

July 12, 2017

To be hopeful means to be uncertain about the future, to be tender toward possibilities, to be dedicated to change all the way down to the bottom of your heart.

Rebecca Solnit

Dear Mennonite Church Saskatchewan,

Over the last 40 years, stories about lives transformed through the work of Person-to-Person and Circles of Support and Accountability have been shared at Delegate Sessions, Equipping Days, and Sunday morning church visitations.

One such story is that of Mike Foley, who shared his experience at the 2010 Annual Delegate Sessions in Prince Albert. Mike was a lifer and prison was a lonely and dark existence. After he connected with P2P, his volunteers, who regularly and consistently showed up to visit him once a month, became a light at the end of a very dark tunnel. And in that light, he dreamt of one day owning a house, planting a garden and caring for a pet cat. Several years later his dream was fulfilled. He bought a small house in PA, dug up his large yard, and welcomed Misty from the local SPCA into his life. Mike lived his dream for several years, until his life was cut short by a massive heart attack as he was readying himself for Sunday worship on December 9, 2012.

There are many stories similar to Mike's, stories of volunteers and inmates taking the risk of opening their lives to one another and being transformed because of it. The Visitor and Correspondence Room, the room where inmates and volunteers meet, is an unlikely incubator of miracles, a sacred holy ground surrounded by stone brick, metal bars, bullet proof glass and tight security; a structure built to keep such hope out.

With that said, not all visits and not all pairings turn into these great, life transforming experiences. Often visits can be mundane, the connection not overly strong or meaningful, or one can go several months visiting a different guy for a variety of reasons, leaving you wondering what difference does this make. Yet, even in times like these, maybe especially in times like these, one needs to be reminded we don't fully know how the Spirit of God is at work.

Dave, a long time volunteer from Carrot River (and not his real name), visited a guy for almost two years, and in those visits, he felt there was little-to-no connection. And after many of his visits, he spent the two-hour drive home wondering if he should quit visiting; the whole evening felt futile. Unfortunately, the inmate's situation worsened and he was transferred to Edmonton Maximum Security. Roughly six months later, Dave received a letter from this inmate expressing the following (paraphrasing); "All my life I have sat in the darkness. Today, I still sit in darkness. But when you visited me at SaskPen you brought a little light into my life. Thank you."

As I reflect upon our season of Refresh, Refocus & Renew, and upon the future of the Mennonite Church in Saskatchewan and Canada, these stories surrounding P2P come to mind for a couple of reasons.

First, the Visitors and Correspondence Room serves as a liminal space; a space where one leaves the familiar and crosses into a place of vulnerability and uncertainty. Even though SaskPen, and society for that matter, is all about control, certainty and security, entering into liminal space opens up the possibility of connection and transformation. While not every P2P pairing is this great, transformative experience, just being there creates room for that possibility to happen. This gets to the heart of our time of silent, communal prayer. Even though these 2, or 5, or 10 minutes of silence can seem mundane at times, we are creating liminal space within ourselves, and in doing so, we are creating room for the possibility of being connected and transformed by God. In this space, we are not in control of the outcomes, or even the process, but rather, we can only tend to the present moment, and the person sitting across the table. This leads me to my final point.

As Dave's story reminds us, we do not know in full. Even though he was ready to quit, thinking what he was doing was all for naught, more was happening beneath the surface. With all the concerns about the future of the church, we can be thankful we do not know all the variables. Our task is not to control the outcomes and determine the results, but to open ourselves to the possibilities of a future not yet fully realized.

Yours in Christ,

Ryan Siemens