

## *Reflections on an Interfaith Journey , 2008 – 2010, by Rev Nicola Alan*

“I know that having a community of people around”, I heard myself say at the open day in London, “is going to be very important for me”. Really?! My husband had decided to come to the open day with me. I was fine with that; I would after all have two years of my own space doing my own thing. I needed it. But he and the universe had other ideas. Despite my railings, the two of us journeyed to Scotland together in November 2008 for our first residential week-end. We gathered in the Skye room at the Gillis Centre and began with a ‘getting to know you’ game, during which I discovered that the community which was, by my own admission, to be so important to me, included a witch, a shaman and Miss Fluffy.

At 7.30 the next morning we gathered for meditation. A voice read, “It is said that the Sufi master Hafiz was asked ‘What is the sign of someone who knows God?’ His reply was, ‘They have dropped the knife. They have learnt to drop the cruel knife most so often used against their tender selves and others’.” Ah... that cruel knife. That knife which cuts with judgement, which criticises and then turns punitively on the critic. What would a life without cruelty perpetrated against myself and others look like? How sweet the thought. How tender the heart, thus discovered. And so the process of transformation, of ‘undefending’, of ‘tenderising’ began.

I lit candles to the moon and recognised my grief as I leave behind the age of mothering. I smarted as my husband fell in love with trees and bounced around like Tigger. I nervously welcomed into our home two fellow travellers for our first study group and wondered how to cope with all the water flowing from one quarter. I bristled in the home of the Imam, being put with his wife and children whilst only my husband could talk to him, and at last submitted. I shed aspirations to grandeur with my spiritual counsellor and found my likeness in a simple, kind and upright tree. I witnessed many funerals at a memorial woodlands and wept for the loneliness of the grieving. I opened my heart and ears to my peer counsellor as the telephone became a compassion transmitter and as my mentor offered me the bounty of her loving wisdom. I retreated alone in Scotland, paddling in the river, writing haiku about the gorse and seeing the Tao through the eyes of Pooh. I enjoyed my Self thoroughly. Meanwhile, those accompanying souls grew dearer. Their love supported me. My love mattered to them. The witch wasn’t scary, the shaman became my angel and Miss Fluffy was a Mrs. with a heart of gold whose graciousness and generosity humbled me.

The first year retreat arrived. Retreat? A misnomer for sure. On my 51st birthday I arrived into the maelstrom of 90 people. How do I find me, the quiet inner me, in the midst of all this? And how do I keep warm standing for two hours in the dewy cold of a breaking dawn, while we are all being initiated? It was my husband’s turn to have the initiation stole placed on his shoulders. So this is how to keep warm; my heart melted and the tears flowed as I witnessed him, knowing what it had taken for him to get to this point and honouring him deeply.

Our second year journey began and I was re-born – welcoming myself as a little one onto this beautiful earth. The next month I buried myself and shed tears as my study group companions placed flowers on my coffin. I had come from the ocean and to the ocean I would return. A little drop of water falling as rain and finding its way down the mountain, back to the ocean which calls from within. At the Memorial Woodlands I now stood beside the coffin as the departed soul flowed into the ocean and became the anchor for those who grieved, praying to God, “May I be the presence of your love”.

Back at the Seminary I lost my temper, yelled my fury and was held without blame or judgement. Truly the knife is most dangerous in my own hands. Truly unconditional love is the healing balm of hearts.

We were asked to challenge our identity and I arrived uncharacteristically in red high heels and short black dress, wanting to be a powerful woman – for once. I didn't feel powerful; I felt badly behaved, uncomfortable, like I had sold out somehow. I sat with a dear companion on my bed, bare-breasted both, as we gently honoured our bodies for mothering. We dressed one another in floating softness and arrived bare foot into the class. My husband said, "I would just like to say that my wife has arrived and she looks beautiful, feminine, powerful and queenly." I felt beautiful, feminine, powerful and queenly. I am a woman and I need not be afraid to be a woman any more. That evening I stepped, as a 16 year old, into my womanhood in my rite of passage ceremony, witnessed by my loving community. So now, could it be possible that we, my husband and I, could collaborate on a ceremony of recommitment, man to woman, husband to wife? We needed to heal first. With the help of a spiritual counsellor we began, and a healing ceremony emerged. "I have a proposition", the email from our tutor said. "Would you allow two student ministers to minister to you in your ceremony of recommitment?" And I thought we'd got away with that one! Not so. The healing ceremony had to happen first. On the rocks near our home, the wind blustering, the sea tossing, our dear study group companion and his wife lit a fire, beat the drum and we, acknowledging our pain and grievances, gave them to the earth, the wind, the fire and sea for healing. In Edinburgh our loving ministers prepared our ceremony. My sister of the floating softness took me to her room, brought me dinner, loved me, dressed me for my wedding and when all was ready accompanied me to the ceremony. All the women were waiting on the stairs, the men unseen in a little room to the side. My beautiful sisters looked at me with such tenderness and then sang spontaneously, "How can anyone ever tell you, that you're anything less than beautiful?" I remarried my husband. Witnessed by the dearest souls, the kindest hearts, I remarried my life's companion.

So ordination is calling and we retreated to Exmoor. I sang it in the hall, I sang it in the gardens, I sang it in the shower and waiting in the queue for the vow taking ceremony, standing behind the watery quarter of our study group who now shone with radiant beauty:

"Closer and closer each step to my Beloved.  
God you're in each breath I take,  
You are my Beloved."

When my stole, embroidered with the journey from ocean to ocean of the water droplet, was placed on my shoulders, I vowed to my Beloved, "All that I am I yield to you, with love".

"It is said that the Sufi master Hafiz was asked, 'What is the sign of someone who knows God?' ", I said in the opening of my speech at the ordination ceremony, "His reply was 'They have dropped the knife. They have learnt to drop the cruel knife, most so often used against their tender selves and others.' "

I wish I could drop that knife, lose it and never find it again, but my hold on it has at least loosened. God has worked through the sincere hearts which beat within the Seminary and through the community of dear ones I have journeyed with. My longings to accept, to embrace and to know God have been tenderly met.

With deepest gratitude,

*Nicola Alan*