



Auckland Unitarian Church

Love beyond belief

## In memoriam of my mentor: John Shelby Spong

Clay Nelson © 19 September 2021

In a letter to Robert Hooke in 1675, Isaac Newton wrote: “If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of Giants”.

The phrase is understood to mean that if Newton had been able to discover more about the universe than others, then it was because he was working in the light of discoveries made by fellow scientists, either in his own time or earlier.

I stand on the shoulders of John Shelby Spong and he stood on the shoulders of [John A T Robinson](#), an English New Testament scholar, author and the Anglican Bishop of Woolwich, his friend and mentor. Robinson stood on the shoulders of Paul Tillich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and situational ethicist Joseph Fletcher, when he published a highly controversial book in 1963, [Honest to God](#).

The dominant theme of *Honest to God* is that, having rejected the idea of “God up there”, modern secular people needed to recognise that the idea of “God out there” is also an outdated simplification of the nature of divinity. Rather, Christians should take their cue from the existentialist theology of Paul Tillich and consider God to be “the ground of our being”.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's notion of a religion-less Christianity is also a major theme in the book. Robinson's interpretation of this phrase was controversial. Robinson claimed that secular people require a secular theology. That is, God’s continuing revelation to humanity is one brought about in culture at large, not merely within the confines of “religion” or “church”.

The book also introduced the idea of situational ethics to an English speaking audience. Situational ethics takes into account the particular context of an act when evaluating it ethically, rather than judging it only according to absolute moral standards. People need to look to personal ideals of what is appropriate to guide them, rather than an unchanging universal code of

conduct, such as Biblical law as divine command. What was most appropriate for Fletcher, Robinson, Spong and me is love.

*Honest to God* highly influenced Jack Spong's theology, and his books often expanded on Robinson's themes. It was his compass on his life journey.

While Jack was a great intellect, what I most appreciated about him was that he was a wounded healer. The first theology book I ever read, long before I thought of going to seminary, was one by Henri Nouwen entitled *Wounded Healer*. For Nouwen, ministers must be willing to go beyond their professional role and leave themselves open as fellow human beings with the same wounds and suffering — in the image of Christ. In other words, we heal from our own wounds.

*"Our service will not be perceived as authentic,"* Nouwen warns, *"unless it comes from a heart wounded by the suffering about which we speak. Thus, nothing can be written about ministry without a deeper understanding of the ways in which ministers can make their own wounds available as a source of healing."* ([The Wounded Healer](#), p 4)

Being a wounded healer starts with a deepening awareness of our own personal struggles and with receiving the empathy that we need — tender-hearted understanding and compassionate support — from other people. Being filled with love ourselves, we can overflow with love to others so they know they are not alone. Feeling our own sadness, anger, anxiety, and inadequacy we can deeply empathise with the emotions of other people so that they can articulate their experience and receive care.

When I first met Jack I was new to the diocese and I was in deep distress. My 15-year marriage to someone with a severe personality disorder had pushed me to the end of my rope. I went to see him in his office, where I learned he was sleeping on a camp cot in his office closet. The reason was that he wasn't safe at home because his wife suffered from a severe mental illness involving paranoia. He certainly understood my predicament. I will never forget his empathy, compassion and support. It would take two years for me to extract myself from the marriage. During that time I had to endure being slandered in my small town by my wife, having townspeople going through my rubbish, having my children kidnapped by her to the other side of the country and then accusing me publicly of abusing them. Through it all, and before her lies were all refuted, Jack provided practical and emotional support, constantly

reaffirming his faith in my honesty and integrity. He also thought I wouldn't survive in the parish and began making provisions to keep me elsewhere in the diocese. When the parish remained solidly behind me through it all, he was pleasantly surprised.

Jack was also a humble man. After his wife died and he was a single parent, just as I was, he asked if I knew a clothes dryer had a lint trap and needed to be cleaned out regularly? He hadn't. Embarrassed and chagrined, he confessed that after several months his dryer had caught fire.

On one occasion when I was hosting him at my home after his annual visitation to the parish, he asked about where my eldest daughter was. I told him she was in bed ill. He went to the kitchen, made a bowl of soup, and carried it to her attic bedroom on the top floor. My favourite memory of Jack is his managing to crouch his tall frame to sit on her bed and spoon her soup, while chatting with her like one of her close mates.

One of the characteristics of a wounded healer is a willingness to be vulnerable. One of the ways Jack did that was by calling his clergy together four times a year for a teaching day to share with them portions of what he was writing at the time for their feedback. The issues he was confronting were highly controversial at the time and the traditionalists amongst us were outraged that he was proposing to make the church religion-less. They were no less scandalised by his view that the Bible was not the word of God, but a human creation. He had a way of absorbing their outrage and making them powerless without returning outrage in kind. He did not blame them for their blindness, but chose to love them without giving an inch of his own convictions. I am in awe that he was able to do it for 21 years as their bishop without becoming cynical or vindictive.

This week I've been overwhelmed by memories, like the kerfuffle he stirred up internationally, nationally, in the diocese and in my parish by ordaining the first openly gay man as priest. His strong support for Barbara Harris to be the first woman elected as bishop was not appreciated by the rest of the Anglican Communion.

I would eventually leave the diocese to help care for my aging parents, but then, being in a very conservative diocese I had to be Jack's voice, saying to a new congregation that the church must change to be of any use. I presented

his ideas about rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism to a packed auditorium with the loudest protestors outside in California's Bible belt.

I would not see Jack again until 2007 when I played a role in his making his second visit to New Zealand. My helping to host Jack and his wife Christine, whom I had known as his diocesan administrator, gave us an opportunity to reflect on our ministries and how we had managed the controversies that had surrounded them. When I sat at dinner with him on his last night here I thought about the Episcopal Church before and after Jack and how they were two different entities. For that matter, so am I. Those changes would not have happened without one person willing to be a wounded healer with honesty, integrity and courage.

Rest in peace my dear friend, knowing that your vision for us to live fully, love wastefully and be courageously authentic has sprouted, but is not yet fully realised. That is for the next generation, but you have given them shoulders to stand on.

**Meditation / Conversation Starter:**

- Whose shoulders do you stand on?
- What indelible marks has it left?