

SOFiA Newsletter 178 June 2025

Exploring Values, Meaning and Spirituality



Limestone cliffs like those at Dover, scene of the poem “Dover Beach”

Is Life only ‘Work, Consumption and the Media’?

This passage from Don Cupitt hit me like a revelation:

The great majority of people are becoming lumpenconsumers whose lives consist of nothing but work, consumption and the media.

It just seemed so true. Most people have almost no room left for questions of value and meaning. Work has become more and more dominant in their lives. We are in a media landscape that is saturated with advertising that elicits more and more wants rather than needs and that portrays the affluent lifestyle of the rich and famous, making us want to spend money to become at least a little bit like them. And the media naturally gravitates to providing entertainment so that we are confronted with a plethora of entertaining possibilities that can easily fill up our lives. Even the news often gives us entertaining or salacious stories of little real news value.

Now Cupitt himself offers this thought as part of a complex argument so while he has some sympathy for it, he finds it necessary to counter the perspective to advocate for a future church that still looks something like the traditional church. But even the most dedicated churchgoers no doubt spend much more time watching TV or social media than they do going to church. It’s just natural that work and the media and shopping play a big role in their lives. The Editor

Out with a Bang not a Whimper: Sea of Faith in Hawke's Bay

Thanks to Peter Cowley for the suggestion, a luncheon get together to contemplate a resolution to disband. The luncheon was held at Taradale Club Napier on May 18th 2025 with 10 attending and 4 apologies.



We mulled over our history: Jocelyn displayed the letter praising us for our hospitality and organizational skills, when we hosted the Sea of Faith Annual Conference in 2000. We thanked Margaret Gwynn and Bernadette Krassoi for organizing the Sea of Faith 2012 Conference at Lindisfarne. With a five-piece band on stage, 2012 ended on a high note. Adrian Skelton's chairing of Panel

Discussions at a raft of Sea of Faith Conferences was exemplary. Most recently he contributed an article to the newsletter remembering Don Cupitt.

TO DO

It was the memorial for Don Cupitt that got us thinking, how will we honour Lloyd when his time comes? Does Sir Lloyd have any expressed wishes? Will there be an online service? But for those who aren't online where and how could we gather?

Jocelyn has in her possession our archives. Where do we deposit them? The local Hawke's Bay Archives part of MTG? At the Knowledge Bank? We seek National SOFiA advice (Susie). Other thoughts: Contact Peter Lineham.

Based on the unanimous consensus of nine members present, the residual funds in our HB Sea of Faith Kiwi Bank account will be sent to Victoria University, Sir Lloyd Geering Scholarship in Religious Education and our bank account closed.

Mary Ellen Warren

A Complete *Unknown* – Bob Dylan film and song

"There's a movie about me opening soon called A Complete Unknown (What a title!). Timothee Chalamet is starring in the lead role. Timmy's a brilliant actor so I'm sure he's going to be completely believable as me! Or a younger me. Or some other me." Bob Dylan 4/2/25



John Thornley giving a Dylan talk in the Palmerston North City Library.

The film *A Complete Unknown* was nominated for eight awards in the March 2025 US Academy Oscars but won none. Many of us would love to have seen Timothee Chalamet in the role of Bob Dylan win the award for the Best Actor. But it was not to be.

At the end of March, the songs of *A Complete Unknown* appeared on vinyl and CD. The full versions of songs were not necessarily played in the film, as listening to the CD confirms. 'Blowin' in the Wind', 'Subterranean Homesick Blues' and 'The Times They Are A'Changin'' are all played in full. But only the first and last verses of 'Like a Rolling Stone' are played. This is a pity, because 'Like a Rolling Stone' is arguably the greatest rock song ever written.

This article is a reprint of the writer's earlier coverage of 'Like a Rolling Stone', published in the SOF Newsletter January 2020. New copy is added to show Chalamet's commitment to capture not only the factual line of Dylan's life and music but, more importantly, the spirit or soul of the artist. Chalamet spent five years learning to play guitar and harmonica for thirty Dylan songs, performed in that rough-hewn hillbilly and bluesy vocal style of the artist. The social and political setting in 1960s Greenwich Village, New York, and the wider world are brilliantly covered in the film...

The Film "A Complete Unknown"

James Mangold, the film producer, described Chalamet as being 'voracious about research'. That research included a road trip back to Dylan's home town, Hibbing in Minnesota. Cameraman Bill Pagel and Chalamet travelled in a hired rental car and went to the high school Bob had attended. Chalamet met Megan Reynolds, who is in her seventh year as the drama director at Hibbing High School. The night before Chalamet's visit, she was told the actor was in town doing research for a biopic. Tim wanted to see where Bob had played in a 1958 talent show and was kicked off the stage because he was pounding Little Richard's 'Tutti Frutti' too hard.

The actor also visited Dylan's home, bought in 2019 by collector and retired pharmacist, Bill Fagel, who put together 'a little museum' in the basement rec room. The star of Fagel's museum is a triple-disc Guthrie '78 set, Documentary #1, 'Struggle', released in 1945. Inside the back cover of the album's book-like case is a drawing by the late teens Dylan, of himself holding a guitar facing a winding road leading to a city skyline and the words 'Woody New York City'. On the bottom corner are handwritten lyrics to Dylan's 'Song for Woody'.

Pagel remembers Tim was 'blown away' and sent a photo of the object to Mangold, describing it as an 'absolutely incredible object'.

In the same period Dylan read Woody Guthrie's autobiography, *Bound for Glory*, which fuelled the flames of fandom even higher. This book is highly recommended for those who wish to share how it inspired the youthful Dylan.

Prior to heading to New York in 1960, Dylan enrolled at Minnesota High School but gained his real education in the nighttime clubs and cafes, moving beyond his rock'n'roll teen years towards the folk music he heard live and from the record collections of friends. This 1983 quotation from Dylan traces his music journey from rock'n'roll via folk music to folkrock:

'The thing about rock,n'roll is that for me anyway it wasn't enough . There were great catchphrases and driving pulse rhythms, but the songs weren't serious enough or didn't reflect life in a realistic way. I know that when I got into folk music, it was more of a serious type of thing. The songs are filled with more despair, more sadness, more triumph, more faith in the religious, and much deeper feelings.'

In the film the buildup to its live electric performance at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival gives an inspirational climax. It's the music that creates a revolution in rock music, lifting the blues from the past into its new guise for a new age. Michael Gray, writer of *The Bob Dylan Encyclopedia* (2006) has this eloquent description of the music:

'Like a Rolling Stone' was recorded June 16, 1965, with a snare shot on drums that Bruce Springsteen described as 'like somebody had kicked open the door to your mind.' At six minutes length, the song was subversive of all rules. It wasn't only the opening drum sound that was thrilling, but the beautifully expressive guitar licks, the interaction within the five-member band, the torrid clever flow of it all, while the voice was at once so young and so snarling, so energetic and so cynical. And then there were the words. They too were a jolting, glorious assault; a chaotic amalgam of blues vernacular, impressionism, allegory and an intense directness: 'How does it feel?'

Dylan's dramatic presentation of this song at the Newport Folk Festival is described by the keyboard player Barry Goldberg, who came on stage within 24 hours of an invite by Bob. His obituary note to his death (22/2/25) records his memories of that evening: 'There were some people out there who dug what we were doing. But the others weren't even listening. They were so angry

that Bob was turning his back on the folkies, they couldn't get their heads around what Bob was doing.' Goldberg was proud of his part in musical history. 'We were warriors on a mission to back up the leader of the gang. I had done my thing for Bob and knew that some kind of force had come along and touched me.'

Like a Rolling Stone

Once upon a time. A fairy tale to grow up with!

The song marks a turning point in Dylan's career – from acoustic folk to electric rock; from the ballads and parables with explicit moral lessons to the creation of myth where the meanings are multiple and implicit. The listener is challenged to complete the communication. From songs that pointed fingers at other people – White racists, masters of war, obtuse adults in authority, etc – to songs that found the finger pointing at himself.

Recall the background of the song: the movement of significant numbers of middle-class Whites opting out of mainstream values and goals, the Hippie and Flower Power youth believing that hobnobbing with the poor and oppressed would earn them the mantle of street credibility:

You've gone to the finest school all right Miss Lonely,
but you know you only used to get juiced in it
and nobody's ever taught you how to live on the street
and now you're gonna have to get used to it.

In reality, Dylan suggests, the children of middle-class America haven't earned such downward mobility in the social order. To quote the writer Matt Damsker (*Rock Voices*): 'It's as if the 'mystery tramp' and 'Napoleon in rags' we once threw dimes to and must now contend with as a matter of survival, are the honest 'nobility' of the down-and-outs, while we 'used to ride on the chrome horse' with the thieving politicians who oppress us all.' Their claim to be saviours of others was shown to be a sham in the 70s and 80s when, under President Reagan, they rejoined the privileged class and turned their backs on the less fortunate.

The song is not a putdown of the high society Miss Lonely. The song's real target is himself and coming to terms with his own conscience. To quote a much earlier pilgrim after truth, Paul of Tarsus, Dylan is working on his own salvation in 'fear and trembling' (*Philippians 2: 12-13*).

The more sympathetic acceptance of Miss Lonely's plight towards the end of the song, and the gentler, more compassionate later versions of this song recorded since the 1990s, support this reading. This quotation from Michael Gray (*Encyclopedia*) puts it well: 'Sometimes there has been a real re-interpretation, when Dylan sings the song not as vituperation, not a snarl or sneer 'out there' at someone else, but as a reflective, Hamlet-like soliloquy, in soft tones and contemplative mood, in a spirit of 'This is so, isn't it?' addressed to himself', though clearly seeking empathy with his audience.

If this understanding of the lyric pushes a specific interpretation too far, you might be more comfortable with a more general reading: the song as one person's journey – though implicitly it's a journey we all make – from adolescence to adulthood, from innocence to experience. Use of the word 'journey' evokes the Jungian Archetype, as applied to a metaphorical or mythical understanding. In such a journey, disillusionment and loss of ideals are an inevitable part of growing up. This doesn't deny the Don Quixote valour of crusades against the rich and powerful – and Dylan still sings his early acoustic morality songs with conviction – but recognises that we can do more than tilting at windmills!

For many listeners, it's the chorus that is the emotional hook, summing up the existentialist dilemma: conveying both individual exhilaration at freedom from the past restrictions and despair at the loss of communal supports and structures:

'How does it feel,
how does it feel,
to be without a home,
like a complete unknown,
like a rolling stone?'

The journalist Robert Shelton gave Dylan's early career good coverage in the *New York Times*. In these groundbreaking electric sessions, he noted that the artist seemed happier and more confident than in the early days. He shares Dylan's words to him: 'I'm lucky...Not because I make a lot of bread. But because I am around groovy people. I don't have to fear anything and nobody around me has to fear anything'

That's where it's at: bread, freedom, and no fear.

Key Books and One Recording

Michael Gray *The Bob Dylan Encyclopedia* The Continuum International Publishing Group 2006

Matt Damsker *Rock Voices: The Best Lyrics of an Era* 1980

Greil Marcus *Like a Rolling Stone: Bob Dylan at the Crossroads* Faber and Faber 2005

Shelton Robert: *No Direction Home: The Life and Music of Bob Dylan* Hardie Grant Books 2011

Guthrie Woody. *Bound for Glory*. Dutton 1943.

Elijah Wald *Dylan Goes Electric: Newport, Seegar, Dylan and the Night that Split the Sixties* HarperCollins 2016 – the key book for the makers of the film *A Complete Unknown*.

Suze Rotolo *A Freewheelin' in Time: a Memoir of Greenwich Village in the Sixties*. Aurum Press 2009, Rotolo is Dylan's first serious relationship. To protect her privacy the film actor is renamed Silvie Russo. Rita Marley's *No Woman No Cry* and Rotolo's *A Freewheelin' Time* are classic female explorations of coping with the artistic and male Ego!.

'Diamonds and Rust' - ballad by Joan Baez, the other lover of Bob, setting up the triangular tensions within the Bob/Suze/Bob relationships. A phone call from Bob, possibly inviting Joan to join his Rolling Thunder touring circus in the late 70s, is the context for this song capturing the romance and reality of their 60s relationship. A reference to this song is included in the closing credits to the film. Listen to 'Diamonds and Dust' on Utube.

John Thornley

Like a Rolling Stone – The Lyrics

Once upon a time you dressed so fine,
You threw the bums a dime in your prime, didn't you?
People'd call, say 'Beware doll, you're bound to fall'
You thought they were all kiddin' you.
You used to laugh about
Everybody that was hangin' out
Now you don't talk so loud
Now you don't seem so proud
About having to be scrounging for your next meal.

How does it feel
How does it feel
To be without a home
Like a complete unknown,
Like a rolling stone?

You've gone to the finest school all right, Miss Lonely
But you know you only used to get juiced in it.
And nobody has ever taught you how to live on the street,
And now you're gonna have to get used to it.
You said you'd never compromise,
With the mystery tramp, but now you realise
He's not selling any alibis
As you stare into the vacuum of his eyes
And ask him do you want to make a deal?

How does it feel
How does it feel
To be without a home
Like a complete unknown,
Like a rolling stone?

You never turned around to see the frowns
on the jugglers and the clowns
When they all come down and did tricks for you.
You never understood that it ain't no good
You shouldn't let other people get your kicks for you.
You used to ride on the chrome horse with your diplomat
Who carried on his shoulder a Siamese cat

Ain't it hard when you discover that
He really wasn't where it's at
After he took from you everything he could steal.

How does it feel
How does it feel
To be without a home
Like a complete unknown,
Like a rolling stone?

Princess on the steeple and all the pretty people
They're drinkin'. thinkin' that they got it made
Exchanging all kinds of precious gifts and things
But you'd better lift your diamond ring
 you'd better pawn it babe.
You used to be so amused
At Napoleon in rags and the language that he used
Go to him now, he calls you, you can't refuse,
When you got nothing, you got nothing to lose,
You're invisible now, you got no secrets to conceal.

How does it feel
How does it feel
To be without a home,
Like a complete unknown,
Like a rolling stone?

'Like a Rolling Stone' is on the 1965 album Highway 61 Revisited.

Omega Man: 'Heretic' Geering at 107



Philip Mathews wrote a newspaper feature on Lloyd Geering. The following is an extract from the article.

“Churches Retreating Into a Ghetto

Geering took an academic role in Brisbane in 1956 before returning to Dunedin, where he was Professor of Old Testament Studies at Knox College theological hall and then as Principal. By then, he was becoming worried about what he saw as complacency in the church.

‘I was beginning to feel that the churches were shutting their eyes to the many intellectual challenges that the modern world, global and scientific in its outlook, was presenting to the traditional expression of the Christian faith’ he wrote in *Wrestling with God*. Worse yet, I feared that the churches were retreating into a ghetto of their own making, within which they felt confident and secure.”

To read the full article, follow this link: <https://www.thepress.co.nz/nz-news/360657145/omega-man-heretic-sir-lloyd-geering-107>

Thanks to John Thornley who provided the excerpt.

About SOFiA

SOFiA (The Sea of Faith in Aotearoa) is a network of people interested in the non-dogmatic discussion of values, meaning and spirituality. We want to explore for ourselves what we can believe and how we can find meaning in our lives. SOFiA is not a church: it is a forum for discussing ideas, experiences and perspectives. SOFiA itself has no creed; its members come from many faiths and from those with no attachment to any religious institution. If you are in sympathy with our aims, you are most welcome to join us; receive our Newsletter, and/or attend a local group. We follow similar organisations in the UK and Australia in taking our name from “Sea of Faith”, the 1984 BBC TV series and book by the British religious academic, Don Cupitt.

Committee

Our national Committee oversees the work of SOFiA.

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Copy deadline for the next Newsletter is 1 August.