

OUT OF THE ABYSS

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About a week into the ten day residential Life and Living program I texted home:

"Awake at five so excited about the day. I know I am going to live. I have looked into the great festering abyss and realised that it is in the past and doesn't exist! It has left a legacy in my present but each thing can be easily dealt with. I am completely and utterly free."

It's not that this program changed my life. Cancer changed my life, but The Gawler Foundation shaped and focused the changes and showed me where I might pick up the tools to build a future with.

The program is non-religious but is founded squarely on the practice of mindfulness meditation. The first activity of the day following the wake up bell and the daily tot of lemon juice and water, was 45 minutes in the sanctuary being gently led into silence.

The aim of mindfulness is to be quiet: quiet in body mind and spirit. Quiet but not asleep or in any sort of trance. Quiet, but alert and aware of the now, undistracted by thinking or imagining or fretting or scheming. Don't just do something, sit there! It sounds easy but it's not. The chattering machine between my ears takes some subduing. Or rather, some ignoring. The self doesn't like being told it is surplus to requirements and sidelined. I come up with all manner of devices to subvert myself, but we are instructed well.

The phrases used in our guidance quickly become catch-phrases in the jokes of the 32 of us on the course:

...softening, loosening, letting go...

...let it come when it's ready and go when it's ready....

...that's good....

And there are a lot of jokes.

Cancer is the nice person's disease. We are type C personalities every last man Jack and woman Jill of us. We survive by mediating and putting our own interests last. We kill ourselves with kindness. And here we are a congenial group; shy at first but forming deep bonds as the days progress.

Everyone has a story of the progress of their disease. Everyone has a story of the trauma which has led their body to react in this way. Many have lost their hair. I sit at lunch and wake from a personal reverie to find my five women table companions are discussing breast reconstruction in quite intimate detail. These are not victims. These are all people who have also looked into the abyss, and given it the two fingered salute. Mindfulness also shapes the other great pillar of the program - food. We eat fresh vital food; delicious and plentiful.

We are not just being fed in the dining room, we are being taught. We are being coached into mindfulness: being present with what we eat: knowing what is in the food and what it is doing to us. We are being encouraged away from the laziness and the habits which lead us to ingest the things which in all likelihood have contributed to our illness.

Before every meal the chef, teaches us what is in it and how it was prepared. She is a huge personality, who, not so long ago, was a belly dancer. Her hands still dance as she talks and so do her words. We listen and laugh.

The days are long, but feel unhurried. We stop every hour or so for juice, and some of the instruction is aimed at getting us moving. I learn about Qigong and breathing and energy. Every afternoon there is a lengthy break and I use it to go walking. Evening sessions are often a bit lighter: perhaps a film or a discussion, but I find myself going to bed early to allow my mind to assimilate the day's learnings through sleep. There are six people who operate a sort of tag team in teaching us.

In most of what is taught there is the thread of mindfulness: in dealing with our emotions and life patterns; in knowing exactly what our disease is and how it develops; in knowing the medical profession and what it can offer us, and what it cannot; in taking charge of our own lives and establishing patterns that build life not death. Of course, the overriding personality in all this is Ian Gawler.

His own remarkable struggle with cancer is recorded in his book *You Can Conquer Cancer*, and we hear it again, in more detail. He is a tall skinny guy with crutches. His strong will is evident in all of the details of the place, as is indeed his name, but he is curiously unassuming. He smiles a lot and laughs at his own expense.

The staff treat each other with mutual respect and kindness, modelling the sort of mindful self awareness they are hoping we will establish for ourselves. In two weeks I don't hear any of them personally condemn anybody, not even those whose opinions run counter to all the Foundation stands for.

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Ian Gawler invites us to research what he tells us, and encourages mindfulness: alert, aware questioning of all that anybody (including himself) tells us. The kaftan isn't about setting himself up as a guru; it's about finding the most comfortable clothing possible for a one legged man living in the Australian heat.

A week in and several things have gelled for me. I have begun to consolidate and refine the routines I had established before coming to Australia.

I had hoped to strengthen my meditation practice and now the parts of the day I most look forward to are the times in the sanctuary. I know it hasn't been long, but now that I am back home I am managing to continue the routine of an hour and a half a day of mindful silence. Clemency and I are fine tuning our diet and making plans about preserving the integrity of what we eat when we go overseas in a few weeks.

The Ven. Dr. Kelvin Wright has been Vicar of St John's Roslyn since January 1999.

He grew up in Dunedin, Lower Hutt and Christchurch and was trained for the Anglican priesthood in Auckland.

He was ordained in 1979. He holds degrees from the Universities of Canterbury and Otago and a Doctorate of Ministry from the San Francisco Theological Seminary.

Before coming to Dunedin he worked in the Christchurch and Waikato dioceses.

He is married to Clemency and has three children.

He participated in The Gawler Foundation's 10 day Life and Living Program in March 2009.

Visit his blog at www.vendr.blogspot.com