

# A Litany of Hope

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 16 January 2022

A shared reflection by Jolyon Bromley, Vera Tibbertsma,  
Vivien Langford and Allison Gentle

Epiphany 2C

1 Corinthians 12: 1-11; Contemporary reading *The Gift* by Mary Oliver

The video of this worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/> The version below is not a transcript, but the scripts from which the reflectors spoke, so there may be some changes of wording.

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JOLYON

The original idea for the Litany of Hope was to gather brief quotes from texts that different people in the congregation found had inspired them with hope. Then it was suggested that these people might like to share why they found these passages inspiring, how it changed their understanding or influenced their actions. So the litany of hope has evolved into shared reflections.

Our overarching theme is the variety of gifts of the spirit – so we affirm that the spirit manifests uniquely in each individual and we value each shared perspective, listening for what the spirit has to say to us.

So I'll begin with my contribution to the litany, then Vera, Vivien, and Allison will share in more depth.

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Margaret Mead wrote; *“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world, indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.”*

This was quoted recently in the Sydney Morning Herald after the headline - *How a Small Regional Community Beat a Multinational Coal Giant*. There is a long backstory to this which I have a peripheral connection to. This is about an 11 year struggle to stop a new coal mine in the rich agricultural lands of the Southern Highlands at Sutton Forest. It involved petitions, blockades, legal action, rallies and vigils. I remember signing a petition in Bundanoon in the early days of opposition as the movement started. Essentially it was a South Korean company with Australian partners firstly known as Hume Coal then revealed as POSCO.

In the last weeks of 2021 the Independent Planning Commission finally blocked the project - saying the potential impacts were too great to be reasonably managed, particularly on groundwater, surface water, the Sydney catchment, agriculture and heritage values and many more. This was a titanic struggle galvanising the local communities but not getting much publicity outside the local area despite becoming part of the Lock the Gate Movement. It's one of those small successes by a group of thoughtful, committed citizens that truly inspires hope!

My favourite quote is from a book called *Daily Readings* with George MacLeod, Founder of the Iona Community in Scotland (edited by Ron Ferguson).

From the reading, "*Benediction of a Day*".

*Here is the root trouble of our lives. We all love life, but the moment we try to hold it, we miss it. The fact that things change and move and flow is their life. Try to make them static and you die of worry.*

I came across this quote about 25 years ago and it did transform my life time, but it has always been a struggle not to fall into old patterns of behaviour.

My natural inclination is to control. As a perfectionist by nature, a planner and list maker; cautious about my decisions and how I implement them, I manage my environment and life.

So this quote struck me at the heart of my natural inclination to control. I thought of myself as reasonably successful – my life was largely mapped out and I was well into the finer planning for a yet more successful future. But I was dying of worry.

*We all love life, but the moment we try to hold it, we miss it.*

What I think George MacLeod was saying in that quote is that I needed to find a way of learning to accept life on life's terms and not mine.

Being busy on the inside as well as the outside I spent my days waking at 5am with the radio on, working fulltime and planning my days and weeks. Travel time was reading time, and I had something to do every night of the week.

I soon realised that I had to start with a willingness to do less to understand what this quote meant for me, and to learn to live with more silence in my life.

I was good at making endless task lists but realised that I was poor at prioritising the tasks, so I found a Priority Matrix that helped me cut my task lists by more than half.

I also cut down on my evening activities over time, used travel time as thinking time and slowly increased the silence in my day.

I started to enjoy silence. It has a calming influence and allows me time to think deeply. Plans do emerge but in a kinder way, and by that I mean that I've given up ideas of success and failure.

Better is enough.

Emptiness in both my mind and environment gives me space and time to experience more:

- I have space in my cupboards for thing I need.
- When I have a setback, I can reflect and grow from it.
- When I have a victory no matter how small, I have time celebrate it.

It is a gentler pathway to progress.

Better is enough.

*We all love life, but the moment we try to hold it, we miss it. The fact that things change and move and flow is their life. Try to make them static and you die of worry.*

I wonder if you can identify with my experience. Where can you let go of business and control in your life? A willingness to be less busy helps us to stay in the present and helps us to be in touch with the changes, movement, and flow in our lives.

VIVIEN      Fatima's Letter

When Jolyon asked me to talk to you about a text that inspires me, Runa Khan's interview kept coming to mind, with her hospital ships that ply the back waters of Bangladesh. She told me about Rohingya refugees flooding in from Myanmar... and how it nearly broke her to see their suffering. She said *"I told our staff – We must have courage because we KNOW what to do"*.

But the text I really want you to hear was a letter in an envelope entitled *To an Essential Worker*. A bundle of these was delivered to the Emergency Department where our son works. His letter was from a girl called Fatima. Here it is.

To the hard working health care workers:

*My name is Fatima and I am a hard-working student. I am 9.5 years old, I have the best teacher in the world! My favourite subject is art. I also have a little sister and 2 older brothers that are in high school. I am writing this letter to thank you for helping us above and beyond! We couldn't defeat this COVID 19 without you. Guess what?! One of my aunties had COVID and she couldn't see her newborn baby but because of you she is better. I am so grateful for how much work you've done!*

*I have one experience to tell you about. Three years ago, my family and I went to the park. We told each other to race on a slide and when my mum came down.... an incident happened. When we arrived at the hospital it was very late, the doctors took extra care of her. One special day my mum came home, and it was the happiest day of my life. I am shocked that you work 24hours a day and 7 days a week.*

*Thank you for helping and curing people who have COVID19. Thank you for all you are doing to help save our community. Thank you for using your holidays to save us. I am grateful for all your hard work. You have made a huge difference. Clearly you are an amazing HERO!!*

*Yours faithfully*

*Fatima.*

This gave my son a bit of a laugh. Heroes! Seven days a week? Well 12-hour shifts, then being asked to do an extra one... it must feel like that.

I imagined the teacher telling her class; *"The hospital is open 24hours a day and sometimes they have to work in their holidays."*

But what inspired me was the idea of this classroom, where the children are guided into thoughts of specific gratitude and the value of expressing it.

I know many of you have been that inspiring teacher or essential health worker. You may not expect much thanks. Your satisfaction may be to just know that there are many people still alive today or enriching the social fabric, like Fatima. You are lucky to be the people who “*know what to do*” but sometimes that can be exhausting.

One of my cousins is an Indigenous woman who told me at Christmas she was proud of getting 600 people to come along for their job and to bring their relatives. She knew what to do to help them overcome their hesitancy. I thanked her and I would like to thank all of you.

In the adult world sometimes money or better conditions are the way appreciation is shown. In my experience, when lockdown stopped me raising funds for community radio through film showings or concerts, many of YOU came up to me quietly and pressed money into my hand. It felt like Fatima’s letter, expansive.... A surge of energy.... As if climate action was an essential service to you. I will never forget it.

How good would it be if the overwhelmed essential services were properly rewarded? The pat on the head given hurriedly by the media and politicians must feel increasingly hollow and condescending. Surely with deep gratitude in mind we need to recalibrate things for aged care, hospitals and schools. We cannot expect them to go on strike in a pandemic.

Fatima’s teacher used her platform to turn her children’s minds to gratitude. Many with a bigger platform, who do not really know what to do, fill adult minds with unhelpful ideas. They then crowd the hospitals and schools with unreal expectations and a deep sense of malaise. It’s the same when bold action is needed for the climate or for refugees. When our common good needs to be the headline a confusion of voices can drown out the people who “*know what to do*”

Back in the emergency department, a seriously ill middle-aged person gasping for breath was asked this question: “*Is there any medical reason why you have not had the COVID vaccine?*” The answer, through an interpreter, was “*because I believe in God*”. There was no judgement as the young medical staff did their very best to relieve this person’s suffering, but they were baffled that so many people seem to be confused by inspiring texts of one sort or another that have actually led them into danger.

Right now there is a tennis star in detention, not because he could spread COVID but seemingly because he was an icon for unhelpful ideas.

Last night I noticed the full moon rising over St Vincent’s hospital. Their lights were still on late at night. This poem by RUMI is to give you courage in these dark times:

*Search the darkness  
Sit with your friends; don't go back to sleep  
Don't sink like a fish to the bottom of the sea.  
Life's water flows from darkness  
Search the darkness don't run from it.  
Night travellers are full of light  
And you are too; don't leave this companionship  
Be a wakeful candle in a golden dish,  
Don't slip in to the dirt like quick silver.  
The moon appears for the night travellers  
Be watchful when the moon is full.*

*One day you finally knew  
what you had to do, and began,  
though the voices around you  
kept shouting  
their bad advice –  
though the whole house  
began to tremble  
and you felt the old tug  
at your ankles  
“Mend my life!”  
each voice cried.*

*But you didn’t stop.  
You knew what you had to do,  
though the wind pried  
with its stiff fingers  
at the very foundations,  
though their melancholy  
was terrible.*

*It was already late  
enough, and a wild night,  
and the road full of fallen  
branches and stones.*

*But little by little,  
as you left their voices behind,  
the stars began to burn  
through the sheets of clouds,  
and there was a new voice  
which you slowly  
recognized as your own,  
that kept you company  
as you strode deeper and deeper  
into the world,  
determined to do  
the only thing you could do –  
determined to save  
the only life that you could save.*

I love Mary Oliver’s poem about leaving behind false voices and finding the voice that is your own. It speaks to a few junctures in my life when I arrived at a way forward, but especially one in my earliest adulthood.

I was one of those young people who took a long time to figure out what I wanted to do in life. All the voices were advising students to choose the best paid, highest status profession their grades and abilities would permit. I had finished high school and still had no idea of what career I wanted to follow.

The teachers told us we should especially avoid traditional female occupations like teaching and nursing. It was the 1970s and so many careers were open to us. I was advised to do law, but I imagined the life of a lawyer surrounded by conflict, and I didn’t want that. With no better idea, I did a one-year secretarial course. An inner voice with the short-sighted logic of an 18-year-old, told me I could leave home faster that way. The outer voices were all horrified.

Secretarial work was predictably unsatisfying, but I continued to have no better idea till I was 27 and found myself the mother of a beautiful baby, whose father was a self-confessed ne’er do well. I had no regrets, but I could see I might end up having to support this child, and a new, more far-sighted voice told me I couldn’t do office work for another 20 years.

I started asking for advice, and an older, insightful woman said she thought I could be a teacher. These words landed in my psyche like a depth charge. For two days, most of my attention was on the trajectory of this idea as it ricocheted around my consciousness. It connected dots I had never connected before.

I had gravitated towards children since I was a child myself, a volunteer helper for any neighbour with a baby, striking up conversations with younger children on buses and in front yards. I taught my little sister how to spell. One day the principal brought her into my classroom so she could show off her feats of spelling on the blackboard. My teacher said he didn’t think anyone in his class could spell as well as that.

I was torn between irritation and pride but I managed to say nothing and let her have her moment. As a young adult I still played peek-a-boo with strangers' babies in queues and waiting rooms. And yet I had never considered a career working with children.

As I thought, I remembered the voices I'd heard, the teachers, the careers adviser, the other students. At a social gathering after the HSC results came out, one student told another that she was going to study teaching. "Oh," the friend said, "*What did you want to get into?*"

My father was unimpressed when my sister went out with a schoolteacher. He thought she could do better. In my world, teaching was considered low status work. I think I internalized these voices and let the values they represented become my values. They drowned out my calling.

But at 27, nine years older and more independent, someone said I could become a teacher, and a voice I slowly recognized as my own said, *yes, of course, that is true, I've been connecting with children all my life.*

To borrow the words of Mary Oliver, I finally knew what I had to do, and began. I didn't stop. I strode deeper and deeper into the world, determined to do the only thing I could do, determined to save the only life that I could save.

The poem also reminded me of other references in the literatures of the world to voices that are recognised and listened to, voices that are not heeded when they should be, and heeded when they should be ignored.

Ulysses had himself lashed to the mast of his ship and his sailors blocked their ears with wax so that they would not be tempted by the sweet voices of the sirens, trying to lure them to their destruction. The goddess Circe had warned Ulysses of the danger.

In the Christian teachings, Jesus said many times, *those with ears to hear, let them hear.*

Isaiah spoke of a voice crying in the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord.

When the Pharisees asked John the Baptist who he was, he answered in Isaiah's words, *I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness: 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'*

When Jesus was confronted by the Pharisees about the source of his healing power, he answered that *sheep listen to the voice of their shepherd and follow him because they know his voice. They never follow a stranger; they run away because they don't know his voice.* Then he identified himself: "*I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep, and they know me.*" It's the ancient covenant: *they shall be my people, and I shall be their God.*

It is not an easy matter to leave false voices behind. Ulysses tried to break free of his ropes, because he was so tempted by the sirens, in spite of Circe's warning. Mary Oliver's protagonist felt the whole house shake, and she had to pass through a wild storm in order to leave the voices behind. I wrestled with the idea of becoming a teacher constantly for two days.

Jesus also said, in the same conversation with the Pharisees, that *he is the gate, and that those who enter through him can move freely and safely from pen to pasture and back again.*

This is the same sense of safety, comfort and nurture that Isaiah spoke of in the passage about the voice in the wilderness. *When a straight highway is prepared for God, the valleys are raised up, the mountains made low, rough ground made level.*

As Mary Oliver's protagonist runs away from the false voices, she sees stars burning through the clouds. It is then that she hears the new voice she starts to recognise as her own, bringing a sense of company for the journey ahead.

The person in Mary Oliver's poem experienced the voices she left behind as multiple; the voice that was her own was single.

In these stories, leaving behind false voices prepares the way for the voice of truth to be heard. That voice can be seen as the indwelling Spirit, the voice Jesus left with us, who leads us into all truth.

The person who recognises a voice as truly their own, knows the voice of the shepherd, the one who can show us the way, the truth and the life. Recognising the divine, guiding, saving voice is the same as knowing and being known.

May we listen, may we hear, may we know the voice of truth and life, may we find our way, may we know and be known. Amen.