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The Lay Witness of Ursula Fleming (1930–1992)*

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The work of Ursula Fleming, both during her lifetime and since, has reached a tremendously wide range of people, and has elicited many responses. In Ursula Fleming's person the apparently unconnected fields of pain relief and Eckhart studies found a consistently clear advocate of mindful, reflective action; of action rooted firmly in spiritual tradition. The purpose of this paper is to describe her life and work as a particularly noteworthy instance of lay witness.

By the time of her death on 17 March 1992 (St Patrick's Day), at the age of 61, her work had begun to receive a very large measure of recognition.[1] Less than a year earlier, in June 1991, she had been the recipient of an award from the Templeton Foundation, which seeks to honour special contributions to the cause of religious understanding. Much of her decades-long experience in pain relief work was set out in her book *Grasping the Nettle: a Positive Approach to Pain*,[2] and it was subsequently adapted for a teaching manual for the nursing profession.[3] The posthumously published collection of her correspondence, journals and writings (edited by her elder sister Anne Fleming) provides ample material on her long immersion in the theology of the German mystic Meister Eckhart (*c.* 1260–1327).[4] The book further relates how it came about that she, while having no professional training or status as a theologian, in time petitioned the Dominican Order to have the writings of Meister Eckhart reassessed with a view to reinstating them as sound Christian teaching. The Dominicans' response to that petition was positive, as, eventually, were the findings of the commission set up in 1985 to reexamine Eckhart's disputed statements.

Born in Wallasey, Liverpool, on 19 October 1930, Ursula Fleming grew up a Roman Catholic, and mostly she attended convent schools, as far as the disruption of the war years allowed. Home life was stable and happy. An absolutely crucial formative influence was the medical background of both her parents, her father Aloysius, a general practitioner (GP), and her mother Marjorie, who also trained as a doctor. Their ethos of care and compassion was transmitted to Ursula in full measure. Endowed with a naturally compassionate temperament herself, Ursula, when she came to mature reflection on the Gospels, was especially drawn to their imagery of healing and restoration. In her the practicality of the doctor was combined with a clarity of spiritual vision, the immediacy of which was at times breathtaking.

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Showing very early promise as a musician, Ursula initially set her sights on becoming a concert pianist, and as a teenager she studied under Harold Craxton and Christopher LeFleming. However, in time nervous tension and selfconsciousness began to affect her ability to perform well. She earnestly sought means to overcome these impediments, and became aware of relaxation methods being promoted by a certain Gertrud Heller. Those methods themselves became the focus of Ursula's absorbing interest. At the age of 19 she dropped music and went to work under the direction of Gertrud Heller at the Crichton Royal Mental Hospital in Dumfries.

This was a decisive change of direction for her, and it carried certain risks. There was no recognised paper qualification for the type of training she undertook; all she could do was to accumulate experience on the psychiatric wards at the Crichton. Very soon after this demanding apprenticeship – and young as she was – Ursula moved to Harley Street, London, and she began having patients referred to her. However, lack of a recognised medical qualification counted against her. Many in the profession refused outright to recognise her skills, and throughout her twenties and thirties (and even later) she encountered non-acceptance – or, at very best, extreme caution. She was obliged to function as an 'outsider', seeking private patients and having no scope, until quite late on, for working within the National Health system. It would be fair to say that only in the final decade of her life (1982–92), when she was supported in her work by the late Lord Craigmyle, did the medical profession really begin to acknowledge her success in the treatment of pain and various forms of tension.

Ursula's early work was conducted quite a long time before the eventual expansion in complementary medicine, and long before the climate was right for GPs to think in terms of *combining* conventional forms of treatment with 'alternative' therapies. I contend that what doctors at that time found *more* unsettling about her approach – more unsettling than the label 'alternative medicine' – was her very obvious readiness to make explicit the connection between patients' physical condition and their spiritual welfare. To them her language seemed to be too obviously that of the 'religious retreat'. In her terms it was a natural connection to make, and it accorded with her own religious worldview, though it has to be said that she refrained from applying religious explanations where patients very obviously sought secular ones. Her experience actually showed, though, that ever more patients were ready to confront the religious questions which their suffering brought to the fore. And, given Ursula's obvious readiness to explore those questions with them as she sat by their beds, it frequently happened that those patients made huge steps in self-understanding – and self-acceptance.

Working first at Sir Michael Sobell House (the hospice attached to the Churchill Hospital in Oxford) and then, for well over five years, at the Academic Department of Surgery at the Royal Free Hospital in London, Ursula felt a special calling to work with people in the final stages of cancer. She became extremely experienced in this field, and the work brought out her enormous reserves of compassion and practicality. Death and the welfare of the dying increasingly entered her conversation and reflections outside the hospital wards. She seemed able to demonstrate that heightened quality of treatment for which hospices have become deservedly famous. In her time at Sir Michael Sobell House she soon became a mainstay for the hospice nurses, who themselves required counselling in order to pursue their demanding work. Helping the helpers, and all but teaching the teachers. Talking so often of what is effective, practical and spiritually sound.

From the early 1970s Ursula became increasingly experienced as a director of

religious retreats, in England and also in Ireland. This came about once she moved to the Oxford area and entered an increasingly close working relationship with the Dominicans at Blackfriars in St Giles in central Oxford. She was invited by them to run evening help sessions for drug addicts and people afflicted with other conditions. Then, at a time of considerable turmoil in the Roman Catholic Church (and among Anglicans too, incidentally), she began conducting retreats for those in religious orders. She had great compassion for those in the orders who found themselves doubting their monastic vocation, and this was one of several factors that induced her to reflect deeply on the nature of monastic spirituality.

Most frequently she held retreats at the Dominicans' conference centre Spode House, at Rugeley in Staffordshire, and she became deeply attached to Spode, as she did to its warden, the late Fr Conrad Pepler.[5] The friendship and working relations that grew between Ursula Fleming and Fr Conrad from the early 1970s led, in 1987, to the founding of the Eckhart Society, with both of them as cofounders.

Fairacres in England and various Catholic monasteries and retreat centres in Scotland and Ireland came to be included in Ursula Fleming's very frequent rounds of travelling. Ever proud of her Irish forebears, Ursula relished her travels through Ireland, and when she reached her decision to become a Dominican tertiary, it was as a member of the Irish Province rather than of the English one. Her relations with the Dominicans in England, and in Oxford in particular, remained warm and close. She knew Herbert McCabe, Fergus Kerr, Simon Tugwell and many others, and especially Timothy Radcliffe, now master of the Dominican Order, but at that time still based in Oxford. It was Timothy Radcliffe who delivered the address at her funeral, a month or so before he went to assume his new duties in Rome.[6]

A retreat which assumed enormous importance in Ursula's own life was a week-long retreat on Meister Eckhart which she conducted at Spode House in autumn 1978 together with the then already prominent Dominican theologian Fergus Kerr. To my knowledge, this is the sole retreat conducted by Ursula for which tapes and a transcript exist, and it is unaccountable how Ursula arrived at the decision to tape the proceedings of that retreat in particular.[7] The interplay between Fergus Kerr's reflections and her own, their initial differences regarding 'detachment' as a spiritual ideal, made for a singularly intense week of exploration, one that the present author is able to recall vividly, even 20 years after it took place.

Of the many ties and attachments that located Ursula in society (that with the Dominicans being one that she valued greatly), the tie with her immediate family was paramount, and it actively shaped her working life. Indeed, family merged with work, and insights acquired in the context of her immediate family informed her work-related reflection. She drew much support from the very close friendship she maintained with her two elder sisters, Mary and Anne, and exulted in becoming a grandmother. For her, friendships and bonds within family life were truly to be celebrated. She believed that in the Catholic world 'celebration' was duly appreciated – in the spirit of *in vino veritas*.

Ursula regarded bringing up a family (four children, in her case) as the key learning experience in her own life, and she often referred to this in her talks. Being a parent provides unparalleled opportunities to learn about joy, compassion, detachment, anger (justified and unjustified), emotional blackmail and so forth. Ursula's position on this might be summed up as follows: if we find ourselves incapable of learning the harsh but necessary lessons of life from being a parent, then have we any capacity for learning at all – or, for that matter, any realistic hope of self-transformation? Childbirth itself (in the context of coping with high levels of unavoidable pain,

and otherwise) featured frequently in her talks. But what became dominant for Ursula in this context was the Eckhartian motif of 'the Eternal Birth'. The first sermon which appears in volume I of M.O'C. Walshe's translation of Eckhart's sermons and treatises begins in the following way:

> Here, in time, we are celebrating the eternal birth which God the Father bore and bears unceasingly in eternity, because this same birth is now born in time, in human nature. St Augustine says: 'What does it avail me that this birth is always happening if it does not happen in me? That it should happen in me is what matters.' We shall therefore speak of this birth, of how it may take place in us and be consummated in the virtuous soul, whenever God the Father speaks his eternal Word in the perfect soul.[8]

Ursula was able to pick up and convey to others the *urgency* of Eckhart's endeavour ('We shall *therefore* speak of this birth, *of how it may take place in us* ...'), and she relished the images he used, his ways of stressing the 'here and now'. In her view, Eckhart's writings made good the seeming lack of emphasis on *method* among other Christian writers on the spiritual life:

> Meister Eckhart says that the man who finds no taste of God wearies of looking for him. One of the criticisms of Christianity, and one of the reasons why many young Christians turn to the East, to Buddhism or to Hinduism, is that in Christianity there is no apparent help with method. How do we find God? How do we even start?
>
> Eckhart is one of the Christians who faces this and accepts it as a problem. Good intentions are not always enough. We need instruction in how to make ourselves fit to receive the revelation of God, to receive the eternal birth.[9]

Elsewhere and in a related context, Ursula felt it necessary to question the uses to which meditation is sometimes put. For all her own years of therapeutic work, she was prepared to question, bluntly, whether meditation should be driven by therapeutic needs: 'So much of present day "meditation" for seculars and even sometimes for religious is therapeutic. It is to cure "me" from the evils which beset me. It is not energised by the burning desire for truth. By the necessity of finding God.'[10]

Ursula Fleming thus engaged with the world around her intensely and in numerous ways. She died with a strong sense of leaving work unfinished. At the time of her death she was in the process of setting up a therapeutic centre close to Lourdes, where she had hoped to receive patients and train nurses in her pain relief therapy. The intensity of her involvement could hardly be doubted.[11] Yet there was at the same time a contrary pull in her personal make-up, an ever-present longing to withdraw from society, and that tension in her is reflected in the very title of her posthumous writings, *The Desert and the Market Place*. Swayed, in turn, by bouts of misanthropy, a disdain for politics and forebodings of ecological disaster, she spoke frequently of the need for a self-sufficient, semi-hermitic life. The fact that, in the end, she never made the transition to that kind of life should not obscure the deep seriousness of her aspiration towards it. Keenly aware of her children's need to complete their education and of her own existing commitments (to family, patients and others), she well understood the factors militating against her full withdrawal from society. This understanding elicited a dual response in her: firstly, and on the surface, to be unfailingly self-mocking whenever she spoke about her intended 'flight from society'; secondly, to work in her own life towards a great *stillness within*

activity. Most of those who came into contact with her discerned that capacity for great stillness. When pressed for clues as to the sources inspiring her stillness, Ursula cited the Psalmist's words 'Be still, and know that I am God' and the sermons of Meister Eckhart. She also had a great liking for Nicholas of Cusa's paradoxical dictum 'Activity is but rest drawn out in an orderly series' and for T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets:* 'At the still point of the turning world ...'.[12]

Ursula's early quest for personal equilibrium, even before she entered her twenties, induced her to contact Marco Pallis, author of *Peaks and Lamas*, in which he had recounted his own travels and life in Tibet. That contact led to an almost life-long friendship between them. One side of their correspondence has been preserved and published: Pallis' letters to Ursula between August 1955 and October 1978.[13] His influence upon her was absolutely decisive: it was his counsel which took her to Eckhart's writings at a time when she herself favoured immersion in the Buddhist scriptures (advice which, subsequently, was wholly endorsed by Conrad Pepler); and it was Marco Pallis who impressed upon her the need to get Eckhart's writings reassessed within the Roman Catholic Church. It then took him a little time to convince her that she was actually the person best placed to approach the Dominican Order regarding this matter. Once she did agree to assume responsibility for this task, she pursued it with a commitment that brought surprisingly rapid results: she asked for and obtained supporting letters from a wide variety of distinguished figures, including the late Dame Iris Murdoch and Professor Michael Dummett.

Ursula's activities on this front were crowned and consolidated by the founding of the international Eckhart Society in 1987.[14] The Society holds an annual conference in Oxford (at the end of August), the papers from which are published in *Eckhart Review*, edited by John Orme Mills OP. By the end of November 1998 membership of the Society had reached 282, of whom 56 had joined the Society between 1997 and 1998.

A matter that engaged Ursula's mind throughout most of her working life was the nature of the relationship between contemplation and action. Drawing from Eckhart's interpretation of the parable of Mary and Martha and from sources in Orthodox Christianity, then from the writings of Thomas Merton and those who had inspired him, Ursula sought to clarify for herself the interaction – better, the reciprocity – between contemplation and action.[15] These categories became wholly absorbed into her working language, equally applicable, for her, to secular settings as well as to religious ones. That may be another way of saying that, as far as Ursula was concerned, the language used for religious retreats need not be 'fenced off' from that used in the rest of life. Indeed, better that it should not be. It is not easy to locate specific or definitive statements made by Ursula on contemplation and action, in part because Ursula was not given to issuing definitive statements. Her reflection on these matters is probably best judged by turning to her small anthology of Eckhart's writings and looking at her choice of texts, her arrangement of the material and the introduction she wrote to each section of the book.[16]

In the final year of Ursula's life, 1991–92, one event besides her Templeton Foundation award was a source of particular joy, and this was an invitation for her to address the Carmelite Order's international conference in London to mark the fourth centenary of the death of St John of the Cross.[17] She prepared this address with a special sense of purpose and with heightened concentration. Extremely well received by her audience, this proved to be her last occasion for public reflection on a major figure in the Christian contemplative tradition.

Ursula spoke with uncommon authority – and *gravitas* – about the value of

religious tradition in our highly secularised society. It was far from her mind to affirm tradition as a means to retrieve or somehow recreate the past. Rather, what came through was how greatly she valued the *sacramental* life offered by and within the Church *here and now*. In the final 15 or so years of her life she returned again and again, in her teaching, to the immediacy of attentive concentration on the Mass, to the immediacy – and eloquence – of the priest's actions when performed with due 'measure' (unrushed in, and through, time) and mindfully. She knew all too well that for many people, in churches everywhere and on Sunday after Sunday, the Mass falls very far short of this ideal: a saddening loss and impoverishment. But she felt convinced that, in its very form and order, the Mass itself is resonant with opportunities for receiving grace. The critical and open question is: can we find it in ourselves, during Mass, to be appropriately receptive?

What is it, finally, that makes Ursula Fleming's contribution as a lay Catholic so distinctive and valuable? She earned the respect of people within and beyond the Roman Catholic Church, and was herself especially drawn to people on the margins of society. Being neither priest nor academic, she nevertheless found ways to make Meister Eckhart's writings a focus for many people hitherto unaware of his spirituality. For the best part of 40 years she applied her therapeutic skills in a singularly consistent manner for the relief of physical, mental and emotional pain, and understood much about the root causes of disorientation in our society. And she was ever driven (under the tutelage of Marco Pallis and, in his way, by Conrad Pepler) to distinguish between root causes and mere symptoms – and to uncover the former. Where psychological and spiritual wellbeing were concerned, she deplored all half-measures and what she called 'patching up with sellotape'; indeed, she deplored anything that postponed or deflected a real recovery of those in extreme suffering.

In her own busy and often stressful life she learned, early on, to pursue action from a point of very focused inner stillness, and proved that she was able to teach others to do likewise – or a least to aspire to make that their concern. With great personal feeling she articulated many people's profound disenchantment with the exclusively secular preoccupations of 'sophisticated', 'civilised', 'progressive' (and, in the final analysis, complacent) western society. She was wary of utopias and rural idylls, though attracted by the latter, understanding that even if we found ourselves there, we would still bring with us the whole burden of emotional turmoil and pain that caused us to seek escape in the first place. A far more fruitful locus for change, as she understood the matter, was in the immediacy of mind-body relations, and this is where her therapy had such impressive results.

Notes and References

1. Obituary article, *The Times*, 28 March 1992 (written by the present author). See also *Eckhart Review*, June 1992 (commemorative issue), pp. 2–7.
2. Ursula Fleming, *Grasping the Nettle: a Positive Approach to Pain* (Collins Fount, London, 1990).
3. Carol Horrigan (ed.) and Anne Fleming (compiler), *Relaxation for Concentration, Stress Management and Pain Control, Using the Fleming Method* (Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford, 1997). Ursula Fleming herself published occasional papers in *The Practitioner* and in *The Journal of Orthopaedic Medicine*. Here, see her 'Relaxation as a means of pain control', *The Journal of Orthopaedic Medicine*, no. 1, 1988, pp. 21–24.
4. Anne Fleming (ed.), *The Desert and the Market Place: the Letters, Journals and Writings of Ursula Fleming* (Gracewing, Leominster, 1995).

[5] For an illuminating chapter on Conrad Pepler and his theological vision, see Aidan Nichols, *Dominican Gallery: Portrait of a Culture* (Gracewing, Leominster, 1997), ch. 9, pp. 342–400. See also 'Essays for Conrad Pepler' in *New Blackfriars*, July/August 1981, especially pp. 299–302 and 311–19.

[6] For the text of that address see Anne Fleming (ed.), *The Desert and the Market Place* ..., pp. 224–26.

[7] For the transcript see Anne Fleming (ed.), *The Desert and the Market Place* ..., pp. 145–79.

[8] M. O'C. Walshe (trans. and ed.), *Meister Eckhart: Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I (Element Books, Shaftesbury, Dorset, 1987), p. 1.

[9] Ursula Fleming (ed.), *Meister Eckhart: the Man from Whom God Hid Nothing* (Collins Fount, London, 1988), p. 37. The revised edition (Gracewing, Leominster, 1995) includes the text of Ursula Fleming's 1980 petition to the Dominican General Chapter, with the signatories listed, pp. 149–51, and names of those expert theologians who sat on the Eckhart Commission, p. 152.

[10] Anne Fleming (ed.), *The Desert and the Market Place* ..., p. 81.

[11] See journal entries for the final year of her working life, in Anne Fleming (ed.), *The Desert and the Market Place* ..., pp. 210–14.

[12] Her reading was extremely wide, and among other figures whose works she knew and admired was Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877–1947).

[13] Anne Fleming (ed.), *The Desert and the Market Place* ..., pp. 33–47.

[14] Information about the Eckhart Society may be had from its honorary secretary, Ashley Young, at the following address: Summa, 22 Tippings Lane, Woodley, Reading RG5 4RX.

[15] Two source-books which she found especially valuable were Whitall N. Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom* (Perennial Books, Bedfont, Middlesex, 1971), and Y. Ibish (ed.), *Traditional Modes of Contemplation and Action* (Allen and Unwin, London, 1976), the latter being a collection of papers from a colloquium convened in Texas in 1973.

[16] See footnote 9.

[17] For the text of this address see Anne Fleming (ed.), *The Desert and the Market Place* ..., pp. 109–19.