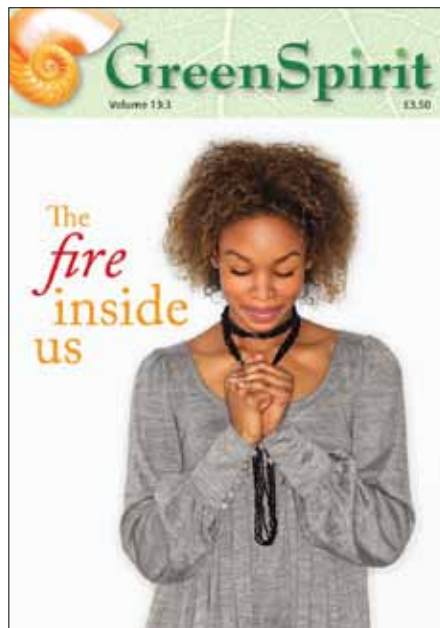


The Fire Inside Me

Levi Hall (interviewed by Ian Mowll)

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The Fire Inside Me

LEVI HALL

I was born in 1964 in West London, England. In those days it was hard for black people so my Mother did what many others did – she sent me back to the West Indies to be cared for by my relatives at the age of 3. As I went through adolescence, I missed my Mother so my relatives asked her to take me back. Just before I turned 16, I returned to East London in England to be with her.

I got work through an agency going to factories packing boxes as well as other jobs. I had money in my pocket and that felt fine. A few months later, my Mother left for the States and I was on my own again.

During this time, I used to go to the West End of London where there were lights, shows and people were having fun. I was offered a job operating winches in a show and from there I got other jobs, often at the Palladium as a stage hand. I worked on shows such as Tommy Steele, *Singin' in the Rain*, Roy Castle and numerous others. Eventually I was offered a job with the English National Opera and there I worked my way up to the second top job in the stage management team. I went around the world building sets for the company in Russia, America, Australia and parts of Europe.

I loved the fantasy of the shows – it was like an escape from the harsh realities of life. I could be creative, people clapped and they were enjoying themselves. This was a place where I felt truly happy.

Then things started to change at the English National Opera and eventually I had to leave. For 15 years I had worked incredibly hard for the company and I felt as if I was at the top of my game. As I worked long hours and travelled, I had lost friends. And without my job, I lost my income to pay my bills, my mortgage and keep my family together. My life fell apart and I felt rejected.

So I returned to the streets where I knew what was what. I worked as a doorman in dangerous clubs. My job was to make sure the club was secure, to tackle someone if they took out a gun, to search for guns at the door and to do other protection work. To do this, I had to carry guns to and from the club for others to protect me although I did not use a gun myself. I knew this was wrong but the police tended to leave our community to protect ourselves.

In this community, people grass on each other to be let off crimes or to get reduced sentences. And my name must have come up. One day as I was driving to work, out of the blue, 2 police cars drove up and placed themselves in

front and behind my car blocking me in. They shot at the tyres and the windows, my car was riddled with bullets. My life flashed before me as I wondered if I would survive. I remembered kissing my baby daughter goodbye that day and now I knew that I would not see her for a long time.

I was sentenced to jail for 6½ years of which I served 3½ years at Brixton prison. Life in prison is hard. Anything is an excuse for people to kick off as the loneliness and isolation affects you. You feel forgotten when there are no letters or visits. Weekends were particularly difficult. You knew that people outside were having fun and there was not much to do. It was horrid.

I had a fire within me. A fire of anger, disappointment and bitterness. A fire that was out of control. I blamed everyone and everything for the way my life was turning out.

But in prison I had time to reflect. Time to look back on my life. And when you are in trouble you regress back to when you are younger to try to make sense of your life. You start to connect to your past strengths and comfort zones. For me, this is God.

My reflections took me back to when I was in the West Indies. My Grandmother sent me to a bible school in August at a time when all the other kids were having fun. I remember sitting alone in a church with colourful glass. I saw light fall on the face of a statue of Jesus. Bang! I suddenly knew that I was more than my physical self. There was something much bigger and more wonderful to life than I had ever imagined.



So in prison I went to church and bible study, I even cleaned the church. I liked to read the stories in the Bible of Jesus, not so much the biblical stories but Jesus' human story. Now I hate pain, I'll do almost anything to avoid it. So if Jesus was going to suffer all of that pain and to transform his pain into love, well, that is amazing. As my Christian faith deepened, I felt the energy of Christ inside me and I realised that if God loves me, I do not need anyone else.

Through the counselling course I did I started to learn about myself, who I was and why I did certain things. I started to learn to direct the fire within me, not to quell it but to use my passion and energy positively. And the same fire that was damaging me began to repair me, the fire within started to transform my pain into love.

retreat. I remember doing yoga on a mountain in beautiful surroundings and there I had a mystical experience. I felt as if my spirit grew bigger and bigger and I had an out of body experience – I felt connected to everything. My experience taught me that if you go to the right place where there is peace and space on Earth, your spirit can connect back with Nature and you can be free of all that has happened to you.

Another time I was invited to make a speech at the House of Commons to a group of MPs and others about restorative justice and reform of the penal system. I told the audience that people in prison often feel that they are no good and not valued. And through the counselling course that I did in prison I learnt that we can love each other and overcome hate.



Brixton Prison with a rainbow bursting forth from the clouds.

With the help of the Samaritans I became a listener and people would call me at any time to tell me their story. Maybe a prisoner's wife was having an affair, maybe he was not getting any visits or there was some other trouble that caused him to act out his anger onto others. Once I knew what the problem was, I could help by making suggestions, for instance, getting him to make a phone call.

Once, a dangerous criminal came to the prison. No-one wanted to be in the same cell as him out of fear so I took my Bible and spent a night with him in his cell to make sure that he did not self harm. Another time I came across a prisoner trying to hang himself. I held him up by the legs until help came.

When I was released from prison I started to re-build my life by getting work and taking courses. One time I went to the Christian ecumenical community¹ on Iona for a

Now, amongst other things, I return to prisons to help with the Forgiveness Project². In these sessions a speaker who has been a victim of crime talks about his or her forgiveness for the person who perpetuated the crime. I then talk about my story as an ex-prisoner including my inner story with all of the feelings, not the bravado. This process helps the prisoners to reflect on their own story and some turn a corner in their life as a result.

Today I am working towards helping people in body, mind and soul. For the body, I am training as a fitness instructor and I already have some clients.

For the mind, I am going to do a diploma in group facilitation, conflict resolution and counselling skills so that I can lead Forgiveness Project sessions in prison. And for the soul, I have trained as an Interfaith Minister³ so that I can offer spiritual counselling and ceremonies to help people on their spiritual journey.

My whole life is about helping people. Looking back, I feel as though I was looking for love and fulfilment in all of the wrong places, now I have purpose in my life and I see love in other people.

References:

1. Iona Community www.iona.org.uk
2. The Forgiveness Project www.theforgivenessproject.com
3. Interfaith Foundation www.interfaithfoundation.org

Levi was interviewed by Ian Mowll, the coordinator for GreenSpirit who lives in East London.