

## **WITNESS STATEMENT OF HEATHER E. BENNETT**

My name is Heather Bennett. I have been a practicing Anglican all my life. My birth family was very involved in parishes we attended as we lived in various cities across Canada. I attended church weekly until I graduated from high school. During university, I left the church for a time, believing I did not need to be concerned about my spiritual life. Marriage and becoming a parent, took me back to church and into active participation. Over the years, I have taught Sunday school; served on parish councils; served on worship teams; led Christian Education activities at both the parish and diocesan level; trained lay leaders; and served as churchwarden for a large parish in Toronto. The church community, in whatever city I have lived in, has been a second home. My identity is deeply connected to Christianity and its expression as found in the Anglican tradition.

As an adult with deep roots in Anglican spirituality, I have had a foundation on which to explore my beliefs and to challenge assumptions and traditions. I have developed spiritual practices including regular bible reading; reflection; journal writing; and prayer. In recent years, I have belonged to women's groups with members from protestant, roman catholic, Jewish as well as non church backgrounds. Sharing and listening to others in informal ways as well as in more structured ways including leading workshops has enabled me to enrich my understanding of women's spiritual needs. These diverse practices have been developed by eking out precious bits of time over the years while being employed full-time; raising children; completing a master's degree in education as well as completing a transformational coaching certification and providing leadership and

companionship to others on their spiritual journeys. Time for spiritual development and growth has been an important and intentional aspect of my life.

At age 53, the mother of two university age children; still working full-time; and at a stage when parents and several friends have succumbed to illness or premature death, I have found that the toll of everyday living requires regular, intentional renewal and refreshment. I live in downtown Toronto and do not have access to a cottage or country property. As a woman, having a safe and enriching place to go for such renewal and refreshment is difficult to find. I also travel regularly as part of my job and stay in hotels. These are in no way places that enable and support spiritual renewal and refreshment. In my experience, sacred spaces do afford the safe, quiet; and supportive environment that individuals need for spiritual nourishment. Having access to a spiritual director or companion is of immense value as well. Often, by being in sacred space that is quiet and without everyday distractions, the stillness releases the pent up attentions of heart, mind and soul. It can come as quite a surprise to find deep emotions stirred by a bar of music; a piece of scripture; the sight and smell that takes one to a long forgotten memory. Having the luxury of time and the care of a spiritual director to process these emotional expressions can provide deep understanding and healing.

I have been fortunate along my spiritual journey to have come in contact with other individuals who have given me the gift of insights they have gained; the title of a “must read” book; practices that have deepened their own prayer life and so forth. One of the gifts I received was knowledge of Loyola House. I first learned about Loyola House

from the Rev. Dr. Dana Fisher, an Anglican priest, who is a spiritual director as well as training and supervising others as spiritual directors. I later met a fellow parishioner from Church of the Redeemer in downtown Toronto who mentioned that she was going on retreat at Loyola House in Guelph.

Having spent two or three days at a time over the last twenty years on retreats at St. Michael's House operated by the Sisters of the Church (Anglican) in Oakville and at the convent run by the Sisters of St. John the Divine (SSJD) in North York, I was ready to take the step of observing an eight day directed retreat in August 2004. As a person who often ministers to others, I was not sure how I would react to the silence and the spiritual exercises prescribed by my spiritual director. But, I felt that I had been led to this place at that time. It was a time of transition in my life as my second child was leaving home to go to university and I recognized the need to mark this transition and work through its meaning for me.

The experience was profound. Freed from the noise, hustle and bustle of the city, the bombardment on the senses of sights, smells and sounds of the country was profound. I developed a routine of walking meditations, spending hours outdoors, regardless of the weather. If I walked the labyrinth, the crunch and the smell of the tall grasses marking its sweeping curves was my companion. If I walked down the lane toward the hermitage, I was aware of the diversity of wild flowers in bloom; the hum of bees; the smell of the earth from puddles on the rutted track. If I walked along the trail following a stream, I was amazed at the undergrowth; the lush ferns; the carpet of needles under the pine trees.

If I sat in the early morning sun for meditation, facing the garden with several varieties and colours of sunflowers; cosmos; dahlias; tomatoes; squash; onions; dill; lettuce; beets and potatoes, it was difficult not to be distracted! But most profound was the quiet. I noticed the sounds of silence; the sounds of birds; the sounds of the cows and the sheep eating when visiting the barns. It was as if my hearing had been fine-tuned! The absence of car horns; revving engines; sirens; yelling; and in general, the continual drone that bombards the city dwellers' existence was so noticeable as to be "deafening." The silence was immensely therapeutic and it was definitely associated with slowing down; with being able to rest; to reflect. At last; here was a place of refuge; a place of quiet; a place that allowed comfortable and supported silence.

The time I spent at the Ignatius Jesuit Centre was immensely valuable. Through prayer; scripture reading; meditation; writing and expressions of creativity, I was able to gain a perspective on my life and to make decisions about going forward. The physical environment was integral to this. The sights, the smells, the connection to the earth, the silence all contributed to this profound spiritual experience.

At noon on the eighth day, the retreatants were allowed to talk. I was so surprised to learn who my silent companions had been. Many had come hundreds of kilometers to be there! They too had heard about Loyola House as a place of refreshment and renewal. An Episcopalian priest had come by car from Alabama; two elderly sisters had driven from Iowa; a retreat director had come from New Jersey; a youth pastor had come from Hamilton; a university professor had come from Washington. Those of us who had come

from the Greater Toronto Area felt quite ordinary by comparison, shocked to realize that we were envied ready access to this oasis. Many came regularly as part of their annual discipline of sustaining their spiritual practices.

In talking about my time at Loyola House to others after the retreat, I came to realize the tremendous value of the experience I had had there. For a period of several days, I had been in sacred space, fed and supported in multiple ways by the land itself as well as by the people of the Ignatius Jesuit Centre. I want to return to the Centre for spiritual renewal by spending time on retreat. I want friends, family and those whom I do not know but who are fellow sojourners seeking spiritual sustenance to be able to benefit from the experience when the time may be right for them. I want the Centre and the surrounding environment of silence; of farmland and meadow, and the night sky to be there when they need it.

From my perspective, it is the opportunity to connect with God's creation that makes Loyola House a place of spiritual retreat and renewal. I believe that if the proposed immense commercial development of some 155,000 square feet were to go ahead, this would fundamentally alter the quality of the Ignatius Jesuit Centre as a place of quiet and refuge. There would be inevitable increase in traffic; decreased sense of security on the property by curiosity seekers wondering about a potential shortcut "just up this road"; destruction of habitat for bird, animal and insect populations. Further, light pollution emanating from parking facilities would impede the view of the night sky. Thus, in

significant ways the essential qualities of the retreat centre property and value of it as a sacred space would be lost.