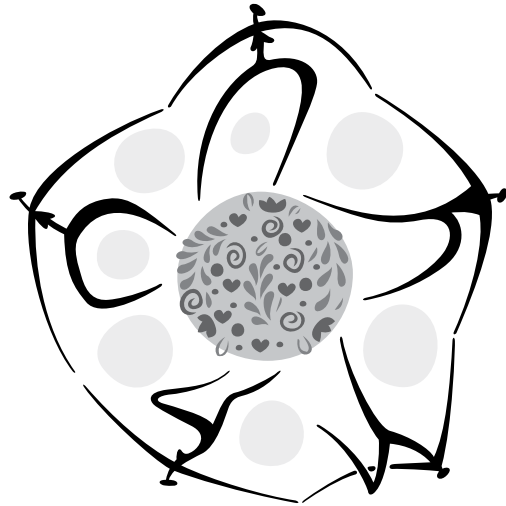


Finding my **raison d'être**— or is it my recent **debt**?



What exactly is stewardship?

Genesis chapters 1 and 2 are less an early account of our creation and more a summary of our purpose. There we hear of land, sea, plants, animals, and even human beings. And it was all good. Somehow in that account we have a sense of an interconnectedness, of how everything fits together.

In my own life, when I have strayed from being connected, when I have separated myself from creation and the Creator, when I have set out my own purpose (fame, fortune, fortress), I have felt disconnected, dislocated, and disoriented.

It's at moments of anxiety like these that we discover who our real gods are. In the affluent West of the 21st century, we hide our fears in things, in amassing what our culture tells us we

What would **Jesus** buy?



What our monthly credit card bill says about our stewardship

There is a lot of talk these days about “family values.” I am often curious how these values manifest themselves. How do we know when we live values we profess with our lips?

The Bible frequently speaks of “bearing fruit,” when our faith takes on some form to demonstrate that it is active and engaged. As James might say, “Faith without works is dead.”

So here's a simple exercise in “family values.” Next time you get your monthly bank statement or your credit card bill, read it carefully. What were your major purchases? Who were these items bought for?

At a critical point in Jesus' ministry, his brother and mother confront him and ask him to stop what he is doing lest he deprive his family of a close relation. His rebuke is stinging when he asks, "Who is my brother, who is my mother?" He answers his own question when he says that those who perform acts that fulfill his vision are his family.

Read Matthew 25:35-36 and you get a sense of what that vision is: the naked clothed, the homeless housed, the stranger welcomed, the prisoner visited. Does your bank statement read that way?

If the vast majority of our purchases are for things that have nothing to do with Jesus' vision, or even our vision, why are we buying them? Who told us we have to? Do they bring us peace of mind, satisfaction, or real joy?

Isn't it time we had a serious conversation with ourselves, with someone wise and thoughtful, perhaps in prayer? Given what we have, what we need, and what this vision that stirs us requires, what are we doing with the resources we've received? The time for that conversation is now.



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need in order to be legitimate, to matter. And the more afraid we are that we don't matter, the more we buy.

Recent economic studies indicate that Canadians are more indebted today than at any other time in our history—ironically, at a time when unemployment is low, incomes are rising, and times are good.

Canadians are not very generous with charitable givings. We are not sharing. We are not connecting. But does this fearful living move us closer to happiness? Apparently not, because anxiety, stress, and panic are everywhere.

In his book *Becoming Human*, Jean Vanier says that we discover our true identity when we connect to one another, particularly when we share of our true selves with one another. The very act of reaching out beyond ourselves is spiritual; it is a tangible demonstration that we care. Whether this act is volunteering our time, writing a cheque for a worthy cause, or working to better our community, it is a sermon—our sermon.

If I truly believe that God made me for a reason, that there is something inherently worthy about me, then using my gifts as an act of commitment rather than simply spending on material things to silence my fears is something I am called to do. And that something is what we call stewardship.



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If I were a
gift what gift
would **I be?**



Our gift is God's stewardship

A friend of mine told me that she was "complex, not complicated." I like that. None of us can boil down our essence into a simple one-word explanation. We are all complex—a mixture of contradictions, dysfunctional behaviours, glorious insights, amazing talents—a circus of personalities.

But what would we say about ourselves if we could give the eulogy at our own funeral? How would we sum up that complex body of work and energy?

In the early church, Paul thought that the gifts were many and the purpose quite focused. Some were teachers; some were healers; some were preachers; and some spoke in strange tongues. And yet the gifts themselves were part of a rich tapestry that together hung like a quilt. The quilt could be a blanket to keep us warm or a work of art, but it could be only a limited number of things.

The
Eleventh
Commandment: Thou **Shalt**
Compost



The stewardship of creation

Creation is in trouble. Not just global warming threatens it, but also landfills that are overflowing, wildlife species that are becoming extinct, water becoming poisoned—to name just a few problems. The reasons for these crises are easy to see: overpopulation, overconsumption, an ethos that the earth is a commodity that is meant to be exploited.

Luke 12:24 talks about the ravens and how little they need or have, and the beauty of the lilies, how "even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these" (verse 27). So why do we move beyond our needs to push this planet to the brink?

The three Rs of the environmental movement are reduce, reuse, and recycle. Most of us are pretty good at recycling and reusing but really struggle with reducing. Again, it takes a change in vision to see creation as a beauty capable of filling our hungry souls. Maybe you “can’t eat scenery,” but you can be satisfied by the smell of the ocean, the sound of tall grass blowing in the wind, the touch of rich soil in your hands. Sometimes what it takes to reduce what you use is to fill the void of “having” with the peace of being—being one part of a larger whole.

In church we can do away with bulletins (why are our bulletins so long in the United Church?), by holding more services outdoors, and by thinking outside the box and moving our sanctuaries to more cost-effective venues.

Next time you are on summer vacation, take note of the flowers and plants in the ditches along the highway. This is truly nature’s cathedral.



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Likewise, you and I have a huge variety of talents, but only a limited number of ways to harness this energy for something that gives us meaning.

The great commandment tells us that we can love others only if we love ourselves. Do you love yourself; do you believe you have something worthy to share and be? It is a radical act of faith to believe this, since our world defines our worth in terms of wealth, beauty, and popularity.

If everyone matters—including us—then what we have been given is a gift, and a gift is meant to be opened and enjoyed. I wonder if we spent more time in prayer considering who we are, what we can share, and where we can share it, whether we’d be a little closer to discovering what this crazy adventure called life is really all about.



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Justice or ? just us ■



How our stewardship contributes to a new world

What was the last cause you joined? What was it that motivated you to care, to get involved?

Sadly, many of the campaigns I see people joining these days involve a high degree of self-interest: preventing something from coming into the neighbourhood, stopping a school closure, or demanding that subsidies be maintained. But how often have we opted to join forces with others in a cause that was greater than our self-interest?

None of us has the time or resources to right every injustice or be part of every worthy movement. But we do have the time, talent, and treasure to make some cause our own, especially one where vulnerable people without access to power need our solidarity. Go to the local coffee shop, attend community meetings, or read your local newspapers and become informed.

Downtime is not a down time



Stewardship of self and renewing the spirit

So what happens when you do and do and do and your energy and spirit are exhausted? What happens when there is literally nothing left inside you to share? Who cares for the caregiver; what sustains the prophet; where do we all go for renewal?

The United Church is often accused of being a “works denomination”—a body of believers who practise deeds of love with little mention of the Spirit that sustains. It’s a fair criticism.

Try as I might—liturgy, Taizé services, walking the labyrinth, buying one of those miniature waterfalls, long periods of silence, devotionals, and meditation exercises—nothing seemed to give me the renewal I was craving. My own Sabbath time came with the discovery of coffee. My high-energy, hard-driving, people-pleasing personality can literally stop and smell the coffee.

When I am truly tired I head to a local café with a good book and hide in the corner. The smell of the coffee beans, the taste of the bold black coffee, sitting on a comfy sofa, the quiet space, and the reflective reading recharge my batteries.

Now everyone is different. While a spa treatment or tai chi may send me over the edge of boredom, that may be just the ticket to regenerate your spirit.

Remember, the psalmist said, “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). Sabbath time is not just to rest between frantic actions—it is also a time to experience the presence of the Holy. Alone with the rhythm of my very fast-paced walk, I can sense I am not alone and be filled with the knowledge and peace of presence.

Making time to listen as well as act re-creates my spirit and enlarges my purpose.



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And don't stop there—expose yourself to stories about marginalized people worldwide, like people in Sudan, people in the Middle East, or fair-trade coffee growers. You can write letters for Amnesty International, join the local chapter of Stephen Lewis's Grandmothers campaign (linking Africa with our continent), or form a cooperative that buys coffee at a fair price.

Why do those of us who seek Jesus care about such things? Because Jesus did. When the rich young ruler was lost and confused, Jesus told him to renounce his power and privilege and he would be healed. Further, Jesus wanted the man to deliver some of his wealth to the poor, to make a concrete change for the many who were poor, and to save the souls of the few who were rich.

When asked what faithfulness is all about, the prophet Micah answers, “To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). You can change your day with a smile, you can make one person happy with a generous deed, but you can truly change our world only when you venture out in an act of justice.



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