

December 27, 2020
Nutana Park Mennonite Church

Reflections on 2020 by Don and Edna Froese

The year 2020 began for us in Calgary, very early. By six o'clock, on New Year's Day, Don and I and two of our sons were driving across Calgary to catch a morning flight to Abbotsford for the funeral of my oldest brother on the following day, when our third son joined us. There, in a typical BC rain, we stood at the graveside, and wept. Weeks later we knew that we had reason to be grateful that Al had not died alone, as so many others have since. We could at least gather, as family and friends, to grieve together.

Since my brother's family is conservative evangelical (think Baptist rather than Mennonite), we were back in a country whose language we knew but hadn't spoken for decades. The hymns, contemporary songs, the Jesus and me phrasing were so familiar, yet uncomfortable. We hadn't seen the BC contingent of our family that often; they were not aware that we had learned to speak Christian differently.

Our family is good people, unfailingly decent, hospitable, warm, generous. Despite my unease, I was half envious of their assumption that God had lovingly managed their affairs in detail. Prayers had been answered so specifically, they said, and they were confident in their talk about the hereafter. God had comforted them.

I didn't know how to put that scene together with what I was hearing about evangelicals as a political force in the US. I had read too much about the major crises of our world; clichés and easy slogans of belief just irritated me. I was likewise baffled by some of the opinions I had heard from family members. I wanted to respect my evangelical brothers and sisters in the faith, to honor my background, to include rather than dismiss and denigrate, but I didn't know how.

So 2020 began in confusion. To struggle with matters of faith when my energy had already been depleted because of illness was hard. Indeed, the illness, not to mention the COVID pandemic, added urgency to the search for meaning and solidity. Where was God in this weird year?

[Don's contribution]

For me the New Year started with a new job, after returning from the funeral. It was exciting to start a new venture and have a new purpose for my days. It was good to find another involvement where I felt comfortable and capable of contributing. Then the

pandemic hit and it all went downhill. I had just started to develop a cleaning routine and now suddenly new sanitization protocols were needed. I trust that my work has been satisfactory.

Patrick asked us, “Where was God present or absent in 2020?” I’m sure God was present all along. The bigger question might be “where did I miss seeing Him?”

I missed seeing Him in the eyes of grandchildren, some of whom we haven’t seen in person for almost a year. I missed seeing Him at a planned family gathering to help us celebrate 50 years of marriage, many of whom we haven’t seen in a year or more. Family connections have been really important as we watch the next generations grow and develop their own personalities.

I did see Him as a comforter at the funeral of Al, a beloved dad, grandpa, brother and brother-in-law. Not knowing my brother-in-law well, I was able to support those who grieved more deeply, perhaps being God’s channel of comfort.

I did see God as healer as I watched Edna’s recovery from major surgery. This was a major shift in our lives. Once regular activities were now restricted and so extra effort was needed just to help her get through the day. After the first few weeks it was amazing to see the progress that she made.

I see God in the leadership of this congregation during the pandemic, even though we have missed seeing many of you for months. There is a real sense of loss when we can’t meet as usual. As the reopening group sought to understand and implement changing protocols, it has been good to see the unity of purpose and the co-operation of our church community in trying to make this environment a place where we can still worship and honor the God who gives us purpose and focus.

Spiritually and emotionally, I have had a tough year. Lethargy and depression have been close companions at times throughout the year. As I try to understand new ways of reading the Bible and living the Christian life, I have struggled to know who I am and how/where I belong. As I was growing up, I was taught that the Christian life is more

about getting ready for the hereafter than living in the present, a teaching that I've found hard to shake.

Readings by Marcus Borg, Jan Richardson and Barbara Brown Taylor have been very helpful.

My hope for 2021 is that we as individuals and as congregation continue to find purpose and meaning in the days we are given and that the God who sometimes feels far off will become nearer to us.

[back to Edna's story]

With happy gardening and frequent meetings with friends and neighbours outdoors, our summer was easier, especially post-surgery since all was going well. In the last months of 2020, though, I have known divine absence far more than presence. As winter settled in, we moved into ever greater isolation. We were now just two healthy people whose children all happened to be in Alberta and whose friends here in Saskatoon already had family bubbles. Oh, we've had phone calls and emails and video chats now and then, an occasional meeting on the sidewalk. Mostly we've been on our own.

Except that in a deeper sense, we have not been alone. It's not easy to put that into words, but I remember a few thin places which, here and there throughout the year, felt like barely seen doorways into the presence of God.

Back in mid-summer, our daughter-in-law had sent me a prayer shawl. In her note, she described herself as not a praying person at all but knitting the shawl for me had felt like love. As far as I was concerned, that counted as prayer. The shawl now keeps me warm during my morning centering prayer time. While on some days meditation feels distracted and futile, other days it is a silent retreat that makes the seeming absence of God feel like presence. I have been knitted to love.

In the fall, our longer walks along the river and in Cranberry Flats were beautiful vacations from anxiety. One evening we watched the sunset from the Meewasin Trail near the Gabriel Dumont park; it felt like transfiguration. Spectacular winter sunrises also matter – a lot.

And the company of my book friends came to my rescue. With blessedly right timing, a friend of mine lent me a book that would horrify my evangelical family. Ken Wilbur's *A Brief History of Everything* swept me into a wonderfully intellectual and then mystical rethinking of the grand sweep of human history. The book was dense, heavily theoretical, and long. My mind hadn't been stretched like that in a long time, yet Wilbur's discussion of the evolutionary stages of human development, both as a species and as individuals, rang true for me and made sense of so much. To understand finally that human emotional and cognitive development must needs happen in stages, each stage having to include the previous stage while moving into a new level, was liberating. It wasn't a matter of choosing the right or wrong form of Christianity; all stages were differing manifestations of Spirit. I read the book twice, never mind its length.

I read through two books of blessings by Jan Richardson. Barbara Brown Taylor showed herself a kindred spirit again; I reread *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, for the third and fourth time, and then I read *Holy Envy*. The respect and charity Taylor expressed toward all religions, all the while becoming more grounded in her own Christian faith demonstrated what Ken Wilbur in *The Brief History of Everything* might have meant about including what we have outgrown, yet moving on, beyond, to new territory. I read James Fowler's *Stages of Faith*, and was encouraged not to negate what I had once been but to continue the journey.

All of that is not to say that I'm now always happy in the Lord, if I can use my family's language. Some days seem purposeless. Reading the Bible is difficult because old meanings stand in the way. One needs a community in which to accomplish the work of reinterpretation. So I look for the face of God in small kindnesses both received and carried out. There is so little that I can do now, but I try to be kind when I do meet others. And I write, for whatever that might accomplish, now or eventually.

I feel that I should be quoting Scripture here; instead, I'm more likely to rely on poetry. In the most difficult weeks of pre-surgery and after-surgery, I recited to myself like a mantra, Denise Levertov's "The Avowal."* Its image of "freefall" into "Creator Spirit's deep embrace" which requires no deserving helped me put aside ancient guilts and fears and move closer to mystical confidence.

As I was writing this, T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* fell into my hands again, and I end with these lines:

For most of us, there is only the unattended
Moment, the moment in and out of time,
The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,
The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning
Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
While the music lasts. These are only hints and guesses,
Hints followed by guesses; and the rest
Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.
The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is
Incarnation.

(T.S. Eliot, *The Dry Salvages*)

* **The Avowal**

As swimmers dare
to lie face to the sky
and water bears them
as hawks rest upon air
and air sustains them,
so would I learn to attain
free fall, and float
into Creator Spirit's deep embrace,
knowing no effort earns
that all-surrounding grace.

Denise Levertov