



LESSONS for LIFE

April 26, 2009 11:00 a.m.

SHARING OF STORIES

“STAYING OPEN”

Melee Hutton & Marysia Czariski

SACRED READINGS

Lesson: Reading of “The Guest House” by Rumi

Gospel: 2 TIMOTHY: 1: 6 - 7

The Rev. Jo Bell introduced a couple of friends and congregants: Melee and Marysia who are here to share their story with us today. Melee is a long time theatre actor recently turned Director who founded her own theatre company, Kid Theatre, last year. Melee also served MCC Toronto as team leader for our Lector ministry for five years. Marysia is also accomplished vocationally. She runs her own company, Velocity Partnership and she works with other companies to help them become effective and more innovative. If any of you know Marysia you know she is a tad active in sports and she is the founder and producer of an annual charitable event held here in Toronto, the open door festival of music. Marysia also became the team leader of our Blessing of Animals service team which we offer here in October of each year. Speaking of animals, I would say we're all animal lovers. The way I first met Marysia and Melee was when they got a brand new cute little puppy named Cormick and Cormick invited my chocolate lab over for dinner – and Cheryl and I got to go too. So, would you please welcome Melee and Marysia. (applause).

Good morning. My name is Melee Hutton. Good morning. My name is Marysia Czariski. It is such an honour for us to be here today sharing what MCC Toronto means to us and our journeys that got us here. (Melee☺ I was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland and grew up Catholic. This meant that religion was a complicated issue. I was born in a country where people literally fought and died in the name of it and yet it was a bedrock of my family's values and brought me much in terms of community, vitality and purpose. As a teenager I was highly engaged in the church. My best friend and I created a folk Mass on Sunday evenings; we formed a church community action group and traveled miles over the country to be at youth groups and weekends. I went to the ecumenical retreat “Taizé” in France and got on a 'bus to Wales to see Pope John II give a Mass in 1982. In other words, I was a pretty hard-core Catholic girl. I'm sure, like many of you here today, as I began to realize I was gay I also realized there was no way I could ever express that within the church that I attended and so around the age of nineteen or twenty I slowly stopped belonging to any church at all. I claimed my sexuality but I lost my connection to my spirituality. In the late nineteen eighties in London, England, I remember seeing a large tent at the Gay Pride Festival for something called *Metropolitan Community Churches*. Now, something I should explain to you is that left entirely to my own devices I tend to be a little bit of a cynical and negative person. Ugh, I thought, some gay people in a tent pretending to have church! No thank you! And I avoided them for my remaining years in England.

I moved to Canada in 1996 with my ex-partner. Nothing shakes you up in life like a good dose of emigration! Moving countries challenged everything I had come to know as my self: the friends I had, the work I did. The support I had taken for granted for years was no longer there. Five years after I moved here I saw some pictures of legal same sex weddings spread out across the Globe and Mail at one of those Community churches again and I thought, well, maybe I should go and take a look. Like



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many before me and many to come I wept at that first service. I couldn't believe that such a place existed; a place where I could be with God and fully myself.

(Marysia) I come from the suburbs of Ottawa, which today are still considered to be the boonies. My parents came to Canada in the 1950s, both immigrants, and both survivors of the Second World War. My Mum experienced the impact of war from her home in London, England, where she has incredible stories of sleeping in a bunker every night as the alarms sounded that the Nazis were again bombing her city. My Dad, on the other hand, was in the streets of Warsaw, because at the age of fourteen his mother, my grandmother, was taken by the Gestapo and was never to be seen again. At the same time his home was sealed off, so he basically had the clothes on his back and witnessed the harrowing impact of war on every aspect of his life. I grew up with the profound sense that I could do anything I wanted to do in my life. Both my parents were hard working and very loving, yet neither believed there was a God. How could there be a God after everything they had witnessed in their life? And if there was, it definitely was not the kind of God that they wanted to worship. Religion was also condemned because it was seen as divisive. I grew up in a household where there was no hatred and no racism. I did, however, notice that whenever my Dad heard German spoken he'd get very tense. Interestingly, my family would attend church on Christmas Eve; however, when I was in those churches I did feel like an imposter. The words didn't resonate with me and furthermore it seemed to back up all of my beliefs and stereotypes about religion – that being it was divisive, arrogant and righteous. The only inspiration I got was to continue to justify my belief that no religion was good religion. A defining moment occurred for me when I was eight years old. In my sleepy little neighbourhood a young male neighbour of ours sexually abused me. Out of fear and out of shame I did not tell my parents until I was thirty years old. It was at that age when I had done enough therapy and work on myself that I could freely talk about that experience and actually could see how it had shaped me. As Brent says, *We can't change the past, so embrace it*. While I was victimized I worked very very hard on not being a victim. I can say that all that work I've done on myself also left me very open minded and open to hear things anew. I believe all that work left me open to the possibility of finding a church home like MCCT.

(Melee). It's safe to say that Marysia and I simply would not be together were it not for MCCT. I had been coming here alone after the break up of my ten year relationship, weeping my way through services, trying to find my centre. One particular day I was feeling very lost and I went up to a deacon after service. It was Kevin Willcock. He prayed with me and as I left him he said, "Keep coming here." It was very sound advice. I did keep coming here – just showing up with my broken heart. For about a year I wept and prayed and wrestled the demons, got myself into therapy and started to doing the very long road of work to addressing some major issues in my life. It was a time of solitude for me. I believe that MCCT was a major part of my staying in this country at that time. There was a friendly looking man who came to the church and who also lived very close to my apartment. Although I had never spoken to him I would often see him in the neighbourhood and think, oh, there's that guy from the church. One day I was going to the laundromat and I walked past him. The next time I see him I should just say hello, I thought. Well, thirty minutes later as I was going to put my laundry into the dryer I – unbelievably – saw him again. 'Hello', I said. He jumped into conversation with me immediately and with great vigour and the next thing I knew he was asking me if I was single! Wow, I thought to myself. He seems way too gay to be asking me out! A little confused, I said, 'sort of.' "Are you or not?" he said. 'Yes, I am,' I told him. "Good," said Alain Matou, "you've got to meet my friend." (laughter).

(Marysia) I've always treated my personal development like going to the gym: meaning I work at my happiness. At the time I was leading a transformational programme at Landmark Education over the course of six months and one of my participants was Alain Matou. Alain talked a lot about MCC during



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our programme and the impact it was having on him. I know it may not be common to ask one of your students about finding you a partner; however, I was very committed to finding an awesome girlfriend. After one of our working sessions I vividly remember saying to him, 'Alain, are there a lot of women who attend your church?' And he said yes there were, so I said, 'Alain, there has to be one of the women in that church who could meet my conditions of satisfaction.' It didn't take him long to say he had seen a woman who he thought just might fit the bill.

(Melee) My Mum was visiting from Europe when this Marysia woman wanted to meet me. I told Alain that I was busy and maybe we could meet in a few week's time. He answered, "Oh that's fine. I told her already and she said bring your Mum!" And so it turned out that I went on a blind date with Marysia, my Mum and three gay men. We were due to meet at Slack Alice's restaurant on Church Street after church. Instead, at the last minute, Marysia slipped into our pew at the very end of the service and I first set eyes on her in this place. We were married here on August 28th 2005. At the time of our wedding there was a rift in my family. My brother and my Mum had not spoken to one another for six years. I wanted to have my family at my wedding but I just couldn't see how that could happen. I had never told my sister I was gay, and was terrified to do so. My Mum and my brother were seriously divided. My father had passed away when I was twenty-six. I knew that if my marriage was to be authentic and lasting it had to be built on complete honesty. I wrote my sister a letter, telling her I was gay, happy and getting married. I said to my Mum and my brother, 'I want you both at my wedding but I don't want you to be here and not speaking.' At this request my Mum and my brother did meet up and see if they could work things out but things did not go well. After their meeting they both contacted me, saying that they were sorry, but if the other one were at my wedding in Canada, then they could not attend. I spoke with my brother on the phone. I wanted to ask how on earth that could have happened; that they both hadn't tried hard enough. But I breathed and somehow managed to say, 'I love you and you're welcome in Canada any time.' And so my Mum arrived a few days before my wedding. The following night she got up to use the washroom and in the dark, and somewhat jet-lagged, she fell down the main flight of stairs in our house. We woke from the noise and found her lying on the floor in a pool of blood as she had hit her head on the marble fireplace. We called the ambulance and they rushed her to hospital where she was in the ICU with a blood clot on her brain. My sister was away on vacation with her family and, uncharacteristically for her, had not given me her contact information, so I was sitting alone in the dark in an IC unit with my wonderful mother in a touch and go situation. I e-mailed my brother Paul in England to tell him what had happened. Two days later and exactly one hour before our wedding, after his first trans-Atlantic flight, my brother arrived at my door – after a six year absence from my family! With no time to spare, he jumped in the shower, got dressed and came to MCC Toronto. My Mum was to light a candle as part of the ceremony; my brother Paul and I lit it on her behalf, together. Immediately after our wedding Marysia and I went to St. Michael's hospital with Brent Hawkes and Paul and prayed with my Mum. It was an incredible thing for me to see my Pastor praying over my healing family on my wedding day. My Mum, luckily, has since recovered from her injury and she and my brother Paul have been great friends and in daily contact ever since. As Mark read in the reading this morning from the Rumi poem, *awful things can be a clearing for something good.*

(Marysia) So out of my visit to this place over six years ago I met my awesome Melee. However, something even more surprising happened to me. I found a church home. I began attending MCCT almost from the first Sunday we met. The message coming from Brent's sermons, the music, the people I have met and the values of the church deeply resonate with me. I feel that this is such a safe place and is so strong and confident that I can stand here and say that I still struggle with the concept with Jesus being the son of God and wonder why He has to come again. And still I have been a



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member of our church for over two years and became a team leader of the Blessing of Animals about the same time. That's when my church becomes a house of prayer for all CREATURES. I have a very deep connection with animals of all kinds, witnessed by the fact that we have three cats and a dog. I have also found that my deep affinity for animals can be expressed through my current involvement in Creating a Life that Matters. I have been touched by Rev. Jo Bell's and Cheryl Myers' encouragement to keep embracing Spirit and God in all creatures. CLM is just another demonstration of MCC's commitment to giving us a space to keep growing and learning about ourselves and working towards our happiness.

(Melee) Over the last two years or so I have been struggling with a vocational issue. I was training to become a deacon in our church, yet discerned part way through that process that this was not the right time for me to follow that path. It was an extremely painful decision. I keep wandering around trying to discern what exactly I'm supposed to do with the next half of my life. It's not a particularly easy time for me, but this church provides an anchor. I turn up – like Kevin advised me to – like I have done since 2001 whether I know the answers or not, whether I'm particularly happy or not. I know that this place has exceptional power. I know that God has something for me to do; I also know that I can't clearly see it at the moment. Our spiritual development curriculum, specifically the "Creating a Life that Matters" course provides me with another weekly space to listen and do the necessary work for true discernment. In truth, I mostly hate having to work at being happy and I really wish that someone else would just come up with all the answers for me! However, I know that if I keep turning up to this building, to this community, to this energy, to this spirit, then God can work with me.

(Marysia) MCC constantly calls me to be in a better relationship with Melee and all of my relationships in my community. I am so proud of this church and this country of ours; however, I also know that we can't sit on our laurels or be smug about our success to date. We also must be mindful that we could regress. I'm not too sure how my full leadership will unfold to support the values of this church and beyond but I do know that through MCCT I will get there.

(Melee) When we married we chose eight guiding principles for our life together: loyalty, openness, compassion, creativity, humour, adventure, generosity and possibility. Every Sunday in this church we are re-presented to these values and are inspired to keep generating them to keep our relationship strong and healthy. We believe that our church is a major part of our relationship being what it is.

(Marysia) Everyone here has an extraordinary story. Our church is filled with people who have extraordinary stories. It is how and why there is so much power in this place. Our collective searching, sharing and celebrating provides a deep and necessary structure for us to grow. As our lives change, and we know they will, we look forward to the continued lessons we will be learning from this community – so long as we keep coming back.
Thank you very much for listening.