

September 2006 Issue Number 1

COMMON LIFE

NEWSLETTER



Contents

Editorial

Common Words
Yvonne Stewart
~2~

Word from the
Common Life Groups
~3~

Articles on Community Life

On Staying at the Table:
A Spirituality of
Community
Parker J. Palmer
~8~

Soul Friends
Bea Arnill
~10~

What Are We Learning
at Caledonia?
Ted Black
~12~

The Purple Martin House
Henk Dykman
~14~

General News
from the Centres
~15~

Resource Material
A Ritual of Endings and
Beginnings
Nancy Hardy
~17~

Five Oaks Pilgrimage
Nancy Hardy
~18~

Personal Contributions
Common Life (poem)
Joan Tessier
~7~



Holy Week Rituals in
Mexico ~4~



The Joy of Engaging in
Justice ~16~



Shekhinah Seekers
Retreat ~5~

***“Community is not an end in itself.
It is a way of being in solidarity with the work of the Holy Spirit.”***

~ Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Common Words

I've been thinking about this issue of our Common Life Newsletter for months. Wondering what you readers would like to read and hoping that the contents would support us all as we participate in God's healing action in the world.

The newsletter was in the back of my mind when I attended the World Council of Churches Assembly in Porto Alegre, Brazil last February. The Iona Community was prominently present – with Kathy Galloway, its leader, Peter Millar, former warden, Norman Shanks, former leader and member of the WCC Executive, giving workshops and providing leadership. The contribution of the members of this community made me realize how much effect a relatively small disciplined community can have on the church and world. Their music enriched meeting times and worship; their commitment to community undergirded the ethos of the Assembly, their commitment to right relationships and justice responded to the cries of pain and oppression. It is my belief that our Common Life Communities can and do also function as yeast in church and society – a function sorely needed in these times of violence and war.

The Iona Community's workshop on *Engaged Spirituality* provided me with much encouragement for the ongoing functioning of Common Life Communities. I report some of Kathy's comments in a flow of consciousness style for you to reflect on and connect to your group's experience. Her phrase "common life," of course, caught my attention immediately.

Common life is about rebuilding broken relationships between:

- classes and economic groups
- prayer and politics
- work and worship
- prayer and practice
- spiritual and material
- gospel and life

The Iona Community is committed to the renewal of worship and social justice.

Only a demanding common task builds community. ~ George MacLeod

The Iona Community's justice and peace statement didn't arrive by consensus and unanimity until 1966, thirty years after the members started the process!

Living in community is deepened life – deepened struggles, sorrows and joys. ~ Harry Williams

Community is not an end in itself. It is a way of being in solidarity with the work of the Holy Spirit. ~ Dietrich Bonhoeffer

People come to Iona looking for peace and quiet and leave looking for peace and justice. ~ A participant

Do any of these statements invite you and your group members to pause and reflect?

At the start of the life of this newsletter, the plan is to highlight in some way one of our disciplines or practices in each issue. We'll see how that works out. This issue emphasizes the practice of community. Whether our Common Life group has just begun

or is starting its fifth year of life, the article, *On Staying at the Table: A Spirituality of Community*, by Parker Palmer may move us to think about "deepened life" in community. I found this 1986 article in my "community" file. Parker (or I) today might change the odd word or phrase but the basic concept still has relevance today. You might want to discuss this article in your group and explore whether the content resonates (or not) with your experiences of the challenges and graces of persevering in community. By the way, Parker sent permission to reproduce the article from the "other" Paris. Kathy Galloway's references to community above, as well as Bea Arnill's article, *Soul Friends*, Ted Black's sermon excerpt, *What Are We Learning at Caledonia?* and Henk Dykman's, *The Purple Martin House*, can lead us to reflect on the different kinds and purposes of community.

At the WCC Assembly, I learned that Iona is one among several communities or movements with connections to the World Council of Churches. Have you heard of Focolare, Grandchamp, Army of the Lord, St. Egidio, or Taize? I'd only heard of Taize. Some of these communities relate to youth, others are monastic in emphasis but they all seem in some way to be committed to enabling participants to live out peace and justice in their daily lives in the world (despite the name of one of these groups). Learning about these communities made the goal of producing this newsletter to help us feel part of a movement across our Centres seem somewhat provincial – and yet, however nebulously, part of something greater. Contributions from groups connected with Five Oaks, Tatamagouche, Calling Lakes, and Naramata are foundational to the "building up" of this particular "body." I hope you will find that the offerings in this issue are nurturing and inspiring.

When I wrote the group contact people asking for contributions, I said, *I'm interested in descriptions of a particular process you've used around a discipline/practice, a "cause" you have committed to and what you have done; a particularly meaningful worship or ritual or activity; the story of one of the members of your group, the poetry, storytelling or journal writings of a group member – or whatever news or aspect of group life that you think you would like to read about in a newsletter. – and, that would make you feel part of a movement of people who desire to intentionally participate in God's healing action in the world.* This first issue will have some gaps as we get organized and as we wait for the Spirit to move us to make our contributions. Probably all issues will have gaps since we are human! Please contact me or your group contact person if you have any suggestions for improvements or additions, news items, articles, etc. that you might want to offer to our Common Life Community. Letters to the editor are welcome as well. This is your newsletter. With your help we can make this an important part of the living out of our Common Life.

Thank you so much to those who took the risk to offer material for a very first issue. Thanks also to the contact people who shared news of the common life in their groups and Centres. May we continue to inspire and support one another through this newsletter. I extend a very special thank you to Debra Brown of Calling Lakes Centre who did a fabulous job of editing and formatting. I hope you agree.

Word from the Common Life Groups

Tatamagouche

Moncton Area

Group Members: Janice MacLean, Marilyn Burrell, Charlotte Campbell, Bob Childs, Shirley Childs, Shawn Redden, Linda Foy

Storytelling through Tapete

A Tapete is a carpet of “painted” sawdust and comes from the cultural traditions of Brazil and Guatemala, where it is used during religious and community celebrations. The sawdust is hand-dyed in the colours required for each design. The design is chosen because of its symbolic meaning for the group participating in the ritual.

The Tapete inspired our presentation to the Moncton Area Group at the Common Life Annual Gathering (June 24-25, 2006). In that presentation we created a design that symbolically highlighted our work the past year. Rather than sawdust we used paper streamers and fabric pieces! The following text comes from our presentation.

Tapete is an impermanent art form. In a Tapete celebration, people dance or walk through the sawdust design and destroy the design in the process. This is “transformation through celebration.” It is a symbol for us of how what we have done together as a group has and is transforming us – as individuals and as a group.

We will invite you at the end to join us in the transformation dance as a symbol that we are one group that belongs to a wider common life community.

We began our year raising our awareness of the Make Poverty History campaign. We committed to wearing bracelets and recognizing the designated days. Several members wrote government officials and shared responses received. We focused one meeting on poverty by watching the video called “When Did I See You Hungry?” [Marilyn forms a horseshoe shape with WHITE streamers.]

Our fellowship together is an important part of our gathering. We share a simple meal of soup, bread, cheese, wine and dessert to which we all contribute. After my sabbatical from the Common Life Group this was an important part of coming back and entering into the community. As part of our rule we have a common grace that we offer each time we gather round the table. [Shawn creates a design with PURPLE/BEIGE for bread (food) and wine.]

Last fall some of us had the opportunity to attend an event led by Ched Myers, noted educator and activist, at the Tatamagouche Centre. The focus was on building community in a world falling apart. Several years earlier our New Brunswick group had read one of Myer’s books, *Sabbath Economics*, so we were familiar with his challenging interpretation of Jesus’ take on the Hebrew scriptures’ call for justice, peace, and right

relations with others and with the land. Myers continued this theme, walking us through parts of the book of Mark (excerpted from *Say No to This Mountain*), and leading us to consider how being faithful to its Jubilee message might shape our action for all of us living in this privileged part of the world. Later within our home group, what intrigued us the most was digging into Myer’s concept of “biosphere” and the importance of establishing both personally and with one’s community a deep connection with the land that one dwells on. As is further described this group reflection would lead us to developing a theme and project to shape our group for the following year. [Charlotte uses BROWN/GREEN streamers/fabric to make land/earth design.]

For our Christmas meeting we chose to each share a favorite children’s Christmas story. This was a way to reflect on the meaning of the season in a very simple and non-materialistic way. The stories and the meal shared gave us a sense of Love present with us and with all of Creation. [Bob lays down RED streamers.]

In the spring we joyfully went on a three day retreat which involved silence, fellowship and worship. We divided the weekend into segments, and each of us was responsible for bringing a reading or thought concerning water to be shared at the beginning of one of the segments. We’d then go off on our own for reflection in silence. Our time together was deep and nourishing. [Linda lays down BLUE streamers.]

As our retreat time was coming to a close, an idea came to birth for us to be about a “river” study. It grew out of our desire to become more familiar with our bio-region (and this was inspired from Ched Myers as shared earlier). We talked about how this project would help us live out our Common Life commitments. Here are some of our reflections: enlarge our sense of community; we value what we know by name so to increase our respect for and responsibility to our bio-region; this promoting of bio-regionalism will help counter consumerism; help us find imaginative ways to express prayer and reverence for Creation and the Creator; awaken us to the abundance right around us; help us find sustainable ways to live faithfully in our world. Our plan is developing and we hope to begin in the fall and to offer our learnings to others through a possible printed resource, presentations, etc. [Shirley lays down BLUE fabric flowing out the opening in the horseshoe.]

**Together: It is the Spirit who gives us passion.
It is the Spirit who sparks our ideas.
It is the Spirit who nourishes our spirits.**

[All sprinkle “spirit” YELLOW/ORANGE pieces.]

Join us in transforming the design as a celebration of our common life. Join us in praising life! [All dance.]

End: While transforming the design that has just been created, the dance with the larger community creates something new and exciting!

Word from the Common Life Groups

Five Oaks

Background

In 2002, five Common Life groups came into being. In 2004, four groups chose to recommit – **Centre Group**, **Free Spirits**, **Sloe Jam** and **Tent Dwellers** (with a few members leaving). The two groups formed since 2004, **Anamchairde** and **Hearth Dancers**, committed to a two year, more residentially based program (than the first five groups experienced), led by the Five Oaks Common Life Leadership Team. They focussed on: covenant-making; theological reflection and Sabbath economics; and personal and communal spiritual practices. In 2005, the **Skekhinah Seekers** were established. After two years, groups choosing to continue follow the pattern of the first groups, meeting whenever they wish (usually at least every two months) and participating in the annual CLC retreat. One or more discernment days are offered each fall for folk interested in being part of Common Life.

Anamchairde



Group members (L to R): Paul Roth, Gail Lucas-Roth, Trish Strung, Amy Hill, Ione Grover, Bea Arnill, (not pictured, Des & Joan McCalmont).

Holy Week Rituals in Mexico

In preparation for Holy Week events this year, three members of Anamchairde, Gayle, Amy & Bea as well as Amy's husband Bob, boarded a plane which took them to Mexico. While there, Joan & Des McCalmont helped them explore the Holy Week events, as they are experienced in their village of Ajijic.

All the scenes from the Passion Narrative were acted out on cobblestone streets or in the Roman Catholic churchyard. If a scene took place at "Gethsemane", the townsfolk and visitors trekked to the hill north of town. If a scene took place in the churchyard/courtyard, you could count on a crowd wending their way to that location. The Palm Sunday parade took place on a

street scattered with alfalfa. Jesus rode the donkey and the disciples walked alongside him. We walked with the crowd waving our newly purchased palm branches.

The highlight for me was the Friday evening torchlight vigil. After a service in the church courtyard, the townsfolk swarmed out the church gate and walked solemnly in a procession through the streets of the Ajijic. Although the narrow streets were crowded, the only sounds heard were occasional cries of babies and the steady beat of the procession's drum. Reverence for the passion of our Lord was most apparent.

We returned having been taught by the Mexicans what it means to hear the Passion story with one's heart. ~ *Gayle Lucas-Roth*



Des and Joan McCalmont in Ajijic, Mexico. Photo: Gayle Lucas-Roth

Trish Strung also reports that Anamchairde members have made a commitment to contact each other by e-mail on the day of the month on which their birthdays fall in order to make more regular contact with news and support.

See also, the article, *Soul Friends*, by Bea Arnill in the *Articles* section (page 10).

Centre Group

Group members: Don Robinson, Barbara Buttars, Jan Aylward, Ruth Ferguson, Ted Black

What Are We Learning at Caledonia?

You will find an excerpt from a sermon *What Are We Learning at Caledonia?* by Ted Black in the *Articles* section. The desire to write it arose not only from the anguish experienced in the Brantford/Caledonia area regarding the land claims/development/ blockade issues (that most of us have seen or read reported in the national media) – but also from the reflection and support provided by the Centre Group.

Word from the Common Life Groups

Free Spirits

Group members: Yvonne Stewart, Marion Kirkwood, Michele Braniff, Nancy Hardy, Valerie Carson Kirkpatrick, Betty Jean Klassen, John Klassen, Lilojean Frid, Mary Joan Bradley

Our Search for a Common Cause

Since the beginning of our group four years ago, we members of the Free Spirits group have carried out our commitment to justice by pursuing our own passions. We are involved in aboriginal rights groups, support of fair trade, local Kairos groups, children's international centre, women's issues, food coops, global issues, particularly African, Stephen Lewis' Grandmothers group, support of Christian Peacemakers, support of a community health centre providing health care access for all and many other urgent and ongoing "causes." We decided last fall that we would like to try to find a justice concern we could support together as a group. It didn't take us thirty years like the Iona Community deciding on its peace and justice statement but it took us most of a year to come to a decision.

As part of the process, we engaged in bible study reflecting on the connection of spirituality and justice – looking mostly at Old Testament prophets who were inspired or pushed to speak out against injustice through their relationship with the divine. There were still some questions about the meaning of spirituality after that and so we agreed to continue our discussion of this topic from time to time.

Four issues arose as the most crucial: Water, Fair Trade, Make Poverty History, and Sisters in the Spirit. We found it hard to choose among such important causes. We researched each issue and made presentations to our group. We created collages. We identified the values of each, sketched out activities that could be undertaken, weighed the pro's and con's, determined our personal priorities and finally decided on Make Poverty History. We chose this because it met the differing time and energy resources of our group. Each of us can be involved at a level that we are most comfortable with: doing in-depth reading and sharing it with the group, responding to the Make Poverty History e-mail requests, wearing the white bracelet, writing letters to appropriate government and/or church bodies, participating in local and/or global anti-poverty action groups, prayer, financial support, etc. Each member stated what action we could commit to. This was put in writing and we will be accountable to each other.

This summer, media discussions have deliberated on the success or failure of this movement. We will do our little bit to keep the cause alive. Some of our members became so impassioned about the cause they researched, they have decided to continue working on it as well.

One member of our group, Michele, because of other pressing commitments has decided to take a one year sabbatical from Free Spirits. We will remain in touch through e-mail and she will come to gatherings when possible. All other members have decided to continue for another two years.

Hearth Dancers

Group members: Catherine Mac Donald, June Anderson, Elaine Beattie, Mary Beer, Mary McHarg

This group decided to bring their group to a close – which they did through a closing ritual in June. June Anderson and Mary McHarg intend to remain connected to the Common Life Community in some way. They and the Centre are considering the possibility of associate membership. We wish former members well, and trust that their Common Life experience will have touched their lives in a meaningful way.

Shekhinah Seekers

Group members: Pam Byers, Barbara Bitzer, Peg Earle, Jane Entiknap, Carol Gierak, Lloyd Smith

See the *General News* section for, *The Joy of Engaging in Justice*, by Pam Byers (page 16).

"Shekhinah Seekers" Retreat

Once again, as in January, food for the soul was mingled with food for the body as the Shekhinah Seekers met in July. We gathered Tuesday afternoon at the family cottage of one of our members near Havelock, each bringing our share of the food for the time we would have together. In our gathering and throughout our time, we remembered in our prayers the one member of the group who was unable to attend. After a wonderful meal and some informal conversation, we shared in worship, led by two of our members, the singing accompanied by another on the keyboard. Then we moved to the dock for a gentle soul-time of "checking in", while the sun set over the lake bathing us in its bright orange rays.

Gathering for a delicious breakfast, we continued our gentle, welcoming time together. The main focus of our morning was a discussion of the book we had all read since gathering at Five Oaks in May: Parker Palmer's *A Hidden Wholeness*. One of our members had e-mailed us all some helpful questions to draw out our responses while we read the book and another member prepared a chapter-by-chapter outline of the book to give some structure to our discussion. We resonated with many of Palmer's points, especially around the need for "circles of trust" to allow our souls places to be heard. We noted how in our "check-in" we had tried to follow Palmer's guidelines and agreed to monitor ourselves in our gatherings with his teachings in mind.

While our plan had been to finish formally late in the afternoon, we all agreed we would happily stay overnight. And there was certainly enough food for this change of plans. Menus were shifted a little, so that we had a light salad lunch before enjoying some "retreat" time. One of our covenants is that, in each of our gatherings, we will incorporate some time for individual silence and reflection. Most of us spent much of this time walking the beautiful property.

For the rest of the afternoon, we reviewed our individual covenants. We agreed to spend some time at each of our times together being accountable to one another around our fulfilment of our covenants in the various areas of the Common Life

Word from the Common Life Groups

disciplines. In this, our wish is to be supportive of each other, especially in those disciplines which we find challenging.

We concluded, formally, with an Agapé meal and covenanting liturgy. After another wonderful meal, we spent the evening in conversation, moving down to the dock once again for the sunset. In the morning, some of us enjoyed the hot tub and then, after breakfast, we all packed our cars and returned to our ordinary lives, refreshed, renewed and revitalized, looking forward to being together at Five Oaks in November and for our next group meeting in January. ~ *Lloyd Smith*

Pictured on Cover (L to R): Barb Bitzer, Lloyd Smith, Peg Earle, Jane Entiknap. Photo: Pam Byers

Sloe Jam

Group members: Janet Saunders, Lynn Godfrey, Thom Davies, Margaret Fisher, Deborah Hart, Jennie Jones, Louise Simms, Lucy Burke

The group is focusing on prayer at this point in their community life and on support for members dealing with significant life issues – such as a parent diagnosed with cancer.

Tent Dwellers

Group members: Joan Graham, Celia Orth, Joan Gugler, Ellice Oliver, Lorraine Dykman, Henk Dykman, Peg Simmons, Doug Ross, Eleanor Brent

See the *Articles* section for, *The Purple Martin House*, by Henk Dykman (page 14).

A Five Oaks Pilgrimage Walk

*Bless to us, O God,
The earth beneath our feet.
Bless to us, O God,
The path whereon we go.
Bless to us, O God,
The people whom we meet.
Amen.*

With this ancient Celtic prayer, visitors to Iona set out together once a week for a pilgrimage around this tiny island off the east coast of Scotland. It is a long walk over rough, wet, stony ground. Pilgrims need good boots, a lunch – and a waterproof jacket, of course. The purpose of the walk is to visit places important to the history of the island, for it is here that St. Columba brought Christianity from Ireland to the wild north part of Britain. At each stop along the route, there is a brief reflection, a prayer, and a song or time of silence. Pilgrims are encouraged to reflect on their own journeys of faith. The experience is unforgettable, and one that many long to repeat.

Our Common Life Community is modeled on the Iona Community, which is based in Glasgow with Iona as its “holy place.” Like them, we have our own holy place here at Five Oaks, where we began and where we return regularly. Our history may be shorter, but it is full of stories of dedicated people with a vision. We can make our own pilgrimage around the

property, stopping at all the “sacred” spots – to enjoy the beauty, to remember the founders who worked to establish this centre and to learn about those who faithfully maintained and improved it over the years. Most of us have our own special places on the grounds that have become dear to us on our walks and filled with good memories. As we reflect on our place in God’s world, we may take inspiration from remembering all who went before us.

Two CLC groups have already made a pilgrimage around the grounds of Five Oaks as part of a regular meeting. The walk takes approximately 1 ½ hours, and good weather is desirable, if not essential. (Trails can be muddy and wet trees drip!) What makes the experience worthwhile remains to be discovered personally by each pilgrim. Who knows what inspiration may come from walking prayerfully together in our own “holy place”? ~ *Eleanor Brent*

See *Resource Material* section (page 18) for, *Five Oaks Pilgrimage*, by Nancy Hardy for the readings, prayers and responses used at Five Oaks.

Calling Lakes

We have had two intakes in our Common Life Program. In the first one we had a registration for the exploratory weekend of about 20, however only 16 chose to continue with the program. We then had two small groups of 8. One group folded at the end of the 6 gatherings, but the other is still meeting and intends to continue to do so.

In our second intake we realized that our organization of the first intake had been too informal, so a planning team of three people, including me as coordinator, was put in place to guide the registrants through the 6 weekends. That worked much better and we were able to give folks an introduction to the 5 practices during the first weekend and then focus on each of the practices during the following 5 weekends.

In the second intake we had a registration of 24 and they formed into 3 small groups, largely regionally based. Life circumstances caused about 8 people to have to withdraw, but the three groups were able to continue. At the end of the six weekends, one of the groups decided not to continue, but the other two indicated that they intended to continue, as they had developed a good bond and really valued their time together. ~ *Jim Von Reisen*

Keeping On, Keeping On

By Joan Tessier

I started out with the first intake of Common Life at Calling Lakes Centre in Saskatchewan. The small group that I became a part of was from a wide geographical area. For this reason we met infrequently other than the six meetings at Calling Lakes. Even when we met in a more central location, we each had to drive at least two hours. Although we all enjoyed the group, got a lot out of it, and found it to be a great support, after the two years we folded.

Word from the Common Life Groups

I was then asked to be a part of the planning team for the second intake of Common Life. With 24 participants, three small groups were formed. I was still searching for a Common Life group to journey with so one of these groups very graciously took me in. This worked a bit better, but we were still spread out over a broad area with a 2-hour drive or more for most of us to a central location. We tried to keep in touch by email, designating a particular person to be in leadership until our next meeting. That seemed to work for awhile. Then, for various reasons, folks started dropping out and we are now down to three or four members. We would like to continue but we are four of the furthest from one another so time will tell what the future will hold for us.

I really found both Common Life groups to be a support, a challenge, and a source of comfort to me to know that there were others out there on the same journey that really cared about one another. I believe the program can only grow and mature as we learn from each other how things are being done in different places and incorporate or adapt some of those things to make ours even better.

I was honoured to be asked to lead the planning team for the third intake at Calling Lakes Centre. My planning team is in place – Laurie Sinclair and Craig Neely – and I am looking forward to another great two years of Common Life.



L to R: Bev Diduck, Joan Tessier, Esther Edmonds, Marj Mack, Janet Simpson and Craig Neely (operating camera) met in Saskatoon and worked with clay as they discussed their reading.

Naramata

In 2002, a group of ten people under the leadership of then staff person, Tim Scorer, launched into a two-year, six session, weekend residential Common Life experience. The group members were positive about the concept of Common Life but since they were so spread out geographically, chose not to continue formally after the initial pilot project. Naramata has offered subsequent discernment opportunities but has not received significant response. The Centre intends to continue in

the Common Life Community and to extend further invitations to potential participants. Andrew Church, Director of Naramata Centre participates in the four member Centre staff Common Life Community.

Personal Contribution

Common Life

Common life
Common links
Connecting with each other
In support, and love, and caring
As we share with one another
Our stories, our lives, ourselves
In safety
In the knowing
That we are accepted
For who we are,
For what we are
Challenged if we want to be challenged
Supported when we need to be supported
Gently held with tender care
When that is what we need
As we journey together
Laughing together in joyful triumphs
Crying together in painful times
Being in awe together
As we encounter the Holy
In our sharing
And in our caring

*~ Joan Tessier
February 17, 2003*



A Spirituality of Community

On Staying at the Table:

A Spirituality of Community

By Parker J. Palmer

GOD CALLS US to community, to a mutually supportive, empowering, and accountable life together. We know that from the Bible, we know it from Christian tradition, and we know it from the yearnings of our own hearts. Today, the heart's call to community is amplified by the practical need for community in our lives. In this time of dwindling resources, we need to share; in this time of dangerous social tensions, we need to cooperate and celebrate; in this time of political madness, we need to support each other's sanity.

... In this time of political madness, we need to support each other's sanity.

But what, exactly, does "community" mean to us? What is it that we are called to and looking for in the church (or in friendship or in the family)? If we cannot answer those questions we are in trouble. Without an accurate image of life together, we may settle for something that falls far short of community. Or we may fail to recognize community when we are in the midst of it – ignoring or even denying the gift when it comes.

So what does "community" mean? As a sociologist I might answer that question in a rational, objective way, listing the attributes of community in strict conformity to the best sociological theory. But I shall try to obey W.H. Auden's eleventh commandment, "Thou shalt not commit a social science," for the simple reason that our everyday dealings with community have little to do with reason and objectivity.

Our yearnings and our actions are shaped not by theories we carry in our minds but by images we carry in our hearts. If we

look deeply enough within ourselves, I think we will discover the images that shape our hopes for community. If we find (as I think we will) that these images are romantic, unrealistic, and doomed to defeat, we can look for other images that will help us stay open to the community that God continually offers us.

I believe there are two images of community rooted so deeply in our psyches that they might be called archetypes. As such they have a powerful impact on our lives, our attitudes, and our behavior. Both of them are found in the Bible, a document full of archetypal material so profoundly does it reach into human experience.

The first image of community is found in Genesis. This is the image of "the garden." Here community is portrayed as the harmonious, organic unity of all things. That is the way God created us before sin intervened: humans, beasts, vegetable and mineral life existing in oneness, in unity, in ecology of grace. And there are words in Genesis that describe the human experience in this communal garden. "They were naked and unashamed." The image of the garden and the possibility of living naked and unashamed – these resonate deep in the human soul and draw us toward the dream of community.

As we come into community we hope to find a harmony that is not available in the larger world.

As we come into community we hope to find a harmony that is not available in the larger world.

We hope that in community we can, at last, be naked – open and vulnerable to all the pains and failings of our lives – without ever having to feel shame about

who and how we are. This image from Genesis exerts a powerful influence on our expectations of what community is and can be. At least, that is true *in my own experience and the experience of many people I know.*

The second archetypal image of community is found in Revelations. This is the image of "the New Jerusalem," the city of God purified of all sin and sadness, made clean and holy by the action of grace. Here, too, the text offers key words to describe the personal meaning this image has for us: "And every tear shall be wiped away." The image of a holy city and the hope that our sorrows will meet with solace – these too, resonate deep in the human soul and draw us toward the dream of community.

Or so it has been with me and with many people I know. We came into community hoping to find a safer and more sacred city than the cities we had known. We came into community hoping that our sadness and struggle might be lifted, that the kingdom of God might arrive. The New Jerusalem, like the garden, has a profound, if unconscious, impact on our image of what community will be.

But the experience of community is nothing like the garden or the New Jerusalem. Not, at least, after the first few weeks! Many people experience an initial euphoria with the new marriage or the new friends or the new church. But soon "the honeymoon is over." Euphoria fades and dies. We begin to realize that all is not harmonious here; that it is not entirely safe to be naked with each other; that earth is not yet heavenly; that even if our old tears are wiped away there are new ones to be wept.

Articles on Community Life

As the euphoria dies, as our images of community crumble, several options open up to us. Some people simply abandon their hopes for community and return to isolation and individualism. But they go back to that condition with the added burden of disillusionment and cynicism; the community that once existed for them as a beckoning dream no longer exists at all. Other people choose to stay in community – sort of – but withdraw their hopes and enthusiasms and energies, eventually creating the kind of community that Revelations calls “lukewarm.” This is the condition of many of our churches, I think. People have dealt with their disillusionment by “sort of” staying in community with each other, but not at any depth of investment or risk.

Then there is a third option we might take following the death of euphoria, the crumbling of our utopian images. That is to keep on keeping on; to press deeper into the experience of disillusionment to see what it has to teach us; to abandon our romantic images of community and look for new images that have the power to explain what is happening and to help us deal creatively with it.

As I have attempted to choose this third option, I have realized something crucial about the images of “the garden” and “the New Jerusalem.” Both of them are images from outside of history. The image of the garden comes before history begins. The image of the New Jerusalem comes after history ends. This does not mean that they are irrelevant (as I shall show later). But it does mean that I must find an image of community that comes from the historical reality in which you and I live.

... Let us look to the Last Supper to teach us about the true nature of community.

Once again, the Bible provides the image. For between the garden and the New Jerusalem there is the story of God’s action in history, of God’s entry into history in the person of Jesus Christ, and of Christ gathering people into community – a story that reaches one of its high points in the experience of the Last Supper. So let us look to the Last Supper as an image of community in

history. Let us see what that image has to teach us about the true nature of community. Let us see what we can learn from the Last Supper about how to keep on keeping on.

I said that the story of Christ gathering people into community reaches one of its high points in the Last Supper. Perhaps I should have said “low points.” Here is Jesus who has been pouring out his life for the people seated around the table. Now he has brought them together in the universal rite of friendship, family, and hospitality – breaking bread together and passing the cup. And what do these people do? First, in response to Jesus’ claim that one of them will betray him, they deny that any such thing is possible: “Not us, Lord, not here, not in this nice church!” Having taken care of that little matter they move right along to an argument about who is the greatest among them! Blind to their own capacity for betrayal, and obsessed with power struggles, the disciples at the table act out two of the issues that make community life so painfully difficult, so unlike the garden or the New Jerusalem. As someone has suggested, they probably went on to quibble over who would pay the bill.

And what does Jesus do in the midst of all of this? Being fully human, he must have been tempted to get up and leave – just as you and I are when our romantic images of community fail. But Jesus does not leave. Instead, he keeps breaking the bread and passing the cup. Both here and in the rest of his story Jesus demonstrates his commitment to staying at the table.

If we are to follow Jesus Christ, we must try to stay at the table with our own communities

If we are to follow Jesus Christ, we must try to stay at the table with our own communities, in our own churches and elsewhere. This does not mean that there never come times when relationships must be judged failures, when meaning or healing are such distant hopes that we must make the agonizing decision to separate and move on. But too many of us make those decisions too quickly and easily, with too little provocation. We must learn that betrayal and conflict – and all the other demons that emerge when real community happens – are not necessarily

terminal but can provide openings into the deeper reaches of the spiritual life, into deeper relationship with one another and with God. That was true for the disciples as they journey on with Jesus, and that shall be true for us – if we will learn to stay at the table.

And how did Jesus manage to stay at the table? What was his “secret”? It was the same “secret” that Jesus taught throughout his ministry – put ultimate reliance not on yourself or on others but on God alone. Jesus was not shocked or undone by the dissolution of community that he saw at the Last Supper. He knew human nature, he knew our weakness, and the disciples only demonstrated what he already knew. But he knew something more. He knew that there is a God who is with us more fully than we are with each other, a God who will keep us together if we will only place our trust in God and not in our own togetherness.

... community is not so much a demonstration of heaven as it is a *via negativa* to God.

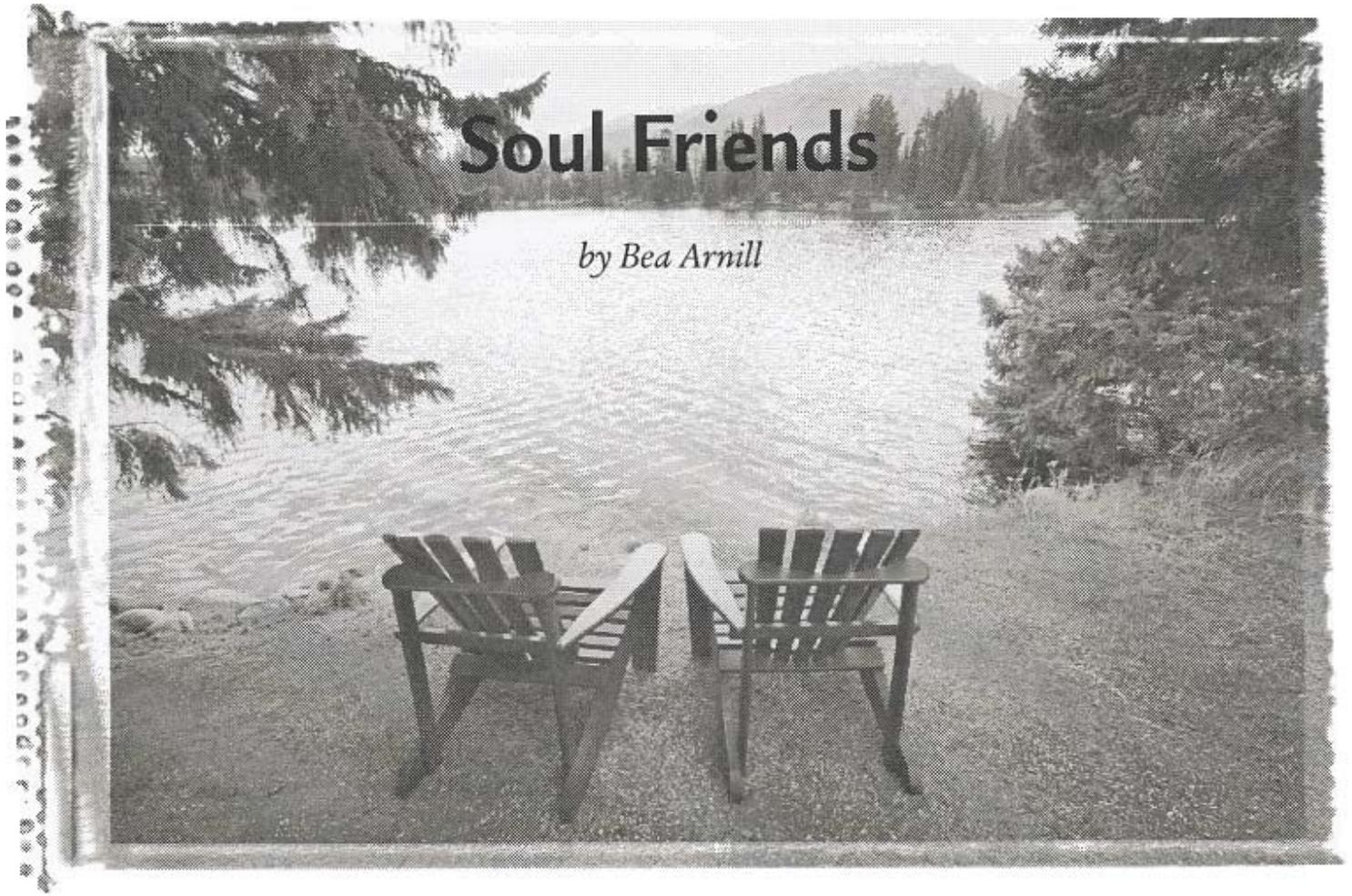
To put it as sharply as I know how, community is not so much a demonstration of heaven as it is a *via negativa* to God. We will always be disillusioned by community. But in the spiritual life disillusionment is a good thing: it means losing our illusions about ourselves and each other. As those illusions fall away we will be able to see reality and truth more clearly. And the truth is that we can rely on God to make community among us even – and especially – when our own efforts fail. By being willing to suffer the failings of community, we give ourselves the chance to draw closer to God. By entering and staying with community, we enroll in school of the Spirit where we learn about the Source that sustains our life together.

And here is the paradox: as we become disillusioned with community and more dependent upon God, we also become more available for true community with each other. But now we are different. Our eyes have been opened and we have no more romantic illusions. Seeing ourselves and each other clearly, yet seeing God’s

Continued on page 13

Articles on Community Life

A Common Life Community



Soul Friends

by Bea Arnill

An orange moon rises over Manitowaning Bay. The air is balmy for mid-September. Our campfire snaps and crackles. Pungent wood smoke rises in the air. We sit in a semicircle, firelight playing on our faces.

"Let's sing 'Fires Burning,'" suggests Amy. Our voices float out over the dark water. Between bursts of song and conversation...silence. A silence that draws us deeper into ourselves and closer to each other. Peace, one of the gifts of the Spirit, is present.

The group sitting around the fire is my Common Life group. We have been together for almost a year. Two of our members are missing. Trish is in the hospital. She is having an operation tomorrow. Ione is struggling with some issues and couldn't come. It is the first meeting where we can't all be present.

Usually we meet at Five Oaks, our education and retreat centre. Last spring we were discussing when to hold our next meeting.

"September sounds like a good time," said Paul.

"Oh, I'm still at my cottage on Manitoulin Island," I said, disappointment in my voice. A meeting in September would mean closing up my cottage early or making the long trip south and back up north.

"Then we'll hold our meeting at your cottage," said Gayle.

"Would you really?" I replied, delighted. They grinned and nodded. So it was in September that I stood on the dock at South Bay Mouth waving wildly as Amy's van disembarked from the ferry, loaded

with people, food, suitcases, books, and drums.

When it's time to douse the fire, we go back up to the cottage and decide to call Trish. We have composed a get-well song and sing it with vigour over the phone.

"You don't know what this means to me," she says, we can hear the tears in her voice.

"We will keep a candle lit for you all day tomorrow," says Joan.

We end the evening with a film that Des made in Scotland about religious communities.

The seeds for Common Life groups were sprouted at the national church's consultation for lay ministry in 1999. This meeting started training centres across the country talking about a lay discipleship program. Over the next couple of years,

Articles on Community Life

they would try to discern what God yearned for them to do. In January 2001, the directors and program staff members from the different centres (Tatamagouche Centre, PCTC-Calling Lakes Centre, Five Oaks, and Naramata Centre) met at Five Oaks.

Mardi Tindal, director of Five Oaks, explained: "We asked, 'What are the spiritual challenges?'"

Several areas were identified: yearning for a deeper prayer life; faith connected to action; retreats; more discipline and a framework for spiritual formation; support and resources for exploring the interior life. In September 2001, two people from each centre gathered to design a program, agree on a framework they could all share, and create a mission statement. The name Common Life came from a brainstorming session influenced by Micah 6:8: "...and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Common Life began with a vision of lay discipleship, but developed quickly into discipleship for the whole people of God. I have not been surprised by the large number of clergy, both ordained and commissioned, who are taking part. Ministry can be a lonely vocation. In my group of eight, we have seven who are clergy and one layperson who is active in leadership in her local church and beyond. Some of the clergy are retired, and some are still working.

Spirituality has an ethereal sound. I have learned in Common Life that spirituality is hard work. We do not stumble into the spiritual life accidentally or pop in as we are passing by. Everything is intentional. At the centre of any spiritual formation and growth is intentionality and commitment. I am committed to a certain number of meetings a year with my Common Life group and the larger community of seven groups. I have made a commitment to prayer and Bible study, to learning and growth, to using my resources faithfully, to engagement in justice and a commitment to community. In Common Life we hold each other accountable in love and kindness. Slowly, the spiritual insights unfold, the self-

knowledge grows, and we experience the presence of God.

I decide to canvass the long-suffering members of my group with two questions. The first question is "What do you find life-giving about Common Life?"

Everyone begins with the same answer: the people. They are honest, real, and down-to-earth. They admit to their struggles and failures. One person was amazed at the commitment of our members. Another was impressed with the work being done on the spiritual disciplines. Common Life is a place where you can share your questions and insights, even as you struggle for the words, knowing they will be honoured and held in respectful hands. Some of us have found this a place of healing.

We pray for each other on a regular basis. Prayer softens the heart, removes rivalries, and makes clear our priorities. "You can't dislike someone you pray for," comments one member wryly. Our relationships deepen and become spiritual. One member had thought of spirituality as an individual effort. "We need both mystery and knowing," he comments. "In Common Life, God becomes less abstract."

When God becomes less abstract and more concrete, we see the needs of God's creation more clearly. The wisdom and spiritual gifts embodied in this group are being called out to act in God's world.

The second question is "What do you find draining about Common Life?" For some, the intensity and depth of our guided learning is heavy and the tasks fatiguing. "It's something you don't do every day," comments one person. For those of us who are reflective, more downtime to reflect and integrate would be helpful. On the other hand, one member says that we dawdle, and he feels impatient that we don't take action. He realizes that we have to accommodate each other. Another feels guilty when she doesn't live up to her commitments.

There is a cost in belonging to Common Life. We spend our time, money, and effort in coming together. Some of us are dealing with little disposable income and must make changes and turn our anxieties

over to God. I find trust a difficult spiritual discipline, but in the end, one that is highly rewarding.

Candlelight flickers on the faces around a table laden with food and drink. It is January 2005, and we are meeting for the first time on our own as a Common Life group. Our task after supper is to find a name for ourselves. With much hilarity, we come up with suggestions, some of them quite outlandish. In the end we decide on Soul Friends. We will use *Anamchairde*, the Celtic translation of Soul Friends, in honour of the Iona Community in Scotland that has influenced our program. Nobody can pronounce it. That's okay. We know what it means.

Bea Arnill is a teacher; writer; and diaconal minister. Three years ago she retired from pastoral ministry and moved to Barrie, Ontario-delighted to be near her adult children and grandchildren, walking down the new roads that beckon.



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At the centre of any spiritual formation and growth is intentionality and commitment.

A Community of Nations?

What Are We Learning at Caledonia?

Reflections shared in a sermon on First Nations Sunday

by Ted Black, Balfour St. United Church, Brantford ON

What are we learning from the reclamation protest in Caledonia? What are we learning about ourselves? What are we learning about the First Nations? What are we learning that might help us to move closer to being the kind of just nation that we want to be?

To begin with what we might be learning about ourselves, I think we are seeing that when conflict comes close it can be really hard to keep emotions in check.

We in Canada enjoy a privileged place in this world. Most of the time when stories of ethnic tensions hit the news, they are stories from far away. We wonder in disbelief when we see the kind of rage that has sparked ethnic conflict in the Balkans, in the Middle East, in Africa, and more recently among Iraqi's. How can people who have lived beside each other for centuries suddenly turn on one another and become enemies?

This last little while, I have realized that we, in Canada, are not completely immune to such an out-of-control emotional outburst.

When somebody tells us that the land we put our life-savings into owning may not be ours, we immediately feel the emotional juices flowing! We feel attacked. And if a whole group of people starts to look like the enemy, it is hard not to start generalizing. It's not helpful, but, emotionally, we do start to link Muslim and terrorist, or Native and law-breaker. So even the innocent neighbour gets labeled as "the enemy."

Civil society is such a precious thing. And yet how vulnerable we are if we do not hold fast to the commitment to be together with respect, and without violence! When conflict comes close, emotions are raw. We need to recognize that. And we need to know how to act

responsibly whenever our emotions are threatening to take over.

It may be a matter of pausing, or stepping back. It may be a matter of reminding ourselves of our commitment to be with one another in peace. However we do it, we need to move out of that place where emotion is threatening to rule, and into that place where we can listen and reflect. In that quieter place we ask ourselves, What are we feeling? Do we know what underlies it? Can we find a way to put that in words that the other can understand?

I think the protests in Caledonia, and the fallout from them, have reminded us that this whole business of listening and reflecting takes work. And since letting emotions run amok is not the answer, we must sit down and listen to one another.

To the extent that we have done this, and are doing it, we are learning a story that many of us have been unfamiliar with. For it appears that most of us who live our lives along the Grand River are the beneficiaries of a whole series of historical injustices.

In 1784, the Crown purchased land from the Mississauga first nation in order to provide land for those of the Six Nations who were displaced from their traditional territory following the American Revolution. And so the Six Nations were granted what has become known as the Haldimand Tract – a 12-mile wide strip of land, from the mouth of the Grand to its source.

In 1795, about 10 years after the granting of the land, the Grand River area faced a particularly hard winter. There was famine in the valley. And so in order to get relief money, Joseph Brant sold off large blocks of land north of where the Nith River joins with the Grand – in other words north of Paris. Some blocks were also sold near the

mouth of the Grand – in the Dunnville area.

Later more land was surrendered, mostly in order to accommodate white settlers who had been living as squatters on Indian land. The surrender of the Brantford town plot in 1830 was made in the hope that this would resolve the problem of squatters in our area.

In 1841 the government of Canada arranged for a "General Surrender" of all the lands outside the present Six Nations reserve. It is not clear whether the Six Nations actually agreed to this surrender. It appears to have been a matter of dispute right from the beginning.

Here we are now 165 years later. Six Nations people are saying, as apparently they have been trying to say all along, "We weren't dealt with fairly, on the land issue. Land that we leased was sold. Land that we sold we did not get paid for. Money, for land that was paid for, was held in trust by the Government and we did not receive the promised benefit. And nearly all these deals were either one-sided, or forced upon our people."

We who hear this story today wonder, What do we do about it? It is such an old hurt. We can't go back. How do we go forward? With whom do we negotiate? Who negotiates for us? Are the Six Nations a nation separate from Canada, or part of it? The questions are numerous. At this point the answers seem few.

But the work has to go on. And I think a big part of the work is for all of us who call ourselves Canadians to work at the dream of what kind of country we want to become.

We have to ask, If our government settled with the native people, what then?

Articles on Community Life

Do we expect assimilation? Will there be a form of apartheid? What avenue is there other than these two distasteful options?

My sense is that we are being challenged to dialogue with all the multicultural groups in this country. We need to ask, of others and ourselves, “What do you need from Canadian society to maintain your cultural distinctiveness? And what respect are you willing to show this society that honours your distinctiveness?”

We need to find a multiculturalism that calls all people and peoples to a mutual recognition and respect. It will be a multiculturalism that finds richness in diversity, but also enjoys an underlying or overarching unity.

It may be that in such a nation we will not be without enemies, for there may unfortunately be those who will refuse to respect others. If need be, let these extremists be the enemy. If there has to be a divide let it be between peace loving people of all cultures and creeds, and those who would deny our common humanity.

Twenty years ago the United Church took a first step toward building a national community of mutual respect in partnership with our Native people. On behalf of the General Council, Moderator Bob Smith spoke these words of apology:

Long before my people journeyed to this land your people were here, and you received from your elders an understanding of creation, and of the Mystery that surrounds us all that was deep, and rich, and to be treasured.

We did not hear you when you shared your vision. In our zeal to tell you the good news of Jesus Christ we were closed to the value of your spirituality.

We confused western ways and culture with the depth and breadth and length and height of the gospel of Christ.

We imposed our civilization as a condition of accepting the gospel.

We tried to make you like us and in doing so we helped to destroy the vision that made you what you were. As a result, you, and we, are

poorer and the image of the Creator in us is twisted, blurred, and we are not what we are meant by God to be.

We ask you to forgive us and to walk together with us in the Spirit of Christ so that our peoples may be blessed and God's creation healed.

Two years later, the response of Native people within our church was this:

The Native people of the All Native Circle Conference hope and pray that the apology is not symbolic but that these are the words of action and sincerity. We appreciate the freedom for culture and religious expression. In the new spirit this apology has created, let us unite our hearts and minds in the wholeness of life that the Great Spirit has given us.

In this spirit, we need to be committed to the ongoing task of building the just society. We must keep our anxiety in check, listen to others' stories, and dream the new dream that we believe is God's dream.

Notes

1. The historical part of this reflection was based on information prepared by the Six Nations Council.

The reference to Joseph Brant and the famine of 1795 was found on a website for the City of Cambridge.

2. The statement “if there has to be a divide...” is based on a similar statement by Maude Barlow on page 272 of her book *Too Close for Comfort*.

On Staying at the Table

(continued from page 9)

continual healing presence among us, we can begin to experience the fruits of the Spirit with each other: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, and gentleness. The community we have yearned for is among us, in exactly the measure that we are able to discern God's presence in our midst.

If the Last Supper is the image of community in history, what is the role of those two images from beyond history – the garden and the New Jerusalem? Their role is crucial. I will even bet that Jesus had these images in mind as he sat at the Last Supper, and that they helped him to stay at the table.

The garden is an image of memory, one of the basic spiritual disciplines. The memory of the garden is a reminder of the fact that God created us in community, one and whole. It is from that ancient memory that our great yearning for community arises, the yearning to reclaim the wholeness we possessed before sin intervened. If we want to live in and for community, we must cultivate this sacred memory of our God-created state as a hedge against history's divisions.

The New Jerusalem, at the other end of history, is an image of hope, another of the basic spiritual disciplines. Our hope is not in our own good works, as important as they are, but in the fact that God is always working toward the building of heaven on earth. God does this work in the midst of our brokenness, and nowhere is that brokenness more evident than in our fragile and failed attempts to create community.

So let us live in community with the memory of the garden and the hope of the New Jerusalem – but also with the knowledge that we are joining with Jesus in the Last Supper; in the challenge to stay at the table. Let us live in community knowing that what God created whole and is bringing back together no human power can ultimately put asunder.

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A Community of Birds

The Purple Martin House

By Henk Dykman

The “Tent Dwellers” have donated a purple martin house to Five Oaks. Peggy Simmons’ husband, Val, constructed it. He retired from farming a couple of years ago and offered to construct a 14 compartment nest box in the shape of a miniature farm barn. He did a great job and Tom, the caretaker of Five Oaks put it on a pole (with the help of a few volunteers) in the area between the retreat house and the swimming pool, north of the parking lot.

So all is ready, but what about those large swallows, the martins? When will they move in? Some of us may have noticed that it’s not uncommon to see martin houses, but usually they are empty or being used by other birds, mostly starlings. How can we try to actually get martins to use the Five Oaks “home”?

Let me share with you my own experience with those birds. When I moved as a newly ordained clergy person to Reston in Manitoba to minister in the Reston-Pipestone Pastoral Charge, I acquired a fascinating neighbor. I deeply regret having forgotten his name by now. He was a retired tailor but also a kind of “renaissance” man with many talents. He took me to the Reston park, which he had designed and landscaped. In the middle of this memorial park stood a cenotaph for the fallen of the wars. The rest of the park was divided into four quarters. In one, among some ash trees, stood a handsome martin house. But only one pair of martins was nesting in it. It had been left up there without cleaning and English sparrows had filled the compartments with hay, which was sticking out of most entrance holes. The elderly tailor looked at me expectantly, hoping I would voluntarily take on the job of cleaning and fixing that box. I told him I would think about it, but later I decided that if I was to take care of these martins, which were new and fascinating to me, I would much prefer to

be able to see and hear them from my home.

I began by nailing to the outside of the second storey sunroom of our large manse a three-compartment nest box. I did that early in August and to my great surprise a handful of the loud and boisterous large swallows arrived soon after and swarmed around the box for a few days, then left. The manse committee gently indicated to me that it was not proper to nail ugly things to the manse, certainly not without consultation. So I took that box down again, made a proper 16 compartment house and put that up in spring, in between manse and church. Great success! Martins soon arrived. But to my disappointment, they kept on flying around, going in and out once in a while, but not nesting. I consulted my friend, the retired tailor. He told me that those were immature one year olds, who were not yet ready for raising a family, but who probably would come back a year later. In the meantime sparrows and blackbirds

arrived, happy with the chance to nest. I made a few adjustments, so I could swivel the box up and down and clean it out regularly. So that first summer passed, the martins visiting now and then, with another group of fledglings coming by in the middle of August. At the end of that month I took the box down again and stored it for the winter.

The next spring it worked. I did not raise the box until I heard martins calling early on a warm day in the beginning of May. A few pairs moved in and after only a few “swivels” the sparrows and blackbirds did not come back, while some of the martins stayed and began to raise their families. The third season, those large swallows used most of the compartments, the air ringing with their melodious calling.

So, at Five Oaks I expect there will be a few martin visitors in August this year, a few more next season and some nesting pairs in 2008, if all goes well. In the meantime, swivelling and cleaning will need to be done somewhat regularly, especially if starlings start moving in. I did not have to cope with those birds in Reston. Hopefully they can be discouraged as easily as the blackbirds in Manitoba.



General News from the Centres

Five Oaks

Annual CLC Retreat

Alexandra Caverly-Lowry led our well-attended and appreciated annual retreat. As is her talent, she encouraged participants to engage with the wisdom of our bodies. Here are a couple of quotes that were thought-provoking.

It is the body that is 'donum,' the given. Soul, spirit, God and theology are the questions, not the starting points. The question is not what theology from a superior vantage point has to say about the body but rather what the body has to say about theology. John Y. Fenton (Theology and Body, 1974)

If you set a person in motion they will heal themselves.
Gabrielle Roth (Maps to Ecstasy, 1989)

Since much of what we did was bodywork, the effects are wordless! However, our hard work in the gardens produced obvious concrete and beautiful results.

Groups valued the time to reflect on our commitment to the disciplines/practices and to begin to discern our futures.

Sustained Action for Justice

By Mardi Tindal, July 28, 2006

I remember debates during the early formation of Common Life about how to frame this discipline. Should it be 'action for justice' or '*sustained* action for justice'?

I'd forgotten about those until recently. But since March, the significance of the word *sustained* has taken on greater meaning for me. The most meaningful relationships are *sustained* relationships. So if you're in relationship with those who are experiencing personal and communal injustice, you are inevitably drawn into *sustained* action for justice.

March brought with it a generous invitation from New Credit-Chapel of the Delaware pastoral charge to a friendly Seder meal on the New Credit reserve. These dedicated folks had prepared a delicious turkey dinner beyond compare – as a fundraising dinner for Five Oaks!

That evening I asked George Montour how the Plank Road land claim process was going (you may know it as the Douglas Creek Estates dispute in Caledonia). George led a program at Five Oaks last October (2005) about land claims throughout the stretch of the Haldimand Tract, six miles on either side of the length of the Grand River. George was kind enough to take time again that evening and provide me with up-to-date documentation about this particular claim and spoke with hope about how investing in greater understanding would lead to positive results for all.

Shortly after that, violence erupted at the protest site with the OPP's action to clear the protesters. I then accepted an invitation to lead the prayers of the people within the Sunday Service, back at New Credit.

Since our shared Seder meal, we've been back and forth many times, as Five Oaks staff and program participants; guests and board members, listening and learning. Because we are in *sustained* relationship, we are committed to *sustained* action.

It's not as if this had been our plan. In fact, I don't think I would have chosen such an uncomfortable route. Sending letters to government leaders about causes on the other side of the world are an important part of my Common Life practice. But standing in the midst of angry young men in Caledonia as they wave Canadian flags and racist posters at those on the other side of a road blockade, and speaking face to face with my Member of Parliament the next morning about the urgent need for political leadership to prevent violence, weren't what I imagined when I signed up for *sustained* action for justice. But these are the places into which we are drawn when we have committed ourselves to such discipline and to such relationship. When one is in relationship, face to face, visit after visit, with neighbours and friends whose rights have been ignored, and one professes to be committed to a disciplined common life, there is little choice.

The choice is particularly clear when requests for support come as they have, for example on the afternoon of April 29th. Darrell Doxtedor, Senior Political Advisor to Six Nations Chief Dave



During the Five Oaks annual retreat, folks engage in a "joyful activity" in the afternoon. BJ Klassen (above) does the joyful activity of sweeping the patio.

General News from the Centres

General, had phoned local clergy to see if any would be willing to be a prayerful, peaceful presence that night on the Caledonia side of the barricade. The police had received an anonymous note saying that “something was going to happen” that evening. Darrell’s study of the civil rights movement, he told us that evening, had led him to believe that the presence of church leaders would reduce the likelihood of violence. So that’s why I was in the midst of angry young men. Until that evening, the sight of our flag waving had always instilled a good feeling. That night it was being used as a symbol of aggression.

Eight of us met Darrell in the midst of about 500 people from the town and about 150 OPP officers. The police were clearly anxious that something might happen and we moved through the crowd with clerical collars and large crosses around our necks, introducing ourselves and our purpose to appreciative police and fending off the media swarm which tried so hard to get more out of us than “We are here to be a prayerful, peaceful presence” with questions like, “Does that mean you’re expecting violence?”

Fortunately, nothing happened that evening. Or did it? The following day, Darrell sent this message by email:

All too often, when listening to the news, we may wonder what difference could have been made “if only...”

“If only” someone stood up and said something.

“If only” someone asked for help.

“If only” someone responded.

Today, when listening to the news, the media reported that “nothing happened” last night. However, those who were there knew another story.

It is because of Common Life that one takes such steps and responds in these ways, and it is also because of Common Life that one is sustained and held up through it all. Knowing that we pray for one another daily is a powerful reminder that we are all held in God’s dream for justice – and while that is a place of peace, it is not a place of comfort.

It will be interesting to see what further blessings and demands these relationships bear in the months to come. Much of what we do at the Centre prepares others for sustained action wherever they are planted “to discern and do God’s healing work”. As a Centre, we are planted on the bank of the Grand River. We will keep on listening and responding in order to see what God’s healing work will look like here, because we are committed to sustained relationships.

The Joy of Engaging in Justice

By Pam Byers of the Shekhinah Seekers

On July 14th a two-year dream became a reality. Seventeen women who live with the burden of poverty but volunteer their time and energy to the Hope Centre in Welland, and two Hope Center staff members were treated to a Women’s Wellness Weekend at Five Oaks. The bulk of the cost of the weekend was covered by the Niagara Presbytery Extension Council, Niagara UCW women and the Sisters of St. Joseph in London. In



Women enjoying the luxury of a hand massage (Photo: Pam Byers)

addition, ten women volunteered their time and talents, providing massages and Reike treatments; Tai Chi and aerobic exercise leadership (both on land and in the water); hair cuts; manicures and pedicures; t-shirt painting; spiritual nurture (including a labyrinth walk); and just plain fun and friendship. Also, the women were invited to take part in the Five Oaks chapel prayer times, and on Friday evening two native women (previous Women’s Wellness attendees) talked to them about their traditional medicines and spirituality.

All three days, despite the heat, humidity and accompanying bugs, the Hope Centre women delighted in the quiet beauty of Five Oaks, the refreshing waters of the pool, the shady resting places, and the abundance of healthy food and tasty treats proved by the kitchen staff. A long-standing tension among a few women travelled with us to the weekend but even some relief from it was realized in quiet conversations and walks. For many of the women it was a transforming event. It gave me great joy to see them relax, laugh, feel pampered, develop deeper friendships with each other, and hear them speak of a rekindling of their faith or the lifting of an emotional burden that had troubled them for some time.

I learned about this Women’s Wellness Weekend offered by Five Oaks when I was doing my student placement work there two years ago. Mardi, my Learning Facilitator at the time, encouraged me to seek funding for a weekend for my Hope Centre friends and I was thrilled when Niagara Presbytery readily agreed to support it. I feel a great sense of joy to be able to do ministry with people who know the meaning of life-giving justice and who readily and enthusiastically support each other in their efforts.

I dropped into the Hope Centre the morning after our retreat week-end and was not surprised to see a number of the women already back at their volunteer jobs providing drinks and snacks, preparing the noon meal, answering the phone or handing out emergency groceries. Others were hard at work attending to

General News from the Centres

their studies in the class room. The two staff members who had experienced the weekend were also deeply involved in the pile of daily tasks facing them. Each woman greeted me with a broad smile and several showed off the t-shirts they were wearing that had been donated to Women's Wellness by another woman's group. These women from the Hope Centre now carry in their hearts the knowledge that many other women (and men as well) care about them and want them to experience the abundant life offered us all by God. And I carry a deep joy knowing I can be a conduit for God's transforming grace.

Every year Five Oaks seeks out sources of funding and talent to make retreats for marginalized people possible. In 2006, four were held, three for women (including sex trade workers trying to leave the street) and one for men. Your Common Life group might want to consider supporting one of these retreats in some way. Or, invite your congregation to do so. Or, recommend sources of funding for Five Oaks to pursue.

Labyrinth Dedicated

Gailand MacQueen, author of, *The Spirituality of Mazes and Labyrinths*, and Joyce MacQueen led a group of sixty people through a labyrinth experience and a dedication of an eleven-circuit brick and sod labyrinth and a seven-circuit wheelchair accessible labyrinth painted on asphalt. Participants enjoyed walking the labyrinth in candlelight under a royal blue summer solstice sky. These labyrinths offer opportunity to Common Life Groups meeting at Five Oaks "to travel and trust a path together."



The labyrinth: an opportunity to travel and trust a path together.

A Sad Loss

Diane Hunt, spouse of Tom Hunt, our maintenance coordinator, died in late May. She was much beloved by her personal family and her "Five Oaks family." May our prayers be with Tom, his two daughters, their partners and the five grandchildren.

Resource Materials

A Ritual of Endings and Beginnings

By Nancy Hardy

Nancy wrote this ritual for the Free Spirits group, Five Oaks. Groups that are recommitting to community in their Common Life group could use this ritual. You will note that there is also a place in which to acknowledge the loss of a member.

Leader One: Let us reflect on our life together, remembering the presence of our God who is with us and who understands our experience of community.

Scripture: Mark 6:6b-13

We have travelled together as disciples of Christ over the past two years. Sometimes the way has been clear; sometimes the light has been dim on the road. But we have been together, and we have grown together. And now we look ahead to a new chapter. [*We also feel sadness at losingwhose friendship we have cherished and who will be sorely missed.*] Let us reflect in silence.

(silence)

Sing #647 – "Travel On" - verses 1,2

Leader Two: Scripture: Isaiah 65: 17-22

One: We give thanks for what we have been as a group, and we look forward to new possibilities for the future, however that may look for all of us. So let us pray.

Prayer of Thanks:

God of the inward journey,
We give you thanks for the life we have had together.
For insights shared and horizons widened,
For pain and triumph, tears and laughter,
For loving support in a safe place.
We are grateful.

Spirit of challenge and justice,
We pray for the world around us.
For those who pray for bread and justice,
And those who have lost the energy and heart to pray.
For those who long for an end to their oppression
And those who work with them to bring hope to their lives.
Especially today we pray for

God of patience and persistence,
Remind us that on our journey, we are not alone.
Help us remember that we follow a risen Christ
who became a servant and calls us to do the same.
Whatever the days ahead may bring,
Grant that we might find joy in your love and peace. Amen.

Sing #595 – "We Are Pilgrims"

Blessing

Resource Materials

Five Oaks Pilgrimage

By Nancy Hardy

This is the text of resource material provided for people who walk the Five Oaks Pilgrimage. It is hoped that these words will inspire others to create a pilgrimage on their own holy land, adapting these words as appropriate.

“This is a thin place.” These are the words of George MacLeod, the man responsible for founding the Iona Community in Scotland and rebuilding the Iona Abbey between 1938 and the mid 1960’s. The Isle of Iona is considered a “thin” place, where the boundary between the spiritual and material is especially transparent. It must have been very moving to hear him apply this expression to Five Oaks. Bev Oaten, first director, was deeply influenced by Iona, and had invited George MacLeod to visit Five Oaks and give him advice for this new venture in Canada.

Every Tuesday on the Island of Iona, visitors are invited on a guided pilgrimage around the island. Following in the tradition of Iona, Five Oaks has developed a pilgrimage on this 116 acre site. This booklet points us to four meditation sites, and our hope is to develop others throughout the property. May this pilgrimage walk invite you to reflect on the significance of each site and the connection with your life and with God’s world.

Memorial Fountain

We begin at the Memorial Fountain and Meditation Centre at the patio off New Hall (at the back of The House of the Interpreter).

There has been a fountain here since the early days of Five Oaks, but the area really came into its own when it was developed in 1971 by many volunteers into a meditation site in memory of the Rev. Bev Oaten, first director of Five Oaks.

Bev always liked rocks. In the right side of the fireplace of the Upper Room, you can see stones that he collected from Iona and Kirkridge – centres that served as mentors to Five Oaks – and from our three companion centres in The United Church of Canada – Naramata, Prairie Christian Training Centre, and Atlantic Christian Training Centre. Rumour has it that he somehow managed to get a stone from the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa to place in the fireplace of the Rideau Room in the Chalet! The rocks in this fountain came from a farm in Troy, Ontario. They have a pink cast like the granite of Muskoka, an area he loved.

Bev believed strongly that worship and work are one: that faith must be put into practice in the world. He was keen to call the Centre – Five Oaks Christian Workers Centre – because he felt such a place should exist to help people live their faith in their work, their homes and their church. For him, meditation at a place like this was not withdrawal from life but rather a way of engaging more deeply with it.

When Bev was director of Five Oaks, a bell sounded five times a day and was followed by the reading of these words from Psalm 90.

Let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us and establish thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish thou it.

It is a great blessing when we have work, however modest or great, that contributes to God’s work of healing broken bodies, hearts and relationships and creating beauty in the world. The construction of this fountain area was done with a sense of reverence for Bev Oaten and the work God accomplished through him.

Think about the daily work of your life. Do you ever have a sense of worship or sacredness as you go about your routines and activities?

Remember many people in our world who labour in locked sweat shops for subsistence wages. Remember also those who are driven to working long hours to make exorbitant profits, those who struggle at jobs they hate, and those who struggle or search for any job at all. May we “picket and pray” so they may have meaningful work and fair remuneration.

This meditation centre contains the work of creation – rocks, water, trees, air, light – and the work of many human hands. The plaque placed at this centre will invite you to reflect on the significance of work in God’s world.

The First Nations people sometimes call the rocks their ancestors. Celtic spirituality asserts that everything in creation is “of God.” The presence of God, like a shimmering thread, is woven through every aspect of creation. In scripture, God is described as a rock and Jesus as a foundation stone.

Who or what has been like a rock in your life – in good times and bad? What might rocks or stones represent in your life?

From the centrally placed fountain extend four flag stone paths. The paths, including the four breaks in the hedge, signify the cross, but they also represent the four directions, important in native spirituality. Native spirituality retreats have been held continuously at Five Oaks over its history. You might want to pause at each opening of the hedge and reflect on the meaning of each direction for you and the resources you receive from each. Or the meaning of the cross in your life.

Now we go down the steps and the road to the lower campus. Near the river, you will find four benches which form a pattern for our walking prayers.

The Prayer Space

Time and space for prayer have always been important at Five Oaks, from Bev Oaten’s calls to prayer, to the present community prayer times held in the chapel three times each day.

Resource Materials

For many years, the Lowville Prayer Centre held its retreats and workshops in the Retreat House on the hill, and when their formal ministry reached a time of closure, their memorial funds were given to Five Oaks to create a labyrinth. Following a period of prayerful discernment, the Five Oaks Board decided to create two labyrinths – an eleven circuit one in this space, and a seven circuit wheel chair accessible one on the tennis courts. For now, rocks and benches have been placed to help us pray the four directions.

The benches have been placed here in honour of Yvonne Stewart, director of Five Oaks from 1994 to her retirement in December, 2003. In many ways, they form a locus for the renewed spirituality and energy she brought to Five Oaks.

There are many ways to walk and pray as a spiritual exercise. Here is one, developed by John Buttars of Harcourt Memorial United Church in Guelph, and a Five Oaks volunteer associate.

Praying the Four Directions in the Form of a Cross

On a silent retreat in the mid to late 1990's, I found myself in an unplanned walking prayer that was a combination of the story of Jesus' passion and resurrection. I prayed the four directions out of the Native tradition and with the Celtic walking prayer. It was as if the cross of Jesus was on the ground and I was walking it in a north, south, west and easterly direction. As in the Celtic tradition, I found myself turning usually to the right, in the direction of the sun's movement across the sky. The words attached to the four directions and the emotion with which they are inwardly expressed slowly evolved and have changed over the years.

I have sometimes thought that if I were ever to suffer from dementia, I would be rooted once again, if a caregiver would walk these directions with me. For me, the prayer allows me to both rehearse a significant part of the story of Jesus and wed it to the created order of nature and human activity.

Placing myself in the centre of the vertical and horizontal beams of the cross and facing east

Bless to me, O God, the earth beneath my feet.
Bless to me, O God, the path whereon I go.
Bless to me, O God, the people whom I meet.

Bless, O God, the earth beneath my feet.
Bless, O God, the path whereon I go.
Bless, O God, the people whom I meet.

Turning to the right, a three-quarter turn, facing north and upon walking north along the 'horizontal beam of the cross:'

I walk to the north, arms outstretched to all peoples and all things.

You are the creator of all things and of all peoples.
It is in you that we live and move and have our being.
Praise to you, O God, praise belongs to you, source and goal of all that is.

Turning to the south half a turn and upon walking south to the other end of the 'horizontal cross beam:'

And I walk to the south, arms outstretched to all peoples and all things.

You are the creator of all things and of all peoples.
It is in you that we live and move and have our being.
Praise to you, O God, praise belongs to you, source and goal of all that is.

Returning to the centre, facing west and upon walking west along the 'vertical cross beam,' possibly the longest part of the cross:

And I walk to the west, arms outstretched to all peoples and all things.

You are the creator of all things and of all peoples.
It is in you that we live and move and have our being.
Praise to you, O God, praise belongs to you, source and goal of all that is.

And it is to the west that I walk, the region of darkness, the setting of the sun, to the ending of this day.
I walk to the death of Jesus, to all the deaths we have endured these past days/weeks, and to my own death
But you are a God who brings good out of evil, life out of death, joy out of sorrow, warmth out of the cold ashes of despair and defeat.
Praise to you, O God, praise belongs to you.

Returning to the centre and then walking to the eastern extremity of the 'vertical cross beam:'

And I walk to the east, arms outstretched to all peoples and all things.

You are the creator of all things and of all peoples.
It is in you that we live and move and have our being.
Praise to you, O God, praise belongs to you, source and goal of all that is.

And it is to the east that I walk, to the region of light, to the rising of the sun, to the resurrection of Jesus, to a place of resurrection for me and all peoples and all things, to a new heaven and a new earth.
For you indeed are a God who brings good out of evil, life out of death, joy out of sorrow, warmth out of the cold ashes of despair and defeat.
Praise to you, O God, praise belongs to you.

Returning to the centre and ending the prayer as it began

Bless to me, O God, the earth beneath my feet.
Bless to me, O God, the path whereon I go,
Bless to me, O God, the people whom I meet.

Bless, O God, the earth beneath my feet.
Bless, O God, the path whereon I go.
Bless, O God, the people whom I meet.

The next site is a short walk away close to the dam and where the river meets the creek.

Meditation Bench

People who come to Five Oaks often say that this is a place where they have a special feeling – a sense of peace – or comfort – or strength. In Celtic and Native spirituality, the meeting of

Resource Materials

two waters is considered a sacred place – symbolic of a meeting of two worlds.

The words on the plaque at this site invite you to reflect on the meeting of these two worlds and on the power of water in your life and the world.

The Camlachie congregation, near Sarnia in London Conference, wanted to honour the ministry of the Rev. Don Robinson who was retiring and coming to live as chaplain in residence at Five Oaks. They decided to create a meditation site and chose to locate it at the most sacred spot on the property – at the confluence of Whiteman's Creek and the Grand River – to show how much they honoured his work.

Listen to the flowing water and enjoy the beauty of the view. Feel the “thinness” of the boundary between the spiritual and material world.

Scripture mentions water many times. In Genesis, we read of the power of God moving across the face of the waters; in John's gospel, Jesus offers the Samaritan woman the “water of life.” In Christian baptism, water cleanses and transforms.

Water can be sacred, healing and life giving. It can also be dangerous and life threatening. As we sit here, reflect on your own experiences of water – frightening ones and comforting ones.

Throughout history, water has been a source of political tension and even war. It continues to be today – between nations and also between corporate needs for profit and the basic needs of citizens for clean, adequate water supply. Every day, millions of women and children walk miles to find water for drinking and cooking.

Thus we are calmed yet challenged as we sit by the water's edge.

*For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of the jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.*

Isaiah 35: 5 – 7

Sing: “I've Got Peace Like A River” (VU #577)

Lastly, walk along the road, go behind the craft cabin to the entrance to the trail and walk a short distance.

Woodland Meditation Centre

Near this place, dedicated workers built an outdoor chapel in the early 1950's, complete with a trickling fountain. Many meaningful times of worship and life changing events took place there, but eventually, time and severe weather eroded the chapel. Many years later, Janet and Lloyd Holland were inspired to maintain a connection with the chapel of the past, yet create something different.

The plaque at this site tells you about their experience.

Janet and Lloyd Holland were married in the former Woodland Chapel in 1961. They have both been faithful volunteers at Five Oaks. In 1999, they decided to create a new “chapel” in the form of a meditation centre. They cleared the land and removed a few dead trees, preserving the ferns they planted so many years ago. The nurse tree remains so that those seeking quiet here can see new life rising from the fallen trunk.

In the Bible, there are stories of the Hebrew people or individuals like Jacob building stone cairns to remind them that this was a place where they had encountered God.

Have you ever had a desire to honour a place or relationship or experience that was meaningful in your life? How might you do that or how did you do that?

The chapel also invited you to reflect on “holy ground.”

Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground. Exodus 3:5

Woodland Meditation Centre has been a place of worship, celebration, prayer and meditation for many years. Here, vows have been made and joy expressed. Here, the sorrows of life and of the world have been held out to the One who comforts and disturbs.

We need times of solitude and silence and of celebration and community to strengthen us to respond to the challenges of each day. Through scripture, through creation, and through one another, we can experience the mystery of God that is at the heart of our being.

*Bless to us, O God,
the earth beneath our feet.
Bless to us, O God,
the path whereon we go.
Bless to us, O God,
the people whom we meet.
O God of all gods
Bless to us our lives.*

You are welcome to stay and meditate here.

This space is a reminder that there is room for your contribution to this Common Life Newsletter. We will be putting the next issue together over the fall and so please send us your news, photos, reflections, challenges. Help the Spirit to inspire our country-wide community.