn something I was more likely to stick to it. Jeff also learnt to mediate with the TM movement, just after he met me.

The draw card for me had been my questioning of a woman I worked with, having witnessing a dramatic positive transformation in her. At that point I had never even heard of meditation, nor did I think I was dissatisfied with my life as it was, which incidentally was a far cry from where it is now! Her response was enough for me to investigate, and after obtaining assurance that it was 'nothing to do with religion' I learnt how to meditate.

It changed my outlook and my life completely within a few short months, and since then I have been an avid advocate for the practice, and, might I add, whatever discipline it comes through. My changes took me initially through everything the 'new age' had to offer, vehemently avoiding anything to do with religion, especially the Christian religion, having had plenty of encounters with several 'born again Christians' I had worked with. I was not impressed, and assumed that that was the full sum of the Christian religion. How wrong I was!

At some point in my seeking, about 15 years ago, by chance I began reading Christian based mystical material and obtained an entirely different perspective on the word 'mystic', and indeed the Christian teachings. Two books had a dramatic effect on my journey around that time, Kathleen Norris' *'Cloister Walk'* and Carol Flinder's *'Enduring Grace'*. But it wasn't until I did a course with an Anglican priest who ran several different classes through Theology House in Christchurch, that I began to truly realise that there was a different aspect of Christianity not normally offered, not readily apparent, and was alive and well in our wee country!

Father Phil Dyer became a light in our lives. Amongst other things of a Christian mystical nature, he taught Christian meditation and introduced us to Anglo-Catholicism. He also baptised me. Then through the Labyrinth, set up monthly at St. Luke's in the city, which Phil helped to initially set up, we were introduced to the wondrous Anglo-Catholic tradition which has never failed to draw us, week after week since then.

Jeff and I had been trying different churches, carefully avoiding the modern offshoots that we knew were not our scene, even though we didn't know at that point what exactly our scene was. We have now long been regular attendees of St. Michaels, also in the city. We have meditated with various Christian based groups over the years, mainly changing only to fit in with what else was happening in our lives at the time. We both have elderly parents which take up a great deal of our time and energy. Health problems, mainly theirs, plus a few other difficulties, make it difficult for us to have a group of our own as yet.

Of two things I feel sure. Firstly, knowing my initial abhorrence for anything religious as such, in retrospect, every single place my journey has led me has been acutely

(and sneakily at times I feel!) instrumental in getting me to where I am right now, and for this I am deeply grateful. Thank you Lord.

Secondly, I feel sure that meditation and the contemplative way, have given me a deep respect and tolerance for all pathways. Even the ones that are seemingly ridiculous and often downright dangerous to us looking on.

The Divine certainly does work in mysterious ways, ways I have learnt we can never really place judgement on, because our view of reality is so limited.

Yvonne & Jeff - Christchurch

Reflections on a Meditation and Healing Journey

My meditation journey has its beginnings when I was about 17 or 18, back in the 1970's. My older brother learnt Transcendental Meditation and tried to encourage me to also learn. I was apprehensive that it might be a cult type thing which I knew I needed to steer clear of and so I did, without actually asking many questions. Secretly though, I was very curious about what my brother was doing in his bedroom in silence! Our mother was a Catholic and we were raised in the Catholic faith in name only, in that love, respect, etc were not a part of our upbringing. My siblings and I all stopped going to church as soon as we could.

So life continued. I married and we had two children and on the surface everything was fine. Unfortunately, with my background, there was a lot that wasn't right. I was in my early 30's and for the first time tentatively looking at myself, not liking what I saw, and somehow knowing there was something more. I then had a scare with breast cancer. Around this time, my husband met someone who meditated regularly and he spoke with great enthusiasm of all the benefits he gained from the practise. This seemed to be just what I needed and within a short space of time we enrolled as a family to learn Transcendental Meditation. I was captivated right from the beginning. In fact I dreamed of being able to go off to the mountains to live as a hermit and spend the rest of my life meditating! Talk about escapism, yet in my naiveté I didn't realise just what I would have to face. I felt frustrated that I was told I should only meditate twice a day for 20 minutes.

I will never forget my children's joy, particularly of my younger 10 year old son, from his experience of meditating. I can't remember how many minutes they meditated for but for a couple of days he was so filled with joy, he was such a delight! It was like a light had been switched on in him. Unfortunately we weren't able to encourage our children to continue meditating. I am glad they had that experience though.

What I noticed almost immediately, was the ability to not need a recipe to cook a meal. I was able to improvise. That was such a sharp contrast with how I used to be.

When I was meditating I noticed that my eyes would involuntarily screw up really tight, which I found rather disconcerting. I tried to relax but the tightening would return. I asked my meditation teacher about this but he could offer no explanation. This involuntary tightening in various parts of my body continued for many years. In retrospect, I realise that it was a freeing up happening within me because I was such an anxious person and my physical body was very rigid as a result of my childhood experiences.

Within a few weeks of learning meditation I went on antibiotics for a throat infection. This was a recurring problem; however this time I had a reaction to the antibiotics and didn't sleep for three nights in a row. My body literally broke down and six months later I was diagnosed with ME/Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. Not long after this I left my marriage and was too sick to take my children with me. It has been a long, slow 15 years of serious ill health and depression which is only now coming to an end.

For the first five or six years I meditated twice a day, rarely missing a sit. Even though I was so sick and tired I only slept for short periods so time to meditate was something that I did have. It was like a faithful companion for me, almost an obsession. In the meantime I had been searching for more. Meditation helped but it wasn't enough. I think all my baggage stopped me going deep. I was empty most of

the time. I joined up with a new age group, then the Spiritualist Church, then Zen Buddhism, etc. When I was very sick I used to see images of Jesus so clearly and a clairvoyant had told me that I had Jesus and Mary with me but I wasn't interested at that stage. Then in 2000, I surprised myself by coming back, with much trepidation, to the Catholic Church. I met some lovely people in the church but they told me how wrong my previous ways had been, including meditation. So with much regret I ceased to meditate and really missed it initially.

About a year or so later, to my joy, I discovered Christian Meditation and eagerly came back to it. I was surprised and pleased to discover that the process was so similar. It took me quite a long time to become familiar with my new mantra and not to slip back into the old mantra I had been given. Even as I type this my old mantra pops into my mind.

Despite meditation, anxiety and lack of trust were still major factors in my life. However, slowly, with professional help, I was learning to go a little deeper within myself which was a very painful process. Meditation would regularly bring up a lot of grief. There have been periods when I have been too black with depression to meditate because it would bring up demons that I could not face. During those times I reverted to a more formal way of prayer.

I have come to appreciate (sometimes) the chatter that does go on during meditation. Invariably I find myself processing the small incidents of my daily life and it also brings to light bigger issues that need resolution away from meditation. I often find answers to problems pop into my head or inspiration for creativity that I enjoy.

I have a Christian meditation group that I am connected with. In the beginning stage of Christian meditation I went along regularly. It is so inspiring to meditate with others because the group energy makes such a difference. It is also helpful to hear yet again that everyone else struggles with too much thinking as a part of their meditation. Invariably we will laugh about this aspect! Nowadays I go along when I feel the need to.

These days, I meditate once a day for 30 minutes. I find that it is very much a part of me and I could not imagine life without it. Often I will find myself slipping into a meditative space naturally whilst sitting with God prior to the beginning of Mass, when reflecting on a piece of scripture, etc. I find that meditation brings me back to what is important to me and away from the busyness of life and the constant striving to achieve. It certainly helps to relieve stress. It gives me an inner silence. Meditation has been so healing for me in learning to relax. I think meditation is helping me to be honest with myself. I have a very rich dream life which I think is aided by my commitment to meditation.

There were a few occasions last year when I got out of the habit of meditation and prayer for three or four days or so and then I found myself in a really weird space wondering what was wrong with me. Each time, I eventually realised that my body was missing meditation and as soon as I returned to it, I was back to my normal space. Part of me is quite relieved about this because it means that meditation will remain a very important part of my life. Another part of me says "can't I have a break sometimes?" Yet meditation is a wonderful break.

I use a timer to meditate so I'm not tempted to keep peeking at the clock and it's always a wonderful feeling when the time has whizzed by. Not that I judge my meditation of course! There have been a few occasions when I've meditated for 45 minutes or so because I hadn't pushed the start button on the timer. Other times I start to worry that I didn't set the timer. Some of these mind games are quite funny

afterwards. My body does seem to intuitively know when my meditation period is close to an end. Sometimes moments of boredom towards the end of a meditation period can seem excruciating. When I have to sit and wait for a bus or train for a while and time is dragging because God is far from my mind, I often find myself reflecting and marvelling that I can sit for 30 minutes in meditation with no boredom whatsoever and then these thoughts bring me back to God.

I've come to realise, in reflecting on my meditation and healing journey, that I have tried many different tools and every one has been beneficial to some degree. However, meditation remains the one consistent tool that I use. I am so grateful for meditation in my life; it provides me with such grace and gives a deep richness to my life. It continues to be a powerful healing modality. What I have gained from meditation more than compensates for my commitment to sitting regularly each day. I find that I am deeply intuitive sometimes and I believe that meditation has contributed to this. My inner journey has been so deeply painful yet rewarding beyond measure.

I give thanks to my God for the love that I carry within and that meditation takes me there.

Cathee - Tawa

The Group Keeps Me Faithful

I had always enjoyed a certain amount of solitude and even before being aware of meditation I used to sit with scripture. My first experience of meditation came when I attended a talk given by Fr. Laurence Freeman in Hamilton in 1988. Following that talk I received newsletters from time to time and practised meditation on and off for some time.

I had just stated a Bachelor of Social Sciences and as part of a university paper called Psychology East and West we were required to take part in tutorials which included meditation and creative visualisation. A practical aspect of my Counselling Theory paper enabled me to lead a tutorial in which I shared a period of meditation which was well received.

By this time I was meditating regularly and did a course with the Self Realisation Fellowship which I found very useful. It was extremely disciplined, so much so that a weekend retreat at the Tauhara centre nearly killed me! We were expected to meditate seemingly for hours on an empty stomach. This sent me scuttling back to the Catholics.

I joined a meditation/sharing group that had just begun in Huntly at the Anglican church and this group eventually became the seed group for the Huntly, Pauanui and Thames groups.

While by this time I was using the WCCM tapes and books the others in the group weren't quite ready. When I moved to Pauanui eight years ago I started the group and this continues to meet weekly.

I rely heavily on the group to keep me faithful to my daily practise to which as an Oblate I have committed myself. My husband is also a faithful supporter and meditates with me each morning. I would like to attend the community days more regularly but find travelling a problem. On one occasion Trish Panton the Oblate co-ordinator in Sydney, included me in their cell day so I took the day to read and reflect on their programme for the day and found that most helpful.

I have twice made retreats at Monte Olivetto, a retreat in Ballarat and the John Main seminar in Penang. I have also attended the School and several retreat in NZ. All help to keep the momentum and being with likeminded people is essential. We have no ordained person in Pauanui of any denomination so everything we do is of an ecumenical nature by lay people.

Barbara - Pauanui

The Eleventh Step

During the late 1950's and early 60's the roll at the primary school I attended was rapidly dropping, and with this situation came a succession of Headmasters. Finally the school attracted an unusual and forward thinking Principal who was able to stay. He introduced yoga, relaxation, creative writing, Spanish and Italic writing into our daily routine.

Every morning we would sit with our arms outstretched, palms up on the desks in front of us. The Principal would call out the Yoga breathing sequences in Spanish over the P A system for about five minutes. Then he would instruct us to relax and listen to piped classical and romantic music. We were encouraged to relax deeply and let our thoughts drift with the music. This was my introduction to meditation. I found it beneficial at the time and it helped me over the years. Eventually I neglected my meditation practice.

Many years passed and a crisis led me to seek advice from my parish priest. He recommended I take up the discipline of meditation. I asked God for guidance and a few days later a pamphlet arrived in the mail advertising free Sri Chimnoy mediation classes. These sessions were helpful and familiar as they were similar to the yoga practise of my youth. I became uncomfortable with them however, as I sensed a seductive quality to the meditations. I stopped.

Another door opened when I attended a series of talks on meditation at my local church. There I met June Meyer who kindly took me under her wing and introduced me to the John Maine and Lawrence Freeman method of meditation. I felt comfortable straight away with this form of meditation because for me it was spiritually safe. It was heartening to find there is a long tradition of meditation in Christianity. I felt at home immediately with this practice.

June was a wonderful and patient teacher. After our sessions we would often talk. This time with June, enabled me to detach from what to me, was an abyss of terror that surrounded my personal life. Later, I came to realise that the problems I was experiencing were due to my husband's addiction to gambling and alcohol. His addictions seemed to invade every part of my personal life wrecking financial, spiritual and physical havoc. What I feared most was that my integrity seemed to be breaking down and I feared for my future and sanity. Because of the meditation practise with June and her kindness, patience and understanding I was able to reveal to her some of what was happening at home. This freed me from my shame-based isolation. June and the meditation brought enough healing and peace into my heart that I was able to accept and escape the situation. This happened throughout the course of the year in which June and I practised meditation together in her home once a week.

Not long after we finished meditating together I felt led to join an Al Anon family group. This is a fellowship of people who follow the twelve steps of AA. This fellowship helped me to deal with the effects of alcoholism which were deep rooted and destructive. I certainly needed the programme. It took courage to join and perseverance to stay, but I'm sure I was sustained by the practice of meditation.

Three years later, June contacted me to say Lawrence Freeman was coming to New Zealand for the first time. She sent me a registration form for the retreat and I took a friend from Al Anon with me. We have been attending CCM gatherings ever since.

Interestingly, the eleventh step of AA and AI Anon is all about meditation and it is as follows: Step 11

“Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as *we understood Him*, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.”

John Maine has said that seeking is a response to a summons by God. Part of Lawrence Freeman’s closing prayer for our CCM groups talks about the seeker. The eleventh step of AA and AI Anon starts with seeking. I find so many parallels between the Christian Community mediation and the aims of the eleventh step. I feel I am doing God’s will by being a member of both fellowships and it is heartening for me to hear of Fr Lawrence Freeman’s work with alcoholics.

Today I feel it is God’s will for me to share with you how I became a meditator and what led me to seek this form of prayer.

Mary - Waikowhai

A Gentle, Gradual and Guided Unfolding

Occasionally, special things *certainly do* happen in seemingly mysterious ways. My journey to Christian meditation, for example, unfolded for me in ways that I could have neither predicted nor planned. Concepts, perceptions and insights that previously I had only read and experienced through a number of years of 'mainstream' health and well-being style meditative methods were now being presented to me and discussed in a Catholic Church! Presented with an all-important difference, and discussed from the Christian perspective that I had been hoping for. So there I was, on a midweek evening sitting in Saint Francis Church (Hibiscus Coast Parish) listening to an 'Introduction to Christian Meditation' presented by Vincent Maire.

Up till then I had not been aware that meditation was active in the Christian perspective. Sure, I had heard about Mystics in the early years of the Church, but could find little information on that period. I had always enjoyed listening to inspirational and spiritual visionaries, like for example, the charismatic Fr Thomas Keating, (globalonenessproject.com). So a pragmatist would no doubt conclude, that I was predisposed to find contemplative pray. Maybe I was. Eastern thought would most probably assert that what I was sub-consciously focusing on, I would eventually attract into my life. Maybe that is so, I do not know. But for now it didn't matter, this was great, Catholicism and meditation, alive and well, right here 'on the coast'. Only months earlier, I had asked. Why can't this happen in Catholicism? I was. It seemed to me, at that very moment, being handed the answer.

So, one year on, I sense that for me, the journey toward the Christian meditative path was, and still continues to be, a gentle, gradual and guided unfolding. Like from the helping hand of a mentor. Guiding and deepening, through my earlier meditative years. It had all started quite simply for me when I started using various entrainment programs and other meditative practices to help discover much needed health benefits, 'stress' relief, and deeper levels of relaxation. This was and still is important to me. As I believe, like all many others whom I have met, that we are all linked in mind, body and soul. We all know how our busy day-to-day lives can be somewhat stressful at times. But the good news is that meditative 'silence' can be transformative, both physically and mentally, if you make the time to let it be.

Christian focused meditation adds the deeper dimension of mind body *and* soul for me. Perhaps it's the letting go of attachments to 'things' that really, are not that important. Gradually, I found that negative thinking, illusions of control, and many of life's annoying fears and regrets no longer served me; they began to become very distracting. They were just getting in the way.

Getting in the way of what? I hear you ask. Well, I didn't know and still don't know much more. However it did become easier to witness how the ways in which I thought and acted each moment, affected the various 'love' outcomes in my life. To then learn to take full and total responsibility for all the outcomes in my life. Maybe I felt it was my time to seek a new 'personal and Spiritual growth? Yes I believe it was and is. But I sensed that what I had heard being presented, and what I experienced on that Introduction course in Christian mediation that I had so hoped for, was indeed 'a path' I needed to start to travel along.

'A path' that I choose initial, has become now, more like the time one would choose to spend with a loved one. Sometimes simple silence, sometimes focused communication, sometimes active listening. A peaceful time.

Richard - Albany

To Learn to Meditate is to Meditate

Reading and reflecting has been a major habit of mine to meet a hunger for depth and meaning and also a longing and ache I constantly and periodically experienced. In my younger years life to me was scary, daunting, unappealing. Yet from my reading and also listening to stories there was presented various ways a person could follow to live a fulfilled life.

My reading became more and more focused upon the stories and writings of the mystics and saints. Also nourishment was gained from literature, film, theatre and listening to particular people.

With a big diet of reading and listening, I began to get a sense of the difference between what I was reflecting upon (and the excitement and exhilaration of that) and the way I was in myself. There seemed to be an enormous gap. A great tension came and went within me.

For many years these states were vague, predominantly an unconscious turmoil, with an inability to articulate. Yet I kept returning to the reading and reflecting to feed my soul, so to speak – this gave me some sustenance. Yet the split between the reflection upon life and living life was at times intolerable. There was a hunger for (I can name it now in hindsight, but not at the time) a hunger for wholeness, integration, transformation.

I had gathered that the way towards this integration would involve prayer, deep prayer.

And over the years, due to my background, I prayed in many different ways: for example communal worship (Mass, Benediction, Stations of the Cross etc), vocal prayer (Rosary, Litanies); there was a period of charismatic prayer, Ignatian meditation practice, just sitting in church, chanting of Office etc.

But my reading of the writings of mystics was pointing to a deeper, experiential, more engaging prayer, hinting at transformative dimensions. And my being knew this was how it was meant to be. All the mystical writings I came upon wrote about this from their own experience and knowing – and yet there was a difficulty in applying this knowledge for me in a living, practical way. The question arises, *Why is it so difficult for us today to pray in this way?*

Then in my life I began to get hints of a path, of a way, a praxis. These hints came to me largely through persons who personally shared their gift of knowing and experience:

I remember a series of evenings back in the late '70's presented by Father Eugene O'Sullivan OP on the fourteenth century spiritual classic *The Cloud of Unknowing*. The essentials of what I was looking for were there in that writing.

Then in 1983 while attending a conference on Inculturation, led by an Indian Jesuit Fr Amalorpavadass, he guided us attendees (about a hundred people) into a meditation. When I experienced those twenty-odd minutes I knew this was what I had been looking for, for a long time.

The following year, journeying to India, I spent several months at Fr Bede Griffiths' ashram, Shantivanam in Tamil Nadu. I was exposed to two periods of meditation time slotted into the routine of the ashram timetable. Bede's constant advice to me personally was – *Meditate, meditate, meditate*. From the excellent library there he directed my way particular writings on meditation. The first such book was *Word into Silence* by John Main OSB; followed later by Basil Pennington OSB *Centering Prayer*. Then an autobiography of a Hindu mystic, Swami Ramdas, and the writings of Swami Abhishikananda (Henri LeSaux OSB), particularly *On Prayer*. Also for the first time I was attending yoga classes, becoming more aware of the importance of the incarnational aspect of prayer – that is, we pray within the body which houses the Spirit.

Then later on in my stay at the ashram we were visited briefly by a Jesuit priest, resident in Japan – Fr Hugo La Salle – a man in his eighties who sat in lotus posture and gave us a discourse on Zen meditation for an hour. This was followed by another hour of answering questions. After which he had to leave for another area in India. During those two hours I was rapt.

This period in India was also a time to have exposure to other traditions outside Christianity. There was a period of time spent in two different Hindu ashrams following forms of meditation from the Wisdom tradition and the Devotional tradition. Also near the end of my stay at Shantivanam we were visited by a Buddhist monk from Sri Lanka who gave us eight days of Vipassana retreat. Such a time was devoted almost completely to intense meditation practice.

This exposure to other traditions that had a praxis of meditation made me realise what had been missing for so long within our own tradition. This contemplative, mystical element had been shunted and pushed aside with indifference, suspicion and even hostility for the sake of a more rational approach – losing much in the process of vitality and experience of a living faith.

These experiences in India were foundational for my continuing meditation practice on my return to New Zealand. I continue to meditate daily now – in fact, those times I didn't I felt something vital was missing in my day.

Although I had read books on meditation within Christianity – for example, Anthony de Mello, John Main, Basil Pennington, Thomas Merton, Bede Griffiths, Henri Le Saux – it wasn't really until being with persons handing on the tradition and communicating this from their own knowing and experience that I began to catch this learning and to begin in earnest a path of praxis. The turning point for me in becoming a Christian Meditation practitioner came with the visit of Paul Harris to Auckland in 1995. It was through Paul that the grace came to me to catch the truth in the teaching of Christian Meditation and also the desire and will to practice on a daily basis.

The reading and reflection, you might say, provided a map for the inner journey. It was the personal encounters with those who had been travelling that gave guidance and encouragement to set on the journey itself. As John Main says *To learn to meditate is to meditate*. It is as simple as that.

This is what I have grown more and more to appreciate. The wisdom of that: the simplicity. And the joy that this wisdom taps into the mystical and contemplative teachings of the saints, mystics within the Christian tradition. In fact Christian Meditation is the natural outgrowth of this tradition, recovered in no small measure by John Main, among others. We who meditate today are benefiting from and standing

on the shoulders of those through the centuries who with their graced wisdom have walked this inner path of simple being.

Michael - Whangarei

Sitting with the Trinity Twice Daily

I'd like to say I'd been thrown off a horse, found the Lord, and could not find a better way to get to know Him. Not true. I can't remember when I didn't know the Lord, and His Father. My friendship with the Holy Spirit came as I matured a little. I'd like to say that meditation has changed my life, made me a wonderful person whom everyone loves, can do no wrong, and is a saint waiting to be canonised. Not true!

Something stirred within me many years ago as I read of meditation of the Christian variety. I read every book I could find on the subject, listened to a couple of John Main's tapes, attended a talk which didn't impress me a great deal, signed up for the WCCM newsletter, and did not much else. Finally, one day the Holy Spirit must have nudged me and I realised that I was supposed to put into practice all that I had been reading about. So about 18 years ago I began – occasionally. I guess you could say I dabbled, a little bit here and a little bit there.

Six years ago I realised what a fool I was, the Holy Spirit again no doubt. At the same time that I decided to meditate seriously and regularly the Holy Spirit arranged for a group to start in our Parish. And so it began.

I sat in the recommended position for two sessions of meditation each day without fail, repeating my mantra throughout. Over the intervening years I have made four retreats with Fr Laurence Freeman and attended most of the Community Days and Retreats organised in Auckland. Am I a changed person? Only God really knows I guess but I wouldn't withdraw from Meditation for anything. I find it right for me. I look forward to sitting with the Trinity twice daily. My mind still wanders all over the place until I return to my mantra. I put all these thoughts in God's care before I begin and pay no attention to them. I trust that I am becoming the person that God meant me to be when I was created. I am able to be objective about things and accepting of situations over which I have no control. The only hard thing about Meditation is being disciplined enough to make two set times each day and to stick to it. Occasionally I do miss out but there's always a genuine reason and Fr Laurence tells us never to take any guilt on board. Just get on with it the following day.

One thing I am certain of. Meditation can only do me good. It improves me and my little world. The talks that Fr Laurence gives as he visits groups in every area of the world help not just the people he meets, but the whole world. Our world is a better place for the tens of thousands of Christians of every denomination who meditate twice daily.

Come join us.

Jacqui - Orewa

The Words Of Everlasting Life

I had for a long time been interested in meditation, though never done alot about it, partly because I'm a reflective kind of person. I noticed, some years ago now, an article in the WECOM paper about a visit from Fr Laurence and a talk he was giving about Christian Meditation, I recall a photo of his beaming face and thought, there is a happy man!

I went to the talk and knew it was the way forward for me, the word of God within. I have attended occasional meditation gatherings and persevered for quite some time now, not as part of a group, just a solitary effort. I would say a somewhat faltering effort at that.

But I know I will continue because in the word attributed to St Peter, " Lord where would I turn, you alone have the words of everlasting life."

Patrick - Masterton

Signposts along The Way

Between 1973 and 1977 I had a wonderful BIG OE in Europe. I travelled, studied, made many friends and met my wife. In August 1974 I spent two days at the French Marian Shrine at Lourdes. I took to the grotto a problem that had been weighing on me and quickly received a message from deep within that this was but a minor issue, that all would be well; but the most important thing I had to do in life was to pray.

I took this message seriously but as the years went by I entered a spiritual desert. I studied scripture, read Merton and even composed a prayer to him asking for guidance. A priest recommended *Letters from the Desert* by Carlo Carretto. I couldn't grasp the theme of the book but on the inside back cover wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer's famous prayer, "*Oh God, early in the morning I cry to you. Help me to pray.*"

Lourdes in 1974 is the first of four significant signposts in my adult faith journey and discovering the Enneagram in 1991 is the second. The Enneagram is an instrument for gauging differences in personality and is used as a means of spiritual direction.

I used the Enneagram to find my way out of a mid-life crisis and took seriously the process of integration / redemption that is central to its wisdom.

I had cut myself off from the world and in so doing had succumbed to the sin of avarice. I journaled my horror at finding what a mess I was in and decided that as I had got myself into this mess only I could get myself out of it.

Ironically, most of this work was done at a time when I ceased to be active in matters of faith and regular church attendance. Looking back, I see that this was part of the process of becoming 'redeemed'. Being a type 5 thinker / observer personality my approach to matters of faith and spirituality had become overly intellectualised and was not grounded in human experience let alone Gospel values.

By actively seeking to connect with my direction of psychic and spiritual health (the process of integration / redemption) I took myself in what can only be described as an adventure. I became chairman of a charitable trust supporting children with special needs while also becoming a very experienced leader in a rapidly growing outdoor sport.

Through the act of leadership I was learning a new, and for me, entirely appropriate way of connecting with people. My map was the Enneagram and in hindsight I see that my guide was the Holy Spirit.

I was being prepared for that third signpost along The Way, meditation in the Christian tradition.

I had long been interested in meditation and investigated other forms but was uncomfortable with them not being Christian. In the early 90s I heard of the existence of a group of Christian meditators in Auckland but was unable to track them down.

In 2004 I reconnected with my local parish at a time of a parish renewal. During the session on prayer a lady sitting in front of me mentioned meditation, John Main and Maranatha. That evening I Googled these words, discovered the WCCM website and then, much to my joy, found that during my absence, a meditation group had started in my local church.

I immediately joined, discovered that pearl of great price and experienced a sense of homecoming that remains to this day.

Recently I read a quote from the famed English Benedictine Dom John Chapman (1865-1933) "*Pray as you can and don't try to pray as you can't*". My experience as described above is common to many people who come to meditation after wandering like thirsty pilgrims lost in the desert, struggling with forms of prayer that for them are dry and therefore meaningless.

Another significant thing happened too; on discovering this wonderful way of prayer I found I had absolutely no urge to read any books on Christian Meditation. Other than *Christian Meditation – Your Daily Practice* by Laurence Freeman OSB I read virtually nothing. This was incredibly liberating! My previous method of functioning was to seek and devour any literature I could find on the topic of the moment. It would at be least four years before I started to investigate further, and was greatly encouraged to discover that John Main had recommended no serious reading on Christian Meditation until at least three years after taking up the practice.

To begin with it took three to four years to develop the discipline of the twice-daily meditation. For the first year or so it was all stop-start with the morning meditation but by year three I was beginning to include the evening meditation. Somewhere in 2008 I found my stride so to speak and developed the practice of a twice-daily meditation, extended it out to 25-minutes and in 2009 moved to the recommended 30 minutes.

I mention this not to boast but to demonstrate the wisdom of what John Main refers to as 'being gentle with yourself'. Start out slow and don't set yourself up for failure. It really is a discipline and that simple phrase, "*just say your mantra*" is the best advice in the entire canon.

Meditation has changed my concept of God. The idea that God is an elderly chap 'up there' has gone and in its place is God as spirit, Christ-centeredness, Cosmic Christ. Even these phrases seem inadequate to describe something that is beyond words yet waiting to be experienced.

I finally began to understand what the indwelling Christ means; that Jesus lives in our hearts and all we must do is to be aware of this and actively seek to nurture the relationship.

Through meditation these concepts ceased to be intellectual propositions but a living, moment-by-moment reality.

I experienced a gentle form of healing that continues to this day. The healing has taken two forms; one is being healed of the idea that I was unworthy in God's eyes and the other is that my daily practice continually heals me of negative feelings about myself.

I became more compassionate towards others. In fact, when you start feeling compassion for people you would ordinarily have dismissed, you are experiencing the fruits of meditation.

I devoted less time to trivia. Media consumption declined significantly, TV programmes that included violence became distasteful and my overall outlook on life became more positive.

After a few months of meditation I discovered that previously held ideas about people and events in my life had changed. It wasn't revelation but realisation; somehow, in a small but important way, meditation was making me a little wiser.

In 2006 I had the very good fortune to write an article for *Taonga*, a magazine published by the Anglican community.

I interviewed four meditators including Fr Michael Watson, an Anglican priest and Wellington hospital chaplain. He had this to say about his experience of meditation.

"Meditation makes the soul grow bigger. If you keep it up, it gradually shrinks the ego allowing the soul to expand into the space left behind."

Now that is a truly profound statement.

Meditation shows just how problematic an unchecked ego is for so many of us. Indeed, you really have no true understanding of the shadow side of your personality until you form your life around a spiritual practice like meditation.

Fr John referred to this as 'smashing the mirror'. That moment in our spiritual growth when we are united with God as our Supreme Power Source; when we break through the screen of 'hyper self-consciousness of egoism' – when we smash the mirror! Meditation does this, and it smashes that mirror over and over again.

I relate to this idea in the following way. In my early stop-start days I soon discovered that after a few days of not saying my mantra I seemed out of sorts.

Groundless fears would invade my psyche, stress levels would rise and I would retreat back into a cave of negative thinking. But once I re-connected with my mantra I was able to contain these tendencies and in so doing began to understand what it means to live mindfully.

I was also being prepared spiritually for the fourth signpost on The Way.

In July 2009 I placed myself under the loving guidance of a spiritual director, a very wise and humble man who is very experienced in these matters, and a fellow meditator.

To begin with Andrew showed me how to read scripture in a prayerful way. He called this the 'thinking person's way' and it suits Enneagram type five thinker / observers like me. I started with the Gospel of John and was astonished at what emerged. Each chapter spoke to me. In chapter 9 where Jesus heals the man born blind I discovered that while I had not been blind to Jesus, for some reason I had spent most of my adult life avoiding eye contact with him.

In chapter 11 Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead and on reading this I understood why, 30-years after my experience at Lourdes, I finally learnt how to pray. Jesus works at his timetable, not ours. They begged him to return to Judea to cure Lazarus but Jesus lingered and Lazarus was dead three days already.

Three days, three decades – what is that to Jesus? He works at his timetable and raises us on his terms.

Above all, Andrew introduced me to the concept of brothering, of inviting Jesus to be my brother. I wrote in my journal:

I must not consider Jesus as a purveyor of miracles, but as a brother who moment-by-moment walks with me along the road less travelled.

In the latter months of 2009 small but significant differences began to happen in my life. Andrew asked me to note them when they occurred, but I found this hard to do for no other reason than at the time they seemed almost insignificant, and only on reflection did I understand their importance.

Something else happened too. I sensed a change happening deep within me, which was difficult to articulate. I re-read many of my Enneagram books, especially those that treat the Enneagram as a tool for spiritual direction.

I started reading John Main including commentators on his writings. One of these, the Canadian Protestant theologian Francois C Gerard, has this to say on the spiritual journey.

Fr John invites us to explore the nature of our human self as a precondition to wholeness, serenity, and harmony. He is convinced that unless we have a healthy relationship with ourselves we cannot expect our religious pilgrimage to lead us anywhere. To be relevant and effective, an authentic relationship with God must be rooted in self-discovery, self-reconciliation and true self-love. The knowledge of our self, or better, the searching for our true self, is already a sign of divine grace and the right place to begin.

In *The Way of Unknowing* John Main writes: *What all of us have to discover is that the only way we can talk in any meaningful way about God is if we discover him ourselves; if we set out on the road of self-discovery which is the pilgrimage to our own essential being.*

The dictum of Augustine, often quoted by John Main is very apt: *If we are to be restored to God, we must first be restored to our own selves and then make ourselves, as it were, a stepping stone by which we step to God.*

I was discovering God, I was discovering my true self. It also felt as if I had my foot hard down on the accelerator, as my journey along The Way seemed to speed up.

Over Labour Weekend I responded to an intuitive feeling that I had to journal what was going. I was astonished at what emerged.

The Enneagram, my map for self-discovery, plus twice-daily meditation had fused into a single pathway to God. Overlay Andrew's spiritual guidance and I was experiencing a feeling of Divine Presence that is near impossible to articulate.

John Main and St Paul both lament the inability of words to describe such an experience. I too have been left speechless by what has occurred. The very best I can come up with is '*aliveness*'!

John Main has a lovely term; '*changes that occur in the minutia of life*'. I couldn't have put it better myself. These are not dramatic changes; indeed 'change' is too simple a word to describe what is occurring. But something has happened; it is authentic and comes from deep within. I am responding to Jesus and Jesus is responding to me.

And this is why I must continue to meditate. It is an act of giving and receiving and this giving and receiving is life changing.

Before starting my twice-daily meditation I read from *Silence and Stillness in every Season, daily readings with John Main*. I cannot praise this book enough as it combines wisdom with common sense. It is an excellent guide to all aspects of this wonderful prayer of the heart and a superb introduction to the writings of Fr John Main.

Participation in community days, retreats and attending the Essential Teaching Workshop in Wellington in 2008 are also part of the experience. New friendships have been made and it has been a pleasure to introduce others to this ancient tradition of Christian prayer.

And I cannot praise enough my weekly meditation group. We spend just 40 minutes together every Wednesday and jointly 'recharge our spiritual batteries'. We listen to a CD then meditate for 20 minutes. There is just six to eight of us and this seems a typical number for most meditation groups. We encourage each other in what some may consider a lonely road. But it isn't. It is a road to our own heart where we find ourselves being nurtured by the Holy Spirit, which is the love that flows between Jesus and his Father. Meditation in the Christian Tradition is the authentic Trinitarian experience.

Maranatha – Come, Lord Jesus.

Vincent - Hibiscus Coast

A Discipline, Not a Technique

I was always interested in meditation as I enjoy peace and quiet, and reasoned that if I could pray as well, it would be an awesome experience. So I went to an evening with Fr Peter at the Panmure church. There was a short video presentation which explained everything about meditation, adding that after some months you may experience something. Well, I've been doing it for some years now, but have been unable to experience anything. In fact I feel as though I have made no progress after about nine years of twice daily twenty-five minute meditations. I suppose I do feel as though I am more tolerant as the years go by--but I doubt if my dear wife would agree!

So, why do I keep on with it? I now understand why things are not progressing as to what I had hoped! I can't recall the meditation teacher's name, but on one of the CD's he said and I quote "Meditation is a discipline to be followed, NOT A TECHNIQUE TO BE MASTERED!" So I shall keep on plodding morning and night hopefully until the day I die.

George - Panmure

A Gentle Thing

In *'Under the Huang Jiao Tree: Two Journeys in China'*, writing as Jane Carswell, I describe the inner and outer journeys of a year teaching English in China. The inner journey proves to be the last stage in my journey toward Christian Meditation. In the passages from it below, I tell of my first encounter with Christian Meditation, why I was drawn to it, and why I hope that meditation will—by grace—be my lifelong companion.

'Two years after I returned [from China], the monks arrived – three of them, standing on each other's shoulders you might say. I heard a Benedictine monk, Laurence Freeman, speak in the Christchurch Catholic Cathedral one evening. He told us he'd been the student and friend of another Benedictine monk, John Main, who'd recognised an extraordinary deposit of light in the 4th century writings of yet another Christian monk, John Cassian. The light was a simple discipline of contemplative prayer, prayer of the heart, prayer of being. First he talked about it. I was surprised to have no issue with what he said. Why wasn't I, as usual, spoiling for a theological argument, or feeling guiltily at odds with what he outlined? Why wasn't I re-running my usual internal growl that the answer had to be bigger than this? He proposed a principle of union.

The only problem with this practice, this discipline, apparently, was its simplicity. I could understand that; I knew that I complicated almost anything I touched. Anyone could do it, monk number three insisted calmly, and so we did. This discipline was called Christian Meditation, which at first baffled me. My idea of meditation was of thinking about something, and that was just what we weren't doing. It's always hard to get a word that wraps right around a mystery, and the practice itself wasn't at all confusing. It felt right – no special feelings, no special experiences – just a feeling of rightness and an awareness, that grew over time, of a dimension of being that just ... just was.

I wasn't expecting to find anything that evening in the Cathedral. Nor was I looking for anything; I didn't know there was anything to find. I'd only gone to the talk because someone I liked had told me about it. I came away wondering if I'd at last found a way of prayer that made sense to me. The only prayers I'd ever known were variations on the theme of batting words hopefully in the direction of the boundary. Having sent the messages, I always wondered if they'd got there – wherever that was – and if so, could whoever was there understand them, and were they acceptable? It seemed an extraordinarily uncertain way to approach a supreme being, a surprisingly distant way to address a spirit that claimed to be indwelling as well as beyond, and such a chilly way to address your father. But I didn't know any other way, and I did, desperately, want to make the connection. I'd read about people who quite definitely had found a line-in; I could tell because it made such a difference to them. And why would Love deny us that connection?

But where was the socket?

John Cassian, John Main, Laurence Freeman ... what did they have in common? I was reassured that they all pointed consistently and firmly beyond themselves: none had any interest in being a magnetic guru. And, strikingly, all these monks had asked someone to teach them how to pray. So, now, was I.

I continued to meditate twice each day – the monks said this was best. I found the quietest place I could, sat down, closed my eyes lightly, and for about half an hour I sat as still as I could and let the internal voice of a mantra gradually bring my mind to

stillness. For that half-hour, I let fall away from me, as best I could, all my thoughts and words; in time, I came to trust the mantra to contain them all – and all the impulses of my heart. I wanted to learn to let go of all that my hands held, to let even the mantra fly free, and allow my attention to follow its sound with the ear of a child, as it led me deeper into silence.

Gradually, threads of being that seemed to have no belonging in my patterning found their proper place in me. These were threads, familiar over a lifetime, whose disorder had troubled me ...

And my inner room? I'd always known that I had one, deep inside, and that it was a good place to be. I remembered living there much of my childhood, but I couldn't find my way back ... As silence and stillness reclaimed their rightful place in my days, the door inside me quietly swung open.

The discipline of meditation proved to be, not easy, but simple. As the months went by, an awareness of something that already *was*, of a reality complete, accessible to all and embracing all life, crept in upon me. This reality, too, was simple; union *is* simple ...

I was surprised that reality turned out to be a gentle thing.'

Jane - Christchurch

Come Home

My sister and I have always been good friends as adults (she is the eldest and has been a huge help to me over the years) but the greatest change in our relationship came about when she introduced me to Christian Meditation. There was a depth of understanding, a shared joy in our spiritual life as never before.

We had travelled different spiritual paths; she remaining within the Catholic Church taking advantage of the opportunities with Vatican II and the many paths of renewal and growth, thus coming to a deeper understanding of the teachings of Christ. I left the church before then with the church laws and beliefs of my childhood intact, and searched in other religions for spiritual depth and meaning. I learnt to meditate and practiced for some time but with three little preschool children it was difficult to find a time and place without them and eventually I let it go.

I returned the church with the assistance of a wonderful Mission given by an Australian Passionist priest, Brian Traynor; but it was still a slow struggle. Imagine my surprise a few years later when my sister said she had begun to practice Christian Meditation! "What? Tell me about it, and give me all you have that I can read. If I'd known about this I'd have been back in the church years 20 earlier". I did try but my city church seemed to be still the church of my childhood all rules and sin and somehow lacking in the depth I was searching for.

I sat on the bed and read until the early hours of the morning. Then as we talked my sister mentioned a retreat we could go to the following month. A silent retreat with the Benedictine monk Fr Laurence Freeman who leads the World Community for Christian Meditation, and whose words I had read in a couple of the pages she'd given me.

I began to meditate that day as directed by John Main OSB and seldom missed a morning or evening. I just yearned to find out more, and the retreat was a wonderful experience; all that silence, so many periods of meditation, the opportunity to be alone (in the sense of being uninterrupted) with God, and to hear with such clarity the talks given by Fr Laurence. I pondered and played with a couple of haiku which I thought worked well, but really two words summed up that time. It felt as if I had 'Come Home'. (And I thought that was an original thought!) When the silence ended I listened to groups of people talking, always wanting more knowledge, not realising I had all I needed for the journey. But I also bought the book of John Main's writings *Silence and Stillness in every Season*. That book of daily readings taken from his many books has been a real asset and I imagine it has been responsible for my setting aside the meditation time morning and evening.

Our parish priest and I began a meditation group here at St Joseph's Waihi after the 2007 retreat. It has grown slowly in number and recently several women from St James' Presbyterian church have joined us.

Why do I continue to meditate? I think the main reason at present is because the fruits of the Spirit are such an unexpected joy, they show themselves without any apparent effort on my part and I can not claim these small opportunities to live well as 'mine'. All areas of my life are enriched in many tiny ways.

And my sister and I have that extra special bond being able to meditate together, share spiritual books and thoughts at every opportunity we have to be together.

Raewyn - Katikati

Reflections from an Internet Cafe

(I am sitting in the internet cafe where inspiration can be hard to receive but here goes!)

The meditation as taught by John Main and later Laurence Freeman has completely changed my prayer life. In fact I am not sure I had a prayer life before I discovered the meditation. I had prayers of course, prayers of adoration, intercession, and forgiveness that were all part of my life in the Church, but they were prayers which seemed to disappear into the ether, never apparently to be received or validated. It was like sending a rocket into the sky and hoping it reached someone somewhere sometime but never being quite sure about it.

This may sound very disloyal to my past attempts to contact the Almighty. I certainly always thought I was doing some good, carrying out what I had been instructed by my mother and various nuns and priests during the first seventy years of my life, even though at the time I really only felt I was going through the motions. I always had the sense that I should be receiving some reaction but I was not sure what form it might take.

Everything changed when I learned that by literally turning myself off I could place myself directly in contact with "the stream of prayer that flows between God the Father and God the Son" and, by doing so leave myself open to the work of the Holy Spirit from within me. I often quoted that "the Kingdom of God is within you" but this was the first time that vital phrase came to mean something real, something which it was up to me to make happen.

It sounds easy, but I quickly discovered it was so simple it was extremely difficult to carry out. My brain is not designed to be turned off while I am conscious. I literally cannot stop thinking. There is continuous electrical and chemical communication going on in the normal brain and that is why the mantra is so important. Repeating it constantly helps me ignore the other messages and ideas and fantasies which keep trying to invade. The mantra is a prayer in itself, but must not be used as such. "Maranatha" means "Come Lord" in Aramaic but that is not what I am using it for. I am using the mantra to block out other thoughts, and I must return to it as soon as I realise I have been seduced into thinking about other things, however important or desirable they may seem.

I have always understood that my ego was my personal motivator, without which I would be a nobody with no aspirations or intentions, just being the object of everyone else's aspirations and intentions. In meditation it is my ego which is making me continue with its practice but what appears to be happening is that my ego is denying itself. I am using my ego to disconnect myself from my brain activity. Everything I think about while I am meditating which is not actually the mantra is pandering to my ego, things all about me and my plans, regrets, desires, ponderings, in other words fantasies.

Of course those plans, regrets and ponderings are important at other times. Without them my life would not be liveable.

I have been meditating now for about seven years and it is still difficult to maintain concentration on the mantra but there is one thing I am absolutely sure of. That is the benefit that I have received from it. There is no obvious result from meditating, no blinding enlightenment, no warm fuzzies. That is not how it works. The benefits only appear later, only gradually have I become aware of them. They take the form of changes in me, in my reactions to people, to situations, to challenges which I face. I

discover a greater sense of peace, a sense that I am using my energy in constructive ways instead of fuming against situations or people. I seem to be able to see what is going on around me with new eyes, I am more accepting, more relaxed. I find I am speaking to people in a different, more respectful way. All this without any apparent intention on my part.

I truly believe that this is the Holy Spirit working in me. It is as though I was a battery which is constantly being recharged every time I sit down to meditate. It is simple but it is a discipline; it is always a challenge but it is a challenge I cannot ever contemplate going without. My whole life, not just my prayer life, has been changed forever by meditation.

Jane - Herne Bay

I Came to Christian Meditation

I came to Christian meditation in 2004 while studying for priesthood at the Holy Cross Seminary/Good Shepherd Theological College, Auckland. Father Peter Murphy spoke to us first year students, and I was hooked. I loved the stillness, silence and above all the simplicity in the practice. You just said your one word. In an institution where thoughts, images and words are up for discussion and sometimes controversy the simplicity of saying your one word was heaven to me. Not that I could do without the rational mind but its foundations lay in stillness and silence. This is where I discerned the vocation God was calling me to. This is where I found the courage and conviction to speak out and act on issues affecting seminary life. I meditated alone at first, but in the following year we formed a meditation group that met at Good Shepherd College. I left the seminary at the end of 2005. What was the best thing to come out of the seminary? Christian Meditation. I continue to meditate regularly as it seems necessary for me to come back to the foundations, to the source of being, in the midst of this busy and sometimes worrying life. Thoughts and images come during the meditation period but the return to the one word 'Maranatha' helps me to let go and let God direct my life. I sometimes meditate in conjunction with the Divine Office. In the book 'Light Within', Laurence Freeman gives an informative history of meditation practices in the Christian tradition and where this form fits in. Its simplicity, in comparison with other forms, attracts me.

Robert - Dunedin.

My Journey to Meditation

I was born in Auckland, New Zealand in 1946, the eldest of four children to a New Zealand father and an English mother. In my journey to meditation, I was very fortunate to grow up in a devout Catholic home during the post-war boom. In those days our lives revolved very much around the Church. Virtually all the people we had contact with were Catholic, even though Catholics made up only fifteen percent of the national population. The family rosary was a daily practice until television came to our home in the mid-sixties. By that time I had left home for seminary.

My first distinctly spiritual experience that I recall was my decision to become a priest. I was sixteen at the time and had had a year interrupted by sickness. I had been going backwards and forwards for a couple of years on whether to become a priest or not. The moment of decision came when I was lying in bed at home recovering from a minor operation; I was reading an article on vocations. I distinctly recall a movement coming up from deep inside me and immediately knew that next year I was going to seminary. My parents were keen for me to wait and have more experience "in the world," but I would not hear of it. I had made up my mind and I went from there to telling the parish priest, then the bishop, and I was on my way.

My seminary years were a mixture of happy and unhappy times. It was the mid-to-late sixties and the period was turbulent. Large numbers of students were entering, but many were also leaving. At the beginning of my studies, we had a six-month spiritual semester during which I learned the discursive method of meditation that was commonly taught in the Church at that time. It was a period of falling in love with God, what the spiritual writers call "first fervour." At this time, I resolved that I needed to make prayer a key part of my life. I experimented with methods but the range was narrow; my primary method was simply contemplating the Gospels, what I now understand as a primitive form of *Lectio Divina*. I am grateful to the seminary for setting the daily pattern for the spiritual life: morning meditation, Eucharist, the divine office, the rosary, spiritual reading, and visits to the Blessed Sacrament.

Like most students, I went through lengthy periods of uncertainty; however, the memory of that original spiritual experience sustained me. I recall on one retreat prior to receiving minor orders, I was pacing up and down outside the seminary chapel. I had had a difficult year. My best friend had been killed in a drowning accident and I was not allowed to attend his funeral, which left me very angry. I had made the decision to go ahead with minor orders but I was still plagued with feelings of insecurity and doubt. While I was walking, I had my New Testament in my hands and I came across John 14:1, "Set your troubled hearts at rest; trust in God, trust also in me." This was the turning point. From then on I knew I was on the right track in my studies for the priesthood, even though anxieties continued to plague me from time to time. My subsequent spiritual experiences in the years ahead seemed to follow this pattern, namely the calming of anxiety and fear for the future.

My first year in pastoral ministry was an emotionally turbulent one, but it also gave me the sense that I was being looked after. I recall reading the autobiography of Mahatma Ghandi and being struck by his interpretation of what it meant to be saved. It was the sense of God's guiding hand in all happenings. It was the early stages of sensing I was on a journey. I was very much in an activist role at the time and although I was generally faithful to my prayer times, I had indwelt the secular attitude of the period and saw this as being the model for a relevant priesthood. Towards the end of that year I began an arms-length association with charismatic renewal. At the time, it was instrumental in giving me the much-needed sense of peace I craved.

I had been appointed to two parishes within my first year of ministry, and at the end of that year was appointed to another rural parish community. This was a very difficult appointment, for I was with a senior priest who did not want an assistant nor did he want to be in this particular parish. My outlet was my chaplaincy to a psychiatric hospital where I was in a relatively free space. This also gave me the opportunity to relate to people who had serious personal problems and with whom I could feel a real empathy. I recall one day walking around the grounds with a man I had known from my first parish. He had severe depression and later committed suicide. The symptoms he was describing were exactly what I was feeling myself. It gave me a fright. I was very fortunate that people in the parish could read the presbytery situation and I had an open invitation to numerous homes for meals. However, that did not replace the deep emotional insecurity that I felt. I recall lying on my bed one afternoon being in a state of acute anxiety and suffering from heart palpitations and just asking for help. I recall a word came to me and I immediately felt at peace. I forget what the word was, but the experience taught me to listen to my body whenever this anxiety came on. There was also a priest from a religious order in the neighbouring city with whom I was friendly and he took an interest in me. Little kindnesses like this went a long way.

After two years in this parish I knew I needed a shift and was appointed to an urban parish on the edge of Auckland with a senior priest, Tom, who became a close friend and mentor. This was a very happy period in my ministry. It was here that I found my identity as a priest. When I was moved to another parish after four years, I recall saying to Tom that I had some understanding of what the relationship between Jesus and the apostles might have been. It was a very special friendship and had many aspects: friend, confidant, brother, father, and son. I was safe here and could hide in his shadow. It was during this period that I first began to meditate. I came across a little publication on contemplation which maintained that all priests and religious should spend an hour a day in prayer. It was by James Borst, MHM. This publication pointed me in the direction of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. So began my feeble attempts at meditation with a mantra. I was puzzled by the choosing of a prayer word. The only one that seemed to mean much to me was the word "trust" based on my experience of John 14:1 some seven years earlier. During this time I became aware of a vocational cycle of twelve years within my life, this happening twelve years after my initial spiritual experience which led me to decide for priesthood. I would begin my day with an hour's meditation. Then after early morning mass and breakfast, Tom and I would pray the Divine Office together. The practice of praying together was a very supportive experience that gave the friendship another dimension.

In the latter part of this period I went through another emotional crisis. I was aware I needed to find a spiritual director. My experience of spiritual direction in the past had been mixed. We were assigned an official director in seminary. They were good men but lacked an understanding of our age group and of the changes the Church was going through at the time. In my later seminary years, I shopped around in desperation but that did not prove a satisfactory solution either. I was, however, fortunate in this period to come across a diocesan priest who was very skilled in counselling and my consultations with him relieved much of the anxiety I was experiencing. It was a turbulent time in which to be growing up with much confusion created by the changes of Vatican II and in society. During my "settled" period, my friendship with Tom seemed to meet that need. However, I was in need of some wise counsel from one with whom I was not so personally involved.

One evening I was at a lecture on liturgy in the city given by a priest. No sooner had he started talking than I knew intuitively that he understood my situation and I needed to speak to him. I already knew him as a colleague but this was different. I

immediately contacted him and made an appointment. Thus began a relationship that was a lifeline for me for the next nine years. The affirmation that what I was experiencing was normal was so reassuring. I recall on that first meeting he was diffident about being in the role of spiritual director. "We are all going in the same direction," he said. Despite his reluctance, I put him in that role. I had a pattern of putting people to whom I bared my soul on a pedestal, and this was very true in his case.

Shortly after this meeting I was moved to another parish. I found this very difficult because I was leaving a very supportive situation for one which was much less supportive. Although difficult, this was a very important phase in my spiritual journey. I had been a very emotionally dependant person. In my first few years of ministry I tended to look for mother figures within the parish. I had been fortunate to be blessed with friendship that helped heal these insecurities. Here I learned to stand on my own feet. The habit of an hour-long meditation in the morning was established and was my sustenance.

Eugene, my spiritual director, assumed a very significant role in this period. It was he who gave me the image of the desert as a necessary phase of the spiritual journey. He also led me away from meditation with the mantra to the practice of *Lectio Divina*. The daily mass readings became the "grist for the mill," a favourite expression of his. In this period I was dealing with deep-seated anger and my visits to him, which were often combined with the Sacrament of Reconciliation, would open up the Word enabling me to journey on for another forty days and forty nights. So often I would feel I had come to the end of the road, he would help open up a new path for me along which to continue.

After four and a half years in this parish I went through a series of temporary appointments as sole charge before being appointed as parish priest to a small rural parish. I was also diocesan vocations director at the time. On top of this brief I took on the role of creating a supportive network for young priests within the diocese. I was now in my mid-to-late thirties. I began to find it increasingly difficult to develop enthusiasm for the core parts of my ministry. The weekly homily became a torture. I was becoming increasingly tired. Prior to this I had been on a priestly renewal course which included an eight-day personally directed retreat. That experience revitalised me, but only for a short time. I had been a regular attendee of in-service courses, often with visitors from overseas. I was aware a pattern had developed: bursts of enthusiasm created by inspirational sources from outside before the drudgery would set in again.

I also began making plans for a six-month sabbatical to which I was entitled after fifteen years in the ministry. I had decided on a Third World experience for the first part and then a course in Creation Spirituality for the second half. I was aware this was going to be a once-in-lifetime opportunity. The image for this time, given me by Eugene, was an opening up of the imagination. The Third World portion was spent in South America. Here at the back of my mind was the question: Is the Lord leading me to minister here? The energy of that continent was enticing. I could see what it did for the missionaries who worked there, some fellow diocesan priests who were there for a term of six years. The process of learning a new language and adapting to a new culture appeared to have a transformative effect upon them. There was much that was attractive, but there remained that niggling of doubt that this was for me.

As soon as I arrived at the Creation Spirituality course in northern California I had the sense I found what I had been looking for. The most vivid memory upon arrival was an enormous energy in my body trying to burst out. I was into everything that was going on. It became a joke that with any event taking place, my name was at the top

of the list. What I found here that was so reassuring was that I could name my journey and the oppression I was under. It seemed to be meeting my needs on all levels: academic, spiritual, and emotional. I found that I could not continue with my meditation practice, as my mind was hyperactive. I justified this by saying to myself that I was like a fish in a pool of spirituality: I was eating, drinking, and breathing it all the time. I did, however, continue praying the morning and evening prayer of the Church, and attending daily mass, but silent prayer was out of the question. The art-as-meditation component of the programme also formed a substitute for this. I found that in such practices as working with clay, dance, drawing, music, working with dreams, and creative writing, I was processing and making some sense of the turbulence within me.

I was only a month into the course when it was suggested that it would be good for me and for the programme if I took the whole nine-month course. I deliberated on this and realised I probably would not have an opportunity like this again. I was desperate to break the enthusiasm-to-drudgery pattern I had fallen into.

An important component to the programme for me was a course on Native American Spirituality. This included participation in sweat lodges and a vision quest, a Native American rite of transition. At this time I was trying to cope with the sense that my life had been wasted. I was in my fortieth year and was trying to cope with my surge of anger at the Church for leading me to this predicament. The vision quest gave me the courage to stay with the process. I was stepping into unknown territory. Prior to coming on this programme, I had had no intention of leaving the active priestly ministry. But now I became increasingly aware that I could not return to what I had come from.

As the programme continued, it became increasingly clear to me that I did need to leave the ministry. I had also met a woman on the programme whom I wanted to marry. I had been close to women in the past, but when it came to choosing between marriage and priesthood it was always clear that I was a priest first. One particular relationship had been very healing, but I had been in other situations where it was necessary for me to leave the parish simply because it was too much to cope with. Fortunately, no lasting damage had been done but there was a deep need within me for a female companion. What drew me to decide to leave the ministry in this situation was that here I had found someone with whom I could share my spiritual journey, which was so much more attractive than stoically continuing on my own. I was having amazing dreams which helped confirm for me the rightness of this direction. Interestingly, the day after I ceased praying the morning and evening prayer of the Church was the day I made my decision. There were other symbolic happenings at this time too; for instance, the day I made the decision to leave was the twentieth anniversary of the death of my best friend. His presence had been very strong for me during the course of this programme. It was also twenty-four years since I had first decided to become a priest, and twelve years since I had begun to meditate. Thus I became even more aware of the twelve-year vocational cycle. These and other little symbolic events gave me permission to take the step out of active ministry.

From this time on I no longer had a meditation practice. I continued to process my journey through journaling, fed primarily by dreams. The practical implications of my decision, however, I could not work out. Within a couple of days of returning to New Zealand after the programme ended, I was sure enough of myself to approach my bishop and formally request leave from the active priestly ministry. I had already forewarned him in writing that I needed time out. I found labouring work, which was all I could cope with at the time; I would simply numb out with any thought of what I would do with my life in the future. While my family was very supportive, what I was

going through was almost a complete breakdown and it put great strain on family relations. My mother also found it very difficult. She had come to depend upon me since my father's death, and while she had always been supportive of any decision I made, this was totally unexpected and it took some time to adjust. The situation also placed a considerable strain on the relationship I was in and eventually we agreed to go our separate ways. I was grateful that it had been a catalyst in my whole process, but it also devastated me, for my whole future had been invested in this. On one level there was the yearning to return to the priestly ministry, but I was aware this was primarily for security reasons. My whole symbol system had changed and I was quite lost.

What was vital for me during this period was the need for an annual retreat. Retreats had been a regular feature of my life since my early seminary days. However, I had long since become disillusioned with clergy retreats, which were more like social gatherings than a serious occasion for spiritual searching. In my later years of ministry I used to go off on my own, but I was not entirely satisfied with that either. My experience of the vision quest in the United States had taken me to the very limits of endurance and this provided a model of how I wanted to shape my own retreat.

First I needed a supportive environment. I was very fortunate to find Eric, a former teaching brother, who had taught for many years in the United States and who now was living on a farm. Eric also understood what I was going through. He was a philosopher and was able to describe my experience in the context of the age. His own vision saw the need for creating spiritual centres where people could come and stay and simply hold themselves together by meditating for as long as they needed. He saw the West collapsing, and as had happened so often in the past, the civilization would reform around such spiritual centres. Secondly, I wanted four days of solitude, silence, and fasting from all food and drink except water. Thirdly, I wanted a quiet, lonely space in the open where I could stand on one spot and pray for a period of twenty-four hours. I found such a space near a small waterfall in a bush-clad gully on the property. I went into this retreat time with a request: What word do I need to take me through the next year? This third part was the climax of the retreat time. I would chant a mixture of Native American and other chants I had learned in the US, plus some favourite verses from the psalms, such as, "O God, come to my aid; O Lord make haste to help me."

The night was the difficult time. Here I encountered my demons of loneliness, despair, betrayal, and abandonment. But always I would be given what I needed. I simply had to trust that the word would come. One morning after spending a night like this, I was becoming desperate for a word, and I was suddenly pestered by a blowfly. After the initial annoyance I just sat down and laughed. Here I was feeling sorry for myself for what purpose? My burden was much lighter after that. I found too, particularly after my time of silence, that my meetings with Eric were among the most profound listening experiences of my life. My retreat experiences since have been of a much more genteel nature.

I was blessed also in this period to meet Margaret, an older and very wise woman, who subsequently became my spiritual director (Eugene had since died). From Eric I obtained the big picture and the place of the Church in the context of the age. With Margaret I found help in discerning the inner movements of the Spirit. To begin with, she led me back to my meditation practice. She was not a Catholic. Her journey to meditation had been through the East; she had been initiated by the Maharishi on his visit to New Zealand in the 1960's. She gave me the first real instruction I had had in meditation, and the similarity with John Main's practice was remarkable. She gave me a mantra, instructed me on how to sit and to do this every morning and evening for thirty minutes. In the beginning my practice was off and on. She said to me one

day after I had seen her a number of times, "I hope you are meditating. I don't work with people who don't meditate." I had been receiving such personal help from her that the thought of being cut off and adrift again was enough to strengthen my resolve. From then on there was no looking back. The meditation practice became my anchor. Although I was still confused about the direction of my life, it no longer worried me. It would simply take its course.

Margaret's discernment after each retreat was also invaluable. It was after the fourth such retreat that I decided to set out on a new direction, which was to go to university and do a degree course. My programme of Creation Spirituality had awakened me to the plight of the environment and the need for contemporary spirituality to incorporate ecological issues. Hence my course of study revolved around the question: How can I serve the earth?

Another aspect I was aware of was the need to experience the ordinary initiation processes of young people. It seemed that when I left the priestly ministry I was like a seventeen-year-old (the age I entered seminary) in need of picking up my life. My life had developed spiritually, but in other respects it was underdeveloped. Although I had studied philosophy and theology for seven years, I had no "piece of paper" to my name, for the seminary course at that time was not a recognisable degree course. To put myself through university was my way of catching up on life.

This decision to study took place four and a half years after I had decided to leave the active priestly ministry. This seemed a significant milestone. Until then I kept asking myself, particularly during times of uncertainty, if should I return to the ministry. Now I had a new sense of direction. My relationship with the Church at this time was rather ambiguous. I would still go to mass regularly but I preferred to go where I was not known so I could be there anonymously. When I first left the ministry I had a great sense of freedom and began exploring other spiritualities, initially New Age and then Eastern spirituality. I enrolled in a correspondence course on meditation with the Self-Realization Fellowship. When it came, however, to commit myself to a particular organisation I would pull back. Having been totally committed to the Church, I was very reluctant to commit myself to another religious institution. Nevertheless, there was much that I gained from my reading and practice within this tradition, especially a deeper sense of connection with my body.

I recall in the latter part of this period attending a workshop run by Paul Harris, who had personally known John Main. While this was useful, my orientation was still towards the East. Through Margaret I came in contact with the writings and teachings of Sai Baba, and these seemed to touch the right spot. I went to their national conference and was so impressed with the people there that I decided I had to go to India to satisfy my curiosity. My reasoning was that if Christ were alive today I would want to meet him. Here we were at the end of the second millennium and a new "Christ" was among us.

During this period I also became engaged to a woman I had known for many years. It was one of those hasty decisions that just happened. I desperately wanted a companion with whom I could share my journey. However, it gradually became clear to me that we were not on the same journey. I became aware of just how far along the path I had come, and that I would be living with someone who, if not directly, at least indirectly would be undermining it. We eventually agreed to go our separate ways, thankfully, without any lasting damage.

I had also finished my university studies and, after a year of applying for work, was offered a job as a resource (or town) planner in a provincial city close to my friend Eric. I enjoyed the work, but after a couple of years there I realised that future

progress was closed to me in that place and that it was time to move on. What I noticed in my various work crises was the increasing calmness with which I weathered the storms. My future was up in the air, but I simply trusted that “all will be well” and it was. This increasing inner security I knew was the outcome of my meditation practice.

Corresponding with this job closure and my move back to Auckland was my trip to Sai Baba’s ashram in India. There was much that was attractive there: the peacefulness of the place, the thousands of people from all over the world—it was Christmas—and the devotion of the Indian people. What was alien to me was the adulation given to the guru and the fleet of late model Mercedes-Benz cars that were at his disposal. This seemed incongruous to me, but the devotees were blind to it.

Upon moving back to Auckland, I deliberately chose to live in a parish where I knew there was a meditation group. I had been meditating regularly on my own for almost eight years but I had the desire to be with other meditators. I also had a good friend who had been a member of this group and still came occasionally. I found it difficult at the beginning. Since leaving the priesthood, this was my first venture into meeting with people who were part of a church community. They did not know I was a former priest, nor did I tell them. They were very conservative Catholics and did not share my alienation from the Church. At times the discussion after the meditation made me want to run away, and I used to find excuses for leaving early. However, I persevered, and as time passed I became aware that there was something deeper binding us together despite the differences on the surface.

The teachings of John Main initially did not enthuse me. I had come across his tapes in the 1980's but my reaction was that he was just another spiritual teacher. When Fr. Laurence came to New Zealand in 1988 I went to hear him and for a short period tried to meditate twice a day, but found it too difficult to persevere. Paul Harris’ visit in 1995 was another connection with WCCM but again not the right time. Fr. John’s talks initially seemed to me rather bland, but after listening to them each week at the meeting I began to make connections with what I had been reading in the works of Paramahansa Yogananda and Sai Baba. The only difference appeared to be the recommendation of *Maranatha* as a mantra.

I wrestled with what mantra I should use. Although Margaret had given me one, I kept chopping and changing. I was still faithful to the daily mass readings and would frequently use the alleluia verse of the day or the response to the psalm as a mantra. I was unsure whether *Maranatha* was a recommendation or a command. I prayed about this for quite some time. During one of my work crises I found my original mantra helped bring me into the “now” of the present moment. From then on I stayed with that.

As I listened more and more to Fr. John’s recordings, I began to appreciate the richness of his teachings. The Eastern writings on spirituality and meditation I had been reading had an authority about them, but I was confused by some concepts, such as saying we are gods. This was alien to my way of thinking, but Fr. John was able to interpret these statements in a western and Christian context. I began to realise that our civilizations and spiritualities were separated by thousands of years and that we were not going to solve that breach in a generation or two. Fr. John’s genius was in interpreting this thought into a Christian frame of reference, which made it acceptable to me.

I was aware at this time that the twelfth year of my vocational cycle was coming around and I had an expectation that a new direction would be revealed to me. One day a senior member of the meditation group told me that he had been in contact

with the national coordinator of WCCM who wanted to pull out. Then he made an off-the-cuff remark to me. "You could do it," he said. My immediate reaction was that, yes, I could do it. After some weeks I contacted the coordinator and arranged a time to visit him. In the meantime, he had advertised his intention to pull out and was asking for volunteers. Dick Clarke (recently deceased) indicated he was willing, and as he had a computer and was prepared to look after the distribution of the newsletter and take book orders, he took the job. I was to look after the Auckland scene, which I was quite happy to do.

One of our first tasks was to organise Fr. Laurence's visit to New Zealand in 1999. Fr. Laurence had indicated he wanted to come, but it had been some time since he had visited and nothing seemed to be happening. We deliberated for a long time on whether we could organise this event, but in the end we took the plunge. We held a weekend retreat seminar in Auckland and arranged nightly meetings for Fr. Laurence in other provincial centres. During that visit, Fr. Laurence and I had a two and a half hour drive to a provincial centre. What was significant for me about this trip was that it was the first time I had been able to share my journey with a fellow priest who understood it. It indicated to me the importance of contemplation in being able to touch the fullness of a person's life, and only deep prayer could give that understanding.

I found, too, that my relationship to the Church was beginning to heal. It no longer angered me to go to Mass. The parish I was in was conservative, but the priests were good priests and they had the welfare of the people at heart. Where at one time it would not worry me to miss Mass on a Sunday, now I began to make sure I never missed. The following Easter I celebrated the Sacrament of Reconciliation for the first time since I left active ministry. I also decided it was time for me to branch out and try and teach meditation, so I ran a series of twelve meetings in the parish based on Fr. John's tapes, *In the Beginning*. A local priest came to one of the meetings and revealed that he, too, had begun meditating and invited us to join him in the church one afternoon. This I did and afterwards we prayed the evening prayer of the Church. The second time I did this there were just the two local priests and myself. This gave me a jolt. Here I was praying the Divine Office with the local clergy. It was a ghost from the past but there was something very different happening here. I began to pray Morning and Evening Prayer regularly from then on. I had kept my breviary even though I had not used it all these years. The thought occurred to me then that I could return to the active ministry, but this I quickly suppressed, believing it to be just an old tape. Nevertheless there was a certain euphoria that came with that thought.

Many years before, when I was in the United States, a young Native American man told me that the Spirit gives you three signs: the first you can ignore; the second is stronger but you still manage to suppress it; the third, however, you cannot ignore, you just have to go. It was on the strength of that that I left the ministry. One weekend I was visiting Eric and was talking about my friendship with a woman that was very important to me. There was a real closeness but it did not seem to be going in the direction of marriage, and at the time I considered I needed to be married. Eric made an offhand remark that I could return to the ministry. I remember I had a headache at the time and I rarely suffer those. As soon as he uttered those words the headache lifted and the subsequent euphoria stayed with me for some days. I did what I always did on such occasions, check this out with Margaret. She felt it was an old pattern repeating itself and I subsequently forgot about it. When this euphoria at the thought of returning came over me this second time—that is, my praying with the two priests—I knew something was happening, but I quickly suppressed it and instead told myself I wanted to work for the Church in a lay

capacity. The meditation community was very much a lay community and I would be more authentic in this work as a layperson.

I had kept up my friendship with Tom over the years. I knew he was very disappointed when I pulled out of active ministry but that did not change the friendship. I used to visit him periodically and we would go for walks like in the old days. This became less frequent as he aged. He occasionally used to ask me if I thought I would return to the priesthood. I always said I did not think so, primarily because I had changed so much and did not think I would fit back into the system. Some of the parishioners who were close to him used to ask me the same, for they were aware of how much the friendship meant to him. When I was living and working in the parish with him he had kept his distance from people out of a deep shyness, although he was very highly respected. At that time, we both experienced significant personal breakthroughs, and as he aged he allowed himself to be loved by people so much that when it came time for him to go into a rest home there was much opposition within the parish. People wanted to care for him right to the end. However, there was also a parish to run and the parish priest had done very well allowing Tom to continue living in the presbytery that had been his home for thirty years. I visited him a couple of times in the rest home and was saddened to see him go downhill, for he had been such a vital man.

He was only in the rest home a matter of weeks before he slipped away. When I received the call that he had died, I was stunned. It seemed so sudden. I was asked to be a pallbearer and readily agreed. I had taken the week off work on an assignment for a master's course I was doing. However, I found I simply could not concentrate on anything. The next morning the tears came, and for some hours I simply could not stop crying. People he knew closely kept telling me how much he loved me and how he wanted me back in the ministry. Now I felt I could not resist any longer. The funeral was quite an emotional event for me. Afterward, I was at the graveside when a woman whom I had not seen for many years approached me. I was still upset and told her how Tom had wanted me to return to the priesthood. She said simply, "I have been praying for you every day." I just hung my head in silence for a moment and then I said, "It won't be long." I knew this was now the time.

I did not do anything initially. I wrote to Eric who was overseas at the time. His reply was succinct, a verse from Robert Louis Stevenson: "Home is the sailor home from the sea, and the hunter home from the hill." I went to see Margaret, who had a unique knack of bringing me back to reality, but even she knew this was different. I thought I had better wait until I settled down before seeing the bishop. I recall one weekend visiting Tom's grave and asking him what should I do and when I should make my move. I had been having some tensions at work and my position was under review. The following Monday all hell broke loose and I made up my mind that I just had to get out of there. When it came to deciding where I should go, there was only one way, so the next day I contacted the bishop to make an appointment.

I had kept the bishop in touch with my involvement in meditation and when Fr. Laurence came to visit I arranged for the two of them to meet. I think the bishop imagined I wanted to speak to him about the meditation work, but when I told him I wanted to apply to be accepted back into active ministry he was quite pleasantly shocked. At this stage I could not picture myself back in parish ministry. I made it clear that I saw my meditation work as key to my ministry and that I wanted to focus particularly on this. I can see now that it sounded a little arrogant, as if I wanted to return on my own terms. The agreement was that I would move into a presbytery in the New Year, that I would go through a period of assessment, and that I would continue with in my employment in the meantime. Fortunately, the situation at my

work had quieted down when my manager moved into another role, so I was able to continue there until I was ready to leave.

The period of orientation went very smoothly. I fitted back into presbytery life very easily. I was with a senior priest and there were others living in the house, one similar to myself who had been out of the ministry for a number of years. One of the questions I asked myself in this assessment process was: Am I a priest who meditates, or a meditator who is a priest? The bishop already had a number of priests who had their own ministry. His need was for priests to work in parishes.

I was received back into the priestly ministry on 22 September 2001, fourteen years after I had left and one year to the day after I had visited Tom's grave asking for direction. He obviously had a major hand in the proceedings. I wanted to celebrate in style. I felt like the prodigal son in the parable; I had been lost but now was found; I had come home after years of wandering. I had a story to tell and I intended to tell it. There were many people there from different parishes in which I had served, including a large number from Tom's former parish, and my family was there in support, too. It was one of the happiest days of my life.

It was strange, initially, to celebrate mass again, but I quickly became accustomed to it. It was the same with the other sacraments. I had an abhorrence of performing my role in a mechanical fashion. Preaching, too, came relatively easily. I was aware that I had done much reading and had had the experience to relate to that. I was also aware that my meditation practice gave me a deep well upon which to draw. I supplied on weekends in different parishes. I also attempted to set up meditation groups in various communities, on some occasions without success. I also began leading a meditation group in the local maximum security prison. This I continued to do for a period of eighteen months with limited success. For a good period the men appreciated the silence and the simplicity of John Main's talks even if they did not practise it regularly. When a younger group who had no interest in keeping quiet began coming, I decided reluctantly to cease.

In the middle of 2002 I was appointed parish priest of a small suburban parish. This has provided a good opportunity to move into the role of pastor once again. There was a high degree of lay involvement, which made it fairly straightforward for me to move back into the role. Attached to the parish is a primary (elementary) school. I began teaching the children to meditate on a regular basis and took special delight in teaching the young ones. They never tired of Greg Ryan's book, *My Happy Heart*. I also had the privilege of burying my mother. It was one of those sad but ecstatic experiences, and I was so grateful that I was able to do this for her.

It has been a delicate balancing act blending my involvement and keen interest in meditation with my pastoral work. Recently, I have taken on the role of New Zealand National Coordinator of the World Community for Christian Mediation. In my enthusiasm I have found it difficult to understand why people do not take to meditation as keenly as I have. When I was received back into active ministry, I wanted to set up a meditation church! Now I am aware I have to be more patient, although I am convinced that a spiritual practice such as meditation is essential to living a Christian life in today's secular world. The contemplative parish remains my goal. I am so thankful to the Good Lord for leading me this far. It has indeed been a happy homecoming and it is not finished yet.

Fr Peter - Auckland