



# THE PORCH

ISSUE 12

A SLOW CONVERSATION ABOUT BEAUTIFUL  
AND DIFFICULT THINGS



# Welcome to *The Porch*

When folks say "Now, more than ever", I wonder.

These days, I'm (sometimes) experiencing my own anger at the harm being done in the world as an energy for courageous light and boundary-holding, but I feel that what we are called to just now is something like Jesus in The Grand Inquisitor section of *The Brothers Karamazov* - neither suicidal/martyr melodrama nor revolutionary violence of the overthrower, but a kind of holy stand-your-ground: speak the truth, speak peace, speak prophetic rage to be sure, but don't lose our sense of ourselves as gorgeous creatures made to be delighted in and to delight in the universe. And then keep walking.

In other words: **to take life seriously but not take ourselves too seriously**. To neither understate nor overstate the importance of the present moment: not *now, more than ever*, but perhaps *for such a time as this*. It's just a moment, but it's **our** moment, and we are privileged to do some work, take some risks, but also play well, for what God made us to do is to live fully, not to despair, and to know with Moses that we may only see slightly over the mountain in front of us, but that we can also look back and see how far we have come.

"The more people hate an enemy for the violence they believe he will inflict on them, the more they will behave in such a way as to incite violence. The more they fear war to be imminent, the more they will act in such a way as to bring war about. Rather than being self-refuting, then, prophecies of violence and war tend to be self-fulfilling. This is a secret well-known to political leaders. When

they want war, one of the actions they take is to present war as inevitable. The more inevitable a war is perceived to be, the more inevitable it becomes. Preparations for battle create their own momentum, and any leader who might want to stand in the way will have a daunting task. It is always easier to provoke violence than to prevent it." - *Mark Anspach, Vengeance in Reverse*

There are lots of ways to prevent violence, lots of ways to repair its consequences, lots of ways to build beloved community. In a polarized society there may be no more effective violence prevention measure than building bridges, or at least none more accessible. Get to know at least one person who votes differently. It's not necessarily easy. But it is necessary. And the history of conflict transformation proves it works. Start with the person of different political views with whom you feel most comfortable. Just get to know each other. This is the work.

Welcome to The Porch.

*Gareth Higgins*

Editor

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That summer night as the Rann children's mission  
Drew to a close, the preacher shared the tale of one young man,  
- Saved when a boy - who walked the Mayo roads  
And preached God's Word to the Romanists,  
No bitterness in his heart just love for lost mankind.  
At 21, he headed on to help evangelise America,  
Asleep in steerage on that April night when a huge  
Atlantic billow crashed through the riven hold.  
What greater evidence did boys and girls all need  
Of a brave lad still on fire for Christ though tragedy  
Loomed than the word of a shivering survivor  
On the deck of the Carpathia who saw a preacher boy  
Stand still on the tilting deck, an open Bible in his hand,  
Who yelled - 'Get the unsaved into the lifeboats first!  
If you are a child of God you need not fear the waves!'  
Another lady, saved from the deep, would speak  
In later years with fading memory of how she'd watched  
From a jam-packed lifeboat a young man cling  
To a spar while floating by with pillows, handbags,  
Walking sticks, the linen and the half-drowned human forms –

'Sisters, brothers, heed my call! Get right with Christ!

Don't trust in anyone else to stay above the waves!

When Belfast's pride and joy had slipped beneath the waterline

She heard that Ulster voice pipe up again then fade.

The preacher stopped - we sat there thunderstruck

While lemonade and bags of buns were handed out,

And a call went up for boys and girls who'd 'like to give

Their hearts to Christ tonight' to simply raise one hand.

I slipped out, faint, when a final hymn struck up and told

The adult on the door my mother wanted me at home.

I walked the laneway un-convinced, as still I have to be,

That what I stood upon back then was solid ground.

## *Your Story is Not Over* - Nancy Hastings Sehested

“Chap, you got a minute?” Dozens of inmates passed through the corridor around us but Slate just looked at his watch. Sixty seconds passed. “That’s it,” he said. “You gave me a minute. I’m eternally grateful for your time.” He smiled as he joined the flow of inmates on their way to work. I watched them walk away and thought about Slate, this man who’d barely known a second of peace in his life, starting with being choke-chained in an attic for being a recalcitrant six-year-old.

As a chaplain in a maximum-security prison, I imagined asking for a minute to greet incoming prisoners. I wanted to stand at the receiving dock with the words: *Welcome. The cruelty and abuse that has been done to you or that you have done to yourself or others...it stops here. Here we practice a new way of being human together. Here we stop blaming. Here we practice taking responsibility for your life, and we practice respect for yourself and others. Your story is not over. Change is possible. God is here. Peace to you. Come on in.*

Yet the prison system was a monumental hindrance toward the restoration of lives. The gravitational pull from social and personal patterns of behavior was fierce.

I grew up afraid of wasps and scorpions, but in my own home, I never experienced anything but safety. I was never afraid that my parents would slam me against a wall, beat me with a bat, or chain me to a fence. I didn’t fear the darkness of a bedroom with marauding molesters. I never imagined that I might die by a gun or a knife. I didn’t worry about being belittled or abused from parents who were drugged or drunk. I didn’t know anyone who dropped out of school or ended up in prison. My neighborhoods weren’t raided by law

enforcement. I wasn't targeted for suspicion or arrest because of my skin color. I didn't experience the daily traumas of addiction or mental illness.

Working in prison, I came to see that when the main thoroughfares of society were blocked to the inmates, they found detours and pathways of survival, sometimes making the only choice that seemed available to them. But I also held hope that their self-defeating and abusive choices could be exchanged for good and redeeming ones.

Nevertheless, the best of intentions can be swept out to sea in the undertows of despairing times. I lost hope for a while. I retraced my steps to find it. Did I lose it in the hospital room when I visited an officer whose jaw had been dislocated by an inmate? Or was it the day I fled from my visits to solitary confinement because the smell of feces smeared on a cell wall made me nauseous? Was it the conversation with the inmate in four-point restraints because the staff had grown tired of his verbal tirades? Was it that incident when the medical team valiantly treated the inmate whose neck had been slashed open by an inmate I'd previously considered non-violent? Or maybe it was the time I led a workshop for a regional staff meeting on the topic, *How to Treat an Inmate like a Human Being* and no one came.

Some staff said, "I don't want to know their crime. It might change the way I treat them." But I wanted to know their crime because it might change the way I *understood* them. Their crime was part of them and an honest avenue toward healing. As a chaplain I had a unique relationship that allowed me to enter into their lives. I wanted to hear the stories they rarely told, the ones that were not rote and reeled off to every case manager, court-appointed attorney, or administrator. I wanted to know when they knew they mattered to someone, and someone mattered to them. I asked for stories of their heroes, their hopes, their



joys. Together we sifted through the ruins to find what remained for beginning again.

“We’ve got the mark of Cain, and we’ll never be rid of it,” was the lament of some inmates, sure that it symbolized shame, failure and banishment. But rather than a curse for killing his brother Abel, Cain was given a sign of protection from God against the vengeance of others. It was a mark for life, not death. It was the mercy mark.

Mercy. It was my one-word prayer, the plea I found myself saying daily, repeatedly, in a kind of pray-without-ceasing kind of way. Sometimes I said the word audibly. Mostly it was my inner cry.

Mercy is not going soft on crime. It doesn’t flinch from our cruelties and deceptions. It doesn’t avoid looking at the constellation of people still suffering the aftermath of crimes, from grieving parents, to bewildered children, to surviving victims, to a wounded community. The miracle of mercy is that it can be clear-eyed to our hatreds and horrors, but still interrupt our ceaseless rounds of retaliation and vengeance.

Mercy is not mercy if it is given to those who deserve it. Mercy is an opening into the possibility for transformation. It can carry the full weight of our failings. It is a holy gift that can enable us to begin again. It seeks the healing of the wounds for victims, perpetrators and community alike.

Luke walked through a doorway of mercy, and discovered a blessing of hope and purpose for himself. He found his part in the work of mercy and became a “bless-er.” I often reminded the inmates that they had the power to curse or to bless. Luke decided God wanted him to bless others as a way to make amends for the harm he had caused in his life. He made it his vocation. He carried one-line blessings in his pocket, suitable for various occasions. He had

blessings for inmates or staff who were grieving a death in their family. He had blessings for peace of mind amid the daily conflicts. He wrote blessings for food, visits, policies, transfers, classes, work and weather. "Chap, you need a blessing? I got one for you." Skimming the words from his pocketed papers, he found one for the moment. "May your acts of kindness and mercy be rewarded by seeing God smile in the face of someone whose need was met."

Luke is a vivid reminder of what can happen when prison becomes a place of accountability and restoration. If we lose track of our common stories of failure and hope, we lose track of our common humanity. We are known best by how we treat the least, the least within us and within others. We carry within us the power to bless and to redeem, a power that makes God smile. Society can change if we revise our narrative about crime and punishment to the transformation of lives. We were the people who designed and created these places of punishment. We can re-imagine them into becoming places of promise and possibility. The whole world will be blessed.

## *Moving On* - Mike Riddell

Currently my wife and I are on the cusp of shifting location. As I reflect on the process of changing our hometown, I see a latent trajectory. At one time we were living and working in New Zealand's major city Auckland, population 1.5 million. Our house was in a central urban village, with all the buzz and bustle of city living. It came with noise and traffic and the sense we were always running late.

From there we moved to a more convivial city in the south of the country – Dunedin, population 120,000. Famous for its adverse weather (snow once a year if you're lucky), Dunedin is home of the arts. One of the reasons for this is that it's cheap to live in, so creative types can exist on their meagre incomes. And it sits on a wild coast with seals, penguins, and tumultuous storms. There I became a serious writer.

Nine years on and we had to escape our overwhelming nest and move north once more. This time to the quasi-English village of Cambridge, population 20,000. A pleasant 'Town of Trees', where the surroundings are rural and pastoral. It has a reputation for breeding racehorses. We've been living there 13 years, the longest we've resided in any house. And now we're moving on.

Our destination is once again in the south of the country. We're heading to a tiny village in Central Otago, that goes by the name of Otarehua. The population of the town is 30. We've bought the last available house for sale there. The settlement is nestled between Rough Ridge and Blackstone Hill, with a range of mountains named the Hawkduns to the north.

It seems our migratory pattern is one of shifting to smaller and smaller places. It's been unconscious rather than intentional, but this latest move has made it

clear. There's a heartfelt hunger for something that is dying out in Western civilisation: a deeper connection to the land and to the people around us. In our new setting we will have neighbours in the deeper sense of the word.

Oturehua is a rural community in which everyone knows each other. Among the small number of inhabitants are three established writers (one of them a poet laureate), and a publishers' editor. It has one hotel and one general store, so all the basic needs are covered. Communal tasks involve cleaning the public toilets, and cooking for the annual gathering of 2,000 bikies at the 'Brass Monkey' rally.

The hamlet has the enviable reputation of being the coldest place in the country during the winter, and among the hottest in the summer. The beauty of the hills and the skies is literally stunning. To go outside on a winter's night is to be almost crushed under the weight of the stars, so brilliant are they. Wild thyme grows on the hills, wafting its scent on the breeze.

People ask us why we'd go there. 'There's nothing there,' they say. To which we reply,

'Precisely'. In these times it has become difficult to find a fecund nothingness. Wendell Berry has said "And the world cannot be discovered by a journey of miles, no matter how long, but only by a spiritual journey, a journey of one inch, very arduous and humbling and joyful, by which we arrive at the ground at our own feet, and learn to be at home."

This longing to be at home is the real reason we're moving to the 'middle of nowhere'. In the language of the indigenous people of New Zealand, Māori, there is the concept of 'tūrangawaewae'. It means something like 'a place to stand'. This word contains the idea of belonging – belonging to the land and to the people. It expresses the sense that it is the land and the people who give life, and without either there is no life.

To quote from our new neighbour, the poet:

The loveliest places of all  
are those that look as if  
there's nothing there  
to those still learning to look

It has taken me a lifetime to understand the truth of this. I'm not suggesting that the inhabitants of cities are unable to find meaning. It's simply that for me the time has come to answer the deep quest of my heart for identity. I want to know and be known, to celebrate the rhythms of the earth, and to have the landscape teach me how to love. I've been skating on the surface of the land; now I seek to grow roots.

I can't describe how my heart thrills when I crest the top of the Black's Hill and look down at the Ida Valley laid out before me. The distant Hawkduns are not just something to be seen, but to be experienced at a visceral level. There's a connection that is at once mysterious and tangible. When I'm in that place I feel at home, despite the fact I'm a newcomer. I love the land and the land returns the love.

To be human means many things to many people. Contemporary culture has romanticised the proposition that it is possible to be alone and anonymous without diminishment. In years gone by I've been one of those celebrating the freedom of urban *anomie*. But now, in the autumn of life, I thirst for something a little more. Achievements no longer do it for me; I want connection and the embrace of community.



Life has its seasons. Death is the final stripping away of all that has glittered in our quest for meaning. Toward the end of our days there comes a new perspective on what is important. I find myself wanting simplicity. To sit on the porch and drink a cup of tea, to sing out of tune while planting a tree, to remember how utterly wonderful is this good earth on which we find ourselves.

The whole of life is a stitching together of a series of moves, whether geographical or spiritual. If we sit in silence for a time, it may just be possible to discern a pattern to them all.

## *Small Ruminants* - Lesley-Anne Evans

On the morning we dropped,  
a torrent of red on white wool  
(bath from our mother's tongue,  
hint of light),

On the morning we pushed  
from her warm constricting comfort  
into the pastoral shadow  
of dark wings tearing at placenta,

On the morning we began,  
little dark lamb, little white lamb,  
our cleansing first breaths,  
there were death songs,

there was call and response.  
Did you feel a revelation  
when the wind shook  
the scarecrow in the early hours?

When it was still night — not day —  
(a lid, a blind eye,  
the back of God's head,)  
When the shepherd

Who said I will never  
leave you nor forsake you  
was in the croft house

drinking coffee after all night

In the fields, in our white-lambled  
season of tender tongues  
and gull-torn rectums,  
when our unopened eyes

Are pried awake by  
hooked beaks. Did you  
hear our mother delivered  
from the inside out?

Did you love the sheepdog,  
her brown eyes watching  
you fostered by the stovepipe?  
As you suckled a strange nipple,

Did you know the darkness  
that set you apart  
was your complicated saviour?  
I am white bones,

the dark spot on the X-ray  
wringing its hands,  
the loss the womb cannot  
fully comprehend.

## *Three Billboards, On Reflection* - Duncan Hollomon

*Note: This review reveals plot twists - you may wish to see the movie before reading.*

Although it was almost six months ago now, I still have vivid memories of watching Martin McDonagh's deeply disquieting *Three Billboards outside Ebbing, Missouri*. As I witness the tribalism and primitive "us versus them" animosity in our current US American politics, I find myself reflecting on my experience of watching that film. For it seemed like a kind of torture of enlightenment, an immersion into a dark world where evil begets evil, but in which rays of light nonetheless break through, revealing an unexpectedly benign moral vista.

The premise is original - Mildred, a mother suffering extraordinary grief at the murder of her daughter, erects three billboards to challenge the local sheriff who has not solved the crime. The plot is complex, taking in questions of racial prejudice, vengeance, criminal justice and justice that may be criminal, family secrets, the abuse of power, terminal illness, poverty, neighborliness, and the transformation of enemies into friends. In watching the film, as I do in reading the latest news of the primitive behavior of some political leaders, I felt subjected to repeated visceral shocks, and yet I knew that within the mayhem depicted in the film something deeply wise was being offered. I began to notice that cinematic situations were carefully orchestrated for their suspense, heightening my sense of foreboding, but always with the same bifurcation point: would the scene become violent, or would there be mercy and compassion? Over and over, scene after scene, it was the same experience of uncertainty, dread and possibility revealing itself in horror or redemption.

While I struggled with the intense portrayal of violence, I was aware of an excruciatingly fine-tuned depiction of the crossroads that will determine or reveal to which aspect of human nature the character would surrender.

In a central scene of the movie, Penelope, Mildred's ex-husband Charlie's young girlfriend, sings in her baby doll voice the slogan "anger begets anger," one of the leitmotifs of the movie, and sure enough, that's what we see enacted over and over. And yet something else was ever also possible. Tenderness. Mercy. Compassion. And we never knew which — violent rage or tender mercy — would make itself apparent as each suspenseful moment unfolded.

Consider the scene in which Mildred grasps a wine bottle around the neck like a club, and walks toward her ex-husband in a restaurant after learning he was the one who torched the billboards. I was bracing myself for the possibility of brutality, revenge, breaking the bottle over his head, with a close-up of his blood flowing onto his dinner plate. But it didn't happen. She places the bottle on the table as a kind of offering, and tells him to be kind to his girlfriend. It was extraordinary — a moment of grace, of almost divine intervention, rescuing us from the viciousness from which we were cringing.

Or this: the scene in which, as filmic "luck" would have it, the mummy-like bandaged Jason Dixon, the rageaholic loose cannon of this small town's primitive constabulary, is wheeled into the hospital room of Red Welby, the young man in charge of selling the billboards. We don't know if Red recognizes Dixon, or what will happen when or if he does. The scene becomes increasingly distilled down, and intimately focuses on a glass of orange juice. We are in exquisite moral suspense. Will Red recognize him? What will Red choose? And then — the moment becomes sacralized, as we see the glass being placed on Dixon's bedside table, and the straw is turned toward his mouth. So finely tuned. The horrible and the sublime intimately juxtaposed, and the sublime transcending the horrible. Love, as they say, wins.



I remember years ago reading a review of Robert Altman's *Nashville* that pointed out the awful sense of inevitability that there would be violence. Sitting in the audience I felt the foreboding, and my powerlessness to do anything about what was surely coming. In contrast, I didn't have that experience in watching *Three Billboards*. Rather, I kept feeling the juxtaposition of hope and horror. I kept wondering — what will happen now? Will things turn dark and brutality reign, or will some other salutary spirit make itself known?

In the final scene, as Mildred and Dixon are driving to Idaho with a loaded shotgun in the back of her station wagon, we hear Mildred entertain the possibility that they turn back. McDonagh, an Irish playwright intimately familiar with the delicate and perilous intersection of violence and mercy, shows us that we do indeed have a choice, if we are courageous and humble enough to face into it.

For me, then, *Three Billboards* is about the possibility and challenge of being an adult. The only character who has a decent claim on adulthood is Chief Bill Willoughby. The letters he writes to loved ones are an extraordinary testament to the possibility of mature love and understanding. Mildred throws herself at his adulthood, as we might rail at God for what suffering we must endure. Not knowing the identity of the perpetrator makes it even harder for her to grieve the loss of her daughter; not being supported in her very real, almost unimaginable pain threatens to keep her permanently in the role of protesting victim. We sympathize with her plight, but cringe at the vehemence of her violence, which borders on the sociopathic. She won't relent, even when she is assured by Willoughby that he has done everything he can, nor does she soften her attack in the face of his sentence of terminal cancer. Her quick tongue and pointed boot can't save her from the damage that vengeance does to the vengeful.

Which means of course that her plight is ours. Her outrage is ours. And her need to grieve and suffer is ours as well. For, ultimately, it is her unwillingness or incapacity to suffer deeply, to surrender to the horrible fact of the death of her daughter by an unknown assailant, that brings the tragedy of the film. Instead of surrendering to grief, she protests and rails against reality; and no one seems to know how to help her.

As in the film, we can be daily saturated with stories of horror and violence, especially if we are passive consumers of mainstream media, rather than discerning seekers of a more full view of reality. As in the film, we are in a period of reverse distillation in which the sludge is rising to the top. Perhaps our question is: Are we riding together with a shotgun in the back, will we pause in our headlong rush, and make a different choice? What does it take to be adult in a predicament such as ours?

I'm struggling with my own answer to that question.

What does being an adult involve? For me, it means facing into my own tendencies to cling to victimhood and rail against the perpetrating dark. And it means surrendering to my own willingness to be in honest, vulnerable relationship rather than allowing vengeful anger and hurt to hide me.

It's awkward and painful to be yet again facing into my own shadow, but I find there is a wisdom in the dark quite different from that which relies on the light. So it occurs to me that while the death of her daughter threatens to keep Mildred stuck in her anger and pain, perhaps it is her awareness of the horror she is undergoing that frees her to access her own loving — adult — nature. In the restaurant, a rehearsal for her connection with another enemy; in the car, a further step toward if not restoration, at least acceptance. She Just as Willoughby

has nothing left to cling to, and hence his tenderness and care can emerge, Mildred, facing her own demons, may do the same.

As the Oregon poet William Stafford reminds us, "The darkness around us is deep." I keep learning that despite my efforts to polish my image in my effort to radiate light, often it is in sharing our dark secrets with one another that we can find healing and redemption. Perhaps the lesson of the movie is that, rather than looking for the light first, we need to learn to see better in the dark.

## *Losing my co-religionists - Veronica Zundel*

Not long ago I clicked through from Facebook to an article which listed all the characteristics the writer wanted in an ideal church. I don't remember everything in the list, but it would equally have worked for any human community. My immediate reaction was tears of grief for the church community I'd lost when it closed down two years ago. Because it had every single feature in that list, and now it's gone.

It wasn't perfect, since it consisted of imperfect people. Having started as a gathering in an international student hostel, it was biased towards the intellectual. And as it went on it became increasingly middle aged and middle class. But many groups have at least that second fault. We also never quite resolved the issue of whether to be a 'network' - gathering people of like mind from a wide area - or an inner-city neighbourhood church (I think we were the wrong people to be the latter). But let me recall the virtues that drew me to this particular group of people and kept me there for 24 years:

- It was entirely led by its members. We didn't reject 'experts' -- people with theological or pastoral training -- but we were not subject to a 'professional' leadership. This was in the end the congregation's downfall, since there were not enough committed members left to keep it going. But it also led directly to the next virtue:
- The people were trusted. Anyone could have a go at leading services, speaking or other initiatives. We didn't worry about the 'audience' being led astray, since we were perfectly at liberty to disagree with preachers or leaders, or gently point out where they might improve.

- Perhaps stemming from the same origin, every member was equally valued. We put people before principles, and when new people joined, with new needs and new challenges, we adapted to them rather than forcing them to adapt to us. For instance, when we acquired a member with a historic alcohol problem, we immediately switched from real communion wine to grape juice for every communion. This illustrates what I call 'Zundel's law' of the difference between institution and community: an institution moulds new members to fit the institution, a community changes with each new member.
- There were no barriers of gender, race or sexual orientation to leadership or participation in the community's life. In fact, so crucial were women in leadership that we had to make a special effort to occasionally have men lead or speak!
- We aimed to practise truth-telling in all contexts, especially in our (often laborious) process of consensus decision making.
- We were committed to the world, and to justice and above all peace within that world. In Christian leader and writer John Stott's memorable dictum, we practised a double listening: listening to the Bible as our foundational text, and listening to the world around us.
- We were covenanted to each other and to God, and we renewed our covenant every year. Of course there was conflict, disagreement and occasionally gossip, but we aimed at, and often achieved, genuine love and forgiveness towards each other.
- Being in the radical Anabaptist tradition, we endeavoured to fill the 'Jesus-shaped hole' in the historic creeds, which go straight from Jesus'



birth to his death: to study the life of Jesus, and to practise discipleship based on his teaching and actions.

- We were always willing to experiment and to review our experiments.

Listing these qualities is painful – it reminds me of what has been lost. As the daughter of Holocaust refugees I have never had an extended family, but this church was my core community for over two decades, and it kept me going in persistently difficult circumstances. The first thing I did on arriving there was to have the breakdown I had promised myself for years – I knew this was a safe space in which to have it. One thing I valued was that even at my most fragile they allowed me to contribute to communal life, and never treated me as a ‘case’. The church was the ‘village’ I needed in which to bring up my disabled son, it was the cocoon of love to which I turned at every crisis. And it was the place where I discovered that I had been an Anabaptist for 20+ years without knowing that was what I was. It was a homecoming.

Committed communities are hard to sustain – they can make huge demands on their members, although in the best ones, they give as much as they ask. Many Christian and other communities last only a few decades before they break up, through either conflict or burnout. Is there a secret for survival of a close-knit, visionary community? I don’t know. What I do know is that there are common pitfalls, one of them being a slide into legalism, another being domination by a charismatic but flawed/unprincipled leader. Our own way of preventing the latter (and perhaps the former) was that we adhered to founder member Alan Kreider’s teaching that ‘leadership is plural’ - which brilliantly sidesteps all the controversies about gender and leadership. It occurs to me now that when leadership is plural, it enables everything else to be plural: it opens the way for a move away from an individualistic, over-interiorized faith and into a social, though never corporate or monolithic, incarnation of faith – something today’s

church worldwide desperately needs. And perhaps there are lessons here for other human groups: political parties, protest movements.

Recently I saw another Facebook meme, on grief. It suggested that grief never actually lessens, though it may fade. Instead, from experiencing grief, we grow, so that the part of ourselves occupied by grief becomes relatively smaller. I know after 2 ½ years I am still grieving for my church, on top of the other griefs I have inherited: the 'missing' family wiped out by the Holocaust, the (I believe related) suicide of my brother at 27. I have found another church to be part of, a High Anglican church, as different as possible from the church that closed down – that way I am not reminded and made to cry every Sunday. But welcoming as it is, it has nothing like the close community or even the aspiration to it that the Mennonite church had.

It is still possible that something new will emerge from the ashes of my beloved community. We had a reunion dinner a couple of weeks ago, which started as five people and kept expanding till there were 13; and I sensed that the people still wanted to see and share with each other. In the meantime, I want to say: if you find a community that meets your ideals and hopes in the way this community did mine, hang on to it as hard as you can. It is a rare treasure.

## *Stop Saying You Don't Understand* - Lesley-Anne Evans

What I am waiting for: this impossibility,  
something I have always longed for,  
something I won't recognize when it arrives  
*heard, half-heard, in the stillness*  
*between two waves of the sea.*

Seen, half seen, in the space  
between hawk's beauty and her hunger  
*Every phrase and every sentence*  
*is an end and a beginning.*

Every night I die,  
every morning I rise again.

Like the blind man sight restored  
beholding a tree, all his longings  
consumed in the consolation  
of a green like that. All  
that cannot be contained  
in a statement of fact. You know  
what I mean, stop pretending. The time  
I watched you transfixed on the beach  
as a humpback breached, and the time  
you held your eyes closed tight  
at the first bite of bread warm  
from the oven, and drenched in butter.

You know what I mean,  
that vibration in your gut when  
the resined bow meets violin strings

and you suddenly wipe your eyes,  
all that we stretch ourselves toward,  
all that we cannot reach, or say.  
We are consumed by beauty,  
and yet we cannot fully say.

So imagine you are born blind. You feel  
the bark of maple and ponderosa, you sit  
in cool ponds of shade, you taste  
plums, apples and figs, you listen  
while others describe the attributes of trees.  
Suddenly, you tip your head toward  
what you only know as up, and you see!

Above you, like the clear tone  
of a ringing bell filling the air  
and rippling out, and out again,  
what they have told you is named *green*.  
Nothing but green. Nothing but  
before and after what is.  
Your jaw, your eyes, your heart now  
like unhinged doors opening  
to everything, all that cannot be contained  
in a statement of fact.

I don't know what else to tell you.

*(Lines in italics from T.S. Eliot, Four Quartets)*

## *Puzzle* - Ken Morefield

There is a scene about a third of the way through *Puzzle* in which Robert (Irfan Khan), an idle rich inventor, explains to Agnes (Kelly Macdonald), a Roman Catholic housewife, the metaphysical and aesthetic pleasures of making jigsaw puzzles. No matter how many wrong decisions you make along the way, he waxes, at the conclusion you can be confident that everything is exactly as (and where) it should be.

How you feel about such metafictional exposition will probably go a long way toward determining whether you like *Puzzle* as much as I did. (I liked it a lot.) I normally prefer such thematic elaborations to be a bit more subtle (earlier Robert calls Agnes a “godsend”), but I was so pleasantly surprised to find a commercial narrative film that was genuinely interested in its characters’ religious motivations that I did not begrudge it having them talk more pointedly about them.

A lesser film would be more rigidly structured around the puzzle competition that the unlikely pair partner to enter, treating Agnes’s burgeoning awareness of her own domestic and spiritual unhappiness as a mechanism for suspense. (Will her husband find out where she is going when she and Robert practice? Will he complementarian-shame her into giving up her one piece of self-expression or only just domestically guilt trip her?)

A contemporary “Christian” film about this material would probably be too rigidly linear — using each scene and decision as a mini-illustration of a foregone conclusion rather than taking any genuine interest in the ways people change or showing any curiosity about what prompts them to do so.

But *Puzzle* turns out to be one of those film gems that is both utterly conventional in its set up and yet fresh and unpredictable in its delivery. It does so in part by investing less time in the conventionally “dramatic” scenes — we get maybe a minute of the actual competition and are only told after-the-fact how it concluded—and more time in character building moments. Agnes sits on the stoop and talks to her elder son, bumming a cigarette that turns out to be her first. A blind man on a subway train sings “Ave Maria.” Agnes buys a train ticket on the train itself and learns the cost is different from buying it at the station. (Hmm, that’s thematically metaphoric too, isn’t it?) These scenes don’t materially advance the plot, but they give us insight into the characters so that when other, more traditionally dramatic things happen, we are invested in their outcome. Macdonald gives another in a seemingly endless stream of brilliant, understated performances. Much like Brad Pitt, she is a master of vocal delivery, finding unexpected intonations or emphases that evidence how well she knows and understands the character. Nothing would have toppled this movie faster than an overeager performance. Agnes is not timid, but she is guarded. By letting Robert see and articulate her character rather than having Agnes talk about herself, the film allows us to see that reserve as authentic and also understand how the cracks in it are both frightening and intoxicating.

Khan, too, is a magnificent actor who is too often undervalued because his roles are often less showy. (His arc in Season Two of *In Treatment* is a prime example.) Robert’s ethnicity here is more or less incidental. He spends most days watching the news and lamenting the latest disaster that reflects his inner fear that life is chaos. Khan also has some tremendous line deliveries in this film, particularly in his final scene.

Robert and Agnes are very different in many ways, but they are both fast thinkers. In another expository speech, Robert explains how menial, concrete tasks help fast thinkers to concentrate and remain grounded in the real world.

Here again some other film might have tried to express that idea through a visual gimmick—slow motion, soft-focus, sound manipulation. But director Marc Turteltaub wisely trusts his actors. We can see it in the way Agnes finds an old puzzle in her house and can't quite get it to the table before turning it over and sorting the pieces. The chores she does in and around her first foray into puzzling are more than simply a montage of domestic drudgery she must escape from, they are an expression of her difficulty in multitasking.

For such minds, happiness is often self-forgetfulness. But paradoxically, the joy of getting lost in a task, however trivial, is what also leads to newer and greater self-awareness. In so many (so very, very many) films, that greater self-awareness leads inevitably to a reflexive, contemptuous repudiation of one's previous self. Perhaps the thing I like best about *Puzzle* is that it doesn't insist that we take sides between Agnes and Agnes 2.0. It doesn't insist that she has transformed into someone or something else. Instead it suggests that, like a puzzle being put together, she is a fuller, more complete version of who and what she always was.

## *National Geography* - Jasmin Pittman Morrell

Dressed as a cross between Lara Croft and Indiana Jones, I bounded from my house to the car, waving to a group of trick-or-treaters next door before I cranked the engine. With my husband staying behind and our daughter safely ensconced in her crib, for these few moments I was free to step out and enjoy myself at a Hallowe'en party with my neighbors.

The sun fell in a blushing sky. Drumming my fingers on the steering wheel, I tried to shake my sense of unease as I pulled away from my home. Halloween had been the bastard holiday of my childhood; the occasion that my family, as evangelical Christians in the '80s, approached with caution bordering on trepidation participated in celebrating. But now as an adult, I was pretty sure the woods weren't teeming with Satan worshippers.

A few minutes later, I rounded the corner of my street and turned into the cul-de-sac on the next street over, passing modest starter homes with tidy front yards. These neighbors were not simply people who lived nearby; they were college friends, some of my best friends. We'd gone to school in Georgia, and now I felt lucky to live so close to them as we navigated early adulthood together in Raleigh, North Carolina. Parking on the street, I hopped out of the car, slinging my Granddad's WWII binoculars around my neck.

I breezed into Sarah's house and had barely hit the living room before she grabbed me.

"Hey, Jasmin! You made it!" Sarah wrapped me in a quick hug, then held me at arm's length, running her eyes up and down my costume.



Our costumes were supposed to reflect our childhood idea of what we wanted to be when we grew up. For me, ambition was shaped by the far-away, exotic worlds depicted in the glossy pages of *National Geographic*, which first entranced me when I was six years old. At that age, I lacked the words for anthropologist or journalist, but explorer was something I understood.

Sarah cocked her head, hair spilling like champagne down her shoulder, blue eyes narrowed in curiosity. Melissa wandered toward us and joined Sarah in appraising me with an equally puzzled look.

“What are you supposed to be, Jasmin?” Melissa was as earnest as a Georgia peach.

“C’mon, guess!” I was sure they at least knew the contours of my childhood dream. And even if they hadn’t known, I was certain the reporter’s notebook and pen tucked into the front pocket of my flannel shirt was a dead giveaway.

“A homeless person?”

“Aunt Jemima?”

Momentarily stunned into silence, I suddenly saw the salient details: kinky hair wrapped in a bandanna, army green rucksack hanging from my back and hiking boots that grounded the ensemble. And there was my deeply tawny skin, constant no matter what I wore.

“I’m a *National Geographic* writer,” I mumbled.

“Oh, really?”

There was a shrug in Sarah's voice. Beers in hand, Sean, Drew and Lexie laughed raucously at a joke Sean had told, and Melissa and Sarah pivoted to join the rest of the party.

Planted there, I was left with the weight of those images.

*Did you forget you're colored? None of your white friends have.*

When I left the party early, I'm not sure they noticed, but knowing they would've been mortified to know they'd hurt me. At home again, I cracked open my daughter's bedroom door to peek in on her as she slept. In the span of a generation, what might change for her?

## *A Hundred Miles up Spruce River Road* - Lesley-Anne Evans

The time you were a hundred miles up  
Spruce River Road with a bunch of buddies  
came around a corner and saw  
~ Snow Ptarmigan ~  
blinding white on the first dusting of October  
a hunter's holy pause, and not one  
itchy trigger finger in the bunch of you.

The next year you won't comply  
you give your guns away to your brother  
leaves you pissed, leaves you  
having to ask, leaves you  
ripped like lichen from rocky soil  
roots exposed and drying out  
like discarded bones.

I hear them rattling  
when you tell stories of long drives  
down backroads and county lines  
out past Trout Lake and the Lappe Store  
old man in the Pontiac  
full tank, time to kill  
like you once killed birds.

In September you fight the urge but  
call anyway. Ministry of Natural Resources clerk  
hard as shield rock, says you  
can't buy a game tag without owning a gun, says you

can't own a gun without getting a license.

Circular red-tape bureaucratic double-speak  
I know the talk, hear it sometimes on Sunday morning.  
You feel the trail go cold, hear the call  
of upland Alder, Birch, and Sumac silenced  
tell the guy "Go To Hell" slam down the phone.

Tomorrow you might head out to Shibandewan,  
cousin there still catches walleye,  
you'll bring one home, fry it up  
for supper.

## *Maybe* - Steve Tomkins

This year we buried my dad. The sun shone, friends gathered and the strains of *Blue is the Colour*, the 1978 hit by Chelsea Football Club, filled the church. As he had requested, I led a prayer, read from the Bible, joined those sharing thoughts and Spotify'd *Blue is the Colour*. It was, I think, everything he wanted. What a difference six years can make.

My dad died aged 78, after a short illness, neither a sudden loss nor a drawn-out ordeal. He was physically marked by his illness, but not in pain or mental decline. There was time for my family to visit together, and for me to come back alone for a last conversation. There was one last thing I had to tell him, which I rehearsed throughout the two-hour journey, even though it was only one sentence, then somehow I failed to get it out. Now I'll just have to hope he knew.

Either way, he was cheerful and ready. And then he was gone. It's my ambition to follow in those footsteps, in good time.

My earliest memory is of my parents shouting, my mum holding me in her arms as my dad went out the front door. I have no idea if that ever happened or if I concocted the scene as an emblem for my life.

Their marriage didn't last, and as a child I didn't see as much of my dad as I would have liked. Saturday was his day to take me out, which might involve a trip to the Happy Eater or the cinema, or waiting outside a pub, or hanging around in his office playing with a calculator, or it might involve nothing because he didn't turn up.

God told my mum that her husband would return. They had both been devout Christians, meeting at Bible college, smuggling the Scriptures into eastern Europe together. But they clashed, he fell into a cliché with his secretary, quit church, and left his family. One day, my mum was praying when she had an overwhelming

experience of God speaking to her, saying that my dad would regain his faith and come back to us. It was unmistakable. If anything was true, this was.

My mum compounded God's mistake by telling me. What a relief. What a comfort. You can put up with anything when it's only temporary. I never admitted to my friends that my dad had left. Single-parent families were rare, and seemed shocking, in 1970s Surrey, and I was the only person I knew in this situation. (I guess we all kept quiet.) When my best friend Matthew said his mum had told him that my parents were separated, I denied it to his face. My dad was just away a lot with work, I said. How could they understand that he wasn't really gone?

Once I stayed the night at my dad's house and we feasted on sausage sandwiches. Then he showed me my room for the night. It was a little girls' room. Two beds. I realised there was something happening here that I was never going to be a part of. He had a family and I wasn't in it. I didn't tell my mum because I didn't want to shatter her illusion.

In my teens and 20s, my dad and I didn't argue – we didn't communicate well enough – but neither were we at peace. I was bitter and sullen, felt disrespected, felt he had messed up my life and had no right to his opinions on it. What he felt about me I had no idea and less interest. His passions were business and sport, mine were poetry and music, we had no point of contact at all.

My mum had a conscious policy to not turn me against my dad, but she didn't have it in her. We both knew that we were a loving godly family, and he had turned his back on all that. He had money, we had principles. I was painfully quiet, which was clearly to do with my dad. I didn't have a girlfriend and couldn't imagine ever asking anyone out because I was terrified of being rejected. It was obvious where that came from. When I got arrested for shoplifting, my mum explained to the police about the upsetting situation with my dad.

One night I was hit by a car. I was paid some compensation. My dad said I could spend the money on something, or he could invest it for me and I could watch it grow. Investments were his business after all. I gave him the money. Whenever I asked him how the investment was doing he said nothing. I stopped asking.

I worked in his office for a stretch. It was a dull job in an industry devoted, as I saw it, to making rich people richer. I found it deathly. He treated his staff well, it seemed, but on the phone he could tear other people's employees apart. He was furious with people begging on the street, outraged with people who got in his way. He must have been properly angry about something, but I have no idea what. When I became interested in researching my family tree, I asked him about his parents' families. "We're not great communicators in our family," was his only answer. It sounded like a creed and the end of that conversation forever.

He never once so much as raised his voice at me, though my mum and I argued all the time. He did once tell me he would kneecap me if I got a motorbike – which I had never wanted to do for a moment – but we both knew he was just talking like an idiot.

All it was, I suppose, was a lot of moments like this: on my first day in the office he told me to come to his room at five and he drove me home. The second day I came, and asked if he was going to drive me home. "I've got a business to run," he cried. There was something here that I was never going to be a part of.

Once when I was being particularly uncommunicative, he complained about me having "nothing to say to your old man". How dare he claim I had an obligation to him in return for his fathering? I had the perfect comeback.

I said nothing.

After working for a year, I unexpectedly got a place in college. My dreams sparked back into life, but my dad was adamantly opposed. I would not shine, he told me. Why should he care, I thought. Did he nurture a secret hope that I

would work my way up the ladder in this business I showed no interest in and take over the family firm? I was thrilled that for once in my life there was something he wanted from me, which I had the power to withhold.

In my later 20s, I was ready to walk away forever, but my partner wouldn't stand for it. "He's your dad," she'd say. I said: "You have absolutely no idea what you're talking about." She said: "No, but he's still your dad."

She said, "Your mum and dad are a terrible match, they could never have stayed together." As blasphemies do, it made some terrible, secret sense.

We got married, our four parents sitting either side of us at the reception. I made a speech, telling a story about my mum and me. I made no mention of my dad at all. That, after all, was the true story of my life.

We bought our first flat. We got together enough money to pay the deposit, and my dad doubled it. I didn't know how to feel about that. I knew what to feel, but not how to feel it.

We met for the occasional lunch. For both of us, purgatorial.

Late one night he phoned me. His eldest daughter was in hospital with a medical emergency. "You know what to do," he pleaded. I hadn't a clue. "Pray!" he cried. I said a prayer. She pulled through, for now.

Another night he phoned to say his wife had left him and their three teenage children. I expressed sympathy. His voice cracked as he said, "The children just really miss their mum." What do you say to that?

Slowly, he mellowed. When my partner and I had children, it turned out that my dad was much more ready to be a grandparent than he had been to be a parent. As a three-generation family we spent whole days together that we wouldn't have known how to spend as two. I heard fifth-hand that he was proud I completed a Ph.D. and wrote books, but I wasn't sure whether to believe that. He



seemed, perhaps, ready to start becoming friends. I wasn't sure *how* to believe that.

A separate story unfolded in my life – one for another day. I was sad and angry. We pulled through, and time passed but the anger didn't. I saw a counsellor. I told her about my life and she asked about my dad.

Eventually, with strenuous encouragement, I had drink with my dad, and managed to say, "Listen, I was angry with you for a long time, but I'm not any more." I was only halfway through when he jumped in: "You had every right." I had imagined this opening the floodgates, but it was all we said on the matter. Still, we had communicated. When he left, he held out his hand as usual, but instead, for the first time I could remember, I hugged him.

That was six years ago. Then I became the editor of a magazine, and he subscribed. We started to meet regularly for lunch, and I told him about the business. When I had gigs or took church services, he travelled to be there. We met for drinks in the evening and he told me about his family history. We told each other about ourselves. We chatted. We always hugged. I noticed that we had become friends.

He found it increasingly difficult to get around. He had some tests, said the results were fine, he had really dodged a bullet, and by the way, when the time finally did come would I please be in charge of the funeral. He wanted four hymns: *Abide with Me*, *Jerusalem*, *Lord of the Dance*, and *To God be the Glory*. I smiled. *Abide with Me* is played at the FA cup final, English soccer's biggest annual fixture; *Jerusalem* is played at the cricket; and *Lord of the Dance* is sung with different words on the Chelsea terraces. But why *To God be the Glory*? Dad said, "It's the one that says, 'The vilest offender who truly believes, that moment from Jesus a pardon receives'."

Six years of friendship may not sound like a lot, but it was enough. And it was a gift. It made all the difference in the world, and though he has gone our friendship continues. At the funeral my younger brother and sisters and I comforted each other, and exchanged stories, and are still in contact. It seems more things can be mended than we know.

What I meant to tell him, that last night before he died, was that it was one of the greatest joys of my life that we had become friends. Maybe he already knew.

## Survey Crew - Lesley-Anne Evans

Shock was not  
canvas tents strung along  
the shore of Lake Superior rather than sleazy  
shag-carpeted motel rooms south of Marathon  
no

shock was not flying clear dome bell chopper  
black fly and bear territory  
land-on-a-dime river side  
in the middle of the God-forsaken-wilderness  
God's country depending on how you look at it  
no

shock was not watching Roy walk pissed off  
straight into the bush for a three hour no map  
bush-whack straight back to camp  
to roll cigarettes and hork into a smoldering fire  
no

not night sky infinity  
white pin pricks bleeding out heaven  
not sound absence  
adrenaline blood rush pregnant voids  
not off res boys  
hard down blind drunk fireside fights  
no

the shock was

axe blade clean cut through his work boot  
Dan felled like a lodgepole  
you pinned between him  
and the forest floor

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## *Risky Business* - Brian Volck

“Make sure you bring some food to share,” advised more experienced friends before we headed to the Hopi village for *Powamuya*, the midwinter festival sometimes called the Bean Dance. My wife, our six month-old son, and I had been invited by Edna, our nanny, to join her family before sunrise in their one-room house for the ancient pueblo ceremony. We were newcomers to the high desert and brand new parents with new jobs at the hospital. We couldn’t yet claim we knew Edna well. We did know – because Edna told us – that she’d had been cooking for days in preparation, and our friends’ advice was spot-on. To the Hopi, who have lived in what is now Arizona for centuries, we were clueless *Pahanas*, the latest arrivals in a long, fraught theater of US-Native American history. Our non-Hopi friends knew Edna was taking a risk with us. Anglo guests have a reputation for culturally offensive behavior: interrupting ceremonies, uttering racial slurs, entering people’s homes uninvited. Yet visitors are still welcomed to Edna’s village, a practice that makes me wonder how Native Americans might inform the national debate over undocumented immigrants. With five centuries of experience, they may have some interesting things to say. In any case, Jill and I needed to be told that guests do not show up empty-handed, no matter how small the gift.

We arrived in the predawn darkness with homemade cookies and a bag of oranges. Edna graciously accepted our token gifts, adding them to her already groaning table before insisting we sit down and eat. A large metal vat brimmed with meaty stew glistening with puddles of fat. Alongside stood bowls of unfamiliar vegetables, a mountain of mashed potatoes dripping with melted butter, and the shapeless remnants of roasted green chilies. Not our typical menu, but tasty and filling, and Edna beamed as we ate. Much of the fare came from her tiny kitchen, supplemented with dishes from family and neighbors, while in the corner stood empty boxes ready for the “thank you” gifts (Edna

called them “paybacks”) she would make and distribute after the festival. For now, however, her task was to ensure everyone was well-fed and ready for a long day of ritual and celebration on the village plaza. In that moment I grasped, however dimly, that Edna’s family and ours were already in a relationship of mutual obligation – guest and host – not entirely of our choosing, yet life-giving and instructive.

It was a lesson in hospitality I remembered learning through example from childhood gatherings with my extended family, whose immigrant ancestors brought similar traditions of welcoming and sharing. This new context, however, brought those practices into clearer relief. Our experience with Edna came early in my career as a pediatrician, and I’ve seen her evocative witness duplicated in encounters with materially poor but culturally wealthy families throughout North and Central America. Such moments might occur anywhere, I discovered, though far more often outside the hospitals where I worked than within. Most people find hospitals alien, unwelcoming places of bureaucratic confusion and arcane hierarchies of power. Simple hospitality often comes more naturally outside the hospital doors where, for the locals, the ground is more level, the territory more familiar.

These encounters gave me new appreciation for models of hospitality from my childhood, more intimate and labor intensive than what now might be labeled hostess gifts, housewarmings, and open houses. It also called into question the now diminished notion of hospitality as an option one chooses rather than an obligation a community fulfills. As with so much of our shared discourse, the word “hospitality” has been commandeered by the rhetoric of consumer capitalism. From the high-end retail trendiness of Martha Stewart to the oxymoronic neologism, “hospitality industry,” we have turned a virtuous communal practice into individualized, for-profit transactions. That we once knew better is certain. The evidence is buried in our language.

Our words “hospitality” and “hospital” are, at first glance, an unlikely pair, but both derive from the Latin *hospes*, which can mean both “guest” and “host,” an ambiguity still found in the French *hote* and Italian *ospite*. Our word “host,” shares a Latin root with “hostile.” The related, if very different sounding, Greek word *xenos* can mean “guest,” “host,” “stranger,” and “foreigner,” while the verb *xenizo* can mean “to surprise,” “to be strange,” or even “to entertain.” Linguists trace all these words back to a single Proto-Indo-European root *\*ghos-ti-*, which can mean “guest,” “host,” “stranger,” and “foreigner.” For the ancients – indeed for most traditional cultures – hospitality is understood as a duty and a danger at the same time. Host and guest enter a relationship of mutual obligation: the host offers protection and inquires after the guest’s needs, doing her best to meet them. The guest does not abuse the host’s generosity, and pledges to reciprocate if possible. Etymologically, then, xenophobia may mean as much fear of being host as it does fear of the stranger. Contemporary discourse has all but lost this edgy vision of hospitality, but not, I think, because it’s untrue. Nor is it too late to recognize its inherent wisdom.

I have neither the aptitude nor the *chutzpah* to propose a national campaign toward that end. I’m more interested in what might happen in neighborhoods where even a small group of people understand hospitality as a shared duty full of promise and risk. What might happen if some of us spent just a little less time with friends on the back patio and a little more on the front porch, talking to passersby? Who would be willing to risk extending a dinner invitation to their reclusive neighbor, that dodgy-looking new coworker, or the loud uncle whose habits and opinions so offend you? How do I engage the person on the other side of the increasingly ugly political divide if I don’t assume they are malicious, insane, ignorant, demonic, or just plain stupid?

Hospitality alone won’t heal what’s ailing us, but it’s a necessary ingredient. Risking that most people will do right (as they see it) most of the time

may be especially difficult for those who've been wounded in past encounters. Edna and her people, however, somehow learned a way. Now that she's passed on and my children are grown, I see how her practices and those of my immigrant ancestors have attenuated over generations. Lament if you will, but we honor their memory far better by reclaiming the demands of a word we have, of late, hollowed out. Edna was fearless, but she never sought admirers. She simply met what was for her a joyful obligation.



## CONTRIBUTORS

**Lesley-Anne Evans** is northern Irish-born, and lives in the Okanagan Valley, Canada. She and her husband make pots of stew and invite folk to linger at their table, overlooking a Ponderosa pine forest. *laevans.ca*

**Duncan Hollomon** lives in Cambridge, MA. His background is a braiding of three strands of passion and concern: performing art, law, and psychotherapy. He is currently exploring a relational approach to religion and conflict transformation.

**Ken Morefield** is a Professor of English at Campbell University. He is the editor of and a contributor to *Faith and Spirituality in Masters of World Cinema, Volumes I, II and III*. [www.1morefilmblog.com](http://www.1morefilmblog.com)

**Jasmin Pittman Morrell** is a writer and editor living in Asheville, North Carolina with her husband and two daughters. She enjoys facilitating healing through creativity, imagination, and deep listening.

**Philip Orr** is a writer, thinker and teacher- interested in conflict transformation.

**Mike Riddell** is a Kiwi author and screenwriter. [www.holybucket.com](http://www.holybucket.com)

**Nancy Hastings Sehested** is a Co-pastor of the Circle of Mercy Congregation, an ecumenical church in Asheville, NC. She recently retired as a prison chaplain having worked in medium and maximum security prisons for men for over thirteen years. She is currently at work on a book about her prison experience.

**Steve Tomkins** is the editor of *Reform*, a magazine published by the United Reformed Church in London. He has written a number of books on Christian history.

**Brian Volck** lives and writes in Baltimore and practices pediatrics with the Navajo Nation. His most recent book is *Attending Others: A Doctor's Education in Bodies and Words*.

**Veronica Zundel** is a professional writer and amateur parent, living in London.

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