On beauty and illness: an interview with Norman Schmidt

Photo: Zuzana Kacerová

Norman Schmidt has lived a full life. In the early 2000s, he retired from a career in professional design and teaching in Winnipeg, Manitoba, where he and his wife, Sharon, currently live. They have also spent a portion of their lives residing in rural Southern Manitoba, where Norman (and Sharon) grew up and where his interest in all things beautiful began. (As a matter of fact, Norman and Sharon's farm in Kleinstadt was just three miles north up the dirt road from where I grew up.)

Norman completed his undergraduate studies in art at the University of Manitoba, and further honed his interests in graduate school at the University of Alberta under the mentorship of Swiss master printer Peter Bartl, earning a Master of Visual Art Degree. Norman's passion for melding art and other ideas led him, over the course of his life, to explore interdisciplinary forms of expression, namely in the literary and visual arts. Over the years, his ideas have been realized as prints (in the book arts), quilts, and kites.

In 2008, Norman began experiencing the first symptoms of a neurological illness that would gradually take over his life, making it near impossible for him to live and do his work as he was once able to do. I visited Norman and Sharon in their apartment in Osborne Village, where they have lived since 2016. Norman spoke to me at length about his life, his illness, his involvement with St. Margaret's Anglican Church, and finally, the way he sees beauty and ugliness in the context of the Christian faith. — Sara Krahn

SK: Can you tell me, as concisely as possible, where you are from and what your upbringing was like?

NS: Well, there's no concise answer because life is not concise. My upbringing was not Mennonite. Even though my family lived in a Mennonite community (the village of Old Altona) and my name is Mennonite; we spoke German. When I was young and just at the edge of my memory, my family left the Mennonite Church, because my father disagreed with some of its practices. My father was brought up a few miles east of Gretna, in the Edinburgh church, which no longer exists. It's now the Gretna Bergthaler Church (where my parents met). After they were married, they began attending the Bergthaler Church in Altona, but for some reason my father had a ministry in the Mennonite Brethren Church, who insisted he be re-baptized in accordance with their method, leading eventually to our family leaving the Mennonites altogether because my parents disagreed with needing to be baptized a second time. My family believed in one baptism. So, my father and our family joined a breakaway church from Anglicanism (which some call the Plymouth Brethren), and only retained a few of the 39 articles from the Anglican Church and none of the Prayer Book and its liturgy. Our gathering was really a very small group, just our family and another family. And we gathered every Sunday morning in our living room around a square table covered in white linen draped to the floor. On it were just three items—a loaf of bread, a goblet of wine, a small square box covered in dark green velvet with a slot for the offering. There, in a simple service of scripture readings, some exposition, singing, and prayer the baptized shared in communion. For this my mother would always bake a special small loaf of bread (Saturday was baking day). In hindsight, this was a kind of contemplative service; an ascetic aesthetic. There were long silences (at least they felt long to me as a child) and the sole focus was on the salvific nature of Christ's crucifixion, of Christ giving His full self for our full self. It was impressed on me that this was very important. For my entire upbringing, there were always two things that were asked of me: Read your Bible and pray. I was given no instruction on how or why, but my mother would remind me every day before I went to bed, up until I was a teenager. As I matured, its merits were affirmed, reading J. I. Packer, an Anglican scholar who stressed in his writings the importance of knowing and praying continually to and communing with the triune God in Word written and word spoken and Holy Communion.

SK: How did you come to be a member of St. Margaret's?

NS: After Sharon and I were married, for a time we continued with the church group from my upbringing. But it became evident after a while that the group was erring in some ways. For instance, they required headdress from women, taking it as a "forever" biblical injunction. Sharon objected to this. She had grown up in the EMMC in Winkler and didn't understand this policy. This was also the 1960s / early '70s, and we got caught up with the sub-cultural rejection of conventional values of that time. Sharon and I did a lot of camping around this time, in the Whiteshell; the forest was our "church." But by the time we were in our 30s, we realized we were missing something in our religious lives. I'm not exactly sure how it came about that we started attending St. Margaret's, probably hearing of it by word-of-mouth. It was the first liturgical church that we had ever gone to. Before that we tried some non-denominational churches, where there was little to no communion. We were looking for a church more focused on Christ. At the time, I was also reading various literature written by Anglicans. I was working as a professor at the University of Manitoba, and I would park North of St. John's College and walk through the College every day. St. John's Chapel had a book rack just outside, and occasionally I would stop by and leaf through some of the documents.

Drawing: ***state of life and death***
Norman's note: ***it is striking to see how the cycle of life is everywhere in evidence in the boreal forest, with seedlings sprouting amongst the mature trees, and aging barely alive trees, and the dead giants***
pen & ink, crayon, 9 x 12 inches, 1980s

SK: Who were some of the authors that you encountered on this book rack?

NS: John Stott, and J.I. Packer (Professor of Theology at Regent College, UBC), and Michael Green were referenced. I bought their books and read exactly the stuff that was missing in my heart. I also had an abridged Anglican prayer book that I began using for my evening prayer. And Sharon and I began reading C.S. Lewis, who drew us further towards Anglicanism. We started attending St. Margaret's in the late 1980s, right before David Widdicombe became the rector. I remember that David was a very good organizer, discerning preacher and erudite teacher, and a very astute observer of people's gifts and abilities. He had a unique gift in that way.

SK: Did you feel motivated towards your gifts through your involvement with the parish?

NS: Yes, certainly. For many years I assisted with communion once per month or more. And in the early years Sharon and I prepared sandwiches that people brought for after-service "fellowship" downstairs. I also helped with an annual art show at St. Margaret's, in the 1990s. The whole sanctuary was transformed for one day. I was a kite-maker and had a large collection of kites. Almost 100. Along with other artworks, some of these I displayed at St Margaret's. They've all been donated now to the schools (in Altona).

SK: I'm wondering if you could comment on what it's like to be a senior member of a parish, but also the experience of not being physically active in a parish where you were once a very active member.

NS: This has been a very difficult thing, hard to talk about, because of my illness causing me to be away from the church family I had grown to love. The church must now come to me.

SK: Could you describe your illness?

NS: It's a very complicated illness and it prevents me from doing anything physically. It's been a very gradual loss of physical function. Sharon and I have lived in this apartment off Osborne since 2016, when I could still get around, but we were never able to attend St. Margaret's together in that time. Once, just prior, after not having been able to commute from the country for a time, I just screwed up my courage and said, we need to go. I've been too ill since.

To describe the illness, I must go back to 2008. That's when I had my first attack. I woke up one morning and I had no hearing in my left ear. It just happened over night and has not returned. Shortly thereafter, I had my first attack of vertigo. To describe vertigo to someone who has never experienced it is difficult. The closest I can come to describing it is like this: imagine spinning yourself around 20 times and trying to remain upright. That's the initial experience of vertigo. It's completely unprovoked by anything. There's no forewarning. You could be brushing your teeth, doing anything at all. It's very dangerous to actually go anywhere. You

drop like an empty sack and are plastered to the ground. Suddenly, as it intensifies gravity has ten times the strength it normally has. This is because the part of the inner ear that normally deals with gravity is sending the wrong signal to the brain. Initially, it was diagnosed as Meniere's Disease in the left ear. I would have a vertigo attack every second or third day, and they would last anywhere from 6-18 hours, and I would go into this weird trance where reality passed over me. I would be in this strange, swirling world, sick as a dog.

Norman in his private printing studio in Altona, Manitoba

Anyway, we left our farm in 2008 and moved to the town of Altona. We had a studio built onto the house and I thought, it would be easier this way. Then my symptoms worsened. I couldn't focus and concentrate. I couldn't hold my tools. This degenerative disease, atypically, developed in my right ear also. My ear specialist then sent me to a neurologist and had dozens of MRIs done. The neurologist said she didn't know what was going on in my brain. The brain was abnormal in that it had areas of atrophy in both cerebrum and cerebellum/brainstem—something you would see in a 90-year-old, but at the time I was still only in my 60s. Finally, one of the MRIs showed what she was looking for related to my symptoms, indicating a second disease: Hypertrophic Olivary Degeneration. The two olivary glands in the base of the cerebellum (which control much of the neural communication with your brain), were swollen. Their malfunction affects speech, hearing, balance, vision, taste, fine motor control, and swallowing. Medication does, thankfully, alleviate some symptoms a bit. My vision remains affected by something called oscillopsia, specifically see-saw oscillopsia, where one eye goes up and one goes down. I still struggle with this, and it makes it very difficult to read because lines will start blurring and overlapping. I feel dizzy and woozy all the time. But I've actually tried to work this into my artwork.

SK: Tell me about that. How has your illness influenced your artwork, your artistic practice, your life as a maker of things?

NS: Well, many things converge. There's the fact that God has allowed this in my life. Why? Every person who gets sick who is a Christ follower will ask: why? There is no answer. Whether there will ever be an answer, I don't know. It's probably better we don't know now. Then, in the convergence, my verbal/visual consciousness has sharpened. I have always been a typographer, and visual art for me has always involved words. But illness has made me rethink some things. When I was teaching in the late 1990s, something new was happening in the world and society. There was a paradigm shift in the culture. Art became ephemeral, non-aesthetic, in stark contrast to my being a maker of objects that might evoke a sense of beauty. I recall the work of a photographer and filmmaker, Edward Burtynsky. He was doing large-scale prints of the destruction that we have done to the earth. But the way he presented this destruction was beautiful. Beauty in ugliness. Beauty to me has always been very important. (Which was one of the things that attracted us to St. Margaret's. The beauty of the liturgical service.)

A linocut proof print and a page spread from Norman Schmidt, *Monarchs, Milkweed, Oyamel Fir Trees*, letterpress book, linocuts (tipped in), hand sewn signatures, canson paper, hand binding in cloth over boards, 24 pp, 2010

Taking a step back. When I was an undergraduate art student, the word beauty was taboo. You couldn't speak it. Art was no longer about making beauty through craft; in fact, art was about nothing I thought it was going to be. It was about expressing one's egoistic self, which to me seemed a terribly selfish enterprise. Its egotism more than puzzled me; I almost quit art school because of this philosophical difference. I thought art for art's sake was the most devilish thing you could do; an effrontery. I did not and still do not agree with that premise for making art.

I wanted to make things that others could engage with in an enduring aesthetic. But ugliness, is, in fact, a necessary collateral to beauty. In fact, you would not know beauty unless you had ugliness. Just as you do not know wellness unless you have been ill.

These are the things that have been deliberately created by God to be part of the human experience. This world is a place of ugliness and suffering, a place Martin Luther said was in the sway of sin, death, and the devil, "the unholy trinity," and it is into this reality that Christ came. He came as a suffering servant; a thing of great beauty for those who see it and feel it—love and sorrow mingled. And this was impressed on me when I was very young.

But in the art world of the 90s, ugliness for its own sake suddenly became celebrated; its ugliness existed solely to be precipitously neutral, without aesthetic purpose. It made me think of some artworks from history. Of Matthais Grünewald's (1480-1528) *Crucifixion*. It's probably the most grotesque image of the crucifixion ever. It was done for St. Anthony's hospital, where patients were being treated for painful skin diseases. Grünewald thought that if he could make this piece as ugly as these people were feeling, it might lift the spirits of the patients, and show them that Christ suffered in the same way they were suffering in the beauty of empathetic symbolism.

I now work in terms of broader philosophical/religious symbolisms. Beauty and ugliness have coalesced, becoming juxtaposed layers of meaning in my art—maybe it's my

Typoem: 5 red wounds
Norman's note: *this image came to me during a most violent vertigo attack imaginable, when i saw swirling in my trance-like state the five wounds of christ, spinning*
cut paper + stitching (paper quilt), 14 x 14 inches, made in about 2009

return to 60s thinking, risking being misunderstood.

I think of Maundy Thursday, a day focused on misunderstandings: The disciples of Jesus once argued amongst themselves about who was the greatest. On this day at evening meal their Master poignantly punctuates their dispute by taking the place of a slave and washing their filthy, dirt and dung encrusted feet, saying that, "now I have given you an example." A symbol. Then he confounds the ordinary meal; turns it into the greatest of symbols.

Symbolism like this is so important. In your own imagination, the symbol comes alive. The symbol prompts you to think and imagine. To grow. The well-worn symbol is what drives communication. And this is the essence of religious experience. And that's where beauty comes in.

In experiencing beauty, you experience something numinous, a God-experience. And people who have no religious thought in their body can suddenly also have this numinous experience, first described by religious thinker, Rudolf Otto, which psychoanalyst Carl Jung later explained as God giving humans a "nod" through the non-rational in the idea of the Divine and its relation to rational human existence.

The first time I had this experience came when I flew a kite. I was standing out in a field looking at this kite, and suddenly the whole sky and clouds and scenery became so overwhelmingly beautiful. I could hardly stand it; it was such a beautiful ecstatic experience.

***Airborne swallow kite*,**
synthetic paper over a wooden dowel frame about 40 x 36 inches, 1990s