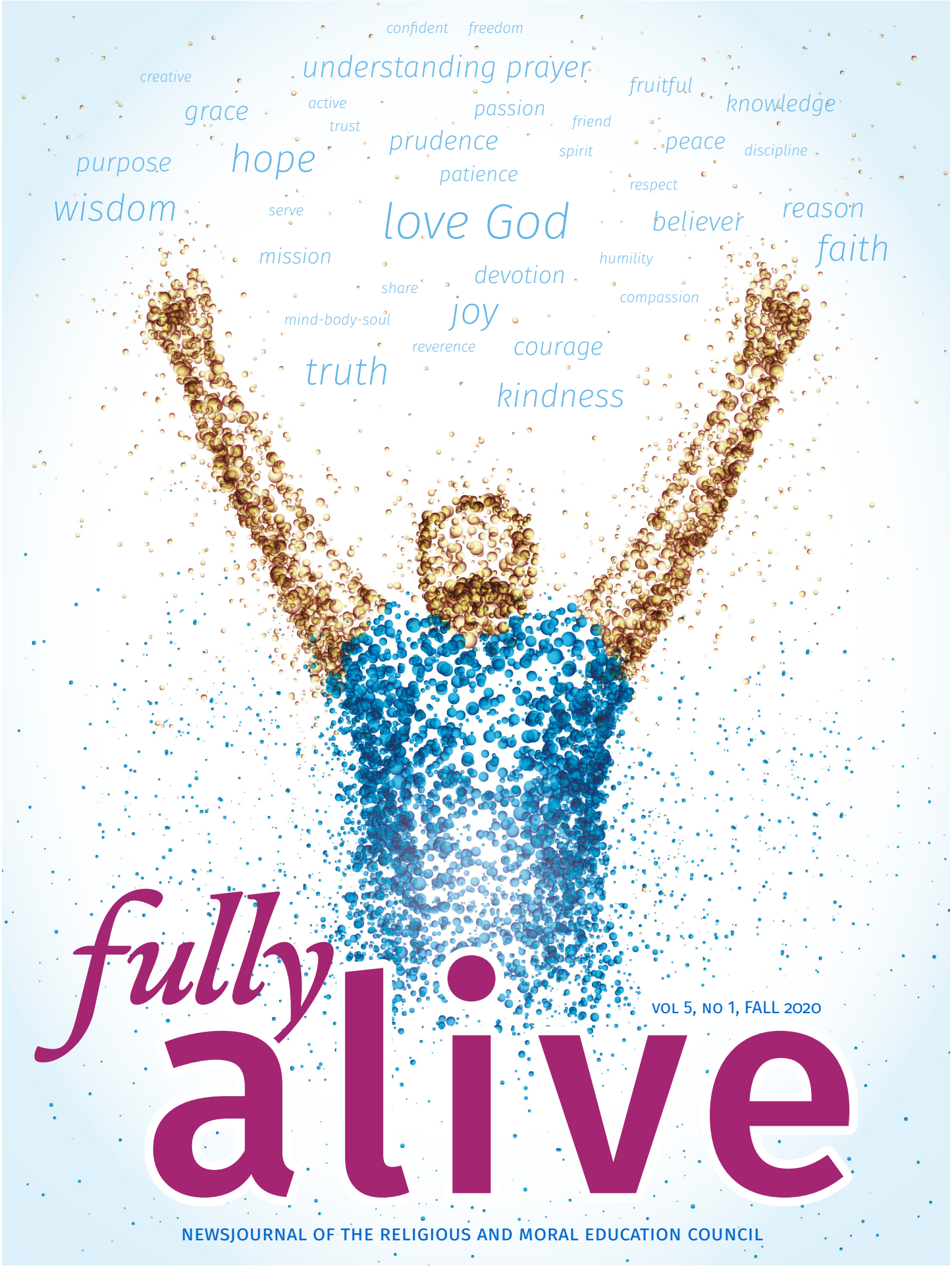


# fully alive

VOL 5, NO 1, FALL 2020

NEWSJOURNAL OF THE RELIGIOUS AND MORAL EDUCATION COUNCIL

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fully alive

VOL 5, NO 1, FALL 2020

# In This Issue

# From the President

How our world has changed! On March 11, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared coronavirus disease (COVID-19) a pandemic. We teachers finished off our work-week, not sure what this all meant. By the weekend, the grocery stores were cleared out of toilet paper, hand sanitizer and many other items. Suddenly, on Sunday afternoon, the premier announced that K–12 in-person classes had been cancelled and that we would be moving into at-home, online learning. Two days later, a recommendation came down that if we could, we should be working from home. We continued working almost exclusively from home for the rest of the school year—doing our best to provide online learning to our students. The COVID-19 pandemic changed our world in ways we never imagined.

As I write this, teachers still don't know what the fall will bring. The government has given us three scenarios for returning to school and has told us that we will be informed on August 1 of which scenario will be implemented. Many teachers are fearful that schools will not be safe and that physical distancing efforts will not be adequate. Even though the number of COVID-19 cases in the province is currently down, many experts predict a second wave that could be worse than the first. The prospects for this school year are troubling.

In response to the fear we are facing in our world and workplaces, we hope for better days. Our faith teaches us that we need not yield to fear. This is the message of the angel on Easter morning at the tomb, who says to the trembling women, "Do not be afraid."[1] This message was not given only to those women but to all of us, to trust that God will make things right—even during a pandemic.

We don't know what more the pandemic will bring or when it will end, but we will continue to do our best to navigate these uncharted waters and make adjustments to our plans to best serve our students and families. Some changes the Religious and Moral Education Council (RMEC) has made include transforming our World Catholic Education Day pub night into a very successful virtual pub night and moving our annual conference from October to March, with hopes that we will be able to meet in person. We will continue to make changes to better serve our members.

I hope that you and your family are doing well, in spite of COVID-19 and the risks it presents. If you have suggestions for how RMEC can support you during this time, please let us know.

God bless!

## Note

1. Matt 28:5 (New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition [NRSV-CE]).

*Dan McLaughlin*

## The Religious and Moral Education Council

**Mission**

The Religious and Moral Education Council exists to improve the knowledge, understanding and practice of our members in the field of religious and moral education.

**Vision**

The Religious and Moral Education Council will, in search of peace and the common good, be a principal resource for Alberta teachers.

**Values**

We are committed to serving teachers through the values of faith, dignity, respect and collaboration.

# A Note from the Editor

The Fall 2020 issue of *Fully Alive* includes several supportive articles about our journey through the COVID-19 experience, which has occupied so much of our teaching energy in the past months. I am proud to note that several of the articles were written by classroom teachers, who share their observations and wisdom with us as we strive to grow as educators.

In this issue, you will also find a review of RMEC's virtual pub night, held in May to coincide with World Catholic Education Day celebrations, as well as a review of a book about how caregivers can care for themselves.

New to *Fully Alive* is an article from a faith tradition other than Christianity. I am pleased to welcome Imam Mahmoud Omar to share his insights about the intersections between Christianity and Islam. My hope is that connecting with other world religions will foster a deeper understanding of the faiths that make up our provincial, national and global collective.

This issue also marks my first as editor. I have taught in small-town Alberta for 35 years. Never a dull moment is experienced when one has the opportunity to revel in the growth of one's students. Of course, the same is true of raising children. My husband and I have three, who reside in Edmonton and Calgary. When we moved to central Alberta a year ago, I began volunteering at a local school. I will return to the classroom part-time this autumn while continuing my voluntary pursuits.

I have served RMEC in a variety of roles over the past decade. As I embark on this new venture as editor of *Fully Alive,* it is my desire to nurture teachers with words and ideas that speak to their minds, hearts and souls. I invite your thoughts about the content of *Fully Alive* at amberzeroone@gmail.com.

Turn the page, read on, be challenged, find support, and grow!

*Elaine Willette-Larsen*

# Meet Your RMEC Executive

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Your RMEC executive members give their time out of a genuine desire to serve you, our members, and to further develop religious and moral education in Alberta. We hope you'll get involved too!

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# An Ignatian Pilgrimage to Post–COVID-19 Education: Fear Not for God Is with Us

Sister Zoe Bernatsky

## The Pilgrimage Begins

How will things look in the post–COVID-19 world of education? Should I prepare for teaching remotely or in the classroom? How will we manage the knowledge gap resulting from the transition to online learning in March? How will I stay grounded and help students and parents manage stress and anxiety in these troubling times?

These questions race through the minds of teachers across the country. As I pedal my bicycle down a scenic path in June, I have similar thoughts. Fear and uncertainty threaten my usually calm disposition as a professor of moral and pastoral theology, and distract me from enjoying the beautiful ride. I remind myself to let go of my fears, for God is with me. Quite suddenly, my vision opens up, and I see bright leaves cheering me on as I pass. "You are not alone!" the trees whisper, a soft but clear affirmation. "God is with you." With a deep breath and a smile on my face, joy and confidence return to me.

*The spirituality of Saint Ignatius offers a way of living marked by distinctive anchor points: finding God in all things, freedom and discernment.*

Cycling is what I love to do in the summer months. On Sunday afternoons, I make a pilgrimage into Edmonton's river valley. The goal of a pilgrimage is not rest but, rather, challenge. I am never quite sure where I am going! Although a pilgrimage often involves travel, its essence is an inward movement marked by openness, attentiveness and responsiveness (Smith 1998, xi). Long days, with rough roads and just enough nourishment for the journey, end in sound sleep and a deeper appreciation for all that I sometimes take for granted.

During the initial phase of the COVID-19 crisis, fear drove me to incessantly check my phone for updates and information. While some of the information was helpful, it did not assuage my anxiety. I had to take concrete steps to shift from a place of fear to a place of calm and serenity. I found myself drawing from the principles of Ignatian spirituality to move ahead on the inward journey.

Saint Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), the founder of the Jesuits, developed a guide to deepening one's spiritual life. In the *Spiritual Exercises* (Ignatius 1849), he sets out a series of meditations drawing from the Christian faith rooted in the Bible, especially the Gospels. He describes various ways of praying in a process that emphasizes awareness of our inclinations and motivations and the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Although Ignatius does not use the phrase, the exercises involve consciousness-raising.

As I learn to discern the voice of God's spirit, inviting me to move forward with trust in God's providential love, I also become aware of the spirit that is counter to God's spirit—the spirit of destruction and disorientation, the spirit of panic and fear.

## Anchor Points in Ignatian Spirituality

Ignatian spirituality is concerned with a life of action, not only particular acts. It is congruent with virtue ethics, a system of moral theology that is concerned with character or a stable disposition over time. Spirituality and ethics both explore virtues or qualities that help us to be more fully human and to flourish—body, mind and spirit—in accord with our true nature (Sheldrake 2012, 76–77).

The spirituality of Saint Ignatius offers a way of living marked by distinctive anchor points: finding God in all things, freedom and discernment. The awareness that God can be encountered in and through daily life reminds us that faith must be integrated into all our actions. However, we cannot act in a manner consistent with our faith if we are not free. Freedom from distractions and the freedom to live from deeply rooted Christian values are critical to making wise choices consistent with our most profound truth. Discernment helps us understand our desires, identify where we lack freedom and direct our impulses toward life-giving options.

### Finding God in All Things

The central anchor point for Ignatian spirituality is finding God in all things. As the letter to the Romans reminds us, nothing can "separate us from the love of God."[1] It is possible to meet God in whatever circumstances we find ourselves. We might want to label the COVID-19 pandemic, an illness or a loss as the worst experience of our lives. However, these experiences, as painful as they are, can also expand our vision and help us discover new ways of flourishing.

Beyond the waves of panic and stress, the pandemic has been a time to rediscover God and others. While home and work are often entirely separate realities, the pandemic required many to stay home, work from home and oversee the education of their children from home. Even participating in Sunday Mass happened from home, via livestream.

A few bricks in the wall that separates home from our school or faith life were removed. What did that mean for you? For me, it required an inward journey of patience and kindness. I was grateful for the Daily TV Mass. As a community, we gathered in front of the TV to listen to the readings, hear an inspiring homily and partake in spiritual communion. Instead of visiting my elderly mother a few provinces away, I, along with my brother or sister, would conference call and pray the rosary with her each evening. I could sense that my mother's health was deteriorating; we were supporting her in prayer, which meant so much to her. God was with us in these strange encounters!

> *When I am free, I want and I choose what best leads to God's deepening life in me.*

### Freedom for Transformation

Had we not embraced the challenges introduced by COVID-19, we could have become frustrated with the limitations placed upon us. Freedom is marked by letting go of present circumstances, to enter into a new reality. To live contemplatively, aware of God's presence, we must live from a place of freedom, liberated from inordinate attachments.

The Principle and Foundation, described in the first week of the *Spiritual Exercises*, reminds us that all the gifts of the created world are meant to help us to know, serve and love God more faithfully. If created things hinder my progress toward the goal of an active Christian life, I ought to let them go. To respond to the call of Jesus Christ, I must be free. This freedom involves discipline and a real cost as I give up what is most convenient or comfortable for me.

The first week of the *Spiritual Exercises* is devoted to attaining inner freedom. "Our only desire and our one choice should be that option which better leads us to the goal for which God created us" (Fleming 1978, 23). When I am free, I want and I choose what best leads to God's deepening life in me—ultimately, to love and be loved by God, since "God is love."[2] Until we are free from those things that constrain us and prevent us from putting Christ first in our lives, we cannot move forward. This invitation to choose God first happens over and over in our lives.

As in the stories of heroic people throughout the ages, a call and a firm committed response must motivate our actions. Awareness of our sin and all that constrains us from living generously and compassionately will lead to humility. We return to our

Creator, who loves us unconditionally, forgives our inadequacies and desires to give us new life. A contemplative understanding of God's fierce and passionate love changes the landscape of our lives. Like the hero of days gone by, we are called forth into a new adventure, which causes us to cross a threshold, beyond the old self. Captivated by God's vision of ourselves, and the challenge ahead, we leave our worldly interests and sinful ways to take on the vision and values of Christ.

The path of spiritual transformation involves the movement from inauthenticity to authenticity, which takes discipline and dedication. The discipline takes the form of spiritual practices, such as prayer and concern for others, rather than our own comforts. Teachers are no strangers to commitment. The intellectual, spiritual and moral formation of students is foremost in the minds of teachers. Whatever adventures are required, the superhero teacher is willing and ready to go!

What new-found freedoms did you find in your COVID-19 life? Were there areas of your life in which you found that you were unfree?

### Discernment

The *Spiritual Exercises* is a medium for spiritual guidance and transformation. It helps those doing the exercises to make life-giving decisions. Self-reflection is an essential component of the spiritual life, but there is also a need for a spiritual director or guide.

In the Ignatian tradition, the spiritual guide uses two sets of rules. The rules for the first week, or the initial phase of the journey, guide those who are not fully committed to the spiritual life. Here, the spirit of God disturbs them in an attempt to wake them up from complacency and help them get on track with their spiritual life. In the second week, once they have committed their life more fully to God, the Holy Spirit works by increasing their sense of peace and tranquility when they act in a manner consistent with God's grace.

The Holy Spirit is always present, encouraging us along the way, either by disturbing or by consoling. However, the enemy can try to throw us off balance by giving us false consolation when we are not on the correct path ("That yummy doughnut is good for me!") or by encouraging doubt when we are on the spiritual path (false desolation).

Spiritual consolation is an internal disposition characterized by an

> experience of being so on fire with God's love that we feel impelled to praise, love, and serve God and help others as best as we can. Spiritual consolation encourages and facilitates a deep sense of gratitude for God's faithfulness, mercy, and companionship in our life. In consolation, we feel more alive and connected to others.[3]

Consoled by God's loving presence, we increase our acts of love and devotion.

In contrast, spiritual desolation is an experience of darkness, turmoil and doubt. I here recall when I ruminated on my fears while cycling back in June. Had I continued to focus on my anxiety, I would have become discouraged, my faith diminished, and my actions and relationships would have exemplified this.

When interpreting consolation and desolation, it is crucial to identify where the experience is coming from and where it is leading us, since consolation does not always mean happiness, and desolation is not always equated with sadness. I can feel sad when I realize that I have moved into a fearful mindset because I am preoccupied with my own concerns, rather than those of others. This sadness can lead me to conversion, which leads me to deep peace and joy. In this situation, the original sadness moves me toward God, so it is an example of consolation. Superficial happiness, which comes with the acquisition of more stuff, can cause me to resist the promptings of God, who reminds me of my creaturehood and my reliance on God, not possessions. If I persist in my attachment to material objects, I fall into desolation, or a movement away from God.

Ignatian spirituality reminds me to return to places of consolation, Scripture passages and prayer experiences that remind me of God's love and inspire me to be loving to others. Psalm 139 and Isaiah 43:1–7 are passages that offer much consolation to me. They remind me that God is always there for me. When I can hear God speak to my heart and call me by name, my spirit is refreshed and my energy is restored. When I feel swallowed up by fear and anxiety, I can return to prayer and recall how precious and honoured I am in God's sight. I can decide to turn my cares over to the Lord's attention and to grow in mature faith, committed to the God who loves and cares for me.

## The Pilgrimage Continues

The pilgrimage continues as I embark on a three-month retreat in daily life that will end as the school year begins.[4] I am following *Finding Christ in the World: A Twelve Week Ignatian Retreat in Everyday Life*, by Joseph Tetlow and Carol Atwell Ackels (2017). The retreat guide offers tips for prayer; questions for reflection; and an opportunity to consider my thoughts, feelings and desires each day.

My hope and desire are that my spiritual senses will be awakened so that I can be more attuned to Jesus as I begin the school year. I hope to help students grow intellectually, but I will also invite them to enrol in the school of the heart. The school of the heart encourages attentiveness to the interior life and a robust spirituality that finds God in all things. Saint Ignatius reminds us that God is already at work in the lives of all people, even when it seems that God is absent. As I begin this retreat, I trust that God is with us, just as I will when I start the school year. We are not alone!

I look forward to noticing the graces bestowed in abundance in the upcoming academic year, and I hope the same for you.

## Notes

1. Rom 8:39 (NRSV-CE).

2. 1 John 4:8 (NRSV-CE).

3. "Introduction to Discernment of Spirits," Ignatianspirituality.com, www.ignatianspirituality.com/making-good-decisions/discernment-of-spirits/introduction-to-discernment-of-spirits/ (accessed June 7, 2020).

4. While the *Spiritual Exercises* encourages us to take time away from our usual occupation in order to have more time to dedicate to prayer, Ignatius makes provision in annotation 19 for the exercises to be done while at home and carrying out regular duties.

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# Our Fathers: Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac

Imam Mahmoud A Omar

In the second chapter of the Noble Qur'an, God says, "Or were you witnesses when death approached Jacob, when he said to his sons, 'What will you worship after me?' They said, 'We will worship your God and the God of your fathers, Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac—one God. And we have submitted to Him.'"[1]

From the inception of Islam, Muslims have had an affinity for their cousins—Jews and Christians. After all, Prophet Muhammad and his greater tribe descended from Ishmael. The Qur'an itself calls for unity under the banner of Abraham (peace be upon him). Just as Jews and Christians revere Abraham, so do Muslims. Not only do we identify Abraham as our religious patriarch, but we also see him as the unifying factor between Jews, Christians and Muslims. This unifying factor extends to recognizing all prophets—including those of Jews and Christians. In the Qur'an, God commands the believing Muslim to say, "We have believed in God and what has been revealed to us and what has been revealed to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the Descendant and what was given to Moses and Jesus and what was given to the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and we have submitted to God."[2]

*The Abrahamic faiths can come together through compassion and dialogue in shaping social integrity, moral values, peace, justice and security.*

Muslims believe in the previous revelation of God to the earlier prophets and see Muhammad as the final brick in a wall of prophets. Thus, we identify our cousins as people of the book, to emphasize unity between the faiths that possess monotheistic scripture. The Qur'an specifically mentions the Torah of Moses, the Psalms of David and the Gospel of Jesus (may peace and blessings be upon them). The term *people of the book* inspired Muslim domestic and foreign policy consisting of pacts of protection and a charter of rights and freedoms for non-Muslims (Morrow 2017). It created a legal framework for intermingling between faiths. The simplest examples involve marriage with and eating the food of the people of the book, among other rulings, thus signifying a sense of family and community (Carimokam 2010, 463).

One may even come to realize that Islamic civilization itself is a product of the influence of various cultures and religions. Both the Jewish and the Christian communities took shelter in Islamic civilization, and the governors incorporated them into their courts for civil governance. The cultures intersected, even though the religions remained distinct. As the communities developed, religion became just one of several variables in identifying a community, including language, ethnicity, profession and social status (Sharkey 2017).

The theology of Islam developed as a result of this intermingling. As the Muslims expanded, they debated with the atheist and agnostic segments of

society in the East and with Christians and Jews in the West. Within this dialogue and civil discord, tools for exploring theology emerged under the framework of *kalām*, which borrows from Christian epistemology. Similarities to *kalām* can be seen in two major Christian dialogue cases: the *Dialogue with Trypho*, by Justin Martyr, and the *Dialogue Between a Saracen and a Christian*, by John of Damascus (Cook 1980, 33). Both dialogues fit into the Christian tradition of writings that show how to argue a religious case. *Kalām* is the formulaic adaptation of this dialectical structure, which includes a hypothetical question or statement of an idea, followed by a reaction to the response (sometimes in the form of if–then statements) and, finally, a synthesis. For example, "Ask them . . . . If they say . . . , then respond to them with . . . ."

Islamic thought has had an influence on the West, in turn. In science, Islamic thought was essential to the evolution of scientific method and inquiry. Prioreschi (2002, 17) cites the extensive work of Al-Kindi as a precursor of the Scientific Revolution and highlights his treatise and precisions in scientific experimentation. In human rights, Islam pioneered women's rights and developed equality between races and tribes. Islamic women found equality in roles and responsibilities in both private and public spheres (Jawad 1998). In governance and policy making, the Constitution of Madinah, written by the Prophet Muhammad, is recognized as the first written constitution and unites the Muslims, the pagans and the Jews under a single umbrella (Warren 2017).

Even in war, the crusaders returned with the idea of chivalry, and Napoleon brought Egypt its first Arabic movable-type printing press (Sharkey 2017). While Muslim–Christian history includes tension, hostility and war, one cannot discount the not only historical but continuing period of peaceful coexistence and toleration.

Beyond dialogue, a complete approach to education in a diverse community involves adopting compassion and sympathy toward one another. The work of French Catholic orientalist Louis Massignon, who was influential in Muslim–Christian dialogue and interfaith relations between Islam and the Vatican in the 1950s and 1960s (Kimbal 1995), is remarkable in this area. He says, "To understand something is not to annex it, it is to transfer by decentring oneself (*par décentrement*) to the heart of the other. . . . The essence of language should be a kind of decentring. We can make ourselves understood only by entering the system of the other" (Massignon 1969, 631; translated). Massignon proposed a cultural solution through compassion and focusing on universal maxims.

Hence, we must put aside the ideological divergences driven by religious extremism and political

Photo courtesy of Elaine Willette-Larsen

interest. In our modern world, humanity is driven into hatred, selfishness, jealousy and aggression as a result of materialism and communism. The Abrahamic faiths can come together through compassion and dialogue in shaping social integrity, moral values, peace, justice and security. It is our responsibility to establish basic human rights by addressing global challenges through a moral and ethical lens.

To conclude, a close companion of the Prophet Muhammad, a saint by the name of Ammar ibn Yasir, said, "Whoever has three qualities has completed faith: a sense of fairness in yourself, spending in charity despite difficult circumstances, and offering peace to the world."[3]

## Notes

1. Qur'an 2:133.
2. Qur'an 2:136.
3. Ibn Abi Shaybah, Musannaf, 30440.

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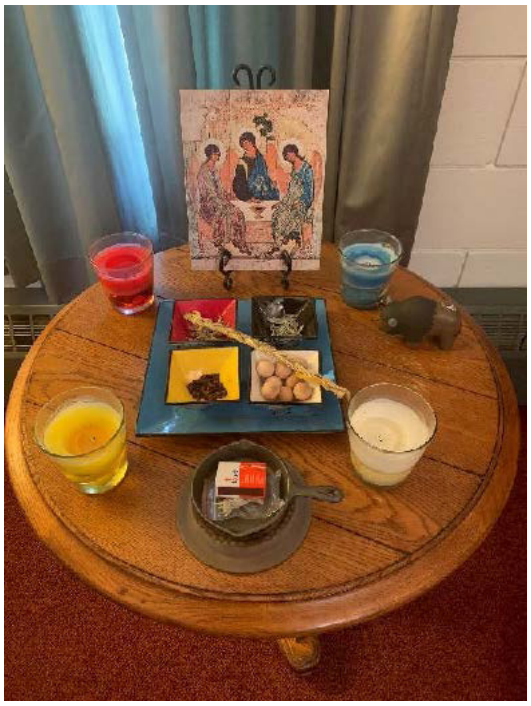
# The Medicine Wheel: A Lens for Deeper Listening

Mark A Nixon

"The Medicine Wheel, sometimes known as the Sacred Hoop or Sacred Circle, has been used by generations of various Native American tribes and First Nations in Canada for health and healing and as a tool for learning and teaching" (Beaulieu 2018, 15). Although the Medicine Wheel has many variations, as Canada has more than 630 First Nations communities,[1] each brings people of all ages, races and faiths to an increased self-awareness. Each can illustrate one's relevance in creation and one's connection to the Sacred Mystery.

During my doctor of ministry program at St Stephen's College, University of Alberta (2002–07), each day of our Integrative Seminar 3 class, we centred ourselves and reflected on our whole person using the Medicine Wheel's four directions (east, south, west and north) and its four quadrants (mind, body, spirit and emotions).[2] This was my second encounter with the Medicine Wheel. Fifteen years earlier, while taking an Aboriginal studies course for my bachelor of education degree at the University of Lethbridge, I was introduced to the teachings of the Medicine Wheel and the four directions. It would take 10 more years for me to begin to understand how these teachings relate not only to the history of Indigenous people but also to a deeper understanding of myself in a holistic way.

Over those 10 years, I was blessed to have enough professional development funding to take several summer sessions from Barrie Bennett on instructional and graphic intelligences, at the Ursuline Monastery in Quebec City, which dates back almost 400 years. After these experiences, I developed several placemat



*Adapted Medicine Wheel in the author's office*

activities to help my high school students better understand themselves and their relationship to specific topics and issues. Since the high school where I taught for 28 years had an Indigenous population of approximately 18 per cent, mainly Blood Nation and Piikani Nation, I gravitated to a Medicine Wheel from the Blackfoot tradition.

I shared my placemat with several Elders and Indigenous educators, to ensure that I was properly honouring First Nations cultural traditions. On my journey, I came across this quotation from Chief Dan George (1974), of the Tsleil-Waututh Nation:

> Everyone likes to give as well as to receive. No one wishes to receive all the time. We have taken much from your culture. I wish you had taken something from our culture . . . for there were some good and beautiful things in it.

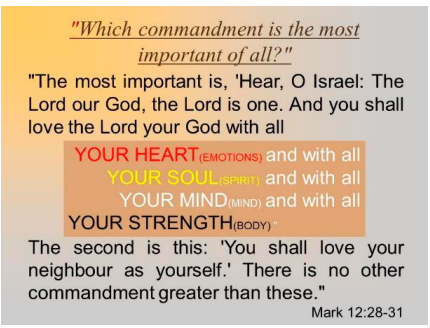
Through this, along with my knowledge of the Love Command from the Synoptic Gospels, particularly Mark and Luke, I made the connections shown in the placemat.

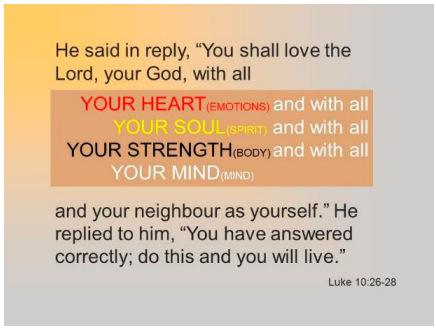
In my classes, the Medicine Wheel placemat helped students convey their observations during various educational activities, both academic and nonacademic. I also used it in a mindfulness mirror walk exercise to break up a two-hour class and engage students through self-awareness. In this version of the exercise, participants spent time in each quadrant by reflecting on a specific question in a different location. They recorded their answers to eight questions on a Medicine Wheel placemat, using a provided list of descriptors or coming up with their own words that best described their observations. They then wrote a brief rationale. Later, they discussed the points they were comfortable sharing in a think–pair–share exercise, as well as in a group discussion of the whole.

*Picture taken by the author at St Stephen's College*

I later used this exercise successfully with employees of Covenant Health in Lethbridge, with teachers at various teachers' conventions and with retreatants at the Martha Retreat Centre in Lethbridge. In my workshops, the Medicine Wheel provided a simple way for Covenant Health employees (who represented various ages, ethnicities and educational backgrounds) to articulate their observations after viewing short videos on the specific values of their organization. This gave them a safe way to quickly document self-awareness and then choose parts of the Medicine Wheel that they were willing to share with each other—thus building trust and relationships.

Speaking of trust, I will share this story from my doctoral studies at St Stephen's College. My last Interdisciplinary Study of Ministry course (ISM 2005) was the most powerful and prayerful. As we gathered





*Medicine Wheel placemat created by the author*

around the Medicine Wheel each morning to begin our day, the prayer services, including the one I prepared and presided over, fed me on many levels. The prayers offered diversity, depth and breadth, which touched my spirit, my emotions, my body and my mind (the quadrinity).[3]

One service that struck me was a spontaneous prayer service in which three classmates, Fred, Karin and Barb,[4] took the lead by putting on a reading and some songs, along with an impromptu sermon together, on the day when no one had signed up. When asked, I read from Zephaniah. The passage begins as follows:

> Woe to her that is rebellious and defiled, the oppressing city!
> She listens to no voice, she accepts no correction.
> She does not trust in the Lord, she does not draw near to her God.[5]

Later, after reflecting on this reading, I saw a direct correlation between listening and trusting, as well as between not accepting change and being far from God. If one listens deeply to the passage, one can hear that true listening requires trust in God and that being close to God requires self-correction. Throughout this doctoral program, I had come to appreciate the importance of truly listening—of being attentive to my surroundings, to my ministry, to my family and to myself.

After reading the passage, I sat down. I had a strong urge to place the Bible on the table in the middle of the quadrinity tablecloth, but I did not act on this urge. Instead, I closed the Bible and placed it beside me. Fred needed the Bible for his talk, so I gave it to him, and when he finished, he gave it back to me. As soon as Fred finished, Greg, another classmate, asked if he could light the candle that was on the prayer table. Fred said yes. With the lighting of the candle, I suddenly felt empowered to ask if I could place the open Bible on the prayer table, between the carving of the hand holding the egg and the lighted candle (as shown in the photo). Fred again said yes, so I placed the open Bible in the middle of the table. I returned to my seat. Drawn to this trinity, my eyes focused on the candle, the Bible and the carving.

At that moment, in my mind's eye, I experienced a vision that left me awestruck. The vision powerfully drew me into an awareness of how the incarnation can be literally an ongoing process, as God's Word is incarnated (fleshed) through each of us. I saw this vision as an opportunity to be present to my own self-care. I saw, like Parker J Palmer (2004, 39), that "whatever we do to care for true self is, in the long run, a gift to the world." I believed that this gift did not belong to me alone; it belonged to the community formed in this course. So when it came time to recount the blessings of the past two weeks, I shared it. This was new for me, as I would not have shared this experience before being involved with the program.

As I reflected on this experience later that spring, I saw the Bible as the mouth of God and the words as the breath of God, and like the air we breathe, the Word of God is life-giving. We've all heard that we are what we eat. I would like to add that we are what we breathe. This visual enriched my sense of the incarnation—the Word made flesh. From time to time, my ego drives my listening away not only from the Word of God but from all those around me. As Palmer (2004, 120) writes, "We listen with half a mind, at best, busily filtering what we hear so that we can embrace what we agree with and reject the rest. We listen, that is with our egos." So I offer my story of the Medicine Wheel, which is steeped in traditions both cultural and scriptural, as a means for your students and perhaps yourself to be more attentive to the moments that the living God gives each one of us.

## Notes

1. Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, 2017, www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1100100013791/1535470872302 (accessed September 21, 2020).

2. Here, being centred refers to one's spiritual, emotional, physical and mental state and becoming aware of one's balance or imbalance in the context of the Medicine Wheel at any given time. It is a method by which one can become mindful of one's true self in relationship to the Sacred Mystery.

3. The *quadrinity* is a term used by Brenda Peddigrew, RSM (Sisters of Mercy), PhD, in the ISM 2004 course to describe all levels of being. *Quad-* refers to the relational number four represented by mind, body, spirit and emotion, and *-rinity* evokes the Trinity—the Godhead, three persons in one God.

4. Not their real names.

5. Zeph 3:1–2 (Revised Standard Version [RSV]).

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# The Power of Connection: Fostering Safe and Caring Communities

Mariette Dobrowolski

The first time I met Cody was on a computer screen. With COVID-19 restrictions, that has become commonplace, but at the time it was far from ordinary. Really, it was extraordinary—and so is Cody.

Cody has a gentle spirit and a warmth that draws you in. Our exchanges invite me to reflect on what I too often take for granted. You see, Cody is homebound. Not the way we've all been homebound in recent months (which has been enough to make most of us appreciate our freedom). For Cody, this situation has not been just a few months. It has been years. He was once carefree and able to run around the playground, but his condition has deteriorated, and he currently is not very mobile. He uses a wheelchair and needs to be carried from place to place. He's dependent, at least in that way. Further, when his anxiety or enthusiasm escalates, that "just a bit more" can trigger a seizure—and with it a variety of complications, including fractures. This makes feeling too much, moving too much or even thinking too much a risk with painful consequences.

In high school special education, I work with a group of 14 students on our campus of close to 1,800 students. This is called a teacher advisor (TA) group. Every TA group includes students in Grades 10, 11 and 12. The teacher is the point person for these students throughout their high school years and fosters community within the group. This work is dynamic, and there's never a dull moment. I connect daily with students who have a variety of diverse learning needs. Cody is now one of them.

I met Cody in the spring of 2019, just before summer holidays, at a meet-and-greet in preparation for


the fall semester. He needed support in connecting not only with curricular content but also with his peers. He needed engagement. He'd been out of the loop for too long and needed back in, but with a huge caveat: coming *into* the school was too risky. He would need to engage virtually with students and faculty, and I needed to figure out how to make that happen.

I had conversations with him on Google Meet, meetings with his mom and our professional team, and discussions with consultants and his medical supports. Distance learning hadn't gone well for him. It was too removed and too impersonal. We needed to make connections.


In the fall, we sought out a best fit, a learning environment in which Cody could share common interests with his peers. We found that environment in a pre-engineering class with an amazing group of students and a dynamic teacher. Mr MacDonald modelled an ease of exchange with Cody as they interacted online. He even carried the Chromebook around the classroom while he and Cody maintained their conversation on Google Hangouts. That Chromebook was Cody's window to the world. They toured around the classroom, and Mr MacDonald introduced Cody to the class.

As the students watched, they realized that they too could carry Cody with them. And so they did. They embraced the experience and invited Cody into their conversations. In so doing, they tapped into an essential human quality—empathy. They reached out, engaging face to face, and Cody started to feel a connection, a sense of belonging. He looked forward to getting up in the morning. He waited for class and was excited to log in. He engaged in group work and shared ideas. It was good for him to laugh and be creative. His world opened up in a whole new way. He was motivated, and that motivation built momentum. His peers became part of his world. They made his circle bigger. They were motivated too.

With several projects behind them, the teams in this class were challenged to design and build hovercrafts, the culmination of their course learning. That became the vehicle for ongoing engagement, and Cody thrived as they worked together. His ideas and insights mattered, and so did he. He even rode his team's hovercraft on its first test run. Picture the Chromebook perched on the driver's seat as power surged through the system for the first time. With some tweaks here and there, the hovercraft became capable of supporting the weight of other team members too. As they worked together, Cody and his team created a shared memory—a shared story.

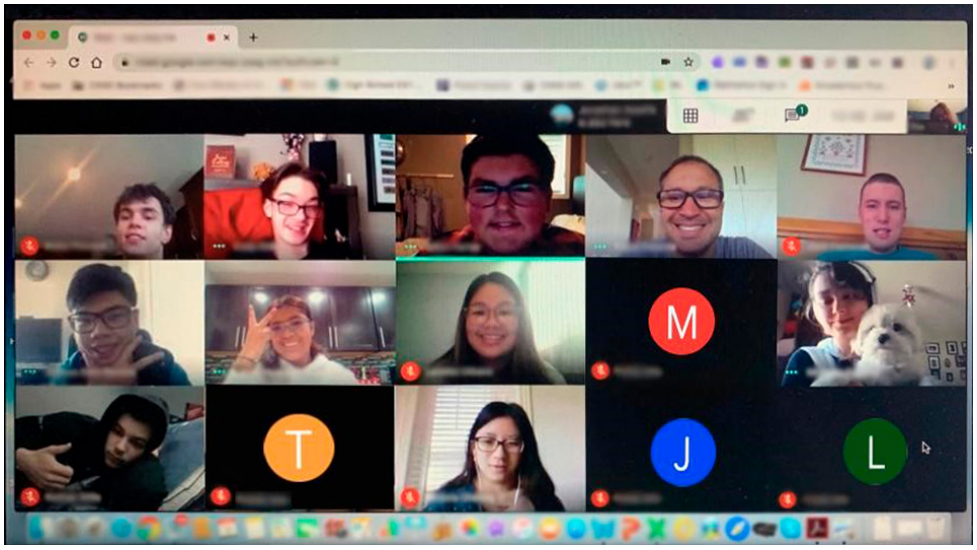
We captured that memory on video (see the link at the end of this article). Memories are important. They carry us through. We also started the Cody Club. We knew that those relationships mattered and that maintaining them would support Cody as he transitioned to other learning experiences.

Little did we know that what was the exception would become the norm in the upcoming months. Not only would Cody engage with his peers in our classes together in the second semester, but he would lead us as we pivoted in mid-March. When the shift to learning from home redefined our engagement as a learning community, he was a calm and steady presence, showing up online like he had done so many days before, eager to learn and engage. Like Mr MacDonald, carrying the Chromebook and modelling for his students ways to work together in an online world, Cody and his demeanour assured his peers that they could do likewise.

As a diverse learning community, we engaged in both asynchronous and synchronous learning, meeting for both daily TA group and several online sessions, with active, ongoing engagement. We brainstormed and discussed, explored concepts, and sometimes just did our work, side by side, online. As we came to the end of the school year, we had created many memories of our time together. We certainly had bumps along the way as we tried new things, but we believed that we were capable of overcoming hurdles to connect with one another, and we saw the value in doing so.

Together, we also tapped into empathy, that essential human quality. We reached out to one another, engaging face to face, and maintained connections during a time of unprecedented isolation. We fostered

a sense of community. We looked forward to getting up in the morning (albeit later than before). We maintained a routine and anticipated our time together, logging in and sharing our lives. We explored ideas, laughed and learned. It was good to laugh and be creative.




Our world has opened up in a whole new way. It's more expansive. We've experienced more, and become more too. We've become more tolerant and patient. We're more attuned to one another and our individual realities. We're more focused and less distracted, more responsible, productive and independent. We've become more capable and more empowered. We're more digitally literate too. Through it all, we've gained new confidence and have grown up a bit more.

As we look to the upcoming school year, with its uncertainties, I am grateful for the privilege of sharing in ongoing engagement with my students. We have grown together. They are resilient, and I have confidence in them. They have supported one another in the midst of many unknowns and continue to engage, sharing their hopes and fears. We talk about what's going on, and we pray for those around the world and in our local communities and families. We reflect on gratitude and grief in solidarity with others. We are better citizens for it. Stronger.

The power of connection has carried us through. It has helped us find meaning and purpose in a time of uncertainty. We're finding our *why*. As we plan for this year, our time together has set the stage for whatever learning model will be implemented in the months ahead. Whatever the future holds, connecting has continued to move us forward, supporting a sense of well-being in our learning community. Cody takes it day by day, grateful for these exchanges and the ways his circle has expanded. He's excited to learn again, and so are we. What was exceptional in the not-so-distant past has become the new normal, and it doesn't look to be shifting any time soon. We've weathered the storm with the confidence that we can do this—together—because we *can*. There's much grace and power in that.

*To watch the video The Power of Connection, go to https://drive.google.com/file/d/1m5s4_f3UVNZQQCAw4TcUY95JFHcLE08r/view.*

*Before going to print,* Fully Alive *learned that through student advocacy from his pre-engineering classmates over the summer, Cody has been given a telepresence robot that can operate remotely to provide him with the ability to navigate in the classroom with greater independence while he remains at home. For more information, go to www.doublerobotics.com.*

*Mariette Dobrowolski has served as a teacher-chaplain in the Calgary Catholic School District, as well as teaching religion, English language arts and diverse learning. She currently teaches at Notre Dame High School, in Calgary.*

# A Journey into Uncharted Waters

Elizabeth Dokken

The education system has always been fluid and able to adapt to the most bleak of situations, but who would have conceived of the complete reinvention we have witnessed in recent months. Twelve weeks and counting. As I write this, that's how long it has been. My journey as a teacher in an inner-city school has been a long one. Like so many others, it has been flooded with uncertainty and anxiety.

Teachers often feel that their job description is no longer simply that of educator. With increased mental health diagnoses in our classrooms, and a steadily increasing number of diverse learning needs, it is not uncommon to hear teachers refer to the aspects of social work, parenting, occupational therapy, behavioural support and moral guidance they offer their students. This has never been as true as today.

Like countless others, I am trying to navigate the waters of remote learning. Someone once pointed out to me that the statement that we're all in this together does not reflect our individual struggles. Rather, we should think of ourselves as being in the same storm. We all have our own boats, and each boat navigates the waters differently.

For some, the boat may be filled with financial hardships that are adding to the mounting stresses of this unusual time. These people might have lost their jobs or had their hours cut back. They might be struggling to avoid eviction, fearing the growing unpaid bills or feeling uncertain about when they will have their next meal. Our school, like many others, has been tireless in its efforts to create food hampers and care packages to help these families navigate the waters.

Technology is another element to navigate. It is challenging enough to teach young children to use

Photo courtesy of Elaine Willette-Larsen

*It can be difficult to calm our fears, and the fears of those around us, when we think we are alone in our journey.*

technology they are unfamiliar with and to help them develop the skills needed to access the required programs for daily learning. Add to this the lack of technology facing many families and one could say that enough hurdles already exist for remote learning. But once the technology has been conquered, teachers still need to find unique and diverse ways to instill the knowledge and skills that they are so well trained in passing on to their students.

Others may be affected by health concerns or fear of becoming ill or even of dying. As a teacher, I would argue that this has been the most difficult part of the journey. When the usual challenges of remote learning are accompanied by anxiety and fear, in the lives of both teachers and students, they change from simple waves to virtual tsunamis that threaten to take down even the strongest and best-equipped boat. And despite decades of training and professional development as a teacher, I can't do much to ease these anxieties, other than offer platitudes. The result is a feeling of inferiority and inadequacy, adding to the surmounting stress of navigating these uncharted educational waters. It can be difficult to calm our fears, and the fears of those around us, when we think we are alone in our journey. Yet in the brief moments I take for reflection, I recall the fear the disciples felt before Jesus calmed the storm, and I find comfort in knowing that I too am not alone.

This storm has been unlike any other we have experienced in our lifetime. People may try to tell us we are all in it together, but that is only a half truth. We each have our own boat with conditions unlike anyone else's. Each experience, each situation, is unique to the individual, and we cannot truly say we are all in this together. We can, however, take solace in knowing that we are weathering the same storm, and together we will sail our boats to safety.

*Elizabeth Dokken has been employed with Edmonton Catholic Schools since 2004. During her teaching career, she has taught at various junior and senior high schools in the Edmonton area, as well as working for nonprofit organizations in the community. As a chaplain at the junior high level, she decided to pursue a master's degree in religious education (MRE). She successfully completed her MRE and has been teaching at an inner-city elementary school, where she has also held the position of chaplain for several years. She is a member of the School Opening Mass Committee and has been the church lead for the Ukrainian Catholic Divine Liturgy at St Josaphat Ukrainian Catholic Cathedral, in Edmonton.*

# We're All in This Together

Simone Brosig

The year 2020 will be remembered as the year of the coronavirus pandemic. It has been an exceptional time that has disrupted not only the economies of the world but also human interactions.

Early in the crisis, the practice that was at first called social distancing was renamed physical distancing. This distinction emphasizes that it is physical separation between people, not social estrangement, that prevents the spread of the virus. Soon after, experts and nonexperts alike recognized that the very isolation that will keep our bodies safe can at the same time endanger our mental health. People need people in order to thrive.

*It is our interaction with Jesus through the sacraments and the Christian life that bridges the existential distance between humanity and divine life with God.*

On one level, the longer we were apart physically, the more intentional and creative we became about reaching out socially to mediate our feelings of loneliness and isolation. No longer working next to colleagues, sitting side by side with classmates, or enjoying Sunday dinner with extended family and friends, we made time to phone, video call or write to each other. The tools employed in business for virtual meetings were quickly adopted for recreational use. Firefighters thrilled children celebrating birthdays without their friends by driving by their homes with lights and sirens. Church bells and the Muslim call to prayer rang out publicly, to remind us that we were not alone.

On another level, physical isolation itself became a social action that called attention to the needs of certain segments of society. As public officials encouraged us to stay in our own neighbourhoods, a new form of social connection appeared in the form of window signs, social media campaigns and even sidewalk chalk art. Many of the messages expressed gratitude for those who provide essential services, drawing our attention to people whose work is often taken for granted. We were also invited to become, as it were, nosy neighbours—to actively find out who in our sphere needed help obtaining provisions and medications during the shutdown. While it was the public officials who made the announcements and the rules for physical distancing, in these social responses we heard the voices of the people, pleading on behalf of others—in particular, on behalf of those who were most exposed or susceptible to infection.

In the language of prayer, this kind of appeal is known as intercession. The root of *intercession* is *cedere*, which comes from the Latin verb meaning *to yield* or *to give oneself over*. The prefix *inter-* suggests that we do this through the mediation of another. Our thriving in the spiritual life also depends on a mediator. It is our interaction with Jesus through the sacraments and the Christian life that bridges the existential distance between humanity and divine life with God.

Jesus is fully divine and fully human. Only by sharing in his humanity are we able to partake of his divinity.

When the Catholic community gathers for Mass, there is also a pivotal moment between the proclamation of the Word and the sacrifice of the Eucharist in which the liturgy mobilizes the faithful themselves to intercede for those in need. This liturgical unit is known as the universal prayer (formerly the prayer of the faithful). It is noteworthy that after their baptism at the Easter Vigil, the first act of worship new Catholics undertake with the community is to intercede on behalf of all humanity. It is an exercise of the priestly ministry bestowed upon them through baptism. Not only do the most vulnerable in our society need our prayers and support but, in order to live out our baptism, we also need to pray for others.

Photo courtesy of Elaine Willette-Larsen

Most of us are more comfortable with giving than with receiving. To admit our need and ask for assistance is humbling and difficult. We think we are giving when we fulfill our role as mediator by saying, "Lord, hear our prayer," in response to each petition. Yet God already knows what we require. In this prayer, we do not so much tell God what to do as express our trust that God will come to our aid. When we intercede for others, we enter into a deep relationship of dependence upon God and interdependence with others.

The prayer is called universal because the petitions are such that they affect and concern everyone. Coronavirus is also universal; it is so contagious that all bodies across the world have become as one body. Isn't this what it means to be a Christian? The one body is the church is the body of Christ. When one member suffers, the whole body suffers. Although physical distancing was needed to reduce transmission of the virus, it was social connection—intercession—that made the campaign a success. There is no distinction between caring for yourself and caring for others. Remember that after the first commandment to love the Lord God, the second commandment is to love your neighbour as yourself. Whether in a pandemic or in the spiritual journey, we're all in this together.

*Simone Brosig, PhD, is a liturgist who has served for the past decade as the liturgy consultant/director for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Calgary. Her background is in medieval studies, specializing in spirituality, liturgy, musicology and manuscript studies. She has always been interested in how the liturgy of life shapes our spiritual journey to God. She is currently working on a manuscript for the publisher Novalis that invites readers to connect the ancient rites to their modern lives through the medieval labours of the months.*

# Religious Education and the Black Lives Matter Movement

Matt Hoven

I haven't been able to bring myself to watch the final eight minutes of George Floyd's life. I don't think I ever will. This hasn't stopped me from knowing the details of his painful death and the unprecedented reaction around the world. As religious educators, you and I can identify with the pain of senseless dying: we need only to recall the crosses and crucifixes hanging in our classrooms and homes. Empathy for the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement should surely feel second nature to us.

Showing solidarity with the BLM movement and its cries against racial injustice is, as a Protestant friend of mine declared, the godly thing to do. When 19th-century English theologian John Henry Newman (now a saint) became a cardinal, he took for his motto "Heart speaks to heart," or, in the original Latin, *Cor ad cor loquitur* (Mansfield 2011). The phrase, constructed from a number of sources in the Christian tradition, encourages us to speak heart to heart with God, who searches for us as the Good Shepherd[1] and waits for us like the father of the Prodigal Son.[2] We extend that tender attitude when we bring mercy and forgiveness to our family and friends—and to our neighbours. It also means encouraging other staff members and comforting marginalized students. "Heart speaks to heart" requires an openness to God's grace in all circumstances—which ultimately leads to charity for others, especially today for those suffering racial prejudice.

*Who are saints that ethnically reflect the student bodies in our schools? Or, better, where are racially diverse saints who can challenge our primarily Caucasian images of sainthood?*

To put on the attitude of "heart speaks to heart," here are four initial means for religious educators to support the BLM movement in faith-based schools.

The first is straightforward: teach the approved religious education program. For instance, many places in the K–12 Catholic religious education program in Alberta address the Catholic Church's social teachings and thus open the door to denouncing racism. Because social teachings often receive greater emphasis later in a number of the programs, there is a risk that educators might review these doctrines only briefly or even forget them. Teaching the approved curricular program ensures that social teaching topics are addressed in the religious education classroom.

Next, Christian social teachings cannot be left solely in the hands of religious educators. Grace (2016), in a book chapter on Pope Benedict XVI's 2009 *Caritas in Veritate*,[3] demands that Catholic secondary schools engage in social teachings in order to build up their distinctive religious and educational programming. Student engagement with social teachings challenges young people (and teachers) to take morality seriously when weighing social and economic issues. This requires permeating or integrating social teachings across the curriculum. Grace uses Pope Benedict XVI's image of contrasting a "heart of stone" and a "heart of flesh" to determine a divinely inspired way for humanity (p 212).[4] In particular, Grace connects

Photo courtesy of Elaine Willette-Larsen

"hearts of stone" to today's "globalised materialism": a world view constructed by uncritical acceptance of capitalism, an unreflective culture of dissatisfaction and a broad rejection of spiritual values. Its downplaying of the spiritual life and its disparagement of the power of virtues such as mercy, love, justice and peace necessitate a strong rebuttal from Christian social teachings across the curriculum.

Outside of the approved curriculum, two further examples can support the BLM movement: the lives of saints and school liturgies.

Think about the school patrons in your district or the pictures of saints in your school. For example, Catholic schools in my surrounding neighbourhoods in Edmonton are all named after people of European descent, except for St Augustine Catholic Elementary School, which commemorates Saint Augustine (of Hippo), a North African. (However, he is generally celebrated more for his Latin-ness than his Africanness.) Who are saints that ethnically reflect the student bodies in our schools? Or, better, where are racially diverse saints who can challenge our primarily Caucasian images of sainthood? Consider the lives of saints Charles Lwanga and Lorenzo Ruiz. Or hear of the trials encountered by the tens of thousands of Vietnamese martyrs commemorated each year on November 24. Surely, celebrating the life of Saint Kateri Tekakwitha is especially important, given that one of the competencies in Alberta's *Teaching Quality Standard* (Alberta Education 2019) is applying foundational knowledge about Indigenous peoples. A legacy of St John Paul the Great (Pope John Paul II) is that he canonized saints at an increased pace to show, in part, the universal appeal of the Christian faith. This move signals a growing diversity in Christianity, as Canadians can witness in churches across the country (Bibby and Reid 2016). (Noteworthy here is the book *Every Tribe: Stories of Diverse Saints Serving a Diverse World,* edited by Prentis [2019], which offers stories of diverse saints across the Christian tradition.)

School liturgies are another way to support the BLM movement. American religious educator Sister Thea Bowman (1937–1990) challenged the Church in the second half of the 20th century to improve its reception of the gifts and talents of African Americans (Walker and Smith, nd). Bowman, who was raised in a segregated Mississippi, advocated for the incorporation of Black music, traditions and cultures into the life of the Church: "Black sacred song celebrates our God, His goodness, His promise, our faith and hope, our journey toward the promise" (Bowman 1987). She explained the educational power of the music:

> Teaching the songs of faith required definite cognitive, affective, and behavioral objectives; use of right and left brain teaching–learning techniques; participatory learning; reality-based learning; value learning; multi-sensory appeal; involvement of intellect, memory, imagination, will and body. The methodologies are simple and engaging. (Bowman 1993, 50–51)

Music and the arts are powerful vehicles for showing solidarity and inspiring action. Worshipping according to a spiritual tradition other than our own expands our image of God and reminds us that Christianity is a world religion—not a white man's concoction.

In light of the BLM movement, religious educators should rethink and rededicate themselves to Newman's motto "Heart speaks to heart." This stance is particularly important for the response of faith-based schools to the calls to action by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015). By promoting the Church's social teachings and celebrating various cultures in the Christian tradition, we can promote solidarity with all peoples in local Catholic schools.

## Notes

1. John 10:1–21 (NRSV-CE).
2. Luke 15:11–32 (NRSV-CE).
3. Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate,* 2009, www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html (accessed September 21, 2020).
4. Ezek 36:26 (NRSV-CE).

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# Striving for Our Better Selves

Gerry Turcotte

> I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun.
>
> Ecclesiastes 4:1

When I was growing up, it was popular to mock *Duck and Cover,* a film made in the 1950s to prepare children to survive a nuclear war. Older folks will remember this odd mix of animation and live-action footage that featured a bowtied Bert the Turtle, who could duck and cover at the first sign of danger. The film instructed children to jump under their tiny school desks in the event of a nuclear detonation, presumably safe from the mushroom cloud erupting in the near distance. It was an oddly benign and disturbingly simplistic treatment of nuclear fallout by a generation that had just witnessed the devastation of the Second World War and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and a nation that was then embroiled in the Korean War.

With the Vietnam War that followed, Nick Ut's famous photo of Phan Thị Kim Phúc, the nine-year-old girl fleeing a South Vietnamese napalm attack, forever changed the rendering of war in the public arena. No longer simplistically a good versus bad story, no longer a black versus white account, the Vietnam War gave rise to significant community protests, perhaps the first to truly challenge the American military–industrial complex.

Alas, despite significant evidence of the utter futility of war, we have continued to pursue conflict. There has never been a time in history when no part of our planet has been at war. What has changed, however, is the technology, which has allowed the devastation to be more fully and comprehensively captured and transmitted around the world. In the immediacy of reporting, and with the proliferation of graphic imagery available on every mobile device, we are seeing an exponential increase in our sense of anxiety and concern.

This is especially true for young people. These conflicts and others—such as the recent terror of the COVID-19 pandemic or the violence resulting from systemic racism (which has given rise to massive worldwide protests in support of the Black Lives Matter movement)—have generated enormous fear and uncertainty among young people. No amount of contextualizing can entirely address these issues. The reality is that today's youth deal with an immediacy and a concreteness of detail that no other generation has dealt with. Death and destruction, hatred and persecution, happen in real time, on their phone screens, inches from their faces, 24/7. It isn't surprising, then, that anxiety and mental health issues are at an all-time high.

*The reality is that today's youth deal with an immediacy and a concreteness of detail that no other generation has dealt with.*

More often than not, teachers are at the front line, dealing with this phenomenon, supporting a vast array of children with different needs, different fears, different coping skills. Many of our teachers are trained for this. Most, however, are not. The scale of the issue

and the limited resources can mean that excellent teachers are called on to occupy roles far outside their comfort zone or field of expertise. I know because I was one of them.

I remember teaching a class of some 400 university students in Australia the day after September 11. I entered the large lecture theatre to find only half the students there, all with stunned expressions on their faces. A number of them were crying. It seemed ridiculous, in that moment, to do a lecture on Romantic poetry. Instead, I invited them to talk about how they felt, and we moved around the room, discussing the anxiety and fear that this event half a world away had generated.

I know that it wasn't enough, but it was a start. Over the following weeks, we established a support group to talk about the issues, to try to understand the context, to support American exchange students struggling with personal connections to the loss and trying, overall, to build community at a time of stress and uncertainty. There was little else for me to draw on as a teacher, so I did the best I could. What wasn't addressed, though, was the stress that teachers—myself included—felt at that time. Our ability to cope was taken for granted—despite significant evidence to the contrary.

Today we understand the importance of mental health better than we ever have. Even though much more needs to be done, more services are available to support those who are struggling, and greater efforts are made to destigmatize mental health issues. We are seeing creativity, too, from teachers who are reaching out virtually to their students isolated by a virus the likes of which we have never seen, to ensure that they stay connected. We have seen teachers contacting their students to help them overcome the obstacles of virtual learning. And we have seen educators finding meaningful ways to rally behind their students who are shaken by the systemic racism in Canada and abroad that has led to numerous violent deaths at the hands of those normally seen as protectors.

I have been similarly impressed with the many students who have used the social media platforms at their disposal to engage the world and to ensure that their voices are heard. More than at any other time, young people are at the head of social movements to protect the environment, to champion racialized lives, and to combat homelessness and poverty. And it's heartening to see how many of these young people are supported by caring teachers who understand the importance not just of the cause but also of the initiative for change that our students champion. Their activism is itself a tool to build stronger mental health.

In the midst of these catastrophes, it is not unusual to ask about the place of faith. For some, disasters are proof of a failed belief system. For others, faith is the anchor that grounds them through the uncertainty. It is important that we, as educators, acknowledge the upheaval and uncertainty that surround us and locate them in the context of a God who loves us and who has our back. It is important that we remember—and that we remind our students—how Christ himself suffered under the yoke of oppression, racism and ridicule yet never lost his belief in the grace and potential of humanity. It is that belief in us, expressed by the greatest teacher who ever lived, that should inspire all of us to be our best selves, despite the challenges and fears we face. Now is not the time to duck and cover. It is a time to stand together and face our challenges as the community that God calls on us to be.

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*Gerry Turcotte, PhD, has been president and vice-chancellor of St Mary's University, in Calgary, since 2011. He is the author and editor of 18 books, including the novel* Flying in Silence *(Cormorant, 2001), which was shortlisted for* The Age *Book of the Year award in 2001, and* Border Crossings: Words and Images *(Brandl & Schlesinger, 2004), a mixed media text that includes photographs from his one-person photographic exhibition at a major Australian gallery and the text of a performance for music and words that he performed live at the Sydney Opera House. He was awarded the Governor General's International Award for Canadian Studies in 2011 and the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Medal in 2013.*

# Hope

Mike Landry

As long as I can remember, I have had superhero movies to watch. From the Superman movies of the 1980s through the Spider-Man movies of the early 2000s, I always found them a nice diversion. The release of *Batman Begins* in 2005, to be followed a few years later by the launch of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, represented a big change in the way superhero movies were produced and distributed, turning them into the blockbuster movies we've seen over recent years.

There's a lot to love about these movies. The production value is up—these aren't the cheesy productions they were 30 years ago. They also remind us of a time when we imagined that we were the heroes, facing down whatever evils—real or imagined—could be found in our lives. But I think there's more to it than this.

A common trope found near the climax of these movies has the hero(es) in some difficult situation and facing insurmountable odds. We wonder how they can possibly win or survive. Think of *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), when Batman's back is broken and he's in prison, or *Return of the Jedi*, when Luke finds himself on the Death Star, watching the rebel army get ambushed. These moments build tension and keep us excited. But something deeper is going on here as well.

In *Do the Gods Wear Capes? Spirituality, Fantasy, and Superheroes*, Ben Saunders (2011, 3) comments that these stories are "fantastic, speculative, and distinctly modern expressions of a perhaps perennial human wish: the wish that things were otherwise." In superhero movies, the hero usually overcomes the forces of evil through some praiseworthy action or heroic sacrifice, and we leave the theatre suitably impressed by the goodness and fortitude of this particular hero.

*I don't know about you, but 2020 has often left me wishing that things were otherwise.*

I don't know about you, but 2020 has often left me wishing that things were otherwise. And while it can be tempting to dwell in that feeling, I know that one of the best places to look when I feel this way is Scripture. A number of biblical people lived through moments when it would be tempting to wish that things were otherwise, but they instead responded with goodness and with fortitude.

Job is an obvious example. We meet Job in the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament, where he is presented to us as a man who is "blameless and upright," a father of 10 children, fairly well off and considered "the greatest of all the people of the east."[1] In the blink of an eye, all of that changes. He loses animals, property, his children and then his very health. Things get so bad that Job's wife suggests that the best course of action would be for him to "curse God, and die."[2]

Job doesn't understand why he must endure all that he suffers. We, however, know that God allows these trials in Job's life so that Job can demonstrate his goodness and fortitude. Three of Job's friends appear and spend the bulk of the book admonishing him for


Photo courtesy of Elaine Willette-Larsen

what they believe he has done to offend God and challenging him to make amends to God. Job turns to God, lamenting and asking how a good and just God can allow him to suffer so much without cause. While there's more to their dialogue, the notable difference between Job and his friends is that Job alone speaks not only *of* God but *to* God directly.

Then you have Jesus's own followers, who also find themselves wishing that things were otherwise. In Mark 4, the disciples find themselves in a boat, with Jesus asleep in the stern after a long day of preaching. When a storm overtakes them—and it's a severe enough storm that these professional fishermen fear for their lives—they awaken Jesus and ask him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"[3] The disciples are understandably overwhelmed, afraid, confused—and upset at Jesus, who apparently was about to let them perish. The truth is, though, that he does care. Before the boat is overturned—before their struggle becomes more than they can handle—it is Jesus who calms the storm. It is ultimately Jesus who can bring peace to our hearts in hard times.

Lazarus's family would also wish that things were otherwise. When Lazarus becomes ill in John 11, his sisters Mary and Martha send word to Jesus, assuming that this man who had been healing others will come and save their brother. But by the time Jesus arrives at their house, Lazarus has been dead for four days. Their grief is palpable as each sister approaches Jesus and says, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died."[4] In response, Jesus offers Martha hope and Mary empathy—what each of them needs most at that moment. And this sets the stage for one of the most beautiful verses in the Bible (and, in many versions, the shortest verse): "Jesus wept."[5]

Whether we speak of Job, Mary, Martha or the disciples present that night at sea, it's obvious why they, like many of us in 2020, would wish that things were otherwise. We can learn from all of them how to handle that feeling as Christians. The Christian story tells us of a God who comes to meet us in all the experiences of our humanity: joy, struggle, celebration, grief. In these biblical examples, we see people who question God's care and presence with them—but who address that question to God and stay in relationship with him so that he can answer. May we who live in such difficult and unprecedented times also do the same—and turn to the one who is our perfect hero.

## Notes

1. Job 1:1–3 (NRSV-CE).
2. Job 2:9 (NRSV-CE).
3. Mark 4:38 (NRSV-CE).
4. John 11:21 and John 11:32 (NRSV-CE).
5. John 11:35 (King James Version [KJV]).

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Saunders, B. 2011. *Do the Gods Wear Capes? Spirituality, Fantasy, and Superheroes*. New York: Continuum.

*Mike Landry is a speaker, writer, musician and diehard Edmonton Oilers fan. He works full-time as division chaplain for Evergreen Catholic Schools, serving students in five communities west of Edmonton. You can find him online at www.mikeisthird.com.*

# "He Laughs": RMEC's World Catholic Education Day Virtual Pub Night

Chris Ferguson

> God said, "No, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him.
>
> Genesis 17:19

For many, when they are asked about the Church or the Bible, the words *humour* and *laughter* are not at the tip of the tongue—yet humour and laughter are at the root of who we are.

In Genesis 17:19, God tells Abraham to name his son Isaac, with whom he establishes an everlasting covenant, through Isaac's lineage all the way to the New Covenant—Jesus Christ. Have you ever looked at the onomatology of the name Isaac? In Hebrew, *Isaac* is a transliteration of *he laughs*. Names are so important. Just think about it—you didn't haphazardly name your own children. Do you think our God would haphazardly name the child of Abraham? Of course not. What does this mean? It means that as Christians we are called to laugh!

On May 21, to celebrate World Catholic Education Day (May 30), we did exactly that. RMEC was not going to let the COVID-19 pandemic stop its community of Catholic educators from celebrating the day that celebrates their calling to their vocation. With the help of the ATA's corporate Zoom account, we held a virtual pub night, with guest speakers Lars Callieou (comedian), Dan Taylor (comedian) and Colin Forbes (former NHL player), who entertained all in attendance as we raised our glasses in a toast to Catholic education.

It was a wonderfully successful night, with over 200 participants from across the province sharing the joys of Catholic education. As we listened to Dan's humorous take on the pandas at the Calgary Zoo, heard about Colin's relationship with God through his hockey career and burst out in laughter at Lars's unique outlook on life, the spirit was alive in all our hearts. We became like the patriarch of our covenantal lineage, Isaac. "He laughs," and we laughed.

RMEC would like to thank the ATA, Dan Taylor, Colin Forbes and Lars Callieou for contributing to this amazing evening. We are looking to take the momentum of the virtual pub night and use it to create similar events in the future. Stay tuned!

*Chris Ferguson is a teacher-chaplain at Archbishop MacDonald High School, in Edmonton, and also teaches high school physics. Whether he is in the religious education classroom or the physics classroom, he is at home, as both environments bring him closer to God.*

# *Healthy Caregiving: Perspectives for Caring Professionals in Company with Henri J M Nouwen*

**by Michelle O'Rourke**

**Twenty-Third Publications, 2020**

Reviewed by Gabrielle Earnshaw

> Self-care is not something to add to our already full to-do list or to relegate to an annual vacation. It must become an intentional way of living where our values, attitudes and actions are integrated into our day-to-day routines. To me, there is a moral imperative to making sure that we work diligently at this to remain healthy ourselves, but also to ensure that we have what we need to give to others. We deserve it—and so do they.

Burnout. Fatigue. Stress. These are some of the issues facing caring professionals—including teachers—in our task-oriented society. One antidote to these modern afflictions is self-care. In the timely and affirming book *Healthy Caregiving: Perspectives for Caring Professionals in Company with Henri J M Nouwen*, Michelle O'Rourke (an emergency room and parish nurse, a lay minister, and a hospice founder) explores the concept of caring for ourselves so we can care for others. O'Rourke notes,

> Time and again I have witnessed how beautiful hearts, including my own, become tired and broken when the burden of caring becomes onerous. With millions of people involved in caring professions in North America, and millions more caring for their own family and friends in an unpaid role, supporting and nourishing caregivers is a monumental but essential task.

Have you ever found yourself asking, "How do I care for my students without sacrificing my own well-being?" If so, this book is for you. While the book is aimed primarily at health-care professionals, it offers much wisdom for teachers as well. It focuses on raising self-awareness so you can be a better caregiver. O'Rourke, a practitioner with four decades in the field, observes, "Even if you've been engaged in the profession for a while, it is good to sit back and reflect." She encourages readers to take time to be in touch with their heart and soul and ask what is going well, what is causing difficulty, and what changes might help redirect them to live more in line with their own inner values and who they want to be.

A key feature of the book is O'Rourke's use of beloved Catholic priest Henri Nouwen as a wisdom teacher. In fact, the book was commissioned by the Henri Nouwen Legacy Trust, the body responsible for Nouwen's legacy since his death in 1996, to extend his spirituality to modern care practitioners. Nouwen wrote nearly 40 books on spirituality and the inner life, including *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (1972), and his understanding

of care as based on mutuality and self-awareness sets the foundation for the book: "I definitely believe that we can only care to the degree that we are in touch with our own doubts and fears, just as we can only listen to the story of the other by knowing our own."

Nouwen's insights serve as the foundation for each chapter, but O'Rourke also features the work of others, including Parker J Palmer, Thich Nhat Hanh and Rachel Naomi Remen. She weaves in stories from her own life, as well as from chaplains, social workers and other professional care providers. At the end of each section are thoughtful questions for reflection "to encourage the reader to explore their own care experiences and inner landscape." Readers could use these questions as the basis for a personal retreat or group discussion.

An additional strength of the book is O'Rourke's expertise in curating resources for practising self-care, including Jon Kabat-Zinn's helpful summary of mindfulness, tips on how to use writing as a self-discovery tool and Kristin Neff's good introduction to the practice of self-compassion.

The crux of the book involves the essential nature of care. It covers such topics as suffering, power and entering into the pain of the other. O'Rourke explores the differences between a job, a career and a calling; care versus cure; and caregiving as a sacred vocation. She examines in detail the challenges of caregiving—the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual costs. She suggests the following concrete strategies for compassionate care: examine your bias, acknowledge your judgmentalism, give up control, and enter into your weakness. Meditations on patience and time offer new insights that might change the reader's understanding of how to be present in difficult situations. The power of listening and being (as opposed to doing) are also explored. Brené Brown's "myth of self-sufficiency" and the concept of being enough are offered as useful tools for identifying ways you might sabotage yourself as you care for others. Other topics include the importance of building community with colleagues, looking out for signs of distress in fellow carers and tips on how to ask for help, which provide important lessons on how to sustain yourself as a professional caregiver for the long haul. Many of the suggestions are applicable not just to classroom teachers but also to those who care for them, including school principals and other upper-level administrators.

Photo courtesy of Elaine Willette-Larsen

While the book is written for a broad audience, the sections on sustaining the spirit will be particularly meaningful for religion teachers. O'Rourke draws the reader's attention to Palmer's concept of sanctuary, which is about finding places, rhythms and practices that nourish the soul "for your own sake, and for those who you care for and care about." Gratitude journals, telling care stories, inspirational reading, quiet time and formal retreats are some suggestions for nourishing the spirit. Other sections on growth and transformation are equally meaningful.

In 1976, Nouwen gave a public talk at Yale Divinity School called "Living the Questions: The Spirituality of the Religion Teacher." In it, he reflected on the role

of the teacher of religion. He said, "The religion teacher is called to help students in the discovery of their own most personal search by entering with them in a common vulnerability so that in the mutual relationship between teacher and student the questioning Lord can be made visible." *Healthy Caregiving* is the resource you need in order to take up Nouwen's challenging call and flourish in the sacred undertaking of teaching.

*To purchase this and other books on caregiving from the Henri Nouwen Society, go to https://henrinouwen.org/resources/caregiving-overview/caregiving-books/.*

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*Gabrielle Earnshaw is an editor, writer, speaker and independent scholar specializing in the life and work of Henri Nouwen. She is the founding archivist of the Henri J M Nouwen Archives and Research Collection at the University of St Michael's College, in Toronto, a position she held from 2000 to 2016. She holds a BA (Hons) in history from Queen's University and a master's in archival science from the University of British Columbia. She has been the advisor to the Henri Nouwen Legacy Trust for 19 years and is consulted throughout the world on Nouwen and his literary legacy. She is a coeditor of* Turning the Wheel: Henri Nouwen and Our Search for God *(Novalis, 2007) and the editor of* Love, Henri: Letters on the Spiritual Life *(Convergent, 2016),* You Are the Beloved: Daily Meditations for Spiritual Living *(Convergent, 2017) and* Following Jesus: Finding Our Way Home in an Age of Anxiety *(Convergent, 2019). Her most recent book is* Henri Nouwen and the Return of the Prodigal Son: The Making of a Spiritual Classic *(Paraclete, 2020). She lives in Toronto and can be found at www.gabrielleearnshaw.com/about/.*

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RMEC CONFERENCE 2020

# NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE RESEARCH

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**with**

**Scripture Scholar Dr. Michael W. Duggan, Ph.D.**
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The RMEC newsjournal *Fully Alive* is published to

- promote professional development of educators in the areas of religious and moral education and
- provide a forum for contributors to share ideas related to religious and moral education.

Submissions are requested that will provide material for personal reflection, theoretical consideration and practical application. Where appropriate, graphics and photographs are welcome.

The following areas will be addressed in the newsjournal:

- Classroom and school projects
- Upcoming events
- Book reviews
- Reflections
- Feature articles and interviews
- Humour in religion
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Manuscripts should be submitted electronically, in Microsoft Word format. The manuscript should include a title page that states the author's name, professional position, address and phone number(s). Submissions should be typed and double-spaced and may be any length to a maximum of 5,000 words. References must appear in full in a list at the end of the article.

E-mail contributions or enquiries to the editor, Elaine Willette-Larsen, at amberzeroone@gmail.com.

The editorial board, which reserves the right to edit for clarity and space, reviews all submissions.

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