

Stirrings

A Basilian Peace & Justice Newsletter

Spring 2020

From the Frontlines of the Wet'suwet'en Struggle

By Natalie Maxson

**LAND AND
WATER
PROTECTOR'S**
1-2

**VULNERABLE
BIBLICAL
VOICES**
3

**TWO
PATHS
FORWARD**
4-5

**2 VIRUSES
IN
BETHLEHEM**
6

**YEMEN
PEACE
VIGIL**
7

**BOB'S
BOOK
SHELF**
8

It was dark when we arrived at the Gidimt'en camp outside Houston, B.C., with a trunk full of groceries and winter camping gear for everyone to share. Chuck Wright and I made the twelve-hour road trip on behalf of CPT to the site at the 27-kilometre mark along Morice West Forest Service Road in response to an invitation from Wet'suwet'en leaders for legal observers. It was evening in early February, and the camp was lit with the glow of a bonfire. The sound of people chopping firewood filled the air.

"This is bush life," said one person while we were being oriented to the camp.

"Where do you get your drinking water from?" I asked thirstily.

"The river gives good water," said one supporter. I hesitantly dipped my bottle into the Wedzin Kwa (Deep River) -- a point of contention between land defenders and Coastal GasLink (CGL), the company behind the disputed natural-gas pipeline. The water was pristine and refreshing, a far cry from what First Nations under boil-water advisories experience every day.



Walking into the woods that first night to reach the outhouse, I stopped in my tracks. I had the distinct feeling I was being watched. I knew the RCMP checkpoint was only one kilometre away. But this visceral feeling of being watched was different and very close. I stopped on the snowy path, my gaze directed toward the trees, and I introduced myself. I declared my intentions for being in the territory: to monitor and document police behaviour, and to do no harm.

There is a presence here. This land is sacred. During our week-long stay, moments of prayer and ceremony highlighted our time at Gidimt'en camp.

On the first day at the camp, I noticed red dresses hung up along the road. The red dresses are reminders of the women and girls who have been killed or gone missing on the nearby "Highway of Tears" and express distress over the risk the CGL worker camp poses to women in this community. The 2019 report of the national inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls states that there is substantial evidence that links resource extraction

continued on page 2

Stirring: (adjective) exciting, arousing, awakening, animating, quickening

Wet'suwet'en Struggle

continued from page 1

projects with violence against Indigenous women and girls especially where worker camps or “man camps” are established.

Being on this beautiful land and meeting the people on the frontlines has transformed my engagement from one of intellectual knowledge to a deeper spiritual and physical understanding. It's one thing to read about the region: I was inspired by the landmark Delgamuukw court case, which found that Aboriginal land rights in the area had never been extinguished by Canadian occupation and hereditary chiefs continue to have title over their traditional territory (I first read this in 1998 as a university student). But it's another to hear first-hand stories from people about what this territory means to them.

In conversation with hereditary Chief Namoks during our stay, I learned that the camps set up and occupied along the Morice Forest Service road are historic village sites. He added that the proper archaeological assessments have not been done in the areas where CGL is scheduled to work. That same week he had been in talks with CGL and provincial government representatives and reflected, “We always suspected who was calling the shots, but these meetings were the first time I actually saw industry directing government officials what to do.”

I met a nine week old baby with big, bright eyes who smiled when I said, “What do you think of all this? All this is for you and the children to come.” I later witnessed an elder confront the RCMP officers at the checkpoint that restricted people's access to the territory state: “We're not doing this for us. We're defending the land for the children to come. Not just First Nations children, all children.”

During our time at the camp, we witnessed the overwhelming presence of heavily armed police, tactical units, helicopters and drones to defend an injunction passed to protect Coastal GasLink's pipeline project. We witnessed RCMP restrict and detain media reporting on the situation in the territory. Chuck and I were arrested on February 8 along with several others when the RCMP expanded their “exclusion zone” in the area, and were held in police custody for over two days.



Canada has not heeded the call from the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination to suspend CGL's work. The province of BC passed legislation to implement the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in November 2019 but the province's Premier, John Horgan, insists the pipeline will go ahead and that the application of UNDRIP will only be forward looking.

It doesn't matter how many apologies have been issued for residential schools, potlatch bans and other acts of oppression and genocide against Indigenous peoples when the reality on the ground says otherwise. This is why many are declaring, “Reconciliation is dead. Revolution is alive!”

This movement to respect Indigenous rights, crystallized at this time by the Wet'suwet'en struggle, is an important opportunity for church and society to show up and demonstrate what justice could look like. Many churches have been committed to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to action and hosting the Kairos Blanket Exercises to learn about Canada's colonial history and their complicity in it. As we witness solidarity actions across Turtle Island (North America) in response to this struggle for Indigenous rights, faith communities have a real opportunity to step up and bravely engage in these issues, as places where people have a foundation of shared values and established relationships.

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Stirrings

A Peace & Justice Newsletter
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Stirring: (noun) the act of moving or putting into motion, activity

The Vulnerable Voices that Promise Newness

by Sylvia C. Keesmaat

One of the astounding things about the Bible is the way that it repeatedly gives voice to those whose stories are normally ignored, the marginalized. These stories tell us who our God is, who we are called to be, and what true healing looks like.

One of those pivotal stories is that of Hagar, Sarah's slave, given to Abraham so that she could bear a child by proxy. Hagar, a slave woman, was used for sex, beaten, and then sent away into the desert, thirsty and hungry. Hagar cried out to God. She lived because she saw God, the God who hears the cry of the slave (see Genesis 16 and 21 for the whole story).

Of course, we aren't surprised, for this is the God who rescued the people from Egypt and tells us to proclaim freedom for the oppressed. Who is this God? The one who hears the cry of the slave and sets them free. Who are we called to be? The ones who image this slave-freeing God by setting free the oppressed.

Two other pivotal stories revolve around women named Tamar. One is denied her right to a husband after her first two husbands die. Dressed like a prostitute, she seduces her father-in-law, gets pregnant, and avoids being burned to death when he realizes that the sin was his (which was, interestingly, not using a prostitute, but denying her her rights; see Genesis 38). The other story describes the rape of another Tamar, the daughter of King David. When King David hears of this, he does nothing (2 Samuel 13). These

stories highlight the violence done to women throughout the biblical narrative and indeed throughout history. We sense the desperation of the first Tamar and are told of the devastation of Tamar after her rape.

In the New Testament, however, we see a shift. Women are no longer victims, but partners in the proclamation of the gospel. The tide has turned, their voices now heard.



So, what do these stories tell us about our God? That our God works through and on behalf of the most vulnerable. And what do they tell us about who we are? That we are called, with Judah, to acknowledge the righteousness of the vulnerable. We are called to look for justice. We are, with Paul, called to work alongside the vulnerable in announcing redemption.

A third story is that of Ruth. This story is one of hospitality given by the detested enemy people, the Moabites, to Naomi and her husband, who had come as refugees to Moab. It is the story of one of those Moabites, now a refugee herself, arriving in Israel.

And it is the story of Boaz recognizing that Ruth was righteous for all she had done for Naomi. This is the story of the enemy becoming family, of deeply ingrained hatred being overcome, of welcome for the stranger. It is a story of the stranger demonstrating the welcome that God and Jesus call us to throughout the Biblical story.

Who is God in this story? The one who loves the stranger, who gives them food and clothing. And how do we image this God? By welcoming the stranger as God has welcomed us.

The last story is that of Naboth, whose ancestral inheritance, his land, was desired by the King. When the Queen realized this, she had Naboth framed and killed so that the king could take possession of his land (1 Kings 21). This story is all too familiar. It's the story of the ancestral inheritance taken by the powerful, by the colonizers.

Who is our God? The one who brings judgement on those who take the land of another. Who are we? We are the ones called to give it back.

These are the stories our culture would like to keep hidden. They are the stories of those suffering from economic oppression (the slaves), violence (the women), exclusion (the stranger) and land loss (Indigenous peoples). But these stories are also about those who dare to name the pain, and so dare to hope for God's newness. When we hear their voices, we too can glimpse the kingdom.

Sylvia is Adjunct Professor of Biblical Studies at the Toronto School of Theology.

Two Paths Forward

Will the significant deference shown by government to the medical officers of health in response to the pandemic play out differently when it comes to climate catastrophe and the destructive projects that contribute to a frightening future?

By Matthew Behrens
April 21, 2020



The ongoing pandemic epoch has exposed a clear duality marked both by increasingly obvious and blatant inequalities, hypocrisies and systemic failures as well as beautiful, loving and creative responses in the form of mutual aid communities and direct action to save lives.

What happens when -- or if -- this epoch comes to an end is anybody's guess, but there are clearly two paths forward, with a thankfully growing consciousness developed long before COVID-19 that our present path is one leading directly to disaster. Indeed, the 24-hour news cycle dominated by masked faces, hospital images and infection charts has almost obliterated from memory everything from January's apocalyptic Australian brush

fire scenes that served as yet one more warning about planetary peril to the grotesque armed invasion of Wet'suwet'en territory by paramilitary RCMP units.

It is encouraging to see a growing collective analysis and empathy reflected in statements that there can be no return to a "normal" rooted in the very structures that have led us to this unprecedented crisis. It's a recognition that for the majority of the world's population, daily life – the "normal" everyone talks about returning to – is a daily pandemic of poverty and exploitation, filthy water, malnutrition and a vicious structural violence enforced by the hellfire missiles of drone warfare.

Ecological Grief

Pre-pandemic, for many of us, it was not uncommon to recognize in the growing rates of species extinction and the disproportionate impacts of climate catastrophe on the world's most vulnerable, a phenomenon tagged by Ashlee Cunsolo and Neville Ellis as "ecological grief." By naming this ecological grief, they argued it was not a declaration of defeat or despair, but rather a source of hope because of the "responses ecological grief is likely to invoke."

"Just as grief over the loss of a loved person puts into perspective what matters in our lives, collective experiences of ecological grief may coalesce into a strengthened sense of love and commitment to the places, ecosystems and species that inspire, nurture and sustain us. There is much

grief work to be done, and much of it will be hard. However, being open to the pain of ecological loss may be what is needed to prevent such losses from occurring in the first place."

A Path for Transforming

Coming out of COVID-19 will require a continuation of much of the good work that was well underway pre-pandemic to eliminate the global inequality, climate catastrophe and violence that undergirds so many daily decisions of corporations and governments. That's a given in such beautiful work as the recent piece by Arundhati Roy, which reminds us that the pandemic is a portal to a new world, if only we will take the opportunity it provides us to enter and build on the vision we would like that future to be.

Public Health Means Social Justice

In the pre-pandemic world, there were a series of initiatives underway in this land called Canada that, arguably, were brilliant expressions of the core principles that underlie public health. They were not listened to by Canadian officials, who chose instead to dismiss them, to condemn them, and, ultimately, to criminalize them. From over a million young people marching in the streets last fall for real action on climate change and changing the way of life that causes such harm, to January and February's beautiful continent-wide and international actions to #ShutCanadaDown, we were practitioners of public-health prin-



ciples in action.

In a 2012 document, Public Health Ontario prescribed a model for the ethical conduct of public-health initiatives that explored three core principles. These might sound very familiar to those who not too long ago were occupying rail lines, blockading ports and calling for respect for sovereign Indigenous nations whose lands were being invaded and occupied on behalf of oil and gas corporations: “respect for persons, concern for welfare and social justice.”

Respect for Persons

At the core of respect for persons is the notion of autonomy or, as the document points out, “guaranteeing individuals the right to make decisions about their own lives.” (That sounds perfectly in sync with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and its cornerstone principle of free, prior and informed consent.)

Concern for Welfare

Concern for welfare “consists of the impact on individuals of factors such as their physical, mental and spiritual health, as well as their physical, economic and social circumstances.” Moreover, “harm includes any negative effects on welfare, broadly construed.”

Focus on Social Justice

Justice is defined as “the obligation to treat people fairly and equitably.”

This focus on social justice is seen by many as one of the central roles of public health.

Reduction of health inequities may at times require ‘focusing on the needs of the most disadvantaged.’ Groups may suffer from health inequities as a result of a wide variety of factors including income and social status, social support networks, education, employment, early childhood health, gender and culture.

Will the Authorities Listen?

But it has been refreshing to now see what appears to be a significant deference shown to the medical officers of health whose advice is playing a major role in determining specific government plans in response to the pandemic. Still, the question remains:

will that deference to medical science and public health play out differently when it comes to climate catastrophe and the destructive projects that that contribute to a frightening future?

We Can’t Wait

Thankfully, many are not waiting to do the work of justice. Indeed, educational work and organizing have taken on new online and social-distance-respecting forms. It’s not just the traditional tools of protest that will help us transition. It’s the many creative ways we express ourselves through theatre, song, art and literature, among many other art forms, as well as the thousands of mutual aid groups that have sprung up in every community, helping those in need get groceries to their door, providing sound and practical advice, and creating connections that allay our fears and remind us of what it is to be human. All are representative of what we can and should be. No pandemic can kill that.

Matthew Behrens is a freelance writer and social justice advocate who co-ordinates the Homes not Bombs non-violent direct action network. He has worked closely with the targets of Canadian and U.S. “national security” profiling for many years.



VINTAGE PHOTO

Basilian Social Justice Committee Members with Matthew in 2004 at vigil calling for release of political prisoners held without charge in Canadian Federal Prison.
L-R: Fr. John Murphy, Fr. Wilf Canning, Matthew, Fr. Dick Wahl

photo: Bob Holmes

In Bethlehem

There is a virus that kills humans
and another that kills our humanity

Holy Land Trust Update

Bethlehem continues to be under full closure and restrictive movement. The main towns of Bethlehem, Beit Jala and Beit Sahour have been cut off from each other by Palestinian security barricades and personnel staffing every street in and out of these towns. In addition, last night, an indefinite curfew was imposed. No one is to leave their home until further notice. We can only have basic food items and other needs delivered to our home.

Adding insult to injury, the Israeli occupation army, took immediate advantage of the curfew and raided the city late last night. Israeli soldiers dressed in medical protective gear raided different locations and arrested three young Palestinians, who were at home with their families. Such raids are not new to us, but now in the midst of such a crisis? While this can be seen as a small act of raid and arrest, we see it also as an insult to the spirit of unity, compassion, and care that is emerging globally.

Maybe such a raid is a reminder to all of us not to forget that while we are facing the physical dangers of the coronavirus, there is another virus that has existed in this world and has been slowly incubating and spreading itself in the hearts and minds of many. The virus that is at the core of all our epidemics and illnesses, the virus that breeds fear, hatred and mistrust amongst us, the virus that triggers racism, segregation, marginalization of others and the destruction of earth and its resources. It is the virus that might not kill us directly, but takes over our minds and makes us kill each other. It makes me see my religion and my God as better than yours, my race as purer than yours, my gender as superior to yours, and therefore justifies my violence towards you.

Humanity must come together now to address both of these killer viruses, the one that is killing humans and the one that is killing our humanity.

At Holy Land Trust, we are doing our best to address these two threats and with your support and help we can. We know that many of you are now worried about your own situation and rightly so but we still seek your support for the people of Bethlehem and for the vision of a healed world we have been engaging in for many years. We believe that this vision is more possible now than any time before – this could be a time for transformation and deep change.

The virus of the occupation of the heart, soul, and body of humanity will one day cease to be and united by the message of love and peace that was born in this town we can make it happen.

As staff and friends of Holy Land Trust we are resisting the fear and remaining positive, focussed on that which brings change and growth. We are so grateful for the support that has come from around the world which has enabled us to buy and distribute 120 food and hygiene packs this week to families most in need.

Our prayers and good wishes are with you as you face major changes in your life over this time. We are so conscious that we are a global family and we need each other more than ever. Please keep us in your prayers too and remember the people of Bethlehem and the message of the one who was born here: love is stronger than fear and death will never have the last word.



Inspired by Love

Holy Land Trust works to build communities of trust and respect.

We travel and encourage others to go to bear witness and meet those who are marginalized and oppressed, carry their untold stories out in the world, and organize for a better future for all.

We create a space for all internationals to come and learn about the political, cultural, religious maps of the land.

We teach to help build communities where love, peace, justice, and equality are at their core. As a research center, we have learned and developed the tools to help those in need to address the daily challenges of violence they face. From personal transformation, spiritual awakening, nonviolent resistance, communication skills, trauma healing work – we want to serve by teaching as we continue to learn.

We open space for the healing of the historical wounds and narratives that have shaped us to live in fear, separation, and victimization.

We open up space for new visions of the future to become possible, visions that are not embedded in fear but are motivated by seeing the other as the same.

Vigil for Peace in Yemen a New Norm

by Kathy Kelly

For the past three years, several dozen New Yorkers have gathered each Saturday at Union Square, at 11:00 a.m. to vigil for peace in Yemen.

Now, however, due to the coronavirus, the vigil for peace is radically altered. Last week, in recognition of the city's coming shelter in place program, participants were asked to hold individual vigils at their respective homes on the subsequent Saturday mornings. Normally, during the public vigils, one or more participants would provide updates on the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, the ongoing war, and U.S. complicity. As COVID-19 threatens to engulf war-torn Yemen, it is even more critical to raise awareness of how the war debilitates the country.

If the vigil for peace were to gather in Union Square this Saturday, activists most certainly would draw attention to how Turkish officials indicted 20 Saudi nationals for the murder of the dissident writer, Jamal Khashoggi.

Numerous news reports over the past five years establish a pattern of Saudi responding to inquiries about Saudi-led coalition military attacks against Yemen civilians with misleading statements, outright denials and attempted cover-ups.

For example, On August 30th, 2015, according to Human Rights Watch, a Saudi coalition led airstrike attacked the Al-Sham Water Bottling Factory in the outskirts of Abs, in northern Yemen. The strike destroyed the factory and killed 14 workers, including three boys, and wounded 11 more.

Later on August 30, after the airstrike, Gen. Al-Asiri told Reuters that the plant was not a bottling factory, but rather a place where Houthis made

explosive devices. However, all of the individuals Human Rights Watch interviewed concurred: ... that plant was being used to bottle water and was not used for any military purposes... A group of international journalists traveled to the site of the blast two days after it was hit and reported that they could not find evidence of any military targets in the area.

Meanwhile, Yemenis were desperately trying to contend with rising cases of cholera caused by shortages of clean water.

In October, 2015, when eyewitnesses declared a hospital in northern Yemen run by Doctors Without Borders was destroyed by Saudi-led coalition warplanes, Gen. Al-Asiri told Reuters coalition jets had been in action over Saada governorate but had not hit the hospital.

On August 15, 2016, a Saudi-led bombing campaign again targeted a hospital in northern Yemen supported by Doctors Without Borders. 19 people were killed.

The Abs hospital was bombed two days after Saudi airstrikes attacked a school in northern Yemen, killing ten students and wounding dozens more.

Yet Saudi officials continued to insist they struck military targets only. Commenting on the August 13 school attack, Gen. Al-Asiri said the dead children were evidence the Houthis were recruiting children as guards and fighters.

In one of the deadliest attacks of the war, on October 8, 2016, the Saudi-led military coalition's fighter jets repeatedly bombed a hall filled with mourners during a funeral for an official in the capital city of Sana. At least



A quarantine-sized Saturday morning vigil for Peace in Yemen, Union Square, NYC

Photo: Bill Ofenloch

140 people were killed and 550 more were wounded.

General Al-Asiri, still a spokesman for the Saudi-led coalition, suggested there were other causes for the blast and later reported the coalition had not carried out any strikes near the hall.

The U.S. has steadily sided with Saudi Arabia, including supplying it with weapons, training its armed forces and covering for it in the United Nations Security Council. But "Defense One," a U.S. news agency recently issued a stinging rebuke to the Kingdom's Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman. They denounced the "humanitarian abomination" ushered by Riyadh's war in Yemen. Defense One urged Washington to discontinue enabling "Riyadh's most reckless behavior."

U.S. national security leaders and stakeholders in war, as they shelter in place, have an extraordinary opportunity to set a new norm and link with the vigil for Peace in Yemen, virtually. And, some may even join Yale students on April 9, from sunrise to sunset, in their National Fast for Peace in Yemen. They invite us to pledge support for Doctors Without Borders and other relief groups in Yemen.

Kathy Kelly (kathy@vcnm.org) co-coordinates *Voices for Creative Nonviolence* (www.vcnm.org)

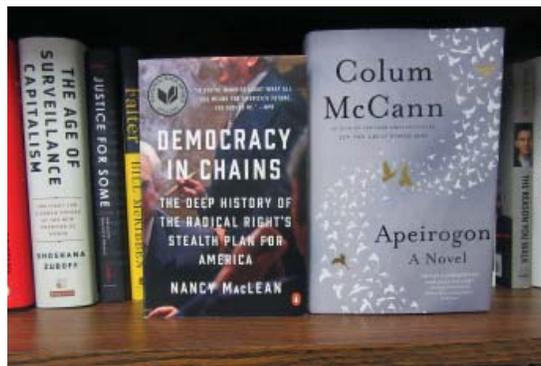
Two very interesting books I've read during the pandemic and, although I am not a critical book reviewer, I would like to introduce them to you.

Having read Jane Mayer's *Dark Money*, where she shines a searchlight on the hidden history of the billionaires behind the rise of the radical right, I am aware of how dark money is streamed to Republican candidates, both state and federal, to effect legislative changes in favour of corporate interests.

Nancy McLean in *Democracy in Chains* delves right into searching for the master plan behind this phenomenon. She discovered the formative role of James McGill Buchanan who founded the Virginia School of Political Economy and who taught that socialism – any group or government meddling with the market – was dangerous. Socialism is the enemy of freedom when applied to economic affairs and, according to Buchanan, taxation to advance social justice or the common good is nothing more than the mob gangsterism attempting to take by force the fruits of another person's efforts.

In this economic thinking it is the successful business leaders, not the federal government or their employees, that have made the U.S. economy into a world powerhouse – why should they be paying into unemployment and retirement funds? Education and health care are commodities which users should pay for rather than governments. Collective bargaining by unions allows the majority to impose its will on the minority. This goes against the constitutional rights and liberty of all Americans.

Clearly these ideas will not be accepted by the majority of voters and therefore cannot be openly adopted by a political party. Ordinary electoral politics would never free capitalism from government interference. Hence the need for stealth in developing operational strategies to change the rules so as to insulate property rights from the reach of the majority of voters such as calling for “freedom of choice” in order to end compulsory union dues and there by weaken the political voices of unionized labour, fostering private retirement investment in order lower government spending on Social Security, imposing stricter voting regulations to reduce the political voice of the poor and marginalized, and so much more.



Bob's Bookshelf

Colum McCann's book *Apeirogon* (a polygon with an infinite number of sides) captured my attention because it tells the story of two friends of mine but does it as a “novel.” Halfway through the book he records the stories as told by each.

I first met Bassam Aramin and Rami Elhanan, a Palestinian and Israeli, in Jerusalem when together they told their stories to our Basilian Peace and Justice pilgrims few years ago.

Both had suffered the terrible loss of a daughter - one to suicide bombers and the other to border police. They are members of the Parents Circle – a forum for families who are grieving the loss of a family member in the ongoing conflict. They come together to share their stories, to heal, to never forget and to carry their message of “No more killing!” to all who will listen – Israelis, Palestinians and Internationals. They have over 700 members who go out two by two, Palestinian and Israeli, to speak to groups, especially in Israeli and Palestinian schools.

This takes courage. Bassam is accused of “normalizing” by Palestinians who want nothing to do with Israelis. Rami is called a “self-hating Jew” for befriending “terrorists.” But I believe they represent the future of Israel/Palestine. No matter how they decide to live out their shared occupancy of the Holy Land each side must accept and acknowledge the trauma narrative of the other and then work out a new narrative for living together.

Nathan Englander on the book cover calls the novel, “a high-wire act . . . a political tightrope walk . . . the story of modern Israel and the story of modern Palestine . . . an extraordinary act of listening.”

Writing the story of real-life events as a novel allows McCann to reimagine the whole heartbreaking suffering on both sides and provide a glimmer of hope in the unexpected friendship between these two men.

Every year our Basilian Peace and Justice Pilgrimage requests a visit by members of the Parents Circle. Always a Palestinian and an Israeli who have suffered a family loss in the conflict – sometimes two men, sometimes a man and a woman, sometimes two women. Always their stories bring us to tears but also raise our hopes of a peaceful and just shared Holy Land.

Bob Holmes CSB