

[On Sunday Dec. 28, three people shared their reflections. So far we have two; the other will be added when it becomes available. (Admin.)]

Toronto United Mennonite Church

Sunday, December 28, 2014

Cheryl Valkenburg

On a certain level, as humans we all know our own limitations and that none of us will live on this Earth forever. And then sometimes, events happen in our lives that lead us to be aware of our own mortality on a deeper level. As I reflect on this past year, I'm very aware of the fact that if I had not received some kind of treatment, the tumour that was rapidly growing in my chest would have most likely taken my life by now. On the day the emergency room doctor told my husband, Albert, and I that there was a large mass in my chest that was likely cancerous, and I called close family and friends, I couldn't help but tell them that God was telling me that I would get through this. It probably sounded crazy as we knew nothing about the kind of cancer, available treatments or if the cancer had spread to any other part of my body. But I knew it to be true in the depth of my soul and I clung to this belief over the next months.

I grew up in Kitchener going to Glencairn Mennonite Brethren Church and I met Albert at Conrad Grebel at the University of Waterloo. We got married in May 2013 and moved to Toronto to be closer to his work as an electrical engineer and I left my job as a manager at the Elmira MCC Thrift Shop. I felt very out of place in this big city and we felt strongly that we wanted to find a church community to connect with. Although I grew up in the Mennonite faith, and Albert in the Dutch CRC, we both were open to other denominations and checked out a few churches. Nothing seemed to fit with us until we came to TUMC. Neither of us grew up singing hymns and although we still stumble through most of the songs, we've found the heart of this community to be incredibly welcoming. When I was diagnosed this past May, we had only been coming to TUMC for a few months, and yet I knew that if I asked for prayer, you would all be right behind us. And you definitely were. We didn't come to TUMC very often during my chemo treatments due to my white blood cell count being low, but it was incredible to know that you were all holding us up in prayer even if you had no idea what we even looked like! Thank you for the prayers, the hugs, words of encouragement, dinner invitations and emails. They all meant so much to us.

When we came to Toronto the plan was that I would find work in the non-profit sector as I had loved working for MCC and developed a heart for the mission.

I looked for almost a year for full-time work in the non-profit sector and after 7 interviews, hundreds of resumes, visiting a career centre and even making cold calls, still no job. Through a friend of Albert's I got an interview at a merchandising company and although this was not at all where I had thought God was originally leading me, it was a job. After a month and a half of working there, I was diagnosed with cancer and I figured I would likely lose my job and not qualify for unemployment insurance as I hadn't put in enough hours. I was floored when the owners told me that I could come in when I felt well enough and no matter what I would still have a job there. Not only that but they didn't want me to worry about money while going through this so they paid me my full wages, even though sometimes I was off for weeks at a time. More than the money, it was great to know that I could go in to work and have some normalcy when I was feeling well, and stay home on days that my body just wouldn't let me get out of bed. Although the profit-driven mentality still drives me crazy sometimes and I long to get back in to the non-profit sector at some point, I know that I'm there for a reason right now and I pray that I can allow God to work in me and through me while I'm there.

My prayer for God to work in me and through me has been on my mind as I went through a biopsy, bone marrow aspiration, many scans, 6 rounds of chemo and 18 rounds of radiation. Each appointment I went to, I prayed for God to go before me and prepare not only the people who were going to be working on me but also prepare me and my heart for the work He was going to do. I should know better by now that when we pray for God to use us as vessels for Him, He actually listens and will call us to do things we never thought we were capable of doing. One day I heard God's call so strongly and this experience has changed my life. I struggled with whether or not to share this experience with you today because I don't want it to come off as if I'm special for hearing and listening to God. My hope is that this story points back to Him and His greatness.

I was at the Sunnybrook Cancer Centre waiting to have my PET/CT scan that would determine how many rounds of radiation I needed. I had received my injection of radioactive glucose and was out in a waiting room waiting to be called in for the scan. There was a man in a hospital bed across from me with a woman and a nurse standing beside him. The man looked to be about my father's age and looked tired and weak. A doctor made his way over to the bed and began to tell him his scan results. He told them that the tumours in his brain had not shrunk from the chemo, but in fact had grown. He went on to say that he had two options: one was to have surgery to remove the larger of the two tumours. The other option: he began by saying that because this man was 61 years old; they could talk about end-of-life options. 61 years old? And he's supposed to be okay with dying? This didn't sit well with me. The man decided he wanted to go ahead with the surgery as I think most of us would. The doctor left and the man lay there with his eyes closed and the nurse and woman tried to make small talk with each other. I

sat across from them and stirred. I felt weird that I had heard such private information about this man's life and I knew I needed to pray for him. As I prayed for him I felt as though that wasn't enough. I silently argued with God that I was already doing a good job of praying in my head but He was pushing me to voice my prayers. My heart raced as the pushing not only didn't go away, but got stronger.

I finally stood up, walked over to the woman beside the man's bed and said "I don't know what your beliefs are but I feel very strongly that I want to pray for him. Would that be okay?". She looked confused but said okay. I asked his name and it was Terry. As I turned around to Terry's bedside, his eyes were closed and I asked him as well if I could pray for him. He nodded. I placed a hand on his shoulder and asked God to carry him through this time as his body felt weak. I asked for comfort for him and his family and for guidance for each doctor ahead of him. I know I said more but it's a bit of a blur as I shook and cried through most of my prayer. I opened my eyes to find tears streaming down Terry's face as well.

We looked each other in the eyes and he whispered "thank you". I told him that my faith was what has gotten me through my cancer journey and I wanted to share that with him. This is all I know about Terry. I don't know what happened before or after that moment in his life. However, I hope that someday we'll meet again in Heaven and I believe we will instantly recognize each other.

I'm so thankful for the opportunity to continue to learn, make mistakes, grow, love and make more mistakes here on Earth. I certainly have had times when I'm anxious and down and I know there are likely more times like this to come. But mostly I'm excited for what the future holds for Albert and I and I know that with our eyes focused on God, we can celebrate the good times and thrive through the trials.

Persons Who Have Inspired Me In 2014 ***Bill DeFehr***

I wonder what Simeon would have said if he had been told that more than 2000 years later the child, Jesus, that he was looking at, would be considered one of the most inspirational individuals in history.

Jesus continues to inspire us, yes, and people around us inspire us as well. As I reflected on the past year people quickly came to mind who inspired me through their various achievements but mostly through their faith and values.

First of all, there are a number of definitions of the word "inspire" but I am thinking of someone who spurs me on; who enlivens me; someone who encourages me to make the most of life; who is an example to me.

I didn't have to look far--right here at TUMC I thought immediately of Cheryl (who just spoke to us) and JD Penner--both have shown amazing strength of character, optimism and determination in dealing with very difficult medical issues.

Throughout my teaching career as a high counselor many students have also inspired me. But, I decided to focus on four persons who are related to me—I hope you don't mind.

My niece, Leana, and her husband Dennis let it be known that their travelling days were pretty well over and they were extending an open invitation to relatives and friends to visit them. So, on our trip south last February we dropped by for a couple of days.

Dennis and Leana live in Woodstock, a pretty town just north of Atlanta, Georgia. Dennis is a real southerner, born and raised in the area. How Leana, born in Winnipeg, and a CMBC grad, ended up there is another story.

They met a number of years ago when Leana was working as a massage therapist and Dennis was getting treatment for Multiple Sclerosis. Dennis was already in a wheelchair. He had been a talented athlete, a college football star and after that had managed a sporting goods store—and then was diagnosed with MS. They each have two adult children from previous marriages.

They both love life and each have an incredible sense of humour. And it only takes minutes after you meet them to be laughing. They have a great relationship with their adult children—who are now either in college or employed.

They are very much in love with each other. At one point Marlene said to Leana, "You look so happy." Leana responded with, "I am very happy." Quoting Dennis, "I'd be a total mess without my wife Leana. She helps me with every aspect of my life. I'm convinced that God sent her to me. When Leana is with me I don't feel disabled."

They both love cooking and up to a couple of years ago they ran a family catering business as a sideline, which Dennis named "Rednecks' Gourmet". He told me that he's not the redneck—his customers are the rednecks! They took their portable smoker from fairground to fairground. I think that they did it so they could entertain while they cooked.

Which is quite something when one considers that for a number of years now Dennis has had double vision and from his neck down only has very limited mobility in his left wrist and two fingers and must be moved from bed to wheelchair using a Hoyer Lift. However, he can still run his high-tech, battery-powered wheelchair with his two fingers.

Up until just recently he was employed as a teacher's assistant at a local high school to work with teens who have behavior problems. He also coached the school team to its first lacrosse championship even though he never played lacrosse.

One time we noticed that Dennis had left our restaurant table to join and encourage the street musician across the street.

Dennis showed me around his "garage gallery" where he had posted all kinds of photos of him while he was a young, very talented athlete. There were several photos of him with Bobby Cox, long-time Atlanta Braves manager and former Blue Jays manager.

Dennis now chairs their condo committee and he is a leading member of the board of their local Methodist church. He attends both services each Sunday.

So, why was I inspired by Dennis and Leana in 2014? It is their love for, and commitment to, each other; it is their helping and encouraging of others less fortunate than themselves; it is how they cope with adversity with courage and humour; it is how they spread joy.

Some of you are aware that I was asked to make a presentation about my grandfather, CA DeFehr, to the Heritage Club in November. It was in preparation for that speech that I was again reminded of how important he was in my life and what an inspiration he has been to me.

We've all heard similar stories many times. A Mennonite family, quite successful in Russia and then after the revolution they must flee and leave everything. My grandfather also had many close calls and finally in 1919 he and his family had to leave their home and a highly successful farm implement factory that at one point had 200 employees. They came to Canada in 1925.

Much can be said but about CA, who lived to be 97, but I will just quote a few sentences from one article about him. This one by Harold Jantz, in his book "LEADERS WHO SHAPED US." The article was titled "C.A. DeFehr: In Business For The Lord", "We may never know whether Cornelius A. DeFehr made it his goal to

set an example of how to put one's entrepreneurial skills at the service of Christ and the church. What we do know is that within the Mennonite Brethren circles few did it better during a period when they were entering the Canadian Business world as never before"

In addition to running a successful family business (with branches in 3 Western provinces) he took a leading role in establishing the Mennonite Brethren Collegiate, the Elmwood M.B. Church, the M.B. Bible College (which evolved into Canadian Mennonite University). He was also very involved in inter-Mennonite projects like the Mennonite Collegiate Institute in Gretna and Concordia Hospital in Winnipeg.

My grandparents made 4 MCC service trips to Paraguay (two lasted almost a year each) to assist refugees settling there from Europe. They were in their late 60's and took a lot of risks. One important result of CA's work in Paraguay, in which he and several others played a major role, was the formation of MEDA (Mennonite Economic Development Associates).

What inspired me again about my grandfather? His commitment to his faith in a very practical way; his encompassing *Weltanschauung*—he was open to new ideas and he was inclusive regarding other Mennonite groups and other peoples (like his fellow Russians); and his willingness to give of his time and talents for worthwhile causes; and that he was a risk-taker.

At different times Marlene and I find ourselves focusing on one of our 4 grandchildren and then another, generally depending on what activity they are involved in. This year our 11 year-old Jada has been getting a little more of our attention. Jada will never walk beside you--she skips or dances beside you. Last January she auditioned for the National Ballet School's Summer Programme. We heard that there were 1500 applicants from across Canada and only 40 would be accepted.

Well we had a great month of July with Jada. We pushed our piano into the furnace room so we could make a girl-cave for her in our small downstairs room. Everyday we did the 12-minute drive to the school main campus on Jarvis. I insisted on driving her every day even when her parents were also staying with us.

Each morning at 6:45 am, and without any hesitation, Jada would quickly get up. The daily before-breakfast challenge for her was to get her hair in a perfect "bun". My suggestion that she get a "bun" hairpiece didn't go over very well.

When we'd ask her each day about how things went, the usual answer was "Awesome"--even though the workouts were very rigorous. What a thrill it was to be able to see what she and her classmates accomplished after just four weeks.

We were expecting that Jada would complete the summer programme and start school in Stratford in September as usual. However, she, along with 15 other young girls from around the world, was invited to join the Grade 6 class of the National Ballet School, which included room and board at their residence along with a demanding academic and ballet programme.

The family decision was not an easy one, but it was unanimous. After, all as Jada said, how could she pass up this opportunity? She would never forgive herself. Jada was keen and ready to take on the challenge of 9 1/2 hours of demanding classes each day. She was quoted in a couple of articles in local newspapers, "I'm really looking forward to having more independence and definitely improving in my ballet." --said this 11 year-old! After a quick, enthusiastic start, things became a little rocky when Jada realized that being away from her close-knit family for more than 5 days a week (NBS has classes on Saturday mornings as well) was quite a bit more difficult than she had expected.

However, with strong support from her family, and the school, she persevered and on Dec. 14 she made her debut with the National Ballet Company in *The Nutcracker* at the Four Seasons Performing Arts Centre. A minor role, of course, but a thrilling experience for Jada, her family and many, many friends.

Just as an aside, when Jada's 9-year-old brother Ben was with us a couple of weeks ago, we drove past Maitland Avenue, where the NBS residence is. Marlene said, "Ben, Jada lives just down this street." After just a moments hesitation, Ben responded, "Jada does not live there! She only stays there!" Mind you, they've both told me individually that when they get together on weekends, they now get along really well.

How did Jada inspire me in 2014? It was inspiring to see how motivated she is to follow her dream. I was inspired by her love for, and commitment to, her family. And finally, I was inspired by her ability to think things through and understand what it is about ballet that has captured her. To quote Jada, "The music in ballet is really beautiful, and I love moving to it. I just feel like I can sort of express myself."

This has been a humbling experience for me. It has also pointed out the importance of recognizing and acknowledging people who have inspired me each year. I want to remain open to the inspiration of others.

And it has led me to the question, “How can I, in 2015, be encouraging, be an example, and perhaps even be an inspiration to others?”

William DeFehr