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Ageing and Interfaith Dialogue: storytelling and the beginning of the wisdom of love

Jewish-Christian dialogue is often blessed by those “old and full of days” (Job 42:17; 1 Chron 23:1). The years of life contain gifts to be passed on from one generation to another. Two important gifts here are storytelling and hope. Today, we live in a world where youth is adored and worshipped. “It is not surprising”, according to Henri Nouwen, “that most elderly can say with the Psalmist, ‘Those who see me in the street hurry past me; I am forgotten, as good as dead in their hearts, something discarded’” (Ps 31:11–12).¹ However, in response to “the fear of becoming old in our western world,”² is the soft smile of the elderly, “full of days” who signify an “open ended” quality of hope: the humour of never taking oneself too seriously and the vision of living in the light that overcomes the darkness of religious, cultural, social, economic, and political divisions.³

Given that ageing itself is “the call to spiritual growth,”⁴ the encounters of Jewish-Christian dialogue offer a place of spiritual reminiscence. This is to say that interfaith dialogue has much potential to be a fecund time for sharing meaning through stories, and even finding an intimate and hospitable environment to relate the pain, heartache, tragedy and suffering of life. Commemorations like Kristallnacht or joint prayer evenings for example are planned to provide a liturgical sense of sacred space for a communion of hearts to remember and seek hope. And moreover, where dialogue and all its activities serve to foster moments of friendship, opportunities arise for those fewer in years to listen to stories of the elderly and to partake of the hope that these stories engender and bless upon the soul.

In *The Gift of Years*, Joan Chittister reflects how the older generation possesses the wisdom to pass on ancient truth of discernment:

Older people have what this world needs most: the kind of experience that can save the next generation from the errors of the one before them. This is a generation, for instance, that knows the unfathomable horrors of mass genocide and holocaust. This generation knows that war does nothing but plant seeds of the next one. This generation knows that there is no such thing as “rugged individualism” anymore; we are in this changing world together. The older generation knows that the only thing that is good for any of us in the long run is what is good for all of us right now. That’s wisdom. Wisdom is not insisting on the old ways of doing things. It is the ability to make ancient truth the living memory of today.⁵

¹ Henri Nouwen, “Aging and Ministry,” *Journal of Pastoral Care* 28:3 (Summer 1974): 165–166.

² Nouwen, “Aging and Ministry,” 166.

³ Nouwen, “Aging and Ministry,” 172–174.

⁴ Joan Chittister, *The Gift of Years: Growing Older Gracefully* (Katonah, New York: Bluebridge, 2008), 69.

⁵ Chittister, *The Gift of Years*, 126.

Chittister again reflects:

And why must the elders in a society immerse themselves in the issues of the time? If for no other reason than that they are really the ones who are free to tell the truth. They have nothing to lose now: not status, not striving, not money, not power. They are meant to be the prophets of society, its compass, its truth-tellers.⁶

The stories we hear especially from the elderly — of survival, the sacredness of life, the hunger for justice and the good to prevail — possess a pertinent message for interfaith dialogue, namely that dialogue produces an ethical import upon the soul: “to make ancient truth the living memory of today”. And what is this ancient truth but to be “prophets of society, its compass, its truth-tellers”. The elderly have what the world needs most, “right now,” namely to share experience, impart meaning and to tell the truth.

Listening to the spiritual reminiscence or the elderly one’s stories of survival and hope amidst death and despair invites a heartfelt formation into the guts of human existence. Both storyteller and listener, in effect, begin to share the crisis, and grow together. In the listener, the positive and formative effect is the bearing of respect. The listener, before assimilating the story and conversation into the energies of its being, must first rein in the ego-tendency of self-certainty, and restrain the self not to do injustice to the other, reducing him or her to a personal experience, fact or idea. Dialogue therefore begins with an ethical hesitation, restraint and shivering. “Dialogical shivering”⁷ then becomes an important state of primarily and initially being moved by the other’s story. Before sympathy (the sharing of emotions) and empathy (understanding the other) comes an ethical hesitation or restraint, namely a dialogical shivering of awakening to the crisis of the other. In Jewish-Christian dialogue, this is the respect and the heart to listen to those “old and full of days”. Where there is the dynamism of shivering — “utter cautiousness and carefulness”⁸ — the listener takes on not only a sense of justice and vigilance (not to hurt the other in any way in the conversation), but also a production of mercy — of being moved, touched and troubled in our viscera (guts) so that mercy (*rachamim*) may grow into ways of hospitality, intimacy and healing.

The elderly have what the world needs most. By being free to share their experience and the gift of years, the elderly offer the wisdom of sharing memories and stories. The listener too, through dialogical shivering, by being moved and sharing in the crisis of the story, may too learn wisdom saturated in love and goodness. Ageing indeed is a way of stories and hope, inviting the world of interfaith dialogue into awareness and the beginning of the wisdom of love.

Associate Professor Glenn Morrison, Chairperson

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⁶ Chittister, *The Gift of Years*, 127.

⁷ Roger Burggraeve, “Dialogue of Transcendence: A Levinasian Perspective on the Anthropological-Ethical Conditions for Interreligious Dialogue,” *Journal of Communication & Religion* 37:1 (March, 2014): 23.

⁸ Burggraeve, “Dialogue of Transcendence,” 23.

Our New Honorary Presidents

In 2014 we welcomed on board two new Honorary Presidents: Rabbi Adi Cohen, of Temple David, and the Rev Steve Francis, Moderator of the Uniting Church in WA.

Israeli-born Rabbi Cohen, a leading member of the Rabbinic Council of the Union of Progressive Judaism (UPJ), arrived in Perth at the end of May with his wife, Gila, and their three school-age sons, Shaked, Tommer and Yoav. Ordained as a rabbi at the Jerusalem campus of Hebrew Union College, Adi Cohen served from 2006 as Rabbi of Brit Olam, in Kiryat Ono, near Tel Aviv. He is passionate about education, and in addition to his congregational responsibilities, he taught law and Jewish ethics at a high school in Ra'anana and worked in special ed. kindergartens in Kfar Saba, as a story-teller. From April 2011, he served for three years as congregational Rabbi for Temple Sinai in Wellington, New Zealand, before taking up his appointment in Perth.

Rabbi Adi Cohen was officially installed at Temple David on Sunday 2 November. At this glittering ceremony, attended by over 230 distinguished guests, the President of the Board, Joel Mendelson, spoke in glowing terms of their new incumbent: "His abundant warmth, humour, energy, knowledge and love of Progressive Judaism and Jewish life, underscoring his creative leadership, make him an ideal candidate to help us build on the foundations and traditions of this community."

Regarding his role as an Honorary President, Rabbi Cohen commented wisely: "I see the importance of interfaith dialogue not in the safe shores of the commonalities, but in understanding and respecting our differences." He has already made valuable contributions to the work of the Council, notably towards the organisation of the Commemoration of Kristallnacht, and by his significant participation in that event. We look forward to an ongoing fruitful relationship.

Rev Steve Francis has a background in Engineering, and has worked for a mining company in the Pilbara, a chocolate factory in England, and for Lufthansa in Germany. He also has an Arts degree from UWA (Philosophy and History) and received his theological education in Perth through Melbourne College of Divinity and Murdoch University. He worked as a part-time lecturer in Youth Work Studies for three years at WACAE (now Edith Cowan University). Ordained as a Minister of the Word in Perth, 1980, he served in the Scarborough Parish 1980–1984, and later with the Nedlands Congregation from 1991 until August 2014, prior to his installation as Moderator of the Uniting Church in Western Australia on 11 September.

Rev Francis views ministry as being a "servant, shepherd and steward," and believes that we need to be open to where the Spirit of God may lead us. He has served as a member of school councils (St Stephen's and MLC), and also as a Council member at Kingswood College (now Trinity). As Co-chair of the UCA Multi- and Cross-cultural Committee, and through his travels in Asia, Africa, North America and the Middle East, he has gained broad experience of the richness of the global Christian family. He is grateful for the support he receives from his own family, who are active Christians. His wife Kim is a graduate in Science, Education and Theology; their daughter Sarah works as a Medical Doctor, and their son Joel is an Accountant.

With regard to Jewish-Christian relations, Rev Francis shared that as a history student way back in the 70s he had researched an essay on the famous "Dreyfus Affair", and had become painfully aware of the long history of anti-Semitism in Europe. Also, as a student of church history he is mindful of the way Christians have sometimes behaved appallingly towards Jewish people. "This is a matter of profound regret," he said. "If we are to learn from the past we must forge strong and healthy relationships between Jewish and Christian people." Commenting on his role as an Honorary President, he affirmed: "I am very privileged to be part of CCJWA, and strongly support its aims and values."

Mary J. Marshall

Review of 2014 Events

Annual General Meeting

Our AGM, held in the Anglican Parish of Applecross on Sunday 2 February, was most significant in that it marked the retirement of Ken Arkwright OAM after two decades of close involvement with the Council. His occasional address "My Family's C & J Encounters since 1668 CE" was an inspiring and poignant account of his family's interfaith experiences, including several relating to survival of the Shoah. The speech engendered much lively discussion. Incoming Vice-Chairperson Revd Marie Wilson, who like Ken is a foundation member of CCJWA, gave the expression of thanks, warmly acknowledging his extraordinary service on the Executive, and his commitment to Jewish-Christian relations. She presented a token gift, foreshadowing that an appropriate occasion would be arranged for further acknowledgment of the Arkwrights' contributions.

(A reconstruction of Ken's speech is available on the website.)

Luncheon at Café Hyatt

On Sunday 4 May, many CCJWA members gathered for a delightful buffet luncheon, with Ken and Judith Arkwright as guests of honour, in gratitude for their immense contribution to the Council. In the absence of Chairperson Glenn Morrison, who was unwell, Revd Marie Wilson gave a heartfelt speech acknowledging Ken's twenty years of commitment as a member of the Foundation Working Group, and as Vice-Chairperson of the Executive Committee. She also paid tribute to both Ken and Judith for their gracious hospitality to Executive Committee Members for meetings held April 1996–October 2013, and their support and innumerable contributions to the life and work of the Council since 1995. Appropriately-worded Certificates of Merit were presented, and Honorary Life Membership was bestowed upon them both.

An Evening at St George's College

The beautiful St George's College campus in the UWA complex was the setting for an evening of worship, refreshment and conversation on 15 May. The Chapel service which heralded the evening was enhanced by the voices of the Winthrop Singers under the baton of Associate Professor Nicholas Bannan, as they sang liturgy familiar to Jews and Christians present.

The traditional Jewish hymn *Hine Ma Tov* (Psalm 133:1), was sung for the Introit. Revd Sebastiana Pienaar, who as locum College Chaplain was presiding, warmly welcomed everyone, providing some background information about the Council and how gathering for interfaith worship coheres with its objectives.

The words of Psalm 133:1 were reiterated in the opening responses, and there followed a special prayer for harmony. A beautiful rendition of Psalm 150 was then sung by the choir. In between readings from scripture — Isaiah 65:17–25 and Romans 12:9–21, the choir sang Louis Lewandowski, *Enosh Kechotzir Yomov* (Psalm 103:15–17). For the Canticle, the Winthrop Singers offered the lovely piece *The Lord hath been mindful of us* (Psalm 115:12–15) by Samuel Sebastian Wesley, and for the Anthem, chose *Echa*, Louis Lewandowski's haunting setting of lamentations. Several prayers followed, and the service concluded with the Aaronic blessing. After the choir had processed out, the congregation lingered on to listen to a voluntary played by gifted organist Alessandro Pittorini.

Following the Chapel service, CCJWA members and friends were invited to a meal in the College Dining Room, offering an opportunity to mingle with resident students, and to continue our interfaith fellowship. After this very enjoyable, well-catered meal we retired to the Junior Common Room for a "Fireside Chat" with Dr Bruce Robinson — West Australian of the Year in 2013, and Winthrop Professor, School of Medicine and Pharmacology, at the University of WA.

Bruce shared his thoughts about Life, with anecdotes, tips and affirmations about Dad relationships, and personal experiences to illuminate and highlight his current philosophy and outlook. Volunteer work after the tsunami and training people to give medical care, combined with a rich and colourful family life, gave him the satisfaction he was seeking in his life. Bruce spoke of his foxy involvement and wind surfing, his local Church, and how his personal Christian belief supports him in his work. Through service to the community he achieved his humanity, and was able to answer the question "What am I here for?". His generosity of spirit was evident during question time when he offered a young student of pathology an open door to his office.

Spending this time with a scientist in a religious setting was inspirational, as was the entire evening, from the first note of the Winthrop Singers in the Chapel to Bruce Robinson's final and simple statement of "Religion and Science are the same."

Seminar on inter-religious dialogue

Members and guests gathered at Perth Synagogue on Tuesday 20 May to hear ICCJ President Dr Debbie Weissman give "an Israeli perspective on inter-religious dialogue." Introducing her topic, Dr Weissman referred to the ICCJ website, and particularly to the 2013 statement on Israel and Palestine: "As long as you believe in a living God, you must have hope."

She asserted that "inter-religious dialogue" is, at present, the third most important issue in the world. The first is "environmental damage," evidenced in climate change; the second is the gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots"; and the third is learning to live with the other (in terms of ethnicity, gender, and religion) with mutual respect. Dr Weissman encouraged the celebration of one's own religious feasts, whilst remaining respectful of the other who is different, emphasising that world peace is not gained through homogeneity — through consensus — but through respect for diversity. She noted that while in Perth the focus is still on Christian-Jewish relations, in Israel the ICCJ involves trilateral dialogue — an international Abrahamic dialogue — reflective of a wider aim for peace.

One of several questions from the audience was whether she approved of the BDS movement (whose goal is to delegitimise the state of Israel). Dr Weissman expressed disagreement with its aims. Her approach, in contrast, was to seize opportunities to engage with hard-line Palestinian Christians in order to build relations, and educate. She explained that in Israel, Jews need to be encouraged to reach out to non-Jews to broaden their horizon and succeed at developing healthy regional cultural diversity. She stressed that in some regions, where Christians are under threat, attention needs to be given to their shrinking populations.

Dr Weissman closed with the Torah, reading from Leviticus 26:36–37, "you will flee but there is no-one pursuing you," adding that we need to be courageous: "let us not flee because of our memories". "Jews will feel secure because we have wonderful friends."

(A full report on the seminar is available on the CCJWA website.)

Film afternoon

On Sunday 24 August, members and friends met at Temple David Social Hall to view the documentary *The Lady at Number 6: Music Saved My Life*, a feature film about the life of pianist and Shoah survivor Alice Herz-Sommer, who died in February 2014, aged 110. Alice, an Austrian-born British pianist and music teacher from Bohemia, was a survivor of the Theresienstadt concentration camp.

In the film, Alice recollected her life. Of Jewish origins, she was born in Prague in 1903. She had a twin sister, Mariana, and three other siblings. Her family entertained well-known intellectuals and musicians at their home. At five, Alice took up piano, which she studied diligently, and she became a professional performer. In 1931, she married Leopold Sommer, a violinist, and they had a son, Stefan (whose later professional name was Raphael). As Jews, their idyllic life came to an end in 1939 when Czechoslovakia was taken over by the Nazis. In 1943 the three were sent to Theresienstadt, a transit stop before Auschwitz, but which doubled as a propaganda camp to give the impression that Jews were well-treated. Alice and Raphael stayed there for two years performing in concerts, but in 1944 Leopold was sent to Auschwitz, and then Dachau, where he died. After the war Alice taught in Jerusalem until 1986, then settled in London, where she lived in "Number 6", continuing to play the piano daily. Tragically, Raphael died suddenly in Israel, aged 64.

From the macabre story behind the film, one would expect it to be depressing, but it is in fact surprisingly uplifting. This is because Alice's indomitable spirit shines through with comments such as: "When you go down into hell and come out again, the only important thing is life, is relationships. We're born alone; we die alone, but in-between might come something nice." and "We had two lives: when we were born, and then when we *didn't* die."

At the conclusion of the film, Associate Professor Glenn Morrison invited discussion. A number of responses, such as about Alice's unusual resilience, this film's likeness to "The Pianist," and the power of laughter and music, led to a further discussion on Shoah experiences and the difficulty of tracing lost family members, which continued over afternoon tea.

Kristallnacht Commemoration

Temple David sanctuary was filled to capacity for the annual Kristallnacht Commemoration, held at 3:00pm on Sunday 9 November. We were very privileged to have Her Excellency the Honourable Kerry Sanderson AO, newly appointed as Governor of WA, among the guests, accompanied by Revd Marie Wilson. Associate Professor Glenn Morrison, as MC, invited Rabbi Adi Cohen to give the welcome speech. A sober tone for the proceedings was then set by violinist Paul Jansz, as he played John Williams' work "I Could Have Done More," from *Schindler's List*.

All were drawn to participate in the liturgy by the MC's Call to Worship, as we acknowledged the purpose of our gathering together as Jews and Christians — to remember, to mourn, to confess, to seek healing, compassion and courage — in our shared longing for justice and righteousness.

There followed readings by students of Presbyterian Ladies' College. Two haunting poems, "Waiting" and "Verses", both written at Terezin ghetto, were beautifully presented by Laura Rogers and Isobel Cole, respectively. In between we heard two very moving excerpts from the Collection of the Gratz College Holocaust Oral History Archive, solemnly read in turn by Lucy Rossen and Gilian Scott. Our spirits were then lifted by the PLC Chorale's lovely rendition of "Inscription of Hope", by Z. Randall Stroope, conducted by Philippa Tan, and accompanied by Sarah Saunders.



The guest speaker, Martin Moen, was introduced by the MC, and delivered a truly inspiring address: "The Righteous Among Nations — A Dutch Holocaust Story," illustrated with numerous PowerPoint slides. It was a remarkable account of how his mother's survival was made possible only because many Dutch citizens selflessly risked their lives to shelter her in five successive hide-outs. There were also heartrending stories about some who did not survive, including his aunt and uncle, who were betrayed to the Nazis through a farmhand's vicious act of vengeance against his boss. Martin Moen concluded his address by showing several slides depicting current world events, with the poignant message that "we must learn from history that persecution is not a uniquely Jewish occurrence," and that "if we are to enjoy true freedom ... we must be prepared to stand up and fight against evil and injustice."

The lighting of memorial candles followed. The first was in remembrance of all who perished in the Shoah under the terms of the "Final Solution" — including not only six million Jews, but also millions of non-Jews. The candle was reverently lit by Helen Bryant, Temple David Congregation's representative on the Committee. The second candle, in remembrance of The Righteous Among the Nations, was lit by Revd Steve Francis, Moderator of the Uniting Church in WA, and an Honorary President of CCJWA.



Silence was kept for two minutes of quiet reflection, which was interrupted by the sound of shattering glass. All then joined together in remembering before the Eternal One, the horrors that occurred on the "Night of Broken Glass" — the burning, looting, destruction, arrests, deportations, and deaths. We stood then for the traditional sign of reconciliation, each of us turning to those nearby, and offering a hand of friendship, wishing each other "Shalom", "Peace". A Candle of Hope was brought forward by Daniel Fasser of Carmel School and Amber Macleod of PLC (symbolising Jewish-Christian harmony), and kindled with the flame of a memorial candle.

A challenging *Exhortation* was given by the Most Reverend Roger Herft, Anglican Archbishop of Perth, and an Honorary President of the Council. We were enjoined to go out in peace, alert and with courage, holding fiercely to what is good, and to help and honour those who are suffering. The charge ended with an echo from the opening Call to Worship, with its quotation from Amos 5:24, and the sense that if we truly live in such a way, "God's justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-rolling stream."

There followed the *Kaddish*, led by Rabbi Cohen, with its plea for harmony and peace then being accentuated by the translated lyrics of the song "Ose Shalom", sung by the PLC Chorale: ("The One who makes peace in the heavens, may He make peace for us, and for all Israel, and let us say, let us say Amen.")

After the MC's expression of thanks to participants and organisers, Paul Jansz played a Yiddish Lullaby "Raisins and Almonds" while the official party departed; he then segued into "A Fiddler on the Roof" by Jerry Bock, bringing the commemoration to a close. From the very positive feedback received from attendees, the occasion appears to have been a resounding success.

Mary J. Marshall, acknowledging that some material is drawn from original articles by Helen Bryant (St George's College evening), and Judith Schneider (20 May seminar and Film afternoon)