OF CANCER AND OTHER THINGS:

CONVERSATIONS WITH THE ROYAL PHILOSOPHER

ON PILGRIMAGE TO SANTIAGO de COMPOSTELLA.

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By

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Certificate of Authenticity.

The work presented in this dissertation is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

Melvyn John Macarthur.
SYNOPSIS.

This dissertation presents an outline, and one interpretation of, the life of its author, The Reverend Doctor Melvyn John Macarthur. It seeks to do this through both its methodology, which is textual and experiential, and through dialogue with the provocateur, Qoheleth, author of the book of Ecclesiastes. The dialogue component (the ‘Conversations’) reflects the author’s passion to engage with people in conversation and also his love of theatre.

The ‘Conversations‘ in the dissertation take place on the Camino Santiago de Compostella (French Way), a long distance, ancient pilgrim route from St Jean Pied de Port in France to Santiago de Compostella in Spain. The dialogue partners are the author of the dissertation and Qoheleth.

Qoheleth, the self-proclaimed Royal Philosopher, is a mysterious figure about whom much is conjectured, but little known. Qoheleth has been, and remains, a controversial figure in the Judeo-Christian traditions: considerable numbers of people, whether lay, ordained or scholar, hold that Ecclesiastes should not have been included in the canons. This author holds the view that the work of Qoheleth is among the most thoughtful and unique of the canonical writings. One hope held for this dissertation is that it would be a vehicle whereby I could ‘lean toward’ (Pelias, 2016; 9-11) the person Qoheleth. The motivation for doing this is that his remarkable honesty and depth of thought commends Qoheleth as an ideal provocateur, one who is able to offer a searching critique of the wide and varied life experience of the author, one who it is enticing to lean toward.

Ronald Pelias (2016; 12) writes of his use of multiple qualitative methods in the writing of personal narratives. The methodology of this dissertation is, likewise, eclectic, and I would argue, ‘necessarily’ so. A human life is complex and mine is no exception. A human life does not readily lend itself, convincingly at least, to understandings from a single discipline. This dissertation draws on material and methods from a variety of disciplines in an endeavour to convey and clarify aspects of the life of the author. The influences in the life of this author are, as mentioned, wide and varied: his professional life in social work, particularly in child protection; his vocational life in ordained ministry.
and pilgrimage; his more than four decades of participation as a student and researcher in a wide
variety of pursuits in the academy; his experience of wilderness for significant periods during his
adult lifetime and his last ten years of living with a life threatening cancer (non Hodgkins lymphoma)
have all significantly impacted his life. The methodology of the dissertation is built upon these
foundations that are termed ‘abiding interests’.

For anyone wishing to have more detail of the author’s life prior to the reading of this dissertation, a
brief curriculum vitae is attached as Appendix One.

An appraisal of the author’s account is presented at the conclusion of the ‘Conversations’ with
Qoheleth. The appraisal takes the form of commentaries written from the widely differing
theological, philosophical and social perspectives of the Reverend Brand, the central character of
Henrik Ibsen’s play Brand and the Grand Inquisitor, a prominent figure in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novel,
The Karamazov Brothers. The author’s personal reflections about the pilgrimage to Santiago follow
on from and take a full account of, the appraisals of The Reverend Brand and the Grand Inquisitor, in
addition to the conversations with Qoheleth.
For who knows what is good for mortals

while they live the few days of their vain life,

which they pass like a shadow?

The Royal Philosopher (Qoheleth) (*Book of Ecclesiastes* 6:12)

Use your head, can’t you, use your head,

you’re on earth, there’s no cure for that.

Ham to Clov, in *End Game*, by Samuel Beckett.

Socrates said, ‘The unexamined life is not worth living’.

My revision is, but the examined life makes

you wish you were dead.

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RESEARCH QUESTION.

How can I best engage with the writings of Qoheleth, the Royal Philosopher and author of the Book of Ecclesiastes, in order to write autobiographically?

(I settled on a research question that was not reductionist and would permit imaginative and expansionist thinking within the dissertation. To formulate a research question with these characteristics was a prerequisite for the representation of a life replete with rich experiences and wide academic engagement). The question above has been constructed on the premise that research does not have to be a conclusive linear outcome from a definitive question. Ideas and further questions are generated throughout the dialogues of this dissertation, in what Ryan (2005) refers to as ‘research that is not limited to hierarchical, linear and quantitative processes or conclusive answers’.
INTRODUCTION TO THE DISSERTATION.

Prior to proceeding to the methodological and creative sections of the dissertation, (although these are not as discrete as the statement suggests), I will introduce the reader to the aetiology of my long established practice of pilgrimage. This introduction, along with an outline of my ‘abiding interests’, will provide the foundational methodology upon which the dissertation is constructed. It will allow the reader to gain an appreciation of why and how this dissertation came into existence and of the particular form it takes.

Aetiology.

There is a vast corpus of writing available, from a variety of theoretical perspectives and disciplines, on the importance for adults of impressions formed during their childhood and adolescence: that is, experiences and learning during childhood and adolescence can impact, deleteriously or otherwise, on the adult’s lived experience. A section in Erik Erikson’s now classic Childhood and Society, entitled ‘The Eight Stages of Man’ (1977; 238-265) is a good representative example from a psychoanalytic perspective, which is but one perspective among many from various disciplines. I can look back on the early periods in my own life and identify some formative experiences that, I believe, predisposed me to being very receptive to and then embracing pilgrimage as an important and regular practice in my adult life.

My first experiences of what I now consider to be virtues, namely stamina and discipline, prerequisites for the successful participation in reflective long distance pilgrimages, developed from athletics carnivals undertaken during my last year of primary school. It was here that an identity ‘athlete’ developed. This was an important and enduring identity of mine and has some correspondences with Erikson’s (1977; 252-255) ‘Age’ of late puberty and adolescence. Prominent among my recollections was running ‘the mile’ event at my first sports carnival. I was immensely proud of that achievement. The mile was a distance looked upon with awe by the children at the
school. It seemed like a prodigious distance to run. I approached the event with some trepidation but, importantly, as I was running the event and when I had fallen into a regular stride and breathing, I experienced exhilaration in the rhythmic movement of the body through space. This feeling of exhilaration has often been present through a lifetime of endurance activities, whether I was running, carrying heavy packs in remote areas or cycling. This exhilaration increases with the economy of effort expended in undertaking these activities, which in turn is the outcome of a high level of fitness. There is, for me, nothing quite like the feeling of perspiration running down my body, and knowing that the body is adapting to the demands being placed upon it and functioning at a high level. Knowing that my body can provide whatever is required to enable me to attain my goals adds to my feelings of self-confidence, which enables me to take on more challenges as required. This is particularly important when hiking and exploring in wilderness areas.

This feeling of oneness with my body is much like the experience of the youthful long-distance runner described by Alan Sillitoe in his novella, *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1970; 37). The young runner depicted is an inmate of a borstal in England, where he was incarcerated following convictions for theft. He found an outlet for his suppressed anger in cross country running. His natural talent earned him periods of leave to train and allowed him to escape the confines, social and physical, of the borstal. The Governor of the Borstal recognized the runner’s talent and the possibility of his winning acclaim for ‘his’ (the Governor’s) Borstal through what he believed would be the runner’s success at inter borstal athletic competitions. The highly conditioned runner, with his body fluid in response to the exertion and multiplying the endorphins to produce the ‘high’ so familiar to long distance runners, discovered in his running a period of tranquillity and solace where he was able to transcend the punitive and regimented socialisation of the borstal. His morning runs, both physically and psychologically far from the constraints of the Borstal, mirror the feelings of Camus’ Sisyphus (2000) who transcended the gods on his descent of the hill en route to recover his stone and recommence his labours.
A decade of marathon running in my early to mid-adulthood flowed from this childhood engagement with athletics. Over the years of physical endurance activities, and through my developing powers of reflection, an immense respect for my body and a recognition of the power of my will emerged. Together, these attributes and attitudes enabled me to fulfil another passion, namely that of accessing remote and wild places on multi-day hikes. In visually splendid places, such as the Western Arthur Range in the South West Wilderness of Tasmania, I would always, before getting into my sleeping bag of a night, deliberately and respectfully, before exhaustion took its toll, thank my body and will for opening these experiences to me. A Cartesian split? At those times, such questions were forgotten as the senses were sated by the aesthetics of the natural environment and, on occasion, that sensation of mystery and awe that Otto (1959; 19-21) termed the ‘Numinous’.

Pilgrimage, as I practice it, fits well with Lovat’s definition of ‘praxis’ as ‘a combining of theory and practice with a view to change’ (2009; 22): the view to change referred to by Lovat being the possibility of transformative learning. Pilgrimage began for me in 1998, five years after my ordination, when I undertook a pilgrimage from Dublin to Jerusalem by bicycle (Macarthur, 2005). This pilgrimage traced the journeys of St. Columba, St. Columbanus and St. Paul, which linked the United Kingdom, Europe and the Middle East. St. Columba mainly travelled in Ireland and Scotland, while St. Columbanus established monastic communities across France and northern Italy; he died in Bobbio in the Italian Alps. St. Paul travelled extensively in what is now Syria, Turkey, Greece and Italy. Cycling along a route, which visited historical places associated with these Saints, gave a structure to the pilgrimage. I thought that on such a long journey I may have to divide it into sections, so that it did not seem so long; I had initial concerns that setting Jerusalem as the only goal might feel altogether too daunting. It also meant that a definitive route was established and I therefore did not have to decide where to go from a myriad of alternatives. The journey thereby had a theme. I soon learned, however, that my random encounters with people along the route would be a significant aspect of the journey: it was these encounters that contributed heavily to my developing reflective practice and personal and spiritual formation. From this time onwards, long
distance pilgrimages became self-perpetuating; they did so because of the potential they provided for personal formation and transformative learning.

Long pilgrimages provided an environment that lessened the intrusions of what I refer to as the ‘surveillance society’, the concomitant of the over-regulated social environment of modern, particularly urban, living. Self-sufficient hiking in wilderness areas, as well as cycling in the isolation provided by sparse settlement and little used roads, provided me with an environment which I describe as being ‘beyond Hobbes and Bentham’, the philosophers whose names are closely associated with the concept of social control. Beyond Hobbes and Bentham is the place I wish to be. That place equates most strongly with wilderness. There are no social constrictions in wilderness, apart from those I carry with me as a product of my socialisation. A chilling description of Bentham’s deeply disturbing idea of the ‘Panopticon’, with its modern implications and applications, is given by Michel Foucault in his classic study *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977; 195-228).

Bentham’s ideas, in their crude form, brought into existence the separate system of prisons, whose practical pillars of isolation and religious indoctrination produced much insanity among the inmates of the prisons, who were mainly drawn from the underclass of British society and who, it could be argued, were the least resourced to be able to cope with the rigours of this system. Much to Bentham’s disgust, the concept of the Panopticon never had an architectural life, at least in its pure form. Even in its modified form the separate system of prisons was a failure, producing insanity rather than reform. While the Panopticon never had an architectural form, the enthusiasm for social control continues unabated.

Interestingly, Thomas Hobbes conceived the ideas underpinning his classic *Leviathan* during his daily routine walk and meditation between the hours of 7am and 10am (J.C.A. Gaskin; Introduction to *Leviathan*, 1996; xvi-xvii). Although Hobbes did not make any definitive recording of his philosophy of walking, I nevertheless suspect that he and I would have very different understandings. Certainly, very different perspectives emanated from our musings while we were walking; polemical I would
suggest. How one could have the interest or motivation to ponder social control while walking in wilderness areas is beyond my imaginings. Perhaps regular doses of wilderness may have evoked different writings from Thomas Hobbes. Then again, the mind that is attracted to social control would probably baulk at extended periods spent in the unstructured freedoms and aesthetics of wilderness. Social control and the long vision will never be bedfellows: the former is restrictive, while the latter is expansive.

The pilgrim, who has found a mindful and focused place, at a geographical and ideological distance from the legacies of Hobbes and Bentham, can avail him or herself of what I term the ‘long vision’. The ‘place’ of the long vision is where the pilgrim can see to the physical horizons, minimally impeded or unimpeded by buildings and other human obstructions associated with urban living, which for the most part I experience as breathtakingly bleak. The attendant benefits of the ‘long vision’ for the optical sense has, for me, its mental equivalent. It is in these places of the long vision that my mind feels most unencumbered and I have my more expansive ideas. It is the mental equivalent of the mystics’ spiritual thin places, the places where the ‘veil’ between the human and the divine is at its most transparent. In my places of the long vision the standard epistemologies and research methods come most vigorously under challenge. The places of the long vision bring forth my creativity. It is interesting to note that the literature on walking refers to luminaries such as Plato and St. Augustine (McClintock, 1994; 94), Wordsworth and Keats (Wallace 1993; 167), Henry David Thoreau (2007; 187,189) and Arthur Schopenhauer (Russell, 1989; 723) among others, who attest that their most significant ideas were conceived while walking. Whether we are in agreement with the ideas produced by these luminaries is another question entirely, but there is no doubt that they are great thinkers who conceived expansive ideas while walking.

As the reader may now appreciate, my pilgrimage research is not an exclusively cognitive undertaking, an information based exercise, conceived while in a sedentary mode. Regular physical pilgrimage is integral to my pilgrimage research. I concede, however, that it was my reading which
initially excited my interest in pilgrimage to the point where I wanted to make a pilgrimage of my own. This reading commenced during the years I spent as an ordinand of the United Theological College, the Uniting Church (New South Wales Synod) training facility in North Parramatta, Sydney. This reading, and my predisposition from years of endurance training, combined to produce an intense curiosity about what it would be like to experience a long distance, human-powered pilgrimage. I was also interested to bring my physical and mental attributes to bear on a long pilgrimage. I wanted to see if I was ‘up to the mark’. A few years after my ordination, circumstances afforded me the opportunity, in 1998, to make my first long pilgrimage. A journey that I had dreamed of making now became a possibility.

In 2014, sixteen years on from the Dublin to Jerusalem pilgrimage, and with various other long distance pilgrimages now a part of my experience, I decided to make a pilgrimage along the French Way of the Camino Santiago de Compostella. This pilgrimage was my second along the Camino by the French way, the previous one being in 2012. The 2014 Camino would become the ‘field work’ component of this dissertation. The 2012 pilgrimage had been intended as the fieldwork for this dissertation, however that was not to be. When I had walked only as far as Pamploma, I met up with two pilgrims who had been held up by problems with their feet. Being low on confidence, they asked if they could walk with me, a highly experienced pilgrim. This pilgrimage entailed lengthy conversations with a fifty five year old Dutch lawyer and businessman, who had profound doubts about his current path in life and a twenty three year old Irishman who was contemplating a vocation in the Roman Catholic Church. I needed to go back to the Camino in 2014 to do my fieldwork, but also because the Camino was a place of exciting unpredictably.

The Camino by the French Way commences at St Jean Pied de Port on the French side of the Pyrenees. Once across the Pyrenees and into Spain, at the village of Roncesvalles, the Camino path turns westward to Santiago, eight hundred kilometres distant. By selecting the Camino, I chose to make a classical pilgrimage ‘to’ a definitive destination, the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostella.
This is the legendary, but unlikely, site of the bones of the Apostle St James. I chose this route because it had significant infrastructure support. This choice was in preference to a pilgrimage ‘in’ a remote area, such as the South West Wilderness of Tasmania, where the need to be self-sufficient over a substantial period would require me to carry a heavy pack with provisions and survival equipment. The task of sketching the early drafts of my ‘Conversations’ with Qoheleth, the Royal Philosopher of the *Book of Ecclesiastes*, was going to be much more readily achievable with the provision, at a hostel, of a table and chair and electric lighting, not to mention the distinct advantage of the absence of physical exhaustion at the end of the day. Having a familiarity with this route, I could focus more readily on my writing and reflection tasks without being encumbered by the demanding and constant requirement of navigating in an unfamiliar wilderness environment, such as the South West Wilderness of Tasmania. Aesthetics was a lesser route selection priority than was convenience and comfort.

Stimulating and formative personal experiences on previous pilgrimages were important factors in sustaining my pilgrimage practice and in the aetiology of this dissertation. When I was on pilgrimage in 2012, walking the French Way to Santiago de Compostella for the first time, I posed this question to a selection of my fellow Camino pilgrims, with whom I had most contact: ‘If you had the choice of two people with whom to walk the Camino, and those people could be fictional or non-fictional, and in the case of non-fictional, dead or alive, who would you choose?’ The answers were wide ranging and fascinating. In fact, an interesting account could be written of the answers and their attendant justifications. The main outcome for me, however, was that the question became not simply one of curiosity about my fellow pilgrims and their motivations; I posed the question to myself and began to sift through and ponder my own possibilities. Just who would I wish to accompany me on a walk of the Camino? The first choice suggested himself: Qoheleth, the Royal Philosopher, author of the *Book of Ecclesiastes*. *Ecclesiastes* is a strange and unlikely book to be in the Judeo-Christian canon, for a variety of reasons which I will consider at a later point. The reasons have much to do with the theological positions of the commentators. Qoheleth, its mysterious author, had long intrigued me. I
am not alone here. Many scholars from religious and secular positions have been drawn to the writings of the mysterious Qoheleth. My attraction to this man, as a partner in dialogue on the Camino, is that he has asked awkward questions throughout his writing. For me, a person writing autobiographically, it is the awkward questions which are likely to produce the most significant insights. A friend of mine, reading Ecclesiastes for the first time, remarked that the book was not at all what she expected. She had expected apologetics in the writings of a person with the exalted title of ‘Royal Philosopher’. The book for her was ‘profoundly gloomy, but profoundly honest’. Qoheleth, with his background in the Wisdom writings, is a significant challenge for a person of a religious persuasion, such as myself. He provides significant challenges to traditional religious belief. Uncritical religious belief will not engage with Qoheleth: in the theologian Paul Tillich’s famous phrase, Qoheleth poses the questions that can ‘shake the foundations’. There always remains a risk to engaging with Qoheleth. The Book and its author are central to this dissertation and Qoheleth will join me at St Jean Pied de Port, after I have introduced other matters crucial to my work.

**Abiding Interests in Brief.**

I will now proceed to note the factors crucial to the production of this dissertation, namely my ‘abiding interests’. Of course, I have more abiding interests than the ones that follow, but in the course of autobiographical writing one has to be selective and sift out the material that is most crucial to the task at hand. These ‘abiding interests’ are only briefly mentioned in this section. They serve to herald the section on methodology, where they will be discussed in more detail, for they provide the foundations on which the methodology is built. The abiding interests are a mixture of cognitive and physical interests, some are structured and some unstructured, some are urban and some are remote environmental, some are institutional based and some are solitary, some are secular and some are ‘religious’, some are occupational while some are recreational, some are professional and some are vocational. These abiding interests reflect my wide life experience. They also reflect my praxis oriented approach to research.
My first abiding interest, the Book of Ecclesiastes and its author, Qoheleth, is a crucial one. However, even the mention of ‘author’ in the singular can raise controversy among some Ecclesiastes scholars. Although a single person authorship for the book is now in the ascendancy among scholars, controversies are an ongoing commonplace with regard to the Book of Ecclesiastes. It would be fair to say that there is little agreement between scholars on the significant, particularly the biblical hermeneutic, issues raised by the study of this Book. As Fox notes (1989: 13) ‘often exegetes present him [Qoheleth] as consistently pious, or consistently sceptical and pessimistic’. Limburg (2006; 8) portrays the polemics of interpretation well and his comments I regard as being worth quoting at length for they, accurately to my reading, depict the polemics that Qoheleth’s writing has generated over millennia. Referring to commentaries on Ecclesiastes, Limburg (2006; 8) asks:

‘Is it indeed “a tedious and tepid recital of a faith that is lukewarm” (Baumgartner)? Is it a “nasty tome reeking of the stench of the tomb” (Robinson)? Or is it an “invitation to earthly happiness and to a radical involvement in the issues of the world” (Bonhoeffer)? Is it a “call to flee the world and its distractions” (Jerome)? Or does it intend to encourage readers to “happily enjoy the things that are present, lest we permit the present moment, our moment, to slip away” (Luther)?

Limburg himself comes down on the side of Qoheleth being a great believer.’ He believes when there was no evidence for believing’ (2006; 124).

If Fox’s observations with regard to the hermeneutical polemics of Ecclesiastes are correct, (and I along with many others concur with him), ideology and personal theologies, not simply exegetical skill, are to the fore in the hermeneutic task. Scholars are not immune from taking definitive theological and ideological positions in their interpretations of Ecclesiastes, although I have found that this is seldom formally stated. Ecclesiastes, more than most other scriptural texts, seems to encourage ideological and theological lines to be drawn in the sand.
Suffice it to say at this point that Qoheleth stands out as an anti-hero in the Christian canon. He is unlike the conventional heroes, champions of the faith such as St. Peter and St. Paul. But still, Qoheleth has his place. Brombert (1999; 2) makes the point that: 'The anti-hero, more keenly perhaps than the traditional hero, challenges our assumptions, raising anew the question of how we see, or wish to see ourselves. The anti-hero is often a perturber and disturber’. There are, of course, exceptions to Brombert’s statement. St. Paul had a distinct tendency to perturb and disturb people, both during his lifetime and through the ages, and he is one of the heroes of the church universal. However, it is true that the anti-hero, Qoheleth, has long perturbed and disturbed the exegetes and scholars of the church. Often, scholars sought to ‘harmonise’ his writings with the other books of the canon (Fox, 1989; 18) or, sometimes, rued what they regarded as the mistake of his writings being placed in the canon (Whybray, 1989; 3). While Qoheleth and Ecclesiastes have been a source of fascination for scholars, such cannot be said for the churches. He has been largely ignored by the congregations and the preachers (Limburg, 2006; 7). This has certainly been my experience. In my twenty five years within the Uniting Church in Australia, I cannot recall a sermon in Sunday worship being preached from Ecclesiastes. Chapter Three, verses one to eight (‘there is a time for everything), is sometimes read at funerals, but taken out of the context of Qoheleth’s thought throughout the book. Noteably, and importantly, the book has little in the way of reference or acknowledgement within the Revised Common Lectionary. The mysterious Qoheleth has long fascinated me and the selection of him as the person to accompany me on a pilgrimage on the Camino was an unqualified first choice.

Another abiding interest of mine which, to use Foucault’s term, has contributed to the ‘birth’ of this dissertation, is my desire to write autobiographically. This interest in autobiographical writing began when I determined that I would write an account of my pilgrimage to Jerusalem. In fact, I endeavoured to do so when I arrived in Jerusalem at the end of seven months of cycling from Dublin. After trying for several days to make a start on writing an account of that particular journey I abandoned the effort. I realised that I was too close in time to the experience and that it would
require a considerable time to gain some understanding of the emotional and spiritual impact this pilgrimage would have on my life. On my return home from the pilgrimage, I became distracted and instead undertook and completed a Ph.D degree, which was fairly conventional in its epistemology and methodology. I realised, nearing its completion, that my preferred style of writing was one where I could blend scholarship and imagination and seek to better integrate my formal education with my wide and varied life experiences. I had not, however, found the writing style and genre which would allow for those possibilities.

My academic writing changed tack when I enrolled in a creative writing program and undertook, as part of the requirements of that program, to write a fairly lengthy creative piece. I needed a subject that I was passionate about. I chose to write an account of my Jerusalem pilgrimage. I found that I was now able, after five years had elapsed, to better understand the way in which the journey had profoundly contributed to my personal and spiritual formation. Through my involvement in the creative writing program, I realised that autobiographical writing was my preferred genre. I also realised that the writing of dialogue was something that I was good at, fostered perhaps by the writing of many a ‘verbatim’ report supplied to the New South Wales Childrens Court. Given the difficulties of recall in what were highly stressful and often menacing situations involving the removal of children, these reports had a strong ‘creative’ element to them. My writing of dialogue was also fostered by an extensive training in the interviewing of people from varied socio-economic backgrounds. This interviewing was an integral part of my professional practice in child protection.

As well, I wished to record something of my life for my contemporary and future readers to consider. I think I would rate high on ‘generativity’, according to writers such as Erikson (1970; 258-261) and McAdams (2013; 210-217). After looking through a family tree, and realising that I was none the wiser as to who these ancestors of mine actually were as persons, I decided that I would leave a collection of writings, of which this dissertation will be one, for family tree observers to peruse, if they so desired. For the curious, I could be an ‘identity’; some information about me and, hopefully,
some understanding of me would be available through my writings. I would not simply be a name, a ‘branch’ on the trunk of a family tree, shrouded in anonymity like most other names on the various branches.

In undertaking autobiographical writing, I have no drive to prove Qoheleth wrong and be ‘remembered’ after my death, as opposed to fading into oblivion (New Revised Standard Version, 1989; 537; ch 2, v16), which according to him we are all destined to do. Rather, I see myself as providing material for the curious and those seeking to examine their family and cultural heritage. I do not harbour the hope, or according to Qoheleth (NRSV, 1989; 537 ch 2, v15-16), and Brecht in his poem ‘On hearing that a Mighty Statesman has Fallen Ill’ (Brecht, 1976; 398-399), the delusion, that it will be a memorial to me. I concur with Qoheleth that striving to be remembered after one’s death is ‘Hebel’, a Hebrew word often employed by Qoheleth and in the opinion of Fox (1989; 31) best translated as ‘absurd.’ I consider any such striving to be, to use a refrain oft employed by Qoheleth, a ‘chasing after the wind’. Rather I seek to provoke a reflective response from the reader, as concerns their own life and lived experience. The reader is invited into the story. As indicated, my writings are not solely directed to the person who may read them after my death, they are very much documents in circulation, which the living read and discuss with me. Autobiographical writing offers the possibility, both for me and the readers of my work, to gain greater insight into our lived experience; if the writer of the autobiography is alive to interact with, so much the better for our understanding and insight. Of course, I acknowledge that there are those who would, with justification, contest the truth of that statement with reference to Barthes’ ubiquitous and now famous notion of the ‘death of the author’.

Another abiding interest of mine had its origin in the writings of Plato and some scholars of Plato. This interest has been long standing. I find particularly intriguing the account of the trial and death of Socrates, as presented by Plato in the Last Days of Socrates. This account is perhaps the most famous trial and death in the literary legacy of the Western world, behind that of Christ’s trial and
execution, recounted in the Gospels (for instance, evidence the metaphors that have passed from these accounts into everyday language and usage: ‘washing one’s hands of the matter’ from the trial of Jesus; and being ‘handed the poisoned chalice’ from the execution following the trial of Socrates.

More recently, my interest has been fuelled by Rebecca Cain’s ideas about what she terms ‘philosophical drama’ (Cain, 2002) and about Plato as a writer who has written pieces that can be seen (from one perspective) as philosophical drama. I have no intention here of launching into a comparison and the merits of Cain’s ideas with regard to other understandings of, and perspectives on, Plato’s work. Rather I am noting that this one way of viewing Plato’s work, in the *Phaedo*, has been a significant influence on my development of what I am terming ‘autobiographic drama’.

Socrates’ social situation, a prison, and his personal situation, his conversations with his friends while his death from ingesting the hemlock is immanent, creates a powerful dramatic context for the *Phaedo*. Socrates is portrayed as the deeply reflective person intent on imparting his thoughts to his followers, in spite of his death being immanent. Socrates, by his actions in this time, is both advocating and demonstrating what he regards as the priorities of life. The immanence of death distinguishes the *Phaedo* as a compelling dramatic piece, more so than the *Crito*, which also foregrounds the topic of death, but is not a piece which so readily lends itself to dramatic performance.

The *Phaedo* is a text which conveys profound ideas, in what from one perspective can be seen as a dramatic form, and as such is a text I look to for informing my writing of autobiographical drama. Also, as a person with a life threatening illness, the *Phaedo*, which foregrounds death, has a special significance for me personally. Socrates is depicted as being intrepid in the face of death; an admirable quality as far as I am concerned, being a person raised in a society where death is widely perceived as the ‘intruder’. Notwithstanding the inevitability of death, it is seen as an intruder into the media fuelled fantasy of the ever-young and ever-consuming, physically beautiful person. Death, unless denied or ignored, interrupts the fantasy and ‘spoils the story’. The concept of the intruder is
Plato, whether intentionally or not, conveys deep philosophical (and theological) thoughts in a dramatically engaging fashion by embedding them in the life experience and thought of his main character, Socrates. The *Phaedo* has some similarities to the ficto-critical narrative writing of J.M. Coetzee in his work, *Elizabeth Costello*. In this work Coetzee encapsulated complex arguments about animal rights and animal liberation within a fictional social setting. Coetzee’s work, as with the *Phaedo*, encouraged me to consider the use of a variant of the Socratic Method in my dissertation by way of the ‘Conversations’. ‘Autobiographical drama’ ultimately became a key platform for my research. Socrates conversations with his respondents in the *Phaedo*, encouraged me to consider the possibility of constructing Qoheleth as my protagonist for my Conversations. To do this it was necessary to ‘construct’ Qoheleth from the text of *Ecclesiastes*, as his historical identity is beyond the reach of Historical Critical Method. More will be written of this in a later section.

My interest in the concept of philosophical drama led me to a renewed interest in the *Messingkauf Dialogues*, authored by the celebrated German dramatist, Bertolt Brecht. My interest in these particular readings focused on the structure of the *Messingkauf Dialogues* more so than the philosophical content. Brecht’s work, as with Plato’s, exhibits the Socratic Method and conveys complex ideas in an engaging way. Brecht’s philosophy of the theatre, as expounded in the *Messingkauf Dialogues*, is an engaging piece of theatre in and of itself. It is also a good and helpful example of how drama can be used to bring across complex ideas in an engaging and accessible way. Brecht’s personifying of points of view in the *Messingkauf Dialogues* (the Director, the Actor etc.) illustrated to me the wide variety of ideas from diverse fields of thought that can be presented in different genres (drama, narrative) by the imaginative use of variations of the Socratic Method. Drama has been an abiding interest of mine from my first year at university in 1971 and would certainly figure in the development of my ‘autobiographical drama’. The inclusion of drama in my
thinking around autobiographical writing is consistent with my eclectic orientation in methodology, and is coupled with my abiding interest of Plato and philosophical drama.

 Literary theory, being drawn from various disciplinary fields and involving ‘speculative practice’ (Culler, 1997; 14), informed the writing of this dissertation. Culler states that speculative practice challenges received ideas and encourages the rethinking of categories through which one may have been reflecting on literature. Speculative thinking has been an important contributor to this project. The interpretation of the text is crucial to my enterprise, especially as I seek to construct the character of Qoheleth. The construction of Qoheleth’s character is crucial, because I converse with him on my pilgrimage. As best I can, I need to ‘know’ the person with whom I am conversing. In the Conversations, there needs to be a consistency between Qoheleth, the constructed person, and Qoheleth’s speech acts, what the literary critic Kenneth Burke refers to in his ‘Dramatistic Method’ as the ‘agent-act ratio’ (1989; 136). This ratio, Burke writes, ‘reflects the correspondence between a man’s character and his behaviour (as in a drama the principles of formal consistency require that each member of the dramatis personae act in character, though such correspondences in art can have a perfection not often found in life)’ (1989; 136). Knowing the character makes empathy more readily achievable. Empathy enables me to ‘place myself in Qoheleth’s shoes’ and to generate the questions and critiques this man would level at me as he, the provocateur, engages in a review of my life through the Conversations. Literary approaches to the understanding of Scripture are gaining more widespread, scholarly acceptance (Brueggemann, 1993; 2); they are no longer seen as merely reflecting the limitations of the theologically less sophisticated, that is those who are not as conversant with the dominant, social scientifically oriented, historical critical method.

 In the study of Scripture, historical critical method is still the main approach, although it is no longer the ‘only game in town’ as Walter Wink wrote of it 1973 (in Brown, 1998; 137). Nevertheless, it is the staple offering to theology students for the ‘understanding’ of scripture. Historical critical method is social scientific in its orientation. It is certainly the main approach within the academy.
Whether it is the best approach is open to question and as an approach it now has some strong critics. The critics bring their criticisms from a variety of ecclesiastical positions. Steinmetz (2011; 4) writes of his preference for pre-critical approaches to the text with their emphasis on multiple meanings, in preference to critical scholarship and the ‘recovering’ of the intended meaning of the author of the text. Marshall is of the view that it is the questions that the text puts to us, the readers, which is more important than the questions that we, as critics, put to the text (Lundin, 1997; 3). Stanley Hauerwas writes of his preference for the ‘usefulness’ of scripture over meaning’ (1993; 37) thereby, he believes, freeing theology from its ‘academic captivity’, (1993; 8). His is a congregation-based, as opposed to an academy-based, focus on scripture. Further to this, and allowing for some hyperbole in Wink’s style, there is merit in his comment that, ‘for many liberal scholars in America, the most urgent question has become that of finding a context in which their interpretations of the Bible might have significance (1973; 11). Some scholars, such as Brueggemann, take a distinctly literary approach and emphasize the ‘little stories of scripture’ (1993; 2). C.S. Song (2011; 48 and 52) is thinking in a similar vein when he talks of ‘approach’ as opposed to ‘method’ in theology. Theology, for C. S. Song, is an articulation of the insights already deposited in stories (2011; 155). It is not my intention here to enter these general exegetical debates on scripture. It is sufficient to state here that, for my ends, historical critical method will be mined for whatever it may reveal that might aid, in however small a way, in addressing the mystery that surrounds the Book of Ecclesiastes and its author. The hermeneutic approach will also be used to this further end. I will use whatever tools are available and useful to me to construct the character of Qoheleth.

As previously discussed, pilgrimage is an important abiding interest and is central to this dissertation. Pilgrimage provides the physical setting for the conversations with Qoheleth. These conversations would neither have been conducted, nor created, as effectively within the walls of a library. Wordworth’s approach to life is informative here. To illustrate my point, when a traveller asked Wordworth’s servant to show him her master’s study, she answered, ‘Here is his library, but his study is out of doors’ (Thoreau, 2007; 189). As a person with a considerable history of human
powered, long distance pilgrimage, I am positioned in the Romantic tradition of people such as Wordsworth: my study is very often out of doors. There are other important reasons for having my own study ‘out of doors’, as far as this dissertation is concerned. It has been previously noted that my physical pilgrim route provides me with an environment ‘beyond Hobbes and Bentham’. The pilgrim route provides for the ‘long vision’ and it also provides the time and opportunity for focused reflection; the ‘intentional’ walk allows for unfettered space, free from the tyranny of intrusion from our voluble and prolific electronic overseers, the gadgetry, which can adversely impact on the quietly reflective person in much the same distracting way as the cracking of horse whips did for the philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer (1978; 127-133). The very unpredictable nature of pilgrimage also means that the learning associated with it is far removed from the economic rationalist, outcomes-based modalities prevalent in contemporary education. Along with adult educator, Richard Bagnall, I classify these outcomes-based modalities as ‘training’, not education (Bagnall, 1994; 13, 1, 22). Even considering the current popularity of the Camino (it surges and wanes), long distance human powered pilgrimage is unlikely to be anything much more than a marginal activity with the population at large: I consider that the lengthy time and considerable physical effort involved will ever place a cap on numbers, drawn as they are from societies which foreground convenience and the ‘saving’ of time. As a research undertaking within the academy, my research, a praxis based investigation of pilgrimage, is a rather marginal activity, this in spite of holding the potential for formative and transformative learning for the author (and perhaps others, whether directly by being inspired to undertake a pilgrimage, or vicariously by involvement in the text).

Even though I completed my ordinand training over twenty years ago, theological education has been an abiding interest of mine, not because it was intensely interesting, but rather because the opposite was the case. My experiences of the college curriculum were largely non-engaging. When I entered theological college as an ordinand, I also had the responsibility of supporting my family. As my lectures took place during the day, I had no option but to work at night. I therefore undertook work with the crisis unit of the then Department of Community Services (DoCS), the statutory
agency for child protection in New South Wales. I worked exclusively on the overnight shifts several times per week. Immediately prior to entering the college I had worked with DoCS during the day. Upon entering theological college it took but a few weeks for me to realise that even had I not had the responsibility of supporting my family I still would have elected to work overnight shifts for DoCS. The primary reason for this was that the college curriculum and college ideology placed little value on my life experiences prior to being an ordinand, denoting such experience as superseded, and representing a ‘previous life’. For me, a person looking to integrate theology with life experience, this was simply not good enough. I decided that I would create my own curriculum which would run parallel to that of the compulsory curriculum of the College. Integration of life’s experiences would be the theme, a theme which has gained increasing momentum since that time and is still important among my abiding interests.

My practice in the DoCS crisis unit also gave me opportunity for reflection on how theology might inform that practice, or not. In sum, my extra curricula activity of child protection work was pivotal to my personal and spiritual formation during the three years of theological college. The continuing result was that it encouraged me to think about how theological education might be more relevant to ministry practice, as well as to how it might be integrated into my life as a whole. This abiding interest is leading me toward seeking to publish this dissertation as a text for ordinands who might like to consider the possibility of writing their own autobiographical drama, preferably by going on pilgrimage. I have never had any desire to teach in a theological context, however, I am of the opinion that an innovative course in reflective pastoral practice could be designed, taking account of the ideas and practice of autobiographical drama as outlined in this dissertation. It could be useful also for those undergoing the Year of Discernment; this is a reflective undertaking prescribed by the Uniting Church for those persons who have indicated a desire to consider a life of ordained ministry. A pilgrimage could be an agreed-upon undertaking during the Year of Discernment, if agreed upon by both the candidate for ordination and his, or her, designated mentor.
The academy, the collective name for the various universities and colleges I have been associated with as a student for over forty years, has been a powerful force in my personal development. It has been a constant thread running through my adult life. I have never followed a conventional pathway of a particular discipline or career, my philosophy being to undertake studies that assist my personal and spiritual development at particular periods of my life. My interests for some time have been on the integration of the ideas from the various disciplines and fields of scholarship with which I have been involved. My life in the academy, as what I term an ‘ontological student’, has been central to my developing ideas about autobiographical drama.

Finally, it might seem unusual to term cancer as an ‘abiding interest’, however it is so for me, at least in an indirect sense. For some people, who pursue a course of action which entails knowing everything they possibly can about their disease, cancer has become a way of life. This can translate into an ‘obsession with the disease’ (Bregman and Thiermann, 1995; 82), perhaps even a ‘revelling in victimhood’, as McAdams suggests (2013; 212). Many such people have been used to filling their life with a career of some sort and now cancer supersedes that and itself becomes the career. I am not numbered among the people who respond to their disease in this way. As a person who has a diagnosis of cancer there are many other, more satisfying pursuits as far as I am concerned. I have no intention of engaging with cancer as a career.

Cancer has provided me with many trials, such as marked debilitation and a depressing loss, albeit temporary, of will and discipline. As well, cancer threw up the trial of poor memory retention from the combination of this debilitation and ‘chemo head’, which is now being recognized as a side effect of some combinations of cytotoxic drugs. As well, though, I have had some profoundly positive experiences, such as deeper relationships with my carers, which I would be the poorer for never experiencing. It is sufficient to say that cancer contributed to directions that my life has taken and will doubtless have an influence on future directions. It figures among my reasons for undertaking this pilgrimage and my desire to write autobiographically. It is an abiding interest, and as a disease
that could bring about my premature death, it exerts an influence on choices I make in life. This influence is overt in some instances, but more subtle in others. While I do not experience cancer as the ‘Sword of Damocles’ (Renton, 2005; 381), it is one prominent influence on the course of my life, which includes what I write about. Cancer, therefore, has a place in the methodology.

**METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS.**

**Preamble.**

As indicated in the Introduction, my ‘abiding interests’ generate the methodology on which this dissertation is based. Given that my abiding interests are wide and varied, the methodology built on these abiding interests is necessarily eclectic; no one discipline or perspective alone has provided the impetus for the choices and actions in my life. To use Tess Brady’s metaphor (2000), I function like the discriminating bowerbird when developing my methodology: I pick out the ‘blue’ material that meets my requirements. My life itself has evidenced fragments, whether that is with regard to thought, experience or social role. Any adoption of a ‘one size fits all’ methodological approach would certainly be inadequate; my thinking and research could not be jammed into such a limited framework, nor would I subject my story to such a reductionist approach. Neither is it a matter of me ‘fishing around’ among traditional taxonomies of research techniques to find the ‘best fit’ for the research I have in mind. In this research, there is no ‘best fit’. I therefore suggest to the reader that they resist any desire to see this research as a ‘case study’: a method through which data may be gleaned to inform future, larger scale, generalizable research.

Conventional research terminology, such as ‘replicable’, and ‘external validity’ have little relevance in the context of this research. On that count, this research is rather like the *Book of Ecclesiastes*: the reader may use it to inform his or her own reflections. It might also be noted that, as a researcher, Qoheleth was very much an eclectic, setting out as he did to explore what might be meaningful for human beings to occupy themselves with during their lifetime. This research does not
fit the ‘deeply ingrained assumptions of Enlightenment rationality, and traditional Western epistemology’ (Ryan, 2005).

The methodology underpinning this dissertation has been sourced heavily from both my formal training and education and my informal educational experiences. With regard to formal training, that has been mainly within the academy. These disciplines and areas of interest include: theology; philosophy; sociology; social work, adult education, psychology, English literature and creative writing. I also draw upon what could be referred to as informal, ‘popular cultural’ perspectives, such as music and even what could be termed ‘graffiti’. Wisdom and insight is not the sole province of the academy.

My methodology will also draw upon non-textual sources, such as my experiences of wilderness and my pilgrim journeys. Like Wordsworth, my study is very often out of doors, but unlike Wordsworth, it has often been in remote areas such as the South West Wilderness of Tasmania. The experience of suffering and the experience of a life threatening illness are also important to the methodology. In drawing upon a wide variety of sources that cross genre boundaries and which include personal experience in addressing themes, my work, which I have termed ‘autobiographical drama’, has similarities to that of scholars such as Ronald Pelias. Pelias (2016) terms his methodology ‘imaginative enquiry’.

I will approach the task of outlining in more detail the methodology of this dissertation by first considering the notion of ‘fragments’, which is central to the construction of this dissertation. The notion of fragments exhibits an eclectic approach to epistemology. Like Tess Brady’s ‘bowerbird’, cited previously, I am picking out the ‘blue things’.

I will then consider the Book of Ecclesiastes and its author, Qoheleth. I will approach this task from an examination of the perspective of historical criticism and a consideration of hermeneutics. From
an exegesis of Ecclesiastes, I will build a character for Qoheleth in preparation for the Conversations on the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostella.

Next, I will address the question of why I wish to write autobiography, looking critically at the ‘autobiographical imperative’ (Eakin, 2008; 151). I then will examine the function of ‘autobiographical drama’ as a critical factor in the dissertation. I will discuss autobiographical drama and acknowledge my reliance on the writings of Plato in the Phaedo, a book within the compilation, The Last Days of Socrates. The influence of Brecht and to a much lesser extent Bishop Berkeley and others will be referred to.

I will then examine the place of wilderness in my methodology. I will then refer to the educational and heuristic possibilities of human powered pilgrimages.

I will outline the important part theology plays in my methodology. In particular, I will outline why I give precedence to the hermeneutic approach over the social scientific when considering theological texts. This discussion will be headed ‘From Critical to Pre-Critical Theology’. While not discounting the social scientific approach, I give prominence to the hermeneutic, which in my view best supports my particular task at hand, that of integrating theology with other disciplines and integrating my formal and non-formal learning and training.

Important in my life experiences has been the time I spent working nights for DoCS. This experience was formative in my thinking around praxis, particularly with regard to the non-authorized curriculum I developed to run contemporaneously with the college curriculum. DoCS raised issues as to whether my theological understandings were Sunday events, closeted off from my participation in the secular world, or whether they could inform my actions in that secular world, particularly that part of the secular world which was the maelstrom of DoCS.

Finally, while not instrumental in the design of the dissertation, the development of a life threatening illness is an important source for the content of the Conversations. The Conversations
with Qoheleth, in particular those referring to my experiences of illness, made this, my second pilgrimage on the Camino, an even more keenly anticipated one than the first. The conversations with Qoheleth, a keen critic, made it more likely that I would have a strong focus for the walk and thus made it more likely that significant learning could take place.

(1). The Approach of Fragments.

A feature of the methodology of this dissertation is that it foregrounds what I term ‘fragments’ (Macarthur, 2003; 40). For instance, the theologian, Walter Brueggemann’s emphasis on ‘little pieces’ (1993; 25), such as parables and stories, and what he sees as the necessarily reductionist nature of systematic theology (14) is one example of an epistemology informed by the approach of fragments. Gerhart and Russell’s work in New Maps for Old, Explorations in Science and Religion (2001) is an example drawn from interdisciplinary thinking on epistemology, which highlights the metaphoric process and illustrates an approach of fragments. The approach of fragments in this dissertation also encompasses various personal, non-textual experiences, such as my experiences on pilgrimage and my experiences of cancer.

The thought of Qoheleth in Ecclesiastes is itself a clear example of an approach of fragments. As Koh comments, (2006; 167), Qoheleth’s approach indicates that life is more complex than the traditional [Hebrew] wisdom corpus has made it out to be. Qoheleth illustrates this by his selection of particular fragments, comprised of his empirical observations of events and or actions. Qoheleth’s observations and writings question wisdom as being an all sufficient pursuit in life that guarantees the possessor of such wisdom ultimate good fortune. The conservative view of wisdom, as opposed to Qoheleth’s radical view, was a position held by sages of the Hebrew wisdom tradition (Fox, 1989; 105). The Book of Job is often used to illustrate the conservative, conventional viewpoint with regard to wisdom: faithfulness and fortitude are ultimately rewarded by God. Qoheleth will not abide this, as his observations tell him otherwise (New Revised Standard Version (NRSV); Ch 2 v 15-17).
Fragments can have the effect that Culler attributes to theory (1997; 7), they can move beyond their original fields of conception and can be used by people thinking about other topics. Culler discusses the work of thinkers from fields other than literature, such as Foucault and Derrida, to indicate how theories conceived in other disciplines can exert a significant influence on how literary texts may be interpreted. To illustrate this point about fragments, an example is Macarthur’s use of the work of theorists working on metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson (2003), Goatly (1997), (Gerhart and Russell (2001), to develop and use a novel biblical metaphor, ‘from Armageddon to Babylon’, to aid an investigation into the decline of the influence of the prison chaplain as an institution from the separate system of prisons till 2001 (Macarthur, 2003).

Of course, there are critics of a methodology of fragments, among them the prominent philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre. MacIntyre has argued, within the context of political philosophy, that a society without an agreed upon philosophy degenerates into a plethora of sectional interests, particularly when considering questions which could be considered as ethical, or moral; questions such as whether to use military force, whether abortion should be legalised, how wealth should be distributed, and so on. The sectional interests in these contests bay for power and manipulate to achieve their own particular ends, which MacIntyre states ‘are notable chiefly for the unsetttable character of the controversies thus carried on and the arbitrariness of each of the contesting parties’ (1981; 238). MacIntyre suggests that this state of affairs comes about because ‘Western society is not coherent in its thinking and judging on moral and ethical issues, because it attempts interpretation and reaching of consensus through a pot pourri of social and cultural fragments, detached at various stages of modernity, from the integrating traditions from which the culture derived’ (1982;2).

MacIntyre points us back to traditions, however I am declining the invitation for two reasons. Firstly because, while noting his acute observations, MacIntyre has many critics (Fuller, 139-140) and secondly, it is not within the scope or purpose of this dissertation to attempt an evaluation of these
arguments, which are broad and political in nature and would embed me in an epistemological quagmire. I merely note that a methodology of fragments, while having its advocates and practitioners, has its detractors, as indeed does any methodology, particularly in the humanities, where questions of meaning are to the fore. However, as this dissertation is autobiographic in nature, it should come as no surprise that eclecticism and fragments are forefront in its construction. Besides being fragmentary, lived experience can be very mysterious, particularly to the person living it, however reflective that person may be. Order and coherence can make autobiographical writing appear contrived and or imposed. This is one of a host of difficult issues facing the writer of serious autobiography. As a writer of autobiography, questions that immediately confront me are: ‘from a fragmentary (complex) lived experience, which are the seminal and salient experiences of my life to be foregrounded in my writing? Which are the crucial ones to include and for what ends? What informs this selection’? The selection of experiences chosen are always likely be a work in progress, for circumstances and experiences in life are subject to change.

Further to the issue of coherence and order in the writing of autobiography, another matter comes to the fore. The ‘Masters of Suspicion’, considered by Lundin (1997), quite convincingly I believe, to be Marx, Freud and Nietzsche, have all emphasized that human beings are not the predictable, rational beings of an Enlightenment understanding of epistemology. People do not think and behave out of a consistent, logical positivist-like approach. Two of those Masters of Suspicion, Freud and Nietzsche, have convincingly proposed that human behaviour has a mysterious, opaque side to it, an unconscious, which is a contributor to non-rational thought and often unpredictable behaviour, inconsistent with the concept of the ‘rational’ person.

Having suggested that my methodology of fragments aligns with a postmodern epistemology, and claimed that any autobiographical writing, which is deeply reflective about a wide and varied lived experience, is fragmentary rather than systematic, I will now consider the Book of Ecclesiastes and its author, Qoheleth, as I look to begin a pre-pilgrimage, preliminary building of the character with
whom I will converse on the Camino Santiago de Compostella. During the actual Conversations, the character of Qoheleth will become more ‘biographical’, while the character, Mel Macarthur, will be more ‘shaped’, that is if Mel Macarthur is able to deeply reflect on the probing of his interlocutor.

The matter of the symbiotic relationship between the author and the subject has been addressed by Rachel Morley in two informative papers (2011; 2012). Morley argues a case against the ‘absent’ author of much published biography: the author of the text, she maintains, is mainly missing from the text he or she has created, and this in spite of the often emotional experiences involved with researching the subject of the biography. Empathy for instance is essential to engaging with the subject and brings with it a bevy of emotions and attachments, which are then closeted away when the construction of the text begins. A writers’ presence in the text has mostly been viewed as an intrusion, if not a transgression, by conventional practice of biography writing, although Morley notes that there is some evidence of change taking place. In my research Qoheleth and I are thrown together in conversation across the Camino Santiago de Compostella, and our relationship is certainly not hidden. More will be said of this in the section below (From Philosophical to Autobiographical Drama).

(2). The Royal Philosopher (Qoheleth) and the Book of Ecclesiastes.

Qoheleth, the Royal Philosopher, is the person who drives the text I am creating. He is my chosen companion and provocateur on my intentional pilgrim walk to Santiago de Compostella. But, who is Qoheleth? And what did he believe? Why did he write this strange book, which is considered by many scholars and ecclesiastical people as being so much out of harmony with the other wisdom writings of the Judeo-Christian canon? What are the dominant themes in his work? How can I best approach the text and its author? What voice is Qoheleth writing from? Is this book the work of one author? These are a few of the myriad questions that have occurred to me during my musings on Ecclesiastes. Some of these questions I will need to address during the course of my enquiry. I need to know what I can about my interlocutor, if I am to hold conversations with him over the five or so
weeks it will take to walk the Camino. The means employed to ‘construct’ Qoheleth are historical-critical and hermeneutic.

I will start with an examination of what can be yielded by historical critical method, a social science based method for the examination of the Scriptures and other writings, involving form criticism, language criticism, redaction criticism and sociological criticism, among other forms. Historical critical method is the main tool for the exegesis of scripture and is the dominant method taught to ordinands in the more ‘Liberal’ theological colleges and university schools of theology and religious studies. I was an ordinand in the years 1991-1993, inclusive, and was a recipient of this form of biblical teaching. The historical-critical domination of exegesis has continued to the present and has, if anything, been reinforced by the trend for theological colleges to attach themselves to secular universities. For example, the United Theological College of the Uniting Church in Australia has been incorporated into Charles Sturt University as the Faculty of Theology. This movement has meant that historical critical approaches have been consolidated due to their social science foundations, which are, in general, more acceptable to the universities than what, from a social science perspective, are termed ‘subjective’ methods. Whether this conformity to the requirements of the academy is the best approach to biblical texts is another question. The American theologian Stanley Hauerwas, among others, thinks not. From an ecclesiastical perspective he writes in support of ‘freeing theology from its academic captivity’ (1993; 8) and returning scripture to its ‘church-centred practice’ (9). For Hauerwas (34), ‘fundamentalists’ are devotees of the absolute supremacy of, firstly, a literal, and alternatively a historical-critical interpretation of scripture. I am in agreement with Hauerwas in his musings. In recent times, fundamentalism of the historical-critical type is increasingly being brought into question. Steinmetz (2011; 4) has asked such questions of the historical critical method:

Biblical scholarship still hopes to recover the original intention of the author of a biblical text and still regards the pre-critical exegetical tradition as an obstacle to the proper
understanding of the true meaning of that text. The most primitive meaning is the only valid meaning, and the historical-critical method is the only key that can unlock it. But is that theory true? I think it is demonstrably false.

I, also, think it is demonstrably false. I could not hold the opposite opinion, given the nature of my dissertation, which is to converse with Qoheleth on pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostella. My task is a long way from the historical-critical approach. Steinmetz also makes the point (2011; 12) that the act of creation of a text confers no special privilege on the author when it comes to the distinctly different, if lesser, task of interpretation of the text. For Steinmetz (13), the notion that a text means only what its author intends it to mean is historically naïve, because the text of creative imagination has a life of its own. I concur: I can benefit from reading Hamlet, even if I know nothing of Shakespeare. Or indeed I can benefit from reading Ecclesiastes, even though very little is known of the historical Qoheleth and his context. Raising what I consider to be justifiable doubts about the primacy of historical critical method and its assumptions does not necessarily mean that the ‘baby has been thrown out with the bathwater’. Can historical criticism usefully inform me about some aspects of Qoheleth and the Book of Ecclesiastes? Can it supply me with something pertinent to my task of ‘constructing’ the person Qoheleth? That is my next matter to investigate. I begin by posing the simple but also, paradoxically, very complex question, ‘Who is Qoheleth’?

What can historical criticism uncover? Endeavouring to isolate the period in which Qoheleth wrote may possibly yield some clues. In the first two chapters of Ecclesiastes the literary voice is that of King Solomon. But most scholars, for very good reasons, dismiss this as ‘Solomonic fiction’ (Whybray, 1989; 4). Whybray, accurately and wryly, notes that if Ecclesiastes was authored by King Solomon, then it would have been written in classical Hebrew. He goes on to note that a modern student trained only in classical Hebrew, and confronted for the first time with the Book of Ecclesiastes, would find it largely incomprehensible. Hebrew language changed markedly from King Solomon’s time to the language of the time, within quite broad parameters, when Ecclesiastes was written.
Ecclesiastes was not written by Solomon. Most scholars are of the view, based on language, form, and the ideas expressed, that the book was written in the third century BC (6), Clements, 1992; 90, Limburg, 2006; 9) and likely in Jerusalem (Whybray; 6). One of the problems with precision dating is that there are no direct references to historical events in Ecclesiastes; the text is theological and philosophical in nature, not sociological and political (Brown, 2000; 11).

While it is useful for the purposes in this dissertation to rule out Solomonic authorship by placing Qoheleth somewhere in the third century BC, and possibly in Jerusalem, I am no closer to answering the question, ‘Who is Qoheleth?’ As Fox notes (1989; 12), Qoheleth reveals nothing about himself apart from his thoughts. My examination of Ecclesiastes confirms Fox’s appraisal. There are no personal, or historical, references in the text that can significantly advance a close identification of the historical person, Qoheleth. There is, however, another question and another area of investigation which could prove more useful.

From my perspective, as a scholar looking to construct the character of Qoheleth, from the text of Ecclesiastes, the question can usefully be asked, ‘Is there only one author of this text’? If the text is only partly his work interspersed with a series of hypothesized glosses, constructing the character of Qoheleth would be very difficult indeed. What work would definitively be that of Qoheleth and what work that of the glossators? This is a significant question. Fortunately (for me), most scholars now see the work as that of a single author (Whybray, 1989; 19, Bartholomew, 2001; 74). The exception is the short epilogue of Chapter Twelve. It is virtually universally accepted that the epilogist of Chapter Twelve is a different author, for the epilogist speaks of Qoheleth as the ‘Teacher’ and does not speak in the first person, as is the case with the rest of the text. Regrettably, the epilogist gives us no clue as to where Qoheleth might have taught, who he taught, why he taught, what he taught, or how he taught; perhaps the epilogist simply did not know. The epilogist, for whatever reason, also seeks to embed Qoheleth in mainstream Wisdom writings, possibly to advocate for the book’s recognition as writing justifiably identified with Jewish Wisdom literature. Ecclesiastes inclusion in
the canon created controversy among sages when it came to make a decision regarding its incorporation (Rudman, 2001; 23). The epilogue seems to function as an apologetic for Qoheleth as a mainstream sage of the Wisdom tradition. In sum, the current thinking of most scholars is that there is a single author of Ecclesiastes, with the exception of the epilogist as noted earlier (Bartholomew, 2009; 40). The weight of evidence for the idea of a single author, rather than a text with a series of glossators/redactors, is a useful finding of historical criticism and contributes significantly to my project. Single authorship justifies, as well as aids, my intention of constructing Qoheleth from the text.

Form criticism can sometimes isolate the sources of influence on an author and provide some insights for identification purposes, but with Qoheleth and Ecclesiastes, form critical applications have produced widely varying views among scholars. Whybray, a pre-eminent scholar in the field says as much in this regard: ‘Form critical criteria are often insufficient for the study of the structure of this book. Qoheleth uses many forms within one argument’ (1989; 20). Bartholomew (2001; 61) notes that there is no consensus among scholars as to the genre of Qoheleth’s work. Again, Whybray, commenting on the shortcomings of form criticism to shed light on Ecclesiastes writes; ‘What form criticism cannot illuminate and can only make allowances for is the genius of individual writers’ (1989; 21). Some scholars, for various reasons, may not share Whybray’s high opinion of Qoheleth’s work, but there is no doubting Ecclesiastes’ complexity and capacity to confound when subjecting it to form critical analysis.

Much of the research into Ecclesiastes is of a highly technical nature, enquiring into the particularities of language and grammar and the hypothesized similarities of form and style with other literature of the ancient world, notably Egyptian and Mesopotamian. Koh notes (2006; 24, 25) that neither suggestion about cultural influences on Qoheleth’s thought, Egyptian or Mesopotamian, have gained general acceptance among scholars. Similarly, suggestions about a Greek influence have been not been widely accepted. As Barton notes (Rudman, 2001; 29), ‘such parallels as exist
between Ecclesiastes and Greek philosophy prove, at most, that Qoheleth was a Jew who had in him the makings of a Greek philosopher’.

This leads to the question of what could be understood as a ‘social role’. The epilogue of Chapter 12 refers to Qoheleth as referred to by the epiloge as the ‘Teacher’ but, as already noted, where he taught, who he taught, how he taught, what he taught and why he taught are beyond the reach of historical criticism. As Fox states (1989; 12), virtually nothing is known of education in early Palestine, hence whether Qoheleth was in any sense a professional teacher is unknown. With regard to the question of Qoheleth’s social role, Fox (12) indicates that only the most general statements can be made. I am of the view that Rudman summarizes (2001; 27) the situation accurately when he states, ‘Diversity of opinion suggests that only the most general conclusions can be drawn about Qoheleth the man’. Historical speculation suggests that Qoheleth would likely have come from a privileged educational and economic background, for he had access to, and a working knowledge of, the Wisdom writings.

Although the production of scholarly writing continues, Qoheleth, the embodied person of history (what history, whose history?), seems destined to remain elusive. Historical-critical writing seems highly unlikely to produce anything paradigmatic. Social science can offer little that is definitive about Qoheleth and the Book of Ecclesiastes and Qoheleth’s ‘sitz im Leben’ (setting in life) remains mysterious. Nevertheless, I have the significant benefit from the majority of scholarship that Ecclesiastes is the work of a single author. While literature about multiple selves in authorship (Maftei, 2013; 44-45) continues to accumulate in both volume and complexity, it is relieving not to have to contend with different embodied authors of the same text in whom there are multiple selves.

In sum, Qoheleth and his writings remain opaque to historical criticism, at least when some sort of consensus is the criteria for judgment. However, as I have an appointment with Qoheleth to walk the Camino Santiago de Compostella, I need to make my own judgements about Qoheleth and the
*Book of Ecclesiastes.* In the opinion of Koh, Christianson and others (2006; 49), ‘the character of Qoheleth is revealed in the narration’ although I am not as confident as the aforementioned scholars that this is so. My task for this dissertation is to give ‘an’ interpretation that has merit, knowing that it is but one interpretation. Notwithstanding this qualification, and after reviewing the historical critical material, I have formed the view that hermeneutics may provide me with the best insights into, and for my purposes in this dissertation, a working knowledge of Qoheleth.

In sum, the absence of clues in the text, as well as the lack of contemporaneous, corroborating material makes it likely that Qoheleth will remain an enigma to historical-critical scholars. For my purposes, however, there have been some useful conclusions drawn about the limitations of historical critical method to ‘discover’ Qoheleth.

There is a plethora of hermeneutic literature related to the *Book of Ecclesiastes.* While historical critical studies have produced little to illumine the identity and status of Qoheleth in his social environment, and any attempts to generalise tend to be tentative and highly contested, there are many scholars who have given bold interpretations of the *Book of Ecclesiastes.* These hermeneutic positions, often written as commentaries, are mostly derived from an interrogation of the text, which stands in contradistinction to my exegetical approach in this dissertation, which is being open to the text (Qoheleth) interrogating me. Mine is an intersubjective approach, an approach close to, but differing from, other intersubjective approaches such as that of McGrath, who writes about ‘projecting’ ourselves into the text as an aspect of meditating on the text (2000; 15-18). What I term my ‘immersion’ in the text expands upon the work of McGrath in that it entails a series of ‘Conversations’ with the author of the text. As with the exegetical work based on historical critical studies, there is no general agreement among scholars who interpret Ecclesiastes as to the nature of the book. As I have shown in the Introduction, opinions about the man and his work vary widely. Qoheleth is difficult to interpret, due in part to the oft commented upon ‘contradictions’ among his stated views.
As previously noted, in order to converse with the character Qoheleth I need to be clear about what views I think are being expressed in his text. A particular difficulty here is that the ‘contradictions’ in Qoheleth’s writing are frequent and glaring. There is no general agreement about why these obvious and frequent contradictions exist. At times, Qoheleth seems to affirm the Wisdom writings, while at other times, and often, he contradicts them. From my reading I would suggest that Qoheleth is not merely pointing out contradictions to the conventional Wisdom writings from some sort of detached curiosity, rather he seems positively enthusiastic to point them out. Qoheleth, it seems, is keen to point out to the reader that the Wisdom writings are not acknowledging the complexity of life in that they do not present, or perhaps deliberately ignore, the contradictions to the maxims they advance. Qoheleth seems to have tentatively advanced a form of falsificationism as applied to the conventional Wisdom writings and their maxims, but he seems reluctant to fully prosecute this line of thought. By referring to his empirical evidence to the contrary, Qoheleth is levelling a critique, of sorts, at the sages of the Wisdom tradition. The contradictions he points to are readily observable, or readily deduced from observation (NRSV, 541; ch 9, v 16). Qoheleth provides a sceptical appraisal of the Wisdom sage’s writings: Wisdom writings are to be viewed critically is the message from Qoheleth, in spite of his frequent retractions to the conservative position. Wisdom cannot provide guarantees against adversity or, as in the case of Job, denouement, should adversity come upon one. In my view, Qoheleth’s writing can be seen as a challenge to, if not directly an undermining of, the Wisdom tradition. Qoheleth, in pointing out the flaws in the optimism of the Wisdom writings, cannot be judged as pessimistic solely on the basis of this critique alone. A dissenting voice, yes, but the judgement of pessimistic sage is not definitively established. It is in the presentations of his wider theology that Qoheleth must be appraised.

Qoheleth, from the outset of his book, depicts himself as being on a mission to discover what is worthwhile for people to pursue in life. This he does by engaging in various orientations to life and recording his findings from this ‘experiment’ (NRSV, 1989; 53, ch 1, v 12ff). Brown is a scholar who has no doubts about the fruits of Qoheleth’s experiment, he writes of Qoheleth as ‘presenting
himself as the elder Royal sage at the top of his form, the king and grandfather of wisdom, who in the end comes up empty handed’ (1996; 123). For scholars holding a similar view to Brown, Qoheleth’s writing wreaks of, to use Robinson’s language, ‘the stench of the tomb’ (in Limburg, 2006; 8).

The affirmative (optimistic) position is noted by Whybray (1989; 24), who states that Qoheleth is often depicted as affirming the general truths of the Wisdom sages of the Hebrew tradition. The difference between Qoheleth and other sages being that Qoheleth is courageous enough to point out the contradictory instances, where wisdom does not profit the possessor. In spite of his alertness to these contradictions, however, Qoheleth does not lose faith in God, and hence is seen by Whybray and other scholars, such as Limburg (2006; 124), who take the affirmative view, as the exemplar of a man of strong faith, who believes against the odds, against the evidence he has accrued. That scholars are divided with regard to interpretations of Ecclesiastes is hardly surprising. It is easy to understand how early interpreters arrived at their, now largely superseded, ‘gloss’ hypotheses, one where redactors, having a ‘whiff of heresy’ (Emilsen, 1991) have inserted more traditionally palatable phrases into the text. As noted, contemporary scholars in general hold the view that the work of Ecclesiastes is a unity. However, they hold numerous and varying opinions as to what these textual contradictions mean and why Qoheleth wrote in this manner. On the whole, I find the criticisms more illuminating of the scholars’ theological positions than of the Book of Ecclesiastes.

Given that Ecclesiastes has generated a profusion of interpretations, how do I interpret the book and its author? The polemics of the interpretations of Ecclesiastes are that he is the ‘grocer of despair’, to use the metaphor of Leonard Cohen (‘Field Commander Cohen’, in New Skin for the Old Ceremony. Columbia Records; undated), or that he is the doyen of faith. The question now is can I ‘hum Qoheleth’s tune’, to use the metaphor coined by the critic Brown (2000; 13). To answer this question
I must first identify what I understand to be Qoheleth’s tune. To this task I now turn my attention and deliver my interpretation of Ecclesiastes and its author.

Reading Ecclesiastes is very different to reading other wisdom literature. Qoheleth appears as an anti-hero, in contradistinction to Job, a conventional hero of the wisdom tradition, or St. Paul, a hero from the New Testament. Job, for example, is synonymous with forbearance in suffering, ‘the patience of Job’ being a common saying. The conventional hero, Job, who perseveres in suffering and never wavers in his faith, has his fortunes restored by God (NRSV, 424; v 10-17). While his faith in God is severely tested by calamity, Job remains steadfast. Qoheleth, on the other hand, is quick to point out that there are numerous exceptions to the Wisdom writing’s presentation of life, particularly the denouement evident in Job. Job famously exemplifies that wisdom suffices for life and that faith in God will see one’s fortunes restored in spite of calamity. Qoheleth, in the view of Brown (2000; 14), whittles away at the traditional claims for wisdom made in conventional Wisdom writings. Qoheleth accumulates his observations in evidence. He observes that the wise and the pious are not always the success stories of life, they often suffer, and for these people, the subjects of Qoheleth’s observations, there is no denouement. Qoheleth has seen the evil and the corrupt profit (NRSV, 540; ch 7, v 15, 538; ch 3, v 16). Qoheleth points to numerous injustices and attributes these instances, which appear far from infrequent, to God’s not acting swiftly to punish the offender, (NRSV, 541; ch 8, v11). Qoheleth observes that the failure to punish evil doers allows them to act with impunity. In spite of this, Qoheleth still professes to a belief in God. Unlike Ivan Karamazov, who in Dostoevsky’s novel, The Karamazov Brothers, reflects on the unspeakable instances of the abuse of children, abuse which goes unpunished by God, and thereby decides to ‘give back his entrance ticket’ to God the Creator, Qoheleth retains his ticket. Qoheleth, while he offers a damning criticism of the world of injustice, retains his ticket. For Ivan Karamazov the questions of theodicy were unanswered (Dostoevsky, 2007; 263-269). Qoheleth suggests, that there will be divine retribution against the wicked, but he does not, or cannot, specify how or when this
will be executed (NRSV, 541; ch 8, v 11-13). The assertion sounds rather vague and unconvincing, much more like a wish than an assertion.

Even Qoheleth’s acknowledgement of the existence of God seems ethereal. God’s ways are forever inscrutable (NRSV 540; Ch, 8, v 17). A question, similar to that posed by the philosopher, Antony Flew, in his famous explication of the ‘Parable of the Invisible Gardener’ (Flew, 1968; 48-49), seems relevant here. How does this God of Qoheleth, as remote from the natural and social world as the hypothetical gardener of the parable is from the garden and whose ways are forever inscrutable, differ from no God at all? One could reasonably conjecture that, prima facie, it differs not.

Qoheleth’s stated view, though, is that God is the all-powerful creator, before whom all humans should stand in awe (NRSV 538; Ch 3, v 9-15). Qoheleth’s view is that God’s ways are inscrutable and that humans cannot know why they exist and what, if any, is their telos. Even though they have been given a sense of the past, a future and eternity, they are in no position to make intelligent responses and enquiries, as God does to not reveal his ways to his creation. This sounds like a terrible cosmic joke. This is an existentially preposterous and a hopeless state of affairs for a Creator to have inflicted on his intelligent creation. It is likely that this impossible-to-solve conundrum is at least a contributing reason to Qoheleth arriving at the judgement that all is ‘Hebel’; the Hebrew term most convincingly translated, among a range of similes, as ‘absurd’ (Brown, 2000; 22). As Brown (125) notes, in quoting Vaclav Hare, ‘Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out’. Qoheleth, unlike other sages, is not looking at codes of behaviour and traditional wisdom, he is looking at ultimate explanations of and for human beings in the world. From Qoheleth’s global and existential perspective, it is not difficult to see why he concludes that life is absurd, given that humans have been dealt a ‘bad hand’ in their ‘life under the sun’ (NRSV 537; ch 2, v 11). Life under the sun can be experienced as absurd by Qoheleth, because humans are ‘kept in the dark’, they are denied a telos. How do they then make the best of this seemingly irredeemably bad situation?
The writings of Qoheleth are bleak. In the course of his enquiry, Qoheleth asks the searching existential questions. Why has God created the human species and endowed it with intellectual powers, only to present it with riddles affording no solutions? This is a situation as meaningless as the task the gods set for Sisyphus, the hero/anti-hero of Camus’ essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* ( ). The situation outlined by Qoheleth is, however, much worse, for it is not a single individual’s plight, but for Qoheleth, the universal human condition. If so, for Qoheleth it is a grim situation. As Bartholomew (2009; 58) notes: ‘For Aristotle, true knowledge could indeed be arrived at inter alia through reason and observation; whereas for Qoheleth observation and reason and experience led him to confusion and enigma’. Wisdom has some merits for Qoheleth (NRSV, 541 ch 10; v 13-18) but they are modest. These are not the exalted merits of the Proverbs (NRSV, 511; ch 3; v 13-18, 515, ch 8; v 1-21) and they do not bring answers to Qoheleth’s larger questions. They certainly do not secure the human possessor in the face of life’s challenges and vicissitudes.

Limburg notes, rather lyrically ‘wherever we are in the story [of Ecclesiastes] that word ‘Hebel’ is always sounding in the background, like a sustained base note on an organ’ (2006; 13). In the opinion of Brown (2000; 49), ‘Qoheleth pushes his morbid logic to its final conclusion: the best of all possible worlds is the one in which life is never conceived’. I am of the opinion that Brown’s comment is accurate as an interpretation of Qoheleth’s logic, or better his observations, as Qoheleth’s epistemology is empirical. For Qoheleth, knowledge is a vexation and ultimate wisdom is an impossible quest. *Hebel!*

Like Camus’ character Sisyphus (Camus,1976), to whom he has been much compared, Qoheleth sees the absurdity of the human condition, but unlike Sisyphus he does not emerge triumphant. Qoheleth cannot find meaning in non-meaning as Sisyphus can; he has no hill to walk down, no opportunity to transcend the gods. In Qoheleth’s case, he has not even the possibility of an understanding of the Supreme Being. For Qoheleth, God has a logic for the creative acts of the universe, but such logic is forever out of human reach. Unlike Sisyphus, who understands that he has transgressed against the
gods, however just or unjust his punishment may be, Qoheleth can never know why he lives in an absurd world. Unlike the prophets and the psalmist(s) he cannot invoke God, as God is inscrutable. Von Rad’s comment, cited by Whybray (1989; 24), rings true: ‘Nothing remains for Qoheleth, but to submit in deep resignation to his tragic existence’.

In his absurd world, it is hardly surprising that for Qoheleth the long term salves of living: money, sex, and fame (power and status) are not the panaceas, the opiates of the masses, that they are for the occupants of Brave New World (Huxley, 1994) and 1984 (Orwell, 1990). Qoheleth has tried them (NRSV, ch 2, v 11-11). Sex, wealth and fame are a chasing after the wind as far as Qoheleth is concerned (NRSV, ch 2, v 1-8). They are signifiers without a signified (Fox, 1989; 70) as they do not point beyond themselves. Money, sex and fame are seen as part of the global absurdity, a ‘chasing after the wind’ to summon up Qoheleth’s oft-stated refrain. It is hard to imagine two interpretations of the opiate of the masses as polemical as those of Qoheleth and Marx. Qoheleth would consider the claim that religion is the opiate of the masses as preposterous.

What is surprising as far as Qoheleth’s writing is concerned is that, amid a text that is considered, not unfairly, by Watson to be ‘rigorously hopeless’ (Bartholomew, 2009; 39), Qoheleth concedes that some aspects of life can be worthwhile, such as a good meal (NRSV, ch 9, v 10) and sleep after a hard day’s work (NRSV, ch 3, v 22, ch 4, v 12). But these are minimalist concessions and their value is contingent upon an understanding of the world as absurd, thereby forfeiting any grand design one might have, relegating them to a chasing after the wind. Perhaps Qoheleth’s concessions are best understood as filling in the time a little more convivially, while waiting in line to add to the ‘stench of the tomb’ (to use Robinson’s terminology). The ‘Sydney Central Railway Tunnel Philosopher’, may not have read Ecclesiastes, however his philosophy of life, inscribed on the once brick wall of the tunnel, has a definite similarity to the thought of Qoheleth:

‘Not my will... time to kill... box to fill’. (copied exactly from observation by this author, 1971).
Regrettably, the railway authorities have now tiled the tunnel, so the travelling populous of Sydney has been deprived of the musings of these philosophers of popular culture.

The totality is absurd! Qoheleth is unremittingly bleak in his proclamations. However, something can be retrieved. Humans can have some simple joys when the grand designs of life are brought to nothing by the realisation that humans all go to their inevitable deaths and their oblivion (NRSV, 541; ch 9 v10). Qoheleth entertains no exalted view of human existence; in fact from his musings on injustice and corruption (NRSV, ch 5, v 8, 9), hypocrisy and lack of transparency (NRSV, ch 8, v 10), he would probably arrive at the same conclusion as Hobbes, namely that a life consistent with our natures and of our own making is ‘solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short’ (Leviathan; 1996, xliii).

Humans have no demonstrably favoured place in the order of things; they perish as with the animals (NRSV, ch 3 v 18-21). Qoheleth’s few concessions read more like a despairing gesture amid his life of absurdity.

For Qoheleth, death is a central consideration of his worldview. God’s ways are opaque and wisdom cannot unlock them, death and oblivion are the inevitable ends of a life that is absurd and they, in turn, contribute to the absurdity of existence, viewed as a totality. Qoheleth subjects traditional wisdom to a searching empirical critique. Interestingly, in doing this Qoheleth displays strong similarities to Jesus of Nazareth. I say ‘interestingly’ for Qoheleth is often seen as presenting a view antithetical to that of the Gospels, based as they are around the life and teachings of Jesus.

However, both Qoheleth and Jesus were strong critics of traditional wisdom. The Sermon on the Mount, arguably the best known of all New Testament literature, is punctuated regularly by the words: ‘You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times…but I say unto you (NRSV, ch 5 v 21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43). Qoheleth was equally radical in challenging tradition, however he was less forthright and more equivocal in the way he presented his message than was Jesus. By virtue of his critique, he was probably closer to Jesus’ orientation than many of Jesus’ predecessors. Qoheleth’s radical and searching message is confronting and burdensome, as is that of Jesus in the Sermon on
the Mount (NRSV, ch 16 v 21). Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor would have despatched Qoheleth off to be burnt at the stake, the end he had originally intended for Jesus (2007; 285). The Grand Inquisitor would have seen in Qoheleth a similar threat to a quiescent populous as he did with Jesus. But, lest we see too much similarity, the understanding of death and the finality of death is a chasm that separates Jesus and Qoheleth. Death is the finality for Qoheleth, its function is no more than to end the hopelessness of an existence lived in the global absurdity. This is foreign to the teachings of the New Testament.

It could be argued, of course, that the psalmist in Psalm 90 also foregrounds death; ‘Teach me to limit my days that I might learn wisdom’ (NRSV, v 12). However the foregrounding of death for the psalmist is likely meant to aid to people in making appropriate decisions in life by acknowledging and placing limits on their life’s span. Many people live as though life will go on forever, which is probably one contributing reason why, in my experience as an oncology ward chaplain, there is often such shock at an unfavourable, or terminal, diagnosis. Scholars such as Bregman and Thierman writing (and practicing) in the field of palliative care make similar observations (1995; 61, 77).

Priorities can be set by those adopting the approach of the psalmist for life is given an arbitrary end point, often the biblical three score years and ten; anything beyond is an unexpected bonus. Death for the Psalmist is what McClure calls the ‘Archimedean point’ (in Miller- McLemore, 2012; 246). It is the point from which to view life; it places boundaries on the lifespan for reasons of assisting in the determining of priorities. This is a long way from Qoheleth’s concept of death, which simply compounds the absurdity of existence. The Archimedean point for Qoheleth is the opaqueness of life ‘lived in the hospice called life under the sun’ (Brown, 2000; 62). Qoheleth would concur with the thoughts expressed by Brecht in his poem ‘On Hearing that a Mighty Statesman has Fallen Ill’ (1976; 398-399). Soon after death the ‘indispensable’ aura collapses and the great man joins the rest of deceased humanity in oblivion.
In my reading of Ecclesiastes I agree with those who see Qoheleth’s work as essentially pessimistic. His comment that it would be better not to be born into this absurd world (NRSV, ch 4, v 3) depicts his perspective. No miniscule concessions, such as appreciating a meal, could compensate for this bleak perspective, generated from his quest to find out what is best for humans to do during the short span of what he terms their absurd existence. Qoheleth was on a Faustian quest when he set out to discover what is best for human beings to pursue during their ‘life under the sun’. Qoheleth’s was a quest to seek knowledge of the Creator’s purposes, so that the world would make sense to him. Dr. Faustus’ quest degenerated into trivial conjuring tricks (Marlowe, 1998; 214-217). Qoheleth’s quest ended in the cul de sac of despondency and resignation.

So, who is Qoheleth? This is the primary question to be answered, for my purposes. Subsidiary questions emanate from this enquiry: what themes from Ecclesiastes would be most relevant to my lived experience and most likely to enter my conversations with Qoheleth? What are the areas of my life for which Qoheleth will be a ‘good’ protagonist? Why would I want this man to accompany me on the Camino?’?

I consider that I am now in the position to respond to my primary question. From the foregoing it is clear that to address this question has required an approach that is multi-disciplinary and eclectic in method. Historical and sociological (social scientific) research alone cannot construct Qoheleth. My interest in Qoheleth is not entirely academic and textual; coming to a decision about Qoheleth the person is crucial and instrumental to the writing of my autobiographical drama and, in turn, to a deepening of my own self-understanding. The deeper my understanding of Qoheleth, the greater my opportunity to empathise with him, the more likely we can have a quality dialogue while walking the Camino. A quality dialogue with Qoheleth is the premise on which any increase in my self-understanding from this pilgrimage will be built. As Marshall (in Lundin, 1997; 11) remarks, ‘in historical research on the truth of scripture, or the historical forces that produce a text, we lose sight of the real subject. The real subject of reading is the transformation of the interpreter’s life’. I am in
agreement with Marshall about the transformative intent in research. The possibility of
transformation is an important hope for my research, as indeed I consider it was for Qoheleth, at
least when he commenced his project (NRSV, ch 1, v 12-18).

There is no question that Qoheleth set himself a monumentally challenging, Faustian-like task when
he sought to determine the best course of action for humans to take in life. Qoheleth reached the
conclusion that the human being’s sitz im leben in the cosmos is irretrievably absurd: human beings
cannot ever fathom the purposes of the Deity, so the world must ever remain an enigma to them.
Wisdom is impotent in the face of the opaque and no one, however clever, is going to disperse the
darkness (NRSV, ch 8, v 17). While Qoheleth concedes that possessing wisdom has some advantages,
some of the time, and that it is intrinsically preferable to folly, it is a burden to be wise and aware of
the existential dilemmas of existence without being able to answer them. Wisdom can only identify
the absurd, it cannot, in Qoheleth’s world, reverse it.

Qoheleth’s world can be envisioned as an amalgam of fragments, with strong similarities to great
texts that both pre and post-date it; Oedipus the King and the uncertainty of life (Sophocles; 1984),
Meursault and the indifference of the universe to the existence of the individual, The Outsider
(Camus; 1968), and Vladimir and Estragon’s futile wait for an existential answer to human living in
Waiting for Godot (Beckett; 1968.).

As with Oedipus, any certainty in Qoheleth’s world is illusory. What follows from one’s actions may
well not be what one might reasonably expect. Wisdom cannot be guaranteed to secure one’s
existence in the world (NRSV, ch 6, v 7, 8). Illusion can be followed by disillusion, whatever one’s
situation or role in life. Oedipus personifies this. Oedipus is a kind of ‘every person’ and every person
is potentially Oedipus. We do not know what might be lurking in our backgrounds, and what might
emerge at any time to distress us, or worse. In Qoheleth’s time, the Wisdom writing of the Hebrew
tradition associated wisdom with privilege. Qoheleth dismantles these confident assertions with his
honest and critical observations. Qoheleth’s message is that wisdom cannot be relied upon to
deliver what is expected of it in tradition and simply cannot deliver at all in terms of making ultimate sense of the world.

In Beckett’s play, Vladimir and Estragon wait for the mysterious Godot. Theirs is an indefinite wait for an explanation that never comes. This was Qoheleth’s world, (albeit he was more proactive than Vladimir and Estragon) until he called a halt and deemed all to be ‘Hebel’. Unlike Vladimir and Estragon, Qoheleth gave up waiting (and pondering the question) and resigned himself to his tragic existence. For Qoheleth there is no answer which will be forthcoming and there never will be. His clear message from his own project is that there is also no merit in actively searching for, or even waiting for, an ultimate answer.

Qoheleth’s perspectives also have similarities with those of Meursault, the central character of The Outsider. However, unlike Meursault, Qoheleth maintains a belief in a Supreme Being, the Creator. Being inscrutable, however, Qoheleth’s Supreme Being merely creates enigmas for the enquirer. Qoheleth is just as much a stranger in the world as Meursault. As with Meursault, Qoheleth has no assurances about another existence beyond this one. The universe is as blindly indifferent to Qoheleth as it is to Meursault. Qoheleth is as devoid of grand plans for life as Meursault, perhaps more so, as Qoheleth sees the solaces of hedonism as a chasing after the wind. Meursault found some solace with his girlfriend, Marie, something that Qoheleth would see as a signifier without a signified, the ultimate chasing after the wind.

Qoheleth’s detachment from action in the world has brought much criticism from readers of Ecclesiastes. For instance, Watson (in Bartholomew, 2009; 39) writes ‘nowhere else in Holy Scripture is there so forthrightly set out an alternative vision to that of the Gospel, a rival version of the truth’. Qoheleth’s detachment brings censure. While Qoheleth observes and broods over injustices and other social ills, his conviction that these are endemic and that bureaucratic corruption and incompetence are rife and givens, rules out any call to action that so characterized the prophets before him. Added to Qoheleth’s view of wisdom lacking the capacity to bring meaning to human
existence, his passivity in the face of observed injustices, brings a sense of hopelessness to his writing, as well generating censure. Hare, (in Brown, 2000; 121) made just this point when he stated, as previously quoted, that ‘hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out’. For Qoheleth, no guarantees exist that things will turn out well, but guarantees do exist that ultimate meaning for human existence will never be discovered. This is close to the philosophy of the unbelieving Meursault.

Qoheleth was a man who sought wisdom in the sense of ultimate understandings of the actions and intent of the creator. By his own admission, he failed. He would comment that this was inevitable (NRSV, ch 8, v 17). However, in reaching this conclusion of the global absurdity of human existence, it could be said that Qoheleth was laying claim to fact fully understanding the essence of human existence. With regard to this point, Qoheleth stops short of taking the next logical step, which is to question why the Supreme Being would hide what are the ultimate purposes of the cosmos from his creation, the intelligent and enquiring human being, thereby condemning them to irreversible obfuscation. While his writing is courageous in its questioning of traditional Wisdom writing, such as contained in the Proverbs, Qoheleth stops short (just before the point of bankruptcy according to von Rad) of raising further questions. This is obviously not the result of an inability to do so, for Qoheleth is an original and deep thinker. This raises the question of what I call the ‘hesitancy’, which I believe is evident in Qoheleth’s writing. One hypothesis can be put forward for this hesitancy. The Book of Ecclesiastes introduced a different (empirical) epistemology into Wisdom writing. This was radical enough without adding even more to controversy by having radical content. A sufficient, but not necessary, hypothesis for Qoheleth’s hesitancy is that, while he wanted to question accepted tradition and wisdom, he would only go so far, possibly because he also wanted to remain within orthodoxy, albeit at the margins.

In Hauerwas’ terms (1993; 120) it may be that Qoheleth wanted to remain within the ‘story’ of the Hebrew Wisdom tradition. Be that as it may, Qoheleth’s hesitancy suggests a writer who was hyper-
alert to the transgressive potential of his work. The various early disputes over the nature of his work (which have persisted to this day) would suggest this may be the case. Qoheleth may have wished to push the boundaries of Wisdom thought, but the fear of ostracism could have tempered his writing. Qoheleth writes as a person who realised that he had something important to say, while at the same time wanting to ensure that his work had an audience. It could be interpreted that he wanted to push the boundaries by criticizing accepted wisdom, but not so far as to be deemed heretical by the tradition. Fox noted (1989; 99-100) the radical nature of Qoheleth’s work when he made a hypothetical comparison of Qoheleth with a more conventional, contemporary wisdom writer. ‘In brief, if one could ask a more conventional sage, “How do you know this?” He would, I believe, answer, “Because I learned it.” To this question Qoheleth would reply, “Because I saw it”. As a keen observer of human action, Qoheleth would likely have been politically astute and known that too radical an action could have unfortunate consequences. How would a freeing from these constraints, such as on the proposed pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostella, influence Qoheleth’s thinking? This was a prominent question for the constructing of the Conversations.

Qoheleth’s writings also indicate to me a writer who could blend scholarship with imagination. It is well accepted that Qoheleth was versed in the Hebrew Wisdom writings and equally well accepted that he introduced a new epistemology of empirical observation and writing in the first person to that tradition. Qoheleth was also a writer who addressed the big themes throughout his writing; metaphysical and existential themes were radical departures from the conventional Wisdom writings (Fox, 1989; 100) which were more oriented to the inculcation of appropriate behaviours (105). In addressing the difficult questions of human existence, being imaginative and introducing new paradigms, Qoheleth recommends himself as a dialogue partner for the Camino.

The tone and content of Qoheleth’s writing are indicative of a man of strong character. There has been covert and implied criticism of Qoheleth for not following through with his critiques, for pulling up short so to speak. I consider such criticism a little naïve in the sense that Qoheleth was probably
as radical as circumstances allowed him to be. His writing probably pushed the bounds of tolerance and orthodoxy to its limits. Qoheleth, in my view, was exhibiting some of the virtues that Aristotle spoke of in the Nicomachean Ethics, such as courage, truthfulness, prudence (2004; 162-163, 284). I am of the opinion that Qoheleth wrote bravely and pursued the truth, as he understood it, to the limits of tolerance. Some evident hesitancy is justifiable in that context. In fact, Aristotle would probably have considered it prudent and moderate of Qoheleth to have avoided the extremes of where his thought may have taken him had he pursued it with all vigour.

While Qoheleth would mock the very idea, I consider him to be a person who has the admirable virtues of truthfulness and prudence. His writing has belied his idea that people are forgotten after their death, for he is still widely read more than two millennia after his own death. Qoheleth is also a very astute observer of human behaviour and one who has a capacity for penetrating critique. These are qualities that are, in my opinion, observable by a close examination of his text. While his identity remains a mystery, it is not role and historicity and authorial intent that are paramount for my purposes. My interests are to find a dialogue partner of honesty and insight with whom to walk the Camino. Qoheleth has the courage, insight and truthfulness to be a dialogue partner who can progress my autobiographic drama by the realisation of these, his qualities.

Another appealing aspect of Qoheleth’s character is that he has a pronounced disrespect for those people who are not transparent, especially those people deliberately who hide behind pious facades (NRSV, ch 8, v 10.) His criticisms are appealing to someone, such as me, who is endeavouring to be as transparent as possible in the writing of autobiography.

Qoheleth is also a man who is used to living with contradictions. This I find reassuring. As a person who has a life threatening cancer, which no doubt few would desire, I also have had beneficial formative experiences, which are the direct result of having cancer. Cancer is a disease that, for me, is replete with contradictions. A person with some significant experience of living with
contradictions, exemplified by Qoheleth, would be well placed to enter conversation with me around this topic.

Leaving considerations of Qoheleth’s character, I now turn to another consideration, namely identifying the significant themes of Qoheleth’s work. As Fox (1989; 105) noted, Qoheleth went after the ‘big themes’ and as I will be writing about the major formative experiences in my life, these ‘big themes’ are likely to emerge during the conversations. An ideal interlocutor is one who has some familiarity with one’s life experiences as well as the courage to enter into the dialogue.

Some of the big themes that Qoheleth went after are very obvious. First and foremost is Qoheleth’s dual understanding of God and death. Much of his thought hinges around these essential understandings. Qoheleth’s ideas about God and death exert a profound influence on what I consider as his reductionist recommendations about how one should live ‘life under the sun’. God and death inform the other great themes of Ecclesiastes: wisdom, meaning, relationships, justice, social action, the problem of suffering (theodicy) and ethics. Qoheleth’s views on these matters will heavily influence my inter-subjective experiences on the Camino as, in Gadamer’s terms, Qoheleth’s horizons fuse with mine (Gadamer, 2001; 2-3).

Qoheleth’s life experience, as he has recorded it, has some essential similarities to mine. First and foremost Qoheleth puts together his work from lived experience. As I have noted earlier, my methodology is generated from what I have called my enduring interests, so both our epistemologies have a strong empirical (experiential) element, as well as having a strong textual element: Qoheleth was well versed in the Wisdom writings of the time, while I have spent much of my adult life in the academy. Qoheleth was a keen observer of human behaviour, while I have made a point in my working life of ‘getting my hands dirty’: I have deliberately chosen to work in deprived areas and areas of human crisis, such as in hospitals, hospices and child protection units. I have made my own experiments in seeking wisdom, just as with Qoheleth. I am not in dispute with Qoheleth’s epistemology and methodology as were some of his contemporaries and as are some
modern clergy and scholars. Our methodologies are not incommensurable, so we will not be quibbling about fundamentals and should thus be able to enter the conversations without undue problems.

Having investigated Qoheleth, his character and the themes raised in his writings, I will now address the matter of the autobiographical imperative and then move to the examining the work of Plato and Plato scholars and the concept of philosophical drama and how I transition to autobiographical drama.

(3). Allure and Methodology: My Autobiographical Imperative.

The words ‘allure’ and ‘methodology’ may seem unlikely bedfellows. One is in the realms of the poetic, while the other conjures up ideas of social scientific rigour, objectivity, precision, definition, pattern and the like. When examining the literature associated with autobiography, one would be justified in baulking at beginning the endeavour. The critical literature raises problems associated with such an undertaking. The ideas of Roland Barthes gave impetus to doubts about efforts to write autobiographically; for Barthes, there is no ‘essential’ self to write about, merely a series of grammatical instances (Anderson, 2001; 16-17). Perhaps even a series of sound waves? This is messy indeed; it could present a significant stumbling block for the aspiring writer of autobiography, at least those with philosophical inclinations. It should be noted, however, that Barthes’ musings have not stemmed the ever increasing flow of autobiographical writing Di Battista (2014; 2).

Lacan also raised doubts about the autobiographical endeavour. He thought that a knowing subject, a unified subject, is a fantasy (Anderson, 2001; 66-68). This a position supported by Derrida. In Derrida’s opinion Freud’s claim to such ‘knowledge’ is that which a subject cannot know Anderson (70).

Freud and psychoanalysts of various persuasions, influenced by Freud, brought the concept of the unconscious into every day conversation. The idea of an unconscious has generated many various
definitions over time. These definitions may only have succeeded in obfuscating the conversation more than enlightening it. Apart from fundamentalists of various schools, the idea of ‘unlocking’ the unconscious has become increasingly less credible. For the writer of autobiography, a crucial problem to be contended with is ‘how could this mysterious interiority of the individual, even if something of it could be ‘known’, ever be credibly translated into language for a reader’?

Then there continues to be academic debates on various questions, such as whether autobiography is indeed a discreet genre (Anderson (2001, 1). Also, there is the more vexed question of a definition of autobiography (Marcus, 1994; 5), and the eternal question of what is ‘good’ autobiography?

These questions have generated conferences and papers, but no definitively agreed upon conclusions. Di Battista notes (2014; 2) that, ‘the very capaciousness that made the genre [autobiography] (my italics) hospitable to many diverse critical agendas also made it difficult to define’. Di Battista also quotes from the ‘influential scholar’ James Olney’s scepticism that he ‘never met a definition of autobiography that I could really like’ (2). An aspiring writer of autobiography could be dismayed by this material, or could immerse him or herself in these arguments and just give up altogether on the endeavour to write autobiography. One could wade into the arguments about whether there is an essential self. The issues raised by Barthes and others noted above could stall my own writing of autobiography, perhaps indefinitely, as they basically raise questions that do not lend themselves to any definitive answers, hence they could present lengthy delays for my actual endeavours to write autobiography.

There are, however, other commentators who hold out some hope that the writing of autobiography need not be an endeavour of epic proportions. Some writers such as the neuroscientist Damasio (in Eakin, 2008; 67, 68, 75) and the philosopher Alasdair McIntyre (2003; 205) argue, from different perspectives, that there is an essential ‘self’ that has an identifiable essence that continues through time. They support the notion that there is in fact ‘a self of some kind, as long as consciousness continues’ which can be written about intelligibly (Eakin, 2008; 3).
To engage deeply with this voluminous critical literature seems to be akin to ‘fiddling while Rome burns’ (Brewster, 1999; 879). As a potential writer of autobiography, I do not want to spend my dwindling reserves of time pondering on, or perhaps adding to, the already copious criticism on the subject. I do not aspire to be a critic. I look to aspects of criticism to inform my writing, but I consider the actual writing of autobiography as my primary task.

The ‘allure’ and the ‘methodology’ are both embedded in the questions that interest me about writing autobiography. The questions for my consideration are: Who and what informs my decision to write autobiography? How do I begin to write it and what form will it take? What are my motives for writing autobiography? Who is my intended audience? Where does my sense of self come from? These are all functional and procedural questions that flow from my premises, which can obviously be challenged, but which are: that I am a self with an essence that is identifiable, if not consistent, over time and that I can have some insight into my life that is not solely in the realm of the grammatical and is the product of sustained reflection. I will deal with these questions I have raised in the order I have raised them.

Who and what informs my desire to write autobiography? It could be thought that the decision to write this autobiographical piece as a dissertation is based around gaining an academic award. This would not be entirely accurate. The award is not the central consideration for me; however the resources of the academy are, and always have been, highly important. The academy has good human resources, in the form of some creative minds who stimulate my thinking, and it also provides a structure within which I work well and productively. That structure has been important to me for a variety of reasons, conscious and probably unconscious, for in excess of four decades. Besides the obvious intellectual contribution the academy makes, there is also the ontological contribution; the academy has been an integral part of my identity, my understanding of who I am, for much of my adult life. The academy defines me as a scholar. I am very comfortable with this identity and have no desire to change it; in fact changing it would be threatening for me.
I also have a desire to continue the both difficult and elusive process of attempting to integrate knowledge and practice; to identify ‘the threads of my journey’, to use the metaphor that provided the title of a course I undertook, through the Broken Bay Institute in Sydney, Australia and conducted by pastoral theologian, Alex Nelson. I hold the hope that reading my reflections on my life journey may be of some value for those who are in the process of reflecting on their own journey, identifying their own threads, in particularly those who have life threatening cancer as part of their journey. I also consider that, in an age of the instant and saturating transmission of information, where we are encouraged to ‘measure out our life with coffee spoons’ (Eliot, 1961; 13), I am among a dwindling reserve of people capable of sustained reflection. As such, I consider myself a possible, useful resource.

How do I begin to write autobiographically? Brockmeier and Harrel (2001; 53) refer to the ‘Heraclitian nature’ of autobiographical narrative; to merely record the many changing events, periods and moods of my life journey would require many volumes. They could also have used another metaphor derived from ancient Greece and referred to the ‘Herculean nature’ of the task of autobiographical narrative. The task would be Herculean, even if I am to limit the task to a selective narrative based on ‘important’ or ‘formative’ events. Perhaps the adjective, Sisyphean could be a prefix to ‘task’ for an attempt to record even most aspects of my life would be absurd; many events of my life would be of little interest to anyone, including me, as they have contributed little or nothing to my personal formation. Discerning selectivity at least would evade some, but not all, of the Sisyphean nature of the task.

Another consideration in choosing how I begin to write autobiographical narrative is, ‘How do I choose (and explore) the events that are formative’? Perhaps that question needs to be restated to become, ‘how are the numerous events of my life, which are thought by me to be formative, most appropriately selected and then explored?’ It is at least conceivable that I am not the most appropriate person to make those choices, or that such choices are best recognized as being not the
province of me alone. This conflates into the question of what form my autobiographical narrative
will take, for to conclude, as I do, that my autobiographical narrative is best served if I am not the
sole decision maker in the process of choosing and exploring the formative events, then other
people will be involved in the process. What form will this suggest? One form that suggests itself is
dialogue between the parties, myself and whoever else; a Socratic dialogue. This is in fact the way I
learn best, face to face dialogue with someone who pushes out the boundaries of my thought. The
‘whoever else’ has already been established and that is Qoheleth, the Royal Philosopher. The form
will be dialogue with Qoheleth and in that I am informed by Plato. The form established by Plato will
be explored in the following section ‘From Philosophical to Autobiographical Drama’.

What are my motives for writing autobiography and who is my intended audience? Sorting out
motives is a difficult task, particularly if I concede to Goffman, as I do, that there is often a huge gap
between people’s social presentation and their inner lives of confusion and chaos (in Fuchs and
Howes, 2008; 97). This consideration of motives is an important one for me as a survivor of cancer,
(or perhaps it is better to say, a person who is surviving cancer at present), for life threatening
illnesses can impact significantly on life decisions and directions. Motives are hard to address, let
alone to disentangle and the latter may not even be possible. Be that as it may, I acknowledge that I
need assistance in the attempt. Here the mantle falls to Qoheleth. Suffice it to say at this point that
my illness is one of the driving forces behind the dissertation and an important factor in the
methodology.

Writing within an academy for an award means that one intended ‘audience’, of necessity, is that of
external examiners. Who those examiners will be is a mystery during the writing process. So, in
effect, I am writing for an audience, who are unknown to me at the time of writing. These ghostly
figures can be seen to differ little from no audience at all, although there is a prevailing ethos that
research students need to ‘impress them’. Examiners seem to be categorized as an ‘ideal type’,
rather than persons, which is hardly surprising given their pervading anonymity. My issue is that
what interests the examiner might not interest another audience I hope to reach. That audience, those people affected by cancer, is a more specific one, even though they are comprised of people from every section of the populous, as no one is beyond the reach of cancer. This audience, while it represents all sections of society, can divide into those people who have experienced cancer directly, by having the disease, or indirectly, though often no less profoundly, as a carer, relative or friend. This is an important audience with which I identify and to whom I direct my writing. I am very aware, however, that examiners may well be included in the second category of people; perhaps an awkward position to be in.

Another audience I write for is, hopefully, posterity, particularly those with an interest in the ‘family tree’. My hope is that family members, in succeeding generations might be curious enough to read the work of a family member (me) that they discover as they scan the branches on the ‘tree’. This is a catering to the curious, based on my frustrations of not having available information about people on the family tree to satisfy my own curiosity. I find it very unsatisfying to look at such documents and find so little in the way of information other than the basics about births, deaths and marriages.

The third audience I am writing for is ordinands. These are people training for the ministry, or priesthood. I am hoping that my dissertation will encourage more people training for the ministry to consider writing reflective pieces. I am hoping that my work will provide a supplementary approach to the social science dominated research that comes out of theological colleges. The approach of the social sciences has been the subject of criticism from scholars concerned with the marginal position of the churches in contemporary societies. The social science dominated approach to the examination and teaching of scripture in the academy is considered by some of these scholars to be particularly arid, a view that I hold from having been subjected to it for three years. In a later section of the methodology (‘From Critical to Pre-Critical Theology’) these critiques will be explored in some detail.
Of all these groupings, the most important one I write for is the group comprising those who have either direct or indirect experience of a life-threatening illness. I write as one who has cancer, but what I write may have relevance to people with life threatening illnesses other than cancer. This is the audience I most hope to reach. I write as an ‘insider’. Cancer is an emotive topic and to address it requires that experiences be related as truthfully as possible, that is including emotional responses to the illness. This holistic approach, even when offered by established academics, is often shunned in the academy, as Jane Tompkins’ (1987) experiences illustrate.

Jane Tompkins, feminist and academic, wrote in her essay about the ‘two voices’ within her. The two voices became problematic for her: ‘the problem is that you can’t talk about your private life in the course of your professional work. You have to pretend that epistemology, or whatever it is that you are writing about, has nothing to do with your life, that it is more important, because it (supposedly) transcends the merely personal (1987; 2).

What is well known is that the examiners will expect a ‘scholarly’ work. Here I needed to make a judgement. Is an autobiographical narrative, particularly one that addresses matters which can raise fear and insecurity, compatible with a strictly scholarly approach to writing? That may well be an open question; however I think autobiographical narrative is consistent with a deeply reflective, imaginative and intellectual approach to writing.

I also write for myself. As Kenyon and Randall (1997; 169) suggest, we can often be our own best therapists in that we can re-author ourselves, or in my case co-author myself with the assistance of Qoheleth. Re-authoring and co-authoring is, of course, not quite as straightforward as it may sound. The thorny issues of truth telling and the privacy issues of others come to the fore and can be inhibitors in autobiographical writing. The two considerations can clash and there are awkward decisions to be made by the writer about whether to tell the truth in the story, as he or she sees it, when that could impact on others. It could even present the issue of whether to tell the story at all. These are matters the writer of thoughtful autobiography will face. In telling the truth in the story,
there can be issues with the fallibility of memory, but as Mary Shelley reminds us (in O’Rourke, 2006; 50) the shadows of our past actions can rise to confront us through what she terms ‘that mysterious position of mind called conscience’.

Finally, I also write ‘to’ a particular person, a mentor. This person is a confidant, someone to whom, when I write, I can express my follies, mistakes and doubts and not feel judged. This person knows my vulnerabilities and I can write to this person with confidence and the inner confusion can be expressed much more so than with others: the temptation to resort to the masks is much less when I write to this mentor. I don’t have to resist ‘editing’ as consciously and heavily when writing to this person and my writing can be more authentic. It is my intention to show this dissertation to my mentor, progressively in chapters, before submitting it for examination. It is this person’s opinion that I value above all others, for it is this person’s views and character that have made a deep impression on me and given me some confidence for what I experience as the demanding and rewarding task of writing autobiography.

(4) From Philosophical to Autobiographical Drama.

Plato has been a central influence in my research, particularly his Phaedo, from The Last Days of Socrates. In this work, Plato depicts Socrates in conversation with his followers in the hours leading up to his execution. The themes of the Phaedo are varied, but an unquestionably important focus of his thought is death and its concomitants. This is hardly surprising as Socrates, the central character, is soon to meet his own death at the hands of the State. This is the thought of a man who knows when his end will be and who is lucid up until the point where the hemlock begins its task in earnest. As such it is a rare offering: Bregman and Theirman note that writing from one whose death is near is a rare event (1985; 33). Philip Toynbee’s End of a Journey (1998) is a classic example. Plato was probably not present and what his source of information about Socrates’ death actually was is speculative, as are Plato’s motives for writing about it, however the account appears consistent with Socrates’ thought and character in other dialogues. Be that as it may, the Phaedo is an inspirational
text, which addresses the notion of death through a language and textual form that makes the work accessible to a wider readership than a more traditional philosophical approach of a series of propositions.

Plato is usually classified as a philosopher; however there are a number of writers who argue that, while this is undoubtedly valid and justifiably the dominant perspective, it is not an only or exclusive perspective from which to view his work. Seeskin, for instance (1987; 144), argues that Plato’s work defies a simple classification ... ‘there are no readymade categories by which to interpret him. He is not an analytic philosopher, a phenomenologist, a pragmatist, or an existentialist; he is a unique person embarked on a mission, which he invented’. In this sense, Plato is an albeit indirect encouragement for my own methodological stance of eclecticism: a drawing on a variety of perspectives. I, too, am embarking on a mission of my own invention; holding my life up to review and reflecting on what direction it might take in the future through the medium of autobiographical drama.

Rebecca Cain argues that Plato developed a unique method which had as its aim the ‘moral self-improvement of the respondent’ (2007; 1). Plato does this, she argues, ‘through a unified collaboration of philosophical and literary elements, which makes the argumentation between the participants all the more exciting and realistic’ (8). Puchner (2010; 3-4) argued that Plato did not completely abandon his previous drama endeavour to become a student of Socrates, but rather he invented a strange form of drama, whereby he was able to express his philosophical ideas in dramatic form, with Socrates as the central character. Plato’s Socrates is a teacher, and can also be seen as an actor in a drama, albeit not a classic one in the sense that it is not a ‘fatal flaw’ of character that ushers in Socrates’ demise. Socrates is not the classic tragic figure, such as King Lear, or King Oedipus. In this sense, Plato’s work has strong parallels with that of the German dramatist Bertolt Brecht and his ‘epic theatre’ a concept commented upon by the philosopher, Walter Benjamin, who saw the affinity between Brecht’s anti-tragic protagonists and Plato’s Socrates.
Benjamin singled out the *Phaedo* as the best example of the comparability between the two authors (106). What these scholars are pointing out is that Plato seemed to be pursuing what I refer to as a meshing of scholarship and imagination. Puchner referred to this phenomenon as an ‘entanglement of philosophy and literature’ (182). While there has not been a large corpus of philosophical writing which follows the dramatic form of Plato, as instanced in writings such as the *Phaedo*, there have been examples, as instanced by Nobel Prize winners, Jean Paul Satre and George Bernard Shaw in their various plays which reveal deeply philosophical concepts being conveyed in dramatic form.

My own work is heavily informed by that of Plato, in that this dissertation seeks to review my life through the medium of critique from the antagonist, Qoheleth. Essentially Qoheleth is my Socrates, questioning my understanding and philosophies of life. My writing has personal formation as a strong teleological element, the difference being that my personal formation is much more intentional than those engaged in dialogue with Socrates; these characters are gently prodded in teleological directions by Socrates.

Another strong influence on my choice of writing style was Plato’s content. His writing is characterised by dialogues structured around life issues of significance. In the *Phaedo*, Plato was concerned, among other things, with issues associated with death and meaning. I decided to look to the writing of Plato because it illustrated a praxis. Plato’s writing brought a philosophical process to bear on life’s issues when Socrates dialogued with his various respondents. In my writing I developed a praxis between my understandings of pilgrimage and my physical pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostella, with my reflections on my own life through my conversations with Qoheleth.

The point made by the scholars cited above was that Plato in his writing was not exclusively putting forward a series of philosophical propositions. There were social contexts and overt emotional exchanges contained in the *Phaedo*. The issues evident in the exchanges were matters of moment in peoples’ lives, even though some of these exchanges contained strong elements of the esoteric. Plato’s writing enticed me to apply this style in my autobiographical writing, where issues of
moment, such as my life-threatening cancer, demanded a style that was more expansive and not endeavouring to exclude the personal and the emotional. This can sometimes the case with purely philosophical discourse. The nature of cancer, which has profound social/emotional as well as physiological ramifications, encourages a style of writing that is expansive. A writing style, autobiographical drama, informed by philosophical drama, can contain both the intellectual and social/emotional aspects of reflecting on a life-threatening cancer.

The audience for my writing was also an influencing factor in choosing a form of writing informed by philosophical drama. I wanted my writing to have an audience that was much wider than the academy. As cancer is a pervasive illness in societies, I wanted my writing to be available to as wide a spectrum of people as possible, while still satisfying the requirements of the academy for an academic award. I value the resources of the academy, both human and physical, and I needed to retain that, so the writing genre I adopted had to satisfy the requirement for the academy as well as the intended wider audience.

The success of writers in diverse fields who have utilised a genre similar to that of Plato was an important factor in my decision to adopt the general style of Plato for my own writing. Bertolt Brecht, in the Messingkauf Dialogues (1965), succeeded in conveying his complex philosophy of the theatre in an engaging manner using a form of writing similar to that of Plato. Brecht’s plays have been immensely popular in world theatre. Similarly the philosopher George Berkeley, in his Principles of Human Knowledge and Dialogues (1988), brought a human context to difficult metaphysical problems, making them more engaging. It is also interesting to note that some philosophers in recent times have made use of the interview to convey their views in a more personal way. Hans-Georg Gadamer (2001) and Richard Rorty (2006) are numbered among the philosophers who have adopted this approach. In fact Rorty, in discussing two philosophers of the modern era, Dewey and Habermas in his opinion, who have had a wide appeal, mentions that they paid special attention to dialogues with the public; they did not limit their appeal to an academic
audience alone (2006; 57). Satre is the outstanding example of the thinker who has made this transition to the wider discourse of the public intellectual.

Plato has been central to my endeavours to bring together a lifetime’s experience into an autobiographical project to blend scholarship with imagination. His work has provided the impetus for me to create my own dialogues on the Santiago de Compostella.

(5) The Importance of Wilderness and Pilgrimage.

One needs only to read Pilgrim at Tinker Creek (1998), the Pulitzer Prize winning work by Annie Dillard, to understand that profound learning is also to be had outside of lecture theatres, publications and computer screens. I understood this by way of my own experiences in remote natural environments long before reading of the experiences of Annie Dillard at Tinker Creek. Unfortunately, I do not have the literary talent of Annie Dillard to express my learning in like manner. I can however articulate it, and need to articulate it, because wilderness has had a profound effect on my formation.

Dillard has been an inspiration for me. Her work I see as a vindication of my decision, early in adult life, to pursue a course of life-long learning, wherever that learning may take me. Like Dillard, it has taken me into the natural environment, as well as to other places, such as the academy. Dillard’s analysis in Pilgrim at Tinker Creek displays a wide reading, formal and informal, across a variety of discipline areas, which she brings to bear in insightful reflections on her encounters with the natural environment. Davidson et al (1994; 250) comment that Dillard’s writing has attracted little critical study. It has also been noted by Deresiewicz in a recent publication (2016; 96), that Dillard had published almost nothing in the previous 17 years. Davidson proffers as a possible contributing reason for the paucity of critical study that Dillard’s work tends to defy categorization. I think that Davidson may be correct in this speculation. Be that as it may, Dillard’s approach to education and
methodology, combining scholarship and imagination, has had, and I daresay will continue to have, a powerful influence on the way I choose to write.

Wilderness has been an important contributor to my formation, from my earliest encounters with the Overland Track in Tasmania in 1973, to later and much more difficult walks through Tasmania’s South West Wilderness. As with Thoreau (2007, 187), wilderness has been essential to my wellbeing. I need wilderness to keep a perspective that counters what I see as the dominant ideology of the wider society in which I live, namely an ego-centric focus that tends to see others, possibly with the exception of one’s own little inner sanctum, as competitors. In my vocation I regularly conduct Communion services on mountain tops, particularly Mount Solitary when I am on walks in the Blue Mountains World Heritage wilderness areas near to where I live. I often ask people who accompany me to imagine that they are on a nearby mountain with powerful binoculars and they are surveying Mount Solitary. I ask them how those people on Mount Solitary might appear when viewed through the binoculars. The response mostly given is that they would appear as insignificant specks in the vast wilderness. Discussion usually ensues about how the wilderness can challenge the elevated view of the self which is, I believe, prevalent in Western society. Wilderness and mountains for me are the antidote to the ‘me’ society and help me keep a perspective of my place in the world.
Mel (rear) with companion at Lake Oberon, Western Arthur Range, South West Wilderness World Heritage Area, Tasmania, 2014.

In these areas I have the sense that I am very small and insignificant in the vast wilderness, but unlike Mersault, gazing into the evening sky from his cell, while I sense that the natural environment is indifferent to me I also have the reassuring feeling that I am beloved of the Intelligent Designer.

For me, the situation is thus delivered from absurdity. While I am unimportant in and of myself I am also of importance to the Supreme Being. While Camus’ Mersault would consider that absurd, I see it as an example of Hegel’s dialectic tension (Marinoff, 2000; 69-70) between a thesis (I am insignificant in the wilderness and it is indifferent to me) and its antithesis (I am important to the Supreme Being, or Intelligent designer), to arrive at a synthesis (I can live without absurdity within a
wilderness that is indifferent to me). For Hegel the synthesis then becomes the new thesis and we continue to think through the situation indefinitely, refining our understanding.

Wilderness also allows me to clear my mind of what Philip Toynbee refers to as clutter (1998; 31). As an aside, the academy is not immune from clutter at times, but I shall not dwell on that concept. Philip Toynbee, in his musings when nearing his death, thought deeply about what was necessary for living; what was not clutter. Toynbee articulated his conclusions from his deathbed, conclusions that I have reached in the areas of wilderness, areas where there is an absence of what many urban dwellers feel is necessary for their existence. There are various ways of clearing the mind of clutter, spending extended periods in wilderness is mine. I am not alone in this feeling, in fact I share it with some luminaries like Thoreau, who was of the opinion that ‘life connects with wilderness. The most alive is the wildest. Not yet subdued to man, its presence refreshes him.’ (2007: 203). In the writings of Annie Dillard, there is the distinct impression that what is necessary for her living fully is that life is not lived at pace. This allows Dillard ample time for reflection; the examined life as Socrates would have it. This is very much akin to my thought and produces within me a state of being which I refer to as ‘a calm at the core’, a state which the Royal Philosopher will likely interrogate me about on our pilgrimage on the Camino, Santiago de Compostella. It is not usual practice in academic writing to quote cartoonists, however Michael Leunig (2004; no pages numbered) has a wonderful poem, supplementary to his cartoon, on the slow path of the pilgrim. I recommend the reader to consult this poem, if he, or she, is inclined to consult references, as it will give an initial insight into what I term the ‘calm at the core’.

Wilderness, however, is not only the absence of the paraphernalia and gadgetry of urban living, it is also the presence of phenomena not generally available to the urban dweller. The two complement one another. An important aspect of wilderness for me is that it provides what I term the ‘long vision’. From its mountain tops I have an unimpeded view to the horizons. In the built environment, I have views of the built environment, even from its tallest buildings the built environment is the
dominant view. The long vision in wilderness provides me with an uncluttered view to horizons. I am sometimes the recipient of remarks about the ‘beauty’ of Sydney Harbour, which I think is a case of say it often enough and you will believe it. Sydney Harbour is beautiful, if I compare it with housing in suburban Sydney, but not if I was to compare it with Lake Oberon in the pristine wilderness of South West Tasmania, a comparison I regard as intrinsically ridiculous. I find that when I am in the wilderness the expansiveness of my physical view has as its corollary an expansiveness in my thought. My most creative thinking is done in the wilderness. Like Rousseau, there is something about walking that stimulates and enlivens my thought (Anderson, 2001; 47). I can bring back ideas which I can then work on until I need to go back to the wilderness to be refreshed. This is one of the major reasons why I return regularly to the wilderness for extended periods, usually for at least eight days. This affords me the time to really encounter the wilderness and distance myself from the accoutrements of urban living. Someone like John Armstrong would find this hard to understand for in his opinion, the greater the freedom we have the greater is our need for civilisation (2010; 32). Our positions are likely incommensurable.

While they have not gone to remote wilderness areas, there are numerous luminaries who have found stimulus for thought in the walking process itself. These include Plato, Rousseau, Augustine, Wordsworth, Schopenhauer and Kant to name a few (McClintock, 1994; 94). For others, such as Annie Dillard, motion was not necessary, exposure to nature was sufficient. When at Tinker Creek Dillard hardly travelled at all, at least when judged from Wordsworth’s perspectives and indeed from my pilgrimages, but the effect of nature on her thought was profound. Both perspectives have produced results.

For me wilderness, the natural environment at its most essential and pristine, has other repercussions. I have needed, throughout my life, to maintain a consistently high level of fitness to be able to access wilderness. I have thus had to devote considerable amounts of time to sustaining fitness to carry heavy packs in these remote areas whenever I feel the desire to go there. Because of
the profundity of the experience of wilderness this training regime, physically demanding though it is, I have never experienced as onerous. In fact, my view of this regime is that it has been very valuable for it has developed the virtues of discipline, patience and resilience and contributed to a calm at the core, which I have drawn on throughout the periods of my illness.

Pilgrimage has also had a profound influence on my thinking. It has been an abiding interest of mine for some twenty years. My first pilgrimage, from Dublin to Jerusalem, expanded my views on education. I was convinced that this journey was an important complimentary to my formal learning in the academy and that this learning would need to continue, along with my formal learning, as an essential component of my education. This blending of formal and informal has been evident in my intellectual life and I have made pilgrimage praxis a subject of my research in the academy.

Pilgrimage has made a distinct contribution to my education. While it shares some of the characteristics of wilderness, it is distinct from it. Most of my pilgrimages are undertaken over much longer periods of time than are my walks in remote areas, basically because I can access supplies and accommodation very readily while on pilgrimage. As well pilgrimages tend to be far less physically demanding than walks in remote areas. In remote areas the carrying of heavy packs, and the necessity of intense concentration for close navigation, mean that contemplation and the recording of events and thoughts of an evening is far more difficult to achieve. For deep and lengthy reflection over protracted periods, in contrast to the stunning aesthetics and solitude of the wilderness with its commandeering of the senses, pilgrimage is my preference.

Pilgrimage as I practice it is a time of extended reflection. It is a time where I de-emphasise some particular routines (frequenter of libraries, gardener, grandfather, minister) and emphasise others (walking companion, autobiographer, Australian citizen, citizen of the world). It is a time where I can focus more intently on reflecting on the known and the searching for wisdom, following Aristotle’s invitation to follow the path of wisdom (Armstrong, 2010; 23). It is a time where I can look to the spiritual and emotional aspects of life and pursue these matters in depth, which is an increasingly
difficult undertaking in a society obsessed with the pursuit of information and intent on being entertained through to the grave (155) T. S. Eliot, as early as 1954, expressed similar observations about an information obsessed society in a most eloquent way in his poem, _Choruses from The Rock._

‘Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?’

(Eliot, 1961; 107)

and likewise similar views on ‘entertainment’, also in _Choruses from ‘The Rock_’

‘The rabbit shall burrow and the thorn revisit,

The nettle shall flourish on the gravel court,

And the wind shall say: here were decent godless people:

Their only monument the asphalt road

And a thousand lost golf balls.’

(116)

In my outlook on life wilderness and pilgrimage are part of the process of striving for the ‘best self’ (Armstrong, 2010; 28). They are the Archimedean points from which I can take the longer view (Bartholomew, 2009; 246). This process of reflection is helped of course when the long visions are encountered, as is often the case, on the Camino Santiago. Going on pilgrimage, as with going into the wilderness, is seeking a form of knowing that, to use Habermas’ words, ‘transcends the prevailing sciences’ (1989; 4). This knowledge that ‘transcends the prevailing sciences’ leads into the next section of the discussion of methodology.
(6) From Critical to Pre-Critical Theology.

As already mentioned Qoheleth’s identity and setting in life are almost completely beyond the reach of historical critical method and that Qoheleth the person has been created from the text. In the following theological considerations of Qoheleth the person and the Book of Ecclesiastes, I have chosen to again deviate from the norm of the social sciences and revert to what is termed pre-critical theology. For reasons previously cited, I believe that this approach is superior to that of modern, conventional approaches.

In my three years of theological college I was fed a staple diet of historical critical method. While it was not quite the ‘only game in the park’ to use Walter Wink’s expression, it was the sentinel of the College; it prevented biblical fundamentalism obtaining any real voice. Such an occurrence would have been the worst imaginable disaster as far as the College was concerned. There seemed to be little appreciation in the College that historical critical method was a countervailing fundamentalism itself at the other end of the spectrum. As Brueggemann has pointed out, both extremes are fundamentalist, both serve to ward off a perceived chaos (1993; 5). An unfortunate, probably unintended, consequence of the College ideology was that it also limited the expression of more creative and literary exegetical endeavours by ordinands. The epistemology of the College, as far as scriptural exegesis was concerned, was firmly in the realms of the social sciences. Woltersdorff sees the historico-critical movement of the Enlightenment as being, along with the Romantic Hermeneutics of Friedrich Schleiermacher, reasons for what he calls the crisis in hermeneutics (in Lundin, 1997; 4). I do not follow Schleiermacher in the way that I seek to interpret Qoheleth, I am not seeking the historical person Qoheleth, in my opinion a futile endeavour over millennia. I am gleaning what I can of a philosophy that Qoheleth reveals in the text and constructing his character from my interpretation. I make no claim to have discovered the ‘real’ person, if indeed such a discovery is ever possible (Curthoys and Docker, 2006; 3, 150). I am not looking at the historical and linguistic background, but at the textual. My approach is a reader response to the text, following
Barthes, rather than a quest to recover the intent of the author. I have decided doubts about the possible success of such an enterprise seeking to recover such intent, especially when the events are so far removed in time. The recent ‘history wars’ debating genocide of Indigenous people in Australia is evidence of how difficult that endeavour can be, even when the events and the literature are much more recent.

In the following discussion I will refer to both theology and philosophy, as there are both theologians and philosophers who regard their disciplines as being estranged from a wider public. Their lament is that the public has little contact with their disciplines, an unfortunate occurrence, as both disciplines have within them, in some applications at least, writings that address the fundamental questions about human existence. The theologian David Steinmetz raises an important point for discussion when he states that theology needs to critically review its theoretical foundations, given what he considers its very restricted audience. He suggests that a failure to do so will court the risk of theology becoming relevant only to the academy (2011; 14). I think that this phenomenon has been in evidence for some time. I am of the opinion that a chasm exists between the academy and church congregations. This is a point that Hauerwas (1993; 9, 49, 1981; 3) makes most emphatically with his idea that the interpretation of the scripture needs to reside with the transformation-oriented congregations, who are the keepers of the tradition. Interpretation needs to be praxis in Hauerwas’ view. Theologians of the academy are generally not the people with influence in the wider community (Hauerwas, 1993; 8), although there are exceptions. This will be discovered when I refer to the exemplary work of Walter Brueggemann.

Richard Rorty, as already discussed, expressed a similar concern with regard to philosophy when he stated the importance of philosophy having two conversations: one conversation with the wider public and a second within the academy. The latter, in Rorty’s view will only ever be of interest to professors of philosophy. Rorty’s ‘heroes’ are therefore those philosophers who were able to have conversations with both the wider public and the academy. He nominates Dewey and Habermas as
his examples (2006; 53). Martha Nussbaum, in an interview with Jeffrey Williams (2009; 65-67) also laments the lack of public intellectuals among contemporary philosophers, however she does not lay the blame squarely on philosophers and hyper-specialisation in contemporary philosophy, but sees the choices exercised in modern journalism as playing a significant part.

Max Black (1981; 77-78) opened the epistemological floodgates for me with his landmark work on metaphor and epistemology. Black emphasized the epistemological value of metaphor. Andrew Goatly (1997), others such as Lakoff and Johnson (1981), later wrote about the prominence of metaphor in daily life and its place in the way that people understand and live their lives. I would note that the concept of metaphor includes story and parable, which are extended metaphors. These are sometimes reduced to contracted metaphors, as exampled by such stories as the Good Samaritan, in the Gospel of Luke (NRSV, ch 10, V 25-37) being reduced to the single word ‘Samaritan’ to instance a person’s compassion.

Armstrong took up this point of public engagement by the academy when he discussed the ‘Cicero factor’ (Armstrong, 2010; 194), where Cicero pointed out that philosophy needed to engage with a wider public to have any significant impact in society. Cicero believed that people in public life, the ‘generals and the senators’ were ‘too busy, not too stupid, to engage with complex disquisitions on abstruse subjects’ (194). The same could be asserted with regard to theology, and in fact I do assert that academic theology will be read, in the main, by those in the inner sanctum of the academy. Again, this is not because people are too stupid to engage, but rather because they are too engaged with the practicalities of life to be reading abstruse disquisitions. This was a strong motivating force in my choice to work overnight with the DoCS Child Protection Crisis Unit when undertaking my ordinand studies during the day: I did not want to be involved solely with considering what I deemed to be academic theological works, ‘abstruse disquisitions’. I needed to ground this theological curriculum from the College in the cauldron of life and test it out to see if it was found wanting. This was my way of addressing the Cicero factor.
Of much more interest to me now, as then, are the works of thinkers in the field of theology who engage with the scriptures in ways that are more literary than both the social scientific and the systematic theological. I agree with Brueggemann (1993; 59) when he states that one important factor in the growth of historical critical method is to make theology palatable to modern rationality in the form of the academy. My need, however, is to engage with the thinkers who are utilising interpretive methods that seek to give prominence to engaging with the lived experiences of the reader. The theologian Alister McGrath is one such thinker who informs my thought. McGrath has a similar way of approaching a text, in his case a biblical text, to the great thinker in literature F.R. Leavis. Both emphasize what can be called an ‘immersion in the text’. The literary theory of F. R. Leavis advocates entering into the text and participating in the story (Armstrong, 188). McGrath has similarly advocated this approach similarly throughout his book The Journey (2000). Hauerwas, as we have noted, has an even more radical approach; he maintains that the transformative congregations are the story.

Walter Brueggemann is a theologian who gives prominence to the ‘little stories’ as opposed to systematic theology which he sees, correctly I believe, as necessarily reductionist. He has already figured prominently in my discussion on the methodology of fragments. Brueggemann’s approach is one of deep reflection, advocating that fresh configurations come to scripture from such reflection. Brueggemann’s approach accords with what I am calling the alignment of scholarship and imagination. Sallie McFague is another theologian who favours an approach of fragments. This is evidenced in her publication, Metaphorical Theology.

Lyon (in Lundin, 1997; 12) makes the point that the hermeneutics of suspicion the major proponents, according to Lundin, being Freud, Nietzsche and Marx de-throned Enlightenment rationality and system. Dethroned is far too strong a word in my estimation, but it is true to say that there have been challenges, however well accepted or pervasive, to Enlightenment rationality. McFague, Brueggemann, McGrath and others have challenged the dominance of the product of
Enlightenment rationality, historical critical method, through their approaches to the scriptures. Wink makes the point that historical critical method is seen as the legitimate approach, and therefore tends to raise those questions, which its methods can answer (1973; 8). For me, as a person who seeks guidance and insights for living, historical critical method’s questions and proffered answers are not of paramount importance in relation to the scriptures. In contemporary times theological colleges and their theologians have the same problems Wink defined when he led the early assault on historical critical method, namely that their difficulty is finding a context in which their approach to scripture might have relevance (11). I agree with Donald Marshall that in focusing on historical matters we can lose sight of the real subject; ourselves and our transformation. As stated earlier my approach to scripture is to let the text question me and give this more emphasis than questioning the text. This allows me to vitally relate to the text and for the text to make its demands on me and my formation. Habermas commented (1989; 304) that the notion of theory (and I would add ‘narrative’) as helping human formation is often seen as apocryphal. My approach, to emphasise the pre-critical approach to scripture, enables me to seriously address that criticism. It also helps me in my endeavours toward praxis.

(7). DoCS

My experiences in what is the maelstrom of DoCS have been very formative and deeply influencing of the way I see the world. Working overnight in the crisis unit I learned self-reliance. I also learned that people and situations are highly complex and that the theories that purport to ‘understand’ people and their situations were reductionist. I also found that they had little predictive value. In DoCS my epistemology of fragments was reinforced by the failures of single discipline-based theories to inform the work I was doing. DoCS was the place where I tested out theories that purport to understand the human being they did not survive the maelstrom they were found wanting. From having inflicted upon me the reading of ‘expert’ reports, I learned that reports that lay claim to such a comprehensive understanding of the human being are reductionist. DoCS was a clearing house for
failed theories. I also learned the power of words in DoCS. As an example, criticism of the way things were done was ‘oppositional behaviour’. A person going to DoCS with a critical perspective was and still is likely to emerge as a post-modernist.

(7). The Place of Cancer in the Story.

A life threatening cancer will likely make a big impression on an individual’s life and how it is lived. On a broader social scale cancer has generated huge amounts of research in what is seen as a ‘war’ that is being waged against it. How many times have we seen or heard the phrase ‘the battle against cancer’? When cancer is the topic under discussion military metaphors abound. It is as though people are constantly looking toward a ‘Waterloo for Cancer’. Or is it of the epic proportions of Armageddon where good will finally triumph over evil? Theological metaphors abound: cancer is seen as a personified evil, the Grim Reaper, ‘claiming’ the lives of people who ‘fight’ against it. It is not an innocent calamity, like polio, or malaria, it is a malevolent intruder.

We hear of cancer in a largely Western context. One wonders if cancer was a solely third world disease whether it would have generated much consternation at all in the West? As it is it has generated an enormous amount of fear and angst in Western communities. In the parlance of modern advertising cancer could be seen to have a big ‘image problem’.

There has been a tremendous amount of writing about cancer, both in scientific, medical and sociological fields. There has also been a great deal written about cancer in the genre of autobiographical writing. Much of this material has been written by carers (Bregman and Thierman, 1995; 1). Also much has been written by survivors, those who have had the experience of cancer and ‘won the battle’, so to speak. Bregman and Thierman refer to such literature under the heading of ‘How I overcame Death’. Of course this is not overcoming death, if the cancer doesn’t account for us something else inevitably will. I imagine, though, that it can be comforting to have that illusion, an
illusion like the forever young person, the immortal one who never dies, this being the creation of the advertising industry, that gigantic apparatus of persuasion.

Little in the autobiographic genre has been written by people who currently have cancer (Bregman and Thierman, 1995). The perceptive Phillip Toynbee, in his wonderful book *End of a Journey* (1998; 354), notes, shortly before his death, that much has been written about death, while little has been written about dying by the dying. I wonder in this dissertation if I am writing about dying. When is one dying? If a life threatening illness is incurable, is one then dying? When all is said and done it seems that the sub-text of cancer writing is the spectre of death. The bigger issue is not cancer, it is death. Cancer is only one means of directing us there. A cure for cancer is not a cure for death. One wonders, when a cure arrives, what disappointments we will experience when we are left with death, particularly when we have defeated the arch enemy cancer.

My own cancer experience has been mediated through five years of ministry as a chaplain, in both an oncology ward of a major hospital and a hospice. These were important experiences, ones where I talked personally, and in many cases intimately, with cancer patients and palliative care patients. This was an almost daily occurrence most days of my life for those five years. Few people have that experience. As a chaplain I could talk on anything with the cancer patient, unlike my experiences as a social worker where conversations were strictly secular; ‘religious’ conversation was outside professional boundaries. Often conversations in the hospice were around the fear of the unknown.

My personal experience as a cancer patient is mediated through this wide experience. My personal experience as a cancer patient is also mediated by a rich and full life, and hence cancer is only part of that experience, not its totality. Many writings on cancer relate predominantly to the experiences from diagnosis onward, hence the title of this dissertation is, ‘Of Cancer and other Things’, suggesting that cancer for me is to be seen in the wider framework of life experience. My experiences of cancer, from my view of the literature, seem idiosyncratic. This puts me at odds with
the generally accepted ‘prescriptive’ literature in the field, much of which does not fit my experience.

A landmark book in the field is *On Death and Dying*. It was written by the psychiatrist, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, in this book is contained the celebrated ‘stages’ of dying. Consistent with ‘one size fits all’ schemas, there are situations that cannot be covered by the ideas, even though those ideas were, as in Kubler-Ross’ work, drawn from many case studies. I don’t recognize myself, or my experience, very often in Kubler-Ross’ work. As this would suggest, my experiences are idiosyncratic, and I should explain how I came to arrive at this position. Much of the reason for this lies in what could be termed my anticipatory socialization through my experience as a chaplain in oncology and palliative care. I never considered myself immune from cancer after six months or so of being immersed in my vocation. In fact, I rather expected that the law of averages and the prevalence of the disease would one day see me as a cancer patient. I had no illusions that my fitness and lifestyle would insulate me from the disease; I had seen many people as fit and well as me die from cancer. Much as the suffering of patients, from both their disease and the attendant treatment, was confronting I imagined that one day, any day, cancer could be my experience. My thinking and my hope was that I would have one of the ‘better’ cancers; one where the treatments, if that was the path I elected to take, were not the harsh ones and where death by that particular cancer would be swift. I have no wish here to be hypercritical of Kubler-Ross, who performed a great service by bringing death to the fore in a medical arena where dying was more of a defeat than a treatment category. I merely wish to assert that I am different in terms of being ‘unequal’ through my life experience, so it should not be surprising that I do not identify personally with the writing of Kubler-Ross. On the whole, though, Kubler-Ross’ findings equate to experiences I have had with numerous people experiencing cancer. The prevailing perception among the non-effected, it seems to me, is still the belief that cancer is something that happens to ‘someone else, not to me’. Kubler Ross’ generalizations have merit here.
My own ‘surprise’ when diagnosed with cancer was how well I felt before the diagnosis and up until chemotherapy treatment. In the hospital and hospice I had only seen people at their ‘worst’. These people were in advanced stages of suffering and debilitation, or in the final days or weeks before their death, as was the case with the hospice patients. My experiences in the hospital and hospice informed my questions to medical personnel at the time of my diagnosis and indeed throughout my cancer treatment. I needed to know whether, if I ‘recovered’, I would get back to my pre-cancer levels of fitness. I did not want to be deprived of wilderness, nor of pilgrimage and my life as an enquirer in the academy and elsewhere, these being the profoundly formative influences on my life. If I had the possibility of reasserting myself, then I would be pleased to have treatment, whatever I had to endure. I did not then, and do not now, aspire to decrepitude or ‘mediocrity’, as I would define such a state for myself.

Having performed so many funeral services in my vocation as a clergyman, I could not entertain an illusion that death would evade me. Death was forever before me, I needed to come to terms with it. A favourite Psalm of mine is Psalm 90, part of which advises the reader to number his, or her, days that she may learn wisdom (Psalm 90: 12). Numbering my days (I was more generous a decade ago with my three score and ten allocation) has meant that I could plan my activities thoughtfully and discerningly, with an eye to the ‘ticking clock’ and those days coming to an end. This has meant that I have not let opportunities slip by to do things that I have wanted to do (refer to my CV in Appendix One). I have not pursued a career, preferring to accumulate varied life experiences and to foster my personal formation. The two were not aligned in my case. Since my diagnosis I now plan no more than two years ahead. When that two years elapses and I find myself still on earth then I plan for another two years. The experiences I accumulated in the hospital and hospice have served to affirm the choices I have made in life and the pathway I have gone down. This has often been against the advice and counsel of others. The advice has often been permeated by loaded terms like ‘security’ and ‘superannuation’ and ‘saving for rainy days’. I am pleased that I chose to ignore such advice.
Another affirmation that has become apparent to me is my choice to read as much as I could of the works of the significant theological, literary and philosophical thinkers. This endeavour has been personally affirming as well as intellectually stimulating, both generally and with regard to my illness. With regard to my illness, I have been influenced by two deep and courageous thinkers. The philosopher, Havi Carel is an author who I respect very much, as is Philip Toynbee, the literary critic and author of a trilogy of autobiographical writing. As well as my respect for these authors of contemporary times, the work of Plato in the *Phaedo* will be influential as long as I endure.

Havi Carel is a writer who was going down a conventional career in academia until she was diagnosed with an incurable and debilitating lung disease. This disease, being rare, had no treatment protocols. It was not common enough to vigorously research, as there was no profit margin likely for drug research companies. Carel’s hopes of a family and career were dashed and with the bleakness of advancing decrepitude facing her she sought solace in the writings of the philosophers she had studied. She approached them with ‘different lenses’. My own resources to consult are not as specialized as those of Carel, but she has been inspiring in the way she has approached an illness which greatly restricted her physical capabilities. A once good athlete, she was an active runner, netball player, cyclist and hiker among other things, her illness was a huge issue for her to come to terms with, particularly at the age of thirty five.

The deeply reflective Philip Toynbee has been a person writing has been a great resource for me. Widely read and keen of observation, he wrote until the last days of his life. His observation that there are powerful kinds of good that can come into life only when something has gone terribly wrong has helped my reflections on my illness (1998; 371). Toynbee’s writing has made me question whether cancer is in fact ‘something that has gone terribly wrong’. I readily admit that I might not have posed this question for consideration if my life was intruded upon in the permanently and continually debilitating way that Carel experienced in her illness. To employ Qoheleth’s refrain, ‘Who
knows’? This leads me into the fascinating if perplexing area of the affirming aspects of cancer.

Considering the affirming aspects of cancer has deepened my knowledge of the resources I bring to living with my illness. It also informs the way I think about life: ‘cancer as an aspect of methodology’, to coin a novel metaphor. Some of these aforementioned resources have come from a lifetime’s experience of encounters with formal and informal learning contexts. Discipline, resilience, and my long standing belief about the inadequacy of any particular discipline to yield up an exclusive method of enquiry, one which will yield an exhaustive explanation and meaning, have developed out of a discourse between these formal and informal learning contexts. These contexts are the social and the natural environments I frequent regularly, namely the academy and the wilderness and pilgrim routes, and those I was previously immersed in over long periods; the professional (DoCS) and the vocational (ecclesiastical). Importantly, these interactions and the attendant learning have led me to shun having a ‘career’ in cancer, that is seeking to know everything I possibly can about my illness. This is often a recommended path, along with the exploration of a bewildering array of alternative ‘treatments’. I decided early on after diagnosis that I simply did not have the time, or the desire undertake such a ‘career’ at the expense of all of the other things I was involved with. While some have criticized my actions as abdicating my responsibilities in treatment and giving all power to the haematologist, I cannot agree. I see the haematologist as supplying an expert opinion, which enables me to see the options for treatment and which in turn enables me to make an informed decision about courses of action. I have learned trust in this process, which is valuable learning and at the same time allows me to do the things in life that are important to me. If forced to choose between reading as exhaustively as I can about lymphoma or heading out on long distance pilgrim routes, or traversing wilderness mountain ranges, (and maintaining the fitness to accomplish these things), minimal deliberation on my part would be necessary to choose the latter. I do not need to read voraciously into lymphoma. I am perfectly happy to let the haematologist do that, knowing that his knowledge will far surpass mine however much I could manage to read. That is what he does
well. I do what I do well, namely getting on with my life and the activities that bring fulfilment. This brings in the value of trust, to leave my treatment in the hands of another while I get on with my life. I have trust in the haematologist given that he has been well informed of my aspirations to pursue my best interests. This is a policy that has worked for me and is an ongoing, chosen pathway, one which I have never regretted following.

Cancer brings with it an enhanced awareness of the need to order life wisely and be discerning about the essentials. I say enhanced because, as mentioned in the discussion of Psalm 90, my life has been a reflective one well prior to the onset of cancer. This reflective life is akin to the process of purification and simplification that Toynbee speaks of; a clearing of the mind of all clutter. Toynbee has managed to do what I do in the wilderness without his being in the wilderness. Toynbee and Carel are the two writers I cite because they are the writers whom I have felt closest to in terms of their background and reflective powers.

It needs to be noted that these methodological considerations are not discreet, they interact, and which becomes prominent could depend on a myriad of different circumstances. For instance, had this pilgrimage been through the Norwegian mountains on St Olav's Way, from Oslo to Nidaros Cathedral at Trondheim, the emphases may well have been different.

It would not be apposite to leave this section without heralding the next, even though the sections are discreet. The next section is where the strange and mysterious Qoheleth, he who wrote an ‘ode to death’ as Brown termed the *Book of Ecclesiastes* (2000; 109), makes his appearance as my companion on the Camino Santiago de Compostella. Of course, I could have outlined Qoheleth’s ideas on death in greater detail in this section, however, he is more than capable of speaking for himself. I will now allow him to do so.
Notes

The reader will note that in the following section there is some use of director’s notes where I think they may clarify or enhance the interpretation of the interaction between myself and Qoheleth. While this dissertation is not intended as a performance, I nevertheless have thought it useful, for the purpose of clarification, to insert the notes.

The reader will also note in the following section that there has been a change from my preferred Harvard referencing system to End Notes. This is done because autobiographical drama is not suited to ‘in text’ referencing, I consider it to be intrusive in that it interrupts the flow of reading.

The reader will note that Lymphoma, when capitalised refers to my personal disease. I have personified it and that is the way I relate to it. For me it is not some generic concept shared with much of humanity, but is my personal possession.

The reader will also note that there has been the occasional use of italics within the text where it has been considered that this would aid reader interpretation.
Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do and once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it, “and what is the use of a book” thought Alice, “without pictures or conversation.”

Lewis Carroll. *Alice in Wonderland.*
Conversation One.

(At café at St. Jean Pied de Port, France.)

‘Everyman, I will go with thee and be thy guide, in thy most need to go by thy side’

Everyman. Author Unknown

‘O my soul, be prepared for the coming of the Stranger,
be prepared for him who knows how to ask questions’

T.S. Eliot. ‘Choruses from ‘The Rock’.”
Mel walking to the café rendezvous with Qoheleth at St Jean Pied de Port.
This conversation took place at a café in St. Jean Pied de Port, the traditional starting point of the Camino Santiago de Compostella, by the French Way. There are a goodly number of pilgrims in the café, even though the peak season for pilgrimage was a couple of months ago. There is an air of excitement from pilgrims anticipating the start of their pilgrimage. The ‘Pass Napoleon’ and the ‘Pass Charlemagne’ are sometimes heard amid the deluge of resonating voices. The morning weather forecast is a popular conversation topic as rain is predicted for the following morning. This forecast opens up the choice of routes: the higher and more exposed, but more scenic, Pass Napoleon, or the lower, less scenic but safer Pass Charlemagne.

My pilgrimage is to begin the following day. I have decided that the pilgrimage will not end at Santiago, but will continue on for another eighty five kilometres to the Atlantic Ocean at Finisterre. Many pilgrims, from the earliest times onward, continued on from Santiago to Finisterre to collect a scallop shell from the Atlantic Ocean. Along with the seal of the Cathedral at Santiago, this was the proof for pilgrims of early times that they had made the Camino pilgrimage. It was essential to those sentenced to pilgrimage for their sins by ecclesiastical courts. Finisterre was regarded by many pilgrims of early times as the ‘end of the earth’; it was something fearful as well as wondrous. My decision to continue to Finisterre was based on it being a more ‘natural’ ending place than the Cathedral, for it is not possible to walk any further westward from Cape Finisterre.

Accompanying me on this pilgrimage is the Hebrew thinker, Qoheleth. Dead for over two millennia, his influence abides with me through his canonical text the ‘Book of Ecclesiastes’. Interestingly, Qoheleth’s view, expressed in the book, was that people will be forgotten by succeeding generations. Why he wrote, then, is something of a mystery, as it seems to clash with his philosophy, unless he considered that his writing would not generate interest and thus fade out of people’s memories due to a lack of significance. On the other hand, as we have seen, there are many apparent contradictions in Qoheleth’s writing, so I will not conjecture further.
Our meeting was pre-arranged. Its purpose was to ‘test the waters’ prior to setting off on pilgrimage at dawn the following morning. The meeting gave us the opportunity to see how we might respond to each other before commencing the walk, and indeed on the walk.

Qoheleth enters the café. He makes enquiries of the waiter, sights the table I am sitting at and then, immediately and purposefully, makes his way there and sits down. I have been watching out for him, keenly anticipating his arrival. Qoheleth is a tall man with angular features. He is intense looking and purposeful in the way he moves. He fits my stereotype of the scholar of antiquity. He is dressed in a brown robe. His feet are shod with leather sandals. He has the assured look of one who is deferred to, but also one used to defending his intellectual position. I put down my reading matter. I was too intent on scouring the entrance to the café anticipating his arrival to do any serious reading.

Qoheleth glances at the book as I place it on the table. He hovers over me momentarily, peering intently at me, as though searching for some kind of flaw. He then pulls out the chair and sits deliberately and confidently opposite me, his gaze still fixed.

Mel:

(unable and unwilling to contain his enthusiasm) Teacher! I am delighted to see you. I finally get to meet you outside the pages of the text. You have been such an enigma over millennia that this is a great privilege for me.

Qoheleth:

Really? I can’t imagine why. But, I suppose you have some reasons for thinking it so! (Looking quizzically and rather superciliously at me). So, you are the reason I am here!

Mel:

Yes! Yes, that I am. The sole reason. I imagined you into existence, in the manner of St. Anselm1.
Qoheleth:

I think that you are missing something essential here. As this is about your autobiographical writing, I am conjuring you into existence.

Mel:

Be that as it may. At last I get to meet you.

Qoheleth:

(cynically) Now that I have made my point, answer me this; why bring me to Spain to trudge through this monotonous landscape for five weeks? You are a person educated in the Scriptures; did you not learn anything from Moses and the Exodus? Surely you couldn’t have expected that I would be overjoyed about wandering around the backblocks of Spain? Surely you are capable of something more imaginative than that! If you had to conscript me for your purposes, you could have taken me to the Western Arthurs for instance: you are reputedly fond of wilderness. That would have been less tedious, visually at least. All I have now is the prospect of five weeks of tedium: crowded, smelly albergues; rampaging bed bugs; loud intoxicated youth...

Mel:

(defensively) The Camino is by far the best option for our purposes, Teacher.

Qoheleth:

Our purposes? Our purposes? What input did I have in all this! Let us get this straight: we are here for your purposes, not mine. What are you trying to do here, replicate the Emmaus Road experience? That was a few kilometres, whereas you are compelling me to walk eight hundred kilometres. Have you lost your sense of perspective? Have you...
Mel:

(emphatically) Let me take you back to options, if I may. I can clarify this matter of context for you. It might make you feel more content with the option of the Camino. Do you know what walking through a wilderness such as the Western Arthurs requires of you?

Qoheleth:

A smaller portion of boredom than the Camino? Nothing new under the sunvi.

Mel:

You are living up to your reputation! Well, I will tell you what your suggested alternative would require. You would be walking for two weeks, with the requirement being that you are totally self-sufficient. This means that you would be required to carry a twenty kilogram backpack. I cannot imagine you being enamoured of that, although it would slow down your chasing after the wind, one of your oft recorded phrases. Now, consider the Camino, by way of contrast. When you walk the Camino with me, you are not required to do something beyond your capability, or even something that pushes you near to the limits of your endurance and discipline. You carry less than half the weight over much easier terrain. It allows for a more leisurely, reflective walk for us both. That, Teacher, is why the Camino is the best option. (a pause) Surely, too, my offer is a distinct improvement on Sheol!vii

Qoheleth:

(fixing his glance on a group of loud, excited pilgrims), Marginally perhaps, but that (pointing) hardly recommends the Camino to me.

Mel:

What were you expecting of the Camino? Philosopher’s Corner? This is a popular, world famous walk. People will get excited and noisy at times, particularly here where they are starting out. It is a
great adventure for them. Some of them would have anticipated this event for years, why wouldn’t they be excited? Many people find walking the Camino the experience of a lifetime? I thought that you would be positively enthused about this pilgrimage. I thought as a contemplative person, it would hold great appeal for you; five weeks or so to range through your thoughts. And, most importantly, I hoped that you would find interest and satisfaction in assisting me with my project.

Qoheleth:

(emphatically) Obviously, I am not “many people”! You have chosen me for this task, I imagine, for precisely that reason: I am not many people; I stand out from the crowd. And as for the ‘experience of a lifetime’, I cannot imagine why you would have thought that would have been my reaction. How could you possibly have thought that, having read Ecclesiastes? What sort of mental gyrations have you gone through to come to the conclusion that I would be full of enthusiasm and excitement for your enterprise? (pleadingly) Is there still some chance that you will change your mind about this exercise: a change of plans to something a little more civilised, more aesthetic? (imploring) What say we walk this dreary path for a few days, surely that will be enough for your purposes, then stop at Pamplona. We could spend quality time in conversation there. The University of Navarra is a perfectly good and comfortable facility. Stopping there could serve your purposes and save me weeks of drudgery. Is this not a good compromise? What do you say to that variation?

Mel:

I say that you have demonstrated to me that you currently have a poor understanding of what the Camino, and my pilgrimage, is about. Unfortunately, I have not succeeded in accurately conveying to you its purpose and my intentions.

(distractedly) Tell me, Teacher, were you familiar with the Greeks? Were they a significant influence on your writing? There are some similarities between your thinking and that of Aristotle\textsuperscript{vi}, and of Parmenides\textsuperscript{vii} come to think of it, perhaps you could tell me if you were informed by ...
Qoheleth:

And you think that I have a poor understanding of what this pilgrimage is about! Here you are, wanting to drag me into some arid exposition on ‘influences’! I thought that this exercise was to be one of reflection about personal formation, on matters of biography? Let me say, at the outset, you have a poor understanding of what this journey is about for me, so I will tell you: (building up to a crescendo) it is an arduous trudge, an impending tedium! It is Sisyphus’ rolling his stone up the hill each day! It is Rieux’s struggling against the insurmountable odds reigned against him by the plague, it is...

Mel:

Enough! Teacher, I see what you are getting at, but I am confident that once we start out, you will find that you will relax into the rhythm and simplicity of the routine of walking. The Camino will grow on you like...

Qoheleth:

A cancer?

Mel:

(curly) Let us delay that conversation until we know one another a little better shall we. For the present, let us try to just focus on the task at hand, which is for you to assist me with my reflections as we walk the full length of Camino. I will be very grateful for your assistance.

Qoheleth:

And so you should be! Am I to understand, by that rather emphatic comment, that there is no dissuading you from your current, intended course of action? Walking the Camino with you means, does it, that there is no stopping at Pamplona, apart perhaps for an overnight stay at one of those
dreadful albergues? Is that right? My perfectly reasonable suggestion is not an option for you? My entreaties have been disregarded? This does not portend well for our companionship on the walk.

Mel:

Certainly you’re right as far as trying to dissuade me from my chosen course is concerned. That would be a useless agitation of the air. You will be waiting for Godot if you are waiting for me to change my mind on that point. I am going to walk the Camino. Full stop. End of story. Further, I have selected you, from a vast range of possible candidates, as the person to walk the Camino with me. That is the task you have been selected for. You are to be the provocateur for me. In other words, you are the ‘Chosen One’. The ‘anointed one’ might be more in line with your tradition. You surely get the drift of what I am saying? If not, I will spell it out very clearly. There will be no compromise from my stated position of walking the Camino in its entirety. There will be no discharging you from your walking with me. Consider, I have bought a few weeks respite from Sheol for you. Be grateful! I suggest we get down to business.

Qoheleth:

Which is?

Mel:

For you to help me write honestly and as thoughtfully as I think through and record my life experiences. That is your allotted task. That is the clear expectation I have of you. You are the one best equipped to be my provocateur. I appreciate your ability to raise and wrestle with significant matters. You are a thinker who introduced a new epistemological paradigm into your tradition. There is a radical streak in you that I find appealing. You are the man for the job! You are suited to it and I feel confident that you will warm to the task when we start our journey.
Qoheleth:

So it is not just a matter of convenience, then, that you have chosen me?

Mel:

I have no idea of what you mean.

Qoheleth:

Given that I have been dead for two thousand years, you didn’t have to go through a lot of red tape with the Ethics Committee regarding ‘interviews’. Did that not figure in my selection? Death has its uses. Hmmm, ‘the pragmatics of death’, perhaps that has implications for a later conversation? A later and awkward question perhaps? I will store it away on the mental shelving. Who knows, perhaps I may dredge up a modicum of interest in this walk after all. Perhaps at the point when I have you ‘pinned and wriggling on the wall’. But, the question is, will you ‘spit out all the butt ends of your days and ways’? I wonder?

Mel:

That is a little menacing! I am all in favour of by-passing red tape, however in this case it is a matter simply of human action, but not of human design. I am not a dilettante. I chose you from my established criteria, avoidance of administrative procedures was not among them. You are the person of choice for other reasons; namely for your learning and your character.

Qoheleth:

OK. So, let me clarify this. Let us set out the ‘terms of engagement’. No, that has too much of a military overtone to it. Let me try again. There is some kind of Rousseauian social contract involved here. My part of the contract is that I endure this journey, contend with its drudgery and to top it all off provide a continuous critique of your developing narrative. That sounds like a double imposition to me. You are expecting rather a lot from me: a hyper alertness to your moods, striving to tease out
your motives, being alert to your veracity, or otherwise, looking for your subtexts; and all this over, what is it, five weeks?

Autobiography is a flawed enterprise. Everyone has private areas of their lives that they would be reluctant to reveal, and who knows what lurks in those mysterious areas of the mind, areas that are largely beyond our access. This is an enterprise destined for failure, if you think that you are going to be honest. No matter how intent you are on being truthful, I cannot see that happening on some grand scale. Further, I cannot see that I will benefit much from all this effort on my part, other than, perhaps, my five weeks parole.

(pensively) What about your part in the contract? Are you really likely to accept my critique? Are you equipped for your task, I wonder? (with some relish after a pause) Am I to take it that I have carte blanch to raise questions about anything to do with your life?... Anything at all?

Mel:

I ... guess so. You have put that in a rather menacing way. I’m feeling rather intimidated. I hope there will be some empathy in our interactions and that you will perceive that you are here to assist me, not to attack me.

Qoheleth:

You do want honesty! Or so you said! (brow furrowed, trying to recall) ‘Keep the bastards honest’.

Who said that?

Mel:

Some Australian politician or other. It doesn’t matter.
Qoheleth:

(pensively) Yes, there may be some interest for me in this wretched walk after all. Tell me, is this pilgrimage some kind of confessional for you? Are you coming here as some sort of penance? Have you lived the private life of a philanderer and concealed it all? Behind that façade, does there beat the heart of a hedonist? Do I have an original, *authentic pilgrim* on my hands? That’s almost medieval! Are you trying to emulate St. Augustine perchance? Then why not use God as your provocateur, if you wish to be honest? In that case there will be nothing that you can say that is not already known. There is an incentive for you! That will minimise the problem of truthfulness for you!

Mel:

God as provocateur? That sounds rather strange coming from you; you who have written with such fervour about the inscrutability of God. But let us not get too carried away. I see my project, if I can call it that, as an endeavour to get *away from image*, not *into* confession. Besides, I am not an Augustine. In the image-obsessed society in which I live, one where appearances are paramount, it is quite an ordeal if one tries to be honest; image is forever getting in the way. Honesty can mean being fed to the jackals and their withering hypocrisy. Image is a big hurdle to contend with in autobiographical narrative. I do not underestimate its difficulty. I hope that you, also, will realise the emotional difficulty I have in contending with it. I need your rigorous critique, but also I need you to be aware of the point where enough is enough. I want to be encouraged not intimidated.

Qoheleth.

Yes, but for a critic with a brief of interrogating for honesty I can’t, at the same time, be holding your hand. I am not the Grand Inquisitor, nor am I your nurse, or your fairy godmother. You must realise that truthfulness will cost you and there is little that can be done about that. Are you up for it?
Mel:

(resignedly) Well, this is going to present difficulties for us both; there’s nothing surer than that!

Qoheleth:

If you want my opinion, your task seems to me to be insurmountable. How do you expect to be honest, and by that I mean to be cognisant of the predator, image, with its capacity to distort and threaten and alienate and yet be willing, still, to commit to paper your reflections, the outcomes of these interrogations? You may have the best of intentions to tell your story with honesty, but your stories will inevitably intersect with those of other people and who knows what they will think about your storytelling. They could see you as treading all over their sensibilities and their privacy and, dare I say it, their image. (voice rising) You could be accused of insensitivity, of putting the principle of honesty before people’s sensitivities, and God knows what else you may be accused of. They may see you as harming them, rather than offending them. Those distinctions do get confused, do they not? You are entering the lawyers’ hunting ground here tarnishing images, defamation: but then again as you have little money you may not be an appealing, lucrative target. Some people may even want to accuse you of being a Pharisee, of standing in judgement. Do you really want me to interrogate you vigorously when that may well open Pandora’s Box\textsuperscript{xvii}? (quietening) True, I hold resentments about being compelled to walk the Camino with you, but I really don’t want to act in ways that will cause problems for you, at least not intentionally.

Mel:

Well, I don’t know how I will go with being honest in my writing, I am just as susceptible, I imagine, to the seduction of image as the next person, but that is where you come in, my friend. As the ‘Chosen One’, my interlocutor, my interrogator, my inquisitor, I need your critical abilities and your insight. But do make an effort to act as gently as practicable.
Qoheleth:

Hmmm... As this conversation is a preliminary so to speak, let’s flag another, wider question, which is: ‘How can you, the subject of this autobiographical drama as you term it, know you are being truthful about your life experiences and events which, because of factors such as history, image, the passage of time and personal development, you could but little understand’? We are so regularly re-storying ourselves and editing our experiences that veracity becomes very difficult to evaluate, let alone confirm. Further, and in particular, how can I know what has gone on within you over the years? I have only just met you. You must know that this is an impossible task you have set me. I should imagine all but the most fundamentalist practitioners of the psychoanalytic community would endorse my comments that the person, and in this case you, is mysterious.

Mel:

Let me reassure you that I am not expecting you to succeed in what you have rightly identified as a monumentally difficult task. I am not even sure of what ‘success’ might mean in this endeavour. I have invited the Reverend Brand and the Grand Inquisitor to each offer a critical commentary on our conversations. They are strong people, definite in their ideas and ideologies. I am sure that they will not be reticent to express whatever is on their mind. I note, however, that you are due back in Sheol before that appointment with them. I regret that you won’t be in attendance. (pensively) You know, as you have mentioned Dr. Rieux, it seems to me that you are in much the same position as Dr. Rieux himself; he was in no position to succeed either, as he contended with the consequences of the plague. All that he expected of himself, and all that discerning others expected of him, was that he do his best. That is all I ask of you, namely that you do your best, in a task which is, admittedly, one where it is very difficult to define what success means, let alone to establish set criteria for it.

Qoheleth:
I have already conceded that I have, unfortunately, been unsuccessful in dissuading you from walking the entire Camino, so, in the interests of clarity, let me summarize what I think it is that you expect of me. You expect me to walk to Santiago with you and...

Mel:

Actually, it is now Finisterre, not Santiago.

Qoheleth:

‘In for a penny in for a pound’xviii. What is an extra ninety kilometres among pilgrims? As I was saying, I am to engage with you in conversation, as your provocateur. It is not your sensitivities that are to be my paramount consideration, but the critique of your thoughts and stories. I am to assist you to get as much clarity as you can for your writing, even if I make you feel awkward at times by opening Pandora’s Box. For your part, I expect that you will not unreasonably object to my questions and comments and undertake to answer as honestly as you can? Is that a reasonable summary?

Mel:

Yes, although I now think someone less critical than you may have been, if not a better option, then at least a softer option as far as a provocateur is concerned. How’s that for honesty! I may yet rue my selection of you as my first choice for a provocateur. You seem very formidable. You mentioned confession earlier. Here is a confession. There is a sense in which I am frightened of you!

Qoheleth:

(cynically) And I thought that you were not one for easy options! I hope disappointing me won’t become a trend.

Mel:

What do you mean?
Qoheleth:

Well, you often present yourself as someone who is prepared to take risks in life. That was even prominent in your wedding vows. This wishing for the soft option seems rather out of character, if I am to believe your claim that risk-taking is part of your disposition. Or is it just your ‘image’, your ‘presentation of self in everyday life’\textsuperscript{ix}.

Mel:

I am a risk taker, make no mistake about that. That is not just an image, something that I wish to project to people. It is in fact an integral part of me. I am a person who wants to further my development, that’s important to me and to do that requires that I take risks in life. It is through risk-taking that can I test myself out and gain insights.

Qoheleth:

That is a bold claim! In the course of these conversations, we’ll soon find out what kind of risk taker you are, my carte blanche brief will be very helpful in that regard. Tell me, though, there is something I am more than curious about. Why are you writing your reflections as a dissertation in the academy? I would have thought that locating your writing there would have placed restrictions on your freedom of expression. Your motive cannot be just the motive of having another award conferred; you have jumped through those hoops a number of times already.

Mel:

Quite simply, I want to remain in the academy, much as you wanted to remain within your Wisdom tradition. I have no desire to cut the umbilical cord with the academy any more, I believe, than you desired to be outside the structures of your tradition. You undoubtedly can understand that.

I find the academy a stimulating place to be within, physically and emotionally. I like being on campuses with the students and academics. The academy helps to structure my life. It keeps me
intellectually on the ball. Over the past forty years it has become a lifestyle for me. I guess that I would describe myself as an ‘ontological student’. The academy is essential to my being in the world. I am unashamedly dependent upon the academy, as it helps me to gain a clearer idea of who I am. But beyond that, I am of the opinion that my work will ‘fit in’ within the academy, although it could take some manoeuvring.

Qoheleth:

An alarming thought has just occurred to me. Surely you can’t think that what you write is going to have any lasting impact anywhere, or on anyone? (ncredulously and mockingly) You surely can’t expect that you’re going to be remembered³⁹? 

Mel:

To cite a favourite saying, or more accurately, a lament of yours, ‘Who knows’? Your writing has survived your death and for millennia in fact. People still read it. You are a great writer. People remember you. You are important.

Qoheleth:

You cannot say that in all seriousness, surely? The church is full of amnesiacs; they go out of their way to forget Ecclesiastes. My writing has spawned a lot of commentaries. Do you really think that is important? Surely, you can’t think that what I have written has an influence on how people live their lives? Next you will be extolling the commentators...

Mel:

No, I definitely won’t be doing that. As you said, we are focused on reflections while on this pilgrimage. I need to say, however, that your writing has had a definite influence for good in terms of how I have elected to live my life.
Qoheleth:

(incredulous) I find that naïve, preposterous even. How you find importance in my writing is beyond me. You have clearly not really grasped my thought, my philosophy. You are a bigger dunce than I thought you were. Otherwise you would see that such was not my intent. Only dunces would utter what you have just uttered. Allow me to explain. The key understanding from what I have written is that life is intrinsically absurd, because we human beings have no idea, and cannot have any idea, of the Creator’s purposes. The Creator’s ways are opaque. The Creator has not revealed a telos for his creation. We have no idea of a telos. Hebel! Your existence is just as absurd as anyone else’s, for we have no idea of the Creator’s telos for our life! God’s ways are inscrutable to us, his creations, and this is the most gross of absurdities. All I wish to say in response to your comment, your attempt at flattery I assume, is that I consider it your grave misfortune to have been born into a world that is so intrinsically and irredeemably absurd.

Mel:

Well, I am underwhelmed by your confidence in my capabilities. I predict that my dissertation will not rank high in your estimates. I hope others will be a little more generous in their estimations.

Qoheleth:

(quizically/ pensively) So that you will be remembered? Having read my work, and viewing it as having authority, how can you entertain the ridiculously optimistic idea of being remembered after your death? Might I suggest that you go back and re-read Ecclesiastes! I can now understand that you really do need my assistance with your writing, but more so with your thinking, otherwise you will be destined to produce a superficial utopian tract. The last thing we need are utopians, either of the religious, or the Richard Dawkins\textsuperscript{xi} variety, peddling their optimistic cant. (sullenly) Maybe you will still produce a utopian tract, in spite of having the benefits of my critique.
Mel:

Teacher, I am under no illusion that you regard my undertaking of the writing of autobiographical drama as anything other than absurd. There is no requirement on my part that you are in agreement with the purpose of my task, or my philosophies, you merely have to assist me. Putting it as clearly as I can, what I most require is your co-operation in assisting me, not a judgement of my motives and purposes. Of course, for you, my task is a chasing after the wind! I well understand that. That would well accord with your thinking on just about everything and it will provide the critique I am looking for to clarify and assess ideas and events that have punctuated and influenced my life.

To reiterate, what I’m requiring is your commitment to, and co-operation in, my task. You are the Chosen One. Who knows what may eventuate over the course of this pilgrimage; that is the nature of long distance pilgrimages, we cannot set up learning ‘outcomes’. We may both undergo changes, but we will have no idea beforehand of what they may be, as we have no idea of what we may encounter on such a long walk.

Qoheleth:

Me, change my well thought through and empirically tested position? Mine is the work of a lifetime.

Now who is waiting for Godot?

Mel:

Hmm. Let’s backtrack a little. You have asked me about my purposes in writing this piece within the academy. Let’s widen the investigation. I will tell you why I am writing this dissertation per se, not merely why I am writing it within the academy. Does that seem a reasonable way of proceeding?

Qoheleth:

Yes, the question was going to come up at some point anyway.
Mel:

There are a number of reasons and you may wish to comment on them in due course. For now, I will merely try to enumerate them. Importantly, probably most importantly, I am hoping by writing this piece to encourage other people into the process of significant and sustained reflection and possibly even writing. In particular I am thinking of those people with life threatening illnesses, although there are other groups of people who may find my writing of interest. In the past there has been healing for me in this process. I would like to think that at least some people could be encouraged in that direction, to reflect on their ‘known’. I am not advocating for ‘utopianism’, I am merely endeavouring to provide encouragement for the reader of my work.

Qoheleth:

You have some high opinions of your writing and your powers of reflection. I can see that this is a wider topic that we will need more time for at a later stage. (menacingly) Let me assure you, we will revisit it! For now, though, in the little time we have left, let me go back to the question of writing in the academy. I am mindful that we don’t have all that long, because it looks as though the café is winding down for the day. You have heard of Jane Tompkins, I assume?

Mel:

Yes.

Qoheleth:

Then, why on earth are you so intent on doing your rather unusual writing within the academy? Jane Tompkins could tell you a thing or two about the problems of such an endeavour. Are you a slow learner? Haven’t you learned that there are a lot of conventional ideas floating around in the academy about what constitutes ‘proper’ methodology and knowledge, and dare I say it, what constitutes wisdom, although I suspect that is not a strong topic in the academy in this day and age
of ‘bean counter’

dominance? Some people who hold influential positions in the academy, and who are to change their views, would wish to exclude what are very novel claims in epistemology. (quizzically) Are you desirous of being the patron saint of lost causes? Or, do you just want to be ‘different?’

Mel:

Consider this, if you will. Walter Breuggemann, a scholar I have great respect for, has made the point, albeit made by many others, that God wants us to be different in the world, but with me it is not intentional, it just happens that way.

Qoheleth:

Hmmm. Just integral to who you are? Not intentional? I wonder. Having read your CV it seems to me that it is rather a lifestyle choice with you.

Mel:

Have you been talking with my wife? She thinks that being different is a lifestyle choice with me.

Qoheleth:

No, I am merely being acutely observant, which is my trademark after all. I am not one whose head is ‘stuck in the Enlightenment’ as you are so fond of saying, and saying so often. But I am a good empiricist, as you know. I think your critics may well be right. You do seem to revel in being different! It has the hallmarks of intentionality about it, which raises the question of whether this is actually an image you want to project.

Mel:

A ridiculous assertion.

Qoheleth:
I thought that your obligation under our contract was to answer my questions, not dismiss them! But let me try again. You are often highly critical, perhaps even derisive, of the social media phenomenon, but consider what you are doing now, this autobiographical thing, is that not an expression of what you call the ‘mini-celebrity cult’? Is it not ‘Facebook with an academic gloss’? A gigantic exercise in narcissism, albeit tarted up a little?

Mel:

I can only reply to that by saying that I have no desire to be a celebrity, or a paragon, particularly in lymphoma circles. I guess that is what you are alluding to. I am merely endeavouring to put before people my efforts to live life meaningfully. It is up to them, in whatever circles they frequent, to do with it what they want.

Qoheleth:

Is this not another way of stating that you consider yourself to have lived an exemplary life by way of comparison with others?

Mel:

That assumes that you are of the opinion that I am a competitive person, who appraises his life by way of comparison with other people. Frankly that concerns me very little. I have no desire to order my life according to others’ expectations. I try to not do so. I suggest to you that I am rather more inner directed than other directed in the way that I live my life.

Qoheleth:

So, you are not, or no longer, competitive? You expect me to believe that?
Mel:

I am not consciously aware of wishing to compare myself with anybody. Now, a question for you. Are you saying that you know more about me than I know about myself? (pensively) A whole first world ‘therapeutic industry’ has grown up around that concept...

Qoheleth:

Let’s leave aside the therapeutic industry as you call it. Let’s say, for arguments sake, that I am one of those people who you refer to as ‘having their heads stuck in the Enlightenment’. Is yours not a comparison with them and are you not thereby displaying your own superior, ‘enlightened’ views, your wisdom? I would ask you then, as a matter of curiosity, no, as more than a matter of curiosity, how you evaluate your life, if not by way of comparison with others?

Mel:

I like to make judgements according to the Beatitudes and, to a lesser extent, a modified form of Aristotle’s Virtues. I think that using people as a measuring rod is not only unhelpful, but it places barriers to creating relationships of any depth and any compassion. The Beatitudes and the Virtues are not person-centred comparisons; they enable me to make judgements as to how I am living by way of comparison with those ideals. These comparisons enable me to see, if I am willing, how I am living and how I am fulfilling my potentials. They have little to do with comparisons with others, although they are, of course, the products of the thought and experience of people who can, in my view, but not everyone’s, be deemed exemplary.

Qoheleth:

I was about to say that your statement is rather Kantian, but it sounds to me more like one of those mission statements, some kind of corporate ideal that we see framed and hanging on a corporate
wall somewhere, something everybody can agree with and safely ignore. A motherhood statement in fact! It has a huge propensity for self delusion!

Mel:

I can see that I will need to steel myself against your cynicism for the next nine hundred kilometres!

Qoheleth:

I can see that you are rather hesitant in the face of critique and that I will have my work cut out holding you to answering my questions. You are rather evasive for someone who is seeking to write honestly! I think the next nine hundred kilometres will be devoted to pinning you down.

Mel:

Well, thinking positively, which you may find offensive, I can say with some confidence now that I have you ‘on board’ so to speak. I think I have my Mephistophelesxxvii to accompany me along the road. I think you have engaged with me, to a workable extent at least, enough to enable us to get on with things.

Qoheleth:

Well, I can’t say that the prospect of walking the Camino makes me feel buoyant, as you obviously do, but I am more engaged with it. Regrettably, I have no better option for passing my time than walking with you. And I have, as Auden wrote in his poem Letter to Lord Byronxxviii, ‘all eternity in which to do it’. I’ll keep my side of the contract. It is a contract, is it not?

Mel:

Living in an over-determined society, I am not enamoured of legal terms. Let’s go with ‘agreement’, that’s not so harsh and oppressive and it doesn’t conjure up Hobbes and Benthamxxix, a rather confronting duo, are they not? Like the upper and lower jaws of some wild beast.
Qoheleth:

Very well, agreement it is.

Mel:

So, tomorrow morning, before sunrise, we walk out of St Jean by torchlight bound for Roncesvalles. Let’s hope that we have a day filled with promise and discovery. Come on, let’s go and collect our credentials and prepare ourselves for our beginning (both rise to exit the café; enter a group of three or four pilgrims).

Pilgrim:

An early night for an early start tomorrow? Getting exciting now!

Qoheleth:

If you call watching the grass grow exciting (exit Qoheleth).

Pilgrim:

(turning to Mel) What is he so touchy about? Is he always like that?

Mel:

No, he has travelled a long way to get here. He will be fine in the morning, once he has had a decent sleep.

Pilgrim:

For your sake, I hope so; otherwise it will be a very long Camino for you (Mel exits the café).
Conversation Two.

(At San Juan del Acre hospice ruins, Navarrete.)

Life = ‘Not my will......Time to Kill......Box to fill’.
Graffiti on the wall of the Central Railway Station tunnel, Sydney. Author unknown.
Sighted by Melvyn Macarthur 1971.

‘Is there life before death’?
Graffiti on a wall at The Shankill, Belfast. Author unknown.

‘And the sign flashed out its warning
in the words that it was forming
and the sign said, ‘The words of the prophets are written
on the subway walls and the tenement halls’...
Simon and Garfunkel, ‘The Sounds of Silence’
Photo at San Juan del Acre, Navarrete, Spain.
The Ambassadors.

Hans Holbein the Younger.
We have been walking for about a week. This conversation took place as I was about to inspect the ruins of the twelfth century hospital of San Juan del Acre, near Navarrete, Spain. The building served as a hospital and hospice and was established by the Church to provide shelter and care for pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago. Many of these pilgrims were ailing and some would end their life’s pilgrimage, permanently, at San Juan del Acre. Qoheleth, who does not enter, observes me as I walk into the ruins. I am silent before the history of suffering that would have occurred there. I am also deeply respectful of the resilience that many of these ancient pilgrims would have displayed in their determination and resolve, and perhaps their simplicity and naivety, as they plodded toward Santiago. Many of them would have been ill and frail from their life of serfdom prior to discharge by their masters. Discharge mainly happened at a point when they were deemed to be no longer economically viable, that is, the point where they could not perform enough labour to earn their keep, let alone produce sufficient surplus value\textsuperscript{xvi} for their masters. The discharged, devout serfs were then able to make the choice to undertake the pilgrimage to Santiago, but they were often in too poor a physical state to complete such an arduous and demanding journey, such as it was in their time. I have these thoughts running through my mind when Qoheleth speaks.

\textbf{Qoheleth:}

There’s no need for you to book in just yet … or is there?

\textbf{Mel:}

No, my demise is not imminent, (hesitates) at least I think it’s not. I’m feeling fit and well at present. In fact, I have been feeling well for some time. It has been over three years since my transplant and I have undertaken a lot of arduous and demanding activities in that period.

\textbf{Qoheleth:}

Always good to qualify it though … for someone in your position that is. It has come back once before!
Mel:

Don’t get hopeful. There’s no early discharge likely from your labours on the Camino.

Qoheleth:

I’m not known for being hopeful ... We sound rather like Ham and Clov\textsuperscript{xxii} don’t we?

Mel:

Is that supposed to be a compliment?

Qoheleth:

No, and it is not in my agreement to provide compliments. Remember?

Mel:

I’m sure you won’t let me forget it!

Qoheleth:

Tell me, Reverend Doctor, this dissertation you are working on, do you really think you will finish it?

Mel:

I’m thinking so.

Qoheleth:

You don’t think you are, what can we say ... running out of time?

Mel:

I am playing well into the last quarter\textsuperscript{xxiii}, I am aware of that. But, notwithstanding that, I feel confident of lasting another eighteen months or so. I feel confident that I can finish this dissertation
within that time. But, I won’t be crying tears of blood if that doesn’t happen, the world will still continue to spin on its axis, whether I am on it or not.

**Qoheleth:**

I may have to retract some previous comments of mine. You have absorbed something of the, what can we say, the *flavour* of Ecclesiastes.

**Mel:**

(ignoring Qoheleth’s comment) Let me tell you something. I set myself ‘two year plans’. Rather like Russia between the wars … although they were five year plans weren’t they? If I get to the end of that two year period and I’m still drawing breath, and drawing it well, I’ll devise another two year plan. In fact I have only recently set my latest two year plan, in June, 2014, two months ago.

**Qoheleth:**

Wise man! I applaud that. (cynically) You continue to rise in my estimation.

**Mel:**

Wise? Perhaps, I am not sure about that. What I am sure about is that the Psalmist was wise. I think he, whoever he was, and the Psalmist was a *he*, had his act together. Do you recall what he wrote in Psalm Ninety? ‘So teach us to number our days that we might gain a wise heart’ (90 v 12)?

**Qoheleth:**

Yes, yes, of course I do. I am well versed in the Psalms. Go on.

**Mel:**

By the way, as we have dropped the King Solomon myth, when exactly did you write?
Qoheleth:

(forcefully) Keep to the point!

Mel:

Of course, excuse me. I consider this advice from the Psalmist to be very wise. Some of the best advice I have gleaned, and not only in the context of having a life threatening illness, is ‘Number your days’. That is why I set two year plans. I think that planning in the absence of a definitive time line, when I have lymphoma, would be foolish. I would regard it as foolish, even if I did not have lymphoma, but as I do have lymphoma it would be particularly foolish. It would be sheer folly, not to mention futile, for me to focus on a particular project that could take ten years to complete and to be focussed solely on that. In that circumstance at least, I think a conservative approach is a good one. But with regard to my studies in general, that is a different matter. The case is exceptional. I have no intention of leaving the academy while ever I draw breath and some neural activity is going on, so inevitably I will leave some degree or other unfinished. This matters not, it is a lifestyle choice, there is no goal or objective attached; I simply like working in libraries and mixing in with the student body and things like that. Where death ends that process, and that lifestyle, is not a matter of any great importance. The academy for me is not a matter of particular accomplishments, it is a matter of being; it is an ontological matter.

Qoheleth:

The ontological student, hmmm... So, are you telling me that you are not accommodating the covert ‘I’ll live forever, death happens to someone else’ phenomenon that is so prevalent in contemporary Western Society?
Mel:  
I am certainly not accommodating that. In fact I have already conceded defeat. Lymphoma will collect me, unless something else does the job more rapidly.

Qoheleth:  
You sound almost nonchalant about it. Are you nonchalant?

Mel:  
Lymphoma is in my consciousness from time to time, but I am not making a ‘career’ out of it, (pensively)... come to think of it, I have not made a career out of anything! ... I do not experience cancer as being pursued by Nemesis. It rather creates a context; the parameters within which I make choices.

Qoheleth:  
What about initially, at the time of your diagnosis? Did this approach to your illness come as a result of ‘pulling yourself together’ after the shock of the diagnosis?

Mel:  
In fact, my diagnosis did not come as a shock to me, with all due respects to Kubler-Ross. What did surprise me at the time, though, was how well I was when I was first diagnosed. I was cycling one of the major endurance routes through the Blue Mountains of New South Wales the day before I was diagnosed. I was out there with the alpha specimens. Unbeknown to me, my lymphoma was well advanced at the time of diagnosis. I was surprised that I could be life threateningly ill and still be cycling Mount Victoria Pass. I remember walking home from the surgery, after receiving the diagnosis, pondering this and thinking that Ionesco or Ayckbourn could have created something from this raw material, which seemed to me to be an utter absurdity. But there again, my main exposure to cancer was encountering people in the hospital and hospice: these people were
mostly at the far end of the health spectrum, they were often in the last weeks of their lives, the end stages of their disease. So, in retrospect, I guess my being surprised at being vigorous and life threateningly ill concurrently was understandable, given the circumscribed experiences of cancer in my vocational setting. (pensively) Some five years of my vocation was spent in chaplaincy in the hospice and oncology ward of the hospital. To sustain a delusion that I was outside of the cycle of life and death through cancer, a cycle that I was a regularly immersed in, albeit within the context of others’ experiences, would have required huge amounts of emotional energy. In such a setting as the hospice, I doubt that I would have been capable of supporting that level of delusion.

Qoheleth:

(enters the ruins and sits on a low wall beside Mel) Are you suggesting, therefore, that death is not a foreboding matter for you?

Mel:

I have other fears. One that is very much to the fore is mediocrity. The possibility of not having the courage of my convictions to take risks in life and endeavour to develop my potential is something that I really fear.

Qoheleth:

To raise a previous point I made, are you not thereby comparing yourself with others? With the mediocre? And people think that I am replete with contradictions! But come, let us focus on death for the moment, not mediocrity, death and fears associated with death.

Mel:

Very well. Severing relationships in this existence will be difficult, so in an oblique way death is foreboding, but as for death, the thing in itself, it is not so. To invoke a metaphor...
Qoheleth:

Quite a habit of yours...

Mel:

As I was saying before being interrupted, and do not make that a habit of *yours*, arriving at death, I imagine, will be much like arriving at the walls of Jerusalem terminus following my seven months of cycling from Dublin; it was the weary ending of a long and very interesting pilgrimage. Arriving was not the climactic event I had initially expected. When I arrived in Jerusalem I was very weary and I just wanted to stop pushing on the pedals. I wanted more than anything to simply find somewhere to rest, no triumphant entry for me. I imagine if I had arrived at Jerusalem directly from an aircraft, it would have been different, suddenness is something qualitatively different, but I had been cycling for seven months.

To pick up the analogy, I have been ‘cycling’ toward death for a decade. I have been riding a tandem bicycle with Lymphoma for a decade! I have been occupying the front seat doing the steering; setting the direction, Lymphoma has been in the rear seat, out of sight and mostly out of mind, occasionally making a prima donna appearance, such as when I relapsed five years after my initial chemotherapy treatment, but in other ways supplying some power in the form of motivation.

Qoheleth:

I may take up that analogy again, but for the moment let me ask you a question, in case I forget. The way that you refer to ‘Lymphoma’, seems to me to suggest that you personify your illness. Am I correct? Do you personify your illness and if so what function does that serve for you?
Mel:

Yes, I do personify my illness. Lymphoma is a gender neutral, spectral figure. I sometimes converse with Lymphoma; I did this in an extended way in a previous dissertation. I write best in the style of dialogue and it helps to have a conception of the person with whom I am dialoguing. I guess that Marlowe had to consider this when he wrote Dr Faustus and created the character of Mephistopheles.

Qoheleth:

Mephistopheles I can understand, but personifying an illness is rather odd I think.

Mel:

It is not as uncommon as you seem to be suggesting. Consider the Grim Reaper type personifications, so often associated with cancer. You know the deadly scythe-wielding, cloaked and hooded figure, full of malicious intent, waiting to ambush us in his good time, much like ‘Death’ in Everyman. Cancer is the sinister enemy, against whom we are waging war on all fronts. My cancer does not have that sinister persona. Lymphoma is a being, in Satre’s terms, whose essence precedes its existence. Lymphoma, quite innocently goes about fulfilling its destiny to destroy me. There is nothing malicious in its intent: it is a kind of Calvinistic being doing its foreordained, not chosen, task. It is hard to feel combative toward such a being, this both suits and reflects my disposition and temperament.

Qoheleth:

Which separates the lymphoma from you; it is therefore not part of you. Denial perhaps? Whatever ‘Stage’ that is?
Mel:

It separates us as you say, but only in one sense. In another sense I see that Lymphoma and I are going to the precipice together. We share a destiny. After all Lymphoma, in destroying me, its host, destroys itself, so there is a sort of bonding there. I could say that we are fellow pilgrims, but that suggests too close a relationship for I do not think of Lymphoma that often.

Qoheleth:

A rather odd ‘bonding’ if I may say so. But in the end it matters little, we all perish and bring a merciful end to our absurd existences. Hebel, hebel.

Let us return to your cycling pilgrimage to Jerusalem analogy and take it a little further. Arriving at the terminus of Jerusalem you often refer to as being ‘anti-climactic’. You describe the journey, not the arrival as the focus, as many people do; there is nothing new in that. Arriving at death involves a journey of sorts. Here the analogy becomes a little strained. Your journey to Jerusalem was fairly uncomplicated, notwithstanding your encounters with the Syrian military, but it could have been otherwise. What if the journey to death is not like the arrival at the Jerusalem terminus: the end of a fairly smooth and fairly uneventful road. Suppose the journey to death has ‘complications’?

Mel:

I think I see what you are getting at, where this is leading. I am sure that you will correct me if I am wrong. What you are suggesting is, ‘what if the terminus of death included a journey of decrepitude, or dementia’? That is what you are asking me to answer is it not? Well, my answer is that the very thought itself is horrible! It is something I don’t dwell upon. As a fit, vigorous person, one capable of traversing mountain ranges and cycling continents and researching at the highest levels, I find your suggestion horrible. There is no ready salve for it. The thought of having wilderness permanently denied me, or the world’s great literature permanently denied me would lead me to hope Lymphoma got a move on.
I was talking to a friend recently, a friend who has been my hiking companion over some eighteen years. We were walking in testing weather conditions in a remote area in Tasmania. We were working hard, physically. It was wonderfully enjoyable; the endorphins were really coursing around my body. My friend made an off-the-cuff comment that death out there would be a good ending. Curiously, I had the self-same thoughts running through my mind at that time. Romantic thoughts I know, but in remote environments that have contributed so much to my personal formation over an adult lifetime, it is about the only, albeit very mildly consoling thought, if contemplating the terrors of decrepitude, or dementia. For fit and experienced people, the prospect of death in the wilderness, happening in an unpremeditated way, are remote. We did not pursue the thought.

I recently read an account of Belden Lane’s journey with his mother as she moved slowly toward death and as her dementia took its inevitably increasing toll on her mental abilities. Over time it became a bonding experience for Lane, but even though the account was beautifully written, I didn’t relate to it, probably because of fear. Is this Eliot’s vision of the horror and the boredom? (pensively) But to each his own. I can imagine that there will be people saying that about my work when they read it.

Many people comment to me that I have lived a full and interesting life and indeed I have. I have thought that this plethora of experiences would have sustained me into old age, a time where mobility and life in general, it seems to me, inevitably becomes more limited and limiting. Now, I am not so confident of the inevitability of experiences to sustain me. I think the loss of agency will be a difficult time for me, as a person whose body has done all that I have asked of it over a very active lifetime.

The same applies to the loss of my mental faculties. I had a dress rehearsal of this when undergoing chemotherapy. From early on in the six cycles of chemotherapy, I was not able to focus. I could not read a paragraph and retain the information. ‘Chemo head’ it is popularly known as, it destabilised my discipline and mental toughness, which are the big guns in my arsenal when encountering
difficulties in life. Chemotherapy had deprived me of these resources, taken them out of the
equation and I was more vulnerable than I had ever been in my remembered lifetime. I don’t know
how I could prepare for such frightening eventualities as the radical loss of mental capacity.
Hopefully I will not need to. Perhaps it might not happen, courtesy of Lymphoma. Perhaps
Lymphoma might come back at just the right time, an entry at the Kairos, my Deus ex machina.
Lymphoma carries many expectations and not a few fantasies of mine!

Qoheleth:

Deus ex machina? That sounds very unlike a person who prides himself on his sense of agency and of
being highly proactive. That sounds like a wish to me, but Lymphoma is not at your beck and call. It
will come in its own good time. Perhaps, if lymphoma has a cynical streak, it will hold off until you
savour dementia and decrepitude. (cynically) All part of the learning experience! As Creon said to
Oedipus, when the latter began to reassert himself after his demise, ‘Rule no more’. Do you
understand that connection, that analogy?

Mel:

Yes, not being master of my own body and mind, not being able to ‘rule’ would be the most
disarming of experiences, particularly if the losses were irretrievable. When I see people who find a
few stairs as challenging as I find the Western Arthurs, I sometimes feel a sense of dread. I also recall
the words of the Philosopher of The Shankill, in Belfast, ‘Is there life before death?’ those words
have some relevance to the context we are speaking of. I would be very happy not to have such
challenges presented to me by dementia and/or decrepitude.

Let me illustrate. I have a friend, who regularly walked in the Tasmanian wilderness with me. He has
developed a severely debilitating neurological disease. Once a strong, powerful man, in his element
with heavy packs in remote areas, he has been reduced to a wheelchair with the prospect of a
gradual and irreversible demise. The prospect of losing control of muscles and co-ordination, losing
control of bodily functions and speech and cognition is fearful for me when at times it comes into consciousness. I could not imagine a more fearful eventuality. I would not want to be put to this kind of test. I fail to see anything I could gain from it, no matter how optimistic I tried to be. My friend, when I wheel him around the streets, makes courageous efforts to walk a few metres. I admire that, even though it is difficult to see the point of the effort. He has lost control of his speech to the extent that he cannot relate his feelings to me and the non-verbal cues are virtually eliminated by the lack of muscle control. (pensively) ‘In short, I was afraid’ (Eliot).

When I underwent those six cycles of chemotherapy, it was a severely testing time, but it was also an enlightening time for me. I realised just how important optimal mental functioning was to my well-being, especially through the exercise of my will and my discipline. Stripped of these assets of character, I found coping with the physical deterioration overwhelming. The consequent prodigious physical effort to undertake the simplest tasks, such as walking to the bathroom or kitchen, became major exercises, huge obstacles, exhausting. I was sustained by the reassurance that it would end, or I would end, but knowing that such a state would go unremittingly on, as is the case with my friend’s neurological disease, or from dementia, or decrepitude from the aging process, that is of another order altogether. I dread such a state where my resources of discipline and physical fitness are severely diminished and where the progression of the condition is unabating. Such a situation would be devoid of hope, apart from the benevolent intervention of Lymphoma.

Qoheleth:

Who knows what’s in store for us? It’s just the luck of the draw! But consider Herbert Marcuse’s thought that the insanity of the whole, that is, for me, the lack of a telos in human existence, absolves particular insanities. What do you think of that?
Mel:

I don’t ascribe to the insanity of the whole as strongly as you do, but there is nothing I can think of that would lessen the horror of dementia for instance.

Qoheleth:

Let us then take this away from the speculative and make it more tactile. (stretches out his arms and touches the ruins of the walls) What about these catastrophes? Tell me, what do you think about the, what could we call them, the ‘guests’ of this establishment? Consider these wretches. Wouldn’t it have been much better if they had they never been born, a question posed by my writing. Were their lives not some monstrous cosmic aberration, or cosmic joke, depending upon how you think about God?

What does Blake say?

‘Some are Born to Sweet Delight,

Some are Born to Endless Night’\textsuperscript{xlvi}.

But I must add this rejoinder; I think that Blake was mistaken when he referred to the experience of ‘sweet delight’. Who could live in sweet delight but the less reflective people, those immersed in physicality to the exclusion of the metaphysical, those not given to philosophy? In other words, those living in social cocoons. The gifted, such as me, could never live in sweet delight, we are too insightful, too cognisant of the nature of human social existence.

Mel:

(does not answer).

Qoheleth:

(fixing his gaze on me intently) Are these guests too far away in time? Or are they perhaps too close?
This is the plight of most people on this earth in my opinion; it is not something confined to this establishment. Consider the inhabitants of your Third World. It seems to me to be preposterous that they continue to reproduce themselves and bring people into this life to suffer in all sorts of appalling ways. But, consider, the First World has a plight too, does it not? You can’t seem, in spite of heroic efforts, to entertain yourselves enough to avoid, eventually, confronting the thoughts contained in the writing of the Sydney Railway Tunnel Philosopher. The sweet delight will dissolve in the face of death, particularly those who studiously ignore it to the point when it inevitably and forcefully asserts itself, the point at which they are totally unprepared.

I think that Shakespeare stated it succinctly when he had Macbeth say his famous line, ‘life is a tale, told by an idiot, full of sound and fury signifying nothing’\textsuperscript{xlvii}. I think that quote should have been the caption at the beginning of this dissertation. It would have been had I been writing it.

\textbf{Mel:}

Well, you are not!

\textbf{Qoheleth:}

(ignoring the comment and continuing) It is much more impressive and has much more literary merit than your quote from the Railway Tunnel Philosopher, but then you are not out to impress anyone, or so you say. The Shakespeare quote is also more poignant and universal than that of the Shankill philosopher, whom you quoted among your first captions. His comment was born out of a specific absurdity: the ‘Troubles’ of Northern Ireland. I am referring to a much more generalised absurdity. With all its material wealth, the First World inhabitants have to work hard to try to convince themselves that life is worth living. Discontent is rife for those who pose the deeper questions, such as I have posed. Hans Holbein, the Younger, presented the dilemma well in his painting of ‘The Ambassadors’, the figures in his painting who were busied with averting their gaze from death. They
are a sort of ‘Everyman’ of the First World. Now that visual caption from Holbein was a good choice of yours.

**Mel:**

Yes, now, as to these ‘guests’ as you term them, I agree. They were in a very similar situation to people of the contemporary Third World, at least in terms of suffering. As an aside, however, what a strange turn of events that the people who walk the Camino in contemporary times are, in the main, the educated, the university trained professionals and functionaries, the middle classes, those who can afford the time and money to do such things, unless they are busy building their careers or, as you would say, chasing after the wind. But to return to your question, yes, I think that you are right, the lives of these ‘wretches’ as you term them do present as some preposterous and monstrous cosmic aberration. But what about life in the First World, I think …

**Qoheleth:**

(emphatically) Let us focus on the Third World for the moment. What are the implications of your admission? (cynically) Would you agree that most people on earth, those who eke out some sort of tenuous existence, enables your lot, and by that I mean the comfortable, middle class, latte sipping, inner city trendies and other well off groupings, to live off the ‘fat o the lan’\textsuperscript{viii}. Would you agree?

**Mel:**

Wow, where did that come from? (anticipating Qoheleth’s response) Sorry, that is the social worker coming out in me. But to save you the bother of reminding me, I will answer your question. *Partly.*

**Qoheleth:**

Why partly?
Mel:

I don’t want to pursue the rather vexed and contested question of class, that is not within the terms of reference of this dissertation, but I also don’t want to be labelled ‘comfortable’ and ‘middle class’. (emphatically) I don’t have middle class assets, I don’t negative gear properties and have fat bank accounts and holiday houses. And furthermore, I don’t live comfortably in the inner city or other privileged areas! I can hardly be numbered among the privileged. Does that answer your question!

Qoheleth:

Not at all! I have touched a raw nerve and I have only just started. I find it difficult to believe that you think your little outburst will exonerate you. I will expose the nerve a little more. Being a student for, what is it now, over forty years, and at the state’s expense what’s more, is that not at least an indicator of being comfortable, I will drop the appellation of ‘middle class’, as it upsets you so. I will not however drop ‘comfortable’. Is yours not a position of privilege? Even the latte sippers might, secretly anyway, be appalled by your extravagance, your Bacchanalian approach to formal education. Overtly, of course, you would be acclaimed for ‘achieving’, but aren’t your ‘achievements’ just tantamount to self-indulgence, ‘pushing your snout into the trough’, to use a favourite expression of yours.

Mel:

(does not answer).

Qoheleth:

(continues) You do get caught up with peripherals, don’t you! Here I am referring to the question of widespread human misery and deprivation and you are snivelling about your ‘image’. Pathetic! If you wish to continue with my assistance then you had better dispense with your juvenile sensibilities.
Mel:

My apologies, I am a little sensitive to being numbered among the privileged. I am rather sensitive to this, as I tend to agree with Shaw that the advocates for the poor and disadvantaged, the ‘radicals’, are the well off. Shaw had things to say about that did he not? Was the wealthy Jack Tanner\textsuperscript{xix} not ‘a bit of a Socialist’ by his own definition? Yes, I am numbered among the exploiters of the Third World; maybe that is inevitable? But I do try to use my education for the benefit of others. I worked for years on the DoCS front line, working overnight shifts, which were not exactly a popular pursuit. I have, during the course of my vocation, spent many hours in the hospital and hospice providing pastoral care for people of all classes. I have taken adolescents from an underclass area of Sydney on a remote, multi-day walks in Tasmania. I am planning to do more of these walks, which have opened up a new world of experience to these young people. All these activities are hardly undertaken with an aim to accumulating wealth. In fact, I have very little money and qualify for a full aged pension: I am hardly in the financial and accumulated capital league of the latte set as you refer to them. And, I should add, nor do I want to be.

Qoheleth:

Hardly a statement of Aristotelian virtuosity! I would suggest that you give some more thought to your ethical position my friend: it needs it. I would also give some thought to your ability to focus and provide a straightforward answer to questions that are posed to you. I cannot be expected to work this hard throughout the entire length of this wretched walk.

You have done nothing to answer the question of your exploitation of the Third World and your contribution to it, although I concede that you are not among the worst of consumers, at least in some areas. The poor and those who rue their birth, in First or Third World, would have little to rejoice about from your statements, or indeed from your life. Shining example? I think not!
Mel:

You can hardly speak credibly on this issue can you!

Qoheleth:

I don’t have to! Let me remind you, yet again, this is not my autobiography! Do you want my critique, or don’t you!

Mel:

(a little repentant) Yes, I do ... I am hardly likely to have an inflated ego around you!

Qoheleth:

You hardly have cause to have one! And I have only begun my critique. Tell me, please, and this crumbling house of misery seems an appropriate place to pose the question to you, you are looking down the barrel, are you not?

Mel:

I have cancer, so yes I am looking down the barrel as you put it, but it could hardly be said that I make a habit of it, looking down the barrel that is.

Qoheleth:

Looking down the barrel is often a place where reflection comes more readily. Let us test that. Were there times in your life when you, like many of these ‘guests’ I assume, wished that you had never been born? You are well aware that this was the terminus point of my ‘morbid logic’ as one commentator called it. (pensively). I notice Ham’s comment, in your caption at the beginning of the dissertation; ‘You’re on earth, there’s no cure for that’. Ham’s view is a replication of mine. Why, I wonder, did you put this quote at the beginning of this dissertation? Is it your view as well? Be
honest now, no religious platitudes. Are there times when you wished that you had never been born?

Mel:

Are you accusing Beckett of plagiarism?

Qoheleth:

Don’t be a smart arse! Answer my question!

Mel:

(pensively) Have I wished that I had never been born? Yes, there have been such times. I often wondered why my parents wanted to bring a child, well actually in their case three children, into the world. I never put the question to them of course, such things were not done in our family, perhaps not in most families. I have merely concluded that they never really thought deeply about it. Reproducing themselves is just what people did. I can’t imagine my parents sitting down and deliberating on the merits of reproducing themselves. I doubt that my parents sat down and thought deeply about the merits of being parents and what they might have to offer as parents and what kind of world it was that they were to bring children into. This is not the kind of topic and discussion that my parents would have thought of engaging with.

I attest to the fact that the kind of world my parents brought me into is not one that has much appeal to me, be that the immediate world of my family of orientation, or the wider social world. Many of my experiences growing up within that family I could have done without. So, yes, there were times when I wished I wasn’t born, times when the arguments between my parents were caustic and my father’s cynical criticisms of his children were bordering on the insufferable and were definitely abusive. Yes, there were times when I wished I was never born, or in ‘brighter moments’, wished I was born to other parents. I was not convinced that my parents thought much about their
own development, a prerequisite, I believe, to making judgements about the raising of children, or even of bringing children into the world in the first place. Later on, when I went to university and so on, my mother lived vicariously through my ‘achievements’, or at least what she considered was ‘achieving’ in the world. It was a kind of compensation for not being in a position to pursue an education herself, as her family was poor and she was required to work from an early age to make a financial contribution. My mother always felt her truncated education keenly, she felt it as a terrible deficit and I guess it was as it appears that she was a promising student. This was all very awkward and frustrating for me.

Qoheleth:

Rather harsh on your parents, it seems to me. Are you going to whinge about your trials being all the fault of your parents? I hope not, I find that sort of thing, not taking responsibility for one’s life, all rather tiresome.

Mel:

No, I am not about to do that. I am about to add a comment though, it is a very necessary addendum to what I have just said. My mother, even though I was the ‘apple of her eye’, but also a major contributor to her anxieties, never stood in the way of my pursuing my dreams. This was such an important stance for my mother to take. When I was planning to cycle to Jerusalem, through Syria, my mother announced that she would be worried about me until I returned. In that particular case, her worries were going to extend over the best part of a year. She added, however, the rejoinder that I must do those things that I considered important for my formation and that I was not under any circumstances to return if, as she put it, ‘anything happens’. By that she meant her death, or ill health, although there was little chance of my finding out about such happenings, given that I was cycling mostly in remote areas of poor countries. My mother’s stance on my pilgrimages and other activities in remote areas was at great personal cost. Her imprimatur was a release for me in this and
other endeavours, where I sought to fulfil my potentials. These endeavours meant having long periods of absence when I would not see my mother. The further I go through life and see what a repressive institution the family can be to development, risk taking and personal formation, the more I appreciate my mother’s contribution to me. She was an extraordinary woman in that regard. Aspects of my mother’s parenting had a powerful influence on my own parenting.

It seems to me that children are often considered by parents as their ‘achievement’, odd as that may sound. I never really understood why couples who did not, or could not, have children are considered so blighted in the estimation of so many people. I love my children, but having children, reproducing myself, was neither a sufficient nor necessary condition for living my life in a manner which I considered to be purposeful. The idolizing of children puzzles me. I dread being confronted by people zeroing in on me bearing protracted digital boredom in the form of screen after screen of images of infants.

Let me tell you a story, which I hope will illustrate my point. In a hospital where I worked, one of the staff had suicided and in a very gruesome way. As the senior chaplain, I was asked to organize a memorial service for members of staff who, to a person, were very distressed by this happening. One of the deceased person’s work colleagues gave the eulogy. In that eulogy, he mentioned a tribe, a race of people, I think somewhere in the Himalayas, where the people celebrated death and mourned birth. That is a story you would relate to, I am sure. The person who gave the eulogy didn’t elaborate on why the people thought this way, but they clearly did not consider human existence and the human condition as an unadulterated good and they certainly were not baby worshippers. This stood out as unique for me among the many eulogies I have heard. It was refreshingly honest.

My own stance on this matter is that I seek to give generously, out of my atypical experiences, to my grandchildren. For instance, as a highly competent and experienced multi-day hiker, I take my grandson on bushwalks in our local Blue Mountains National Park. I do this as a prelude to introducing him to multi day walks in more remote areas. This is a way of accompanying him on life-
shaping experiences, which I am well positioned to provide, and which will likely be among the most memorable experiences of his life. I am also careful in this regard to avoid being insular and nepotistic, so I also take young people from deprived areas on such walks and will continue to do so. It is a way of giving from my experience to people in highly deprived areas. This also represents a redistribution of monetary resources from my friends, whom I will be asking to ‘cough up’ to provide the funds for further ventures for people lacking the necessary resources to access remote areas.

I think, though, that one doesn’t necessarily have to accommodate your view of human existence to realize that, besides adults, there are many minors who, had they the developmental acumen, would wish that they had never been born. In my work with the statutory authority in child protection I have had the harrowing experience of seeing many children in this position. Dostoevsky wrote compellingly on this in the Brothers Karamazov\(^6\), however I hardly need Dostoevsky to enlighten me in this regard, my life is replete with experiences of my own. I recall sitting with a child in the Children’s Hospital in Sydney, his legs were in traction and he had various other fractures. His life was hell on earth. I had removed the child with a Child Protection Order. He was sedated. As I sat beside him in the early hours of the morning, with police alerted to the possible appearance of the assumed assailant, I wondered if there was not some pervasive feeling, somewhere in this child’s being, that longed for a state of non-existence.

**Qoheleth:**

Let us make this rather more personal again. As per Saul Bellow’s quote at the beginning of your dissertation, have you, as a reflective person, as a person who has led an examined life, actively wished at times that you were dead? By this I mean, not just rued the fact that you were born at all?

**Mel:**

Yes, there were a few occasions where the thought forced its way into consciousness, but I can’t give you anything ‘appetising’ here, for I never seriously thought of bringing that state about. A goodly
A goodly dose of Marx in my mid-twenties led me to think that many of the social issues, which I encountered in my practice as a social worker, child abuse and so on, had a strong structural component. This led at times to a sense of futility: you know, the individual against the power of the ruling class and its lap dog the state, as the radical Left viewed it and indeed as I viewed it at that stage. A goodly dose of Camus and endeavouring to find meaning in a universe that yields up no meaning also brought a deep sense of futility at times. Finding meaning amid non meaning was something I was not particularly good at. I struggled. While I found Camus’ writing superb, as literature, I never did find his philosophy convincing. Camus’ advocacy of finding meaning in non-meaning was never a big selling point for Camus’ philosophy, as far as I was concerned. While Marx and Camus’ assessments of the human condition had merit, their solutions and, in Marx’s case, predictions, were unconvincing. I guess the ‘entertainment’ at that time was good enough and frequent enough for me to avert my view, Ambassador-like, away from a preoccupation, or deep engagement, with the conundrums that my practice questions raised for me. I think also, that the methods of the social sciences and ‘objectivity’ serve to keep such matters ‘academic’ and at arm’s length, something that was not so easy for this thoughtful practitioner on the DoCS front line. On a more ‘domestic’ plane, mortgages made no sense to me either. In particular, they brought about a sense of futility. I was not enamoured of the idea of keeping banks wealthy as a lifestyle. Nor, as a church member, was I enamoured with the wealthy church schools that entrenched privilege. Amid all this gloom, I had some antidotes. Fortunately for me, from the time of my mid-twenties, I began taking goodly doses of wilderness at every opportunity. I was discovering the restorative powers of wilderness and I had no regret that I hadn’t fallen off any cliff.

Qoheleth:

I can see that you could have had a good apprenticeship with me. You have a fledgling sense of the absurd, which could, with the right tutelage, really blossom. You were born in the wrong era for the flourishing of your personal development! I would have made an excellent mentor for you!
But, let me enquire a little further on the subject of death. You have confronted the deaths of other people many times in your vocation in the clergy and you have confronted it in your work in child protection. You have confronted death as a person with a life threatening illness. I do not particularly like to employ the word, but this experience is ***impressive***. Tell me, based on all this experience, what does death mean to you?

**Mel:**

It means ***passing through***. I like the story a friend told me of a religious tourist who, when in Poland, went to visit a famous Rabbi. The tourist was surprised that this Rabbi lived in a single room, which was very sparsely furnished, apart from burgeoning bookcases. Finding nowhere to sit, the tourist enquired ‘Rabbi, where is your furniture’ to which the Rabbi replied, ‘Where is yours’. ‘But, Rabbi, I am only passing through’. The Rabbi replied, ‘So am I’. This is much the same way that I think about the prospect of death. I, too, am passing through existence in this world. This is why I am not enamoured of Camus’ philosophy, or do I call it his theology? If death is the end, then life really is absurd, for it would lack a telos and Camus would be right. But I can’t believe that he is right. And Mersault[^ii] is not a superstar in my eyes.

**Qoheleth:**

(mocking) So, a Nobel Prize in Literature is not enough to convince you?

**Mel:**

No, rising from the dead[^iii] I find much more impressive.

**Qoheleth:**

You are obviously not claiming this for yourself, and you are my focus at the moment. You have looked down the barrel. Tell me what that was like. What was your experience of being near to death? How do you understand that experience?
Mel:

The time I assume you are referring to, when I had a hospital infection during my transplant, I was just too sick to take it all in. I was at my most vulnerable. This was at a time when my lymphoma-compromised immune system had been deliberately destroyed, as a part of the process of developing a new one (‘a kind of simulated car crash’ as the haematology registrar put it). My body had no defences of its own and I was reliant on powerful antibiotics to ward off the infection. I was thinking, if I could refer to my mental processes of the time in that way, that I had lived fully and if life was to end at that point, I had done well. I thought that if I was to leave this life and this world, to fall off the carousel at that point, it may not be qualitatively so different to any other point. I will have things that are incomplete at any point in life, whenever I leave, or am ejected from, the carousel. My thoughts, at that point of time in the hospital, were that if I was to survive, I would strive to ensure that I was constantly on the right path in life.

By the way, do you like the image of living as being on a carousel? It is widely applicable in my opinion. It would seem to me well aligned with your idea of the monotony of life under the sun that you speak so eloquently of in the first chapter of Ecclesiastes, you know the round and round in circles sameness of nature. It is more the pity that there were no carousels around when you were conceiving Ecclesiastes. I think the image would have really enhanced your writing. People may not have thought you so sombre, so ‘reeking of the stench of the tomb’ as Robinson would have it. Readers of your book may even detect a little gaiety in your writing had the metaphor been available to you.

Qoheleth:

(annoyed) Whose writing is under scrutiny here? Let us get back to the point. We can hold the image of the carousel, given that you find such joy in it. Let us assume for the moment that when you
finally fall off the carousel it is after a period of being condemned to life and a period of dementia or decrepitude. That could hardly be described as having been on the right path could it?

Mel:

No.

Qoheleth:

In imagining that scenario, would you be a colleague of mine in conceding that life is absurd? What purpose could you possibly see in being condemned to that sort of life, a life over which you can exercise no agency? What sense could you make of it? What sense could you make of God?

Mel:

(doesn’t reply)

Qoheleth:

(after an extended pause) We are seven hundred kilometres from Finisterre, is it going to take all that time to answer me? Surely you have given this some thought? You are fond of referring to The Karamazov Brothers’ and the question of theodicy raised by Ivan and directed to Alysha. I have simply substituted disease for abuse. Have you had your head in the sand for years, or is it simply that you can’t answer the question?

Mel:

I don’t think I can answer it, well at least not to your satisfaction. As long as I have my faculties about me, and I am in possession of my will and discipline, my personal resources you could say, I could probably make a go of some, but certainly not all, of the consequences of decrepitude. I can stand quite a lot of pain. I don’t go in for the ‘why me’ routine associated with life threatening illnesses, thus avoiding a lot of angst and resentment, which in turn must intensify suffering. If those personal
resources are interfered with, or destroyed, then life would not make sense, because the examined life is rendered a pipe dream.

**Qoheleth:**

So, like Ivan, are you going to give back your ticket?\(^{14}\) Ivan gave the ticket back on ethical grounds. Is dementia, which abuses the elderly and the not so elderly, not a reason for giving back your ticket, as much as is the innocent suffering of just one child, as with Ivan’s example? Or for that reason, to be rather more personal, is not cancer, which abuses everybody in its path, a compelling reason for giving back the ticket? You would be in a good position to answer that from an experiential as well as an intellectual perspective.

**Mel:**

One might say that I am in a far worse position in having a broad experience; I have rather more resources to deal with cancer than most. By the way, your emphasis on experiential learning didn’t serve you particularly well, given that your senses and experience confirmed for you that ‘life under the sun’ is absurd.

**Qoheleth:**

I don’t know how many times I have to remind you: this is not *my* autobiography.

**Mel:**

Alright, but you mustn’t chasten me if I quote you, or make reference to you, which I consider to be a perfectly reasonable thing to do in *my* autobiographical writing. I think I am taking something approaching your stance in the sense that I don’t claim to know much of God’s ways, but I do believe that there is some sense behind what admittedly appears as an absurd universe. I will never know what that sense is, given my limitations of thought and language. How could my limitations of language possibly provide the vocabulary for understanding God’s existence and God’s ways? This
position, one of faith if you like, is rather more palatable than concluding that there’s no sense at all and having to live with the consequences of drawing that conclusion.

**Qoheleth:**

So, for you, your ideas are based around what is ‘palatable’, that is, it is based on what makes you feel better amid the gloom, brought on by involvement in the dung heap of human existence? You choose what to believe by how it smooths the way for you! This is dilettantism at its worst is it not? And how does this fit in with your claims to be ‘honest’, something I must say you have made quite a song and dance about? And is this what ‘fragments’ is about? Choose what you like to make you feel good. Looks like a sop for fools and for the faint hearted to me.

**Mel:**

I can’t let that go without comment. If this world, which I concede can credibly be interpreted as ‘absurd’, was all there was, if it was the end of things, I am not sure where I could look for hope. It would be unlikely to be based around some idea of the perfectibility of the human species as a kind of telos, from my empirical observations over more than half a century, I can’t believe that human beings are perfectible, for essentially the same reasons that I can’t believe in Mother Goose. I am not lining up with the fantasies of the Utopians, and goodness knows there are fewer and fewer of them. Like the church, utopianism seems on the wane. Where I would line up is another question, I guess I would have to line up somewhere, I cannot live without hope.

**Qoheleth:**

Let’s leave the utopians aside. They are going nowhere, literally, so we can have no problems leaving them metaphorically. Does it comfort you to believe that there is ‘something’ of a positive nature after death? Does it take the sting out of it, as your St. Paul would say? Does this comfort you?
Mel:

Rather it comforts me to believe that there is something before death. I’m addressing the question of the Shankill philosopher in Belfast, when he asked whether there was life before death and the statement of the Railway Tunnel philosopher in Sydney, when she suggested that the only ‘end’ of our lives was to fill a box at the conclusion of it. I like to think that what I do in my life will not go to waste in another existence. I think an intelligent designer would not waste my lifetime’s rich experiences and development. If that was not the case then the whole thing would be absurd, whether the intelligent designer existed or not. For me, it would be ‘time to kill’, with the question to be answered being, ‘why bother killing it’? A supplementary question is ‘does it matter how we kill it’? This is a question with massive ethical ramifications.

Qoheleth:

And presumably, you would consider your life experiences would be worth preserving, depending on whether they conformed to the prescriptions of the writings you consider to be sacred. I assume that would be the criterion?

Mel:

For me, yes

Qoheleth:

I will come back to beliefs in due course, but for now I want to move back to what one of the commentators called my vision of ‘the hospice called life on earth’. Take the Railway Tunnel Philosopher, whoever he or she was, I imagine that you would not have too much trouble accommodating one of his assertions, namely ‘not my will’ and perhaps even ‘box to fill’, but what do you think of ‘time to kill’. Is that what life is about? It seems obvious to me that this is the case, but what about you?
Mel:

I agree with the commentator when he said that it is ‘very difficult to hum your tune’.

Qoheleth:

I asked what you think; I have no interest in what whoever it was said about humming my tune.

Mel:

I can’t accept that life has no telos, that life is just about killing time.

Qoheleth:

Why, when to me it is so obvious? Even if there is a telos, you will never know it. You are fond of Wittgenstein’s comment that the limits of your language are the limits of your world. You can never have the vocabulary of another existence. It can never be known to you. If there is a creator, that creator’s ways are unknown, unless the Creator revealed them, somehow. The creator is as vague and distant as Aristotle’s unmoved mover, and as ephemeral as Flew’s gardener. You are here and you can never have any idea of why. Is that not absurd? Leave aside all the arguments of theodicy and ethics, answer me, is that not absurd?

Mel:

I think that something can be known of the Creator. Not necessarily in pedagogical and semantic ways, as you seem to limit yourself to. For instance, when I am in wilderness areas, or on mountains where I have what I call the ‘long vision’, I can feel a great affinity with the creation. I feel that it welcomes me. I feel reassured about the Creator.

Qoheleth:

Even when that wilderness, those mountains, break your bones and tear your muscles and spill your blood, all the trials you have told me about? That is a strange way of welcoming the aspiring
contemplative. How is that different from not welcoming you? I could be excused for thinking that
the benignly indifferent universe that Mersault conceived of to be a whole lot less threatening than
what you are presenting.

**Mel:**

All I can say is that I would not swap places with Mersault. I want to believe that my existence has
some purpose to it.

**Qoheleth:**

So, how do you *know* that purpose? It is one thing to stand on a mountain and feel somehow
reassured about another existence, but what could you ever know of that other existence, given the
limitations we have spoken of?

**Mel:**

Holding a Christian view, I think that the message of the benevolence of God gives me hope and
gives me a telos that is worth striving for. It tells me that what I do in life is of value to the Creator, it
won’t be wasted by the creator when I have passed through. That is my hope. The Beatitudes of the
Sermon on the Mount I find particularly appealing, for they invert the values of a Western society
that the sociologist John Carroll refers to, quite aptly I think, as a ‘wreck’\textsuperscript{19}. In Carroll’s opinion, it is a
society that has come adrift from its traditions and heritage, both religious and cultural; it has lost its
way.

**Qoheleth:**

That is a hope meted out to the relatively few who have adopted the Christian tradition, or one of
the Christian traditions. Don’t speak of it as a unity, for disputation is the way of the splintered
Christian church. Not everyone can have access to hope in your scheme of things. Can hope lie in
this tradition you speak of? Consider the child you mentioned, the one you sat with in the hospital?
Where is the hope of God evident there? Not to mention the benevolence. My, we do tend to come back to theodicy, don’t we! Nor can the child have the mountain top experience, so what confidence can we have in this hope you speak of when it is portioned out to the few? I think your appearance with a removal order with the child’s name written on it was a whole lot more useful for the child, on the other hand, from what we know of abuse in care, we cannot even be assured of that. Your postulated creator may be benevolent as far as you are concerned, but I find it unconvincing as far as the children you were dealing with were concerned. And surely, the creator cannot be partial to just some of humanity. That is a major point made by the Grand Inquisitor, is it not? I feel sure that he will have a lot to say, when you speak with him about your God and how it is the human being, and not God, who is more empathic and caring toward the masses.

Mel:

There is no answer to the questions of theodicy. I am of the opinion that there never will be. It raises awkward questions. These are questions that make me feel emotionally uncomfortable. All I can say with regard to those questions is that I think it very reasonable that I give an account of myself in terms of what I have done about these situations, which you so rightly point out are awful. This is the pressing, personal and practical issue to arise for me from the unsolvable matter of theodicy, unsolvable from a Christian perspective that is.

Qoheleth:

You miss the point. It is God who must be held to account. The sum total of human misery surely counts against God, but more importantly than that even, God’s silence on matters of purpose and meaning count more heavily, and demand more justification, as I have pointed out in Ecclesiastes.
Mel:

I can’t account for God. As you say, I have no language or vocabulary to do so. All I can do is follow the injunctions of faith and endeavour to act as justly and compassionately as I can, this is what is required of me. I know this will sound entirely unsatisfactory to you, but it is the best I can offer.

Qoheleth:

Yes, that account is definitely not good enough, but what are these ‘injunctions of faith’ you talk of?

Mel:

As an example, the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount are the injunctions I take as authoritative. They deride what modern Western Society foregrounds as being that which should be sought after with vigour: money, sex and status, with some violence added to the pot pourri for entertainment.

Qoheleth:

Even if I was to grant that these injunctions of faith as you call them are worthwhile, these Beatitudes about the merciful and the meek and the compassionate and so on, I see no evidence of these coming from a benevolent creator. If these are seen by you as authoritative, I wonder why they are so, as the creator does not follow them, as evidenced by the children you refer to whose sufferings are preposterous as well as meaningless.

Mel:

I can’t respond to these criticisms of yours any more credibly than Alysha did to Ivan lx

Qoheleth:

Good, then God’s actions, or inactions remain a mystery, that is what I have held all along and this is central to my contention that life is absurd. The contradictions that caused me to question the
Wisdom tradition, in which I was schooled, hold over the centuries. If you were to acknowledge that God’s ways are inscrutable, then we would be theologically much closer and you would have nothing to justify. Claiming to have unravelled something of the mystery pushes you beyond a simple appeal to faith and into the arena of explaining that mystery of God, about which you claim to know something. Acknowledge that God’s ways are inscrutable and save yourself being caught in impossible binds. You could even keep a faith, of sorts, for it is not based on claimed knowledge.

Mel:

That is what I simply can’t acknowledge.

Qoheleth:

Because you are fearful?

Mel:

Partly. The world of the unmoved mover has little appeal to me. It is akin to there being no God at all.

Qoheleth:

You want a Mother God, rather like Mother Goose. You want to be nurtured, have your hand held. You want to be succoured again. You want to regress. You want all to be well as you are embraced in your little cocoon.

Mel:

I don’t want everything to be ‘well’, being cancer free and that sort of thing. I just want things to make sense. I don’t want to be immersed in your world of the absurd. As far as wanting things to be ‘happy’ and ‘secure’, I wouldn’t be reading the Sermon on the Mount if that were so. There are few things more disturbing than that tract. To take that seriously is to put myself on the periphery of the
values and aspirations of the society in which I live, a society whose aspirations and values make little sense to me. In that way, I am rather like you. You also found those aspirations, money, sex, fame and so on to be a chasing after the wind.

_Qoheleth:_

I suppose I find some common ground with you in that I find those things are a chasing after the wind, when confronted with the reality and finality of death. A good meal here and there and the oblivion of sleep is all that the enquiring person can find some solace in; the occasional small, fleeting pleasure. Death renders human existence absurd. But, back to the wretches here, in this place. They quite probably had no good meals in their lifetime of poverty and servitude. Was there ‘life before death for them?’ Hardly. And the Third World of today? Well, you have done a very poor job responding to my questions of theodicy in your own affluent culture, so I won’t proceed further down that Third World pathway as you have already conceded defeat.

Tell me, Reverend Doctor, you have intimated that you are well disposed to the Beatitudes. You have said that they are that to which you aspire. They are the things that provide you some hope, as you believe the values of your society to be deficient at best and worthless at worst. The thing that strikes me about the Beatitudes is that they are unattainable. This was central to the Grand Inquisitor’s critique, was it not? Why take on something where, inevitably, you will fail. (amused) Maybe this was why there were so many eager Christian martyrs; they were all keen to break the cycle of failure. Was death a great enticement?

_Mel:_

I don’t see any great enticement in death, other than in the case of dementia or decrepitude.

_Qoheleth:_

But you concede what I said about the Beatitudes being unattainable?
Mel:

Yes.

Qoheleth:

Addicted to failure?

Mel:

I think, rather, that I find myself in the position of Mr Savage in Brave New World\textsuperscript{lxiv}; I find myself out of step with the values of a society that is essentially turning away from death, much like Holbein’s ‘Ambassadors’, a society embracing what I see as distractions. I would much prefer to fail at the Beatitudes than succeed at society’s goals. Much like you I suspect.

Qoheleth:

Both pursuits are absurd and a chasing after the wind as far as I am concerned, but I am not your reference point. Are you trying to undermine my ongoing critique by courting favour with me, by flattery?

Mel:

Definitely not.

Qoheleth:

Good, because you were about to chalk up another failure. (mocking) Perhaps we should try to present you in a slightly better light than you have succeeded in doing so far? How about a Lucky and Pozzo interlude? But no recitations about tennis!\textsuperscript{lxv} A funny story perhaps, but linked to death, as long as death is not presented in a threatening or menacing way. One cannot be morbid in contemporary society which foregrounds entertainment. Tell a story, Reverend Doctor. It can be
inserted into your text, as I have inserted some wisdom tradition writing in mine. An apologetic almost. Tell a story, Reverend Doctor.

**Mel:** (hesitant) If you insist.

**Qoheleth:**

I do! I do!

**Mel:**

Very well then. A colleague of mine was in a two minister parish placement. His senior minister was a dignified, highly educated man, seen in church circles as an unsurpassed orator in homiletics and liturgy. He was highly regarded for his eloquence when performing funeral services. The senior minister was conducting a graveside funeral service at a local cemetery where the following event took place. The senior minister, when gesticulating grandly during his homily, took a small step backward and tumbled into the adjacent grave which was being prepared for an interment. This grave was dug to about half the required depth. Fortunately, perhaps surprisingly, the senior minister was uninjured. He was hauled out of the grave by the funeral attendants, in as dignified a way as possible, and resumed the service as though nothing had happened. No one at the graveside responded in any way. They were probably too startled and obviously had no experience to draw upon regarding how to act in the situation. The senior minister went on to resume and finish the service in his usual dignified manner. After the service my colleague drove to the funeral parlour with the funeral attendants. On the way, once outside the gates and outside the view of any attendees, the driver stopped the hearse whereupon everyone burst into uncontrolled and uproarious laughter. I quite wondered how some of the attendees responded once outside the cemetery and the requirements of decorum. The following Sunday, the senior minister, who always formally processed into the church to begin the service, entered the church to the strains of the organ playing the introit tune, ‘Up from the Grave He Arose’. My colleague did not relate how the
senior minister responded to his organist’s sense of humour. I must say, though, I would have appreciated it.

Qoheleth:

Amusing, certainly. Now that Lucky has concluded, let us resume. You have been unconvincing thus far around the topic of death, and its associations. What say we give you another chance, an opportunity to redeem yourself? You are fond of telling the story of the scales of judgement when it comes to your cancer, run that by me again. Let’s see how this holds up to some scrutiny.

Mel:

Very well then. As I have already related, when reference is made to cancer the image of the Grim Reaper is often invoked. There are, however, some positive aspects to cancer, at least to some cancers. Specifically, my experience of cancer has a positive side to it. In the course of my reflections I have pondered my experience of cancer. I have visualised this experience as something like the scales of justice. Where do the scales most often tilt? Is it most frequently toward the side of benefits, or on the side of the very obvious detrimental aspects of cancer? I envision the process playing out this way: I am at the point of diagnosis and a person enters the consulting room with a laptop computer. This person makes the following pronouncement as she opens a program,

‘I have discovered a reference here to a drug that can cure you of your cancer immediately, but first I want you to look at this video. There you will see the events of your life as they will unfold over the next ten years of your experience with cancer. When you have viewed this, you can tell me whether you want the medication administered. We have the drug here (shows me a pill). The decision is yours’.

I settle back and view the video.
Qoheleth:

So, your answer is?

Mel:

Well, I vacillate, but I think these past ten years have been richer than the ones I would have had through the miraculous cure option. The scales have tilted more often to the positive side than the negative.

Qoheleth:

Allow me to borrow the Caterpillar’s request to Alice, ‘Explain yourself.’ But make sure you make a better effort than Alice!

Mel:

I shall try. The benefits are those that have accrued to me from my interaction with other people and also from my resilience in enduring my cancer treatment following my diagnosis. My cancer has given me insights into the character of people who supported me during this trying time. I saw virtues and qualities in people that would likely not have been exhibited to anything like the same extent had I not had a life-threatening illness and been so dependent. I have deepened my relationships with my son and daughter and other friends as a result of this illness. That alone makes me incline to the benefits axis and preferring the pathway I have come rather than the administration of the hypothetical miraculous drug. The benefits I refer to extend far beyond the periods of treatment and have had a major, perhaps the major, effect on relationships.

In terms of my own experiences, I have noted that the administration of chemotherapy was the most trying event I have ever had to endure and that over a period of more than four months. I am a person with many qualities to draw upon when faced with crises. This was never more evident than when I worked overnight in the child protection crisis unit. I was known as a person who remained
calm in a crisis, of which there were many in that work, and I was seen as a person who was good to go to call-outs with because of those qualities. When the chemotherapy was administered those qualities of calm, patience, intellectual insight and decisiveness were severely diminished by the chemicals. It was just sheer doggedness that brought me through. From this treatment experience, I learned that even in the most difficult of circumstances that I had faced I could prevail over adversity. This experience reinforced my confidence in my capacities and helped me make bold decisions following my treatment, such as undertaking and completing an eleven day hike through the Kakadu National Park soon after the completion of the treatment.

In reading the work of literary critic Philip Toynbee I was encouraged by a particular statement of his, which he made toward the end of his life. It had a similar effect on me that a good metaphor can have, it encouraged broader thinking. Toynbee said, referring to his illness, that while all illness demoralizes, absolute illness demoralizes absolutely. By ‘absolute’, he meant life-threatening. Toynbee added a rejoinder that there are some people whose virtues rise to meet it. I thought that, in my case, my virtues rose to meet it. While I am not looking for acclaim for my efforts, having discerning people reinforce my evaluation of my efforts during my treatment was encouraging.

I have also found that my satisfaction from challenging activities, which have continued post cancer, has been significantly enhanced. I attribute this to the heightened appreciation of my ability to make bold decisions and of my formidable will, which restored my fitness to pre-cancer levels and allowed me to undertake endurance activities once more. I have a much greater appreciation of my body and my fitness than in pre-cancer days where I saw my body as delivering what was ‘only to be expected’, given my fitness level.

Cancer has become a part of my identity. I define myself, but certainly not exclusively, as a cancer patient. I do this because cancer has what I imagine advertising people might well refer to as an ‘image problem’. It is something akin to the image problem for sharks, crocodiles and snakes. What I have done post-cancer is very unusual and I often engage people in conversation about my activities,
remote area walking, long distance pilgrimages by foot and bicycle and the like. When the conversation is well underway, I mention that I am a patient with a life-threatening cancer. Mostly, people react out of the stereotype, finding my activities hard to believe in the context of my being a current cancer patient. As an example, when I was cycling, unsupported, from Sydney to Uluru, I stopped my laden bicycle at a road house at Cadney Park, in South Australia not far from Coober Pedy. I walked into the road house perspiring heavily. A man sitting at a table saw me pull up and come inside. He remarked that he wished that he was as fit and well as I was. I could not let the opportunity slip to provide a little education. I replied that I was sure that he wished that he was as fit as me, but I doubted that he would wish that he was as well as me, as I had a life threatening cancer. I was disbelieved. I was not able to convince the man of my bona fides until I produced a card I carried during my recent treatment. The card stated that I was a cancer patient receiving chemotherapy, and that should my temperature be elevated I was to receive priority treatment at the hospital casualty ward. This was enough to convince the gentleman. We then proceeded to have an interesting discussion about cancer.

I do not actively seek recognition, but I have a feeling of deep satisfaction that my character traits and virtues continue to rise to meet my life-threatening illness. I have come to know and deeply respect myself for that effort. Cancer has put me to the test and I was not found wanting. Without the intervention of Lymphoma, I would not have had the opportunity to develop in the way that I have. My Judgement about having cancer is that I do not resent having it. In fact, I would say that I have tended to think that I have benefitted more from living with cancer than I would have done living without it.

**Qoheleth:**

I wonder having listened to you, whether you are not, after all, absorbed in your cancer story. Is this not a ‘career in cancer’?
Mel:
For me, cancer is a just an innocent calamity and secondary to other things I am doing in life, but it often enhances those things.

Qoheleth:
What if it stopped enhancing those things? What if it began to take them from you?

Mel:
I would be enquiring of the haematologist what the possible courses of action were. I would be enquiring whether those courses of action, combined with my will and discipline, could wrest the advantage from Lymphoma and I could resume my activities as before.

Qoheleth:
And if it could not be done?

Mel:
If all that was open to me was a year or two of decrepitude, then I would be content to decline treatment and ‘declare the innings closed’.

Qoheleth:
Is that, then, what we could inscribe on your gravestone? ‘He declared the innings closed’?

Mel:
I will not have a gravestone. I want my ashes scattered. I mentioned to my son that he might scatter my ashes at Lake Oberon in the Western Arthur Range, but he demurred, suggesting that it was too difficult a place to access and involved a week’s walking. He is right and I have settled for Mount
Solitary here in the Blue Mountains. But, if I did have a gravestone that would be a very good inscription.

Qoheleth:

Declaring the innings closed is often seen as a bold move. I acknowledge that you have done some bold things in life, pointless, but bold. Do you need to be bold in death?

Mel:

I like to think that will be the case with me when my time comes. I like to think that I have lived with courage and I trust that I will die the same way.

Qoheleth:

I hope that you are among Toynbee’s ‘few’, for it would not do for the health of Western capitalism if large numbers of people all of a sudden lost their fear of death. It would send the stock market into decline. Whole industries are reckoning on the fear of death continuing to prevail to support the ideology of the ‘infinite possibilities of cure’. You owe it to your country to struggle to the end, to consume until the last; your country needs you to contribute to the GNP until your last breath, fight the enemy to the end, or better still beyond the end. Think of the heroics associated with cryogenics\(^{\text{xix}}\). Mass ‘sporting declarations’ do not contribute to the GNP, to Queen and country.

Mel:

Thank you, Teacher, for those stirring words, but now we must be head off among the living to find an albergue in Navarrete.
Conversation Three.

(At the town square, Carrion, and beyond.)

‘For I have known them all already, known them all

have known the mornings, evenings, afternoons,

I have measured out my life with coffee spoons. ‘


‘The age of lust is giving birth and both the parents ask

the nurse to tell them fairy tales, on both sides of the glass’.

Leonard Cohen. ‘Stories of the Street’
Photo with statue at Carrion
Qoheleth and I have emerged from one of the albergues in the town of Carrion. Carrion offers a variety of accommodation to pilgrims on the Camino. Albergues vary in the quality of accommodation that they offer and some leave a lot to be desired in terms of basic cleanliness and hygiene. On the whole, pilgrims have low expectations in terms of comfort, but they would hope that they do not encounter bed bugs, a scourge of the Camino and a talking point among pilgrims en route to Santiago de Compostella. Qoheleth and I emerge from the albergue we stayed in. Qoheleth is scratching his arms and is clearly in a bad mood as he turns to me and we begin our conversation, which commences as we set forth along the road leading out of Carrion.

Qoheleth:

Damn bed bugs! Wouldn’t you just know it! Being assaulted by bed bugs is not in my job description! I should not have to put up with this.

Mel:

So, the worst imaginable disaster has just befallen you! But you of all people shouldn’t be daunted. (mockingly) You, who had no fear in the face of the harbinger of death. You, who can resign yourself to the meaninglessness of existence. Surely a few bed bugs will not perturb the courageous philosopher, who can face life in all its meaninglessness? I expected that you would remain undaunted by minor inconveniences.

Qoheleth:

And I expected some empathy from a person trained in pastoral care!

Mel:

I expected a more detached, a more Stoic response from one who had come to the conclusion that life on earth was demonstrably absurd. I expected more gratitude; the attack of the bed bugs would
serve to affirm your views, another piece of empirical evidence to advance your argument for an absurd world. Why are these creatures here when all they can do is torment us?

Qoheleth:

Life is demonstrably absurd without recourse to bed bugs! Let’s get back on track with my critique, it will take my mind off this wretched itching.

Mel:

Distractions? I thought that this little episode might serve a useful purpose, serve to launch you into a critique of a society ‘chasing after the wind’ diverting minds from bothersome things like death. I thought that you might go straight for the jugular, Holbein-like, and deride us for cowering in the face of death and entertaining ourselves through to the grave. (cupping his ear as though listening intently to sound) Hebel! Hebel! Hebel! I can hear the refrain now.

Qoheleth:

I will ignore your caustic and mocking comments and get on with my allotted task. As you have raised the matter, then by all means let’s pursue it. After all, we have Marx making his famous statement that religion is the opiate of the people, distracting people from understanding their oppression by the ruling class by promising a better world in the hereafter. The tranquillizers of faith! I was sure to want to question you on that at some stage. That’s a subject that you, as a clergyman, would have an opinion on I feel sure. Marx thought that religion was a distraction that kept people oppressed by contributing to false consciousness and was thereby a part of the infrastructure that supported the dominant mode of production. Whatever the situation was in Marx’s time with regard to the power of the church, religion is certainly a lesser force than was the case in the nineteenth century and, I should add, it is common knowledge that it is still declining. Certainly religion does not command participation in the prominent social discourses as it seemed to do in Marx’s time. All we have now is Public Theology where marginal schools in some universities
are trying to carve out a place for their critique of social issues, but it seems to me that, by and large, the public, have little idea of just what Public Theology is. I suspect that it is a tiny minority who have even heard of it. I have often heard the word ‘post-Christian’ bandied around when the nature of contemporary society is the topic of conversation. This begs the question of whether society was ever ‘Christian’ in the first place. But leaving that aside, would Marx still think that religion is the opiate of the masses, if he was living now?

Mel:

I doubt it. I think that he was right when he conjectured that there were ‘opiates’ which promoted a false consciousness by deflecting attention away from the excesses of the capitalist enterprise of the time. Religion may well have aided the development of a false consciousness in past times by the concept of the next life being better than this one. And ‘this one’, in the beginnings of the industrial revolution, was materially very sparse for most people, with the exception being, of course, those who owned the means of production. The socio-economic situation of Western society, while it has improved in absolute terms, with regard to the provision of housing and health care and the like, still exhibits huge disparities in ownership and wealth. Religion does not lessen the painful reality of this, although some churches do raise objection that such inequality should have no place in a wealthy country like Australia. I find it difficult, though, to conceive that anyone could seriously hold that religion is the contemporary opiate of the masses.

In my opinion there is still an opiate of the masses, but it is not religion. I think that sex, or more accurately, the commodification of sex, has replaced religion as the opiate of the masses. It serves a similar kind of function to that which Marx claimed for religion in the nineteenth century. I think that the commodification of sex encourages a quietude of the masses.

Qoheleth:

That is not a politically correct statement!
Mel:

It was not meant to be.

Qoheleth:

There could be trouble looming from comments like that! You could be castigated for political incorrectness. But let us consider what you have said. (amused) Perhaps sex has become the religious ritual of the day, rather than replaced the traditional religious rituals. Has it become the religious opiate? ‘This is my condom, wear it in remembrance of me’? Sex as the new ritual, the condom as the new vestment? The bed as the new communion table? The orgasm as the new god to be worshipped. All are invited to participate in this new ritual, (sings)

‘Come just as you are

Come and see

Come and receive

Come and live forever.\textsuperscript{lxx}

Mel:

Yes, and don’t ask any questions, particularly about commitment, or honesty and transparency, or the fear of tarnishing an image.

Qoheleth:

I remember you mentioning a young student wearing the T-Shirt with the caption, ‘love will tear us apart’. I suspect this has some bearing on the matter for you. Am I correct?
Mel:

Yes, I rather think so. I am not sure what line she was advocating, but it certainly wasn’t commitment. (distracted) Commitment seemed to be the ‘fly in the ointment’ in that case. And I will cite the source of your metaphor.\textsuperscript{lxvi}

By the way, you have a fine voice. You could make a good living as a cantor singing the Psalms in one of the big city synagogues.

Qoheleth:

Back to the opiates! Does commitment have to enter into it? I mean what is the problem with the masses killing time with casual sex if it distracts from the spectre of death, and the whole depressing event of living. It is not unlike what Shaw wrote about in \textit{Major Barbara}\textsuperscript{lxvii} where Bodger, the whisky distiller, enabled the poor to cope with their lives through the medium of his distillery. Why they bothered coping was a question which Shaw failed to ask, but that is another matter. And bear in mind, the masses are people who, lacking reflective powers such as mine, have fewer resources to even address what they may well regard as the disconcerting, sometimes terrifying questions of death. Why not just entertain themselves through to the grave? That is no more or less pointless than anything else?

Mel:

So, ‘time to kill’ is not far wide of the mark?

Qoheleth:

I think it hits the mark.
Mel:

By the way, you did not seem to find the outlets of pleasure particularly satisfying. In fact, if I read you correctly, all your rampant indulgences achieved was to lead you to satiety and disgust. It seems to me that you ...

Qoheleth:

Let me remind you, again, this is not my autobiography!

Mel:

Quite so ... I am not one for sex as a distraction. For me it does require commitment. Commitment makes sex something significant and intimate between a committed couple; it can deepen commitment and deepen love, most importantly, as far as I am concerned, it means that one doesn’t acquire an exchange value in the market, depending on how closely you conform to the image of the ‘sexy’ person. You know, ‘This one is worth a bigger investment of my time and money than that one’. (muses) Back in school, somewhere, we learned of an economic term, ‘the Law of Diminishing Marginal Utility’. That has a lovely ring to it, doesn’t it?

Qoheleth:

No, I must say I am not enthralled. I hope that you are not intending to chant it to me over the next twenty kilometres.

Mel:

No, I will simply explain it. Basically, it says that something you experience, or consume, for the second time, let’s say ice creams, will be less satisfying than on the first occasion and so on in an infinite regress. All things being equal, I think this tends toward correctness, if the thing, or
commodity, doesn’t change in its essence. If ice creams remain ice creams, orgasms remain orgasms, unless something makes them qualitatively different, then I think the ‘law’ holds. For me it is the increasing depth of love and commitment that makes the sexual act something that defies the law of diminishing marginal utility. Otherwise, I think the ‘law’ tends to hold.

Qoheleth:

I wonder, rather, whether you would have made these comments as a thirty year old, rather than a sixty-eight year old? When you first saw the Philosopher of the Railway Tunnel’s comment, what were you thinking at that point? Was sex, as your proffered opiate of the masses, on your mind as a way of filling in the time before filling the box? Or were you drawing on other ideas?

Mel:

I’ll draw on one of your refrains: ‘Who knows’? What I suspect is that commodified sex seems to me to be a massive social distraction. It permeates everything. Take advertising as an indicator; sex is used to sell every prominent commodity from perfumes to heavy machinery: we are being persuaded by advertising to believe that it is ‘sexy’ to drive a Mack truck. In my, albeit brief career as a driver of heavy vehicles, I never found that to be the case, perhaps I needed more time to be persuaded. Commodified sex, so tied up as it is with image can be hugely distracting. Separated from depth of love and commitment, I think I could find many better ways than sex of using my time, rather than ‘killing it’, as the Railway Tunnel Philosopher would have it, but I would probably go for something other than a good book and an apple as Noel Coward suggests.

Qoheleth:

If you feel like dicing with making another politically incorrect statement, what is this something other?
Mel:

The something other is the feeling in my body, as I progress through four hours of the long climbs on my Mount Victoria cycle endurance circuit. The pushing of the physical and discipline limits. The awareness of every muscle that is marshalled for the effort; the euphoric effect of the endorphins as they kick in a half hour or so into the climbs; the feeling of satisfaction having marshalled, in one superlative effort, all of my energies and physical and mental toughness to meet the challenge, that is incomparable. That is the something other.

Qoheleth:

I must say, that is an adroit way of avoiding criticism, given that only a tiny minority could undertake the ride and hence make the comparison and therefore be in a position to offer informed comment. Most people cannot have any semblance of hope in managing that circuit. I am not letting you get away with failing to answer my original question. Shall I restate it?

Mel:

No, no, there is no need.

Qoheleth:

Then, answer, if you will. Or have you reneged on the contract, sorry the ‘agreement’?

Mel:

No, the agreement remains intact. Yes, I think that I would have made a similar response at thirty. At thirty, I was not entirely disenchanted with Marx, but certainly I had questions about some of his ideas, particularly after re-visiting the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew’s Gospel, which is one of the most challenging tracts I have ever read, particularly the Beatitudes. If Marx had ever read this tract, then he certainly read and understood it differently to me. If, having read this, he still held religion to be the opiate of the masses, then in my opinion it would have been a very superficial
reading, alternatively he could be accused of deceit to achieve his ends. Unless, of course, he was talking about the institution of the church, rather than religion, then he could have been on firmer ground ... 

Qoheleth:

(annoyed) The answer, if you will!!!

Mel:

My apologies. To answer your question, finally, I express views now that are not unlike those of my thirties. I find making love to my wife a very meaningful experience, as long as it does not become the quest for the Holy Grail, the orgasm. If that comes to the forefront of my mind, then I am ‘having sex’, not making love and I become aware of it being all very mechanical. The event becomes something like a golfer being coached to execute the ‘perfect’ drive off the tee. A mark is achieved for each execution, depending upon how closely the drive was to technical perfection. This is all rather distant from ‘knowing each other in delight and tenderness’ as the rites for the sacrament of marriage\textsuperscript{lxv} would have it.

I avoid the term ‘sex’; it sounds altogether too much like a commodity, too trivialising. It is hard to resist that way of thinking when ‘sex’ is such an integral part of the sales pitch, of that massive apparatus of persuasion, the advertising industry, and now of course of that increasing mass of drivel, the ‘social media’. That which gets caught up in the selling process tends to become banal, so it seems to me, and that which panders to the social media cult of the ‘mini celebrity’, is even more banal.

Qoheleth:

So, to take up your drive from the tee analogy, you see yourself as a kind of sexual Arnold Palmer; that legendary maestro of professional golf, your approach is unorthodox.
Mel:

No, more like a sexual Gary Player, that other golf legend and contemporary of the flamboyant Arnold Palmer. I am a thoughtful ‘golfer’. My sexuality is much more reflective of my approach to life. I am not a candidate for one night stands.

Qoheleth:

A wowser!

Mel:

I would say discerning. I tend to be on the margins of the herd; I keep it vaguely in sight, but act more deliberately. I am more ‘inner’ than ‘other’ directed, to again use Reisman’s terms\(^{lxxvi}\).

Qoheleth:

I am not sure that Reisman had that kind of application in mind when he coined the terms.

Mel:

Perhaps not, but who knows what he might have had in mind. Your own case could be illustrative here...

Qoheleth:

(interrupting) Let me make a comment, by way of a more immediate observation. There appear to me to be a goodly number of pilgrims to Santiago who would think you a wowser, the prime purpose of their intentional walk seems to be to bed as many fellow pilgrims as they can.

Mel:

Teacher, you have many fine qualities, which I would be delighted to acquire during the course of this pilgrimage, however your ubiquitous cynicism is not numbered among them.
Qoheleth:

Are you disagreeing with me?

Mel:

No. I am saying that we tend to notice different things, perhaps it is more accurate to say that we emphasize different things.

Qoheleth:

A trivial comment, if I may say so. But there is a sense in which that is quite appropriate, given our topic, if you can call it that. However, as we are on the topic of trivia, it seems a good juncture to raise the topic of the church. The Church has a propensity for indulging in trivia, does it not?

Mel:

I tend to agree.

Qoheleth:

Good, let us interrogate this a little, as the church has been a pervasive presence in your life and, it seems, influence on your life. The church is a rich field of exploration for researchers of trivia. Think of all the fuss about the ordination of gay people. Here we have the church obsessed with a topic that the vast majority of people outside the Church, and many inside, could not give a damn about. The context of this ‘debate’, (is that what you call it?) came against a backdrop of millions of people starving, dying and being raped in wars, becoming homeless, becoming refugees, and this spread among both the First and Third Worlds. Against this backdrop the church devotes whole Synod and Assembly gatherings to gay ordination. Does this not strike you as absurd? You deride me for whinging about the trivia, as you term it, of bed bugs; but does not the Church specialize in getting itself embroiled in matters that are at best of peripheral importance, such as Gay ordination etcetera. (cynically) Or is this perhaps an example of the church providing entertainment? And it
certainly did entertain many who watched the church shoot itself in the foot, so to speak, with the fracas about gay ordination. Whole congregations split, many members abandoned the established churches and defected to the fundamentalist churches, or left the churches altogether, did they not? One could be excused for thinking that the Great Commission for the church was ‘go into the world and entertain’. Is this perhaps a part of the Church’s outreach in the world, part of their, your, mission?

Mel:

I get the feeling that you have been itching, and there is no pun intended here, to ask that question. To have the ordination of gay people as the focus of National Assembly meetings in the Uniting Church did strike me as absurd in the wider context that you accurately describe. The question can be reasonably asked as to why the church should knowingly promote schisms and devote its increasingly scarce resources to this matter, when there were the massive questions of moment to address, such as those you have pointed out. I would like to say something derisive about this, but how could I improve on the original?

Qoheleth:

I’m sure I don’t know. But let’s ask a few more questions. Let’s make this a little more personal.

Mel:

As you wish.

Qoheleth:

I take it that you must be dismayed at times with the church’s propensity to focus on, or become obsessed with, things that are peripheral, ecclesiastically parochial things, things of minor importance according to many people, both secular and religious.
Mel:

Yes, that is true ... Where are you leading with this?

Qoheleth:

Where am I leading? Your question surprises me. I am leading to my next, and I suggest obvious question! Why do you stay within the church?

Mel:

Hmmm. I think I see where you may be leading. Let me commence by saying that life within the diversity of the Church can become difficult at times. Battle lines are forever drawn within the church between conservatives and liberals: roughly speaking between those who have a more literal reading of the Scripture on the one hand and those who have a much less literal reading of Scripture on the other. In spite of some striving for an artificial ‘consensus’ in various meetings, and few are happy with the artificial outcomes, these fundamental positions are never going to be brought into an alignment, they are incommensurable. As well, the Church hierarchy is similar to secular hierarchies in my experience. Organisations I have worked within all had Machiavellian undercurrents. In spite of this, I stay within the church for a number of reasons, some of them social, the church provides friendships and structures in life. But the main reason is because it has the most potential for good of any grouping of human beings of whom I am aware, but I do understand that there will be questions put to me about that statement.

Qoheleth:

Quite so, and let me be the first to pose one. We have talked about the Church often being embroiled in trivia and you have conceded the veracity of my position in this regard. You concede that the church has Machiavellian undercurrents, as with other organisations. You concede that there are incommensurable theological and hermeneutic positions within the church. How then do
you make what I can only term the fantastic leap to an assertion that the Church has the most potential for good of any grouping of human beings? Don't keep me in suspense. Solve the mystery for me.

Mel:

I think the Church has the potential to challenge what I regard as an absurd delusion held in Western society that we, the human race, are ‘perfectible’. When we hold this view, we are susceptible to the intrigues of charlatans, who peddle their various forms of utopia. A great strength of Jesus’ teaching, as far as I am concerned, is that he did not make appeals to the collective. He did not speak of creating the great society, or the ideal society, but made his appeal to the individual. He talked to the individual human, not the human race. As Graham Greene noted in The Quiet American, and Dostoevsky noted in The Karamazov Brothers the dangerous people are those full of love for humanity, but who have little time for people.

Jesus spoke about repentance and this does not have a lot of appeal in a society that still holds, increasingly tenuously I suspect, to the concept of human perfectibility. It seems to me, however, that the church in fact often emphasizes the collective as opposed to the individual. In some ways, it seems to me, the church often differs little from various secular social welfare organisations pursuing ‘social issues’. I sometimes wonder if the church knows what its ‘core business’ is.

Qoheleth:

I reiterate, why are you within the church? Nothing you have said convinces me that the church has this wonderful potential for good as you assert. By the way, I note with some curiosity that you went counter to the trend when you went from social work to ordained ministry. I assume this was not just another instance of your propensity to go against trends, but a definite choice and one that was obviously a big shift in your life circumstances.
Mel:

Yes, it was a huge change. I had spent a long time in child protection. This was a time that had many frustrations. There was a distinct tendency in the field of child protection to psychopathologize the individual, when it seemed to me that many of the issues I confronted were the products of the social structure and social planning. They were matters of deprivation and lack of social and educational opportunity. The creation of underclass ghettos by the State generated many of the problems I was confronted with, but there was an expectation that the interpretations of situations of abuse would be psychological and a-political. I was uncomfortable to collude in perpetuating this myth. I wanted to explore other, more all-encompassing understandings of life, rather than accepting the psychological, reductionist ‘party-line’ and the hidden agenda that it was assumed we would all ascribe to. Questioning government policy and social inequality, which in my opinion lay at the heart of the problems I was dealing with, was not an acceptable role of the public servant. And this was not some futile attempt on my part to wind back the clock to Marx. It was a critique of the psychological blinkers that are handed out in the training of new DoCS recruits.

Qoheleth:

You speak of your, what can we call it, your disillusion within child protection. I find it difficult to imagine why you thought, if you did so, that the church was going to be any better than the ‘toe-the-party-line’ state bureaucracy you liberated yourself from. So, are you equally disillusioned with the church?

Mel:

I think disillusioned is too strong a word. I have disappointments at times, but these are often due to my own shortcomings and lack of knowledge, or insight and the like, and not simply attributable to moribund actions of the church. My ordination vows make me subject to the discipline of the Presbytery and an integral part of this is that I have to reflect deeply on the positions taken by the
church, particularly when I have doubts, or when I have formed contrary opinions. This goes some way to preventing me making ill-considered, or poorly considered judgements.

**Qoheleth:**

I can hardly recognize the church you are referring to here with the one I see. I am a good empirical observer, as you know. I see a church where moribund actions are the order of the day. The church’s intelligentsia are concentrated in theological faculties. It seems to me, and to people like the theologian Stanley Hauerwas, that there is a great gulf here between the congregations and the theological faculties. Whether this is a ‘problem’, or not, is a matter for conjecture. It seems to me that the church’s intelligentsia contributes little to the life of the congregations. It seems to me that they ‘fiddle while Rome Burns’, in other words while member numbers diminish and the church moves rapidly toward a collapse. Or, are the theologians really going to turn it all around for the church? I can hardly think of anything more unlikely, but what are your thoughts?

**Mel:**

Yes, the church needs something more than its academics to resuscitate it. Much academic writing seems a chasing after the wind as you would have it. The church, it seems to me, needs to set its own agenda, to understand and act upon what it considers to be its core business. The church needs release from its own propensity to react to rather than lead with regard to social matters. The church needs to have a confidence in its capacity to define the critical matters that need to be addressed, rather than simply, as it mostly does in my opinion, take its lead from society and follow, often uncritically. It needs to be pro-active, to put things out there for consideration. This is much more easily said than done, given that the church hardly has an audible social voice anymore. But the church, if it is to be proactive, needs to begin at home, with reflection on directions and ends, on its telos. It must define its core business and, in doing so, must take into account presenting Jesus’
challenge and appeal to the individual and not simply focus on issues of the collective. The Gospels call for radical changes in our understanding of life.

**Qoheleth:**

So, you *are* disillusioned. (amused) There will be Grand Inquisitors after your head bellowing ‘Too hard for people’. I can hear it now.

**Mel:**

Who knows?

**Qoheleth:**

This response of yours to my question of why you remain in the church is, I must say, confused and feeble, totally unconvincing. Why you remain in the church remains a mystery. So, let us approach it from another angle; maybe that will prove more satisfying. What have you gained from all your years in the church, apart from friendships that is?

**Mel:**

I assume that you are referring to the positive things?

**Qoheleth:**

Of course.

**Mel:**

I have been reassured, I have been challenged, and I have found what I call a ‘calm at the core’.
Qoheleth:

I will be interested to hear about this reassurance of yours, particularly as you were floundering with my questions of theodicy. You have also roundly criticized the church, this does not suggest the thought of a person who has been reassured by the institution. You are not going to get a good reception from the Grand Inquisitor when you encounter him in Santiago, there is nothing surer than that. Let’s start our enquiry though, with what you are calling the ‘calm at the core’. One wonders how, if you claim to have a perspective on social justice, and I believe that you have, you could live with a sense of calm in a world that you see, if I am not mistaken, as grossly unjust and horrifically violent. There are many deeply disturbing things that happen in this world. If you are to be involved with endeavours to address them, as I believe you have been, how do you develop, let alone maintain, a ‘calm at the core’?

Mel:

Let me try to answer this by referring to a seminar I went to with my wife, who has been involved in early childhood education for more than twenty years. The seminar introduced me, an amateur, to a way of looking at an aspect of early childhood learning. But it did much more that, it gave me some insights into my own disposition, and a metaphor for better understanding its aetiology. The presenter showed a video clip of a child and its parent, in something like a shopping mall, if I remember correctly. The parent was sitting in a central position. The environment was a new one for the child, new and exciting, but also a little foreboding. The child would make forays out to explore what was an exciting and challenging new environment, but after some exploration kept returning to the security of the parent before venturing out again. The child seemed to need that reassurance and feel that security provided by the parent (the Circle of Security, as it was termed) in order to venture out again. She, (or he), I cannot remember which, felt compelled to return to the parent’s security once she had been exploring for a while. Her ‘emotional tank’ needed replenishing. She
needed that feeling of security to go out and explore and needed to have it re-established through re-connecting with the parent after she had been exploring for a while.

My calm at the core is dependent upon returning to my personal Circle of Security, as the child returned to her parent. My calm at the core, which enables me to venture out into the social world, is dependent upon my connection and re-connection with my Circle of Security.

Qoheleth:

So, who or what is the ‘heart beat’ of your circle? It cannot be the church, surely? What is this source of replenishment you refer to?

Mel:

My faith is at the centre of my circle. My faith is the security I need to function in the world, socially and spiritually. My faith is my source of replenishment: my times of reflection while on pilgrimage, whether in wilderness areas or en route to traditional sites, my times in a worshipping community, during my musings on directions from the Scriptures, my ponderings while integrating the sacred and secular writings, my assurances of being on the right path. They are all a part of my Circle of Security, they all contribute to the calm at the core, that to which I return after my exploratory and service forays into a testing world.

Qoheleth:

Faith depends on some firm knowledge of God and God’s ways and intentions. I imagine that you know my position in this regard. God is inscrutable and therefore the Creator’s ways and intentions cannot be known to the creation. Obviously, I think what you are relating here is impossible to defend or demonstrate. As the Creator’s ways are forever unknown to us, we are condemned to live life in ignorance of any telos, hence for me it is all absurd. For sure, take what few morsels of pleasure are available, and they are few indeed, unless you are of the hedonistic bent of going down
the pathway to indulgence and shielding yourself from any critical thought about it: Marx’s false consciousness, my chasing after the wind, Ham’s plight of ‘you’re on earth, there’s no cure for that’, Sisyphus’ stone without the fantasy walk down the hill. This is the lot of humankind. Do you understand this? I hope so, for I can never understand what you call the origins of and sources for the calm at the core, if they are embedded in faith based on a ‘knowledge’ of God and God’s ways.

Mel:

Yes, I think that I can understand your position. I cannot agree with it, but I can grasp it.

Qoheleth:

That is all I can expect. Of course there are many ways that a calm at the core may be developed that have nothing to do with a particular religious orientation.

Mel:

Yes, you are right in saying that. I am not claiming exclusivity.

Qoheleth:

Then we have no cause for dispute, at least on this matter.

Mel:

I think that I may likely have developed a calm at the core outside the church, and I may, with my existing disposition, have achieved a calm at the core by other means. But I have been within the church and speculation about alternative possibilities is a useless speculation. Can I pursue the question as originally posed?

Qoheleth:

Yes, that is perfectly reasonable.
Mel:

Thank you. I have been fortunate to have been exposed to some great teachers within the church, so the questions of faith and human existence were addressed for me most readily and purposefully within that setting. I was also fortunate to have had the company of a number of people at critical stages in my life who, like me, were ‘seeking’. Having people who were on a similar course to me was a great advantage. My calm at the core rests on the security of knowing that I am beloved of the Creator. That knowledge enables me to deal as best I can with calamity. Most importantly, that knowledge enables life to make sense. I don’t profess to know much of the ins and outs of the created order, but the feeling of knowing that I am beloved of the Creator means that it does not matter that the nuts and bolts are not known. I can never know the nuts and bolts, I agree with you on that point; I cannot expect to know that when I have no idea of any vocabulary, or concepts from another existence. My place in the world will never make sense if I am relying only on my resources of language and intellect alone.

Qoheleth:

What else can you rely on?

Mel:

With regard to some understanding of God, a feeling of ‘rightness’ about my actions in the world and how I measure up to the wisdom and teachings of the scriptures. A critical part of that wisdom is establishing broad parameters for how I should relate to my fellow human beings. The perspectives coming from the Scriptures are justice and compassion.

Qoheleth:

Both are very slippery terms. Notwithstanding that, there will always be injustice and corruption in the world. You can’t seriously think that you are going to make the slightest difference to that,
however you relate to people. Your efforts in this regard are insignificant, to say the least. You have not made any impression in all your years of working in child protection; that is just a chasing after the wind.

Mel:

If I had some ridiculous criteria like ‘outcomes’, the flavour of the month, I am sure you are right, but the only criteria is that I do my best.

Qoheleth:

Who judges that? Is there an accountability for that? Who judges what your best is?

Mel:

God. The accountability for matters of importance is to God.

Qoheleth:

And this would be through what you see as revelation in the scriptures? This is your way of avoiding just filling the box?

Mel:

No, it is a preparation for what I term the main event. I am sure that you remember the story of the Polish rabbi, which I related to you earlier at the hospice of San Juan del Acre?

Qoheleth:

Yes, I do. But are we not back to Marx’s opiate of the people? Have you not progressed beyond the Industrial Revolution?
Mel:

I have said before that faith is not a salve. You have just reminded me of the saying of Jesus, ‘to whom much has been given, much will be required’. The injunction to develop my talents is challenging, especially when it is linked to their use in the service of my fellow human being and being accountable for both. That is hardly a salve.

Qoheleth:

But those experiences, however much they challenge you in life, have the salve of helping you diminish the fear and the finality of death, human kind’s deepest fear. So, in a sense, it is a salve.

Mel:

It is rather more proactive than that. The accent is on receiving, not avoiding. It is in the receiving, in receiving the assurance that I am beloved of God, that brings the calm at the core. It comes with receiving the assurance that life makes sense, that helps bring about the calm at the core. An intelligent Creator will not waste my life’s experiences.

Qoheleth:

(cynically) That is kind of God to give the assurance to you, personally, that life makes sense. Personally, I think that should be distributed evenly among the populous, rather than making it the province of the few. God is being rather discriminatory is He not, or is She not?

Mel:

I can’t answer that any more than Aloysha could during that famous conversation with Ivan.
Qoheleth:

I take it, from your earlier concession, that you do not preclude the calm at the core from being achieved in ways other than you have claimed for yourself; it is not the exclusive province of Christianity?

Mel:

Quite so.

Qoheleth:

Then I have no bones to pick with you over that, apart from my total disbelief in a God who is so personal. I think you greatly diminish God.

Mel:

Well, we can agree to disagree. This dissertation has not set out to solve the theological questions of centuries. I am merely trying to gain insights into how I have lived my life and I thank you for your efforts so far in that regard.

Qoheleth:

I imagine that you will have to make big efforts of your own very soon.

Mel:

Oh, why is that?

Qoheleth:

According to this guide book we will, within thirty minutes or so, be approaching the village of Foncebadon, where I assume we will stay for the night. I take it as given that you will be writing
notes to God tonight and placing them tomorrow morning, along with your stones, on that ever-growing hill surrounding the Cruz de Ferros.

Mel:

Yes, you can take that as given. I will be occupied with thinking and writing this evening.

Qoheleth:

There it is, Foncebadon. If there was a decent hotel, I would suggest that we lodge there for the night. As it is, the only accommodation would seem to be albergues, hopefully without bed bugs.

Mel:

Yes, Foncebadon. And so soon. See how time flies, Teacher, when you are enjoying yourself.

Qoheleth:

I suggest that we concentrate on some immediate matters, like finding somewhere to eat and sleep. Somewhere that is half decent. That one on the right over there looks reasonably well maintained, we now need to negotiate entry past the Hound of the Baskervilles sitting on the step. You first, Reverend Doctor.
‘Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?’ said Alice. ‘That depends a good deal on where you want to get to’, said the Cat. ‘I don’t much care where’ said Alice. ‘Then it doesn’t matter which way you go’, said the Cat. ‘---so long as I get somewhere, Alice added as an explanation. ‘Oh, you’re sure to do that,’ said the Cat, ‘if you only walk long enough’.

Lewis Carroll. ‘Alice in Wonderland’.

‘A thousand policemen directing traffic
cannot tell you why you come or where you go’.

T. S. Eliot. ‘Choruses from the Rock’.
Mel (top figure) at Cruz de Ferros.
I have walked to the top of an imposing pile of stones with a large iron cross protruding from the summit, aptly named the Cruz de Ferros, situated a few kilometres on from the village of Foncebadon. It is customary for pilgrims, particularly those with a spiritual persuasion, to place a stone, which they have brought from their homeland, to add to the mound. This mound has grown to immense proportions over the centuries. It is also customary for those same pilgrims to offer a prayer, often a prayer for guidance, at the Cruz de Ferros. Some pilgrims write the prayer on a piece of paper and then wrap the paper around a stone which they then place on the mound. I have done precisely that, before walking to the top of the mound. My stone has come from the shingle beach at the Point of Ayre, the strange desolate, northernmost landform on the Isle of Man, the setting for my most recent pilgrimage on the ‘Way of the Gull’. I am standing alone and in silence atop the mound, preparing to come down. I have been on top of the mound for some ten minutes, when Qoheleth calls to me. He has not participated in the ritual.

Qoheleth:

Reverend Doctor, you look suitably pious up there. Not quite as impressive, though, as those pious drawings of Moses on Mount Sinai. You really must try harder. Vestments would have improved the effect.

Mel:

(coming down from the mound) You are spectacularly cynical this morning, Teacher.

Qoheleth:

Now, now, a little respect wouldn’t go astray in this sacred space. But let’s re-focus. A little history if you would. As I understand it, this is where, as a long standing tradition, pilgrims deposit their ‘wish list’ with God? This where they intone their prayers, perhaps chant their requests? Am I correct in saying that?
Mel:

Yes, that’s right, more or less. It could have been stated without that hefty dose of sarcasm, but you are more or less correct. Tradition has it that this is where they make their feelings and hopes and fears known to God. It is a place where they speak from the heart to the God, who listens to them and cares for them. They are certainly not humming your tune.

Qoheleth:

‘Humming my tune’? Who coined that term?

Mel:

Somebody. A commentator. I cannot remember offhand.

Qoheleth:

Oh! ... (after a pause) I noticed the caption heading of your chapter as you were writing last night. Alice seems rather ‘off track’. Is that why you chose that quote? Are you off track, so to speak? Tell me, what have you deposited up there? Whose tune are you humming?

Mel:

Whose tune? I am inclined to hum my own tune. I like imagination and innovation. I am very much an individual.

Qoheleth:

‘And proud of it’, if I might quote your wife. (quizzically) Do you have to ‘End Note’ that?
Mel:

No, my wife’s comment may have passed into family folk law, but it need not be End Noted. Lest we become distracted, I think we had better concentrate our attentions on the matter at hand... What was it now?

Qoheleth:

I asked what you deposited there (pointing to the mound). I would normally be more discreet about such things, but I have an agreement to fulfil, remember? In the course of this walk, I have gleaned a lot of information from you, so let me hazard a guess about your deposit.

Mel:

Why don’t I tell you? that would either save me correcting you, or prevent your gloating, either of which would be of benefit to me.

Qoheleth:

Very well, go ahead. Let us hear your dreams, your imaginings, or is it your regrets? Where to start? Let’s take up the Exodus theme, as you seem fond of biblical metaphors and images. What is your destination? What is your telos? Where is your Promised Land?

Mel:

I thought I was to make a statement, not answer a question, however as you have put it to me and as it seems a reasonable place to start, let’s go with your prompting. A Promised Land? I can’t say that I have any definitive destination as such. I merely need to be on the right path, as I have noted before. I need rather more direction in my life than Alice, but I am certainly not heading to a Promised Land.
Qoheleth:

The right path’? This would suggest that, unlike Alice, your path seems to be leading somewhere in particular?

Mel:

Perhaps, but it is not known to me. I think it could be said, though, that my path has taken me full circle. That is a thought that occurred to me in my musings up there.

Qoheleth:

Hmmm, circles put me in mind of Blake. But Blake wasn’t fond of circles. Are you fond of Blake?

Mel:

Fond of Blake, yes, but I am not Blake. I will answer for myself.

Qoheleth:

Elaborate then. You started to tell me that your path has taken you full circle.

Mel:

I have been on my circular path for rather a long time. Come to think of it, it is probably more useful to invoke our metaphor of the carousel. Yes, I am on a carousel, enjoying the ride, lulled by music and the lilting movement of the horses, or are they unicorns? I am on a ride that I have found satisfying and challenging, a ride I wish to continue. The carousel has now brought me full circle, after a forty four year ride.
Qoheleth:

Let me make another observation, but not from a fit of pique, or to be ‘oppositional’, as you might think. The carousel follows a beaten path and you are fond of another image; ‘Beaten paths are for beaten people’. I have been wondering if you are a dilettante. Do you pick and choose among metaphors and images which suit your circumstances at the time and which make you feel more emotionally comfortable, deliberately ignoring others which may be confronting? So, if I may make use of your image of the beaten path, are you a beaten person on a beaten path?

Mel:

A beaten person? No more than Sisyphus was a beaten person on a beaten path rolling his stone up and down the hill for all of eternity. No more than Santiago was a beaten person when he could no longer repel the predatory attacks of the sharks upon his fish. No more than the blinded and disgraced Oedipus was a beaten person when he was told by Creon to ‘rule no more’.

To answer your question, before you remind me, I expressed a number of things up there: fears and hopes. One of my hopes is that I hope for a quick end when I make my exit from the carousel.

Qoheleth:

(annoyed) What a stupid, futile thing to ask of whoever, or whatever, you think is listening. What makes you think that you can make demands, when time and chance happen to them all?

Decrepitude, dementia … all part of the carousel. If you think that the carousel can be ordered for your convenience, then you had better think more deeply about your ride, before disillusion arrives, as it likely will. You had better address Ham’s question, ‘Do you think there’s manna from heaven for imbeciles like you’? Surely, you sensed that reply up there when you were presenting your, your … what can we call it, your petition? But first tell me about the carousel. Since you mentioned it, I have come to adopt it as a good metaphor for my understanding of life, round and round in circles, ‘nothing new under the sun’. How can the same metaphor yield such different understandings of
life? What constitutes validity in that case? Too big! Too big! We must leave that in abeyance. Tell me about your carousel, Reverend Doctor.

**Mel:**

In later years, I have been very conscious that I have been riding my carousel since the beginning of the nineteen seventies. That was the time when I first attended the University, when I first experienced the wilderness of Tasmania and when I first had inklings that faith was a way of life. These were the beginnings of some dominant formative forces in my life over the ensuing forty years. They are, of course, interwoven in a praxis, or at least they are heading in that direction. I once undertook a course called ‘The Threads of my Journey’. In this course I traced the dominant influences, or ‘threads’, running through my life by means of threads on a tambour frame. These threads are present throughout this period of my life; they have given my life direction, as well as a richness and a challenge.

**Qoheleth:**

So, these threads are visual representations of your ride on the carousel? The tambour frame somehow depicts how long you have been on the carousel?

**Mel:**

Yes, that’s right.

**Qoheleth:**

And of being expelled from the carousel? What is it that warrants a petition such as yours? Why should you get preferential treatment?
Mel:

I am not seeking preferential treatment. My words up there are expressions of vulnerability. There are many ways of exiting the carousel, some far better than others. Let me elaborate. When I was a chaplain at the hospital, I sometimes had to go to the dementia ward. I would avoid it if the volunteers were present on that particular day. Dementia was a fearful and demanding encounter for me. Dementia would certainly eject me from the carousel, but the exit usually takes a long time. Lymphoma is more immediate and more humane. Lymphoma is a known quantity and nowhere near as confronting as dementia. At least, I would still know of the carousel and be present to my ending, which for me is important. In the case of dementia, the carousel ride may not even be in consciousness and who knows what I may in fact be conscious of?

Qoheleth:

I think that what you are saying is that dementia simply doesn’t make sense to you. I do not wish to ‘rub it in’, but you are raising, once again, the question of theodicy. Suffering through dementia makes no more sense than the suffering of the child mentioned by Ivan Karamazov.

But, enough of these apprehensions, let’s talk about things where there is scope for being proactive. What is it that you want to do to ‘chase after the wind’, to’ kill time’ as the Railway Tunnel Philosopher would have it? To what do you aspire?

Mel:

I simply wish to continue to have the reassurance that I am going down the right path, or the assurance that I need to make changes if I suspect that the path I am on needs to be renavigated or abandoned at some point.
Qoheleth:

You must be rather more specific than that for my liking! You have two year plans, so you tell me. Finishing off this dissertation is one, but what else is in your thoughts for your allotted two years? You must surely have had these things in your petition.

Mel:

I think that a trans-Australia cycle journey would be on the cards, in the second half of 2016. Both times, when I have cycled east to west on the Australian continent, I have swung up into the centre from Port Augustalxxxvii. The first time I went to Uluru and on the second occasion it was to Alice Springs. I would like to do a west to east, Perth to Sydney ride to take advantage of the prevailing Roaring Forties tailwinds blowing in from the Indian Ocean in September/October. The possibility of facing headwinds when cycling in deserts is daunting to say the least. The possibilities of that occurrence must be minimised. I would like to have a time in the desert once again and a crossing of the Nullarbor would be an ideal way to achieve that end. The desert and its emptiness is the essential Australia in my view, although we are, most of us, dwellers in coastal cities, who have little to do with our vast, empty interior. While we like to write about the interior, most of us have had limited experience of it.

Qoheleth:

(cynically) No doubt you will get some accolades for that ride!

Mel:

I probably will, but that is not the intention, although if I do the ride as a fundraiser, accolades are inevitable. I have to use the media for my purposes. Cancer is something that grabs attention, particularly if you are perceived to be engaged in a ‘battle’ with it, which in fact I am not, but people are going to construct it that way. How they report it is basically out of my hands.
Qoheleth:

Are you telling me in all seriousness that a little ego stroking is not on your agenda?

Mel:

Yes, that is what I am telling you. I have other ways of feeling adequate.

Qoheleth:

You expect me to believe that?

Mel:

I have no idea what you would believe, although I note that you, yourself, were not enamoured of fame. If you have come to that conclusion about accolades, I think that you should not be too surprised if I have reached the same conclusion, as I have been influenced in these matters by your writing, at least as much as I have been by the writings of Plato, who also was indifferent to public opinion. Having said that, I do however appreciate the encouragement given me by staff of the cancer clinic where I am a patient. Their encouragement over the years, which is discerning and informed by years of experience in the treatment of cancer, has meant a lot to me and added impetus to my determination to develop myself through my physical, intellectual and spiritual endeavours. I welcome encouragement, but I do not seek accolades. The difference should be obvious.

Qoheleth:

Just testing the waters! Now satisfy my curiosity, why would you want to do a cycle journey such as the one you just mentioned? It is not as though it materialized in your mind, metaphor like, as something that seemed like a good idea at the time. It was not that spontaneous.
Mel:

That’s right, it has been brewing for a while. As you are aware from my CV, a couple of years ago a friend and I took a group of mid-teenage boys from a deprived area of Sydney on a seven day walk across the Overland Track, an iconic walk in a World Heritage National Park in Tasmania. This walk was a significant event for these young people and I would like to replicate it. The church supplied some funding for the first walk, but they have been, thus far, unable to appreciate the benefits of this walk and see its worth as an ongoing program, so the funding for another trip from the church is not likely at this stage. I therefore thought that I would raise the necessary finance myself, by way of sponsorship for this trans-Australia cycle journey.

Qoheleth:

Hmmm ... I can appreciate just how deep your disappointments with the church really are. This has really irritated you, hasn’t it? The group with the most potential for good you say? I don’t believe that for essentially the same reasons that I don’t believe in Santa Claus. But let us not dwell on your disappointments, or your illusions, or your misconceptions, although there are a lot of them in your life.

Mel:

Touché.

Qoheleth:

It sounds like your forays into the church bureaucracy will have you scurrying back to your Circle of Security on a regular basis!

Mel:

I remain positive.
Qoheleth:

About yourself no doubt, but about the church?

Mel:

Yes, and about the church, too.

Qoheleth:

That is indeed remarkable. You are indeed patient and long suffering. Yes, the Patron Saint of Lost Causes.

Mel:

You have made your points!!

Qoheleth:

But, will you report them in your writings, or edit them out?

Mel:

I will report them, the criticisms must be included.

Qoheleth:

With that assurance, I shall move on. Why is it so important that you replicate this program and take another group of young people to Tasmania?

Mel:

It is an area where I can make a direct contribution to people, a contribution which emerges directly from my skills and life experiences. There is not much on the wider stage that I can influence, I agree with you about that, but in my immediate sphere of influence I can do quite a lot. The young people
who came with me to the Overland Track described the experience as ‘life shaping’. This was my perception, as well as their statements. It is worth making efforts to find the money to finance more of these trips. These trips involve modest amounts of money, but a great deal of personal input and involvement on the part of the leaders. They make full use of my skills and talents.

I have another motivation and that is to lead a group of mid-teen females on the next walk. The area where the young people live has a kind of prevalent male supremacist attitude. I would like to see several young females complete this walk and take that sense of achievement and confidence back into the home environment. It could be a case of yeast leavening the batch of dough\textsuperscript{xc}. The issue for me will be to find female co-leaders to allow the plan to come to fruition.

**Qoheleth:**

Unlike the church, you clearly regard this as something worthwhile to do, but equally clearly it does not take up all of your time. That cannot be the totality of your petition, your entreaties, up there on the Cruz de Ferros?

**Mel:**

No, I was thinking about the wheel coming full circle. I was unveiling my thoughts for scrutiny, much as I am doing now. I have come back to what I call ‘the fork in the road’. When I was applying to go to the university for the first time, I had to make a choice between two interesting areas in which to undertake studies. Those areas were social work and English/drama. Well, I chose social work, after much agonizing, and I have no regrets about that decision. Social work opened up a wealth of experiences for me. However, since 2004, my academic work has moved away from conventional academic research canons into areas I experience as more creative. My writing now exhibits much more dialogue. I have progressively become aware that dialogue is my writing strength. I have been following this pathway to what I consider will be its logical end; writing a piece for performance. May I elaborate?
Qoheleth:

The stage is yours.

Mel:

I have long been fascinated by the figure of Pontius Pilate, so I am considering writing a play, centred on the events between Jesus’ arrest and his being despatched to his crucifixion. The play would be written from the perspective of Pontius Pilate and he in turn would be created from direct and indirect historical sources, any available fiction, and a scholarly exercise of my imagination. I think the figure of Pilate is crying out to be performed. The majority of people, even in a society as multicultural as Australia, would have heard of Pilate. Most would be familiar with the ‘washing one’s hands of the matter’ metaphor. They may well have used it many times themselves. Pilate’s role in the crucifixion story is open for a dramatic interpretation, independent as far as possible, from theological accretions of the centuries. Do you like the idea?

Qoheleth:

It is as useful, and useless, a way to pass the time as any other.

Mel:

I guess that is about as affirmative a comment as I can expect from you.

Qoheleth:

It will ‘keep you off the streets’. Is that less confronting?

Mel:

Might I say in passing, that your critiques are sometimes not all that helpful?
Qoheleth:

And might I say in passing that your request was for a critique, not a sop?

Mel:

Let us say then that there are times when your critique could have been more constructive.

Qoheleth:

Constructive! (annoyed) Hmm. How is this for a constructive scenario? What say you go back to St Jean and walk the Camino backwards? You could get a listing in the Guinness Book of Records, along with all the other inanities, then you could publish your memoirs: ‘A Backward Person’s Pilgrimage on the Camino’. It should attract a strong readership. Your final act of benevolence as a magnanimous person, and in recognition of my brilliant suggestion, which may bring you some instant, transitory and worthless fame could be to immediately discharge me from my labours.

Mel:

It is not only the utopians who are the disappointed ones, the cynics are well represented.

Qoheleth:

You neglected to mention the discerning!

Mel:

Teacher, I think we should move on.

Qoheleth:

‘Move on?’ Of course, how foolish of me, you must site that idiot notion of ‘progress’. That justifies everything in Western society. Who was it again, the person who said that we mass produce the
means of our own self destruction and call it rational enterprise? The insanity of the whole absolves particular insanities.

Mel:

Herbert Marcuse, I think. Anyway, whoever it was, he, or she, is a person after your own heart. Another musing of mine up there was how best to use my personal resources how best to spend my time.

Qoheleth:

Likely your very limited time! So, what else did you come up with?

Mel:

Wilderness was to the fore …

Qoheleth:

Strangely to me, you make little mention of relationships. Have you come to Satre’s conclusion that ‘hell is other people’ and thus studiously avoided comment on the topic?

Mel:

I certainly don’t resonate with Satre on that score. Of course we can talk about relationships. First, though, let me continue with my musings on wilderness, it is important to me.

Qoheleth:

And relationships are not?

Mel:

They are important, but I don’t want to lose my train of thought.
Qoheleth:

Yet again!

Mel:

(annoyed) As I was saying, wilderness is important to me. Of particular importance is the need to preserve it, there is precious little left. I have taken of late to introducing people to wilderness: the young people from the deprived area, who I have mentioned; a group of people of Chinese ethnicity I take walking in the Blue Mountains National Park; young people, who my long term walking companions and I select to come with us to the remote areas of the South West Wilderness of Tasmania. These people, now socialized into national parks and wilderness, will very likely object to any possible commercial or other Philistine intrusions into these pristine areas that they enjoy so much. My leading of walks in these areas is an investment in their preservation. I intend to maintain, and possibly expand, these activities of mine.

I am also looking in the near future to taking my grandson, who is almost nine years old, on a multi-day walk on the Overland Track. I would like to have been introduced to wilderness at such an age myself. I would like to take him on this walk, for my experience over many years has been that such walks create strong bonds between people. It could well be life-shaping for him and it is something special that I can contribute to his development, something that others in his immediate social milieu cannot contribute with anything like the competence that I can. First, though, I have to convince my daughter that he is well able to complete this walk.

Qoheleth:

This, it seems to me, leads neatly into relationships. Does your wife participate in many activities with you?
**Mel:**

Only some.

**Qoheleth:**

And why is that?

**Mel:**

She is not as passionate about hiking as I am.

**Qoheleth:**

Hardly surprising! Who is, apart from that little group of oddities like yourself who go with you? Muse a little more on your answer please.

**Mel:**

Anne is more domestic than I am. In fact we do struggle at times to find common ground. This search for common ground tends to highlight our differences. In fact, I could say at present that we need to find more common ground to stop a drift toward living more or less independent lives.

**Qoheleth:**

Will the differences diminish? Can the drift be halted?

**Mel:**

I cannot see that happening in the short term. I cannot see anything on the horizon that beckons us both with a similar intensity, as we have very different dispositions and commitments. I think that we had more in common with the respective partners in our previous relationships than we have with each other. That was certainly so in my case at least. We cannot become those partners, nor would we wish to, so the search for common ground goes on.
Qoheleth:
With vigour?

Mel:
Yes, but there are also other commitments we each have. We also have other separate interests, so we need to make the most of the time we do spend together.

Qoheleth:

You seem like the original ‘odd couple’. Are you?

Mel:
That is a question I am often asked.

Qoheleth:

I am sure you are, but I am equally sure that it is more with you in mind that people ask it! There are few people with whom you would not constitute an odd couple.

Mel:
I suspect that you are right there, but I only ‘suspect’. Many people are not prone to saying what they think, they often edit with the ‘other’ in mind before they make their statements. Without directly asking I am often unsure of what people think about us as a couple.

Qoheleth:

You being clergy would not help in this regard either; people could have a tendency to edit when speaking to clergy, or being in the presence of clergy. Am I on the scent here?
Mel:

Possibly so. Let me illustrate, if you please, the illustration will demonstrate your point. During the time I was senior chaplain at the hospital, building renovations were carried out on the chapel. I would make an inspection of the chapel each couple of days and talk with the works foreman about progress and requirements. When I was walking along the long corridor toward the chapel, there must have been a phone call made to alert the workmen, as I would hear the sounds of tool boxes snapping shut, thereby shutting off from my view the pictures of women in various states of undress, which other hospital staff informed me were inside the lids. When I entered the decorum was impeccable, ‘Good morning, Reverend’ ...

Qoheleth:

You have quite an arsenal of anecdotes. Have you thought of publishing them, or would that be irreverent?

Mel:

I think that you are in a better position than I to make comment here, after all you lived on a knife edge in your tradition with regard to conformity and critique, so what say.....

Qoheleth:

Keep your focus Reverend Doctor, if you wish to keep your interlocutor.

Mel:

My apologies, Teacher.

Qoheleth:

The odd couple?
Mel:

You could say that.

Qoheleth:

But, what do you say?

Mel:

I say that people who note our external differences, our differing interests and dispositions, sometimes comment on it, to me at least. The curiosity here seems to be, ‘what holds this odd relationship together’?

Qoheleth:

So, will you endeavour to tell me, from your perspective?

Mel:

We, as a couple, have our moments. Had we married each other forty years ago, had we gone through adult life together, there is no doubt in my mind that things would have been less complicated at this point in time than they are now, where we are adjusting to a lifetime of differing experiences. The irony of all this is that we knew one another at that time, all those years ago, but we were about to marry other people and had only the most cursory interest in one another. Life may well have gone in different directions for us had we married then. For me, they almost assuredly would have.

Qoheleth:

That is a nice touch of history, but altogether tangential. So, why has it held together over five years? It is together isn’t it?
Mel:

Yes, it is... I think. My input in holding it together is that I believe in its potential and, when we are ‘on song’ as I describe it, I feel very close to Anne. I am also committed to the sacramental nature of marriage in the Christian tradition: I honour my vows. I try to be as honest as I can be, that is a commitment I have in this marriage.

Qoheleth:

Then Anne will read this dissertation?

Mel:

Yes.

Qoheleth:

Un-edited?

Mel:

Yes.

Qoheleth:

Any misgivings about it?

Mel:

Yes, I do not think we have reached a confidence in one another to be able to express some aspects of our lives with a high level of honesty. That is a question of trust and that does not develop overnight.
Qoheleth:

So, are there any concerns and anxieties with regard to where expressions of honesty could take you?

Mel:

Oh, yes, definitely. Understanding something of a person’s past can be very useful in understanding behaviour and reactions that are exhibited in the present, it can be very useful in knowing how best to respond in various situations. But if this information is not freely given, it can appear as prying if information about a person’s experiences is actively sought. This is especially the case if the person is very ‘private’, for whatever reason.

Qoheleth:

So, do you as a couple share that information?

Mel:

No, we don’t do so very often.

Qoheleth:

You see this as evidence that trust between you has a way to go.

Mel:

Yes, I do. However, what I must add to your commentary on us as an odd couple is that many people see us as an interesting couple; altogether a more positive perception. I suspect that perhaps this is the predominant way that some people see us and its confirmation is that many people seek to engage with us. I think the impressions of the odd fit are often submerged in the wide variety of experiences which we as a couple bring to our relationship with others. I think our characters and attributes and experiences are highlighted by the contrasts between us. I think they are contrasts
more so than contradictions. I do not feel anything competitive about our relating to other people.
So, while more common ground would be very useful, we also need the space to be able to pursue
our, sometimes very disparate, interests and be able to give expression to these. This is a way of
contributing to others, and that is an essential part of a relationship’s self-expression in my view. A
delicate balance.

Qoheleth:

You strike me as being somewhat idiosyncratic and you have stated that your wife thinks that you
make a lifestyle of being different. It seems to me that this is indicative that you grate with her at
times. Do you grate with her? I have some difficulties with you after just a few days of walking with
you. She lives with you. These differences may not be as inconsequential as you are making them
out to be.

Mel:

I think that you would grate with most people, just look at the commentaries on Ecclesiastes. Just
look at...

Qoheleth:

I have no interest in the commentators on Ecclesiastes and their opinions. I repeat, this is not my
autobiography. Answer my question!

Mel:

I think that our dispositions are an issue. We are very different there. I think that I am very much a
product of my background. I spent years on the DoCS front line. In some ways this has been
beneficial and in others, mainly social ways, it has had its drawbacks. Put succinctly, I have made my
living from my propensity to be calm. This is an expression of the calm at the core, which I spoke of
earlier; it was honed at DoCS. Being calm in crisis situations was a positive attribute. It helped in
making decisions, but it also tended to push further and further out the boundaries of what might ‘ruffle my feathers’. As a consequence, much of what bothers many people without such experiences, what they feel as stressful, tends not to bother me much. My experiences of the DoCS front line led me to regard much of what upsets people as trivial matters. Only the ‘spectacular’ can raise me from slumbers. What was valued on the DoCS front line can be seen as indifference or lack of concern, by those without those experiences, those in the mainstream. I am on the lookout for these reactions from people. I explain to people early in relationships that I come from a situation where I spent much time relating to people in what could be deemed extreme circumstances. I find this helps people to understand my disposition. I also, though, have to be wary of the opposite reaction where people clamour after ‘war stories’.

_Qoheleth:_

You have lived what I would call a polemical life. A large amount of your time has been spent in what one of your friends has called the ‘dung heap of human existence’. That said, I must disagree with your friend, because the entirety of human existence, not just its violent and sordid extreme, is a dung heap. Without a telos for humanity, what is not a dung heap? At least for those reflective people such as myself. Aesthetics have also occupied a lot of your time. You have spent a large amount of time in the remote wilderness. Curiously you have not seen the sameness of it all as I have, never seen that there is nothing new under the sun. But, those polemics that mark out your life would likely make it difficult for you to be attracted to, perhaps even understand, the ‘middle of the road’. Tell me, from out of your oddity, are your contacts with people often permeated with monologues about your life?

_Mel:_

No, definitely not. I would rather listen than speak.
Qoheleth:

Do you?

Mel:

Often, yes. It was not always the case, however Anne alerted me to that some time ago and I have made changes.

Qoheleth:

So, what do you think of the middle of the road?

Mel:

Well, in the longer term, it is inevitable that I will be there, in the middle of the road. My body will not sustain the present activities forever. I will need to find alternatives that are satisfying and challenging, but appropriate to my capabilities. I will give that more thought when the time comes nearer.

Qoheleth:

The garden as an alternative?

Mel:

Possibly so.

Qoheleth:

So, where is the challenge in this? Where is the pushing out of boundaries? Where is the risk-taking that you were so vocal about earlier on? Surely, you cannot expect me to believe that you will be content in the garden, no matter how attractive it is?
Mel:

This does not have to be life’s entirety. One of its benefits, besides spending time with Anne, is that my activities in the garden give me something that is complete in itself. It presents me with tasks that I can follow through from a defined beginning to a defined end. I have spent many years working in areas of social welfare, where I never had that sense of completion of tasks, or activities. Many problems I confronted did not present the possibility of solutions, as many were structural in nature, outside my power to effect change, possibly outside anyone’s. Capitalism seems to move through a volition, an imperative, beyond human control, but that is another question. Also, working in a garden, besides providing an activity that can be completed, such as weeding an entire garden bed, provides time where I can have uncluttered time for reflection. When I am incapable of reaching Mount Solitary and the Tasmanian Wilderness, the garden may offer an option...of sorts.

Qoheleth:

A second best? Tenth best?

Mel:

Life is inevitably about coming to terms with one’s limitations. I will give up the Wilderness, very reluctantly, at the appropriate time, at the ‘kairos’.

Qoheleth:

Relationships are also full of compromises. Is your relationship therefore a challenge?

Mel:

Relationship in itself is a challenge. I thought that was clear from what I have already said. It is one of the most unpredictable of all things. To draw an analogy, wilderness provides its challenges. It is replete with challenges such as sudden changes in weather, floods and rapid temperature drops and the like. It must be respected if it is to reveal its beauty. Relationships are like going into the
wilderness: there are no assured outcomes, even given high levels of skill, fitness, commitment, discipline and the like. I, however, am not someone who needs outcomes spelled out in advance. Mostly, in whatever endeavour I undertake, I contribute heavily to making things happen. Relationships are similar in that I have to play my part in making things happen.

Qoheleth:

So, what is this contribution, pray tell?

Mel:

Mine is an examined life. This is an important contribution and commitment. Self-examination is risky and one of the biggest challenges of all. I am fortunate that self-examination through extended reflection was endemic in my theological education and vocation. I also was driven in that direction by the nature of my work in DoCS. Many questions arose for me doing this work, which I have noted before, but an important question was always, ‘what sort of person is it who develops and addresses these questions’?

Qoheleth:

So, this carries over into relationships? Has application there?

Mel:

Oh, yes, definitely. I think that my propensity to self-examination has played a major part in my relationship with my children for instance. We address matters of substance in the time we spend together. I find this promotes bonding, as well as being intellectually exciting.

Qoheleth:

So, do you discuss Ecclesiastes with them?
Mel:

Yes. In fact they have been to my service, where I gave you your time in the sun. *Ecclesiastes* is required reading, a set text if you will? Do I detect the vestige of a smile, Teacher?

Qoheleth:

There is no longer a requirement to swallow hemlock for ‘corrupting’ the youth!

Mel:

That is a consolation.

Qoheleth:

You have noted your frustrations in both the church and DoCS. Have you ever thought about going back and changing things now that you have the advantage of hindsight and times of reflection? Has the Camino generated the will to right wrongs as you have perceived them?

Mel:

No, nothing of the sort has happened. I have no desire to go over old ground.

Qoheleth:

Are there other petitions you made up there? Any big aspirations? Anything that would make the audiences marvel at how that could be countenanced by an aging cancer patient, notwithstanding that you do not seek the plaudits?

Mel:

No. My appeals have been of lesser nature in terms of scale. They are asking that I can follow the Beatitudes and the Virtues, but in fact these are probably the greatest things I can take on, the greatest challenges.
Qoheleth:

So, no big aspirations, it is mainly in a small circle that you seek to have your influence, or make your contributions, or whatever it is that you are seeking to do?

Mel:

Yes. I am seeking to be a better follower, a better disciple if you will.

Qoheleth:

So, you seek to go down a path that I have found futile. In much knowledge there is much vexation\textsuperscript{xcii}.

Mel:

Yes, that was what motivated my prayers up there. Hopefully I can be guided to openings, to areas of service where I can use my talents and develop my potentials.

Qoheleth:

Well, Reverend Doctor, I trust you are up to the mark, for you will receive no supernatural assistance to help you on your way. You wanted critique, there it is. As you have been walking with me now for some weeks I trust that you are a little closer to discovering that you are in this existence where there is no telos from the Creator. The world is riddled with puzzles that afford no answers. You have been found wanting, a fact that has been demonstrated throughout our conversations. Accept that God is inscrutable and resign yourself to this tragic existence and you thereby have your answer to the riddles of human existence. \textit{Hebel!} Absurd! Let us quit this place and move on to wherever it is that we are going.
Conversation Five.

(At the Cathedral, Santiago de Compostella.)

‘I am moved by fancies that are curled
around these images and cling:
the notion of some infinitely gentle
infinitely suffering thing’.

T. S. Eliot. ‘Preludes’.
Mel (left) at the Cathedral, Santiago de Compostella.
I am standing at the rear of the Cathedral, along with Qoheleth. A service is taking place. The Cathedral has no available seating and many people have to stand. The service is being conducted in Spanish. From our experience of the pilgrimage, it was evident that most pilgrims did not speak Spanish and most were not practising Catholics. A reasonable deduction is that few people present were able to interpret what was happening as the priests intoned the mass. Just why people were there was an interesting question. I was there hoping to experience a quiet, contemplative time. The atmosphere was anything but quiet. There was much murmuring and an air of expectation. The reason for this became apparent when the huge silver censer at the front of the cathedral was hauled up, soon to be swung in great arcs across the transept. This was ‘the’ service. We just happened upon it. Cameras, phones and IPads were poised and at the ready for when the hauling began and the big moment arrived. When it did arrive, a sea of brightly coloured screens appeared before us as the censer began to rise. People sprung to their feet. Murmurs became gasps of delight, which poured forth as the censer swung and spread its incense through the cathedral. The orgasmic moment had arrived.

**Qoheleth:**

Let the entertainment begin! There is hardly any point in observing the ‘Silence’ sign amid this din! Did you say this was a service or a circus?

**Mel:**

I said a service, ... but (looking around) I am open to changing my mind.

**Qoheleth:**

Can we leave? I have no particular interest in seeing a censer swing back and forward across a transept. (we begin our exit from the cathedral) Does this church specialize in entertainment?
Mel:

I am not sure what the church thinks it is doing? If I had my way, I would be looking for more meaningful involvement from the church. As English is the common language of the Camino, I would conduct the service in English, notwithstanding the political outcries from some people about ‘cultural imperialism’. I think it better for the majority to understand what is going on than to stand on a dysfunctional principal.

Qoheleth:

Do you go in for alliteration?

Mel:

(ignoring the comment) I would also be looking to create opportunities for people to meet and quietly reflect on their experience, preferably within their own language. That would not be beyond the resources of the church.

Qoheleth:

The idea of meetings makes sense. It seemed to me that many people we met along the way came here with burdens they brought along, and I don’t mean heavy packs and the lack of preparation. An opportunity to talk about their experiences would be preferable to this circus, or at least an alternative way for some to pass the time. I could be conscripted to be a facilitator, as long as I didn’t have to walk here from St. Jean each time.

Mel:

I am not sure I would go as far as to endorse that.

Qoheleth:

And why is that, might I ask?
Mel:

I am a little more-thick skinned than some people. Your style is a little less than subtle on occasion. I am not convinced that your style would be widely appreciated, particularly by those who are, as you put it, beset by heavy burdens.

Qoheleth:

I will overlook your snide comment. The magnanimity of my gesture contradicts your assertion. Tell me, what is all this fuss about the Camino in your view? It is not a particularly aesthetic route. Even for the religious, there is little attempt by churches along the way to provide any religious input for pilgrims; many of the churches are closed, apart from those that are little more than museums and have hefty entrance fees. If you are in a position to pay the fee, you then face a phalanx of ‘selfie sticks’[^33]. What happens if you simply want to go in to pray, but can’t afford the entrance fee? The church does not seem to have much investment in the Camino pilgrimage, apart from this extravaganza. Or is it perhaps a question of ecclesiastical politics? Perhaps the authorities in Santiago do not have control of what happens outside Santiago de Compostella? I digress, what is the fuss about the Camino? It seems to me that there is little to fuss about, but your view, please.

Mel:

I think the Camino is a cultural artefact. It also makes a big contribution to the economy of a depressed northern Spain. It is cheap to walk the route, if one does not indulge a passion for Cathedrals and museums, and it provides a novel kind of holiday for people. It also provides various challenges for many people. I think that its original functions, penance and healing, have long since become obscured amid catering for the tourist. Christendom, which supported the Camino’s original function, has mainly disappeared. Nowadays, the Camino seems to provide some sort of alternative, self-administered therapy for those people who come with ‘problems’. It is probably as good for some people, as sitting in an office somewhere talking to some professional or other.
Perhaps the Camino, too, has become, or been turned into, a commodity. Perhaps it, too, has been sucked, inexorably, into the landscape of capitalist commodification. But that is not to deny that there has been significant benefit, perhaps even transformative learning for some people as a direct result of their walking the Camino. For these people the Camino is more than a cheap holiday, or a way to lose weight, or a topic for conversation at the tea table, or a compostella\textsuperscript{xciv} to hang on the wall.

I guess, too, that tradition itself has something to do with the Camino’s popularity. It provides a tradition to link with, when many societies seem to lack such traditions. There is something about the long history of the Camino and the millions who have trudged to Santiago that contemporary people relate to, especially people who have felt out of step with the rapid changes of a society that lacks a telos. Change happens, but the reasons for this happening are often opaque. It is hard for reflective people to embrace change when it is not apparent that there is any particular direction that this societal change is taking them. People may feel that they are a part of a tradition by walking the pilgrim route. They may feel that they are part of something that has been accepted by many throughout millennia as important. They may thereby feel important themselves, not just an insignificant part of large cities and the like. The Camino likely functions as a sense of history for those individuals who feel that their life lacks that, or who feel to some degree alienated in mega cities.

\textbf{Qoheleth:}

This is more speculation than anything, interesting though it may be to speculate. Let us get back to the task. Tell me, what does the Camino mean to you?

\textbf{Mel:}

That hinges around what I bring to the Camino. I imagine that, Heraclitus\textsuperscript{xcv} like, one does not walk the same Camino, if one is to do it multiple times as I have. I brought different perspectives to the
Camino each time I walked it and I encountered a different Camino each time. The first time I walked the Camino, two years back, I was thinking about research into pilgrimage as a praxis and walked the Camino to ‘get a feel for it’. I anticipated a solitary pilgrimage, walking it as I did toward the end of winter. My actual, and totally unexpected, experience was that I met two people at Pamplona, in the early stages of my pilgrimage, an Irishman and a Dutchman. Both had matters in their lives that they were seeking to resolve. We all walked together to Santiago. I am very glad that we did. I had no regrets that my initial expectations fell by the wayside. We were termed ‘The International Brigade’ when we met other pilgrims in albergues at the end of the day’s walk. I learned that the Camino is an unpredictable undertaking, it may turn out nothing like you expect, but that unpredictability is the nature of long distance pilgrimage, such has been my experience. Pilgrimage brings with it the unexpected. There is no definitive, predictable ‘outcome’, to use the modern parlance. For me, pilgrimage as a practice is synonymous with the unexpected.

Qoheleth:

Fits with your lifestyle choice perhaps?

Mel:

That is what my wife may interpret it to mean for me, but your question was directed to me, so I will resume. Walking the Camino for me means being able to have five weeks where I am able to ponder life and its directions and where life is simplified for those five weeks. I do not have to make deliberate endeavours to avoid electronic gadgetry and the frenzied pace of urban living, it simply is not there with me, although electronic gadgetry is increasingly there for others. I am not feeling that I am swimming against the tide, as I often do in urban society. I do not feel sucked into any frenzy. Life is reduced to simple acts on pilgrimage, primarily walking and reflecting, which are primarily undertaken outside of considerations of time and various day-to-day responsibilities. When I am back again and the impositions begin anew, I have to resume efforts, initially at least, to preserve the
'pace' of the Camino. I suspect that these adjustments of mine are far less than most people who resume ‘normal’ roles, but for me, a person who does not own a car or wear a time piece, or have a mobile phone, the adjustments are not as daunting. This altered role while on pilgrimage is what anthropologist, Victor Turner, denotes as liminality, a position between leaving a role in society and then taking it, or another, up again on return. The pilgrim often takes on a different role on pilgrimage, although with the advent of intrusive gadgetry I wonder how many pilgrims are ‘present’ to the Camino when their IPhones, tablets, sat navs and the like are present. The extent of the pilgrim’s involvement in the pilgrimage seems to me to correlate with the involvement in how much his, or her attention is focussed on their gadgets. The pilgrim can be a work in progress, forming or transforming, or they can never really have left home. Remote areas, beyond the reach of gadgets, have an appeal to me beyond that of the Camino.

Qoheleth:

I can see that.

Mel:

You would never have had a phone go off when you are conducting a funeral service!

Qoheleth:

No, of course not.

Mel:

It brings out the worst in me. I halt proceedings, while staring at the person fumbling for the phone. When they finally silence the wretched thing, I ask them for permission to proceed.
Qoheleth:

Yes, it does bring out the worst in you. But you digress, and you don’t need my permission to proceed.

Mel:

As I was saying, I am not meaning to be deliberately contrary, but the Turners do not have an understanding of pilgrimage that depicts ‘pilgrimage as I practice it’. I have been on many pilgrimages and my pilgrimage dispositions are being integrated into my way of life. Pilgrimage has become a regular part of my lifestyle rather than a rare, or one off journey. It is not a complete aberration, something out of the ordinary. The destination may well be, but the practice of pilgrimage is not. On pilgrimage, I am mostly conscious of not having to work within and against the constraints of time and in opposition to the various apparatuses of control and most of all in opposition to the frenzy. In society, I am often conscious of having to work against these various impositions, but this is becoming less so, as the dispositions from the long standing participation in pilgrimage becomes more integrated into daily life.

The Camino experience means that I am exposed to sustained periods of the ‘long vision’. That is being able to see to the horizon for lengthy periods. Even though I live in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales, a World Heritage Area, I do not have the opportunity to have the long vision over extended periods of weeks at a time. The urban environment, with its brick and tile and concrete, dominates my view, either in the urban area, or in the academy libraries. I often find that I have different thoughts when exposed to the long vision for extended periods and on my return from pilgrimage I am able to process those thoughts, before succumbing, once again, to the craving for the extended experience of the long vision. The Camino, as with other long distance pilgrimages, such as St Olav’s Way in Norway and paths in Israel, afford me the long vision. The ideal however is Tasmania, where the long vision is complemented by an absence of human habitation.
Qoheleth:

Does the Camino have a religious significance for you? I don’t seem to detect that in what you have said.

Mel:

Often when I am exposed to the long vision, my thoughts turn to God. Feeling small is integral to the long vision and my thoughts often focus on my own insignificance. The thoughts also turn to the polemics associated with being small and insignificant and yet being important, the latter springing from a faith that I am beloved of God. I connect deeply to my experiences of faith, which is the ‘rock’ I build upon, to use a biblical image, or my Circle of Security to use another image, but from a more secular literature. I do have the long vision fairly often while on the Camino.

Qoheleth:

To have a truly religious experience on the Camino, presumably the destination of the pilgrimage would be paramount would it not? Is your pilgrimage more consistent with some non-confessional, non-mainstream type of spirituality, rather than with a religious pilgrimage?

Mel:

I am not convinced that destination is paramount. As I read of Jesus’ ministry, many of the more spiritual moments were those where he encountered people in the course of his travels. For a couple of examples from the Gospels, read the account of the woman at the well\textsuperscript{xcvi}, which is so beautifully recorded in John’s Gospel, or the account of Jesus’ meeting with Nicodemus\textsuperscript{xcvii}. An example from my own experience is my own pilgrimage from Dublin to Jerusalem. I wrote an account of that journey a few years after its completion, when its significance for and influence on my life became more apparent. In that account, there was very little mention of Jerusalem itself, or reaching it. The account was a series of short stories focusing on people I encountered along the
way, my encounters with myself, in the form of times of doubt, and my encounters with the divine, or times of being very aware of the presence of God.

Qoheleth:

Are you telling me that the religious tradition of the pilgrimage plays no significant role in your walks of the Camino?

Mel:

I have some admiration for the early pilgrims, yes, but the tradition is more of general interest than of personal significance. Wilderness and pristine areas are more important to me than traditional pilgrim routes, although I will continue to walk such routes, likely more so when wilderness becomes problematic to reach with my declining physical capacity. In wilderness, I am incorporating the mystical into my pilgrimage practice. Aesthetic environments are the most significant environments in evoking the presence of God for me. It is in these environments where the veil between the human and the divine is at its thinnest. To illustrate, if I was forced to choose one form of pilgrimage above another to access for the rest of my active life, one being traditional routes and the other being wilderness, I would unhesitatingly choose wilderness.

Qoheleth:

You have stated that your life is not easily separable from, or at least it is closely aligned with, your pilgrimages. You have stated that pilgrimage plays an important part in your life, what part does ecclesiastical religion play for you, an ordained person of the church? Talk to me about that.

Mel:

Life, pilgrimage and ecclesiastical religion are not so easily separable. For instance, I lead regular pilgrimages to Mount Solitary, near to where I live in the Blue Mountains. At the summit of Mount Solitary, I celebrate Communion using a modified form of the church’s liturgy. So pilgrimages,
ecclesiastical practice and my close relationship with aesthetic environments are not discreet. I make conscious and increasing efforts to bring them into alliance.

The teachings of the church have been central and critical to my life from early adulthood. The Beatitudes in particular have appealed to me, as they present an alternative pathway to the values and practices of western society, considerable amounts of which I find vacuous. I suspect that many people walking this path with us have similar feelings. I suspect that is an important reason for their being here. For all of its shortcomings, and all of mine, the church still proclaims the Good News through its sacred writings. These writings are of ongoing importance to me as an antidote to the rampant commodification evident in secular, capitalist society. They represent hope and a telos, which I cannot find in the secular world.

In that way, I am like you. Your writings indicate dissatisfaction with the obsessions of society, which obsessions have shown little evidence of change from your day to mine. You adopted these obsessions and found them to be vacuous, a chasing after the wind. You arrived at that position by empirical enquiry, claiming no telos from the creator could be established, which produced obfuscation and consequent meaninglessness for human existence. I find a telos from the Creator to be present in the sacred writings, which mock the entertainment and consumption culture of Western society. This culture has parallels with the cultural practices you identified in your society, practices which you experienced, assessed and subsequently found unsatisfying and meaningless. You, on the basis of your experiences, became a trenchant critic of your society. We both find the obsessions of society meaningless, you because there is no evident telos given by the Creator, me because there is so. From different premises we reached a similar conclusion about the vacuousness of the culture of our respective societies. That is the gulf between us, but it matters little for my purposes here. I say this, not to flatter you, Teacher, but to register the importance of your writings for me.
Qoheleth:

Baulking at the recognition that there is no given telos will always place you at odds with me, although you in other ways are enticingly close. You lack the courage to admit that we are in the existential abyss. Tell me though, how does the ecclesiastical teaching filter into your life, of that I am curious.

Mel:

It filters in through a number of conduits. Participation in services of worship and the pondering of scripture are prominent, but also very prominent is the reading of secular literature and being surprised with how often I find theological themes in it. I also find that ecclesiastical teaching comes very much to the fore as I view the vacuousness of the western capitalism which surrounds me; a variation of the via negativa if you will.

Qoheleth:

So, Reverend Doctor, having arrived at Santiago, tell me, what were the highlights for you? Being chummy with God on the Cruz de Ferros perhaps? Poking around in the house of misery at Navarrete?

Mel:

Just a reminder, this is not the end, we are leaving for Finisterre in a couple of days!

Qoheleth:

Yes, I am aware of that.

Mel:

Good! The highlight, of course, is having your company so that the walk has been an intentional one. I have wanted to write an autobiographical piece for some time and you were just the incentive I
needed to do it. I have been able to write in my preferred genre of dialogue through your accompanying me. This has been a great advantage in structuring my work.

**Qoheleth:**

I am pleased that you have made the most of it, for this is my swan song. I am not backing up for any sequel you may have in mind.

**Mel:**

It may well be my swan song as well. You are a hard act to follow, Teacher. I cannot imagine wanting to come back to the Camino when I do not have your company. Allow me, therefore, to make a few observations. I have come to the conclusion that you have a closeness to the teachings of Jesus. Does that surprise you?

**Qoheleth:**

Hmmm. What is it that you are wanting?

**Mel:**

Only your attention. The similarities I see between you and Jesus are that you both were critics of the religious establishments of your day. You both mocked the ideals of the societies you inhabited. You were both people who pursued your ideals and in doing so lived the virtues of honesty and integrity. And of course, you were both astonishingly brave, you both lived and chose to live ‘on the edge’. Many people live on the edge, in tense situations brought about by calamities such as cancer and so on, but you chose to live on the edge by being critical and outspoken and that is brave. I think that you stand in the best tradition of the prophets. I think that your writing should be foregrounded in the church.
Qoheleth:

But the differences are stark, because he was ever the optimist. He never doubted the telos.

Mel:

True, that is an essential difference. I do, however, see those similarities between Jesus and the enigmatic, but ubiquitous Qoheleth. I like the fact that you both pose the questions that Google cannot answer.

Qoheleth:

Let us come back to my question. Apart from the ‘enigmatic, but ubiquitous’ Qoheleth, what other highlights were there for you on the Camino?

Mel:

A highlight has been the affirmation of the ‘threads’ that I have identified to be running through my life and the affirmation of my confidence that I have been on the right path. I have been affirmed in my confidence that the telos from the Creator retrieves life from absurdity. I can state that with conviction. The carousel has been a ride steeped in learning for the main event, it has not been taking me around in circles, as you were suggesting. My faith has provided a rock for life, the Archimedean point, my confidence and belief in this has been reinforced.

Qoheleth:

And all this with the contributions of a church riddled with imperfections?

Mel:

The Church tells of the Good News!
Qoheleth:

Spreading the Good News? The victims of clergy sexual abuse would have something to say about that, but would you care to comment?

Mel:

Let us not confuse the messenger with the message.

Qoheleth:

I think the aforementioned people could be justly excused for doing so. The church for them is a huge disappointment. You have even admitted that it has been the case with you, at least for some of the time. Remember your disappointment when a congregation rejected your ideas of reaching out to the community and incorporating the performing arts into the worship and liturgy of the church! These are bitter memories for you of the vehicle of the Good News are they not?

Mel:

Unfortunate actions agreed, but the messenger and the message are being confused. There is hope and meaning, that cannot be erased from my life, from our lives, and that is the Good News.

Qoheleth:

That merely begs a question as to why the bearer of Good News, the bearer of hope and meaning is becoming marginal for people and going into severe decline. Surely, if it is Good News, people should be clamouring for it. I see no evidence of that. But that is a matter for consideration at another time. I wish to say here, Reverend Doctor, that in the process of this walk I have come to think that you underestimate the contribution that the academy has made to your life, by way of comparison with the church. The academy has been not only a consistent thread in your life, but a heavy contributor to your identity. I think you identify heavily as a scholar, the unique identity that
the academy has given you. Yes, the academy has made at least as significant a contribution as that
of the church.

Mel:

An interesting comment! One of many from you that I need time to process. I do not have all the
answers to put forward.

Qoheleth:

Well, might I say that we are not going to process anything much just wandering amid these
(pointing) wall-to-wall souvenir shops. Would all this continue to exist, I wonder, if St. James’ bones
were dug up in some other part of the world? I could imagine that there would be all sorts of
machinations going on around here to discredit such a claim. Empires might fall!

Mel:

Let us dispense with doomsday talk and find somewhere to rest up for a couple of days.

Qoheleth:

Agreed, let us go to the Menor. You can walk around feeling like a scholar.

(Qoheleth and Mel depart in the direction of the Menor).
Conversation Six.

(At Cape Finisterre.)

‘So, the great affair is over, but whoever would have guessed,

it would leave us all so vacant and so deeply unimpressed,

its like our visit to the moon, or to that other star,

I guess you go for nothing, If you really want to go that far’.

Mel at Cape Finisterre
Qoheleth and I are standing at the lighthouse at Cape Finisterre, looking out to sea. After several days of heavy rain and wind, the sea is calm and the sky is clear. Both of us are lost in thought. A few other pilgrims are mingling among souvenirs at a nearby shop. There is nowhere to go now, but ‘home’. Qoheleth picks up his backpack and snaps shut the buckles. He surveys the scene, looking back to the hill we descended the previous day to access the beachfront we would use to walk into the village of Finisterre. I will return from Finisterre by bus to Santiago, before I make my way back to Australia. Qoheleth turns to me and speaks.

Qoheleth:

That was a long way to walk to see a lighthouse!

Mel:

(after a period of silence) Have you nothing further to offer?

Qoheleth:

It was better than ending with the circus in Santiago?

Mel:

Is that your attempt to be positive?

Qoheleth:

No, as Hume would say, the statement was a matter of fact, not a relation of ideas. And as the famous and distinguished thinker, the Doormouse, would have it, ‘I mean what I say and I say what I mean’. But, on to other matters. I noticed that you bought a T Shirt back there with the caption ‘Finisterre: Game Over’. Can that sum up matters for you? If so, it seems to me that this is a silly game.
Mel:

You take your role as provocateur very seriously! Thank you! No, it doesn’t sum up matters for me. In fact, I bought that T Shirt simply because it amused me. There was nothing deeply reflective behind the purchase. In fact, what I’ve been thinking about here is something entirely different. I’ve been thinking of a children’s story; *Scuffy the Tugboat and his Adventures on the River*. This is a story that has had a huge impact on me throughout my life. It has a special relevance here as I gaze out to the Atlantic horizon. Did you know that the early pilgrims thought that this was the end of the world?

Qoheleth:

Yes.

Mel:

Oh ... Have you come across the story of *Scuffy the Tugboat*?

Qoheleth:

No

Mel:

Then let me take a lead from one of my favourite characters, Ivan Karamazov, from Dostoevsky’s novel, and tell you a story. Mine is the story of Scuffy. Scuffy is not a character I have either conceived of, or written into existence. Scuffy was brought into being by Gertrude Crampton.

Qoheleth:

Who?
Mel:

Gertrude Crampton.

Qoheleth:

(pensively) I have never heard of her.

Mel:

Then there is a gap in that formidable learning of yours, Teacher, which I will endeavour, if you permit, to rectify. Gertrude Crampton was a writer of children’s literature, although I do not know of anything she wrote, other than *Scuffy the Tugboat*. In my opinion, however, in *Scuffy* she has written a significant work of existential philosophy.

Qoheleth:

That is a very big claim.

Mel:

Well, the story is one that has had a powerful impact on me. Allow me to tell you the story and you can determine whether my claim for the significance of the work is justified.

Qoheleth:

Very well, go ahead. Don’t be too long though, I am due back in Sheol in a day or so. I can’t be like Oscar Wilde’s *Selfish Giant* and extend this visit for seven years. I would run out of conversation well before the Giant.

Mel:

I feel sure that I can manage within the time dictates of Sheol. The story was one that my mother read to me on numerous occasions during my early years. I was about four or five years old when
she introduced me to Scuffy. Scuffy was a tugboat, who had been left on a shelf in a toy shop. As there still beats within me the heart of a child protection caseworker, I would say that Scuffy was neglected. Scuffy was a flamboyant, red-painted tugboat, with a blue smokestack no less ... or was it the other way around? Being an adventurous type he pestered his owner, the man with the polka dot tie, a true villain in my estimation, to free him from this state of isolation, to arrest this movement toward entropy...

Qoheleth:

Don't interpret the story for me. I will make up my own mind about the man with the polka dot tie!

Mel:

Very well, I shall try to refrain from interpretation, as much as is possible, for I have deep feelings about, and an empathy for, Scuffy. To continue, Scuffy was also a courageous tug boat, willing to stand up to authority. The man with the polka dot tie took him home to his little boy. Scuffy was then placed in a bathtub and ordered to sail. Again, the courageous Scuffy raised an objection, this time to the man’s oppressive domesticity...

Qoheleth:

If you please ...

Mel:

I am trying, Teacher, I am trying!

Scuffy was a tugboat who refused to accept that his essence preceded his existence. Scuffy was convinced that he was made for bigger things. Scuffy kept imploring the man, much as did the woman with the unjust judge. The man with the polka dot tie finally relented and took Scuffy to the local brook to sail in more spacious and salubrious surroundings. Scuffy seized the moment and sailed away from his owner and captor and made his adventurous way down an ever widening, and
frightening river system to a harbour. Scuffy’s journey was fascinating, exciting and a little alarming for me as a child. In fact it still is, to a degree. Scuffy was my superstar as he made his intrepid way down the river. The river eventually flowed into a large and busy harbour. At the mouth of the harbour, where the river entered the sea, Scuffy faltered before what he calls the ‘Sea with no beginning and no end’. Faced with this terrifying abyss, Scuffy’s courage failed him and he was relieved to be rescued, at the very last moment, by the man with the polka dot tie. Scuffy was then returned to the bathtub to float at peace with the ducks.

Despite my entreaties to allow Scuffy to sail into the sea with no beginning and no end, my mother refused to change the ending. ‘Scuffy is safe and happy now’. For Scuffy to pass his time floating at peace with the ducks was a terrible anti-climax to contend with for a five year old. As I understand this story and its context, sixty three years later, I realise that at that time I wanted Scuffy to face his phantoms. I still do!

My estimation of Scuffy vacillates. Sometimes I see him as a hero, resisting the man with the polka dot tie; here he is a kind of early childhood Che Geuvara. At other times I see him as the anti-hero, who falters at the final hurdle and elects to return to the bathtub and float at peace with the ducks. I have heard him described as a type of Prodigal Son, but I think the analogy is strained. Scuffy is not on a hedonistic mission, as with the Prodigal Son, his motive is adventure and challenge, not profligacy.

Qoheleth:

That is indeed a quaint story. You seem a little harsh on Scuffy, in my estimation. Has your estimation of Scuffy changed during the course of this long walk? Has he changed in your thoughts while crossing that long, arid and tedious mesa to the rains of Galicia and on to the Atlantic Ocean? Is he a tugboat for all seasons, or does he vary with your environment?
Mel:

He is a spectral character. He changes, but I am not sure why, possibly with my changing circumstances? I have not thought enough about the question you pose. The concept of the sea with no beginning and no end is frighteningly graphic to me. Is it so to you? If I am not mistaken, you have been in just that situation with your absence of a telos.

Qoheleth:

I agree that the sea with no beginning and no end is a fearful image, but nevertheless a real one. There is no telos in the sea with no beginning and no end. There are no boundaries, no markers, no certainties, no firm ground underfoot so to speak, no Archimedean point. It is a good image of life for the reflective person.

Mel:

Maybe life is like that for a lot of people with dementia, but they have limited resources to interpret or understand the situation. They just have the sea with no beginning and no end. What a horrible thought.

Qoheleth:

Horrible or not, it is another classic example, a true depiction of the purposelessness of life in my opinion. ‘Not with a bang, but with a whimper’

Mel:

Sailing on without a purpose. Frightening! Perhaps heroic?

Qoheleth:

What a dilemma for a little boy! Scuffy, hero or antihero? Was your mother, by her refusal to alter the ending, unbeknown to her, offering you the first of the sops in the capitalist armoury to fend off
the fear of death? The first of the offerings, which culminate with Holbein’s Ambassadors looking away from death to whatever it is that they are looking to for distraction? Was the bathtub presented to you by your mother as a kind of utopia and the man with the polka dot tie as a saviour? Was Gertrude Crampton writing on a grant from ‘Uncle Sam’, presenting America as the great bathtub, offering security and protection and the opportunity to float at peace with the ducks for all the bewildered and frightened Scuffy’s of the world? Again, is the man with the polka dot tie the personification of God, the anthropomorphic God, invented by Man, as Feuerbach would have it. The being who offers a substitute existence over and against the fear of death? No wonder you have had this story reverberating around in your mind, continually imposing itself over all these years. We might yet see a reprint with an interpretation from conservative theologians attempting to shut the matter down..

Mel:

Perhaps you could write a foreword, Teacher?

Qoheleth:

I think my writing a foreword to that story would be its death knell. It would then get a similar reception to that given to John Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath on its initial publication.

Mel:

A public burning of Scuffy the Tugboat? Now, that would be something to behold.

Qoheleth:

Perhaps we should move on to more pressing matters, matters beyond fanciful speculation? As I understand it, the metaphor of the sea with no beginning and no end has resonated with you over the best part of a lifetime. After a lifetime’s consideration, tell me, Reverend Doctor, what is your
sea with no beginning and no end? From what you have said, death does not seem to qualify, so just what is your sea with no beginning and no end? Or is it plural?

Mel:

(gazing at Qoheleth) ‘You who know how to ask questions’

Qoheleth:

Perhaps, but back to my question.

Mel:

My sea with no beginning and no end. That place where there are no boundaries, no predictability, no ‘outcomes’; that place which strikes fear into the heart. No wonder this gallant little tugboat captures my imagination to this day. Perhaps it struck fear into my mother’s heart and that is why she would not change the ending?

Qoheleth:

Your answer!!

Mel:

My sea with no beginning and no end has not been faced. Hopefully it never will be faced. My worst imaginable nightmare, as I fantasize it, would be to share your world. I am fearful of being in a world that has been given no telos and thus one that makes no sense: the world that you live in. That is my nightmare. That world would demolish my personal resources much more than any illness, or debilitation. Your world would render me defenceless before absurdity. It is a tragic existence of the highest intensity.
Qoheleth:

Perhaps you will retain your delusions and illusions and not face the sea with no beginning and no end. You are a resourceful person, but incapable of dealing with my world as you would have it. Do you find this more challenging than a life-threatening lymphoma?

Mel:

Definitively yes! My courage would definitely fail me. Probably lamentably.

Qoheleth:

As I know how to ask questions, I will pose another for you. You have lived a life that could be described as polemical. Large slabs of your time have been spent, as your friend so eloquently put it, ‘in the dung heap of human existence’. Completing the polemic, large slabs of your time have been spent in visually aesthetic places in remote areas, areas untainted by humanity. It seems to me that you have been attracted to the margins. If I was to put a title to this dissertation, I would entitle it ‘A Polemical Life’. I wonder why, though, it has been lived in this manner? Do you in fact have a vision of the horror and the boredom\textsuperscript{ch} from your perception of and participation in the middle of the road life? Is this what lured you to work in the dung heap and flee to the wilderness? Or was this drifting (or is it ‘rushing’) to the extremities an effort to build a persona, an endeavour to be seen as an ‘interesting person’? Are you more of a narcissist than you wish to admit? Why have you occupied these places? I note that you are not reticent to speak of your experiences. Does this give you some sort of kudos? Do you not revel in it?

Mel:

I became involved in the dung heap initially because I hoped to make some positive contribution to people’s lives. I was quite idealistic. Exposure to Marx soon had me questioning whether this was bourgeois revisionism on my part. Was I contributing anything, in fact? Bureaucracies also had me
questioning the worth of what I was doing, when those bureaucracies were generally fearful of ideas and certainly critique was anathema to them. It was here that I learned of ‘political correctness’ and inflated egos, and where I several times met Machiavelli incarnate. I learned in DoCS that psychopathologizing the individual, as a first response, was the modus operandi and that class and other sociological critiques were out of bounds. Even the most elementary questions, such as why there was a proliferation of DoCS offices in underclass suburbs and a small office for the entire upper middle class area of Sydney, was out of bounds.

**Qoheleth:**

Having heard your dilemmas here, I must say that I fared no better. I also could see the problems faced by the bureaucracyrx. They were intimidated by the collectivity into having only one perspective about the aetiology of social problems. The state tolerated only one view of social problems and allowed only that view onto the hermeneutic agenda. I elected to do nothing about that and cautioned people to take a conservative approach to avoid reprisalscx. Hmmm, I was not intending to bring my experiences into these conversations, forgive the intrusion, I remind myself that they are intrusions.

**Mel:**

I am not the only one who experiences what I call the state and bureaucracy collusion, the oligarchy of interpretation. Having noted my disquiet and frustration, I must say that my immersion in the underclass culture of child abuse was a huge learning experience. The ‘polemic of wilderness’, I will use your term, was an antidote to the difficult situation in which I found myself in the workplace.

**Qoheleth:**

So, why stay in bureaucracies, when you were never going to get your views on the agenda without devastating reprisals? Why accept their paradigm?
Mel:

The usual reasons. I had a family to raise and rocking the boat would have put that in jeopardy. Financial obligations have a habit of suppressing one’s ethics and ideals.

Qoheleth:

Especially when there is an industrial reserve army available. Now that you have given some insight about what it was like for you to work in bureaucracies, I will give you another chance to revisit the fork in the road. It seemed to me that you were too sure of yourself with your previous proclamations. I suspect that there was some remorse about the chosen fork.

Mel:

Well there were some regrets initially. I had the opportunity of studying drama as an elective in my first year of social work. It was by far the most interesting area of study in my undergraduate years. I did have some doubts as I went through that year, but I decided that I needed to give social work another year. Throughout the four years of that degree, I continued to go regularly to the theatre and this was my greatest stimulus. Marrying at the end of my third year meant that any change was ruled out. I think I resigned myself to social work thereafter. I did however begin to appreciate the extraordinary array of experiences that social work provided in hospitals, addiction clinics, health centres and child protection units. I can honestly say that I chose the right fork and it had the inestimable benefit of assisting me in my vocation when I turned in that direction. But I am now very pleased to be incorporating more drama and literature. I also believe that this immersion in social work, as well as my vocational experience, has given me a better platform from which to appreciate drama and literature. There is a definite integration beginning, albeit at a slow pace.
Qoheleth:

You have come full circle. I think that you have the vision of the horror and the boredom, but is it all too late?

Mel:

No, the horse has not bolted. I have mentioned that as far as I am concerned, being on the right pathway is the important thing. I think that my wide-ranging experiences have contributed to my becoming a better writer. My maturing through work in child protection and my experiences in chaplaincy and ministry set the groundwork for writing.

Qoheleth:

And, what might that writing be? Something independent of the academy?

Mel:

No, I am not ready to be weaned off the academy. In truth I may never be.

Qoheleth:

We all have obsessions! Tell me more of this new project of yours.

Mel:

In recent years my writing has been focussed on matters that are more personal. I have written about my pilgrimages and I have written about my cancer. The common thread running through these writings has been the endeavour to pull together the threads of my journey, to combine the formal and informal learning experiences of my life by way of a written narrative, through the creation of a text. This new work that I am envisioning follows this trend.

What I have in mind, and the thinking around it, has been sharpened by this pilgrimage on the Camino. I want to write a piece which can be developed for performance. The content would
possibly centre on the events from the arrest of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane to when he is sent to his crucifixion. The events will be told through the voice of Pontius Pilate.

Qoheleth:

That will not be easy. There is little contemporaneous material about Pontius Pilate.

Mel:

There was nothing written about you, however I have managed to mine various sources, albeit secondary, and glean enough ideas to put together some thoughts about you, a kind of speculative profile.

Qoheleth:

I can see why that early first-century period of history might interest you, given your background and training. Tell me, though, why the interest in Pilate to the point where you would tell things from his perspective?

Mel:

There are a number of reasons. I am fascinated by Pilate. He is the ‘baddy’ of the gospel accounts. But what might have been Pilate’s motivation in the events leading up to the crucifixion? There is obviously so much more to the story than the gospels relate. I think an examination of the Roman presence in Judea, their policies, their military operations and their relationship with the Jewish authorities of the time, to name but a few factors, may shed some light on Pontius Pilate. I have a wide background of scholarship that could be brought to bear on this task, which I would find fascinating, much as I have found the puzzle of Qoheleth fascinating. I also think that Pilate is ‘visual’, he is waiting to be performed, not simply as an ancillary, but as the major player. I think Pilate, even in such a multi-cultural country as Australia is very well known, and the washing of the hands has gone into the folk law of metaphor. Yes, Pilate is waiting to be performed, once he is
created with reference to the best scholarship that can be accessed and the imaginative processes that can be applied to that scholarship. I can see that this work will pull together much of my learning and experiences. You are right in that I have come full circle with regard to the fork in the road, but my re-entry is from a different vantage point and mind set; I am now confident enough and mature enough to apply my scholarship creatively in the writing of my own material.

Qoheleth:

Do you really think there is an audience for this work, whether reading or viewing?

Mel:

Yes, I think so. I think that the subject matter is known, however vaguely by many people. I think that there is scope for the application of scholarship and imagination. That is what I enjoy doing.

Qoheleth:

So, what takes precedence, your enjoyment as you put it, or the marketability of your end product?

Mel:

My main criterion is being as honest as I can be in the presentation of my writing, which brings us back full circle, does it not?

Qoheleth:

I suppose it does.

Mel:

(gazing toward the Atlantic) Well, Teacher, there is nowhere to go now but back, literally not metaphorically.
Qoheleth:

And mercifully not by foot.

Mel:

You sound as though you are pleased to see it end.

Qoheleth:

I have done what I was summoned to do.

Mel:

Is that all this pilgrimage meant to you?

Qoheleth:

Was it supposed to mean more?

Mel:

I thought that you would have found some meaning in the exercise.

Qoheleth:

I find no meaning in any exercise.

Mel:

None at all?

Qoheleth:

None at all, apart from affirming the Railway Tunnel Philosophers dictum, ‘Not my will ... time to kill ... box to fill’.
Mel:
That is a rather bleak appraisal.

Qoheleth:
You did want me to be honest?

Mel:
Yes.

Qoheleth:
Well, there you have it.

Mel:
Well, for my part, I grew rather fond of you over the time. I appreciated your presence on the path.

Qoheleth:
The pleasure is all yours.

Mel:
Very well, Teacher, all that remains is for me to thank you for your contribution to my project. I have valued your commentary and critique. It does not mean much in your scheme of things, but to me it has helped clarify some aspects of my few days of life under the sun, in your hospice called life on earth. Your contribution has been meaningful for me.
Qoheleth:

It might pay you not to think too deeply about it. Your thinking might well align more with 
Ecclesiastes. Beware, your illusions may fall away and then you may well change your benevolent 
attitude toward me, as the Swedish researcher, Gunnar Myrdal, once said ‘there is nothing the 
public resents so much as being robbed of its follies’.

Mel:

I realise that I have harboured hopes of you changing and finding some meaning on this walk. I 
realise, however, that this was not only pretension, but folly on my part, perhaps even arrogance. 
Your position is entirely consistent. I have no wish to try to impose hope into it.

Qoheleth:

Then, it is farewell, Reverend Doctor, let us go our separate, meaningless ways. (pause) But before 
we do so, let me place a scenario before you. Let me be Mephistopheles for you.’ Your soul this day 
is required of you. This is as far as you go, physically as well as geographically. What are your thoughts, now that the final curtain is a few hours away? Gather them for me?

Mel:

Hmmm. I had not thought about the curtain being rung down so soon. If Finisterre was in all ways to 
be my end point, what do I make of it? It averts my fears of dementia and decrepitude, so in ways the end is welcome; I and others around me would not experience that dreaded protracted decline. 
(looking around) The setting is not too bad either and a big improvement on a hospital, or nursing home. Then there is that long-standing, intense curiosity about the main event, something that I can have no real conception of with my current limitations of mind and language. In line with your thinking, the human constructed world I live in I consider to be absurd and vacating it will not be a huge trauma. Capitalist enterprise, the lynchpin of it all, I find quite abhorrent, as well as absurd.
But, it is not all beer and skittles⁹ as far as vacating goes. There are natural areas that have brought me great joy and peace and a final revisit before my departure would have been delightful. There are people whom I would not have the chance to farewell and express my final, deep appreciation to for their contributions to my life. If I met my end here today at Finisterre, this would not be possible. But I do make a point of expressing my thoughts and feelings to people when I experience them, so I would not harbour huge regrets. Lymphoma has prompted me in the direction of expressing my thoughts and feelings at the time, a gift really. In all, I would not have to be dragged kicking and screaming away, Faust style.

**Qoheleth:**

This does not appear to me as a recommendation for human lived experience.

**Mel:**

This life has been worthwhile. I have tried to fulfil my potentials and live in accordance with my values. I cannot endorse your thought that I have simply killed time. And I find the reincarnation thought a thoroughly depressing one. I do like to think of something beyond this existence, somewhere where there abides "the infinitely gentle, infinitely suffering thing."⁹

**Qoheleth:**

You are not a devotee of cryogenics we have established that.

**Mel:**

Quite so. I think that if the people wasting the planet’s scarce resources by freezing themselves for decades really were going to return, I would wish them to return to some remote, Third World hamlet in the middle of a desert, where they could not so easily and selfishly squander more resources.
Qoheleth:

Well, you can go off now and work on your tome. Farewell, Reverend Doctor. Continue to chase after the wind. (Qoheleth turns and starts down the hill toward the village of Finisterre).
An Appraisal of the Conversations with Qoheleth.

(At the library, University of Santiago de Compostella.)

‘Who am I’?

They mock me these lonely questions of mine,

whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine’.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Who am I* a poem in *Letters and Papers from Prison*. 
I have returned to Santiago de Compostella from Finisterre. Qoheleth has departed, his work, and his obligations to me, having been completed. I have made my way to the University of Santiago de Compostella. The scene is the group study room in the School of History and Geography. Meeting me on my arrival are the Grand Inquisitor, a creation of the Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoevsky, in his novel *The Karamazov Brothers* and the Reverend Brand, a creation of Henrik Ibsen in his play *Brand*. I have invited these two characters to offer commentary on my Conversations with Qoheleth. They are people from different traditions and different theological perspectives. I am using their commentary as complimentary evaluations of my pilgrimage on the Camino.

**Mel:**

Reverend Sir and your Excellency, thank you for agreeing to offer commentary on my pilgrimage with Qoheleth. You have both played important parts in my formation. I refer, firstly, to my formation as an ordained person and, perhaps equally importantly, to my formation as a thinker. You have both had the opportunity of overhearing my conversations with Qoheleth. You both know the task I have set myself, namely of reflecting on my life and writing autobiographical drama. I am now going to ask you for your comments, beginning with you, Reverend Brand. You are free to comment in whatever way you wish and to ask me any questions that may be helpful for you in progressing your commentary. I will offer my final summary at a later point and not interrupt your commentary.

**Brand:**

(cynically) Where to commence? I will start by making some comments with regard to you as a clergyman. I was disappointed with these conversations with Qoheleth and indeed with your so-called pilgrimage. In fact, I am disappointed with you. You are a person who has been given many privileges in life, most of all three years in a theological college in which to devote yourself to the study of the Bible. You have little to show for it. You give no indication of someone who has been
transformed by your reading of the Scriptures. You are a person who is lukewarm. The writer of Revelation has made a general comment on religious adherents, it sums you up very accurately ....... lukewarm. You are accommodating of the world, a reed shaken in the wind\textsuperscript{cxviii}. You claim that the churches have become too accommodating of the world, that they are followers of social fashion and faddism. I am not disputing this. They are little more than welfare organisations. You, however, are no different. You have a remarkable lack of insight into your own life and there is little evidence that this is going to change.

Firstly, and briefly, I will make a comment on your choice of Qoheleth as a provocateur. This was a very poor choice indeed. Qoheleth is a man singularly lacking in any direction and any commitment. He is a blind leader of the blind. Why you would choose him as a provocateur is inexplicable. He was always going to be incapable of offering anything other than a resignation to despair. He lived an ignoble life of no particular value and set forth an example which was counter to the New Testament scriptures and the prophets. You could have chosen someone of faith and yet you chose a functional unbeliever, one whose writing should not be numbered among our Scriptures. You had the opportunity to use the time on the walk in a constructive manner, instead you squandered it by choosing a companion who had little of substance and worth to contribute.

As far as you are concerned, it is my opinion that you have either lost, or perhaps you never had, a vibrant faith. If I might quote a favourite writer of yours, the philosopher Antony Flew, your faith has ‘died the death of a thousand qualifications’\textsuperscript{cxiix}. You rightly, in my opinion, criticize historical critical method as tedious and arid, and in this I think you are correct, it offers little in the way of guidance for living. But you have lost a radical acceptance of the authority of the scriptures. You seem to imagine yourself as radical in some way; however I consider this to be a delusion of yours. Let me explain.

One of the platforms in your conversations is depicting yourself as a risk taker in life. I cannot see this as credible at all. The biggest risk you could take is to believe what you read in the Scriptures
and then to act upon it. This you fail to do. Placing yourself in the stories of the Scriptures is acceptable, and you rightly quote the scholars, McGrath and Steinmetz, but there is little evidence that you act as though you believe. There is nothing in your method of autobiographical drama that accepts the primacy of Scripture and there is little in your life that acknowledges that primacy.

I wish to raise another point. Have you ever asked yourself, seriously, why the mainstream churches, including your own, are diminishing? Have you ever asked yourself, seriously, why the growth is in the charismatic churches? (Not that I am necessarily recommending those churches). Why is it that few people have the slightest interest in what you, in the mainstream, are saying? Why would they when what you have to say differs little from what Amnesty International is saying, or what any Council of Social Service is saying? I would suggest to you that you present nothing of interest for people; there is nothing that is unique in the message you proclaim, nothing unique in the nature of the teaching. You say nothing that excites passion. Just what is your ‘core business’, to use a crass mercantile term? You are too much in the liberal camp and if I might quote the commentator you mentioned, Wink? You are faced with the huge problem which faces the liberal academic theologians, namely that of finding people who might have some interest in what you have to say.

You and your church have succeeded in making the radical message of Christ, the admission of sin and repentance, into a limp call for an extension of social service provision. A radical message has been ignored and a bland one substituted. Your church is destined for oblivion and you as one of its ministers will face the same end, irrelevance and oblivion, unless you catch the spirit of the Gospels.

You rightly criticize those who would have the church be a welfare agency. You rightly ask how this approach would differ from those who espouse the aims of the a Red Cross, or Amnesty International and other agencies of advocacy. What you fail to do is identify the core business of the church. In that sense, you are no different to those of the liberal camp who are presiding over the church’s demise. A few more bowls of soup and a few more placards about refugees are not going to save the church from extinction. When the church meets its inevitable end, other agencies
will have no problem in filling the soup bowls and putting up the placards. The church seems to have nothing distinctive to offer. You do not offer the challenge to people of a radical following of Christ and of all that means. You have not explored the implications of following Christ. The church does not even have entertainment value any longer.

As for yourself, you are merely a globe trotter of no real use to what should be the prime purpose of the church: to make known the uniqueness and demands of the Gospels. The social advocacy of the church is likely to be the last program of the church, as soon there will be no church voice for advocacy, for there will be no church. You think you are being radical with your pilgrimages to Mount Solitary and I concede that this could bring the teaching aspect of the church to the fore, however your message is limp, and besides, even if it was aligned with the gospel message, it is but a drop in the ocean as far as teaching is concerned, and teaching is the activity which should be the prime purpose of the church.

The pilgrimage to Santiago? Well, it was a waste of time; at least Qoheleth had that right. There is some hope for you, however. It is clear to me, from your comments about utopia and utopians that you do not give any credibility to the ridiculous notion of the perfectibility of the human being. You need to go further now and really believe in the Gospel message that I powerfully advocate: ‘all or naught’\textsuperscript{xxxii}. Then you will save yourself from ecclesiastical extinction and prepare yourself for relevance to the world through proclaiming eternal values. There is still hope for you, if you have the courage to believe. Your failing to go down that path will affirm my current evaluation of you: a poor excuse for a clergyman.

\textbf{Mel:}

Thank you, Reverend Brand, for your frank contribution. There is no doubting your scrupulous honesty and your zeal. You offer your comments without edit and you are far from being politically
correct, you court no one’s favour and are dismissive of ‘image’, ubiquitous in Western culture. These are qualities which I quite admire in you.

Now I turn to you, your Excellency. I suspect that your comments will be no more flattering of me than were those of Reverend Brand.

**Grand Inquisitor:**

Quite right! I can see nothing meritorious about you! Let me be more specific.

While I find myself in disagreement with the premises on which Reverend Brand has based his criticism of you and your pilgrimage to Santiago, a fact in itself which is hardly surprising, I find myself in agreement with his conclusion, namely that you are a disappointment and that your pilgrimage was a waste of time: a rather frivolous, flippant and self-indulgent event in the guise of acquiring self-knowledge.

Like Reverend Brand, your choice of a provocateur I consider to be a poor one. Qoheleth is a person self-obsessed, weak, indecisive, confused and lacking in commitment. This of course is abundantly evident in his writings. Reverend Brand complains that Qoheleth is a blind leader of the blind. This is quite wrong. Qoheleth is not a leader of anyone in any sense of the word. You needed someone like me to be your provocateur, strong and decisive and with a real feeling for the flock, who are in the main the weak and indecisive and those who need strong leadership.

I want to begin by insulting you; indeed insulting you in the most confronting way imaginable for your mind and disposition. But insult you I must. I put it to you that you are well along the road to becoming a modern day Pharisee. You set people heavy burdens. You give them tasks that only a very few can ever fulfil. Walking to Mount Solitary indeed! And who would want to ride a bicycle from Dublin to Jerusalem? Folly of the highest order! People need reassurance, not challenge. I agree with Qoheleth to that extent, if you present people with challenges then life will overwhelm them. But Qoheleth, with his moping around, would present people with even bigger problems.
People do not want to be challenged with existential questions of the type that he raises. They cannot deal with that sort of freedom; life will overwhelm them. They need figures of authority; they need to have people whom they trust and whom they consider to be acting in their best interests, to take away these challenging and frightening scenarios. They want people of authority who can define life for them in palatable ways. They do not want to know about seas with no beginning and no end. They need the strong figures of the church, like me, to reassure them and assuage them and advise them. I agree with Reverend Brand that the weak need strong figures to guide them, but I disagree with him in that he sets the expectations too high, they are ridiculous burdens he would impose. They are burdens the weak do not need. Role models like Reverend Brand they definitely do not need. Role models like you they also do not need, although unlike you Reverend Brand has quality of character and conviction, he is simply mistaken in his views.

You endorse, along with some other critics, the notion that historical critical method is of little interest to the congregations of the church and that the biggest problem that the ‘liberal’ clergy now face is finding anyone who could be bothered listening to them. Correct! So far at least! But you seem oblivious to the fact that your approach alienates people. People cannot meet your expectations. You demoralize people, we placate people, we make life easier for them, we do not, as you do, impose pharisaic burdens. Life is difficult enough for people without them having to shoulder such burdens. We, on the other hand, feed them the bread of reassurance and they trust us. Is that not a noble endeavour? You are destined to be, and only ever can be, the patron saint of lost causes as long as you continue to go down the path which you are now following.

People want to live their lives as followers. They don’t want challenges. You mockingly call this desire the ‘tranquillizers of faith’. But who wants to strive in matters of religion? Striving is for the demands of the workaday world. People want religious salves, they have enough stress and pressure in their daily lives. They are not up to it in religion. When will you and the other crusaders realize that? You do not take your lead from the people, as we do. How can you say you are a ‘servant’ of
the people? This is a preposterous claim. What truth is there in this claim? You are fortunate that you have invited me to comment on your pilgrimage, for you are singularly lacking in insight. You claim for yourself an ability to wrest insight from your physical and intellectual experiences; I cannot see any justification for this claim. You need to realise that to speak to the people you need to speak with authority, this you clearly do not have apart, perhaps, from the very few who listen to your appeal to what you term Eco theology and trudge out to Mount Solitary with you. Most people who go with you would probably not give a damn if you disposed of the theological niceties.

We are the ones who speak with authority. We have no challengers. Marx noted that religion is the opiate of the people. He, however, had some harebrained idea that people would up and rebel and overthrow governments and presumably the church along with it, when they were rid of what he termed false consciousness. False consciousness he, of course, attributed to us, but the fact of the matter is that Marx has long gone, the revolution never happened, capitalism is entrenched and we continue to have the allegiance of many people. Marx had at best, to give him the benefit of the doubt, what Graham Greene accurately described, in The Quiet American, as a passion for humanity as a whole but no time for people. Well, Marx was waiting for Godot and we continue to have the allegiance of the people.

Then there are those, like Nic Bolstrom (medical ethics journal) who would see that they are heralding a new age, where death will be banished and teeming masses of Methuselahs will live athletic lives to a ripe old age. He views anyone who doubts this is a spoil sport, a kill joy. Without being too cynical, I was wondering if Nic is the non de plume of the chief executive officer of a pharmaceutical cartel. Nic’s plea for the unprecedented injection of funds to strive in this direction of seeking to be forever young and staving off death seems like a wonderful way of using the spectre of death to produce surplus value on a massive scale for a privileged few. No longer do we have the ideology of the infinite possibilities of cure to produce capital, we have the ultimate card being
played, staving off death. Nic, too, is waiting for Godot. We are still the ones giving out the tranquilizers.

I must say, though, that I am of the opinion that there is merit in your idea of sex as the opiate of the people. Nic’s idea is not offering solace in the face of death, being as it is in the realms of science fiction. And waiting and postponing gratification is not appealing to people who are socialized into ‘fast’ and ‘immediate’. But sex is an immediacy and available to all. The issue is how could the church corner the market? We must give that matter thought, it would add to our authority.

To conclude, this exercise of yours has only excited a few yawns from me. Qoheleth had nothing better to do in eternity no doubt, but even he was not enthused to accompany you. Find something better to do with your time than make arduous trudges to distant places, and refrain from further wasting my time, although I concede that your decision to consult me was a very appropriate one and one of the few insights you have demonstrated. I trust that you will learn from it.

**Mel:**

Excellency, your comments have met, perhaps even exceeded, my expectations, although I did not anticipate that you would share some consensus with Reverend Brand. I thank you for your comments. You may perceive that you have wasted your time, but I find your comments thought provoking, although confronting. One of my goals in my writing was to get beyond image. You have certainly assisted me in that regard.
My Concluding Reflection.

Dear Reader,

As Roland Barthes has designated you as the supreme authority in interpreting texts, the final determination of the merits, or otherwise, of my text rests with you.

You have heard from the Grand Inquisitor and the Reverend Brand. Neither was ever going to be enamoured of me, in fact they were inevitably going to be my detractors. However their comments were enlisted for your consideration, to provide another perspective on my foray into autobiographical writing.

How do I, the pilgrim, assess this pilgrimage? Were there any merits in terms of transformative learning? Was there any merit at all in the exercise? Was it simply an arduous trudge, as the Grand Inquisitor would have it?

I consider the pilgrimage and the application of autobiographical drama to have been a useful way to have reviewed my life. The examination of my life has not left me wishing I was dead, as the distinguished Saul Bellow suggested it may. I am of the opinion that my pilgrimage and its testing of autobiographical drama could be a useful addition to my writing where posterity, if they are interested, can read the work and know a little more about me, not just see me as a branch of the family tree. Will they be interested? As Qoheleth would say, ‘who knows’? I think he would also add that it is absurd to even ask the question.

One of the things I raised earlier in this dissertation was the ‘fork in the road’ and my coming full circle. Did I take the wrong fork? Or, as the Cheshire Cat and Qoheleth would say, does it really matter which direction I took? For Qoheleth my life is simply killing time, for the Cheshire Cat, I will get ‘somewhere’ whatever direction I take, so long as I persevere. Is the direction I have taken the correct and appropriate fork? Was it really a fork? As Bonhoeffer would comment, ‘they mock me these lonely questions of mine’. My passion for drama has not abated over forty years. I now
find myself thinking that maybe the fork in the road between social work and drama was imaginary; the product of early thinking that saw things as binary opposites and not dialectically. I seem to have perceived drama and social work as thesis and antithesis, not countenancing Hegel’s synthesis. The synthesis has seen me looking to a new project, which recognizes the indispensable contribution of my social work practice, drama and vocation to the development of this dissertation. At the outset, when pondering the choice between social work and drama I was thinking in narrow, disciplinary terms. It would seem to me now that the synthesis was happening all the time. Drama and social work were developing side by side, each influencing the thinking in and about the other. The project is the logical outcome of my thinking and training.

It is sometimes difficult, even for a person like me whose activities often transcend stereotype boundaries, particularly ageist stereotype boundaries, to not be influenced by those same stereotypes. Such is the power of ideology. Even as I think about my activities and the (imaginary?) fork in the road, a voice inside me cautions, ‘You are approaching 70, what makes you think that you can become a writer for performance? What makes you think that you can turn back the clock? Is this not all a “chasing after the wind “, as Qoheleth would most certainly say? The philosophy of Qoheleth, it seems to me, leads to entropy and I am not one for entropy, even if my activities were and are absurd. So, as a person approaching 70, I determine that I will write for performance. This determination is hardly transformative, but it is significant and affirming.

I came to the opinion during the pilgrimage that my utilisation of autobiographical drama has possible application in areas other than simply individual pilgrims who have a passion to write autobiographically. Social work, for instance, gives much emphasis to critical reflective practice, as does ordained ministry. I think that during the course of this pilgrimage I have utilized a reflective practice that is challenging, focused and capable of being sustained.

The method I utilised on the Camino led me to think that it is able to stretch the boundaries of reflective practice, while also reinforcing the tendency of social work and ordained ministry to be
open to and informed by a variety of disciplinary and literary sources. I think, in particular, that autobiographical drama could be adapted for those giving consideration to candidating for ordination. It could be usefully deployed during the Year of Discernment. It could also, I consider, be a useful tool for those people in the helping profession, such as social workers, or those training to enter those professions, such as social work students, who need to operate out of a grounding in self knowledge. These thoughts are not transformative for me personally, as I have been giving thought to reflection on practice for a considerable time.

Perhaps what I have learned most on this pilgrimage is that not all pilgrimages will be transformative. For a person whose life is rich with experience, it could be that transformation is less likely for me. I liken this situation to my work in DoCS over the years, where having been confronted by many and varied crises, particularly when working overnight, I have a propensity to be calm in these situations much more so than people who have not had this range and depth of experience. Pilgrimage is likely to be transformative for people whose experiences of pilgrimage and exposure to life events are more circumscribed.

A main theme to emerge from this pilgrimage and the reflections thereon is gratitude. Qoheleth’s critiques of my privileges in life are telling. It is self-evident that I am much more privileged than people living in the Third World and people living in deprived circumstances in Australia. I also consider myself privileged to have only a small amount of savings, less in fact than six thousand dollars. I consider that I am greatly privileged to not be burdened by wealth and possessions. In fact, when working with DoCS, I declined to participate in Lotto draws out of concern that there was a remote chance that we would win. Such an event would have been a crisis for me, a calamity in fact.

My long history of education has been nourishing. It is not just a passport to an income, or the training of a functionary. For this I am deeply grateful. I have chosen areas of study that seemed likely to develop my potentials at the time, not a career, although the two at times do overlap. I cannot regard learning as a burden, as a source of vexation, as Qoheleth did. My education raises
awkward questions about life, certainly, and it causes me to think and review, certainly, but it is also intensely interesting to try to gain insight into the nature of the world around me. It also mandates me to share that learning in appropriate contexts.

Much of the time, I have regarded my cancer as a privilege, through the opportunity of witnessing some people’s potentials being realized. I have seen their qualities of character emerge in the context of their response to my life threatening illness. This was a situation of great stress for those people and they responded admirably. Seeing virtues develop in friends and family has been a privilege for me. To see my own character tested and not found wanting has also been a great privilege. Philip Toynbee wrote\textsuperscript{cxxvii} that ‘Illness demoralizes and absolute illness demoralizes absolutely’. He added a rejoinder that there are some people whose virtues rise to meet it. In my appraisals of ten years of living with non Hodgkins lymphoma, a life threatening illness, I consider myself to be one of those people whose virtues rose to meet it. There is a sense in which I am grateful for this test of character. I am grateful for the opportunity of being put to the test. Lymphoma has consolidated my confidence in myself as a person capable of facing death with a degree of equanimity. A serious infection in the hospital was a ‘trial run’ in fact. While ‘I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be’\textsuperscript{cxviii}, I am nevertheless proud of my responses in the face of my possible demise.

My faith has also been a privilege, particularly the calm at the core that has flowed from the values and teachings I have derived from that faith. With that privilege comes the injunction from faith to share those privileges. As my privileges are not material, my sharing will be in the areas of personal contact. To this end, introducing people to wilderness, pilgrimage and spirituality, particularly in the Blue Mountains and the South West Wilderness of Tasmania, is a high priority. Further expanding these contributions to young people from low socio-economic status areas is the top priority.

The pilgrimage across the Camino has brought with it the conviction that my life has been going along the right path, it has consolidated the belief that the accumulation of life experiences will
transfer to the ‘main event’. If there is no main event, then as far as I am concerned, Qoheleth is right, it would all be the meaninglessness that comes from the lack of a telos. The main event brings a stability to my life. A ‘sop’, as Marx would say? Hardly. As I have indicated, the Beatitudes are the most challenging and demanding influences in my life, but with them and other teachings from the Scriptures, life makes sense to me, however demanding life may become as a result.

Along the Camino came the consolidation of the value that I place on ideas. My next venture into research within the academy is firming up. Ideas flowed as they always seem to do when I have time and the ‘long vision’ at my service. My mind always, and as a matter of course, has the question of what could make a possible thesis lurking in the background. Forty years in the academy has left a strong and ongoing legacy.

The ideology of the Camino and the vast and continually expanding literature of the Camino emphasizes transformation. There exists a plethora of books on the subject of walking the Camino. Many are rather crassly mercantile, like Tom Trumble’s An Unholy Pilgrim. There are other reflective writings such as Joyce Rupp’s Walk in a Relaxed Manner. My particular contribution, through autobiographical drama, is possibly unique among writings about pilgrimage on the Camino. It makes no grand claims about change and transformation, while not denying that such changes do happen. Rather, it makes modest claims about consolidation and confirmation of life directions and utilises a serviceable approach for those considering reflective autobiographical writing.

Possibly the most significant consolidation for me is that of the place of wilderness in my life. The classic pilgrim routes have made big impressions on me. I have benefitted greatly from completing human-powered pilgrimages to all of the pilgrim destinations of Christian antiquity: Jerusalem, Rome, Santiago and Nidaros Cathedral, Norway. I consider that my pilgrimages on traditional routes will likely decline in the immediate future by way of comparison with wilderness pilgrimages, provided that my body continues to meet the rigours required. Even on this pilgrimage across the Camino, the pull of the wilderness was powerful. I found myself at times wishing that I was in the
wilderness, away from the almost constant evidence of civilisation along the Camino and away from crowds. Wilderness is incontestably what I thrive on, it is incontestably there where the veil between the human and the divine is thinnest for me. The best of human constructed environments pales for me beside the grandeur of the South West Wilderness of Tasmania. Along the Camino I came to the realisation that while ever my body holds together and I can maintain my high levels of fitness, I will endeavour to reach the incomparable places of Tasmania’s South West. They feed my soul as nothing else can. When my body can no longer deal with the demands of wilderness, I will endeavour to resume my pilgrimages along the traditional routes.

Now, in the words of the Epilogist of Ecclesiastes, Chapter Twelve: ‘The end of the matter. All has been heard’.
END NOTES.

1 Mel is referring to St. Anselm and the Ontological Argument, where Anselm postulates ‘a Being the greater of which cannot be conceived’. See Russell 1975; p 411-412.

2 The reference is to the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt to wander in the Negev Desert, referred to in the biblical book of Exodus.

3 The Western Arthurs range is a small mountain range situated in the South West Wilderness World Heritage area of Tasmania, noted for its unique landforms.

iv Albergue refers to a hostel-like building providing accommodation to pilgrims walking the Camino Santiago de Compostella.

v This is a reference to the story of Jesus’ appearance to disciples walking the Emmaus Road in Judea, noted in the Gospel of Luke 13:33ff.

vi A phrase recorded in Ecclesiastes 1:14.

vii A place to which all go after physical death. In Ecclesiastes, 9:10 it is referred to as a place where there is neither work, thought, knowledge nor wisdom.

viii The similarity referred to here is to Aristotle’s deity, a being remote from human existence and inscrutable, sharing such characteristics with Qoheleth’s God (Russell 1975; p181).

ix The reference here is to Parmenides’ idea of a lack of change see Russell; 1975, pp (66-67).

x Qoheleth is referring here to Sisyphus as the central character of Camus’ novel, The Myth of Sisyphus.

xi Qoheleth is referring here to Dr. Rieux, a central character of Camus’ novel The Plague.

xii Mel is referring here to a concept attributed to the philosopher J.J. Rousseau.

xiii Qoheleth is referring here to the ‘Confessions’, authored by St. Augustine and often cited in the literature on autobiography.

xiv Qoheleth is referring here to a central character of Ivan’s story ‘The Grand Inquisitor’, related in Dostoevsky’s novel The Karamazov Brothers.

xv Qoheleth is referring here to the mythological figure, Pandora, who opened a box, releasing evils which afflicted the human race. Kirkpatrick, 2001; 759.

xvi An expression which denotes an agreement to commit.

xvii A term accredited to the sociologist, Erving Goffman, and the title of his book of that name.

xviii Qoheleth refers to his writing in Ecclesiastes 1:11.

xix Richard Dawkins is often seen as the standard bearer of the movement sometimes referred to as the New Atheism. He is the author of a number of books, including The God Delusion.

xx Jane Tompkins, author of ‘Me and My Shadow’ (1987)...an article which brought forth debate about merits, or otherwise, of the writers’ self being transparent in the texts they produce.

xxi Qoheleth refers to a popular, current idea that it is financial controllers who exert the most influence on university education and that universities are most accurately seen as businesses.

xxii These are classification/categories used prolifically by David Riesman throughout his book, The Lonely Crowd.

xxiii Mel is referring to the Gospel of Matthew 5:1ff.

xxiv These are identified and discussed in Aristotle’s work The Nicomachean Ethics.

xxv Mel is referring to the devil of Christopher Marlowe’s play, Dr. Faustus.

xxvi The reference is to W.H.Auden’s poem ‘Letter to Lord Byron’, a long poem, which ends with Auden’s cryptic comment that Byron has an eternity in which to read it. Auden 1994.

xxvii Thomas Hobbes, author of Leviathan, and Jeremy Bentham, originator of the nightmarish concept of the ‘Panopticon’ penitentiary, are oft cited as theorists of social control.

xxviii A credential is the pilgrim ‘passport’ for the Camino Santiago de Compostella. Stamps acquired for the credential at each albergue allows the pilgrim entry into the next succeeding albergue.

xxix A term used by Karl Marx to denote ‘excess’ labour performed by the worker to produce profit for the capitalist.
The reference is to the central characters of Beckett’s play, *Endgame*. There is much banter between Ham and Clov in this play.

A phrase used in Australian Rules football to denote that the time allotted for the game has almost elapsed.

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross wrote a famous book entitled *On Death and Dying*, in which was contained her equally famous ‘stages’.

The reference is to a noted bicycle endurance circuit in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales.

The reference is to Eugene Ionesco, a playwright associated with absurd drama.

Mel is referring to his dissertation, ‘Trekking to the Centre’, (Sydney College of Divinity, 2012).

A Medieval play written by an anonymous author.


A Greek word for ‘appropriate time’.

A mechanical device/platform used in the theatres of ancient Greece to lower God’s onto the stage to intervene in the action taking place.

The final dialogue between Oedipus and Creon in the Sophoclean play, *Oedipus the King*.


William Blake in his poem ‘Auguries of Innocence’.

A famous statement by Macbeth in the play by William Shakespeare.

The reference is to the phrase often used by Lennie, a central character in John Steinbeck’s novel, *Of mice and Men*.

Jack Tanner is a central character in George Bernard Shaw’s play *Man and Superman*.

Mel is referring to Ecclesiastes 8:1-9.

Mel is referring to Ivan’s examples outlined to Alyosha in *The Karamazov Brothers*, Dostoevsky 2007, p263-268.

Mersault is the central character in Camus’ novel, *The Outsider*.

Mel is referring to the Christian doctrine of Christ’s resurrection.

‘Giving back the ticket’ is a phrase used by Ivan when discussing the questions of theodicy with his brother Alyosha, a monk. It occurs within Ivan’s arguments against the doctrine of Atonement. Dostoevsky 2007, p268.

The reference is to 1 Corinthians 15:55.

The reference is to the term used by Brown, 2000, 62.


The philosopher, Antony Flew, commented on the ‘Parable of the Gardener’, which aimed to demonstrate that a god, unable to be apprehended by the senses, could not be credibly differentiated from no god at all.


The reference here is to Alyosha’s inability to counter the arguments Ivan presents to the view that a loving God and creator is inconsistent with the evil and massive suffering present in the world. The reference is to Dostoevsky, *The Karamazov Brothers* p263-269.

The reference is to Ecclesiastes 9:7

The reference is to Ecclesiastes 5:12.

The Grand Inquisitor is the central character in Ivan’s parable of the Grand Inquisitor, found in *The Karamazov Brothers*.

*Brave New World* is the name of the novel by Aldous Huxley, a story of an imaginary future dystopia.

A reference to Lucky’s speech in Samuel Beckett’s play, *Waiting for Godot*.

The reference is to the chapter ‘Advice from a Caterpillar’ from Lewis Carrol’s story, Alice in Wonderland.

The reference is to Toynbee’s final volume of his autobiography, entitled *End of a Journey*, 1998.

A term used in the game of cricket, where the captain of a batting side elects to not continue batting until all his batters have been dismissed, having considered that his side has amassed sufficient runs.

The freezing of one’s body after death, with the hope that science will eventually find the knowledge and techniques to restore life to the corpse.

Qoheleth has given new referents to the lyrics of a popular Christian song by Crystal Lewis ‘Come as you are’.
Mel is referring to Ecclesiastes 10:1.

Major Barbara is the title of the play by George Bernard Shaw.

The reference is to Ecclesiastes 2:1-11.

The reference is to Noel Coward’s comment in Lazar 2013; p221.

Mel is quoting from the liturgy of the Marriage Service in the Uniting Church liturgies, gathered in the publication Uniting in Worship.

The reference is to the terms used by Reisman in his book, The Lonely Crowd, 1950.

The Cruz de Ferros is an iron cross standing amid a huge pile of stones and pebbles placed by millions of pilgrims over the centuries.

Qoheleth is referring to William Blake’s gnomic Verses to God. ‘If you have formed a circle to go into, go into it yourself, and see how you would do’.

This saying was attached to an advertisement for a Nike product, I cannot remember which.

A character of mythology, re-worked by Camus for his essay The Myth of Sisyphus.

From the final scene of Oedipus the King.

Qoheleth refers to Ecclesiastes 9:11.

Qoheleth refers to a statement of Ham and directed to Clov, in Endgame.

The quote is from Ecclesiastes 1:9.

Port Augusta is a town in South Australia near the junction of the highway connecting Perth and that connecting Darwin.

Mel is referring to Ecclesiastes 7:5.

In the Crito, Plato is disparaging about ‘public opinion’ p88ff.

Mel is referring to an image from 1Corinthians 5:6.

The final statement, in the closing scene of Satre’s play, No Exit.

Qoheleth quotes from Ecclesiastes 1:18

Poles on which a camera, or device, is attached, which enables the bearer to more easily take photographs of themselves.

A certificate issued to people who successfully complete a prescribed length, not necessarily the whole, of the Camino Santiago de Compostella.

Ancient Greek philosopher, who questioned change and permanency. See Russell; p58ff.


See Gospel of John 3:1ff.

The song fabled to have been sung by swans immediately prior to their death: a finale.

A seminary near Santiago de Compostella Cathedral, much of which has been converted to accommodation for visitors to the city, not exclusively pilgrims.

A distinction made by the philosopher, David Hume in Of Human nature and the Understanding.

A character from The Mad Hatter’s Tea Party in Lewis Carroll’s Book, Alice in Wonderland.


An Argentinian born Marxist revolutionary. A popular figure for Left students, especially in the 1970s.

The reference is to the parable from the Gospel of Luke 15:11-32.

The reference is to T.S.Eliot’s poem ‘The Hollow Men’.

Feuerbach presents this thesis in The Essence of Christianity, 1957.

There were public burnings of Steinbeck’s book on its publication.

The reference is to T.S. Eliot’s poem, ‘The Wasteland’.

The reference is to a statement by T.S.Eliot, Balakian; 2008, 298.

Qoheleth is referring to Ecclesiastes 5:8-9.

Qoheleth is referring to Ecclesiastes 8:1-9.


The reference is to the Parable of the Rich Fool in the Gospel of Luke 12:13-20 and also to the summoning of Dr Faustus in the last scene of Christopher Marlowe’s play, Dr. Faustus.

A term Mel uses to denote an existence beyond the physical.

A phrase denoting that life is not all pleasure.

The reference is to T.S.Eliot’s poem ‘Preludes’.

Its (extremely limited) application in the human sphere is the freezing of human bodies after death with the hope that the body will be restored to life by scientific discoveries in the future.
The reference is to Jesus statement about John the Baptist in the Gospel of Luke 7:24.

Brand’s reference is to Antony Flew’s statement in his ‘Parable of the Gardener’, an argument against the existence of God.

The reference is to soup kitchens, an activity of quite a few churches.

The reference is to placards, often displayed outside churches, calling for the acceptance of more refugees and asylum seekers to Australia.

A regular saying of Brand throughout Ibsen’s play of the same name.

The reference is to Jesus’ criticism of the Pharisees throughout Chapter 23 of Matthew’s Gospel.

The reference is to The Fable of the Dragon-Tyrant, an article by N. Bostrom, 2005.

The reference is to Alice’s conversation with the Cheshire Cat in Alice in Wonderland.

A state sponsored lottery in New South Wales.

The reference is to Toynbee’s work, End of a Journey 1998.

The reference is to T.S.Eliot’s poem ‘The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock’.
APPENDIX ONE.

CURRICULUM VITAE.

THE REVEREND DOCTOR MELVYN JOHN MACARTHUR.

D.O.B. 24/7/1946 SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA.

RESIDENT OF WENTWORTH FALLS, BLUE MOUNTAINS, AUSTRALIA.

EDUCATION.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Award</th>
<th>Graduation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University of New South Wales</td>
<td>Bachelor of Social Work</td>
<td>1975</td>
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<tr>
<td>Macquarie University</td>
<td>Diploma in Urban Studies</td>
<td>1977</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deakin University</td>
<td>Bachelor of Arts</td>
<td>1989</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Theological College</td>
<td>Bachelor of Theology (SCD)</td>
<td>1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of New England</td>
<td>Grad. Diploma in Continuing Education</td>
<td>1994</td>
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<tr>
<td>University of Sydney</td>
<td>Master of Social Work</td>
<td>1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Sydney</td>
<td>Doctor of Philosophy</td>
<td>2004</td>
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<tr>
<td>Macquarie University</td>
<td>Master of Arts</td>
<td>2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sydney College of Divinity</td>
<td>Doctor of Ministry</td>
<td>2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Sydney University</td>
<td>Doctor of Creative Arts</td>
<td>Current</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Current Thesis Title: ‘Of Cancer and Other Things: Conversations with the Royal Philosopher on Pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostella’).

OTHER EDUCATIONAL AND TRAINING COURSES.

District Officer Training Course in child protection (Family and Community Services (statutory authority). This was a full-time course of four months duration in 1989.

Caseworker Training Course (Child Protection). Department of Community Services (statutory authority), a four month course in 2007.

‘Threads of my Journey’. A four day course in transformational learning in autobiography, conducted by Dr Alex Nelson at the Broken Bay Institute in 2008.
Remote Area First Aid Training Course with St. John’s Ambulance in 2010.

WORK HISTORY.

Various work on leaving school and working during my first university degree included: storeman, heavy duty truck driver (I am still licensed to drive semi-trailers, however in the interests of public safety I refrain from doing so), industrial cleaner, builder’s labourer, bricklayer’s labourer, concreter.

My professional history was as a social worker. This work has included: working for five years (1974-78) in a government community health centre in both counselling and community development; social worker for three years in the Commonwealth Government’s social services in Orange, a rural area of New South Wales (1978-1981); social worker to a general hospital in Orange for four years (1981-1985); social worker to an aged care hospital in Wentworth Falls, New South Wales (four years 1985-1988); two years with the Department of Community Services (statutory authority) in child protection, during office hours (1988-1991); four years overnight with the Department of Community Services Child Protection Crisis Service (1991-1995). I also worked a total of two years contract work for the Department of Community Services while working in my church vocation.

VOCATIONAL HISTORY.

I was ordained as a Minister of the Word in the Uniting Church in Australia in 1994. I was a chaplain and chaplaincy co-ordinator to the Canberra Hospital and Canberra Hospice from 1995-2001 and then minister of the Central Blue Mountains Uniting Church from 2001-2009.

I developed and taught a course in child protection at the Education for Lay Ministries of the Uniting Church at the Centre for Ministry in 1993.

INTERESTS.

Fitness Training

Writing autobiographical narrative

Meeting with friends

Reading drama

Developing my writing skills

Walking in remote areas and passing on my experience to newcomers of remote area walking, especially young people from low socio-economic areas.

Undertaking long distance pilgrimages.
## PILGRIMAGES.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pilgrimage</th>
<th>Geographic Area</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dublin to Jerusalem via Rome (bicycle)</td>
<td>Europe and Middle East</td>
<td>1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sydney to Alice Springs (bicycle)</td>
<td>NSW, SA, NT</td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Arthurs Pilgrimage (to where wilderness photographer Peter Dumbrovskis died.)</td>
<td>Tasmania</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Highland Way (to the Highlands of my ancestral clan)</td>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camino Santiago (French Way)</td>
<td>France/Spain</td>
<td>2012</td>
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<td>St. Olav’s Way</td>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>2013</td>
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<td>Way of the Gull</td>
<td>Isle of Man</td>
<td>2013</td>
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<tr>
<td>Camino Santiago (French Way)</td>
<td>France/Spain</td>
<td>2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Way of the Gull</td>
<td>Isle of Man</td>
<td>2014</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE.

From 1974 I have built up extensive experience in wilderness hiking. I have made numerous expeditions into the South West Wilderness World Heritage Area of Tasmania in the Western and Eastern Arthur Ranges, Gordon/Franklin Wild Rivers National Park, South West to South East Cape. The wilderness of Tasmania is my cathedral.

I have also walked in the Central Australian desert (Larapinta Trail) and New Zealand (Mount Cook National Park and Lakes Heron and Tekapo).

I have also made six crossings of the Overland Track in Tasmania including, in 2012, leading of four adolescents from a socio-economically deprived area of Sydney. This was the subject of a seventy minute video documentary, ‘Beyond Bidwill’, available from Bidwill Uniting Church, (Google ‘Bidwill Uniting’).

## BICYCLE JOURNEYS.

I have made a number of long-distance, unsupported bicycle journeys, including Sydney to Adelaide (2,000 kilometres), Sydney to Byron Bay (800 kilometres), a fund raising ride from the Nepean...
Cancer Care Centre (Sydney) to Uluru (2,500 kilometres), the South Island of New Zealand (1,500 kilometres), the West Coast of the United States (2,000 kilometres), a tour of Tasmania (1,200 kilometres).

OTHER SIGNIFICANT LIFE EVENTS.

The most significant of these was my diagnosis of a life threatening disease, diffuse large ‘B’ cell non Hodgkins lymphoma in 2004, for which I received six cycles of chemotherapy in 2005 and an autologous bone marrow transplant in 2010. The disease was the subject of my D.Min dissertation ‘Trekking to the Centre’ at the Sydney College of Divinity. The degree was awarded in 2012. I have also made a DVD, along with a member of Central Blue Mountains congregation of the Uniting Church, ‘Taking the Cancer Journey’, which has been shown widely in the Sydney region.

Referees.

Academic.

Dr. Robert Stephenson (mathematician). bhstephenson@y7mail.com

Dr. Alex Nelson. (pastoral theologian, adult educator, psychologist) alex.nelson@optusnet.com.au

Pilgrimage.

Mr Denis Golding. (with whom I walked St. Olavs Way 2013). denys.quoll.quest@gmail.com

Mr Erik Breeuwsma. (with whom I walked the Camino Santiago 2012). erikbrexs4all.nl

Dr. Elisabeth Poscher (whom I met in Alexandroupli (Greece) when cycling to Jerusalem 1998). poscher@sasktel.net

Remote area walking.

Mr Terry Perram (with whom I have undertaken many remote area expeditions). tperram@bigpond.com

Mr Jeremy Jones (with whom I have undertaken many remote area expeditions). jaynjones@gmail.com

Mr Stuart Nicol. (companion on Western Arthurs Traverse 2014) stuart.nicol@uqconnect.edu.au

Church membership (Uniting Church Leura NSW).

Dr. Jim Tulip. tulipgold@bigpond.com
Dr. Peggy Goldsmith.  tulipgold@bigpond.com

Cancer related.

Mr Anthony Stanley (whom I met while we were both undergoing bone marrow transplants in Nepean Hospital in 2011 and now a close friend).  ajs_56@hotmail.com

Mel Macarthur.
November, 2017.

46 Darwin Avenue, Wentworth Falls. 2782. Australia.

revmel@bigpond.com