

One & Other Project

Hello my name is Kate Rowles and I'm interviewing you for the Wellcome Trust as you are taking part in Antony Gormley's One & Other. The date today is the 8th of October 2009 and the time is 2.20 p.m. Can I please ask you to say your name, your age and where you are from?

My name is Rachel Denton, I'm 46 years old and I'm from Lincolnshire.

And how are you today?

I'm very well; I'm very relaxed now I've been here for a couple of hours. I got here early so now I'm very relaxed.

What was it that motivated you to apply to be part of One & Other?

I'd heard about it and thought it was very interesting but never thought about applying and then on the first or the second day I saw the plinth and my first thought was about... the Stylises, now the Stylises were pillar hermits they lived in Syria in the fifth to the seventh century and they lived all their lives on pillars and I just thought we've got to see a Stylise up there so = I waited a couple of months to see if anybody was going to be a Stylises and it was apparent nobody was jumping at the opportunity. Because I'm a hermit myself it sort of tied in with my vocation, my... my experience my understanding of different ways of living in the Christian faith so in the end and I put my name down and thought well you know at least it's an opportunity of somebody being up there and doing it and then I was picked and I thought again whether or not. I really wanted to do it and I decided I did, I emailed the bishop and said you know, because he is in charge of me and said would it be ok to have a hermit up there and he said go for it and so that was it, yes.

What do you mean the bishop is in charge of you?

I've taken ... I'm like a nun in the Roman Catholic church so I've taken vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and although my obedience is to God, ultimately the bishop is if you like his delegate on earth and he's the guy that I took my vows to [?] my profession three years ago so.

And what does being a hermit involve?

As I say it's basically being a nun so it's a contemplative life but it's ... I live on my own so it's a very solitary life so the traditional vowels for a nun are poverty, chastity and obedience as I say and I've interpreted them as simplicity, solitude and silence so I live on my own and I stay in the hermitage in so far as I can I mean obviously for practical reasons I have to come out and my life is dedicated to prayer which doesn't mean being on your knees all the time but it means living very prayerfully and very ... trying to live in the moment trying to dedicate everything to God and taking it very slowly and consciously aware that this is God's gift I mean ultimately it is a life of gratitude a life of thanksgiving for the gift of being alive, yes.

One & Other Project

What motivated you to take this path?

To be a hermit, yes? I ... when I was quite young I wanted to be a nun and I went on and off that and in the end I joined the Carmelites very shortly after I left university and it was a very interesting year. I only stayed the year but living with 16 other women is quite a difficult thing to do and it really wasn't for me I found it very claustrophobic so I left, it was difficult leaving but I left and for 15 years I was a teacher and I sort of made my way up the ranks and ended up as deputy head of the secondary school down in Cambridge and then the opportunity came for another career move and for a few years previous to that I'd been very seriously thinking about hermitage because one of the reasons I left Carmel was although I wanted the life of prayer and a life of with everything taken out of it apart from being alive in a sense and that was what I went to Carmel for ... and I couldn't find that in Carmel because as I say I found it too claustrophobic and I was beginning to think about hermitage when I left Carmel but it's very difficult to be a hermit because you've got to be self sufficient and yet you don't want to be going out to work and so it's a real tension because nobody is out there supporting, nobody is paying for you so anyway I was in the fortunate position of being able to sell my house in Cambridge and move to Lincolnshire and I could afford to do that and I could afford to take very low paid jobs which were not so distracting, obviously teaching is a very distracting job so I could take very low paid jobs and I could use my calligraphy for a bit of income that sort of thing and it was just really an opportunity a lot of things came together my advisor said this was a good time the opportunity came as I say for career move and I was financially in a position to be able to do it but it was something I mean I... I've always it's always been there, I've always wanted to be... to live the life of the hermitage it's... it's a very hidden... well I mean apart from today it's a very hidden life it's a life that... it's a life of prayer it's a life of thanksgiving in Christ it's ... I mean if I say it's Eucharistic life that's quite a Catholic term, it's a Greek word and it means thanksgiving, it's a life which celebrates everything to do with being alive that means the difficult things and the hard things and the grieves and it just embraces it all in a very, very simple way and it gives it back to God and [?] says this was worth it that it was worth being alive and thank you for the experience, you know.

How do you spend your time?

Well I get up fairly early and I pray for a couple of hours and then there's breakfast and that sort of thing and then I'm working most of the morning, usually in the [?] workshop or in the garden. I'm self sufficient so then I have a couple of hours over lunch, some of it is prayer, some of it is just relaxing, some of it is obviously having my lunch and then in the afternoon I have another three hours work and then in the evening there's about another two hours prayer and that includes things like the divine office which is something that all consecrated people in the Catholic church and priests we all, it's the prayer of the church so we all say it no matter what the circumstances if you live in a monastery or a priest in a presbyter or a hermit in a hermitage we all say it and then this last summer and the end of the summer before

One & Other Project

I've been doing the [?] office as well which is really lovely so I get up during the night for an hour and pray then as well and that's really been a lovely experience because it's much more focussed there's not temptation to run off and do anything else and it's very quite and it's a time which is, which wouldn't be there is if you went up doing it and so it's entirely concentrated entirely gifted if you like yes.

How do your family and friends feature in your life?

Oh they are very important, my family have been very supportive and so most of my friends have been very supportive of what I'm doing, my family in very practical ways so they sort of my dad pays the petrol bill you know I mean I don't go out that often but if even so because I earn so little it's a significant part of when I do go out so he pays for that and I mean that's just one thing that's fairly typical of how they supported me and my friends know that they knew before I went in that I suppose I wasn't run of the mill that was something slightly odd about me so they've coped really well with it and some of them are a hundred per cent behind me but there is always a sort of tension between the Rachel that they thought they knew and Rachel that seems to be separated from them and seems to be acting without regard to them and that's a tension which is taking years to just explore and resolve really but it is, it is happening slowly there is a growing understanding them of me and me of their position as well yes it's quite slow but it's quite graceful yes.

Is there a difference between your solitude in with your faith is it quite, are you, how often do you see your family and friends with solitude being part of your life?

Ok, yes, my family a couple of times a year it's my parents' golden this year so I was there for that and with the calligraphy stuff very much part of the preparation because of course there was lots of cards to put together and we presented them with a book which you know which I was in charge of you know so I got lots of stuff from other people and put it all together so there's a lot that could be done with without having to see people you know every other day so I see the family a couple of times a year say and friends my closet friend probably a couple of times a year, once or twice a year but it's the next one down that don't see that much of me it's the ones you'd probably say were good friends but I actually don't see much of them and they don't see much of me, so.

And how do you find it emotionally, your life style?

I well I'm made for it you know I know that I know a lot of people say oh I could do with some of that when you say it and that's absolutely lots of people there's a bit of the hermit in most people but most people would not choose to do it all the time all the year every year I... it's natural to me I don't have an issue with solitude I, I enjoy it never mind what it might be spiritually I actively enjoy it so, that's not a problem and I do have very close friends that are on the end of a phone or on the end of an email when things get tough so I'm not without support I mean there's a sort of usually in

One & Other Project

this situation you would have a very specific spiritual director and I started off with one and, and, he's a great friend he's very dear to me but after a while it became apparent that actually that wasn't entirely useful and so instead there's about 4 or 5 people and they know who they are and they've been asked quite specifically and when things get a bit weird which is inevitable if you are living on your own then they know to talk straight to me you know they know that I'm not into beating about the bush I want to know is this idea completely off the wall or am I actually you know is there some grace in it if you like and that's been absolutely brilliant because of course you can try 2 or 3 not to get the answer that you want but just to get a wider range and then that enables you to sort of find the right way through things so yes.

And today could you talk a little about your ideas for the plinth and your knowledge of the history of this period that you are going to represent with the people on the pillars?

Ok then the *Stylites*? I don't know a huge amount about them. They lived in Syria and they were some women but the ones that are recorded, the guys, they were trying to live as hermits and finding it quite difficult because people kept following them so they built these pillars they went and sat on them and it kept them separated from the people I mean they needed to be supported because there isn't much that grows on a pillar so they had disciples that passed them baskets of food and sort of helped them practically but their life was quite removed and quite separate and quite focussed on their faith that's what they were there for and so there was no question of them being invited to a party or you know getting involved in stuff that's what they were doing and so it was a real statement for them and then it's quite amusing if you read about them these pillars they started off just... a metre or so high and it was just a case of I'm going to stay here I'm not going anywhere and some of them chained themselves to the pillars you know like the suffragettes almost and it was a case of I'm staying in this spot and then people came and kept on poking them or whatever and trying to engage them in conversation so they built the pillars higher and higher and higher and you hear about them being twenty or thirty metres high these pillars and you wonder how they got up in the first place it's really quite a fascinating history and they sort of moved their pillar and go you know go somewhere else because there were too many people where they were and they I mean I'm going to be very, very quite today I'm just going to pray for prisoners because I wanted obviously to go there and pray because that's what I do but I, I didn't just want to pray generally I wanted to be quite focussed and I was looking for a group of people that wouldn't have the opportunity and the prisoners were the obvious ones they ... it's part of our community part of society that's hidden for the most part and I just wanted to say we know you are there you know we know you are there we know you can't be up here but we want you to know that we are thinking of you and that's why I chose the prisoners to pray for.

And can I ask you to say a little bit about your upbringing?

One & Other Project

Oh Catholic, Catholic through and through family of 6, Catholic schools all the way through ... Catholic primary school, all girls Catholic secondary school, member of the Catholic chaplaincy at university so I mean break me in half and you see Catholic. There's no more to be said about Catholic ... an interesting family though, six girls and six boys. I'm number three so I'm the last of the girls and all very... it's a reflection on my parents, I think, that we are so diverse now in what we do and have worked and bent so many rules that are to do with the Catholic faith and my parents are very devout and very ... it's very important to them and they have difficulty with rule breaking or bending and yet they haven't you know they supported us all in all the weird and wonderful things we've done and I think it's a real tribute to them you know they might not consider it to be a tribute to them but I think we are, you know, yes.

What did you study at university?

Microelectronics and micro processes of applications university of Newcastle upon Tyne '81 to 1985 I think. I took a year out in the middle to go to Northampton and I was a lift engineer for a year and spent most of it on top of lifts testing them which was great fun but I had Carmel in the back of my mind even then so yes.

And did you go into that field of work at all?

No just the one year of experience, yes, and then I went straight to Carmel from university and then into teaching from Carmel.

And how was your experience being a teacher?

I enjoyed it I enjoyed it I was surprised to find how ... the first couple, the first few years were quite difficult and then I got into a special school and started teaching science to special kids and I loved those seven years I was there for seven years. It was the longest job I held and I really very much enjoyed that and then I went back to mainstream ... as a special needs teacher. I used to be a science teacher and transferred over to special and from then I went into managerial post senior teacher and then deputy head and I really enjoyed those the sort of the management side of things but the expectations that are placed on teachers are so... so tremendous you know that the stresses and the strains are quite incredible and you look around to your colleagues that you know you are trying to deal with your stresses and strains and you try and help them with theirs and it's... I think if I'm honest to a huge extent it's taken for granted I think that it's a very, very difficult job and I've huge admiration for the people that do it brilliantly the people for whom it's a real vocation I don't think for me it ever was it was a job I was quite good at but it was never a vocation thing and I think part of the difficulty is that the authorities look at the people for whom it is a vocation who are inspirational to the children in and expect everybody to be like that and actually it's not a gift that everybody has and working very, very hard at it is what it's all that most teachers can do and because you have these bright shining

One & Other Project

light of inspiration right in front of you a lot of teachers feel a lot of time that they are failing and I think it's such a shame because they are doing a very, very good job but the bench mark has been set up so high in their minds at least that it's almost impossible to reach it so it's shame because they shouldn't feel as if they are failing but they do.

Do you think you becoming a hermit have changed you as a person?

It's made me more myself so I'm much more relaxed. I wouldn't ... when I was a teacher I would never dream of doing this you know but now I can because I know I'm going back to the silence and the solitude and it's like having your feet very firmly rooted somewhere it's like having a home which means you can come out of it occasionally so yes I go out socially like my parents golden wedding that sort of thing people are always very surprised at how gregarious I am but I wasn't before I was a hermit so you know it's born of that confidence that I can go back again.

And you mention the calligraphy.

Yes.

Can I ask you about that?

Yes, I did a little calligraphy before I was a hermit and I was looking for a way of earning money from the hermitage and it seemed an obvious way to explore further so I took a few more classes and started basically a greetings card business www.saintcuthberghouse.co.uk ok? I produce these greetings cards and it is a bit of an income from which is great but it's also a way of ... it's that slowing down thing of the hermitage again that there's so many words around all the time and I can spend days with very few words and try and present them in a way which is true to them in some sense and maybe it'll speak to somebody else as well so it's about that savouring if you like, savouring of that moment savouring of the word, letting it be itself yes it's a good thing to do I enjoy it.

Who are you doing this for, taking part in One & Other?

Oh I haven't thought of that because it was something that I thought I've got to do for the prisoners because yes, I suppose I very much feel their separation and want them to be part of it. I want them to be acknowledged as part of it and I suppose possibly for the contemplative life in general, not for the nuns and that sort of thing but just to say to people there's a guy called father Ralph Earnie (?) and he said that there's a hermit in everybody and it's the church's responsibility that everybody has the opportunity to touch hermitage even if it's only with the tip of their finger and there's that sense of just let people see just let them be aware even if it's only subconsciously and you know and the limited number of people that are going to see this but it's just saying this is possible you know this is happening and one of the sort of, the motif if you like of hermitage rather strangely hospitality and it's born because

One & Other Project

the first hermits lived in the desert and so if somebody came and knocked on your door and asked for a glass of water you didn't turn them away because of course they would die and there's this sense that ... it might be a drop of water a drop of refreshment to somebody who can't see anything for somebody who [background noise] is just so thirsty that they are dying and it's not much but it might be a drop of water.

Is there anything else you would like to say or convey about your taking part in One & Other?

I think you've asked brilliant questions, I really do so no, I think you've dragged it all out of me.

Have you got any hopes or fears or expectations about your hour on the plinth?

I think it would be misunderstood, I think that's inevitable but I'm not sure that's a fear. I think I faced that in those first couple of hours when I was trying to decide whether or not to do it so I suppose it's more of an expectation than a fear and maybe this sort of talk maybe what I put in my profile will help to explain it to people but it will be misunderstood and there will be people out there saying what's a hermit doing on the plinth and there will be people out there you know because I'm going to be making a cross out of my walking stick and the plinth pole because that was quite nice I wanted to sort of consecrate the plinth in a sense you know to actually make something of what's already there so it's quite nice to make the cross in that way rather than being imported and then take it away again so even when I go part of the cross will still be there but I kind of like that, yes.

Thank you very much.