

Finding my raison d'être— or is it my recent debt?



What exactly is stewardship?

More than an early account of creation, the first two chapters in Genesis give us a summary of our purpose. The land, sea, plants, animals, and human beings were created by God, and it was all good. Somehow, that account gives us a sense of an interconnectedness, of how everything fits together.

In my own life when I have strayed from being connected, when I have separated myself from creation and the Creator, when I have set out my own purpose (fame, fortune, fortress), I have felt disconnected, dislocated, disorientated. It's at moments of anxiety that we discover who our real gods are. In the affluent West of the 21st century, we hide our fears in things. We amass all the things our culture tells us we need to be legitimate, and to matter. And the more afraid we are that we don't matter, the more we buy.

Recent economic studies indicate that Canadians are more indebted today than at any other time in our history—ironically, at a time when unemployment is low, incomes are rising, and times are good. At the same time, Canadians have become less generous with charitable givings. We are not sharing. We are not connecting. But does this fearful living move us closer to happiness? Apparently not, because anxiety, stress, and panic are everywhere.

Jean Vanier, theologian and founder of L'Arche, a community of people with intellectual disabilities, says in his book, *Becoming Human*, that we discover our true identity when we connect to one another, particularly when we share our true selves with each other. The very act of reaching out beyond ourselves is spiritual, it is a tangible demonstration that we care. Rather than simply spending on material things to silence our fears, we show we love God by giving back to God and by reaching out to others. Whether this act is volunteering our time, writing a cheque for a worthy cause, or working to better our community, it is a sermon—our sermon.

If we truly believe that God made us for a reason, that there is something inherently worthy about us, then utilizing our gifts as an act of commitment is something we are called to do. And that something is what we call stewardship.

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Discover Stewardship

Stewardship is our response to God's love in every area of our lives—most of which happens outside the walls of the church.

Being stewards means making good decisions daily about:

- how we invest and share time, talents, and spiritual gifts.
- how we share who we are as God's children.
- how we organize our whole life to share God's good news.
- how we earn, spend, invest, and share money.
- how we relate to the rest of creation.
- just about everything!

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If I were a gift what gift would I be?



Our gift is God's stewardship

A friend of mine told me that she was “complex, not complicated.” I like that. None of us can boil down our essence into a simple, one-word explanation. We are all complex—a mixture of contradictions, dysfunctional behaviours, glorious insights, amazing talents—a circus of personalities.

But what would we say about ourselves if we could give the eulogy at our own funeral? How would we sum up that complex body of work and energy?

In the early church, Paul thought that the gifts were many and the purpose quite focused. Some were teachers, some were healers, some were preachers, and some spoke in strange tongues. And yet the gifts themselves were part of a rich tapestry that together hung like a quilt. The quilt could be a blanket to keep us warm or a work of art, but it could be only a limited number of things.

Likewise, you and I have a huge variety of talents, but only a limited number of ways to harness this energy for something that gives us meaning.

The great commandment tells us that we can love others only if we love ourselves. Do you love yourself? Do you believe you have something worthy to share and be? It is a radical act of faith to believe this, since our world defines our worth in terms of wealth, beauty, and popularity.

If everyone matters—including us—then what we have been given is a gift, and a gift is meant to be opened and enjoyed. I wonder if we spent more time in prayer considering who we are, what we can share, and where we can share it, we'd be a little closer to discovering what this crazy adventure called life is really all about.

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What can I Give?

Giving is a joyful celebration of God's generosity to us and a sign of our ongoing dependence on God. In addition to money, we can use the things we own as tools of generosity. We can open the doors of our homes for hospitality. We can share our tools, our cooking ingredients, our vehicles, our knowledge, our skills, our recreation toys, and our time.

What would Jesus buy?



What our monthly credit card bill says about our stewardship

There is a lot of talk these days about “family values.” I am often curious how these values manifest themselves. How do we know when we live values we profess with our lips?

The Bible frequently speaks of “bearing fruit”—when our faith takes on some form to demonstrate that it is active and engaged. As James says, “Faith without works is dead.”

So here’s a simple exercise in family values. Next time you get your monthly bank statement or your credit card bill, read it carefully. What were your major purchases? Who were these items bought for?

At a critical point in Jesus’ ministry, his brother and mother confront him and ask him to stop what he is doing lest he deprive his family of a close relation. His rebuke is stinging when he asks, “Who is my brother, who is my mother?” He answers his own questions when he says that those who perform acts that fulfill his vision are his family.

Read Matthew 25:35-36 and you get a sense of what that vision is: the naked clothed, the homeless housed, the stranger welcomed, the prisoner visited. Does your bank statement read that way? If the vast majority of our purchases are for things that have nothing to do with Jesus’ vision, or even our vision, why are we buying them? Who told us we have to? Do they bring us peace of mind, satisfaction, or real joy?

Isn’t it time we had a serious conversation with ourselves, with someone wise and thoughtful, perhaps in prayer? Given what we have, what we need, and what this vision that stirs us requires, what are we doing with the resources we’ve received? The time for that conversation is now.

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How I Live Matters

Part of being good stewards is being conscious of how we earn, spend, invest, and share money.

- Develop a spending plan for how you will allocate your financial resources. Consider how you will share, save, and spend the resources God has given you.
- Provide safe spaces in your church where people can freely talk about lifestyle choices, intergenerational transfer of money, ethical investing, and other such topics.

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The Eleventh

Commandment: Thou Shalt Compost



The stewardship of creation

Creation is in trouble. It is not just threatened by global warming, but also by landfills that are overflowing, wildlife species that are becoming extinct, and water that is becoming poisoned—to name just a few problems. The most vulnerable victims to these changes are those who contribute the least to the causes—people living in poverty.

It is easy to see how over-consumption and an ethos that the Earth is a commodity that is meant to be exploited are contributing to this crisis. Luke 12:24 talks about the ravens and how little they need or have, and the beauty of the lilies, how “even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these” (Verse 27). So why do we move beyond our needs to push this planet to the brink?

We have inherited this Earth as a place to enjoy God’s gift of Creation in all of its natural splendour, and to keep it safe for the next generation. The three Rs of the environmental movement are reduce, reuse, and recycle. Most of us are pretty good at recycling and reusing but really struggle with reducing. Sometimes what it takes to reduce what you use is to fill the void of “having” with the peace of being—being one part of a larger whole. Maybe it takes a change in vision to see the beauty of creation as capable of filling our hungry souls.

Find new ways to celebrate God’s gift of creation by going outside to run, walk, or cycle. Next time you are going on a walk or drive, take note of the flowers and plants in the ditches along the highway. This is truly nature’s cathedral.

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Be A Steward of Creation

- Reduce, recycle, and reuse. Calculate your ecological footprint and find ways to reduce your global impact both as individuals and as a community.
- Before you purchase something new, reflect on whether it is a need or a want. See if you might meet the need another way. Choose to buy items second-hand. Purchase communally, rent, or borrow. Be creative!
- Let your choices and actions be known by your community and its leaders. Write letters, attend events, and arrange meetings on caring for the environment. Visit www.kairoscanada.org for sample letters and ideas.
- Join or form an environmental committee at your church. Do an energy audit of the church and commit to working to save energy. What else might you do?

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Justice or just us?



How our stewardship can help build a better world

What was the last cause you joined? What was it that motivated you to care, to get involved?

Sadly, many of the campaigns people join these days involve a high degree of self-interest: preventing something from coming into the neighbourhood, stopping a school closure, or demanding that subsidies be maintained. But how often have we opted to join forces with others in a cause that was greater than our self-interest?

None of us has the time or resources to right every injustice or be part of every worthy movement. But we do have the time, talent, and treasure to make some cause our own, especially one where vulnerable people without access to power need our solidarity. Go to the local coffee shop, attend community meetings, or read your local newspapers and become informed.

And don't stop there—expose yourself to stories about marginalized people worldwide, like people in Sudan, people in the Middle East, or fair-trade coffee growers. You can write letters on behalf of people whose

human rights are being abused; support local farmers by buying produce locally; or form a cooperative that buys coffee at a fair price.

Why should those of us who seek Jesus care about such things? Because Jesus did. When the rich young ruler was lost and confused, Jesus told him to renounce his power and privilege and he would be healed. Further, Jesus wanted the man to deliver some of his wealth to the poor, to make a concrete change for the many who were poor, and to save the souls of the few who were rich.

When asked what faithfulness is all about, the prophet Micah answers, "To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). You can change your day with a smile, you can make one person happy with a generous deed, but you can truly change our world only when you strike out in an act of justice.

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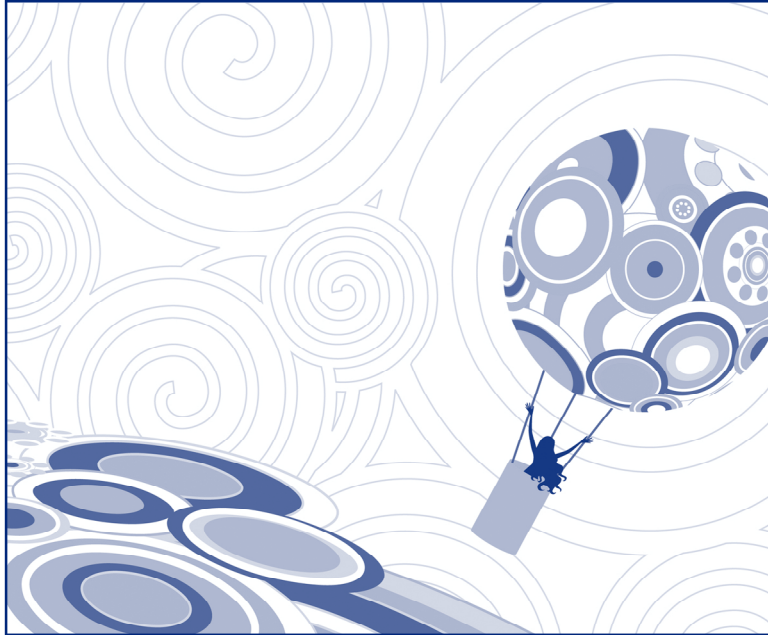
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Do Justice!

- Join a local KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives group or participate as an individual in one of their actions www.kairoscanada.org.
- Check out the recent reports that the International Affairs Committee of The Presbyterian Church in Canada makes each year to General Assembly. Each addresses important justice needs and provides concrete ways for action.
- Give to *Presbyterians Sharing . . .* and Presbyterian World Service & Development to support global partners who speak out for the most vulnerable around the world.

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Downtime is not a down time



Stewardship of self and renewing the spirit

How often do people today cry out in exasperation or despair, “I just don’t have enough time!” There is so much to do: earn a living, fulfill a vocation, nurture relationships, care for dependents, exercise, clean the house. Moreover, we hope to maintain sanity while doing all this, and to keep growing as faithful and loving people at the same time. We are finite, and the demands seem too great, the time too short. Whether we know the term Sabbath or not, we, the harried citizens of late modernity, yearn for the reality. We need Sabbath, even though we doubt that we have time for it.

So what happens when you do and do and do and your energy and spirit are exhausted? What happens when there is literally nothing left inside you to share? Who cares for the caregiver? What sustains the prophet? Where do we all go for renewal?

Try as I might—liturgy, Taizé services, walking the labyrinth, buying one of those miniature waterfalls, long periods of silence, devotionals, and meditation exercises—nothing seemed to give me the renewal I was crav-

ing. My own Sabbath time came with the discovery of coffee. My high-energy, hard-driving, people-pleasing personality can literally stop and smell the coffee.

When I am truly tired, I head to a local café with a good book and hide in the corner. The smell of the coffee beans, the taste of the bold black coffee, the comfy sofa, the quiet space, and the reflective reading recharge my batteries.

Now everyone is different. While a spa treatment may send me over the edge of boredom, that may be just the ticket to regenerate your spirit.

Remember, the psalmist said, “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). Sabbath time is not just to rest between frantic actions—it is also a time to experience the presence of the Holy. Away from the rhythm of my very fast-paced walk, I can sense I am not alone and am filled with the knowledge and peace of God’s presence.

Making time to listen as well as act re-energizes my spirit and enlarges my purpose.

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Rediscover Sabbath

Stewardship includes taking a break from work. In many churches, it is the people on the committees who most need to be reminded to keep Sabbath! Here are some ideas to help keep Sabbath.

- Creating regular patterns of Sabbath time that provide opportunities for worship, spiritual renewal, and play. This may not always be on Sunday, but it is important that it be regular.
- Buying and spending involve work, and create the conditions for more work. Find a day to refrain from shopping—it could soon become a refreshing habit.
- During your Sabbath time, refrain from activities that we know will summon worry—activities like paying bills, preparing tax returns, and making lists of things to do in the coming week.
- Find time to spend with loved ones just for the pleasure of being together!

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