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RLN welcomes story ideas, news items, and other input. If you want to be involved in this media ministry, please [email the editor](#).

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Ready to Open the Door

Photo: [Christian Grab](#)

We've just had Thanksgiving, a day we celebrate with copious amounts of food and fellowship with our family. We clean our houses so they are fit for company and spend an entire day in the kitchen, brining turkey, mashing potatoes, and rolling out pasty for pies. It's so much *work* to prepare for Thanksgiving, but the end result of a delicious meal and over-stuffed bellies is worth it. We'll do it all over again at Christmas, and then at Easter in the Spring.

One of my favourite poems, "Making the House Ready for the Lord" by Mary Oliver, offers a different perspective, however. In it, the speaker tries to clean their house for a visit from the Lord, to make it "shining as it should be," but keeps running into obstacles. They are torn between cleaning their house and providing shelter for a number of animals throughout the winter:

"...Under the sink, for example, is an uproar of mice – it is the season of their many children. What shall I do? And under the eaves and through the walls the squirrels have gnawed their ragged entrances – but it is the season when they need shelter, so what shall I do?"

In the end, the speaker decides to embrace the disorder in their own version of Matthew 25:35's "I was a stranger and you welcomed me":

"...And still I believe you will come, Lord: you will, when I speak to the fox, the sparrow, the lost dog, the shivering sea-geese, know that really I am speaking to you whenever I say, as I do all morning and afternoon: Come in, Come in."

The speaker realizes that, by sheltering the mice and the squirrels, they've already invited in the Lord who created them. The cleanliness of the house doesn't matter.

In this issue, we're exploring different facets of Preparation. Theo Robinson writes about the importance of the deacon's role of preparing the table for Eucharist. Steve Bell offers a reflection on Advent as a season of active preparation. And Jamie Howison writes about getting ready to receive those parishioners who only visit at Christmas. In *via media*, Kirsten Pinto Gfroerer contemplates ripening tomatoes at the end of the harvest season and the slow decay of dementia.

Mary Oliver's poem gives me hope that, no matter how little I am prepared, God is already there. I just need to open the door.



Kyla Neufeld is the editor of *Rupert's Land News*.

Preparations

GEOFFREY WOODCROFT

Photo: Jonathan Meyer

The Magi – they who visited the infant Jesus, Mary, and Joseph – must have spent enormous energy and time in *preparing*. Just think, to be travelling for months through deserts, fording rivers, protecting themselves from marauders, thieves, and bandits, and all the while navigating by the stars and carrying some very expensive goods. We know these wise folk made it to the stable, according to the story, and we know that for reasons of security and safety they returned to their homes upon a different route. One might consider that the Magi were, indeed, well prepared long before the journey toward the Christ child.

Advent is held as our time of preparation, and, for many in particular, for Christmas. I suggest that Advent signals us to be prepared for Christ and our belonging in him. There is much to do as we prepare new disciples in Baptism and confirmation; there is much to do in planning a year of ministry and mission; there is much to do as we make our way towards God’s activity in the world.

The Church seasons, and topically here Advent, teach us Christian discipline to be employed throughout the year. Advent holds for us a key and pathway toward the health of the Body of Christ, in that it causes the Church to explore more closely the call God continually offers us, and our hopes and dreams that pursue such calls. The Magi must have prepared for months, if not years, to make the months-long round trip and include a contingency plan if confronted by Herod; they were, in fact very well resourced.

We, the Church who have heard the call(s) from God, sort of know what the goal looks like, and we have struggled to patiently live out the preparing stage, the part that says “This is how we are going to get there.” It has been difficult for many of us to see past our perceived deficiencies, those things measured by old metrics like money and Sunday attendance, so we have been somewhat negligent in preparing, while we put our energy toward repairing.

I do not measure the health of the Body by those metrics, but by the person of Christ made available to me in you. In the coming weeks, months, and year, opportunities will present themselves to us, opportunities that I believe will strengthen leadership, amplify our common vision and hope, and enable us to prepare our response to God’s call(s). The Inter-Diocesan Learning Community is one such opportunity with which we are beginning to engage, where we, with five other North American dioceses, will share, reach, and strategize (*and not reinvent the wheel*) in a series of face-to-face meetings over two years. We know that we have much to learn from one another, but also much to teach.

To attain the goal we desire, that is to make it to the stable and back alive, we are called to enter a deep and sustaining Advent, one that shall last more than four Sundays.



Geoffrey Woodcroft,
Bishop of Rupert's Land

Preparing the Table

THEO ROBINSON



As seen in Acts 6:1–6, the diaconal ministry has been deeply involved in the church since its earliest days. One of a deacon’s many roles was to help the bishop with distributing communion elements, with the bishop sharing the bread and the deacon sharing the wine. In the examination at a deacon’s ordination, one of the duties stated in the *Book of Alternative Services* is: “You are to assist the bishop and priests in public worship, and in the ministration of God’s word and sacraments.”

Originally, the bishop presided over all Eucharistic services. As communities grew and spread out, it became harder for the bishop to reach all of the people. Therefore, deacons were called to attend a service. The bishop would bless the elements and then divide them

up among the deacons for distribution to the people. These services would happen on a weekly basis, especially in major cities such as Rome. On feast days, it was expected that everyone would make pilgrimage to the martyr’s church and take Eucharist together with the bishop. Those deacons would subsequently return to their congregations to hold mass and distribute communion on behalf of the bishops.

According to Louis Weil in *Liturgical Sense: The Logic of Rite*, at the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D., the roles of presider and distributor of communion were delegated to the presbyters, as the council deemed the deacons already had enough pastoral responsibilities, such as organizing ministry and tending to the needs of the world.

Photo: [Priscilla Du Preez](#)



While the deacon’s purpose during the service has changed over time, they have kept the vital role within the Eucharistic liturgy as the one who sets the table and distributes the wine.

Sara Miles, author of *Take this Bread*, quotes Bishop Bill Swing in saying that, “there’s a hunger beyond food that’s expressed in food, and that’s why feeding is always a kind of miracle... the disciples took the bread and did what they were told, got up and started feeding.” That quote explains a piece of the deacon’s role quite eloquently.

Andrew Rampton, in his article “[The Deacon’s Role in the Eucharist](#),” also says that an important ministry of the deacon is one of assistance and hospitality, such as visiting the sick and feeding the hungry. This ministry is reflected in the traditional liturgy as the one who cares for the elements before and after the Eucharistic prayer.

In my opinion, setting the table for the Eucharist is one of the most sacred parts of the liturgy, next to receiving communion itself. As you lay out each item on the table, you create a bubble of sanctity that contains the spirit of Christ.

There are all sorts of things going on at this point of the service: music, money gathering, and people preparing themselves. But as you put yourself fully into preparing the table, all of that outside noise disappears. While others

may be singing joyous songs of offering, you become part of a solemn event that will be the starting point of the most important part of the liturgy.

One theology that lies behind the Anglican Eucharist, one that sits well with me personally, is that of consubstantiation, meaning the substance of the body and blood of Christ are present alongside the substance of the bread and wine, which also remain present. When you prepare the table for the Eucharistic prayer, you can feel the power of what is about to happen at that table. It is humbling.

Holy Communion is both an encouragement to the journeying Christian and a celebration of the communion each Christian has with the Trinitarian God we worship, as well as with one another.

The prepared altar becomes the table of Christ. As it is prepared, it is made ready for those who love him, and for those who want to love him more. It is Christ's will that those who want to meet him, will meet him at the table.

The call to the table, the call that Christ will be there and waiting, is a reminder to us all that while not everyone is at the same point in their Christian journey, we are all welcome at God’s table. It is there where Christ will be found.

Communion then becomes a time where we gather together to share in the feast of the Lamb of God in memory of the communal Pass-over meal shared among Jesus and his disciples just before the his arrest.

The solemn preparation of the table becomes a joyous reunion with Christ.



Theo Robinson is a recent Bachelor of Theology graduate from the University of Winnipeg, a transitional deacon, the deacon-in-charge at St. Michael's Victoria Beach, and a spiritual care practitioner in health care.

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Introduction to Advent

STEVE BELL



Advent simply means “to come” (Latin: *advenire*, from *ad* – “to,” *venire* – “come”). Christians have traditionally set aside this liturgical season to anticipate the coming of Christ. Advent is a season of attentive waiting. Of course, as with all waiting comes the inevitable agony of anticipation – so much so that we are inclined to want to do something to make the waiting itself bearable and meaningful. In this regard, Advent is an active season of mindful preparation as well.

When a young couple discovers they are expecting a child, it is not enough for them to simply wait out the nine months and hope for the best. On the contrary, there is necessary preparation. Perhaps they clear out a spare room to create a nursery. Tough decisions are made about what stays and what has to go. They collect and purchase appropriate furnishings. They seek advice. They endlessly brood over a name; about the kind of birth experience they hope for; about the joy, fears and future of this new reality. Such preparation is not meaningless. It’s about getting ready to fully receive the gift of the child who is coming.

When I started to attend to the Advent season, I was surprised at the themes present in the ancient writings. Traditionally, Advent was not the giddy season of festive parties and garish décor we have come to know. The more rooted Advent tradition was a preparation for the return of Christ, not a mere preparation for Christmas celebrations. Indeed, there was an element of festive joy, but it was also a sober season (almost Lent-ish) that began with sustained attention to our deepest longings and the assumptions, valid or vain, which those longings might indicate. It was a time of penitent reflection about the many inordinate attachments and affections we have given ourselves to – those ill-discerned commitments

that prevent us from fully attaching to Christ.

Advent was a season to reflect on the rich spiritual metaphor of motherhood, or spousal maternity, which reveals the deepest truth about the mystery of the human person: that we were created to receive and house heaven in our womb, and bear it forth for the sake of the world. The Christ child doesn’t merely come to us but *through* us.

Advent was also a time to reflect on the ancient names of Christ – Emmanuel! Wisdom! Dayspring! Majestic Lord! Root! Key! Desire of the Nations! – as memorialized in the tradition of the O Antiphons.

Finally, it was a time to reflect on the upside-down nature of this astonishing kingdom of God that is breaking in on our desperate history, as suggested by the ancient oracles of Isaiah.

Upon reflection, one realizes that Advent is a robust and demanding spiritual season. Easy, triumphant declarations like “Jesus is the reason for the season!” or campaigns to “Keep Christ in Christmas” will not do. We are invited to much more than that. We are encouraged to attend deeply to the pulse of this season, to enter into it quietly, penitently, patiently and expectantly, allowing it to penetrate and resound in the fecund depths of our souls.

May it be done as you have said!

Plant your seed in me, O God.

**Not the seed of human life,
but your everlasting Word.**

**For we are all just like the grass,
and our glory’s like the flower.**

But the grasses wither, and flowers fade.

Yet your Word, O Lord... it stands forever!

–From “May It Be Done” by Steve Bell.
Listen to the full song at [Advent Chapter One](#).

Ready My Heart*music and lyrics by Lois Farley Shuford*

Ready my heart for the birth of Emmanuel
 Ready my soul for the Prince of Peace
 Heap the straw of my life for His body to lie on
 Light the candle of hope
 Let the child come in

Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!
 Christ the Saviour is born

Mine is the home that is poor and is barren
 Mine is the stable of cold and stone
 Break the light to each corner
 Of doubt and of darkness
 Now the Word is made flesh
 For the birth of me

Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!
 Christ the Saviour is born

Photo: [Chris Wolff](#)*Listen to the above song at [Advent Chapter One](#).**This reflection was originally published in Pilgrim Year: Advent (Novalis, 2018).***Here are a few suggestions to help you prepare for this season:**

- Commit to memory and reflect often on the quote at the top of this chapter: "He came with love to Bethlehem; He comes with grace into our souls; He will come with justice at the end of the world."
- Consider carefully the various emotional, material, or ideological attachments and commitments you have made which either help or hinder your ability to welcome Christ.
- Consider clearing the clutter (lesser things) to make room for greater things.

**Ready yourself! Christ has come. He comes now.
 He will come again. Alleluia!**



Steve Bell is a singer and a storyteller. His lifelong pursuit of the rich traditions of the church has awarded him a voice in the contemporary recovery of relevant formational practices for personal and corporate Christian spirituality. He lives with his wife Nanci in Winnipeg, Treaty 1 Territory and homeland of the Métis Nation.

'Just Visiting'

JAMIE HOWISON

Photo: [Kieran White](#)

At saint benedict's table, we're big on the season of Advent. That's partly my doing, as Advent is the season I most treasure, but I'm far from the only person in our community who has come to love the season. We take care to emphasize the themes of expectation, preparedness, and watchfulness, steadily reminding ourselves that while this season has the birth of Jesus in view, its deeper call is that we be open to the promised culmination of all of time and history in Christ's second Advent. We make books of daily Advent devotions available for personal use and encourage people to introduce an Advent wreath to their homes. When the crèche first appears only the animals and an empty manger inhabit it, with Mary and Joseph arriving on Advent Four and the baby and shepherds on Christmas Eve, when we finally bust out the Christmas carols. More than anything, it is a season in which we invite our people to slow down, breathe, and simply "be" with open hands and hearts at a time of the year when the rest of our culture is telling us all to ramp up, shop for those perfect gifts, spend, attend parties, be of good cheer, and then spend some more.

Yes, we're big on Advent at saint benedict's table, and looking over our vestry book you can see that reflected in the solid attendance at worship over those four Sundays. Still, those

numbers are nothing compared to Christmas Eve, when suddenly our Advent attendance more than doubles, with well over 300 people filling the church to capacity. Not only that, but a good number of those people who have so embraced Advent with us are actually not present on Christmas Eve. Many of the university students who attend saint benedict's table will have gone home for the Christmas break, others have traditions of going to Christmas Eve services at their family's home church, and a number of people are inevitably travelling over the season. Of course, a good number of saint ben's people will be joined at our Christmas Eve service by their families or friends, but that hardly accounts for those jam packed pews.

Surely part of the challenge to people who dare to call ourselves followers of Christ is to be sure that our doors are well and truly open on that night, both literally and metaphorically.

It can be tempting to think, "Oh, wouldn't it be good if all of these people came all of the time?" Maybe that's not the worst thought to have, or at least not so long as that message

isn't subtly – or not so subtly – communicated to those visitors. Even a statement as simple as “It is nice to see so many visitors here with us tonight” can easily come across as having the mildly shaming subtext of, “and you know we’re here every Sunday of the year, right?”

Simply put, the visitors who join us on Christmas Eve should not be seen as potential members or resented as occasional, seasonal culture-Christians, but rather welcomed as guests. As St. Benedict famously wrote in Chapter 53 of his Rule, “Let all guests who arrive be received as Christ, because He will say: ‘I was a stranger and you took Me in’ (Matthew 25:35),” and when better to remember that than on the night we celebrate Christ’s birth? In Luke’s account, the doors in Bethlehem are closed to Mary and Joseph, and so they have to resort to sharing quarters with the animals as they await the baby’s birth. Surely part of the challenge to people who dare to call ourselves followers of Christ is to be sure that our doors are well and truly open on that night, both literally and metaphorically.

With all of that in view, I seriously question the wisdom of passing a collection plate on Christmas Eve. I am aware that in writing this, I have just caused the hearts of many a treasurer and church warden to skip a beat, yet I do not think that we want to look at our guests as being a source of year-end income, even if we struggle to balance the books. “But some people really want to make a donation,” you might reply, and I don’t argue with that. Put out an offering basket or two at the back of the church and include a note in the bulletin welcoming any who wish to make a donation to do so using the envelopes provided beside the baskets. Your own regular congregation should have no difficulty making the switch, and it will save your guests – guests – from feeling that they must scrounge in their purses and pockets for the bit of cash they assume is expected of them, all the while singing one of the carols that probably brought them there in the first place.

Part of the reason I so love the season of Advent is that it puts Christmas – not just Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, but the whole of the twelve days – into its proper perspective. After its quieter, watchful, even somewhat sombre opening Sundays, the light begins to draw closer as we tell of the visit of the angel to Mary or to Joseph. We can feel the anticipation building as we begin to all but taste the festal season that arrives at just the darkest time of the year. Those of us who, week by week, walk through Advent are made ready for the Christmas feast, hearts all but bursting as we hear the opening chords of the first carol of the evening. And isn’t that kind of joy simply ripe for the sharing with our guests?



Jamie Howison is one of the priests at saint benedict’s table, where for 15 years he has helped to cultivate a congregational love of both Advent and Christmastide.

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Parish News Round Up

New Book on Joshua

Lissa Wray Beal has a new book out: [The Story of God Bible Commentary: Joshua](#). Lissa teaches at Providence Theological Seminary as a Professor of Old Testament, and chair of the Seminary Bible and Theology Department. She also serves in an honorary capacity at St. Peter’s Anglican, Winnipeg.

Here’s what she has to say on her new book:



For many people – believers or not – the Old Testament book of Joshua is a difficult book to read. The lectionary pays scant attention to it, and doesn’t engage any of the difficult passages. I grew up in the Church and well remember the (very old!) flannel-graph portrait of Joshua: it was all about the walls of Jericho falling down. It was an exciting story! But in my priestly vocation, the more I taught Joshua in churches and academic settings, and as our world was repeatedly shocked by religiously-related violence, that child’s view of Joshua grew thin.

I wondered about the lives of the real people in the land. I wondered about the commands to do violence and “totally destroy” the inhabitants – was that *really* what God was saying? And I wondered how – and if – the book’s portrait of God comported with

the Lord Jesus, and the God that he is. So, the questions grew for me: if this book is Word of God (and I was and am convinced of that), what does one do with the violence? How does this book relate to the New Testament? Why has the book been used (and wrongly used, I say) to support past and present colonial expansion? These are the pressing questions of students as I teach in a seminary setting; these are the pressing questions of parishioners who read the book of Joshua.

For the past few years, I’ve read, researched, written about, and prayed over the book of Joshua and its problems. Out of this, I’ve written a commentary on *Joshua* in the *Story of God Commentary* series. As [the publisher](#) describes this series, it is a “new commentary for today’s world. It’s the first commentary series to explain and illuminate each passage of Scripture in light of the Bible’s grand story. This ‘story-centric’ approach makes these commentaries a fruitful resource for pastors, students, Sunday school teachers, and everyday readers.”

If you are wondering what to do with the book of Joshua, this readable volume may be of interest. (Next May, a series of my short lectures that follow the volume will be published through Zondervan; available on Amazon). The commentary won’t answer all questions about the book (and my work hasn’t answered all of mine, and even raised several more!). But it will engage readers in the narrative, cultural, and canonical contexts that help illuminate it. And, as we seek to live faithfully as the Church in the world, this volume can inform our discipleship as it brings the book’s message to today’s world of Winnipeg, of Canada, of the global context. – *Lissa Wray Beal*



This page of the Parish News Round Up is sponsored by Richard Rosin. For more information, see his ad on page 16.

PWRDF World of Gifts

The PWRDF World of Gifts campaign for 2019 is now open. Gifts in this year's four-page guide align with many of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals for 2030, including improving gender equality, providing access to clean drinking water, and adapting to climate change.

There are many returning gifts, such as goats, cows, pigs, and seeds and tools for farmers. As climate change continues to threaten vulnerable communities, small holder farmers need continued support with diverse seeds, proper equipment and livestock.

New this year are Shallow Water Wells with PWRDF's new partner in Kenya, Utooni Development Organization (UDO). The shallow wells are a great example of climate adaptation. As the rainy seasons bring less rain, and higher temperature dries up traditional water sources, communities need to harness the water around them. Shallow wells are built, creating a catch basin from the rivers as they flow to the sea. Local villagers dig the wells by hand. Culverts and porous membranes are installed to keep the water clean and the sand acts as a natural filtration system as the water overflows from the rivers into the wells. PWRDF plans to support UDO by building 45 wells over the next three years.



Another new opportunity in this year's gift guide is a crowdfunding project to buy an ambulance. An ambulance costs \$75,000, but with a 6:1 match from the Government of Canada, PWRDF needs to raise only \$10,700. When you make a donation to this gift, you will be able to see the funds grow.

Throughout the World of Gifts guide you will see maple leaf icons wherever the Government of Canada is matching funds as part of our All Mothers and Children Count program. This four-year program comes to a close at the end of March 2020, so parishes wishing to fundraise through Lent should send their donations in by March 31, 2020.

To order a gift, visit the [PWRDF online store](#). You can also [fill out the order on paper and mail it in](#), or call toll-free, Monday to Friday, 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. (EST) at 1-866-294-6899.

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View the four-page guide

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This full day training is geared for faith leaders, pastors, and those in spiritual care roles. The day will include sessions on understanding the dynamics of intimate partner violence, how to respond to those who are harmed and those who use violence in relationships, and how to offer spiritual and theological support in ways that do no further harm. This workshop is presented in partnership with Salvation Army.

Registration is \$35 and includes lunch. Deadline to register is November 14, 2019. Please note that there is limited capacity. If you register after we have reached our capacity you will be notified and put on a waiting list.

[Click here](#) to register. You will receive an email the week of the training with further details regarding parking and location.

Program:

Morning

Val Hiebert – *Shattering the Holy Hush: Domestic Violence and Christianity*
 Sherrie Winstanley – *A Lived Experience*
 Jaymie Friesen – *Forms and Dynamics of Intimate Partner Abuse*

Afternoon

Hennes Doltze – *Assisting Men Who Use Violence*
 Jaymie Friesen – *A Trauma Sensitive Response*
 John Unger, Jane Woelk, and third guest TBA – *A Panel Conversation on Theological and Spiritual Considerations*

Anglican Church of Canada

The 2020 Canadian Church Calendar is now available for purchase. The images represent a diversity of churches from across Canada, and verses and images feature the theme, "Light and Darkness." You can find more information about ordering at [the ACC website](#).

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We are all on a journey. Maybe that sounds cliché, but it's true. Our stories are unfinished, works in progress –we are *En Route*! And our journey causes us to ask some big questions along the way: Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going? Where do I belong?

Jesus was on a journey too: a journey that led him up mountain passes and down wilderness trails, from the Jordan River to the streets of Jerusalem. *En Route* together, we'll explore the paths that Jesus travelled, and perhaps learn more about our own journey along the way. Because Jesus isn't just waiting around for us to arrive at our final destination. Jesus meets us on the road.

Find more information at the [CLAY website](#). [Email Lisa Van Dyjk](#) to register your youth.

Reddening in the Dark

KIRSTEN PINTO GFROERER

Photo: Dan Gold

I can remember only one glorious summer when my father decided to become a gardener. To fully appreciate this wondrous event you need to know something of my father. He is a Portuguese immigrant, who came to Canada claiming on his immigration forms that he was skilled to work on a dairy farm when really he had never touched a cow. My father lived in his mind and not in his body. Every physical job for which he was hired quickly turned into an office job. Partially because his bosses didn't want him to get hurt – he had a slim build and a tumultuous constitution – but primarily because they quickly noticed that his brilliance in accounting and management far outshone his physical prowess. Needless to say, one wouldn't have expected him to become a gardener, nor to thrive as one. However, my father is a Portuguese immigrant for whom the romantic notion of owning and cultivating your own land in this glorious country expressed the culmination of true success.

So, he bought a property with a huge garden and for one summer he had dirt under his nails and a lovely crooked grin on his face. He was most proud of two of his growing efforts. The first was a tiny watermelon. My father loved watermelon, *melancia* as it is called in Portuguese. It reminded him of all that was good in a troubled childhood. That he could grow it here, in this northern land, on his property, gave him such joy.

The other thing he grew was tomatoes; so many tomatoes. I don't know if I have ever seen such a harvest of tomatoes. But I don't remember eating them on late summer nights; they

must have been planted late. Instead, what I do remember is a huge box in the basement filled with green tomatoes and newspaper, and me sitting beside it in October wondering at how it was possible for these tomatoes to redden in the dark. Redden they did, however, and we slowly ate through the box; only a few were lost. My father never really gardened again. He was a man who lived in his mind for good and for ill, and he only occasionally came down into the joy of working the earth: tasting food and other forms of embodied living. But when he did, I remember that he was happy, alive in a way he never was otherwise.

This year was my first year of vegetable gardening. My family will attest that enthusiasm and ecstasy over beautiful things grown by one's own hands are genetic. I feel my father's



"Of Life, Death, and Honor"
by [Aftab Uzzaman](#)

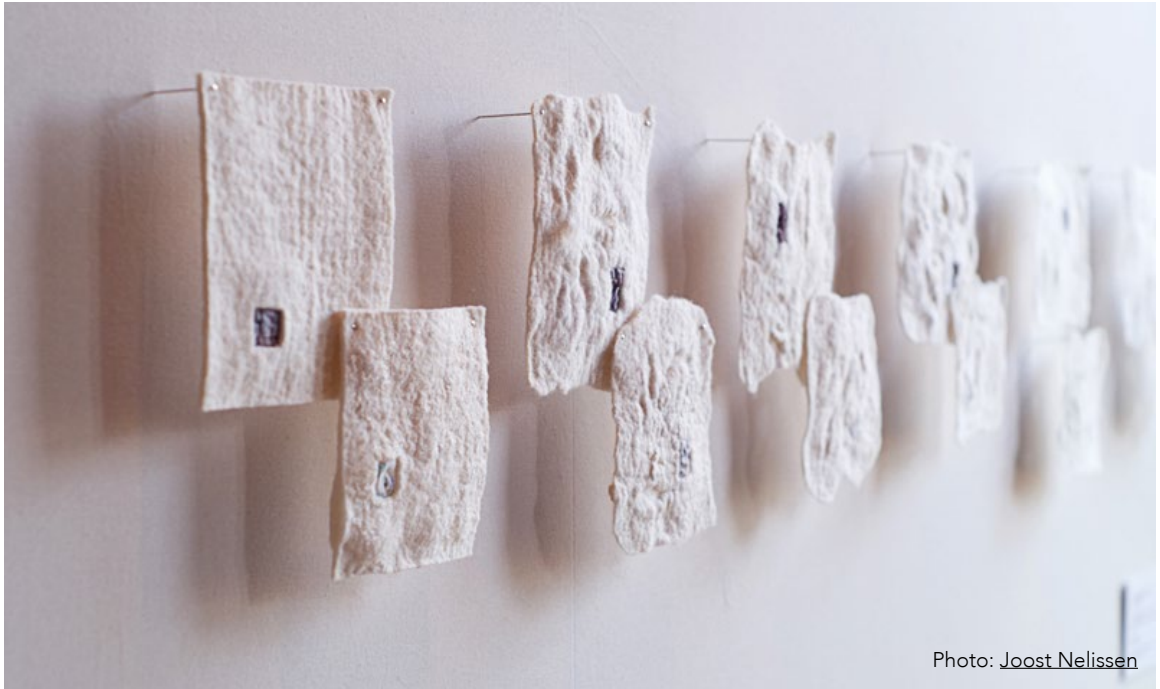


Photo: Joost Nelissen

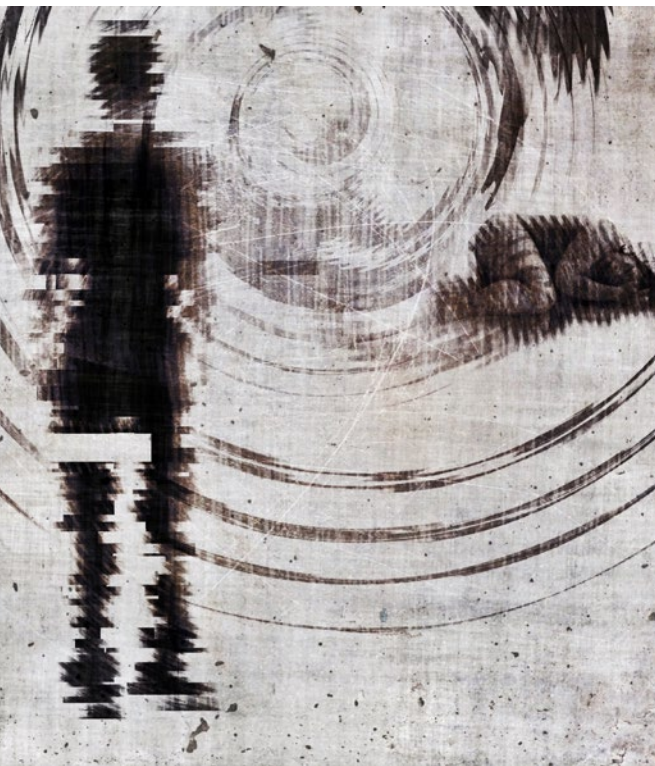
**A display of textile art about the decay of the mind.
The patches get more torn up to the right, depicting dementia.**

happy, loud voice ring in my bones as I go on and on about what has come to be. And on my dining room table sits a box of green tomatoes. I come every morning in the dark and look at them, amazed that that which was so green yesterday is tinged with vermillion today. I pick the reddest for our family dinner and leave the rest. I am gardening because my life has gone quiet and I feel called to a sustained stability. I want to understand how to live grounded in place, in God who is my source, in family, and in the tiny bits of land to which I am responsible.

It is my father who precipitated my “going quiet” and rooting down. A few years ago, it became evident that my father had dementia. Slowly, his precious mind unravelled. Remarkably, it was his capacity for numbers that left him first. I found myself arguing with him about a simple calculation, and I knew I had to stop resisting denial and support my mother on this long, frightening walk. We had all thought that my fiery father would blaze up in some quick and tragic death due to his temperament and ill health. We never imagined a long slow diminishment and dying away, a walk into the dark.

Somehow this unmade me and at the same time realigned my sense of self. My father was Portuguese, and the Portuguese know how to care for their elderly. Since childhood, my father had planted in me a call to respect and care for the old and vulnerable. When I was 4 years old, he took me along to his weekly visit to his mentor’s sister in a care home. It was special time for all three of us. I remember the day she died; he woke me from sleep to tell me, he took me to the funeral, and later he took me often to the graveyard. He was actively showing me what he believed was good and true and valuable. The seed of his teaching rooted deep and there was no dislodging it. When he became ill, I knew my place was to be a support to my mother and to him, and I knew in an overstretched life this place would require me to leave many others I occupied.

So here we are. This walk is long, and this place is sometimes barren. The summer of my father’s mind has long vanished, and he lives now mostly in his body. If he had died earlier, I would have remembered everything vibrant and fiery about him. Now, after these years of



"Feeding the Black Dog"
from Project 365: Looking for the Lost Self
by [Michelle Robinson](#).

slow diminishment, these memories feel lost. They are replaced by a gentle abiding sense of his love, which somehow remains so clear and true, a great respect for his vulnerability, and a wonder at that which remains of his personhood. My father is still fiery, which isn't always fun, but he is also always thankful, as he always was. He still calls out to God for help in distress, as he always did, and he still tears up in response to beauty.

There are other winter fruits on this walk into the dark. We as a family have gentled too. We are together more often, and his presence makes all of us more careful and caring to one another. Personally, the fact that God has allowed the slowness of this diminishment has helped me to understand the value of slowness. It has helped me to see that life doesn't have to be fast and full to be good. There are riches in sitting nightly with an old man and a dog in a care home just as there are riches in taking so much time planting vegetables that sometimes don't even come up. My father in his dementia is still giving gifts, and I am learning the ground of being.

If God gives us this slow, latent time at the end of our lives, and if it has fruit to bear in our lives and in the lives of others, then maybe I can trust this long slow process, this box in the basement full of tomatoes and newspaper. For sometimes we redden in the dark into a fullness that is more than we can ask or imagine.



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