

The Harcourt Herald May 2024

The Life and Work of Harcourt United Church





Harcourt Memorial United Church

An Affirming Congregation of the United Church of Canada

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

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

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

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

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

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From the Desk – May 2024

What a season! All that new growth, all those nice temperatures, all the warm sunshine – truly a time of gratitude and contentment. I love Spring!.



And here I am, in my fourth year editing the Harcourt Herald – and I hear positive feedback (not in writing though). The Herald seems to be working – members of the Harcourt communities of faith get to know each other better. So thanks for all the thought you each put into your writings. Just read all the articles on people’s spiritual practices! Wow!



We still try new things: in order to be more conscious about paper waste and costs we have reduced the number of printed copies. Is it working for you? Remember we have a sign-up list if you wish to receive a printed version.

From our Minister – Kate Ballagh-Steeper

“speak to each other with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; sing and make music to the Lord in your hearts; always give thanks to God the Father for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ; and submit to each other out of respect for Christ. . “ Ephesians 5:19-21

Paul’s words here to the early church encourage those who follow the way of Jesus to gather, sing, and give thanks to God – always. Not an easy task, but certainly something to aspire to as part of our journey in faith.

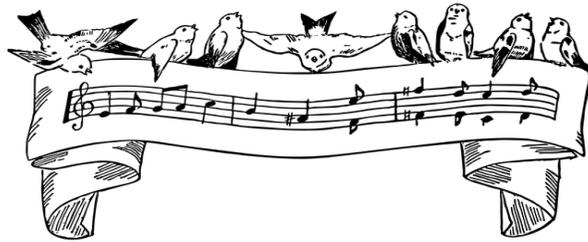
Many will say the Holy One encounters them in the midst of creation. I too would say that. It is the moments when a bird, a flower, a horizon catches one’s attention and we can be stunned by it’s beauty or it’s intricacy, or any other marvels moments of astonishment and amazement.

I would also say, when I am encountered by the Holy, it is often in the midst of community, and often a community of music – either as a participant or spectator. There are moments when choral singing in a choir or a congregation, it feels as if I have been touched by the Holy. It doesn’t happen often, and it usually has nothing to do with the skill, difficulty, or even beauty of what is being sung. It is impossible to anticipate the moments when God moves. I suspect though, God is revealed when a choir is working in unity, listening to one

another, paying attention to the conductor, singing for those who are listening, and with a heart of gratitude.

Whatever practice serves you well to open yourself to God, may it come from a place of gratitude to the One who creates and is creating still. For me, I'll continue to join with others to sing and expect a Holy encounter.

Peace,



Council News - Kent Hoeg, Chair



April showers bring May flowers. Judging by the last little while our gardens will be flourishing! This month we were asked "What spiritual practice has fed you most?". My response is much the same as last month when we discussed how volunteerism has fed us.

Mark 10:45 states "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve..."
"Service" is a spiritual practice and I hope that I serve with the love of Jesus.

I certainly do not "serve" for recognition. I serve as there is a need. I serve as it brings me joy and I am blessed that I can. I feel energized and wanting to do more. Volunteering feeds my soul more than I would have imagined.

Council News

Since I was speaking of service 😊, let me put this out there:

Join our Gifts and Gratitude Team!

We are looking to build a small team who can find creative ways to celebrate the many gifts of time, talent and resources of our Harcourt Community of Faith.

It can be as much or as little time as you want to dedicate.

You won't be on your own! Council can provide many tools for you. We have

gratitude stories, (anonymous) financial givings, insight into giving programs, volunteer needs, M&S stories.

You may wish to write an article for the e-harcourt weekly update, publish in the Harcourt Herald, make an announcement, send out thank you letters, write a skit for a Sunday service. Have fun!

We want you to use your creativity to inspire generosity and invite participation.

Does this sound like a good time? It will be!

Please contact Kate (kate@harcourtcommunity.ca) or Kent (hoeg@rogers.com) and we will meet and brainstorm how to share the good work of Harcourt with everyone at Harcourt.

Other news that is important:

Remit 1: Establishing an Autonomous National Indigenous Organization

Some of you may recall articles in previous versions of the Harcourt Herald, e-harcourt and Council Minutes explaining "Remit 1: Establishing an Autonomous National Indigenous Organization".

The National Indigenous Council has proposed that the church identify and remove any structural barriers that would prevent the development and sustaining of an autonomous National Indigenous Organization within The United Church of Canada. This would acknowledge Indigenous peoples' rights to their own spiritual identities and to self-determination. All regional councils and pastoral charges were to vote on this motion.

The votes have now been counted and the Remit has passed (Harcourt did vote to pass).

What happens now? The decision on enacting the remit will take place at the Annual Meeting of General Council, on October 19, 2024. When the remit has been enacted, the change will be included in the next edition of The Manual.

[Click here to find out more detailed information about the remit result.](#)

[Click here for a shared statement from The National Indigenous Council.](#)

On April 17, Council met. Key highlights:

- Janet Wood, Chair, Board of Directors, Chalmers gave a presentation to Council. Key messages:
 - Chalmers provides emergency food and other services to people in Guelph who experience food insecurity.
 - The mission is to advocate for and deliver practical, meaningful programs that empower guests, and alleviate food insecurity.
 - According to Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health, in 2023:

- The cost of a Nutritious Food Basket for a reference household of four people is \$1,246 per month (14% over 2022).
 - The highest risk groups for food insecurity include:
 - low-income households (living wage \$20.90/h; minimum wage \$16.55/h)
 - households with limited assets (e.g., home ownership, savings)
 - Indigenous households and other racial/cultural groups
 - female-led lone-parent households and
 - households reliant on income supports
 - 60% of Chalmers' guests are children.
 - Chalmers' challenges:
 - Chalmers staff juggles food orders with incoming funds. For example, last summer oranges and cucumbers were eliminated to keep within budget.
 - Chalmers' volunteers must routinely turn people away because we have no or little food left for them.
 - Grants received are not stable and must be found each year
 - Chalmers' strengths:
 - They support an important need within our community
 - They receive strong support from local farmers and community gardens
 - Approximately 100 volunteers give their time to Chalmers
 - 15 churches (not just United) donated to Chalmers in 2023
 - Harcourt Community of Faith has always been a strong supporter
 - Chalmers' Current Objective:

To facilitate Chalmers' transition from a grassroots, volunteer-run hidden gem to a prominent, volunteer- and staff-run organization with stable funding and governance that retains its original, exemplary values.
- Memorial Book. Many have noticed that the Memorial Book which used to be kept within the Greeting Area has long since been removed. It has been decided to move the Memorial Book to a prominent area within the shelving unit across from the Offices on the second floor.
 - Kitchenette. We took a tour of the kitchenette, what a wonderful remodel! It will serve our staff and renters well. A special thank you to Lynn Hancock for coordinating and Larry Gibbs who put so much sweat, time and effort into the renovation (painting, wiring, plumbing, removing and building cabinets and more). Thank you Larry!
 - Security Upgrades. Thanks to efforts to obtain over \$20,000 in grants, we have implemented an access control/alarm system (with fobs), we will install additional

interior door locks, install additional exit crashbars, and will provide de-escalation training for up to 30 people. Harcourt is safer!

While we talk about the need for more leaders and volunteers, I do want to acknowledge the many, many, MANY, contributions by so many of you.

Financial Update

March results has us running a surplus of \$11,000 for the year-to-date. This is down from \$17,000 in February and even further down from January of \$18,000. \$11,000 is great, but we can't lose our momentum. Harcourt is able to do what it does because of your generosity!

Outdoor Spiritual Practices this Month at Manna – Pamela Girardi

Now that the spring weather has mostly arrived, Manna has been spending more time outside. We often meet for forest church at the Arboretum these days. While adults are off doing their practice, children and youth have been trying an eco-spiritual practice that we learned from Wendy Janzen at Burning Bush Forest Church - the phenology wheel.

A phenology wheel is a way to record what we notice as we move through the church year and the cycle of the seasons. The outer wheel is a place to draw and write about what we notice when we are outside in creation that month. The inner circle is a place to reflect on a spiritual insight or connection to the church year for that month. For children, we simplify the practice by focusing on where we are finding joy - where are we finding joy outside this month? Where are we finding joy inside our hearts this month?

In her blog post about this eco-practice Janzen notes, "As a Christian pastor and spiritual director, I see eco-spiritual practices as invitations to explore and deepen our spiritual lives through activities that invite contemplative connections with creation and creative or embodied expression of our response to God's presence there. To some, they may seem far from a typical prayer practice, but as I read somewhere, anything can be a prayer when we bring that intention to it. Eco-spiritual practices invite us into the wondrous, to nurture our spirit and connect with God".

You can read more from the blog post here
<https://www.burningbushforestchurch.ca/reflections--prayers/phenology-wheel>

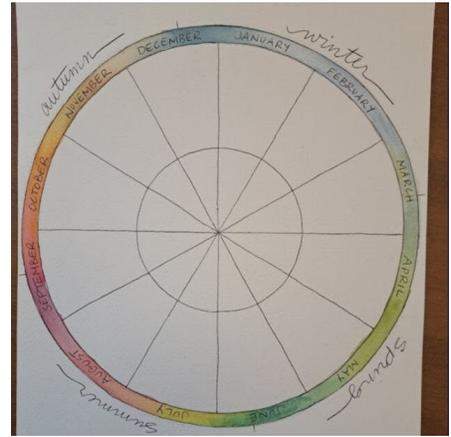
Phenology Wheel

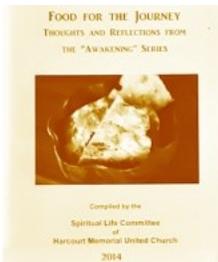
Our eco-spiritual practice for the month (and, indeed, for the year) is a Phenology Wheel. This is what I wrote about it for the Godspace website: www.burningbushforestchurch.ca

To celebrate Earth Day, Manna was able to volunteer together at Green Legacy this month. Together we cared for at least 1300 trees and got soil ready for thousands more to be planted. These trees are given for free throughout the region to help increase our tree canopy coverage to 40%. The trees are native species, grown from seeds harvested by volunteers.

Some folks repotted trees into their larger cells, others shovelled dirt. Some pruned, others watered and mulched.

It was a joy to work together to help our watershed.





Food For The Journey – Using the Holy Listening Circle as One’s Weekly Practice - Peter Jackson

Over the past few years, the spiritual practice that has fed me most is participation in the online holy listening circle. The highlight is the sharing that takes place on Sunday morning, but the practice fills the whole week. This is how it goes.

Like other frequent participants in the Circle, I receive on Tuesday an email telling me which text has been selected for the week. My first step is to read the text and also what

comes before and after it. Typically, the Lectionary directs us to short extract; however, that extract was composed as part of a much longer whole which is relevant to understanding it.

Over the next few days I try to find answers to a few questions:

- Who were the intended audience and what were their circumstances?
- What was author's intention in writing to them?
- How would the message have been understood at that time?

This cognitive work involves digging into books and articles, similar to what is often done in bible study. It helps me to get a clearer idea of what the scripture meant when it was first written and heard. With this firm grounding in the meaning of the text in its context, I can then move to considering how it speaks to me today. So my next question is:

- In what ways might we apply the author's original message to our circumstances today?

Next I move from thinking with my head to listening with the ears of my heart. My understanding of what the text meant then and how it might apply now helps me do that. I begin by re-reading the text a few times.

After allowing all this to sink, there are a couple of techniques I often use. One is to notice what phrase or image catches my attention and explore it; and then ask myself what is going on in my life that made this item stand out, and finally what Spirit is calling on me to pay attention to.

Another technique works best with stories. I immerse myself imaginatively in the story and notice details such as which character I most identify with, how I feel, what I can smell, touch, hear and think. After ten minutes or so 'in the story', I bring myself back to today and review what occurred and what insight Spirit has offered into the story and into myself.

A third technique I sometimes use with a more poetic composition such as a psalm is to rewrite it. I try to preserve the original structure - the sections and emotional shifts - while using words, metaphors and images that resonate today. Then I reflect on the resulting paraphrase and my creative process; I try to notice new insights and how Spirit may be speaking to me.

These techniques can be used several times during the week. The text becomes a lens through which I experience life each day and notice new things. On Saturday I take a few minutes to make notes, sorting out what I will share on Sunday morning.

When the small groups form on Sunday morning, each participant comes with their unique pearls of insight and nuggets of wisdom and troubling questions. Some of us conduct a

week-long process similar to mine; others share their in-the-moment reflection on Sunday morning. The sharing is like a pot-luck banquet, to which each contributes and by which each is nurtured.

There is always plenty to digest on Sunday afternoon and on Monday. Then Tuesday rolls around and the process begins over.

I am so grateful for my companions in the Circle, fellow travelers on The Way.



Communion ministry – Janet Gostonyi

[Janet's article arrived too late for inclusion in last month's issue on service. But it fits equally well in this issue on spiritual practices! - Ed]

In times past, I prepared communion for the congregation. Making two loaves, kneading the dough, letting it rise, baking the two loaves, left to cool.

Getting a bottle of grape juice, the gifts were ready for the church.

Out came the communion ware, and silently I prepared morsels of bread, filled the trays and filled the small cups with juice, and covered each tray, placed in the fridge.

This filled my heart and soul.

The Spiritual Practice of Eco-divina - Arlene Davies-Fuhr

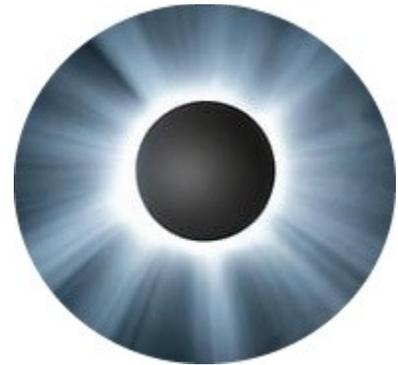


After a pilgrimage to Iona, Ireland, and northern England which gifted me the opportunity to marvel at high Celtic crosses, and hear legends about Celtic saints, I have practised a meditative form of eco-divina that encourages nature to speak to me in a specific spiritual way. This means I often sit quietly, or walk slowly and reverently, until I notice a particular aspect of nature that calls out to me. I savour the experience as the item snuggles in to infuse my soul. I am moved to discover ways this natural encounter imparts its spiritual significance as it conveys its joy and wisdom. I give thanks for the opportunity to be present to nature in this particular way. Often, I return home and compose a poem or write a journal entry about my enlightening experience. Below is my attempt to capture the wonderment of

experiencing a total eclipse on the shores of Lake Erie as Bryan and I picnicked along with many others in a park in Port Rowan.

Eclipse Mania

Every so often, our solar system puts on a stupendous celestial display that reminds us life on Earth is mysterious. Light and darkness intertwine as moon gobbles up the sun - incredible activity that is miraculous, magical and mystical. People clap to convey their joy as a three-minute total eclipse suddenly conjures up twilight while blue sky remains overhead. Even Venus and Jupiter can't resist joining the festivity. Many like me were initially skeptical, a real doubting Thomas actually couldn't imagine being very impressed until - voila! No words or photos can capture the spiritual experience. Instantly corona, bright diamond, weird shadows, and street lights appear. To witness a total eclipse is unbelievably awe-inspiring!



Spiritual Exercises, personalized. - Bill Lord

Introduction.

I appreciate the opportunity to offer this reflection in response to the theme for this edition of the Harcourt Herald.

The Ignatian Exercises.

Since arriving in Guelph, I completed the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises (traditional model) Annotation 19. The reflective time was spent over 40 weeks instead of within a 40-day retreat. It offered me several fresh methods that I continue to employ to deepen my spiritual journey. Harcourt is offering that opportunity for you to do the Spiritual Exercises with a dedicated spiritual director. If you have not done so, I strongly encourage you to risk taking the journey.

The learning continues.

In my recent reading I came across this process. It contains several steps: It starts with a question. Am I feeling OK or not OK. The next step, if I'm feeling not OK, is to name the feeling. Then focus on as much as possible to deepen the feeling in the body. The next action is to go into one's history and ask when was the first time that one was aware of this feeling and recall the experience. When this internal process has been lived, the next action is to share that

experience with a trusted compassionate friend or friends. As a final act, the author suggests bringing that feeling or experience to God with a question. Ask, what can one learn from this experience? I find that I needed to amend this final step because I believe that the Spirit, is with us at every step of the process and we will learn at any stage.

My current experience.

Let me share with you the way that I have used this in a recent experience of loss. In the past four weeks we have experienced the loss of four friends. Two of them go back to my days at Emmanuel College in the early 1960s – long-time friendships. The other two are more recent friendship. So, as I followed the process that I have outlined above, the feeling is one of deep loss. I experienced it, as I focused my attention on a common shared experience with each of them. Going back in my history, the earliest loss I remember or was aware of was my dad's death in a car accident when I was 3 1/2 years old. At that time, that experience was not captured by my brain, but as a memory in my muscles and my bones. I shared that experience with two groups of people that I've been a member of for many years. Both groups were compassionate and listened to my story. I found no need for the final step to take it to God with a question. I became aware that again that where 2 or 3 gather in my name, I am with them. (Matthew 18:19-20)

A picture is worth 1000 words.

When I retired from the Toronto School of Theology in 2000, I was given as a retirement gift, a copy of a painting by Caravaggio of the meal after the Emmaus Road story. It was painted by a colleague of mine on the TST staff and he painted my face on one of the characters. This has always been one of my favourite biblical stories. And is found only in Luke 24:13-35. The two companions were walking on the road telling their story of their loss to the stranger. Only later, at the breaking of the bread in the meal do they discover that the stranger was Jesus. For me one of the key learning from this was to remind myself that Jesus is walking with me, as I mourn the loss of my friends. What it says to me is, in what ways do we bring our awareness of the current events in our life and our feelings developed from them, as an invitation to go deeper in our spiritual growth? My wish for you is that you find a classic story that helps you ultimately understand and grow in the faith.



The Ignatian Exercises offer you a unique opportunity to explore many biblical stories to discover which ones speak to your journey.

My spiritual practices – Crystal Chilvers (she/her)

I joined the Harcourt Choir in 2007 following the breakup of my first real “adult” relationship. It was my first real venture into church life, apart from the affirmation services with the Rainbow Chorus, occasionally attending with a friend as a child and going for the 'playoffs' with my grandmother. Back then, I had a lot to learn—I remember mistaking "manna" for "man ah."

My grandmother instilled in me the values of kindness, generosity, and spreading love in the world. Later, Andre Auger became my spiritual guide, and together we explored the first testament, discovering insights that were new to me and asking some embarrassing questions, like which one of the biblical figures in the first testament was Jesus! Oops!

When my children were born, they were taken into this massive church family with open arms – I never had to worry about where they were when we were here! And having my children was when I started my spiritual practices at home. At night, when my children could talk, we started the practice of cuddling in bed together and each sharing our *favourite part(s) of the day* – in a way thanking the universe for the gift of happy memories. And then secondly stating *what we are thankful for* – which often turned into talking about people we are thankful for. Again, thanking a Higher Power for the gift of good people, good moments, good food and how fortunate we are. In times when things are hard, we talk about the hard stuff, but then about what kind of message or gift will come of the hard times.

My children have grown into compassionate individuals. They've asked for food for Chalmers for their birthday (collecting 330Lbs of food) and helped me deliver food to people who have fallen on hard times. Madison always says she feels like she can fly when we give to others, and almost feels bad for feeling so good! Kyra has taken up the practice of taking presents to anyone who has a birthday in her class (including all her teachers) because she feels they should be celebrated. A few days ago, a student in her class passed away. After the tears had settled, Kyra said “I'm sorry mommy”, and I asked why? She said “because (the little boy's) mom would be sad, and her teachers would be sad”. She asked me to buy a teddy bear for people to hug in her classroom whenever they missed the little boy (she's in a developmentally delayed classroom, so not a lot of the students understand). And today she asked if we could buy a card for his mom.

In our family, our goal is simple: to leave everyone we encounter feeling a little more loved. We believe in the power of kindness and offer plenty of hugs along the way.

Sending you hugs,

Letting My Soul Catch Up – Gaylyn Maclean

Some of you may know that the past few years have been very challenging for me. I am so grateful to the congregation of Harcourt Memorial for giving me a “resting place” for my ministerial credentials while I stepped away from paid ministry for selfcare and navigated the support and oversight of my Mom who had cancer and my husband who had late stages of Parkinson’s and Lewy body Dementia. They have both passed now I believe into the peaceful presence of loved ones and their Creator.



I had always been “a walker”. I enjoyed evening strolls even as a teenager and took strength and solace as I took in the evenings sights and smells. With young children I put many a mile on my double stroller as we traversed life’s demands both pleasurable and necessary. As they grew in age and independence I continued to walk. Eight years ago my daughter and I completed the over 700km Camino pilgrimage. It was one of the hardest things I have ever done and one of the most rewarding. When I returned home I couldn’t stop walking. I just wanted to walk, walk, walk. But alas life and its demands took up more and more of my time and yet I still prioritized my daily walk even if it was just an hour or so. My dog Gracie and I venture out every morning down to the river and along the path on one side and then cross over to the path on the other side. Like the postal service we walk in

rain, sleet or snow but do our best to avoid ice!

I realize that over the years I have walked through countless seasons: winter, spring, summer, fall, childhood, young adulthood, midlife, celebrations, grief and so on. More consciously I have learned that walking reflects the different terrains of our lives, the highs, the lows, the difficult path, the easy trail, the shaded parts, the brightly lit portions, and constant on my favourite route is the river, constantly flowing like Ruah, God’s spirit; God’s breath, air or wind, reminding each of us of the physicalness of God’s presence in the world.

In these past few months of grief I have taken to stopping at a quiet bench and sitting for a while with my trusty canine companion at my side alert to any danger, especially squirrels and ducks. It has become a very intentional part of my walk as I take the time to simply sit and take in my surroundings. The accumulation of ice at the river's shore among overhanging branches or grasses. The smell of the earth as it thaws and the expanding water flows faster. The still mirror-like surface in an early morning time before the sun has risen or the light of the rising sun shimmering like diamonds across it. I sit and breathe. I let the thoughts of the day or night finish their frenzied pace in my mind and breathe. I let go. I pass to God's ever present spirit those things that weigh me down, that lift me up, that sustain and hold me no matter what.

I can't remember who it was that said, "we walk so that our souls have time to catch up". I believe that. What began simply as a way to get out of the house in the evening as a teenager for "some space" now as an adult has become "sacred" for me. Sometimes I walk with a certain intention: perhaps to pray for friends, family or parishioners. Sometimes it is to focus on a particular challenge. Other times it is to walk off an unsettling dream from the night before. And sometimes it is just to be moving at a pace that is not scheduled, timed, slotted or pressured. It is to feel the flow of the Creator in and through me as I navigate the wonder and mystery of the world of which I am a part, step by step. It has become a spiritual discipline. A time to let my soul catch up.

Feeding my Soul – Kathy Magee, Covenanted Spiritual Companion

I have always liked the term "Spiritual Practice". It reminds me that God does not expect me to be perfect, that maintaining connection and being present requires practice. It is never a once and for all thing. As with any activity, whether piano, tennis, yoga, or spiritual connection, practice is important and creates muscle and brain memory that last a life time. If there are times when I am less than diligent in making an intentional connection with God, God is always waiting for me, with loving ears and open arms. And I get to practice being present with God again. What a blessing!

Choosing one spiritual practice that most feeds me is difficult. There are so many wonderful forms of spiritual practice, and I have some favourites. There is one form of prayer that I return to most often. I use it when I am feeling stressed, when I feel impatient or overwhelmed, when I can't sleep at night, or when I want to celebrate the wonder of being

beloved by God. It is a combination of body and breath prayer. With each line, I breathe in and breathe out, visualizing the part of my body that I am praying about.

God be in my mind that I may think calmly and clearly.

God be in my eyes that I may see you in all things.

God be in my ears that I may listen patiently.

God be in my voice that I may speak kindly.

God be in my heart that I may love deeply.

God be in my breath that I may breathe in your grace.

God be in my centre that I may feel your steadying hand.

God be in my arms and hands and legs that I may be your love in action.

God be in my feet that I may know I am rooted in your love.

Sometimes it takes a few times through before I feel centred and can listen for God's voice, but it is always worth the time and intention.

I was recently introduced to a website with which I now start each day. It is from a United Church member in Nova Scotia, and takes only a few minutes. It is called A Little Spiritual Care. The website is sharon@alittlespiritualcare.ccsend.com

It is always a lovely reminder of the many ways that we are held in God's love.

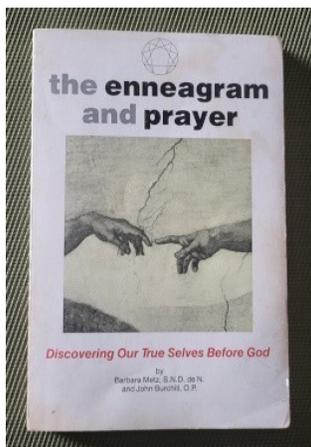
My Spiritual Practices – Lisa Beattie

My group spiritual practice is weekly attendance at Harcourt's Holy Listening Circle and participating in acts of service both within and beyond Harcourt. I find committed and intentional practice with others is like drinking from the well each week – as a result I notice that I see beauty as I move through my day, I feel gratefulness, I feel a nourished sense of connection and hope.

My private spiritual practice has become very simple recently and has led to a sense of relationship with God which is quite quiet and still. Surprisingly this has come more from letting go of something in my private practice rather than adding anything new. I now make specific times in the day – first thing in the morning and at bedtime, to simply BE with God. This quiet time has made a difference for me from trying to be there for God in the actions I take to instead finding myself feeling beloved by God by just sitting together. This practice is leading me to understand the concept of unearned grace.

I have always had the feeling that I had to do something more than this and I do have specific prayers I like to say as well. But I re-discovered a wonderful book which I originally found many years ago in a small bookstore at Mercy Center in California.

It's called *The Enneagram and Before God* (Barbara Metz and John know the Enneagram but it is not aside time each day with no actions quiet time with God has ended up has turned into relationship for me of "consolation" at the moment, that "desolation" or feeling less journey and that is okay. We can the evening.



Prayer: Discovering Our True Selves Burchill) As a Type 9 (for those who necessary) just regularly setting or expectations other than spending building a sense of connection that in a new way. I find myself in a time and at this point in my life recognize connected to God is also part of the still sit together in the morning and

Wind as the Breath of God – Lynn Hancock

As you may know, I was introduced to "bubbling" on Easter weekend of 2013. I had NO idea at the time that "bubbling" would become a spiritual practice. The first summer I was doing the activity in parks, including High Park, (I lived in Toronto for 60 years), I heard more "WOW"s than 30 years of teaching! Inspired by others' reactions, I came to realize that I would benefit from saying affirmations and setting intentions of letting go as I created the bubbles with the help of the wind. I would pass out if I were to attempt to blow those big bubbles myself. What is the wind if not the breath of God? How many of us still remember the poem:

"Who has seen the Wind?" by Christina Rossetti

Who Has Seen the Wind?

Neither I nor you:

But when the leaves hang trembling,
The wind is passing through.

Who has seen the wind?

Neither you nor I:

But when the trees bow down their heads,
The wind is passing by.

* * * *



Who has seen the wind?

Neither I nor you:

But when huge bubbles do appear,
The wind is passing through. -Lynn H.

This spiritual practice has fed me most because it is a powerful reminder of the presence of God. I am not alone. When asked the secret, I say it's all about the wind. Let the wind have its way. You want the wind at your back. For best results, YOU adapt, adjust and accommodate and see what manifests. I have the opportunity to be mindful and conscious of the present moment. I first heard this from Loretta Laroche: "Yesterday is history. Tomorrow's a mystery. Today's a gift that's why we call it the Present.". May we feel the presence of God in everything we do and say. May it be so.

My spiritual practice – Mary Harding

In brief, within the large matrix of concrete forms and endless connections..

The spiritual practice that feeds me most, is going deep within, centred & connected, to my inner landscape, physical & spiritual, and then connecting to the outer timeless landscape, including all creation as far as the expanding universe. It's a heightened sense of compassionate awareness, physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually in the flow (constant shifting) of what is now. Be here now - what 'here' means can be so expansive and hopeful.

My spiritual practice – Miriam Flynn

When my children were young, our family were guests at our friends' cottage for a weekend. Our combined household had dispersed in several directions one day - some of us hiking, some of the children at summer camp, others out in the boat taking a tour of the area by water. When we gathered for our evening meal, our hostess invited each of us to share with the group "an apple and an onion" from our day's experience. We were asked to relate both a highlight from our day – *an apple* – and also to identify something that happened that really *kind of stank* -- in other words, *an onion!* I was impressed by how rich our dinnertime conversation was that evening and occasionally added the game of "apples and onions" to our own domestic routine as a way to get beyond the blank stares and one-word answers that often met the question, "What happened at school today?"

Years later, I recognized "apples and onions" as a modified form of the Daily Examen – a simple Ignatian practice used as a technique of prayerful reflection, to detect God's presence in our lives and discern God's direction for us. The Examen involves taking a few quiet moments at the end of each day to ask *Where did I see God today?* or *When did I feel closest to God in this day?* And also to ask oneself, *When did I feel furthest away from God today?* This

way of attuning oneself to the presence of God in an ordinary day can form a gateway to contemplative prayer.

I have heard it said that to engage in spiritual practice is to “pause and ponder and be present.” In a preoccupied and distracted culture, we have too few moments to take a step back to notice *the essential and transcendent*. As a result, we suffer from what psychologist and contemplative James Finlay describes as “depth deprivation.” In biblical terms, *spiritual thirst*.

I first heard the expression “spiritual practice” when I attended seminary in 2011. Students were given a booklet with a number of suggested practices and were advised to adopt one or more to support our spiritual journey. Of course, I knew folks who prayed or read scripture on a daily basis (and in some seasons of my life have been among them), but I had no idea of the breadth and scope of reflective practices that were available. Until then, I thought meditation and mysticism belonged to other faith traditions. I was largely unaware of the rich *Christian* contemplative tradition.

Over the years, I have had the chance to experiment with many, and have returned again and again to the grounding and illuminating core practices of contemplative or centring prayer and journalling. These practices have been sources of spiritual strength, comfort and nurture in all seasons and especially during times of stress or indecision. Just as a routine of regular physical exercise improves our overall health and sense of well-being, these practices provide spiritual grounding and resilience, as we live out our faith day by day.

I have never viewed spiritual practice as a replacement for either corporate worship or faith-based social action. Rather, practices help me internalize the spoken and sung theology of worship. Practices can foster a deeper and more personal sense of connection with the Divine. And they supply a renewing spark of perspective and hope that keeps the oil of our service and activism burning, through stretches when it can be hard to see light at the end of the tunnel.

Spiritual practices often call us into silence and solitary space. For me, like many others, finding even 30 minutes of quiet and solitude in a day has been, at certain stages of my life, the biggest challenge to starting or maintaining a daily meditative practice. We are a culture that tends to value *doing* over *being*, at the best of times, and our responsibilities – vocational and familial – place very real demands on each precious hour. It is hard to make space to surrender into quietude and, yet, as Mirabai Starr (translating John of the Cross) has put it: *doing nothing accomplishes great things*.

Sitting in the same quiet corner, gazing out a window or taking a daily walk along a wooded path becomes a form of prayer when we *pause and ponder and are present* – to the signs of life that surround us, to the simple beauty we encounter. Letting ourselves open, with a sense of wonder to the sacred all around us and within us, we can listen to the voice without words – audible by the heart where our deepest selves and Divine presence rendezvous.

When I was a child, there was a clearing in a wooded area by the lake at my family's cottage, where the sun shone warmly every afternoon. I remember stealing off to that spot to simply sit and watch the play of the light on the leaves. When I have been able to establish a daily, meditative practice, the rejuvenating effect is somewhat akin to visiting my childhood "secret garden" by the lake. On good days, the sense of having been in the presence of the *essential and transcendent* is profoundly healing and carries me through the day, offering equanimity that has never come naturally to me as a matter of temperament. Other days, I simply take comfort in knowing that while I may break the thread of connection throughout the day, God never does.

Alas, practice *does not* make us perfect – as practitioners or people --but it can help us live more graciously and gratefully with the world's imperfections and our own.

There are times I've fallen out of the habit of regular spiritual practice and other times I've sensed the need to "mix things up" to reignite inspiration or regain focus. And while I tend to think of spiritual practice as a silent and solitary pursuit, some practices are shared. Praying, chanting or meditating with others can produce a common pulse of sound, rhythm or energy that fosters contemplative practice. Sharing one's experience with a reflection group or spiritual companion can strengthen commitment to a new practice, enhance insights gleaned and deepen connection with others.

Anyone hoping to begin or renew a spiritual practice will find many resources in Guelph. A wellspring of spiritual energy and gift seem to converge and bubble up here, within our own denomination and among ecumenical leaders and laity. For the seeker, Guelph truly seems a *thin place*. Opportunities to explore spirituality abound and there are many wise and generous companions willing to accompany those who yearn to "go deeper." Of course, getting started *or restarted* can be as simple as initiating a grown-up game of "apples and onions." We just need to *pause, ponder and be present* to the sacred around and within us. We just need to notice and recall where *we've seen God*, in an ordinary day.



What Spiritual Practice Has Fed Me Most – Marilyn Troop Parr

I have knowingly been involved with spiritual practices for the past fifteen years. Although I had been reading a daily devotional far longer, it was only on occasion that someone else's writings struck a chord with me.

So fifteen years ago, I began to see a Spiritual Guide on a monthly basis. In the first session, I was asked to sit quietly with my eyes closed and wait for what might happen. Seven images came into my mind, each of which had a specific message for me. This was a rare occurrence, but at each meeting since then, I have been able to voice my concerns about my beliefs, my friends and family and the world in general, always finding a sense of calm and a reassurance of my place in God's eyes.

Even though I have had to change spiritual guides several times (due to moves and distances), each time I have been blessed to find a new spiritual guide who has been gentle and kind and grounded in God's love.



Harcourt Memorial United Church is blessed to have so many people who are willing to walk with those of us who are searching. Shortly after I moved to Guelph in 2010, I was able to participate in the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises being offered through Harcourt. My guide for these exercises was incredibly patient with me, and I am thankful that Harcourt offers this experience. It made me stop and spend time in reading and praying and thinking deeply about my relationship with God.

These days, I am reading three different daily devotionals, but I still find that my monthly meeting with my spiritual guide is what feeds me most.

Touchstones - Stan Bunston

Inevitably, and to my delight, the invitation to share about a spiritual practice has invited me into a deeper place of reflection on my life story. Reflection has been required as to what is appropriate to share from some of my personal life journey and, importantly, reflection on whether anything that I would like to share would be of interest or helpful to anyone else. My conclusion is that my penchant throughout my life for using "touchstones" is a particular form of spiritual practice that may resonate with others who are drawn to what I would refer to as "left brain" ways of being in the world. I would add that in my mature years "touchstones" have taken shape within the sweep of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises – life changing for me and so many others. But let me start much earlier with my most enduring experience of "touchstone."

In 1971 I returned to Toronto after two years in Ghana working on an agricultural assignment helping to mark out three acre farming plots for people forced to leave their original land. A hydroelectric power plant and dam created 50 resettlement villages around the newly expanded Volta Lake north of the capital city of Accra. This was a CUSO sponsored

assignment that ended with the “culture shock” of returning to affluent Ontario to start MBA studies and figure out, at age 24, who I was and where I was headed with my life. My first touchstone was written (now long lost) on a cheap, lined yellow sheet of paper. It read: (1) Love, (2) Keep the faith, (3) Take it easy. This was an attempt to provide an orientation, or guide for daily living if you will. The first word encompassed the Divine and also human expression of love as being the foundation and central purpose of life. The second was intended as encouragement to confidence in the inevitable uncertainties of life. And finally “take it easy” was only an invitation to try (a life long struggle for me) to be less driven and hold life more lightly. These **simple** phrases accompanied me spiritually for many years in my youth.

Over time I have continued the use of touchstones as “at hand” reminders whenever I encounter wisdom that I would like to take into my being. Some, like memorizing the key meditation guidance of Jon Kabat-Zinn, may have come and gone, though even there certain fragments remain as touchstones – like the eastern idea of “beginner's mind.” I find that phrase to be an encouraging notion in the reality of falling short to reach the spiritual consistency to which I aspire. A fairly longstanding example of using an acronym to hang onto spiritual guidance arose from a book called Serenity, that I bring to mind with the almost pronounceable acronym of SAPBRP-LG2. That stands for:

Slow down
Aceptance
Present moment
Balance
Rest
Play
Let go
Let God



While I may continue to play with words and phrases as reminders of the big perspective on life, nothing compares to the on-going impact of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises which I did in 2013 and repeated as the New Spiritual Exercises (based on Louis Savary's book). The prayer of the “Principle and Foundation” that was created while walking with a spiritual guide through the exercises in 2013 and expanded over the years with additional phrases is central to my spiritual life. This prayer reminds me daily in my own words the ground on which my life is built.

Ignatian Spirituality encourages us to see the Divine in all of life and to become “contemplatives in action” (see photo of statue of St Ignatius

at Loyola House). I find that a very helpful perspective. Also, I have found a way to expand my daily connection with scripture with the help of a book called “Too Deep for Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina” by Thelma Hall. This book offers 500 scripture texts for prayer, organized as 50 themes, e.g. Compassion, Freedom, Joy etc. What an easy way to find meaningful touchstones from scripture for daily living and to refresh that encouragement with changes if recitation became too rote in my interior spiritual journey. That said, I have stayed for several years with Thessalonians 5: 16-18: “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

The Ignatian Exercises a life changing experience

The Spiritual Life Committee
of Harcourt Memorial United
Church

is offering the “Ignatian
Spiritual Exercises in Daily
Life” (Annotation 19) starting
late September of every other
year.

Participants commit to pray
each day with the material
provided and to meet with
their spiritual director once a
week for the duration of the
Exercises, which is usually 40
weeks.

Experienced spiritual
directors from Guelph and
Area are participating in this
program accompanying
participants on their journey.
There is a cost associated with
participation.

Starts June 2024

For further information and to register
contact Marion Auger at 519-824-6329
or marion.auger@sympatico.ca

**Here are some of the
statements made by people
who went through the
Ignatian Exercises:**

“The Exercises have also made
me aware that God is in all
things, and that I am
unconditionally loved by God.”

“I have clarity on who I am
supposed to be.”

“The Exercises have also
brought me a better
balance between mind and
heart.”

“Through them I
found a sense of
purpose.”

“I also developed a
compassion for myself.”

The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius - A Brief Overview – Andre Auger

Are you looking for an opportunity to develop an intentional spiritual discipline? Would you like to spend some quality time getting to know the person of Jesus better through meditation on the Gospels? Do you long for a personal experience of God's unconditional love for you? If you've read some of the testimonials of those who have taken the Exercises, you get a sense that this might just be possible! Perhaps you might consider whether it's time for you to take the Spiritual Exercises.

Though they began as a Roman Catholic practice, you will find these in many Protestant circles. Originally designed by Ignatius as a discernment tool for young men seeking to enter the Jesuit Order, they remained a rare practice until the 1970s, when two Jesuits at Loyola House in Guelph, John Veltri and John English felt called to open them to laypeople and to Christians of all denominations. There's even a long tradition of these Exercises in India! Because of John Buttars's close connection with Loyola House, Harcourt has been offering them every two years for over 20 years. (John was a previous minister at Harcourt for three decades). I myself took the Exercises for the first time at Harcourt in 1995, and have done so four times since.

The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius are an ordered set of directed meditations and exercises offered either in 40 days in a retreat setting or in daily life over 40 weeks. They can be undertaken in a number of formats – the traditional approach, an approach more in keeping with the Protestant tradition and with attention to gender-related issues, and an approach consonant with contemporary science and evolution in the spirit of the Jesuit paleontologist and mystic, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. All three approaches are similarly structured.

The Exercises begin with the **Disposition Days**. This is a chance to see if we are ready for the discipline of the Exercises. It is also an opportunity to experience God's personal love for me. We at Harcourt tend to offer these Days over six weeks during the summer.

We then learn and pray the **Principle and Foundation** in which we learn to acknowledge our creaturely status - that humans are created to praise, reverence, and serve God - and that our task in life is to distance ourselves from inordinate attachments in order to be spiritually free, to respond to whatever call God has for us. This leads us to the entry point into the Exercises proper.

If we are ready to continue with the Exercises proper, we continue with **Facing Brokenness ("Week One")**. This is a time of examining the broken state of our world and lives, the effects of our selfishness, greed and fear. We look at ourselves, and we ask: what have we

done for Christ, what are we doing for Christ, what ought we do for Christ? We also learn how to take advantage of **Consolation** and what to do when in **Desolation**.

As we prepare to enter "Week Two", we undertake **The Kingdom Exercise** where we are invited to hear Jesus' call to imitate Him, and to be transformed in heart and soul and to take up his project of a new form of humanity. We pray the Grace to know Jesus with such a deep felt knowledge that we might love him more and not to be deaf to his call in the unique and concrete circumstances of our life.

We are now ready for **Discipleship ("Week Two")**. Jesus invites us into his life. We learn methods of prayer to help us on our journey, to walk and talk and share in the ministry and the events in the life of Jesus. In short, to become a disciple. We pray the Grace of asking for an intimate knowledge of Jesus, that we may love him more deeply and follow him more closely.

As part of our discipleship during "Week Two," we are offered a set of exercises to help us become even clearer on our desire to follow Jesus: **The Two Standards, The Three Kinds of Humility, The Three Classes of persons**. This is a time to choose: to follow the ways of the world or to follow Jesus by accepting his call. We ask for the Grace of a growing ability to recognize the deceits of the World and of our Ego in the decisions we make, and the strength to guard against them. We also learn to discern between **true and false Consolations**.

During "Week Two," we have made a commitment to be Jesus' disciples. We are prepared to enter **Faithfulness Unto Death ("Week Three")**. This week is an invitation to stay with Jesus at a time when many of his followers fled in fear. We ask for the Grace to have the courage to stand with Jesus in solidarity, bearing his sorrow and pain and brokenness with our own love, tears, and deep grief, and learning to transform diminishment into some form of growth.

We can now participate with Jesus in His new life: **New Life in Christ ("Week Four")**. Jesus is risen. We are called to experience the movement from deep sorrow to great joy and gladness. We see the eagerness of Jesus to walk with us in the unique and concrete circumstances of our lives. We ask for the Grace of deep interior joy because Jesus, now the Cosmic Christ, is filled with glory, and for a deep appreciation of how Jesus is present to us in our daily life.

In gratitude for the gift of this journey, we engage in **The Contemplatio**: We contemplate on the love of God; we consider that love ought to show itself in deeds over and above words. That love consists in a mutual sharing of goods. As a lover one shares with the beloved something of one's own personal gifts or possessions, so too, the beloved shares in a similar way with the lover.

We conclude the Exercises with the **Appropriation Days**. We recall the graces received through this journey with gratitude. We experience a deeper awareness of a truer image of God: a God of love and mercy in our own sense of sin. We remember the sense of call to move beyond the confines of self, beyond fear and weakness. Love ought to manifest itself in deeds rather than words. We relish in a new sense of personal freedom and a knowledge of discernment through the discernment of the spirit, the movement of consolation and desolation. We acknowledge the call to suffer with Jesus, to forget self and to be present to the needs of others, knowing that the Christ is always with us.¹

If you'd like to learn more about these Spiritual Exercises, speak to any one of the Covenanted Spiritual Companions at Harcourt.

The impact of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises – Andre Auger

Every month, Harcourt's Covenanted Spiritual Companions meet, along with a few other colleagues from the area, for a time of mediation and sharing. Because I knew that this month's Herald was focusing on spiritual practices in general, and the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises in particular, I invited participants to reflect on what permanent impact the Exercises had on their spiritual life. Here's a sample of what was shared:

"I have an affirmation that has stayed with me: I have clarity on who I am supposed to be. The Exercises connected me with the larger picture – with the Universe, in fact. I have also experienced a reorientation toward Jesus. The Exercises have also brought me a better balance between mind and heart. Finally, my personal theology has become more mature."

"For me, it was the combination of the Exercises and a good spiritual director that had the most impact. I'd have to say that the Exercises literally saved my life, both emotionally and spiritually. They reoriented me to be not directed by other people's expectations, but by an inner grounding. I became convinced that my ongoing spiritual practice needed to be intentional, consistent, and regular."

"Through the Exercises, I discovered the depth of both Gospel Contemplation and Lectio Divina [*two basic forms of meditation used by the Exercises – Ed*]. I also learned to treat myself

1 Adapted from material prepared for the Ignatian School of Spirituality, Guelph, ON, 2009.

more kindly: I recall my spiritual director saying to me, after I had berated myself about something ‘Can you imagine Jesus ever saying that to you? No? Then why do you?’”

“The ‘Suscipe’ [*‘Take and receive,’ a prayer of giving over which culminates the Exercises – Ed*] has become one of my daily practices. I’ve also learned to ask for the Grace I need. I realized that the Exercises are experiential: we learn to pay attention and receive our sense of call and direction directly from God. While this requires circumspection, I have leaned to take risks, even when some of the consequences have led to painful experiences. I have learned that there is deep wisdom in the way of the cross.”

“Throughout the Exercises, I was trying to find my identity. Through them I found a sense of purpose. I also developed a compassion for myself. I became firmly convinced that I am loved by God and that God is indeed in everything. They opened me up to something I had never experienced before. My relationship with Jesus deepened. I learned to listen more attentively to those little nudges. My world became a much bigger place. I now realize that I am never alone. The Exercises had a huge impact on me.”

“As a direct result of the Exercises, I developed two spiritual practices and two theological insights. I regularly engage in the Awareness Examen [*a daily prayer practice that summarizes the day in terms of God’s Love – Ed*] and I recite my Principle and Foundation [*another prayer which retreatants create for themselves toward the beginning of the Exercises which sum up their personal convictions about the purpose of human life -Ed*] every day to remind me of who and whose I am. The Exercises have also made me aware that God is in all things, and that I am unconditionally loved by God.”

“While I don’t practice as regularly as others, the Exercises were for me life-changing and have deepened my connection with Jesus, and this has seen me through difficult times.”

“The Exercises helped me “enflesh” Jesus – to see him primarily as a human being. It was also through the Exercises that I developed the strong habit of seeing two sets of standards in the world – that of “Empire,” based on wealth, status and power – and that of Jesus – based on distributive justice, humility and compassion – and that has convinced me that belonging to a faith community which tries to live out this second set of values is really the only way I can sense any hope in this world. Through the Exercises, I also managed to develop a reasonably regular spiritual practice. I also developed a profound respect for the notion of the “Cosmic Christ,” which one version of the Exercises emphasizes. I am also aware that I am learning to rethink Jesus’ ordeal on the cross in terms of his ability to convert “passivities of diminishment” (bad stuff that happens to you) into activities of growth (finding, in the midst of the pain, some way to do something good.)”

An Interview with Conor Russel, Harcourt's Administrative & Tech Co-ordinator - Judi Morris

Two firsts here. An interview with someone I knew nothing about and no time for research - *[my reputation as an interviewer could crash and burn with this one]* and a planned carriage ride *[the pony was off]*, turned it into a hike. As you read through you will see how Conor, an interesting, caring, generous young man, whose full government/birth name Irish/Gaelic – Conchobhair Irish means Lover of hounds – lover of wolves which might explain his love of trees, nature and the environment. Conchobhair as it turns out is a hiker. He made the interview experience for me pure delight.

Judi: This is cold turkey for me. I know nothing about you, Conor. You are going to have to take the reins of this interview. But first, how long have you been at Harcourt and your job there?

Conor: Just a short while, about seven months. The official title is Administrative and Technical Co-ordinator, along with that of office administration, with the many duties that it has, then also co-ordinating all the tech for the Sunday services and all the rentals that Harcourt has been doing as well.

Judi: Oh my goodness ... that's a lot ...
So ... what has brought you to Harcourt and to this position?

Conor: Pamela reached out to me about the position. I've done some contracts with the United Church at the National level before. Last summer I was a youth climate co-ordinator. Youth across Canada that were doing environmental projects in their community ... and my job was co-ordinating them, connecting them with each other, the wider church, environmental NGOs, community groups, politicians, as well developing their project planning, implementation, and advocacy skills.

And so, I've been familiar with the United Church generally, and Harcourt as well through their work in the community – and said I'd love to contribute.

Judi: How did you get here?

Conor: I went to the University of Guelph

Judi: *[stops & picks up a wood stake from the ground]* That's something a coyote has dragged over here from my drive-shed. They pick things up from your yard, take them away, then drop them.

You went to Guelph. Are you from Guelph? Are you a Guelph Native?

Conor: No. I came to Guelph. It's latched its teeth into me and hasn't let go yet. I went to undergrad for environmental management. My Masters was in environment, geography, international development. In my thesis I also did some work with Ontario Farmers around digital agriculture and different cyber-security concerns as the sector makes that shift.

Judi: Wow. That's quite a spread.

Conor: Very much a generalist for sure. It's been very hard to pinpoint just a few the things that I am interested in.

Judi: So...do you know where you want to go with all of that?

Conor: Forward [he laughs and a pause] ... So for me I kind of split up my life into these different guiding stars that I align my employment, or my volunteering, or my 10% donation/tithing with. So, whatever I don't contribute to as work I see if I can contribute to as a volunteer or my tithing.

Judi: That's interesting.

Conor: That way I can hone into the different things I want to put into the world. For instance, one guiding star I care about is poverty alleviation, so I volunteer at Royal City Mission every week and do a bit of advocacy around that. Another of course is Care for Creation and Environmental work. Most of the time my employment lines up with that sort of thing. Other stuff looks like Human Rights work – specifically around rights for children and queer folk around the world. I've helped start a grassroots charity in Uganda with a friend of mine who is trying to help more youth receive quality education. I also donate and help with groups around the world who are trying to advocate for dignity and human rights for queer folk. I know Canada is far from perfect, but at the root of it I'm so grateful to live here – I recognize folks like me aren't as safe elsewhere in the world.

A few other things I especially care about is child safety and child empowerment. For me that looks like being on the board of Child and Family services, so volunteering a bit there or working with youth, as I have in the past. I kind of like to give youth the perspective that, you're not just the leaders of tomorrow - there's many ways you can be leaders of today. Finally, I tend to engage these issues in both political and religious contexts – I'm also an exec for the Guelph Greens Constituency Association.

Those are a few things that matter to me (there's always more) and I try to see where I can contribute where I can.

Judi: While you are telling me that, it makes me wonder if you have any aspirations of going abroad to areas of need in the world?

Conor: I've often thought about it I've had the opportunities to travel to places for interesting forums and strategy sessions. The World council of Churches was held in Germany two years ago. Denominations and representatives from so many different countries all came there asking very interesting questions of each other. The goal of course, where there is agreement – feed the poor, heal the sick, and take care of the planet, how can you be more effective together? Where there is disagreement, which can be a lot of human rights lines, how do you create space for disagreement without taking away from the other part? Like my recent trip to Greece for the World Council of Churches Eco-Schools I've been fortunate spend time with folks from different denominations, countries, and political beliefs to work together on environmental rights-based advocacy for issues like climate change, global hunger, global health, and water rights. These sorts of things do light me up, though it can be challenging work.

Judi: Is there anything in particular that you brought back with you?

Conor: When I was there – I shared this with Harcourt a couple of months ago – it was both a learning opportunity as we learned from both each other and the experts who spoke with us - and also a networking and strategizing time so when we came back to our own faith communities, we can share what others have been doing and consider what we may add to our own strategies to make a more just, green, and caring world.

Judi: *[We passed Faery Lodge and a short piece past it I said]* This is where Pamela brought Manna one Sunday in February last year. They made a fire & had Smores.

Conor: Love that! So good to be connecting with each other in nature. If children don't grow up with a connection to nature, how can we expect them to care and advocate for it?

Judi: So now you are going to tell me about what city you were raised in.

Conor: Mostly Burlington – we were in Florida for a while and then Spain and came back to Canada.

Judi: What were your parents doing in Florida and Spain?

Conor: Both of them were swim coaches actually. My Father at the time was coaching a national level athlete in Spain. All of us went into swimming as well. Two of my siblings went to the Olympics for it.

Judi: Wow. *[I kept saying "wow" throughout the interview]* You have brothers and sisters.

Conor: Too Many. *[We both laughed]*. An older brother went to Beijing and London and a sister to just London. I have two brothers, two full sisters, two half sisters a big family.

Judi: *[more Wows]* Amazing!

Conor: We all swam ... I never much liked it. Leaving was the best thing I ever did. As you can imagine, it wasn't a popular choice but was the best thing for me.

Judi: *[We stop and I take a photo of Conor in a space on Faery Lane that spoke to Conor]* I am the most environmentally conscious in my family much to the annoyance of my family. It's funny, sometimes I find it's easier to affect change outside the home than it is to do it in the home!

I've always cared about the environment, but my real body-felt connection started later in life. The change in me happened around Covid. When Covid first started I was running in Guelph Lake Forest – you are on you own – away from other folks. There was a lot more fear back then. I would run – I would ease my mind as I ran, especially in the summer. Felt really good. Then many months later I went to Toronto to meet the Aunties of my partner at the time. Over dinner, I had this anxious sensation as my mind went: “where is the nearest tree?” I laughed later – it seems Guelph had wakened me to be needing nature more often than I had. Or perhaps my body had always needed it, but now I was aware. Now I need to do Forest Bathing as they call it. Just walking in the forest immersing in it. I don't even need music.

It makes me a little sad because a lot of what I do in environmental advocacy we are often, in my opinion, putting the huge burden of becoming a more sustainable society onto individuals, but the bigger picture, the more systemic thinking is, why is industry allowed to get away with huge wasteful practises, while folks like you and I are begrudged for having a plastic straw. I mean, I think we shouldn't use plastic straws, for sure, however we shouldn't let the plastic straws distract from how many people are taking private jet planes everywhere. By pointing the finger at each other, we're not looking at the bigger problems – and the bigger solutions.

We are often given narrative of individual responsibility to change everything. The individual carbon footprint concept we were all taught was actually made by oil companies as a way to draw attention away from their actions. And don't get me wrong. It's important that we look at our actions – I even eat plant based for the environment - but we shouldn't let that be a distraction from all the other things that are going on that are above our heads when it comes to policy, industry, and the exponentially and disproportionately higher emissions of the most affluent among us.

Judi: Conor, you make me feel a bit better about myself, because I manage these trails and I don't leave anything behind when I trim and everything. I take it all back to my burn pit. I have a vendetta against buckthorns and often go on a buckthorn rampage yanking them out all over the place and burn them. A friend of my does trails and pushes the refuse up all over the place but I don't feel the same sense of peace walking through his trails as I do these.

Conor: In the grand scheme of things, you manage your trails. You're a far cry from an irresponsible forest company doing constant massive clear cutting without any penalties. And you clearing your small paths allows you and others to connect with and enjoy nature – which helps build desire to protect. It's not as if you're paving over everything.

Judi: That is all so interesting. *[This interview does not reveal the number of times I have said. Wow!]* So ... now you are moving on. Now it's time for you to tell us about your new venture.

Conor: It will be with the Global Partnership team at the National Office of the United Church in Toronto, and thankfully I will only need to go into the Toronto office on Wednesdays. I can take the Go Train there and back and still stay in Guelph. I'm very entrenched in Guelph with several volunteer commitments. Guelph isn't done with me yet. Guelph has stolen my heart.

The United Church has about more than a 100 different Global Partners. And that looks like Global NGOs, Global Charities, other denominations, and they all do good work in various fields like Global Hunger, climate change, human rights, the environment, and education – especially for young girls. These organizations partner with and apply to the United Church for funding. Part of my job is to look over the grant applications, co-ordinate among them and a bit of admin as well. The final piece is communication, sharing the different success stories of these NGO's and Charities, especially to congregants.

Judi: Are they all religious organizations?

Conor: These groups range from religious ones to non-religious ones. Different NGO's and charities. A good example is the Canadian Food Grains Bank. They are partnered with the United Church and they do work on global hunger so when they have a project and they want to apply for United Church funding or connect with us in other ways, I'd be part of those conversations.

Judi: What would you like to share with the Harcourt congregation? What would you like them to know about you?

Conor: That's a good question. I know some folks that have gotten to know me better in the office. They will stop by – we have a good talk and I know more about them. That's been one of my favourite things. Having an office where people come and say hi, and typing away while Alison's music groups are down the hall. I don't know if I will get that same ambience at my next job.

Judi: What message would you like to give the congregation with regard to your interest in the environment or anything?

Conor: Don't come to church on your private planes on Sunday morning. [*Hearty* laughter erupts from both of us]. First is gratitude to them on a personal level for being so welcoming, warm, and kind to me for the seven months that I have been here. Beyond that, what they are currently doing is the reason I was drawn to this church and will continue to attend their events. I could see there was a heart there and people really care. And last year and this year there have been times where it's been tough for queer community. And I saw there was a lot of people at Harcourt that really cared – they would show up. I think that goes a long way. Even my friends who are not religious, they noticed that. And for a lot of folks who have been hurt by religious institutions, it's healing to see it.

Judi: It's not only Queer and Gay people that have been hurt by religion. John Buttars once said, "Religion is the wound, not the bandage."

Conor: Such is often the case, but I find people speak highly of Harcourt and they notice the work being done. I just want to say thank you and keep going because people notice. And even if people didn't notice, I know they would still be doing it because it is the right and good thing to do.

Likewise, even if the future of a good human and environment relationship was hopeless, I would still choose to lead my life this way, not because it would be successful, but because it was the right thing to do. I go forward and I try to do what I can – I am not someone with great power, great wealth, or great influence, but as Mother Theresa says, I can always do small things with great love.

Judi: Conor, you have wowed me throughout the whole of this hike. You have an incredible beautiful soul with so many lessons for us and an example for young people showing a way they can take their time wading through life and what they want to be and how to divide it up into stars even us seniors can adapt that approach. I leave you with an Irish/Gaelic greeting and salutation. Dia Duit – meaning God be with you. It was used and maybe still is today where we would use hello and goodbye. A blessing to all whom you meet.

Harcourt thanks you Conor, for being in our space and place for seven month, for all you have been and given to us. We all say to you Dia Duit.

Being Still - Lisa Browning

"Seek out a tree, and let it teach you stillness."

~ Eckhart Tolle



Those who know me well will not be surprised when I say that I find it difficult to be still. My mind is always racing, with dreams, ideas, and items off a never-ending to-do list. In and of itself, this is not a bad thing. I am living my passion, and it feeds my soul.

But the lack of stillness is problematic for me, as I can keep going and going (I think of myself as the Energizer Bunny!), until eventually, I crash. Then I rest, and start the cycle all over again.

Since I retired from my day-job in December, to devote more time to my business, I have also taken time to reflect on my own self-care, to a greater extent than ever before. And I have realized how important stillness is, and how crucial it is for my own well-being.

I have tried meditation on a number of occasions, and in many forms -- guided meditation, silent meditation — but nothing seemed to work for me. *Acknowledge your thoughts, then gently bring the mind back to the present* was the instruction given. Easier said than done!

All of this changes, however, when I am out in nature. There is a trail surrounding the wetlands, close to my subdivision, and I go there at least once a day and walk for 30 minutes to an hour. From the moment I set foot on that trail, surrounded by stress and any sense of urgency *there*. As I walk, my mind is at the birds singing, and delight in and chipmunks, being in the Spirit is present.



and I go there at least once a hour. From the moment I set trees, I can instantly feel all dissolve, and I am simply rest, and I take in the sounds of the sight of rabbits, squirrels moment. And it is there that

There have been many studies done about the spiritual/healing power of trees. I do believe that the energy of trees affects our mental well-being, and our emotional and physical bodies. It certainly does for me.



The backyard of my house is another sanctuary for me. A friend who does a lot of work with mandalas created the space for me, full of winding pathways and gardens, and an abundance of shrubs and flowers call out to birds, butterflies, and bees. When the weather is warm, I spend as much time out there as I can, soaking up the calming energy and feeling peace in my soul. It is there, as on the trail, that Spirit is always present.

In these spaces, in my silent, intuitive communication with Spirit, there is a knowing, of both questions and answers, that sustains me and results in my feeling safe and cared for.

And I take comfort in the fact that I don't have to be formal, or follow pre-set guidelines about "how to do meditation." All I have to do is show up, be present, and listen for the answers and the connection that inevitably come.



The History Corner – Marilyn Fardig Whiteley

You're probably aware that Harcourt is an Affirming Congregation, welcoming people of any sexual orientation or gender identity. But how did this come about?

1 In June of 2000, the United Church celebrated the seventy-fifth anniversary of church union. It was a time for giving thought to the years to come, and Hugh Whiteley reflected on the future shape of the church and wondered about ways to avoid some of the cultural blindness of the denomination's earlier years. He subsequently presented a motion at the January 2001 Council meeting, that Harcourt explore what it might entail to become an Affirming Congregation, one that explicitly welcomed everyone, regardless of sexual orientation. Council passed the motion and struck a committee. The committee, chaired by Peggy Knapp, presented its report to Council in May. At that meeting, the Council voted to have the congregation enter the process that might – or might not – lead to a decision to become an affirming congregation.

Knowing that the process was coming up for consideration, John Buttars and his family made a significant decision. In a sermon on December 10, 2000, he shared with the congregation his "experiences of being a father of two wonderful daughters, one of whom is a lesbian." John remained at the front of the sanctuary afterwards so that no one would feel obligated to greet him on the way out. But the line-up of people who chose to come and speak with him was long. John did not participate actively in the affirming process; instead, it was Harcourt's other minister, Monica Moore, who served on the two committees, the first an exploratory committee, and the second a steering committee.

The Affirming Congregation Steering Committee held its first meeting in October of 2001, chaired by Randy Seager. A long and careful process followed. It included a bulletin board and bookshelf, an idea box, newsletter reports, and several forums. Members of the congregation were encouraged to express what they considered the advantages and the disadvantages of becoming an affirming congregation. Committee members tried to develop safe ways for those opposed to the idea to express their opinions, but this they found the most

frustrating part of their work. They hoped that, whatever the outcome of the process, Harcourt would as a result become more welcoming toward people who were different.

In the spring of 2003, the committee wrote its report and sent it to the church Council. There was little time to hold a congregational meeting and a vote before many members dispersed for the summer, so the Council called no meeting. And no vote on that question was taken at the annual meeting the next February. But that didn't mean that nothing was happening.

During the months before the 2004 annual meeting, much work had been done studying and developing the congregation's positioning statement, mission statement, and core values. The values were similar to those reached through a visioning process in 1993, but with some additions. According to the 1993 values, Harcourt welcomed all "regardless of background, ability, sex, age, race, lifestyle, or class." Now at its 2004 annual meeting, the congregation approved a new version that included the phrase "regardless of background, colour, ability, gender, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or socio-economic status." In addition, it voted to strike a Core Values/Mission Statement Implementation Committee to monitor Harcourt's faithfulness to what it had approved.

During the months that followed, it became apparent the congregation was able to live according to these values. The Council decided that all couples, including same-sex couples, were to be treated the same in respect to congregational marriage policies. In effect, Harcourt was already functioning as an affirming congregation. Perhaps it would not be so difficult or so divisive to become, officially, an affirming congregation and to become a member of Affirm United! At the annual meeting in February 2005, a strong majority voted in favour of that action, and on Sunday afternoon, April 3, a service of celebration was held as Harcourt became an affirming congregation of the United Church.

Since that time, Harcourt has become known as a welcoming place for people of any sexual orientation or gender identity. It has developed a warm relationship with the Rainbow Chorus of Waterloo-Wellington, of which Harcourt's Alison MacNeill is now the Artistic Director. And



each year Harcourt celebrates and renews its status as an Affirming Congregation by devoting one Sunday morning service as Harcourt's Affirming Sunday. Now, as we approach the 100th anniversary of church union, Harcourt remains an actively Affirming Congregation.

