finding naasicaa

letters of hope in an age of anxiety

charles ringma

In a post-Christendom world, young people continue to be vitally interested in matters of spirituality and justice, despite their lack of engagement with the Christian faith and church. This situation calls for new forms of communication and a reconsideration of the claims of the Christian faith.

This book for searching minds does just this. A series of letters written by theologian Charles Ringma to his 19-year-old granddaughter, *Finding Naasicaa* addresses ultimate issues of life, faith, spirituality and social transformation accessibly, unpretentiously and winsomely.

Charles Ringma is regarded by many as a thinker, activist and contemplative. He has written in the area of the social sciences and philosophy. He has worked as a missioner, researcher, and urban ministry practitioner and has written many books on Christian spirituality. He has lived and worked in Europe, Australia, Asia and Canada, teaching theology and mission at Asian Theological Seminary, Manila and mission studies, philosophy and spirituality at Regent College, Vancouver. As a retired professor he continues to write and teach in various parts of the world.

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contents

preface

I have written this book for my oldest grandchild, Naasicaa. She is nineteen years of age and is presently attending university.

My purpose for writing is, on the one hand, simple enough. I wanted to share with her something of the Christian story and my own joyful and at times difficult journey of faith. In doing this, I have the hope that this storytelling might also be helpful to others, particularly those who know snippets of the Christian faith, but have doubts about its claims and relevance.

But of course, there are always more complex reasons for writing. We are never subject to singular motivations. We usually do things for many reasons and some of these may remain hidden even to ourselves.

One of these more complex reasons is that the opportunity to restate the Christian story and to reflect on my own journey of faith has provided me with the opportunity for renewal and recovery. What I mean by this is that storytelling is a way of deepening the story for oneself.

Another factor is that I feel that I owe Naasicaa and others like her something. What that something is, is rather difficult to bring into words. Perhaps one way of

getting close is to acknowledge that to believe and to live the Christian story in our present culture is much more difficult than when I was young. In my youth the Christian story was generally held in much higher regard. Today there is much doubt, even cynicism.

This of course does not mean that I see myself in a better position and that I can talk with confidence while others doubt. I have no such superior attitude. In fact, these very things raise a serious problem, namely, that my faith shaped in a different time may not be able to appreciate fully or relate to the difficulties and issues of our present time. I guess that only you, the reader, will be able to determine the extent to which my storytelling has been relevant and helpful.

While this book has in view a wider audience, it is also about the celebration of family, intergenerational links and the passing on of stories and values. So I wish to honour my children and grandchildren. I appreciate their individuality and creativity and their equally strong sense of mutual love and care.

The reader will note that the personal pronouns in relation to God are in inverted commas: 'He'. This is a way of indicating that God is Spirit and not a male figure as the use of He might otherwise indicate. In other words, God is beyond gender.

I especially wish to thank my daughter, Marina Ringma-McLaren for her enthusiastic assistance and for doing the work in completing the typescript, and Robert Hand for his editorial work and creativity in turning a manuscript into a book. A final thanks goes to Karen Hollenbeck-Wuest, whose editorial skills have made this book more readable.

Charles Ringma
Brisbane, Manila, Vancouver, Yangon
2005

an opening word for naasicaa

letter one

You will remember the 'Easter house', Naasicaa. For a number of years when Rita and I returned to Australia from the Philippines for a holiday we would all gather as an extended family at this beach house on Queensland's Sunshine Coast. It was always during the Easter period.

We still all talk about the 'Easter house'. Not only did we have a fun time there, but there was also the snake drama, among other memorable events, to add texture to our story telling.

The 'Easter house' has become part of the family folk lore. And in the telling and re-telling we almost relive the fun times and the drama.

We all carry many stories within us. Some we tell often. Others are barely mentioned. And sometimes the most important stories are never told because there doesn't seem to be an appropriate setting in which to tell them.

So in the form of a series of letters, I want to share with you some of the stories of life's meaning and purpose and matters of faith and spirituality.

The Christian story is a big story. It has its roots in the fascinating pages of the Old Testament. And it continues in the burst of activity around the person of Jesus Christ, which led to the formation of the early Christian communities and has continued up to the present. This story is thus thousands of years long. And obviously, this whole story cannot be told here. So I will have to highlight certain aspects of that story.

It is important for you to know that we usually make a distinction between the initial telling of the story as that has been recorded in the pages of the Bible and the way in which the story has unfolded in the history of the church over the past two thousand years. What I mean by this is that the recorded story has the priority over the way in which the church throughout its long history has sought to understand and live that story. Put differently, the Bible has priority over church tradition. This means that the story of the Bible can correct our story.

But in many ways, while basically correct, this distinction has many problems associated with it, and we will have to return to this issue as we go along. One difficulty is that we cannot understand an old story without taking our present issues, culture and history with us.[1] I realize that this rather bald statement may be difficult for you to grasp but hopefully this will become clearer as we go along.

In telling any story there are many ways to tell it and many forms of expression. It could be told as drama. But I am sharing the story in the form of a series of conversations that I have written in letter form. This is not quite as exciting as drama but I hope you will bear with my lack of creativity. I enjoy letter writing so I will make use of what I do best.

This of course is not to suggest that the Christian story and something of my experience of it are downright dull and boring.

You are probably well aware of the fact that we always seem to slant a story in a particular way. Put differently, depending on who we are talking to we tend to tell the story differently. This is in itself good, for it has to do not only with our sensitivity to the one to whom we are talking, but also our creativity. But there are problems with this as well. We may exaggerate the story. We may tell the good bits and leave the bad bits out. I have to be careful at this point in my storytelling. I must not make the Christian story and my participation in that story easier or nicer than it is. I don't want to fall into propaganda.

The main point that I want to get to in this first letter is to ask whether the story is worth telling. Is it one that we could simply ignore? It is obvious that I think the answer is, 'No, we can't ignore this story', otherwise I would not be writing to you. But let me give you several reasons why. The first is that Christianity is an important part of two thousand years of history. Western thinking, art, music and the general culture have all been influenced by Christianity. This is now true of other parts of the world as well. Secondly, the Christian story is worth thinking about because it provides insights into so much of what life is all about: the beginning of the world, the nature of human beings, the shape of the social order and the future that awaits us. It talks about love, suffering, death and hope. These and many other issues are matters that we all grapple with.

So where do we start with this big story? We could trace the story chronologically, starting with Genesis and following through to the book of Revelation, or we could move from early Christianity to the contemporary church. But I would like to tell the story differently. I think that talking about major *themes* would be a better way to go. I

can then weave together scripture, church history, some of my own experience and then connect it to the contemporary world.

You know that each year I spend my time in Canada, Australia and Asia. My conversations with you are written in different parts of the world. Some of the flavour of these different settings will come through in what I write, and I think this is appropriate. The Christian story is no longer the story of the West. It is a world story.[2] In fact, it has always been that way, although for a long time it was predominantly a Western story.

The other important development is that many Western nations have become multi-cultural and many people travel and experience other parts of the globe. This has influenced the way we see and understand things. We are very aware of diversity, plurality and difference. This has implications for the way in which we understand the Christian story, particularly because Christianity is presently weak in the First World, but alive and virile in the Third World. Maybe others now know the Christian story better than we do. This calls for a new humility on our part and willingness to listen to others.

But this probably is enough of an introduction. (In fact, I sometimes wonder why we succumb to this literary device. Does an introduction sort of set the reader up?) Why not get to the story proper! It is in the story itself that the power lies. And the wonder of stories, particularly the big stories of humanity and of our world, is that they allow us to interface the small story of our lives with their grand themes. In this, we ourselves are enriched and become more fully human.

the world without and within

letter two

You may be a little surprised that I want to start here. You probably expected that I would begin to talk about the importance of faith or the necessity of prayer, or that I should begin to talk about God and everything else would flow from that starting point. After all, religion usually has to do with belief in a Deity and participating in the religious practices that flow from that belief.

But this is not where I wish to start. However, this does not mean that I do not think that God is centrally important and that faith can be relegated to the sidelines. Rather, I want to start, Naasicaa, with where you are. I want to talk about life, the kind of world in which we live and the way in which the world shapes us.

This last idea, the world within, is particularly important for us to think about. The world, and here I mean both nature and the social world (the world of cities, industries, institutions, culture), is not simply a world that lies outside of us. Of course it is out there, but it is also

within us in the sense that we are shaped by its institutions and values through the process of socialization. One of the reasons why I need to talk about this is that we are really not as free as we think we are. We think that we make a whole range of decisions, but often our choices are very much influenced by our family background, schooling and the way in which the general culture has influenced us. So this is an important issue that I wish to discuss and will return to in subsequent letters.

the world of nature

I am writing this letter in the home that I share with your aunt and uncle in Brisbane, Australia. It's a typical Queensland winter day. The temperature is 24 degrees. The sky is brilliant blue. The sun filtering through the palm trees in the backyard is doing a dance of light and shadow on my writing desk. I can hear the screech of rainbow lorikeets and the more melodious call of the butcher bird. As you know our backyard runs into bushland and then into parkland. One would hardly know that I am living in a big city. Nature is all around us. We see possums and bandicoots and ticks bite us from time to time reminding us that there is a snake in every paradise.

Like you, I love nature. The bleached beaches of Fraser Island, the lush subtropical rainforests of the Lamington Plateau, the stark Canadian Rockies and the exotic beauty of the island of Mindoro in the Philippines—these are only some of the beautiful places that I have experienced. And you, of course, love the beautiful Blue Mountains west of Sydney, where you spent some of your childhood.

I see the world of nature as a most wonderful gift from the Creator. It is a gift that sustains us and the billions of others who inhabit this planet. The natural world not only

gives us food and water, but also all the resources we need to build our societies and to create our cultures.

While I do not believe that we should worship nature, I do believe that we need to appreciate it much more than we have done in the past. Previous attitudes towards nature took it for granted, believed it was inexhaustible in terms of resources and riches and as a result nature was exploited.

Sadly, the Christianity of the past number of centuries uncritically contributed to these faulty ideas. The Genesis story in the Bible was read in such a way that humanity was seen as having dominion over the natural world and this meant exploitation rather than care and stewardship. I think this was a misreading of the story. Care for the world rather than exploitation is central to the biblical message.

We now know better that we cannot keep on taking. All things need care and renewal. So does nature. And it has been a good development that we have become much more environmentally sensitive. Sadly, this has come belatedly, after so much environmental damage has already been done. And in many places this wanton madness continues.

Since you are an astute reader, you will have noticed that this brief discussion has already moved from the world of nature as such to what *we* do with nature. And this is precisely the issue with which we repeatedly have to grapple. Yes, there are wilderness areas and other locations where nature exists in its pristine beauty, but so much of the globe is an environment shaped by human hands. We have turned nature into landscape, and we have done that for very good reasons. Moving from hunter-gatherer communities to agricultural, to industrial and now post-industrial communities, we use the world of nature to sustain life and build our societies. That we have done this with some faulty ideas should not surprise us.

You and I both know that much more could and should be said about the world of nature. Nature is not a

compliant 'mistress'. It does not yield its secrets easily. And when scorned nature has a way of retaliating. Many natural disasters are 'man'-made, and nature can be 'violent'. Having lived in the Philippines I do know something firsthand of the power of typhoons and earthquakes.

For a long time Christian theologians talked about God providing humanity with 'two books': the Bible and the book of nature. Some theologians believed that the book of nature would eventually lead us to want to understand the Bible. Nature, it was claimed, tells us something about the power and magnificence of God, while the Bible tells us about the person of God and 'his' involvement with humanity. I am not so sure about these neat ideas. It is more likely the other way round: knowing God as the redeemer helps us to appreciate God as the creator.

the social world

I don't know about you, but one of the things that has always impressed me is human ingenuity, creativity and diversity. The social world is like a kaleidoscope of contours and colours.

The social world often appears as a rock solid given. The language we speak, the way we structure family, the institutions we create, the way we produce things and do business and the political realities that govern our world all seem so permanent, even though they have to adapt to changing circumstances. While the world of a millennia or even centuries ago changed very slowly, that is not so now. In fact the opposite is the case. Our urban environment, institutions and values are all caught up in rapid change. Therefore I think we need to acknowledge that *uncertainty* is very much a part of our contemporary consciousness. This is surprising in light of the fact that we tend to regard our 'primitive' forebears as living in a world of uncertainty

in the face of the forces of nature, while we claim that we have made the world secure through the power of science and technology. This security is really a myth. The very social and economic world that we have created now frequently threatens us.

You will not have failed to notice, Naasicaa, how quickly my discussion about the social world has moved to talking about some of its difficulties. This is not good, for we cannot live only problem-centred lives; we should also celebrate. We cannot only look at the world with critical eyes; we also need eyes of wonderment and appreciation.

So let me start with wonderment, and then return to the matter of critique. What particularly amazes me is the way in which we have been able to respond to different physical environments in order to create a diversity of societies and cultures. It seems that the human impulse is towards creative externalization, though this does not mean that we are not also creatures of tradition and continuity. We not only adopt what is given, but we also adapt. We not only receive what is given, but we also transform. We not only live with what we have, but we also create the new.

I believe that human creativity is a great gift and it is amazing how we have been able to utilise this creativity to build the kind of societies we have today. So in many ways you are blessed, Naasicaa: to grow up in the beautiful city of Sydney, to have parents and grandparents who love and respect you, to have the opportunity for good schooling, health care and lots of recreation in the land of surfing beaches. People around us serve us well and there is every reason to celebrate so much that is good. What is troublesome, however, is that those of us who live in the Western world are generally *not* thankful. We don't appreciate what we have. We want more. And this wanting more is the worrisome driving force in our culture. Contemporary capitalism functions by fanning an

insatiable consumerism. We are told that our very happiness depends on our having the latest consumer product. As a consequence, we are not a culture that appreciates what we have; we are a culture of *complaint.*

You are probably smiling now and thinking that it doesn't take your grandfather too long before he gets back to the problems of our society. You are right, for while I do seek to celebrate all that is good in our culture, I do have some grave concerns. In summary, I am concerned about some of our core societal values and equally concerned about the growing gap between rich and poor countries and the gap between 'the haves' and 'the have-nots' in our own society.

But let me first back up a little bit. While the social world is the movement of tradition, it is also a world that we are making and shaping. And while the 'we' includes all of us, it particularly includes the elite and the culture bearers in our society. Put differently, those with power and influence are the ones who are shaping our world. While I am quite sure that many of those in power seek to shape our world for the common good, I am equally sure that others seek to shape the world in such a way that it primarily *benefits them.* As a consequence, I believe that real exploitation occurs in our world, that we are fed propaganda and that we are being manipulated by powerful interests and forces.

I wonder whether this makes me some sort of 'radical' in your eyes or maybe even a 'communist ideologue'. I am actually neither, but I am critical of aspects of our society. And I believe you are as well. In fact, many of your peers are questioning some of the previous certainties of modernity, including scientism and rationalism and the impact this has had on the political and economic processes of our time.

Let me briefly explain how my more critical stance came about. It certainly did not come from my family upbringing or my participation in the life of the church. My family was very conservative and the Reformed Church of which I was a part was more isolationist than socially engaging. I later learned that this should not have been the case. The Reformed tradition is fundamentally reformational and is a world-formative Christian movement.[1] In other words, it believes that Christians are in the world to change the world in the light of the Kingdom of God. But particular churches in particular points of history do not always live up to their own heritage. The Dutch Reformed Church in the former apartheid South Africa is a good example of this failure.

My more critical and radical orientation came from three interrelated sources. The first was through reading and re-reading the gospels in the New Testament. The message of Jesus with its emphasis on reconciliation, love, peace and care for the poor, is so different than what normally occurs in our world. Secondly, my work in urban mission made me aware of the gross injustice that occurs at street level. Not only are the poor neglected, but some the worst drug pushers were the police themselves. And finally, living in a Third World country for many years made me aware of questionable Western economic values and the nature of structural evil.

A critical approach to society need not be negative in orientation. It can be fundamentally positive, for it seeks to penetrate the rhetoric and propaganda that is constantly fed to us. We are told that individuals, companies and governments do things that will benefit us. But so frequently things are done that benefit them. Drug companies suppress information about harmful side-effects, multi-nationals hide their exploitative work practices, and governments give us information that will enhance their

election prospects. We certainly cannot live gullible lives in our kind of world.

So let me come back then, to some of my central concerns. Contemporary Western values promote individualism, consumerism and self-preoccupation. We are taught to struggle by ourselves when the very nature of social life has to do with community and partnership. We are encouraged to desire things when happiness lies in relationships and inner values. And we think that the more we focus on and live for ourselves the happier we will be. This is not true. Emotional well-being includes being others-concerned and not simply self-preoccupied.

I am aware that you may simply respond with the suggestion that we either should not worry too much about these things or that we can't do much about these matters anyway. But we can't put our head in the sand and we can't be neutral. In fact, if we don't think about these things and do something about them, we simply contribute to the way the world is. Inaction is being for the status quo. To put that differently, we simply end up adding to the injustice and dysfunctionality of our world.

the world within

If you have followed the drift of my thinking so far, you will have realized that I am arguing for both an appreciation of our world and a critique of it. In more expensive language I am talking about a hermeneutics of affirmation that appreciates the value of tradition and a hermeneutics of suspicion[2] which questions much of the way things are.

But I am also suggesting something more. We cannot only think critically about our world; we also need to get our hands dirty. In other words, our critique and concern must lead to costly engagement. Here Karl Marx is suggestive

with his famous dictum: the philosophers have tried to explain the world, but we must seek to change it.

Not only is this easier said than done, but we are no longer so sure in what direction we need to work for change. We certainly don't want to go in a state communist direction. That has been totally discredited. But capitalism isn't all that wonderful either. It has given us plenty of material goods but happiness escapes us and our social fabric is seriously torn. These are deep questions, and therefore we need to talk about the world within.

We often have the idea that the world within is our private inner world: it's the place where we hold our stories, memories, hopes and fears. The inner world is the world of our secrets, the place where we are safe. But, sadly, it is not so simple. Our inner world is not simply of our own making; it is also the internalization of the things around us. Or, to put that differently, our landscape becomes a part of our soulscape.

What this means is that through family, education and the institutions of our society, we imbibe a language, a whole set of values and particular ways of thinking. We are profoundly shaped by the world around us and that is one of the reasons why it is so difficult to see our world differently and critically. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann speak about the way in which we creative human beings 'externalize' ourselves through the creation of communities, artifacts and culture. Over time these become objectified; that is, they take on solidity and permanency. As such, they become internalized, and we begin to think that this is the way these things are: this is the way the world is, and maybe even needs to be. And so we accept our world, and don't even think about the need to change it.[3] Thinking about change often only occurs when we are in some sort of pain because things no longer 'work'.

So what I am suggesting to you, Naasicaa, is that the world without is also very much the world within. To a large extent this is good because socialization leads to social cohesion. But what is not so helpful is that we internalize not only what is good in our world, but also its pain, dysfunctionality and propaganda.

The 'stuff' we see on the mega-screen of world history is also the 'stuff' that is within us on a small scale. The greed, injustice and irrationality that we see around us are also, in some small way, within us. And that is a big worry. This means that the world within is not a peaceful world. And while we don't need to agree with every interpretation of Sigmund Freud regarding our inner world, he is right in pointing out that it is not a harmonious world. It is one of conflict, just as our outer world is such a world as well.

None of this seeks to deny the good, the beauty and the creativity that lie within us. Music, art, literature, architecture, culture, technology and so much more of human achievement reflects this ability to do good and to make beautiful. It reflects the power of the human spirit not to succumb but to overcome. It shows our ability to wrestle with our problems and difficulties and to work towards solutions.

This inner world requires a lot of care. It cannot be neglected. We cannot focus only on outward activity and forget about our inner person. We cannot be concerned only about building our cities and our economy and leave the heart unattended. If we do, we will not only become lopsided, but we will begin to suffer.

Maybe this is all old hat to you, or maybe you think that we can't really think about the world in this way because it is far too sombre. But you will let me know, won't you?

When I started writing, I constantly heard the shrieks of the rainbow lorikeets. They are gone now. I had placed birdseed and water for them in a tray on our back deck, but

they made too much mess. Your grandmother asked me to move the birdfeed, but now the lorikeets have gone. Maybe you can't have beauty without having shit. Possibly, this letter has been somewhat about this.

life's meaning and uncertainty

letter three

I have been revising this letter to you since I returned to Canada. It's good to be back in our small basement apartment in East Vancouver. We live just off Commercial Drive and the neighbourhood teems with people from different cultures, although Italians, Asians and Latinos predominate. Sometimes, I am the only Caucasian on the bus that runs along the Drive.

Rita and I deliberately moved into this area even though this takes me far away from my work at Regent College on the University of British Columbia campus, which is on the other side of the city. Our move here was carefully thought through and has everything to do with some of the values we hold. I guess it has a lot to do with our life's meaning. But more of that later.

I have been revising this letter because it is not easy to write about life's meaning. It may be easier to write about life's uncertainties, which we all experience to greater or

lesser degrees. But to deal with life's meaning invites us into the amazing diversity of life's experiences and into the recognition that different people make very different sense of life. What we can say is that where one lives and the culture one is a part of do have a lot to do with the meaning one makes of life in a broad sense, although here also we see great diversity. One can be an educated middle-class Caucasian Canadian and believe in primal religion, or one can be a First Nations person and be a dedicated Christian. These differing belief systems obviously impact the meaning these two individuals make of life.

meaning-making creatures

I think that a good place to start this reflection is to recognize that we are meaning-making creatures. We attempt to make sense of life. Or to put that only slightly differently, we spend a lot of time trying to understand others, our world and ourselves. In fact, Martin Heidegger goes so far as to suggest that our very being has to do with seeking to understand all that can be understood. Hence the ceaseless quest for knowledge.[1]

I broadly suggested in my earlier letter to you that there is some connection between understanding ourselves, others and our world. To seek to understand ourselves in isolation does not make a lot of sense. We best understand ourselves in relationship to others and the wider world of which we are a part. Thus our environment and our culture shape our self-understanding.

It is one thing to know this intellectually, but it's another thing altogether for this to be brought home when one transfers into a different socio-cultural setting. I never realized, for example, how middle-class my values were until I began to work among the urban poor in Australia. And I never realized how Western I was in my values, ideas

and ways of thinking until I lived in Asia. What all of this means is that we don't make sense of our lives by ourselves; rather, we inherit our society and our place in it uncritically, without thinking about it.

But having said all of this, it is nevertheless true that you and I have to make our *own* sense of the world. And this is difficult. We soon realize that we can't even make sense of ourselves. We are complex in our feelings and motivations and we often sense that we are a mystery even to ourselves. And as for making sense of our world, that is even more daunting. The world is bewildering in its diversity. And there is so much specialized knowledge out there that many lifetimes would not be enough to even begin to read it all, let alone understand it. The consequence of this is that we are becoming more and more specialized in narrow areas of interest and are losing a grasp of the wider picture and the interconnectedness of life.

I think it is important to note that the journey toward making our own meaning of life is a bit of a lonely journey. It takes some courage, for we have to ask some difficult questions and we have to be willing to come to different opinions than those held by people around us, particularly the significant others in our lives.

I remember well when as a teenager I began to question whether I wanted to live the kind of life my parents were living. As migrants to Australia from The Netherlands their over-riding preoccupation in the new country seemed to be to build the good life—a life of material prosperity and well being. And I remember saying 'no' to my father's invitation to become a part of his business. Looking back over my life I can see that I have had to say 'no' often in many different settings and circumstances as I have attempted to live out my own sense of meaning and purpose. We don't make important decisions about what we believe and how we

want to live only once. We have to do this again and again, so the idea that we are on a *journey* is a good metaphor.

The other thing that I should point out is that our quest in understanding life's meaning involves some pain. You have probably experienced this already, Naasicaa. When we hold something as being important and a friend of ours does not, then in time that may rupture the relationship. I disagreed with some of the teachings of the church of which I was a part in my younger days and consequently had to leave. This cost me quite a number of friendships.

So discovering life's meaning and purpose, while at times exhilarating, is also fraught with difficulties. And maybe that very both/and experience is central to the way we live life.

accepting limitation

Since we cannot read, experience and know everything, it becomes rather obvious that our understanding of life's meaning can never be exhaustive or comprehensive. It usually does not take us too long in life's journey to realize this.

This raises an interesting question: If we can't know everything, how can we be sure that we can know life's meaning? This is related to the idea that we can't understand the part unless we understand the whole.

There are various ways of responding to this fascinating issue. One way is simply to disconnect the idea of knowing everything and knowing life's meaning by stating that since I need to discover *my* meaning of life, I don't need to know everything. Another way is to acknowledge that I don't need to have exhaustive knowledge in order to really know something. I can truly love someone and yet not have exhaustive knowledge of that person.

But another way to proceed is to make sense of life by embracing a 'meta-narrative', a story that is big enough to deal with life and death, the individual and society, the past and the future. What I am suggesting here is that most of us don't simply create our own meaning of life but use existing religious or philosophical systems to help us make sense of life. We don't try to make sense of life simply *by* ourselves. This of course is not to deny that we do have to make sense of life *for* ourselves. What I am proposing here is that we don't start with a clean slate and start from the beginning and do it all by ourselves. This is not possible anyway. Heidegger speaks about our being 'thrown into the world'. What he means by that is that we are all socialized into a particular world of language, culture and values which shape us much more formatively than we realize. So in the West, whether we realize it or not, we are shaped by ancient Greek thought and by the Judeo-Christian tradition, by the Renaissance and the Reformation, by the Enlightenment and by Romanticism, by scientism and mysticism.

You may feel a little overwhelmed by my reference to these major formative movements of thought because you may have not yet had the opportunity to study them all. And that is okay for the moment. We will pick up on some of these matters later.

Even as I write this I can see your wrinkled brow, your flashing eyes and your reluctance. Talking about meta-narratives is possibly most 'uncool'. And I am not surprised if you would point out to me that many people in the Western world do not embrace some major philosophical or religious system, and many of these major systems have been discredited anyway.[2]

These are fair comments to make. In our contemporary culture there is great skepticism about the meta-narratives or the major ideologies of the past. State communism and the Christianity of the colonial period have been largely

discredited. Much of the older views of science, with their underlying ideas of objectivity, control, progress and manipulation, also have been seriously questioned. This questioning is good. However, it is important to point out that one of the problems with meta-narratives is that over time the basic story gets embellished and often becomes distorted. Stalin's state communism was a far cry from the writings of Karl Marx and centuries of Christianity in the Middle Ages were a far cry from the gospel message of Jesus.

While many people may not have formally adopted a particular philosophical or religious system, even those who have no formal position nevertheless hold an informal perspective that is philosophically explainable. For example, a person may claim, 'I don't believe in anything and life has no meaning'. This comes close to the position of nihilism. But it will not be lost on you that this person *does* have a belief, namely, that nothing is worth believing.

So by way of basic recapitulation, I am simply pointing out that while we have to make meaning of life for ourselves, we usually adopt or adapt major ideas that are available to us. That is the only point that I wish to make now. I will later discuss how we can know whether the ideas that we embrace are good and beneficial. This is a huge concern, for history teaches us that people have accepted ideas that are harmful and destructive. We only need to think of the impact of Fascism in Germany, and in earlier days, notions of white superiority in the displacement of Aborigines in the settlement of what later became the nation of Australia.

purpose and paradox

I suppose it is true that there are people who sort of meander through life and never think too much about anything. As long as their basic needs are met, they seem

to be happy enough. There are also millions of people who live in dire poverty, oppression and marginalization, whose most basic impulse is to survive and to work for the betterment of the next generation. Both groups have purpose: the one is not to be too concerned about anything, the other is survival and improvement.

In making sense of life we do need to talk about how we see life's purpose. While at school we have to begin thinking about what work we want to do. And while we may be influenced by very pragmatic reasons, such as, 'I want to work in the hospitality industry because that is where the jobs are', or, 'I want to become a lawyer because that is a high status and well paying career', what we wish to do also involves how we see our purpose in life.

So what is life's purpose? Here we need to be careful that we don't become reductionistic, making statements such as, 'My purpose in life is to be married', or 'to be famous' or 'to be rich', or to be a 'musician' or 'a missionary'. It seems to me that while some of these statements may give one's life a particular contour and direction, life's purpose is to be seen as being much broader and more comprehensive.

What I mean by this is that I am more than simply my career. And my purpose in life besides being a good lawyer may also be to be a caring wife and mother and to work voluntarily for marginalized youth. But even describing life's purpose in these terms is grossly inadequate. All of this is still too pragmatically focused. We can make more fundamental statements such as 'my purpose in life is to use my gifts for my loved ones and others' or 'my purpose in life is to love' or 'my purpose is to glorify God and serve others'. And whether we are a motor mechanic, farmer, professor, priest, or family and home caregiver, all or some of these more fundamental values can come to expression.

It is appropriate, I think, to ask at this point how this sense of purpose comes to us. This is difficult to answer, for it invites us into life's amazing diversity. For some a sense of purpose may come very early in life. We only need think of the young Mozart. Or the equally young Dietrich Bonhoeffer springs to mind who, at a very early age, knew he was to become a theologian.[3] But for most of us, life's purpose is a gradually unfolding reality. We feel our way *into* life. We make choices and modify them. Through our experiences of pleasure and pain we come to see what is worth living for.

I am not all that sure that we can say that we were born for a particular purpose, if we mean that a particular purpose is predetermined for us. I don't think that this is so, even in a religious sense. Some of the key people around Jesus were fishermen. They later became apostles. (An exception to this seems to be John the Baptist who, from birth, was marked for a prophetic role. And, of course, this was also true of Jesus himself.)

But for most of us our sense of purpose and vocation unfolds. And frequently, it is simply a surprise. I entered the printing and publishing industry as a young man and loved this kind of work with all its creativity. I had no idea that I would end up being a specialized urban youth worker and later a theological educator.

So it's important to touch on the paradoxical dimensions around these issues. One is the basic observation that it is often not the formal situations of life that provide us with the opportunities to express who we are, our values and how we want to benefit and bless others. It is often what we do informally, along the way and incidentally, that provides us with the opportunity to realize what we most fully seek to be on about. The other is that sometimes we just 'fall into' doing something, and it is only later, as we look back, that we see some sort of pattern. Others again are drawn

into life's purpose through circumstances and events that almost 'overtake' them. This was true of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who was drawn into the civil rights struggle and was thrown into national prominence.[4]

a personal reflection

I know you probably want to ask me what I think about life's meaning and purpose. In one sense this whole book is an attempt to answer this important question, but I will make some initial responses to this. Bear with me if this is not as comprehensive or as specific as you may have wished.

I want to begin by emphasizing that understanding life's purpose has very much to do with seeing life as a most precious gift. Life itself, and so much more, is given to us. By the 'so much more', I am referring to family, friends, education, resources and the list goes on and on. And who we are, with our physicality, talents, personality and intellectual resources, is sheer giftedness. This, of course, is not to deny that we don't contribute to this by the life choices we make and the kind of life-style we live. We are not set in cement so that everything about us is a pre-given. But we cannot wholly remake ourselves either. We have to learn to accept our physicality and giftedness and live *into* what we have and are, rather than *against* who we are. Sadly, some people never learn the gentle art of self-acceptance and continuously do violence to themselves by trying to be something other than who they are.

Let me further unpack some of the things I am saying here. The first is that the most basic movement of life is not giving, but receiving. Life is not first of all demand, but a blessing. It is not first of all what we *do* with all our energy and talents, but who we *are*. Secondly, I believe that life can only be lived meaningfully and purposefully if it is lived

with gratitude. If we live life with resentment and demand then the very fabric of our lives will become distorted. And finally, much of life has to do with learning the difficult art of acceptance. We have to accept the way we look, the intellectual and artistic gifts we have been given, our biological health and the way we are oriented.

I further believe that we can't squeeze life's meaning out of life in a similar way to juicing an orange. Life unfolds. It is appropriate to speak of one's life's 'cycle', or to put that differently, to speak of life's major transition points in the journey from childhood to adulthood and old age. And each of these phases has its own contribution to make in terms of our psycho-social development and our growth in understanding life's purpose and mystery. I have the writings of Erik Erikson in view here.[5]

It seems to me that we need to live life with a great capacity for openness. This in no way denies the importance to plan and to make choices about relationships, place, work and life-style. But much comes to us not as a result of our planning and doing, but by way of surprise and gift.

What I mean to say here is that rationality needs to be complemented and impregnated by contemplation. Max Weber has pointed out how much the modern Western world has become enamoured with rational efficiency.[6] This has been translated into the economics and institutions we have created. And this reflects an understanding of life that has to do with control and productivity, which gives us the idea that we are making it all happen. Our efficiency virtually becomes life's meaning. But there is more to life than this. There is the beauty of art, the mystery of creativity, the profundity of philosophy and the power of religious experience. Life's meaning is not discovered simply by the way we control nature and shape our urbanscape. It is also discovered in contemplation and reflection.

So the meaning of life has to do with living life's giftedness, becoming all that we can be with our capacities, talents and creativities and then bringing that to expression in ways that enrich the wider human community. A lot lies embedded in these few basic statements and these will need further elaboration. One of the critical issues that we will need to look at is what it means to do good in our world and, more basically, what this good looks like. But that is for a later letter.

life's uncertainty

Even though you are young, Naasicaa, you understand that there is nothing smooth about life. Even though life has been good, you have already experienced a fair share of disappointments. There is nothing easy about growing up with parents who are separated, for example. Life is rough, frequently unfair, often difficult, and marked by uncertainty. And while much of life has a sameness about it, there are experiences of pain, sickness and betrayal that rock the foundations of our existence. Victor Hugo is right: 'Hours of ecstasy are never more than a moment'.

I think what we cannot do is hold life's meaning in one hand and life's uncertainty in another, holding all that is secure in the one hand and all that is threatening in the other. It is not quite so neat. Rather, life's meaning includes life's uncertainty. Uncertainty is not an appendix to the main text; it is everywhere throughout the story. Put differently, death is not the footnote to life; death is an integral part of life. Its fine print is already etched onto a baby's fragile hands. The Australian novelist, Morris West, puts it better: 'We are conceived without consent, wrenched whimpering into an alien universe with our death sentence already written on the palms of our helpless hands'.

When I am speaking about uncertainty you must not think that I referring to a pessimistic or negative approach to life. I don't believe that uncertainty needs to lead to cynicism. One can love and embrace life and still recognize and experience its uncertainty. One can commit oneself to friendships and still accept that some relationships will not work out. One can work in the world to bring about change and accept that there may be unintended consequences. Life's uncertainty need not freeze us to inaction, but it can make us less triumphalistic and more careful.

Life is complex and is bigger than each of us. There is much that is out of our hands. And while we act into life seeking to create our structures of security and well-being, life also acts upon us. To put that more clearly, we seek to impact others, but others also impact us. And that is always for both good and ill. While we may seek only to bless others, we will also end up hurting them, and this is also true of the way that others act towards us.

Uncertainty is not only a factor in our interpersonal relationships, but also in the movement of history. Much happens in our world that we do not expect or anticipate. Uncertainty is a key characteristic of much of contemporary life. Economic realities and the job market are as much marked by uncertainty as by predictability. And while some wish to speak about the patterns of history, I think that Jacques Ellul is closer to the mark with his comments about life's arbitrariness.[7]

While we are fed the myth of security and safety by the purveyors of contemporary capitalism, our daily lives are much more fraught by uncertainty. Little wonder that anxiety characterizes the modern psyche and that the therapeutic culture is therefore a hallmark of the West. Without a therapist one almost falls into non-being.

It takes courage to live life. And life's meaning is not found in a single book or a university course. It is found

in the living of life in gratitude and hope in the face of the pain and difficulties that come our way. I think the Latin American proverb is appropriate: 'We make our path by walking it'. So much of life is just like that.

the doing of good and the persistence of evil

letter four

It has become more and more difficult in our contemporary world to speak about what's 'good' and the nature of 'evil'. This is due to a whole lot of reasons. But the more obvious ones have to do with the breakdown of traditional communities with their traditions of particular values and the relativism that characterizes our modern mindset.

I am quite sure that it is obvious to you, Naasicaa, that our understanding of and lack of clarity about the one very much affects the other. If we are not sure what the good is, then the nature of evil can also become blurred and vice versa. The other difficulty, particularly now that we are living in a 'global village', is that what one culture or community calls good another regards as wrong. For example, a Palestinian suicide bomber is regarded as a hero in his or her community, while in other parts of the world this is regarded as an act of mindless terrorism. Or a less

severe example: in some Asian countries the maintenance of relationship and the 'saving of face' takes priority over truth telling, while in Western culture this would be seen as moral compromise.

In saying this, I am not implying that what is good or evil can always be divided into neat packages. There are gradations of both good and evil. For example, it is good to care for another person, but to give your life in the place of another, as St. Alban the British saint did centuries ago, is a more profound act of goodness. You are also aware that we often speak of the greater good. This usually implies that someone's sacrifice can lead to the benefit of the many. The old analogy here is where some jump or are thrown overboard in a life raft that is grossly over crowded. And regarding evil, things are equally complex. The systems of law in most countries recognize the greater and lesser severity of evil and wrongdoing by the degree of punishment that is meted out to the person found guilty before the court.

We both know that the discussion gets even more complicated. For example, what is good in one setting may be evil in another. For example, violence against another person is wrong. But what of situations of war or self-defense? I have always been fascinated by the shift of Dietrich Bonhoeffer from pacifist to activist leading to his involvement in the conspiracy to kill Adolf Hitler.

So even with these brief introductory comments you can see that there is nothing easy about this discussion. But one simply cannot avoid dealing with it.

why good is necessary

It is very understandable that someone might ask, 'Why think about these issues', or, 'Why can't I just be and live my life'? The response to this is simple enough: we don't

'just live', without also having effects on the lives of others and the world around us. Now it is possible to counter this with the comment that I am just 'small fry' and have little influence in the bigger scheme of things. That may be so. But that really agrees with my point, for the implication is that people with influence do have an impact. And to a lesser degree, so do we all, even if that is only on myself, my immediate family and my friends.

So why should I care that I have an effect? Because at the most fundamental level, *care* is intrinsic to a healthy humanity. Not to care does violence to ourselves. It is the embrace of a 'death' rather than the affirmation of life. No longer to care may lead to anti-social behaviours and criminality, and it will always lead to an internal dying. And to care presupposes the good, because to care is to do good.

In this part of my letter I wish to explore the question of why the good is necessary. The answer, I believe, is that without the good, life is not possible. You and I are the product of the goodness of others towards us. The care, love, concern and interest that parents, family, friends, teachers and others have extended towards us is what makes us human and whole.

I believe this is also what makes community and society possible. While we may sometimes think that it's only the structures, institutions and laws that make society, I do not think this is so. By this I do not mean that these realities are not important; they are. But they are to be the vehicles for good. Laws are there to affirm the good. Political institutions are there to empower a people. Schools exist for intellectual, moral and technical formation. Learning means that we are enriched by traditions so that we can become more fully human.

The good, therefore, is not something that happens only at the interpersonal level, such as being kind to my

friend. It also occurs at the institutional level. A company can have good working conditions, a good management structure, produce a good product—one that is useful for humanity—and utilize good sales and distribution practices. It also needs to have a sensitive environmental policy. In this example one can see that the good is to have many dimensions in view and not simply certain outcomes.

It seems to me that the understanding and practice of the good lies at the very heart of the moral universe. And while each of us may not quite script it the same way, there are familiar themes. I don't want to control others, but to empower them. I don't want to destroy, but to build up what is wholesome and good. I don't only want to take, but also to give. I don't want to hate and turn away, but to love and embrace. I don't want to exploit but to care, nurture and steward others, communities and the creation.

Much more could be said, but the basic theme is that I want to resist evil and affirm and nurture the good.

Now, this does not mean that *only* good occurs to us and in our world. Nor does it mean that we only do good no matter how much we may desire that. You have already experienced something of the less than good and even the nasty and hurtful. And I will say more about this in exploring how much good is possible in our world. But I want you to know that I feel that my life has been shaped more by goodness than by anything else. As a result, I live with a deep sense of gratefulness. So much has been given!

The surprise in all of this is that goodness does not always come from the expected places. My experience of my family of origin was not particularly happy. I began my early life with an absent father due to World War II and subsequent migration. This skewed me a bit. But throughout my life older men took an interest in me and in that I found much encouragement. In my own family, in

the experience of Christian community, in friendships and in places of education, work and service my overwhelming experience has always been that others have cared for and encouraged me. And for me, the experience of backstabbing and betrayal have only ever been a minor note. Of course, I don't want to deny that others may have had quite different experiences to mine.

The many years of working in urban mission with homeless youth, drug addicts, prostitutes and people with serious life-controlling problems never dinted my sense of the goodness of people. While in no way wanting to condone these sorts of behaviours, I again and again found that most of these people were more 'wounded' than bad. And when some of this woundedness was healed, these new companions on the journey enriched our lives and the lives of others. You know that I am not talking theory here, because some of these young people lived in our home when your mother was a child.[1]

the nature of good

While I believe that definitions can be helpful in certain areas of discourse, in others they are most unhelpful. For example, how does one define beautiful, or more specifically a beautiful painting? If I define the good as that which contributes to the sustenance, nurture and development of life, this is a good start, but I don't think it gets us very far. So let me attempt a thicker description.

The old idea that the good is what my conscience dictates is not tenable. The logic that operates in this notion is that somewhere at the core of my being, usually regarded as the soul or the human spirit, there is a perfect set of values. It is something like a divine barometer or alarm clock. In ancient Greek thought this was thought to be the divine spark within humanity. Through the burdens and

complexities of life this pure spark gets buried or muddied and so we have to find ways to scrape off 'the gunk' in order to hear this innate goodness and then act on it.

This idea is not credible for many reasons. The first is that it posits an immortal or pure soul which does violence to the reality of our vulnerable humanity. Secondly, it commits us to a subjective internal archaeological expedition. And who is to say that we will ever find this core and not our own delusions? Thirdly, this view means that our experience of life and of the human community can add nothing to our understanding of the good, since the good is innate. There are also serious theological problems with this view, but I won't go into them now except to say that the Reformational view questions the whole notion of an innate goodness in humanity. The main problem with this perspective is that it overlooks the whole process of socialization and moral formation.

Others suggest that the good is what our society believes and teaches its members through family, schooling, media and society's other institutions. That this process takes place is of little doubt. We are shaped by our society and culture. But that the current values of a society should be the measure of the good is also open to serious question. One concern is that societies promote or condone things that are obviously wrong. In the past some societies condoned slavery, and this is still practiced in our modern world.[2] Our present Western societies condone work practices that take little account of impact on families or health, and until recently, showed little concern for the environment. Another concern is that societies tend to be blind to their own psycho-pathologies. Hitler's Germany is a case in point. But so is America's preoccupation with the individualism and violence that fissures its way throughout the culture.[3] A further matter is that modern societies are

no longer homogeneous, but ethnically, and therefore often ethically, diverse.

If you are following me in this discussion, then I am saying that one's understanding of the good cannot simply lie innately with the individual, nor can it be solely determined by the dominant values of our society. Our understanding of the good has to transcend both. This means that the good has to be shaped by transcendental values. And we come to those through reflective processes by listening to the voices of historians, philosophers, artists and the religious.

The nature of good, which sustains and nurtures life and well-being, is bigger than each one of us. And to some extent it is a good that is beyond us. In other words, the good is like the winsome voice of a lover, the voice that surprises us and calls us forward and beyond ourselves. The good that brings blessing rather than harm, peace rather than violence, and wholeness rather than fragmentation and dissolution is a good that beckons us. And in its embrace and praxis we ourselves are made more whole.

What all of this means is that the good, the being and the doing of good, cannot be separated from the movement to love and to hope. In fact, to do the good can only spring from the desire and capacity to love. And the continuation of the good has to be borne on the wings of hope.

I think that the greatest good comes to expression not in heroic individualism but in the context of community.[4] That is the place where we learn to do good to each other and seek to extend that good to the wider community.

good for whom?

One of the things that we need to think about, Naasicaa, is that so often in our contemporary culture, when we think of the good we think only of what is good

for me. Or to put that on a much grander scale, what is good for America is assumed to be good for the rest of the world. Hence we need to ask this question: good for whom?

It is very apparent when one lives in Asia that the Asian mindset is very different to that of the West. The general orientation is not what is best *for me*, but what is best *for us.* And this usually means the family and extended family and sometimes also the wider community. This way of thinking and living is largely lost in Western societies. And we see this particularly in the loss of commitment to the common social good. We want social systems and institutions to work for us. We are prepared to give little back.

A member of a Western family does not make life and vocational choices with the benefit of the family in view. In fact, it is the other way round. The family is expected to be a resource to help me in becoming and doing what I want to be.

Similarly, employees think about their career path in a company and give little thought to how they may benefit the company. Or again, a student attends a particular graduate school to enhance his or her career or ministry with little thought of contributing to the school. Hence student associations cannot fill the various positions to serve the wider student body.

What I am referring to is the self-interest that characterizes people in our contemporary Western societies. This is individualism elevated to the status of a right and a demand. The sad implication of all of this is that others are there only for me. I have no responsibility for them. This is fundamentally abusive and tears apart the fabric of a civil society.

I believe that for something to be good, it can't be good *only* for me. It must also be good for others. One of the things I have really appreciated about the thinking and strategy of Martin Luther King, Jr. was his emphasis that

not only did the African-American need liberation, but so did the white oppressor. Both victim and perpetrator needed to be set free.[5] Thus true freedom is not for the one at the cost of the other, but freedom for all. And to the extent that others are not free, I am not free. Or to put that differently, if I am blessed but others are not, then I am not truly blessed.

One implication of this is that when others suffer, I also suffer. We see this particularly in close relationships. A parent may grieve deeply over the waywardness of one's child. A lover hurts deeply when the loved one is hurt or taken away in death. But we need to see this more broadly as well. I can't be happy as a politician when my people suffer. And I can't be satisfied as a business person when some of my employees are exploited. Thus profit-making cannot be the only criteria for a good business. Goodness is always a wider configuration.

And yet the notion seems to persist that what is good is what is good *for me*. So we see party politics which have little to do with the national good. We have business practices that favour the profitability of the corporation but misuse people. And we experience relationships that are exploitative and sometimes abusive. So what does it mean when someone says 'I love you' but is emotionally or sexually exploitative? What does it mean when parents say they love and care for their children, but are emotionally absent or are manipulative and controlling? Well, it doesn't mean much. The good is absent. We do a 'snow job' on the good despite the abundance of our stated intentions and many words. Good, therefore, cannot be merely at the level of intentionality. Good is a form of praxis.

What I am saying is that the good is not my personal property and privilege. It is something that we have together, if we have it at all. In Western culture, we no longer understand this very well; we think that we need

to carve out the good for ourselves. So some live the 'good life' by living in exclusive condos with electric gates and antiseptic streets. But this is not the good life. It is a diminished life. It is sterile in its very opulence. Exclusivity is the self-interested protection of the good from its real humanity and, therefore, from its authenticity.

After working for many years with troubled young people from 'the wrong side of the tracks', as the Americans would say, I needed a break. So for six months I worked for my father-in-law to clean the houses of the rich. And not to my surprise I discovered many unhappy, isolated and drug-addicted wealthy people—so lonely, in fact, that some paid me to drink coffee and talk with them rather than do their house cleaning.

Having lived in a Third World country, the Philippines, it is obvious that the good in our global world is still seen as what is good for the West. So while the old exploitative colonialism is dead, First World exploitation of the Third World is alive and well in spite of all the rhetoric about rich countries helping the poorer ones.

There is much more to say about all of this, but letters have their limits and so has your reading concentration. The good is what blesses *all* of us, not simply the well off. In fact, I will later develop the idea that the good blesses the poor and weak. What all of this means is that doing good brings with it a cost. Good is not cheap and to do good may well cost us much. It is usually a call to downward mobility.[6]

how much good is possible?

In one way or another, I have thought about this issue most of my life. There are two factors at play here. The one is that as an activist, I have worked, together with others, hard and long to bring about certain social changes, particularly

in the field of drug abuse. While we may have done some good, the basic reality was that things simply got worse, not better. In mid-flight of all that activity, I sometimes became deeply discouraged, wondering what was the point of going on. I want you to know this, Naasicaa, so you will realize that I don't have nice and neat answers. The other factor is that I teach a graduate course that deals with theories and strategies for social transformation. Here I am supposed to have answers, but I have grave doubts about much of the thinking in this area.

I do wonder whether I think about these issues differently depending on where I am. In the slums of Manila, despite the persistence of poverty, people inspired me with hope. Not only did much good take place in the most difficult of life's circumstances, but people continued to live, believe and act in hope that the greater good is possible. I don't experience that same sense of hope amongst the street people of East Vancouver. Instead, I sense resignation and bitterness. People simply feel abandoned by the system. Good will never come to them, it seems.

Last year while in Yangon, Myanmar, I was also wrestling with this question of how much good is possible in a country that is suffering under an oppressive military dictatorship and in dire poverty. In connecting up with some of my former Burmese students and seeing their work for transformation on the outskirts of Yangon, I both rejoiced and wept. I rejoiced at their courage to improve the lot of others, but almost despaired regarding the insurmountable odds and the relentless poverty I saw.

So I really don't know how much good is possible in our world. Sometimes I feel like saying 'not much'. At other times, I am more hopeful.

I think we have to acknowledge that while there is much good in our world, there is also much that is evil

and unjust. And the latter just does not go away, hence my reference to the persistence of evil. The problem is that evil does not only lie out there with the 'baddies', it also lies close at hand for all of us. In fact, it lies within. I believe that we were made to be and do good, but we are very capable of wrongdoing.

Evil can be described as the absence of the good. What this means is that I not only do wrong when I harm someone, but also when I neglect someone. It is evil to oppress a people. It is equally evil to neglect people.

As far as I have been able to understand these difficult matters, I think that much evil and wrongdoing comes from those who have first been wronged, harmed and abused. Thus we talk of the cycle of abuse. The abused become the abusers. I also think that evil comes from the misuse of power. The greater one's power, the greater the responsibility and the greater the opportunity to do good. But power does corrupt and often instead of using this power *for* and *on behalf* of others, this power is used for *oneself* and *against* others.[7]

Furthermore, while wrongdoing occurs at the personal level, it also occurs at the structural level. Here we speak about structural evil. What we mean by this is that evil can become embodied and embedded in social and cultural values and society's institutions.[8] Slavery was a form of structural evil yet was regarded as a normal part of the society of that time. And the present day persistence of a patriarchy that oppresses and marginalizes women is similarly a form of structural evil.

I do not believe, Naasicaa, that good will fully triumph in our present world. Nor do I believe that evil will triumph. The lesson of history is that while evil may reign long, the seeds of decay are within it, and it eventually comes undone. At the same time, the movements of good also

carry the seeds of death and will deteriorate. The good must therefore be won again and again in the face of evil.

I see a lot of good in you, Naasicaa. I believe that you will want to do good in our world and not do harm. To live like this will require a lot of courage and deep inner strength and resources. You will need to understand and tap those resources. And about that we will need to talk some more later.

the story of god and the human predicament

letter five

It's five a.m. The Manila sun is already making its way through the polluted heavens, giving it a more subdued colour. It's as if a fine see-through shroud has enveloped the world. Along with many others, I am in the Roman Catholic Church of the Sacred Heart, joining the faithful in worship, adoration and the eucharist. There is nothing outstanding about the liturgy, but I always sense a presence in this old building with its cool stone floors, its porticoes open to the street already bursting with jeepneys, tricycles, hundreds of people and the vendors making an early beginning to a long day of probably small pickings. Birds irreverently flutter in and out, while beggar children reverently wait for the service to end to accost the faithful to share the fruits of their spirituality through the practice of charity.

Later, after having had breakfast, I walk to the Protestant seminary where I teach. I am not at all sure what

my colleagues think about my early morning escapades to the Roman Catholic Church. But to be honest, I don't care too much. I always come away feeling blessed through having been in God's presence. And I am quite sure that God is not too impressed with all of our 'man'-made divisions and distinctions within the church.

But it is not my intention to talk about the church. I will do that later. I do want to talk about God and 'his' presence in the world. And even though I began this letter by speaking about experiencing God in church, I in no way want to suggest that God can only be experienced there. God is not limited in that way. Nor should we think that the experience of God is only a churchly activity. This kind of thinking has led to a huge divide in Western thinking, where we separate the sacred and the secular. God is thought to be there for the Sunday experience, but is somehow irrelevant from Monday to Saturday.[1] This has made the church a religious ghetto and has left the life of work and play without any sacred dimensions.

I believe that God can be present to us in all the dimensions of life: in our praying and playing; in work and in contemplation; in liturgy and nature; in mission and politics; in preaching and art. God's presence is relevant to the *whole* of life and not simply to some narrow religious segment.

god as problematic

But I can already see you shaking your head, Naasicaa. And I can hear you saying, 'But wait a minute, how can you speak so confidently about God when God is such a problematic idea in our world?' You are right, of course. God is a difficult 'idea' in contemporary Western culture.

This is so for several reasons. One is the long Enlightenment project, where Western thinkers began

to question the authority and tradition of the church and ended up replacing the church's claim to knowledge based on revelation with the counter claim of knowledge based on human reason. The outworking of this, even up to the present day, is the idea that 'real' facts are the product of science and that 'soft' facts, including matters of faith and spirituality, belong to the sphere of personal opinion.[2] This of course means that while matters of science are certain, matters of religious faith are not. They are simply personal values that some people hold. As a result, we don't really mind if someone deeply believes in God. That is his or her personal business. It has nothing to do with me if I happen to believe that God is simply a fanciful idea.

There are several problems with this confident Enlightenment idea. The first is that we are no longer so sure, following the work of Thomas Kuhn amongst others, that science simply gives us facts. Science also gives us traditions of interpretation just as philosophy, history and religion.[3] And secondly, the story of God is not my personal idea. Someone can't say, 'Oh, you just sucked that idea out of your thumb!' The story of God is a public story. It is a long story. And it is a story addressed to all of humanity. So the story cannot be reduced to one's subjective values. It belongs to the realm of general discourse.

Another factor that has made the idea of God problematical is the thesis expressed by Feuerbach, amongst others, that 'God' is simply a projection of our own needs and insecurities. This means that God is not really there. God is mere wish-fulfillment.[4] Given my smallness and vulnerability in a big and complex world and given the inevitability of death, it is not surprising that I want to resist and transcend these realities. As a result, human beings have 'invented' God. God is everything that we are not. We are finite; God is infinite. We are often powerless; God is all

powerful. We fail and mess things up; God forgives, heals and makes all things new.

I think that Feuerbach is right in identifying that we 'need' God. But it does not follow that we therefore 'invent' God. I need love, but this does not necessarily mean I therefore live in love's make-believe world. I believe that we should turn Feuerbach upside down. Our need for God is because we have been made in God's image and made for relationship with God, just as we have been created to love and be loved. The book of Ecclesiastes puts it rather nicely: God has set eternity in the hearts of humanity.

There is another factor as well. In our world as 'global village' and in a climate of pluralism, it is little wonder that we ask the question, 'Which God are we talking about?' Is it the 'god' of Islam, the Jewish faith, Hinduism, Christianity, or that of the primal religions of First Nations peoples? Are there, then, many 'gods'? Or is there the one God who manifests 'himself' in various ways in the differing religious traditions?[5]

It is obvious that there are many gods, including the contemporary gods of our own making. Here we may define god as something to which we give our ultimate allegiance. It is interesting how we now speak of the gods of sport, referring to our sporting heroes. And since greed has been proclaimed as good in Western culture, material acquisition is another contemporary god.[6] So whether ancient or modern, there have always been many gods. But are they all differing manifestations of the One God? I think not. If that were the case, this god would be scary and I would certainly never give my allegiance to such a god. The reason I say this is because the gods are contradictory. So how can we be confident about a god who gives us conflicting messages about who 'he' is? The gods of primal religions, of Hinduism and of our contemporary culture are very different to the God of the biblical story. So somewhere along the line

we have to choose whom we will love, worship and serve. There is nothing flippant about this choice. It is a painful one, particularly because our culture tells us that we are intolerant if we make such a choice.

Taken together, all of these issues make the notion of God very difficult. I believe the church itself has not helped either. It has become a defensive institution. It has fostered a dualism that makes God irrelevant to much of life and has often failed to live up to its own message. But I will come back to this when I write to you about the church.

god as actor in history

I won't try to deal any further with all of these difficulties, but will come back to them in later letters. Nor do I wish to talk speculatively about God. I am not all that sure that expressions such as 'God as Ultimate Other' or 'God as ground of our Being' get us very far. Instead, I wish to talk about the story of God as told in Judeo-Christian tradition. It is the story of a God who joins us in the human fray. It is this God who has captured my heart and imagination.

The story of God is a long story. The story of Abraham may go back to nearly two thousand years BC and what led up to that story goes back into the hoary mists of time. This long story has been believed and lived over the many centuries of Israel's history in both good and bad times. Therefore, there is nothing trite or simplistic about this story. It is not a one-day wonder. If you like, it has withstood the painful rigours of time.

It is also a colourful story. The story like that of the Exodus is told in dramatic prose. That of the book of Isaiah is told with visionary prophecy. The Psalms are the heart and prayer language of the Old Testament, and Proverbs, as wisdom literature, provides us with a picture of what it means to live a life that pleases God and blesses the

neighbour. There is, therefore, nothing monochrome about the Bible. And its literary power makes it one of the great books of all time.[7] If truth be known, it should be on the *New York Times* best seller list each week, for it far outsells any other book each year.

But the heart of the matter does not simply lie in its literary power. Rather, it lies in the fact that the God of the Bible has come amongst us. This is not the God of philosophical speculation. Nor the God of the sole mystic who has some visionary experience unattainable to other mere mortals. Nor is it the God of holy remoteness: a deistic God moving the wheels of destiny, but far removed from the beauty and pain of the human condition and the paradoxical movement of history.

The story of God is the story of the Exodus. It is a story of liberation.[8] It tells of a God who hears the cry of 'his' people's suffering and who comes to their aid against the Pharaohs of this world. It's the story of movement from ignomy and marginalization to promise and rescue. At heart, it is the story of freedom. Little wonder that theologians have seen redemption and freedom as central to the whole biblical message.

But this story of God's care for Israel is embedded in a much larger story. For the God of Israel is no parochial tribal deity, but the God who made the heavens and earth. This God is not only the God of a particular history and of a particular people, but of the whole earth and of all humanity. And Israel's blessing in knowing this God was not simply for itself. They were to be a light to all the nations. God does not have the few in view, but all. God is not the God of a particular time, but of all history and into the eschaton.

This larger story encapsulates the themes of creation, the fall into chaos and the surprise of recreation. God's world is 'his' artwork. God the great designer calls into being a world of astounding beauty. And into this world,

with all its residual potentiality and resources, 'he' places the creatures most like 'himself'—woman and man. Made in God's image, humans are made for God, for each other and for participation in the world. What this means is that we are fundamentally relational beings and we have a calling to shape the world. That this grand story got 'messed up' is the sad fact of the human endeavour. Our foolish pride led to rebellion and alienation. The result was every form of distortion. Our relationship with God, each other and with the created order suffered. The first good news is that God made all things good. The second good news is that our messing things up is *not* the final word. God comes to help us, to make us 'new'. God desires to restore all things.

Every story has its implications. So has this story. One important matter is that God and the world cannot be totally opposed to each other. It is not true that God is only good while the world is wholly bad. This is an unacceptable dualism. What is true is that God is eternal and the world is a creation. Therefore the world and what is in it cannot be God. As a result, things and people should not be worshipped. Only God is worthy of our worship and obedience. But this does mean that the world is wholly good. Human folly and disobedience have brought about a distortion in the order of things and even nature itself has become affected. But God is *for* the world. God made it, sustains it and is recreating all things. And God invites us to join 'him' in caring for all of creation. Thus to do good in our world is to join with God in 'his' love for the world.

Another important element in the story is the rescue that God seeks to achieve. We find this idea difficult because we don't like the fact that we need others to help us. This is an affront to our ability and independence. But it is obvious that we are interdependent creatures. The very fabric of society reflects this. We need parents, teachers, friends, farmers, manufacturers, systems experts, medical personel. The list

is endless. So what is so difficult then about our needing God? What is so difficult about living in the presence of a God who made us, joins us in the journey of life, forgives our sins and stupidities, heals our woundedness and empowers us to live life in full stride?[9] God does not seek to diminish us, but to lead us to wholeness and purpose. To live *with* God deepens our humanity. And to live *for* God is to do God's recreative good in our world. And that involves our engagement in all of life and not simply participation in religious activity.

I have often wondered what vocation you will choose, Naasicaa. Both your mother and your maternal grandmother have a strong artistic bent. Maybe you will follow in their footsteps? So your vocation may choose you, rather than the other way round? I believe that God is the consummate artist and your possible move in that vocational direction may be a small reflection of the passion of God. This is not to say that God is only spoken of as artist, but also as vine dresser, architect, healer, shepherd.[10] The descriptive metaphors[11] about God are numerous and so is the scope of human activity, all of which can be done by cooperating with God to bless our world.

god as trinity

When we think about God we often think about a God or the God. We don't think too much about God as Trinity. Yet throughout the biblical story we hear of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This may not seem all that important to you, but I think it is.

Your aunty, Marina, when she was a young girl, was quite convinced that the Bible didn't get that quite right. She always spoke of God as Father, Mother and Son. She thought that was a much more logical order. But maybe she was also questing for the feminine in God? That, however,

is a whole other story, and we will come back to that at another time.

God as Trinity does not mean that there are three Gods. There is the one God, but this God has three modes of existence or God expresses 'himself' in three ways. In God there is unity in diversity. Or to put that differently, God is a community of 'persons'. Augustine sought to express this mystery as God as Lover, Beloved and Love itself. In more recent theological thinking we speak of God the Father as the architect, creator, builder and sustainer of all things; God the Son as the redeemer, reconciler, healer and restorer of humanity and of all things fractured in our world; and God the Holy Spirit as the beautifier, empowerer, inspirer and revealer to all of humanity in its quest for love and renewal.[12]

The reason why it is so important to think about the Trinity is that so often we become one-sided and reductionistic in our understanding of God. Some only want to think about God as Creator. This, however, leaves God as powerful, but remote. Others only want to emphasize God as Redeemer in Christ and so speak of God's salvation, healing and forgiveness. While this rightly emphasizes personal transformation we must not lose the larger picture from view. God wishes to bless not only individuals, but also families, communities, neighbourhoods and the world as a whole. Others again wish to focus on the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit in bringing gifts and graces into our lives and bringing inspiration and revelation. But this if stressed one-sidedly can lead us into other-worldly mysticism.

God as Trinity reminds us that creation, redemption and renewal belong together. This affirms the world, calls for the transformation of all that is evil and reminds us that God empowers and graces us to live in this world. God as Trinity reminds us that building the wider community, building the community of faith and having sources of inspiration

all belong together. It reminds us that the world of politics and work, the world of evangelization and mission, and the world of prayer and contemplation belong to each other.

It is very sad that some churches have inadvertently dismembered the Trinity. Some mainly speak about God's concern for the created world and as a result focus only on environmental theology. Others mainly emphasize God's redemptive activity and focus only on Christology. Others still emphasize spiritual renewal, but have little concern for the wider social issues and the work of justice and social transformation.

I would like to draw some implications from this important part of the story of God. The first, in the words of the Cappadocian Fathers, is that the 'members' of the Trinity are committed to mutual care and self-giving in a communion of love and this is of significance for us. For if God participates in this movement of self-giving, or to put it differently, in the rhythm of reciprocity, then this calls us, who are made in God's image, to do likewise. The contemporary values of self-fulfilment and independence are therefore very far off the mark. The very nature of God calls us to live a very different rhythm of life—one of mutual care, giving and receiving.

The other implication, embedded in the first, is that if God is a community of 'persons', then we too are called to the community-building task. The nuture of family, friendships, communities of faith, partnerships in the workplace and hospitality in our neighbourhoods is the creative and demanding task to which we are all invited. And in attempting to fulfil this task, we reflect something of the being of God.

I think you can see in this discussion that God as Trinity is not abstract theological thinking, but has ramifications for the way we live now.

the long march of god

I hope, Naasicaa, that you will read the story of God for yourself. It's an amazing story. It begins in the faded mists of time with the beginnings of our world. It then moves from the general story of earth's primal history to the personal story of Abraham, to the story of the Exodus and conquest, to the emergence of the nation of Israel called to live in covenant with the God who had redeemed them.

The story traces the move from Israel's tribal confederacy to the rule of kings and the growing power and wealth of this small nation jammed in between the superpowers of that time. And in this development we see played out most of the issues that still plague us today. We see those in power, called to serve and bless the people, misuse their power for personal ends. We see the growing gap between rich and poor. And we see people initially awestruck by the presence of God in their midst become tired of the long road of obedience. This results in the hunger for other gods, the gods of their own making, and the resulting social consequence of covenant-breaking, which in turn leads to lack of care for the neighbour.

This basic story has repeated itself in the course of history. Peoples blessed by God have taken things for granted; faith has waned and deterioration has set in. This is true today in the deterioration of the Christian faith in the Western world. In the 1800s more than eighty percent of Christians in the world were from Western nations. Today in many European countries, Christians are a tiny minority, while more than sixty percent of Christians in the world today come from the Third World.

But this basic story is often also our own personal story. We begin the journey of faith in love and hope and with great enthusiasm. But we become discouraged, get side-tracked and lose our way. Faith gives way to doubt and

faithfulness succumbs to disobedience.

What's remarkable in this story is the persistent action of God. God neither washes 'his' hands to withdraw from our mess nor ever gives up. God sends prophets to call us to faithfulness and to a new vision of the reign of God and provides priests to bring healing to our lives. And God calls 'his' people back to covenant faithfulness and to the kingly role of reflecting God's lordship in the world.

This pattern of the movement from enthusiasm to faithlessness and from judgment to renewal brings us to the story of Jesus. Jesus came to bring renewal to a tired Judaism, to proclaim a fuller vision of the kingdom of God and to call the social outcasts to God's banqueting table.[13]

In the story of Jesus we see the long march of God to bring hope and healing to his people and to the whole world. In this story of the carpenter's 'son' we see the amazing movement of God to visibility and vulnerability. God as infinite and eternal being comes amongst us in Jesus Christ. This is the miracle of incarnation. It is not humans climbing the mystical ladder to find God, nor humans probing inward to discover an unsullied immortality, but it is God bending down towards us in tears of compassion and the pain of identification. Mother Teresa speaks about being kissed by God.[14]

Jesus comes as the messenger of God, calling people to repentance and renewal. He heals the sick and performs exorcisms. He builds a community of disciples of women and men and empowers them to become part of his mission. The heart of that mission is sharing the love, forgiveness and generosity of God to all, including the poor. Jesus seeks to bring about a revolution of the heart, which brings love, peace and justice into a world marked by suspicion and inequality.

The continuing story-line is a familiar one. People are enthusiastic about the good news that Jesus brings, but

there is opposition by religious leaders who are threatened and offended by the message of Jesus. And at the end of the day enthusiasm wanes and is replaced by abandonment and betrayal. Jesus, Son of Man and Son of God, shares the fate of criminals and is crucified. The one who came to serve had to give his very life.

But the story of God is never a story where evil triumphs and where we have the last word. Remember, Naasicaa, how I pointed out earlier that God does not give up? And in the places of deepest darkness, 'his' light shines. The story of the cross becomes the story of the resurrection, where the bands of death are broken and Jesus appears to the shattered community of his followers to inspire them with the victory of God, the renewal of hope and the empowerment of the Spirit.

The story of Jesus becomes the story of the early church. Inspired by the One who loved unto death and who in his death carries our folly, sin and shame and bequeaths forgiveness and healing, the early Christians followed in the footsteps of their Lord. They formed communities to worship God and celebrate the eucharist, and they sought to live contrary to the pervasive values of the then-known world.[15]

It is at this point that the story of God partly becomes the story of the church: with its long decades of persecution, the eventual Christianization of the Roman world, the later evangelization of barbaric 'Europe' from the sixth to the eleventh centuries, the fascinating development of monasticism from the fourth century onwards, the growing power of the popes and the collusion of church and state, the Reformation, the evangelization of newfound peoples in other parts of the globe, and the colonization project leading to the church in the modern world under attack from rationalism and science.[16] This story I will have to tell in some more detail later. But it is important to note

that even though the story of God becomes the story of the church, the story of God continues. God is not limited to the church. God continues to work in our world and challenges 'his' people to renewal by the Spirit.

the human predicament

The story of God is not simply about God. It is also the story of the world, humanity, and the world to come. It is therefore a big story. At the heart of the story is God's good purposes for our world and for us as human beings. What gives the story such poignancy is that while God seeks to grace us with good gifts so that we can live wholesome and blessed lives, we seldom like God's way with us. Basically, we want to live life our own way. So the God who could force, but has chosen the way of gentle nudging, ever seeks to draw us into 'his' will and purpose for our lives.

The great human predicament is that we were made for relationship with God, but God is frequently neglected or relegated to the sidelines of our lives and our world. Furthermore, if we don't want to live lives centred in God, then we soon create our own centre-points. Or to put that differently, we create our own idols. The irony of all of this is that we therefore don't ever get away from being creatures who worship something and someone. But why worship what we have made when we may worship the God who has given us life and gifts and makes all things possible?

I wonder, Naasicaa, how you are approaching life? You are probably looking to the future with a great deal of hope and enthusiasm. You have plans regarding what you hope to be and what you will do. In many ways you are facing an open future. So much is possible and achievable in our kind of world. And you are empowered in that you have many options and opportunities. So you are blessed. You know that this is not true of many others in our world, where

poverty and oppression have closed the door to a more open future.

So in all of this, what and who will be the source of your life's inspiration? This is an important question. For we are not only outwardly constrained in the ways that life places all sorts of limits on us, but we are also inwardly motivated. So the question is, what moves, motivates and inspires you? Exploring this question brings us again to the human predicament. For we are often mixed up in what we do. We do things because they are right and good, but we also try to please others and we want things for ourselves and we may need to be needed.

Knowing our more central inspiration is one thing, but this is so often overlaid with fears, self-doubt and insecurities. We are far more fragile and vulnerable than we make out.[17] And there is the added problem that others don't believe in us or encourage us, so we are pushed down rather than built up. Not everyone around us is committed to our well-being, so we need to be discerning about who we will listen to, who will inspire us and who will mentor us.

To conclude this letter, I think the human predicament is that often we don't know what we should live for, to whom we can entrust ourselves or how we can do good in our world. I think that this can bring us back to the story of God. To entrust ourselves to the wisdom and grace of God and to do God's good in our world, can be the central inspiration to the whole of our lives.

notes

Letter One

1. See in particular the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, especially his *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

2. See Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Letter Two

1. See N. Wolterstroff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

2. See R. J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983).

3. P. Berger & T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Doubleday, 1966).

Letter Three

1. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (London: SCM Press, 1962).

2. See Zygmunt Bauman, *Post-Modernity and its Discontents* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997).

3. See Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000). See also my *Seize the Day with Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Colorado Springs: Pinon Press, 2000).

4. See J. M. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1986). See also my *Let My People Go with Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Colorado Springs: Pinon Press, 2004).

5. See in particular Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton, 1963).

6. See Max Weber, three volume *Economy and Society* (New York: Badminster Press, 1968).

7. See Jacques Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1973). See also my *Resist the Powers with Jacques Ellul* (Colorado Springs: Pinon Press, 2000).

Letter Four

1. See J. Grant-Thomson, *Jodie's Story* (Sydney: Anzea, 1991) for something of this story.

2. See Mende Nazer, *Slave* (London: Virago, 2004) as an example of contemporary slavery.

3. See R. Bellah, et. al., *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

4. See E.A. & J.D. Whitehead, *Community of Faith: Crafting Christian Communities Today* (Mystic: Twenty-Third Publications, 1992).

5. See Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Bantam, 1968).

6. For one person's downward mobility see Henri Nouwen, *The Road to Daybreak: A Spiritual Journey* (New York: Doubleday, 1988) and my *Dare to Journey With Henri Nouwen* (Colorado Springs: Pinon Press, 2000).

7. See Rollo May, *Power and Innocence: A Search for the Sources of Violence* (New York: Norton, 1974).

8. See Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988) and my *Cry Freedom with Voices from the Third World* (Sydney: Albatross Books, 1998).

Letter Five

1. See my good colleague's work on this topic: R. Paul Stevens, *The Other Six Days* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

2. See Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

3. See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

4. See the discussion on Feuerbach in Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* (London: IVP, 1973).

5. Consult J. Hick & P. Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (London: SCM, 1987).

6. See Thomas Wolf's telling *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (New York: Bantam, 1988).

7. See T.R. Henn, *The Bible as Literature* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1970).

8. See J.S. Croatto, *Exodus: A Hermeneutics of Freedom* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1981).

9. See my book *Life in Full Stride* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2004).

10. See Robert Banks, *God the Worker* (Sydney: Albatross Books, 1992).

11. See Sally McFague, *Metaphorical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

12. You may wish to read Colin Gunton, *The Promise of a Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997).

13. See Athol Gill, *Life on the Road: The Gospel Basis for a Messianic Lifestyle* (Sydney: Lancer, 1989).

14. See her *One Heart Full of Love* (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1988). Also see my *Wash the Feet of the World with Mother Teresa* (Colorado Springs: Pinon Press, 2004).

15. See Donald Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1978).

16. You might like to read this amazing story in J.L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Present Day* (Peabody: Prince Press, 2004).

17. See Henri Nouwen, *Sabbatical Journey: The Diary of his Final Year* (New York: Crossroad, 1998) for a discussion of this kind of vulnerability.

Letter Six

1. See F. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), vols. VII–IX. For a discussion on Hegel, see pp. 159–247.

2. See R.Bendix, *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1962), 49–79.

3. Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, Vol. II* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1959).

4. See Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Bluff* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

5. See A.T. Hennelly, ed., *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990).

6. One book that reflects something of that very varied movement is Arthur Blessitt, *Turned on to Jesus* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1971).

7. See Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (Norfolk: New Directions, 1961).

8. Here you may wish to read Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971) and my *Seek the Silences with Thomas Merton* (London: SPCK, 2003).

9. For a helpful statement of theological themes within the Evangelical tradition, see Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2000).

10. Here the writings of St. John of the Cross may be helpful. See particularly his 'Dark Night of the Soul' in *The Complete Works of St. John of the Cross* (Westminster: The Newman Bookshop, 1946).

11. Karl Rahner *Theological Investigations* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1971), 7:15.

12. See Malcolm Muggeridge, *Something Beautiful for God* (London: Collins, 1972) and Mother Teresa, *No Greater Love* (Novato: New World Library, 2002).

13. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer's classic, *Life Together* (London: SCM, 1954).

Letter Seven

1. See my *Catch the Wind* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2005).

2. See Darrell Guder, et. al., *Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

3. See Alan Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith* (Wellington: Philip Garside Publishing, 2000).

4. See Karl Rahner, *The Shape of the Church to Come* (London: SPCK, 1974).

5. See Emil Brunner, *The Misunderstanding of the Church* (London: Lutterworth, 1952).

6. See Edwin Judge, *The Social Pattern of Christian Groups in the First Century* (London: Tyndale Press, 1960).

7. See Bengt Holmberg, *Paul and Power* (Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1978).

8. See R. & J. Banks, *The Church Comes Home* (Sydney: Albatross Books, 1996) and L. Boff, *Ecclesiogenesis* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986).

9. Quoted in D. F. Durnbaugh, *The Believer's Church: The History and Character of Radical Protestantism* (London: Macmillan, 1970), 23.

10. See D. J. Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

11. You might like to read the challenging small book by E. Arnold, *Why We Live in Community* (Farmington: Plough Publishing, 1995).

12. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: Collins, 1971).

13. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1962), IV/3, II.

14. N. Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

15. Jacques Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom*, 2nd ed. (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1989).

16. D. Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1978).

17. See my 'Lower the Drawbridge: Bring Social Justice Home', *Renewal Journal* 3 (1994), 3–9.

18. You may wish to read Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey* (London: Sheldon Press, 1977).

19. See also Jean Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community* (New York: Paulist, 1992).

20. John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2000).

21. To gain some sense of this regarding Latin America see G. Cook, ed., *The New Face of the Church in Latin America* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994). For Asia see S. Athyal, ed., *The Church in Asia Today* (Singapore: Asia Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 1996).

22. See D. W. Ferm, *Third World Liberation Theologies: A Reader* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986).

23. You may wish to read J. O'Halloran, *Small Christian Communities: A Pastoral Companion* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996).

24. See the little classic by Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980).

25. Craig van Gelder, ed. *Confident Witness – Changing World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

26. A good read of the Bonhoeffer story is R. Wind, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Spoke in the Wheel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

Letter Eight

1. See R. Paul Stevens, *The Other Six Days* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

2. I touched on some of these themes in my book *Seek the Silences with Thomas Merton* (London: SPCK, 2003).

3. See L.S. Cunningham & K.J. Egan, *Christian Spirituality: Themes from the Tradition* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996).

4. For a brief discussion, see Diogenes Allen, *Spiritual Theology: The Theology of Yesterday for Spiritual Help Today* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1997) 86–89.

5. For the general setting of early Christianity see S. Benko & J.T. O'Rouke, eds., *The Catacombs and the Colosseum: The Roman Empire as the Setting of Primitive Christianity* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1971).

6. See my *Whispers from the Edge of Eternity: Reflections on Life and Faith in a Precarious World* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2005), 113.

7. St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul* (New York: Riverhead, 2002).

8. Rollo May, *Power and Innocence* (New York: Norton, 1974).

9. Fredrick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 7: 404.

10. See J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

11. See Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1975).

12. See the wonderful little classic of Evelyn Underhill, *The Spiritual Life* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1937).

13. You may wish to read about the Desert Fathers. See Helen Waddell, trans., *The Desert Fathers* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

14. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1969).

15. S. Chan, *Pentecostal Theology and the Christian Spiritual Tradition* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

16. See J.D. Faubion, *The Shadows and Lights of Waco* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

17. M. Scott Peck, *People of the Lie* (London: Rider, 1983).

Letter Nine

1. G.E. Ganss, *Ignatius of Loyola: The Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991).

2. H-G. Gadamer, *Heidegger's Ways* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 63.

3. D. Keirsey & M. Bates, *Please Understand Me: Character & Temperament Types* (Del Mar, CA: Prometheus Nemesis, 1984).

4. D.R. Riso, *Understanding the Enneagram* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990).

5. An interesting read is the theologian Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (London: Collins, 1962). And a writer who was very helpful to me in younger days was the Swiss psychiatrist Paul Tounier. You would enjoy his *The Meaning of Persons* (London: SCM, 1957).

6. See my *Gadamer's Dialogical Hermeneutic* (Heidelberg Universitatsverlag: C. Winter, 1999), 44.

7. You may wish to read the interesting book by Janet Hagberg, *Real Power* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1984).

8. You may enjoy his *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (London: Fontana, 1964).

9. D.M. Thomas, *Alexander Solzhenitsyn: A Century in his Life* (New York: St Martin, Press, 1998).

10. Henri Nouwen, *With Open Hands* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1972).

11. M. Scott Peck, *In Search of Stones* (New York: Hyperion, 1995).

Letter Ten

1. You may want to read A. Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987).

2. For two thoughtful books about living life with passion and commitment, see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM, 1959) and Donald Kraybill, *The Upside Down Kingdom* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1978).

3. For something of the history of this see J.J. Suurmond, *Word and Spirit at Play* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

4. A helpful book that sets out the prophetic vision of the Old Testament is Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1978).

5. Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2005).

6. The person who has written well about this is Segundo Galilea in his book *Following Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984). See my *Wash the Feet of the World With Mother Teresa* (Colorado Springs: Pinon Press, 2004).

Letter Eleven

1. One of the books that inspired us was Edith Schaeffer, *Hidden Art* (London: The Norfolk Press, 1971).

2. One of Jacques Ellul's helpful books is *The Presence of the Kingdom* (New York: Seabury, 1967).

3. You may want to check out Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury, 1975) about the power and possibility of questions.

Letter Twelve

1. See M. Kelsey, *Encounter with God* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1972), 110–117.

2. Letty Russell, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 139.

3. L.S. Cunningham & K.J. Egan, *Christian Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 123–142.

4. M. Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1997).

5. P.D. Hanson, *The People Called* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986).

6. G. Hancock, *Lords of Poverty* (New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1989).

Letter Thirteen

1. See R. Banks, *All the Business of Life* (Sydney: Albatross Books, 1987).

2. See my *Resist the Powers with Jacques Ellul* (Colorado Springs: Pinon, 2000).

3. M.J. Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

Letter Fourteen

1. See the classic by N. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (London: Paladin, 1970).

2. Leo Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God is Within You* (New York: Noonday Press, 1961).

3. Bryan Wilson, *Religious Sects: A Sociological Study* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1970), 181–184.

4. For the above themes and emphasis regarding the Kingdom of God, see H.A. Snyder, *Models of the Kingdom of God* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991).

5. R. Kinsler & G. Kinsler, *The Biblical Jubilee and the Struggle for Life* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999).

6. A. Gill, *The Fringes of Freedom* (Sydney: Lancer, 1990).

7. See Jacques Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

Letter Fifteen

1. N. Perrin, *The New Testament: An Introduction* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 283–284.

2. R. Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community* (Sydney: Anzea, 1979).

Letter Sixteen

1. J. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

Letter Seventeen

1. See my *Seek the Silences with Thomas Merton* (London: SPCK, 2003).