

BOOK REVIEW

Hedley Beare, *Dolphin's Leap, Hind's Feet—Becoming a Mystic, Journey, Discipline and Practice*. Morning Star Publishing, Melbourne. \$34.95.

Emeritus Professor Hedley Beare AM completed his final book, *Dolphin's Leap, Hind's Feet* just before his death in 2010, and it was published late last year.

An explanation for the book's title *Dolphin's Leap, Hind's Feet* thankfully appears early in the text. Hedley describes seeing dolphins from the Queenscliff ferry. They appear suddenly and travel alongside the boat. 'They are transparently friendly piercing the water under and around the boat with a fluidity and exuberance which are infectious. Then they head off to deeper water and on the way they breach the water in a manner that is almost mystical. It is an act of grace, a creature's gift from sea and sky to us as its companions.'

The image of the Hind's Feet comes from the last verse of the book of Habakkuk in the Old Testament: *He makes my feet like hind's feet and sets me upon my high places*. The deer knows how to walk on rocky and hazardous paths as it climbs to the heights of the mountains. It does what it does naturally.

So for Hedley the dolphin is the image of entering both worlds—the natural and the spiritual and with great excitement leaping from one to the other. The deer or hind is the image of a creature working with its natural abilities to climb to ever higher places.

These are Hedley's images as he invites us to journey through the book with him.

He has a sub-title which is *Becoming a Mystic—Journey, Discipline and Practice*. He opens us to this idea by explaining that 'A mystic is generally defined as a person who has had a direct or transcendent experience of the divine'. Through the book he looks at the lives of a variety of people from all ages

and cultures. He is fascinated about their spiritual lives and practices and he draws wisdom from all of them.

The book explores the techniques used by the spiritually adept over the centuries and tries to give an insight into the lived reality of the saints, seers and mystics, including their range and depth. It is therefore intentionally practical.

The book has four parts, each with a number of chapters.

Part One is called *Recognising the Mystical: A Memoir*.

In this memoir, Hedley shares some very personal experiences and his constant refrain is that what he is describing is something which every person can also experience. Mystics are not the select, special, holy few. He says any human being can apprehend reality with the same deepened vision which characterised the saints and mystics. To assist and encourage us with this, he offers lots of practical exercises for us to try—different ways of praying, of thinking, of seeing, of exploring our world. All of this is designed to aid our journey into the mystery of God who is drawing us closer and deeper.

Part Two is *Getting Ready to Receive: The Four Essentials*.

In these chapters, he describes four daily disciplines he sees in the stories of the saints, seers and mystics and which he enthusiastically commends to us. They are:

- detachment, throwing away the baggage we no longer need;
- poverty, learning how to live simply, disentangled from possessions;
- silence, quiet and the skill of being a solitary;
- the depths of sustained, regular prayer.

He says that when we give ourselves to these practices in our ordinary daily routine we could find ourselves in a dimension of

living that is transcendent and transformative. Let me give you an example of a prayer exercise he includes in this section. He refers us to Walter Hilton's famous *The Ladder of Perfection*, written in English in 1494. Hedley says:

Hilton provides a useful checklist to help us decide how far up the staircase to fulfilment we have progressed. The more fully we have acquired the characteristics listed in Hilton's 46th chapter, the higher we have ascended. Take time to clarify what these listed qualities entail. Then examine yourself carefully to discern the degree to which you possess them:

Purity of spirit.
 Poverty of spirit.
 Spiritual rest.
 Inward stillness.
 Peace of conscience.
 Refinement of thought.
 Solitude.
 Retirement of heart.
 The wakeful sleep of the spouse.

In view of your response, what do you need to do about each of these qualities? (You might write down your responses in your journal).

Part Three is *Varieties of Mystical Experience*.

The seven chapters of this third part tell wonderful stories about all kinds of people Hedley has read and thought about and in many ways befriended. He has certainly learned from each of them. People like Jean-Baptiste Vianney, the Cure d'Ars, Evelyn Underhill, Thomas Merton, St Catherine of Sienna, St Teresa of Avila, Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, Jean-Pierre de Caussade, Teilhard de Chardin, Mathew Fox, St Cuthbert, St Patrick. There are poets (like Gerard Manley Hopkins), painters (like William Blake), musicians (like Hildegard of Bingen). And many more. It is a wonderful collection of teachers and guides from different centuries, cultures, spiritual traditions. All of them feel like Hedley's personal friends and wise companions.

Part Four is *A Summation and a Conclusion*.

Now, as he comes to the end, it's like the climax of a wonderful symphony. Every theme and melody reaches its fullest expression and we can't help but be caught up in its wonder. The pattern of the way to our union with God which he has been exploring is the way every person is being drawn into. It is the way for us to be on.

Hedley says to us with such convincing insight and attractiveness: 'You too can be a mystic—a way of seeing and experiencing the divine that is available to us all'—and so I enthusiastically commend the book to you.

I end this review with a short story—and the book's final words.

On the morning of the day when I was due to complete the draft of this book for the publisher, I found myself on my morning jog running directly into a spectacular sunrise. During the previous evening I had worked into the small hours on the text, agonising about whether it is too self-revealing, for all authors have to live with the consequences, intentional and unintentional, of their creations.

My suburb seemed to be alive with birds. There were the usual early companions whom I love—two big crows, ubiquitous blackbirds, several wattlebirds, a family of warbling magpies. But today it was predominantly doves. They were on the footpath ahead of me and moved aside but did not fly away as I ran past. They were in the trees, on the parapet of a bridge as I crossed it, on the gables of houses, on overhead wires, and they were present for the whole of my three-kilometre circuit around our streets. They chorused to each other across the trees and rooftops, so that I had the impression that the air was filled with the calls of doves one to another, and to me. I could almost believe they were intentionally companioning me. Doves. Doves all the way.

An experience like this is not unusual, but it was a message exchange nonetheless, a beautifully muted epiphany from the birds

which are symbols of peace. Benediction is a beautiful word which means 'the proclamation that all is well'. It is often used in conjunction with the acclamation 'Shalom' ('Peace'), and it flows through Julian's 'All shall be well; all shall be well; all manner of things shall be well'.

So, submerging my apprehensions, I resolved that I could release this text in the confidence that its intention is to spread healing, wholeness and peace to whomever

it wings its message. In telling their own stories, it seems to me, the saints, seers and mystics exhibited that kind of courage and the same longing to be of service to their friends and hearers. Humbly, then, it is my earnest hope that this book will indeed be for you an epiphany and, like the morning songs of the doves, it too will be a vehicle for spreading far and wide abroad just that kind of mystical wholesomeness, inner and outer harmony, and fundamental peace.

—Revd. John Stewart

Dolphin's Leap, Hind's Feet—Becoming a Mystic, Journey, Discipline and Practice is available from bookshops and the publisher.
Email sales@morningstarpublishing.net.au

*Jesus, our brother and friend,
born like each of us, of a woman, and in weakness,
plunged himself into human life
at the waters of the Jordan,
at the beginning of his life with us.*

*Into the depths of sin, love,
into the mystery of fragility, weakness,
and into the history of his people.*

*All life is holy, sacred, eternal
because of Jesus.
We plunge with him into the depths
of our own being;
in the depths of love we will find the God of love,
in the depths of sin, the God of compassion,
in the depths of weakness, the God of strength,
in the depths of division, the God of reconciliation,
in the depths of poverty and misery, the God of justice'
and in the depths of our humanity
we will find the divine life of God.*

—Donal Neary SJ