PENELOPE ECKERSLEY

From an unpublished book on Remarkable Women by Brian Frost
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I first met Penelope Eckersley outside Westminster Abbey in the late 1950's. We were introduced by a mutual friend, Marjorie Milne, who founded the Cathedral Prayer Movement for Christian Unity. Penelope had taken over from George Appleton the prayers for unity he had organised in London while secretary of The Conference of British Missionary Societies and each Friday, from twelve to three, Penelope and others would pray for unity in St. Faith's Chapel, a task she kept up till the mid-1960s.

At out first meeting outside the Abbey's west Door I was struck immediately by her temperament. With scarf tucked firmly round her head, as she talked it was clear she came from an educated background and had been seized by the need to pray. Indeed, in the mid-60s it was Penelope who organised Marjorie's Annual Day on the Feast of the Transfiguration when for the first time since the Reformation a robed Benedictine spoke in Westminster Abbey.

Penelope's background scarcely prepared her for the contemplative life she has lived. Her father, Sam Hammersley, was Member of Parliament for Stockport from 1924-1935, and subsequently for East Willesden from 1938-1945. A grammar school boy, who held to the Macmillan middle way in politics, he had come from a mill owning background. A friend of both Maynard Keynes and Nye Bevan, he was an admirer of Iain Macleod's One Nation Toryism and used to say he was a Conservative because he thought socialism an infringement of people's right to manage their own lives.

Penelope's mother, Kate Wakeley, was born in London but brought up in Guernsey, though educated at a school near Bishop Stortford, where her grandmother, a woman with a gentility rather like a character in a Janet Austen novel, lived.

Brilliant, but the possessor of an untrained mind, her mother had five daughters of whom Penelope, born in 1920, was the eldest. It was a source of sadness to her mother that she never had a son. In practical things she relied on her husband just as he relied on her for her judgement of character. Both parents went to church on specific occasions, driven by their chauffeur in the family Daimler from Dunham Massey in Cheshire, where they lived, into his constituency in Stockport.

When Penelope was three a middle-aged nanny arrived and stayed for thirty-two years. Very stable, she was a great influence, teaching Penelope what truth was and helping her make moral judgements. She was also strict about not telling tales.

Penelope was rather bossy with her sisters, the youngest fifteen years her junior. With one of them she wrote an encyclopaedia of world politicians. At boarding school, where Penelope first learned to stand on her own feet, she had her first religious inclinations. She remembers walking back in crocodile file from the village church at Catsfield in Sussex when she was eleven (it was High Anglican and they used to go to the Eucharist) and asking a friend: "Do you believe in this God business? If it's true, then it's going to change my whole life."[1] After that it was only a short time before Penelope asked if she could be confirmed.

Penelope also became politically aware then. The husband of her headmistress had been military correspondent of The Daily Telegraph so she made sure the girls attended lectures on contemporary subjects. Mr. Hammerseley's secretary had a boyfriend who had fought on the Republican side in the Spanish civil war and this further sensitised Penelope who, like many others, was influenced by the Left Book Club founded in 1935 by Victor Gollancz. Penelope was captivated by Gollancz and walked in the first demonstration, "Czechoslovakia must remain free", behind him and the Red Dean, about whom she had known since a girl in Cheshire, where he had been a vicar. She even laid down in Trafalgar Square to stop the buses in her enthusiasm.

Penelope's growing political awareness had been heightened by four months in Vienna in 1937 where her parents had sent her to learn German and the Piano. Here she became aware of the twice-life size pictures of Hitler and the building up of the *anchluss*. She made life-long friends in Vienna but her father would not let her return because of the growing menace of Hitler.

The problem was: what was she to do? Being part of the social events of the year – she was one of the last debutantes to be presented in full regalia at Buckingham Palace – was hardly likely to occupy someone like Penelope with such a lively mind for long. She stayed in digs in Oxford, taking part in the production of A Midsummer Night's Dream at Worcester College, and while there she applied for a two-year course in journalism at King's College, London, which she took.

She lived in a flat in Sloane Street and attended lectures by Isaacs on modern English literature, Hugh Gaitskell on economics and Tom Clark, formerly editor of The Daily Mail, on the craft of the journalist. She was particularly struck by the writings of Sean O'Casey and J.M Synge and became aware of Ireland's struggles and the failure of Home Rule policies through her reading. As a member of the National Union of Journalists she also spent a day every week in the law courts.

Her father's best friend was Bonar Law's son, Lord Coleraine, and through him, and more especially his American wife, Penelope came to appreciate American literature, particularly Steinbeck and Faulkner. She also started reading French writers like Louis Ferdinand Celine, a precursor of Sartre.

By 1939 Penelope was making new friends, one the niece of the Danish Ambassador, which led to two holidays in Denmark. Her parents owned a great castle, and in the year Penelope stayed with them there was much tension among the Danish upper class families she met as German submarines were in the Danish Baltic ports, on one of which Penelope took tea.

That year, while her parents were in St. Tropez, and Penelope was looking after her youngest sister, she got to know better a neighbour called Timothy Eckersley. He also lived in the same area of Sussex where her parents had a house and a steady friendship developed. It led Penelope marrying him a year later when she was nineteen.

Tim's mother, a militant atheist, had friends like the writer Vita Sackville West and the pianist Noel Mewton-Wood, who lived in her house. Tim's father, a member of the Huxley family, whose hobby was composing and playing jazz on the piano, was Director of Programmes at the BBC. Tim himself did not then regard religion as significant. It was a remnant of a less developed time, he argued, and had a row with Penelope over the use of the Lord's Prayer.

During one vacation from King's Penelope managed to find a job with the Kent and Sussex Courier, writing about how people in the countryside were preparing for war. When it came she did not return to King's. As women were being called up, the paper's managing director suggested Penelope find a hospital job, which she did becoming an untrained almoner.

Over the past years Penelope's faith had been enlarged, partly through an encounter with Roman Catholicism in Austria, partly through an Irish Catholic boyfriend at King's. Now, as she settled down to married life, and the Battle of Britain raged over their heads, she was quietly leaving the matter of her husband's lack of faith to God and coping with the growing difficulties the war was causing.

In 1941 their first son, Toby, was born and Penelope's job ended. Tim, who was working for the BBC, found himself making recordings of pro-allied politicians like Masaryk which were then dropped over occupied Europe. He then went into the Army, and was eventually posted to Germany, after having done some secret work for the foreign office. Earlier, when he was only twenty, he had been shown into a room in the BBC where there were old discs and no method of storage and told to set up a record library. There was no time to do this now but eventually he and colleagues like Anna Instone did establish such a library.

By now their second child, Charlotte, had been born and they had to move. Penelope was left to bring up two children on her own as Tim became more and more involved in the tragedies of the war. Indeed by 1945 he was officer commanding a Polish DP camp where he contracted TB, which returned in the 1950s when he had to have a year off work. Tim also attended the Nuremberg trials for the BBC.

Penelope continued her political interests throughout the war, becoming a founder member of Buxted Labour Party, a fact not likely to please her father. She found that soldiers returning from the war had a deep sense of commitment, a commitment she shared, reading Denis Healey's writings and hoping for a Labour victory in 1945.

When Tim eventually returned together they set up a branch of the Worker's Educational Association. Penelope also joined a Shakespeare reading party and continued to be involved with people in trouble. Her son Toby remembers still a tramp with a red beard, "Old Bill"[2], who his mother helped, help given again and again after their move to London in 1957 to countless other broken people.

Through the church in Sussex to which Penelope belonged she became secretary of the local school governors and also a parish councillor.

During the war Tim's scepticism about religion had altered. Indeed he was converted to Christianity. When he returned to Britain a friend had suggested he went to The Society of St. Francis in Dorset and by 1948 both he and Penelope became friends of the Anglican friars, visiting them at Hillfield Friary. From then on Franciscans were part of Tim's life. He knew and was influenced especially by Father Algy Robertson, who, with others, had first started the friary in the 1930's. Later Penelope found herself more and more involved with the Franciscans and their way of living.

Penelope had become disenchanted with all the sabre rattling and during and after the war toyed with becoming a Quaker, reading about the life of George Fox and the beginnings of Quakerism. She also continued to write poetry (she had begun when eight), often about her experiences of the natural world.

By 1950 Penelope was the mother of three, Tom having been born in 1948. But her family would have been different had her daughter Tabitha lived. June 4th, 1947, was the day "on which Taby was born, very easily and quickly, early in the morning. I had been exceptionally busy the day before and was not expecting her for another three or four days," Penelope has written. "All her life she was an easy and happy baby. Charlotte and Toby were thrilled with her and lying on my bed after feeding her, I would talk and play with her as she smiled and gurgled away so responsively."

Then something happened which has left Penelope "for all my time bereft, bereft of her, her future and her smile."[3] On August 27th she went to fetch three month old Tabitha from her pram after giving her other two children their lunch. "There, sticking out from the thin cotton sheet, which was all she had covering her, were her little feet – quite blue."[4]

Penelope realised instantly that her daughter, limp and floppy in her arms, was dead. "Now, whenever I hear of 'cot death'," she observes, "…my heart gives a kind of thump and I see those little blue feet."[5]

For some time Penelope was unable to give love to anyone for she was frozen in grief. Only her husband's strength helped the family survive. Indeed she thinks now "the other two were permanently affected" and that this was partly her fault, because she could not let her daughter go."[6] Penelope was, in fact, to have another child, Tim, born in 1953, but the pain of her daughter's death has cast a deep shadow over her life.

At the end of the 1940's there was much talk of reconciliation in Europe. Penelope, preoccupied with bringing up young children, was unable to do much socially, but heard of the work for Christian Unity of the Abbe Couturier. He was slowly helping change the attitude of Roman Catholics to other Christians through prayer for the unity of Christians by the means Christ willed. She felt praying was something she <u>could</u> do, too, so began praying as Couturier had suggested.

Tim and Penelope were now on the same journey, though with different perspectives and insights. "You cannot write about Penelope Eckersley without writing about Tim,"[7] Gordon Wakefield, who knew them in the 1960s, has explained. Indeed it was in 1962 that they were bound together even more deeply than when Tabitha had died. Driving to see a doctor friend in South Wales they had a very serious car accident when their car was turned upside down with Penelope, Tim and their young sons in it. When Penelope came to in the ambulance she saw her sons were alright sitting on the little seats at the end of her and Tim's stretchers. Turning her head around she saw her husband unconscious on the other stretcher with blood pouring from his head. Then she lost consciousness again.

Several days later in the intensive care unit Penelope became anxious that she was not being told the truth about him because she herself was so ill. One of the doctors was the person they were intending to visit so she told him she had to see her husband. The doctor told Penelope they could not move her but would bring Tim from his ward the next day. After two days when Tim himself had recovered consciousness he was thinking the same thing about Penelope she discovered when they put him in a wheelchair beside her bed and they held hands and in their weakness and thankfulness let the tears run down their faces.

It was experience like the death of their daughter and their own escape from a brush with death which without doubt cemented the partnership between Tim and Penelope. Naturally it developed as the years passed and their different interests fed and enlarged one another, but its underlying strength had been deepened by that shared suffering.

No-one can understand Penelope without appreciating what family life means to her. Yet she always brings to it a strong sense of boundaries, perhaps because of her own ambivalence to her parents, especially to her mother's difficult personality. So as a wife and mother Penelope has always seen the need both for intimacy and distance in all relationships. Perhaps it is her class background which leads her to this approach. At any rate it is a major ingredient in her make-up. Nevertheless strong affection is there, too, distilled through her disciplined personality and focussed by a mind which has been sharpened by her wide reading.

Writing in 1991 Penelope has commented on a visit to America she made where one of her sons lives with his Chinese wife. "I had a very interesting time in the States," she recalled, "and acquired my first half-Chinese grandson – Benjamin Chung Ying. His second name was given him by his grandfather and means "central hero" – central as "in between" cultures. Quite a load for a pretty small fellow."[8] Here in this clipped style is contained both affection and restraint, obvious delight in her role, an easy acceptance of diversity, yet a certain perspective. It is the essence of Penelope.

Penelope has tried to link our basic experience of family with our wider relationships, saying things that like others when young she had seen the nuclear family as a trap, inhibiting growth and aspirations, even though watching her younger sisters grow and "responding to their love and the love of my parents for all of us," had been basically a rewarding experience. "It was a pattern of responding and responsibility which in some form runs through all prayer and

community life,"[9] she has noted. She does not, therefore, want to withdraw from the facts of our primary experience. Rather she wants them to help us learn how to encompass others. Hence her growing Franciscanism as she ran an open house, and her lack of a sense of hierarchy. "All sorts of people have been given hospitality,"[10] one Franciscan has observed, who considers Penelope's generosity one of the marks of an authentic follower of St Francis.

In the 1960's Penelope needed a role outside the home. Feeling disillusioned with human achievement in the field of political and social activity, she wanted to get behind the ideas which shaped history. Accordingly she became a mature student in the philosophy department at King's College, doing parts of the BD in the philosophy of religion. She enjoyed the work greatly, developing a side of herself she had in part inherited from her father, who had died earlier. Indeed, one of Penelope's sadnesses was being unable to share this development with him.

Working from 1965-9 with Professor H.D Lewis and Geoffrey Parrinder, among others, Penelope found very stimulating. She also belonged to the Institute of philosophy, starting her study by reading Gilbert Ryle's *The concept of Mind*. She had epistemology classes first with Vessey, then with Peter Winch and became familiar with the writings of Wittgenstein, Anthony Flew and Gabriel Marcel. Wittgenstein she liked because "he is so undogmatic." "Not how the world is but <u>that</u> it is the mystery,"[11] she savours still as his profound perception on the human predicament, as we search for meaning in the universe.

Penelope also encountered the writings of de Chardin and became a member of Canon Milford's study group on his writings. She felt Teilhard was helpful because he had a system of belief which was "opening new doors," though his language was sometimes difficult to follow.

Penelope also read A.J Ayer's *The Problem of Knowledge*, but did not find it easy to defend him "because he was such an atheist."[12] She was also one of those who responded to the God is Dead movement stemming from America, and read David Jenkins' *Guide to the Debate about God*. The theology department at King's was against the logical positivists and this had an effect on her thinking as well. Evenings with Eric Mascall, too, when he argues in his precise way for traditional understanding of Christian faith, also stretched her mind.

In the mid-1960's Penelope also became part of a group called The Epiphany Philosophers, focussed around the Cambridge journal *Theoria to Theory*, where she associated with Professor Dorothy Emmet and Richard Braithwaite, and they too, opened her mind to concerns she had hitherto ignored.

Because Penelope was listening to lectures from Geoffrey Parrinder she found herself studying comparative religions. For the first time she came across the writings of Pannikar on Hinduism and this deepened her interest in the world faiths, an interest which has stayed with her.

The course, with its essays, lectures and debates, gave Penelope more confidence. She knew she could not be an academic, but now felt able to look for a job to help her fulfil her potential as the children were in their teens and one, Charlotte, even married with children. So when in 1969 she was approached to become co-ordinating secretary for the Association for Promoting Retreats, an Anglican

group primarily concerned with silent retreats, it seemed the right job for her to take.

Penelope already had experience of retreats and the job fitted in with existing family commitments. She had, however, one provision before saying yes. She needed to be sure she could open it up to other Christian traditions and freedom to say it should die if necessary.

In 1969 Penelope organised a large conference on spirituality at Manchester University. It was here Gordon Wakefield first met her. She struck him "as a typically holy woman, full of good works…"[13] He saw even then that "part of the clue" to Penelope was her husband and that her spirituality included her family commitments. Moreover she was "a discerning and sympathetic person, shrewd and knowledgeable…a woman with an immense gift for friendship in the true sense of the word." He recognised she could mix with men without their being romantically involved with her for she had "a Christian love which was totally beneficent." This he felt was due to her relation with her husband "a more amicable person who just had grace, an amazing partner in the background."[14]

Penelope was administrator of A.P.R for ten years. When she started it was almost entirely a High Anglican group. When she finished, though she stayed on A.P.R's standing committee from 1979-89, Penelope had seen it join with Free Church groups which had sprung up and the Roman Catholic National Retreat Movement to form one umbrella organisation, the National Retreat Council, with headquarters in Mayfair.

"The retreat movement owes Penelope Eckersley an enormous debt," Father Christopher Lowe considers, especially for the way she never ruffled feathers but was masterly with difficult people. Tactful but firm in what she wanted to do she brought to the retreat movement a "zip"[15], especially helping to widen Anglican understanding of what was possible in a retreat.

In this she was helped by her growing contacts with Roman Catholic religious orders. The Cenacle sisters, Jesuits in Liverpool and Manchester, and some of the Carmelites at Aylesford, helped her in these developments, which needed political skills as well as a strong determination to travel along new paths, yet showing appreciation for previous ways. Here she was fortunate for she could draw on her experience both as an almoner and a journalist. Even what she had learned about managing a family – her children were now bringing student friends to stay – was useful she discovered.

Penelope became specially sensitive to the needs of young people, whom she described as "looking for some form of inner discipline and meditation…which will bring them some kind of peace, and a better understanding of themselves and the world."[16] She felt basically they were seeking a new way of life which was Christian "and if we fail them and they turn to other religions which lack an incarnational theology, we must not be surprised if they become drop-outs or advocates of violence."[17] Aware that young people saw Christian disunity as a denial of the fundamental unity of all people she knew clearly that the problems of pluralism had to be taken seriously. Christians now had to grapple with issues of spirituality as keenly as they had done when they had developed acts of common service[18].

Penelope also brought the retreat movement a strong sense of God in nature. "There is in her," her son Toby considers, "a pantheistic streak – seeing God in everything."[19] Indeed, she is probably one of those Christians who is more theocentric than Christocentric.

"One of the best ways of slowing down in a retreat," Penelope has written, "is to give time to becoming more aware of God's presence in the natural world around you. Nothing is too small or ordinary for this kind of attention…Walk in a quiet place, feel the air around you, breathe deeply of this wonderful free gift which sustains our life. Look up at the sky and the trees; see the spaces between the leaves; feel the wind and the sun on your face. Without possessing anything we enjoy all this – and we are part of it."

"Use all your senses," she continues, "sight, hearing, touch and smell, to be aware of the reality of God within all that he has created. "Matter is the garment of the divine," the Japanese Christian Kagawa used to say. So often we only see the garment. It does not matter what we focus on; a stone by the path, the bark of a tree, the water in a stream. It is the quality of our attention which is important, through this we see beneath the garment. There is a Zen saying, 'Take some object, do not move on to another object. In this object is the blessing'."[20]

Already in this early piece of writing Penelope showed her wide reading and her skill at sharing the insights of others as she drew on De Caussade and de Chardin as well as Simon Weil, the Upanishads and the Desert Fathers. Her advice always was a sober realism. "Even if you come to the end of your retreat more aware of the dark side of yourself," she remarked, "and the darkness and the pain of the world, this can also be something to offer to God in thankfulness. For to be on a Christian journey is to seek not only your own peace, but to be a better instrument of peace and compassion for others. We cannot be this if we ignore the world's pain and our own part in it."[21] "When we learn to accept this amazing world with all its paradoxes," Penelope concluded, "we understand how much more we have to learn, both about it and from it. It is "the Way" – Tao. Jesus walked this way in our flesh, seeking God's presence always."[22]

In 1974 Tim Eckersley should have retired from the BBC but stayed on a few more years. Before Penelope had become administrator of A.P.R they had done much together, inheriting a Sussex cottage from his parents, where they spent weekends shaping the garden and enjoying the Sussex countryside. They also camped all over Europe, often combining their holiday with the annual conference of Sound Archives and Music Libraries. Tim liked taking photographs of churches and stone and wood carvings. If you are radical, as Penelope considers she is, "you have to have your roots in something,"[23] she feels, so enjoyed his interests as much as he did.

Indeed Penelope has always been keen to link past and future creatively, as Terry Tastard noticed when he stayed with Penelope, during a change of vocation. Her house was revealing, each piece individual and unique, in harmony with everything else. "There is a sense of someone who values individuality in her possessions and in her friends," he considers. "In her L-shaped room there are contemporary pieces, antiques and pieces from the 1930's – tradition and the present moment."[24]

It was as well Tim and Penelope had shared life so fully together for suddenly in 1977 he fell ill. He had so many things he wanted to do, but the doctor's diagnosis was terminal cancer. Tim turned out to be a good patient as he grew used to regular injections of periwinkle which made him very sick, managing its effect by going to bed for the day. Once a month he knew he had to have a quiet week, but he was determined still to savour life.

For three years their life together revolved around the injections. Penelope's task was to support Tim as he tried to enjoy life as much as possible. They did what they could together. There was for example a memorable visit to Lindisfarne, when Tim took beautiful pictures of St. Cuthbert's Island and other spots. At home they had to cope with Penelope's mother who lived with them and was suffering from Alzheimer's disease, and this was a cause of tension yet when at the end of May 1980 they stayed with Peter de Rosa in Ireland he wrote afterwards to say he had been surprised there was "so much celebrating."

Penelope's children handled the news of their father's illness maturely, though there was the inevitable anxiety. Toby in particular felt Penelope "managed Tim's death well, which minimised its impact."[25]

Penelope continued working until 1979 when she had left A.P.R to organise a large ecumenical retreat conference at Hulme Hall, Manchester. How did she find the strength to do her job, care for her sick mother, latterly hardly able to communicate at all, and her husband? "I think I drew on the strength which I'd discovered working out my doubts about faith," she has observed, "as well as the more contemplative side of the pattern I'd developed of silence and prayer."[26] At the same time she was strengthened by the way Tim had matured and become such a strong person. Indeed by the time of his death his faith was stronger than it had ever been.

When Tim died in 1980 the anguish was great. At his memorial service at St. James's, Piccadilly, Brother Bernard, S.S.F, asked people to contribute what they recalled about Tim. One nephew spoke movingly of how Tim had always understood young people. The same can be said of Penelope and her non-judgemental attitude, too. Moreover, it is her ability to savour each moment of living, both the agony and the ecstasy, which carries her along. "I get something out of everything I do,"[27] she has said. "There was," Toby Eckersley has added about his mother's bereavement "no bitterness or suppressed rage, or turning inwards". Rather there was "a reconciliation with these matters which kept the energy going."[28]

Penelope's poems – she wrote one in 1976, another in 1980 and others throughout the 1980's – show a more complex response as quietly she allowed herself to mourn:

> There's a small rose wet with rain
> My love, my friend,
> Bright jewel on the faded bush
> Whose last red flower
> Your coffin decked.
> The summer sun which shone
> My love, my friend,

The day we planted it, was warm
With trust, enfolding all
Our time together.

Like rain my tears are shed
My love, my friend,
With each drop carving deep
A hollow in my heart
To hold the world.

Gently the folded petals hold
My shining tears.
Tender as a winter rose
My anguished heart holds you
My love, my friend.[29]

Penelope was fifty-nine when her husband died. What should she do? For a while she ran Dunamis at St. James', Piccadilly, concerned with disarmament and other matters. But she found herself locked between a number of powerful men and after six months knew its manner of working was not for her. Moreover she was being pressed to continue leading retreats, so she took a two-year course with the National Retreat Movement.

Earlier in her life she had been involved in ecumenical training for retreat conductors with Father Christopher Lowe, C.R, among others, and had become familiar with different forms of spirituality, Ignatian and Franciscan in particular. She had learned, too, to assess the different types of retreat, guided, silent, individual or group and had begun to understand more fully her own gifts in this field. She now added to them undertaking a two year course in spiritual direction at Heythrop. At this time, too, as she had acquired more counselling skills in a disciplined way, her counselling work developed, a logical progression from the help she had given her many friends over several decades.

Penelope's first retreat as a leader had been at St. Katherine's Foundation in Stepney in 1977. It was followed by many more so that by the 1990's Penelope has become very much in demand, both as a leader of quiet days and as a leader of retreats. She sees the aim of a retreat, as defined by St. Ignatius of Loyola, "to find God in all things and all things in God," advising retreatants to allow them to become aware of creation. By learning to pay attention, which can be cure for all our restlessness, even to minute objects in the natural world "such attention grows naturally into prayer," she feels. De Caussade taught people to pay attention to the present moment. Penelope develops this by urging attention to physical objects like a stone or flower.

In her retreats Penelope encourages retreatants to become more aware of the dark side of creation, its pain, decay and death, and focus on the inner experience of contradiction this reveals. "If God seems silent, rest in the silence," she advises and remember "the desert is the landscape in which the spirit grows."[30] Expect growth, do not shun silence, she teaches, urging people as their retreat ends to gather up their experience ready to the face the rhythms of life in city or country afterwards. The retreat should have helped them acquire greater charity and

compassion she considers. And even if they leave more aware of the dark side of themselves it will still strengthen them if they say "Yes" to themselves because they trust in God. So any retreat should end with thanksgiving[31].

What is it like to be on a retreat led by Penelope? And what is she like as a spiritual director? Anjie Cotter has experienced several, from a week at Bardsey which Penelope shared with another leader, to an eight-day individually guided retreat at Clewer and a third at West Malling for its oblates.

Penelope, she felt, was rooted, a fact others like Terry Tastard have noted. There was a breadth in the way she used the bible and others books, seemingly able to select passages and texts perfectly suited to specific needs. Moreover she could incorporate, without being threatened, the inter-faith perspective, as well as the New Age one.

Penelope introduces herself as a widow. Often she uses poetry to make a point, perhaps a poem by R.S Thomas or Gerard Manley Hopkins. She is always conscious of the level a person has reached and tries to help each retreatant to explore further.

The retreat she led jointly at Bardsey, off the Welsh coast, attracted twelve people. This small island, really a bird sanctuary, had simple accommodation provided, with no inside toilets or electricity. It had a ruined abbey and a chapel as well as a common house for meals. When the weather is fine you get the weekly Bardsey Trust boat over and are away from the many pressures of the mainland.

Retreatants included a member of the Orthodox Church, who was over eighty; a priest and his wife, who was a teacher; an Anglican nun; a health worker; other teachers and a sister from an American religious community. Some people saw Penelope for between forty-five and sixty minutes each day. There were daily liturgies, some of them experimental. The experience uplifted both Penelope and her friends, as they discovered Penelope is an enabler who stands by you in your spiritual search with resources to help you to move on. "She has a fierce caring,"[32] Anjie Cotter considers.

Over the years Penelope has been part of groups which help those on the fringes of Christianity for since 1960 she has been involved with many seekers, especially from the generations in revolt against the materialism of the west. So she has led a Julian group exploring contemplative prayer at St. James', Piccadilly, and stood for a radical spirituality at the church where she has found a home, often preaching at its Sunday morning Eucharists. She feels the churches have a sense of guilt about "our dogmatic and triumphalistic past" so have stressed the social implications of Christianity as well as healing and self-fulfilment for individuals. Now they must move from caring to the prophetic, as Jesus did in the Gospels. "The link," she maintains "is in the time given to silent prayer – listening to God speaking through the world and its history," adding "the true contemplative uses all experience in this way, from passages of scripture to the face of the person opposite on the underground. Felt gratitude, saying "yes to life" – can transfigure the greatest tragedies and can sanctify the most boring and humdrum days."[33]

Is Penelope a political animal as a result? Never a unilateral disarmer Penelope feels strongly about disarmament and supports the Campaign Against the Arms

Trade. "Politics informs her perspective,"[34] Anjie Cotter affirms and her son Toby had remarked drily that he and his mother nearly always seem to get involved in political arguments – he is a conservative politician in a south London borough – just before meals[35].

Penelope is, of course, down-to-earth when it comes to politics, as all else. "Reconciliation begins where we are," she once maintained. "To be aware of how we can change the ways we look at the injustices of the world and take appropriate action, we must be open to changing the ways we look at the problems nearer home, among our families, our communities and our own nation. Changed perceptions lead to alternative policies. Prayer is basic to a clearer vision."[36] "I see very clearly," she has remarked elsewhere, "how so much of the personality aspect to lobbying is being ignored by people for whom it is an important motivation."[37]

How orthodox a Christian is Penelope? Earlier in her life she contributed to the formal Anglican structures nationally as an ACCAM selector for ten years and was a member of the English Anglican – Roman Catholic Commission. Locally she went to her parish church in Paddington where she has lived since 1957 but she always seems more at ease with tasks like running all-night vigils at St. James' in 1973, which fed its participants into the televised Eucharist from Trafalgar square (it was part of the worship festival "That's the Spirit") than with more formal chores. Ecumenically she was a member of one of the British Council of Churches' committees on spirituality, an indication, as Father Christopher Lowe had observed, that "she is at home in a good many places and not comfortable with people of rigid views."[38] So she can be alongside people at a sung Eucharist, but equally at home with those influenced by new cosmologies and the way it affects traditional understanding of the processes of creation.

At one moment Penelope may be addressing six hundred Franciscan tertiaries, at the next leading a retreat for six or eight members of the first order of The Society of St. Francis. Her generosity, hospitality and openness are certainly rooted in one aspect of Franciscanism, as is her love of the natural world, but theologically she is eclectic. Perhaps most of all St. Francis saw Christian faith as a way of life, says Brother Thaddeus[39], and in that Penelope follows him.

"To be guarding this diminutive flickering pool of light (a candle) suspended in such an eerie throbbing drone (a Sherpa below was playing a horn) within such an immense landscape," Penelope has written of one moment during her stay with Tibetan Buddhists high up in the Himalayas, "Powerfully conveys to me the fragility of the human spirit."[40] That realism and emphasis on experience is more reminiscent of Evelyn Underhill, someone with whom she has certain affinities considers Father Christopher Lowe[41].

The toughness also exemplified here – Penelope was sixty-nine when she undertook her physically arduous journey to Nepal – is also found in Evelyn Underhill. Like her Penelope has, too, a respect for the facts of this world, scientific and social, an awareness Evelyn Underhill learnt from Von Hugel. "There is," Terry Tastard comments," something deeply Christian and faithful in the way Penelope is informed and concerned about the world."[42]

Perhaps Penelope is most Anglican in her search for religious truth and her stress on experience and reason as well as the sacraments and the bible. But doctrinally she is unusual, more concerned with an inner core of meaning than historicity. "'Were Christ born a thousand times in Bethlehem and not in me, the world would be lost'"[43] she quotes at the end of one sermon. And "If the resurrection is to be more than a distant event for us, we have to find resonances in our own lives."[44] Similarly with the doctrine of The Trinity Penelope is at pains to indicate how it grew out of experience, God as Father pointed to by Jesus; God as risen Christ, and God as "the strength of the Pentecostal spirit."[45]

For her, Easter draws together three strands, "the natural, the Biblical and the personal." Each strand can inform and deepen others. It can lead us to care for the earth and all evolving peoples in it; help our theology of creation; and aid us in being responsible within creation as we encounter it in our social and economic lives. Moreover Easter can help us grow and mature as we "can be caught up in the unity of a cosmic resurrection at the heart of the mystery of life."[46]

Does Penelope lean towards a non-historical form of mysticism? Certainly, as Terry Tastard has confirmed, she is open, willing to discuss anything with others. Yet she is also rooted. But is this rootedness seen by others? "We are ALL grafted, in our humanity," she has argued, "through the incarnation of Jesus, into the goodness of God, the vine-dresser, who speaks to us through the reality of the world."[47] But is this all the Bible says about the human condition? "I am sometimes accused of being a pantheist," Penelope once wrote[48]. But it does not bother her for she feels in good company from Eckhardt to de Chardin who wrote "Some may wish to worship God as pure spirit but I, as an incarnate being, worship him in all the fibres of the world."[49]

"I suspect I am not a very spiritual person," she has commented, "but if I am, the feel, the rhythms and movements, the necessary self-pacing of simple physical work energises me spiritually and keeps me in touch with reality. I love digging and weeding, sawing wood and making bonfires. I also enjoy cooking and even scrubbing floors. I love the touch of tools, their balance and implied craft, also the smells of the earth, of sawdust, smoke and polish."[50] Because this approach Penelope has come to regard herself as a panentheist.

Some may ask where in Penelope's theology is there room for a God who comes in judgement, not mercy, anger not gentleness. To them she replies that she does not believe God is like that. "I believe with Julian," she has pointed out "that there is no anger in God. We project our own anger on to him." She believes also that "judgement is now, is part of the process. That is why acknowledging and working with the darkness and pain is so important."[51]

Penelope's sense of oneness of creation and her earlier study under Geoffrey Parrinder had led her into an encounter with the world of faith communities. We cannot develop a radical spirituality in the West she feels without acknowledging our limited vision and the way Europeans have treated other cultures[52].

Her membership of the Heythrop Christian-Buddhist group has been one way she has responded to this perception. Another has been her visit to Nepal in 1990. She wanted to go in a non-judgemental way, but found her western outlook often tripped her up[53].

It was Penelope's "lifelong search for ways of understanding our need and longing for God"[54] which also took her to live with the Tibetan Buddhists in the Himalayas. Never before had the Sherpas had a Christian living with them. Penelope looked forward to finding new depths of understanding and was overwhelmed by the natural beauty she saw, recording her responses in her *Nepal Notes*. But she was also disappointed in the form of Buddhism she encountered which was very individualistic, for she and the Buddhist friend who accompanied her were living far from the big teaching monasteries.

"Buddhist meditation," Penelope has commented, "urges us to develop our Buddha nature, but the Buddhas I saw depicted in the Gompa were formidable representations in garish colours surrounded by plastic flowers and assorted offerings. For me they displayed a kind of visual chaos so unlike the temples of Thailand and China. I found nothing to identify with there…I am sure that this was a cultural block but it drove me to question my disappointment at the spiritual level and to question, as I had before, the received belief of those western Dharma students I have met who assume that Christianity has no inner wisdom to teach them…" Why, she queries, have we neglected our own formulations of universal truth so sophisticatedly described in the doctrines of the Trinity?[55]

Penelope found local Sherpa culture tough and independent. Tasks were shared. Water was carried a mile, food from two miles. "Some ingredients of our limited diet were carried for over a week from Tibet on the backs of mountain men and women," she noted[56]. She patterned her own day and times of meditation. Over Sherpa stew and Tibetan tea she came to know and love the new friends she was making. "When the wind blew the clouds from the high peaks it was a magical world of sunshine, snow and flowers," she reported, "of tame ravens…and other bright-coloured birds unafraid of humans…"[57]

What will Penelope do in her seventies? Certainly if her health holds – and she has few illnesses recorded on her medical card – she will continue her retreat work and counselling, though the effects of the car crash in the 1960s are now beginning to cramp her style as sometimes she finds it difficult to walk far.

Every day Penelope has thirty minutes of silent prayer and ten of gestalt, movement and yoga which she has worked out for herself. Her travels – in the past they have taken her to shanghai, Hong Kong, New Caledonia, New York, Melbourne and Harare – will doubtless continue as long as her body allows. So will her exploration of poets like Seamus Heaney, Denise Levertov and Rilke. She will continue, too, to probe the psyche of herself and others using knowledge she has gained from the writings of Anthony Storr and Erich Fromm. "Do you know that paraphrase of the Beatitudes from Gestalt therapy?" she enquiries. "Blessed are those who are totally present in their words, for they shall communicate."[58]

"What amazing changes are bringing this old decade to an end," she wrote in 1990. "I expect the next one will be my last so I hope it fulfils some its promise – for us all."[59] Whatever it does hold Penelope is bound to be seeking an even maturity. This will focus on her capacity to handle loss as she continues to recall the husband who, from the moment on St. Cuthbert's Island when he saw clouds gathering behind the cross set there, and then the same cross silhouetted against the sun's light, as the clouds parted, "never clung to life."[60]

Her poem on the eleventh anniversary of his death, as she recalls Tim's wood carvings, gives the flavour of her lasting love:

> Laden with scrumpted apples
> I climb steeply from the pond
> In the autumn dark,
> Listening for the tap-tap
> Tapping of his mallet on the
> Tool, like some persistent woodpecker,
> But only the sleepy caw of rooks
> Floats on the misty air towards me,
> And all the time between
> His shaping of the wood
> And now, is filled with silence. [61]

In her address to a retreat in Northampton, whose theme was "Send my roots rain" (a quote from Gerald Manley Hopkins), Penelope drew attention to Siegfreid Sasson's invocation "Spirit who speakest through silences, remake me."[62] Always her insistence is that we should grow and develop, especially through the quality of our listening. Moreover, though Penelope remains aware of the pain we all experience as ever, she is keen also to celebrate life.

Whether it is going with a friend to a jazz club in Soho, or taking a friend to a play in Notting Hill about the break up of tribal life in Africa, Penelope is open to new experiences. Though she is not as assiduous an attendant at musical gatherings as when she and her husband regularly had seats at Glyndbourne in the BBC box, Penelope still appreciates each new piece by the Orthodox composer John Tavener and attends concerts at the Barbican Art Centre and once a year at Christ Church, Spitalfields.

Her contact with other cultures, African on her visit to Zimbabwe, Chinese when she visited China to meet her daughter-in-laws' relations (she stayed in rooms in Shanghai once occupied by Madame Chiang Kai-Shek) and American, when she leads retreats and visits her son and family in New York, has led Penelope increasingly to appreciate the immense diversity of human communities. If during her marriage she grew to love Europe's heritage, since then seems to have developed a capacity to become sensitive to Asian and African history and be humbled by it, though she does not find Indian culture readily accessible to her. Is it because of my monotheism, she wonders[63].

The child who at nine asked for the collected poems of John Masefield, a book which influenced Penelope greatly, now is at ease with Proust, Ted Hughes, D.H Lawrence or John Clare. The woman who in the 1940s and 1950s met Pere Villain, Couturier's successor in praying for Christian unity, now is open to the fourteenth century mystic Kabir and the terse comment attributed to him: "When our own soul becomes a stranger to us, the whole world becomes unfriendly."

In our prayer, Penelope has said, as in Buddhist meditation, we open ourselves to our inner community. We must be open to our neglected selves she adds which make up that community, and cease to believe that forgiveness and acceptance are

for export only. We need, too, to be like artists when we pray and build an inner world where nature, art, literature, personal relationships, all helps to build images. Rilke, she explains, has described the process of encouraging our own images as "the future waiting to be born."[64]

At the Northampton retreat Penelope drew attention to "that strange phenomenon of snowdrops and daffodils flowering together"[65] in 1990 when a mild winter had been followed by a second spell of colder whether so the processes in the soil could be completed. It can be like that with the rhythm of our lives, of the broken inner underground which may be due to pain, loss or bereavement, guilt and shame, she observed, or "even to the neglected and angry child still lurking with us," a child needing encouragement and incorporation for the child may hold the key to our most creative self.

"Some of you may know Tippett's opera A Child of our Time," she reflected. "In it there is the lovely line which is repeated – "I would know my darkness and my light. Then shall I at last be whole". It is sung again and again to a very simple melody."[66]

Penelope now seems to be at a point in her life where she can acknowledge her many selves, knowing, as she has powerfully put it, "the greening power of the spirit" at work in each of us as we grow through winter to spring in an ever-repeated cycle.

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