

Innovative
Resources

SIGNPOSTS



Exploring everyday spirituality

Authors: Russell Deal with Karen Bedford; Photography and Design: Brent Seamer



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the dance

'Religion was danced out before it was thought out.' Rev Dr Warren Bartlett

These oft-repeated words by Dr Bartlett formed something of a maxim for the honours psychology students undertaking Dr Bartlett's psychology of religion elective at the University of Melbourne in the early 1970s.

As both an ordained minister and a lecturer in the psychology department (and later the moderator of the Uniting Church of Victoria), Dr Bartlett had a fascination for the lived experience of religious belief. At least one of his students inherited this fascination; the above maxim has echoed around my mind ever since.

More than thirty years on it has been my pleasure to work on *Signposts—exploring everyday spirituality* because I believe it is a unique tool that honours and enriches the meaning that this 'dance' has for countless people.

Libraries may be full of works of philosophy and theology (the 'thinking' or conceptual parts of religion or spirituality—and yes, we do have a struggle to find the right language), however, there are far fewer resources that can help people discover and describe their innermost experiences of searching for meaning and living out their beliefs. This is certainly the case in the world of human service work.

Signposts is not a theology or a set of doctrines. It does not try to convert or shape religious belief. In fact, we hope it appeals to those with distinctly non-religious viewpoints as much as it appeals to those from a wide range of spiritual traditions.

Signposts is not a formula or a framework or a book of recipes for living a fulfilled life.

If *Signposts* has a contribution to make within the myriad ideas and the billions of words spoken and written about spirituality, it is merely to provide a set of simple prompts that can help us reflect on, and talk about, our search for meaning and significance.



We hope that this attempt at creating a simple conversational tool will assist many of those who need the help of social workers, psychologists, counsellors, teachers and other human service workers. We wonder if there may be a spiritual dimension underlying the struggles and issues that many of our clients and students share with us.

We also hope that this tool will 'help the helpers' recognise the spiritual elements of their professions and roles. In doing so, it may provide a valuable means of building resilience and maintaining optimism.

Signposts is a tool that recognises and celebrates the diverse ways people dance out their innermost beliefs. As such, we hope that *Signposts* might play a small part in building inclusion, understanding, tolerance, respect and harmony. Heaven knows that Earth continues to need copious amounts of such qualities.

Russell Deal OAM



the spark

The spark that ignited the idea for *Signposts* took the form of an off-the-cuff comment—almost a throw-away line—by David Mitchell, a clinical psychologist and friend of Innovative Resources.

One day David remarked that he was seeing more and more clients who wanted to talk about the ‘big questions of life’. Some of these clients expressed their concerns in traditional religious language and concepts. Others talked about ‘searching for meaning’, ‘losing faith’, ‘spiritual emptiness’ or ‘facing existential issues’. Despite the different ways they expressed their struggles, David was aware of the connection his clients were making between the problems they were bringing to him for his professional assistance and these other (perhaps ‘deeper’) levels of concern.

As someone who has a deep sense of spirituality himself, David’s commented that he didn’t feel personally equipped to offer ‘spiritual guidance’ to his clients and neither did he think the professional socialisation of human service workers prepared them to respond to this level of searching in an adequate, respectful way.

Many profound and influential thinkers and practitioners (Carl Jung, Viktor Frankl, Eric Fromm, Milton Erickson and Thomas Moore—to name only a few) have reflected on this dilemma and offer a huge array of valuable, wise insights.

David has immersed himself in many of these writings for years but his immediate interest was in how he could, within the constraints of his practice, provide clients who have such concerns with a simple, practical means of talking about and understanding their own ‘spiritual’ uncertainties and longings.

By giving voice to these thoughts in a brief conversation one day over coffee early in 2002, David initiated the process that ultimately led to *Signposts* as it appears today.

As *Signposts* evolved it was important to keep this original conversation in mind. Here was a need expressed for a simple conversational tool that could perhaps unlock some of the complexities of the soul. Hopefully, *Signposts* has not strayed too far from this first spark of an idea.



the evolution

Once we had the idea for *Signposts* in mind we invited some of our friends and colleagues to reflect with us on the key elements of their spiritual/existential journeys. We brainstormed key words and phrases, and at the end of the two hours we sat bewildered and dumfounded at the array of ideas that had been canvassed.

How could this huge array of profound concepts and practices be condensed into a practical, immediately useable conversation-building tool? It seemed such a daunting task that we could have easily walked away. Two subsequent discoveries however, gave us some hope.

Firstly, we discovered the wonderful, evocative photography of Brent Seamer. Meeting Brent and seeing his folio immediately convinced us that here was someone who could describe spirituality with a camera!

Secondly, our attention was caught by a book title that one of the team heard while listening to a radio interview with author, David A Cooper. David's book is called *God is a Verb* (Penguin, USA, 1998). This title provided the spark for thinking about how to construct *Signposts*. The possibility that key aspects of spirituality could be captured by focusing on its active, doing, searching or journeying components provided the window we needed to build a conversational tool that was not shaped by any individual philosophy or ideology.

We took both these discoveries to a second focus group where we critically (and quite extensively) examined the suggested concepts, words and graphics. Some of the questions we considered were:

- How many cards do we need?
- How complex should the card design be?
- Do the metaphors and stories created by the photographs work?
- Have we included struggle, trauma and paradox since these are as valid in our experience of the spiritual path as are joy, ecstasy and peace? Do the words on the cards get in the way?
- Do we refer to 'God', 'the soul', 'soulfulness', 'prayer', 'spirit', and so on?
- How will we use language to be inclusive of all pathways into meaning and significance?

The final stage was the six months of 'to and fro' with Brent as we mixed and matched photos to concepts.

And the final result? You be the judge.



the language

From our initial focus group onwards we recognised what our single biggest hurdle would be: language. Different religious traditions and belief systems have developed complex and highly specialised languages in their attempts to adequately describe their articles of faith. As necessary as such sophisticated ‘languageing’ might be for conceptualising beliefs, it can, however, quickly alienate those who are not initiated into its meanings and subtleties.

In wanting to be inclusive of as many spiritual traditions as possible we opted to only use plain English and to be as rigorous as we could in not using jargon—knowing full well that this approach would not satisfy everyone nor do justice to the centuries of accumulated wisdom that we wanted to honour.

Might the result of this approach be dismissed as reductionist? Would the result be a bland, beige picture of spirituality? Perhaps the simplicity would end up satisfying no one.

We wondered, for example, whether ‘spirituality’ was appropriate to use in the subtitle. We decided that ‘soul’ was not a word that everyone could relate to, but what about ‘soulfulness’, which has a different set of meanings for many people?

The original working title of the cards was *Singing Our Spirits Home*. A great title inspired by one of Eric Bogle’s songs, but one which we thought might ultimately exclude some people.

So, in short, the way we ‘languageed’ the cards and the product was not easy and we know it will not satisfy everyone. We hope you will forgive us if the language isn’t quite right in describing your own personal spiritual journey and that you will feel free to substitute your own words if these work better for you when you use the cards.

In this booklet we have slipped in some words like ‘soul’, ‘spirit’, ‘journey’, ‘religion’, ‘faith’, ‘beliefs’, etc. We have not tried to define these and we have used them in a general, even loose, manner. Again, we hope that you will be generous with your tolerance of this simplicity and not see it as carelessness.

The remaining question that we have so far begged is: Why use any words on the cards at all? We did seriously consider this option. Ultimately, we decided that carefully considered, minimalist words did add a powerful level of meaning—for some people at least.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, using the present participle phrase (for example, ‘returning home’, ‘seeking balance’, and ‘sparking with creativity’) seems to capture the dynamic and continuously unfolding nature of spiritual learning. Some of the cards simply feature a single present participle, for example, ‘forgiving’, ‘receiving’ and ‘trusting’. These words stand alone as hallmarks of a range of spiritual experiences and there seems to be something very powerful about their simplicity.



the caution

Innovative Resources aims to produce materials that are therapeutic and transformational for clients, communities, organisations—and in people's personal lives. However, no one can predict just how and when such change might occur. It is a truly magical and mysterious process.

In using any conversational prompt it is always important to be aware of its potential impact. The most seemingly innocuous visual prompt can trigger powerful and unexpected emotions.

Facilitators are encouraged to consider:

- *their own reaction to the cards*: Do you like them? Do the visual style and metaphors work for you? Are you comfortable using these cards yourself?
- *their knowledge of the materials*: Are you familiar with the cards? Do you need to use all of the cards or are there some you might decide to leave out? Why?
- *their knowledge of their clients*: Are the cards likely to gel with the culture and literacy levels of those you are working with?
- *the safety of the setting*: Do you believe you have created a 'safe space' for people to talk openly and honestly? Is there respect in the group? Is the timing right? Have ground rules for listening and respecting confidentiality been established? How will you ensure that people can pass if they don't want to speak? How will you make sure the quiet or shy voices in a group can be heard?

- *The design of the activity:* Have you thought about how you will introduce the cards? Will you use a particular activity or will you simply leave the cards on a table or in the tea room where clients or colleagues may find them and pick them up? Will your activity involve people choosing card(s) at random or deliberately? How long will the activity take? Have you allowed enough time for reflection and conversations to happen without rushing? Do you have an alternative plan if something isn't working? What will you do if the cards elicit strong emotions?
- *What worked and what they might do differently next time:* How will you know if the activity has worked? What constitutes 'successful' or 'unsuccessful' use of the cards? What did you learn from doing the activity? Would you do it differently next time?

It is our hope that many people will find *Signposts* helpful in reflecting on, and talking about, their experiences and values. We hope that these cards will help deepen and enrich people's lives regardless of what their beliefs or religious traditions may be.



the cards

Forty-eight *Signposts* cards emerged from the two years of reflection and dialogue that constituted the process of developing this tool for exploring everyday spirituality. There could have been more and there could have been less. As with all the 'seriously optimistic' therapeutic card sets published by Innovative Resources, getting the 'right' number of cards is a function of art, not science. We generally try to draw a line when we feel we have done justice to key aspects of the concept. We certainly do not strive to 'cover everything'.

Users of *Signposts* may well discover that an important element of their spiritual journey has been omitted. If this is your experience with *Signposts*, then the cards have done their job—they have reminded you of key parts of your journey.

If you feel you need to include additional cards or pictures to reflect aspects of your journey, by all means do so. If you feel that there are too many cards or that some are inappropriate or irrelevant for you, then simply leave them out. That is the beauty of cards; a whole set may not be necessary to build a transformational conversation.

Here is the full list of the 48 *Signposts* cards:



Accepting who we are



Allowing stillness



Asking for help



Basking in sunshine



Being thankful



Celebrating difference



Dancing with joy



Daring to dream



Developing insight



Embracing change



Finding connection



Forgiving



Giving



Growing in wisdom



Hearing the pain



Honouring the sacred



Imagining



Lasting the distance



Learning



Letting go



Listening intently



Living truthfully



Looking for signposts



Looking inside



the cards



Loving and
being loved



Noticing beauty



Practising
compassion



Receiving



Recognising
possibilities



Remembering
blessings



Returning home



Saying goodbye



Searching
for meaning



Seeking
balance



Sharing
the load



Sparking with
creativity



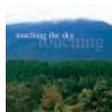
Standing
in uncertainty



Stretching
horizons



Struggling



Touching
the sky



Travelling
lightly



Trusting



Valuing
simplicity



Walking
through shadow



Welcoming
others



Wondering at
the mystery



Working
for peace



Yearning
for freedom



the applications

Ways of using any of the card packs published by Innovative Resources are endless. While many people can pick up the card sets and immediately think of a number of applications, many also find other people's experiments and suggestions useful (and we are so often surprised by people's inventiveness!). So, to get you thinking about some different ways of using *Signposts* we have grouped a range of suggestions into four themes:

For contemplation and reflection

There are, of course, many different traditions, pathways and techniques of contemplation. *Signposts* won't fit them all. However, for those people who find reflective prompts useful, *Signposts* might provide some creative alternatives and help develop meaningful rituals. Here are some ideas you might like to try:

1. Choose a card at random.

- Make it your thought for the day or thought for the week
- Think about both the text and the picture
- What are all the possible meanings this card has for you?
- At what times in your life have you felt closest to these meanings?
- Why were these times special?
- What are your greatest learnings about this card?
- What else would you like to learn?
- What gets in the way?
- Who has taught you most about this card?
- Have you thanked them?
- What challenges does this card have for you?
- As you look at the card what strikes you as significant?
- Have you discovered something new or unexpected?



the applications

2. Spread the cards out on a flat surface so you can scan them all.

- Does one card (or a small number) immediately speak to you or evoke a strong feeling? Why?
- In what ways can you sort the cards?
 - the most beautiful?
 - those you are comfortable with?
 - those you want to work on?
 - those that are a challenge?
- Which cards remind you most of times when:
 - you had a strong sense of fulfilment/divine purpose/optimism/connection, etc?
 - you were happiest?
 - your best childhood memories were created?
 - you overcame a challenge?
 - you needed courage?

3. Again, spread out and scan the cards.

- Do some cards seem to clash?
- Why do you think this might be?
- Are you aware of competing feelings inside you; of conflicting emotions or the struggle to be confident with your priorities and life choices?
- Or is the conflict between your beliefs/feelings and those of others around you, especially your loved ones?
- Is there conflict between how you may appear to others and how you are feeling inside?
- Perhaps you don't have a sense of conflict at all, but rather a sense of harmony?
- How do you think the cards complement and enhance each other?
- Is this a novel feeling or have you sensed this harmony before?

- Do you experience it often?
- Can you create it or bring it on?

For journalling and reflective writing

The same questions suggested in the section on contemplation can be responded to by journalling rather than reflection alone. However, there are also plenty of journalling techniques you can use to enhance your reflection.

1. Choose a card at random, or one that resonates with you for some reason.

- Can you finish this sentence? 'I chose this card because...'
- List the words that the card evokes for you
- As you reflect on this list, are you able to make any discoveries about why these words sprang to mind?
- As you reflect on just one card, what connections do you begin to make with other cards (or other ideas)?
- Are patterns emerging?

2. Choose a different card at random (or consciously) for each day of a given week and write about it.

- Is the discipline of writing reflectively about a randomly chosen card useful for you? Do you prefer to choose the cards consciously?
- Write about the meaning of one card over several days. What do you notice about your writing? Does it change?
- Are you aware of reflecting on different things over time?
- Are patterns emerging?



the applications

For creative writing

Of course, there are no rules to tell you how to journal or what the boundaries are between journaling and creative writing. Both can be for personal pleasure and private reflection, and both can be shared as well. The former may be predominantly autobiographical whereas the latter may include completely fictitious events, but this is not necessary for either. Both can certainly be sources of growth and insight.

Here are some different ways of enriching your creative writing practice:

1. Choose a card randomly or after scanning the pack.

- Can you make up a story around the card?
- Who are the characters in your story?
- What is happening for them?
- How does your story start and end? How does the sequence of events unfold?
- Can you write the story as a short story (say, up to 3000 words)?
- Can you write the story as a 'micro' story (say, between 150 and 300 words)?

2. Write a story (about yourself or others) that matches a card or cards you have chosen according to certain themes, such as:

- the best day of your life
- your deepest fear
- what you would most like to offer a friend as a gift
- a favourite word that appears on a card
- how you would like to die
- how you would like to be remembered
- what you would most like to receive an award for
- one of your heroes.

3. To develop this story further try picking two (or more) cards and write a story that integrates the visual elements and concepts of both cards.

- How do the cards speak to each other?
- What is the connection?
- Are the characters different as they relate to each card?
- How does the dialogue unfold?

4. Choose a card that reminds you of something that 'went wrong' for you.

- Did you have good intentions and then discover that something was wrong?
- Was it out of your control?
- Was it just the timing that was out?
- Did you make assumptions about other people that proved incorrect?
- What did you learn and what would you do differently next time?

5. Choose a card that looks the most promising for a poem or a song.

- Try writing your story poetically, with or without words that rhyme, with or without traditionally poetic structures.
- How does your writing differ?
- Is it easier or harder?
- Does a different set of meanings emerge?

6. Who have your 'angels' been?

- Scan the cards and consider that they all reflect angelic gifts.
- Which gifts do you think have been offered to you? By whom?
- Have you ever taken the time to thank these angels/heroes/mentors for the spiritual gifts you have received from them?



the applications

- Perhaps you could take the time to write them a letter of thanks?
- What would you say?
- Would you send it?
- Are there times when you have been an angel for someone else?
- Which cards represent positive qualities you have brought to a situation or person?
- How did you do this?
- Think of a person you know who is facing a challenge. Which cards would you most wish as 'angels' for them?

For building conversations

Signposts can be a valuable and powerful way of building conversations about our innermost values and beliefs. At times many of us struggle to find the words to adequately describe the joys and sorrows of our spiritual journeys. When it is difficult to put our feelings and experiences into words it is sometimes easier to retreat into silence, even with those who are close to us—those we love and know well.

When remaining silent about our most profound thoughts and feelings because we feel unable to express ourselves (or because we fear we will not be heard or understood) we can easily perpetrate misunderstandings. For example, others may conclude that we are not interested in these questions.

As well, we can easily fall into the trap of believing that others may see the world in the same way we do, simply because there hasn't been the opportunity for dialogue.

- If you are part of a spiritual tradition, a religion or a denomination, which *Signposts* cards are central to this tradition?
- Are some emphasised more than others?
- Why do you think this is?
- Are you aware of any tension, paradoxes or apparent contradictions between the cards?
- Do any cards surprise you?
- Do they say something about spirituality that is new to you, or that you haven't thought much about?
- Thinking of a challenge that is currently in your life, which cards do you find most helpful, reassuring or supportive?
- Which cards do you think might help lead you towards solutions?
- Do any cards remind you of actions that you have successfully taken in the past?
- Which cards remind you of your childhood? Why?
- As you scan the cards can you associate particular people with certain cards?
- Are there people who epitomise the qualities on these cards? Are these people friends, family members, people you know of, heroes, saints or people who somehow exhibit an angelic gift?



the applications

- Which parts of your own spiritual journey are uppermost in your mind or paramount right now?
- If you could choose an angel or someone to help you with your journey, which card would you most like them to gift you with or help you with?
- Which parts of your spiritual journey as described by the *Signposts* cards do you find most difficult or challenging? Why?
- Which do you avoid?
- Are some cards irrelevant or unpalatable?
- Which cards suggest ways you can support the spiritual journeys of others?
- Are you aware of the gifts that you have to share?
- Are you aware of other people who may be experiencing an 'emptiness' in their lives? Which *Signposts* could you offer them that might help them in their journeys?
- Are there events, anniversaries or times of the year that *Signposts* cards remind you of?
- What rituals are significant to you in your spiritual journey? Are any cards relevant to these rituals?

How do you think the cards might be incorporated into these rituals in a respectful and meaningful way?

- Can you imagine ways that you could use some of the cards to enhance or deepen your spiritual experience? Are there others with whom you could share these learnings?

Like all the materials published by Innovative Resources, it is up to you how you introduce *Signposts* as a conversation-building tool. Here are some other suggestions:

If you are part of a discussion group, a worship group or a meditation group:

- Choose a different card for each meeting and ask each person to share what that card means for them and what thoughts and feelings it evokes.

If you use the Bible, the Koran or other texts:

- What verses or teachings are relevant to that card?
- What stories can you tell that each card reminds you of?
- Choose some music that complements a card
- Ask participants to suggest music or songs they associate with a card
- Look at each card by candlelight. How does a different source and type of light change what you see, think and feel?
- Which cards represent the strengths and the practices of the group? Do the cards suggest other things the group may do to further their journey together?



the creators

Russell Deal OAM

I entered Melbourne University at 18 as a Christian fundamentalist and emerged five years later as a confused anarchist. More than thirty years on I am still confused but a lot more wary of applying labels to my confusion. Well known Australian broadcaster Terry Lane once described himself as an 'unfocused theist'. Perhaps this is a label that works for me. However, taking seriously Groucho Marx's principle that he would never join any club that would have someone like him as a member, it is unlikely that you will find me at any gatherings of the Unfocused Theists' Club.

Karen Bedford

Russell mentions questions. I like them a lot. Particularly the ones I ask myself and that mysterious and beautiful 'Other'. The very first time I posed such a question was on my tenth birthday when I wondered, 'What is the meaning of my life?' Since then questions have always been present. Sometimes urgently present. Most often present as living things that I contemplate and hold over a period of time. Sometimes a miracle happens and they blossom like flowers, and for a moment I feel like I can grasp the ungraspable. Then that piece of clarity gives way to something else—and I tell myself, 'Just be as kind as you can because people are worth it.' I hope you enjoy the 'living' questions that this set of cards may offer you.



Brent Seamer

When posed with a challenging project such as *Signposts*, you learn to look at what's familiar in a different way. With my camera never far from my side, everything around me took on a new meaning—the glimpse of the city from the street I live in, an empty park bench, a barley crop in a paddock, even the drain behind my parents' house. It was a welcome change from being holed-up in my studio for long hours on end.

All of the photographs in *Signposts* are original and were taken by the team at Seamer Design. Many thanks to all those who contributed, including Karen Inkster for her time and dedication, and my son, Tylar, for his patience in yet another 'day of photography'. Now that I'm not searching for 'signposts', most days I can be found in my studio at: Suite 1209, 401 Docklands Drive, Melbourne, Australia, 3008.



the contributors

Innovative Resources would like to acknowledge the many ideas and people who have influenced *Signposts*. While the sources of our inspiration are too numerous and diverse to name comprehensively, we would like to specifically thank those who have directly helped shape the *Signposts* project via the focus groups:

David Mitchell, Ian Cutlack, Nada Smark, Tony Smark, Di O'Neil, David Pugh, Drew Lawson, Denise Robertson, Tanya Campbell, Geoff Barker, Wendy Hall, Sue Bishop, Marian Ruyter, Steve Phillis and Leigh Mellberg.

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Karen Inkster, Tylar Seamer, Jayden Seamer, Karyn Davidson and Craig Fussell.

Thank you all very much for your invaluable contributions.

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the publisher

Innovative Resources is part of Anglicare Victoria, a community service organisation providing social work services throughout Victoria and New South Wales, Australia. Innovative Resources is a unique publishing enterprise located in Bendigo and designed to value-add to service delivery roles. We do this through:

- **Publishing:** We publish materials used by thousands of teachers, social workers, psychologists, counsellors and other human service workers throughout Australia and overseas.
- **Online Retailing:** We sell our own original materials including over 60 card sets, various sets of stickers, picture books and texts. An increasing array of digital and tactile resources are also available.
- **Training:** A small group of trainers regularly travels within Australia and elsewhere delivering a variety of practice training and 'tools' workshops. Please contact us to discuss your training needs. In addition, Innovative Resources offers on-line training.

Innovative Resources produces a free online catalogue and a free online newsletter entitled SOON. One of the main purposes of our newsletter is to provide forums for sharing ideas about using the resources. Stories about creative ways of using *Signposts* or any of our other strengths-based materials are very much appreciated by readers of the newsletter.

Let us know your stories!

www.innovativeresources.org

A photograph of a red wooden bench on a green lawn. Long, dark shadows are cast across the grass, suggesting a low sun position. The text "saying saying goodbye" is overlaid in the bottom left corner.

saying
saying goodbye



Signposts—exploring everyday spirituality is a set of 48 cards for building conversations about goals, connectedness, meaning, resilience and wellbeing. It offers ways to reflect on life's purpose and to convert values into actions, no matter what our beliefs or religious traditions may be.

- **What's important to me?**
- **How can I create meaning in my life?**
- **What will I hold onto and what will I let go?**
- **When the going gets tough, what helps get me through?**

Each card combines an evocative, full-colour photograph with a few simple words. The result is a stunning set of cards that can revitalise contemplation, clarify direction and create dynamic conversations about matters we hold closest to our hearts.

**Counsellors, teachers, trainers, mentors,
life coaches, team-builders, pastoral carers:**
**Use these cards to open up topics like stillness,
beauty, uncertainty, pain, gratitude.**

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