

## **Christians on Ageing Conference Call**

### **Older people and spiritual strength in the world of nature**

Notes of the Conference Call held on 17 August 2021. Led by Barbara Stephens and Jacquie Nunn

We were led by Barbara Stephens and Jacquie Nunn, and others taking part were Helen McCormick, Fiona Williams, David Lewis, Elizabeth Hammond, Bernadine Portbury, S K Rait, Fiona Lough, Sally Richards, Jane Jennison and David Jolley (host and note maker)

**Barbara** described briefly her work in the charity sector relating to dementia over four decades. She is currently *Chief Executive of Dementia Pathfinders* [Home | Dementia Pathfinders](#). She is a member of the executive of Christians on Ageing, is sharing the lead on its Dementia Newsletter with Albert Jewell and has recently become Hon Sec. In preparing for this presentation Barbara reflects how much her thoughts are influenced by personal experiences of bereavement.

**Jacqui's career** has been in education in several settings. She brings to this session her experiences and observations during the years of living with her husband's dementia. This brought to them an appreciation of the powers and benefits of engaging with the natural world. She rails against the failure even of the hospice movement to acknowledge the importance of spirituality and faith to human beings, especially in times of stress, illness and the approach of death. 'Just a tick box to be registered but not explored'

- She noted that Sigmund Freud declared himself an atheist but had a deep interest in faiths [Religion According to Sigmund Freud \(verywellmind.com\)](#)

Barbara **explored our acquaintance and knowledge of nature**, starting with a quiz using photographs of trees, wild flowers, birds, and a drop of water

- She reviewed evidence for the benefits of exposure to and involvement with the natural world. There is a strong evidence base which finds better mood, greater sense of well-being and reduced incidence of many illnesses amongst people who have more involvement with nature than the average.
- Once illness has become established, survival and experience of symptoms is improved by time spent with natural life.
- People enjoy being with nature – but the benefits of time engaged with nature endure into periods between such exposure.
- **The University of Derby** has a particular interest in the benefits of nature: [Nature Connectedness Research Group - Research centres and groups - University of Derby](#)
- Contact with nature promotes health in us and our involvement and interest in nature can be protective to the natural environment
- **Citizen Science** projects are involving people and adding to understanding of the relationship between the elements of the natural world, including human beings [Research Focus Areas | Earthwatch](#)

There are **barriers** which limit access to the natural world for older people and for people with illnesses or disabilities: [Disability and Health Disability Barriers | CDC](#)

- Lack of mobility, failed confidence and the way that things are organised are amongst the most common and correctable factors. Impaired senses – especially of sight and/or hearing make for additional difficulty but approaches can be made to help.
- We were reminded that **nature can be brought indoors** – house plants, cut flowers and pets small and large have virtue. [Houseplants: to support human health / RHS Gardening](#)
- [The Health and Mood-Boosting Benefits of Pets - HelpGuide.org](#)

**Spiritual well-being** is generated by meaning, purpose, being connected, it requires nourishment, helped by relationships, set in personal beliefs, faith and the feeling or prospect of peace

- **Liveability** has produced a resources designed to support spiritual well-being in people living with dementia [Livability | My faith matters](#)

**Jacquie took us through the years she and her husband lived with his dementia**, telling the story and illustrating points with perceptive photographs:

- **Tony was only 60** when changes began to be apparent – there was a while before the cause of these changes was identified – most change was in aspects of personality and spatial awareness rather than memory or other features of cognition
- When the **diagnosis** was made and shared with them she received it as ‘a car crash’. He said it made him feel better: ‘At least I know I am not going mad’
- Most **offers of help** they received were **designed for older people** – Communal activities and singing. **He hated that** – never good with crowds
- He loved walking, especially in Derbyshire, and all things physical. We saw photographs of favourite places, Wimbledon Common and cycling – Activities which he enjoyed even when altered by dementia.
- One memorable achievement was a **coast to coast ride** with his sons – enjoying the challenge and raising funds for the Alzheimer’s Society. A positive spin which came from this was the development of **adapted cycles** which can be ridden by someone with dementia alongside or behind a fitter person. He diverted from a family outing to climb a tree – triumph and pleasure showing in his face and posture
- We reflected on the **joy brought to people from a sheltered housing complex** by a trip to the countryside
- We admired a display of garden produce from the garden – Unable to continue work in the legal profession as soon as the diagnosis was known, he put time, energy and interest into the garden
- He lost memories of the past and had no conversation about the future - **living in the moment**. But he had grown up in Southend and visits to the seaside (Isle of Wight) gave him great pleasure. We saw him there and in company with dog Tashy.
- A return to another favourite place to swim in the waters of a cove in Corfu with his two handsome sons brought an enduring smile – Rocks, fossils, water – wonderful. It is a place where some of his ashes are deposited

Jacqui reflected that she could see his life and hers crumbling like the rocks – Musing on space and time, Family places. ‘We are such tiny scraps.’ Lost for speech and words to cope with this experience he found he could paint – and we saw examples of his bold and colourful work. Jacqui too has found comfort in art – we were privileged to see a lino-cut which she has produced, based on her parents’ allotment. Parents who died during the years of Tony’s dementia. Tony was not conventionally religious, but had been brought up in the Methodist tradition. Jacqui has had association with URC and Congregationalists. Both were spiritual and devoted to nature. Three months before his death we could see him finding pleasure in the view of the sea from the Isle of Wight.

Jacqui brought us [Wordsworth Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey... | Poetry Foundation](#)

Barbara brought **Whitman A Noiseless Patient Spider** BY [WALT WHITMAN](#)

*A noiseless patient spider,  
I mark'd where on a little promontory it stood isolated,  
Mark'd how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,  
It launch'd forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself,  
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.*

*And you O my soul where you stand,  
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,  
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to connect them,  
Till the bridge you will need be form'd, till the ductile anchor hold,  
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.*

- These are moments we have in dementia
- Connecting with those we love
- Reflecting on what has been lost
- Feeling and breathing the early morning in the garden
- Connectivity between people which sometimes feels to be lost in our current world

This had been a moving as well as thought-provoking and informative session. There were many comments of thanks, appreciation and respect for what had been shared. There was a reminder of the help which can come from Dying Matters [Dying Matters |](#).

**David** shared an account of his work during the pandemic which included setting up a private Facebook group for older parishioners, some of whom had not been able to get out at all. This allowed people to share what they were doing and thinking in safety. He leads prayer walks in which aspects of nature are encountered and become the stimulus for reflection and discussion. His interest in trees has led him to identify ten trees which are mentioned in the bible – the theme for a ten part series of sermons

**Barbara took us back to the beach – and a photograph of pebbles.** Pebbles which she found herself seeing in a new light in the aftermath of losing her husband.

A wonderful session: moving, thought-provoking and informative. We are grateful to all who made it happen.

**David Jolley**