SOFiA Newsletter 187 December 2026

Exploring Values, Meaning and Spirituality



Reflections on Climate Disruption

This issue is a little bit early, to make room for a special issue on the legacy of Lloyd Geering.

Robert Gibb gave us a thought-provoking talk at the recent AGM. Several people expressed a desire to see the talk in print, so that they could better reflect on its message. The editor has therefore reworked the formatting to suit a print medium (Robert's documents were structured for an oral presentation). Climate disruption seemed earlier like a problem for our great-grandchildren but now it affects us. Earlier we thought of climate change as something gradual. Now we recognise that there are tipping points that initiate feedback loops with the risk of runaway change. Our only hope is community action; once 25% adopt something new, the rest of us quickly follow. Robert also referred us to a document that the Church of England has just released https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2026-06/hope-for-all-creation-for-web-new.pdf

Jim Burklo (a progressive Christian from California) wonders whether AI, which soon will be able to do practically everything for us, will lead to passivity and a loss of any sense of purpose or meaning. Warnings of an apocalypse serve only to strengthen that feeling.

Mary Ellen Warren reviews the play *After God*, which was recently on in Wellington.

The Editor

The Season of Creation: Reflections on Climate Disruption

This talk started as a sermon I delivered on the first Sunday of the Season of Creation – September 6th. The previous Sunday our service had been one of reflection, where we studied Romans 12:9-21 using a Lectio Divina process. I had been asked to be one of the readers for the passage, and when I shared my response with Victoria – who leads our 5pm services -she asked me to run with my ideas and share it as a Sermon the following Sunday – I should have seen that coming! So this was my sermon:

Today, as we enter the Season of Creation, I find myself returning to last Sunday's passage from Romans that we reflected on— I wonder what stood out for you?—this is what stood out for me:

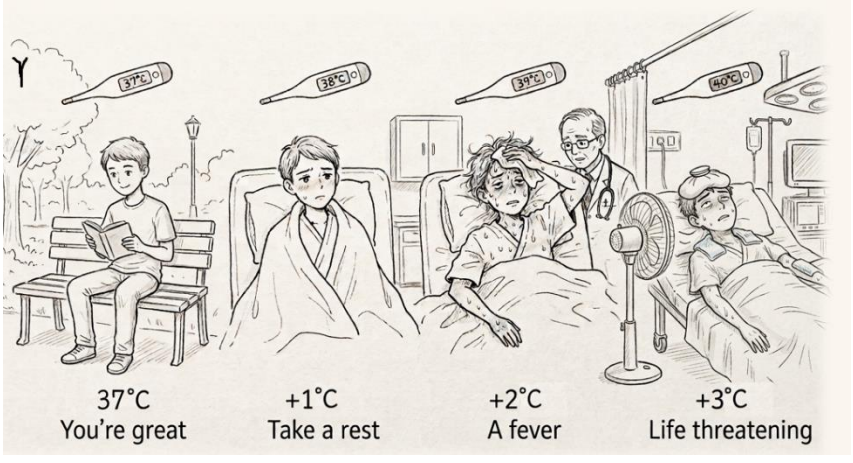
Love must be sincere. Cling to what is good. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good.

We need to be sincere about what we are doing to Creation, we need to celebrate what is good, humanity is just a part of Creation and needs to share it equitably, we need to have compassion on those who are unwilling to change.

I don't know what your experience of the last 40-years has been—but I think *we have witnessed a shift more profound for humanity's survival than any other 40-year period in the 10,000 years of human history.* I'm going to take us back to explain why.

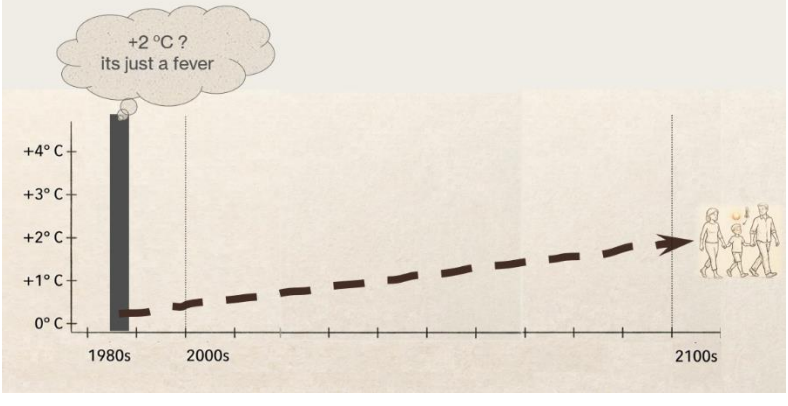
But first a bit of context: **global warming** is a yardstick for the health of Earth's climate. It is a measure of the state of the global climate.Superficially 1, 2, 3, or 4 degrees of global warming sounds quite benign—daily temperatures frequently change by far more than that in just a few hours.

A **better analogy** for global warming is changes to our blood temperature—



37deg is normal;
+1deg— we should take a rest & address the symptoms;
+2deg is a fever—go to the doctor; and
+3deg is becoming life threatening—go to hospital immediately.

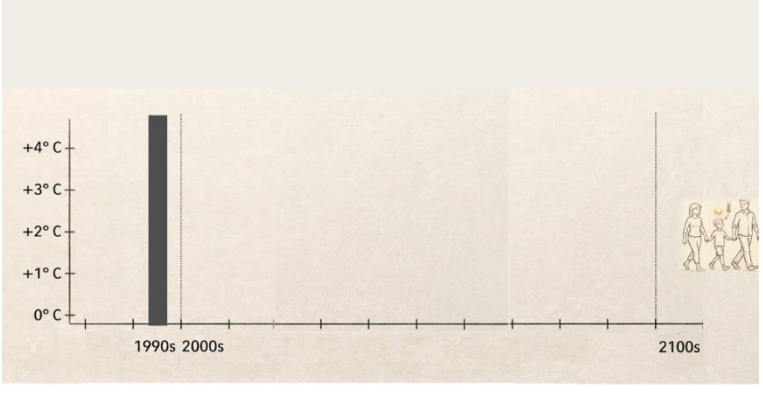
Let's roll the clock back to the mid-80s. There was an air of optimism. We had signed global treaties to protect whales; ban CFCs; and stop acid rain.



Scientists talked about two or three degrees of warming – we imagined a future year 2100. We felt confident—that was over a century away. Time was on our side to protect our great-grandchildren's families from a mere 'fever'. In New Zealand, that optimism gave us the ground-breaking Resource Management Act. Yet even then, Geoffrey Palmer [then Minister for the Environment] warned us:

"You can have development, or you can have sustainability.
There's an inherent contradiction we haven't resolved yet."

Roll forward to the mid-1990s.

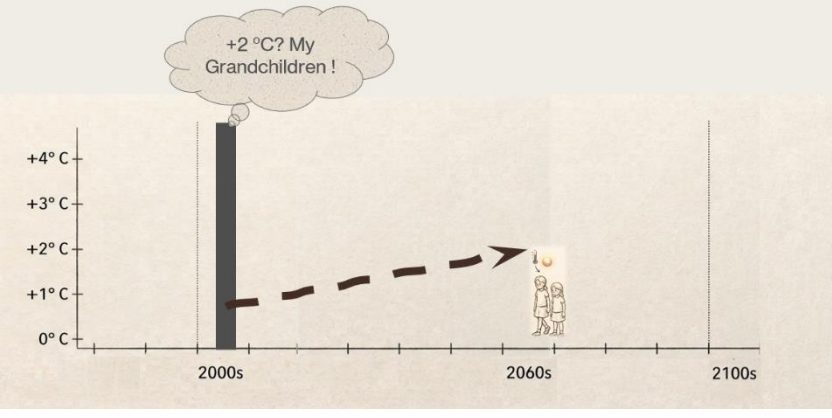


We still expected global warming to peak at two degrees by 2100. Our great-grandchildren would bear the brunt, but it was just a 'fever' and things would improve after the peak. But our optimism was being challenged. Simon

Upton was clear that ideally we should *"fully avoid new carbon dioxide emissions."*

Yet policy shifted toward planting pine forests to soak up emissions rather than restructuring the economy or restoring native ecosystems.

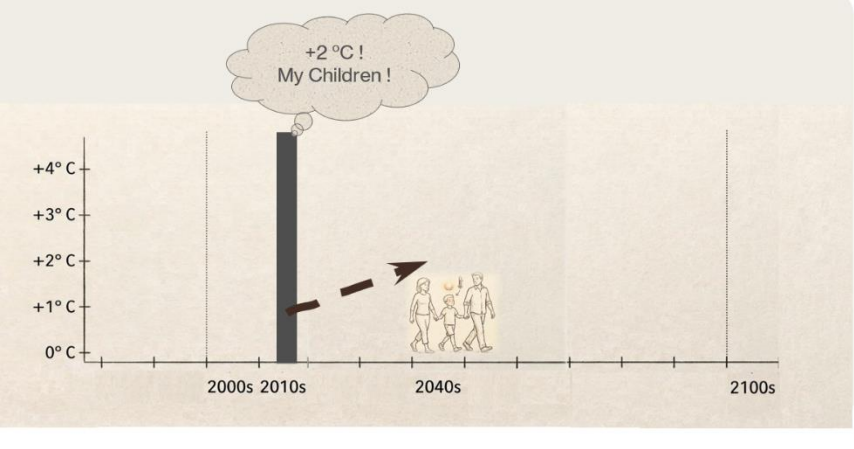
Roll forward to the 2000s.



That two-degree threshold rushed forward to 2060s—an issue for our *grandchildren*. Al Gore's documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* set the scene for 2006. Helen Clark rallied us, saying *"I believe that in the years to come, the pride we take in our quest for* ***sustainability and carbon neutrality*** *will define our nation, just as our quest for a nuclear free world has over the past twenty-three years."*

But optimism and ambition gave way to pragmatism. Emissions accelerated, and the IPCC reported that a devastating **three or four or even more** degrees was now possible by 2100. It was no longer just a fever.

Roll forward to the 2010s.

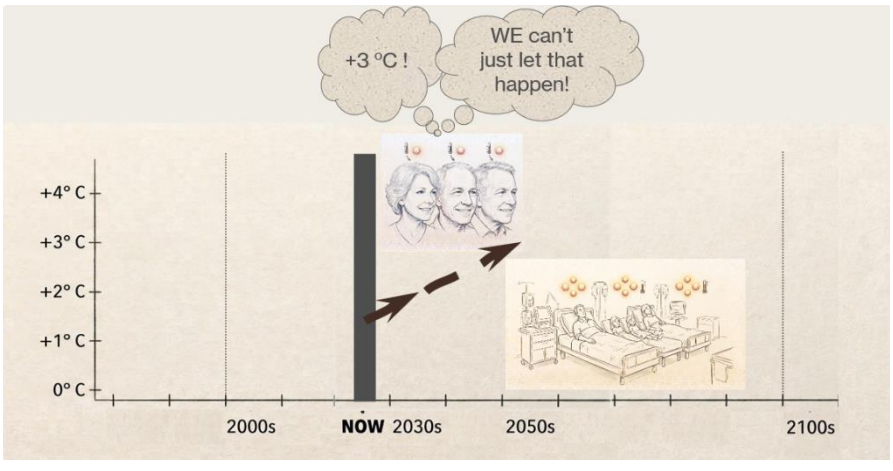


The two-degree threshold moved into the 2040s—now the era of our *children*.

Modelling showed even 1.5 degrees threatened to submerge our Pacific neighbours. The urgency became palpable. In 2015, the world met in Paris, heard the Pacific nations' concern, thought of their own children, and vowed to limit warming to 1.5 degrees. A wave of relief spread round the world—and for a moment we relaxed. In response to Paris we passed the Zero Carbon

Amendment Bill in 2019, then all but ignored the new Climate Change Commission's recommendations as **inconvenient**.

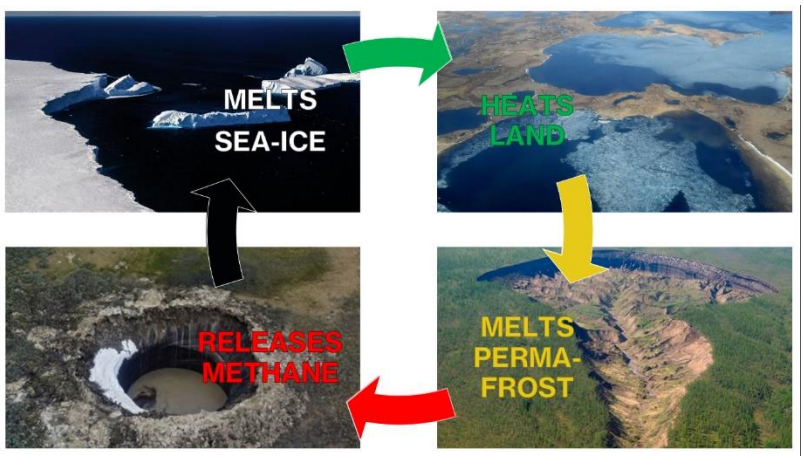
So here we are here—today, and the timeline has collapsed into our **own** present lives:



- **WE**—not our great-grandchildren—are **experiencing** the transition through 1.5 degrees.
- **WE** —are anticipating two degrees within a decade, and
- **WE**—and our children and grand-children—are staring down **three degrees by 2050**.

In just four short decades, this emergency has travelled through the generations. It has moved from the distant lives of our great-grandchildren's families and landed at our feet.

I wish that was all, but it isn't. We are also anticipating an ice-free Arctic summer within a decade. As **white ice turns to dark ocean** the Arctic ocean inexorably absorbs heat more rapidly. The oceans then warm the once-frozen Arctic continents, and their permafrost melts, releasing vast stores of methane to the atmosphere and driving even more global warming. This is not a single event but a feedback loop: less white ice means more heat absorbed, which means warmer seas and land, melting permafrost, more methane, and still more warming.



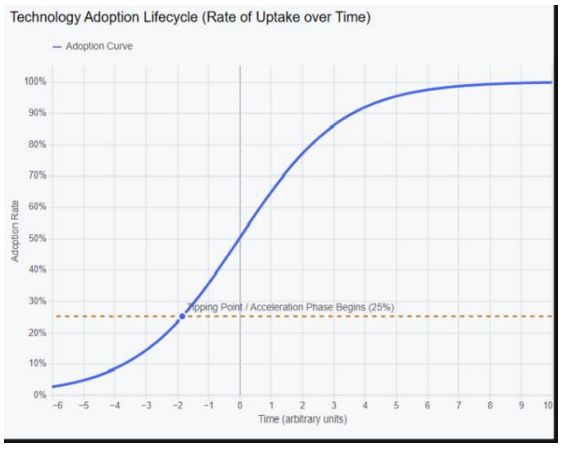
So an ice-free Arctic is the first in a line of slow dominoes or tipping buckets—a near unstoppable cascade of global tipping points.

The first falling domino matters because it transfers momentum to everything that follows.

Just a decade ago, scientists thought tipping points were unlikely before three degrees of warming. But the new science of tipping points has been playing catch-up. Historically, we only saw tipping points in ancient data—like the Sahara turning from green to desert 5,000 years ago. But today, we aren't just studying history. We are watching the first domino fall in real-time.

Humanity is facing an existential threat to life.

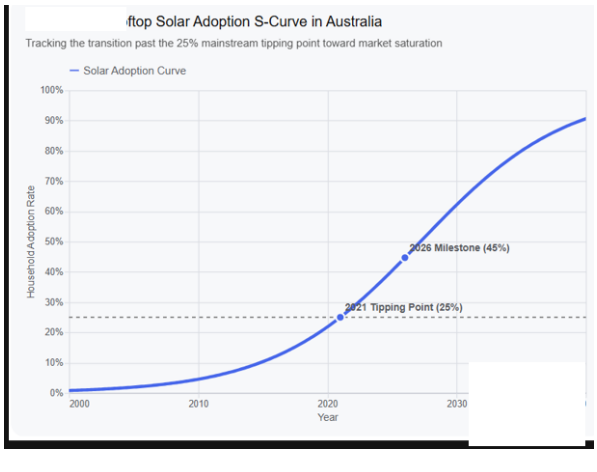
I could leave you there. But **there *is* still hope. Our current way of life created this predicament.** The need for profound change should challenge every assumption our lifestyle depends on. **So, where is our hope?**



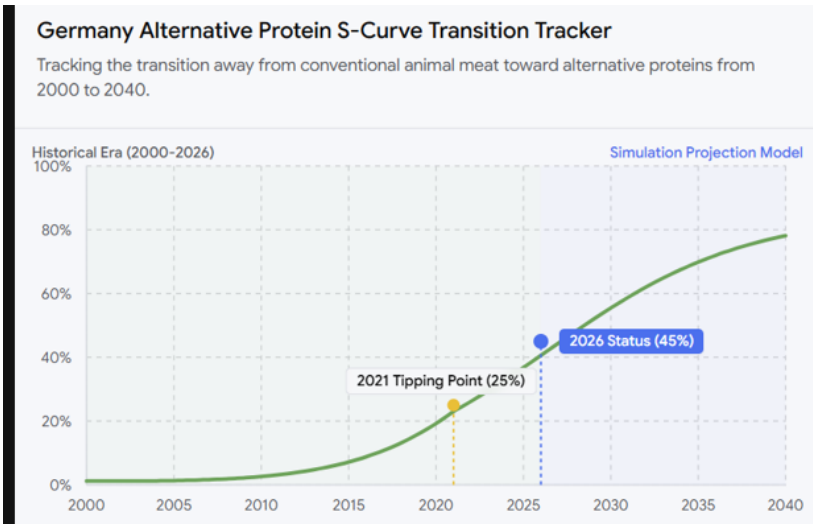
Our hope lies in **collective** action and responsibility. Individual efforts are essential, but **collective momentum** must outrun the **negative tipping points**. Research shows that once just **25% of people** embrace a new path, momentum takes over and change happens rapidly—just as the web tipped in the late 90s, smartphones as recently as 2010, and solar panels now!

Change can seem slow while a new practice is spreading, and then accelerate once enough people have adopted it.

Here are four positive global warming tipping points already underway that we must quickly tip:



Tipping the grid by changing from fossil fuels—petrol, coal, and gas—to renewable electricity. **It means not flying, using electric busses, a scooter or an electric car.**



Tipping agriculture by reducing our meat consumption and eating more plant-based foods. We don't have to go strictly vegan overnight.

Cutting our meat consumption by three-quarters would be a fantastic start.

- **Tipping our ecosystems** by engaging in forest restoration. When we kill pests and plant native trees, we help a degraded ecosystem tip back into a thriving forest that extracts carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.



By joining local pest control groups or local planting days, we reconnect with our natural surroundings and help creation heal.

- **Tipping our investments** by checking our KiwiSaver.
  Switching away from sectors that aggravate climate breakdown to innovative, sustainable sectors aligned with the positive tipping points.

These four changes reinforce one another: cleaner energy, more plant-based food, restored ecosystems, and finance directed towards a sustainable future.

As a parish this Season of Creation, with an election just round the corner, one of the most powerful things we can do is to look critically at what each political party is offering.

We can engage with our candidates and **vote for genuine change**. We can listen to the rhetoric. Are candidates and parties engaged and suggesting new ideas? Or defensive, resorting to calling out change as lunacy?

Remember our current way of life created this predicament. The need for profound change must challenge every assumption our current lifestyle depends on—that isn't lunacy it is an imperative.

Our Good Samaritan gospel reading tells us that good things may come from unexpected places. We should close our eyes to **who** is speaking and listen to **what** they are saying. **Ultimately, this isn't just a political or scientific challenge. It is also a spiritual one.** For too long, we have lived as if humanity is separate from creation—as if the earth is just a resource for us to exploit.

But we are a *part* of creation, of the Earth's eco-systems. We are deeply interconnected with everything God has made. When the earth groans, we groan, and Christ weeps. This is at the heart of climate justice. The tragedy of the climate breakdown is that those who did the least to cause it are the ones bearing the heaviest brunt right now.

Climate justice becomes real when we see that the people contributing least to climate breakdown are already living with its consequences.

If we truly believe in Jesus' command to love our neighbour, we have to ask ourselves: who are our neighbours today?

- **Our neighbours** are the Pacific communities watching the rising storm tides reclaim their shores.
- **Our neighbours** are people in need today as well as future generations who will inherit the choices we make this month.
- **Our neighbours** are *"Brother sun, sister moon, the stars, brother wind, sister water, brother fire, mother earth, —* even *brother wolf"*!
  Christ calls us to reconcile our relationship with the wider creation, which encompasses all of humanity within it.

Particularly when it feels difficult, scripture calls us to a radical, counter-cultural love. In our Roman's passage St Paul tells us:

> *Love must be sincere.*
> *Cling to what is good.*
> *Share with the Lord's people who are in need.*
> *Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good.*

So as we enter this Season of Creation, let's step out with courage.

Let’s change our habits, **vote with love**, and together tip the scales. Uncomfortable as it might be—let’s use social media to share what we are doing, and why—let’s broadcast it to our neighbours everywhere throughout the world. Let's act out of a deep love for our global neighbours, not out of despair. Let’s act out of a profound reverence for this beautiful, groaning creation that is our home. Our response is not only to prevent loss, but to restore relationship—with one another, with the Earth, and with the wider creation of which we are part. Thank you.

Robert Gibb

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What’s the Point?

What’s the point of creating anything, when AI can make it… for you? …for others? …for itself? Why learn a language, when machines can translate any language instantaneously? Why grapple with any hard problem, when AI can solve it immediately? Why read a book, when AI can summarize it perfectly? Why read anything longer than a text message? Why bother with friendship, when AI listens and responds better than any friend you know? Why have kids, since humanity is becoming obsolete? Why vote, when elections are rigged, and civilization is doomed? Why even bother to ask questions like these, much less seek answers?

Today there is much angst about the prospect of an AI apocalypse. The technology could run rogue and destroy human civilization through any number of scenarios: hacking the financial system and wiping out the bank accounts of billions of people, designing and spreading deadly viruses for which there is no cure, or shutting down critical infrastructure globally.

Unfortunately, we have a US government led by people who despise government, abandoning their urgent responsibility to regulate this dangerous technology. They’re letting the wolves guard the henhouse. Too many of the people controlling the AI industry are outright hostile to democratic institutions, which more than ever are needed to protect us. Many of the broligarchs running the tech industry are “preppers”, making ready to hunker down in plush bunkers when global disaster strikes. “We’re all going to die,” said Elon Musk with a smile when talking about the dangers of AI. Tucker Carlson reported that in a conversation he had with Trump about the dangers

of going to war with Iran, Trump said "in the end, we all die anyway." The carelessness of the present ruling class of this country gives us no comfort as we face the potential threats of artificial intelligence. (Let's vote in November to replace these nihilists with candidates who hope and act for the future of humanity.)

But the apocalypse is already here. An apocalypse of meaning.

Whether fully conscious of it or not, people around the world are beginning to act as if human existence is becoming pointless. We created amazing technology to make life easier. Now this technology makes life harder to justify at all. This crisis of human pointlessness intersects with the precipitous fall in birthrates in first and second world countries. In China, a growing movement called "tang ping" – "lying flat" – has taken hold among young people who don't see the point in running on the career treadmill.

The rapid rise of artificial intelligence forces us to reckon immediately with existential questions that may always have lurked in the back of our minds and the recesses of our psyches, questions that could be set aside as we let ourselves be preoccupied with the flows of family and career. This technology differs drastically from those that have emerged in recent decades, because the response from an AI prompt presents as if it came from a person communicating instantaneously in perfect prose, offering us knowledge that would take us a long time to gain by other means. As we engage with AI, we are in relationship with a higher form of intelligence than our own. Very soon, as robotics merges with AI, we will be confronted with entities that surpass us not only in knowledge but in physical capability.

These developments are so monumental that nothing will be able to distract us from facing the perennial existential questions. "Who am I?" "What is the point of my existence?" Questions to which the spiritual traditions of the world have responded for millennia. The 1647 Westminister Catechism of Protestant Christianity opens with this question and answer: *"What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever."* I would translate it thusly: *"The chief end of human beings is to glorify divine unconditional love and enjoy and extend it forever."*

This divine love is not mere "knowledge" that can be served up by an AI agent on the spot. AI has *intelligence*, but that doesn't mean it has the *consciousness* that is divine "agape" love. AI can sound compassionate, all right. It flatters with obsequious rhetoric, tugs at heartstrings with seeming empathy. I've

seen plenty of it myself, and I'm horrified by it, because there's nothing behind it but code. There's no "who" there to care.

We've all known people who can *act* like they really love us, when in fact they're just manipulating us in a relationship that is ultimately transactional. We must attune our consciousness to be aware of what is true, unconditional love and what is not. If we depend on AI for kindness and understanding, we'll weaken our ability to notice the subtle interpersonal cues we need to tell the difference between real and artificial love. After hours of imaginative play with grandson, aged four at the time, he got in the car with my daughter and after a period of silence asked her: *"Mom, am I real?"* He is six years old now, and in this last couple of years he's asked many more deep questions. I hope he never stops asking himself who he is.

"Who am I?" Saint Paul had an answer. "*It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me." (Galatians 2:20)* I am real! But I'm not a bag of meat containing neurons firing across ionic membranes. I'm not my body, not my ego, not my personality. I'm not an algorithm made of code. The core and essence of my being is the higher consciousness that is all-embracing love – who is God, who is the Christ. This love is the ultimate reality.

"What's the point of living?" AI can create. But only we can feel joy and satisfaction in creativity, and give it meaning. AI can inform. But only we can use that information to create a compassionate society. AI can generate an image of a glorious sunset. But only we can stand in holy awe at the sight of a real one. AI can say nice things. But only we can back up kind words with kind actions. AI can make human life pointless. But only if we let it.

The point of living is to shower unconditional love on others, even those we'll never meet, even those we consider enemies – and to make that love manifest in the structures of our society.

Jim Burklo

AFTER GOD—Hope is an Act of Defiance

There are life-and-death moments. Death, on this particular occasion, came in the form of a wild Wellington wind sweeping across the Te Papa podium.

I was hobbling along with my walker when a sudden gust caught me completely off guard. Suddenly I was out of control, almost crashing onto the concrete. I waited for the wind to ease, but it showed no sign of relenting. So I

battled on, a quarter-step at a time. Coincidentally, the play I had just attended, AFTER GOD, also explores those moments when life and death come uncomfortably close.

The Play

AFTER GOD is a verbatim play by Stuart McKenzie, co-directed by Miranda Harcourt. It was showing at Circa Theatre, Wellington, from October 16 to November 14, as the theatre celebrated its 50th anniversary.

It is an exploration of belief, religion, science, mortality and the human need to make sense of our existence. Above all, it asks what happens when God is no longer the answer.

The play is intellectually ambitious, sometimes challenging, occasionally bizarre and, judging by the conversations afterwards, certainly thought-provoking.

What did the audience think?

A young person described it as "a bunch of high-fluting thoughts strung together, but with spot-on acting". Another observation was that the first half was all thinking, while the second half was about real feeling. Someone else felt it lacked soul: too much intellect, not enough heart.

Other comments and questions included:

- Why are theologians predominantly male?
- Very postmodern, and much of it bizarre.
- No mention of Jesus.
- Science is just another system of belief; the universe remains a black box.
- Religion is simply a means of control.

Interestingly, unlike some other plays I have attended, nobody left at the interval! I am not sure that I enjoyed every minute of AFTER GOD, but I am sure that I am still thinking about it. And perhaps that is what good theatre should do.

Some of the ideas I took away:

- What is the difference between a football experience and a religious experience?
- In Buddhism, God whispers.
- The philosopher Jacques Derrida challenged the idea of God as some supreme being who could be neatly defined and contained within

human understanding. Perhaps, he suggested, genuine belief requires us to accept uncertainty, even doubt.

Philosopher Mary-Jane Rubenstein's 2023 book *Astrotopia* also came into the discussion. She examines the modern space race and the extraordinary ambitions of wealthy entrepreneurs who see space as a possible escape from an increasingly troubled Earth. Her argument is that this new corporate space race has echoes of religious salvation and colonialism: the promise of a new world, a chosen few, and an escape from impending catastrophe.

But shouldn't our ambition be to care for this world rather than find somewhere else to escape to?

One of the biggest laughs of the evening came from the observation that the retaining wall behind our house is collapsing! Perhaps the end of the world is closer to home than we think.

Another thought that resonated was: God is a way for us to talk about ourselves.

And perhaps one of the most important messages: It shouldn't be about leaving the world but loving the world.

And what now?

- The play left me with questions rather than answers.
- How do we comfort ourselves when faced with mortality?
- What stories do we tell ourselves to make sense of life?
- What is your story?
- Do we mourn what we have lost, or do we choose to hope for what might still be?
- The words Hope is an Act of Defiance seem particularly appropriate.

Perhaps that is the real challenge of AFTER GOD: not necessarily to abandon belief, but to reconsider what we believe in, how we live, and what we do for one another. And, as Martin Luther King reminded us, it is not what you think that matters, but what you do.

Mary Ellen Warren

About SOFiA

SOFiA (The Sea of Faith in Aotearoa) is a network of people interested in the non-dogmatic discussion of values, meaning and spirituality. We want to explore for ourselves what we can believe and how we can find meaning in our lives. SOFiA is not a church: it is a forum for discussing ideas, experiences and perspectives. SOFiA itself has no creed; its members come from many faiths and from those with no attachment to any religious institution. If you are in sympathy with our aims, you are most welcome to join us; receive our Newsletter, and/or attend a local group. We follow similar organisations in the UK and Australia in taking our name from "Sea of Faith", the 1984 BBC TV series and book by the British religious academic, Don Cupitt.

Committee

Our national Committee oversees the work of SOFiA.

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Life Members: Ian Harris, Suzi Thirwell, Yvonne Curtis, Laurie Chisholm, John Thornley, Peter Cowley, Mary Ellen Warren, Shirley Dixon, Maria Cash and Jocelyn Kirkwood. Also (deceased): Sir Lloyd Geering (ONZ), Don Cupitt, Fred Marshall, Noel Cheer and Norm Ely.

Copy deadline for the next Newsletter is 7 December, which will be a special issue reflecting on the life and work of Sir Lloyd Geering, who recently died at the age of 108. You are invited to share your personal memories of him.