

THE GOD YOU ALREADY KNOW

*Developing your spiritual
and prayer life*



Henry Morgan and Roy Gregory

SPCK

*To colleagues and friends
in Soul Space at the
Greenbelt Festival*

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Editors' introduction

Beginnings

This book came out of the experience of the two of us working together in 'Soul Space', a part of the Greenbelt Festival, which has been held each year since 1973 at the end of August. Traditionally it has been a meeting place for Christianity and the arts, but it has grown into something much bigger than that. In the year 2000 a number of us were invited to go to the Festival in order to offer spiritual direction to *all* those present, in a venue called 'Soul Space'! This was never likely to happen, but we did see a lot of people that first weekend: many of them on the edge of the church, hanging on by their finger tips, for whom Greenbelt was 'their church'. We were moved and fascinated by the stories we heard. The following year we were there again and better prepared. In addition to offering a listening space for people wanting to talk about their faith journey, we also provided a prayer corner, where different ways into prayer could be read about and tried. Our experience was that most people defined prayer too narrowly, and then when their particular tight expression of it ran out of steam, they were left lost and bewildered. The prayer corner was packed out for much of the weekend.

We have both been involved over many years in talking to individuals about their faith and seeking to facilitate their growth. Together we must have clocked up thousands of hours of listening and talking. Henry is a Church of England priest who gave up parish work for a full-time ministry mainly in spiritual direction. Roy is a Free Church part-time pastor also involved in spiritual direction.

A number of years ago Henry edited *Approaches to Prayer* which we have found useful in Soul Space. After this became out of print we cooperated to produce an online version so that it could be accessible to a wider audience, see <www.annunciationtrust.org.uk/

approaches/>>. *Approaches* is now in print again, and *The God You Already Know* is a natural follow-on with the same philosophy – that prayer is not the preserve of the especially holy or pious.

Approaches is a collection of prayer aids to help people to pray. This book goes on from there to address many of the issues that we talk about with people at Greenbelt and adds to this with contributions from others who have found ways to pray in particular situations writing about their experiences. These mini 'case studies' show how ordinary people face the human situation and how this has affected, challenged and developed their spiritual and prayer life.

So in producing this book we have been joined by many friends and people we have listened to, and we wish to acknowledge their important contribution in bringing richness and variety to our endeavours. They are listed with our thanks at the end of this introduction.

People on the edge – Soul Space and Greenbelt

The Greenbelt Festival is a place on the edge, which is why lots of people are drawn to it. It's a place where you can ask any questions you like – nothing is off-limits – and where all sorts of answers will be heard. It's an extraordinarily liberating place, and as a consequence there is a lot of new life to be found there. If you want something safer, something simpler with more security, then you will go elsewhere.

This book has arisen out of our experience of listening to people in Soul Space (and indeed elsewhere) telling the stories of their encounters with God, and of the lack of them, and asking the questions that arise from those experiences. At Soul Space we have seen at first hand a spiritual hunger that does not seem to be much met by the church structures that are currently in place.

Encouragingly, some of the things that have been important to us appear to speak to others – not to everybody, but to some. This book comes out of our growing conviction that the people who gather at Greenbelt are but the tip of an iceberg, and that maybe we have something to offer to a wider audience.

Our assumptions

Our work has led us to believe that most people know most of what they need to know about God already; they don't need new information, but they do need encouragement and confidence to trust their own instincts. We believe that God created us to pray and that therefore it is a natural activity of which we all have some experience.

We believe that if we pay attention life will teach us what else we need to know. God's creation is good, and life is basically friendly and can be trusted. We acknowledge that sometimes we get things wrong, or that bad things sometimes happen to us. But we believe that when either of those things does happen, then under God we can learn something from it and grow. In our experience, God is not a punishing God but a loving God. God's creation is basically good, and we as a part of that creation are basically good too, at least in God's eyes.

We further believe that we can for the most part trust ourselves, our deepest desires and our instincts. In principle, the task before us is not as difficult as we often fear it to be. It is not without its problems, but we are made in God's image, are usually doing better than we think, and have the capacity, under God, to do even better. For this task we need some help and a modest degree of self-discipline if we are going to be able to respond creatively to these opportunities. This is best accomplished safely with the support of a faith community that we trust and where we can be ourselves.

About this book

This book offers a wide range of material written in a variety of styles, and we have quite deliberately encouraged it to speak with differing voices. It is the coming together of the experience of a large number of people. The authors have different personalities and come from different church traditions but share a common aim and philosophy. Recognizing that we are all different and that there are many ways to God is important if we are each to discover

for ourselves our own 'prayer voice'. It is equally important to remember that we each reflect some distinctive facet of God's image, and that the God we each know is one and the same God, however unlikely that may at times appear.

So this is not a book to be read straight through from cover to cover. It is a resource to 'dip into' and to take what speaks to you now. It may speak of different things at different times. Part 1 discusses some ideas about prayer and faces some of the difficult issues; Part 2 looks at the place of change in praying and finding God; Part 3 tells of the experience of many individuals and recounts their struggles with prayer in differing circumstances; and Part 4 is over to you!

In a little more detail, Chapter 1 encourages you to take a fresh look at where you are now on your spiritual journey.

Chapter 2 suggests that most of us already know most of what we need to know about God, but that that knowledge frequently gets buried and forgotten. It offers a way of bringing that wisdom back into our consciousness.

Chapter 3 looks at two New Testament stories that tell of people's religious experience and asks what we can learn from them for ourselves.

Chapter 4 goes on to explore the biblical insight that God is able to speak to us through anything, and offers some ways to reflect on your own life in such a way as to become more aware of this.

Chapter 5 tells the story of how for one particular person God suddenly went silent and missing, and suggests that such an experience is an almost inevitable part of everybody's spiritual journey at some point. What might we learn from it, how do we cope with it, and how might we prepare ourselves for its coming?

Chapter 6 then looks at the biblical tradition of a God who is silent or absent and wonders what it might teach us.

Chapter 7 talks about prayer being primarily God's activity and not ours. God is praying in us even when we are not aware of it. Our task is to try to work with God in prayer. It's not primarily down to us. And blessedly God is good at prayer!

Chapter 8 then looks in more detail at reviewing our life and choosing a structure that works for us. All the Christian traditions offer structures and lifestyles and these give us clues, but for things to last we must make the structure for our life our own and find a community of faith to help us.

Chapter 9 invites you to think about how you might begin to pray as you are, rather than as you are not.

Chapter 10 offers some specific ideas and aids to prayer you might like to try.

Chapter 11 attempts to earth all of this by inviting a number of people to reflect on everyday activities about which they are passionate. Our passions have usually got much to teach us and if we pursue them with joy they will usually lead us to God. We hope that this will encourage you to reflect in a new way on your own passions, and to recognize that God is much more present in your life already than you perhaps imagined.

Chapter 12 follows a similar pattern but here we asked people to reflect on times of pain and suffering. Chapter 13 stays with this pattern but looks at relationships and other areas of our lives.

Finally Chapter 14 looks at where you might find encouragement and support for your journey, and encourages you to take new steps, or retrace well-worn steps, to find 'space for your soul'.

We hope that with the help of this book you might discover or rediscover that you are made in the image of a God who loves you unconditionally, and that learning to trust this loving God is the way to true freedom.

Contributors

Our thanks go to Ray Wilkinson, who sowed the original seed out of which this book grew, and to the following for their contributions, willingly offered.

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