

Subject: God's Awakening, about 8:30
Entry: Tue 13/08/2002 09:05

As I woke I recalled the story of the potter's house I had read in Jeremiah yesterday, where the clay pot was reduced to a lump of clay by the potter, ready for reworking. I felt God say "So what about you? Are you willing for me to start again with you if I see fit?" What a scary question! How could I know what that would entail? Pushing aside the part of me that protested "But you have already built some good things into my life haven't you?" I decided to address the question, hypothetical or not. Slowly, like someone treading through a minefield, I began to vocalise my thoughts. "Lord, if that is going to happen I cannot go through that emptiness again unless I do so in the fullness of your presence. Please, don't take me anywhere where you are not. If I know your loving presence with me only then could I bear to go through that emptiness." I recalled last night's prayer meeting in which we had rested for a while in God's presence and I had found myself reflecting soberly on the implications of God making his presence manifest. "He who falls on the rock will be broken, but he on whom the rock falls will be crushed". Cheers God, what an attractive choice! But the latter choice leads only to annihilation; the former one leads to the prospect of full healing, presumably with the bones fitted together by the "divine surgeon" better than they had been before!

Last Tuesday, off the coast of Port Ban in Iona, I got a small taste of what it means to be broken on the rock. I had gone there with a couple of good friends to pay a surprise visit to our mutual friend Helena who was working there over summer. During the trip we visited Martyr's Bay on the west side of the island. Inspired by the sight of two small outlying islands nearby I decided to go for a swim and circumnavigate them, weaving a kind of figure 8 around them. This I did, recklessly I admit in hindsight as the process involved me swimming Atlantic side of the outermost island. The sea was initially as calm here as it was shore-side of the island, but as I skirted the rocky coastline of the island a gigantic swell came out of nowhere. I had only a brief moment in which to wonder why this wave had appeared in an otherwise untroubled sea before I was submerged under this wave for about 20 seconds. I re-surfaced just long enough to shout out the most profound and heartfelt prayer I've ever prayed in my life – "LORD SAVE ME!" before being pushed down beneath the surface again. This happened two or three times and the swell forced my body against the rocky outcrop of the island. I could feel my skin breaking as my body repeatedly hit the rocks, but fortunately at some point I managed to gain a hold of this rock with my hands and feet and pull myself upwards to the surface. Maintaining my hold I managed to drag myself out of the sea and lay there in the sun panting for breath. Once I'd recovered from the shock a little and felt the oxygen returning to the cells in my body I slowly made my way across the island, treading gingerly to minimise further damage to my feet already cut on the rocks. Shore-side of the island I plunged once again into the now-calm sea, protected from the Atlantic swell that had threatened my life on the other side of the rocky outcrop. I swam steadily back toward the inner island with a relaxed breast-stroke, stopping every so often to tread water. I was freezing cold with a combination of the already icy water and the breeze upon my body as I had crossed the island, but the cold along with the salt of the sea-water also acted mercifully to salve the wounds on my body and protect me from feeling the full extent of my injuries.

Meanwhile on the shore my three friends had become very concerned for my whereabouts, that concern only abating as one of them, climbing the nearby cliff, observed my progress as I walked back across the outer island. The other two of course only caught sight of me as I appeared as a speck in the distance, swimming around the lee of the innermost island. Apparently I looked like the lagoon monster as I rose out of the water. My body was *covered* in cuts that bled proficiently as I left the water, and when my white towel was draped over me it

was soon engulfed in red. The only other occupants of the bay at the time, besides my three friends, were a lovely Christian couple, their little girl and her grandma. Amazingly one of the girl's parents was medically trained and happened to have brought a first aid kit! I was soon being treated, and then slowly shepherded back to the road leading to the small town east side of the island. The little girl kept looking curiously at my wounds. As we walked we shared our lives a little. When they learnt I played accordion, the couple mentioned the well-known player Jimmy Shands whose place in his old vinyl collection Richard Thompson famously name-drops! The little girl's grandma told me the family were related across three generations to Hugh Penny of the Western Isles (not to be confused with his namesake who taught me A-level music!) Her son-in-law, grandson and granddaughter had all been baptised in Iona Abbey, and her son-in-law's mother (also *called* Iona) came from Iona and like her father (a minister whose ashes are buried on the island) had the privilege as a true resident of the island to be granted a burial space on the island should she so choose! When we reached the road finally (and painfully for me as the numbness was beginning to wear off!), the family graciously let me occupy the taxi that had been due to take them back. Thank you Lord for putting your kind servants in my path!

Naturally I didn't sleep much that night. Aside from the vivid recollection of the longest minute of my life keeping me awake, my ubiquitous seeping wounds were sticking to my bedclothes, and for a good few nights I found bloodstains on the sheets but little rest or comfort in bed. A few days ago I was gigging in Dublin with the jazz group Fluid Dynamics. I had arranged with my travelling companions to catch the ferry across to Ireland with them at the end of our trek so they could witness the concert, and I wasn't going to let the side down. On our first night there I hung out with them in a pub in the centre of Dublin itself, consuming a pint of real Guinness (great anaesthetic!) and displaying my war wounds to the others yet again. When I finally went on stage, although I managed to don the rest of the band outfit, I had to go on with no shoes on my feet as they were still too sore! Thankfully this didn't interfere with my pedalling technique on the lovely grand piano I got to play there in the beautiful National Concert Hall of Dublin!

Two days ago I stood up to give testimony to the congregation back at Barnsley Christian Fellowship as to how God had answered my deep if short prayer. Sue **[Bavister, wife of my then pastor Dennis]** came up to me afterwards, her face etched with concern. "When exactly did this happen? What day?" When I said "Tuesday" I could hear her draw a breath. She went on to explain that on Tuesday morning God had put my name on her heart with a great deal of urgency, to the extent that she had persuaded Dennis to assemble the church elders for the sole purpose of praying for me. **[This is the same lady who had earlier prophesied that I would write songs that would minister to the wider church – the first of which, "Lift", I had written a couple of months before this brush with death. See my notes elsewhere.]** She had told the assembled elders at the time that she believed I was about to come under a spiritual attack and needed their urgent prayer – and this only some three to four hours before I nearly drowned off the west coast of Iona at the mercy of a freak swell, in the bay where centuries ago many Irish priests had been massacred for their faith. Sue had been spot on about the need for prayer, which I believe saved me from drowning, but had had no idea that the attack would take such a dramatic form.

Scary stuff, but only my skin was broken, not my bones, and at least I am healing now: the stiffness has largely gone from my joints and the cuts are stinging less and less though I cannot get far from my awareness of them. Maybe there will be scars but with them also memories which always fill both sides of the coin. At the moment, despite my injuries, I am feeling more alive than one usually feels; others who undergo near-death experiences feel that same undercurrent of purpose (if you will excuse the pun!) that I do now, and for me this is heightened

by a deep sense that God has a plan for my life, that the enemy does not appreciate the fact, but that God cared for me enough to prompt the saints around me to active prayer on my behalf. I am blessed, not lucky; luck and fate are never in the equation, especially for those who seek to get their lives on track with God. We are all governed by the higher powers, whether that be the prince of the air, who is continuing to enjoy his long temporary rule, or the King of heaven. **[As I revisit these notes some three and a half years later I can still see two sets of diagonal stripes on my left side, as if a fork has been run across my skin and left its imprints. I will have these scars for life. A good friend of mine nicknamed me 'Tiger', and the name like my stripes has stuck! But back to my waking thoughts on the day in question...]**

Then God made me think of the clothes horse heavy with washing on the window side of my bedroom. I seemed to have set it up the wrong way but this had only become clear when the washing weighed heavy on it and it had suddenly collapsed as I reached for another item to hang out! Maybe the support bar was clipped on the wrong way, but it was too late to start again unless I was willing to spend another half hour restocking the horse after having positioned it correctly! The clothes horse is currently bowing under the weight of washing, on the verge of collapse but not quite getting there. Was God saying to me maybe it was time to get rid of the accoutrements and let him start with me again? He is clearly more patient than me, but if he needs to reposition the skeletal bones before once more adorning them with flesh, it is going to be pretty noticeable and rather insufferable. "God, if it comes to that I am seriously going to need to know you are standing right there with your breath on me- don't leave me feeling alone!"

[Sure enough as I reflect on these notes I recall the massive journey I have undertaken since I wrote them. Part of that journey has been incredibly painful and occupied my days and sleepless nights for weeks on end, rather like the all-encompassing wounds I obtained that day. At my worst point I found myself sinking into the depths of manic depression, during which time I experienced the painful break-up of a long friendship which at the time seemed irrevocable. I was in such a bad state that my parents came across from Scarborough to look after me for a while, though amazingly I was able carry on working throughout my illness. Though this was by far the shortest of three lengthy periods of depression in my life, each of which was finally treated with a successful course of anti-depressants, it was also the most intense. Owing to current changes in the law to prevent misuse of prescribed drugs, anti-depressant medication these days has to be taken in gentler doses, meaning a more protracted convalescence and in some instances like mine an initial worsening of symptoms as the mind reacts to the treatment. I daily faced an irrational fear of hell and eternal judgment, despite the loving reassurance of my Christian brothers and sisters including my pastor Paul, who at the time went considerably out of his way on many occasions to steer me away from suicidal thoughts. I was surrounded by nothing but love and know that the state of fear didn't come from God (whose perfect love casts out fear); yet I know that God was faithful through this time and used my weakness to mould me into a new and better shape and to enable me to achieve his purposes more powerfully. Remember, God spoke these words to the apostle Paul when he protested over his mysterious 'thorn in the flesh':- "MY GRACE IS SUFFICIENT FOR YOU, FOR MY POWER IS MADE PERFECT IN WEAKNESS" (2 Corinthians 12:9) Indeed the song "Lose Myself", to date my most successful published song by a long shot, was written in the early stages of this period at the end of perhaps the most difficult week of my life. I was heading towards this kind of metamorphosis, sensing much personal loss already but wanting to lose the rest of myself in God rather than in self-annihilation. That's the choice I made and continue to make.]