The Harcourt Herald December 2022

The Harcourt United Church Community





Harcourt Memorial United Church

An Affirming Congregation of the United Church of Canada

We are a people of God called together and sent forth by Christ to... **Seek. Connect. Act.**

Our Mission: Inspired by the Spirit, we participate in Christian practices that strengthen us in the building of just, compassionate and non-violent relationships.

Our Vision Statement: To be an authentic community of spiritual growth and service.

Our Core Values: Risk... Respect... Responsibility... Vulnerability... Trust

Our Purpose: To welcome and strengthen in community all who wish to serve God and follow the way of Jesus

Church Administrator: Wendy Guilmette

Worship, Communication and Technical Support: Casey Connor

Custodian: David Kucherepa

The Ministers:

The People with

Reverend Kate Ballagh-Steeper,

Pamela Girardi: Manna Lead Coordinator,

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From the Desk of the Editor

Here we are again with the December 2022 issue of the Herald; and what is more appropriate than thinking about Christmas? For this issue we wanted to challenge you, by suggesting a theme that needed some deep thinking: what image of God are you currently comfortable with? Not an easy topic. And one can see wonderful examples of people struggling honestly with this issue. There's enough here to get you thinking!

As Editor, I have been proposing a topic each month, just so that we can share something of ourselves with each other. How else do we build community? So, please, don't be shy to let us know your opinion about the present way the Herald is designed. The Herald is **your** monthly communication venue, and we want to make it as readable and useful as possible!

Our suggestion for the January topic is: Like the three "Wise Men" brought gifts to Jesus, what is/are the gifts you bring to God? (Because the office is closed over Christmas the deadline is Sunday, December 18, 2022).



From the Minister's Desk

Rev Kate Ballagh-Steeper

I know you may have heard some of my background already, but if I am to get to know you, you need to know me too! I have most recently served as the Minister at Lakeshore United Church in Goderich. When we arrived there in 2015, my husband Kevin Steeper and I were working together in team ministry. Unfortunately, the congregation was not able to financially sustain two full-time positions. In 2017, Kevin served part-time as the Presbytery of Huron-Perth's Pastoral Support Minister (a Minister to the Ministers) and part-time at Lakeshore. Then in



2019, when the structure of the United Church of Canada changed, Kevin became the full-time Pastoral Support Minister for the three Regions west of highway 400 (which includes the Western Ontario Waterways Region of which Harcourt is a member). We enjoyed Goderich and the Lakeshore folks. While serving at Lakeshore Kevin and I were received into the United Church of Canada from the Presbyterian Church in Canada.

I was ordained in 1991, and Kevin was ordained in 1995. I served a joint United/Presbyterian Church charge in Glengarry County (near Cornwall) when I was ordained. Then I served in team ministry at St. Andrew's Presbyterian in Stratford, where our daughters Martha and Maggie were born. Following Maggie's arrival, we moved to Pictou County in Nova Scotia where Kevin served a three point charge. I was largely at home with the girls, but was able to do longer supply stints. We left Nova Scotia reluctantly, but as our parents were experiencing health concerns we felt the need to be closer to them. We then settled in London. I did supply work for a time, then served Ailsa Craig Presbyterian Church, which closed after 4 years. I then had the opportunity to work with L'Arche London – an intentional community supporting individuals with intellectual/physical disabilities. From there I had the opportunity to work as the Chaplain/Executive Director of the London Community Chaplaincy – a small ecumenical agency operating in two of the city of London's largest public housing complexes. It was challenging, engaging and fun work. After 7 years though, I was somewhat burnt out and that is when I returned to congregational ministry in Goderich.

My work with the London Community Chaplaincy was fun, intense and deeply fulfilling. I learned a lot! Being responsible for work that served two of the city's largest public housing complexes for families challenged me in new and interesting ways. We provided After School programs 4 days a week on two sites, which involved about 120 children. We provided advocacy for the adults in the community, connected them to resources, rebuilt the basketball court on one site, sent 50 plus children to camp each summer and ran Summer youth leadership programs. Partnerships and networks were key to the ability to facilitate so many different

programs. This is what continues to interest me in a congregational context, and I know that is what Council is pursuing with the assistance of the Trinity Foundation Consultants.

Kevin and I are excited to be in Guelph and I am grateful to have the opportunity to join with you at Harcourt to offer my listening ear, leadership skills, experience and passion. I can't wait to get to know you! Please feel welcome to drop into the office (I will be there most mornings, although I usually take Mondays off), or send me an email and I would be happy to come to you or visit over the phone. The best email to reach me is kateharcourtucc@gmail.com or on my cell phone, 519-670-1535.

May God bless our journey together. Peace, Kate

"Holy Child, born of a singing Mother"

Sally Foster Fulton, "Hope Was Heard Singing", wild goose publications 2013

Holy child,
born of a singing mother,
you come into the world and call us to sing —
of the marvellous works that are to come —
of the love in our hearts when we open them to each other —
of the life that you have come to pour into us . . .

But so often we do not sing.
We don't even hum.
Sometimes we can't even hear the tune.

Forgive our monotone lives,
for seeing darkness rather than light,
for hearing bad news,
rather than magnificent music,
for living with dread
rather than delight.
Redeem us, enliven us.
Give us hope in our lives and a song on our lips.

Help us to sing: help us to fin our won tune in you. **Amen.**

Council News

Lorraine Holding, Chair



As year-end approaches and annual Christmas letters are written, my thoughts scan all that Harcourt has accomplished this year. More on that in my summary for the Annual Report. However, our November 16th Council meeting highlighted continued progress and challenges.

- As a joint meeting with eleven Chairs of committees/teams, we welcomed Kate Ballagh-Steeper into the life of Harcourt. Each person contributed to her orientation by sharing an update on progress about a key task/challenge since our June gathering. Yes, significant work has been carried out towards creating Harcourt's future. That includes some "next near steps" toward our visioning priorities: building partnerships; spiritual life; worship; and supporting the growth of Manna.
- Our financial challenges continue. As requested by Finance Committee to assist with cash flow management, Council approved an additional transfer of \$30,000 from the Trustee investments to the operating budget to assist in ongoing 2022 expenses. To support our various ministries, we appreciate all givings that will be received by December 31.
- On behalf of Finance Committee, Brian Magee also presented an initial draft of the 2023 budget. Work will continue in preparation for approval at the March 5th Congregational Annual Meeting.
- Council members have participated in two recent meetings of the governing bodies of Guelph United Ministries (GUM) churches. The need to discuss "hard questions" and take some next steps affects each community of faith. Council has affirmed that we support continued and increased action to determine the future of GUM.

In this third virus-impacted season of Advent and Christmas, may we find hope, peace, love and joy in safe and healthy connections with others.

With faith and hope



Financial Update

Brian Magee, Chair of Finance

For the 3rd financial quarter of 2022, I am pleased to report that there is some good news. Not great news but some good news. With reduced expenses for the period and generous donations, the leak in the dam has been reduced. However, there is still a long way to go. The leak needs to be completely stopped and the dam needs to be rebuilt.

For last quarter of 2022, expenses will be higher due to the approach of winter and the related costs. The Property Committee has been holding off on needed repairs and projects. Some will have to be completed. There are a number of in-house and outreach related projects that will require funding by year end. These expenses will help Harcourt to move forward in implementing the visioning goals of the congregation.

Rentals have recently gained momentum and will help to offset some of our expenses.

Thank you to those who have continued to financial support Harcourt. However, we do need additional financial support. If you are a long-time donor, a relatively new donor or have not yet decided to financially donate to Harcourt, please consider making Harcourt a priority in your charity budget.

We all want Harcourt to flourish, not fade. To be able to provide worship, music, spiritual guidance, and a place to belong not only for the congregation (live or virtual) but also for the community.

Please help Harcourt to stop the leak this year and begin to repair the dam 2023.

Financial Summary 3rd Quarter

			<u>Septembe</u>	
<u>SOURCE</u>	<u>July</u>	<u>August</u>	<u>r</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
Donations	38,365	27,429	24,381	90,175
Other Income	3,954	2,654	9,892	16,500
Total Revenue	42,319	30,083	34,273	106,675
Total Expenses	29,279	29,998	39,315	98,592
Surplus/Deficit	13,040	85	-5,042	-8,083
2022 Accumulated				
	-			
Surplus/Deficit	72,979	-72,853	-77,882	

Talup

Food for the Journey:

A fresh encounter with the birth narratives:

Giving Jesus's birth a second look!

Bill Lord for the Spiritual Life Committee



Introduction

The text of the four gospels were written to address a specific audience about what makes the life of Jesus so important. There are only two however, Matthew and Luke, that contain specific birth narrative stories. Mark and John have very different perspective regarding how Jesus arrived in the world. Within the popular culture the unique elements of these two stories are woven together into one. So, much of art features a blended picture with the baby Jesus being adored by both shepherds and wisemen present at the manger. The commercialism in our world finds this time of year great for business.

This advent, the Spiritual Life committee is inviting you to explore in detail the text to discover the original witness about Jesus. After your reflection on the historical importance of these anti-imperialistic narratives, then think about what they might mean for us today. Remember the gospels were written somewhere between the years 60 and 90 of the Common Era. We need the reminder that they were not written for us but were written to speak to a particular situation. The country was under Roman rule and violence was the way to deal with the challenge from the Christian community. Their witness to Jesus was certainly a threat to the royal powers of the day.

Mark's Gospel

This is the earliest gospel. It begins not with a birth story but with Jesus going out to meet John the Baptist before his baptism. Perhaps we would like to ask the author a specific question regarding why a birth story was omitted?

John's Gospel

John's gospel looks at Jesus presence in the world from a radically different approach. It begins with a theological emphasis on the Word ("logos" = blueprint) which was with God from the time of creation. and then talks about the Word becoming flesh. The assumption was that Jesus was present from the beginning of time and was part of the creation story. John's gospel continues to focus on the divine nature of Jesus much more than his humanness. So, Jesus was there from the beginning!

Matthew's Gospel

It is believed that this gospel was written for a Jewish community. It seeks to root Jesus very strongly in the historical tradition of Judaism. There are numerous quotes in the text from the Hebrew scriptures. The author wanted to make very sure that people made connections with the tradition and the understanding within the tradition of the Messiah. The appearance of angel is to Joseph in contrast to Luke and the visit to Mary. It's interesting to note that Jesus is portrayed as the new Moses. Hence the flight to Egypt.

Scholars believe that both Matthew and Luke had access to Mark's gospel. Could it be that in fact that both authors wanted to deal with the silence in Mark? The story in Matthew is the current Lectionary reading for the Christmas season this year.

Luke's Gospel

Scholars believe this gospel was written for a gentile audience. It is very counter cultural and anti-imperialistic. it begins with the Annunciation to Mary and her role in becoming the mother of Jesus. Mary goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth during the pregnancy. Luke is the one who also has Jesus being born in Bethlehem. The announcement of his birth is made to the marginalized shepherds. The focus is on being born in a stable. The family returns directly to Nazareth with no side trip to Egypt.

Our situation

This Advent we are facing the continuing presence of a mutating virus, violence in the streets, raging wars in several places in the world with the resulting increase in refugees and suffering. The four gospels sought to deliver the good news for their world that Jesus represented. We are asking ourselves what the good news of Jesus birth for our world is?

So, the clear invitation for us this Christmas season is to seek a deeper understanding of the counter cultural nature of Jesus's life. We need to pay close attention to each text and its meaning in its original context.

Two New Testament scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan suggested that one not spend a lot of time with these stories as historical facts but rather as parables. Jesus used parables throughout his teaching ministry. Parables grab attention and cause individuals to become involved and think. Jesus did not intend people to ask, who was the prodigal son or the good Samaritan or the farmer who threw seeds in reckless abandon. These parables were a wake-up call to discover a viable alternative to the powerful world of empire. What do we have to unlearn to learn a fresh Understanding?

The Spiritual Life Committee will be offering a detailed guide for your devotional reflection during advent. It will be available in print form and on the Harcourt website,

or here: https://harcourtuc.ca/assets/uploads/2022/11/Advent-2022-Handout-A.pdf

Book by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan The *First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Birth* url: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fk90WDo90_0
Borg and Crossan discussing their book. (Listening time 12 minutes)

My current image of God

Sharon Chapman

A working definition of my Image of God leaves me with more questions than answers. I tend to draw a blank when someone asks me this question. I need something concrete, something practical that I can work with, live through, offer to others.

BUT, as I pondered the idea I began to see a multiplicity of images. Images that touched my imagination and began to create a tapestry, like, picture a tapestry with colour, and texture, differing fabrics. A sense of smell, feel, taste, sight......

I was conscious that my image encompassed tears. Tears of joy, of happiness, of sadness, of hurt. Tears that flowed unendingly, tears that hesitated yet came without cause. I was conscious of laughter and anger, deep abiding love, friendship, and family. I was conscious of rainfall and drought, of winter and summer, of new growth and death. The interconnectedness of each person, each life, each tree in the forest, each bird and insect that fill our skies. The beauty of our landscape, the ravages of mining and clear cuts, and pollution. And I was aware of the interconnectedness of each of us and our world with its wars, and celebrations, its beauty and destruction and I realized that ALL of this good, bad and indifferent for me is GOD.....



My IMAGE of God....

Life itself is an intricately designed and lived out embrace with the creator of all. I cannot say that any part of life is without God nor enhances the presence of God, yet God is present and penetrates all.

As the Psalmist says in Psalm 139....

"Where can I go from your Spirit

Or where can I flee from your presence".....

"Your hand shall lead me

Your right hand will hold me fast". Vs. 7 & 10

An Interview with Jean Hume: Judi Morris

Marion suggested that I interview Jean Hume for the December Herald. Jean attended the 10:30 service and I the 9:00 o'clock service. Our paths did not cross that often. Still, I knew Jean from her involvement with "All Things Christmas", and knew she is very nice and giving of her time to Harcourt over the years. I knew she is a remarkably talented quilter and she donated beautiful, quilted items to the Christmas sale every year; but that was not enough for an interview. I had to call around to find out why Marion Auger felt she would be someone I might enjoy interviewing....and what I found is, she couldn't be righter. Jean may be a small woman in stature but has led a very big life.

Rather than respond to my questions in interview fashion, Jean wrote them in a story which I am delighted to share with you. The thing is, Jean is extremely modest. She did not tell you that I have learned from reliable source that Jean has been instrumental at keeping Caroline Harcourt group going over the past years and taught Sunday School for years. She also didn't tell you how she coordinated, with Anne Parsons, organizing a sewing group, "Days for Girls". This is an international group that sews needed menstrual items for girls worldwide. Jean worked with a committee in the Village by The Arboretum to serve international students an annual Christmas dinner and evening of entertainment. Anne Parsons and Sya VanGeest were the organizers of that program.

These efforts came out of her trip to Africa where she learned how difficult life is for African girls and international students.

<u>Jean Hume - a persistent giver and worker.</u>

Life is Good

Jean Hume



My preschool years were lived in Listowel across the road from the high school where there was always activity to entertain me as the military trained their cadets for active duty for WWII on the school grounds. Our family moved to Brantford where I started into kindergarten and kindly brought the red measles, mumps and chicken pox home to share with my two brothers. First we were city dwellers but eventually moved out of the city on to Tutela Heights Road, three houses down from the Alexander

Graham Bell Museum where I spent many hours pretending to be a telephone operator.

Disciplining me seemed to be my teachers' favourite occupation! My grade five teacher laid me face down on her desk and in front of the class pounded out her frustrations on my bottom.. Another teacher got his fright when I went to step back from the strap and stumbled onto the hot water pipes blistering my forearms. I often met my youngest brother out in the hallways when we were both being punished, me for talking and him for his misunderstood dyslexia.

High School brought all kinds of opportunities for me to talk as I entered many public speaking contests and took lead rolls in drama productions. Needing to be disciplined also followed me to university where I was brought before the Disciplinary Committee more than

once for missing curfew. There were memorable years at Guelph that set me up for my future. Not only did I meet the man of my life there but one of my professors, Edith Bray, invited me to attend church with her and introduced me to Harcourt Memorial United Church in the Fall of 1960.

After graduating from my Dietetic Internship at Toronto Sick Children's Hospital, I married Dave and joined him at Iowa State University. I worked in food service while he completed his PhD. When Dave was invited to be a faculty member at the University of Guelph our careers and family began back here.

His position created life changing opportunities and adventures. We spent two amazing years in Ghana, West Africa where I learned first-hand what Culture Shock was all about. It certainly gave us a better understanding of what foreign students were coping with as they arrived to study at the U of G. I did volunteer work at the Well Baby Clinic at the hospital on the campus. While there I became quite disturbed at what I saw. "Christian Organizations" teaching, not giving any thought to integrating the African good beliefs and behaviour with Christian ideals.



On the way home from Ghana we spent time at a Christian Hospice on the outskirts of Old Jerusalem and toured the sites in Israel of many of the Biblical stories I had been taught in Sunday School. I would love to go back there again.

After our return I was asked by the Margaret Rose Group to speak about the women in Ghana. I spoke and showed slides for almost two hours!!! Those poor women when I think of what I must have put them through.

Four years later, Dave applied to spend his sabbatical in New Zealand. It was a tough decision to make as my father was dying of bone cancer. He encouraged us to go and with the guidance of John Buttars we were able to handle saying our goodbyes. Only the "head of the family" was allowed to work in New Zealand at the time so I joined the Spinners and Weavers guild and made wonderful friends. We did a lot of "Trekking" while in this beautiful country. Upon our return I was offered a job teaching Food Labs at U of G - a job I dearly loved for fifteen years.

During early retirement I became a victim of Breast Cancer. While in recovery a friend talked me into joining a



breast cancer dragon boat team. I had never in my life been an athlete but the thrill of racing was one of the most rewarding adventures in my life.

Volunteering with the Puslinch Agricultural Fair Board, being a member of the Womens' Institute, the Go Go Grandmothers and the Harcourt Women's Friendship Circle kept me busy all the while caring for my mother's needs, making my daughter's wedding dress and the dresses for my son's bridesmaids and welcoming into the world four precious grandchildren.

Aging has introduced some challenges. After moving into the Village by the Arboretum Retirement Community I scaled back on some activities. I attend aqua fit and never miss the coffee hour after each session! I do belong to a sewing group here in the Village where we make feminine hygiene kits for girls in developing countries so that they may attend school EVERY day. The loss of so many dear friends and mentors from our Caroline Harcourt group has been very saddening for me. Hopefully in the near future those of us who are able will be rid of the fear of COVID so that we can be together again sharing laughter and stories and devotions.



What God Feeds My Spirit Now.

Rosalind Slater

When I was a child I thought as a child, but I did as I was told by my elders. My picture of God was an old man like my Grandfather. He was the one in the household who ruled the roost, called the shots etc. That is until one day mother surprised all of us by speaking back. She put her foot down in no uncertain words and told him: "If Sunday is the day of rest for all the family then that includes me and from now on I'll come to church with all of you and you can eat sandwiches for lunch and I won't have to labour over a hot stove to provide you with a roast." My mother's outburst caused quite a stir in the household, we all liked our cooked

lunch, especially Granddad and he didn't like his daughter- in- law taking over. He was the boss. He was also the arbiter of all things Christian in our house and he didn't like to have his faults pointed out to him.

It was a short time after that, that mother came home early from a trustees meeting at church and announced that the trustees had asked her to act as Granddad's secretary from now on because he and his friend John could not agree on an issue and she was needed to keep the peace between them. The people at church had obviously worked out the situation and realized that his daughter-in-law was the only one who had control over him and in her they had a gem. She had come home to break it to the family, as only she knew how and in so doing save Granddad from embarrassment. Actually he took it well, especially when Mum started to cook his favourite foods on Saturdays ready to have treats on Sundays. And as one was trifle I was happy too because it was one of my favourites as well. Much appeased after this, Granddad stopped getting mad with me and sat quietly at the weekends. I did try to get away with knitting on a Sunday but didn't manage it because we all knew Sunday was the day of rest and knitting in our house was considered labour.

So after growing up with this bossy picture of God, the idea of God as a little sweet, cuddly baby bringing peace and joy was a new image that I liked. God as a spirit who walked beside me and supported me in difficult times was one that I met in later life and is the one that I still cling to.

This third image of God came to me very clearly one day when I was very worried about Keith. He'd almost overturned his wheelchair in the roadway and if it hadn't been for our Grandson Oliver he would have been done for and I don't know how I would have handled the situation but Oliver, a big athletic boy, jumped under the front wheels and levered the chair back to its right position. I immediately thought about the poem 'footsteps in the sand', if Oliver hadn't had the idea to jump under the wheels I don't know what I'd have done, and I realized that we were not alone, God had heard my unspoken prayer and inspired Oliver to act as he did. Thank God. Keith was with us for many more years after this.



What/Who is God for Me?

Andre Auger

Recently at a worship service, I became so aware that, every time we pray to God, each one of us is probably praying to something or someone different. It's almost as if the word "God" has become a sort of place-holder for each person's personal understanding. I keep asking myself: to whom or to what are we <u>really</u> praying? Thus, this month's question in the Herald seems so timely: what do I indeed understand by this "God" to whom <u>I pray?</u>

I remember my childhood Catechism: "What is God? God is a pure spirit." To this young child, this conjured up images of a ghost wearing some kind of sheet... What was a "pure spirit" anyway?... We were also told that God was our Father and loved us like a father. But through the eighties, stories of abuse of women at the hands of their father tainted this image for me forever. Then we have the Jewish Testament: full of images of a powerful wrathful being who punished people through some kind of manipulation of world events, including invading armies and floods and droughts. Christian Scripture offers us a God who impregnates a 15-year-old virgin to have a "son," and I prayed "In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost" (later "Spirit.") Worse still, I was taught that God was actually "one God in three persons" — the above-mentioned Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then we have the traditional view of the story of salvation where humans offended God by disobeying; this God required punishment, but because of "His" love "sent" His "son" to die on our behalf to reconcile us to Himself. Add to this that two thousand years of Christian painting convinced many of us that God was an old man, sitting "in Heaven," on a throne, being attended to by angels and the "company of saints."

Then I studied Philosophy and learned that God was "Prime Mover" and essentially impassive and untouched by world events because "He" was perfect, and perfect beings cannot be changed or improved because, precisely, they were perfect. Created reality, I was taught was flawed, corruptible, imperfect, and inferior. So why would a perfect God create anything?

Over time, I realized that this cobbled theological edifice was collapsing on me, and fast. Then came the full impact of the discoveries of the immensity of the universe, made entirely of matter which was also energy and beyond which is nothing — nothing, not even space: nothing! Where, then, was "Heaven"? What could "spirit" possibly be? The New Atheists would like to convince us that there can not be such a being as "God." Atheism is now the dominant view in the educated Western world.

Along came Bishop Robinson's *But That I Can't Believe* in the 60s, and I was freed to reflect critically on the contradictory nature of our images of God. Fortunately for me as well, I

discovered a generation of theologians and biblical scholars who had started writing for laypeople works of such profundity and reasonableness that I was tempted only briefly to toy with the dominant atheism. Many of us have read these: Marcus Borg, John Spong, John Dominic Crossan, Karen Armstrong, to name but a few. So now the "God" I invoke is nothing like the "God" of my youth, and my faith has rejected most of its traditional interpretations. Far from watering down my faith, however, I have forged, I believe, a far more coherent, believable, and relevant theology than I ever had.

I start my current — albeit still imperfect - image of God with my understanding of the created order. As traditional theology reminds us, Creation is the first revelation of God. I go slightly further: I contend that the Universe is the concrete actualization of God's infinite potential. Again borrowing from Medieval theology, updated perhaps, I consider God to be "ipsum esse subsistens," or "Being" itself. (Remember Moses and the burning bush? God declares Godself to be YHWH - "I am who am." A brilliant insight well ahead of its time!) "Being" is a verb, as in "be-ing." The act of being. The creative, always creating and expanding and growing and complexifiying act of Being. The Universe is the fruit of the on-going outpouring of this creative "Being." Franciscan theologian Bonaventure liked to call this First Person of the Trinity the "Ineffable Fount of Being."

From this Fount of Being pours out the created order because actual being is richer than potential being. Thus, the Universe is "God made matter." ("In the beginning was the Word.... and the Word became..." matter!) God does not create like a potter creates, as Isaiah proposed. It's more like the way a dancer creates: so long as the Dancer dances, the dance of creation exists. God is <u>in</u> creation the way the dancer is <u>in</u> the dance. This created actualization of the Ineffable Fount of Being is the Second Person of the Trinity. It is the "Divine Milieu" the French Jesuit Paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin talked about, in which we "live and move and have our being," to quote St Paul. Some theologians like the Franciscan Fr. Richard Rohr call this "the Christ" – God's "anointed." The "Christ" is "everything always."Jesus was a perfect example of what it means for a human to be "Christ." But the Christ itself is much more than Jesus: it is cosmic in scope. I came to see that Paul's concept of the Christ makes a lot more sense when seen through this lens.

Finally, this Second Person is dynamic, always growing, always creating, always becoming more complex and more conscious according to the dynamism of evolution. This self-transcending drive is the Spirit of God, the Third Person of the Trinity. Many theologians have called that dynamism "love" — the affirmation of everything into the fullness of its being, whatever that is. And all of this works on the fulfilment of the Ineffable Font of Being. The Trinity is a circle dance! "Perichoresis" was the term the early Christian theologians chose for this process.



My problem with this cosmic vision of God, though, is that its concept of God is so vast as to risk becoming impersonal, and I need to explain my deep sense of God's intimate Presence within me. Fortunately, theologian and United Methodist minister Paul R. Smith suggests that we can best make sense of our relationship with this vast "Ground of All Being" (Paul Tillich) by filtering our understanding of our complex relationship with God through the grammatical structure of the three "persons," - It, (3rd person) Thou, (2nd person) and I (1st person). The first two will be familiar to readers of Martin Buber. Of my three approaches to God, I can speak <u>about</u> God (3rd person, "God is thus and such"); I can speak <u>with</u> God, (2nd person - as when I pray to God or listen for God's Voice); finally, I can act <u>on behalf of</u> (or "as") God, (1st person – as when I act out of loving kindness on God's behalf.) Together these account for my attempt to understand God, to relate to God, and to help bring about God's Kingdom.

Thus my image of God is now, for me, "big" enough to account for the Universe, intimate enough to make sense of my personal relationship, and compelling enough for me to define my life in terms of manifesting God. In this context, I see prayer as aligning myself to the dynamic Presence of Spirit coursing through the Universe, "coaxing" it toward its blossoming. And I can do my small part.

So what of Christmas – since we're preparing for it again? What replaces a God-out-there impregnating a virgin in order to give birth to a "Son"? What do I celebrate instead? I celebrate that, in the evolution of the universe, at least one human was open enough to God's Presence that he turned himself fully over to that Presence. We have been, in turn, called to do likewise. Called to be, as it were "Humanity 2.0"; humanity driven not by our self-centred egos, but by the unconditional love of God. A few have managed the feat. But then again, it's only been a little over two thousand years. In the evolutionary scale of things, this is but a fleeting moment: humanity is still in diapers. More and more of us will get it. Eventually. In the meantime, I celebrate this evolutionary milestone that Jesus represents! And I remind myself of Teilhard's advice: if you want to love God, fall in love with Creation.



My View of God

Karen Wendling

I came to God late in life. I was raised an atheist, but my mother, an ex-Catholic, was the lead soprano in a Catholic Church when they still had Latin masses, so we went to church every Sunday. My sibs and I sat in the choir box and tried not to get in trouble. The Catholics in Detroit that I grew up with were very progressive, and I liked and respected them.

Fast-forward nearly sixty years later, and I find myself searching for something to ground my beliefs. Secular humanism comfortably grounds my beliefs about human value. But I cannot explain why I think my cat, wild animals, and the environment have inherent value, separate from humans and what we value. The Christian theologian Paul Tillich describes God as "the ground of all being," but I don't find that satisfying. What I'm seeking is something that grounds human and non-human value, not bare existence.

I used to joke that, if faith is an organ, I was born without it. I envied the progressive Christians I knew, but I seemed to lack the capacity to believe. In one of her books, Karen Armstrong describes Christianity as an outlier among religions because it focusses on orthodoxy, correct belief. Most religions focus on orthopraxy, she says, correct practice. In *The Case for God* she describes religion as a discipline, and lights go off in my head. Faith can arise out of disciplined practices. I have mild OCD, so I get disciplined practices.

At Harcourt, I found the other thing I was seeking: a progressive community of thoughtful people who live their faith. The Holy Listening Circle has been my lifeline. Every week we discuss a passage from Scripture, and it's been, pardon the pun, a revelation for me. I came for God and found Jesus' radical message of love and equality. I believe Jesus was a prophet; if he was the son of God then all of us are daughters and sons of God, because I think God must be a democrat. I find some parts of the Bible difficult, especially the passages about a wrathful God. But I listen and participate, and I keep coming back. I have much more learning to do, especially concerning discipline, but I've found a home where I can do it.

To me, God is the ground of meaning, value, infinite love, and maximum equality. It's not a neat view, but then neither is reality.

The Case

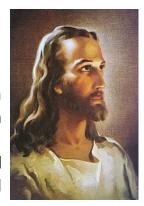
for God

KAREN ARMSTRONG

My Current Vision of God

Judi Morris

Sallman's print, the 'Head of Christ' hung in St. Paul's United Church Sunday School basement and had a special light at the top. That vision from my early Sunday School years is forever imprinted in my mind. At the time I figured his father, God, would have looked the same only grey haired and wrinkled. Whenever I thought of or prayed to God, I had this same visual which remained with me well into adulthood.



This question of my current vision of God is one that has me asking questions. What was my Grandmother's vision of God? She raised me and ... she lived to 101. I cannot recall for one moment her ever questioning and changing her faith, trust, and beliefs as I have over the past 25 years. She never wavered, she remained strong until her end. She, above anyone influenced my beliefs.

I worshipped God and Jesus; however the Holy Ghost evaded me until I began to hear it referred to as Holy Spirit. I was well into mid adulthood before the Holy Spirit had much of an affect on me. I immersed myself in Christianity as a youth and wanted to be a Roman Catholic so I could cross myself when I prayed, kneel in church and have Jesus on my cross necklace. Catholics, it appeared to me, were serious about Christianity. The United Church had no nuns... I wanted to be one of them too ... there was just nothing. Being a Protestant was most certainly boring.

The questions of my youth plagued me throughout my life. Especially people getting spoken to, and miracles happening. No voices ever spoke to me or anyone I knew and there had been no miracles and I wanted them. I wanted poor people to have enough to eat and to be warm in the winter. Miracles like the seven loaves and five fishes was badly needed in Windsor where layoffs in the vehicle sector were regular and often at Christmas. In my mind the waters of the Detroit River needed to be parted and robbers and murderers enticed into the riverbed then drowned. God had his ways, did he not, of dealing with wicked people? It never happened.

The early part of my teenage life had been spent at a cottage on Lake Erie. I had a connection with water... it richly fed my spirit – it spoke to me. Not only the lake but the inland lakes and creeks infused within my spirit. Fast forward to my involvement with horses and owning a farm. Forests, fields, wild animals and swamps replaced the water. My spirit feels strongly connected with them all.

My visions of God from my upbringing no longer feed me, yet I am acutely aware of the power of God constantly around. I have had several experiences which gave me pause and wonder was that God or coincidence ... all the while I knew God was there.

I have come to believe that God is the energy of the earth and that energy we call God. The book we are working through in Women's Spirituality, <u>One Drum</u>, by Richard Wagamese, implies a similar understanding. We have been given this earth to live on, to be our home and as such we need to live on it with gratitude and respect. We need to take care of it or it will be taken from us.

Who has not laid on their back, marvelled at clouds, stars, sun rays from the sky to the earth and been touched by all of it? How often have we heard people comment about feeling God's presence in nature? "For the Beauty of the Earth," a hymn of thanksgiving written by Anglican educator and poet Folliott S. Pierpoint (1835–1917) speaks clearly to this. Science has proven spending thirty minutes a week in forests helps children's brains grow. With this information forest schools are appearing around the world – a few in Ontario and close to Guelph. Renowned Scientist and Druid, Dr. Diana Beresford Kroeger, tells us in several of her books, how the energy of trees affects on our health and wellbeing.

Rev. John Buttars once presented us with his paraphrase of the Lord's prayer. It sent many of us home to create our own. Mine begins with: "Ever loving God who dwells within me." I wrote that because I feel the energy and blessings of God lives within me.

My current vision of God is clear ... God is the energy of the earth, and as such dwells within us all. It/God is always there, beside us, below us, above us, to guide, heal and direct us. This to me is the Original Blessing Celtic Christians believed in and followed.

I believe this energy knows all and the power of this energy can be called upon and moved by prayer. Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I amongst them sticks with me.

To me...this is the grace of God at work.



My (current) image of God

Carolyn Davidson

My mental image of God has - thankfully - evolved considerably from the stern and

@UnvirtuousAbbey

Actual photo of the Holy Spirit letting you know there's plenty of room under there.



judgmental "bearded old guy in the sky" of my Presbyterian upbringing. (Although, some days I still catch myself!)

One of my favourite internet "memes" is the collection of photos shared by "The Unvirtuous Abbey." The subject is usually a bird, accompanied by some variation of the caption "Actual photo of the Holy Spirit..." For example, there's the eagle with a snake in its claws, titled "Actual photo of the Holy Spirit with your insecurities." Or the redtailed hawk giving me a piercing look: "Actual photo of the Holy Spirit waiting for you to do the right thing."

Clearly these somewhat irreverent images are intended to entertain, and yet I never fail to be comforted, encouraged, or inspired by them. They remind me of Jesus's lament over Jerusalem in Matthew 23, verse 27: "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings..."

I'll choose a blue-footed booby reminding me to reapply

my sunscreen over the "bearded old guy in the sky" any day.

God Actually

Lynn Hancock

Q: What image of God currently feeds you? Why?

A: As impossible as it is for me to imagine an image of God, per se, I choose to believe that God is love. So when I witness/hear of an expression of love, an act of kindness, I am reassured. Comforted. Soothed. Inspired. Hopeful.

LOVE ACTUALLY, a movie released in 2003, was promoted as a "Christmas-themed romantic comedy", written and directed by Richard Curtis. Thanks to computer and internet technology, I soon found the opening line from Love Actually: "Whenever I get gloomy with the state of the world, I think about the arrivals gate at Heathrow Airport. General opinion is starting to make out that we live in a world of hatred and greed, but I don't see that. It seems to me that love is

everywhere. Often, it's not particularly dignified or newsworthy, but it's always there – fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, husbands and wives, boyfriends, girlfriends, old friends. When the planes hit the twin towers, as far as I know, none of the phone calls from the people on board were messages of hate or revenge – they were all messages of love. If you look for it, I've got a sneaky feeling that love actually is all around.

Apparently, I wasn't the only one who wanted to refresh my memory of the beginning of that movie. Very powerful images indeed! If I substitute God for love, God is everywhere......they were all messages of God......God actually is all around.

When I watched/listened to the choral concert in the sanctuary at Harcourt on Saturday night, Nov. 5th, via livestream, I was aware of the energy in that space. Folks were singing; using their voices to express love and compassion. I could say that I saw powerful images of God at work; as St. Teresa of Avila would say: "Christ has no body now on earth but yours."

On Sunday, Nov. 6th, I was able to attend the in-person sanctuary service, welcoming Rev. Kate to Harcourt. There was an amazing energy in that space and I remember thinking that, regardless of an unknown future, THAT was a GOOD DAY! Hallelujah! I was feeling an energy that inspired me, uplifted me, comforted me and gave me hope. Acts of kindness and generosity feed my soul. If Christ has no body now on earth but ours, our work is cut out for us. We have freedom to choose. Let's choose love. For God's sake, let's choose love.



My Current Image of God

Donna Chapman

How do I begin to even to describe my vision, my image of God? I think for most of my life God just was. My belief involved a lot of certainty - God created the world. God kept sustaining the world. God



was Spirit. God through Jesus died for us. We would end up in heaven if we took Jesus as "our personal Lord and Saviour". Then some where in the last decade and more, in the complexity of life, my lived experienced, the God I envisioned became more Holy Mystery than a Deity of Certainty. And that Mystery is hard to live with! Some days I perceive God as a presence so indescribably tangible that my whole being is enveloped by warmth and love. Some days I fear God is only a figment of my need - a figment of my imagination because of my need. And yet the universe crackles with some kind of relationality of energy that births all creation. The sheer vastness of the cosmos with moons, planets, stars gases, nebulae, and galaxies stacked on galaxies is more than this little brain can take in. I cannot begin to absorb what can be seen through the James Webb telescope much less comprehend whatever, whoever may permeate infinity.

And yet down to earth I have mundane things to consider. Each day I work in a hospital that tells me medical science can do amazing things and yet fails to successfully treat many patients. I tell my patients that I am the organization's small gesture that says we are more than our physical body - we are also our fears, our hopes, our thoughts, our determination, our doubts and our faith. And if we are more than just breathing beings, than what of the Ground of All Being? Each day as a Spiritual Care Practitioner I know I cannot alone listen to, hold space for, journey with - those suffering and dying. As I look at the bewildered and fearful face of a patient I hear the words the United Church's statement of faith - "We are not alone. We live in God's world." I have seen a couple of miracles and I have seen many unanswered pleas for help. I have had unexpected life changing encounters I would have missed except that the Universe drew me there as it disrupted my plans and schedules. I am not alone and yet most days I struggle to know who is with me.

Does God fully participate in all of life and I just sometimes don't see it, or believe it or pay attention to it? Does God fully participate in all of life around me? Possibly... Probably... Most certainly! It's just that some days I believe it and some days I don't. Which day is it today?

(Rev. Donna Chapman is a Spiritual Care Practitioner (aka Chaplain) at University Hospital London and has been 35 years in Baptist ministry but with United Church roots. Since the pandemic took the Holy Listening group onto Zoom, she has been a regular member of this Harcourt gathering. She disavows any familial connection to Bill Chapman, just 41 years of deep friendship and fun with him and Sharon.)

A Unique rather Playful Image of God

Arlene Davies-Fuhr

What comprises an image of God for me? I am enamoured with the common Western phenomenon of the Northern Lights, or Aurora Borealis. In Edmonton, where we lived for 34 years, Bryan and I would often walk our dog in the crisp, clear, night air. Many evenings, we would glance up and be mesmerized by dancing, dynamic Aurora that swirled and graced the darkness with shimmering yellowish-green light and graceful, breath-taking movement. On rare occasions, reds, blues, and violets would be present amid the green. We never knew when this blessed image would spontaneously burst upon us and this, too, is very much like the God moments I have had the privilege of experiencing.

Angela Abraham writes, "The aurora lights come as if God is writing 'hope' with electric-neon crayon." The Aurora represents a caring, energizing Creator who is present in the darkest of times. One who is capable of enlivening, restoring, even enriching the blackness.. For Aurora, the darkness of night is necessary in order to showcase the stunning colours and pulsating movements. Like God whose eternal and everlasting presence is palpable during difficult times as well as joyful experiences. Aurora enables observers to suffer frigid temperatures then miraculously shift focus to appreciate what is beautiful and mysterious in the universe. Northern Lights are constantly altering and changing in unpredictable and unimaginable ways. I adore this aspect, also, for I think God often asks us to alter direction, change our focus, or shift our attitude.

The fact that Northern lights are elusive signifies ways we are not always aware of God's sustaining and loving presence. The symbol I have chosen represents God as heavenly and dynamic, as well as typically northern, so it is little wonder that I fervently embrace this image of God. I am unaware of any hymn that speaks of the Aurora in religious terms. Perhaps that's another reason why the Aurora are a fav for me. They are a rather unique choice, yet, in my mind a very apt, visual representation of the wonder, the magnificence, the playfulness and the mystery of our dynamic and evolving Creator.



If Music be the food of love - Play on

An Interview with Dr. Gerald Neufeld

Judi Morris

Amidst a busy life and packing to downsize and move, Dr. Gerald Neufeld still took time to speak with me.



Judi: How long have you been attending Harcourt, what brought you here and what keeps you here?

Gerald: I don't recall when Pat and I began attending Harcourt, but it must have been at least 20 years ago. I love the light from the stained-glass windows on a Sunday morning, the windows to the garden, and being inspired by the thoughts of the ministers and the music of the choir.

Judi: You have a Mennonite background, grew up in Alberta, your Father was an unpaid minister. What might you have retained from your Mennonite background in your current faith, and what might have you let go?

Gerald: Like many Mennonites, my parents learned to be grateful for the many gifts of life after they endured the hardships of World War I, the Russian Revolution, the following famine, and emigration to Canada with their families when they were young. They taught us to be grateful followers of Jesus through their actions and the way they lived. Although Dad was a minister, he seldom talked about religion and almost never about dos and don'ts. He and Mom just lived out their faith in their daily lives. I also appreciate the rigorous stance on non-violence in Mennonite belief and practice, but I have also been quite content to have lived almost 50 years outside of any Mennonite cultural context. On the other hand, three years as a music student at the Canadian Mennonite Bible College (now Canadian Mennonite University) in Winnipeg were some of my happiest years spent with wonderful people who are still among my best friends. Learning about music, liberal arts and theology from some of the most progressive instructors was exciting. CMBC is where I first learned about "critical thinking."

Judi: Where did music enter your life? At what point did it give you cause to make a career out of it?Gerald: One of my earliest childhood memories (at about age 4) was of a choir concert in our church in Tofield, Alberta, a small town near Edmonton. I was mesmerized by the conductor who seemed to elicit such beautiful music from the choir. Beginning at age 17, I was honoured to be able to study choral conducting under that choir conductor for three years. At first I thought that studying music was perhaps a one-year indulgence, but

my passion for making music together with other people since childhood only grew instead of being satisfied during three blissful years with like-minded friends. After four years of studying

music and conducting at a music academy in Germany, I was very fortunate to be able to earn a living as a music professor and choral conductor with my first job at the University of Guelph.

Judi: You were a professor of music at U of G, Western, choral director of the Guelph Chamber Choir and recently retired from it all. What do you miss and what do you not miss?

Gerald: I miss most the music, the students and the wonderful people with whom I was privileged to work. Music students are generally idealists who just want to make a better, happier, more meaningful world for other people. They are the salt of the earth. And so are and were the members of the Guelph Chamber Choir. They are very special people. However, I do not miss the many hours of administrative work, writing grant applications, and marking papers as a music prof.

Judi: You have conducted in Germany, Winnipeg, and the US. What's else is on the list?

Gerald: My first choir was in Stoney Mountain (medium security) Prison near Winnipeg. Those men seemed to reflect a vision of paradise and freedom when they sang simple songs like "I Believe". The lyrics begin

I believe for every drop of rain that falls, a flower grows, I believe that somewhere in the darkest night, a candle glows, I believe for everyone who goes astray, someone will come, To show the way; I believe, I believe.

Those men seemed to present a vision of transformation in the moment of singing together with a passion. I have experienced that hundreds of times since then when people sing together in a choir. I have had the privilege of conducting many concerts on choir tours in Canada, England, Scotland, Wales, Germany, The Netherlands, Denmark, and Sweden in cathedrals, parish churches and concert halls. Each event, from the Queen's Hall and St. Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh to small parish churches in the UK, Europe and Canada have been very special. And singers develop very close friendships on choir tours. (It was choirs that brought me together with my first wife, Elizabeth, and Pat, my present wife of 25 years. Many singers have developed closer bonds than just friendship in a choir.)

Judi: Conducting in these countries had to be different than in Guelph. Is there any one place that touched you the most? & why?

Gerald: There were many, many special moments on choir tours. One was singing in the International Eisteddfod in Llangollen, Wales, where the Guelph Chamber Choir was awarded a third prize—to our surprize. But a concert in Ebbw Vale, in Wales, originally a coal mining town, was memorable. The University of Guelph Choir shared an enjoyable concert with a rather reticent male choir from Ebbw Vale after which they hosted us with a generous meal in

their rehearsal building. After a few pints of beer, those men suddenly sang with energy, confidence and gusto that any opera singer would envy. Collaborative choral concerts, always exciting, brought out the best in people.

Judi: Is there any specific music you turn to for your pleasure and relaxation?

Gerald: I love folk music and world music as well as a variety of classical music. In retirement I have the luxury of listening to a lot of orchestral music for which I didn't have much time while balancing two very rewarding jobs as a university prof and a choral conductor.

Judi: Fewer people, these days it seems, appreciate classical music. Why do you feel that is?

Gerald: It may "seem" that fewer people appreciate classical music now but, in fact, there are many more concert halls, choirs, orchestras and private music schools, and institutions for professional music training than there were 50 years ago in Canada. This country has seen a phenomenal growth in both the number of classical music institutions and the calibre of musicians during the past half century while we have been playing catch up to European countries. Whereas there are, for example, fewer than half the opera houses and orchestras in Europe now than 70 years ago, Canada has seen a steady increase in classical music institutions.

Judi: You conducted the Messiah 33 times I believe, and with period instruments. Are period instruments more of a challenge for a choir than modern ones?

Gerald: Period instruments (instruments like those of the 17th to the 19th centuries) require specialized training to play effectively but, although they lack the loudness of "modern" instruments, they can be so much more expressive than instruments designed to be heard in large concert halls of the 20th and 21st centuries. Period instruments blend beautifully with voices and allow the details and meaning of the text to shine through. Instrumentalists who know about historical performance practice are very sensitive to the nuances of vocal and choral music and so they are wonderful musicians with whom to make music.

Judi: How do you feel the pews being replaced by chairs will affect the use of the sanctuary for performances like these?

Gerald: Harcourt Church has a very fine acoustic for both choral and instrumental music. Having comfortable chairs will be ideal for more than just concerts. There are many other events where a variety of seating configurations and setting out chairs for the number of expected attendees will, in my view, make Harcourt Church a very desirable venue for not only music but also other community events.

Judi: The November Herald had people writing about who influenced them and this month your current view of God. On that theme, who, or what ideas have shaped your beliefs and what is your current view of God?

Gerald: Having read a fair bit about religion, theology and history in my spare time I feel that it would be somewhat presumptuous of me to even attempt to articulate a view of God. However, I do believe that we all experience a sense of the divine, the transcendent, and the spiritual in our own way, often in the "still, small voice" within us. I have found books by Dominic Crossan and Karen Armstrong to be both inspiring and enlightening but I experience the ineffable most in music and nature. How can one begin to explain that for which there are no words?

Judi: You currently sit on the "Community Hub" task force. What attracted you to that group and what would you like people to know about it?

Gerald: The idea of Harcourt Church being a place for a variety of events where all are welcome seems to me to be the essence of what the church could be within a community. Given that Jesus wasn't a "Christian" (a term unknown to him—he was an observant Jew who challenged the Jewish religious establishment of his time), and that he invited everyone to follow his "way" without a temple or centre of worship, might it be that the building we call a Church could be offered as a venue for all kinds of people and organizations that just want to create a better "way" for people in our community? I'd like to be part of that endeavour.

Judi: Has music influenced your faith and if so, how?

Gerald: Music has played a central role in my love and trust in the goodness and goodwill of the people with whom I live and interact. Music can be a metaphor for the divine. A deep musical or artistic experience cannot be described in words. It is a very personal, and therefore an especially unique, experience. Is that perhaps a reflection of what faith in a divine entity might be?

Judi: What pieces of music would you recommend to experience spiritual values?

Gerald: I hesitate to recommend any music to experience spiritual values because those "values" are so personal. I can only suggest that we be open to those moments when we are transported to a realm of deep emotional experience and treasure those particular musical experiences for what they have to offer us—in the moment. They may surprise us through unexpected forms, contexts and musical genres.

Judi: If one wanted to acquaint oneself to the classics, which one would you suggest they begin with?

Gerald: Perhaps one can begin with light classics. For example, many film scores use excerpts of classical music such as Rachmaninoff or Tchaikovsky themes from symphonies and concertos. Strauss's music from "Also sprach Zarathustra" was the opening of "2001: A Space Odyssey", as I recall. Even Disney once used classical music for his cartoons that stuck in the minds of children who, later in life, found classical music concerts to be inspiring.

Judi: You and Pat helped cut branches for "All things Christmas". Had I known who you were I would have had you lead us all in song during the effort. I would have been memorable. What other classical or other music might you enjoy at Christmas besides the Messiah?

Gerald: I enjoy Christmas music from the time it was sung only in Gregorian chant through the variety of carols, hymns and songs, presented over many centuries. Christmas music is full of joy, longing and hope for a better future. Apart from its mind-numbing reincarnation as mall music, Christmas music is constantly being re-imagined and reworked using traditional carols as well as contemporary lyrics and songs celebrating the best of our Christian mythology through music.

Judi: Thank you for your time with this and on behalf of Harcourt members, we wish you and all whom you love a very Merry Christmas.





FESTIVE FLOWERS

Barb Friend, Chair Chancel Committee

We will be decorating the sanctuary with poinsettias for our services on Sunday Dec 11^{th} and Sunday Dec 18^{th} .

If you would like to donate towards the purchase of a plant in remembrance of a loved one or to honour a special occasion, please contact Barb Friend

Deadline: Dec 5th

Home #: 519-763-5032 Cell #: 519-803-5032

Email: barfriend52@gmail.com

PS: You are welcome to take your plant home following the service on Dec 18th.

Shining A Light in the Dark

Lisa Browning

I have always believed that everything happens for a reason, and that reason is our highest good. Sometimes the reason is clear, right from the beginning, while at other times it takes time for us to



realize the significance of the event. It's like putting a puzzle together. We don't know the whole story until each missing piece is in place.

This was the case for me, in November 2019, when a friend and colleague sent me an email about a documentary screening at River Run. "Thought you might be interested in this," the email read. I quickly scanned the event listing, and the words "abuse" and "addiction" jumped off the page. Because the main focus of my business, and my life, was helping to empower people who had struggled with those very things, I read no further, and registered for the event.

As it turned out, the documentary (*Prey*) was the story of one man's lengthy struggle to find recovery and receive justice for sexual abuse suffered as a child, and documented his lawsuit against the Catholic Church. And while the documentary was incredibly well done, I couldn't quite figure out why I had felt so compelled to attend. After all, sexual abuse in the Catholic Church was not an issue that I had ever even considered becoming involved in, from an empowerment perspective.

At the end of the documentary, a gentleman by the name of Bob McCabe, who had been instrumental in bringing the documentary to Guelph, got up and spoke briefly. His final words were, "Now if only we could find a way for these men to tell their stories."

Aha! Another piece of the puzzle fell into place!

I sent Bob an email and explained who I was, and what I did, and we made arrangements to meet over lunch the following week. As soon as I sat down, I felt like I had known him forever. So many synchronicities. We knew a lot of the same people, and we had been at

several of the same events. And certainly, our passion for helping people who had experienced trauma was a common bond.

Over lunch, Bob told me about Recovery Speaking Initiative (RSI), a charity he was in the process of establishing, designed to provide advocacy and support to those in recovery from the trauma of sexual abuse and addiction. When he asked me if I would consider being on the board of directors, I knew I didn't have to "consider" it at all. I told him right then and there that I would be honoured to serve in that capacity.

Through my work on the board, and the people I have met as a result of my affiliation with RSI, my resilience in the aftermath of my own trauma has strengthened. I had the honour of publishing an anthology of empowerment stories in support of RSI (aptly titled: *What A Gift!*), and I was overwhelmed by not only the courage of each and every writer, but also by the fact that several of them told me that the opportunity to share their stories — to be heard — was life-changing.

In *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari*, author Robin Sharma said, "You have the capacity to be more than a prisoner of your past." Brianna Wiest (*The Mountain Is You*) expands on this point by saying, "Though you cannot change what happened in the past, by shifting your perspective of it, you can change how you are right now. You can change the story, and you can change your life." I know that Bob would agree with this as much as I do.

For more information about Recovery Speaking Initiative, visit www.recoveryspeaking.org.



Another Glimpse into Harcourt's Past -

Christmas Is a Time of Giving

Marilyn Whiteley



In the weeks before Christmas we shop for gifts for family and friends. If we have planned far enough ahead, we may make some of our gifts. We wrap presents and fill stockings. Yes, Christmas is a time for giving—and not just for family and friends. It is a time to give to those in need, and Harcourt has a long tradition of making such gifts.



One example of this was the mitten tree. In 1971, members of the United Church Women invited the women in the congregation to join them in decorating a Christmas tree with mittens, scarves, caps, and socks. The tree was placed in the greeting area just outside the sanctuary, and soon it drooped with the weight of its woolly ornaments. Sometime before Christmas, the UCW members packed the contributions and sent them to the Red Lake Indian Reserve. Why Red Lake? Harcourt had two connections there. Winnifred McDougall, sister of Harcourt member Al Singleton, worked in the area as a public health nurse, and the nephew of Louise McLean, wife of Harcourt's minister, Don McLean, had worked there. For many years, the cheerful mitten tree decorated the greeting area of Harcourt for several weeks before Christmas, and many heads, hands, and feet were warmed as a result.

Long before the beginning of the mitten tree, Harcourt had another tradition of giving. People brought gifts wrapped in white paper. Where, you may wonder, did the tradition of "white gifts" come from? I wondered, so I looked it up. Its history goes back to the first decade of the twentieth century at a small church in Ohio. The wife of a minister there suggested that Sunday school children bring gifts for those in need. Of course, some could afford to bring expensive gifts while others could only provide modest ones. So she suggested that all the gifts be wrapped in white paper. Thus the givers would feel neither pride nor embarrassment but could simply experience the joy of giving. Harcourt's "white gifts" were sometimes given to the Children's Aid Society or to Wyndham House.

After Lori Edey joined Harcourt's ministerial staff in 1987, it occurred to her that people would feel more engaged if they could make more specific gifts. So she worked with the youth group to initiate the Christmas Angel project. Members of the group made ornaments for a



Christmas tree that was placed in the sanctuary, and they attached to each ornament a description of a recipient suggested by the community group Onward Willow. People in the congregation were invited to select an ornament, buy gifts appropriate to that recipient, and place them under the tree for distribution by the agency.

Gradually the details changed, but for many years, this was an important part of Harcourt's Christmas tradition. In recent years before the pandemic, Harcourt collected gift cards for the Children's Foundation's Adopt-a-family Program. Now we are asked to go to the foundation's website to make a donation, and we can also provide items for Chalmers Christmas Gift Bags. At Harcourt, Christmas remains a time to give not only to family and friends, but to those in need.



Light to Light to Light

Mary Harding

What birth am I anticipating this Advent season?

What if "God born a baby in a manger"

are sparks of new life

that we then

nurture for the evolution of ourselves and creation?

What if the limiting view at Christmas is an exclusive, self-focused one?

What if Christmas' birth is an awe-struck moment of realization that we are all connected? **
Wonder-Full **

Then,
throughout Advent and Christmas and Beyond,
may I notice and nurture Creative Sparks,
and reach out,
make and nurture connections.

Light to light to light.



Passages



Bill Stammers, Oct. 18Th, 2022



Ron Newman passed away on October 31st, 2022.



Fran Mathieson passed away on October 29th, 2022.



Jan Hall passed away on November 5th, 2022.



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