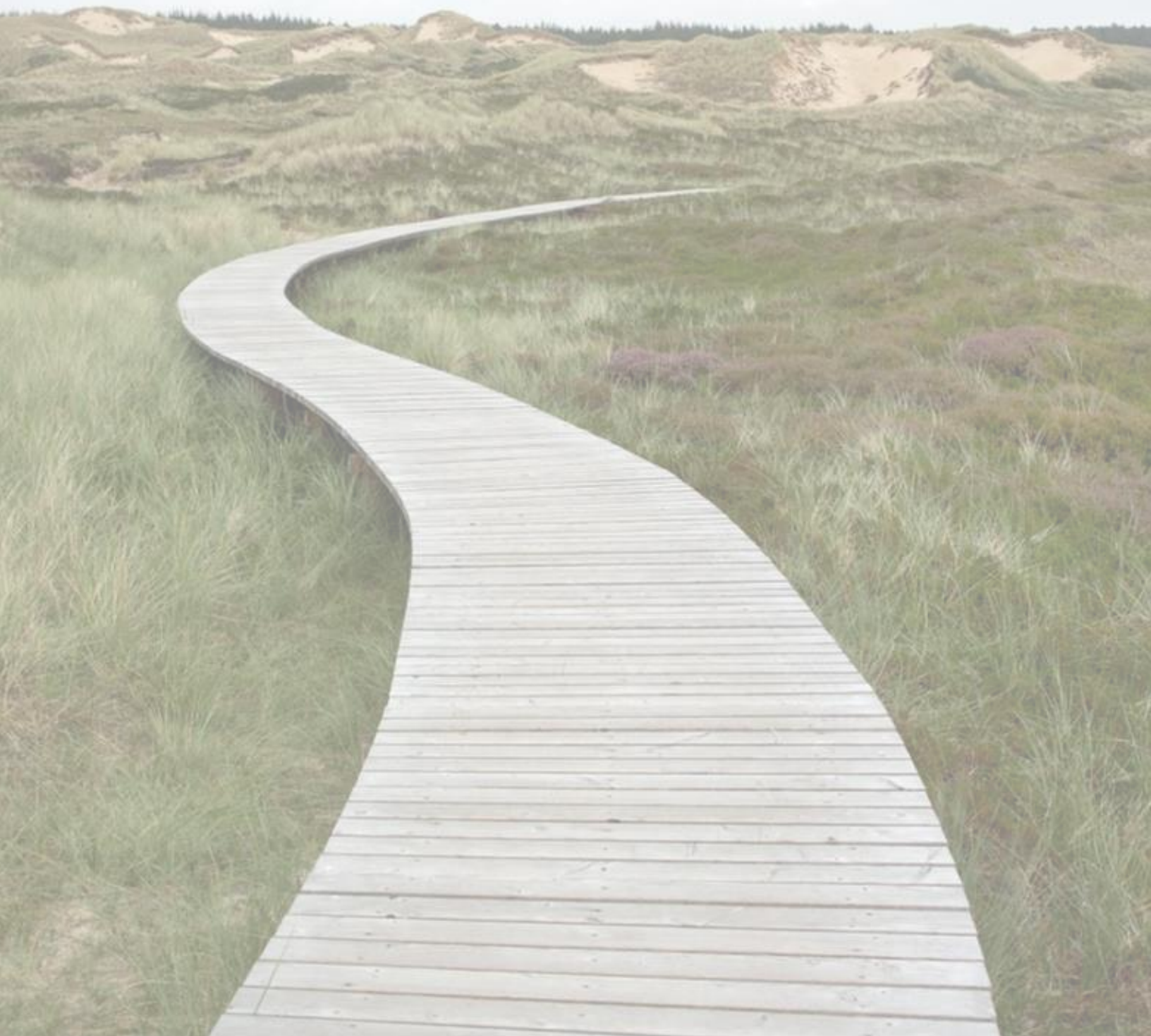


On the Road to Healing: A Weekly Lenten Devotional

Reflections by Congregants and Friends of
Nutana Park Mennonite Church



Lent Week 1 – Introduction – On the Road to Healing (Feb. 26)

Healing can be a problematic term or concept for some, myself included. And healing is not something that is talked about a lot in Mennonite circles, at least in my experience. In fact I cannot recall a single sermon on the topic. Healing may be mentioned in prayers for recovery of people in hospital, but that is the extent of the word healing in a Mennonite worship setting, in my recalled experience. It's no wonder then that it is a daunting topic to even consider, when most of us don't necessarily have the framework to even speak about it. Often healing is restricted to situations involving the physical body. The term healing has been co-opted by some theologies which err to the side of the prosperity gospel - if you have enough faith, if you pray enough, if you pray in the right way or are of the right faith; if you are righteous and blameless and good and suffer in the right way, God will see this and will bestow favour upon you in the guise of wealth, healing, and anything you want.

This isn't how life works, and limited though my understanding may be, this isn't how faith or God works. Where does this leave us, if having [enough] faith doesn't mean we automatically get to take up our mats and walk? What does healing even mean for someone who struggles with a mental illness? What does healing mean in our inherited settler society where many still fail to even try to hear, let alone acknowledge, the truth of the land's history and ongoing colonial story? What does healing mean in occupied Palestine, where the relentless violence and injustice literally never sleeps or takes a day off in nearly 75 years and counting? What does healing mean in Syria and Turkey, amongst all the rubble? What can healing mean in these and other contexts? I don't have answers. I think questions like these and wrestling with questions is a good start. Recognizing and understanding the privileged place we each individually hold in this world and the ripple effects of all of that, is vitally important. Are we using our privilege for the benefit of others and the betterment of the world? Are we addressing our own inherent racism? Are we educating ourselves and continually working to become our best selves?

I don't know about healing per se, but I do believe in justice and compassion and Shalom. Somehow attempting to embody and work towards those things for all of us is perhaps one way to look at healing. – *Stephanie Epp*

“As a health care provider, I inevitably suppress emotions throughout the day. There are times during the day, when I get a chance to sit with the clinical team, and I express more emotion, or even cry. This always feel good. I don't mind

showing vulnerability in front of my team. It keeps us all more grounded and builds our ability to collaborate.

Without this catharsis I will start to "bring my work home". This will usually manifest as impatience with my kids, choosing to be anti-social, and insomnia. I have learned to recognize these patterns and act accordingly, whether that means an apology for an inappropriate outburst, or taking time off for self-care. I think Marlie would say I am getting better at this, but you may have to ask her :). We are still happily married and so I think I am doing some things right.

It is true the health care system is more strained than I have ever seen it. Beds in hallways are the new standard, no longer just an occasional work around. Allied health teams are tired. In my opinion, the main issue is social determinants of health which are left unaddressed at the time of a patients discharge. For example, discharging a patient on multiple heart medications without knowing if they can afford them, pick them up, or even tolerate them. The worst situation is homelessness. How can I hope to make any sustainable treatment plan for someone who is homeless—it will fall apart the minute they decide to use money for shelter instead of medications, physiotherapy, exercise etc. Basic health needs need to be met for outpatient plans to be successful, otherwise patients will end up in hospital. It is then no surprise that hospital wards remain overcrowded after a several year pandemic that saw Saskatoon's poverty and substance use rates increase substantially. And it seems to be getting worse.

There are solutions, some of which I am proud to be involved with. Sanctum Care Group, an organization which Annette Epp has advocated for in the past, addresses homelessness in patients with chronic diseases like HIV. In Saskatchewan, a homeless person with HIV has a 50% chance of dying within a year due primarily to medication non-adherence. Imagine living on the streets and trying to prioritize pills over food or shelter, especially if some of these pills need to be taken on a full stomach, let alone that you have a horrible virus which literally consumes you. This is a third world situation in our city. In Saskatoon, people are dying in the streets from treatable diseases which have a normal life expectancy. I'm ashamed of our social infrastructure when I treat these patients in hospital.

Sanctum Care Group accepts these patients in their residence without prejudice and treats them like worthwhile humans. In my mind, they are fulfilling what Jesus asks of us; protecting the most vulnerable and loving one's neighbour. Sanctum's results are staggering.

Not only do they divert these patients away from urgent care which diminishes overcrowding, but they save lives. Some of their graduates are now housed and leading fulfilling lives. Their programs consistently keep children out of foster care and under the care of their biological mothers. If something is going

to help our system, it has to be this. If you feel the same way, I would encourage you to donate or volunteer with Sanctum Care Group as they need help. The government still isn't investing the amount of money in them that they deserve.

Above all, I feel hope guides me. No matter how sad or treacherous a patient's life has been, they have taken time out of their day to see me so that I can provide some hope, even in the face of permanent physical disability. Having programs like Sanctum offers can help me do that, especially when patients feel society has done nothing to support them. Sometimes hope is transferred through a listening here, a comforting gesture, or more frequent follow-up, even if there are no interventions that modern medicine can provide to improve things. If there is physical disability, the mind must still be tended to and patients must feel loved, have self-worth, and hope. I aim for my care to achieve that no matter what modern medicine can offer. – Ben Leis

For Reflection:

- *What sermons have you heard on the topic of healing?*
- *Alongside your experiences, how have messages about healing impacted you: encouraged, shamed, confounded? Why?*
- *Do you pray for healing? If so, how do you pray for healing in your life, the lives of those you love, the larger illnesses in our world?*
- *As a patient within the Health Region or alongside a patient, how might you extend compassion to those striving for your physical healing?*
- *We are all mortal and physical healing will not always be possible, how do you come to terms with this emotionally and spiritually? Does this change the manner in which you live?*
- *The health care system is currently under great strain. Are there ways in which we can support systemic change which might benefit the doctors, nurses and staff of our Health Region?*

Lent Week 2 – Social Healing (March 5)

Healing is a journey, a process. It is the Power of Love flowing to make us whole. When we are hurt in body, mind, or spirit, or when our relationships with others are strained, we need to heal. This may require effort on our part, or the kindness of friends, or the intervention of skilled helpers. However it happens, the Power of Love comes from God. Usually it requires that we be patient and open, and wait for healing which may take time.

What can we do to heal when we've become injured, ill, addicted, confused, worried, distressed, or despondent?

- Look after our bodies: get enough rest, work, exercise for strength, flexibility and endurance; eat nutritious foods, avoid toxic substances; nurture our immune systems by managing our stress
- Look after our minds: set goals; think positive thoughts; pursue new knowledge and skills; explore options when making decisions; discern important questions with the help of friends; engage in creative activities (e.g., reading, writing, art, music, cooking, crafts); develop awareness of “the big picture,” also the small parts of space and time
- Look after our feelings: be thankful for each day; practise the gifts of the spirit— love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; allow yourself to have feelings and to express yourself without hurting others; nurture friendships
- Look after our spirit: respect yourself, all living things, and the environment; read the Bible and other inspired literature; pray; worship with other people of faith; spend times in nature, in silence, in darkness, in light; ask for forgiveness of wrongs; strive for balance

What can we do to help others to heal?

- listen
- encourage (without judging)
- be present when they're suffering
- be a role model
- reach out and maintain contacts
- be gentle
- provide practical help if possible

Often our hurt is self-inflicted, as when we are careless or neglectful of what we need to be well, or when we have failed to maintain harmony in our relationships. Sometimes it happens due to the actions of others. Either deliberately or inadvertently we may cause hurt to others.

In Canada and around the world we have a long history of hurting Indigenous people and other marginalized groups, treating them with disrespect, injustice, sometimes even with cruelty. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) documented ways in which we have harmed Indigenous families by forcing children into residential schools and interfering with their way of life. For all of this we need to ask for forgiveness and heed the 94 calls to action offered by the TRC aimed at healing our relationships with Indigenous peoples.

Healing leads to wholeness. But do we ever arrive? Can we achieve perfect, everlasting wholeness of body, mind, and spirit? Are our relationships ever in perfect harmony?

Life is fragile. Healing doesn't lead to immortality, nor does it always allow us to overcome disease and brokenness. But it leads us to know what cannot be changed, to live fully in the moment, and to arrive at a serene acceptance of our mortality.

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, The moon and the stars which you have set in place, What is man that you are mindful of him, And the son of man that you care for him? -- Psalm 8: 3-4

- John Elias

For Reflection:

- *What are your thoughts and feelings around Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships at this time and in this place?*
- *How do you cultivate a spirit of openness rather than suspicion?*
- *Are there spaces in which you might be able to be present in the journey towards healing which John & Ray highlight?*

Lent Week 3 – Healing and Disability (March 12)

For most of us, when we think of disability and the Bible our minds will naturally turn to the accounts of Jesus performing miraculous healings of people he encountered who had impairments. These stories serve as literal examples of Jesus fulfilling his mission of bringing good news to the poor and recovery of sight to the blind (Luke 4:16-20) However, the immediacy and fullness of the healings portrayed in those stories has created the expectation that this should be the kind of miracle that is available to anyone who has enough faith. The implication of this interpretation of Jesus' healings for someone with a disability who does not receive a similar "cure" may be a choice between believing that there is something wrong or sinful about them, or that the idea of a God who cares for them is a myth. A lot of pain and despair comes from limiting ourselves to this false dichotomy. Are we able to rethink our theology to allow for the acceptance of brokenness in our world, and that healing may come in different forms? Maybe the power in those stories from the gospels goes beyond the miracle, to the example Jesus provides of recognizing the value of each life and ensuring people are loved rather than marginalized. When we follow this example there will be healing in ways that go beyond what we can see. – *Don Klaassen*

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In 2011 – that's 12 years ago – we had a dramatic life-altering experience. Irvin, my life's companion for 63 ½ years suffered a massive stroke. His right side was paralysed – he had no voice and was unable to speak. Medical care was diligent. They explained the gravity of the situation and assisted us on the new journey we were beginning. His vital signs were strong and after 3 days were stable – so – we set out to forge a new path – a new way of being. Irvin was very calm and his eyes told me he was very aware of what had occurred. Medical personnel told us this would be a slow and limited recovery. I was thinking perhaps 3 months – my understanding of the rehabilitation process was quite limited. This was very new territory for me. We both soon began to understand that recovery would be hard work and progress made would be in small increments. We both knew we would be in this together and our family was totally on side as well.

Irvin has taught me so much about acceptance and courage as well as endurance. He is willing to 'go the distance' and smiles graciously as we accompany each other on the journey. We have learned that life is not only about speed and that healing is a process – it is truly miraculous but not instantaneous.

YES! We do believe in miracles. Our faith, family, church, and community have been a strong constant factor all along the way.

We give God our gratitude for granting us strength for this journey. We know we are not done yet!! – *Donna Driedger (and Irvin too)*

### For Reflection:

*How have you understood the miraculous healing stories of Jesus in the Bible?*

*How do the reflections above help us redefine what is miraculous, or what healing means?*

## **Lent Week 4 – Healing Communal Trauma (March 19)**

*The following reflection was adapted from a retreat attended by Joyce Tremmel. The participants were invited to “get in touch with the spirit of the prairies.” This is what came to Joyce:*

### **A CALL TO WALK TOGETHER IN A GOOD WAY**

I lay on my back on the prairie grass, eyes closed I hear the eerie sound of the soaring hawk. Its mystical cry swirls in my mind. I am transported to earlier times. I see the large bison herds and hear their thundering hooves on the prairie ground. I smell the strong scent of the prairie sage and hear the drums beating, sending prayers of gratitude for all the gifts of the earth to the Creator. I see the Indigenous people's camp grounds, their teepees and hear their sacred ceremonies. I feel a strong kinship with these people who signed treaties with the British Crown many years ago. I remember my grade school Canadian history lessons telling of the coming of the railway, settling of the west, and the signing of the treaties. These were all presented as signs of progress in building our great nation. We were not told that with the disappearance of the bison the Indigenous people were starving. We were not told that in signing the treaties they were formally adopting us - the Queen's children - as kin. We were not told that we were to share the land - that it was considered sacred and not for sale!

I lay on my back, I hear the hawk's eerie cry and ponder all this. I connect with my ancestors. The prairie was their home. They were offspring of the first settlers - settlers of the west, who claimed their plot of land, broke the prairie sod, planted crops, raised animals, built farms, schools, churches and created villages and towns. The Indigenous people were sent to reservations and residential schools - it was cultural genocide! Trauma and poverty took hold!

I lay on my back and hear the hawk's eerie cry and ponder the goodness and hard work of my ancestors. They were faith filled people connected to the land and worked hard. They tried their best to live by their Christian values. They loved the land, and I do too.

I lay on my back and hear the hawk's eerie cry and hear a call - a call to act - a call for justice - for reconciliation - a call from the prairie land and all its creatures - a call for kinship - a call for all to become prairie peace pilgrims. We are all treaty people called to seek truth, justice and healing - called to walk together in a good way!

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The following is an excerpt from an article by Elaine Enns regarding the communal trauma of Mennonites and Indigenous peoples, and ways to find common ground and healing.¹ This material later became part of her book, Healing Haunted Histories (Cascade Books, 2021):

“1. Mennonites have historically endured experiences of violence and displacement, which could potentially help us empathize with the suffering of Indigenous people.

During the Reformation, Mennonites were heavily persecuted by both Protestants and Catholics, and for much of the 16th and 17th centuries in Europe were essentially undocumented people, who often could not legally own property or were denied citizenship.

Violence has also afflicted Mennonites more recently, including during and after the Russian Civil War and through the Second World War. Even here in North America, our distinctive ways were often held under suspicion by the dominant culture, and our religious practices and language sometimes suppressed. From 1918-25, Old Colony Mennonites in Manitoba and Saskatchewan who refused to send their children to public schools were fined, and had their livestock seized and sold to pay the fines. Some were jailed, and other families were reduced to destitution. During both World Wars, German-speaking people in Canada were often vilified and discriminated against.

To what extent has this history of marginalization taught us empathy with the wholesale suppression of Indigenous languages and cultures through residential schools over the course of a century-and-a-half? Should not the suffering of our ancestors open our hearts to the far-more systematic and continuing legacy of oppression afflicting Indigenous people and communities?

2. The ways in which our Anabaptist tradition leans toward justice and the right sharing of resources is another asset.

Do Canadian settler Mennonites today, however, suffer from hypermetropia, the ability to see things more clearly at a great distance? Is it sometimes easier for us to recognize human rights violations or social disparities in distant countries than to see them in our own urban neighbourhood or on the reserve next to our farm?

To take a personal example, my parents were deeply and sincerely involved with Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) refugee resettlement, and I am profoundly grateful to have grown up with people at our dinner table from many parts of Africa and the Balkans. Yet the only Indigenous people we ever hosted for a meal were my two adopted Cree cousins. Why was the distance between our home and the Indigenous neighbourhoods of Saskatoon greater than between us and Congo, Malaysia or Bosnia?

It may be that the standard of our settler Mennonite tradition of justice and peacemaking will be measured by our relationship—or lack thereof—with “the inconvenient Indian,” to quote [Indigenous author] Thomas King.

¹ Elaine Enns, “Facing History with Courage,” *Canadian Mennonite* 19/5 (Feb. 25, 2015): <https://canadianmennonite.org/stories/facing-history-courage>

3. A third prospect is that most Mennonites coming to Canada were rural people, which meant they tended to settle in close proximity to Indigenous communities, opening opportunities to build neighbourly relations.

But have we taken full advantage of this? Indeed, early Mennonite settlements were extremely insular, and rarely related even to other German-speaking immigrants! And more recently, as suburbanizing Mennonites have become increasingly indistinguishable from other middle-class Canadians, we, too, tend to remain aloof from first nation communities. How many of us have inherited a family farm located next to a reserve, but not inherited a tradition of relationship? There are exceptions, of course, but a significant gulf between settler Mennonite and Indigenous communities persists.

Mennonites have, then, generally been well-positioned to develop genuine friendships and empathic collaborations with Indigenous people. Insofar as these prospects have not led us into “restorative solidarity,” however, we must ask why. ...

In a post-TRC Canada, we settler Mennonites can no longer presume that our historic experiences of marginalization are unique; or remain ignorant of past and present oppression of Indigenous people groups; or imagine that our settlement had nothing to do with that oppression. When we are tempted to object that such issues aren't our problem—that these treaties and residential schools were set up before our ancestors even arrived—we need to remind each other that we Mennonites settled on treaty land. That makes us treaty people, which comes with responsibilities for justice and reconciliation.

The Prophet Jeremiah promised that there would be a day on which “people will no longer say, ‘The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge’ ” (Jeremiah 31:29).

May we heed Maya Angelou’s exhortation to face our common history with courage, both its prospects and problems, in order to build empathy, nurture “restorative solidarity” with our Indigenous neighbours, and ensure that injustice not be lived again.”

For Reflection:

What are stories of communal trauma that have shaped you, whether historical or contemporary (ex: the Mennonite experience during the Russian revolution, colonialism in Canada, Sept. 11, 2001, the Covid-19 pandemic)?

How have people in your family remembered these traumas?

What steps toward healing have you or others taken? What do Joyce and Elaine’s reflections inspire you to try?

Lent Week 5 – Healing and the Land (March 26)

The journey of healing the land began in the late 80's with our decision to move to organic farming from what is often referred to as conventional farming. A more accurate term would be chemical based farming.

At the time, our decision was based on the idea of being good stewards of the land we were entrusted with and providing a healthier food option for consumers. Over the years we have come to realize that chemical based farms believe they are also being good stewards of the land and the food they grow.

Our transition to organic farming was, and continues to be a learning experience. We always seem to be experimenting with soil building options, intercropping, etc. The choice we made has allowed us to farm and feel good about it. For us it was the right choice.

Another aspect of the healing was the relationship with our neighbours. In some cases it took years for some to understand what we were trying to do and for them to realize it was a viable option. Some just couldn't handle seeing the weeds. I think in most cases there is a mutual respect for the different farming methods used, and that they can exist next to each other.

Our connection to the land is a Holy experience. The soil is alive and gives us life. If one realizes all the tiny eco systems beneath our feet as we walk the fields and how every system is connected to the next, it is mind blowing and miraculous. We are fortunate and grateful that some of our land remains in its natural state of sloughs, ponds and bushes and we enjoy that daily all year round. Listening to the birds and frogs and crickets brings healing to the mind. We believe everything is connected and the land is also blessed when it hears what is going on above and below. Over the years we have planted shelter belts that provide save habitat for birds and other wild life.

Our farm is located on Treaty 6 territory and it has only been in the last number of years that we have recognized this. This realization doesn't undo what's been done but we believe in a sense it is calling the land to heal.

How can we continue to move towards healing with the indigenous community? One does not need to look far to see what that part of our history has done to the indigenous people.

How does the healing continue?

Plant trees, grow our own food, educate ourselves to get a better understanding of our history, volunteer at food banks, build relationships.

Don & Louella Friesen

How to Heal the Earth in Two Pages or Less

Given that my writing space and likely your attention span are limited here, we're going to focus on the big ideas for this one. Naturally, each person could find different ways to contribute to the healing of the Earth, but if we had to distill all of those individual acts of healing down to their common starting points, I believe they would connect to these two fundamental truths.

Truth A: Humans can only love what they know.

A few weeks ago, Jane and Arla were staging a toddler protest as our family was getting ready to leave church. Ernie wandered up to me and asked, “So how do you get your children to like church so much that they don’t want to leave?” I replied simply, “We just bring them here every week.” Now, there is obviously a bit more to it than that, but not much really. Love can’t grow without familiarity, and we all find ways to love the people, places, and things that we know the best.

I was lucky to grow up with parents that took our family on numerous camping and hiking trips each summer. Sure, there were bugs and cold nights, but overall, those experiences allowed me to fall in love with the sights, sounds, and smells of the forests, lakes, and mountains of our beautiful country, at least as much as any city raised boy could.

That’s a love that might never have grown in me had I not enjoyed those early experiences in nature, because I can only love what I know.

Truth B: Humans will only protect what they love.

My early love of nature was probably the main reason I was impacted so much by one of my summer jobs during university. The job was treeplanting. You live in the forest with a crew of planters, wake up at dawn, plant tiny trees all day, eat a giant supper, stagger into your tent to fall asleep, and repeat again the next day. For a hard worker, it was a good way to make a lot of money, but it also exposed me to the impacts of logging firsthand. Every day we would maneuver our bodies and planting bags through endless acres of slash where forests had once stood. Forestry products were everywhere in my world back home and of course I knew that all the paper and wood had come from trees, but something was different about seeing the forests that were now missing because of these products. I was further impacted by how discretely the forests were being removed. I saw thousands of acres of clear-cut land in my years as a treeplanter, but not one of those acres was within view of a town, campground, or even a public highway. I wonder how different our conservation efforts would be if logging companies were forced to first extract the forests that were visible to us all. I suspect that might change the false sense of confidence we have in the not-so-endless natural resources of our planet.

My experiences as a treeplanter were uncomfortable for me because I loved the forest first, and the thought of its ongoing destruction is still one of the factors that motivates me to live differently today. However, not everyone has had the same experiences with nature growing up. For a decade, I worked as a high school teacher and often took students on trips into the wilderness. I remember one occasion specifically, when a grade 10 student confessed to me before a trip that he had never been to a forest before. I was shocked to learn that a person like this existed! How many more people are in the same position and how would anyone in this position have the necessary drive to stand up for their love of the natural world when things go awry? The natural world could quietly wither away from abuse while our first world culture encourages us to love remodeled kitchens, shiny new vehicles, and tropical getaways. People will only protect what they love.

Action Steps

So how do we turn these lessons into action? Well, if humans will only protect what they love, and only love what they know, then the first step of healing the Earth is to help humans know the Earth. If no one actually knows the Earth, we can’t expect anyone to care about its healing.

In our global economy and screen tethered world today, I admit it can be a challenge to connect with the natural systems that support our lives everyday, so here are a few simple steps that can help with this process. I beg you to follow these steps in order with as much urgency as possible. Don't do it for me, or even for yourself. Do it for our children and all the generations that follow. With the knowledge we have of our environmental impact today, it is unethical to do anything less.

Go outside more, and find a way to do it in places where your view of the sky isn't blocked by buildings and your feet aren't guided by the pavement. Remind yourself that you're a tiny spec in an amazing natural system that supports your life every day.

Meet your needs in life with material goods and services available in your own ecoregion. This step alone won't solve all of our problems immediately, but this makes it much more likely that you will be aware of the true cost of your goods and services. If I buy imported food or clothing, I am oblivious to the destruction caused by unsustainable farming practices or textile mills, but if these goods were produced in my own backyard, sooner or later, any potential problems are going to impact me and I'm going to do something about it.

Erase your ecological footprint and maximize your social impact. What will be left on Earth when your life here comes to a close? Most of us are leaving behind a pretty big pile of garbage, yet the animals around us are evidence that life can come and go and leave a natural system perfectly intact throughout the process. God's creation is a textbook of limits, interconnectivity, and diversity that we have to learn from as we attempt to tread more lightly. How can you live your life here and still leave this planet better off than when you arrived?

That's all I've got for you today. It's not much really 😊. Either we all figure this out together, or we start writing letters to our grandkids to attempt to explain how we knew we were crossing a breaking point with the Earth's natural systems, but we didn't feel like changing anything. Imagine looking your grandkids in the face and delivering that message. No thanks. — *Jared Regier*

For Reflection:

- *How do you see others moving on their journey of healing with the land?*
- *Don, Lou and Jared offer thoughts about how the journey of healing with the land continues—how do you join in this journey?*
- *How are you nurturing relationships with people and plants?*

Lent Week 6 – Healing and Mental Health (April 2)

I have been dealing with mental health for most of my life. Having some one to talk to is important in healing. What is healing with mental health? Time, patience, love for self and for others is so important. Mental health is just as important as physical health. Finding different ways to express and talk about my health is very important. I may be dealing with my mental health for many more years, or I may find the final little aspect to health. I have no answer to fix my mental health. Healing for me is having support physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, and spiritually in my life. Listen, be a friend, and don't judge can help the healing process. Healing isn't a straight and narrow path, instead there are obstacles and barriers in the way. The pathway has challenges in its path. – *Diana Decaire*

For Reflection:

- *With whom do you speak about your mental health?*
- *Whom do you support and listen to about their mental health?*
- *How do you maintain your mental health?*

Good Friday – Death and Healing (April 7)

The following is an excerpt from reflections by Bernie Wiebe, a retired physician who worked for many years in end-of-life or palliative care as the director of a hospice and who is himself living with cancer. His sister, Erika Wiebe, interviewed him on the topic of mortality on her podcast,² and his reflections speak to our Lenten theme of death and healing, or whether there is such a thing as a “good” death, or “living well” even in the midst of dying or a terminal diagnosis.

What is a “good death”? ... Good dying is related to good living. Good living choices, good insights, and good behaviours happened [in the case of our brother, Rudy] when firstly, there was a reconciliation between him and various family members. Secondly, in his final days, he was in the centre of this circle of care ... family members who had been at odds with him in various ways rallying around in a spirit of compassion, with difficult baggage left at the door. That was a great gift to him. Thirdly, in the course of his deteriorating medical status, he was able to have good discussions with medical caregivers in regard to his medical condition and about the goals of care – choices laid out in a way that he could understand, and through which he could make his choices as to how the end would be. And lastly, the actual care he received then was top notch, assurance given that he would be comfortable, excellent symptom management, medication given so he would not suffer at the end of life. These good living choices and circumstances at the end made for good dying.

Once I was involved in end-of-life care, I learned the critical importance of always establishing the goals of care – through discussion with the patient and those close to them, defining what is desired. What do you want or not want – are we going all out for cure at any cost, are you willing to go to a certain extent but not beyond a certain line, or are we now simply wanting to pursue comfort measures or palliative care, leaving the goal of healing and overcoming disease behind? So what’s lost when physicians don’t have empathy, is first of all a shared understanding of the goals of care, and then secondly, an empathetic relationship between the physician and patient. This is an ancient idea going back to the Greek physician, Hippocrates, who said that the role of the physician is “to cure sometimes, treat often, and comfort always.”

[I would not prefer to use the] combative, military language of ‘battling’ cancer. Maybe it works in some situations [such as young patients]. For me, however, now with cancer within me, and not a cancer which likely will go away, but will probably continue to recur and stay with me long-term, like a chronic disease.... It has become part of the essence of my body. It is part of me and is part of my life. And while it wasn’t a welcome intruder into my life, I cannot deny the truth of its presence. So even while I gladly comply with any recommendations for treatments to subdue it and control it, I also find it better to think in terms of coming to terms with its presence, accepting it, and doing my best to continue living. You know, living with it, because it’s not that with the arrival of cancer that my life has stopped and will only be again good or meaningful once it’s gone. My life happens every day, whether the cancer is there or not. It happens through all the days that it is there. So my wife and I try to live our days well and happily and as gratefully as we can, even though we have in a way this cancer companion. This stance feels just more comfortable than always living with an adversarial relationship to the cancer, which then is a set up for a sense of having failed when it ‘wins the battle.’ If I die of this cancer in the end,

² Thanks to Erika and Bernie for permission to reprint this, and to Bob Neufeldt for connecting us to his good friend Bernie. Erika Wiebe, with Bernie Wiebe, “A Physician/Brother’s Perspective on Aging and Mortality,” *Afterthought Podcast*, Jan. 11, 2023, <https://open.spotify.com/show/3rOf0VMirV525TXpxYc18X?si=f56cbec4095d4c7b&nd=1>

which is likely, it will not represent a ‘failure’ of the life that I’m living. Another way I would say it is, the cancer, although it has had a big impact on our life in this last couple of years and the scope of the activity choices we have and so forth, it doesn’t on its own define my life or our life. It’s a big variable right now, but it doesn’t define it.

I’m really lucky to have a long life, which I have not deserved more than those who died early. And the fact that I will die should not disturb me, you know after all, we’re talking about mortality here, we live and then we die. But I have naively thought that since there’s longevity in our family, that I might have decades of retirement like our parents did or you know and die in my 80s or 90s, or maybe more than 90s like mom. But I won’t. You know, I will likely die in my 70s if I make it to my birthday. And it’s not dying that saddens me; it’s the thought of leaving my loved ones, expecting that they will probably feel sad, as we do, and missing out on the growing up of my grandchildren. Those are the hard things to consider. So although there is disappointment in thinking about a shorter life than I might have thought I had coming, it feels like there’s no reason to bemoan the fact. I could choose to sit in a corner and whimper, but it’s way more fun to live each day and enjoy it. So we’re grateful for each new day. We might say now that each one is a bonus day and we try to live it well and happily and gratefully. We do things that are fun and satisfying; we try to keep as well as we can, look for the beautiful things around us every day.

Some people think when there is cancer, in particular a relentless one like I have, that hope is gone. Can I just say a couple of things about hope? So it was helpful in my end of life care and in my work to learn about a more nuanced understanding of hope and how it changes. So here’s my scenario on hope over time in regard to living with my cancer. So in 2015 when a spot was seen in my lung, we hoped that it was something benign and it wasn’t. When I had surgery and chemotherapy, we hoped it would take care of the cancer. It did, for almost 6 years. When it recurred in ’21, I had chemo and we hoped it would heal the lesion and it did, and we hoped I would be clear for a long time, and I wasn’t. I had three more recurrences within the year that followed, each time small, and I did treatment, and each time did so in hopes it would work. And so far it has. And actually tomorrow I’ll have a scan which will tell again whether it’s back and I hope it isn’t, but it might be. And if that’s the case, if it’s back, we’ll hope again that there is effective treatment. But I may well come to a point where there is no more effective treatment or where a suggested treatment will look too burdensome, and I may choose palliative care. Then, I will hope for comfort, for controlled symptoms, for quality time with those who are close and whom I love, hope to make more memories along the way. And we don’t know how it will go. I said earlier, that even a disease we’re foolish to predict how it will go. But if I come to a point close to death, I will hope for continued comfort, close times with loved ones, and ultimately for a peaceful passing. So, you know, hope does not disappear as serious disease advances; it simply reshapes itself. There’s always something to hope for. The only other thing that I would say: I don’t know if I have adequate courage, but I draw strength and encouragement from the memory of the many patients in whose care I’ve been privileged to participate and many wonderful examples of gracious and courageous living while they were dying. So I think in some way that informs my approach as well.

For Reflection:

Have you accompanied a loved one in a time of palliative care?

Did you experience a sense of peace or healing in that time? Why or why not?

What do you make of Bernie’s redefinition of hope in difficult times?

Easter – Healing and Resurrection (April 9)

Christ is risen! Christ is risen, indeed. Hallelujah!

For Reflection:

What does the idea of God bringing life out of death mean to you?

Is there a time in your life when you've experienced a time of healing as "new life" or resurrection?