

Vanessa's Lecture: 'Healing Abuse'

Wearing a smart, brightly coloured dress, Vanessa looked composed as she scanned the faces of the large group seated in front of her, and her face lit up as she started to speak, "When you visit our home, you'll undoubtedly hear music being played rather loudly in the living room! The choice varies according to who's turned on the sound system, and how they're feeling – maybe rock'n'roll," she grinned at Jonnie and Maureen, "Or perhaps you'll find my husband and I in the mood for something classical - recalling times before we knew each other, when it's likely we crossed paths at City's Symphony concerts... Although, as the family will tell you, Richard's musical tastes are noticeably 'timeworn'!"

She was amused at his bashful expression, but saved his blushes when she continued, "He knows I appreciate his varied assortment of albums. In fact I've chosen a favourite song from his collection as a focus for our thoughts this evening; it's called, *'The Wings that Fly us Home'...*"

She pressed the remote control, and stood with her eyes closed, appreciating John Denver's voice through the room's speakers:

*'There are many ways of being in this circle we call life
A wise man seeks an answer, burns his candle through the night
Is a jewel just a pebble that found a way to shine?
Is a hero's blood more righteous than a hobo's sip of wine?
Did I speak to you one morning on some distant world away?
Did you save me from an arrow? Did you lay me in a grave?
Were we brothers on a journey? Did you teach me how to run?
Were we broken by the waters? Did I lie you in the sun?
I dreamed you were a prophet in a meadow
I dreamed I was a mountain in the wind
I dreamed you knelt and touched me with a flower
I awoke with this: a flower in my hand
I know that love is seeing all the infinite in one
In the brotherhood of creatures; who the father, who the son
The vision of your goodness will sustain me through the cold
Take my hand now to remember when you find yourself alone
You're never alone
And the spirit fills the darkness of the heavens
It fills the endless yearning of the soul
It lives within a star too far to dream of
It lives within each part and is the whole
It's the fire and the wings that fly us home.'* [Denver]

She was clearly moved by the music, and kept her eyes closed for a few moments, seemingly preparing to face her audience; when she looked up, her gaze rested distantly over their heads as she repeated the first line of the lyrics, "*'There are many ways of being in the circle we call life'...*"

She cleared her throat, "I have to tell you some things about my life:

I grew up feeling very scared. In fact, every day I lived in silent fear...unspeakable dread."

Her eyes narrowed, and she stared directly ahead, "Nevertheless, not long ago, someone told me I must have had a life experience that took me to heights of wonder," her gaze met Nic's, and she smiled faintly, "So, this song has particular meaning for me, it speaks to me, speaks of a life where, *'spirit...fills the endless yearning of the soul' ...*"

She took a deep breath, "What is it that makes our soul yearn? Why does it feel this way? What must we do to stop its *'endless yearning'*?"

She looked at their faces, and smiled more brightly, "This evening, I want to try to answer those questions, to talk about:

how life experiences that, at heart, seem to be an unjustifiable trial or battle - difficult life experiences that we *choose* for ourselves – bring up the depth of soul's yearning...

how challenging life encounters, especially those we're forced to dwell upon until they're resolved in a spiritual way, enable spirit to shine through us, to *'fill the endless yearning'*."

She paused, connecting to their attentive faces; and then, breathing deeply, she lifted her chin, her chest and shoulders, standing firm and tall; for a brief moment she closed her eyes; her expression changed to stern intensity, and when she opened her eyes she stared around the room, and spoke boldly, "I am a victim of childhood abuse."

She waited in the stunned stillness, and then impassively related the detail: "Throughout adolescence I was sexually, physically and emotionally abused by my father and mother, and – because of others' silent complicity - was betrayed, in fact emotionally abused, by people around me who did nothing to save me from my desperate situation."

She paused as the shocked listeners shifted in their seats; then she looked steadily over their heads, "My unhappy past needs to be exposed so that, as I said, you can see how working through the trauma of abuse enables the soul to be noticed..."

During the silence, she reached for her notebook and thumbed through its pages, "While you take this in...with thought-filled love, I'd like to read a favourite poem; its sentiment confirms for me the significance of **taking charge** when faced with difficult life events..."

A verse from, *'The Road not Taken'*:

'I shall be telling this with a sigh

Somewhere ages and ages hence:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –

I took the one less travelled by,

And that has made all the difference.'" [Robert Frost]

She stared towards the window, and spoke more cheerfully, "So! I must describe a bit about my, '*road less travelled*'..."

Her expression clouded, "It surprised all of us at home that I've only recently uncovered the truth of what life was really like during my teenage years... My secret was very deeply hidden... Actually, my over-riding memory as a youngster was spending most evenings in the local library - to avoid being in the company of my parents..."

She sighed, seemingly lost in thought, "...'*When you find yourself alone*'..."

Suddenly, her manner changed as if she'd found herself back in academia, delivering a lecture about a resulting mental disorder, her voice was loud and assertive: "The raw facts of the abuse were buried so deep in my psyche that for years I had no memory of what my parents did to me; even after my marriage to Richard, and finding nurturing love within our special family, the abuse remained hidden...an ugly psychological 'secret', simmering...long after my parents had died..."

It wasn't that I was in denial.

I was *completely unaware* of what had happened to me...

And then, during routine medical attention at The Matthew Hubbard Centre, strange behaviour began to emerge, making our doctors extremely puzzled by bizarre physical reactions and a resistance to normal clinical procedures...

Finally, the awful truth revealed itself during a routine examination with 'Doctor Michael'," she smiled appreciatively at his nod of encouragement.

"I've tried to explore the path of forgiveness..." she glanced again at the back row where the family watched with rapt attention, "In fact, we've had lively discussions over dinner about what it means to forgive," she grinned, "...ideas which could be a subject for another unusual lecture!"

Her sudden light-heartedness made an interruption seem welcome, and Malcolm tentatively raised his hand, "Was there really no earlier indication of your terrible experience?"

"Well... I'd been predisposed to anxiety, and there were hints of depression...although, in the intervening years - after adolescence, and before I met my family - I kept well away from doctors!"

She enjoyed their laughter, and waited until the amusement died down, then she resumed her serious tone: "What's interesting is that my life choices - career decisions - were significant, creating my, '*road less travelled*': *Studies into Consciousness, and of the notion, 'beyond the brain', together with the philosophy of Eastern Thought, ensured that I successfully explored the concept of self-empowerment, learned the value of meditation, and found safety in a job based upon metaphysics.*"

Maria gazed at her intently, "Is that when you learned about 'ealing'?"

"I'm sure that the practice of healing found me!"

"How?"

"Jonnie talked to us some time ago about how healing comes naturally, especially after a life changing experience," they exchanged warm smiles, "We both discovered that our soul yearned for expression, and realised how it seized an opportunity to be noticed through a moment of trauma."

She tightened her lips, "Accepting soul's powerful presence, and allowing it room for expression...gives Spirit a chance to pour into us, filling us, stopping the sense of yearning..."

"How do you *know*?" Frank murmured.

"A feeling of contentment," she smiled, "...of strength and security; perhaps less afraid because of the realisation that there is nothing that has control over our destiny; it's an inner strength that comes with learning that our self is...an expression of the Divine..."

Her eyes narrowed with focussed deliberation, "My strange behaviour in the doctors' office – they got used to me fainting at the sight of needles – was because my subconscious mind feared being *alone, it felt unsafe, and was frightened of losing control...*"

As Malcolm sat, silently enthralled by her account, he suddenly felt the need to butt in with an observation: "Those fears – fears of medical intervention, real physical fears - mirrored your spiritual uncertainty. So," he hesitated, "it was good that your body, with your mind, showed you how your soul was feeling..." He gained confidence in his reflection, "You just needed to make the connection – to understand what was going on, to realise that your 'medical performance' was actually indicating that something far more profound was awaiting you; in fact, your unruly body was working for you – showing 'The Way', as The Mother would put it."

"Exactly! A perfect description! The doctors will love your phrase, 'medical performance'!" she glanced playfully at Richard and Michael.

"Yes!" Michael smiled, "Though, to be honest, the 'performance' was quite worrying until we got to grips with it..."

"You fathomed it, and resolved the whole problem," Richard intervened, warmly, "Your work with Vanessa was precious."

The eyes of all three met in silent appreciation, then Michael continued: "For me, it was a case of finally realising that Vanessa's *mind* was determined to intervene: it had seen her threatened by past trauma, so it needed to control everyday life events, constantly wary of future trouble..."

In fact, the mind's effort to keep control created a significant phobia that she had to overcome, and we had the difficulty of treating a patient who acted very strangely, just because we needed to take blood!" He put his hands together in front of his lips, "It was a relief for all of us when Vanessa uncovered the truth."

"Thank you, Michael," Vanessa whispered.

"Didn't you think you needed therapy?" Gabby asked, softly.

"I thought I had a personality disorder that had to be lived with; actually, I'd been unhappy for so long...used to tell myself, 'it's the way that I am'."

Gabby nodded, and brushed a tear from her cheek.

Vanessa continued, "Eventually, when I learned to meditate, and discovered its power over mind, I made every attempt to 'love' myself, and to accept 'me' within the eccentricity..." she breathed heavily, "...but I pushed others' love to the limits, totally unaware that the problem was emotional pain bubbling away subliminally, deep in my consciousness..."

As Michael said, my behaviour became extreme in medical situations: whenever I sensed I was losing control, I exerted strange behaviour as a means of protecting myself from whatever I perceived as a threat...

Until, on a very memorable evening, in a routine appointment with Michael, my mind revealed the truth of the abuse... I *saw* what had happened to me," she gulped, "I re-lived the events, and recounted them, in the safety of his office..."

She nodded her thanks as Maria brought her some water, "*I'm now sure,*" she murmured, "*we're never upset for the reasons we think; the world is not what it seems; people act to cover up what's underneath; our traumas are hidden below many layers of learned behaviour...*"

"May I say," Gabby whispered, "I think you're very brave telling us... How did you find the courage to be so open?"

Vanessa smiled appreciatively, "I've talked about the skill of our doctors...and I must mention the loving support of all my family...they brought me through this awful time with patience and loving care, and Jonnie's spiritual healing undoubtedly helped me find myself," their eyes met in unspoken communion.

Malcolm stood up, suddenly taking the initiative with a suggestion that they should have a break, take time to reflect, and move about to make themselves more comfortable.

When they returned to their seats, Vanessa was surprised that Nic remained standing; she raised her eyebrows at him and beamed in warm acknowledgement, then she smiled at the waiting audience, "Nic, and his wife Sunita, are well-known to you all here at Sputnik's Hub; they are highly respected in the Matthew Hubbard Centre community, and much loved by all of us at home; I've felt their support this evening, and right now I'm sure Nic has wisdom to contribute?"

"Indeed, yes! Thank you, Vanessa... Thank you, too, for indulging me with an opportunity to add to your courageous talk... I agree with Gabby's sentiment: you truly are an inspiration ..."

He paused for the group's murmured agreement, and then spoke gently, "Depressive illness is usual in cases such as yours...in cases of abuse..."

May I ask... Did you feel – *do* you feel – a victim?"

She bit her lip, and nodded vaguely; then she took a deep breath before responding, "I know it's normal to believe what happened to me was my fault, and it's easy to fall into the trap of thinking, I am to blame..."

For me, going through guilt and pain of those mistaken beliefs is *valuable*, because working with them allowed me to dig deeper into my spirituality."

Nic sat down, and leaned back in his chair with obvious satisfaction, then he folded his arms, and continued with his usual measured deliberation, "Working through...various life ordeals...led you to an awakening...of your soul's journey; you *chose*...to go to spiritual depths...gradually unravelling *soul's yearning*."

"Yes," she smiled faintly, "Looking back, there were early signs of introspection: the decision to hide my young self for hours every evening in the local library *was* a yearning desire; but then, it was a need to escape, to get away, to feel clean, to be cleansed, to be somebody, to be understood..."

"Indeed. As Malcolm intimated: your feelings, your emotions, were a mirror of your soul's desire – even though you were unaware of that Ultimate Need."

"*'Ultimate need'...*" she repeated, quietly, "Such a beautiful description! Yes, it feels as though I was born knowing the essential need of mankind..."

As a very little girl, I was sensitive and deep...wanting to believe in *something*...wanting to know the mystery; and...as you said, my life challenges - several of them! - helped me towards my discovery...led me to the expression of my soul."

"So that meant you *were* able to forgive?" Malcolm enthusiastically interrupted their tête-à-tête.

Vanessa enjoyed the ripple of amusement from the family, "I now have radical thoughts about forgiveness, Malcolm, as you can probably gather from the reaction of those on the back row!

It's true that my work with Jonnie included self-cleansing, clearing out of unhelpful emotions, and self-forgiveness, but the heart of my message is this: *the soul yearns for something beyond normal ways of forgiveness:*

Our soul is wise. It seeks acceptance... Acceptance that there is a purpose – a deep purpose – that can be uncovered when life offers us a choice of learning, especially when we choose to change and grow as a result of experiencing trauma."

She paused, noting that many coughed and shuffled, feeling uncomfortable in disagreement, and she watched Gabby frantically delving into her bag, searching for a tissue, "I'm sorry you're troubled," she murmured.

Gabby responded hoarsely, "It's hard to hear you talk about choosing horrible things..." she blew her nose, "...you seem so sweet and gentle, how can you believe you ought to suffer? How can you think that your soul would want that for you? Or that God would allow it to happen to such a good person?"

Vanessa breathed heavily, "I realise I'm offering strange acceptance: of my parents, of what they did, of how they treated me... I'm seeming to tolerate: that's how they were...that's how it was for me...for me, with them..."

But my radical idea of forgiveness really did heal me...and continues to help the way I think and feel about my early years...

It's actually true that the moment of realisation...the realisation of the abuse, and learning about a life choice to experience it, really did enable me to force my soul's yearning up into my consciousness, out into the open...so that I could really understand ME."

"Who you REALLY are," Malcolm murmured.

"YES! Then, living with this spiritual discovery – an awakening, if you like – my everyday life improved, letting go of unusual behaviour, finding a calm personality - I've found a sense of normalcy."

She breathed a huge sigh of relief at the nods of approval from the family, and relaxed as Maria chirped in, excitedly voicing her opinion: "The hatefulness made yer rely on yer spirit! You'd bin tryin' to understand who you are, and yer soul stopped yearning when yer found out!"

"Thank you so much, Maria..." Vanessa suddenly sounded tired, "That's exactly how it was: My unhappiness led me to utter despair – I think that was soul's passion. Spirit wanted to be known, and I found it by delving deeply, through the torment.... Beyond everything...to what is most important."

She gazed at their perplexed expressions, took a moment to focus on deep breathing, then gently repeated her thoughts: "The adolescent me was very alone; without hope; with no relief; deeply hurt and very scared; the awfulness made my soul yearn; yearning guided me inward, making me ponder about life...I wondered why I'd ever been born..."

She closed her eyes, seemingly drifting into contemplation, "Those basic questions – 'Why am I here?' 'Who am I?' - represent the call of soul's yearning... When the cry is explored through meditation, with the help of a spiritual guide, we realise we're never alone...

My troubled path was necessary for soul to ignite in me the remembrance of, 'Who we are', and, 'Where we're going'...

I know that by continuing to follow this inner imperative – the yearning - Spirit pours through us, and satisfies the soul... Then there's a feeling of contentment, a sense of being complete... A total knowing that the deepest self can never be hurt, so lifetime trauma is no longer devastating..."

For a few moments, she was silently distant, then she gazed around the room and resumed reflective thought, "Sometimes, even now, I feel afraid..." she hesitated as she glimpsed Richard's troubled reaction: he leaned forward resting his elbows on his knees; he looked down at his clasped hands, then stared at her, intently.

She sighed, "...Not the kind of fear that something bad will recur. It's 'heart-fear'... I mean, the experience of profound fear, deep in my heart; I think a therapist would say it's primordial fear, because it comes through me, seemingly from nowhere, for no reason..."

She faltered, and for a moment, looked bewildered.

Nic gently cleared his throat, and spoke softly, "How do you deal with it? How do you heal the fear?"

His questions helped her continue, and their subsequent exchange seemed like a resumption of their earlier personal conversation:

"By filling my mind with a mantra: 'Father God, Earth Mother; Father God, Earth Mother' as if I'm appealing to 'something bigger'," she murmured, "Followed by the mantra that The Mother favours: 'Who Am I, Who Am I, Who Am I,'" she smiled, serenely, "It's my assurance of Source, my 'peace from God'..."

"That's beautiful; it's good for us to hear that mantras are effective."

She smiled vaguely, "They are reassurance - that the fear is a good feeling."

"How so?"

*"Perhaps it's Universal Fear – the collective fear of everything...something that I **have** to experience...that I'm **meant** to feel, if I also want to experience profound Love..."*

Her focussed gaze met Nic's attentive eyes, "That's the meaning of the lyrics, 'I know that love is seeing all the infinite in one,'..."

*Her expression suddenly changed, her face glowed with excitement, "Those words make my heart feel like it'll explode with awe and love! I just want to sing out aloud with John Denver! The feeling in my heart tells me I'm not alone! There's never any reason to fear, or to fear, fear!" she beamed, "All the Infinite in one...can you believe it? Can you **feel** it? Do you sense being with the Infinite, knowing the Infinite within?... It's amazing!" she breathed deeply, "In the Grand Scheme of Everything, there's awe and wonder! Nothing needs to be feared, there's nothing that's overwhelming!"*

"You're living proof!" Nic grinned, lovingly.

"Yes!" Malcolm leapt to his feet, "What you've spoken of - what your life demonstrates - is strength of purpose, and determination..."

He waited through the group's applause, and then continued, "Will you lead us in meditation?"

But first, a couple of questions..." he spoke briskly:

“How can we be confident of our spiritual connection?
And,
What are the developmental processes that we can expect as we practice meditation?”

She glanced at her watch, “Right... If there’s time...”
He sat down, “Vanessa, we have all the time in the world!”
They chuckled at his enthusiasm, and settled for her response: “Ok! I’ll finish with a meditation...”

To answer your queries:

There are two ways to experience spirit’s interaction – subliminally: our subconscious mind knows what’s going on, and as we become open to the connection, and accustomed to communication, we instinctively know when we’re doing what soul wants for us.”

“How?”

“Well...for me, at times when I’m about to make a decision that’s not for the best, I feel extremely uneasy, with unjustified anxiety – far beyond what’s considered the norm; if I persist with a mistaken choice, my heart rate increases and there’s an inexplicable need to cry; on the other hand, even when a decision seems outrageous, I can be easy, calm and settled...knowing what’s right for me...”

The second way of connecting, is to **choose** to be in proactive communication with spirit...to have a daily conscious desire, a readiness - actually **inviting** soul to be in charge.”

“Through meditation?”

“Yes,” she paused, “Well, paying attention to thoughts after meditation; and by noticing messages that surround us – advertisements and songs, and by feeling the energy of expressive words...poems, lyrics...” she smiled, thoughtfully, “during my adolescent struggle, there was always solace to be found in church worship...phrases from hymns were meaningful and incredibly helpful...”

She smiled at Malcolm, “Now, the question about the cycles of meditative progress is very insightful...”

“I thought it would be!” he grinned to himself.

“...The stages of meditation act like the closing down of flower petals in order to unfurl and blossom with more beauty: the process feels like a continuous closing down and unfurling over time; each stage of meditation comes with new awareness.

The first stage is the desire to be free of the busyness of being human; to give the mind a break, to relieve stress, to relax.

The second stage, together with relaxing and letting go, is to notice...acutely touch...intuitively connect with the energy of God.” She smiled, “I’ve heard it said, ‘Pure Consciousness is an artist creating beauty; do we not spoil it by not noticing?’

And we’re told, ‘speak to earth she will teach you.’

We’re being urged to make meditative practice an avenue to be open to awe - to feel the awe, and to be it.

Gradually this openness leads into a practice of being ‘mindful’...” she looked knowingly around the room, “...I think we’re all aware of mindfulness...”

However, beyond being mindful, there's a meditative stage where we come to know the meaning of the Hindu phrase, 'That thou art'... It's incredibly profound; we know when we've found it... We know, that we know, that we know!" she grinned. "Words become useless, but whatever words we use are an attempt to describe the assertion at the heart of mystical spirituality - the realisation that we, every aspect of ourself, is a perfect expression of God."

She closed her eyes, and took a few moments to focus on her breathing...

Some of the group closed their eyes and joined her...

However, their quietude was quickly interrupted when she seamlessly continued: "Then comes a yearning inner imperative, as I talked about earlier - not from depressive feelings, it's the yearning telling you that the world is not enough; you become open to an overwhelming desire...to reach to the heavens - to actually gaze up at sky - in praise, adoration, wonder..."

Then, eventually - a much later stage of meditation - there's just 'being', where surprisingly, mindfulness loses its passion, and there's no desire to feel the awe; it's an evolved state of no thought, no emotion..."

She hesitated, and looked searchingly around at their faces, "You have to remember that going through a 'progress' of meditative practice does not necessarily happen - in fact it's not essential, nor crucial.

What's important is just the attention to breath, to breathing...

And actually, the supposed development of meditation also goes backwards!"

"What do you mean?"

"We find ourselves re-visiting each process, back and forth..."

"Gaining something more?"

"Yes, feeling greater depth, or perhaps increased meditative satisfaction from earlier stages..."

She sighed heavily, "Finally, there's an experience that has no words - though I'll try! You realise there's no longer any point to searching - searching is just being human! Although there's a new level of looking at the world from the human perspective - where every breath counts, every cell, every atom is it...the all of everything.

You realise something curious, that:

Heart is distinct from Spirit;

Heart is the love of what you love;

Spirit is what you are at heart.

The experience goes beyond, 'That thou art', to nothing. No Thing. Everything. Euphoric Oneness:

'Love so amazing, so Divine, demands my life my soul my all.'" [When I survey the wondrous cross]

She stopped speaking.

Frank gazed at her, frowning thoughtfully, "When you've had the experience of bliss, is once enough?"

"It's never enough..."

"The euphoria makes you want to return?"

"It's not euphoria; it's nothing."

"Oh...I'm not sure I understand."

Vanessa smiled, warmly, "That's it! That's the point – the experience, or none-experience – whatever it is...is incomprehensible, unbelievable, indescribable... Although, the 'returning' does make a difference."

"What kind of difference?"

"Seeing the world, everything, everyone, in new light."

"I don't know what to say," Frank choked as tears began to trickle down his cheeks, "You've done something, Vanessa; affected me; somehow, touched me... I've felt this way once before... When I was with The Mother," his voice broke, "when she and I walked through the fields, just after she'd met our little group," he gulped, "I'm sorry I'm crying."

"Don't feel sorry..."

"No, it's just that I feel so...happy!" he brushed tears from his eyes, "And now **my** mind is remembering a hymn!"

"What are the words?"

"'Lost in wonder, love and praise!'" [Love Divine all Loves Excelling]

Vanessa placed her palms together, bowed her head, and murmured, "Now, we should meditate... Please, focus on your breath, your breathing..."

Close your eyes, and listen to the sound of your inhalation...

...and exhalation

Feel yourself relax with the sound of my voice...

Our meditative image comes from our deepest space;

A place that is strong;

Indeed, our Depth is always strong:

We are **safe**,

S A F E

Strong And Free Eternally.

In your mind, please silently repeat with me:

I am Safe,

S A F E

Strong And Free Eternally.

...Within our safety we are enabled to feel pain;

A pulse of pain,

Pulsing within;

Pain comes from within, never from without;

Pain, pulsing through our being,

Comes from within, never from without;

With every beat, pulse out what it is.

Each beat ripples through our being,

Pulsing out pain;

And each ripple, disrupted by pain,

Awakens an innerness.

This innerness also ripples from deep within, outward;

Each ripple takes hold of each part of our self:

Our mental self ripples with our inner pulse,

Our emotional self ripples with our inner pulse,

Our physical self ripples with our inner pulse;

We are shaken, pulsed, rippled to our core;

*Our inner Knowing is disrupted from within
And erupts out from our centre
It takes hold...
Taking hold
To still every part of our being...
It's the stillness of the soul,
The Stillness of the soul,
The Stillness of the soul."*

She opened her eyes to watch their reaction, "Please keep your eyes closed. Focus on your breath, your breathing...listen to each breath in...and out..."

Notice each inhalation in...and out...

Into further meditation:

Image yourself entering through Heart's gateway, into the Inner Garden of your mind...

Your garden is warm from soft sunlight, and there's a gentle breeze.

You notice the blue sky, and allow its blueness to soak through your body; your feet luxuriate in the lush grass...

You walk along a gravel path, allowing the warm, rounded stones to massage the soles of your feet...

You make your way to a bench in a secluded part of the garden;

The bench is your usual place for contemplation, but occasionally someone may join you there...

As you sit with your eyes closed, you feel the slight movement of your companion; you open your eyes, look down and smile at your 'inner child' seated beside you...

Innocence looks up at maturity; maturity gazes down at innocence; the combination is wisdom...

You reach to take hold of the hand of your younger self.

Without speaking, you both look out at the beauty of the garden – the ancient tree, the fountain, flowers and shrubs...and you listen to birdsong...

After a while your younger self speaks, asking how you are, why you're here, what you plan to do... Excited questions tumble out, but you answer quietly, giving measured loving attention to the young person who keeps hold of your hand, swinging their legs happily; the connection makes you feel contentment.

After a while, you realise it does not matter what is said – your shared comfortable thought is perfect for time together in the garden...

And, together you leave the bench to wander this beautiful inner space; most of the time, your young self walks by your side, and occasionally runs and skips ahead; sometimes you wait and watch moments of intense concentration, when the young one looks at something of deep interest.

Your combined presence is simple and free: freedom from the usual day-to-day troubles, it's rejuvenating; and here you sense the real meaning of forgiveness, the profound ability to forgive without question or conditions; playful honesty is refreshing and revitalising.

The moments of meandering, talk and play, come to an end, and you make your way back to your bench; you close your eyes, knowing that you are, once more, seated on your

own. You do not feel lonely. You're certain that you may return to your garden at any time you choose; it remains a place of safe, wise 'retirement' for your soul expression.

And so it is."

She opened her eyes and waited for some time while her audience slowly brought themselves back to full awareness...

She looked around the room, meeting their warm expressions with a bright smile, "Thank you!"

She reached for the music remote control, and was about to replay the chosen track when Malcolm came to her from the back of the room. They hugged, and he spoke for the audience - warmly congratulating her on the wisdom of her talk, and reiterating thoughts about her courage; they waited through the group's appreciative applause, and then she played the song that was, for her, spiritually moving:

*'There are many ways of being in this circle we call life
A wise man seeks an answer, burns his candle through the night
Is a jewel just a pebble that found a way to shine?
Is a hero's blood more righteous than a hobo's sip of wine?
Did I speak to you one morning on some distant world away?
Did you save me from an arrow? Did you lay me in a grave?
Were we brothers on a journey? Did you teach me how to run?
Were we broken by the waters? Did I lie you in the sun?
I dreamed you were a prophet in a meadow
I dreamed I was a mountain in the wind
I dreamed you knelt and touched me with a flower
I awoke with this: a flower in my hand
I know that love is seeing all the infinite in one
In the brotherhood of creatures; who the father, who the son
The vision of your goodness will sustain me through the cold
Take my hand now to remember when you find yourself alone
You're never alone
And the spirit fills the darkness of the heavens
It fills the endless yearning of the soul
It lives within a star too far to dream of
It lives within each part and is the whole
It's the fire and the wings to fly us home.'* [Denver]