



Finding a way home

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In Darlinghurst, a man with a broken leg, a crutch and a pink elephant stood outside my Rectory gate wanting money for his pet dogs. "A friend" he said was to take him home from hospital after breaking his leg, instead he took a taxi into Sydney CBD, only then to be taken by the taxi driver to Kings Cross Police Station as he had no money for the fare. After overnighting in the police cell, he had made his way to me. Helplessness can be endemic, finding a way home a creative experience – even a pink elephant to lever mercy.

We may find ourselves like this man when our spiritual, mental and emotional resources are exhausted, and knocking on "heaven's door" for a way home. This sometimes is not simply because of a crisis but a whole series of transitions and decisions that lead us into a life "impasse".

Helplessness is a disorientating experience. We may wrestle with matters that we have no power to resolve by ourselves, and we enter an impasse dispossessed of all our learning, skill and influence to make a way forward out of it.

Belden Lane wrote "in a genuine impasse one's accustomed way of acting and living is brought to a standstill. The left side of the brain, with its usual application of linear, analytical, conventional thinking is ground to a

halt. The impasse forces us to start all over again, driving us to contemplation. On the other hand, the impasse provides a challenge and a concrete focus for contemplation, it forces the right side of the brain into gear, seeking intuitive, symbolic, unconventional answers, so that action can be renewed

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eventually with greater purpose."

On hearing the history of abuse towards children and the church's profound failure to attend to the survivor requests for help and recognition, we may feel unable to adequately respond and feel it's beyond our powers to resolve. We

may also have anger and fear and enter the bewildering state of not knowing what to do, yet feeling responsible to do something. As people of faith we wrestle ourselves and God over how to act, yet out of the dark night often come possibilities not imagined before.

Wendy lived with her husband outside of Winton, running a large sheep property by herself, as her husband was often away working to help pay the bills. During drought times water could be drawn from the deep bore on their station to water stock. Each day she would check these water holes for bogged sheep. Weakened by lack of fodder, the sheep would find their way into the bog and not be able to get out. One day, after many days of trying to keep going, Wendy pulled out a sheep bogged in a waterhole. Having got it out of the mud, the sheep turned around and went back in - only for it to collapse and die. Back in the vehicle covered in mud having removed the sheep's carcass from the bog, Wendy said looking at her hands "Is this all there is, God?" Immobilised by her circumstances, she began to pray honest heartfelt life changing prayers.

The Jacob story in Genesis 32, takes up this theme of helplessness and impasse. For Jacob who learnt at an early age to help himself with his brother Esau's birthright "blessing", helplessness is not an experience that

sits lightly. He hears that his brother Esau was pursuing him and we read Gen 32:21 "Jacob got up and took his two wives, two maids, and his eleven children and crossed the ford at Jabbok." It is a context of personal threat and of unresolved history catching up with Jacob.

This story tracks the providence of God even when the world seems to threaten hope. It concerns the grace of God when there seems no room for change and no let up from burdens of the past and present. It is about the boundless capacity of God to work within fragile humanity even when it may feel totally inadequate and helpless.

Jacob remains alone in the night in order to face God, his fear and the demons of his own making. We read; "Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak." This wrestling with a "man" is curious and mysterious. The text is not so much interested in the nature of the man or his name but in the wrestling and in its outcome.

The wrestling changes Jacob physically and he is given a limp. The ancient world always sees the physical in direct relationship with the spiritual. Perhaps the limp is a sign of the character flaws, of his inability to trust God and of the woundings he has brought into his relationships. From the struggle Jacob seeks blessing. He wants God to redeem his life, to do what he is unable to do for himself. And is this not our desire too for survivors, perpetrators and our church?

In the writing of St John of the Cross, *impasse* or "dark night of the soul" is explored poetically. The writer moves from twilight to midnight to dawn, a gradual transformation of the person through what is cherished or desired and through what gives security and support. The writings reveal that we are affected by darkness where we are most deeply involved and committed, and in what we love and care for most. Love makes us vulnerable, and it is love itself and its development that precipitates darkness in oneself and in the "other" whom we love. We all need a level of satisfaction in order to begin and remain in prayer, relationship, ministry, but it is in the withdrawal of satisfaction and the confrontation with limitation (ours and others) that signals the transition, the *impasse* or dark night. In the night, we are being challenged to make the passage from loving, serving, "being with", because of the pleasure and joy it gives us, to loving and serving regardless of the cost. Every God relationship, every significant human love, every human group and every nation, will come to this point of *impasse*, with its intrinsic demands for and promise of a new vision, a new experience of God, a deeper, freer more committed love. And it will come precisely when imagination seems paralysed, when intimacy seems eroded, and when desire feels dead. It is in this time that we must withdraw and reclaim our projections of God, of friend, of ministry, of community, and let others be who and what they are:

mystery, made in God's image (with adaptation of Constance Fitzgerald – "*Impasse and Dark Night*").

The ground of this dark night, this powerlessness, is resurrection. For dark night is a sign of life, of growth of development, it is a sign to move forward in hope to a new vision, a new experience.

Out from the wrestling, Jacob is truly blessed and named Israel, "the one who prevailed". God did not abandon him to his helplessness, did not destroy him because of his self-centred scheming. Jacob in his dark night met God who held him and sustained his life in the face of threat and uncertainty. He found his way home, he found how to stand up.

As the Diocese faces the past and shapes a healthy future there is a momentum underway through the dark night leaning into light and into hope. We are called to pray in that place;

O God, with whom we wrestle until break of day:

*Make us long to seek your face
Beyond the limits of our strength,
That in our wounds we remember you,
And in your blessing we may find ourselves;
Through Jesus Christ. Amen.*

+Gregory

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