

Parliament of World Religions Reflection

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HOPE

'I would draw a distinction between being an optimist and being a hopeful person...I think sometimes it's problematic to talk about hope for the future. I try to live hopefully now: that's all we have any control over'.¹

These words from Kathy Galloway, director of Christian Aid, Scotland, sum up the essence of my personal reflection of the University of Edinburgh Chaplaincy delegation's visit to the Parliament of World Religions in Australia during November and December of 2009. I came away with a newly realized sense of hope for all we are striving to achieve as a Chaplaincy provision in Higher Education, and for a growing consciousness of how people of diverse traditions and beliefs might help bring healing to the earth community and this beautiful planet.

The 5,500 people attending the Parliament, the world's largest interreligious gathering, represented many of the diverse cultures and religious / spiritual communities of the planet. They were drawn together by a common sense that 'in today's world, understanding between people of different traditions is not optional. It is essential... (to) foster interreligious, civil and cross-cultural dialogue on important local, national, and global issues and promote and encourage social cohesion within societies locally and across the world'.²

A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE

Our University delegation of students and staff included a Buddhist, three Christians, (spanning conservative, progressive and Spiritualist communities), a Hindu, a Muslim and a Shaman. We were, in our diversity, a microcosm of the Parliament gathering. We felt that reality keenly. We all wanted to extend the experience we already shared in the University Chaplaincy by somehow deepening our appreciation of living and working together as a diverse community, 'a world of difference'.³

Experiencing afresh what it means to develop deep relationships across diversity is one of the most significant experiences I have come away from the Parliament still cherishing. The daily context of the Parliament ethos and programme valued and celebrated diversity. For our own University team it was the sense of flourishing trust, understanding, compassion and fun we discovered as we spent quality time together, leading workshops, making significant contacts, participating in sessions and ceremonies, sharing meals and exploring the places we travelled through and stayed in, that proved the worth of this special journey. The reality of sharing simple human living, with its mix of ease and disease, sadness and joy, struggle and agreement, despair and hope, was authentically enriching.

PARLIAMENT PRESENTATIONS

i) Documentary Film

The two presentations that we offered in the main programme of Parliament events fed this sense of team flourishing and, gave to those who participated, by their choice to be present at our sessions, a genuine engagement with the celebration of diversity. Our home made film, 'All We've Got: A Documentary Film about Hope', documenting how we manage 'questions that matter' and 'issues that concern' when faced with personal and collective difference, within our life in Chaplaincy and the wider University, opened up the profound questions of dealing with a multi-cultural and multi-faith reality in a high profile institution of Higher Education.

The feedback from our pre-Parliament workshop at the Australian HE Chaplains' Conference, as well as our workshop at the Parliament, surprised us with how the work we are doing via the Chaplaincy is genuinely respected and appears to be largely ahead of the field. We were deeply encouraged. However, knowing the human reality and personal cost of our work, I admit to leaving more challenged than complacent!

ii) Labyrinth Walk – a metaphor of journeying together

The experience of offering a labyrinth walk as a time of spiritual observance or practice was equally well received. As an experienced labyrinth facilitator, consultant and teacher of labyrinth work, I felt our labyrinth session at the Parliament should not pose too great a problem to execute. Despite continuing practical difficulties with the venue, right up until moments before our early morning workshop, our spirits were lifted by the kindness of folk from the local labyrinth community in Melbourne, who loaned us their canvas labyrinth and supported our session in body and spirit!

Some members of our team had a little experience of working with, and walking, labyrinths. For others this spiritual practice was something completely new. Yet all were committed to supporting the session and giving Parliament delegates an opportunity of metaphorically creating their own 'world of difference' in walking the circular path together.

The sensitive and professional way the team managed the session was a metaphor in itself of our developing trust in each other and in what we can offer others. To allow 40-50 walkers a peaceful and unhurried labyrinth walk in the hour allotted was quite amazing. I was very moved by the team's work and the reflections of the walkers...

'My first labyrinth. It was a wonderful, deeply spiritual experience! Beautiful clarity of mind. Thank you for the opportunity.'

'Very relaxing – I started off wanting to walk very quickly and found myself naturally slowing down after a while...very uplifting.'

'This walking path is a wonderful and soul deep start on a new life path.'

‘It struck me as a powerful metaphor of the mixture of ‘doing your own thing’ and ‘living in community.’

AUSTRALIAN LABYRINTH COMMUNITY

During my stay in Australia I was able to connect with the labyrinth communities in Melbourne and Canberra. This proved immensely invaluable.

In 2004, I had walked the Rachum Labyrinth in Canberra. The experience of that walk had laid the basis for ongoing connection with the Rachum labyrinth community and their work, and the development of my own labyrinth work in the University of Edinburgh, UK and Europe. This return visit enabled me to meet the owner and builder of the Rachum Labyrinth, Alison Meretini, for the first time. She invited me to spend a day in the bush walking this beautiful Chartres type labyrinth again, then honoured me by inviting me to lead a ritual of blessing of a much larger, land labyrinth which was already beginning to take shape on the property.

The following morning the wider Rachum group met for breakfast in the Eucalyptus Field of Canberra Botanical Gardens. We talked about the development of their project and how we might support one another, then, to my utter surprise, we had an impromptu launch of my book ‘Labyrinth-landscape of the soul’. It was a moment of joy and delight watched over by four curious kangaroos sat under the nearby trees!

Back in Melbourne I met with Lorraine Rodda, the Australian Representative of Veriditas (a not-for-profit organization dedicated to introducing people to the healing, meditative powers of the labyrinth) and The Labyrinth Society, Inc. She publishes an Australia wide newsletter, ‘Labyrinth Matters’, that seeks to build community, share good practice and encourage walkers and facilitators of labyrinths across the country. I was particularly interested in how such a tool as a national Newsletter could be of help to the steadily expanding use of labyrinths in the UK, not only within Institutions of Higher Education, but also within hospitals, hospices, primary and secondary education, retreat and spirituality centres, prisons, parks, private gardens and the leisure industry.

One of the highlights of my connection with the Melbourne labyrinth community was the experience of receiving a ‘welcome to the country’ by Shane Charles, a Yorta Yorta man of the Kulin Nation and descendent of the local Wurundjeri Clan, and then walking the twilight, candle-lit Reconciliation Labyrinth (laid out in Batman Park at the side of the Yarra River), to the healing sounds of the didgeridoo.

‘As you journey on Our ancient land, travel gently on Our Mother Earth, with respect and care. Hold the Spirit of the Sacred campfire always in your heart and may the Spirits of Our Ancestors always watch over you and keep you safe.’
Mutthi Mutthi



Rev Di Williams holding her book, *Labyrinth, Landscape of the Soul*, with friends.