

This report was written by Dr. Adela D. Torchia when she was a Community Sabbatical Fellow at the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society (CSRS) in 2018. The views, information, and opinions expressed in the report belong solely to the author, and are not necessarily representative of the views of the CSRS or the University of Victoria.

Spirituality and the BC Opioid Crisis:

a Grandmother's Journey

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Introduction

Why do a research fellowship on this topic at the CSRS? In the basic CSRS leaflet on the first inside page under the title: “At the Intersection of Religion and Public Life” we are told that CSRS research projects deal with key issues facing our broader society, including public health challenges, and in the next paragraph, addiction is mentioned as one of those public policy issues. So I appreciate this opportunity to focus particularly on homeless people who are dying from fentanyl-related drug overdoses, although some reports claim that most of these deaths occur in people’s homes – a separate area of inquiry that I’ll leave to others.

Nowadays drug overdose death rates are reported widely and in BC reached an all-time high in 2017 with over 1400 opioid overdose deaths listed so far, or an average of 3.8 deaths per day, although thankfully the numbers were about 25% less per month in Sept to Dec 2017. The main opioid element that causes death is of course fentanyl that increases both profits from drug sales, and the ‘highs’ people experience. Last September 11th my 20 year-old grandson Gordon became one of those deaths, so I was particularly keen to try and explore some of the meanings, values and spiritual elements of this

phenomenon in our midst. Part of the reason that BC's death rate is so high is simply our favorable climate in which it is much easier to be homeless and live outdoors than it is on the frozen prairies – an enclosed garden Paradise perhaps, with many outsiders longingly looking in? I also wonder whether this is somewhat characteristic of the Cascadia region – outsiders longingly looking in but unable to afford to live here?

Gordon was from Winnipeg and although he had the ongoing tentative option of staying at Grandpa's house in Winnipeg, there were various factors that drove him out west instead, not the least of which is that drugs are cheaper in Vancouver since there's a much larger market for them. Gordon also knew he could live with Grandma Adela in BC once ready for detox and school or job training; but my specific story of Gordon is complex and will unfold over time. My first hint of the spiritual component of this issue was the sacred circle and sacred fire in Tent City Victoria in early 2016 so my focus starts there, and goes on to explore other 'spiritual' elements and interconnections.

Early in my project when I googled 'spirituality and addiction' there were almost two million results. And merely reversing the words to 'addiction and spirituality' somehow produced over seven million

results! That's when I panicked a bit and began wondering not whether the topic was viable, but rather whether it was manageable. So let me be clear from the outset that my project is not meant to be comprehensive. Since this topic is so widely covered in the news media, with many good and not-so-good news sources freely available online, I cannot claim any particular expertise – just a strong desire to help articulate the meaning, especially the spiritual meaning of what has become so commonplace in our midst, since so many people are affected. I'm guessing that for each death there's probably a circle of at least 25 people directly affected – family, friends, friends of family etc. And the USA has recently noted that their life expectancy has been going down for two years, partly because of this issue, so its influence is large.

What are some aspects of the spiritual context of this societal epidemic? And how are we defining spirituality for the purposes of this study? Spirituality can mean many things, and most reference sites agree that there's no one definition that can claim authority over all the others. To cite at least one good source I turned to Ursula King's chapter on Spirituality in John Hinnells' 2010 *The Penguin Handbook of the World's Living Religions*. Here are two excerpts of her preliminary defining terms:

... spirituality has become a universal code word to indicate the human search for direction and meaning, for wholeness and transcendence. In contemporary secular society spirituality is being rediscovered as a lost or at least hidden dimension in a largely materialistic world. (p. 669-70)

*** The history of spirituality is resonant with longings for the permanent, everlasting and eternal, for wholeness, peace, joy and bliss, which have haunted human beings through the ages, and for which many people are still searching today. (p. 670)

And here's a preliminary list of my own ideas of some spiritual elements related to this opioid crisis:

- a) A spirituality of non-materialism that has deep roots in many world religions – street people usually own very little.
- b) A spirituality that values inner peace more than outward acquisitions – street people do not generally subscribe to the materialistic culture of our times.
- c) A spirituality that respects the Creator's creation instead of exploiting it for material gain and private profits – street people often love to live in places of great natural beauty, like Canada's west coast.
- d) A spirituality that values our interconnections as in the Lakota idea of *Mitakuye Oyasin* or All my Relations (see ch. 7)
- e) A Buddhist focus on non-attachment to material goods, and

non-attachment to a society that encourages selfishness, greed and apathy. (see ch. 6 and elsewhere)

- f) A Gandhian *Khadi* spirit approach that does not allow lifestyles that cause harm to others. (see ch. 6)
- g) A Jain and Gandhian focus on truth and non-violence in a culture that often embraces their opposites. (see ch. 6)
- h) An HD Thoreau approach to those who 'march to the beat of a different drummer' – like those who live on the streets and reject society's ways.

I believe that many street people in our cities are searching for direction and meaning, for wholeness and transcendence, and are rebels against materialism in a sense. My therapy dog and I make regular visits to Our Place Society in downtown Victoria and we hear many little life vignettes that support such ideas. In the common human search for inner peace and joy and bliss, many of our homeless people with addictions seem to be escaping from challenging situations and life circumstances, using drugs to dull the pain and to reach the "bliss" that otherwise seems to elude them in life. I don't promise that by the end of this brief project, the reasons for this will be understood or resolved,

except in small ways¹. For now let's turn to a discussion list of some preliminary elements of the spiritual context of the opioid crisis.

¹ Already by May of 2108 there's a discernible shift in nomenclature and therefore potentially a paradigm shift when we consider this significant meeting and event put on by Island Health at the University of Victoria May 22, 2018. It's called: "Illicit Drug Poisonings: Decriminalization, Legalization, & Regulation" (<https://www.eventbrite.ca/e/illicit-drug-poisonings-decriminalization-legalization-regulation-tickets-44007111455>). I write this before the event but am fairly certain that the fentanyl that killed my grandson is part of this "illicit drug poisoning" and seeing it described in that way is strangely comforting. One can hardly blame the victim of an "illicit drug poisoning" as indeed often happens when these deaths are assumed to be a form of suicide, whereas most statistics make it clear that the vast majority of these deaths were unintentional.

2. Sacred Circles, Sacred Fires

From the wars against disorder

From the sirens night and day

From the fires of the homeless

From the ashes of the gay ...

Democracy is coming ...

... through a crack in the wall

Democracy (1992) by Leonard Cohen

My first real sense of how the sacred was connected with the homeless drug 'odyssey' in BC occurred on my first visit to Victoria's Tent City in January 2016. It was a dark evening as my friendly little dog and I started roaming around the minimal pathways snaking around the tightly clumped groups of tents, calling out my grandson's name in as gentle and cooing a way as I could muster. It had taken an extra boost of courage to dare to even enter this field behind the law courts that had become Tent City – become so mainly due to a legal glitch that this being provincial land, the homeless could keep their tents set up all day and night unlike the city-owned parks where they

needed to pack things up every morning around 7:00 am. But there I was, fortified by a small Subway sandwich eaten in the car on the way, eaten with full consciousness that such a meal and the freedom and finances to choose it and my car were beyond the means of most of those inhabiting these tents.

As usual my dog Pepper was the ambassador of goodwill and although I did not find Gordo that night, some people stopped to ask if they could pet the dog, and were cheered by his wagging tail and his face eagerly reaching up for theirs to offer them a kiss or nuzzle. Several people asked me who I was looking for, and then tried to help me find him, asking others if they'd seen him. They suggested where he might be -- a few streets over, busking, and so I went there, didn't find him and came back. There were people playing guitars around a fire and so I searched their faces in the dark, hoping he might be one of them, but no luck. Several invited me to join them and sit down at this sacred circle, surrounding the sacred fire as they described it. But I hesitated to actually sit and be one of them. Instead I hovered around the edge a bit longer, hoping Gordon might show up. I could sense that they felt sorry for me, and one of them expressed amazement that I was there, saying he could not imagine his grandmother stepping into such a

setting to look for him. I drew both comfort and courage from his comment, and soon after was introduced to a First Nations young woman who apparently had some kind of central overseeing role. I explained that I lived rather far away on Gabriola Island at that time, but was in town doing some university work and had really hoped to connect with my beloved grandson. She knew who Gordon was and suggested we exchange cell phone texting info so she could try and connect us when Gordon was next seen around there. Gordon had 'lost' several phones and although his girlfriend had one, he rarely if ever kept in touch, although like many of the homeless he still used Facebook Messenger from the public libraries when the mood struck him to communicate. By and large though it was clear that he did not wish to communicate much with family.

Gordon was 19 years old by this time and had hitchhiked from Winnipeg to Vancouver with his girlfriend (before they both looked so much like homeless junkies) in late November 2015. By mid-December they'd come across to visit me on Gabriola Island, and from there to seek medical attention which revealed that they both had a serious staph infection after sharing needles to use heroin in Vancouver. The Nanaimo hospital gave them antibiotics and after staying with me

another day or two, they decided to hitchhike to Victoria to explore this Tent City phenomenon about which they'd been hearing. They liked it overall and decided to stay for awhile.

3. Homelessness, Simple Living & Being Outsiders

Twinkle, twinkle little star

Protect the homeless near and far

With light and comfort from above

Bless them with the gift of love.

- T. Roggenbeck

While the majority of the 2017 overdose deaths in BC took place indoors, my focus here as mentioned is on the homeless people living on the streets, and of course an indoor death does not necessarily mean that a person actually has a home or job etc. It might be reasonable to speculate that people who feel secure and largely contented with life do not generally escape into the abuse of hard drugs, as various theories suggest, and the question of why people do drugs is hugely complex. There are so many kinds of pain that can drive a person towards addictions. As Gabor Maté reminds us – ask not why the addiction, but instead ask – why the pain?

There are of course many kinds of pain including emotional, spiritual and psychological. The main chemical killer in this current

crisis is fentanyl, which is also of course a highly effective painkiller. Strangely enough for me, while my adult grandson was on the streets risking his life with fentanyl-laced drugs, my other toddler grandson broke his ankle and was given fentanyl at Victoria General Hospital for the pain. One worrisome 'side-effect' of this opioid crisis is that doctors in various places (especially the USA?) are being closely monitored to keep their fentanyl prescriptions in check, which sometimes leads to inadequate pain medications being administered to those in great physical pain.

At a 2017 CSRS lecture on "The Crisis of the Spirit and the Globalization of Addiction" David Seljak from the University of Waterloo spoke of the connections between Bruce Alexander's view of the central role of 'poverty of spirit' in the addictions crisis, and Pope Francis' analysis about "the despair and unhappiness of modern society as a spiritual crisis that leads to self-centredness, materialism, and consumerism. This unhappiness has fueled a twin crisis of social injustice and ecological destruction."² While not attempting here to unfold the details or nuances of that fine lecture, it seemed quite astonishing to me to see all these factors linked together. But yes

² From the notice advertising the lecture on March 2, 2017.

indeed – the prevalence of such widespread addictions in our society may well be the mark of a certain bankruptcy or poverty of spirit in which the many souls sensitive to the moral crisis of so many societal factors – opt out of the system in this drastic way. As Paul Bramadat said (at a coffee talk on 6 Feb 2018) of Seljak’s approach: “You can’t understand addiction as a problem until you understand it as a solution.”

Serious drug abuse as a ‘solution’ is clearly born of a despair at the entrenchment of these negative factors in our society, and of course Pope Francis is not alone in identifying self-centredness, materialism, and consumerism as huge problems in modern society. The further link with ecological destruction has been similarly articulated by American environmentalist Gus Speth who identifies selfishness, greed and apathy as the top environmental problems

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/top-environmental-problems-selfishness-greed-apathy-paul-redman>, and Speth says that scientists do not know how to address such problems. So here perhaps is another spiritual element of the addiction crisis – that by rejecting the ‘status quo’ (most conspicuously in overall wealthy cities like Vancouver), and choosing a potential simple living approach like homelessness, these

street people offer our materialistic culture a bit of a mirror into which we can reflect our own complicity in a society or culture with great inequities between wealth and poverty, and with many environmentally harmful lifestyles and habits of consumption.

Gandhi stated strongly that we should live simply so that others can simply live, and also that earth provides enough for everyone's need, but not for everyone's greed. In an era where 20% of the world's population uses up at least 80% of the world's resources, these homeless folks mostly living out of backpacks may well have something important to teach us. A spirituality of simple living has been promoted by most world religions for many centuries, as have the warnings about the dangers of materialism to the spiritual life. Today's rather astronomical disparity between wealth and poverty, often in the same city or country, is a clear indicator of a loss of perspective on the importance of greater balance in this realm. Street people are not high-powered members of society who can argue against this increasingly disturbing phenomenon, so instead they simply live in a way that is quite cut off from our society's markers of success.

As described in chapter 8 "The Last Supper at Dairy Queen in Nanaimo" my grandson was ridiculously unmaterialistic under the

circumstances. And in a visit a year and a half earlier he asked if I had any fabric that he could use for patches since he preferred patched clothes to new ones. I'm sure that St. Francis of Assisi would approve, and Francis who's been considered the Christian patron saint of ecology since about 1978, preached and lived an itinerant street life practising great caution against the possession of any material goods. Indeed Francis and his earliest followers were also basically homeless beggars. Gordon loved music and was a talented guitarist (as also reported to me by the folks at Tent City's Sacred Circle when I was searching there for him). He made what money he could by busking on the streets, and soon came to reject the search for any kind of job (especially as it became more futile³) in favour of being free to explore his creativity. Like many young people he had a variety of talents, from music to artistic photography and poetry or lyric writing, as evidenced in this poem he wrote in his teen years:

³ Portugal is famous for its generous programs towards drug abusers, having legalized the drugs since the early 2000's, and using the money they saved on not policing them to offer rehab and job training programs, and other kinds of treatment and counseling. The Italian San Patrignano Community goes even further in helping people with addictions find their way into more productive and connected lives. I was pleased to learn that leaders of Our Place Society in Victoria are looking at similar models to the Italian one, since that one operates without drastic changes in the country's drug laws.

I thought I knew the sun
shone its rays on everyone
and I thought I knew the sky
don't you ever wonder why
why we thought we knew the sun
shone its rays on everyone
and why we thought we knew the sky
never cried at its goodbye
to the sun and the moon
when they crossed paths at noon
as he whispered in her ear
that she'd always be right here
pointing to his golden heart
though she knew that they must part
she can feel his golden glow
moving cross the sky so slow.

Gordon's creativity was multi-dimensional as mentioned, and
fortunately in this computer age, we have a number of videos of him
singing and playing guitar, as well as one he may have made for a school

project -- in which intriguing images flow in and out while he reads an early passage from Albert Camus' *The Outsider* (or *The Stranger*). After Gordon's death his grandfather felt that this book of Camus' had been very influential on Gordon's life, while his mother knew that he also loved *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton. So there's some confusion about which Outsiders book he would have preferred. While these are very different books, they both focus on characters who feel alienated from the dominant cultures of their societies. In Camus' *Outsider* the main character Meursault becomes increasingly isolated and misunderstood by the people around him, until he commits a murder while hardly seeming to understand why he was doing so. Everything is absurd (a fond theme of Camus') and Meursault ultimately resigns himself to having failed at fighting this absurdity in order to seek meaning in life. Here we can see reflected some of the resignation and hopelessness we often associate with street people on drugs. Life and its ordinary goals and ideals are so out-of-reach that they become rather absurd; and perhaps they do drugs as a means of escape, or as a means of inflicting pain on themselves to jump ahead of having more of the pain of rejection inflicted upon them by others, since they often feel themselves to be misfits or outsiders in our society. 'Crusty Thabum' (Gordon's last

chosen Facebook name) with his “Live Scum” finger tattoos seemed to have long since left behind any pretence of aspiring towards his society’s ideals of success. And yet I wonder did he choose to give those up, or did they seem so increasingly out of reach that he followed some spiritual or psychological wisdom in deciding what he was no longer interested in and/or what he could not have?

In Hinton’s *Outsiders* novel for young people, we get an inside view of insecurities and vulnerabilities of a number of characters, and how that seemed to propel them towards the sense of belonging and protection often sought in gangs. Whether it’s mental health, or peer groups or family dynamics that may have contributed to low self-esteem, gang members and street people are looking to belong in a world where they perhaps only fit by being ‘misfits’ in the dominant culture. Gordon’s mother thought that he identified at times with Hinton’s main character Ponyboy Curtis who at one point in the novel explains that “there are just small bunches of friends who stick together, and the warfare is between the social classes”. Hinton (in this novel she wrote at age 17) does a masterful job of portraying this and other aspects of both the personal struggles of the characters and their socioeconomic differences.

After only recently reading Hinton's book (in my 60's) I wondered how much the economic disparities in a city like Vancouver exacerbates the 'outsider' feelings of street people with addictions and various attendant mental and physical health issues ... the divide between them and so many of Vancouver's highly polished citizens seems so stark.

This 'refrain' began to repeat itself in my head as I considered that scenario, and that eventually led to the long poem in chapter 10:

*Look down, look down near your feet
another one dead on the street.*

4. Life Support in Vancouver

I had apparently just travelled out of cell phone range on a first car trip to Port Renfrew with a friend, on the early afternoon of September 8, 2017 when my daughter and son, Gordon's mother and uncle, began messaging me to call them for an urgent matter. Not until later that evening when I could use wifi did I see these messages, and then it was off to the Port Renfrew general store to beg for some phone use, since the outdoor pay phone did not work, and there were no cell towers nearby to allow my own phone usage. I got through to my son Andrew who had just arrived at St. Paul's Hospital ICU where Gordon was on life support after being found in cardiac arrest on a nearby street. Andrew had travelled across from Victoria, and was glad to get there before his sister Liz arrived from her home in Winnipeg. With some reluctance he sent me a photo of comatose Gordon with his mouth full of breathing tubes and many other machines attached in various ways. How fortunate we are as Canadians that a homeless drug addict found on the street in cardiac arrest likely after a self-administered drug overdose is immediately treated with CPR by paramedics, and then rushed to ICU to be on expensive life support systems -- all without any out-of-pocket costs to families.

Using the Port Renfrew wifi I made arrangements to fly to Vancouver and to book hotel accommodations for us three, arriving there myself on the afternoon of September 9th. Words are inadequate to express appropriate appreciation for how well we were treated by the medical personnel we encountered, although I can't say the same for many nearby hotels that seem to profit quite 'handsomely' from people in these excruciatingly vulnerable situations. But the medical personnel were phenomenal in the respect, compassion and dignity with which they treated all of us, including Gordon. Although brain death was suspected, and St. Paul's ICU was located so centrally that they must have dealt with many such cases every week, and their resources must have been taxed to the max – despite all this we were treated with the utmost of tender care and loving compassion.⁴ Therefore part of the spirituality that I experienced in this process was the informal but excellent spiritual tender-loving-care offered by the medical personnel,

⁴ As a member of a certain professional organization based in Vancouver, one that deals with spirituality, I've remained saddened and perplexed as to why they did not send support or condolences – either at the time, or even up to six months later. No condolences were offered to my family except for a phone call from one person, and an email from another. By the time of this writing, my efforts and questions to understand why this was the case have not yielded any results. One is left to wonder whether they thought that one should be ashamed of what happened, and try to never mention it again in polite company? I am not ashamed of my wonderful grandson, nor of his difficult battle to find meaning and purpose in his life.

who could not be blamed had they responded instead with a measure of indifference bred from the exhaustion and burnout of these repeated and predictable tragedies. Instead they spoke to Gordon with affection and apologies for poking him again, etc., and spoke to us with tender concern and loving looks.

My daughter Elizabeth (Liz) had been in the midst of her first day of teaching early years French immersion students in her school near Winnipeg when she received the dreaded phone call, and went home to pack and board a plane. She and her brother spent the first night propped up in hospital chairs as they clung to any shred of possibility that Gordon might recover. A doctor that night suggested that that might be possible, but by the time I arrived the next afternoon, reports of the brain scan showed little or no brain activity. Regardless of this, we kept touching and caressing his shoulders and face and arms and hands and feet ... and his Mom especially was hoping against hope. For a bit of comic relief Mom noticed that her almost 21 year-old son whom she'd not seen since he'd left Winnipeg nine months earlier -- had become much hairier – perhaps nature's way to help protect him from the cold living outdoors. Also he looked very long in the bed, and the nurse confirmed that he was 6'1" – somehow having grown taller

despite the malnutrition of life on the streets and the staph infection he'd contracted almost two years prior during his first foray into street life in Vancouver. While Mom continuously leaned against his cheek, forehead or shoulder to whisper her love and especially her despair at the thought of losing him, I took some comfort in also massaging his size 13 hairy feet ... while remembering the adorable cuteness of his newborn toes, since he and his mother had lived with us for most of his first two years of life, after she had him at age eighteen.

After hearing from the doctors that his almost nonexistent brain activity was "incompatible with life" his mother was devastated and understandably crumpled in despair and panic at this horrifying news. Physically calmer afterwards, she was mentally in great torment of course, as she tried to absorb the information that her only child was likely already brain dead. We went to the hotel for awhile where we contacted family and close friends about the situation, and then she returned to his bedside for the night. News was also spreading to his street friends (street family I think he would say) and they began visiting him – an astonishing open door policy the ICU allowed if family were okay with it – and a pretty transparent effort to try and prevent some future deaths by having people see up close a friend they

cherished who would not be awakening from his last 'high'. Gordon and many of his friends had overdosed before, but were treated with naloxone etc. so perhaps there was a false sense of security that overdoses were no big deal – a sad double-edged sword effect of BC's generous policy of offering free naloxone kits and training to the public. Sadly no one with such a kit was on hand when Gordon experienced his last overdose; and one is horrified at the prospect of how much worse this whole epidemic would be were it not for the widespread availability in BC of this handy temporary antidote to fentanyl. The toxicology report definitely indicated the presence of fentanyl in Gordon's system along with the heroine he thought he was taking, and the cannabis and meth which were more affordable -- a sorry but all too common state of affairs.

Looking back on my experience of those last three days of his life in Vancouver, I believe that it was the visits of the street people to his bedside that particularly inspired me to want to tell this story in a larger way. They poured in singly or in twos or threes, and their interesting personalities shone through, along with their great distress at seeing their 'brother' Gordon in this comatose state attached to so many machines to keep him breathing awhile longer. Soon enough someone

asked Liz if she could have a lock of his hair or his “dreads” as they called them – not the dreadlocks that cost a fortune at a hair stylist’s, but rather the flattened and matted “dreads” naturally produced by sleeping rough and having very few opportunities for showers and shampoos. Actually back in June when I’d last seen him in Nanaimo, and he’d agreed at first to come visit my place for a few days, he warned me though that he would not be washing his hair, for fear of losing his dreads! So now here was his mother having acquired round-ended scissors from the hospital staff, and small hazmat Ziploc bags, gently cutting off pieces of Gordon’s street dreadlocks for his friends to keep as souvenirs. I too asked for some and am keeping them in a sacred place of my most treasured ‘objects’.

As his street friends came to visit – at first most of them would say “but he’s going to make it, right?” And when we said no, many of them burst into loud weeping or quiet sobs. One or two ran away down the ICU corridor and out the doors. They told us stories about who Gordo had been for them, and how much he would be missed. One young man insisted on leaving behind a skateboard for Gordon, regardless of our protestations ... perhaps somehow hoping that this item might miraculously help rally Gordo’s spirit to come back and be strong again.

These were gracious young people who appreciated meeting Gordo's mom and uncle and grandma, with Mom Liz offering to be Facebook friends with them so they could continue their contact over fond remembrances of Gordon. Liz was so eager to hear more about his final months so as to help fill in the gaps when her contact with him had been so minimal. Appendix I of this document is a November 2017 Facebook reflection from one of Gordon's former girlfriends, with whom he'd made this last trip out west from Winnipeg. Although I do not understand all of it, I believe it gives us an invaluable glimpse into many elements of street life and drug addiction, as well as portraying their relationship in a poignant way, with its ups and downs and regrettable missteps.

It was a privilege as mentioned to get up close to these street people as they came to pay their final respects to their 'fallen comrade' and again I must commend St. Paul's ICU given the usual battle they fight to keep germs out of their space. The whole experience was like having a front row seat in a drama I could never learn about from books.

Once Gordon was known to be brain dead, discussions were initiated about the possibility of organ donations, but this was ultimately not possible once they discovered that he had active

Hepatitis C. So on the third day ... on Monday September 11th in the late morning we were called into a medical meeting and told that he would have to be “palliated”. I was so proud of my courageous daughter who did not particularly flinch at this anticipated juncture in the proceedings, but instead merely asked if she could have two or three more hours with him, and the team looked much relieved and happily agreed. Pastoral care was dispatched to find a Buddhist prayer (my daughter’s choice) to be said in his final phase of life-support heart-beating.⁵ As the final hours unfolded there were many more street visitors, including a lovely Aboriginal woman who offered to organize street memorials for Gordon in both Vancouver and Winnipeg (and did so very efficiently). At one point my son was called out of the room to receive a phone call and came back in quite emotional as he explained that Covenant House had called to say that they were “flooded” with so many saddened friends of Gordon all gathered there to observe the moment of his passing with love and tears – another example of the spirituality involved since this gathering was a sort of prelude that would later be followed by street memorial services.

⁵ Amazingly the one my daughter chose was from John O’Donohue called “On the Death of the Beloved” (see Appendix II) – perhaps the first time this wonderful Celtic Christian had been dubbed a Buddhist, and I’m quite sure he’d be honoured.

5. The Opposite of Addiction is Connection

Here in BC social isolation has been identified as a major problem among various age groups <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/vancouver-candidates-asked-to-address-social-isolation-1.2824532> -- perhaps especially among the elderly, but not restricted to them.

In the 1981 Simon Fraser University experiment called Rat Park, by Bruce K. Alexander, an innovative approach to addictions was introduced – an approach that departs from the disease model of addiction in which the emphasis is on the chemical hooks of popular “recreational” drugs like heroin. The Rat Park model emphasizes that the opposite of addiction is connection, and the living of a meaningful life – both aspects of a broadly-defined spirituality. When one rat is alone locked inside a cage, it keeps choosing the heroin-laced water until it dies from it. Whereas once rats are placed inside a ‘rat park’ model in which there is plenty of connection with other rats, and there’s food security as well as many other desirable amenities of rat existence, then the rats do not prefer the heroin-laced water. A five minute 2015 video explains the basics of this project and its conclusions

<https://feedyoursoul.co/994/drug-addiction/> -- and the video is based on a 2015 TED talk by Johann Hari

https://www.ted.com/talks/johann_hari_everything_you_think_you_know_about_addiction_is_wrong. While the Rat Park experiment was criticized early on, perhaps partly because the disease model of addiction was so entrenched, the video and TED talk above indicate that it's been undergoing a more appreciative reappraisal. Nonetheless the disease model persists and has a strong following. Appendix III offers a more extensive treatment of Alexander's ideas.

The return of many heroin-addicted Vietnam war veterans is used as the main example of the human version of this experiment. The vast majority of them of them stopped using heroin without any help, once they returned to families, friends and a life of freedom and of many options for living a fulfilling life, as compared to being forced into a cruel and confusing war where they had to be ready every day to kill or be killed for issues that many of them did not agree with or understand.

As a spiritual aside, I'd like to mention here that the returning Vietnam vets have also been seen as largely responsible for the earliest dissemination of Buddhist teachings in the USA. That's the beneficial thing they brought back, rather than heroin addiction. Buddhism

teaches compassion for all sentient beings, and although many such spiritual ideals fall short of realization given human limitations of various kinds, the aim of compassion invites adherents to cultivate empathetic connections with others.

If, as the Rat Park model suggests, the opposite of addiction is connection, then we are better able to understand the attraction to street life demonstrated in so many of our cities, especially in warmer climates like BC. The street family members share a common bond and a desire to protect and support each other. But here we have a note of irony since the main bond shared by many street family folks is their common lifestyle of substance abuse; so on the surface it would appear that here addiction and connection are closely related rather than opposites. But one must take a step back and ask what are the sources of disconnection that may have led these individuals to seek out the connection of life lived on the streets? Gabor Maté has emphasized that most people with serious addictions have been deeply wounded by various forms of childhood trauma – and the incidents of such trauma may or may not have taken place in the family home. But somewhere along the line, these people have been deeply wounded, and perhaps rejected or abandoned in some ways, or oppressed by enforced isolation

due to people in authority in their lives disallowing them from making important connections. There's also the further often-noted irony that in our age of previously unforeseen levels of connection via social media and smartphones etc., social isolation is a bigger problem than ever recognized before, with the UK, for example, having recently (Jan 2018) appointed a government Ministry for Loneliness

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/17/world/europe/uk-britain-loneliness.html>.

Paradoxical as it may seem in an era of what might be called hyper-connectivity, given that there's never been a time in human history when it's been easier for people to communicate with each other through so many digital and electronic means, many people face a crisis of dis-connectivity. For substantial numbers of people in BC in 2017 this seems to have been a contributing factor to serious substance abuse in their quest to escape the sense of isolation or alienation from a society in which they seemed unable to succeed or cope on various levels of existence. Why are so many people experiencing such isolation and disconnection in our supposedly super-connected world? A look at the Buddhist concept of Indra's Net may shed some light on the matter.

6. From Indra's Net to Ghandi's *Khadi* Spirit

Indra's Net may be the most ancient and enduring symbol or metaphor for interconnection, and given the hypothesis that connection is the opposite of addiction, Indra's Net deserves some minimal attention here. This is usually viewed as a Buddhist concept with Hindu origins, although over the years I've also seen its origins linked with Confucianism so it's a pervasive image with broadly based cultural roots and an inconclusive historicity. In this concept the universe and every living being is seen to be interconnected through a metaphorical type of netting with reflective jewels at each juncture so that each jewel reflects all the other jewels. Whatever happens to one person or one entity is reflected in all other people – we reverberate with the wounding and villainy of all our fellow sentient beings, as well as rejoicing with their happiness and peace. I am only referring to this concept in a minimal and perhaps superficial way rather than claiming any expertise about its multifaceted Buddhist philosophical meanings. Instead it seems helpful to point out that many religious and philosophical systems of global compassion share this idea that what happens to the least of our

brother and sisters is relevant to us (to use an image from the Christian gospels Matthew 25).

There's also the well-known Jungian concept of a Collective Unconscious – an unconscious shared remembrance of ancestral memory and experience, and how that experience colours our current existence. We could even briefly mention Rupert Sheldrake's theory of 'morphic resonance' – much vilified but still provocative in the simple human experience, for example, of sensing that someone behind you is staring at you. In other words, our conscious thinking about anything is affected by many unconscious possibilities, so our interconnections are vast and likely unquantifiable at some levels.

Returning to more concrete forms of interconnection, I'm quite fond of Mahatma Gandhi's understanding of *Khadi* spirit:

If we have the *khadi* spirit in us we should serve ourselves with simplicity in every walk of life. ... *Khadi* spirit means fellow feeling with every living being on earth. It means the complete renunciation of everything that is likely to harm our fellow creatures.⁶

⁶ Gandhi's *Collected Works* Vol. 34, p. 520 (1927) or see my article in the journal *Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion* Dec. 1997 http://www.jstor.org/stable/43809651?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents (which I wish I knew how to open and offer for free viewing).

Operating within this *khadi* spirit in our time and culture would mean much less materialism, and much more concern for the many issues involved in driving so many people to dangerous street life and drug use, especially in terms of how such people view themselves as hopeless failures in our material culture. Clearly there are many wonderful people who indeed demonstrate “fellow-feeling” with our street people – armies of volunteers, as well as paid personnel who choose this difficult path of service to the poorest in our midst.

Speaking of Gandhi, his Jain-influenced focus on non-violence is also relevant here in my view. Given Gabor Maté’s idea that many people with serious addictions have suffered childhood traumas, we can envision the person who chooses to live on the streets far away from family, as potentially having decided to walk away from all that conflict and stress. Understandably many families with a seemingly under-achieving young adult try to pressure them into either finding jobs or going back to school, and that pressure could easily cause family strife and conflict. Some may feel that choosing to leave, and choosing to escape into drugs is a response of non-violence – of refusing to argue anymore about the stress of not measuring up to family expectations.

There are many other potential talking points about overall human interconnection, with only a few of them mentioned here. Many religious and philosophical systems have warned of the dangers of an overly narrow, individual or egoistic perspective. When we are understandably self-absorbed in our own pains and struggles, or our own desires to succeed and/or supersede others, we are hard-pressed to experience compassion or empathy for the sufferings of others. Often this seemingly selfish approach is born of insecurity or low self-esteem. The Buddhist concept of *sunyata* or emptiness would say that there is no self for us to protect or aggrandize, but our materialistic culture often relies on addressing insecurities (cultivating them if necessary) in order to sell us what we need to feel that we as individuals are successful and highly regarded, etc.

Or perhaps as Henry David Thoreau famously wrote in his 1854 book called *Walden*, some of these folks simply march to the beat of a different drummer: “If a man loses pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a **different drummer**. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured, or far away.” Speaking of drummers, let us consider next some possible Aboriginal connections.

7. Aboriginal Connections and Disenfranchised Youth

There were several specific occasions of my experience with Gordon's journey through addictions in which some helpful aboriginal connections or input occurred. Sadly a large proportion of street people with addictions in Canada in 2017 were aboriginal people. And thankfully that meant, among other things, that an aboriginal man was part of the pair from Directions youth outreach services (part of Greater Vancouver Family Services) that came to visit Gordon at his bedside as he lay comatose on life support, which would soon have to be disconnected. Gordon's mother and uncle and I had been again briefly banished to the waiting room outside the ICU at St. Paul's, while they took care of his more private needs, when these two men came in to see us, and chat about what was taking place. After a brief conversation they told us how wonderful it was that we'd come from other cities to be by Gordon's side, and that sadly they rarely saw this kind of family response. I especially was comforted by this remark because in fact there were substantial divisions in our family relationships partly as a result of dealing with Gordon's addictions, and our different ideas about what may have led to them. No doubt this happens in many other

affected families. At times like this, one looks back and wonders about various things in the person's upbringing, but we also sadly know that many young people with addictions come from very good homes and loving families. I was much influenced over the years by Gabor Maté's 2008 book called *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts* with its strong link between addictions and childhood trauma, and often enough found myself casting a critical eye in certain directions ... which decidedly did not make me the most popular mother or grandmother on the block.

Therefore hearing this beautiful aboriginal man and his partner compliment us as an especially caring and potentially cohesive family was wonderful – balm for my soul. Then when the hospital staff allowed us all back in to Gordon's bedside, this same aboriginal man asked if he could ... pray (can't recall if he actually used this word, but that's what I understood him to be saying) over Gordon, we looked to him for this further balm of healing-in-the-moment. After some moments of bowed and reverent silence, he opened his eyes and looked at Gordon, or at least this remaining husk of who Gordon was, and said ever so simply: "Well Gordo, you're still doing what you've always done – bringing people together." Indeed many street people had been coming together to visit Gordon during these last few days of his life, and celebrate who

he was. Meanwhile these deceptively simple words brought us such joy, especially to learn that he was known for this in his street life, amongst the expansive street family of which he'd become a valued member.

Bringing people together ... is on some levels the most important work that any of us can do – bringing them together in greater understanding or unity or compassion, or bringing them together to fight a common cause – like the hopelessness and despair that had led so many of them into addictions and street life. And here was my Gordon unconscious and likely already brain dead after they had found him in cardiac arrest on the street, followed by a quite lethal toxicology report -- still bringing people together – this time out of love and concern for him, and support for each other over his imminent loss.

A vibrant young aboriginal woman also visited several times and we soon could see that she had amazing leadership skills especially regarding the organizing of memorial services in quick succession and in multiple provinces at once. Consulting Gordon's mother she quickly set dates and locations for memorials in both Vancouver and Winnipeg – and invited people to bring their musical abilities and what food they could muster and to plan on staying overnight outdoors in that spot if they could and wished to do so.

This reminded me of the positive aboriginal presence I'd also experienced in Tent City 1.5 years earlier, especially in the form of the sacred circle surrounding the sacred fire. I was honoured to be invited to come sit there while they played their music, but I wanted to follow a lead someone suggested as to where Gordon might be busking at that moment. Nonetheless I lingered long enough on the edges of the sacred circle to indeed catch a sense of the ways in which this center held a spiritual and relational depth despite the inevitable squalor of the surrounding overcrowded and often ragged tents where most people shivered in the wet cold in sleeping bags while potentially dealing with bed bugs and/or lice as well as addictions and their related conditions like staph infections and hepatitis C and never-ending hacking coughs, colds and flu conditions ... not to mention ... well let's just say what a relief it was to the residents when a couple of outhouses were finally set up between them and the big courthouse behind which they lived. Many neighbours were not as thrilled of course, but did concede that outhouses were better than the odoriferous and disease-carrying elements of living with no outhouses nearby. Again it was often aboriginal people who were leaders in making the needs of the tent city community known.

These were a few of my own encounters with aboriginal people in this context, and the gifts and blessings I experienced through these encounters. Also because I'm a religious person who has begun to explore a few connections or similarities between the Christian understanding of Holy Spirit and the aboriginal understanding of some aspects of Trickster spirit, I would venture to suggest that Trickster Spirit and/or Holy Spirit were at work here ... tripping us up and out of earlier assumptions and presumptions, and calling us deeper into a realm we, or at least I, might otherwise have never experienced. One's horizons of the meaning of existence thus expanded, other doors of perception were potentially unlocked now. Indeed many of my old perceptions about the meaning and purpose of life were called into critical questioning in my psyche, as a result of these sacred encounters along this particular path of my life as I sought my lost grandson and hoped and prayed for his rescue and recovery. Soon after he died I sensed that he was being carried on raven wings (and subsequently named my trailer home Raven Wings). Raven is a powerful presence and symbol for some aboriginal tribes and is one of the ways in which Trickster appears.

On Easter Sunday 2018, a lot of this came together for me when I read a short online reflection called “A Fool’s Journey to Easter” by Rachel K. Taber-Hamilton, an Episcopal priest in Washington State, and the first known aboriginal person to be ordained in the Diocese of Olympia in 2003 <http://godspacelight.com/2018/04/01/a-fools-journey-to-easter/>. She writes about how Trickster can be the catalyst for social change to transform reality, especially for the downtrodden or oppressed:

Tricksters have a tendency to laugh with joy when what is carefully boxed up by the powerful few is freed for the entire world to gain. By those without social power, the Trickster is perceived as playful. By those who cannot comprehend its purpose, the Trickster is perceived as foolish. By those who have the most to lose if the Trickster is successful in its quest, the Trickster is perceived as cunning and incredibly dangerous.⁷

⁷ The article or reflection is only three unnumbered but dense pages so I will not attempt to assign page numbers for reference.

If the Trickster is killed or dies, she goes on to say, it doesn't stay dead, but instead "shape shifts" into another form of being. "As a cultural hero, Tricksters (such as Coyote, Spider, Clown and Raven) possess significant powers of transformation, resurrection, and strong medicine" ... mirroring the powers of their Creator. There's also a Shiva-like quality to what Taber-Hamilton describes – a creator/destroyer element that destroys the old to make room for the new. Tricksters "illuminate the collective urgency to strive for balancing the greed of the few with the need of the many ... balancing societal oppression with culturally adaptive change for long term survival". Taber-Hamilton goes on to make a fascinating case for Trickster Jesus but that is not directly related to this work.

Meanwhile whether as the more 'traditional' trickster, or Trickster Jesus, Taber-Hamilton makes it clear that such figures call for social justice, and for transformation and reversal of unjust social orders. In terms of my own focus here, this made me think of the disenfranchisement of many people with serious addictions – the sense that they are unable to succeed -- earn a living and rent a home and buy food and pay bills – so they escape into drugs from a sense of shame and failure. Growing accustomed to humiliation, those living on

the streets of places like Vancouver are likely keenly aware of the difference between them and those who step around them to work in big corporate offices, or shop at high-end stores. Even in our comparatively generous and egalitarian country of Canada, many youth feel it has become impossible to acquire things like permanent jobs and family homes like their parents were able to get. Sinking too easily into despair and futility, some of them stop trying to fit in, and accept their lot as failures and as despicable 'scum'⁸ on the street. This is just one perception or evaluation of things, and I do not at all claim it to be universally true. Taber-Hamilton ends her reflection in this way:

This April 1st, Easter Day, we again behold the empty tomb.
We know that Trickster Jesus is not to be found there. He
has shape shifted into another form. He is us.

She beautifully combines these two spiritualities into the ongoing prophetic calling to address the injustices that cause so much human suffering, including serious drug addiction.

⁸ Gordon had a home tattoo job done on his fingers, spelling L-I-V-E S-C-U-M ... and that was his profile picture on his Crusty Thabum Facebook page.

8. The Last Supper at Dairy Queen in Nanaimo

About three months before we lost Gordon, back on June 6, 2017, he messaged me on Facebook from the Gabriola Island library to say that he'd love to see me if I had time. Had he forgotten that I had moved away from Gabriola into Langford the previous spring? No he had not, but his latest girlfriend had family on Gabriola, although he could not find her once he got there. Dropped everything except the dog and headed up the Malahat to see my darling 20 year old grandson and at least have dinner together, hoping he'd agree to come visit me for a few days. That previous car of mine had Bluetooth so I only let other family members know where I was going on the way there, for fear that they might try and talk me out of it, or keep lecturing me about not enabling him, not being overly indulgent, and not getting duped by his neediness or convincing rhetoric. "Don't buy him stuff Mom - he'll just trade it for drugs. You don't want to be the one who provides him the means to get the money to buy that last fatal fix to inject into his arm."

Nope I did not indeed. Just before the previous Christmas he'd contacted me from Calgary to ask if I'd buy him a bus ticket to Vancouver. He and his then lady friend from Winnipeg had managed to

get that far but now in late December the Coquihalla was subject to winter blizzards. “No,” I said sadly, “I simply cannot countenance paying your way to Canada’s fentanyl death capital.” “Okay Grandma” he wrote back with his characteristic humour, “then I’ll just have to hitchhike my frozen ass over the Coquihalla.” His mother and uncle (my children) were so proud of me for not giving in to his desire to get to Drug City as quickly as possible.

Almost six months went by after that with very little communication from him, so I was delighted in early June to respond to the phone ping as a message from him. I had not actually seen him for almost a year since the Winnipeg funeral of my 90 year old mother – his great-grandma ‘Nonna’ who taught him to ride a two-wheeler and loved him to bits. Pepper and I were thrilled to be on our way to see him again, and for once the drive up the Malahat felt like I was flying towards a happy goal. The ferry to leave Gabriola is free and I suggested that we meet across the street at the Port Plaza mall. Okay he said but he’d wait at the edge of the parking lot because they’d already thrown him out of the mall and its property before – I decided not to ask why. In perfect synchronicity I drove towards that corner just as he was arriving there. We hugged deeply and then knowing he was very

hungry I mentioned having spotted a favourite restaurant of his nearby – a Dairy Queen Grill & Chill. After more hugs and exuberant cuddles with Pepper dog, we put all his earthly belongings in my car trunk and headed to dinner. But first Gordon and Pepper waited in the car while I stepped into Port Plaza mall with a mission – not only to use the facilities but to indulge my shockingly (to me) subversive plan of buying my very first pack of cigarettes ever – thinking that if he agreed to come to my place in Langford for a few days, this was the lesser of many other possible evils. So I stepped into Thrifty's at the mall and asked for the smallest cheapest pack of cigarettes they had, and then handed them to Gordon with rebellious pride. He rewarded me with the look of surprised pleasure I'd hoped for. Okay I forgot the matches, but baby steps, and there were matches somewhere in my trunk.

A few minutes drive brought us to DQ and standing in line I noticed how tall he'd become despite street life malnourishment, and somehow the teeth that had been broken when his first roommates back in Winnipeg had broken his jaw – looked rather clean and shiny. There he was my handsome though somewhat grimy and unkempt grandson smiling at me with love and affection – inflating my heart with huge joy. I could see that the lady about my age taking orders in our

line looked at him with some concern, and after taking my order, she asked me what 'my son' was going to have (nice to be mistaken for the younger generation) ... perhaps a bit fearful to deal with him directly. Poutine was the main thing on his mind, and months after his death when I passed through Nanaimo again, I stopped for what felt like a little sacramental Poutine memorial of our last supper together. Even got the same table by the jukebox and the back door. We had a warm and happy time together, and he allowed me to take a photo for the family, one that ended up being the last one we had of him upright and smiling (title page bottom right). Lining up again for our favourite ice cream desserts, I was reminded of many visits to Winnipeg during his boyhood, when I took him for ice cream to the DQ near my mother's seniors' residence. I reached my hand up more than once to stroke his cheek with love. Back at our table more laughter and the food of love, and then he spotted a guy outside lighting up a cigarette, asked if I wouldn't mind if he went out to get a light, and then I was treated to another beautiful show through the window. He seemed to instantly make friends with the man and soon they were both laughing and enjoying the sweet evening air of early June. Not wanting to be caught staring at them, I looked away for awhile and next thing I knew he

stepped back inside wearing that man's black vest, while the man gave him a friendly wave through the window. "How," I asked, "did you manage to sweet talk the guy into handing over his vest?" "Oh," said Gordon, "I just told him how much I liked it and he gave it to me." I wondered if some of the cigarettes I bought him were involved with the transaction, but hey, I'd never seen this charming ... shall we say 'entrepreneurial' side of him before. "Gordon my Darling," I said with true admiration, "with skills like that you could go far in this world." and we both laughed again.

Back in the car we went to Pepper's delight, who happily spent all this precious time with Gordon right in his lap for as much direct cuddling as possible. Gordon had agreed to come to my house in Langford for a few days and then I'd drive him back or put him on a bus to Nanaimo where he planned to keep searching for that current lady friend. In the car I handed him my phone and said: "please call your mother" so he did and that 20 or 30 minute call may have been the longest she'd been able to speak with him since he left Winnipeg seven months earlier. The home situation was complex, and as mentioned he seemed to have made a point of "losing" all the phones he'd had in the past, apparently preferring a clean break from his life in Winnipeg. Only

rarely did he show up on Facebook under that street name of Crusty Thabum, while we family trolls hungrily searched for any clues that he'd been there at all, thereby ensuring that at least while he pressed that 'like' he was still alive. He spoke with his mother as he had with me about wanting to get off drugs now, and that this new girlfriend had done so, so he'd managed to get away from Vancouver's heavy drug scene, and was seeking a more tranquil island life to help him ease into this new resolve. Naturally this was balm to all our ears, and our hearts were brimming with hope.

Forty minutes down the highway we were at Cowichan Crossing where we stepped into a liquor store for a few cans of Gordon's favourite beers – he was of age, and I cherished the prospect of us sitting on my porch like friends, enjoying the evening breezes while we sipped our drinks and ate snacks. Then to Walmart where he'd agreed to allow me to buy him a few necessities, especially I thought about clean clothes for after he showered at my place. Back home I'd been collecting a few basics hoping for just such a visit, but we needed more and this was a convenient stop for him to choose the new underwear he needed and a shorter belt for his increasingly thin waistline. He asked if he could also have \$12 sunglasses and new socks. He spotted some

coveralls with no price tag, but when we found out they were \$56 he said “No Grandma, I don’t want you to spend that much.” We picked up a thin summer sleeping bag, and then noticed some adult camper backpacks, unlike the cheap school type pack he had. “Wow these are nice,” he said, and I noticed the price tag. “Is this what they cost \$94?” I asked. “No these smaller ones are only \$45” he said, “but that’s still too much – I don’t want you to spend that.” And he walked away despite my willingness to consider this purchase. I mean hey he was basically living out of his backpack, whereas I had a 900 square foot mobile home all to myself and every room was full of the things I wanted there. Haha and here I was the one who’d been preaching about simple living for much of my life! Clearly I had a lot to learn about simple living from Gordon and his street friends.

All he wanted in the food section was a large package of croissants and was glad to hear that I had Nutella at home. And then finally he asked if he could get a cheap lighter to go with the cigarettes I’d bought him. Of course but when the smallest packages had four lighters in them, he said “Never mind, Grandma, I only need one – didn’t you say you had matches in your trunk? That’ll do.” Wow here he was homeless and likely broke, and he had turned down so many items I’d offered to

buy him – not only a lesson in simple living, but also so abundantly clear that he had zero interest in taking advantage of me. I mean four lighters could potentially be traded for cigarettes or something in the future, and they were cheap, but no, if they did not sell a single lighter, then my book of matches in the trunk would do.

While driving and shopping he had my phone and was hoping to hear back from the Gabriola girlfriend who was thought to have gone visiting in Parksville. Just as we loaded our purchases into the trunk, the phone beeped and it was her, saying how glad she was to hear from him, and that she'd be back on Gabriola in the morning to meet him. 'Well sorry Grandma, but I want to go back to Nanaimo now. You don't have to drive me though, I can hitchhike.'

Damn!! I tried to get him to reconsider and still come to my place for a few days but he apologetically would not do so. "Okay" I sighed, "but of course I'm driving you back – no way I'm missing out on these last 45 minutes with you tonight." And so we headed north again, little realizing that it would be our last 45 minutes together on this earth, except for his final days unconscious on life support three months later – a possibility that was real enough, despite this lovely June evening. When we got back to Port Plaza mall, I loaded the things he was willing

to keep into cloth shopping bags, including the beer since there's usually none of that at my place. And we joked about him having a beer for breakfast like that old Johnny Cash song, and I sang the line for him in case he was too young to know it: "The beer I had for breakfast wasn't bad, so I had one more for dessert." "Darn it" he laughed, "that guy stole my lines!" More laughter, more hugs, more puppy kisses for our dear sweet Gordon, and then he headed to the Gabriola ferry having not asked me for a single dime throughout our evening together!! So much for all those warnings about how he would try and exploit me because of his addictions. As I drove away sadly, I wished I'd at least thought to offer him the walk-on ferry fare.

Recalling the details of that precious last evening together while he could still walk the earth – fills my heart with overflowing gratitude for the gift and blessing he was to my life. He got in touch about a week later to see if I'd pick him up in Nanaimo along with another street friend and his dog (I didn't ask what happened to the girlfriend). I was hesitant about a street dog who well might have fleas that would remain in my car, and also he was sounding confused and potentially on drugs again -- my daughter had earlier made me look up Ice Rage or Meth Rage videos, so I was a bit fearful especially with two of them

potentially coming to the seniors mobile home park where I lived. But I messaged back that I should be able to at least pick him up the next morning but not that same day. He said he'd call later to discuss details but he never did ... and then next I heard he was back in Vancouver. Needless to say the 'what ifs' later plagued me – what if I had dropped everything again, cancelled that day's commitments and headed up the Malahat to get him/them ... would his story have ended differently??? God only knows.

Nonetheless our 'last supper' at DQ in Nanaimo is a memory I will cherish for the rest of my life. Even now, writing these lines, I am filled again with a sense of the warmth of his presence, and the joy of the affection that characterized our connection.

9. All Saints Day and The Bardo

I read George Saunders' 2017 book called *Lincoln in the Bardo* a few months after Gordon died, thinking that the story of this famous father's great grief over the loss of his son might somehow resonate with or enlighten my own journey. Saunders is an unusual and highly regarded writer, but I'm not always sophisticated enough to catch on to what he's doing, and I'm no expert about this kind of ... shall we say esoteric (?) literature. Regardless the book is clearly an intriguing intermingling of various literary forms, together with a departure from many of their anticipated trajectories.

I write these words the day after vast numbers of American youth spearheaded and carried out the March for Our Lives – pleading and demanding that American lawmakers tighten up the outrageous-to-the-rest-of-us lax or non-existent gun control laws that allow anyone to buy semi-automatic military weapons and walk into schools or other public places on a shooting spree. I'm full of admiration for these youth and enjoyed watching and hearing their brave speeches on the cornucopia of free news sources available online especially through Facebook. Just as in Lincoln's day, youth are dying and now rising up to stem the flow

of the spilt blood of their comrades. Of course I'm guilty of manipulating the similarity here, since in Lincoln's time they were dying as soldiers in the Civil War – ultimately seen through our historical lens as brave warriors fighting the horrible injustices of slavery. As an aside -- then as now, the “religious right” (although I think they're dead wrong) support the side that wants to kill, maim or enslave with relative impunity. Today's “religious right” believing that God is on the side of the NRA is as ludicrous as the “religious right” of Lincoln's Day believing that God was on the side of slave-owners. As the cliché goes – the devil can quote scripture to his purpose. Lincoln was criticized for being so distressed over his own son's death, while so many sons of other people died as part of his anti-slavery war; and the offensive from the Northern side apparently grew deliberately stronger soon after young Willie Lincoln's death. The historical story is complex.

I did not find many parallels or points of connection between Lincoln's loss and mine, but was intrigued by Saunders' depiction of a motley crowd of ghosts and spirits who are mostly still so attached to their earthly lives and issues, that they are unable to move forward. Instead they are lingering at the cemetery when Abe Lincoln comes along to take up his son's body in his arms again – to cherish his earthly

form once more because the boy's death had been so sudden, and the father was far from having come to terms with it. It seems that many and various of the other ghosts were attracted to this scene, and some were outright envious since they wished that their relatives also were here to rail against their loss as was this boy's father. When they find out that the father is the president of the USA, they're further inclined to support this ongoing father/son connection ... perhaps in hopes of thereby supporting their own desires to remain connected with their loved ones. As in C.S. Lewis' 1946 book called *The Great Divorce* (which I don't think Saunders' book mentions) these souls or spirits or ghosts are unable to reach a freer and happier state -- until they're able to shake off their excessive attachments, and embrace a new detachment from their earthly experiences. Buddhist philosophy is clearly at play here but again is not mentioned by either Saunders or Lewis as far as I know -- a coincidence or unrecognized influence perhaps.

Saunders' book title did remind me though to look up more info on the Tibetan Buddhist understanding of the Bardo -- a transitional and intermediate sort of liminal state between death and rebirth. According to some sources <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Bardo-Thodol> the length of this Bardo period is up to 49 days -- my own reaction upon

learning this was that it seems like an awfully short time to sort out all one's earthly misperceptions and missteps, but our experience of "days" might be quite different to those Bardo days. I'm a complete non-expert on these matters but I mention it here because I realized in retrospect that my own strongest experience of Gordon's ethereal presence was exactly 49 days after his death, an accidental synchronicity perhaps.

To me it was an important Christian feast celebrated as All Saints Day 2017, following All Hallow's Eve (first the Eve or vigil, then the Hallows or Holy Ones Day). I was in the Anglican cathedral using the side chapel to carry on the usual weekly noon communion service based on Celtic themes from Iona. The morning had been rather chaotic and I was out of sorts when out of my side-vision I sensed hints of movement around the giant flower urn in front of the main altar. It felt like some kind of light dancing movement and I was thinking of harlequin dancing, though I was not sure what that was before looking it up later on. The Arlecchino or Harlequin character originated in the late 16th century Italian *Commedia dell'arte* – a kind of travelling theatre group – and the Harlequin usually wore a checkered costume, which in this case resembled somewhat the patched clothing of the street people. Gordon, as mentioned, loved wearing patched clothing in his last two years of

life – partly celebrating the opposite of materialism. Given his final months with the street people in the north end of Granville Street in Vancouver, this patched clothing would be particularly in contrast to the very slick and stylish clothing of those walking around the street people on their way to corporate offices or high-end stores. I do not blame those who step around them since it is true that street people can be scary in their desperation, or can be subject to meth rage or other types of extreme and unpredictable drug reactions.

So here I sensed this barely discernible harlequin dancing figure and once that got my attention images of Gordon's smiling face appeared in my mind's eye -- a warm smile and a wink as he gestured with his arms and hands pointing to the giant urn of flowers. Even as a baby before he could talk Gordon loved flowers, and pointed to them with oohs and aahs as I carried his infant self in my arms showing him the simple petunias and marigolds I'd planted by the house back in Winnipeg. That gesture on All Saints Day reminded me to focus on beauty. Rather than belabor each detail of that fleeting encounter or sensation, I'll share the poem I wrote about it:

The Visit

There you were dancing in the sanctuary,
a sort of harlequin note to your light prancing steps.

I sensed your presence
 smiling and winking at me
 stretching your arms and hands
 towards the great urn of flowers
 inviting me to focus on beauty.

See Grandma,
 you said without words,
 I'm free and happy now
 and want you to be too.

His teasing loving smile
 drew me into the spell
 so great to feel him being so well.

Soon he had a dance partner

the one that usually or ideally
sashays around sanctuaries ...

The two were like Vaudeville --
swoops and dips and funny smirks.

Exuberant joy and love
emanating from the ether.

Thanks for the visit Darling Boy.

*** All Saints Day 2017

I leave it to the reader's imagination as to who the other dance partner was, but suffice it to say that this heavenly being is not usually seen doing Vaudeville!

We all would like to think that the souls of our loved ones are well and at peace – usually in the Anglican tradition we recite something about asking God to grant that person ‘rest eternal’. However my many years of studying and teaching world religions opens up more possibilities. Also ‘eternal rest’ sounds potentially boring. My father

who died in 1994 for example, was very much a doer and a builder – someone who wanted to keep learning all his life despite his having been deprived of a basic education (in Appendix IV I’ve provided a short memoir piece on this called *Contact Cement*). I can hardly imagine him being satisfied with ‘eternal rest’ and nothing to build or fix. As Reinhold Niebuhr rightly cautioned, it is unwise for Christians to claim any knowledge of either the furniture of heaven or the temperature of hell (The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol II: Human Destiny, p. 294 http://king.typepad.com/mike_king/2005/04/reinhold_niebuh.html)

Some readers may find the sharing of this poem and its context as extraneous to the matter at hand; but many others have drawn comfort and delight from it. To see the loved one who suffered such a potentially ignominious death being so happy and free is a gift, as well as his obvious invitation for me too to become as happy and free as possible. This joyous visit I sensed (imagined?), this daytime dreamlike vision while I was awake and busy with another task – has been a source of grace and blessing to me and to many who have seen the poem tell the story. A few months later I found myself writing a much longer poem based on T.S. Eliot’s excellent 1915 poem called “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” ... and that’s my next chapter.

10. The Love Song of a Fentanyl Grandma

(with apologies to T.S. Eliot and Prufrock)

Let us go then you and I

when the September sun shines across the sky

Like a patient on life-support in ICU

shining brightly through infection's glow

Let us go on a journey of remembrance

cherishing the memory of your little cherub self,

when you were a wee tot for too short awhile

A journey not meant to be ending

here on these Vancouver streets

in cardiac arrest at age twenty

Your brain or mind or soul departed

but your heart by paramedics restarted

Forced to tick-tock like a wind-up clock

while loved ones from afar do flock

to grimly hold your limp hands

and shudder in grief ...

from this sad ending, seeking relief.

Look down, look down near your feet,
another one dead on the street.

So many other grandmas and moms and grandpas
and others weeping along with us today

As they remember their charming cherubs
whom they cherished and lullabied,
intoxicated by those sweet baby smells and smiles
or soothing them back to sleep when they cried,

The muttering retreats of all those cherished memories
fading fast in these final moments
while we watch the grandchild's fake and feverish
"breathing" through a mouthful of tubes
and hoses in their noses,

Also being thankful for our Canadian medical system
since one can hardly afford the family hotel
let alone the cost of life support
and the excellent ICU staffing
and meds and equipment for graphing.

Look down, look down near your feet,
another one dead on the street.

I massage your big hairy feet
with their toenails destroyed by damp fungus
after a long rainy winter outdoors,

And I smile through my tears
remembering your sweet baby toes
though even back then the home nurse said
she'd never seen such big feet on a newborn!

Where else have these feet travelled My Darling?
Besides your constricted life in a prairie city
and your final two years on the balmy streets
of this big ocean city?

Where did you come from before I knew you,
since it seemed an 'old soul' lived within you?

And now when I caress the still warm flesh

of these tough-soled feet, I remember ...

“Oh how many feet you meet”

from your favourite childhood author Dr. Seuss.

How you loved the Lorax who speaks for the trees,

and the brown barbaloots with crummies

in their tummies. and green eggs and ham

Sam-I-am, and the Cat in the Hat

and the Sneetches without stars upon ‘thars’

who did not get invited to the frankfurter parties,

Oh how desperately you searched for your own Solla Sollew

where they never have troubles

at least very few.

Except that instead you ran into

‘the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune ...

to sleep perchance to dream

Ay there’s the rub,

for in this sleep of death what dreams may come’?

I sensed that your soul had already fled,

you had already shuffled off this mortal coil
before we arrived to bid you
Fare thee well our Darling Boy,
fare thee well where'er thee be
where'er thine essence dwelleth now
This oh too frail flesh can no longer
contain thee ... so go My Darling and be free.

Look down, look down near your feet,
another one dead on the street.

In the room the nurses come and go
speaking of heart rate high or low
We linger and cling to their every word
hoping against hope although it's absurd ...

Your brain's gone astray
your heart's a machine,
And yet we press and caress your warm flesh,
Just like so many other family members
every day in this cursed year of 2017

when fentanyl robs the families of 3.8 people a day in BC

... loved ones just as cherished as we cherish thee.

And who are the others lost on this day,

so many young ones for whom their families pray

Spare him Dear God, may she recover

her childhood zest for life,

may he not be crushed by struggle and strife,

Deliver them back into our arms of love

send down mercy, we pray, from 'above'.

An army of grandparents, among others,

desperately praying each day

to not get that phone call to say

she's gone, or come right away –

he may not last the night

Come and help them fight the good fight.

Look down they were found on the street,

not breathing, not moving their feet.

Oh how many feet we meet,

Sadly we grandmas are part of a fleet

of bereaved relatives and before that

we're just scared ... searching Facebook every day

for any little clue or 'like' or comment

you may have made somewhere

and then phew if we find it,

So we can breathe easier today

knowing that at least you're alive

if only you would also survive and thrive

If only ... please God, let it be

For so many others, and me.

But the facts and the stats are against us,

Fentanyl so easy to make this year

in many forms in kitchen labs and cellars

So easy to deliver into the hands of sellers,

A larger profit, a bigger high, a cheaper price

a bargain for the seeker who longs only

to escape albeit briefly
from the overwhelming pains and struggles
from the feelings of shameful failure
From the dejection and rejection and isolation
they feel they've endured for too long.

And seeing no exit from their despair,
they foolishly risk an unpremeditated ending
the Fentanyl laced drugs not forefending,
likely to recover they think, like other
overdoses just another inconvenience.

Most of them do not intend to die
but instead only to get another high
And being so utterly low, feeling their status
as scum of the earth, reviled,

They long to rise up ever briefly
from their low position as litter on the street,

Watching the well-heeled in this city,
the beautiful young women with tiny puppies in their purses

stepping around them in delicate heels,
on their way to buy treasures at Tiffany's.

Look down, look down, near your feet,
another one dead on the street.

But this time it's you whom I've cherished ...
whom I carried as a baby listening to your
ooo's and aaa's as you admired the flowers.

We played so many games of UNO
when I visited your city and we stayed with Nonna
(your great-grandma who delighted in you,
and taught you to ride a two-wheeler too).

After I'd tried but largely failed to help you
do math homework in French (I could barely do English)

I remember that rite-of-passage day
when walking you to school from there
you cautioned me that if I meant to
hug and kiss you goodbye,

to please do it these few blocks before school
so your friends would not laugh to see
and you'd still have some hope of being cool.

And now I think of our 'last supper' at a Nanaimo Dairy Queen
three months before you died ...
laughing together over the poutine you relished
seeing your happy shocked face when I'd earlier bought
my first-ever pack of cigarettes -- for you
in hopes of harm reduction during our anticipated
front-porch visits at my home for the next few days.

But then your girlfriend messaged you to come back,
and you were apologetic, but determined to go
"It's okay Grandma I could hitchhike,
you don't have to drive me back again."

As if I would dream of giving up any precious minutes with you,
well aware that this might be our last earthly visit ...
now so treasured a memory – a gift,
so honoured you chose me that day.

And when I got you back to Nanaimo,

I gave you bags of the things we'd bought on the way,

including a few cans of your favourite beer,

again to have been consumed on the porch with you

My Dear, but I don't drink beer so I left it with you,

remembering and singing Johnny Cash's line:

"The beer I had for breakfast wasn't bad, so I had one more for dessert."

"Darn it," you said "he stole my line" and we laughed and hugged again

...

And I can still see you now walking away towards the ferry,

so heavily laden with bags, and yet,

so light on your feet in my memory,

as if already walking on air.

Our last delicious sharing of hugs and laughter,

like so many other grandparents

cherishing similar memories of final visits and hugs.

Over 1400 such deaths that year,

likely tens or hundreds of thousands of parents,

grandparents, siblings, friends remembering with a smile and a
tear ...

holding out empty arms now like me and wishing you were here.

So much more I could say, Dear Grandosn,

so much more I could pray

as I often do for all of you who have "passed"

and all of us left behind and bereft,

Some days feeling there's nothing left

to gladden our hearts now we've lost you

And yet sensing your presence in so many ways,

Like on ravens' wings, to gladden our days.

Look up, look up in the sky,

there you are like an angel so high

may your soul be free and your 'tires' have air

free as the breeze, without a care

Now released from your troubles and stress

now free to hover and bless

all our days with thoughts of you

though the days were in number too few.
I feel your love My Darling, when the sunshine kisses my skin,
when the mighty ocean waves roll in,
your soul revealed thereby to me
when wind and sunlight sparkle on the sea.

Look up, look up and we see
our troubled young ones now happy and free
Riding the wind of Creator Spirit,
Blessed be.

by Adela (Diubaldo) Torchia -- 7 May 2018

11. Connecting the DOTS

So how do we connect the DOTS (the Dead On The Streets) of our cities with the overall scene of dangerous substance abuse in our modern Canadian cities? In this study I may well have been guilty of various errors and excesses. For one thing there's the all-too-human tendency to idealize the lost loved one, especially when they are so young – to look back on them and our relationship with them through the proverbial rose-coloured glasses. Whereas beforehand they are troubled youth making some bad decisions while being offered many alternatives, afterwards the hagiography can easily come out. We see them not only as saintly in some ways, but also as great victims of a terrible epidemic in which these valiant warriors fell in great numbers day-to-day, succumbing to the Evil Forces of the fentanyl makers and sellers – those profiteering off of the vulnerable and wounded bodies and minds of our cherished loved ones.

In reality many of us family members of these fallen youth are far from perfect in our relationships and even more certainly in our understanding of the whole phenomenon. Despite usually thinking of myself as liberal and progressive, for example, I remain conflicted even

about the use of cannabis while our country of Canada is on the verge of making it legal. Heaven knows the road to this process has been long and arduous, as the Canadian Medical Association wrestled with its awareness of potential brain damage to those under 25, and the police forces struggled to find ways to catch pot-impaired drivers. What has cannabis to do with the opioid crisis, you may ask?

While I'm in no position of medical or sociological expertise to make any definitive comments about the old question of whether cannabis is a gateway drug to other harder drugs, the combination of my family history along with much online research over the years leads me to be at least uncertain about this question. Sadly in our extended family and in other families I know, the early use of cannabis was followed by the use of harder drugs. Also as of this writing (May 2018) the Wikipedia article on cannabis as a drug expresses this observation as part of its intro: "Studies have found a strong relation between [cannabis use and the risk of psychosis](#),^[26] though the cause-and-effect relationship is debated.^[27]"

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cannabis_\(drug\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cannabis_(drug)). I've also become aware of family members using cannabis to cope with such deaths, and

sometimes ending up needing psychiatric care as a result of paranoia and apparent hallucinations. Is it a slippery slope, or just a coincidence?

And of course the THC euphoric-high producing component in cannabis has become increasingly concentrated in our times, so it's not the pot that my brother and his friends grew in the center planters on the main road of our old hometown around 1970, and got the town to inadvertently tend and water the plants! Although I'm a Baby Boomer born in Canada, my parents came from Italy as economic migrants and having been desperately poor, they taught us to never waste a nickel (actually it was pennies that were not to be wasted, but I better write this while nickels or five-cent coins still exist), so I never tried 'weed' as popular as it was in my youth. Having lived my first year of retirement on Gabriola Island, I was asked by a Gabriolan how I could live there and not smoke pot. For one thing I was always much too frugal, although someone suggested that as a 'pot-virgin' I might only need about 25 cents worth to get high!

All this 'silliness' aside let me say that I was fortunate to have apparently been born with a personality and perspective that adored or got high on nature, seeing Creation as transparent to the Creator. As far as I know St. Francis of Assisi (1181/2 – 1226) was the first Christian to

take this official view of the transparency of nature to the divine – ‘praising the Artist (God) through the work of Art (Creation)’. However in Paul’s epistle or Letter to the Romans in the Christian Bible, we also have this insight suggesting nature as the first book of revelation: “Ever since the creation of the world God’s eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things God has made.” (Romans 1:20 NRSV Bible). Francis and other nature mystics showed us how to get ‘high’ from nature – a phenomenon that has been re-appreciated in the religion and ecology movements of the last quarter century. There are so many free and natural ways to get ‘high’ that I do confess considerable confusion and frustration in trying to understand why some people feel the need to introduce dangerous, brain-altering chemicals into their bodies and brains in order to seek these extra special ‘highs’ ... or to escape from the apparently overwhelming challenges of their personal lives; even if they’ve hitherto been healthy Canadians with the immense privileges and opportunities that gives them, compared to billions of other people around the world.

Why risk brain damage including paranoia, psychosis and other serious mental (and physical) injuries by using so-called recreational

drugs, when we have on offer ongoing forms of 're-creation' through the beauty of nature, especially in this Cascadia region of the Pacific Northwest. I write this during the season of riotous rhododendrons, and the flowering trees of Victoria snowing pink petals onto the sacred grounds upon which we live. ... the season when as R W Emerson said: "The earth laughs in flowers". So much poetry and art has been inspired by the 'highs' that people feel when they experience the beauties of nature that again I confess to not really understanding why people of Cascadia in particular would choose dangerous chemical highs instead, or in addition to perhaps.

I also found myself wondering whether a significant portion of church-goers in Cascadia or Canada smokes pot, or whether their spiritual highs were adequate to the task. Church-goers or people who practice various religious traditions like Buddhism in particular -- are ideally also inspired towards compassion and empathy -- towards a profound interest in the wellbeing of all sentient beings. Again this is an ideal and we shudder in our times to see huge and very disturbing examples of the opposite -- like the American "Religious Right" championing greed, racism, dishonesty and bigotry, or the Myanmar Buddhists imposing deadly long-term persecutions on the Rohingya

Muslims. Nonetheless we can hopefully still presume that major world religions who share the Golden Rule and other forms of compassionate teaching – would all encourage their followers towards inner peace and healing through nature and creativity as well as empathy and service towards all those so imperiled around our world by war, violence, prejudice, poverty, natural disasters, disabilities, oppressions, lack of education and other human rights infringements. In other words I do believe that good spiritual paths could offer their adherents both the highs to keep them off drugs, and the challenges towards compassion to help them focus on the potential greater sufferings of others than those sufferings so easily stumbled upon in the less than perfect upbringings, or rejections or inadequacies that so many of us have endured as a natural part of the human journey. Indeed those who suffer none of these often become ‘insufferable’ in their tendencies towards arrogance – arrogance being the only ‘territory’ in which Rabbi A.J. Heschel felt that God could not reside within the human experience (‘God is everywhere save in arrogance’).

12. Epilogue

As I write this epilogue, seven months has now passed since Gordon's death. However, as Ira Progoff stated: "Death ends a life, but not a relationship." In fact many relationships have become strengthened, while others seemed to die a necessary time-had-come kind of ending. The latter are reminiscent of the Dancing Shiva focus of destroying the old (the used up, no longer relevant, or harmful aspects of life) to make room for the new. Among the new things that occurred was a strengthening of bonds between some of Gordon's biological family members including his paternal aunt who'd undergone a terrible journey of addictions herself, to emerge as a prolific Winnipeg artist who subsequently created many new artworks in honour of her Gordon, her nephew lost to addiction overdose. Art had been very therapeutic in her own recovery process, and now she felt entirely inspired to paint her way through the grief process; and her beautiful works have given so many of us solace. As Gordon's message to me on All Saints Day 2017 seemed to say: Focus on Beauty.

Gordon's mother is also rediscovering her more creative side, while undergoing the further unexpected loss of her father six months

after losing her only child, and while struggling with other substantial life changes as a result of new perspectives that Gordon's death unfolded for her. She'd also been known as 'Hobo Mom' to many of Gordon's street friends in his final years, and quite a number of those friends stay in touch with her on Facebook, especially through Crusty Thabum's Facebook page. Her life and struggles have been very difficult since Gordon's loss, but she feels inspired by the close spiritual presence of her lost son and then her father -- to move forward into a more positive, creative and healthy journey of life.

Regardless of the many perils and pitfalls of 'over-sharing' on Facebook, this popular form of social media often provides an ongoing cyber-venue in which those close to the deceased can continue their cherished reminiscences – another potential spiritual aspect of this whole process, as Facebook pages inadvertently become ongoing memorial sites. Seeing and reading the many testimonials, or casual eulogies that anyone can post, there's also an ongoing concern fostered for those still in danger of overdosing and meeting the same end. Many on Crusty's page have felt inspired to get off drugs as a result of his loss – not to say that this necessarily actually happens given the length of time it takes to even get into detox in BC, let alone the even scarcer

resources of longer-term rehab, and attendant job training programs.

But at least that initial impulse to leave drugs behind is sometimes being born and celebrated by those who read these postings – some people are inspired to try and recover, because of Gordon’s loss.

As a retired Anglican priest living in Victoria, I’ve also found more opportunity for creativity as part of my own journey through grief⁹, and many people in this Anglican Diocese of BC in Victoria have been compassionate and supportive, knowing how widespread this problem is in our midst. Perhaps there will be other opportunities to speak of this matter in a church context as time goes on.

I’m not aware of an overall focus on grandparents in this issue, although this may become, or perhaps is already a recognized issue especially among us Canadian Baby Boomer grandparents, who often live well into our grandchildren’s early adult years. Maclean’s magazine did a June 2016 article entitled “Why being a grandparent is more complicated than ever” which ranged widely in its coverage of different and sometimes opposite issues, especially in an internet world where Dr. Google’s views of various aspects of child-raising are often more

⁹ See Appendix V for my “Christmas Without Gordon” article published in our Diocesan Post in December 2017.

respected than Grandma or Grandpa's views, or at least more welcome, especially since one can find supporters online for just about any way of doing things (and probably "proof" that the way our own parents raised us was wrong!). There are also so many conflicting theories about parenting – different ideas that emerge as "the best way" and are later criticized as detrimental or dangerous. The age-old question, for example, of how long a baby should be allowed to cry without picking them up (assuming their needs have been attended to) goes up and down – some thinking that picking them up and comforting them amounts to "spoiling" while recent theories I've seen online suggest that the stress that a crying or screaming infant is undergoing is similar to other kinds of human stress in situations where one's needs are not being met and one is helpless to rectify the situation on one's own. These theories suggest that lifelong depression and aggression may result from ongoing extended periods in which the baby is allowed to cry unattended. Who knows what next month's favourite theory about that will be?

As an example of how parenting "styles" can vary, I mention again that my parents came to Canada as economic migrants after WWII; and they were very poor and also keen to give their children the advantages

of life in Canada that had been unavailable to them. So when I was born in Winnipeg, my mother who unfortunately had no female relatives from her own family of origin (who were quite abundant in Italy) to help her out, ended up, as she told the story later, not breast feeding because she came to believe what formula manufacturers were promoting – that their milk was healthier than mother’s milk¹⁰. In an effort to put aside outdated village ways, these and many other immigrant mothers tried to give what they really could not afford, and make huge sacrifices to buy formula so their baby would be stronger than the babies in the mountain villages back home. There are many other aspects of a child’s upbringing that are cause for disagreement.

The point is that parents, grandparents and other relatives and friends of young people with serious addictions, are often conflicted about what may have contributed to that person’s downward spiral; and they’re often also conflicted or in disagreement about how they can

¹⁰ Of course this approach became a humanitarian crisis when the Nestle Company was discovered in the 1980’s to have been giving away free introductory packages of baby formula in many poor villages, towns and cities around the world, dispensed by fake nurses who convinced the mothers that this would make their babies healthier. In these poor places, people could usually not afford to use the full amount of formula powder per serving, and often they did not have clean drinking water, so babies became malnourished, ill and dying as a result. Meanwhile because the mother had been offered the formula even before the child was born, her own milk did not flow since the baby was not put to the breast.

be helped. Families, societies, health/addiction and government agencies all struggle to find a helpful response. I am grateful to so many forces and sources that have helped me and my family deal with this crisis; and I offer this small work in hopes of continuing the dialogue and the research into how best to avoid or at least reduce similar losses in the future.

Appendices

Appendix I: Facebook post from his former girlfriend:

I've been singing every song you taught me about a hundred times a day. i've been considering what you'd want me to do before every decision, and i think i've been better for it. All you ever wanted was for me to be happy, and i'm so, so sorry for every single time i forgot about that and turned on you. I worry constantly that i may not have properly explained to you about my being bipolar, about how i didn't mean to lash out at you, about how i meant EVERY single word of encouragement i ever said to you and not a single angry one. That day i freaked out at you because you had Rambo all day and didn't feed him because all i left in the bag for you was puppy food and cat food and you didn't think he was supposed to eat either of those types of food, y'know because some people are picky with their dogs, and i just freaked out and refused to see your side of it. \I hate that you ever saw me like that, blinded by anger, refusing to listen to any reasonable explanation. I hope you can hear me when i say that to this day i don't believe that you ever had one bad intention for anyone you crossed paths with in life, unless they hurt someone you love. You were just trying to do what you thought was best for me and Rambo that day, and I just shit all over you. I'm sorry Gordo.... I wish i could have told you all this face to face. I pray that somewhere in between the written letters and the thoughts at night and the posts on here and the messages that maybe you'll hear at least a couple things i have to say. I know you wouldn't want me to feel guilty, you only ever wanted me to be happy. But what about when you told me WHY you were doing heroin again?? |How can i not feel guilty?? but you didn't stop once you had me. so what am i supposed to think??n That night you told me that and cried because you were so worried about me overdosing, look where we are now. I wish i held your hand on more occasions. I wish I wasn't so hesitant. I'm so sorry about that night in the parkade, sucks that was one of the last times we saw each other. Singing with someone won't really be the same for me again. I'm so

sorry I put drugs before you that night... and I didn't follow you when you ran away without your shoes... I just thought you were being ridiculous but I didn't consider that I would have done the very same fucking thing if some one was yelling at me the way i was yelling at you. I should have held you when you cried, not told you to man up, just admit what you did. Because you didn't do anything wrong. Like i said i still believe you've never had a single bad intention for anyone who didn't deserve it, but like i said in any of those times when you were around while i started having a fucking episode over something, that i was just blinded by anger. that I didn't mean a word I said..... I wish i could some how know that you hear me..... when i talk to you when i'm alone..... I miss you.. I'm sorry I left you Gordo, but I know you wouldn't want me to be. I don't regret going back to Mitch. Of course not. You encouraged me, you wanted me to be happy. And I am, Gordo, I am. Aren't you proud? I hope that makes you happy... y'know??

wherever you are... I don't know anything about the after life but I feel like I know that youre safe. that you there, y'know?? When i bury my face in my rag with you dread in it i feel like theres no way you could actually be 100% gone. you're there... somewhere. i know you're watching over me, everyone. Every person you loved, i know you're up there taking care of them, of me. Watching over everyone... Guiding them, stuff like that y'know? |I'm sorry for every time I've called you crazy, but i'm thankful for every time I got to talk you down from psychosis. You were almost too smart to be alive I guess... You're beautiful mind couldn't handle going over every little detail of every horrible thing in the world we were livin in. And the pessimist i both of us refused to see the good. But I did a good job pretending I did right? to bring you back to reality?? relativity was your thing for a while, especially while we were together. But what can your leaving possibly be relative too?? I found myself dressed as a bunny, this halloween. Without even thinking. That's some fucking weird relativity right there. "hazey why you always bringing around all these guys who look like bunnies".. relativity... I won't spdoing from you gordo. Thats something you really wanted wasn't it? for me to never spdoing from you. You

remember that one day i made all the other boys who used to kinda follow me around to leave us alone, one of the first days of the month or two that it was just you and me for a while.... |I sat on your lap outside starbucks on daive n seymore after we played eachother songs we're wrote at the dog park with booboo and rambo.. You taught me what the word spoding ment, we kissed and laughed... exchanged thousands of i love you's and played beautiful music together all night?? then ended up sleeping outside the dispencary with Little Marcus and had loud ass sex right beside him while he was in hi s sleeipng bag high on acid listening to weird post hardcore and rap music on that ipod pierre gave me? I miss you... I won't stop either. I won't spdoing. I know you'll visit me one day soon.. or just atleast one day in general... i'll be waiting. I love you Gordo

(2 Nov 2017)

Appendix II:**On the Death of the Beloved****by John O'Donohue**

Though we need to weep your loss,
You dwell in that safe place in our hearts,
Where no storm or might or pain can reach you.
Your love was like the dawn
Brightening over our lives,
Awakening beneath the dark
A further adventure of colour.
The sound of your voice
Found for us
A new music
That brightened everything.
Whatever you enfolded in your gaze
Quickened in the joy of its being;
You placed smiles like flowers
On the altar of the heart.
Your mind always sparkled
With wonder at things.
Though your days here were brief,
Your spirit was live, awake, complete.
We look towards each other no longer
From the old distance of our names;
Now you dwell inside the rhythm of breath,
As close to us as we are to ourselves.
Though we cannot see you with outward eyes,
We know our soul's gaze is upon your face,
Smiling back at us from within everything
To which we bring our best refinement.
Let us not look for you only in memory,
Where we would grow lonely without you.

You would want us to find you in presence,
Beside us when beauty brightens,
When kindness glows
And music echoes eternal tones.
When orchids brighten the earth,
Darkest winter has turned to spring;
May this dark grief flower with hope
In every heart that loves you.
May you continue to inspire us:
To enter each day with a generous heart.
To serve the call of courage and love
Until we see your beautiful face again
In that land where there is no more separation,
Where all tears will be wiped from our mind,
And where we will never lose you again.

Appendix III: Literature Review of Bruce Alexander 2017 lectures

Addiction: Hopeful Prophecy from a Time of Despair

<http://www.brucekalexander.com/articles-speeches/289-addiction-a-hopeful-prophecy-from-a-time-of-despair>

Begins with this info quoted from the site:

Bruce K. Alexander
April 19, 2017
Revised September 9, 2017

Expanded version of a presentation to the “New Directions in the Study of Alcohol Group,” Fortieth annual meeting, Bradford, UK, April 24 2016. However, this written version was not completed until a year after the speech was given because, as I neared the end of delivering the speech, I realized I could not fully believe what I was planning to say! I had to end the speech on a minor point (Alexander, 2016a). The new ending is a more fully developed and considered version of what I wanted to say out loud in Bradford, but couldn’t.

As requested by the conference organizers, this presentation has three parts. I will start by describing the field of addiction as I found it 40 years ago, when the “New Directions” society was first formed. I will then compare that scene to today’s field of addiction. Finally, I will attempt to prophesy the field of addiction forty years in the future. As a prelude to envisioning addiction in the year 2056, I have found it necessary to explore a much longer stretch of history, including a look at addiction in the ancient world.

This is an extensive article (44 small-print pages including references) originally given as a three-part speech in the UK in April 2016, and revised 9 September 2017. I found it online February 2018 on the **Bruce K. Alexander's Globalization of Addiction Website**

<http://www.brucekalexander.com>

The following is not meant as a full summary of the entire article, but rather just citing some highlights of potential relevance to my research.

Part One: 1976 (Alexander aged 36)

In 1976 drugs were “very narrowly conceived” and the main approach in Canada was The War on Drugs. Alexander cites the Official View throughout this long article, and that view changes over time. In 1976 this official view understood addiction as a virtually incurable habit caused by the use of opioids or alcohol drugs, with “unbearable withdrawal symptoms if they tried to stop”. In the late 1970’s he and colleagues at Simon Fraser University began to challenge this view with their Rat Park experiments – suggesting that it’s more about one’s life circumstances than about the chemical hook involved, at least initially. The SFU Rat Park experiment demonstrated that although a rat alone in a cage will usually choose the heroin laced water until it dies from the heroin, this is not the case when they built a happy community setting for multiple rats (Rat Park) in which the rats had lots of community and enjoyable activities and good food. The context for this experiment suggested that there had been a human version of this when many heroin-using American troops returned from the Vietnam War, and most of them were able to stop using heroin without help, simply because they were now freed from the awful circumstances of the war, and returned to lives of connection with friends and family, as well as many freedoms, entertainments and opportunities for education, fulfilling work and creativity.

The Rat Park experiment cast doubt on the disease model of addictions, and instead moved to a compassionate social connections and

meaningful life model. Unfortunately there were many critical responses and reduction of funding etc.

For the sake of brevity I'm cautiously citing the Wikipedia article on Bruce K. Alexander as to his foci after Rat Park was not as well received as had been hoped:

1. Drug addiction is only a small corner of the addiction problem. Most serious addictions do not involve either drugs or alcohol
2. Addiction is more a social problem than an individual problem. When socially integrated societies are fragmented by internal or external forces, addiction of all sorts increases dramatically, becoming almost universal in extremely fragmented societies.
3. Addiction arises in fragmented societies because people use it as a way of adapting to extreme social dislocation. As a form of adaptation, addiction is neither a disease that can be cured nor a moral error that can be corrected by punishment and education.

The same article explains a further setback to Alexander's approach – this time through the World Health Organization's deferral to American preferences:

1995 WHO cocaine research project

One line of research in which Alexander played a key role was actively suppressed by the World Health Assembly. Early in the 1990s the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO) organized the largest study on [cocaine](#) use ever undertaken. Profiles of cocaine use were gathered from 21 cities located in 19 countries all over the world. Alexander was selected as the principal investigator for the Vancouver site. The WHO announced publication of the results of the global study in a press release in 1995.^[12]

However, an American representative in the World Health Assembly effectively banned the publication, apparently because the study seemed to contradict the dominant myth of addictive

drugs, as applied to cocaine. Part of the study's findings were "that occasional cocaine use does not typically lead to severe or even minor physical or social problems." In the sixth meeting of the B committee the US representative threatened that "If WHO activities relating to drugs failed to reinforce proven drug control approaches, funds for the relevant programs should be curtailed". This led to the WHO decision to postpone publication. The study has not been published officially but was leaked in 2009 and is available at [wikileaks](#).

I cite the latter to indicate the level of resistance that Alexander's radically different approach met with over time – a response well-known to many prophetic voices.

Although I stand to be corrected, I think that points #2 and 3 above are especially key to Alexander's non-disease model. But the disease model persists in many places, and not only does that delay or circumvent more effective responses to addictions, but as he repeatedly notes in the paper revised 9 Sept 2017 – this brings great physical suffering to people ill with many medical conditions – people not getting the full extent of pain medication they need because of the fear instilled by the "Official View" that too much of such medication could cause addiction.

As a personal example when my son's toddler son broke his ankle in summer 2017, he was given fentanyl for the pain at Victoria General Hospital Emergency. Meanwhile my daughter whose 20 year-old son ended up dying soon after from a fentanyl overdose feels that all fentanyl should be banned. From Aristotle and the Buddha the teaching of the middle path, or moderation in all things, may need to be reassessed for modern consideration. Other targets for criticism in the Official View of addictions as disease are medical doctors who must walk the tightrope of prescribing what their patients in pain may need without running afoul of the extreme policing of all opioids.

Part Two: 2016 (Alexander aged 76 years)

That latter point about doctors being overly restrained in providing full doses of medication for patients in extreme pain is an ongoing thread that Alexander notes from the past to the present, and into the foreseeable future. In the (2016) present Alexander is grateful that the understanding of addictions now includes “process” addictions “to gambling, social media, Internet games, overeating, pornography, love, sex, exercise, work, eating and shopping”. I’m sure there are others as well – like my own addiction to too much free online news from good sources (a news junkie?) and I’m addicted to my charming canine companion and to frugality-to-a-fault etc. And while there is not consensus on this point, it might be possible to replace a bad addiction with a good one, especially if one is unfortunate enough to have an addictive personality (the definition of which is also debatable).

Alexander is grateful that the War on drugs has by now come under much greater criticism than ever before, and says that to him “the most impressive of today’s non-punitive kinds of intervention can be broadly referred to as the recovery movement.” Nonetheless The War on Drugs still consumes around \$100 billion a year worldwide, and many people in the treatment business are reframing addiction as a ‘chronic disease’ that can be managed by lifelong monitoring and treatment, but not cured. Saddest of all for those trying to get a handle on this pervasive issue, Alexander states that: “Not only is there no sign that the flood of addiction is abating, but also the field of addiction remains an intellectual disaster area today” (no wonder my CSRS project has often floundered). Alexander is saddened to note the brain disease model of addiction or the medical model remains heavily funded and supported by government and professional organizations.

Let me interject my own perspective here – that while I am much inclined to agree with Alexander’s Rat Park model or with the idea that a person’s overall life circumstances have to be considered in their

struggles with addiction, I also wonder whether this persistent disease model cannot also be seen as motivated by compassion? If addiction is a disease then it is much less seen as the fault of the addicted person. If it's a disease like cancer then there is greater hope that further research might lead to a cure – a magical medical pill that would take away the cravings etc. Of course there already are a number of drugs that are used as intermediary helps between full-blown addiction and recovery, like methadone for maintenance therapy or to help with tapering in people with opioid dependence. Also of course there are harm reduction techniques and sites. And the focus on genetic predisposition also allows for more sympathy for the addicted person since one cannot choose one's bloodline in such matters. For these and other reasons, I don't think that the disease model should be equated with a lack of compassion.

There are a wide range of alternative therapies including one called Knit and Quit -- that I'd not heard of before – brought to Alexander's attention by his wife – an interesting phenomenon which has helped many people especially for quitting smoking since knitting keeps both hands, and both sides of the brain, quite busy.

Part Three: 2056 (Alexander expecting to be deceased rather than 116 yrs old)

In this lengthy paper the past and the present take up about 25% of the actual article, with the future absorbing the remaining 75%. I will not be repeating that proportion in this overview. Alexander first looks at ancient historical materials related to addiction, and claims for example that Plato felt that the root cause of epidemic addiction lies in the structure of society itself. And a current movement in today's health outlooks "contends that a great many health problems are more fully explained by the distortion of social relationships caused by the fragmentation of modern society" than by other factors.

This fragmentation of society, resulting in psychological dislocation for many people – ends up being a main focus of what Alexander sees as the present and future core problem that exacerbates addictions. He calls the idea that addiction is built into modernity the “dislocation theory of addiction” and focuses on “five rapidly globalizing aspects of modernity” to further explain this point of view. He does not deny that addictions are also affected by various personal factors, but feels that these overall societal tendencies are at the heart of the matter. Here Alexander makes surprising connections claiming that this fragmentation of society “is currently shaped primarily by the dominance of free-market capitalism, neoliberalism, ecological devastation, consumerism, gross inequality” and many other modern problems stemming from or related to these issues.

Alexander sees the current and future flood of severe addictions as adaptations to dislocation. His theoretical framework here is very complex and I dare not try to summarize it in too ‘summary’ a way. I was much intrigued by his connection between addictions and compulsive consumerism leading to continuing destruction of our planetary home. I’m not sure I’ve understood that connection fully but it’s not difficult to draw a line bridging compulsive consumerism and the kind of futility and despair that might lead to various forms of escapism like drug abuse. And I loved many of his profound psychological insights like this one: “You don’t have to be dislocated to fall in love, but you do have to be dislocated to sacrifice your life to be addicted to a dysfunctional or violent love relationship.” [Sadly this explains much about the parental home in which my deceased addicted grandson was raised.] And I loved his humorous (one hopes) perspective on the “elders who cannot contribute stabilizing wisdom to succeeding generations because they are addictively involved with television, bingo, Sudoku, prescription drugs, whatever”.

Early in the next section called *Prophecies* I’m saddened to read his prophecy that by 2056 it will be clear that the newer more

compassionate intervention in the field of addiction (some already in use in 2016), while presumably being less harmful, “are little more successful in bringing the problem of addiction under control than was the War on Drugs that they are replacing”. ... [Sigh] I felt like quitting reading right there but there was still another seven densely packed pages, including the major section he added on September 9, 2017 (two days before my grandson died of addictions). Alexander explains that his hopes of being wrong about the various plagues of modernity enduring into the future – were sadly dashed with the 2016 American election, in which so many ordinary people longed for a return to precisely the kind of culture that had generated many of the problematic issues.

Longing to produce a more hopeful prophecy, Alexander was happy to meet (through David Seljak) the Canadian Catholic theologian Gregory Baum in the year prior to his death at age 94. Through Baum and others, Alexander became convinced that “the potential solutions to problems generated by the modernity trap lie in social change brought about by ordinary people finding common cause”. Reading these lines just ten days after the Florida high school mass shooting, I’m inspired to believe this amazingly simple (rather than simplistic) truth – as I watch teenagers from that high school and around the whole USA gather momentum to potentially end the overweening political tyranny wielded for so long by the American gun lobby. Talk about stressors that could lead to addiction – how about the fact that going to school in the USA is now a major risk factor of being murdered, brutally wounded or disabled by gun violence?

I was also pleased to read Alexander’s claim that: “Certainly a part of the common ground must be a shared respect for our battered and abused Mother Earth ... Another part must be the recognition that nuclear war is a path of no return.” It is perhaps those who feel these sad realities and possibilities most acutely who are among the most susceptible to

drug abuse that nowadays easily leads to death because of the fentanyl crisis.

I will not try to detail Alexander's further socioeconomic understandings of the underpinnings of our current opioid crisis; but was shocked to read in his postscript to addiction professionals that they "need to say that we cannot treat our way out of the addiction problem no matter how many of us there are or how much money you give us". Well!! That won't go down well with so many people in this field struggling for further financial help to build the dream programs they're hoping will finally help more people overcome their addictions.

My Conclusions re: spirituality and the BC opioid crisis:

I have long been a fan of Alexander's Rat Park approach to people with addictions – especially that we need to help people overcome the social isolation that leads to the despair and alienation that makes many people more susceptible to an escape from reality into hard drugs. And I very much appreciate the many important 'dots' about modernity's problems that Alexander connects in this long article, especially the connection with excessive consumerism leading to gross inequalities and global environmental degradation. But I was disappointed that Alexander's prophecies for the future of these issues and especially of addiction --were not more optimistic.

Nonetheless this is a masterful contribution to the current dialogues – a contribution that refuses to isolate addiction from the many societal factors that are contributing to its rise.

Appendix IV. Contact Cement (a memoir by Adela Torchia)

Oh, how we all dreaded those evenings, when my father had almost finished building another desk or kitchen countertop, and it was time for him to fret and agonize while the rest of us tried our best to hold down the thin and breakable arborite to be glued down as the desktop or countertop. He had a motley assortment of flat-bottomed weights lined up; and my mother and brother and I had to be super vigilant, and press down with all our strength, to keep that arborite in place, and hopefully get it to adhere without any air bubbles.

My father had come to Canada at the age of 30 after serving in Mussolini's army in Italy, and coming out flat broke. He thought he'd been saving enough soldier pay to buy a small farm, but after the war, that amount was only enough to buy two packs of cigarettes. For survival's sake he had to jump at the chance to come work outdoors at Winnipeg rail-yards – going from the mild Mediterranean climate to Winnipeg's minus 30 Celsius wind-chills. He used to come home from work on such days, like an abominable snowman, with my mother peeling off layers of heavy clothing until he eventually slumped exhaustedly into his kitchen chair. After dinner and wine and the rosary he felt almost human again, and was often delighted to head down the basement stairs to his wood-working shop. The delight flew completely out the window when it was time to glue on the arborite tops. I can still smell those open cans of contact cement, with an emotional nausea at the remembrance of his frustration and anger at those times.

And so this sad saga repeated itself in our household over the years until I was about ten years old, and being the oldest, I now had the most advanced reading skills in the family, since my parents had almost no education, and could barely read and write Italian, especially given how different their dialect was from any form of written Italian.

At about age ten, I remember finally picking up the can of contact cement to read the instructions. Lo and behold, they outlined a quite different method than what we'd been using. Apply cement thinly to both surfaces, and then allow them both to dry until tacky. So it was not

a mad race after all to press and press from the instant the glue was applied! I turned to my father to try and explain what I'd learned from the back of the can, expecting him to be so relieved, but instead he was quite unbelieving. How could this be? You mean there was no rush, and no need to desperately press and hold?! He thought me a foolish child and was not willing to risk a ruined desktop to satisfy my silly childish notions. Soon enough, though, we ran an experiment on some leftover bits of arborite, and his disbelief turned to amazed relief.

From then on, applying arborite was a pleasure he kept to himself, but not without first loudly lamenting his lack of education, and reminding us children of the need to study hard and do well in school. If the mysteries of gluing arborite could be unlocked by a simple reading of the can, just think what other awesome world mysteries lay ripe for the unfolding of those who could read many books as well as cans.

(Jan. 22, 2013)

Appendix V. Christmas Without Gordon

(article in Diocesan Post Victoria December 2017)

Every Christmas many people's hearts have holes in them where a lost loved resides. Increasingly in our province of BC such loved ones may have been lost to opioid drug overdoses, with over a thousand such deaths by the end of August this year. Our family joined these swelling numbers on September 11th when my twenty year-old grandson Gordon succumbed to this epidemic. His death was no surprise since he'd spent winter 2016 in Victoria's Tent City and then after summer months back home in Winnipeg, he headed to Vancouver just before Christmas last year. Promising his mother that he'd try and get back home for the summer, instead he stayed to enjoy Vancouver's lovely dry summer this year -- a treat for the homeless after winters of being continually wet with foot rot and other attendant afflictions.

On one level, Gordon was homeless by choice since his Grandpa in Winnipeg kept a bedroom for him, but after graduating high school and being unable to find a job (partly due to step-dad not allowing jobs during high school), he became increasingly desperate and alienated from a culture in which he could not succeed. His upbringing contained various factors to which this "interfering grandmother" objected ... but in retrospect it's quite possible that everyone involved was doing the best they could understand to do. Even without a problematic upbringing, many young people in our society today reach terrible levels of alienation and despair in a culture where they may never be able to afford a family home, and where the world is so challenged by violence, greed and indifference towards so many aspects of earthly suffering. Lies, corruption, dishonesty and apathy can easily seem overwhelming, and drug dealers are lurking on many corners to try and hook the discouraged youth into a quick fix or euphoric high. And of course each time the high and its duration decrease, creating the craving for bigger doses consumed more often.

After the paramedics found Gordon on the street in cardiac arrest, did extensive CPR to restart his heart, and brought him to St. Paul's hospital in Vancouver, his mother, uncle and I travelled there for what would become the last few days of his earthly journey. The ICU staff were fantastically caring given how swamped they've been with such cases for so long. Amazingly they also allow other street friends to visit the dying patient if family allows, so we got a close-up view of these deep and caring street family relationships. Seeing his life support breathing tubes and his unconscious state some would say to us: "But he's gonna be okay, right? He overdosed before as many of us have also done, and we all recover, right?" No, we had to tell them, no ... Gordon was likely brain dead and would probably have to be taken off life support soon. The great tears of anguish that were shed not only by blood family but by street family members was a sight to behold, and the caring staff treated everyone with the utmost of dignity.

Just before Christmas 2016, Gordon messaged me to ask for a Christmas gift of bus fare from Calgary to Vancouver, and I told him that no I could not countenance paying his way to the fentanyl drug capitol of Canada. So he said with his characteristic affection and humour: "Okay Grandma, then I'll just have to hitchhike my frozen ass over the Coquihalla." The Christmas before when he was in Victoria's Tent City, and I was up island at a sumptuous feast, I felt so strongly the contrast between his circumstances and mine, that I was apparently very poor company and will likely never be invited there again (pew!).

And what will this Christmas hold for me and for so many amongst us who mourn the loss of a loved one in such circumstances? It will be sad of course, remembering the sweet little boy as he grew up, the affable teenager so caring and loving to so many ... seeing others about his age enjoying the gifts and the feasts all around. And yet we know we are not alone both amongst the living who also cherish the memory of their lost loved ones, and amongst the heavenly chorus, now potentially including these lost souls who could not manage to make

their way in this world, who 'burned too brightly' so their light diminished and disappeared too soon. Perhaps with the ears of our hearts we'll hear them humming soft carols filtered through the starlight ... angels we have heard on high sweetly singing ...

O come thou Day-Spring, come and cheer ... and death's dark shadows put to flight.

--- Adela Torchia