



Dear friends,

I am afraid I pinched the design of this card but I do love it and I can't draw! Catrin put pictures together, and included some 'memories'. We thought we would leave you to sort out who is who with the exception of Jan, propping up a tree, and of the building at the top which is not my new house, but the Convent at Wantage! Recently Mair mistook a photo of herself for one of Catrin, so maybe it could be confusing.

First, no Christmas Cards through the post please, we are going to Australia. Secondly, this may be the last one quite like this I will be putting together. Although I hope to continue the round robin tradition, it will very much be with the help of my daughters - one has the skills to do anything on the computer, the other likes doing p.a. stuff for me! A supervisor of the former said *"I have to say I found the speed at which you pulled the project together in the end quite incredible to watch."* I have been without a computer for a month, and the other daughter printed all my stuff, and their journals, and her sister's emails to me and sent them to the convent.

So, I resigned from the prison in April, after a very hard nine months, but the settlement included a splendid apology and I have also several nice letters from the Governor. The offer arrived two days before I went to my convent to Live Alongside for the entire month of October. So I went with a clear heart, free at last. I said goodbye to the prison in an article ..... [www.allen-williams.com](http://www.allen-williams.com) (I was given the headings, by the way). I might write something different now, but at the time it was cathartic without being rude!

I had five months at home after leaving the jail. Throughout that time I was partly involved in investigations I had initiated and it was hard to let go of a job I had loved, but I was also doing a tiny bit of work for Age Concern, (and still doing small amounts of very happy teaching at the wonderful ballet school I go to) and was blessed to get involved in a lovely little church next to the Cathedral. So that helped me turn round. I took the opportunity to see a lot more of my father (who took me to Suffolk for the first time), to visit friends in Scarborough, to go down to Helen and Anthony and to see Jan, to visit Mair - and a friend of my father's - in Edinburgh, and Peter's sister Liz and husband Ian came over to UK so I was free of work to see them too. Then Pip and Alan's daughter's wedding brought long lost friends to Lincoln as well. I live very close to the river and also have a perfect little garden, too small to need a lot of work, sheltered, full of flower and with a pew along the south facing wall. Helen and Anthony brought a real festival load of plants, including beans and tomatoes and sweet peas and I seem to have collected a lot of roses of all colours and sizes.

Convent life, well, um. Virtual silence apart from the liturgy and the odd quick exchange here and there. Busy. 6.0 am-9.0 pm. Entirely satisfactory, even though I never did get the hang of hosing down my wellies while standing on one foot in a long skirt! The book I find best about Community life is *The Choice*, by Sister Kirsty, and we have several copies..... The author has a couple of copies now, thanks to Mair and the internet (it's out of print)! It was written 30 years ago, so things have changed, but I think the spirit is the same. The trial period has an extra two years, there are fewer sisters and it is more contemplative. Partly the law makes that inevitable as everywhere requires certificates now. (As an Age Concern Befriender I wasn't even allowed

to make service users a cup of tea, nor help them out of a chair.) But living with other people remains just as difficult as it ever was, and living in silence means you are faced with yourself; there is no running away, from yourself, God or each other. There is nowhere to hide (I tried once!). Just in case anyone else asks, permanent Living Alongside is simply not permitted. You either enter the Noviciate or you leave. Of course many people enter the Noviciate and then leave. That is what the Noviciate is for, to explore a vocation. A local abbot said, 'It's hell'. Or people wouldn't leave, but some stay and 'there is nowhere else they would rather be', and of those that leave many return to the Religious Life.

I have been on this journey since early 99, the girls too. But the troubles at work certainly facilitated matters as I resigned in April, triggered quite suddenly. Mair says it is a real conversation killer. I think Catrin's conversations are more resilient! My father has taken amazing trouble to try to understand, and he has visited and read and talked, and even written to a nun - do you think my mother is winking up there? The family are welcomed of course, can visit and I would get three weeks plus a couple of days at Christmas to go and stay with them. And even convents have computers and phones as well as letter boxes! I am still on the journey; no final decisions have been made, and even if they had they would merely be the start of the next bit of the journey. I am calm though, I feel it is going to be all right, for all of us, whatever all right is. More news next year. After the anguish of this time last year, happiness is now a positive thing. All friends and most of the family are wonderfully supportive; I have had some amazing letters. I still value and attend Quaker Meeting - and I am still wanted there as after two years of trying to resign I am still the only person there who can sign a cheque!

Mair finished her MSc (distinction) in Edinburgh and has moved to Southampton. Her grandfather said the only bits of her thesis he understood were the 'and's and 'but's! I took this off her Live Journal:

"Three reasons I am possibly weird:

1. I cycled to Nick's. Google maps said it was under ten miles (9.9). I thought it was quite reasonable to cycle.
2. I was wearing odd socks. It keeps surprising me that people find this odd, even though I know they do. Is it really so strange that I don't keep my socks in pairs in the wash? I mean, it takes ages to re-match things. (Her boarding school made us sew loops on socks so they were tied together before they went in the wash!)
3. I was wearing a modem cable for a belt. OK, I know this isn't usual. I was wearing a regular belt, but it broke at the last minute. And I couldn't see anything suitable around. And my trousers are a bit too relaxed without a belt. And that's just the things people \*commented\* on. How weird do you think they secretly think I am?"

Trips in Scotland and to Paris, boyfriend and Quaker events, 8 computers, two bikes and evidently a spare modem cable! She had a lovely flat in Edinburgh so close to water, now she has got a tiny one because it had a river view. Mair has just started a PhD in Southampton - her first month the lab next to hers was destroyed by a big fire ..... She still rings, and seems OK with both Quakers and church. They both are, in different ways, as I am I suppose. As for the socks, I suppose she isn't going to go back to the boarding school days when I had to sew loops on each sock (as well as names) so that they could be tied together for the laundry!!

Catrin finished her year in Paris this Summer. A fantastic year, ballets, shows, sight seeing, field trips, endless friends sleeping on her floor, also a growing-up year, it isn't that easy to live abroad (and do exams in a foreign language), and of course both of them were trying to negotiate LDRs (Long Distance Relationships). Now there is rioting in Paris, and it feels closer to home, Catrin has many friends there. She gets married to Giz (Peter) next Summer, when she (but not he) will have finished her degree, so they will stay in Bristol. She has kept up her ballet, at home and abroad and is still president of the student chaplaincy society. In its present form it was set up by a Quaker whom she has met. Small world.

So, I will be in touch. Christmas in Australia is in the middle of the long holidays so the hype is long since over, bliss. Church, family, and salad meals. Greetings to you all. Lizzie

