

One & Other Project

My name is Verusca Calabria and I'm conducting an oral history interview today on the 5th July 2010, using Skype and calling a landline, Rachel Denton's landline, who was on the plinth and Rachel, hi!

Hiya.

Lovely to hear from you today.

Nice to be talking to you.

So basically I'm calling you just because I want to ask you a few more questions about your time on the plinth because, you know, it's been almost a year.

Yes, yes.

So just first of all to talk to you about what attracted you to the project in the first place.

I was vaguely aware of it through the news I think, I don't have a television I just listen to the news once a day. So I don't know how I originally found out about it but anyway I was following it on the web pages of it and watching the people upon it so that was that was if you like how I became involved with it how I engaged with it.

You mentioned that you were going on the plinth to bring a message of hope for people in prison.

It wasn't so much a message of hope it was of a case of ... when I was going up there I was very aware that it was supposed to represent everybody so the whole the whole community of the British Isles and I was aware that there was aware that there was one group of people if you like that couldn't be represented because they wouldn't be able to get up there and that was the prisoners and therefore I wanted to go there to be their representative if you like it was it wasn't a case of [?] for them as in sort of [?] for their [?] it was much more to say I am going up here to be a prisoner if you like for an hour and I'm representing all these people who can't be here because they are in prison.

And how did you arrive at this idea in the first place?

The prisoner one?

Yes.

As I say it was it was fairly simple I mean as a hermit I tend to be very much in touch with people who are on the edge so I feel for the outcasts of society, if you like, and I'm forever looking for connections with people who possibly aren't mainstream and therefore you know when I was going on the plinth it was a natural thing for me to do to look around and see you know ... which of the people you know the non-mainstream people couldn't represent themselves up there because there was a

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whole variety of if you like fairly dodgy characters up there you know who presented all sorts of different elements of society that you wouldn't you wouldn't normally be visible and I thought that was a really positive thing about it and so I was quite [laughs] I was quite hard pushed to find to find sort of something on the edge that wasn't already represented but I've always had a sort of an empathy towards prisoners and so you know in the end it was a fairly natural thing to do to actually be there for them.

I noticed when I looked at your profile on the One & Other website that somebody left you a message and if you don't mind I'll read it out to you.

Yes.

It goes on the 8th October 2009 Ann wrote that "We enjoyed you and the prisoners in prayers this morning and you will be in our thoughts during your hour on solitude. Hope the weather is pleasant."

Yes.

Did you know Ann?

Yes, she's my mum.

Okay, so where was she, with the prisoners? Was she somewhere with other people?

No, no, she was ... her message was sort of she we talked about it with the prisoners but she wasn't particularly focusing on that she was just saying that she likes the idea of praying to the prisoners and so you know the hour that I was on the plinth I knew that that she was at home e and thinking of me and praying for prisoners at the same time so that was just it was it was really a message of support for me that one. There was another one from two women later further down and they actually worked with prisoners and that was very moving because they'd seen the [?] that I was praying for prisoners and they actually ... got a group of prisoners together at the time that I was on the plinth and prayed with me for themselves and for other prisoners and they contacted me afterwards and one of their friends was actually if you like on the ground on the day and sort of made contact with me and said 'hello' and said that she knew she knew the two the two sisters and you know she knew how much it meant to them that I was doing it and then them and just came to bring me their greetings so that was really quite moving. Yes.

Which prison was this?

I think it was Leeds Armley jail.

And do you know whether these prisoners had a chance to watch the actual video online in real time?

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I don't know. I don't know. I would like to [?] could watch it real time they might have had an opportunity to watch it at some other point but I don't think they have access to PCs regularly so I think it's fairly unlikely but they knew about it and that was that was the important thing and somebody who doesn't following events if you like through the television and through the normal media on the whole I mean this was one thing that I did follow but I tend to my affinity with people tends to be ... not through the media it tends to be if you like a sort of an affinity through prayer and so to me their closeness through prayer meant as much as ... [?] thinking that they'd been watching me. I guess they saw the photos afterwards. I think they did access the photos but I don't think [?] because I don't know these people you see. You know they hadn't ... these weren't friends of mine, these were complete strangers but they just bought into what I was doing so, yes.

So did you hear back from the other two sisters, how it was received, I mean your act on the plinth?

No I didn't because I didn't have any way of getting in touch with them. I mean they'd sent this friend and that was lovely but I foolishly, in all the excitement of coming down again, I didn't think to ask for any contact details. I did send them a note afterwards sort of to Armley jail saying it was good to hear from you and send them ... I make greetings cards so I sent them a few of my greetings cards to sort of give the prisoners I know are often short of that sort of thing and hoped they might be able to use them but I didn't hear I didn't hear any further so ...

Just one more question on this really. How did you get in touch with them in the first place or were they getting in touch with you?

They were getting in touch with me, they just saw me on they just saw it coming up on the web presumably they'd been following it themselves and they you know they they'd got in contact with me through that through my web page. It's down there at the bottom of the webpage I think the sort of the message they sent to me so that was how I knew about them in the first place.

Okay, that's fine, I was just wondering whether you contacted a prisoner as well and let them know about what you were doing, but it wasn't so?

No, no no no no. I mean I did, there's one there's a message there from Father Michael and he worked with prisoners ... he wasn't working with them at the time but he'd had contact and he sort of you know ... in the church a lot of people have contact one way or another with prisoners so it's not a ... it's not difficult to make to make the links if you like yes.

Thank you Rachel.

Okay.

I thought about asking you a few things about yourself and your life which were touched upon during your pre-plinth interview you told us quite a bit about yourself and I wondered if you could just tell me more about your time at "Carmel" and yes

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and you can explain who they are as well because it's very implicit and you know and I didn't really understand which group this is.

Okay, the Carmelites are a group of ... well, there's men and women in this country, there's Carmelites friars and they tend to be priests and I'd say there's about a dozen, may be a few more in this country and they are Carmelite nuns and there are Carmelite nuns are enclosed nuns so they stay in their monastery in groups of about thirteen is thought to be ideal and it's a life of prayer and it's sort of sold to you when you enter as a life of solitude in community so the idea is to be a hermit but to live with the support of other nuns, other women I just found living with other women hell on earth so I left after a year I couldn't do it but it planted, if you like, the idea of hermitage very firmly as what I wanted out of it and it the hermitage in community was difficult for me I wasn't great at living with other women so ...

Why was that?

I think living in community is hard in the first place and I think that generally speaking it is in my nature that I find men easier to get on with than women and so although I have many female friends, living with just women and not having that contact with men at all to sort of dilute if you like, the women around me a bit with just very, very difficult, it wasn't good for me and it really wasn't very good for the community either, I don't think that. I mean they were sad to see me go but I think once we'd all thought about it a little bit it was very much the right decision.

When was it that you were there?

Oh I was quite young, I was quite young, I was only twenty-three, I had my twenty-third birthday when I was in Carmel so I was only there for a year so it was just after I left university. It was something I very much wanted to do and I anticipated staying there, you know, for the rest of my life but, as I say, I hadn't ... I'd never lived with just women before and it's not an easy thing to do, believe me.

So what attracted you to this group of individuals in the first place?

Well, I'm a Catholic so I was brought up a Catholic and I have an aunt who is a Poor Clare nun and they live a fairly similar life to the Carmelites, not quite so much hermitage, a bit more community but it is a contemplative religious life so I'd already ... I had quite a lot of contact of growing up with my aunt and with the nuns and loved their way of life and as I was going to university it sort of crystallised and if you like ... if I wanted to give myself a motive if I wanted to define what it was that made me go inside that that made me want to go inside it was a real desire just to experience ... life without any of the trimming just to feel what it was to be alive to just experience being alive without having big events to look forward to or without having huge stresses to do with ambition or anything like that and without the distractions that having a lot of money can create and all that I just wanted to be alive and to be grateful for being alive and to experience what being alive was like with all the pain and all the wonderful things that just to do with being alive and none of the other stuff if you like.

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I know in the previous interview you mentioned to my colleague you've always wanted to be a nun on and off when you were younger so could you tell me how that developed in you?

Well, as I say, I mean I'd had contact with nuns from a very early age through my aunt and every time we went down there I had a good time and she is an [?] which is the convent which opened up for the Channel 4 programme a couple of years ago so they're quite an [?]. They're also quite forward looking and I just enjoyed being with them and they clearly had something that that I didn't have and that I would like to have and some and some sense of joy about them and so I mean all through school I was talking about it but never really got very far. I would have chosen to be a nun at the end of school but my parents ... you know, they had a lot of influence over me at the time obviously I was still very young and they said no you go to university first, so I said okay I'll go to university and I'll work for a year and in the end I actually worked in the middle of university and they agreed that that would that would do it if you like. And so by the time I'd I left university I was more than ready for it. I mean I'd sort of gone on and off particularly during my university years I had a couple of boyfriends that sort of thing but nothing that got serious enough for me to consider not being a nun it was I was I was fairly ... determined at that that was what I was going to be doing. Yes.

I'm just trying to remember to see whether I can bring you back to the time you in which you might have first realised that's what you wanted to do you know as a child.

As a child. Oh I mean I can see myself at about the age of ten, it must have been ten because we moved house shortly afterwards and you know if you [?] girls that were playing at weddings and I was ... I had wedding but I had weddings to God it was at a very young age. I mean it's just fantasy obviously it's just fantasy at that age but from a very young age it was something that I had at the back of my mind, yes so it was just of what I was going to do, you know. I can't say, you know, that there was any great revelation one day it was just it was just something I was just very content was going to be part of my life later on and I was looking forward to and by the time I got there I was ... the relief at arriving was quite overwhelming when I did eventually get there. During my last year at university it was very difficult not to be in Carmel, it was something I was longing for by that stage so the longing grew although still I guess a fairly immature longing I mean I was only twenty-three so I wasn't that old when I went and you can go in younger but, you know, I was quite young but it was obviously quite different to the ten year old that got dressed up and got married to God in her bedroom you know.

Thank you for that.

Okay.

So just to talk about being a hermit is it a common thing I mean do you know lots of people that do it or?

No, no, it's not common for well ... I mean there are probably far more hermits than anybody knows about because you can be a hermit obviously without actually telling

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anybody about it you just get on and do it. I chose, when I came here, to ask the bishop if I could make my profession which means taking vows for life and he told me at the time which was five years ago when I was talking to him that I was the only hermit of the diocese of Nottingham so to make profession like I have is quite uncommon and it's also more common amongst religious like I would have been like a Carmelite nun who would then chose to go and live as a hermit and there's a number of Benedictines a number of, well, no one or two Poor Clares that's a much more common route to live the religious life in the community for ten / twenty years and then with the permission and the blessing of the abbot or the prior to go away and live the hermit life separately so in many ways I've done it I've done it the hard way because the church doesn't financially support me at all whereas if you were part of a religious community there would be there that little bit of security behind you but I have to you know ... support myself in whatever way I can, yes.

Whereabouts do you live?

I live near Market [?] which is in Lincolnshire so I have wonderful views. My hermitage is an ex-council house but it has wonderful views fifteen miles in one direction and seventeen miles in the other so it's a very lovely place to live. It's the deacon gave me a lift back from church yesterday and he ... it was quite idyllic where you live isn't it? So, it's very beautiful, it's very flat I fell in love with the fens in Lincolnshire when I used to walk a pilgrimage to Wasingham and I fell in love with the fens which is a very flat area and massive big skies it's very, very beautiful if you like that sort of thing, it's not to everybody's taste and when I came here I actually looked for a house on the fens initially but they were too expensive and it's very, very windy. I would have gone completely barmy by now. I'm a little bit more sheltered here but I still get some of the flatness which [?] and the massive skies I still get here, but it's very nice.

Just to unravel some of the things you mentioned just previously about living independently from the community of the diocese of Nottingham. Is that a common thing to do for somebody who wants to be a hermit to provide their own accommodation?

It's the aim ... well... you either have to provide it for yourself or you have to find sponsors who will provide it for you and it's probably one of the reasons why there are [?] ... I mean I had a very successful teaching career before I became a hermit and so I sold houses to sort as I made my way up the slippery slope and so by the time I moved here I was able to sell a fairly expensive house in Cambridge and buy a not very expensive house out here so it's so my outgoings for that are very, very small which means that I can afford to do it do it I mean it's sort of an embarrassment really because you cause you do have to have some degree of financial independence before you before you can live the life either that or you have to find somebody who is prepared to sponsor you to do it for them and you know that that's always a difficult thing to present your case and there are so many calls on people's finances these days that you know it's difficult to justify how you would say that the money would be better spent on supporting you to live the hermit life than it would be supporting other charitable needs so I mean I fortunately ... I'm not in that position and you know I am independent and thank God for that really that's all I can say.

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Okay, how about your life of contemplation, do you manage that where you are?

Sorry can you say that again?

Can you hear me? I wonder whether you're managing your life of contemplation where you are?

Yes, yes as well as I can. I mean none of us manages perfectly to live this sort of dream that they had envisaged but it's not my circumstances that are stopping me if you like it's just who I am. But yes, I mean I have what three hours set aside each day of just prayer and silence and the rest of the time is, you know, is quiet, very quiet. I don't see people; I don't talk to people very often. Sometimes, you know, the work I've done in order to support myself ... I've been involved with other people. I used to support a girl who is profoundly disabled a couple of days a week and that was how I supported myself and so obviously I'd be talking to her but that was about it the conversation for that week would be with her or to do with work ... to somebody who was managing me or something like that. But I mean I'm not doing that work any more and at the moment I'm concentrating on the calligraphy work and that's very quiet indeed I mean to the extent that I was at the hospital last week and they were saying because my voice is not as good as it was and they were saying oh it's very simple it's because you're not using it properly you have to talk more and your voice ... and you're going to lose your voice unless you talk a little bit more so it is a very quiet life and it's something that gives me an opportunity just to be in the quiet yes. And for that's what contemplation is contemplation is just about being where you are and really that that about it I suppose being where you are and being grateful for it it's going back to what I was thinking about when I went into Carmel. It's that idea of just living and being grateful for being alive although that's not always ... you know sometimes you look and you think that there are things that you might not be grateful for that are going on nonetheless it's just sort of being in that place and being grateful for the gift of the experience of whatever it is you're going through.

That's fascinating, thank you Rachel. I just wonder if you could say a little bit more about this contemplation just to explain it a bit more about for example when you say that you're not using your voice very much, how many people do you see on a regular basis and what does regular basis mean in your context?

Yes okay. I phone my parents once a week for about ten minutes. I have a neighbour who knocks on the door about once a fortnight and I have a ten minute conversation, probably less, and then there are a few that ... there's one I suppose I might have an hour's conversation per week with somebody who either calls round or I might go and see Rebecca this girl I used to support or something like that. So most weeks I probably have one hour when I'm talking to somebody at length and then as I say you know a couple of ten minute conversations during the week but the rest it I wouldn't be talking.

So if I understood right about an hour and a half per week?

Yes. Something like that, yes.

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And how do you find that?

Oh, no problem at all it suits me. I mean there is this notion that you do these things for God and you live in silence for God and then there is a [?]. I mean you can't do it completely selfishly but at the same time I am a hermit because it suits me and if you like God wants me to be a hermit because it suits me not because it's difficult for me but because it's the thing that makes me most alive, it's God's ... the way God gives me the gift of life is through solitude, through silence, through trying to live simply and for me that is not always easy but nearly always joyful and I'm always I would say nearly always anyway grateful for it. It's a positive thing, it's not a deprivation for many people, it would be but for me it's not and very many people, when I talk about it, sort of superficially will say 'oh yes, I could do that' and there is this need in a lot of people I mean they couldn't or wouldn't or shouldn't try and do it for a lifetime but there is a need in very many people just to have that space and that silence even if it is for a very short while and although the flavour of that might be slightly different to what I experience nonetheless I am just extending that and not running away when it gets boring or when it gets scary or when it gets lonely I try to stay here in those times as well and just live with those, with that experience because inevitably there is somebody who is more lonely or more bored or more scared than I am so you know there's no point at which I can sort of you know claim any sort of heroism? Something like that. It is just for me ... it's a very natural way of life and I'm very grateful for it. Yes.

Thank you. ... I wanted to talk a little bit about your family as you mentioned in the previous interview you have a very large family.

Yes.

How many brothers and sisters?

There's five brothers and sisters, we're a Catholic family, my parents are very good Catholics when we were all conceived so.

And what do your brothers and sisters do now?

Oh, they are ... two of them are in business, very successful, two are in business very successfully, one is in catering very successfully and one is a doctor so yes they're all professional and they're all very secure ... yes.

Do you keep up a relationship with them?

Oh yes, oh yes it's my aunt's golden jubilee she's been fifty years a nun this year so inevitably as I'm the one with a little more time on my hands if you like and a little more affinity with what she might be experiencing I'm the one that's organising gig so that's at the moment a whole raft of emails going around the family trying to organise who's going to do what and what we're going to be getting and that sort of thing so yes, I mean we're a we're a close family. I mean one of my brothers is over in Singapore but he's he joins in this email conversation you know each day when he

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gets up and yes we are a close family, it's lovely, we get on well with each other as well which is nice.

You mentioned in the previous interview that your family was involved in bending rules in the sort of Catholic tradition in passing and I was very interested in that and wondered what you meant when you said that.

That well I'm guessing [?] was I talking about my parents at the time...

Yes.

And how they coped, yes. I mean because you know when my first sister got married she married an Anglican and for my parents that was quite a difficult thing for them you know and it took a lot of coming to terms with because obviously because they at the time would have preferred that she marry a good catholic and have lots of little catholic children but [?] she has been bringing her children up catholic but you know but at the time there was quite a fuss about it you know and you sort of look back now and you know two of one sister and one brother have married divorced people another brother has been divorced and has married again. We've married into the Muslim faith we've married into the Jewish faith, I'm single my brother another brother is single so we've [?] there is no neat catholic marrying catholic with catholic children in our family and yet ... and my parents who have difficulty with marrying an Anglican have succeeded in embracing all these people all these Muslims and Jews and little agnostics and you know ... we got [?] if you like within our family and ... to watch my parents they don't distinguish between any of us and I just think it's a real ... I have such a huge amount of respect for them for that because they could have gone the other way but they haven't but they've decided that you know God is bigger than denomination or than creed if you like that God ... is so central to their family life and all can do is offer God to people and to welcome and embrace anything positive in return I just think I just look at them and would want all [?] as an example to very many people that I know because they they've not found it easy but they've found a way through and they've found a sort of wholeness in themselves I believe anyway as a result of it so yes all credit to them.

Thank you for that, you also mention in the previous interview about the struggle that some of your friends and your closest ones have had over the years to understand you as a person versus the spiritual person that also exists in you that lives as a hermit and you talked about these tensions and I just wondered if you would to say more about that really you know how you've coped trying to get your friends to understand that side of you.

Yes, I think I mean I have some very close friends and for them it's really not been such an issue. I've been in fact if you like you know they're the ones that, when I was trying to decide to come here, when I was making decisions [?], when I go a bit crazy every now and then you know and sort of wonder how am I going to cope with this situation they're the people I ring and they're the people I talk it through with and there wouldn't be an issue you know there never has been really they've raised eyebrows but they've never in any way sort of held back so it's not the very closest people they've always been very supportive it's the next the next ring out of people I

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know that I know very well and that you know I would if I wasn't here. I'd be socialising, I'd be seeing fairly regularly, would be having a good time together and I sense that they find it more difficult because I don't know what it looks like from the outside but I think they see ... they see first of all that that an element of selfishness that I've sort of not taken their needs into account if you like that that they might have wanted me around more and then and again sort of an element of selfishness in that I've got this very as they perceive it, very quiet secure unstressful life out in the sticks and they're trying to juggle work and family and all these other things and so there's a I mean I don't know but I sense sometimes a slight 'well what do you do all day?', 'what do you do all day?', 'what's all that about?' And a sense that they think that I'm feeling that I'm doing something good okay and then they mean if they talk to me about it they would find out that that isn't the case at all. I don't feel that my life is ... in any way better or more virtuous or more committed or anything like that than anybody else's it's very ordinary if you like it's just that that the way that I've chosen to live it albeit or the way I can live in the way in the same that they can live their family lives, I can live this life and I think it's always difficult looking from the outside in but I think because ... people don't have experience of this life or what they do have is their own little bit of experience and from their own little bit of experience when they're on their own and having a day's sort of peace and quiet by themselves it's a wonderful experience and it's something to be cherished and of course that is the case it is something to be cherished but it isn't always like that here sometimes the silence isn't that that just that relief that e that change if you like from the normal family sometimes the silence is just a sort of stress like family life could be. Am I making sense here?

Yes, yes, I am listening to you and it's very interesting thank you.

Ah, okay. Yes I mean I say I [?] in the same that yes if I look at them and I see the romance of their marriages and sometimes you know and I see the lovely way they get on with the children and the sort of the deep rootedness that gives to them then I can feel a little bit of envy although I don't experience all the hassle and all stress and all the all the cleaning up afterwards and all the [?] all the other family stuff that goes alongside that in the same way when they look at me they just see the peace and the quiet and they don't see all the if you like the less romantic stuff that that goes alongside that and it's just a lack of experience of the other person's way of life and you know inevitably we can't all experience anything, everything, but I think gradually maybe as we grow up or grow older I suppose by my age I ought to be growing older than up then you know we just begin to appreciate that there's a lot we don't know and there's a lot we haven't experienced and so other peoples' lives are not up for judgement really they're just they're just what other people do personally I've reached that point and I hope that you know other people looking at me have reached that point as well and I think I think probably actually probably don't think about me at all you know I'm probably making it all up, they probably don't think about me at all, they're probably not that interested. But when I think, when I'm thinking about it, this is the sort of thought I'm having about them.

Okay, thank you. I wonder whether you have a spiritual guide or someone who you speak to about your faith and the support that you might need for that journey?

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Yes, I have had in the past. At the moment I don't. The solitary life is a little bit difficult because if you have one person to whom you are referring ... semi-regularly on a guidance basis it makes it difficult well I find anyway it makes it difficult to ... not have that person in your mind a lot of the time because you're sort of ... everything you're doing you're almost doing with reference to them or at least it's how I found it when I had a guide I mean when I first came here for the first six years I did have a guide and that was no five year I did have a guide and that was [?] helpful and really quite essential because you know I there was a lot that needed ... just putting into place really. But it was difficult because there was this constant reference every time I decided to do something that I'd have in the back of my mind now what would so-and-so think about this so I think as a hermit you have at some point if you like to become just a little more independent than that. I mean holy church will probably tell me I'm completely wrong here but this is my experience and so I have a group of people friends I was talking about earlier, there's about five of them and they will ... I can speak to them very v honestly and more honestly than I could speak to family or anything you know, really very honestly and they can feed back to me and so it's not just one person there's a few of them and so A. it takes the responsibility off them and B. it means that I'm not focusing on a particular opinion at any time there's a range there and they're always accessible to me in one form or another which means that I don't have to consult with them as often as I might do if I was panicking you know if I wondered they would be there well now I'm quite confident they will be there they'll be there for as long as I need them and often as I need them but they're not going to try and impose themselves on me and because if you like it's spread out over the 5 it just it just makes it for me anyway a bit more healthy but I know that's not an orthodox view the orthodox view would be that you need somebody who has had experience in your way of life, who can offer something completely objective to you in terms of guidance but in order to access that you've got to be able to put into words what it is you're experiencing and although I can't [corrects herself] obviously I can talk I mean I'm talking to you now and I do write about my life occasionally putting it again putting it into words is something that isn't always ... helpful because you spend you whole day walking around with a sort of running commentary in your head and actually that's not being here and that's not being now that's trying to describe this to somebody else and that's not entirely helpful that's not really what it's all about it's not about describing it to somebody else it's about being here and ... and so that that sort of communication outwards has to be addressed with a great deal of sensitivity and I think it's something you know will change as I grow into the life and as time goes on and I learn new skills and I will I will you know these things will change and at some point I might have a spiritual director [?] as I say, at the moment I just have this small group of people that that just stop me from going completely crazy.

Thanks for that. I'm just wondering how you continued to support yourself and develop, for example, a system of contemplation for prayers especially if you're doing this on your own basically?

Yes, yes. Well I read spiritual books at the moment I'm reading [John Henry Newman](#) which is fascinating and sort of exploring his ideas of church which are quite profound and quite rigorous as well. It's ... I have access to quite a lot of spiritual literature. I can always get hold of it then I mean one of my one of this group of five is

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a priest and so when I see him he comes to see me about once a year and we'll spend a day and we'll talk about stuff if you like, religious stuff, but I mean there are times when, that is, if you like is what I would pinpoint as the provision that I don't have that I would ... you know that times when I look for more structuring in terms of study or development of prayer all that sort of thing and sometimes that's obtainable through retreat that's coming up. I went a couple of years ago I went up to Scotland for a silence and awareness and retreat which is a Buddhist method of prayer which had been tweaked to use as a Christian method of prayer ... and that was very helpful and I still use elements of that I don't take it all I don't follow the rules completely but elements of it that have stayed with me and that are helpful to me so it's just a case of sort of looking around you all the time and being aware and also being aware of my own change and my own development because ... I you know I been here eight years now nine years nearly and things change in myself when I look back and I can see things change or events change you know at the moment I'm slightly disabled so I can't work with Rebecca this the profoundly disabled lady and that's thinking about a change in the way things happen ... it's just looking around and ... and letting events works on you the local church is designed for the local parishioners and their needs are to some extent different to mine and so sometimes that's quite frustrating but then if I go a bit further into Lincoln or something then the provision there is better or is more diverse and so I can link in with something that would resonate with my own spirituality more [?] there and so it's just a case of making the links and knowing how to access them and knowing when to access them.

So how are you are perceived by your local community?

Well, [?] is a very small village in [?]. The villagers don't even blink they sort of asked a few questions when I arrived, the children mainly [?], as is always the case. But now it's just you know they don't they don't question what I'm doing it's ... I'm just the one that lives at the bottom sort of thing and so there isn't an issue there at all in the local church ... I'd say I [?] perhaps raise more in the parish church than because it's a very traditional church ... and so somebody sort of putting themselves and saying I'm living this different life was quite difficult for them to come to terms with and they have done to various degrees some people are very happy about it ... some people think it's all a little bit dodgy and don't really buy into it if you like ... and some people just ignore the fact it's happening at all so you know but I think anybody who lives a life which is slightly out of kilter from the norm would expect that ...

Have you had any interest from the press for example, local or national for what you are doing?

Yes, the local press were very interested when I made my profession and they ... I actually, they wrote an excellent article, a guy called Jason Woods who was editor at the time and he came and interviewed me just before my profession and wrote a wonderful article really he got it which was quite amazing and then The Guardian contacted me after ... oh I write for the Redemptorist I write for the Redemptorist which is ... they publish newsletters for churches which go out every Sunday and so I write for the children newsletter and I write occasionally for their adults newsletter and it was mainly through the adults newsletter that people I was writing about being

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a hermit and so I ... quite a few people wrote to me after that they sort of found my ... a link on the web and sort of contacted me or they wrote to the Redemptorist themselves and one of them was a Guardian reporter and so the Guardian came out and interviewed me. That was about a year ago now, it was just before I went on the plinth and then [?] came out as well so the BBC2 thing and that's on my website as well. There's a little video of me talking to [?] but I mean it's sort ... comes and goes a bit, it's like this interview, came out of the blue. I wasn't expecting it and I'm quite happy to talk about it because it is it is so different in people's perception and yet the life I live is very ordinary and just I suppose if I do have a mission at all and I'm not, you know, a mission to the people and I say that with some caution but then it would be a sense of ... this way of life is available, you know, that that's all I would say that it is possible to live like this and that it can be a very, very happy existence and maybe just knowing somebody's doing it is all you need to share that happiness, you know, or to show that gratitude or whatever it is just to be able to touch it, to know it's happening for many, many people would be more than enough. And for one or two it might be a way of not living this sort of life but living another sort of life which would be right for them, yes.

Talking about you moving there to the village, the hermitage, can you tell me more about that how did you choose this area where you are?

Oh well, yes, the primary factor was expense .So I had a certain amount of money in the bank and I had to find a house that that was within that amount and it wasn't ... it was either east Lincolnshire or south Wales, they were the two affordable places in England at the time, and I'd seen this place on the web and it just looked really quite desolate so I hadn't ... but my mother saw it and she sort of said, 'Oh, you must go and see this place, I've found this place for you.' And so I actually came and sort of ... way of involving my mother and I remember because I'd been to a few places by then and there was one or two that I was interested in but nothing that sort of absolutely grabbed me and this place, I mean it is just a very ordinary council house but I came and I just ... I remember just after I'd been shown round and there was a light in it that was the thing that struck first of all. It was a very light house, then the people went away because nobody was living here at the time and I just came back and sat on the back door and thought 'yes' this would do absolutely fine because it's got a decent sized garden so I can grow my own veg, it's on the edge, the end of the terrace so it's very quiet, it's got a little bit of sort of rough land next to it so again that that's a sort of a quietness there and then the next thing is a farm so, you know, it's quiet. I can very much keep to myself if I choose to and then the neighbour on the other ... the only neighbour I have is also a very quiet chap so in many ways in very many ways it was suitable. But it was mainly the price that that permitted me to buy it which is only ...

So I had a quick look at your website and the hermitage so is this how you call your house as well?

It's called St. Cuthbert's House, it's the name of my calligraphy business and the name of my house it's just it's where I live it's where I do.

Do you manage the website yourself?

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Oh yes, yes, yes, which is why it's got a few ... blips in it.

And where did you learn to do calligraphy?

Again that was something I'd always been interested in. I'd sort of ... I've flirted with it all the way through from childhood I at least liked writing things down that sort of thing and then when I came here I took an evening course actually I took an evening course in it and that started me off and then it's I mean calligraphy is one of those things that people can teach you and you do need a good teacher but it's practise and practise and practise and I do have that opportunity here thank goodness so yes it's sort of built up through practise.

When you said that you call your house the hermitage, in what way does it differ from a normal house?

Okay, well it's ... I mean I call it St. Cuthbert's house but I don't call it the hermitage, I call it St. Cuthbert's house but it is a hermitage and I think that's quite an important distinction because the hermitage is the place where I exist, if you like, and it's the place where I meet God and therefore I stay here as much as possible and I mean to give an example there was a call at one point or an invitation at one point that I might have the blessed sacrament in my prayer room in my oratory ... and I thought about it and I prayed about it for a while but in the end I decided against it because there is a sense that to have a God, if you like, very specifically in one room would be to take God away from everywhere else. It would be ... sort of suck everything in to it and there would be, if you like, a focus on that special room. And the point of the hermitage is that this is where God is for me, this is where God is and so being here I am with God and then when I go out from here, the idea of the ideal, the saints will tell you is to carry the hermitage in your heart. So when I go out from here I am actually still in my hermitage because I am carrying God with me although he's always, I mean, the trouble you see, this can start sounding really exclusive because of course he's next door as well with my neighbour and he's down at the pig farm as well or God is ... I keep calling him he, it's just old habits die hard but, you know, God is very much in every place but, if you like, this is where I cherish Godness, this is the place that I try not to escape from and that I try to sit in with God and that's why I call it hermitage because it's not just where I live, it's actually the place where I am.

Thank you for that, just one more question around your work making greeting cards.

Yes.

How do you sell them?

Through the web mainly. Yes, I have a website and people can order them through the web or I get emails off people who give me commissions, that sort of thing. Every now and then I'll exhibit something in a village show or I had some stuff in Lincoln the other year and you know there are other ways and every now and then it won't ... one time I went to a few craft fairs and tried to sell my stuff there ... but they're quite slow things you have to you have to stop and take your time and read them and

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that's not really suitable for a craft fair. I found people just wanted to move on to the next thing then so that wasn't wholly successful but I might have another turn at that at some point but yes mainly it's through the web.

Thanks. I've also wanted to ask you about something you mentioned in your previous interview which I'll remind you now what it is was, you made a comparison between the [?] and the suffragettes when you mentioned the [?] and some of them might chain themselves to a pillar and I really liked that you made this connection from a political perspective and, you know, I wonder whether you wanted to say more about that?

I don't... well you reminded me of something I didn't realise I said, let me think. Yes, well, in a sense where the Stylites were placing themselves in a place that they weren't going to go from to make their point. Okay and in that way that's the same as the suffragettes, you know, they chained themselves to the railings in order to make their point, in order for their voice to be heard. And for the Stylites actually I mean ... unlike me the Stylites were great preachers so they tended to talk quite a lot when people came to listen to them but they came because they were in a place and that was where they were and they weren't going to move from that place and they stayed there and their voice was heard and in the same way I think the suffragettes, when they were chaining themselves to railings, and they sort of they we're staying there until their voice was heard and forcibly often where they removed forcibly at least but yes I think we have a lot to learn from the suffragettes at the moment in our society. I'm reading up a little bit about them at the moment and feeling very affectionate towards them.

What is it that is catching your attention from your reading?

I think that they had a very firm purpose and a very clear vision of what it was that that they were looking for and that they are chained and I think that as a society possibly but certainly as a church it is something that we need to readdress that the lip-service towards women's equality in society is slowly eating away at the status quo and there is change and it is very slow and I still meet to you know people who you know the fact that people still talk about feminists that actually we've not quite got there yet but I think within the church there are ... massive issues and I wonder when that, if and when the time comes for the Roman Catholic suffragettes to get together I wonder, I'll be, you know, if I'll have the courage to be part of that because I think that the time is coming if you like.

Thank you for that. So you've also mentioned that you occasionally write about your contemplation or your hermit life?

Yes.

In what form do you write?

It's a couple of newspaper articles and obviously I wrote for The Tablet about being on the plinth and that involved talking about being a hermit being in a hermitage as well but it's mainly through the Redemptorist which is this ... it's a religious publishing

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house and they publish these newsletters every Sunday and on one side there's sort of some writing that that they've written and on the other side the church will publish whatever's going on in the church that week you see, so they get quite good publicity through those and I've been writing very short articles for them up to now ... just about, you know, I write about my chickens and I write about my life here and I write about what it means to live in [?] and solitude and silence so I just write about my life here but next Christmas, this Christmas coming up, they asked me to do a series of much longer ones that will take up the whole sheet about my experience of Christmas as a hermit and that was such a lovely thing to do. I so enjoyed writing about it and just sharing some of the ... because for many people it would appear that it would be a very drab way to spend Christmas just spending it on your own but it was such a joyful Christmas I know and it was a lovely one to have the opportunity to write about so that's where I am for the most part and then I also write the children's newsletters I do that regularly so they have one they bring out for children and it just makes the reading simpler and it gives a few little ideas for how to think about things how to pray about things for children and I write for that one every three months or so I'm sort of I do a month of that so well I mean it's a great thing to do, it's a very prayerful thing to do but it also ... I also get paid a little bit of money for it so that's helpful as well.

Okay Rachel that was really fascinating. I just wanted to unravel another couple of things about your life story that we've touched on very, very quickly. One which was your fifteen years of being a teacher.

Oh right, yes.

So where were you teaching and who were you teaching?

I was teaching science in secondary school, mainly physics and a little bit of maths but that was ... and I started up in Newcastle which was where I graduated from when I came out of the convent. I went to Leeds to do my teacher training and then I went back up to Newcastle to teach because I loved being up there as a student and I taught there in a catholic secondary school for about 2 years 2 and a half years and then I taught in a special school in the south of Newcastle and that was really a huge part of my life it was it was very special I loved doing it I was teaching science ostensibly but in a special school you sort of you have fingers in very many pies and so and so it was really just teaching young people how to how to grow up and how to how to cope with what was going to come next and I still I mean I got a card last week from a young man that I taught so obviously he's not quite so young now but that taught in our special school we always had a good relationship but he's just moved into his own house so he's thrilled about that and it was a very special time for me and then I sort of carried on with the special work I moved Melton Mowbray and taught I was a special need coordinator there in an upper school I moved to Peterborough after that as assistant head with pastoral responsibilities and then I moved to Cambridge as deputy head with curricular responsibilities so I was ... the next step would have been headship but then I made the break.

I understand, so I just also wanted to ask you about your relationship with your aunt who's a nun because it seems to me from what you've said that she was a very

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influential person in your choice of lifestyle. So what part did you think she played in that?

I think just by being a nun herself and by making it accessible if you like that I could experience what it was like to live in a convent through her and not many people have that sort of freedom to come and go, you know, I mean at any point I can just go and spend a week in a convent and not think twice about it just to see my aunt and that's always been the case and we'd have family visits there for very many people that they would just never see an enclosure from one year to the next so I think probably that was that was the main influence she just she just made me aware that this was a way of life that was possible and on a couple of occasions she's been very helpful and supportive in terms of seeing me through crises or just giving me very gentle not even advice but just somebody to be with during times when or just somebody to talk to during times when I was I was trying to find my own way in difficult situations and she's been there a couple of times like that I think primarily it's just the fact that she is a nun and that I've always known her as a nun and therefore that way of life has always been an option for me.

You mentioned at the very beginning of the interview that they were really forward looking at the nunnery.

The Arundel nuns?

Yes.

Yes.

Can you hear me?

Yes, yes I can hear you.

Okay, okay sorry. Yes you mentioned they were really forward looking at the nunnery where your aunt was based, what did you mean by that?

Well, I mean ... the contemplative life is a very traditional one. it's been in the church for a very long time and therefore there can be a tendency for them to take on board change more slowly if you like than society generally and also, of course, you know the people that are in there went in fifty / sixty / seventy years ago, you know, they've been there for a long and therefore have had a limited experience of what it is to be an active member of society outside and so it there can be a tendency just to withdraw a little bit to become a bit insular and just to hold on to old traditions and old pieties that possibly aren't necessary to faith and possibly aren't helpful particularly for people who are visiting a monastery or convent now, they wouldn't find some things particularly helpful, and I think that the Arundel nuns are a group that ... I mean they're highly intelligent women for one reason or another they've always looked outwards, they've always seen what's going on they've always adapted themselves so that what they're doing is relevant to the world that they are living in and that it that doesn't mean that they're not contemplative it doesn't mean they're not enclosed it doesn't mean that they're not living the absolute essence of what it is

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to be a completive nun. It just means that, as I say, some of the pieties, some of the practices which were more to do with tradition than to do with truth where they just, they just said, 'Well, actually that's just not necessary, that's just over-complicating our life.' or, 'That isn't supportive of the human person and we're about uplifting the human person so just that as a little thing they take responsibility for themselves in many enclosed orders so they don't have radios and there may be a radio for the community and one nun might be designated to listen to it and then she would disseminate the news to the rest of the convent in Arundel if they would like a pocket radio you just a cheap thing and they're welcome to have it because they are responsible for ... for maintaining the silence of their life you know and you know they're grown women they're adults it's not for somebody else to tell them you know, 'It's time to turn the radio off.' If they really wanted to live a life of contemplative silence then they will turn their radio off and it and it's just that sense of taking responsibility for themselves in the convent in their world in their vocation and not and not sort of hanging on to a sort of prissy set of rules that that define their life their life their life is much more than the definition provided by the rules and so they've said actually some of these rules aren't necessary and I think it's a very, very healthy place to be.

Thank you Rachel. Now I just wanted to ask you a couple of questions bringing you back to the plinth experience.

Oh, yes.

And then I'll promise not to keep you for much longer.

That's okay.

Basically, just to look back. How do you remember the experience as a whole now a year on?

Beforehand a lot of anxiety. When I was up there it was just ... it was just lovely, it was ... I mean it went very quickly but everybody says that. I mean I closed my eyes to sort of start praying and when I opened them again the truck was coming towards me so and that was a bit of a shock I just hadn't even heard the bells going in the church in the churches or Westminster or anything I hadn't heard so but I can still if I close my eyes or occasionally if I bring it up on the screen. I can still feel that sort of that autumn sunshine and the peace that there was up there you know it was a very peaceful place to be it was it was it was a lovely experience it was lovely and what's interesting is you know a few people have sort of contacted me since and said, 'It was lovely just to be on the plinth with you again.' And they've got it up and they said that actually they watch me, they just have the sounds of London on in the background and they get on doing whatever they're doing quietly or maybe they'll just sit and pray themselves but it's that sense of company you feel as though they're praying with somebody or they're doing their quiet things with somebody, and that sort of the serenity of the balminess of the sounds of London going on around you. It felt a little bit like when you know when you're when you were a child and you were poorly in bed in an afternoon you could hear all the sounds going on outside your window and there was just a sense of you being in bed in quite secure and quite

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secure and quite rested and part of and yet a part from those sounds that were going on around you and it that that was what it reminded me of, being poorly you know, only mildly but poorly enough to be in bed as a child on a work day afternoon and just hearing the sounds going on around you, yes.

You mentioned people getting in touch with you afterwards. How did they get in touch with you?

Through the website, a couple, you know, the messages that are on the website or a couple of people emailed me through my website and they'd said they'd seen me up there and enjoyed it and sort of and had made the link through to my website from because I'd put I'd put a link on my plinth page so that people could come back to my website if they wanted to know more about hermitage and that sort of thing so that's how [?] how people got in touch.

Did you develop any friendships or anything like this as a result of going on the plinth?

No, no I wouldn't say that I did. There was all the Twitter stuff going on in the background and I contributed just apparently it wasn't [?] ... it was through the web, through the website itself there was a sort of conversation. It wasn't Twitter itself, it was some sort of conversation going on and you could contribute and there was one or two people who sort of said that they felt isolated and they felt that they weren't part of the community and they felt and I was you know and I remember leaving a couple of messages just saying you know that this was actually even before I went up on the plinth that that my sense was that the community of the plinth was bigger than just the people on the plinth. In fact, you know, they were the least of it if you like, that the community of the plinth was included everybody who was watching and contributing and so that sense of being part of a wider community was quite strong at the time and it's not something I pursued afterwards but I don't do those sorts of things very ... that's just not what I do. But I still feel very much part of you know when I see Trafalgar Square in a picture or something then I smile, you know. Somebody lent me the DVD of David Dimbleby's 'Art of Britain' and I was looking at them during the day and he walked through Trafalgar Square and there was something going on on the plinth and they were erecting something [?]. I was just though ... 'ooh' you know and there is a sense of having been part of something and still if you like being part of you know Ollie emails me about this and there was another email a few weeks about something else to do with it and yes I mean I enjoyed that link but it's not something I would pursue in terms of personal relationships it's just you know, it's something I'm part of as a community. I'm part of that and that's quite special.

So you can hear now the siren at my end where I live in London can't you?

Sorry, I can't hear that.

Can you hear the siren going back in the background? Can you hear it?

No, no I can't.

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No. I wondered about that since you talked about sound. Now you just mentioned Ollie do you mean Ollie from Artichoke?

Yes, that's right, yes.

Okay. I just thought we'd say that because the interview will be deposited in an archive so we clarify who we're speaking about.

Oh, ok.

So just to go back to the experience as a whole did you write about it in any way or talk about it to other people are you still remembering it?

Oh yes, I mean I wrote about it for the Tablet. I don't know if the archive got a copy of that, I meant to forward it but I never did, but there is an article I wrote for it, for the Tablet, it's a significant length a thousand words or something. So maybe I ought to forward that anyway and that's ... the Tablet is a Catholic journal, an international Catholic journal so you know that was quite a big publication for me and then the local paper ran a story and put some photos up of me which was quite fun.

And are you ...

Sorry, I've forgotten, I've forgotten what your question was.

I suppose I'm trying to understand how you're remembering this experience.

Very positively for me and I mean I suppose I refer people to it occasionally if they ask about me or if they, you know, if they're interested. Then I will refer them and say, 'Well, have you seen the webpage have you?' You know there was the time I was on the plinth and you know I remember I wrote about it, I write a Christmas newsletter like many people do, to all my friends and it was interesting because this year what I mainly wrote about was being on the plinth and what it turned into was a sort of... a justification for what I was doing here, it was very ... and then sort of a couple of friends rang up and said, 'You do realise that you know what you sent is not just a newsletter it's a sermon about hermit life don't you?' And that came about through the plinth because I wanted to explain why it was that as a hermit who, you know, is vowed to simplicity and silence, would choose to do something like going and sitting in the middle of Trafalgar Square for an hour very publically and very willingly so and you know would raise a lot of question marks in a lot of people's minds as attention seeking, 'She's just bored of being in the hermitage you know, what was is it that would make her do that?' And so writing that down and trying to explain it to them ... but it was a bit like what I was talking about earlier. It was this ... it was the prisoner thing but it was also the sense that the hermitage is what I live but hermitage is an element of everybody's life and sometimes only by making it completely visible, by sticking it on a pedestal do people recognise that and so there's [?]. If you like I was being you know a hermit in public for the day just to invite people, or not even as strongly as that, just to give them, somebody wrote ... I've put it on my page I think just to touch hermitage with her little finger was enough for very many people but it

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was important that they were given the opportunity to do that and that's what I was doing, I was sitting there so that people could touch hermitage with their little finger and somehow be more themselves through that.

Now, did you watch any of the videos during the time of the project?

Oh yes! Oh yes. I had it on in the background for just a couple of hours each day... often without sound but just ... yes I mean I was sort of vaguely aware of what was going on and if something interesting looked like it might be coming up. I forgotten how you could tell if something was coming but there was a list wasn't there? You could see who was coming up and so once or twice I'd sort of you know actually choose positively to watch somebody but I just found the whole thing. I mean again, well I wrote this in the Tablet piece, there was a sense that there was a sense of the plinth this is getting quite sacrament and quite roman catholic now so you might you might tell me to stop [sniggers] but, there's a sense that that the plinth was an alter and that all these people this sort of rag tag of humanity was climbing up on there and ... almost sacrifice themselves offering themselves being themselves being themselves and they'd just by virtue of ... of their generosity in doing that and the generosity of people watching that that was made very holy that was made sacred that those and they sanctified both what was going on on the plinth and what it was that they were being part of and when they came down to it, it was a real sense of offering the first fruits you know to ... well to what? To God? To each other? To whatever you might choose but that sense of ... by virtue of being up there, by virtue of that generosity and by virtue of people watching it, it was made sacred. Yes.

Now, just one more question, do you think the experience changed you in any way?

Yes, it made me more confident in terms of expressing ... as I say I mean that that newsletter that wrote that Christmas, and the article I wrote for the Tablet, and even my thinking before I went on there, it gave me much more confidence and less apologetic about hermitage. I defend it a lot less now, I don't try to justify it, it just is what it is and there was that part of the plinth, it was a case of this is a terribly weird thing I'm doing standing on this plinth, well, sitting on this plinth and doing this thing but that's okay and that's stayed with me that that actually you don't have to justify it was enough that you did it and that yes, that that stayed.

Thank you very much Rachel, did you enjoy being interviewed today?

I did! Thank you very much yes it always clarifies things for you doesn't it? It gives you greater clarity in your own thoughts when you're trying to explain it to somebody else so yes, I did thank you very much for it.

Thank you.