GalGael Trust Iona Visit Report 2018

"The Great Ineffable"

This was the third visit to Iona of the Govan-centred GalGael Trust in Glasgow. GalGael has been going through a time of major change precipitated by the severe shortage of funds up to the task of addressing poverty-related issues. We were especially needing a break away, a chance to relax and enjoy each other's company and to reflect on our values in a context that invites depth. The trip was specially funded by benefactors so it didn't take away from the organisation's pressing need for core funding. Our intention was, in a very general sense, "to explore what *spirituality* might or might not mean for us".

Crossing mythic Mull - terrible weather

Boarding the ferry - Iona in the distance

It ended up as nineteen of us that headed to Iona in two minibuses over the weekend Friday 9 to Sunday 11 March. Again, John MacLean had given us exclusive use of the wonderful Iona Hostel at a special rate since he likes what GalGael stands for. For the third year running, Blair volunteered to come as our cook.

The Opening Sharing

After a meal together on the Friday evening, we gathered round the table for a sharing. Alastair, who had organised the trip and its funding, introduced it. He pointed out that GalGael is not a religious organisation. By "spirituality" he was thinking of the deeper levels of our inner lives. Those often surface as people wrestle with their lives. They may or may not have some kind of a formal religious expression, or emerge in contexts such as the AA.

Our group was made up of people identifying as being of no religion, Buddhist, pagan, and of backgrounds both Christian and Muslim. Later in the evening, we made a fire down on the beach. We were under the shooting stars, with crackling, sparking wood we'd brought from Govan, that our own folks had chopped. People said:

You come in to GalGael with a smile and you go out at 5 pm still with a smile.

GalGael is when you say: "Do you remember?"

It's not GalGael as an organisation. It's us. The togetherness.

Spirituality is like sitting by a fire. Everything is united to the source.

Spirituality is about us pulling together and making sure we're OK for the next batch of folks coming in.

Coming to Iona benefits the whole GalGael. It makes it a better place, including for those who haven't been here.

The source is love. But it's been fluffified. You have to experience it. It's ineffable … (much laughter) *… the great ineffable.*

That last comment set the keynote for the weekend. There followed plenty of jokes about ineffability - about things that can't be put into words. Some were wrestling with their lives. Some shared about the times they'd been through. The physical sense of Iona spoke to all.

Here there's peace. You're away from the scheme. No cars, no noisy neighbours, no barking dogs. I don't think people realise how quickly you can relax down when you come to Iona.

Depression goes through every cell in the body. Fear does not want you to put out your hand. But put out your hand, and the way the universe works it comes and takes your hand. Fear shouts. Love whispers. Love never shouts.

My spiritual journey has made me understand what love is.

Excursions

The next day, Saturday, we all went down to the Abbey, studied the wonderful Historic Environment Scotland interpretative panels, and looked around their museum of ancient stones. Many of these carry images that we have carved in wood in GalGael. Candles were lit in the Abbey as a symbol of appreciation to each of those who had funded the excursion.

In the medieval Oran Chapel, some of our folks sang or chanted, and we sat and soaked the stillness in. We went on down to the nunnery. Alastair was busy explaining a feature that he found *very interesting* on the outer wall, a Sheila-na-gig. A van came round the corner, and the driver gave him a right telling off. Some rude person later reminisced:

> *It was so interesting listening to your story about the divine feminine when you were describing the stone carving and such a laugh when you were interrupted by someone unhappy you were telling it while dangling from the fence.*

Some of us dropped in to see Mhairi Killin in her silversmith's workshop, *Aosdàna*. She shared about her project – *From Shells to Bells.* During the Reformation in Geneva, they'd torn down church bells, and melted them into weapons. Mhairi had led a project that reversed the process. She'd taken wartime artillery shells (the brass cartridges) and re-cast them back into the Bell of Adomnán, abbot of Iona a century after St Columba.

Half of us went on down for a 5-mile round walk to Saint Columba's Bay. Back in the Abbey, Johnnie had shown us a pebble of Iona marble that he'd collected previously. He'd polished it to a bright green gemstone. Island tradition holds that such "Columba's tears" protect from drowning. We talked about "drowning" as a metaphor at times in many of our lives.

Searching for green marble at St Columba's Bay. For Mac, it was a long-awaited homecoming.

Holding of a Sharing Space in the Michael Chapel

The Iona Community, like the GalGael, is undergoing a funding crisis with some major staff restructuring. Some of us chatted with Susan in the bookshop and Janette the Abbey housekeeper and compared notes. These two women – anchors, anchorites, anchoresses – whose work and presence helps to hold the space there through difficult times. Two years ago during our visit, some of us had joined the Iona Community's evening service in the Abbey. Last year, we had a pagan-style handfasting of Blair and Illy on the beach. This year, there was no Iona Community service, so about half of us went down to the Michael Chapel in the storm that had blown up. With Janette joining us, we held our own sacred space.

Johnny, Gehan and Heather contributed beautiful singing. For all who felt comfortable to join in – it seemed to be everybody - Dorothy introduced a Zen Buddhist chant:

All beings without number
I vow to liberate
Endless blind passions
I vow to uproot

Richard, Gillian and Dorothy read out the Beatitudes, the blessings at the heart of Christian tradition, and towards the end all who wanted to joined in, repeated them. We held a period of silence, during which people were free to speak of those who could not be with us but were in their hearts.

The next day, Sunday morning, we shared around the table. People said:

> *I love this place. It is a holy place, a spiritual place.*
>
> *Here you are in touch with the land, air, fire, wind and the beach.*
>
> *We don't have to be religious to do it but we are all spiritual – that way is a different way of thinking, whether in the chapel or on the beach.*
>
> *You've got to be in the right space to think in the right way of loved ones who are not here. I never go to church, my father too, but if he had been in the Michael Chapel last night he would have loved everything he heard – the chants, the songs, the words.*
>
> *Last night's reflection on "Blessed are the meek …" and "meek" originally having meant "the gentle strong", made me think how much courage, strength and perseverance is required to have compassion and care for self and others. Often compassion can be seen by some as a "fluffy", or somehow weak, whereas it requires great courage; as opposed to say, anger, fear or greed which can be reactive.*
>
> *I was moved to tears. I had for so long fought compassion and gentleness.*

The sharing of sacred space also brought up reflections on past encounters that had been uncomfortable, even spiritually abusive. However, we can choose our own ways forward.

> *The biblical stuff is not helpful to everybody.*
>
> *My experience of spirituality was … you get told "you're going to Hell". That's what you get bullied for … because you don't believe in God. Then I got into activism, and living in the woods.*
>
> *I find it really hard to let myself be vulnerable, depending on others, because I was taught to rely only on myself.*
>
> *In the practice of making family we're coming with all our woundedness, so we need to work on what it is we are creating together.*
>
> *It's about togetherness. Both we and the Iona Community are going through troubles. That's when we pull together.*

On the Sunday afternoon, some went wandering along the beaches. Others climbed Dun I (*Dun-eee*), the highest hill on the island. There the weekend's events took on perhaps a more Druidic turn, with varying degrees of immersion in the Well of Eternal Youth.

Iain at the Well of Eternal Youth. Looking north from Dun I.

The Great Ineffable

Finally, we cracked the phrase that Vic had come up with on the first evening. John MacLean keeps a rare breed of Hebridean sheep. They're semi-wild, and he has no sheep dog. They needed rounding up for vaccination. At our first attempt, they leapt shoulder high and broke through our line. Only with all hands on deck did a highly disciplined second attempt get them corralled.

The GalGael herding The Great Ineffable

There had been other reflections in our closing session round the hostel table that morning. Insights were shared that had emerged during the weekend - things that had deepened folks' sense of what GalGael is for, and why it matters to hold fast together in stormy times.

> *I suffer from mental health, depression, but my family … my family is GalGael now, and I'll do anything to keep it that way.*
>
> *In a group like this there's a lot of emotion that runs through us. The staff we've got are going to try and keep the ship floating, and we'll all help.*
>
> *GalGael is family to me. To me, GalGael is total love and family. I'm not having to deal with the money side, and so on, but I known that we've been through a lot, it's something everyone should know.*
>
> *The Abbey on Iona has always felt to me to be a bit on the margins. But coming here this year, I have come to see that GalGael is not an organisation. GalGael is a practice, and the practice is in the making of beautiful things of wood, stone, metal and fabric. Also, the making of community. That's what you are reminded of when you look around Iona. This place is GalGael's ancestral home, and we are carrying its sprit forward. Now I see Iona as the birthplace of the GalGael tradition.*

Thanks

The direct costs of this year's visit were £1,855.84, plus a notional £700 representing 7 days of GalGael staff time involved in the organising – that is to say, contribution to our overheads that keep things going in the background. This was resourced by:

Thanks folks

1. £500 – a market stall holder in Wales, who read our report last year;
2. £500 – a family in Edinburgh, who said they'd match the Welsh donation on hearing about it;
3. £750 – the John Wigham Enjoyment Trust – a fund held by Scotland's Quakers;
4. £236 – a special collection of the Glasgow Quaker Meeting;
5. £379.24 – to balance, drawn from a yearly donation from Stornoway.

If anybody wishes to see detailed expenditure accounts, just ask. And one last thing. If by any chance we go to Iona again next year, *we won't be taking Blair Hamilton again as cook.*

It's not that he didn't rise at the crack of dawn each day, to wake us all with breakfast at eight. It's not that his cooking failed to please. It's just that, starting in June, John has offered him a job as pictured here – working in Iona Hostel.

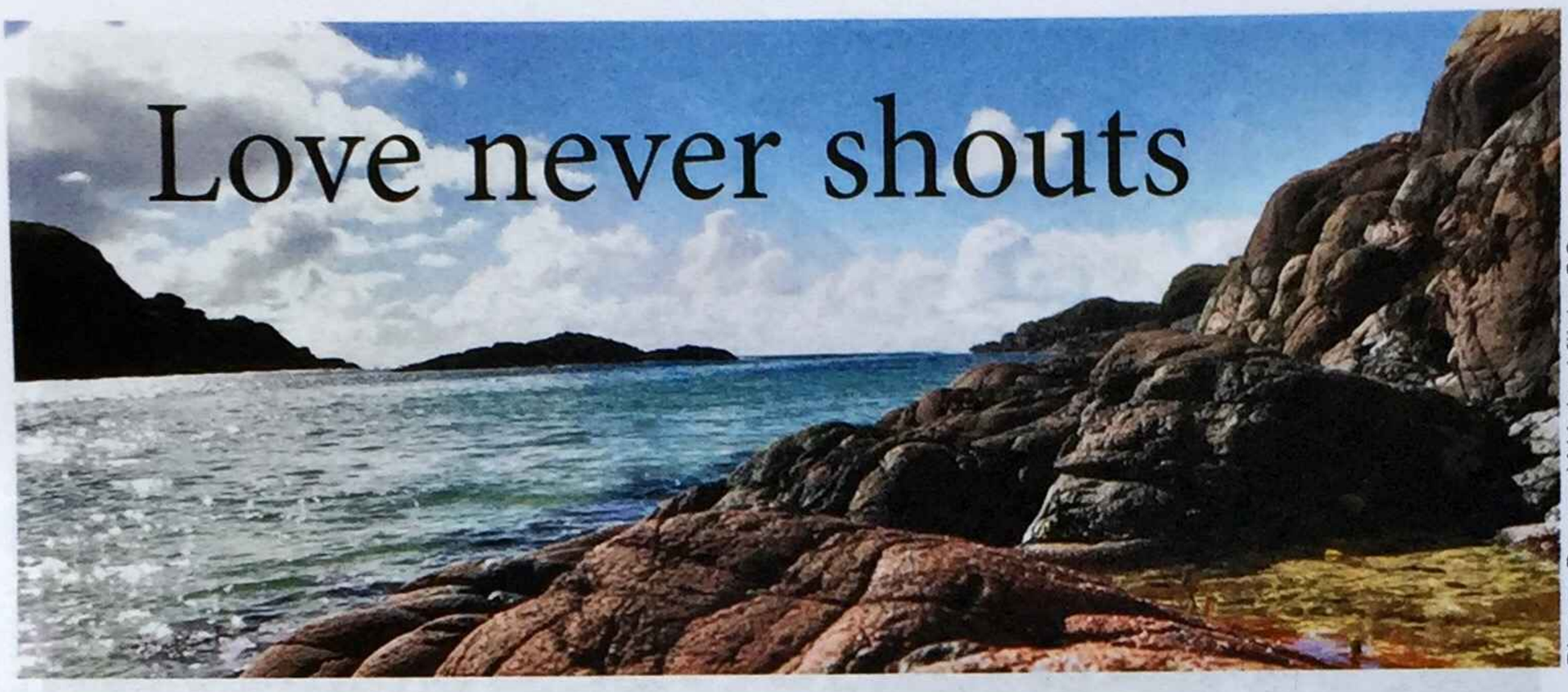

Photo: Darren Wright / flickr CC.

Alastair McIntosh writes about Iona and the GalGael Trust

The GalGael Trust in Govan, the shipbuilding area of Glasgow, grew out of a 1990s' motorway protest camp. People found community around a campfire. Today, hundreds of long-term unemployed folk have been through our training programmes or sailed the wooden boats that we have made.

The *Gal* in Gaelic is 'the stranger', the *Gael* the heartland people. These days, there's a bit of the stranger and a bit of the native in most of us. Our search is for the things that give us life. You could call that 'spirituality'.

For the past three years, groups of around two dozen have reflected on these matters on the holy island of Iona. Funding has come mainly from special collections in Glasgow Meeting and the John Wigham (Enjoyment) Trust.

We stay in the island's lovely hostel. We study the Celtic art set in stone down at the Abbey. We go for walks, and we talk about what 'spirituality' may (or may not) mean for each of us. Last year, two of our people held a pagan-style 'hand-fasting' on the beach. This year, with the Iona Community's blessing, we held sacred space in the Michael Chapel with a Buddhist chant, a Christian hymn, reading the Beatitudes and remembering loved ones.

Dale said it was the first time he had ever seen clear water. Mark said he had found a depth of peace that he'd always sought, but never found, while sitting on a rock beside the ocean. Linda, who is deaf and blind, was thrilled to make it up the island's highest hill – helped by a couple of our skilled ex-army guys.

This year is a challenging time of redevelopment for the GalGael Trust and other charities. We have had to cut back most of our staff. There is so little funding out there. But Iona helps us to strengthen who we are.

People said things like:

Here there's peace. You're away from the scheme. No cars, no noisy neighbours, no barking dogs. I don't think people realise how quickly you can relax… when you come to Iona.

I have come to see that GalGael is not an organisation. GalGael is a practice, and the practice is in the making of beautiful things of wood, stone, metal and fabric… like the monks did long ago.

Spirituality is about us pulling together and making sure we're OK for the next batch of folks coming in.

Depression goes through every cell in the body. Fear does not want you to put out your hand. But put out your hand, and the way the universe works it comes and takes your hand.

I was against Christianity and avoided it, but I've now seen other ways of understanding it.

I was moved to tears. I had for so long fought compassion and gentleness.

Fear shouts. Love whispers. Love never shouts.

The true meaning of 'enjoyment' is a joy that rises up from sources deep within. We give thanks to the John Wigham trustees and to all the others who have made this possible.

Alastair is from Glasgow Meeting.