

## **WITNESS STATEMENT OF BARBARA SHEPPARD**

### **A BRIEF PERSONAL FAITH HISTORY**

I am a Toronto social worker employed full-time by St. Michael's Hospital to practice psychotherapy and counselling in a community family practice clinic.

I was born in 1948 and, although baptized Anglican, was raised without religious tradition. Having married a Roman Catholic, I converted to Roman Catholicism in 1980. I became active with the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace group in my local parish, St. John's in the east end of Toronto, and attended Mass regularly. In the late 1980's I moved my place of worship to the Newman Centre located on the University of Toronto campus and there developed an interest in Creation Spirituality which acknowledges the sacred nature of our Earth and all of creation.

In about 1994, however, I became disenchanted with ways in which the Church hierarchy discouraged the participation of women in the Church. Consequently I joined an Anglican parish, the Church of the Redeemer, becoming a regular and very active member of that worshipping community. For instance, from about 1995 – 2005, a friend and I were responsible for selecting quotations (vetted by the clergy) to be displayed on the Church's outdoor sign at the corner of Avenue Road and Bloor Street. The quotations have been of a spiritual nature and designed to stimulate thoughtful and prayerful reflection by passers-by. I served on the Church's Advisory Board for 4 years, a group responsible with the clergy for discerning the pastoral direction of the parish. I was a leader of the catechesis group in 2005. I served on one of the 9:30 worship teams for several years, taking responsibilities in turn for reading scripture during services, writing

and leading prayers of the faithful during services, greeting and hospitality, and chancel set-up for services. I served as Eucharistic minister.

My faith has led me to 2 volunteer positions outside parish life. I served a term on the Board of Downtown Churchworkers (now called Moorelands Community Services), an Anglican organization devoted to providing summer camp and winter recreational activities for underprivileged children. For the past 3 years I have served as one of the non-Native members of the Working Committee (an informal "Board") of Toronto Urban Native Ministry (TUNM). It is funded cooperatively by the United, Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches to provide Native pastoral and outreach services to Aboriginal Christian peoples who wish also to maintain and nurture their Native spiritual traditions. One of the mandates of TUNM has been to promote healing between Native and non-Native peoples, given the suffering experienced by Native children and families because of Residential Schools. I love Native spirituality for its connection with nature and creation.

In the meantime, I had begun to grow spiritually and realized a great hunger for God that could not be satisfied through weekly community worship. I sought out spiritual direction and retreat experiences. Both of these fuelled my growing desire for a deeper communion with God. I have worked with 3 spiritual directors and made numerous retreats. Within the context of this incredible growth in love and need for God, I began in 2004 to study at Regis College (part of the Toronto School of Theology at the University of Toronto) to obtain a Diploma in Spiritual Direction. St. Michael's Hospital, recognizing the importance of spirituality to the overall well-being of people, (the importance of spirituality for health has been supported by research), and the increasing

acknowledgement of its helpfulness by the social work profession, is covering my tuition costs.

In June of 2005, I left the Anglican Church of the Redeemer to return to the Catholic Church. Somehow, the Anglican context could no longer satisfy my hunger for the mystical, and I find that need more fully satisfied in the Catholic Eucharist. Because of my love of Ignatian Spirituality, I joined the Jesuit parish of Our Lady of Lourdes Church in downtown Toronto. At the same time, I have developed an additional interest in a practice of meditation that has its roots in Zen Buddhist meditation and is practiced by Christians in the form of Centering Prayer. (I teach a secular form called "mindfulness meditation" in my counselling practice at St. Michael's Hospital because of its researched and proven benefits for emotional and physical health and for management of chronic pain.)

### **MORE ABOUT MY SPIRITUAL BELIEFS AND PRACTICES**

I assume it is unnecessary to describe the basic tenets of Christianity. However, I will attempt in an informal way to describe my own wider spiritual perspective that might form a bridge to conversation with non-Christians. My hope is that this rather personal approach will help others to understand why the quiet, undisturbed, uncommercialized peace of the Ignatian property in Guelph is so vital to my spiritual being.

As way of introduction, I read a book review in the Globe and Mail a while ago. The book was "Universe on a T-Shirt: The Quest for the Theory of Everything" by Dan Falk. The review described how Einstein's space-time theory has been challenged by ways of making sense of the universe in terms of multiple hidden spatial dimensions. (A metaphor for hidden dimension described by the book reviewer was the straw -- that at a

distance it appears flat, but from a close angle one can see that it has depth and shape.) There are versions of this idea such as "string theory" and "brane (membrane) models", all of which, some physicists expect, will account for many unexplained phenomenon that don't quite fit Einstein's expectations. This all attests to the amazing capabilities of the human mind to question and reason. For me, if such additional dimensions exist, they further attest to the infinitely mysterious and, in the end, humanly incomprehensible, beautiful interlocking puzzle of Creation. And in there somewhere is the Creator (as I can only understand from the limits of my human experience) of Creation. I also personally believe that our Creator loves this Creation.

As another way of introduction: When I look into my own experience, I know that I have an intense longing for relationship -- with the land and specific places, with community and specific people. I feel deeply and love and long deeply. As this longing and deep feeling grows, I come to feel more closely connected to the person I was "meant" or "born" to be. I can only say that I believe that human beings' capacity to love and grow is an aspect of God's love for Creation, including love for human beings. I believe that part of the inherent constitution of every person, in addition to temperament, brain, and biology and sometimes as part of felt experience, is a yearning for connection with others and with God. I believe these yearnings are positive and life-giving, carrying the possibility of taking us to greater commitment and love of other people and of ourselves. They offer a sense of security that we as individuals are not alone, even when in the human world we feel alone or not adequately loved, and that in the mix of human feeling and human experience, God is present in our lives, even when we are not aware of it. I don't mean that we don't have responsibility for our lives. And I don't discount that

we are, as human beings, capable of behaving horribly out of fear, hate, and indifference. Just that we don't walk alone, so to speak. Also (and I guess this is a paradox), when I look back at events in my life, I see that somehow "things/people have happened" in mysterious (God-triggered) ways to support me along the way.

My connection with earth and nature meets with my need and connection with people and community. All come together in God. A couple of years ago, I attended a discussion group offered by the Canadian Forum on Religion and Ecology. CFORE is a multi-religious forum supported by people who understand our relationship with the earth as a spiritual issue. Stephen Scharper, Professor of Religion and Ecology at the University of Toronto at the time, asked participants to travel back with him 200 years to eavesdrop on conversations at Fort York. The soldiers spoke and journalled about the constant roaring sound that kept them awake at night. It was not the roaring of the waves of Lake Ontario. It was the roaring of the wind in the endless forest of oaks, stretching for miles and miles across what is now Ontario and New York State. (Today only 5% of this forest remains, and it is endangered.) Professor Scharper then asked us to fast forward to our childhood days, remembering a tree, cottage, or garden that had brought us quiet moments of centred peace. Is that place still there? Do we experience its loss as a spiritual loss? ..... My Uncle Martin's Streetsville farm, my childhood place of peace in the country and place of connection with this grandfatherly figure who I loved deeply, is now a subdivision. I was deeply struck by the importance of cherishing and preserving what natural, sacred places of spiritual comfort and peace remain in my life.

So, to summarize, I would say that my spirituality is connected with my God-given yearnings for connection to God, people and place as well as with the way I

experience creation and God's love of creation and myself, all of which are interconnected in some mysterious way. Spirituality isn't for me about logic. It's about hope, longing, and connection with land and community. Spirituality for me is also a process, sometimes painful and frustrating but pulled to know God more intimately. Overall it is taking me to a place of greater security, reverence for God and nature and the world, and deeper feeling.

### **MY SPIRITUAL PRACTICES IN RELATION TO NATURE AND TO THE IGNATIUS JESUIT CENTRE**

I have visited 5 retreat centres, each within affordable distance from Toronto. The Ignatius Jesuit Centre, however, with its unique natural surround, is the only centre that can satisfy my spiritual needs. It is an essential part of my spiritual life. I have made at least ten 8-day and 5-day silent retreats at Loyola House, at different seasons of the year, as well as week-end retreats. This year I am making the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises over a 12-month series of retreats (rather than over one 40-day unit of time.)

The Ignatian Spiritual Centre meets the 3 essential criteria for my spiritual needs: silence, spiritual direction and daily community worship, and prayerful natural spaces for meditation in solitude. Although the chapel is of course important and essential as a place of prayer, it is the silence and beauty of the acres of undisturbed land that is most fundamental. It is also the element most missing in urban life and most difficult to access. I am incredibly grateful to have found it at the Ignatian Spiritual Centre.

Contemplative prayer or meditation is not the same thing as quiet thinking. It is not a relaxation exercise. It is a way of intensely focusing one's attention. It is about seeking God in oneself and in one's surroundings while paradoxically knowing oneself as

sought and loved by God. It is about tuning in to another dimension of existence, the most real and essential dimension, the underlying dimension.

I spend hours sitting in the fields and in the woods and walking the trails to meditate. I find the Willow Dome a wonderful place for meditation. The beautiful woods and marsh of the Great Auk Trail, the Willow Trails, and the fields near the Old Hermitage are especially important for me. At night, I walk the outdoors to take in the night sky and sense of peace in darkness. I find it helpful to dance outdoors reverentially after sunset as a way of making exterior the inner movements of love and longing in the private, quiet, solitude of the evening. (Dancing at night requires a flat, paved space away from the retreat house: The parking lot behind the old Novitiate, overlooking the landscape surrounding Marymount Cemetery, is good for this.) In addition, I frequently spend time at Marymount Cemetery where, although my father is not buried here, I am able to connect with him and nurture a sense of continuity with important people in my life who have died.

I have found healing in communion with this land while making retreats. It calls back memories of childhood visits to family farms and my love for farming aunts and uncles. Connection with this land satisfies a deep longing for connection with God and nature. In the sacred silence, quiet beauty of the land and oasis from reminders of urban commercial values, I am able to hear God's music most clearly. Here I can be attentive to God in the wildlife, vegetation, trees and natural waters. I am able to connect with nature's natural rhythms of the day and of the seasons. I am able, in meditating in the natural surroundings, to find a harmony of inner and outer place and being. I experience awe and wonder in a way I have never before known. In beginning to develop a growing

openness to mystery and to the certainty of uncertainty, I experience a dawning relief and humility that I can't and don't need to predict, plan and control my future. Rather, contentment will come in "letting go and letting God".

Additionally, in the quiet solitude of these natural surroundings, I have been able to discover and feel affirmed in God's femininity. I find this a life-giving experience not supported in traditional worship.

### **HOW DOES THE RETREAT EXPERIENCE INFLUENCE MY WORK AND BEING IN THE WORLD?**

Prayer and contemplation in the acres of natural surroundings of Loyola House is not an escape from the world or self-indulgent narcissism. It is essential to nurturing and restoring me spiritually. It provides me an essential way of renewing and re-energizing myself, preventing burning-out in a very demanding job. It is a job in which I provide counselling and psychotherapy to high-risk clients who struggle to overcome challenges often related to trauma and marginalization. Because of my retreats, I am able to listen attentively and be helpful, for instance, to a person facing terminal illness or suffering as the result of being victim of a random drive-by shooting. Without these retreats and renewal in the meditative natural spaces on the land, I could not do this work.

Having experienced a sense of interconnected relationship with my own personal history, other people, wildlife and the land while on retreats, I have developed a sense that when one of these elements suffers, we all suffer. I feel a kind of reverence for everything and am reminded of my obligations as a human being towards the world and nature. I am enabled to return to Toronto and bring to my work a heightened sense of the

sacred character of each person I meet. This has been very helpful in my work and personal life.

**HOW WOULD COMMERCIAL DEVELOPMENT AT THE NORTH-WEST CORNER OF WOODLAWN AND WOOLWICH IMPACT ON MY SPIRITUAL PRACTICE?**

I hope that the answer to this question is by now obvious. Silence, solitude and outdoor surroundings that are truly natural are essential to retreats. Physical reminders of commercial values are an impingement. Any commercial development adjacent to Marymount Cemetery or the Ignatius Jesuit Centre would be so jarring (in terms of sound, appearance, lights, and value-messages) as to destroy the capacity for meditation. The lights after dusk from development would destroy the option of evening meditation.

I travelled very recently to Guelph for a retreat and took a taxi from the bus depot to Loyola House. It was dark, but the taxi driver told me there were signs at the corner of preparations for digging. This was a very unusual retreat for me in that I didn't get outside much. This wasn't because of poor weather, because weather never keeps me from the land, but because I had come specifically to focus my time in the chapel praying with Jesus in his active ministry. I'm very glad not to have been on the land, though, since I know I would have been very upset (frustrated, angry, and grieving) by any disturbance at the corner and unable to concentrate on my purpose for being on this particular retreat.

There are other possible locations in and near Guelph for commercial development. There are many places where people might go to shop. But there is only one place where people can go to worship and meditate in the unique and sacred way I

and other people from around the world have come to treasure at the Ignatian Centre. It is precious.

Once the sacred nature of this retreat centre is spoiled, there will be no other accessible locations for myself and many other people to renew our spiritual lives. Silence, solitude and peace are delicate.

### **MY PERSONAL MISSION STATEMENT**

I really don't know if this, my personal Mission statement that I keep nearby me at work for frequent inspiration, will be useful here. However, I will include it in case it helps put into perspective my need for peace and stillness at the Ignatian Jesuit Centre. The kind of retreat experience currently available at the Centre (but easily destroyed by neighbouring commercial development) is essential to my hopes and goals expressed in the Mission statement.

#### **MY WORK MISSION STATEMENT**

Pain-bearing, life-bestowing, love-lavishing, companion God:  
I delight that you have given us such wondrous capacity  
for creative transformation and genuine hope, springing from our inner sacred essence.  
You call us to nurture life in each other  
through healthy interdependence and within just social structures.

I commit to solidarity with marginalized people and to calling for a freed world.

I commit to walking as psychotherapist with fellow human beings  
in all our great diversity.

May I recognize the unique beauty and integrity  
of each person with whom I am privileged to journey.

I desire to be an instrument of your hope.

May I strive to continually develop and maintain proven skills of helping.

May I use my skills gratefully, thoughtfully and well.

May I not fear but embrace the deep suffering of those most vulnerable and challenged,  
secure in your gently holding presence.

With vitality, wonder and humility,  
may I bring my whole heart, attentiveness,  
and full awareness of my own brokenness to every relational encounter,

inviting space for your sacred truth to be realized.  
May I always respond to my need to replenish in your unconditional love,  
in human community,  
in creation and contemplation,  
to let go of the illusion of control and responsibility for what is not mine,  
but to desire only fulfillment within you.  
Grant me the gift of self-forgiveness,  
That I am humanly imperfect and cannot perfectly be for others.  
Nurture my love, trust, resolve, gratitude, and inner stillness.