

# The Spirituality of SeaChange

*One of the most influential TV shows in the last three years has been the TV drama SeaChange, shown on the ABC. Series 1 and 2 revealed that for the METRO mainland cities (the usual basis for reporting of TV ratings) the average weekly reach was 15% for Series 1 and 19.2% for Series 2 (representing an increase of 29% on Series 1). The Series 2 average weekly reach represents about 2.5 million people, a sizeable chunk of the viewing audience. The programme has attracted a significant cross-over group, people who may have previously watched 60 Minutes or a US theme comedy.*

The number of people watching SeaChange is similar to the number of Australians attending church monthly or more often. SeaChange and the churches in Australia have other things in common including the fact that viewers of SeaChange are more likely to be women and/or older people. Women aged 65 plus provided the largest viewing group with around one-third of all viewers in that age group watching SeaChange, with women aged between 55 - 64 another large group.

Intriguingly though, the viewing group men aged 18 - 24, had the largest increase from Series 1 - 2, doubling its audience to nearly 10% of that age group, and nearly catching up to the women in that age group (11.1%). There were also dramatic increases in the percentage of younger age groups, teens and women aged 25 to 39, watching Series 2 compared with Series 1.

SeaChange, like the churches, reflects often on matters beyond ourselves, and on the fundamental nature of human beings and their relationships with each other. But the emphasis in SeaChange is on the alternative spiritual dimension, with prime examples being the Holy Site of Brady Point, where cosmic love energy is released, the Hindu shopkeeper and tax agent character, Phrani, and the 21st century hippy Carmen who is into alternative lifestyles, astrology and new age movements like the womens' drumming circle.

Conventional Christian characters are plainly out of sight, except for the depiction of a Salvation Army Family Store, and stereotypes like the members of the Value Australia Party who, at Bob Jelly's house for a meeting, put him into a spin as he has to offer 'grace' before they share a meal together. Bob's version of grace ended up sounding very much like a civil religious form of prayer associated with ANZAC services (Series 1, no.4).

In another episode, Bob Jelly proudly explains to his son his religious philosophy, which places real estate as the uniting foundation for all people - "see, not everyone believes in God, Moses, Buddha, or the Virgin Mary, but everyone wants to own their own patch of this world. Everybody believes in property." Bob asserts that real estate agents "are the holy men of the modern era" ... "because we spread happiness" - the dream house providers (Series 2, no.10).

In one early episode we learn that the courthouse is right next to the

church (Catholic Church), or more accurately where the church building was before being hit by a meteorite. In many episodes, there are references to biblical words, or stories, including a fascinating reference to Solomon, with Laura Gibson, the magistrate, acting on the wisdom of the ages and declaring in the case of the disputed cat, that the cat is to shared (joint custody) or put to sleep. This backfires when the two people decide to have the court put the cat to sleep. The cat manages to escape to ensure a happier ending (Series 2, no.11).

The value of animals is often highlighted, but never more than in one important episode where the famous town dog dies and all sorts of relationships are affected. There is even a fabulous description of dog hell - a huge car park with dogs in each car waiting for their owner to come back which, of course, they never do (Series 2, no.5).

While the acting in SeaChange has been generally exceptional, the main strength of SeaChange has been the writing, particularly the focus on aspects of contemporary society which touch the lives of ordinary people. This orientation comes from the creative talent of Deb Cox and Andrew Knight, who have also written many of the scripts or provided the stories which have been used to continue the SeaChange themes.

## Failed family life, marriages and life in general

The failure of marriages, and the complexity of relationships in general, are continuing themes in SeaChange. One might wonder how many of those who watch SeaChange who have undergone similar experiences to the main character, Laura Gibson: the death of her marriage through failed communication over the years, and

the dominance of other parts of life, including work, which has led her to conclude she was a "mother in name only". The theme of betrayal is also strongly evident. Laura grapples with betrayal by her husband's affair with her sister Trudi. Like many people, Laura is searching for a committed relationship. Diver Dan we find out was also betrayed, left by his wife for another woman, perhaps not an uncommon occurrence today.

Another couple, Bob and Heather Jelly, have recurring marriage problems as Heather begins to realise how she has been used by Bob for his own schemes and how he fails to appreciate her as a person.

We also witness the re-commitment of two people to their marriage, with Vin and Verna (Karen's parents) being blessed this time through the presiding of a Hindu celebrant.

#### **Teenage issues and reality.**

Not everyone in SeaChange is young, tanned and fabulously good looking. Even the youth demonstrate a variety of looks, including the pimple faced Trev. The teenagers are integrated into the whole story and as such provide an opportunity for parents to hear from teenagers reflections on situations from their own points of view.

**Parents and children.** The diversity of relationships between parents and children is quite amazing, with a focus on the single parent roles and difficulties. One of the most substantial and yet underrated is that of the relationship of Kevin (father) and Trev, who are both often seen at the end of an episode sharing a moment together looking out to the sea, with Kevin providing a piece of home-spun wisdom. It is Kevin who tells Trev that it would be "boring if we were all the same. The most important thing is to love the body

God gave you" (Series 1, no.7). He also tells Trev after a bit of a windfall (from which most town members benefit), that he has paid the caravan off, and that one day it will be his. He hopes that this will not spoil him, because as he points out to Trev there is "more to life than money" (Series 2, no.4).

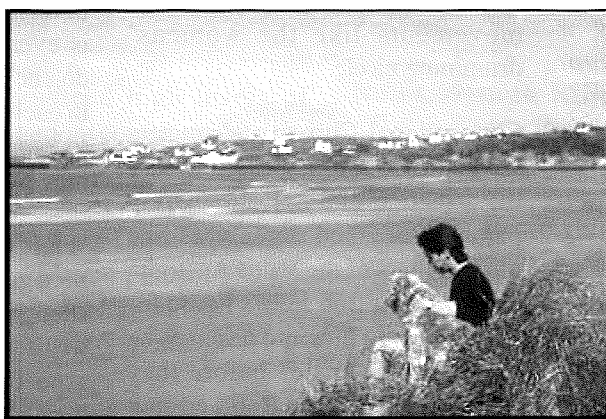
Relationships undergo a seachange, as witnessed by the change of lifestyle for Karen's (the young police officer) parents, who went from conservative country people to old hippies, much to Karen's shock, as she explains to one other Pearl Bay resident that mum "doesn't do sponges anymore - she does life drawings" (Series1, no.8).

Some parental relationships are simply a mystery, like Diver's, who in one

to those who have embarked on programmes, SeaChange promotes the common philosophy of post-modernism of trying something and not worrying if it is different, because it may work for you. Karen's father was 'cleansed' like a new-born baby through a mens' group - ten men, naked in the bush, reaching into their inner being (Series 1, no.8).

#### **Love and Romance in a post-marriage society**

Laura, as already mentioned, has high hopes for a stable relationship, which seem to be continually battered. The perhaps unlikely romance with Diver Dan captured a generation of middle aged women, and many may be hoping for his return. One of the key factors in Diver's leaving, a reality for many women who wish to re-partner, is the children. One of the cutest scenes showed Diver and Laura about to embark on an intimate evening together, when Laura's two children arrive back unexpectedly, and instantly nestle onto the couch with both of them, oblivious to their obvious chagrin (Series 2, no.2).



poignant scene, scatters his mother's ashes into the sea and says "I wish I'd known you." (Series 1, no.11)

Several relationships centre around a death, mostly reflecting moments of broader significance such as the suspected youth suicide, the termination of a pregnancy (Angus's first girlfriend), to the loss of Carmen's hoped-for baby.

SeaChange is a show that different generations can watch and can pick up something peculiar to their age and culture, and perhaps even use as a stepping point to talk to other people not in the same generation.

**Finding oneself - a personal seachange.** From using travel to broaden one's horizons as Karen did,

#### **A Search for Community and Communion with Ourselves and Nature**

This is of course, the cornerstone of the Change.

It revolves around two main points:

**1. The beach and sea.** Readers may recall CRA reports that people were more likely to experience a sense of peace by the sea (*Pointers*, vol.6, no.1, March 1996). Images of the sea and beach have been strongly linked throughout the series. The opening credits, for example, contrast the rat race of the city with the ultimate separateness of the Pearl Bay community. In a Series 3 episode, Angus, the young surfing identity (and usual court clerk), was caught

between an opportunity to move into the corporate world of surfboard manufacture (and a move to the city), and his love of just doing his own thing and surfing when he wanted. In another episode, Angus hears from Karen's father how he has been "communing with the ocean", and says to himself, that when he has seen dolphins it has been "the closest thing to a religious experience for me" (Series 1, no.8).

A cameo from former World Surfing legend Mark Richards was overtly symbolic, and his appearance to Angus on the beach even had shades of the Lord appearing to the disciples after the resurrection.

**2. A place where your name is known.** This theme is a common one in TV land, with even shows like *Cheers* (the popular US TV show), emphasising this point in its theme song. It is a significant seachange to be in a place where you are known by name. While this can be stifling, as there are no secrets, it can also be liberating, as the community support is always there. Kevin believes that the great thing about living in the country is that "we keep no secrets". Everyone is free to be who they are (Series 1, no.2). The still common perception (flawed though it mostly is) is that one has to leave the evil city in order to find community, and what better place than a seaside resort, a place referred to by Laura as paradise.

Thus, the theme of what makes a good, healthy community underlies the SeaChange series. This theme is pertinent to the life of the churches as well as the wider society (see *Pointers*, vol. 10, no.3 'Measuring Community Strength').

### Forgiveness

The Christian church can be forgiven for thinking that it has a monopoly on forgiveness. SeaChange does its best to demonstrate that many other religions and ordinary philosophies have this as a centre. One of Laura's significant ongoing personal difficulties

through Series 1 and 2 centred around the challenge to forgive her husband and sister for their affair, particularly her sister who had a desperate need for forgiveness and acceptance from Laura.

In possibly one of the most important episodes in Australian TV, entitled *Mana from Heaven* (Series2, no.8), the whole theme of forgiveness is crystallised by the character of the Buddhist nun Tenzin Jetsunma, played admirably by Julia Blake. Formerly known as Mabel, Tenzin has come back to Pearl Bay to give a lecture, and to apologise to her oldest friend, Meredith. The event gives the whole town an opportunity to be forgiven for a collective town 'sin' - the theft of timber from a shipwreck, which just happened to be her timber - 'holy wood'. The whole episode is surrounded by a discussion about spiritual belief. Karen reflects on being a Catholic, "I'm lucky. I'm Catholic. I don't have to think about it. ... "I believe what Catholics believe". Max Connors (the cynical journalist) replies to Tenzin's comment that "to survive you need to believe in something" with "or believe in nothing at all". Laura affirms her belief in "You and Rupert", in response to a question from her daughter Miranda about what she believed in.

Tenzin's presence and character prompt all sorts of confessions during her public lecture and personal appearance, resulting in an obvious and real spirit of release from the past for some of the Bay's key residents.

### Truth

The concept of truth is inexplicably linked in SeaChange with forgiveness as it is often demonstrated by the characters that firstly they have to set the record straight before forgiveness is possible. The essential foundation of Tenzin's public lecture is that the

truth will set you free. She comments that there is an "absolute release that truth brings."

Meredith's daughter (Heather Jelly) has come to grips with being given up for adoption. Meredith says "I think she loves me a little", and Tenzin responds, "sounds like forgiveness."

Bill Hunter plays Vin, Karen's father, who on his return to Pearl Bay has to confess to a bank robbery that he had committed years before, so that he can leave his ill feelings about the banks and revenge behind and move on in his newfound spirituality (Series1, no.8).

### Conclusion

Overall SeaChange has consistently rated in the top ten TV shows in Australia, and for much of its time, in the top five.

Its popularity may be partly due to the way the show has dealt with the major themes of life: community and relationship, perhaps even forgiveness and truth. In picturing the escape from city life, it has offered people an alternative way of life, situated by the sea in a community in which people know and support each other. It responds to the desire that people have for love in their relationships and a depth in community. It has pointed to the transcendence experienced in nature and in human relationships. Yet, it has captured the warts along with the beauty. While it has portrayed something of deep Australian dreams, it has also portrayed some of the nightmares.

In its quirky way, it has represented a range of the ways in which Australians approach the major issues of life. People will make their own assessments of the pictures presented in SeaChange. But SeaChange has done its part in making some of the alternatives a little more explicit.

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