

Seasons of faith and life

A BLESSED UNREST

By Penny Barringham

I am the second youngest of ten children, I only found out about the tenth sibling last year! I grew up in a very small country town on the south coast of NSW where I spent a lot of my free time roaming around the local countryside with my youngest sister. My parents were poor, and not very affectionate or expressive. I was a shy and timid child.

Having the answers

After finishing High School I left home and went to university in Sydney and felt very lonely, lost, insecure and overwhelmed. My entry point to belief and faith was through my need to belong.

I became a Christian and took it on wholeheartedly. I believed I had found the answers to life's problems and shared my faith with other students. I became a leader in the group and upon graduation I became a missionary, working with university students.

Status, social standing, and money were not a consideration. I happily lived on a low income by receiving gifts and donations from people. Any extra money I had I would give away. My husband Neil and I were involved in student ministry for around 15 years. We did lots of things during this time. We had prayer and pancake breakfasts, were involved on campus during the day and in the residential colleges at night.

I was regularly running bible studies. Some of the students attending were not Christians but wanted to find out more about what it meant to know God, others were Christians who wanted to grow in their faith. I oversaw women's work in Australia and New Zealand and developed and coordinated a nine-month training course for new missionaries wanting to work with university students. During this time I felt I had a very clear understanding of what it meant to be a Christian and what was important. I believed that I was involved in reaching students for Christ and training the future leaders of our world. There are many people who we were involved with at this time who are now ministers, missionaries and leaders in the community.

I thought I had the answer to the world's problems.

Then Neil and I began asking what more we need to learn, and how might we need to continue to find Jesus in light of verses like in Matthew 25 when Jesus says "I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was a stranger and you received me into your homes, naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me. ... whenever you refused to help one of these least important ones, you refused to help me."

In hindsight I could see that my faith was entering a new season. I wanted to move from a primarily spoken Christianity and to roll up my sleeves, and be involved in the practise and life of my local community. This season was talking and acting, believing and doing.

I was moving from a time where I thought I had the answers to a time of asking questions.

We moved to Highgate Hill and began to get to know people who are often marginalised and devalued by our society. I did some postgraduate study that aligned with my experience in the community.

I began to mix with people who are not seen as powerful, productive or leaders. We shared our house with a number of people who lived with mental health issues, and became friends with people living in local hostels. We became friends with a person who went to prison and had him live with us when he got out on parole. We had my mum who had Alzheimer's live with us for five and a half years and eventually die at home with us.

I was learning from people who are often marginalised in our society. Some of my simple answers didn't fit with what I was beginning to see in the lives of my friends. My clear-cut answers didn't seem to apply so well any more. I began questioning if those who are seen as problems might in fact be our prophets who help us find the way of Jesus.

Around this time Neil and I were employed to do some research around the question of how Anglican parishes in our diocese could welcome people coming out of long stay psychiatric hospitals. This research eventually led to government funding and Neil and I setting up a small mental health inclusion agency called A Place to Belong. This work provided Neil and I with the opportunity to extend our involvement and learning with those who are seen as less. We were finding the wisdom and spirit in those often considered the least.

Another season of my life is a movement from a romantic view of love and two becoming one to a deeper understanding of the type of love Jesus calls us to which results in a more complex sense of unity in the midst of diversity.

In 1980 when I was 24, I fell in love with and married Neil Barringham. Alain de Botton says "what we typically call love is only the start of love."

Neil is a wonderful, faithful, committed, reliable, intelligent, sensitive man. I am very fortunate and admire and respect Neil more than any other man I know. However a fundamental collision occurred when I realised that I had married someone who shares the same values and beliefs but who is also very different.

This fundamental difference became evident on our honeymoon when I kept finding the toilet roll round the wrong way. It should come over the top and I kept finding it going down the back of the roll.

Also, I think quickly when in conflict, Neil's brain closes down, I speak in specifics, he in generalities, I'm tidy he's messy, I'm planned he's spontaneous, for me the holiday starts when we have reached the destination and set up camp – for Neil the holiday starts when we begin planning and packing.

Marriage has often been deeply difficult; there has been loneliness, despair, disillusionment, arguments, silences and marriage counselling! We have had lots of hard times. When some of our friends are having a hard time and beginning to despair they think of us and find comfort knowing their relationship is not as hard as ours!

We have done lots of re-framing, reworking, had painful conversations, displaced our expectations many times, and there has been painful honesty. We have found disillusionment to be a good thing – believe it or not – as it reveals the illusion! Now with

the illusion out of the way you have a chance to see reality for what it is. Disillusionment has been a doorway to greater intimacy.

I reworked my understanding of what a healthy growing marriage looks like. How to live with difference has been a central issue in our marriage of 38 years.

I relate to what Alain de Botton says in *The Course of Love* p219,

They feel a giddy loyalty towards what they have built up together: their disputations, fractious, laughter filled, silly, beautiful marriage that they love because it is so distinctly and painfully their own. They feel proud to have come this far, to have kept at it, trying again and again to understand the lunacies in each other's minds, hammering out one peace accord after another. There could have been so many reasons not to be together still. Breaking up would have been the natural, almost inevitable thing to do. It's sticking around that is the weird and exotic achievement – and they feel loyalty to their battle hardened, scarred version of love.

Eliminating pain, paradox and complexity to embracing complexity, pain and paradox

One of the main seasonal changes that has occurred in my life has been moving from a season of having clear simple black and white answers that I thought would solve everything, to understanding that Jesus is the answer, and he is leading me to embrace and enter into the challenges, complexities, dilemmas and paradoxes in my marriage, in having people come out of prison and live with us, and in involvement in mental health where there are no easy answers. The answer Jesus is showing me is to follow him along the road that is often painful and leads to the cross and death but then also to resurrection and transformation.

Whether or not pain, darkness and complexity are a gift for us depends on our attitude towards it and how we respond. Darkness, pain and complexity are a natural part of life. However we can often see them as intruders, thinking that if we do the right thing then life would always be full of light and sunshine, and not so complex. So when things are painful and difficult we can think that something has gone terribly wrong with me – that I have failed in some way and that I have to work out how to be rid of the dark.

Richard Rohr says that death is not just a physical dying, but going to the full depth of things and hitting the bottom, beyond where you are in control. These are the tipping points – and opportunities to choose transformation... Lots of people turn bitter and blame others... close down to growth and new life. The miracle is that God uses the very things that would normally destroy us – the tragic, the sorrowful, the painful, the unjust – to transform us. We can become very different kinds of human beings in this world – this is resurrection. We can't have resurrection without crucifixion.

John 12:24 Jesus talking about his death and resurrection,

“Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds”