

ST. ANDREW'S-WESLEY  
UNITED CHURCH

LENTEN  
GUIDE 2022

photo by Brenda Maitland-Whitelaw



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# INTRODUCTION

Dear reader,

What a...year? Two years? Three? In this time of constant uncertainty, it can be hard to know what part of the journey we are on. In our faith story we have some examples of travelling through difficult and unscripted times. In the story of Exodus Moses takes his people out of slavery to a promised land and it doesn't go particularly well. There are a lot of challenges, frustrations and hardships on the journey. The followers of Moses have to endure hunger, thirst, and interpersonal and Godly conflict during this confusing and frightening journey. At the end of it all, things don't just "work out" or return to normal. Instead, the people are changed. Perhaps they come out a little stronger and wiser.

This Lenten survival guide seems apt for these times. The idea for it came from a colleague, Rev Deborah Laing, who had asked the question: what do we learn about faith from surviving certain experiences? Last year we asked 12 of you to share an experience of surviving, and we heard how resilience, healing and transformation were some of the insights from those challenges. This year we asked another 12, wondering how two years of a pandemic might change us and how we see our experiences of surviving. We wondered if the lessons that arose would be different, or the same? Would we feel differently about challenges when we were still in one without a clear end in sight?

What we discovered was there were still stories of survival, resilience, and hope, but that the story wasn't always over. Sometimes we were still in the story, reflecting on the lessons. Sometimes we learned to let go, to be ourselves, to endure, or to overcome. Faith often helped us in unexpected ways, by filling our cup or providing a foundation. Trust was still there, even if we didn't know the ending.

As you explore this guide for Lent, we invite you to draw from the well of your own life for your stories of survival. For these 40 days you might explore how your own challenges and struggles have shaped your faith and your beliefs. We look forward to reflecting on faith as we walk this path together...

Blessings, Rev Rhian Walker, Rev Dan Chambers, and Jen Cummings





photo by Brenda Maitland-Whitelaw

# GIANTS ARE NOT WHAT WE THINK THEY ARE

## SHILLAH MANDAVA

I grew up in an extremely remote area of Zambia that had no roads and is about 80km away from capital city Lusaka. My parents were immigrants and they took a risk to move to North Rhodesia to farm.

They went as young parents trying to find their way in a foreign land, away from family and friends. When I was seven years old they sent me to school when lots of children didn't get that opportunity. To get to my elementary school, I had to walk 15-17 km in the company of my cousins. I would go on a Sunday, carrying my food which was meant to last five days before my return home on Friday, where I would pick up my food for the next week and help my parents with the farm work. I always loved to see my parents after being away for days at school.

Fortunate enough with all the challenges I faced during my elementary schooling, I was able to go for further education, to a better boarding school about 100 km away from home. I had to compete with other kids, particularly city kids who I felt were smarter than me, who were city-raised while I was an old-fashioned farmer's daughter. That feeling stayed with me for a long time. I worked harder in all my school work so as not to end up as a farmer like my parents. I hoped to move to the city where I thought there was gold and happiness. After high school, against all odds, I managed to train as an Air Traffic control services officer in the department of Civil Aviation, a technical college in Zambia after which I moved back to Zimbabwe, then Rhodesia.

I was happy to move back to the country of my origin, the country my parents always prayed for and hoped to all move back to again: the land of milk and honey, or so they believed. My parents were religious and we had to pray and read the Bible every evening before going to bed, but for me it was just habit and comfort, a way of keeping my spirits up. It was a huge achievement for me to move back to my motherland. I felt happy and proud that I had a good job and that I was in the city where good living could be found.

Unfortunately, the feeling didn't last long. In 2000 I left Zimbabwe for the USA with the hope of rediscovering myself. In no time, I was back to college with the hope of becoming a nurse and then to settle down, maybe find the man of my life who



would bring joy and happiness into my life. While at college, I worked as a nursing assistant in both nursing homes and hospitals. It is at those institutions where I was made to realize that I still had not found what I was looking for. The memories of my struggles, and hope of finding happiness and the meaning of life, left me feeling crushed hopeless. America: where is this thing called happiness? I was doomed, exhausted and sad: worse still, I realized that even in America the challenges seemed gigantic.

I returned to the bible and started to read it truly, asking the question “What is this thing about: being a human being?” I thought about going back to Zimbabwe but the economy was bad, and I would be in a worse situation since I had been away for too long, but then a friend encouraged me to give Canada a try. In June 2006, I crossed over to Canada from Ohio, Cleveland. On my own I drove all the way from Ohio to Vancouver for five days. The drive across Canada alone and without any incidents gave me some hope and strength. I had some challenges as well in Canada, but I am happy to be a Canadian Citizen.

Now looking back in my life, I am grateful to have survived from impossible situations. In the Bible I connect with the story of David and Goliath. I love Malcolm Gladwell’s take on the story. He says there are many giants in our lives: disability, lack of money, oppression, etc. But giants are not what we think they are. David was an underdog who brought Goliath down with a simple slingshot and a stone. He changed his thinking about the challenges he was facing. David was an underdog and so was I, though in a small way, I managed to bring change in my village by helping build an elementary school for kids. I have survived impossible situations, and I have found hope. Hope/faith is the small thing that makes the giants come crashing down.

### Questions for reflection:

How does the author’s interpretation of the David and Goliath story help you understand your own challenges?

Have you had challenges in your life that you might have made into giants?

### ***1 Samuel 17:4-15a***

*(from “The Message” by Eugene Peterson)*

***But if I get the upper hand and kill him, you'll all become our slaves and serve us. I challenge the troops of Israel this day. Give me a man. Let us fight it out together!” When Saul and his troops heard the Philistine’s challenge, they were terrified and lost all hope. Enter David...***



*"It is abundantly clear that this lifetime is a series of simultaneous deaths and births...It is also clear that the farther one travels on the journey of life, the more births one will experience, and therefore the more deaths - the more joy and the more pain. --M. Scott Peck*



# THE LAST DANCE: THE LOSS OF A PARENT

## JAZMIN HOLNESS

I have survived the death of my father on April 2, 2009. He was only 62 years old and died suddenly of a massive heart attack while ballroom dancing to the tune of Abba's Dancing Queen with a 23 year old. He loved to sing and sang in numerous choirs and loved to dance. He was always the life of the party! I was 32 years old at the time with two young daughters, Jade was 3 1/2 years old and Skye was almost 1 year old. It was a very busy time with the young girls and a full-time career and having a moment to myself was nearly impossible. I remember the only moments for myself during that time was being in the bathroom, but even then the girls would still try to sneak in so they could be with me. It was challenging to grieve. I had to remain strong for my family and keep on living. Losing my father was the deepest pain that I have ever felt. I am sure that this is really just the beginning, since in life there is death and I have a lot of loved ones that will eventually die. Yes, how morbid! But that is also reality.

One impact of my father's death is that I actually felt him after his death and I still feel him. I see and feel his presence in birds. This may seem absurd to a lot of people but it is a feeling of synchronicity and communicating with something bigger than what we can actually see. I felt his spirit cloaking and guiding me through the most painful days, including the viewing of his casket and his burial at the cemetery.

Surviving those days was a day-by-day affair. Some days were better than others but the gift I was given by my father was his belief in me. He would always say to me as a child in my Filipino Tagalog language "Bilib na bilib ako sa yo" which means "I really and truly believe in you." That stuck. I will be forever grateful for that belief. He instilled strength, resilience and courage in me which has carried me through life and which I believe will carry me through this crazy and beautiful world we live in.

The community of the church is very important to me. I can now say I have a history with St. Andrew's Wesley. Getting married there in 2003, Jade's baptism in 2005 and Skye's baptism in 2008 and all the times the church leaders and friends such as Jen Cunnings continue to inspire and rejuvenate my soul. I will be forever grateful.

There are a lot of quotes, hymns, scripture and poems that give me strength but the one I pray mostly is the "Serenity Prayer" by Reinhold Neibuhr:

God grant me the

SERENITY to accept the things I cannot change;  
COURAGE to change the things I can; and  
WISDOM to know the difference.

And of course, being raised Catholic, the Lord's Prayer - but with a United Church twist stating "Our Mother" before "Our Father" :)

I feel one thing that has kept me sane in such an insane world is the gift of hope and laughter or trying to 'keep it light'. This is hard work, especially if life is throwing too many obstacles your way but this approach of 'taking it one day at a time' and not putting the heavy burden of the world on your shoulders and believing that something, (and if you are spiritual one can say that something is God,) will carry you through. As my wise Mom would say, "Let Go and Let God".

### Questions for reflection:

What has the loss of a loved one taught you about your faith?

What does it mean to you when the author says "Let go and Let God?"

### *Saints Bowing in the Mountains*

*Do you know how beautiful you are?  
I think not, my dear.  
For as you talk of God,  
I see great parades with wildly colourful bands  
Streaming from your mind and heart,  
Carrying wonderful and secret messages  
To every corner of this world.  
I see saints bowing in the mountains  
Hundreds of miles away  
To the wonder of sounds*

*That break into light  
From your most common words.  
Speak to me of your mother,  
Your cousins and your friends.  
Tell me of squirrels and birds you know.  
Awaken your legion of nightingales—  
Let them soar wild and free in the sky.  
And begin to sing to God.  
Let's all begin to sing to God!*

*By Hafiz, 14th century Sufi poet  
(transl. by Daniel Ladinsky)*



# THERE IS NOBODY WHO IS NOT ENOUGH

## MICK

*"This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God,  
and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent." -John 17:3, KJV*

The meaning of life is one of the grand mysteries of humanity. Since the walls of Eden fell, we have contemplated our purpose. The bible says that our purpose is to know our God, which is a beautiful answer. God, the creator of the moon and the seas made you, made me, made every one of us just so that we may know Him. So, clear as day, we have a reason to live. Why, then, are you reading this? Why would we need a survival guide? There is an answer, but to find it, we need to ask another question first: what happens when you don't feel worthy of knowing?

I am no stranger to this question, which is why I can answer it confidently. Last year, I went through some pretty hard times. Amidst isolation, I fell into a hopeless depression unlike any I previously experienced. Surviving seemed impossible, not because I was lost, but because I felt unworthy of being known. God created all that is good, and then He made me. Every breath felt like I was stealing it from someone more deserving than me. It was the hardest time of my life, and even though I knew that I had God, I felt like I didn't want to bother Him.

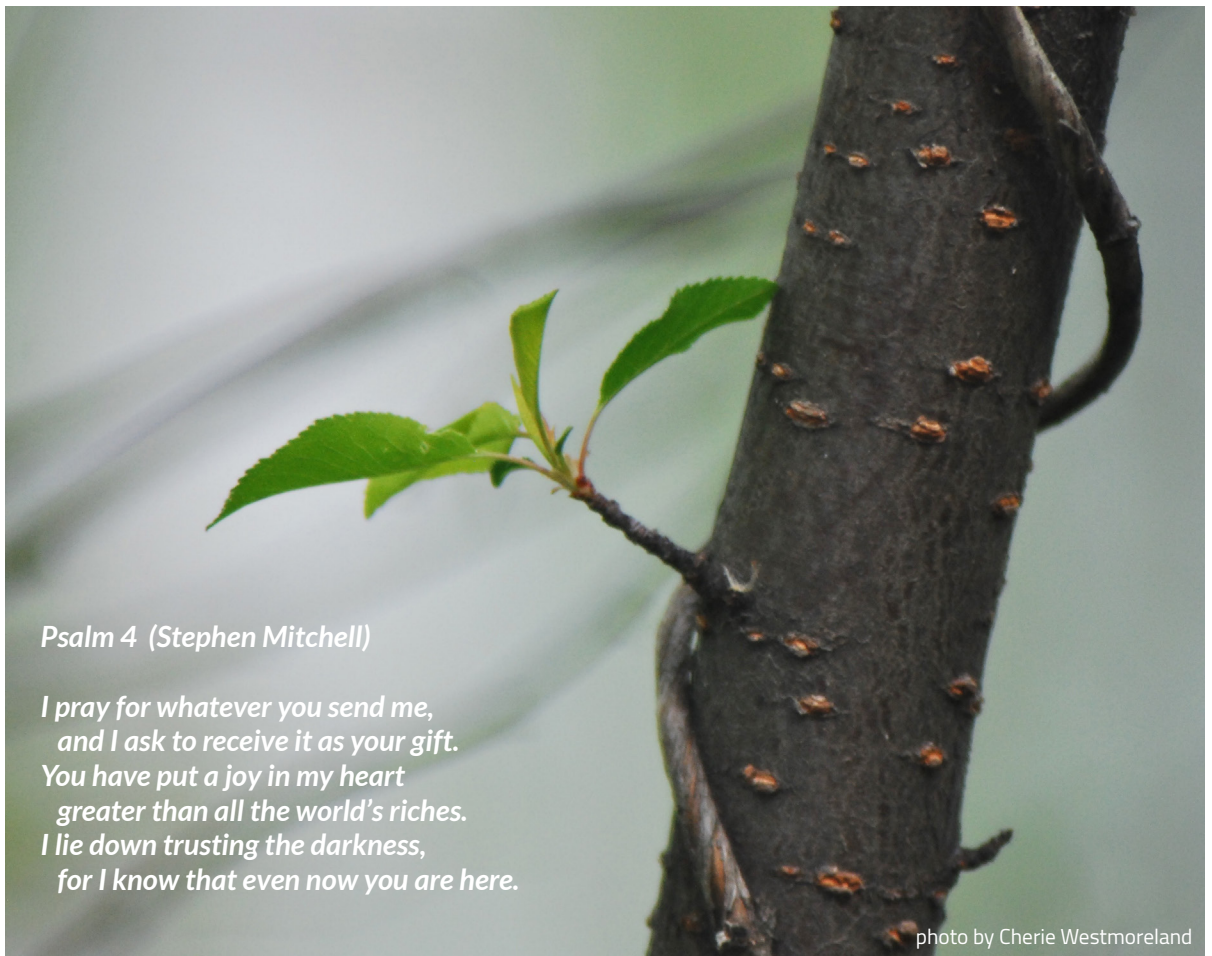
This was right before I was about to go to a leadership program at the church camp I now work at. I felt so unsteady in my faith that I almost didn't go. But, despite all of my fear, I went. Those ten days changed my life. I met so many other people who were going through the same thing that I was, and I started feeling less alone. By the end of the program, I had a whole new perspective. Being isolated from my church community was incredibly difficult for me because I didn't feel that I alone was enough for God. I learned that I was, as there is nobody who is not good enough for God.

If I had to pick a single word to describe God, it would be love. It was God that made us human, and His Love that made us people. Love has bound us together throughout all human history, and that love is God. After Eden, Adam and Eve could have gone their separate way, but they loved each other. In the early days of humanity, we survived by huddling together around a communal fire. Love is everything, which is to say, God is everything. So, if you ever feel unworthy of love, know that the love

of God is for all, and that none are undeserving of it. I have grown, both as a person and in my faith, where I am confident to say that God loves me. I promise you that God loves you, even on the days where love feels far away. Love is everywhere; it is the air that we breathe.

### Questions for reflection:

Have you ever felt not worthy of help from God or others, or unable to ask for help because your issues are “not that bad?”



*Psalm 4 (Stephen Mitchell)*

*I pray for whatever you send me,  
and I ask to receive it as your gift.  
You have put a joy in my heart  
greater than all the world's riches.  
I lie down trusting the darkness,  
for I know that even now you are here.*

photo by Cherie Westmoreland

# THE PILGRIMAGE OF ILLNESS

DR. S.M. STEELE

*"Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord, and by thy great mercy, defend us from all perils and dangers of this night."*

*-from the Anglican Book of Common Prayer*

While you read this at Lent, I write this in the New Year as we enter Year 3 of the global pandemic. At this time, I observe the shock and dismay of so many fellow citizens and family members as their lives 'shrink', again. Gone is their summer of reunions and gatherings, flights to elsewhere, sports events, visits to the gym, a return to church (for some), and life as usual, life as expected. But now, many are sick. All are tired and fed up, and many are angry at our health officials as if they are responsible. Many are depressed. Not I. I am filled with gratitude for this day. At New Year's Eve I snowshoed 7.1 km on Mt. Hollyburn with my Best Beloved (spouse), my Beloved Forever (daughter), her Best Beloved, and our dog Frieda. It was miraculous.

I never thought I'd be here this year, never mind able to have such a wonderful day in the mountains. It has been a time. My little family weathered 2020 hunkered down. My daughter returned to university in the UK and finished her degree, albeit mostly from her tiny bedroom in Oxford. I finished an opera. My spouse returned to work in the film industry. We were okay. Until we were not. Late in 2020, I could not climb a few stairs without being out of breath. I was misdiagnosed for four months until in late April, after agonizingly painful procedures and waiting times, I was told I had Stage IV lymphoma.

In 2021 I endured a year of isolation, fear, pain, agony, doubt, beyond my imagination. My treatments landed me in hospital three times, once for 10 days on the acute care ward for lung transplants (they didn't know where else to put me). I spent months in bed looking out at the mountains, filled with grief that I might never hike them again. All summer I heard from friends and family of reunions. I saw photos of holidays. My social life consisted of seeing people; lovely, kind nurses and specialists who needed to do unpleasant, painful things to my body. The loneliness continued because due to C-19, even the comradery of the ill was denied us as we were all separated, even as we received the powerful infusions, the poisons that would save our lives. To be gravely ill during C-19 is a loneliness beyond loneliness. But for the mercy of a loving spouse who never lost his faith (despite him being one who does not overtly profess faith), I could not have survived.

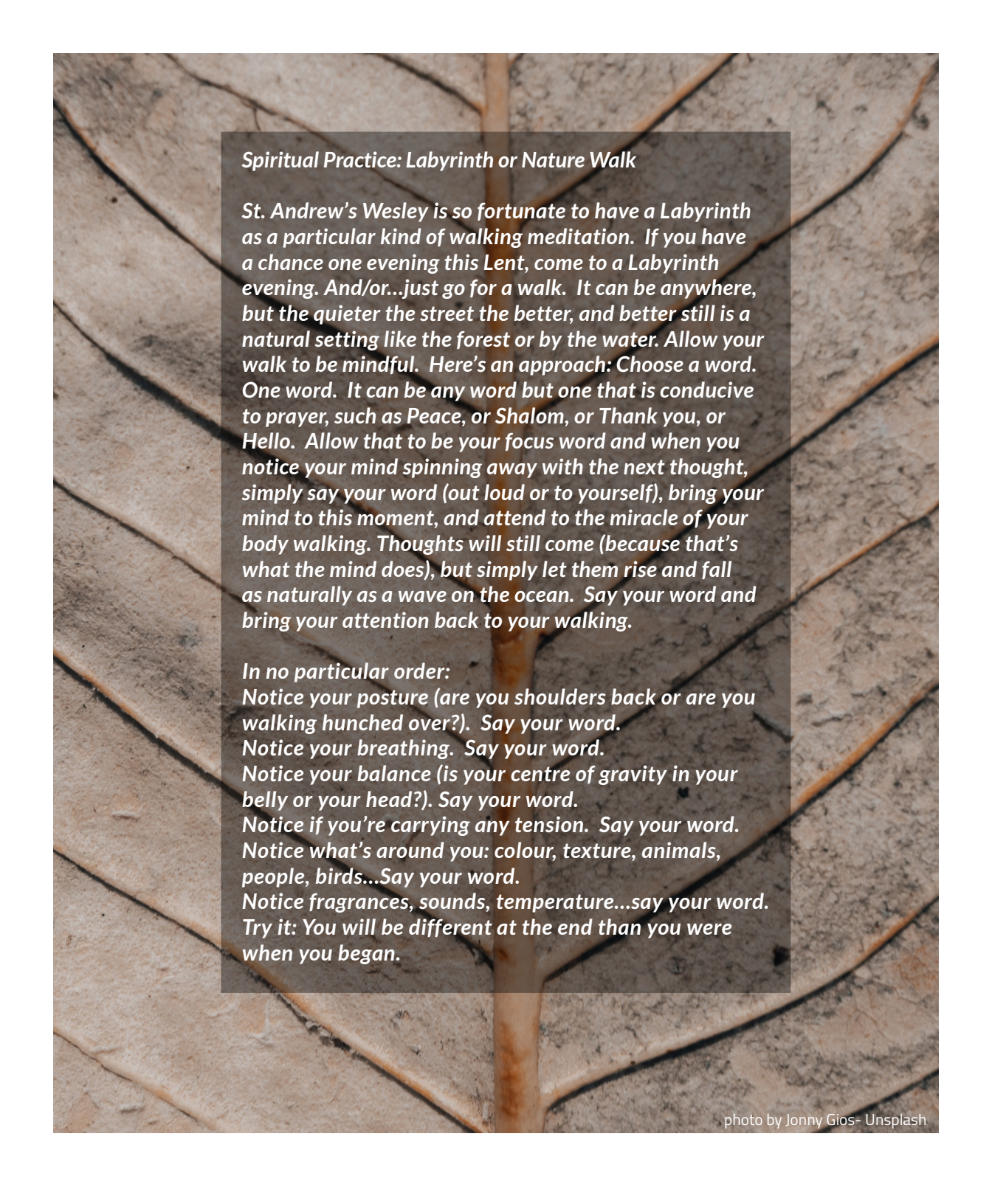


Four visits of that time stand out for me. The first, during the terrible trial of unknowing, was from the Reverend Walker. Her simple gift of food, and just seeing her at a distance, buoyed me. The second, when most gravely ill in the acute care ward, and third, at a bench outside our firehall, was with Reverend Chambers. The fourth was after treatment, with Reverend Cunnings who blessed our new dog Frieda at the Feast of St Francis. I have always had the body of the church, the physical place, to turn to in troubled times, but in C-19, even that is denied me as I belong to a cohort of extremely vulnerable people (despite triple vax), that includes transplant patients. It was, and still is at the time of writing, heart-breaking for me that I cannot safely come to the church as long as unvaccinated people are present. I am a wordsmith by profession, so my church is the liturgy, but it is also the physical manifestation, and to be denied my physical church has bewildered me and tested me almost as much as my body has been tested, physically this past year, though through the physical presence of Dan, Rhian, and Jen, the church came to me.

For me faith is an act not a professing of the 'I am', it is, curiously, one of doubting. In 2007 I walked the Camino with my 10-year-old in thanksgiving for her life, saved as she was at birth through massive surgery and the amazing skills of surgeons and NICU nurses. It was on that long walk I observed that perhaps the most beloved are the agnostics, the atheists, many of whom rail or query our Creator. And sometimes I think that the long walk through northern Spain might have prepared me for the long and lonely walk through catastrophic illness, because the Camino of my body had to be done one painful breath, one painful treatment at a time, and my grief and anger was profound. Yet no profundity has come of this illness, at least not yet. I never smoked, drank much more than a glass of wine, never did drugs, was always super fit, how did I pull this illness card, and especially during C-19 which was already hard enough? I believe there is no "why". It happened. I am surviving. Still, they say it is not until you have completed the pilgrimage and are at home once again that you understand the 'why' of it all. Who knows what insight I might have in the 'after'? For now, I am able to breathe deeply again. And I have returned to the mountains, the light in this darkness. And that, with the grace of Science, is a miraculous gift to me.

### Questions for reflection:

How do we understand our suffering when we can't know why we are going through it? Is there a way our suffering is like a pilgrimage?



### *Spiritual Practice: Labyrinth or Nature Walk*

*St. Andrew's Wesley is so fortunate to have a Labyrinth as a particular kind of walking meditation. If you have a chance one evening this Lent, come to a Labyrinth evening. And/or...just go for a walk. It can be anywhere, but the quieter the street the better, and better still is a natural setting like the forest or by the water. Allow your walk to be mindful. Here's an approach: Choose a word. One word. It can be any word but one that is conducive to prayer, such as Peace, or Shalom, or Thank you, or Hello. Allow that to be your focus word and when you notice your mind spinning away with the next thought, simply say your word (out loud or to yourself), bring your mind to this moment, and attend to the miracle of your body walking. Thoughts will still come (because that's what the mind does), but simply let them rise and fall as naturally as a wave on the ocean. Say your word and bring your attention back to your walking.*

*In no particular order:*

*Notice your posture (are your shoulders back or are you walking hunched over?). Say your word.*

*Notice your breathing. Say your word.*

*Notice your balance (is your centre of gravity in your belly or your head?). Say your word.*

*Notice if you're carrying any tension. Say your word.*

*Notice what's around you: colour, texture, animals, people, birds...Say your word.*

*Notice fragrances, sounds, temperature...say your word.*

*Try it: You will be different at the end than you were when you began.*

# A ROAD LESS TRAVELLED

## HEATHER DUFF

*I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.*  
—from “The Road Not Taken” (stanza 4) by Robert Frost

*You who ride on white donkeys,  
sitting on your saddle blankets,  
and you who walk along the road,  
consider the voice of the singers at the watering places.*  
—from the Hebrew poem “Song of Deborah” (Judges 5:10a, NIV)

There seems to be a natural link between poetry and theology, between intellect and spirit. My mother, who earned her Honors English BA across 25 years, teaching ESL and raising three children, often kept at least two books by her breakfast coffee and toast: usually something poetic like Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Shakespearean plays, or works by the Romantic poets. I would glance over at the dancing energy of her ink marks in the margins; it seemed that Wordsworth himself “wandered lonely as a cloud” by the blissful lipstick on her coffee mug. Then there would usually be something non-fiction, like Dr. Viktor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning*: Frankl’s memoir about what he learned through suffering, as a concentration camp inmate during World War II. After my mother died in 2019, I filled a Mary Poppins bag of her books marked with notes, and journals filled with poems and scripture, hand-written from memory, like Frost’s “The Road Not Taken”, her handwriting less ‘teacher-perfect’ due to Parkinson’s.

Perhaps my own “road less travelled by” is one that I, too, have sought as a life-long learner. The oasis of solace created by a meditative place with notebooks, a crystal or candle, a familiar desk and computer, or walk to a chestnut tree, can sustain in a way that offers integration, renewal, healing. Watching CBC: Kentucky homeowners sorting through debris after December 2021 tornadoes – a climate like Lent hearkening back to Advent – only to find a half-buried treasured item, an old book, a family photo, tears at the soul. The act of witnessing or dwelling in the heart of suffering drives one to ask: where can God possibly be in this? Found artifacts may be symbols of what our minds find in abstract dream-like shapes, in simplicity or complexity of language, a word, or phrase, sometimes mantra-like, or in silent, wordless interiority, amid whirlwinds, rubble, and lost dreams.



When my son was in grade two, I returned to UBC to pursue my doctorate in Language and Literacy Education. That first September, there were no babysitters available. I brought my young son to the first class and settled him with a new Lego kit in a ray of sunshine on the carpet in a windowed corner... while we all listened to the professor and to the click of each Lego piece interlocking with the next. Thus, I embarked on an impossible journey.

I was now a full-time doctoral student with scholarships that needed to be honored, studying among peers who were mostly on sabbaticals, and I also suffered from chronic pain due to complex reasons. The luxury of sabbaticals was not possible, and I continued as Artistic Director the Vancouver Youth Theatre. I was also the sole custodian for my young son, who also had medical concerns. Sole custody became official through the family court system, which involved research and memo-writing for my Legal Aid-funded lawyer whose number of funded hours was limited. With a new awareness of gendered injustices, I volunteered to help immigrant mothers with their written documents in English in preparation for family court. One of these mothers was a Spanish Canadian parent at my son's school and her daughter was his classmate. I met many other mothers in BC Housing nearby and in marginalized social positions. My doctoral research on ethics, spirituality and the arts, dovetailed with the grassroots organizations and systems I faced daily, as well as with motherhood itself. Although I had support from my extremely busy network of family and friends, most of my steep uphill climb needed to be faced alone. Within my doctoral pilgrimage, I took three medical leaves, and somehow completed the degree across nine years. My supportive supervisor, Dr. George Belliveau, told me that I had basically climbed Mount Everest.

Post-doc, I am an independent researcher, continuing to explore art, music, literature, theology, and writing. In addition to directing youth theatre, I design courses to teach at SFU's Continuing Studies, which has compelled me to learn more about the fascinating area of older adult education and spirituality. My son is now a college student, excited about the exploration of ideas. I believe that both within communities of spirit and in the solitary

community of one, we each have a unique call to integrate learning across our storied lives. As soul warriors, we can make our way through darkness and desert, towards the concrete, the real, the wise. We can also look for poetic images of light and water– voices of respite at the watering places– (Song of Deborah), and for a restorative silence that may be found in both.

### Questions for reflection:

The author talks about taking the road less travelled. Has taking that road been an experience in your life and what lessons has it brought you?





*Psalm 121*

*I look deep into my heart,  
to the core where wisdom arises.  
Wisdom comes from the Unnameable  
and unifies heaven and earth.  
The Unnameable is always with you,  
shining from the depths of your heart.*

# NOT DEFINED BY OTHERS

## THOMAS BAERG

Crying and tied to a large, white-barked birch tree I could see the school Principal coming across the soccer field towards me. Words failed me when she asked what had happened. She put her arm around my grade three shoulders and walked with me to her office.

Her voice, like a mother's caring voice, quieted me. I didn't want to tell her what had happened. I was too ashamed, plus I didn't want to be known as a tattletale, but then I explained: the older boys had taken me to the tree and tied me to it just as I was about to have my lunch.

My mom always packed my lunch which consisted of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, an apple or orange and a chocolate bar. My parents owned a small corner store and so the chocolate bar was a special treat for us.

The older boys said, "how can you even eat without a top lip" and then took my lunch, and throwing the sandwich on the ground they shared my chocolate bar.

You see, I was born with a hair lip. Fortunately, I did not have a cleft pallet. My top lip was missing in the center meaning that I couldn't close my mouth completely and my front teeth always showed. As a baby I had to be spoon fed milk and learned very early how to drink from a tumbler.

I don't have any recollection of there being any laughing or bullying prior to that grade three experience but there certainly was a lot of pointing and talking behind my back about what I looked like for a number of years after that.

I will always credit that principle, Mrs. Heron, for telling me who I was could not be defined by what I looked like.

The consequences for those involved in the tree-tying incident was a week's suspension, meeting with their parents and me and my parents. There were apologies but something changed that day. And I was put on my guard.

Somehow, I bought into what Mrs. Heron told me. I did not withdraw but actually became bolder and more outgoing. The process didn't happen overnight, but I was no longer embarrassed. If anyone asked me about my lip, I very boldly explained what I had and that it would not go away but it was also not contagious as some assumed.

“Don’t touch him, you might get a lip like that too”.

My parents and brothers were a wonderful support to me; as were my neighbourhood friends along with my home church. My church had a membership of close to 300 and never did I feel like I was any different than anyone else there. I grew up in that church and they knew who I was apart from what defect I might have had.

I had a few very close childhood friends who never mentioned my lip but just included me in everything they did, as a regular guy. I am still friends with them to this day.

I somehow rose above being self-conscious and lived what I thought was quite a normal life. I loved me and I loved living.

Surgery at the age of 12 improved my lip 80%. The doctors were able to actually create an upper lip. They said that I would need one more surgery to try and create a normal looking lip. I refused the second surgery. I was so confident with what they were able to give me that I didn’t see the need to make any further changes.

My outgoing personality and sense of humor was who I was, not my lip.

As I look back on the years growing up, I understand why I am very sensitive about derogatory comments that someone makes about a person’s physical difference. For me that started at a very early age. In fact, I am somehow drawn to include those without feeling sorry for them. I know that it’s not the outward appearance that defines a person.

I am so grateful for those people who saw me for who I was and not for what I looked like.

### **Questions for reflection:**

Has anyone in your life blessed you with an affirmation about your worth, like the author’s principal did? What has been your journey towards self-acceptance and self-love? What gets in the way of it?

# STORY OF SURVIVAL: EMBRACING A QUEER IDENTITY

## MITCH BROOME

*All this hell you've lived and seen  
drown it all in gasoline  
then light a match and pull the pin  
you are not who you've been.  
The past is just lessons learned  
light it up and let it burn.*  
-from the song "Let it Burn" by Citizen Soldier

This song means a lot to me. I was introduced to it by my boyfriend Red. It gives me words of affirmation for what I have been through and reminds me that the past is the past: we learn from it and we move forward.

I grew up in two very unstable households. My mother is very conservative and transphobic, and very closed minded when it comes to gender expression. For example, she would always make me wear a skirt or a dress when we were going to any type of gathering, even when I didn't feel comfortable with wearing skirts and dresses. My father struggled with mental health and as an older father (55 when I was born) he had a difficult time learning how to parent.

I moved out of my mother's home when I was 14 because it was an abusive situation and I no longer felt safe. I moved out of my father's home when I was 16. I realize now that it was around then that his dementia began, and he was not capable of supporting me.

When I was 15 I began experimenting with different sets of pronouns. First with she/they and then they/them. I started genuinely questioning my gender identity when I was 13 but was too scared to say anything. I have struggled with social and generalized anxiety since I was very young. I was too scared to express myself the way I wanted to and was too scared to even talk to many people. I didn't understand how much of a toll that my mental health had on me until I started seeing a counselor when I was 11. The counselor quickly caught onto the fact that I had anxiety and depression and even questioned if I had ADHD. My mother didn't allow me to try any meds to help. There is a long history of mental health issues on my dad's side of the family. Not being able to express myself made my mental health worse. Also not being able to put a label on how I was feeling, which I now know was gender dysphoria, made me feel restricted about coming out.

I knew that I had always been a part of the queer community because I have never thought that I was straight. I was thankfully able to learn about different sexualities while



I was still in elementary school. But I didn't know much about different gender identities until I was 13 when I actually met trans people at church retreats and on social media.

After I started meeting other trans people I began speaking highly about them to my counselor. The counselor asked me if I was questioning my gender identity. I was hesitant but I said no because I was worried that he would negatively judge me. It was after he asked me that question, that I then genuinely began to question my gender identity. When I was 15, I couldn't ignore that I was trans in some way although I couldn't tell if I was non-binary or a trans guy. In December of 2018 I put my pronouns into my social media bio, and I put them in as she/they.

And I also made a post asking people to call me by they/them pronouns but was still okay with she/her pronouns. It was a slow process but I started having more queer friends instead of straight cis (people who still identify with the sex that they were assigned at birth) friends and within that circle I felt like I was in a more comfortable spot to come out. It took me longer to come out to adults that I wasn't super close to. I fully came out in September 2019. It was a 9-month long process.

Throughout the journey of coming out, I gained more self confidence and that is how I knew I was trans. I have found that cis straight people seek to understand how someone could be trans because many cis straight people can only compare it to body dysmorphia/body insecurities. But gender dysphoria has a much deeper impact on the individual. If you are cis and are confident that you are cis, not questioning your gender identity, I would recommend instead thinking about it like this: if a wizard transformed you into the opposite gender body, with all the same thoughts, feelings and interests and you didn't have a choice, imagine how that would feel. This is the closest that I could explain what gender dysphoria is to people who are cis. In the end, cis people just need to be allies and compassionate with trans people because they will most likely never understand how gender dysphoria feels.

It would have taken me much longer to come out if our church wasn't as affirming as it is, or if my dad took me to a conservative church. There were quite a few queer people in the church when I started coming as a child.

In closing, I would highly encourage everyone to put their pronouns into their bios, social media, emails, any form of communication. Currently putting pronouns in your bio is seen as a typical trans thing to do so it makes it uncomfortable and occasionally unsafe for those people who are not yet out as trans.

### Questions for reflection:

What impacted you the most about this story? The judgements of others can prevent us from being ourselves. How might faith be helpful in weathering that challenge?

## ***Spiritual Practice: Prayer for Someone***

***Take a moment to offer a prayer for someone you care about who is having a difficult time. You might linger with this prayer for 15 minutes or take one minute from your day. Begin by pausing. You might be sitting in your kitchen or on your prayer bench or standing on the beach looking out at the water; wherever you are, just pause a moment. Take a breath.***

***And another.***

***And one more.***

***Call to mind the name of the person you are praying for.***

***Call to mind an image of that person.***

***Now, imagine a warm light surrounding that person's entire body.***

***Hold that image.***

***As you hold that image, ask God to bring healing to \_\_\_\_.***

***Take a deep breath, and you might close with an "amen".***

***And at the end of the prayer, you might also feel the benefit of that caring prayer in your own body/soul.***



# WHEN HEALTH VANISHES, WHERE IS MY HOPE?

## JOHN MCKINSTRY

### RESILIENCE AND HOPE

These are both meaningful words with the power to transform.

For me having hope was essential to my wellbeing. Being resilient to what seemed to be a very dark place gave me the strength to move upward and outward from that place.

I was a seemingly healthy man in my early 70's. Then almost overnight all that vanished. I was in and out of hospital for almost a year. Then came another episode which required months of treatments. I was finally getting better when three events, all requiring surgery, manifested themselves. More treatments, more recoveries.

One night in the hospital, in utter despair that I was ever going to be well again, I said, "OK God, if this is what it is going to be then just get me out of here." To my surprise, my Mother's voice (gone almost 20 years by then), spoke to me. "Don't be so foolish, there is much more for you to do there". So I survived.

That happened once more, this time in my own bed at home. Luckily my desire to live was unknowingly to me stronger than the alternative.

Even though I had been attending St Andrew's Wesley regularly by then, I only realized at that moment that there was strength to be had in having faith that I would be OK.

I also realized how many people were praying for my recovery. There were many lessons to be learned during that time. I have always been a positive thinker and difficult as it was it helped a lot.

Today I believe in the power of prayer. I learned that being positive, having Hope if you will, has its own special benefits. There is an up from that down.

I feel that the community of St Andrews Wesley is what is most important. I love the singing, the stories, the magnificent space and the music. It is, however, the community, once we had been physically apart for all that time, that was the most important part of my faith journey.

Once the pandemic hit us, it made me realize that while the physical being of the Church is a welcome refuge from the storms of daily life, my inner strength and faith made me realize that I would be alright and that helped me weather the isolation of not being around my church family.

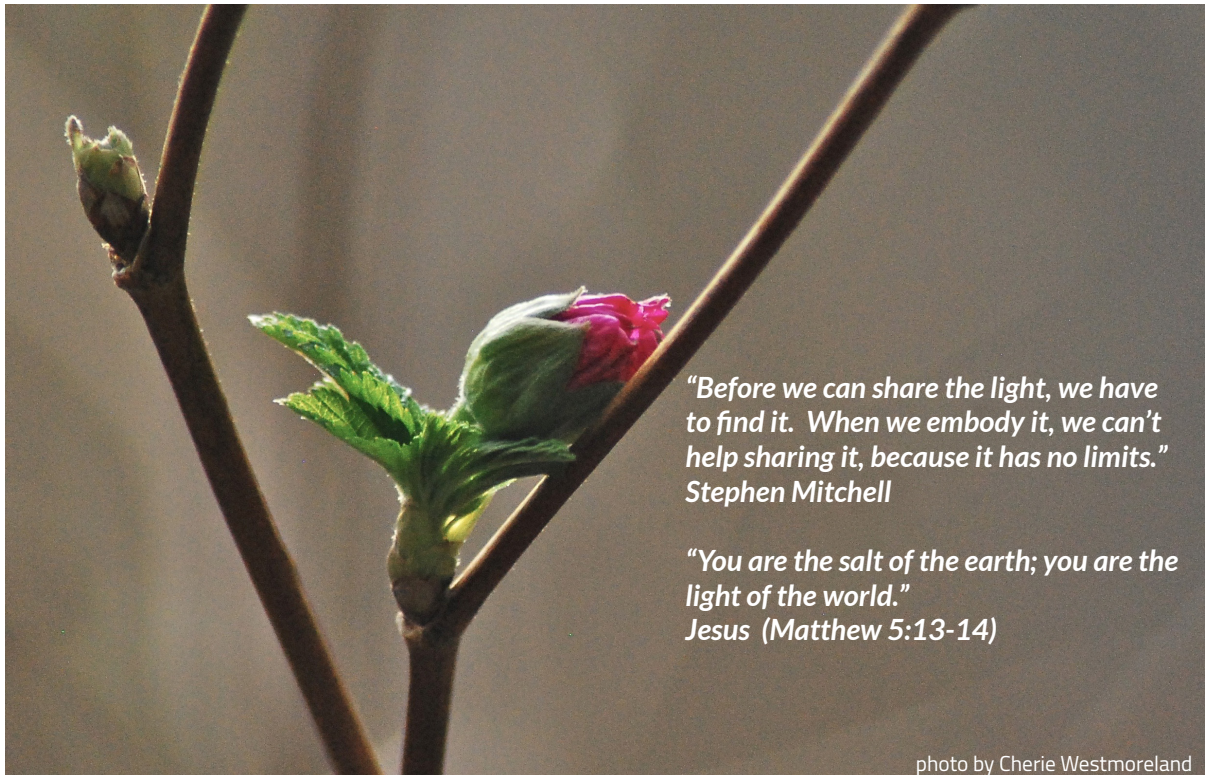


Resilience and Hope. They are, for me, part and parcel of the same path that I take in life. Making sure that my being is strong enough to be resilient to what life throws at me and having hope that I will persevere, and the faith that the spirit will stand by me always.

Strangely enough the piece I has always given me strength is The Lord's Prayer. I say it when I feel that strength is needed, when I am sad or just to hear those words again.

### Questions for reflection:

Where do you draw your hope from? Has there been moments in your life where your community (church, family, friends, sports team, band, book club) have provided you with strength or hope when you thought you had none left?



*"Before we can share the light, we have to find it. When we embody it, we can't help sharing it, because it has no limits."  
Stephen Mitchell*

*"You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world."  
Jesus (Matthew 5:13-14)*

photo by Cherie Westmoreland



# ENDURANCE: MY YEAR(S) OF COVID

## ED KLASSEN

It was in March 2020 that my life was about to change quite drastically. What made it so difficult was that so little was known about COVID in the beginning, making it difficult to prepare for which caused a lot of anxiety. Working as a nursing assistant, we were given the latest information and techniques involving what PPE to wear, and where to wear it. Because most patients were screened before surgery and no visitors were allowed into the hospital at that time, we developed a bit of a false sense of security, thinking that we were safe. Little did we know how fast that could change.

One day, in December of 20, we received news of our first positive case on the unit. Despite implementing strict guidelines to prevent the spread of infection, which included pre-shift PCR tests and strict usage of PPE, more patients started testing positive. Eventually 33 of our staff, including myself, tested positive as well. Although my symptoms were quite mild, I was quite exhausted in the weeks following and it took a few weeks before I returned to work. Due to our shared living space, my roommate also tested positive a few days later and ended up in ICU area for over a week before being released. I found out later that the patient who infected me had died from the disease.

What has been really hard for me was and still is the fear of infecting others, including my friends and family. All 14 members of my immediate family have chosen not to get vaccinated and because of this, I have only seen my parents a few times over the past two years. My mother, who is palliative, is at high risk for acquiring COVID and most likely wouldn't survive the illness. This has caused her a tremendous amount of fear and anxiety.

It was so amazing to attend the WIO retreat in November and I was looking forward to attending church in person again. My heart sank when I heard that we were going back to online services. Over past two years, I've realized how much I value and miss in-person connection with others and how I've taken that for granted. I've caught myself often asking "Why is this happening?", or "When is life going to get back to normal?" I'm starting to say "What next?" How can I enjoy life when it seems to have become so restricted and not get frustrated and angry for all that I've lost? That is my challenge.

### Questions for reflection:

What helps you endure something that doesn't have a clear ending?  
How does an experience like Covid affect your faith? Does it test it?  
Strengthen it?



photo by Brenda Maitland-Whitelaw

***Psalm 130 (from Stephen Mitchell's "A Book of Psalms")***

***I listen for you; my soul  
listens like a deer in the forest.  
My soul waits more intently  
than a soldier watching for the dawn.  
Answer me; open my heart  
so that I can wholly receive you.  
And teach me that this suffering, too,  
shall come to pass.***

# NO TEST HAS OVERTAKEN YOU

## KATSUKO OCHIAI

When we arrived at the Vancouver airport in the end of August, 1969, we were carrying two suitcases, and our two-year old son. Eiichiro started to work at the UBC Chemistry department immediately after settling down.

As Christians we found First Baptist Church, right across the street from St. Andrew's Wesley. I was baptized by the American Baptist Missionary before our marriage. Eiichiro by a Japanese pastor. Our Christian lives were so limited and short, so our routine was to read the Bible every evening.

Eiichiro's decision to come to Canada from Japan was to keep his research and establish his academic work abroad. In many ways, Vancouver in 1970 was very different from today when we started living here in 1970. We were the only Japanese members at First Baptist Church. We were accepted well there. I still had difficulty with English then. The pastor's wife invited me to try conversations in English at their home every week. Some church members became our life-long friends.

We had a new member of our family, a second son. When I obtained the teacher's certificate from the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto, I could start teaching piano in English. For the next decade our lives went smoothly until the day Eiichiro told me that he could not keep his position at UBC.

This was a great shock to us. UBC Chemistry Department cut off his position (as a lecturer) after ten years of teaching, without a clear reason. Eiichiro had even published a book that turned out to be the first reference book in a newly developing research field. It was used as a textbook at the postgraduate level at UBC as well as in many other Universities in the U.S., China, Spain and other countries.

I wondered why this could happen to him instead of gaining some respect from the faculty members. Yes, some faculty members showed him their sympathy. The chemistry department did not have any Asian faculty before; Eiichiro was the first. Did his book bring up jealousy? Were the Japanese still enemy in their mind like in the war time? Did his appearance and the way he speaks English give unacceptable feelings to them? He appealed to the committee for any acceptable reason, but none was forthcoming.

Because he could not find any reason for the unfair action, the decision was impossible to understand and more difficult to accept. Nevertheless, he chose not to seek any legal action.

Instead, he found a new job in USA. I stayed in Vancouver with two children for two years until his position was secured in the US. The same Christian university in Pennsylvania offered me a position in the music department. I took that job and finally moved to join him.

The university in Pennsylvania offered many interesting opportunities through open seminars. There, we learned a lot about world conflicts and peace-making efforts of the United Nation. We found so many friends there, a good neighborhood that was on campus and enjoyed many Brethren church activities.

We spent 25 years teaching at the university. When Eiichiro was asked to write a new version of his book he wrote 30 years ago at UBC we decided to retire from the position and came back to Vancouver in 2005.

Through our living in Canada and USA, we were always learning from the Bible and the churches we attended how to keep a sense of peace and hope for the future. St. Andrews Wesley United Church is no exception, and friends here are the most precious treasure to us.

This most unwanted incidence we experienced more than forty years ago is no more our pain. I still believe and am encouraged by these words from 1 Corinthians 10:13:

*No test has overtaken you except such as is common to man. But God keeps his promise, who will not allow you to be tested beyond what you are able; at the same time you are put to the test, he will give you the strength to endure it and so provide you with a way out.*

### Questions for reflection:

How do you interpret the message of 1 Corinthians 10:13 and how does it relate to your life experiences? What do experiences of powerlessness teach us about life and faith?



# WORKING AND PARENTING IN A PANDEMIC

## ANONYMOUS

*"When I stand before God at the end of my life, I would hope that I would not have a single bit of talent left, and could say, 'I used everything you gave me.'"*

*-Erma Bombeck*

Juggling full time work and parenthood has always been busy but rewarding. I am a healthcare worker supporting children with complex medical conditions. I love the variety and complexity of my work and the time I spend with children and their families. I am also the parent of a happy, active young child. The pandemic has added significant challenges and stressors to both of these roles and continues to do so.

The pandemic has changed my work in many ways. One major change is that my work shifted from low risk to higher risk. There is a constant worry of bringing COVID-19 home to my family or unknowingly taking it to work. The clinical work has also become harder. Many patients stayed home for months to avoid COVID. They did not receive their regular health services and, as a result, their conditions are now more complex and harder to manage. Many appointments were postponed, leading to backlog which must now be worked through. Finally, recent travel restrictions and natural disasters have made it harder to provide services to people living more remotely. With the increased workload, it can feel challenging to meet everyone's needs. I continue to enjoy my work and chosen profession, but I am becoming increasingly fatigued while the pandemic continues.

The pandemic has also impacted my parenting experience in many ways. I am the single parent of a young child. I have particularly noticed the impact of losing many informal parenting supports such as rec centre programs, play dates and in-person church programs. At the beginning, even playgrounds were closed. Without the structure of extracurricular programs, weekends are long and there is little parenting down time. As some in-person programs have begun to re-open, we have chosen not to participate to reduce risk as my child is too young to be vaccinated. My child's return to daycare has been very positive and has brought much-needed social time with peers. However, it also increases the COVID risk to our family "bubble". Parenting in this pandemic involves constantly assessing risk and making

challenging choices as the pandemic continues to change.

Working and parenting through the pandemic has led to some new positive discoveries. At work, I have embraced virtual health which enables me to keep in more regular contact with many patients. Online church programs allow me to maintain a connection with St. Andrew's-Wesley. I am grateful for my friendships and that we have found new and creative ways to socialize outdoors and virtually.

I have been raised in the United Church. I have maintained many close friendships with people I met in church youth programs. I look forward to safely gathering in the church again. In the meantime, I see God at work when I witness the whole world globally working toward improving things during this crisis. This experience has shown me that we are often capable of adapting to more than we realize, and it has emphasized that support and community are so important. When I need a calming moment, I find myself listening to choral hymns from St. George's Chapel at Windsor Castle. It reminds me of the music at our own church and helps me feel connected with our church community.

### Questions for reflection:

Where have you seen God at work in the Covid crisis? Do you find some treasures from hard time you have had?

### *Psalm 84 (Stephen Mitchell "A Book of Psalms")*

*Lord, how beautiful you are;  
how radiant the places you dwell in.  
My soul yearns for your presence;  
my whole body longs for your light.  
Even the wren finds a house  
and the sparrow a nest for herself.  
Take me home, Lord; guide me  
to the place of perfect repose.  
Let me feel you always within me;  
open my eyes to your love.*

*Psalm 30:11-12*

*You have turned my mourning into dancing;  
you have taken off my sackcloth  
and clothed me with joy,  
so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.  
O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever.*



photo by Brenda Maitland-Whitelaw



# A TRUE BELIEVER

## REV CURT ALLISON

I was a true believer. From the time I was around 12 years old, I started to believe. Born to loving parents who cared for me and provided everything that I needed, I remember a happy childhood filled with lots of laughter. We began attending an Independent Fundamental Baptist church that year and little did I know the impact of that decision in my life. I attended the Christian School connected with the church and became a true believer. I loved going to church (3 times a week!) and sat in the pew at every service with an anticipatory expectancy of what God was going to do in our church and in my life. I was the poster boy for fundamentalism. And I TRULY believed.

The next logical step for me was to attend Bob Jones University. Up to this point, everything outwardly fit the mold both of expectations of others at my church, and my image of how I believed I should be in this world. But looks can be very deceiving. For if you were to peel away the layers of my rock-solid, iron-clad presentation to the fundamentalist world, you would have found a very frightened gay young man.

I began to sense my same sex attractions in 7th Grade. But because of the preaching from the pulpit at my IFB church, I understood these attractions were none other than the work of the Devil to draw me away from God's plan for my life. And as a true believer, my entire world depended on being in God's perfect will. So I hid. This struggle continued over the next several years with increasing white-knuckle intensity until a friend of mine admitted he struggled with same sex attractions. Upon his admission, I finally talked about my "struggle" for the first time with a group of trusted friends. We prayed. We cried. But nothing changed.

I attended seminary, was ordained, worked on staff at a church, and got married. But inside, I was dying. Finally, in Dec, 1993, unable to bear the weight of my secret any longer, I sought out therapy, and began attending an ex-gay Exodus ministry that worked with me to try to help change my sexuality.

St John of the Cross talks about the "dark night of the soul." And I experienced that dark night while attending Exodus throughout 1994. Over the next 15 months, I threw myself into the ex-gay ministry seeking change in my sexuality. At one point, I was in therapy 3 times a week. But probably the darkest night of



my soul was in January of 1995 when I finally admitted I was not changing, and decided to leave the Exodus ministry. I was devastated. The ex-gay therapy was not working at all in any way, shape or form. I was so tired of trying to be what others expected me to be. I was tired of putting up false personas. I was ready to be honest and authentic in my living by being the Curt whom God had created. I was ready to live my life with God from a place of truth. But in leaving the Exodus ministry, I felt I was leaving God. I was constantly worried I was deceived. Tears were flowing. My heart was breaking. What was I to do?

Thank God for the promise of Psalm 30:5 — “weeping may last through the night, but joy comes with the morning.” The power of God’s grace cut through my darkest night and began to lead me to the morning. I discovered a wonderful LGBTQ affirming United Methodist church in Oklahoma City. And over the next four years through prayer, study, worship, tears, cries, lament, and laughter, I firmly planted myself in the midst of a new kind of faithful Christian community, I fully reconciled myself as a gay Christian man. That amazing United Methodist church literally loved me back to wholeness. I experienced the liberty of living my life authentically: no secrets, no lies, no hiding, no falsehoods. My passion to faithfully follow God grew with each passing day. In short, the abundant life that Jesus talked about and that was a constant desire of mine from my youth was actually becoming a reality.

As I look at my life, I see different threads. I see the thread of fundamentalism. I see the thread of my sexuality. I see the thread of my love for God and my work within the church. I once viewed these as separate, irreconcilable aspects of my life. But now, I see these as one consistent and beautiful tapestry, woven together over time with tears, brokenness, and eventual reconciliation. Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning!

### Questions for reflection:

What is evoked in you when you hear the lines “weeping may endure for a night but joy comes in the morning?” What strikes you about the statement “But now, I see these as one consistent and beautiful tapestry, woven together over time with tears, brokenness, and eventual reconciliation?”

NOTES:



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