

*A Reflection by Peter Miller, a Church of Scotland Minister, on
his former colleague at Iona Abbey, Neil Paynter's
'Elizabeth and the Rainbow Man'*

A beautiful piece by Neil Paynter, author and also editor of many of the books published in recent years by Wild Goose Publications, the popular publishing arm of the Iona Community. This reflection is from my book "Finding Hope Again: journeying through sorrow and beyond", Canterbury Press Norwich ISBN 978-1-85311-438-0.

When my wife Dorothy and I worked at Iona Abbey one of our colleagues was a Canadian, Neil Paynter who became a good friend. Before coming to Iona, Neil cared for folk on the margins (or perhaps at the 'centre' depending on our view of God), whose lives radically transformed his perception of the gospel. Elizabeth and the Rainbow Man affected Neil's life at many levels. Despite all the obvious daily struggles which they faced, they were both 'bearers of hope' who were able to draw forth from Neil particular qualities of his own soul. It's not surprising, therefore, that his poetic words about them resonate with love for his two wonderful friends. Across our divided world we need to hear many such stories in order that our hearts and minds can be illumined in new ways.

I met Elizabeth working in a psychiatric hospital. (It was a place where few of the patients kept track of the days. Either they were unable to – lost in the fog of heavy drugs – or, because the days were all the same, they didn't bother.)

Elizabeth had an amazing and inexhaustible wardrobe and made a point of dressing up extravagantly. She sometimes changed as often as four times a day! And standing, smiling, in a long, flowering, golden gown, a floppy hat – both too big for the short old woman, who looked like a little girl trying on her mother's outfits – long white gloves, bright red lipstick, costume pearl, dangling earrings in the shapes of moons and fishes – she explained proudly: 'I dress this way, darling, because the days are all the same. And if the dirty old days won't change then, by Jesus, I will!

Through the long afternoons she danced. In the dirty, fold-up dining room. To a music only she could hear. All around her gathered the ghosts of the place – the suicides, the walking dead. I danced with her some times when I was on duty and she taught me new steps. Taught me how to open up and hear the music. Taught me how to dance no matter what.

I met the Rainbow Man working in a night shelter for homeless men. He dressed in bright colours, too – tie-dyed t-shirts, purple hair, pink nail polish. He spoke in colours. It was a depressing, colourless place – dingy, yellow walls, clouds of grey smoke hanging. He was labelled mentally ill, schizophrenic. At one time he had studied fine arts at college, somebody said, and had worked masterfully in oils and acrylics. Now, he worked in Crayola crayon. He drew like a child: dogs and cats and upside-down pink-orange flowers planted in clouds. He got beaten up by the men a lot.

One day he brought a leaf in from a walk he took (he was always taking long walks) and held it up to me and said to look, to see the light in the leaf pulsing, dancing still. I was busy and tired and had forgotten how to see, and said: 'Yeah, it's a maple leaf, so what?' I was oppressed and harried: there was someone buzzing at the door again, paperwork, so many important things to do. 'The light in the leaf,' he said again and danced away in a whirl of wind.

And when I sat down and stopped, I realized that what he meant was: to look and see that energy, that essence, alive in the leaf. He could see it. He was supposed to be disabled but he was able to see the light of God in a leaf and to wonder at it. After weeks of running blind through my life, the Rainbow Man taught me to open my eyes and heart again.

The most significant thing to me about these people, these friends, is that they are living the resurrection experience. They to me are the Christ. Christ in the stranger's guise: walking a road of trials, suffering, enduring crucifixion – maybe daily crucifixion. But in the end, through their belief in life – through their partnership, connection union, union with God – they are able to transform the darkness to light, suffering to joy, death to life.

***An additional note:**

I cite Neil's powerful reflection for although it may not address the current darkness in many parts of the world in a direct way, it touches the core of our shared humanity. However we may understand the word 'resurrection' -- across the world millions are longing for a renewal of the human spirit. Neil has written about how two friends with mental disabilities enabled him to see the world with a different focus. They taught him to open his eyes and heart. I could also say that the last eight years living with a companion called incurable bone marrow cancer, and being on constant cancer drugs has wonderfully enabled me to understand our humanity in new and unexpected ways. These important illuminations which involve our inner depths are gifts we must not shy away from in these times for they enable us all to be tender bearers of hope. Having understood our own tenderness and vulnerabilities and strengths more fully through such illuminations we can be gentle and wise lights in dark places. One of my poems, written for a late friend who had motor neuron disease, says it this way:

*How is it possible that you carry
so much hope in your fragile body?
You who greet me from a wheelchair
that never seems to confine you.
It's your spirit that sings of life,
even as your limbs journey into weakness.*