

Remembering Jack

I first met Jack when he made the journey from Northampton to central London, with Jan Phillips, to attend a service with the Sibyls at St Annes church, held every two months. Since about ten years ago, Jack had gradually come to realise he was masculine, and happier with a man's name and appearance. Jack came to nearly every service after that, first with Jan, later on his own. I saw Jack grow in confidence, humour and sympathy.

Sibyls is a support group for transgender Christians, their families, friends and supporters. Being transgender is never easy but in some church communities it is harder. Yet for any trans person prayer and fellowship is the best support. The Sibyls was formed in 1996 by Jay Walmsley, who wondered if there was a need for a Christian trans group. It has members across the country. Jack is the kind of person this group is for. When he first came to St Annes, he was dressed in a suit, with shirt and tie, dignified but clearly very nervous. Gradually the amount of eye contact he was able to make increased, and it was a real joy to see him grow in confidence over the years.

Jack was able to come to St Annes because of Jan's devoted upholding, which Jack was most thankful for over many years. It means that Jan too became part of our small community of friendship.

Through conversations at our mealtimes after the service, I learned that Jack had had a very difficult life: fearful, repressed, frightened, ashamed, up and down, but lovingly supported by people close to him and specialist services. And that he was devoted to his dear mother, in her 90s. The main thing that shone out from Jack was his solid faith, God as his helper and a beautiful way of praying.

On one occasion Jack said he would really like it if there was someone he could write to and share more personally. I felt led to do this and we started a correspondence. He told me he changed his name in 2013, and is becoming himself. In the first letter in Feb 2017, Jack said 'when I was 19, a very, very timid, shy, only child I felt my onset of manic depression had no cause, I was very petrified by men. I imagined I was made of concrete and lived in a coffin of concrete. I attended mental hospital many times and underwent 60 electro-convulsive therapy sessions and was on depression and anxiety drugs since then.' In 2012 Jack started regular therapy sessions, grieved belatedly for his father, who died when Jack was 28, and began to attend a day service at MIND.

I gradually came to realize what Jack was coping with. His bi-polar condition meant there were times he felt quite desperate. I gained a sense of the support Jack received from Adult Learning Support, the mental health team, art classes, as well as his church. In one letter he said 'I'm simply amazed at how much God's teaching me in such a short time!'

In early 2017 he wrote 'my life has completely turned around. I am now hopeful, notice the weather, smile with ease and adore helping folks. I am learning to love Jack and now I feel I am a man and walk and dress as a man..... I am gaining brilliant help from many Christian folk.'

In a letter, he said, 'You may recall how I am in wonder relating to the Spring this year. I was coming across our St Giles churchyard last evening and wow! I stopped in my tracks and just gazed in wonder looking down our road and over the Guildhall and other buildings – they were absolutely adorned, yes in fact bathed in glorious early sunset. Pale purple, deep orange, touches of pink and almost stripes of tender grey – I almost charged over the road, dumped down

shopping and ran for my old style snaps camera to capture the moment – I chuckled, returned to the middle of the same road and where had the glory gone to? The entire scene had changed in a flash.'

'Even in 2016 I feared forever 'Spring' which to me was engulfed in trauma and mental anguish and just pain... another year, frozen feelings... this is because my mind then just couldn't cope with 'getting better' becoming more free.'

We never know precisely how anyone comes to realize their gender sense doesn't match their body and other people's expectations, but this realisation clearly released Jack from much of that fear. Jack said in 2020, 'I just didn't feel it was God's will for me to go on and on about mental illness leading me to gender difficulties. Gender difficulties and mental health do not link themselves to each other. Something I've wrongly imagined for ages.' Jack discovered a meaningful truth about himself and was brave enough to declare it and strong enough to act on it, seeking God's help in his deep faith. In the short time I knew Jack he started hormone treatment – this was not always easy to get right but Jack undoubtedly became more outward looking and confident and able to relate to people.

As well as regular appointments with his gender clinic in Daventry, Jack was seeing a psychologist. Jack was bothered by his occasional confusion, but laughed about the questions they asked, how he tried to explain how he got his words mixed up, was confused by up and down. Yet at the same time, Jack was incredibly self-aware and made wordplay, jokes with self-deprecating humour which I think endeared him to people helping him.

I was very sad that at a time he was finally unfolding and becoming himself, he suffered set-backs from serious illness. He was in and out of hospital. He had to go to hospital after an epileptic episode but was delighted how he was treated in hospital and loved being known by staff.

He told me, 'I was very unwell in an emergency ward, when a very caring nurse gently knelt down beside my bed and, despite all their extreme busy-ness she whispered 'do you feel you'd prefer to be on a different gender ward?' I was simply amazed and overcome.' He cheered up the other men in his ward by talking and joking and praying for them.

In Jan 2020 Jack wrote – 'just asking you kindly think of me today – it was a brain scan aha! You never know, there might just be a brain inside this little head of mine! Have to see the head psychiatrist at Daventry gender clinic and the epilepsy staff. All in all I am very grateful to both Our Father and the NHS!'

Jack was able to express himself through original art – mainly collage using coloured paper and words. He sent me a few cards. In 2017 he said 'hoping to enter about 10 of my bits and pieces to an exhibition in central library.' He was moved to write expressive poetry and asked if he could send me what he had written. I transcribed it from his handwriting and they were put into the Sibyls newsletters.

All the time Jack was visiting his bedridden dear mother 'delighted she still recognizes Jack' he said, though he knew she would not have understood his gender truth. When his mum died, Jack took part in the funeral and spoke at a Sibyls Zoom service about how after being nervous, he felt warmly received by family and friends and felt God's leading when he spoke at the funeral.

Since early 2020, Sibyls held services on Zoom. I told Jack how to join Zoom by phone, and he came to several, entering the number and password on the phone keypad. He enjoyed these very much. At first he made a mistake and got through to another meeting. He said 'I got through to a lady and said 'Is that the Sibyls group? And she said, oh no it's the bishops!'

He travelled to a Sibyls' quiet day that Rev'd Simon Buckley led at a convent in Blackheath, South London which, with no pressure (being a quiet day) to talk, he could just be with others who totally accepted him, welcomed him and in some way understood his journey. He told Simon it was 'a smashing day'.

He came on a residential retreat and was able to speak to me and others face to face. I remember Jack praying for us both, he had such a natural manner of prayer, he was transformed in the way he spoke. This is the Jack firm in faith. He gave me enormous prayerful support.

Jack was in hospital since April. By chance I rang Jack apparently just after something happened, as all he said was "I think I am being taken to hospital." I spoke to Jack twice a few weeks after, when he was very confused. Then I spoke to him in June a couple of times, and amazingly he seemed back to his usual self, aware of where he was and how he was being treated. The last time I spoke was when he was anticipating leaving hospital, but to go to a care home where he could be cared for better, rather than his sheltered flat.

Those of us that went to the St Annes Sibyls services, and later the Zoom services, saw how Jack progressed in his transition and became more confident, despite his huge burdens and it is so sad to lose him.

Yvonne

On the buzzer

By Jack Simmons

On the buzzer I pressed and pressed,
banged on the window (in awful distress) -
Are you there? I shouted, glaring through dark gloom.
Where's the light – there is no room!
Shall I write or send a rocket?
All I need – just in your pocket!
I'll bang, bang, again.

Hang on a minute, better kneel and pray –
"Wow!" can't believe it, He's been here all day – plus night:
I needn't have shouted and screamed up to you.
Yes you're there, around about,
No need to bang, no need to shout
Just pause and whisper Him by name
and He will whisper me the same!

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