

Working for the currency of joy – a spiritual journey

Born a blacksmith's son in a small mining village in Derbyshire, Keith Simpson rose to become Director of Technical Services with a London Borough, where he managed 1400 blue collar staff. But on the way he had a 'born again' conversion experience in a Baptist church in Peterborough, which drew him to classic mysticism and set him on fire to tackle corruption in the industry. To the surprise of his associates, his focus is not on material wealth or possessions but on “Working for the currency of joy”.

Beginning at the beginning is relevant to the way my life has played out. I was born near the end of the Second World War in a small mining village in Derbyshire, the only son of the local pit blacksmith and a steel worker's daughter from Sheffield. My father died when I was 12 years of age due to Polycystic Disease, a genetic illness

which had killed his mother, brother and sister. His brother and sister died around the same time and because his sister's husband was left with three young children and – like most miners at the time – couldn't boil an egg, my mother began to take care of them. They lived just down the street, 250 yards from ourselves and this went on for

three years or so until they fell in love and decided to get married. So I now had two stepbrothers and a stepsister who were previously my cousins and we all got on really well.

Life continued normally until the late 1950s when our lives were turned upside down by Bill Hayley and the





Austin Westminster
Photo: Wikipedia

Comets. Rock 'n' roll swept the country and changed my life. A young man in our village, three years older than me, embraced the music and created his own pop group. I used to watch them rehearse, and then began watching them perform in local venues, until one day he was invited to appear in a Granada TV programme named "Scene at 6.30" and almost overnight became famous. His earnings went through the roof as the Beatles and Rolling Stones forged opportunities for dozens of pop groups such as his at the time. After a while he asked me if I would like to drive him around the country in his lovely new Austin Westminster car. He would pay me well. Contrary to my mother's wish, I left my apprentice draughtsman's job and hoped to have 12-18 months of excitement visiting venues all over the country. In fact the excitement lasted seven years and took me all over the world, meeting famous people, eating great food and staying in fabulous hotels such as the George V in Paris. When this amazing seven years ended I had not a clue what to do, but eventually began a training course to become a bricklayer with Sheffield City Council, a job for which I was totally unsuited.

My working life

However, during my time at the Council I progressed quickly from trainee

bricklayer, to foreman bricklayer, general foreman, site agent and eventually to contracts manager managing 400 trade staff building and refurbishing houses, schools and libraries. I left the Council in 1986 to take the job of Building Manager with Peterborough City Council where I managed the maintenance and refurbishment of their 11,000 homes. Staying there until 1990 I then moved to become Director of Technical Services with a London Borough, where I managed 1400 blue collar staff undertaking building maintenance, building cleaning, refuse collection, street sweeping and gardening to their 30,000 housing stock and public buildings. Alongside this I managed 200 administration staff, 100 building surveyors and 30 architects. I had renal failure in 1994 but blessed with a kidney transplant, I retired in 1996 to co-create a successful Housing Consultancy in London, selling my share to my co-founder in 2016. Whilst working in the consultancy, I created the Direct Works Forum in the year 2000 and the 125 Housing Association and Local Authority members now manage and maintain well over 50% of the 4.3 million social housing properties in the country. I retired from my position as Chair in June of 2020 since my health issues required further focus and attention.

A reflection on my spiritual life

Reflecting on my spiritual journey, I recall what I now realise was an important event in my spiritual life. I was around 15 years old when my friends and I went on a bike ride to a nearby village where there was a better provision of swings, roundabouts and girls! Cycling down a steep hill on the way home I went too quickly round a corner and lost control, landing in a ditch, and finishing up in hospital having badly damaged my stomach and intestines. I was so severely winded I couldn't breathe and thought I would die. But as I lay gasping for breath in the ditch, my memory like a film replaying my entire life and thinking I was dying, a voice in my head as clear as crystal said "Not yet, it is not your time". I was totally bemused and could not articulate the event to my friends. However it left me with a conviction that there was "something other, different and greater than me" in this universe of ours.

The next time a significant event happened to feed this conviction was 25 years later when my stepfather had a severe stroke, was taken into hospital and my mother explained to us that he had little or no chance of surviving. She decided to take all of us to the hospital in Sheffield to say goodbye to him. My



two stepbrothers and sister went in individually to say their goodbyes and then it was my turn. My stepfather's hands were the size of shovels, with coal fragments embedded under his skin. I sat by his bed and held his hand. The only way he could communicate was by slightly moving the fingers on his right hand. Holding his hand, I began by telling him how much I had grown to love and respect him over the years since he married my mother and thanked him for the advice, support and encouragement he had provided to me in my important teenage years and early marriage. I felt very slight pressure from his fingers at this time and then I said something which I had never planned to say and to this day don't understand just how it came out. I said "Jesus loves you Dad", at which point he gripped my hand so fiercely that I thought he would break my knuckles!! That night he died. Although my wife was a regular churchgoer I had not been to church since childhood. But this confirmed my feeling about "something other" which remained with me until we went to live in Peterborough eight years later, where a visit to Park Road Baptist Church (PRBC) made sense of it.

Applying for the job in Peterborough was a strange experience. The reason the job was being advertised was

because staff had been imprisoned for stealing huge amounts of materials. I was greeted in reception by the Deputy Building Manager who took me upstairs for the interview. On the way I told him that we would work really well together as I knew I was coming to Peterborough. I was successful in interview and moved my family to Peterborough and instigated new procedures to ensure that stealing could not happen again. This experience left me with a lifelong commitment to achieving value for money for the public purse and rooting out corruption.

We settled well and my wife, a lifelong Christian, chose Park Road Baptist Church and continued her practice of inviting me to join her. One Sunday morning I was contemplating a pile of daffodil bulbs that I had dug up and placed in a corner of my greenhouse the previous winter. They were all growing to express their beauty without any water or nutrient from soil but with just the energy stored within them. I thought, 'This is miraculous!' As she did every Sunday, my wife asked if I was coming to church and for the first time I said yes – a decision which changed my life forever! The date was April 1989.

I walked into Park Road Baptist Church with my wife, knowing virtually no

one and none of the hymns they sang. Feeling slightly awkward, I stood as the congregation sang each hymn but in the singing of what I have since learned was Charles Wesley's famous hymn "And can it be", I was contemplating a small wooden cross on the communion table, when the congregation arrived at the line in the fourth verse "my chains fell off, my heart was free". My life changed in an instant! I was literally knocked to the floor by what I can only describe as a "tsunami of love" that physically knocked me to the ground in an experience of pure joy and bliss.

I believe this unique joy cannot be experienced other than in being reconciled to God and is something which stays with you forever, as you are absolutely "born again". In the two or three seconds of falling and being on the floor, seven things were conveyed to me which have formed the basis of my life ever since. (1) The truth will set you free, (2) Learn to pray (3) Bury your ego (4) Be true to yourself, (5) The more you give, the more you get, (6) The universe is spirit (7) and finally I was left with a love for all humanity and a burning desire for every human being to achieve their potential.

Goodness me, there are enough things to address in those seven statements to



Walls of Jerusalem

Photo: Wikipedia

last anyone a lifetime. I'm still trying to bury my ego and learning to pray after well over 30 years of endeavour! However, that mystical "tsunami-type experience" has given me the absolute assurance that I and the rest of humanity are loved beyond measure by God, who is continually pouring out His love to sustain the universe and everything in it. I have found that the continual attempt to act selflessly and bury my ego releases "an enlightened insight" that gives me a greater perception of this ultimate reality which continues to bring me great joy. My reading of the experiences of Christian mystics like St Paul, St. John, St. Augustine, Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila and Bernard of Clairvaux has also brought me great joy.

Trying to articulate the "mystical tsunami experience" is very difficult but other recipients have described it far more eloquently than I. Here are three examples from John Buchan and R.M.Buckle which very closely mirror my own, especially the third one from Dr. Buckle. The fourth is from a poem by Rumi, my favourite Muslim mystic.

(1) *"There and then came to me the hour of revelation scents, sights and sounds blended into a harmony so perfect that it transcended human expression, even human thought. It was like a glimpse of the peace of eternity."*

(2) *"Directly there came upon me a sense of exultation, of immense joyousness, accompanied and immediately followed by an intellectual illumination quite impossible to describe."*

(3) *"Like a flash there is presented to his consciousness, a vision of the meaning and drift of the universe. He does not come to believe merely but he sees and KNOWS that the cosmos, which to the self-conscious mind seems made up of dead matter, is in fact far otherwise, it is in truth a living presence. He sees that life which is in man eternal... that the foundation principle of the world is that which we call love. Especially does he obtain such a conception of the whole, as makes the old attempt mentally to grasp the universe and its meaning petty and ridiculous."*

(4) *As salt resolved in the ocean,
I was swallowed in God's sea;
Past faith and unbelieving,
Past doubt past certainty.*

*Suddenly in my bosom,
A star shone clear and bright;
All the suns of heaven
Vanished in that star's light.*

*Flowers every night,
Blossom in the sky;
Peace in the infinite,
At peace am I.*

A church-organised visit to Israel was a very significant episode in my Christian life just a few years after my baptism. We stayed at the Catholic Seminary in Jerusalem and my first impression of walking in the city, was of God weeping through the walls of the city at the pain and grief that the three Abrahamic religions had perpetrated upon the world throughout the last 4,000 years.

My mystical experience sometimes places me in an awkward situation with some of my Christian friends. My experience reconciled me to God in a once-and-for-all experiential event and my focus since has been trying to understand the experience and why it happened to me? I constantly read books written by or about mystics, most of whom have had revelations such as mine and I obtained real benefit and wisdom from the practice. The first I read 28 years ago was F.C.Happold's *Mysticism – A study and anthology* and this has led me to read the writings of modern-day mystics such as Thomas Merton, Richard Rohr, Cynthia Bourgeault and James Finlay. The line from "On the move", the poem by the 1950's poet Thom Gunn, sums up my developing relationship with God perfectly, "One is always nearer by moving forward".

The effect of my spiritual experience at work

Following my experience and baptism at PRBC in Peterborough I was absolutely on fire with evangelising everyone I met and God provided plenty of opportunities. I was left with a deep desire to legitimise the organisation at the large council depot and I consequently sat down with trade union representatives and agreed new methods of operation that were better for both the council and the employees. The organisation subsequently went on to win awards for service excellence and I was invited all over the country to explain how we did it.

I found that one of the most effective ways of promoting the Christian faith in the sort of male working-class environment that I was working in, was to ask people not to blaspheme by saying “Jesus Christ” when they were angry. I would explain that it was offensive to me and kindly not to use it in front of me, a request that almost always attracted an apology and actually set the tone for future conversations.

When I left Peterborough Council and began daily commuting by train to London for my new job in a London Borough, I must have been a

nightmare to the other passengers as my evangelical zeal was still at its peak. I would take my Bible with me, find a seat at a table for four and if anyone was reading a tabloid such as the Daily Mail, I would gently take hold of it and offer to exchange it for my Bible, telling them that he/she would find little or nothing in the Mail to give them joy but the Bible was full of wisdom to make joy a central part of their life. The reactions were generally a gentle rebuke but on a number of occasions it stimulated conversations that I hope gave them things to think about.

Arriving at work in the London Borough I quickly found that corruption was prevalent and the organisation required an immediate need for reorganisation as it was grossly inefficient. The major avenue for corruption was through a large number of my 120 building surveyors overvaluing work and sharing the difference with the contractor. My commitment to addressing the inefficiency of the organisation required a total reorganisation with the introduction of new procedures.

But before I could analyse the position and write a report, my Deputy wrote and submitted his own report to the Council. I felt publicly humiliated and alone. Very dejected I sat on my bed in the hotel and

prayed the only righteous prayer that I have ever prayed. It went something like “Lord, I’m 100 miles from home, stressed out and convicted that I’m here do your will but I am unable to succeed here without your intervention. I demand that you guide events here to enable me to make the changes required to make sure that public money is spent correctly”. I went to bed and slept. The following morning to my great surprise my Deputy walked in and said “I have not slept well and need to apologise for the report I wrote, putting you in that position with Council members. My report was produced for selfish reasons and I realise now it was not in the best interest of the organisation. I would sincerely like to work with you to produce the new report for next month.” We worked together, introduced the reorganisation and the organisation was transformed. With the assistance of elected Council members I was able to dismiss a large percentage of the offenders; we calculated the loss to the Council had been over £1million/year.

The most significant thing to happen regarding corruption was when an asbestos contractor came to see me and explained that the officers in my organisation had given false evidence in a libel case that he had brought against Channel 4 and Yorkshire Television.



George Carman QC

Photo: Paul Fievez



They had lied because he would not pay them for winning work and his turnover had fallen from £1.5m to £200,000 as a result. He offered to compromise my corrupt officers if I supported him in the appeal that he was mounting. These incidents had happened three or four years previously so I asked my accountant to explore our financial records to confirm what the contractor had said about his turnover; he did this a couple of days later.

It was then my turn to attend the Court of Appeal to give evidence on behalf of the contractor against the TV companies. That was a unique experience, as they were represented by George Carman QC, one of the most famous lawyers in the country at that time. He gave me a hard time in the cross-examination, but I knew the truth and stuck to it for what seemed like an eternity. The contractor was represented by another QC, and his solicitor was from Peter, Carter, Ruck,

who were the most expensive libel lawyers in London at the time. Following all the evidence being given, the judge pronounced his judgement that was to award the contractor £1.4 million in damages.

The Currency of Joy

So, here I am, 77 years old and still committed to people achieving their potential. All my associates and friends now know I'm an "Unorthodox Christian" and the new acquaintances that I meet on a daily basis soon become aware, as they see my focus is not on material wealth or possessions but on "Working for the currency of joy". The fact that the work I still do at my own expense to improve the quality of training, the value for money in government spending and mentoring lots of people to help them achieve their potential is a shock to most of them. When they ask why, I reveal to them

my experience 30 years ago and ask if they have ever experienced joy in their lives. Most say they have experienced happiness, but not real joy. That gives me the opportunity to explain the great difference between happiness and joy. There are many things that can make us extremely happy, like your football or cricket team winning, the birth of a child or getting married, but none of those feelings is remotely comparable to the joy and bliss of being reconciled to God. That unique feeling is one of actually feeling that your heart will burst and you will not live through the absolute bliss of the experience. On occasions whilst driving my car and having a quiet time with God, the joy has returned and I have had to pull over in the nearest layby or risk having an accident!

Well there you have it, not the normal Christian journey but then what is normal about God's relationship with all of humanity? 🙏🏻



Keith Simpson is now about to begin advising the C of E on their project to build affordable housing on 200,000 acres of land which they own. He is also assisting his friend in developing the National Retrofit Academy to train new apprentices to undertake the critical work of ensuring that our 27 million houses meet zero carbon emissions by 2050.