

United Church Regional Council
“The Common Good”(1)
Heather Menzies

1 Corinthians 12:7. Now to each one *the manifestation* of the Spirit is given for the common good.

I want to start by telling you a story; my story.

It starts with my feeling stuck. I'd written books about society's shift to the online, screen-based world – the world we're all inside of at the moment, actually. I'd tracked the automation of all kinds of things, the dumbing down of work, the deepening inequalities -- and also the growing sense of isolation, loneliness, and of disconnection.

Disconnection too from the larger realities happening off-screen: urgent realities like social breakdown and climate breakdown. But I was stuck, because I was part of the problem. I knew it in how busy I always was, how driven; a workaholic really, online and off.

Then I felt a need to go to Scotland, looking for my ancestral roots in the Highlands.

I didn't know why. I didn't know what I was looking for either.

So all I could do was go with what spoke to me, what drew me on. At first it was just the landscape.(2) There was something deeply familiar about those mist-bathed highland hills(3), the austere yet gentle lay of the land. As I took the exit onto the narrow secondary road(4) that would take me to the Tay River Valley,(5) I felt excited, though also a little afraid. Two glens off this valley(6) were where my father's people had lived, since before recorded time as far as I knew. They'd lived on commonly shared land, first as (7)hunter gatherers and then as more settled hunter-gatherer plus farmer-herders. But the land of those glens had been enclosed,(8) turned into private property. And the people – at least my father's mothers' people, the Crerars, had been cleared off. It was called The Clearances.

That had happened in the 1830s. So if I was seeking some kind of homecoming,(9) I was pretty late; the rupture had been complete.

Still, I had a shard of information from a Menzies family geneology: My great great great grandfather James Menzies had been born, in 1793, in a place called Tullicro (10) near Dull and Weem in Glen Lyon. At the time I didn't know that Tullicro was the name of a Commons hamlet or *clachan*. I didn't know where it was either; it wasn't on the road map. But an old farmer pointed a bony finger, and I drove(11) up the lane, my heart beating hard at the back of my throat as the ruins of an old (12) crux cottage came into view. It had been built in 1791. (13)

James Menzies might have been born here, I thought as I walked around it, seeing its original river reed thatching(14) under the sheets of tin, the enduring thickness(15) of its walls. I walked(16) the land of the fields beyond, noting the broken down (17) stone fencing, the ruins of other cottages or bothies, which are small sleeping huts. As I walked, (18) sheep scattered or stared at me blankly.(19) I stared back just as blankly, because I didn't know how to proceed. I might have moved on except that one of the(20) bothies at Tullicro had been restored, and turned into an air bnb,(21) and I was in it.

Still feeling lost, I decided to take responsibility for the weeds that were going to seed in what I imagined to be the ruins of a kale yard, or kitchen garden, on the south (22) side of the abandoned crux cottage. – Maybe I should pause here to clarify what the word 'commons' means, because people often confuse this with communism, where the state owns and controls everything. The Commons is all about individuals in relationship, including relationship with shared land. So, families had their own crux cottages with a kale yard for greens and a byre at one end where they kept their own cows, ducks, geese and whatever. They had use rights to their own strip of the shared infield for growing grain, egg-gathering rights in the local fens, wood gathering rights in the forest and grazing rights in the upland common pastures. Everything was done in shares too to maintain the commons as a whole: repairing stone fences, digging ditches, keeping the pathways clear. The word common means simply "together as one." The commons was constituted and re-constituted season by season, year by year, through these shared practices. It was more verb than noun.

(23) "Commoning" as people referred to it, was simply "the way of life" of these land-based people.

So there I was,(24) in what might have been James Menzies' mum's kale yard, trying to imagine my way into that intimately land-based way of life. As I dug in the gritty dirt that constituted the soil there, bits of what I'd absorbed in my preliminary research and reading for this trip came back to me. "The soil thin and gravellish," the local minister had written in one of his parish reports. Hasn't changed, I thought.

As I continued digging and pulling, another phrase surfaced: (25)"a field in good heart." I sat back on my heels and looked around as I turned that phrase over in my mind, savouring it for what it was telling me: That these people, my ancestors included perhaps, identified with these familiar fields as alive just like them, with a beating heart. They understood too that sustaining that heart beat was essential for sustaining theirs, or so it seemed.

I didn't want to over-interpret that single phrase, but like a recovered fragment of pottery in an archaeological dig site, it gave me a sense of something larger: a felt sense of the mutuality involved in sustaining life here, and respect for its importance.

With the courage to venture further, I packed a lunch into my daypack. I set out (26)to find one of the upland common pastures where my ancestors took their sheep, cows and goats for the summer – from Beltane to Llammas time, in the old pagan calendar. These common pastures were sometimes called shielings but the word also referred to the simple stone bothies and sheep folds they constructed there. As I drove (27), once again, sheep (28)scattered or stared at me blankly. I smiled and tried to imagine my ancestors coming this way themselves, carrying their wool-carding tools, sieves and presses for making cheese, shovels for digging peat, and singing as they came: A tradition bearer would lead the call and response incantation of "Chi Mi," which means "I see." When one of the people called out the name of some feature (29) of the passing landscape, the tradition bearer told or chanted the story behind it. And in doing so, refreshed memories of a richly inhabited homeland, renewing the shared, storied connection to this part of it as one would renew an old friendship. One account I read of this said: "The names of hills, glades, glens, corries, streams and even pools and rapids in a river had each its legend which accounted for its origin or related some circumstance connected with it." ⁱ

It reminds me of the phrase ‘kith and kin.’ The word kith means several related things, including : the country or place that is known and familiar; the persons who are known and familiar taken collectively: One’s fellow country folk, neighbours and acquaintances; knowledge as acquaintance with something; and finally, knowledge on how to behave. ⁱⁱ

Again, the landscape(30) felt familiar, though increasingly I became aware of how silent it was, especially as I left my rental car in the back of a lay-by, and started walking, following a footpath indicated on the large-scale ordinance map I’d bought – a path leading to some symbols that marked the location of some shieling ruins.

As I crested (31)a ridge, I heard the shriek of a kestrel hovering in the air above the valley I was about to enter: warning of an intruder or greeting me? It could go either way. Because while it felt good to walk into that valley toward the (32)shieling ruins at the far end, it wasn’t easy wandering around those silent long-abandoned bothies and sheep folds. There was some inner resistance.

I put my hand (33)on the stones that my ancestors would have touched as they quarried them out of the stream bed, as they made repairs, re-thatching the rooves and as they dwelled here summer after summer – until they couldn’t; they were forcibly gone. Now the stones were tumbled down, sinking and covered in moss and lichen. The dwelling I stood beside was (34)occupied by sheep and local rabbits. I couldn’t enter – because I was up against it: the point of disconnection: my family’s disconnection from the land. The pain of that rupture was too much to take on.

I held back --until the mist came down, the wind got up and it started to rain. I stepped over what was left of the wall and hunkered down. And as I sat there munching on my deer-sausage sandwich, as I stared off into the grey-flannelled landscape seeing nothing, hearing nothing in the enveloping cloud and mist, I remembered what my Ojibway friend Bev, or “Morning Star Woman” had said when I told her about my planned trip to Scotland. “Oh, you’re going to welcome your ancestors back,” she’d said with a smile. At some point while I was sitting out the rain and eating my lunch in the ruins of that shielings bothy, I began to believe this as a possibility. I began to let them in. “Them” being my ancestors, and it feels like they’ve been with me since.

When I returned to Tullicro and my rented bothy, I found myself leaning into the emptiness of what was no longer visibly there. I found myself listening to the silence for what it had to teach me.

I heard a chaff finch (35) sing out from the roof of the cottage, and an answering song from close by. I smiled, they're still here; this is their territory too. I then tried to imagine the myriad songs, chants and incantations that would have filled the air when James Menzies was growing up here. (36) Alexander Carmichael spent decades, starting in the 1850s, transcribing these songs out of the long oral traditions of their having been passed down from generation to generation in Highland culture. From what he preserved, in his book *Carmina Gadelica*, it's clear that people sang and chanted prayers all the time: invoking blessing as they kindled the hearth fire in the morning and as they smooored it down at night, as they prepared for the work of the day and went about it, and as they greeted each new dawn, the blessing of the rising sun gratefully received. The backstory of one such prayerful morning song that someone's grandmother always sang on the way to the outhouse first thing in the morning speaks to me still. The old woman used to say that if the birds sing out their praise and joy at the dawning of a new day, why should we remain silent?ⁱⁱⁱ

Carmichael quotes someone else telling him: "Whatever the people might be doing, there would be a tune of music in their mouth...whether they would be shaking corn in the kiln or feeding cattle in the byre, fetching in a stoup of water or bringing home a creel of peat, from each one's mouth came [their] own croon. It might be that no person would be seen, but their voices would be heard up and doing, here and there..."^{iv}

As I stood listening to the chaff finches call and response, I thought of all these other singing, chanting voices that would have been heard here through all the seasons as they worked alone or together, mowing grain and binding it into sheaves, gathering nettles and braiding it into rope, threshing grain and grinding it in stone querns. I imagined all those lines of single and shared song spinning and weaving an aural net of connection around and through this little commons hamlet that was my ancestral home.

Lest I romanticize – or over-romanticize 00 the Commons, I should pause again, and point out that commons like this one also relied on solid local self-

governance – and associated surveillance neighbour on neighbour. As Elinor Ostrom pointed out in her book, *Governing the Commons*^v, natural human greed and selfishness – including the free rider syndrome – needed to be constrained. And it was, by locally monitored and enforced rules, conformance with which in turn, she argued, promoted mutual trust and a willingness to remain committed to the Common Good. And so, when my ancestors went to the shielings for the summer, not only were there limits (called ‘stints’) to the number of sheep, cows and goats any one family could send to that upland common pasture -- to ensure the pasture’s sustainability. There were commons-elected or appointed field constables who impounded any animals that exceeded the allotted quota, and who levied fines that went into the Common Good fund to buy, for example, a breeding bull to be shared by the community.

Ostrom was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics for her work restoring the importance of a commons-based political economy.

But utilitarian politics are only part of the story. There is also this other, cultural and spiritual side to cultivating community and mutual commitment to the common good: all the ceremonies and ritual practices accompanying all the actions and interactions that sustained everyday life on the commons – if nothing else, ensuring that none of it was taken for granted.

And so I found myself standing in the gap on the north side of the crux cottage where the (37)cow byre used to be. I remembered some lines from one of the milking songs Alexander Carmichael had gotten permission to write down, and I spoke them aloud into the space where my great great great grandmother might have once sat gentling a cow into giving her milk on yet another dreary morning or evening:

“Bless o God, my little cow....

Bless Thou my partnership

And the milking of my hands.

Bless each teat.... Each finger..”

I imagined the words of this prayer slipping like a glove over the fingers of my work-worn hands, enveloping the cow and me in that partnership, attuning us into relationship, one made meaningful and possibly even sacred by that incantation.

After milking, there would have been more singing as this forebear of mine, perhaps with little James Menzies beside her, took the cows to the infield pasture close-by. Again, something from Carmichael's book comes to mind, his observation that "The song is sung in slow and measured cadences charming to hear; and it is interesting to see the measured tread of the older cattle keeping time with the well-known music."^{vi} Or was it the other way around, I found myself wondering as I myself (38) wandered off into the field. These humans adjusting the rhythm of their singing to the steady beat of the cows' feet, or a bit of both.

We think of a sacred landscape as something with suggestively sacred constructions on it – and there are lots of those. But the sacredness can also be invoked, it seems to me, by this kind of simple act and song: in the mutual respect and attunement it suggests between human and more-than human beings^{vii}. And the land itself, I think, recalling that phrase 'a field in good heart' and the song "Chi Mi" with its call and response to familiar features of a richly inhabited habitat, the attunement of that, the honouring of deep connection.

I could go on, and talk about more of the everyday faith practices: such as the Celtic Christian veneration of water springs and wells as sacred -- I discovered one at (39) the base of a cliff above Tullicro, called Saint David's well;(40) it's named after a local minister, David Menzies, who lived in the mid-1400s and studied at a Celtic Christian monastery.

I could also share some of the Celtic Christian interpretations of Jesus as, in one prayer that's been passed down, "the salmon of the well of mercy." And its interpretation of sin as "leprosy of the soul," with leprosy's telling loss of sensitivity in the skin, seeming to be a metaphor for a lack of feeling, even empathy. And with that, an inclination to turn away as Jesus seemed to suggest what sin meant in his teachings, notably in his Parable of the Good Samaritan.

The tradition of the anam cara, soul friend or quasi- elder has also intrigued me, and the multitude of parables that offered guidance on how to live day to day. Two of my favourites are: (41) "Despite the shape of the peat, you can find a place in the stack for it." And "A person by [themselves] is not a person."

I could go on and on, but I've gone off track long enough. I want to stay true to this being a personal journey back in time and space: as a lived experience that opened me to a new perspective. Before I start talking about what I gained

from that journey, I want therefore to stress the importance of the journey itself – call it a pilgrimage to a place of origin: the place and time where and when my ancestors lived in direct relation with the earth, before that connection was severed or lost.

The journey certainly has shifted my perspective, or refreshed it. For one thing, it's made me appreciate the legacy of the early Christian church. According to some recently published studies of it focussed on Early Byzantium,(42) “what mattered most” in those first centuries, “was that heaven and earth should stay connected.”^{viii}

Fittingly, early Christian art was full of Paradise imagery, yet recognizably as being on Earth. In fact, the trees, flowing rivers and pastoral peace of an earthly paradise were central. As Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker write in their paradigm-shifting book, *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire*, “[I]n the early church, paradise – first and foremost – was this world, permeated and blessed by the Spirit of God,”^{ix} they write. “Paradise was described in terms recognizable as earthly life at its best....It flourished where people took responsibility for the well-being of all and respected and protected the great cycles of life that sustain human life.”^x And, later (43) “[T]he early church taught that paradise was a place, a way of life, even an ecosystem.”^{xi}

They coined the term “ethical grace” to suggest what this way of life entailed – namely that “the idea of paradise carries both the grace of the core goodness of life on earth, and humanity’s responsibility for sustaining it.”^{xii}

To many, Jesus modelled this way of living, as suggested in the “I am” statements in John’s Gospel:

“I am the good shepherd.... I am the way....I am the bread... I am the vine.”
As in, identify with me there, there, there. In the writings of 4th. Century Syrian teacher and poet Ephrem, Jesus was likened to a tree, even the Tree of Life.

Brock and Parker stressed early Christian faith practices as much as the metaphors. Central to these was learning to discern and honour the connections between the material and spiritual and to discern the difference between good and evil in everyday life. This “ethical discernment,” they write, “required acute attunement to the present and reflection about ethical behaviour.”^{xiii}

Drawing on the work of Ephrem again, they stressed the importance of reciprocity, or mutuality. They quote him saying: (44)“The inhabitants of the world fill in the common need from the common excess....Our need for everything binds us with a love for everything.”^{xiv}

Again, I’ve gone off into purely intellectual territory. I want to return to my own storied journey, its narrative lines, and its song lines in a sense too, having taken me back to this place of connection to a pre-modern commons. (45) I return to the field near Tullicro. I wander around among the many standing stones(46) and stone circles in the vicinity, thinking about all these things I’ve read and learned, and yet wanting to be fully present here.(47) I walk closer to the standing stones, taking in their presence. I’m unable to read their meaning but am content just to be here with them. They mark this space as an inhabited place: a place where my ancestors drew sustenance and meaning from their relations with this land, and honoured those relations as sacred.

Suddenly, a breakthrough: The Commons as Creation, I think; or Creation as a Commons. I seem to have gained a new perspective, standing here in the land of my ancestors, bringing the legacy of their commoning way of life together with early Christianity, as at least some of it was preserved in these remote glens, as Celtic Christianity. In my imagination, they come together as this metaphor. One that includes not just the earth as sacred habitat but all its inhabitants. Or rather becoming sacred, moving toward the sacred as these commoner inhabitants faithfully pursue their commoning practices day after day: the shared responsibility, the reciprocity, the attunement, the mutuality of fellow feeling with more- than-human beings as well as fellow humans. As I reflect on these, they seem to be in keeping with what some theologians I’ve read talk about: Ivan Illich’s emphasis on the (48)“incarnation[a],” the spiritual combined with “the fleshy, bodily, carnal, dense experience of self and....the other.”^{xv} Eco-theologist Sally McFague writes of an (49)“incarnational theology”^{xvi}, the “immanence of God in the world,”^{xvii} and the centrality of relationships. “God is...the most radically relational Thou,”^{xviii} she writes.

There are so many things to reflect on here if we dare to consider Creation as a Commons and to let ourselves use the commons and commoning as a way to

refresh our thinking. About everything, but particularly the work that you are involved in: things like liturgy and faith practices, mission and pastoral care.

In the short break you'll have after I've finished my talk, I encourage you to just sit with everything you've seen and heard, let the journey of it take you wherever it does. After that, you'll be invited to form discussion groups.

At the risk of prejudicing your own choices of what to talk about, I want to end with some things I've flagged for further reflection myself:

(50) One is what I've already mentioned: the possibilities of bringing together the legacy of commons practices with the legacy of early Christian practices. What's inspiring for me is how the commons introduces an historical context that grounds the sacred. Here, the sacred is embedded in the routines of everyday life, and shines through them in the ceremonies and singing that accompanied these daily and seasonal routines.

Within this discussion, some might want to use the commons cultural legacy as a way to re-think ceremony and ritual, including singing. Especially their role as a medium for mutuality, for attuned engagement and mutual attention.

For those who want to maintain a more personal tone, I think there's scope here to bring new thinking to identity politics, as the commons' historical perspective invites us to shift from focussing on the individual self to focussing on relationships: Or the self *in* relationship with, and mutual recognition of, others -- including more-than-human beings like cows. "In the beginning was relationship, so says the Trinity," Sally McFague writes in *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World and Global Warming*.^{xix} The Commons legacy, or what I've uncovered of it and claimed as part of my ancestral heritage, offers almost a case study of this.

Again, for those wanting to keep things more personal, specifically focussed on story such as what I shared, you might want to at least explore the possibility of doing some shared story telling back in your home congregations: people sharing stories of how their forbears came to be in North America. This might elicit similar narratives of long-ago connection to a place where ancestors lived in direct relations with the earth. It very well also might break silence on the trauma associated with disconnection: a family's shared continuity in a place being disrupted and connections severed.^{xx}

I chose to share something of my story because it was almost narrative therapy for me: Healing an inherited memory of disconnection that I think has a bearing on my being a recovering workaholic.

And finally, there's another theme that I hope has run like an invisible thread through my talk: that of de-colonization. To genuinely address the linked crises of social and climate breakdown that I mentioned at the beginning requires de-colonization: understood, to me at least, as a journey of societal transformation, both personal and institutional. I consider myself to be on such a journey, and it is a healing journey, as I deconstruct the colonized and colonizing thinking that operates in the back of my mind, and as I open myself to alternatives inspired by my pre-colonial ancestral heritage.

As I do this, it hopefully prepares me to walk beside and in solidarity with the First Nations of this land as they assert and re-assert their traditions and their ancestral relations to this land. I hope it also prepares me to contribute to the work that we non-Indigenous people must do to de-colonize institutions like the Christian church.

But that's a topic for another time, and I've said enough already.....

Thank you for your listening attentiveness.

ⁱ Heather Menzies, *Reclaiming the Commons*, pg17. Note 5.

ⁱⁱ Oxford English Dictionary (Compact Edition)

ⁱⁱⁱ Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica*, pg. 621

^{iv} Ibid, p. 622.

^v Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons*, pg.43, 45.

^{vi} Alexander Carmichael, p. 638.

^{vii} I thank Anishinaabe legal scholar John Borrows for teaching me this way of putting it, by example in his writings.

^{viii} Peter Brown, "The Other Rome" Compendium review of four books on early Christianity in *The New York Review of Books*, February 10, 2022, pg. 35.

^{ix} Rita Nakashima Brock & Rebecca Ann Parker, *Saving Paradise*, pg. xv.

^x Ibid, pg. 25.

^{xi} Ibid, pg. 106.

^{xii} Ibid, pg. 29.

^{xiii} Ibid. pg. 88

^{xiv} Ibid. Pg. 99. Note 37.

^{xv} Ivan Illich, *The Corruption of Christianity*, CBC "Ideas" Program with David Cayley, January, 2000, p. 6.

^{xvixvi} Sally McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, pg. 132.

^{xvii} McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, pg. 74.

^{xviii} Ibid, pg. 73.

^{xix} McFague, *A New Climate*, pg.165.

^{xx} I want to thank retired minister Thomas Harding who came up with the idea of people sharing stories of connection and disconnection associated with their coming to Canada. (This was during a delightful dinner at my home with Thomas' wife Elizabeth and their long-time friend Rev. Ted Reeve in May, 2022.)