

Anneke Oppewal is a Uniting Church Minister, currently in placement at North Balwyn Uniting Church. She grew up in the Netherlands and studied theology at the Universities of Utrecht, Groningen and Nijmegen. After working as a minister in the Netherlands Reformed Church for 10 years, she moved overseas and lived and worked in Australia and the UK, moving to Melbourne in 2003. She has published several books on biblical and liturgical topics. (see www.annekeoppewal.com for more information).

Over the years she has experienced many turning points, both in life and faith. With roots in the Dutch pietistic conservative “Gereformeerde Bond” she has been influenced by experiences of Roman Catholic monasticism (Carmelite, Dominican, Ignatian and Benedictine spirituality), the Charismatic Movement, Christian Healing ministries, Buddhist meditation and mindfulness practices (Tich Nat Hahn), Zen meditation, Celtic Christianity, the Progressive Christian movement and secular thinking and philosophy. She is passionate about the reading and interpretation of scripture and finding ways of applying the meaning and implications of these ancient texts to contemporary life.

Turning points, PCNV talk, September 2015.

I was asked to talk about significant turning points in my life and faith, and to be personal about it. That seemed straight forward enough, until I started thinking about it. What to include, and what to leave out? What was significant?

More importantly, I realised nothing ever happens in isolation. Everything is connected and to understand what now, in hindsight, seem to be the major turning points, some understanding of the general background against which they occurred is also important.

So I've decided to give you some idea of where my roots lie first and include some of the broader context where I think it is important, in the rest of this talk.

I've limited myself to turning points that I feel have had a significant impact on my faith and my life as a Christian.

I grew up in the Dutch Bible Belt, in a village twenty seven kilometres south of Rotterdam. The Church I grew up in was ultra conservative and practised a brand of Calvinism that was underpinned by regular worship attendance, daily scripture reading and an intense, personal relationship with God in prayer. God's absolute sovereignty, Paul's "by grace alone", and the total depravity of humanity figured highly in its theology.

It was not a cheerful faith, but it offered a profoundly deep, nurturing and sustained sense of religious belonging and spiritual awareness.

The first turning point came when I entered High School and discovered a world where it was possible for people to not have faith. Until then, this had been inconceivable to me

I was one of the very few who ventured out from what my high school teachers contemptuously called "the villages" to the more secular world of a suburb on the fringes of Rotterdam, for my secondary school education. It was a major shock to the system.

Suddenly I found myself between two worlds, between the highly secularised critical cynicism towards all things religious of my high school teachers and high school peers, and the deeply religious, pietistic world of my family and home village. As a result I developed a kind of split personality: A pious, calvinist, pietistic and in places somewhat charismatic mind frame combined with a secularised, fairly cynical, bordering on agnostic, view of life.

Immediately after High School I enrolled in theological studies claiming a general interest in the subject. Even though I now believe there was a hint of call in that choice, there was no way I would have admitted to that at the time. A woman with a call to ministry was inconceivable from the perspective of the religious context I grew up in, and for different reasons, probably as inconceivable to admit to in the secular context of my high school friends.

At university my faith was shaken, stirred, deconstructed, and reconstructed several times over, as were my secular understandings and prejudices about faith. I gained a lifelong fascination and love for the academic side of theology and met some of the theological giants, in person and through study, that were to guide me further on my way.

Studies in narrative theology, semiotics and linguistic theory were particularly important. They gave me a different, and liberating, perspective on scripture.

During those formative years, in High School and at University, I had two profound and deeply mystical experiences of God's presence that deeply influenced my faith.

Both were connected to surviving abuse. The first time it was the experience of something holding me where I was unable to hold myself. The second time I found my way back to life where I had been ready to give up on it. Even now the memory of those two experiences will move me deeply, and will continue to bring me back to something that lies at the core of who I am spiritually. It is a lifegiving, lifepreserving presence.

Both experiences fitted into the framework of the faith I had grown up with, connecting those negative experiences with the positive experience of the God I knew through prayer and the scriptures.

The story of Jacob at the Jabbok for instance, Elijah in the cave, and Jesus on the cross, the psalms and some parts of the prophets, in the context of severe personal trauma suddenly made a deeper kind of sense, and helped me find my way.

After ordination, in 1989 the tension between my secularised brain and my pietistic heart remained, and kept me insecure about my ministry, about my call, my faith and my place in the Church.

In 1997 I followed my husband to Sydney, and I was more than happy to leave those tensions behind. We had two small children by then and I was looking forward to an opportunity to be with them and do some study. And I vaguely considered a career change.

For well over a year I kept myself well away from involvement in Church work and enjoyed the freedom. Then I was lured into the pulpit of a very small Church by a charming colleague of Dutch descent who badly needed a Sunday off. It was my first service in English.

In the week leading up to the service the insecurity I felt about my call skyrocketed and driving to Church that Sunday morning I was convinced that this had finally clinched it. I was not going to go back into the ministry, it was not for me. Ordination had been a mistake.

However! When I reached the front of the Church and turned around to face the congregation, I experienced a profound moment of conversion.

Unexpectedly I found myself flooded with such a deep and overwhelming sense of certainty, belonging and peace that any doubts I'd had about my call evaporated. No matter how insecure I felt inside, no matter what I believed or did not believe, whatever faith I thought I had or did not have, preaching and teaching the word in whatever language, to whatever congregation that would have me, was somehow at the core of my being. It was a feeling so overwhelming that it has never completely left me since.

We moved to England. With no ministry placements available in the Church anywhere in the area around London where we lived, I ended up freelancing. I taught Dutch to business executives, Latin and Greek to expat children, and I even practiced as a New Age healer for a while. I also taught religious studies at VCE level at the local high school, and tutored ministers in training - and I became an itinerant preacher, honing my preaching skills (and my English language presentation skills) in Churches of various denominations in and around London.

Three years later we moved back to Australia. I tried to contact the UCA as well as the Anglican Church prior to arriving here but didn't hear from either of them. So I ended up dividing my time between working on a translation of Iona material for the Dutch market and baking gluten free bread and cakes as a 'micro baker', while looking for a job in chaplaincy, or education.

Then, just as I was about to accept a permanent position as palliative care chaplain at St. Vincent's hospital, through a chain of serendipitous coincidences I was contacted by Toorak Uniting Church and ended up in ministry there, first as supply, and later in a permanent position. How this happened is still a mystery to me. I had decided on St Vincent's and didn't know much at all about Toorak but somehow had the unnerving experience of things being taken out of my hands by some greater power.

I stayed in Toorak for 8 years and became actively involved in creative arts, dance, publishing and interfaith dialogue, and helped get the Arts and Spirituality centre off the ground.

In the meantime, I had been suffering from increasingly severe chronic pain ever since I was a teenager. This was connected to the abuse I'd suffered early in life. Over decades I tried all kinds of therapy and medication but things only deteriorated. In 2004, two years after our arrival in Melbourne, I was diagnosed with PTSD and Fibromyalgia.

A year into a new placement at North Balwyn, in 2011, it looked as if I had no other option than to stop working. I was on heavy medication and was outrunning the pain by throwing myself into work, keeping myself busy, and refusing to give in, but I was burning out.

Then, at the end of my tether, on the advice of a rheumatologist and with all more conventional means exhausted, I tried hypnosis. It took just two sessions and I was cured! (It then took me a further two years to get over the medication addiction, but that's another story).

It left me shocked and fascinated. How was this possible? I'd tried everything! So why was it that this worked?

From what I understand of it now, it was the daily routine of prayer and meditation practices that had been with me from early childhood that prepared my brain for a track change that would otherwise probably not have been possible.

However far I had sometimes wandered from my pietistic roots, I had never been able to shed my pietistic prayer practice. Paradoxically, the part of me that my rational, critical-thinking side had been trying to suppress or kill ever since high school, ended up saving my life.

What the hypnotherapist did with me at that time, is very similar to what I had experienced from faith healers over the years, except that hypnotherapy is a secular practice, with a lot of science to back it up. Universities such as Stanford and Yale have whole departments devoted to trying to figure out how it works and how it can be made to work to our benefit.

Secular prayer! With the support of my Church Council I have started a course in strategic psychotherapy and hypnotherapy in Sydney to find out more.

This is an exciting new challenge in a life and faith where the tension remains between the experience of “something”, a divine presence if you will, that has held my life together and brought me back from the brink more than once, the love for the scriptures, and a faith that is rickety at best, secular, cynical, critical, post modern, and relativist.

The issues currently occupying my thoughts and keeping me engaged.

As I've indicated before, the issue I am currently thinking about and engaged with is psychotherapy and hypnotherapy and the course I am doing in Sydney. Last weekend I had interesting experience there that may, or may not, prove to be a turning point later. One of the participants went into what is called, as I discovered later, "Esdail Trance". This is an exceptionally deep trance discovered in the 19th century by a Dr. Esdail who used it, successfully, when doing invasive surgery, like amputating limbs. Not only did he have a 30% higher survival rate in his patients, he also discovered their healing sped up considerably if he kept them in trance for a while after an operation. While most of the research into this was abandoned with the discovery of anaesthetics early in the 20th century, now more and more people have adverse reactions to anaesthetics it is back on the agenda.

At the course in Sydney one of the participants went into this trance and I, as I found out later, was the only one who'd ever seen the outward signs she displayed before - in evangelical healing services!

I am even more fascinated about the crossovers than I was before. I think we may have more to offer in Church than we realise, know more than we were aware of knowing. At the same time I think that the rigorous research and developments in this field have a lot to offer us. Words are very important in hypnosis, phrasing, tone of voice, pacing, they are all things that I use in Church, in worship, in prayer and in a pastoral context all the time. I am really looking forward to digging into all of that a little bit more deeply.

This morning I preached on John 14, reading it against the background of what in the field of hypnotherapy is called confusion techniques. I think John is using those techniques, modifying his language to make something happen on a sub-conscious level in his readers. It was fascinating to build the argument and show my congregation how I think it makes sense to think of the author of the gospel as someone who knew how to manipulate his readers with techniques we usually only associate with present day advertising, savvy politicians etc.

There may be another book, I continue to be engaged in interfaith dialogue in different ways, I am involved in the work of the Bethel centre for healing of abuse in the Uniting Church, working with people with PTSD, and interested in trauma studies in that context. So there is plenty to work with in one way or another that will keep me challenged and engaged in learning. The journey goes on....