finding naasicaa

letters of hope in an age of anxiety

charles ringma
In a post-Christendom world, young people continue to be vitally interested in matters of spirituality and justice, despite their lack of engagement with the Christian faith and church. This situation calls for new forms of communication and a reconsideration of the claims of the Christian faith.

This book for searching minds does just this. A series of letters written by theologian Charles Ringma to his 19-year-old granddaughter, Finding Naasicaa addresses ultimate issues of life, faith, spirituality and social transformation accessibly, unpretentiously and winsomely.

Charles Ringma is regarded by many as a thinker, activist and contemplative. He has written in the area of the social sciences and philosophy. He has worked as a missioner, researcher, and urban ministry practitioner and has written many books on Christian spirituality. He has lived and worked in Europe, Australia, Asia and Canada, teaching theology and mission at Asian Theological Seminary, Manila and mission studies, philosophy and spirituality at Regent College, Vancouver. As a retired professor he continues to write and teach in various parts of the world.
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themes of life and threads of decay

letter nine

After all these years I still feel sad about the fact that I was only able to attend the birth of my last born daughter, your Aunty Jodie. The hospital system in Australia in the 1960s did not allow fathers to be present. We were supposed to go fishing! After all, babies were regarded to be woman's work. No matter how much we pled with the doctors, the answer was always 'no'. During Rita's pregnancy with Jodie, hospital policy finally changed.

It was an awesome experience to see Jodie burst into the world. Joy in the midst of pain, body fluid and blood. I was stunned for days afterwards and remember penning several poems lauding the gift of life.

While I have been back in Brisbane, I have been visiting my mother who has been sliding towards death for several years. She is in her late eighties and suffers from
dementia. She no longer recognizes me when I visit and can no longer speak.

Life is the span of the joy of birth and the inevitability of death. Francois Mitterand once commented that ‘birth and death are the two wings of time’. And in between these two points of a beginning and an end, we have a lot of living to do. This living is increasingly longer in the First World due to better nutrition and health care.

My grandfather lived to be ninety-six. Rita’s mother is already ninety-three. So Naasicaa, there are some pretty strong genes that have been passed on to you. You may live a long life! But of this we can’t be sure, can we? Life is finally not in our control.

If you think that in this letter I am going to give you ten steps to live a happy and fulfilled life (some want to add prosperous as well) you can relax. I think that most of this kind of advice promoted in popular books and magazines is a lot of superficial nonsense. As if there are simple steps to live the greatest mystery—life itself! As if we can make it all happen! As if we are in control of all that may occur in our lifetime! Moreover, the happy life seldom occurs through seeking happiness. It more frequently happens in ways that we had never expected or anticipated.

So you won’t get a ten-step program from me. Furthermore, I can’t really tell you how you should live your life. Hard as it may sound, you have to find your own way. In other words, you have to sort out the way in which you wish to live. You have to make choices. You have to set your sails in a particular direction. But you need not do this on your own. There are many who love you and are committed to you and who want to see you grow and develop into a person of purpose.
know thyself

The above phrase is a famous ancient Greek saying that sees self-understanding as being intrinsic to wisdom. It also has everything to do with what we are considering here—what is life-giving. And of course, one can't consider that without also asking the question—what is death-dealing? This set of ideas, asking what is life-giving and death-dealing, comes from Ignatian spirituality.¹ Thinking in this way has been most helpful to me as I have had to make important life choices. But more about that at some other time.

Now the question is probably rumbling around in your head: How can knowing myself have anything to do with what is life-giving? Let me get to the point. There are two elements at work here. The first is that I need to live life within the framework and possibilities of who I am and how I am gifted. The other is that I cannot live someone else’s dream for my life, whether that someone be an especially important person, or whether these are the corporate dictates of a society.

To ‘know thyself’ has to do with self-understanding. And in the journey of understanding ourselves, a lot of mystery has to be revealed. In the words of Martin Heidegger, a lot of unveiling needs to take place.² Put differently, I need to get to know my own being, as well as my potential. I need insight into who I am, as well as the courage to become who I want to and should be.

This double movement is the exciting promise facing every young person. I need to know increasingly how I ‘tick’, or better put, how I operate in the way I think, process things, plan, communicate, do things and how I relate to others. This becomes clearer over time through self-insight and through the feedback that others give us. This also becomes clearer through the clashes we have with others and through difficulty.
Along with this, I need to become more and more aware of what gifts have come my way through my genetic inheritance and how significant others have been able to encourage me and bring out some of my abilities. It is amazing that we have been so richly endowed and that so many talents, like uncut diamonds, lie within the dark caverns of our being.

Here the life of faith also plays a crucial part. To know myself in the light of God’s love and to appreciate the way in which God has made me and gifted me is essential to my self-understanding. Moreover, the gift of the Holy Spirit, as the Spirit of truth, plays an important part in coming to self-insight.

But this spiritual dynamic can also be complemented by other means and there is no reason why psychological or vocational testing should not be helpful. I have found both the Myers-Briggs and the Enneagram to be helpful in later life, but I see these as mere indicators and not as descriptions of who I am. We are all far more complex than any test can indicate.

Along with growing in understanding regarding my gifts, talents and orientation comes the complimentary dynamic of understanding my limitations. This is not the signal to a passive resignation. Nor does this undermine finding the courage to become who I want to be. It is simply the ability to face the sober reality that I am not and cannot be anything and everything. If my gifts, choices and opportunities move me to become a ballet dancer, then I cannot also become a heavyweight lifter.

Most of us struggle with accepting personal limitation. We somehow think that we can be and do anything and everything. But that is impossible. We are not God and fundamentally not even godlike. At this point, contemporary society and its values do not serve us well. We are given the idea that everything is available to us and that we can
do anything and be everything, providing we have the financial resources. This is a myth.

H-G. Gadamer has rightly pointed out that every time we say ‘yes’ to one thing we are by implication saying ‘no’ to something else. And, Naasicaa, I think that you have already felt the pain of this. This pain operates at several levels. One level of pain is coming to terms with the illusions we have about ourselves in thinking we can be and do more than we in fact can. At another level, we are ‘forced’ to make choices. One usually can’t do law and engineering at the same time. And one can’t marry two men at the same time, at least not in our culture!

Rather than seeing limitation as a curse, we may see it as a gift. For by having to make choices and having to say ‘yes’ to one direction and ‘no’ to another, we have the opportunity to find a sense of direction, to discover our calling and to consolidate aspects of our lives.

I talked earlier about this double movement. The one is gaining insight into who I am. The other is grasping the courage to become who I want to be. I now need to say some things about the latter. Within the broader limits of my humanity, giftedness and the general circumstances of my life, there is an openness. I can do and become a number of things. I can make vocational and relational choices. I can make decisions about my lifestyle. And all of these things have to do with the person I am becoming. Thus I have not only been given much in terms of who I am, but I also play a part in becoming the person I wish to be.

About this exciting journey, let me say a number of things. One, in making choices, we need wisdom and discernment. In gaining that, I believe we need the guidance of God’s Spirit, we need to listen to our heart as well as our mind, and we need to be open to the advice of others. Secondly, we need the courage to live our choices and to take responsibility for our lives. Alongside that,
we need to grow in humility, realizing that some choices may not have been helpful. Life is not about always getting things right, but moving in the right direction after we recognize that we have made mistakes. E. Stanley Jones, a friend of Gandhi, once said, 'If I fail, I want to fail in the right direction'.

If I had to summarize in different words what I have said in this part of my letter to you, I would say the following: it is life-giving to live according to one's giftedness and abilities; it is hard to live life against itself. Unlike my father and my two brothers, I had no gifts, abilities and inclinations to work in trades that required mechanical know-how. If I touched a machine, it usually broke down. And in the years that I worked in the Department of Social Work and Social Policy at The University of Queensland, I was banned from using the latest photocopier for that very reason.

Not to live within the framework of one's giftedness and abilities is to weave one's life with the threads of decay and death. One can't continue to attempt to be what one is not. While this attempt may come from one's own illusions, it more frequently comes from the pressure and expectations of others. Thus to be oneself involves resisting the dreams of others. It requires the courage to be oneself.

knowing others

As in all the letters I am writing to you, Naasicaa, I am not being exhaustive in my coverage of topics, but only suggestive. This is also true of the above section. There is much more I could say, including that in learning to know ourselves we also need to face the dark side of ourselves. But I will talk about this at another time.

Here I want to talk about relationships, about knowing, being known and knowing others. Knowing others, particularly in the fragile and challenging art of
friendship, has much to do with knowing ourselves. We need to know who we are and what we can share and give in our relationships with others. This, of course, is not to deny that in deeper friendships we not only share our knowability, but also our mystery.

In friendship, we not only learn to know others, but we ourselves need to be known by others. In other words, we need to take risks in vulnerability and openness. Thus reciprocity and mutuality are key dimensions in the journey of friendship. It is important to realize that this is not true of all relationships. In seeing a psychiatrist, for example, the dynamic is quite different. He or she seeks to know us in our strengths and psychopathology. But it is unlikely that we will get to know the psychiatrist.

This example raises an important issue in relationships, namely, the matter of power. In a relationship of helper and helpee the dynamic of power is not equally distributed. The former has more power than the latter, although the helpee is far from powerless. He or she can refuse to heed the advice and reject the help of the helper.

It is important, Naasicaa, that you think through this issue, for it has ramifications like the tenacles of an octopus. In ordinary relationships, a healthy experience of power is to have power with others. But there are always people who want to have power over others in a way that is not to the other's benefit. A healthy way to have power over others is to have a willingness for others to participate in that power for themselves, or in other words, for them to be empowered. What I have in mind here is the more knowledgeable or the more skilful person sharing their gifts and abilities in ways that facilitate growth in others. This results in power with others. What is unhealthy is when gifts or abilities are used to manipulate others or to make them dependent.7
We need to be aware when others exercise power over us in unhealthy ways and equally careful that we don’t exercise that kind of power in relation to others. We need to exercise power over ourselves in order to relate in appropriate ways to others.

All of this, of course, is related to the much broader issue of hierarchies that exist in social life. We have the rulers and the ruled, the boss and the employee, the clergy and the laity and not so long ago we thought of the husband and wife in hierarchical terms. Not only is the last named no longer understood as a hierarchy but as a relationship of mutuality, so also in other areas of relationship and work there has come a flattening of the power differentials. Workers also have power. So have the laity in the church. What is particularly important is that these hierarchies do not operate in our relationships of friendship.

That relationships can be life-giving is self-evident. But let’s talk about it anyway. Apart from the relationships of family and extended family, which are a given, most other relationships are of our own making. This does need some qualification, however. We don’t choose our teachers, fellow employees, church members and neighbours. Some of these may never become friends. Some, in fact, may be a nuisance factor in our lives. But most of our adult relationships are the ones we choose to develop.

This development is always a movement from stranger to potential friend, from acquaintance to close friend and from friend to possible life partner. This movement requires an interesting dialectic between maintaining our own boundaries and being open to the other. It involves risk taking as well as growth in trust. It involves the movement of giving and receiving. Above all, it needs to be a relationship of freedom and mutuality and not of manipulation and dependency.
Healthy friendships are not only a source of companionship, care and encouragement. They are also a source of revelation. What I mean by this is that in life-giving friendship, we come to understand ourselves better. We discover more of how we think and operate. We also come to see some of our blind spots in the face of the other.

You have met some of our friends, Naasicaa and therefore you know how blessed Rita and I are. Most of these friendships were formed during our years working with Teen Challenge in reaching out to homeless youth and drug dependent young people. These friendships were forged in the communities we formed to help these young people in their journey to wholeness. These friendships are still strong today, even though we have been away from Australia for over fifteen years, and we have all gone into other areas of work and ministry. I regard these friendships as a most precious treasure.

In this, I see some important elements for friendship building. Even though I use this kind of terminology, I still believe that friendship is fundamentally a gift. But gifts can be handled in constructive ways. The first element is that friendship can grow when we have the opportunity to see each other regularly and in a diversity of activities. Secondly, friendship can grow when there are common interests and purposes. Thirdly, friendship deepens when we can go through difficulties and hard times together. And finally, friendship cannot be built when we only reveal our strengths. We also have to show our fears and weaknesses.

I wish, Naasicaa, that I could help you find the love of your life. But that is not possible. For this, I can only pray. I certainly don’t believe that there is a Mister Right out there for you, nor that marriages are made in heaven. The art of finding someone with whom you fully want to share
your life is fraught with difficulty and promise. While love at first sight is always a possibility, but hardly ever the norm, I believe that the movement from friendship to deeper love is a gradual journey. And as trust deepens and love grows, there comes the possibility for more profound commitments.

**forgiveness and relinquishment**

Using the themes ‘life-giving’ and ‘death-dealing’ in the area of relationships, it is obvious that having good friendships empowers us, while being in unhelpful, dysfunctional or destructive relationships weaves the threads of decay. Sadly, relationships with others can be hurtful due to manipulation, neglect or abuse.

While there may be some people who go through life relatively unscathed, and while there may be some who lead ‘charmed’ lives, that is not the experience of most of us. We both hurt others and are hurt ourselves by the unhelpful things that people say and do to us. And since life is not fair, there is no point in trying to keep a moral ledger. The logic that if I am kind to others they in turn will be kind to me frequently breaks down. In fact, a person that one has loved most deeply may in turn become most cruel. After all, Jesus was crucified by people whom he blessed, not abused.

So if there is anything we can be sure about, it is that we will be hurt in some of our relationships. And of course, the more significant the relationship, the greater the possible hurt and wounding. For some, these hurtful relationships go all the way back to their family of origin. For others, these took place during the more vulnerable years of schooling. For others again, relational hurt occurred in their adult years.

Unless we are very sensitive and intuitive, or unless we have a very strong sense of personal boundaries, we often
come to relational difficulties in ambiguous ways. Or we may come to them much too late. What I mean by this is that we often blame ourselves for the neglect or abuse of others because we are never wholly morally free. Moreover, we often allow bad things to drag on in the hope that with time things will get better. They seldom do get better!

What I am saying here is not that we should cut others off the moment difficulties appear in the relationship. If we were to do that, none of our relationships would grow to any depth. But what I am saying is that we should not carry and blame ourselves for the wrong 'stuff' that others put on us. Nor should we remain in abusive relationships because we have developed some co-dependency.

The fact that we are hurt by the sins of others against us and that we also sin against other people opens up for us the challenging art of seeking and extending forgiveness. C.S. Lewis, whose Narnia series you avidly read when you were younger, reminds us in many of his other writings that the most basic movement towards life is the movement to forgive. Forgiveness is the bread and butter of human existence.

I believe that if we have hurt and emotionally wounded others, then we need to apologize and seek forgiveness. If others have hurt us, then I believe we should forgive whether they apologize or not. Obeying the divine impulse to forgive is both life-giving for us and for the one who has hurt us.

Forgiving those who have hurt us is not usually our first thought. We want to retaliate and also hurt him or her in some way, even if it is through avoidance and subsequent neglect. But when forgiveness is our second and final thought, it is a mark of grace and is spawned by love.

Forgiveness lies at the heart of the gospel. God's redemptive love is for a humanity that rejects or ignores 'his' love. Forgiveness is also the fruit that the difficulties
in our relationships may produce. The Russian author Alexander Solzhenitsyn had to find this grace for those who put him and kept him in the Gulag.⁹

While the dynamic of forgiveness in relationships is mysterious enough, the matter of relinquishment is even more mysterious. Relinquishment involves the voluntary handing over or letting go of something that is rightly ours. Now you may be wondering, Naasicaa, why I am wanting to talk about this as a theme of life. Is it not rather a theme of death? Well, in one sense it is, for it may involve dying to something. But this dying gives life. These are not the threads of decay.

Relinquishment is not the favourite topic in our contemporary Western culture. In fact, our culture’s theme is the opposite—much-having. Ours is a consumer culture in which having is important to self-enhancement—the more expensive the better. So implicitly, our culture is telling us that much-having equals happiness and well-being. Not to have something is to be deprived and to be less than what one could or should be.

This emphasis in our culture is grossly lopsided, for well-being does not rotate simply around having, but also around relinquishment. At its motivational centre, this is the ability, in the words of Henri Nouwen, to live life with open hands.¹⁰ It is also a form of self-giving and possibly, even more profoundly, the willingness to bend to the mystery of life by releasing that which we feel we should not cling to.

The more natural impulse is to live life with a closed fist. I do not mean that we are shaking that fist in someone’s face with the threat to violence. I simply mean that we want to hold tightly to what is ours. And however understandable that may be, there are several problems in living this way. The first is that we may squeeze to death what we are holding. We can cling to something so much
that it becomes the core of who we are and as such it becomes idolatrous. Secondly, the closed fist never leaves our hand open and empty. We are in control, but there is no room for surprises. And thirdly, not to be able to let go means that we will never know the blessedness of the movement from death to life.

Whether we like it or not, things will be taken away from us. People will disappear out of our life. The company we work for may fold. And the later aging process, in the words of Scott Peck, is a fearful stripping process. Relinquishment is not what is taken from us. It is what we are willing to let go of.

Thus strange as it may seem, having full hands is not life-giving. Our hands sometimes need to be empty so that new things may come to us.

a closing reflection

As I have told you in an earlier letter, we moved from the better side of Vancouver to a more run-down East Vancouver neighbourhood. Some saw that as some sort of a sacrifice. It wasn’t. We gained much more by living in that community than we did in our isolation in suburbia. Moreover, by joining Grandview Calvary Baptist Church, a community church committed to holistic ministry, we had the joy of being part of a larger group that had a similar vision to our own.

What is life-giving cannot simply revolve around ourselves. To be part of a movement or organization that champions values similar to our own is very empowering. That is why, for the Christian, the challenge to be part of God’s purposes for the world is very life-giving. What I mean by this is that in gaining a sense of what God would have us do with our lives in terms of our work and service in the world, our lives take on a fuller meaning.
This is no narrow vision. And serving God's purposes does not simply mean becoming clergy. One can serve God as an artist, scientist or educator.

I have written about some themes of life. By this I am not proposing some upbeat version of life, a life with a full wind in the sails—as if there are no doldrums and no storms! Life is not that smooth. The threads of decay are always with us. And life knows both joys and sorrows. But it does matter what we lean towards. For you, I trust that it will always be in the direction of what is good and life-giving.

I am finishing this letter while in Yangon. I have just spent time with some of my Burmese friends working in a very difficult section of the city. They have little in the way of infrastructure and material resources and yet somehow their life is full. They have vision. They are blessing the community in which they live. They have a sense that God is with them and is sustaining them.

They are a living reminder of what I have been writing about in my letter to you. Emptiness can be the seedbed of life. Relinquishment can be a blessing in disguise.
The first time I arrived at Yangon airport in Myanmar some years ago, I was shocked. Here was a military regime at loggerheads with Western democracy and resistant to the pressure of the international community calling for the restoration of human rights. I had expected, therefore, that the airport foyer would be adorned with the symbols of Burmese culture in its defiance of the West. But this was not the case. I was met by the illumined signs of Western consumer products. I was most disappointed.

I share this observation not because I support the Burmese regime. Nor am I in principle opposed to Western consumer products. I live with the benefits that such products bring. Nor am I opposed to the amazing network of world trade that allows one to buy one’s favourite products virtually anywhere in the world, including in the poverty stricken Third World. But I am concerned
about some of the bigger issues that lie at the back of this, including the cultural globalization of our world.

Saying that I am concerned about this leads me to point out that I am also concerned about many other related issues. I am deeply concerned about the poverty of the Third World. I find it perverse that rich countries with only fifteen percent of the world's population control eighty percent of the world's wealth. This leaves middle and lower income countries with eighty-five percent of the world's population holding only twenty percent of the world's wealth. What is the most depressing is that nearly sixty percent of the world's population live in poor countries that have only five percent of the world's total income.

What lies embedded in these huge disparities between the First World and the Third World is not simply a lack of equality, but a lack of justice. There is ongoing systemic exploitation occurring in our world. The West's exploitation during the former colonial period is far from over. The colonies may be no more, but the exploitation continues through trade arrangements, the financial indebtedness of the Third World to First World financial institutions and the cultural and economic imperialism of the West. In saying this, I am not implying that the Third World has the high moral ground and is 'squeaky' clean. It has its share of oppressors and corruption. But I am saying that the West is morally culpable. There is nothing distinctly Christian in its role in the world. It only knows how to take. Forgiveness, including debt forgiveness, serving the vulnerable poor, empowering the weak, advocating on behalf of the two billion who stare hunger in the face each day and whose faces reflect our neglect—these are not the driving concerns of the West.
passion: its power and weaknesses

Saying that I am deeply concerned about these matters is another way of saying that I feel passionately about these things. While passion means to have a strong emotion about something or to have an intense enthusiasm, its more basic meaning from the Latin *patic* means to suffer. To be passionate is not to be detached, but to be engaged. One is not passionate about something to which one gives scant attention. To be passionate means that one is drawn in, one participates, even to the point of pain.

My concern in writing to you about this, Naasicaa, is that I believe that we are living in a passionless age. And in this, we are experiencing a great loss that affects our humanity and our solidarity in community. To be passionless not only condemns us to support the status quo—it also diminishes our humanity. As human beings our destiny does not lie in our meanderings, but in our passions. What I mean by this is that we are meant to feel deeply about things and not to live with the numbness of acceptance or indifference.

I believe that passion is inherent in what it means to be made in God’s image and to be God’s vice-regents in the world. God did not call the world into being with solemn detachment. God called into being all that is with the passion of ‘his’ love. Similarly, ‘his’ passion for justice heard the cry of the slaves in Egypt and God’s passion for covenant-keeping brought forth the plaintive cry and the heralding call of the prophets. And it was the passion (note that word again) of Christ, his death on our behalf, that opened the floodgates for God’s fuller redemptive activity in our world.

There is nothing calm about God. God is not ‘cool’ in the sense of a self-satisfied detachment. The God of the Bible weeps and cries. God loves and suffers. God enters
our pain and seeks our transformation. Just listen to Hosea: 'How can I hand you over, Israel . . . my heart is changed within me, all my compassion is aroused' (11:8). Or, in the words of Isaiah, 'For a long time I have kept silent, I have been quiet and held myself back. But now, like a woman in childbirth, I cry out, I gasp and pant . . . I will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth' (42:14,16).

In a similar way, we are not to be passionless creatures. Rather, we are called to enter the passion of God for our world and for its renewal and transformation. Made in God's image, we are to reflect the heart of God. And made for each other, we are challenged to enter the sufferings of others.

Sadly, our contemporary culture does not encourage this kind of passion. While our society encourages us to be passionate about our sexuality, it does not foster passion about our spirituality and social concern. That sounds too much like fanaticism. We are, therefore, encouraged to be rational and, above all, sensible. And ultimately we seek to be 'cool' with a calm superiority of indifference—these things won't occupy my inner world!

It is most unfortunate that many of our universities are now cradles for professional development and not places for critical thought. And while we may be encouraged to be skilful and thoughtful within our field of so-called expertise, we are not formed to be passionate. Become a sociologist, by all means, but not one who is committed to the implications of what one teaches and believes! By all means teach courses on urban justice, but allow me to live on my rural acreage far away from the pain in the inner city!

Sadly, the contemporary church is of little help in these matters. It is happy to speak about the passion of Christ on our behalf, but has little to say about our passionate
commitments. This should not surprise us, for the church is a highly compromised institution. It has suppressed the dangerous memories of early Christianity. It preaches about heaven, but follows some of the ways of the world. Its life is not marked by the cross, even though its lips are.2

One would have expected the Pentecostals to be different. They are known for their enthusiasm. And that means to be filled with the passion of God. But while the early Pentecostals with their Black roots were passionate about the power of God in their midst and equally passionate about mercy and justice, the middle-class, white co-option of the movement led these passions into respectability and eventual mediocrity.3

I have been saying that to be fully human is to live with passion, rather than with a bland mediocrity. Passion is at a premium in our Western world. That should not surprise us. The large market forces in our world want people who consume and who augment and strengthen the system. It does not welcome those who come to disturb. And that is what passion does. Thus our world wants the priest, not the prophet.

To live passionately is to live against the central tenets of our contemporary culture.4 Yet our consumer culture conditions us to live for ourselves. It also conditions us to live safely. These two ideas are interrelated. If we want to enhance ourselves, we need to make ourselves more secure. Since the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre in New York, our world has become more fearful, and the matter of security has been raised to optimum levels. To live passionately is to take risks and to enter another's issues and pain.

I am not surprised that you may have objections to what I am saying, Naasicca. All of this sounds too masochistic. Why live this way, if one can avoid it? Why cannot one live for happiness, safety and security? Why
should one be passionately concerned about the issues in our world and the questions of our time? And why should one be concerned for others, including one's enemies?

Let me respond even if it involves some repetition. First, to be human means to be passionate. We know how to feel deeply and identify with another's issues and concerns. We also know that we should not really stand idly by when we can contribute to the good. Secondly, God is passionate about the good—so passionate that God in Christ embraced a cruel death to show that a way other than violence is the way to life. We are invited to share and participate in the passion of God by extending forgiveness, being a healing presence in our community and resisting the oppressive powers that scar our world—including those of materialism and greed, ethnocentrism and racial hatred, militarism and exploitation.

Without passion we will do little and settle for the mediocre. Our world can't do without those who believe that things ought to be different and should be changed. George Casalis once made the comment, 'I am resolved to persevere in unconditionally refusing to accept the intolerable'.

The marks of passion can be seen around us in sports figures, artists, musicians and social reformers. And those of a deeply religious persuasion who have left their mark on the world were men and women of passion as well: Gandhi, Desmond Tutu, Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King, Jr.

But to live life with passion is no smooth and easy road. In fact, it is fraught with difficulties. Little wonder that many prefer to live life another way. And so often, we hear the words 'don't get involved', or 'you can't change these things anyway', or 'we need further research'.

One of the difficulties in living with passion is that we need to make sure that we are passionate about the right
things. If it is true that love is blind, then passion is blind and deaf. It is possible to be passionate about wrong, or at best one-sided, causes and issues. And it is very easy to become so ‘one-eyed’ about one’s cause that one fails to see the bigger picture or the problems of one’s own cause.

In the light of this, we always need to remind ourselves that the two big causes of the Twentieth century and all the passion and commitment that these released in the Western world were patent failures. I refer here to the short-lived Hitler regime and the longer-lived Communism of the Soviet Union. Here passion became perverted. And when passion is cut loose from wholesome ethical norms, it deteriorates into a diabolical idolatry.

Passion, therefore, must be infused by a moral vision. It can't simply be reactive. Passion can only be a passion for the good—never for evil.

I believe that the biblical story is the expression of God’s good for humans and for our world. To live that vision with passion will challenge us to live a life of reconciliation, forgiveness, service to humanity, empowerment of the poor, work for justice and resistance of the powers of oppression.

But to live this vision with passion is a costly and difficult journey. There are always the forces of opposition, the possibility of discouragement and the temptation to be co-opted. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s mission for racial reconciliation is both fulfilled—legislation is in place—and unfinished—there are still deep racial divides and ethnic marginalizations.

One of the things that has struck me again is how naïve we often are and how easily we give up. While we recognize that it takes generations to build good social values and institutions and that it takes an equally long time for good things to become corrupted and eventually perverted, we assume that change for the better can occur quickly. Passion
cannot be a short burst of enthusiasm while one is young and has few commitments and responsibilities. Passion needs to be the formative influence for the whole journey. The work for good and for justice is never a hundred-meter sprint. It is a marathon. Therefore, our passions can't be rooted in passion itself. They need to be rooted in a credible vision and in hope and faith.

**commitment: its challenges and pains**

As I have mentioned before, Naasicaa, your great grandfather settled in Brisbane, Australia on leaving The Netherlands. He has never moved from Brisbane and lived all his life in the family home. His has been a life of settledness. My life has been quite different. I have lived twice in the State of Victoria and twice in Western Australia, besides spending many years in Queensland. I have also lived in the Philippines and Canada and regularly travel to other Asian countries where I teach. My lifestyle has been much more nomadic.

My lifestyle rather than my father's is becoming more the norm in our contemporary world. With a global economy, the world is literally on the move, not only with the vast movement of raw materials, agriculture and consumer products, but also with people. Our societies in the Western world, as a result, have become multi-cultural. It is highly probable that after finishing your undergraduate studies in Australia you will do graduate work elsewhere. You will also follow every young Australian's dream to travel and see the world. And in your lifetime you may well live on several continents and in turn pursue up to four or five different careers. The usual scenario added to this mobility is that many people also track through a number of serious relationships and several marriages. I hope the latter won't be true of you.
The vast mobility that characterizes our world is not only full of excitement and interest; it also has all sorts of unfortunate consequences. So much travel has ecological consequences. And the more one moves, the more one becomes disconnected from people and place. We become modern nomads with little sense of connectedness to neighbourhood, church, institutions and political structures.

Mobility, the increasing diversity of our urban environments, our lack of regard for major social institutions and the self-interest that so characterizes our mind-set and values have made the notion of solidarity and its companion, commitment, very difficult ideas. And yet commitment is a part of the fabric of human community and of relationships. It's something we need to talk about.

Let me start, Naasicaa, as I often do, with a theological starting point. Theology for me is not an area of interest that is for the clergy alone. Thinking theologically—or as Harry Blamires puts it, thinking Christianly—involves thinking about all of life from the perspective of the biblical story. This is important for me, for it is the story of God and of God's Wisdom.

What is striking about that story is this commitment or covenant that lies at its very heart. God makes covenant with us and 'his' commitment to us is one of grace, generosity and fidelity. The Old Testament book of Deuteronomy puts it so clearly: 'But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery ... know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations ...' (7:8–9).

Commitment in the biblical story is not premised on the mutual maintenance of the commitment, or, in other words, on the idea: I will only be faithful if you are. Rather,
it is based on the veracity of God’s faithfulness, which converts our unfaithfulness into a fragile faithfulness and walk of obedience.

I think this central motif has implications for the way we are to operate in the world. We don’t operate with a debit/credit morality. Our stance is not: ‘I will love you to the degree that you love me’, but rather ‘I will love in good and bad times’. This is not in any way to deny that healthy relationships have to do with mutual self-giving and receiving. But relationships do go through difficulties and cycles. There are times where the one will need to give more than the other.

In the earlier part of this letter, I proposed that we live in a largely passionless world. I think we also live in a world where commitment is a difficult reality for us. It is difficult not only because of the factors I have mentioned above, but also because we have the idea that a commitment must primarily benefit me. So the thinking goes: ‘I will be committed to the company, as long as it will further my career’. Or, ‘I will be committed to this relationship, as long as it satisfies my needs’.

While I am not wanting to deny that there should also be something in it for us, we cannot make commitments solely on the basis of how they will benefit us. What about the company I work for? And what about the other person in the relationship?

In thinking this through, I believe we need to move away from the old idea of hierarchies of commitment. In a much older world, people followed the hierarchy of King, landlord and family, in that order. In the modern era, it has been family, job and country. And in more recent times, it has been myself, with all other hierarchies falling into other places depending on their potential benefit to me. In contemporary Christian thinking the hierarchy of commitment has been God, family, church and world. The
thinking here is that I first should be loyal and committed to God, then to my family and so on. This may sound good, but it is fundamentally faulty. Moreover, it is unlivable. One can't 'divvy' up life like that.

This kind of thinking is faulty because it goes against the tenor of the biblical story, where we are invited to love God and neighbour, and even our enemies. Moreover, we are invited to outwork our commitment to God by serving our family, our colleagues at work and the wider community. Furthermore, there may be times when we have to give one area of responsibility greater attention. In a certain phase in our life, that may be family. In another phase, that may be the wider community.

The problem with hierarchies of commitment is that whatever is down at the bottom receives the least attention. That gets the leftovers of our time, energy and attention. So if we live the God, family, church and world hierarchy, then our involvement with our wider community gets the least attention. A strange idea, when the God of the Bible is a God whose love, passion and commitment is for the world! Sadly, many Christians do attempt to live this hierarchy, usually with the unfortunate consequence that much of the attention is placed on family, and little on the world and little on God. Little wonder that Christians are often socially irrelevant. And it is not surprising that prayer is hardly a part of our lives.

Rather than hierarchies, I think we should live a series of interlocking circles of responsibility, where the one circle impacts the other. My commitment to church should impact my commitment to God, family and world. My commitment to family should impact the other circles and so on. This reflects much more the interconnectedness of life and the holistic nature of our mission in the world. Moreover, this means that family can also be a resource of service to the world and not simply the place of withdrawal.
from the world. Furthermore, our involvement with the world can deepen our relationship with God and our relationship with God can deepen our concern for the world. Finally, the church should strengthen the family and not only that, families should enrich the life of the community of faith.

Here, once again, I am suggesting that we need to live much more dialectically and not hierarchically. In drawing near to God in prayer, solitude and contemplation, I should not leave the world behind. I should take it with me—my family, neighbours and the pain of the world. Moreover, in meeting God in the quiet place of reflection, I meet with a God whose passion and commitment is for the world. This God turns my face raised in contemplation and adoration to the challenges and needs of the world and invites me to serve bread and wine to others and wash the feet of the world. Conversely, in my connectedness to neighbour, workplace and wider community, and in responding to the beauty and needs of our world, I am drawn to God for 'his' wisdom, grace and empowerment.

One of the comments that I regularly hear is that we don't have time to live this way. Family and work already fill our lives and with the increasing pressures and demands of the workplace, there is no time left for wider involvement. I accept that these pressures are real. I experience them myself. But I don't agree with the conclusions we draw, namely, that we don't have time for other things. We can make time, if we are willing to sacrifice in other areas. And that I think gets to the heart of the issue. We want a lot in terms of a good lifestyle and are, as a consequence, not willing to live more carefully so we can make commitments to issues that are beyond the parameters of our own self-interest. If we only make commitments to ourselves and not to wider issues and the common good, then we are in fact contributing to the social fragmentation of our society.
To live our commitments is no easy road. In other people's commitment to us, we receive. In our commitments to others, we give. Such is the reciprocity of life. But as I have said earlier, commitments can't work on a ledger morality, where you give first and then I give an equal amount back! There are times when we may have to give more, or times when we need to receive more. There are also times when our sense of commitment weakens, for in the real world things are refractory. Our work environment or our interpersonal relationships may become especially difficult and so our resolve can weaken.

We have to be willing to 'hang in' during both the good and difficult times. This is especially true when we are involved in the bigger social justice causes of our day. Nothing gets easily fixed up. We have to be willing to be there for the long haul.

**facing disillusionment**

It is very likely that we will become discouraged in working out our commitments. This may come our way for many reasons. We may have over-committed ourselves. This calls for re-evaluation and becoming more realistic regarding what we can do. We may have run out of steam at a particular point and instead of carrying others we may need to be carried for a while. But it is also possible that we have become disillusioned.

This touches a core issue in the outworking of our commitments. We often hope for much—too much! We expect our friends to be consistently loyal, our lover to be wonderfully sexy, our boss to be fair and our social institutions to serve us well. There is little doubt that we will be disappointed. And disappointment may lead to disillusionment. For some, this leads to anger against others and possible retaliation.
We have to face this as part of the human experience. And while this may temporarily stop us in our tracks, we must not allow it to derail us. Disillusionment hardens the arteries of love and hope and breeds the sterile seeds of cynicism.

As a result, we need to develop a spirituality that faces failure. While we may want things to turn out well, this does not always occur. And so, we have to learn to remain committed even when things don’t always work out as we had hoped. Of course, I am not talking about remaining committed to relationships or causes that are inherently destructive. But I am talking about remaining committed in the face of difficulty, resistance and lack of success.

Success may be the fruit of our commitment, but can never be the basis for our commitment. Instead, commitments are made because we believe that we are called to give ourselves to certain persons, causes and situations. But not all commitments are ones of choice. Our lover or our work may be, but to be committed to parents or children is a commitment that is placed into our hands.

Like everything else, commitments have a renewable quality. They need to be made again and again to the same person or cause. And to do that, we need to find renewed love and hope.

**a personal reflection**

I am the kind of person who takes a lot of time to make a commitment in friendship or to a cause. I am slow. And I dare not rush into things that I cannot sustain. I realize that other people may operate very differently. And that is okay. But once I have made a commitment, I am willing to hang in, even when the going gets really tough. And because I am more of a realist than an idealist, I don't bring too great a set of expectations with me. I see myself as vulnerable,
passion, commitment & disillusionment

others as fragile in spite of their abilities and strengths, and the world as refractory and difficult.

Relationships aside, I believe that our best commitments should bear the limits of time. Commitment to causes, projects, work and ministry assignments are best executed with a sense of seeking to make a contribution for a significant period of time and then moving on. I don’t mean moving on when the going gets tough. What I mean is making commitments that facilitate and empower others, so that one has to face the happy and difficult task of handing things over and leaving it to others to carry the project forward. This is a powerful lesson in relinquishment. Unfortunately, some good people are so committed to causes that they don’t know when to get out of the way!

I loved the six years teaching at the Asian Theological Seminary in Manila. I could easily have stayed there forever. But my last two years were committed to team teaching so that others could take over certain areas of responsibility. I cried a lot during that time; it is not easy to let go. But life is as much about relinquishments as it is about accomplishments.
I did not grow up with a lot of emphasis on creativity, even though my mother enjoyed singing and my father was a choir master. Life had its regular routines and its yearly holidays at the beach, where I felt as free as the seagulls present with ever watchful eye for the gutting of fish caught in the Noosa River, north of Brisbane.

At a young age, I swapped my violin for soccer boots and sport became the passion of my life. I am glad I became passionate about that, because beside my deep love for nature, I was bored with much of family life, schooling and church. At school, when I quickly finished my classroom assignments, I was allowed to work in the school yard to prepare the antbed tennis court for the ladies social tennis events. In church, there was no escape.
gratitude, wonder, creativity and the dulling power of conformity

How different things have been for you, Naasicaa. Art classes, music, drama and dancing have been the tone and texture of your life and that of your sister, Annasophia. But then little wonder, with your mother being a fine arts graduate!

I begin this letter on this note, but I in no way wish to suggest that creativity can only be expressed in these ways. Nor do I believe that creativity has only to do with music, art and drama. Rather, creativity encapsulates the whole human enterprise from design to manufacture; from dreams to the beauty of buildings, institutions and cities; from passion to the work of social justice; from commitment to the work of agriculture; from care to the work of healing and medical intervention. There is no aspect of life which is not etched with the colours of creativity, whether that be the art of loving, the joy of home-making, the shaping of our environment or the building of communities and institutions.

the roots of creativity

However, I think you would agree, Naasicaa, that creativity is not where one begins. Creativity is more the fruit of one’s life and not the root, even though one may innately have creative gifts. It is possible for one's creativity not to come to full expression. It may even remain submerged. It is also possible for one’s creativity to be put to useless, unconstructive or even downright criminal pursuits. Some criminals are just so clever and have converted their abilities to serve the ignoble and the offensive.

So if we don’t start with creativity, where do we begin? We could begin with the wonder of who we are and with gratitude for the gift of life and of all that is good in our world. Other starting points, of course, are also
possible. But I believe that these two terms—gratitude and wonder—are key to our discussion. No real creativity is possible if it does not come from love and thankfulness. While a person full of anger or cynicism can bring forth 'things', this will hardly be a form of creativity that makes life whole. Moreover, if one's heart and mind are not open with wonder, then creativity may well remain dormant.

In one of my other letters, I hinted at the fact that I believe that gratitude is one of the most fundamental postures of life, and that this posture is life-giving. Gratitude recognizes the fundamental giftedness of life and the nature of the human community. It also recognizes the rich texture of relationships as the web through which we receive so much. And overarching all of this is the acknowledgement and celebration of the God from whom all good gifts come.

To be a grateful person implies not only that one is thankful, but more particularly that one is open and receptive. To live with a sense of gratitude means that one appreciates what one has. One can celebrate the moment, enjoy the event, appreciate the gift, rejoice in the kindness of the giver. As a result, one is not always focusing on what one does not have. Gratitude nullifies the jealous glance at others and what they have.

Gratitude serves creativity. It is the mother of the good, for it helps us see and make use of what we have been given. But gratitude also makes us open towards the future. Having been given much, we are not only called to bless others, but are also encouraged to remain open to being further enriched. Good things come not to those who demand, assert and manipulate, but to those who are able to receive and give.

To live with gratitude is to live out of grace and the sustaining and empowering presence of the Holy Spirit, who
enhances our natural talents with charisms—those special gifts of creativity, reconciliation, healing and insight.

Since our contemporary culture makes so much of consumer products as the means to a sense of well-being and, in many cases, a sense of identity, we should ask whether gratitude and much-having are closely related. It is good to explore this issue. But I did not, first of all, have this in mind. My focus is more on gratitude for who we are rather than on what we possess. By who we are I mean our physicality, personality, talents, intelligence, beliefs, values, the goodness and love that is in our lives and the way we operate in the world. I have in view our passions and the things that move us. This is more fundamental. And what we have, in terms of material possessions and money, is for me a very secondary matter.

If you were to ask, Naasicaa, your mother will tell you that for most of her growing up years, our family lived on a financial shoestring. This was not because we did not have the training and skills to work in well-paid jobs. But we had chosen to live differently. By ‘we’ I primarily mean your grandmother and I. As an aside, I do need to tell you that we often struggled with implicating our children, including your mother, in our life choices. It is one thing for parents to make certain choices, but these do implicate the children in their formative years. And when the parents make some hard choices, should these be foisted onto the children? So we are still wondering whether we served our children well. I think there are areas where we failed.

But let me come back to the main line of my discussion and talk about what this different lifestyle looked like. We lived a life of downward mobility, hospitality and Christian community serving homeless young people and those with drug-related problems. We lived in rented houses, practised a simple lifestyle and had enough to meet our basic needs. We grew vegetables, baked our own bread and operated a
food co-operative for the various community houses. There was little cash, but lots of life.

And there was gratitude and creativity. We played games, had poetry reading evenings, did pottery, had lots of picnics, film evenings, discussion nights, bush walking. Once a week, we had a special meal—a sort of Christian love feast, with lots of good food, readings, candles and lots of fun and storytelling.¹

One night a week there were art classes in one of the community homes. It was amazing to see young people, who basically felt hopeless about themselves, discover that they had artistic abilities. They also came to appreciate the beauty of nature. They learned to care for animals on one of our farms. Others grew through the challenges of mountain climbing.

So, Naasicaa, gratitude and much-having in terms of material possessions are not necessarily connected. But having a richness of life in terms of relationships, sharing and creativity are very much related. We experienced the latter and largely lacked the former.

One of the things that struck me during my years in the Philippines was that the slums of the poor were places of hope rather than the ghettos of despair. There was laughter, love and gratitude. And that was because there was a sense of solidarity and sharing. Suffering and difficulty throw people together. Material possessions were skimpy. But much-having is not the basis for happiness nor for the joy of gratitude.

So in the West, we have things the wrong way round. When we loudly proclaim to ourselves and to the rest of the world that one needs much in order to be happy and grateful, we are communicating a distorted message. Our much-having has only produced a culture of complaint. We always want more and are never satisfied. We are willing to sacrifice health and our relationships in the quest to have
more. We end up living diminished lives and gratitude does not texture the fabric of our being.

wonder

In the above part of my letter, I have been talking about gratitude as a fundamental posture of life. I believe that thankfulness is life-giving. Gratitude acknowledges both the goodness of God and the way others have enriched us. I am also suggesting that gratitude has everything to do with creativity. Thankfulness, marked by joy and love, always seeks to express itself in ways that enrich others. And for me, that is the heart of creativity. It matters little whether that comes to expression in the way we prepare a meal, decorate our homes, make love, write poetry, do a painting, reform a political party or write a new theology. The possibilities are endless.

I also touched on the notion of wonder as intrinsic to creativity. But before exploring that theme, there are two important qualifiers I need to make. The one is that I am not implying that creativity does not involve hard work and the development of skills. Of course, it does. Creativity does not mean that one does not need to become proficient in a particular skill. Secondly, creativity has other tributaries in addition to the streams of gratitude and wonder. One such stream is pain. From difficulty and disappointment, redeemed from their propensity towards despair and bitterness, good things can come. But more of that in another letter.

To wonder has a kaleidoscope of meanings. It means to be open to the new, unexpected and extraordinary, to be astonished at something, to question, doubt and speculate. There is an amazing sense of openness in all of this. And it is so different than the tasks we are usually so busy with: to
study, to do, to work, to achieve, to prepare, to complete. Do we make time to wonder? Do you know how to wonder?

I have mentioned in a previous letter Max Weber's point about the rational efficiency of the West. We all experience its impact. Our education system sees its task as preparing us to become skillful and efficient, and the workplace soon maximizes this.

This rational efficiency characterizes every dimension of urban life—our transport systems, housing, work environments and health care. Even our time at the gym is marked by this efficiency. And, of course, we work on the logic that efficiency will enhance productivity, that productivity will bring about prosperity and that prosperity will bring about happiness. I think, Naasicaa, that you will have gained the impression by now that I question the movement of this logic.

But just as we have to move away from being a culture of complaint, we also have to move away from our much-doing and become more contemplative. I have touched on this in my letter on spirituality, but let me return to it here, for it is what wonder is all about. And wonder is the seedbed of creativity, just as contemplation is the mistress of radicality and the source of transformation.

To wonder requires a free outer space. And in the frenetic cycle of home responsibilities, work, further training, church, entertainment and the pursuit of particular interests, free space has become the luxury we can no longer afford. In fact, our culture tells us to fill every moment in order to gain every experience. I believe the opposite is desperately necessary. We need to create empty places in the corridors and passageways of our lives. Therefore, we need to recover the practice of solitude.

Jacques Ellul once made the observation that the first duty of free people is to say, 'No'. Our culture tells us the opposite: the first duty of happy people is to say, 'Yes'. And
yet, if we are ever to rediscover the gentle art of wondering, we must learn to say ‘no’ so we can preserve empty spaces in our lives.

To wonder also requires a free inner space. This is more fundamental and usually precedes the creation of a free outer space. The two are related: the quiet outer place can help create an inner detachment and openness.

A free inner space has many contours. One is a willingness to be alone. Aloneness is not the same as loneliness. While loneliness is often the experience of sadness because of lack of company, aloneness can be a positive experience. We choose to be by ourselves in order to be quiet, to reflect, to listen to our heart, to pray. Secondly, a free inner space is the place of the listening heart. There is much that we brush aside. There are dreams we fail to listen to. Intuitions that we rationalize. Feelings that we repress. Hopes that we squash. Moreover, we often fail to hear the whispers of the Spirit. Thirdly, this inner space needs to be beyond ideology, where we are willing to look at the cracks in the systems of meaning we have created for ourselves and be open to rethinking what we hold so dearly and securely.

There is great power in wondering: Do I need to think, be and live this way? Is this really the meaning and purpose of life? Are these really the ways in which we should act in our world? Are these the sorts of values we should hold? Are these the kinds of institutions we should build and maintain? The questions, of course, are endless. But to wonder is to ask new questions, including the hard and disturbing ones. To wonder, above all, is to be open to surprise. Things do happen without our planning. Good things do come our way. In fact, in the story of God, we see most clearly that God is a God of surprises. The unexpected occurs: grace instead of judgment, the blessedness of the poor, the power of the weak.
I have mentioned in another letter that we pride ourselves on being free agents in our Western world. I believe that this is far from the case. We are under tremendous pressure to accept, imbibe and live the dominant values of our culture. We are regarded as being odd if we don't believe all the hype about progress, all the banalities about success, all the promises regarding consumerism.

Radicality has become a dirty word in the contemporary world. Radicals are simply ratbags. And whether they are the leftover socialists or hippies of a previous era, they have nothing to say to our present context. In our kind of world, both those on the political left and right have moved to an insipid grey intermediate zone.

To live with gratitude is to appreciate and to celebrate the good that is in our lives, families, institutions and world. But gratitude does not condone evil—it does not live with a happiness and joy that is blind to the pain of our world. Similarly, to live with wonder is not to wander off into some cocooned inner psychic state. To live with wonder is not a form of escapism. It is, instead, a deeply contemplative experience, where we question what is, dream of the new and have the courage to move to a creative praxis.

Appeals are constantly made that we bend to the altar of conformity in the name of harmony and peace. But harmony is not uniformity, nor is it bland compliance. Harmony, instead, is the fruit of the convergence of opposites, which produces unity in diversity. Harmony bears the hallmark of creativity, while the peace of conformity is a false truce. There is nothing lasting about relationships which are based on the suppression of real feelings and thoughts.
a personal reflection

As you know, Naasicaa, I have worked for many years in several church related institutions. I have never found these to be particularly open places. Many repeated phrases come to mind: 'This is how we counsel here'; 'This is what we believe'; 'This is our ministry focus'.

I have no problem with organizations having a particular mission and purpose. But I have a problem with the idea that one's mission can only be fulfilled in a particular way. Not only is it appropriate to ask whether things could be done better or differently, but it is even more appropriate to ask whether we are really serving well the people we are called to serve.

This can so easily drop out of view. Social welfare services can sometimes give more attention to their staff than to the clients they seek to assist. Universities often give greater attention to the research agendas of its professors than to the teaching and training of students. And churches can sometimes give so much attention to their members that they neglect the seeker and the stranger.

Thus creativity is called for in order to maintain healthy organizations and find better ways to serve those who come for help, education or fellowship and nurture.

Creativity is the endeavour to renew what is old and create the signposts of the new so that life will be more whole. In other words, creativity has to do with bringing into being all that is good and all that reflects the intention of the Creator.

I am back in Brisbane. The winter sun is making its early demise into the bowels of the earth. But at this very point its rays refracted through dark clouds on the horizon are the most vivid. There is great beauty in the world of nature. And following the invitation of the Creator, we are
called to add to the world's beauty by the way we live, by what we make and in the things we create.

While conformity to the good is good, we are so often invited to conform to dominant values that are less than what the good could be. Hence the power of wonder and creativity can dynamite the dulling power of conformity and offer up new ways of being and doing.

Within a Christian frame this has to do with the renewing work of the Holy Spirit, who brings us to Christ, refurbishes our inner being, graces us with gifts and enables us to reconfigure communities of faith which seek to transform our world.
mending and bending

letter twelve

I have been wondering, Naasicaa, what you have thought about my letters. You know that I have not wanted to give you trite advice, nor have I wanted to make things easy or simplistic, because I don't think life is like that.

Oh yes, like you, I do know people who seem to rollick along happily. But that is not true for most of us. I have been counselling people for too long to know that life is not a picnic for most people. There are the deep questions of self-identity: am I really okay and can I accept and be at peace with myself? There are the questions of relationship: do others really love me and can I love them? Furthermore, there are the questions of vocation: what do I really want to be and do? Then there are the questions of values: how will I conduct myself in the world and by what set of ethics will I shape my lifestyle? And finally, there are the questions of ultimacy: what do I really believe about this life and
the life to come? And these sets of questions are not even exhaustive!

These and the other matters that I have raised in my other letters probably all sound a bit too ‘heavy’. Maybe you are right. I do tend to take life a little too seriously. Maybe this has something to do with my Dutch roots and my Calvinist heritage. Or maybe it is simply my personality. It is true, though, that one’s personality has a lot to do with the way one sees, engages and experiences life. One of my good friends, who goes back to the early days of our work in inner city mission, is an ‘eternal optimist’. For him life is good, God is good, problems virtually do not exist and everything is possible. But other friends of mine have seen and experienced life in tragic terms: always the dark side, always difficulty, always a drama, always the experience of pain.

I am quite sure that I do not fit into either of these two ends of the spectrum. I like to see myself as a realist impregnated with hope. I take life seriously, but also know how to dance. I do hope that some of that ‘lightness of being’ has come through in my letters. But not enough, possibly? Maybe the tread of my heavy boots has squashed the flowers. If that is so and if that is the impression you have gained from my letters, then my letters have been a communication failure. I may have only reinforced the general impression that religious people are at best dour and, at worst, dreadfully boring and irrelevant!

I need to tell you, though, that that is not how I have experienced the Christian life. It has been quite different. To put it in a nutshell, it has been an experience of a myriad of colours. I experience the joy of God’s presence and goodness. I experience the pain of the cross, which calls me to repentance, discipleship and service. I have an abiding sense of thankfulness for all that has been given. And I am constantly stretched and challenged to live the
life of faith in our kind of world—the First World with its skepticism and the Third World with the pain of injustice. That doesn't sound too dour, does it? I hope not.

In touching on these matters, I am really on the way to probing some other dimensions of life and of the Christian faith. If I was to put it really crudely, the question would be, 'Is the life of faith fundamentally one of blessing and joy, or one of ongoing struggle'? To put it more carefully, the issue is: can I come to wholeness in a broken world? And this is related to the deeper question of how much the grace of God transforms my life. In theology, this is the question of sanctification.

**a theology of mending**

In several of my previous letters, Naasicaa, I have spoken of a fundamental goodness in our lives and in our world. But I have also touched on the dark side. It is always easier to see this on the mega-screen of history. Unjust wars, irrational racial hatreds, blatant exploitation. The list is long and singularly painful. How can we do these things to each other? And why do we do them again and again? Thus our contemporary history will remain pock-marked by Hiroshima, the Gulag, Auschwitz and the Rwandan and Balkan madness. Pock-marked is, of course, a deliberate misuse of language. I am really talking about deep craters.

What is less clear is to understand and to come to terms with the dark side within us. We all have our aberrations. For some, these are irrational fears. For others, these are compulsive behaviours. And some experience unidentified angers. Here also the list is endless. But these things both hurt us and affect our relationship with others. Thus these very personal and even private matters spill out into our world.
Whether these things are caught through the socialization process, or whether they are part of an archetypal substructure as propounded by Jung, the reality of these things is hardly fully explained. The biblical story makes it clear that sin is part of the human condition. And this has affected us all, in all of our relationships. No part of life is secluded from the effects of wrongdoing.

But as I have pointed out in a previous letter, the story of God is a story of God's healing and renewing activity. In the words of the feminist theologian Letty Russell, God has in view the mending of all creation. This means not only our personal lives, but also our communities and finally the whole of reality in the creation of new heavens and a new earth.

At the personal level, this mending means the reparation of our relationship with God, the renewal of our inner being and growth in maturity and a desire to bless others. The healing of our communities is the move from fear, suspicion, antagonism and conflict to relationships and structures that are marked by forgiveness, equality and empowerment. And the full healing of the nations is God's final restoration in the eschatological future.

There is no suggestion in the biblical story that this healing process comes to full expression in the here and now. There is no hint of perfection. In the words of Francis Schaeffer there is, however, substantial healing for our personal lives and communities. Thus wholeness remains as much a goal as it is a growing reality.

When we speak of a theology of mending we are referring to an articulation of God's restorative activity. And we may primarily set this in the creation-chaos-recreation paradigm.

A good and beautiful world is God's gift to humanity. This gift is to be appreciated and cared for within the
framework of a life of love, worship and obedience to the generous Giver, the Lord of life, the God of creation.

This frame becomes shattered due to human folly and disobedience. We thought we knew better. We had our own ideas about using this gift. Thus humanity went its own way and pulled in its wake the ever widening ripples of distortion.

Starting from the personal centre of a rebellious 'I will go my own way', human wrong-doing spilled in all directions. What a waste! What folly! And everything becomes affected and infected. Distortion occurs in every dimension of life, including our interpersonal relationships and our relationship to the created order.

Of course, from our side, our relationship to God particularly becomes twisted. We become creatures in flight from the generous Giver. And in order to justify our folly we hide, deny and rationalize. The ultimate form of this outrageous rationalization is to suggest that we don't need this God or that this God is fundamentally dictatorial and oppressive. Modern humanism in particular seeks to cast God in such terms.

So we bend things. We have made chaos in our world, whether we have done that personally or corporately. We have bent our view of God and our relationship to 'him'. And so we have ended up with the idea that health and well-being is premised on human autonomy. True freedom is to be free from dependency upon God and, by extension, dependency upon others. This has distorted our view of the human person. Instead of being persons in relationship with God and others and living in community and cooperation for the glory of God and the common good, we have pitted ourselves against each other. We have become individuals in competition rather than persons in mutual cooperation.

This pitting ourselves against others has also occurred on a much grander scale in the many wars of acquisition
and the various forms of colonialism of the recent past. It hardly needs to be pointed out that this also lies at the heart of global trade and the capitalist enterprise.

The idea that we bend things sounds a bit harsh. Don't we build good cities and institutions? The answer to this is a resounding, 'Yes'! We do a lot of good in our world. And for this we are thankful and may see this as a diffusion of God's common grace in our world.

But the very good that we do also has and brings about its own distortions. We do good for selfish reasons. Our good is often what is good for us and not for others. And our good, rather than leading us to celebrate the God of all goodness, often leads us to celebrate our own human autonomy. Thus our very goodness leads us away from rather than towards God.

As a consequence we need to be mended. In healing lies our hope. In God's recreative activity lies our renewal.

Human disobedience brought deep sadness to the heart of God, but not a sullen withdrawal. Nor was humanity left to its own stupidities. The God of the Bible is the ever loving and ever seeking God. God seeks us out in our sinfulness, finds us in our waywardness and welcomes us home from our wanderings.

God's restorative activity is intended to mend us, to make us whole. And everywhere on the pages of the Bible we hear this amazing theme: 'I am the Lord, who heals you' (Exodus 15:26b); God is a 'refuge for the poor . . . a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat' (Isaiah 25:4a); God 'forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases' (Psalm 103:3); 'I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you' (Ezekiel 36:26a). This restorative activity is summed up in the benediction: 'May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming
of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it' (1 Thessalonians 5:23–24).

God's mending activity is costly. It is God reaching beyond the chasm into our need through self-identification. God both enters our need and engages our sinfulness by becoming the bearer of our waywardness and woundedness.

The prophet Isaiah saw this with a revelatory clarity: 'Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows . . . he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed' (Isaiah 53:4–5). John the gospel writer reiterates this theme. Jesus speaks of himself in the following terms: 'I am the good shepherd . . . and I lay down my life for the sheep' (John 10:14–15). And Paul sings, as it were, that we are 'justified freely by his grace through redemption that came by Christ Jesus' (Romans 3:24).

Since the fall into chaos the whole of God's activity has been restorative. God has bent 'himself' towards us. And in Christ Jesus, 'he' has most fully and clearly displayed 'his' love and desire to make us whole and to call us back to 'his' original intention.

**dimensions of healing**

I am back in Yangon. It's the rainy season and it's bucketing down. I am worried that some of my friends' homes will be flooded. The place where they live has poor drainage, and they are also struggling to survive economically. By comparison I am well off. This draws attention to the fact that life is in many ways unfair, the world is characterized by injustice, and healing in the broader sense of that term still needs to occur.
When we speak of the themes of healing or mending drawn from the biblical story, we are amazed by its comprehensiveness. Healing is not simply the absence of sickness, but the well-being of life lived in the presence of God. The theme of well-being must not be interpreted to mean that we will have all we want and will experience smooth sailing on life's journey.

The primary healing that is accented in the pages of the Bible is spiritual healing. Here I am speaking about the restoration and deepening of our relationship with God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. There are many ways of expressing this. We can speak of 'coming to faith'. We can also call this one's 'conversion'. I prefer the language of 'homecoming'. Paul the apostle uses this kind of imagery. He speaks of us being 'separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of promise . . . but now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ' (Ephesians 2:12-13).

What is amazing is that not only do we come home to God in repentance and faith, but God also comes home to us. John, the gospel writer, puts this most beautifully: 'Jesus replied, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him and we will come to him and make our home with him"' (John 14:24).

In the light of this we can say that spiritual healing or coming to faith is entering into a living relationship with God as a community of persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The deepening of this relationship is what the ongoing journey of faith is all about. The great classics of Christian spirituality testify to the way in which women and men have sought to understand the process of growing in Christian maturity and deepening one's union with God.\(^3\)
A further theme in the process of mending is relational healing. I have the horizontal dimensions of life in view, but I believe that this is related to the vertical, the restoration of our relationship with God.

Relational healing has to do with all those exciting and difficult processes of building communities of faith, family, friendships and various institutions. It also has to do with neighbourliness and the practice of good citizenship. Relational healing involves a willingness to open our lives to others in loving service and care, but also to receive help, encouragement, support and advice from others.

This form of mending recognizes the interrelatedness of life. And in the ethos of Ubuntu Theology developed by Desmond Tutu, among others, it celebrates the key idea that the well-being of the one involves the well-being of many. I am not truly blessed if others are not blessed, and I am not truly free unless there is freedom for others.

In the biblical story it is clear that God builds a people. The restoration of human relationships out of the quagmire of fear, insecurity, distrust and disregard is a great blessing that shapes the fabric of community. Thus relational healing is essential to community building.

It is a significant theme in the biblical story that friendship with God means friendship with others. Love of God is to issue into love of neighbour and even the love of one’s enemy.

Our link with Christ through the Spirit also joins us to the body of Christ, the community of faith, where a diversity of people are made one in Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12–13; Galatians 3:26–28). And we are encouraged to live out the mystery that the way we love and care for others is an expression of our love for God. The words from Matthew’s gospel are pertinent: ‘Whatever you do for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me’ (Matthew 25:40).
I hope, Naasicaa, as you have been reading this you will have noticed how different these accents are to the values of contemporary culture. Our Western culture has elevated the importance of the rights and needs of the individual. There is little vision for community building and working for the common good. Individual achievement rather than relationality is the big focus.

It is my hope that you will be a mender and community builder. Building relationships of cooperation that draw people together for the common good is what I hope your life will be about.

This has become a long letter, so let me briefly touch on some other dimensions of healing before I come back to the topic of injustice.

Reading the gospels with its focus on the person and mission of Jesus, it is clear that healing and exorcism were blessings that Jesus sought to impart. While I am fully appreciative of the role of medicine and counselling in healing, I believe that there is a continuing need for prayer. In prayer we may seek the renewing presence of the Holy Spirit for people’s inner woundedness and for those areas of their lives where the powers of darkness have gained some form of access.

To the degree that one can make a snapshot of the global church, there appear to be signs of recovery in praying for people in these ways. Here also the work of mending is taking place.

What is more difficult to understand is in what ways the healing of a neighbourhood, or even national healing, may occur, particularly given the pluralism of contemporary society. And to broaden the picture, it is appropriate to ask in what ways healing can come to nations experiencing poverty, exploitation and injustice. It
seems that all the work of community development and aid is not significantly changing the global face of poverty.⁶

I do make this a matter of prayer particularly because some of my Asian friends live in such circumstances. And I also attempt to do my bit in poverty alleviation, but I most frequently feel discouraged. Thus healing within society and healing among the nations remains ever so problematical for me.

But I must leave things here. I am excited about God’s renewing presence. I believe that healing does occur in myriad ways, yet I recognize that we also continue to distort things and act in destructive ways. The vision of the Bible for a final healing of all the nations remains a far-off dream as well as a present hope.
notes

Letter One

Letter Two

Letter Three


**Letter Four**


5. See Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Bantam, 1968).


**Letter Five**


**Letter Six**


8. Here you may wish to read Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971) and my *Seek the Silences with Thomas Merton* (London: SPCK, 2003).


**Letter Seven**


**Letter Eight**
2. I touched on some of these themes in my book *Seek the Silences with Thomas Merton* (London: SPCK, 2003).


5. For the general setting of early Christianity see S. Benko & J. T. O'Rouke, eds., *The Catacombs and the Colosseum: The Roman Empire as the Setting of Primitive Christianity* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1971).


**Letter Nine**


6. See my *Gadamer's Dialogical Hermeneutic* (Heidelberg Universitätsverlag: C. Winter, 1999), 44.


**Letter Ten**


**Letter Eleven**

1. One of the books that inspired us was Edith Schaeffer, *Hidden Art* (London: The Norfolk Press, 1971).


**Letter Twelve**

**Letter Thirteen**

**Letter Fourteen**
4. For the above themes and emphasis regarding the Kingdom of God, see H.A. Snyder, *Models of the Kingdom of God* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991).
Letter Fifteen

Letter Sixteen

Letter Seventeen