**Previous Comments**

​**Tony Holden ‘Start here!’ June 2021**

I’m struck by how we humans resist some of the issues that are enduring and persistently harmful and damaging to us. Of course - they are complex; our human power systems run deep; our human personalities and cultures are all too often below our potential or our best.

There are many lists identifying our world’s problems. I would highlight the wars [and arms sales] that continue to contribute to the mass disruption of peoples and cultures; the unjust [economic and governance] institutions that lead to poverty for millions; and the pandemic and all that continues to flow from it.

**Here are three changes that can make a difference.**

▓ [1] For nations and human rights – signing-up to, rather than backing out of, the 1948 UN Human Rights Act and the current UN Council together with all the developing international law.

▓ [2] For the world’s [and UK’s] poor and disadvantaged – agreeing and using definitions of relative poverty to undergird effective and far-reaching policies.

▓ [3] For ourselves and our health – using our values [sourced in our politics, spirituality, creativity] in ways that embrace changes in our lives with less fear and anxiety.

**Here are three quotations to reflect on and use -**

[1] For nations and human rights - “Some lives are not considered grievable - The reasons for this are many, and they include racism, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, misogyny and the systemic disregard for the poor and dispossessed [Judith Butler ‘The force of non-violence – an ethico-political bind’ 2020].”

[2] For the world’s [and UK’s] poor and disadvantaged - “Whatever [Prime Minister] Johnson’s ‘levelling up’ means, it isn’t about Britain’s shocking poverty levels” - “Here’s what the Office for National Statistics finds: in 2010 there were 3.6 million children living below the poverty line – and now there are 4.3 million, with 200,000 more since last year. // The universally used measure of poverty, in Britain and internationally, is relative, counting anyone living below 60% of a country’s median income. Important to note it’s not below average income, because by definition, some are always below average. But the median is the mid-point, where half the population earns above and half below [Polly Toynbee Guardian 2021 05 28].”

[3] For ourselves and our health – “[we] find ourselves falling ill due to the state of uncertainty we are surrounded with – ‘betwixt and between’ [Mary Wollstonecraft], neither capable of letting go of the old order that made us increasingly unhappy nor capable of building a new world with solutions from lessons learned. We are exhausted by anxiety, consumed with anger, our minds and defences all too often overwhelmed [Elif Shafak ‘How to stay sane in an age of division’ 2020].”

**Tony Holden, Easter 2021**

I want to try, and try quite hard, to show you something that I think is both hugely important and true!

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Years ago, we watched Melvyn Bragg’s interview with Playwright Dennis Potter [Channel 4, 1994]. Here is part of the text as the dying Dennis Potter [helped by medication] got through a very courageous dialogue.

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“That now-ness becomes so vivid to me now, that in a perverse sort of way, I'm almost serene, I can celebrate life. Below my window in Ross, for example, the blossom is out in full. // And the difference between the trivial and the important doesn't seem to matter - but the 'now-ness' of everything is absolutely wondrous. And if people could see that - there's no way of telling you, you have to experience it - the glory of it, if you like, the comfort of it, the reassurance. Not that I'm interested in reassuring people you know - bugger that. The fact is, that if you see the present tense, boy do you see it, and boy can you celebrate it!”

I’d summarise this as meaning: if you see the present tense; the 'now-ness' of everything; if you see [it] then life is absolutely wondrous [even when you are facing your own dying].

This is what I mean by ‘hugely important and true!’

I’d say that we humans would be wise to pause before arguing about [let alone using violence about] whether or not there is a ‘God.’ Or again what it means to have ‘belief in God.’ Or again what are the ‘names’ to be used of God. Or yet again, which religious practices [or cultural and political versions of these] are useful, valid or true.

The seriously big questions about human meaning and purpose are to do with this: “Do we see the present tense; the 'now-ness' of everything; do we see [it]?” The words I use [as shorthand for myself] are ‘being-reality’ and ‘meditative-focus.’

Recently I noticed media-comment around the religious questions in the census. Some people were explaining how meaning and purpose come from religious faith and practice. Whilst other were asking what meaning there is for those “in our individualistic, secular society [where] we lack even the flimsiest of narratives to guide [John Harris Guardian 28 March 2021].”

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I want to share some valued quotations. In bringing them to your attention I’m thinking of my experiences – and yours I imagine – of visiting an art gallery, museum, sculpture trail, a National Trust house or a wonderful garden.

I went to exhibitions in London during a period of 40 years [1976-2016]. Often, I’d find myself in some marvellous [modern art] exhibition. I’d glance the catalogue, I’d walk through all the rooms, and then I’d go back to a room, then I’d have one last look at ‘favourites’ [old or new]. Occasionally I would sit in front of one painting or sculpture or assemblage and think: ‘I can’t bear to leave this!’

Well, I offer these quotations – seven out of what [no doubt] is millions of relevant options. They are words and ideas and I’ve given them a line of extra space so that you can walk around them and see them from all sides. So that you can seriously chew on them and digest them. So that you can use them to examine yourself. It isn’t as if any of this is new [Plato ‘Apology’ / Socrates – “The unexamined life is not worth living”] – Here they are.

[1] “Astonishment that anything exists at all.”

[2] “There is a Hindu saying ‘Tat tvam asi’ which means ‘that [the ultimate reality] is what you [a human being] are.’ But a statement of the identity of ‘you’ and ‘that’ is only a proposition; it must be turned into a practical reality by strenuous spiritual exertion.”

[3] “Without going outside, you may know the whole world. / Without looking through the window, you may see the ways of heaven. / The farther you go, the less you know. // Thus, the sage knows without travelling; / S/he sees without looking; / S/he works without doing.”

[4] “Carl Jung when asked on television whether he believed in God, replied, 'No, I do not believe, I know’.”

[5] “There has to be a difference between what things are like if it is true and what things are like if it isn’t.”

[6] “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” and “he [Jesus] has risen he is not here.”

[7] “Some lives are not considered grievable - The reasons for this are many, and they include racism, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, misogyny and the systemic disregard for the poor and dispossessed.”

▓ So - I would say that we humans need to back-off harming, let-alone killing, each other. There are many reasons for doing harm none of them are authentic within meaning and truth. Whatever ‘end-word’ works for you [God, humans, science - you know the list] it is [to go back to Dennis Potter] about “seeing the present tense; the 'now-ness' of everything; seeing [it].” This is what experiences  such as self-realization, transformation, creativity, spirituality, mindfulness, wholeness are founded upon, rooted in, and nourished by. What matters is that you intend, learn and practice to ‘go to, rest in, engage with’ being-reality. [8].

Notes

[1] Iris Murdoch ‘Metaphysics as a guide to morals’ 1982 Gifford lectures and 1992

[2] Arnold Toynbee with Daisaku Ikeda ‘Choose Life’ 1976

[3] Lao Tzu, ‘Tao Te Ching’ 47

[4] Carl Jung in Peter France ‘A Spiritual Odyssey’ 1998 - you can Google the TV interview

[5] Bernard Williams ‘Essays and Reviews - 1959-2002’ 2014

[6] Jesus of the Gospels Matthew 6, 33 and Mark 16:6 [and passim]

[7] Judith Butler ‘The force of non-violence – an ethico-political bind’ 2020

[8] My [personal] word for this is ‘meditative-focus.’ It is to do with the intention and possibility of well-being, intensity of awareness and a peace of mind which is utterly describable and fulfilling. It is - in spite of all denials - truly realistic, set as it is within lives of suffering, joy and struggle. I wrote this up in an essay in the Magazine ‘Modern Believing’ 1995. I learnt that there are many words that people use for this experience of ‘Meditative-focus.’ It is variously described and interpreted as ordinary ecstasy, intensity of awareness, being-awake, peak experiences, mindfulness, self-transcendence, compassionate-detachment, realization, enlightenment, individuation, ‘Satori,’ the God within, a transforming search.

**Tony and Barbara Holden 'Being at home', March 2021**

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‘Stay Home, Protect the NHS, Save Lives’ is a sentence we are likely to remember for a very long time.

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Our theme is ‘being at home.’ It’s a phrase that has stayed with us down the decades from when we first heard it at an ecumenical Christian conference. One of the events was a session of contemplation or meditation. The leader was a Dutch Catholic radical priest and his refrain, as a large group listened to his teaching, was - “and be at home there.”

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Whatever the necessity of the strategies to overcome covid-19, words such as ‘lockdown, isolation, quarantine’ are harsh words. ‘Being at home,’ in contrast, is all to do with self-realization and fulfilment.

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So, what does ‘being at home’ mean for us? We know, during this covid time, many people have/are struggling – to cope with work, to juggle childcare, to pay the bills, to feel connected whilst cut off from friends and family. Relationships have been tested and examined. People have found time to explore walks and buildings in their locality. Some have developed new or forgotten activities. Others have found time for each other and their children. Some [unhappily] have turned to anger and conflict.

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We’ve been thinking of ‘being at home’ very literally as being at home in this place and house. In our first 13 years we lived in South Wales; Accrington Lancashire, Bilston Wolverhampton [a total of 5 houses]. When we moved to London in 1976 [with Tony’s work] we didn’t expect to stay. As it happened, Barbara stayed working in the London Borough of Newham until 2006. We moved to a [national] Methodist Church house in Loughton in 1993 and then to our own home for retirement in 1999. So, after all our moving, 20 years plus in one place!

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**So what do we make of this experience especially when we set it against some key Christian words? For us ‘being at home’ means -**

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**[1] Valuing a sense of place [sacred place]**– we know we are fortunate to have the forest! Our working lives were in towns and east London: and a city is the place most of the world’s people call home. Yet all humans are having to face up to climate change and managing our environment. Some take this seriously by regarding the earth as a created and sacred place.

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**[2] Understanding rootedness [incarnation]**– it means getting to grips with where you are, where you find your ‘self,’ with the neighbours, with much that is given rather than chosen. We are humans on planet earth – give and take the odd bit of meteorite that is found near Cheltenham!

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**[3] Practicing hospitality [shared meals]**– the New Testament has many examples of sharing meals not least in Jesus breaking bread [the Lord’s supper, communion, eucharist]. Hospitality isn’t easy through a screen! But as we eat with our nearest, as gifts come through the post or when friends stand on the doorstep and offer food - we value sharing.

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**[4] Engaging in community and neighbourliness [fellowship]**– Humans use many reasons and names [and excuses] for behaving badly and even violently towards each other. But ‘do no harm’ or ‘love one another’ translate into caring for neighbours; working to make communities better; and learning the richness and opportunities of friendship and fellowship.

**Tony Holden ‘And be at home there,’ March 2021**

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To the north - through the window at street-level

Is ‘our’ [bigger-than-the-house] oak-tree -

It grows on Staples Hill and stands tall and branched,

A first step into the kilometres of ancient Epping Forest.

To the south upstairs - we have a view

Of a horizon beyond trees and our commuter town -

A cityscape that includes the Greenwich Millennium Dome,

Embracing London’s diverse millions.

To the south downstairs – we sit out on our patio,

It is our doorway, our memory, our imagination’s store –

To the sea, London, European cities, the Milky Way,

And above us, there is endless cerulean sun-blue sky.

**Tony and Barbara Holden ‘travellers,’ February 2021**



Travelling is a theme through the ages – mythological, Biblical, literary and filmic. We started thinking about travel and journeys and pilgrimages and inner-space after we both read Christiane Ritter ‘A woman in the polar night’ -

* Translated by Jane Degras and with a foreword by Sara Wheeler’ [1938, 1954, 2019].

This was a Christmas gift from daughter Sian. Reading about people in isolation living in the frozen Arctic might seem a bad idea during this covid-19 time!

Anyhow - this adventure began in 1933/4 when a woman Austrian painter joined her ex-navy hunter husband and his fellow-hunter Norwegian Karl Nikolaisen on Spitsbergen. She was to explore and observe living in the Arctic, with all its beauty and dangers. The novel has a lot about ‘ice, soot and holy quiet’ and much about hunting and the landscape. Her description is so sparse and often tense and yet everything is vivid and vital. There is little revelatory about her relationships - with husband Hermann or Karl. She returned to Austria, World War 2 and “my daughter at home” changed by the Arctic experience. She was never to write another book but died aged 103 in 2000 having continued to paint. This is an outstanding novel and a record of an extraordinary woman. It is at once frightening, wonderful, courageous and of course raises many questions.

Having lived together for the best part of 60 years it’s strange to admit that our attitude to and experience of travel is greatly different.

Tony, who did go on European holidays and travelled the UK with his work, tends to think this passage is one to value -

* “Without going outside, you may know the whole world. / Without looking through the window, you may see the ways of heaven. / The farther you go, the less you know. // Thus, the sage knows without travelling; / S/he sees without looking; / S/he works without doing [Lao Tzu, ‘Tao Te Ching’ 47].”

Whilst Barbara who, in addition to our European holidays, still treasures and works at her study tours in North India [1983] and Southern India [1989-1990] and a holiday in Istanbul [2015]. Here’s how she wrote about them in 2017 -

* Travel and study trips to India in 1982 and 1989 and Istanbul 2015 – Its years since I did the two India trips, but it was only in 2015 that I went to Istanbul. In both I was keen to move beyond the enjoyable tourist opportunities. In Istanbul I had researched and got links to go to a Sufi Tekke. As some will know Sufism is a movement within Islam. And the Tekke is a meeting house. So I got permissions from the tour; dressed appropriately and found myself in a room with some 25 women. I sat there and was trying to understand, without any Turkish, what was going on. I loved it because so much was universal and those things that were so strikingly different – such as language, dress, sounds, smells – led me to a sense of meeting that I value [Barbara Holden 2017 06 08 ‘Living with and learning to love difference’].

So what do we make of it?

[1] We do recognize the words of our friend Brian Frost [who died December 2019]: “I am determined to take this rather than that way.” I think we each give different weight to the full quote [see below]. But the phrase brings to our attention the fact and truth that we make many choices, choose paths, make decisions, stuff happens. But if we are fortunate some of the major choices and routes are right and long-lasting: what are your top three or four choices?

* “Struggle implies for me that I have not yet reached a point of rest, of finality - there is more truth, insight, wisdom, growth, activity, to be undertaken. but I have set my face in one direction, I am determined to take this rather than that way, and the invitation. Biblically speaking, is for me to be faithful to that invitation [Brian Frost ‘Prayer and the daily struggle’ 1970’s].”

[2] There is something about the travelling metaphor that continues to feed our imaginations and creativity [see Tony Holden drawing above]: what would you picture and see or offer as a narrative?

[3] Whatever our limitations - in getting out and about [or even crossing the room] – our memories of journeys continue to feed and nourish us. For some through visual memory, for others through photographs, through all in conversations. Obviously, survival is a useful criteria for judging travel – but what has inspired you most as a traveller?

[4] And as for inner-journeys – there are many disciplines and practices on offer. Some are traditional spiritual [religious] exercises including Christian worship and prayer. Many are using current understandings of self-development and how humans flourish. All, to return to Brian’s words, entail us having an intention – all we think are to do with graciousness and grace. What feeds you – what makes your inner-life flourish?

**Tony and Barbara Holden Christmas letter [2020 12]**

Well friends, we’ve written a few Christmas letters in our time!! But 2020 takes the cake or is it the biscuit?

We decided we wouldn’t list all our woes and worries – though in brief - Covid-19 has put the world and us all between a rock and a hard place. We remain distraught at Brexit and its long-term [unknown] consequences. As for the world and President Trump – maybe the old-adage: “less said soonest mended” is useful. As a family we’ve had a tough year with Tony ill [at home] with pneumonia for many months and son Adam still coping with long-covid. Thankfully Siân’s have been safe.

We have tried to respond by living ‘this day.’ It has not been easy. Few people have shared our usual hospitality. We have found ourselves reaching out - through IT media – to friends old and new. Some of the groups we have lost have persisted in creative contact. And we have worked hard at being and doing within the space of our home and our precious small garden. For Barbara joining a zoom sing-around each week via Adam and in the NE is proving refreshing. We have tried to find ways of continuing the activities we value and their ‘communities of interest.’

We have always valued personal responsibility but seen our human present and future to be hugely about co-operation and community.

On our twins birthday this year Barbara said: “it’s wonderful to be alive.” Tony tends to use words like difficult, strange, exciting. But you get the idea.   
People are different – some are ‘naturally’ positive [“all will be well”] for others life, in all its splendour, is always engaged “in spite of, difficulties.”

People are also different in terms of personal and cultural identities. Regrettably [damagingly] humans continue to war against this simple [scientific, philosophical, and religious] truth. Throughout our working and adult-lives we’ve lived with the commitment that “living with difference” is at the centre of truth and justice and peace-making.

To read more about us and our writing [and drawing and singing and family] do subscribe [free] to our website – www.tonyandbarbaraholden.com

**Barbara Holden ‘Singing with others’ [September 2020]**



This live choral event on the 17 September 2020 had 40 voices spaced out, in social distancing, in the massive Tate Modern Turbine Hall. These were the professional ORA Singers led by Suzi Digby.

It gave me great joy. It was the beauty of the chosen items, the precision and balance of voices, and the tangible concentration needed to produce this rich enveloping sound.

The programme started with Thomas Tallis ‘Spem in alium’ for the 450th anniversary of this work. What a wonderful blend of movement, focus and individual brilliance. Part way through one of the images that surfaced for me was Antony Gormley’s many figures standing in sand and sea [‘Another Place’ at Crosby Beach].

Welcome introduction by Frances Morris, Director of Tate Modern

‘Spem in Alium’ by Thomas Tallis

‘Ave Verum’ by William Byrd

‘Ave Verum Corpus’ Re-imagined by Roderick Williams

‘Vidi aquam’ by Sir James MacMillan - “The ORA Singers perform the world premiere of a specially commissioned 40-part work by one of the UK's greatest living choral composers, Sir James MacMillan. This piece reflects the message of 'Spem', meaning hope, for the modern day [Tate].”

After the viewing and listening I spent time mourning the passing of my own singing days. I simply miss singing with other people so much! I’ve belonged to three choirs in the last decade. And, of course, I have always sung regularly at church. The effect of covid-19 on such activities is hard to bear – not as life-threatening but as a loss of activity that is so life-affirming.

The choir I belonged to for 10 years was ‘a cappella’ and met first at St Ethelburga’s and then at St Botolph’s. Both a short walk from Liverpool Street Station London – after a Central Line Tube journey. We were an interfaith choir and our singing was in one or other of the many world languages. I recall the people – the singers - some of the music and, of course, our talented conductors. So often the style and energy for a choir comes from the conductor as they choose music, rehearse and share their own interpretations.

Sometimes we joined with other singers and choirs as with events such as ‘Sing for Water [for Water Aid]. This was part of the annual Thames Festival. At this we were joined by groups from around the country in the ‘Scoop’ outside the London Mayor’s building – see photo!

My very first choir experience was as a four-year-old in South Wales. We were a village children’s choir and were led by a dear man. He was also the village cobbler and distantly related to Sir Michael Tippet! The highpoint of my early musical career was playing triangle in a winning percussion band at the National Eisteddfod.

In all of these experiences I recall that there is a balance and dynamic between individual and group contributions – there is something to do with how singularity and community are both sustained.

These are all powerful experiences and memories. They have been set going by this innovative on-line – social distance-observing - event. It combined a 450th historical celebration with current technology. In both offered a new experience and the possibility of new understanding.

What are your enduring memories to do with singing?

Footnote - Suzi Digby conducts the Ora Singers in the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern – “The first word of ‘Spem in alium,’ Thomas Tallis’s great 40-part choral masterpiece, means “hope”. And just hearing 40 voices singing together again boosted one’s hopes after a dreadful few months during which it sometimes seemed as if big choirs would never sing again. / Yet this concert had much more than symbolic worth. Suzi Digby’s professional Ora Singers had originally been scheduled to celebrate the 450th anniversary of Tallis’s composition with a performance in Tate Modern’s cavernous Turbine Hall last May, but Covid intervened [The Times 2020 09 17 - [https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/ora-singers-digby-review-a-magnificent-poignant-tribute-to-tallis-db75nl9b2](about:blank) ].” You can watch and listen on - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MprnnW-ruz8](about:blank)

**Barbara Holden ‘Letter to my friends’ [2020 08]**

One of the things I realized whilst working with Tony on our e-mail ‘Recommend a Book Project’ [RAB2] is that you learn about books but you also learn about friends and their views.

That idea led me to write this letter.

When I was about 14 years-old I had to have an exploratory brain operation. It was, as you can imagine, hugely frightening. It didn’t get fully sorted until after our twins were born! Recently, I met up with some friends from those days who, remembering my teenage years and epilepsy, were surprised [and pleased] that I am still alive!

Such experiences do shape us.

During the long months we have been in-house, because of covid-19, much has been lost. Not least lives and loved ones. On a personal level I especially miss choir and singing, church and singing, swimming, church and people, going out, and hugging grandchildren.

But the months we have been self-isolating have also made me wonder what more I might do. I wonder: ‘what is within my reach?’ Several ideas overlap.

[1] Some of the things that have driven me are to do with the value of all human lives and the sheer solidness of this. Our regard for each other. Our respect for people who are different. Our handling of the changes that somewhat constantly come at us. For me, from the outset, it has been to do with people of other faiths and other cultures. Now when I do a local walk I meet neighbours and strangers [tourists] who are coming into Epping Forest along our road. When we speak and – many do - I always end with the phrase “stay safe.”

[2] I have been involved with networking and groups all the years. Nowadays I’m aware that there is serious power in our connectedness. It isn’t only a strength of women; it isn’t simply about making connections or building networks; it is also about resourcing and challenging each other. If I was born in a South Wales village I now live in a village made up from the lives I share.

[3] Looking back I recall that my own life moved forward through second chance education [at Chorley/ Lancaster University]. I was fortunate that much of my working life – from early days in Accrington through to the London Borough of Newham [1976-2006] - was in teaching, community education and youth work. As we’ve lived through the whole saga of children and young people being out-of-school I’ve had conversations with our grandchildren and other friends. Given that our four grandchildren are into their teenage years I feel nowadays I’m on home ground. It’s not only to do with my own ‘missed adolescence’ it’s also that adolescence is the launch-pad for that, all important, life-long learning.

[4] Finally, I feel I’m onto something important for myself – it’s to do with witnessing, confessing, encouraging each other to reflect and share. Given the limits to our current activities I wonder how I might engage in significant small actions. This letter is one such from me.

**Tony and Barbara Holden ‘Black lives matter’ [2020 06]**

Sometimes there are so many issues that you hesitate to say anything. Let me try.

[1] In the UK there is far too much denial of racism and structural racism: it’s not only fuelled by ‘the far right’ and ‘supremacists.’

[2] Sometimes events happen, as now, that lead to tipping points and significant change.

[3] Such moments engage large numbers of people of all ages and, given my personal life-commitment, my hope is that it will be non-violent.

[4] The move to a more just society means we must work at structural changes not least those that limit and end abuse, domination and violence.

[5] If you think of slavery, colonialism, globalization: or issues such as law and policing; tax and big-business; the environment ‘after’ covid-19 - you can see that ‘Black Lives Matter’ is proving to be a movement for our time – See - [https://blacklivesmatter.com/](about:blank)

**Tony Holden ‘Being self-running’ [2020 04]**

Most of us relate to young people somehow – as friends, children, grandchildren or even great-grandchildren! They are having many of their boundaries and plans shifted and blocked by the covid-19 lockdown. Changes are often tricky and especially when they happen without our consent or control: we feel, well blocked.

Recognition of this got me into thinking about the life-long task of being ‘self-running.’ You might say that ‘being self-running’ is a sign of a person being adult and mature. Some would use the term ‘self-actualization.' Christians might speak of ‘abundant life’ [John 10,10].

I think it is partly to do with how we manage certainty and uncertainty. It is also about how we learn to cooperate with people with whom we disagree and with whom we ‘negotiate to yes.’ And, I’d say above all, it’s about how we make choices that shift and change our lives.

So, what to do? [1] We sensibly reach for both new and trusted skills: and ask for help from other people. [2] As Christians we continue to practice our serious, meditative and spiritual lives: we - say our prayers, read the Bible, engage [in our case] with LMC, watch media-worship, reach out to other people. [3] Many of us find being creative, in one or other of its many forms, part of our spirituality. [4] Sometimes we make check-lists – some of us do it somewhat obsessively!!!

So, I thought I’d ask what are the key ideas and actions on your - ‘how to survive and be fulfilled today’ list? Here is one of my versions: I am trying to:

1. Structure my days and work at short term ‘projects’
2. Enjoy the extra time to do the many things I value
3. Think, write, work, plan for new hopes, ideas, activities
4. Emotionally move towards and support other people
5. Manage the incoming local and global information carefully
6. Write – think about, reflect on, examine my actions
7. Finally, stop and let go of my anxieties and fears.

So, what do you want to do today?

**Barbara Holden personal reflections on reading Philipp Ther ‘The Outsiders – refugees in Europe since 1492’ [2019] [2020 04]**

To our grandchildren.

When I was four a neighbour, Mr Thomas, said it’s time you learnt to read. This is one of the more difficult books I’ve read. I saw it advertised in London Review of Books. Publisher Princeton has: “European history has been permeated with refugees. ‘The Outsiders’ chronicles every major refugee movement since 1492, when the Catholic rulers of Spain set in motion the first mass flight and expulsion in modern European history. // Ther examines the major causes of mass flight, from religious intolerance and ethnic cleansing to political persecution and war.”

So why did I stick to reading it and why do I think it so important?

I grew up in a South Wales village where the Labour Party, Chapel, Co-op, Choirs, Suffragettes shaped us. One of their underlying ideas was that we were responsible in our personal lives. The other was that we should listen respectfully to the world as it came to us through the media – at first the radio, then newspapers, then TV and now the web.

I’ve written a separate short book review for our RAB2 ‘recommend a book’ Project. This is serious scholarship. It is a long read with detailed academic notes for those who wish to check-out his story. It is illuminating the daily coverage of the world’s ethnic struggles. He is direct, incisive, knowledgeable, evocative – his own experiences across Europe are writ large.

His analysis is huge and his use of 15 case studies calls to mind TV images and history that all of us hold in common. I especially valued these 15 biographical case studies. They remind us of the fact that modern conflicts between nations carry within them the ‘ghost’ of previous empires – somehow these old alliances come back into play. His account makes watching current coverage of the flight from Syria all the more historically meaningful – and desperate.

As I look back at my life’s-work I can see how so many people, events and experiences have led me to focus on ‘living with difference’ and seeking to do this ‘in peace and justice.’

Each one of us has our history to rehearse – mine runs from [1] South Wales to [2] Accrington, Chorley College and Blackburn Road Language Centre onto [3] Bilston Wolverhampton, teaching, Enoch Powell, an early interfaith-group and our children. Then the big move to [4] the London Borough of Newham – and my job in community education, again an interfaith group and our life at Stratford Methodist Church. Within it [5] I did two India study trips plus our own European Holidays and much later a visit to Istanbul. Now [6] well into retirement in Loughton and still working on interfaith issues I sometimes feel the outsider to commuter-suburban London.

But I know this we will not have ‘peace with justice’ unless we resolve wars. We will not heal the pain of migrations and refugees until people and groups are valued for themselves. Philipp Ther tracks the history of European refugees and migration and his academic excellence has fed my community-based passion.

**Tony Holden ‘Artificial Intelligence and human compassion’ [2020 02]**

I’ve been reading about artificial intelligence [AI]. I should say ‘I’ve been trying to read about AI’ [note 1]. The words ‘reading’ and ‘trying to read’ expose the sort of questions that are explored here: human brain-mind over against AI activity.

I’ve pushed myself to understand for three reasons.

Computers have seriously changed the world – arguably as much as any previous ‘revolution.’ Siri [and voice recognition] has just entered our family in addition to Google, Facebook, Wikipedia, Big Data and the like. The most extraordinary truth is how recent it all is – I’m 80 this year but I was in my 50’s before the world-wide-web became public [arguably April 1993 – note 2]

Secondly the issues that are rehearsed here – as a history of AI - are also to do with being human. They are to do with - self [identity], intelligence, emotion, consciousness, language, networks, creativity and human learning. There are many ‘hard problems’ for human understanding still to solve.

Thirdly I’m aware each day through 24/7 media of our huge problems and conflicts as humans and tribes. From the viewpoint of my mostly in-house life I want to urge us humans to do better. I’m reminded of Edward de Bono’s [note 3] very sharp words: “I have written before that the most hopeful thing about the human race is its relative stupidity. If I had to believe that humanity was operating at the full throttle of its intellectual potential and still producing the crises, mess and dangers of today's world, then there could be little hope.”

Notes - [1] Margaret A Boden ‘Artificial intelligence – a very short introduction’ Oxford 2016/2018 [2] [https://webfoundation.org/about/vision/history-of-the-web/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIiIr5wtTs5wIVQbTtCh2Q4AoUEAAYASAAEgJ9pPD\_BwE](about:blank) [3] Edward de Bono ‘Conflicts - a Better Way to Resolve them’ [1985].

**Tony Holden ‘Truth-telling’ [2020 02]**

We inhabit a world of instant and encyclopaedic information. Yet we are also living through times when some people are majoring in lies, disinformation, conspiracy theories and paranoia. There’s nothing new in this but thanks to IT it’s all not only in your face but on your screens! I encounter such people via TV and social media. I see them using such strategies as a means of increasing their own power: some to use their power as a force for domination. I don’t think you can overstate the importance of truth-telling. Bernard Williams wrote: “There has to be a difference between what things are like if it is true and what things are like if it isn’t.” So, here’s what I try to do in an attempt to resist this foolish abuse of leadership and influence. [1] I try to check out what I read and ‘source it’ – if I can before I get worked up at it or start throwing things at the TV! [2] I don’t pass on words or images on Facebook that are used by such people. [3] I write critically but positively as a witness even though my own limitations on the grounds of deafness and mobility are considerable. [4] I look to promote all and any who are non-violent, creative, seeking to empower for the common good. There’s more but I am working on these.

**Tony Holden ‘Do no harm’ [2020 01]**

Do no harm - Reading the news yet again causes me to write: being rude, abusive, aggressive and violent to other people is mistaken, self-defeating and anti-social. It is also very often illegal. This is so for individuals and groups. The motivation [or ideological basis] doesn’t make the words or actions more or less culpable. They need to stop be they tribal, racist, anti-Semitic, anti-gay, anti-women, anti-disabled people or derived from fear and anxiety or success or failure. It is still all to do with people behaving badly and without due care towards others.