

shalem *Digest*

March 2021

TOPICS OF INTEREST TO FRIENDS OF SHALEM MENTAL HEALTH NETWORK

Weathering the Storm Together

BY STEPHEN DOUCET CAMPBELL

What a winter we've had. Fifteen years ago, a news story caught my eye, declaring the third Monday in January to be the most depressing day of the year and coining it "Blue Monday." While presented as scientific fact at the time, the term was actually concocted by a British travel company to boost profits during the winter. Nevertheless, the article identified contributing factors such as the conclusion of the holiday season, the subsequent holiday credit card bills coming due, minimal daylight hours and the prospect of several more months of dreary weather.

We've all worked to weather this difficult winter. A year into this pandemic, I find myself thinking back to that article and

wondering what impact this has had on all of us as we continue to strive to take care of ourselves and support one another in ways that foster hope during this long season of challenge.

A common refrain throughout the pandemic has been: "We're all in the same boat." I appreciate the validation and invitation toward societal grieving that this sentiment offers. However, from my vantage point as a therapist, I can attest that while we are collectively experiencing the same storm, we are individually weathering it in profoundly different ways.

The financial, emotional, and relational costs for each of us are unique and evol-

ing. And as others have pointed out, we don't all have the same boat: some have yachts, some have rowboats, and some have just a plank of wood to ride out this storm on.

Some of us now work from home while others have experienced loss of employment. Some have had more consistent access to government financial support than others. For those working from home, parents of young children will have experienced demands on their time very differently than parents of older more independent children.

Frontline and essential workers are under pressure to perform their jobs in the face of continual uncertainty and change. The disruption of education and extracurricular activities have caused children to lose valuable social interaction and learning opportunities. The affordable housing crisis has escalated as many individuals and families experience bankruptcy, eviction, homelessness or confined living quarters. Others occupy large houses alone or with just one or two others.

Additional stressors include more strain on those experiencing untreated physical and mental health issues, legal involvement, cycles of addiction, marital tension, domestic violence and isolation. Never mind those who have faced illness and loss as a direct result of COVID-19. ▶



DREAM NEW DREAMS, FAREWELL MARK VANDER VENNEN

► We are currently living with constraints and limitations that, until recently, would have seemed unfathomable. It could be said that up until this past year, the collective experience of many middle-class Canadians has been to live in a world where we've had control over most things. When sickness or injury occur we go to the doctor, when hungry we buy food, when things break we have them repaired or replace them, when we run out of money we rely on credit, and when unable to work we turn to insurance or government assistance. We've grown accustomed to these securities. But the pandemic has blown us into uncharted waters, leaving us feeling untethered and adrift.

Simple pleasures such as travelling, celebratory events, corporate worship or even sharing a meal with family and friends have been temporarily put on hold. We are experiencing new limitations and this is having an effect on our emotional health. And as we've lost our usual sense of control, our fear has understandably increased.

FEAR AND OUR BRAINS

Fear isn't necessarily a bad thing. It originates in the amygdala, the part of our brain that processes memory, decision-making and emotion. At its best, fear is natural and God-given, designed to protect us. When we are afraid, our efforts are spent on self-preservation and on things directly within our power. This may

be part of the reason that home renovation projects are at an all-time high.

However, at its worst, fear reduces our ability to consider the experience of others. We become so consumed with our own survival that our suspicion and distrust of people increases. As that happens, our empathy and compassion decreases.

We don't have to look far for examples of this. In March 2020 when the pandemic was declared by the WHO, we saw people getting into altercations over the hoarding of toilet paper and other essential items. More recently there has been increasing controversy over whether social-distancing measures are too strict or not strict enough, whether wearing a mask is necessary, and whether vaccinations are safe or not.

REACHING FOR OTHERS

But whatever our opinions may be on these topics, and whatever information we have access at this point in time, these debates remain rooted in a degree of uncertainty. And they are causing a great deal of strife amongst many families and friends. Because of this, it's important that we each slow down and consider the ways fear might be impacting our relationships and our interactions with others.

We may be physically required to stay apart but we can share meaningful connection in different ways. While it takes

effort and may not feel as spontaneous, we can reach out to others via Zoom, social media or the phone. Instead of focusing on the constraints and losses we are experiencing, we can focus on being present with others and listening to what they are going through. We can choose to replace our suspicion and mistrust with understanding and curiosity — and hope that our friends and family will do the same for us.

The antidote for fear is hope. Seeking hope in these uncertain times restores empathy. Glimmers of hope can be found in many places, such as in a kind word or a moment of shared humour. The news carries stories of long-term care staff who choose to spend lockdown with the residents so that the seniors aren't isolated in their rooms and of generous foodbank donations that far exceed expectations.

For those who hold faith in God, we have access to a hope that we can carry with us at all times. It offers a lens through which we can see the world. Rather than merely seeing the apparent scarcity around us, we can draw strength from the faith we place in an abundant God who eclipses fear with empathy and love. ◀

Stephen Doucet Campbell, M.A., R.P., is a therapist at Shalem's Counselling Centre.



REFLECTIONS FROM MARK

On December 31, 2020, having reached a certain age, I officially retired as Shalem's Executive Director. After a year-long, Canada-wide search, I am thrilled that the Board has chosen Jennifer Bowen to become Shalem's new Executive Director. Since 2009, Jennifer has served with distinction as Shalem's Clinical Director. An inspired choice, Jennifer brings extraordinary gifts, passion and a living Gospel faith to her new role. Best of all, she brings a deep knowledge of Shalem's ministries and of the relational culture that makes Shalem a special place.

I am filled with gratitude to God, to Shalem and to all of you for the profound ways in which Shalem has been able to develop its ministry over the 16 years that I have served as Executive Director. Shalem's DNA—developing new, innovative partnerships between communities and the professional mental health sector—is unique in the field of mental health. Funding structures in mental health do not support (and in fact penalize) the development of such partnerships. But this approach has proven to be so fruitful that it has spawned the generous partnership of some of the best practitioners in mental health (see, for example, the Dan Siegel announcement below)—not to mention so many churches, schools, workplaces and other communities.

I am also grateful to remain engaged in some Shalem activities. I continue to be involved in our FaithCARE work (supporting healthy relationships in churches) and in Shalem's WrapAround programming. This summer I hope to join the Board of the Shalem Mental Health Foundation, in order to stay connected with Shalem's donors and supporters, as together we pursue long-term sustainable funding for Shalem's ministries.

No matter how healthy, change can be hard. But change can also be God's way of bringing growth. Now is the time to see *new visions and dream new dreams* (Joel 2:28; Acts 2:17-18). Please support Jennifer, the Board and the staff in their God-inspired visioning and dreaming. And thank you for your generous support over these 16 years.

The bottom line: Shalem is a remarkable gift from God. And I plan to be Shalem's biggest fan from a distance. May God bless you all!

Mark can be reached at markvvrsw@eagle.ca

REFLECTIONS FROM JENNIFER

Since Mark's retirement in January, we continue to feel his absence throughout Shalem. I see his fingerprints daily, and I am so grateful! I have no doubt that Mark's care for staff, his passion for innovation and his vision for equipping communities will be part of our work not just now but going forward.

When I first interviewed for the role of Clinical Director in 2009, I remember being dazzled by what I heard. Mark had a dream for embedding restorative practices in churches and school. He had also built a new CAP program, equipping churches to respond to mental health needs in their congregations. I was so impressed by how well this program addressed needs, while empowering communities to create change.


As Shalem has grown over the years, I've watch these programs spill into the community with wonderful, radical ideals of peacemaking, and seeing the best in people. I also witnessed our team grow, with each new staff member embracing Mark's vision — it's contagious!


As I've transitioned into this leadership role of Executive Director, stepping into the service of this great agency, I'm honoured to continue the work that Mark started, one full of grace, innovation and reconciliation.


Mark, please accept our deepest thanks for the many, many gifts you have shared and the incredible programs you built. We are so grateful for your vision and we look forward to seeing how God continues to use you as you embark on your next adventure.



ONLINE RESOURCES DURING COVID

 **CAMH**, Centre for Addition and Mental Health: resources to cope during COVID, resources for health workers, dealing with isolation, stress and anxiety.
<https://www.camh.ca/en/health-info/mental-health-and-covid-19>

 **CMHA**, Canadian Mental Health Association: ways to deal with isolation online, coping with COVID,
<https://cmhahamilton.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Online-Resources-for-Mental-Wellness-and-Social-Connection.pdf>

 **Shalem Blog** on self care and stress:
https://shalemnetwork.org/stress_going_beyond_coping_and_selfcare

Attachment, Trauma, and Psychotherapy: Neural Integration as a Pathway to Resilience and Well Being

NEW DATE: June 1, 2022

TIME: 9:00 am - 4:30 pm

LOCATION: Liuna Station, Hamilton

FEE:
Before April 15: \$280
After April 15: \$325

Lunch and refreshments provided

DR. DAN SIEGEL, best-selling author and researcher

You won't want to miss this rare opportunity!

The day is designed to equip the wide array of mental health professionals, medical teams and workers supporting children, youth and adults dealing with trauma and attachment. While built to be a day for professional development, parents and caregivers or members of the community seeking insight into these issues are welcome to attend. Q and A moderated by Dr. Jean Clinton.



{ DIRECTOR'S CORNER }



JENNIFER BOWEN,
M.DIV., RMFT, RP
Executive Director

MANIFESTING HOPE

Greetings! I hope this edition of our Digest finds you well and warm!

Since this is my first Digest serving as Shalem's Executive Director, I thought I should introduce you to a part of my life. I'm an Anglican, and as someone attending an Anglican church, the rhythm of the church calendar beats throughout my life. I love remembering Jesus' life among us, walking through His experiences on Earth each year.

We've just come out of my favorite season of Advent, and what a meaningful time of waiting it was. This year, many of us experienced uncertainty, suffering, isolation, conflict or even despair. I don't know about you, but I was more than ready to welcome our Immanuel — God with us.

Celebrating God's incarnation of the world is one of the most important parts of my faith. We serve a God who chose to walk among us, witness our chaos, experience the margins, feel our pain and delight in our joys. So when we reach for Him, He is deeply attuned to us, ready to enter into relationship. For this understanding, comfort and hope, I continue to be so grateful.

I share this reflection because of a recent exchange I heard during Advent. While readying for retirement, Shalem's former Executive Director, Mark Vander Vennen commented on the chaos happening in the United States. We had just witnessed on the news a large group of angry protesters surge the Capital Building and Mark commented: "All of that hate speech had now become flesh."

It was physical, visceral and violent — a chaotic mob entering a solemn place of societal order. It manifested the hate that had been floating in the public square for so long and had proven difficult to challenge. Mark wrote 'it was a revelation--revealed what this has all been about for everyone to see, not just some'.

Thank you, Mark, for this very helpful frame – incarnation, and the usefulness of the invisible made manifest.

As Shalem steps into a new chapter, and I step into my new role as Executive Director, my deep desire is that Shalem continues to manifest hope to the many families, couples and individuals struggling with isolation or despair through this pandemic. We have pivoted our work this year so that we can continue supporting people during lockdowns. We've learned that connection and relationship increases our capacity for healing — a wonderful system built in us by our Creator.

My other hope is that Shalem continues to equip churches, schools and organizations to respond to their communities in transformative ways, building peace in the midst of society's embedded conflict. Through this work, we can keep practicing radical hospitality and model Christ's brand of inclusion to those who have not felt loved, seen or heard.

In the midst of so much struggle, Shalem has also had much to celebrate. In recent months, we've partnered with the Christian Reformed Church to provide training for lay-leaders to hold Listening Circles within their congregations to help manage challenging conversations. We're also encouraged by growth in our Counselling Assistance Plan (CAP) program. New churches have reached out, increasing our number of CAP churches to 79 at the time of this writing. This is a 14.5% increase since this time last year, which is truly remarkable during a pandemic. Churches are responding to mental health needs, and lives will be changed because of it.

Shalem's work is needed more than ever. Our outstanding board and staff remain committed to offering excellence in our

services. This growth, commitment and quality are extraordinary in this strange season we're weathering together.

As we live through this time, now a year into our pandemic, with deep polarization and isolation, many of us have found these issues touch our own lives, and we all have a role to play in bringing about healing. If you have been partnering with us in this mission, supporting us with your time, talents or donations, please accept our deep thanks. We continue to witness huge returns on the many investments you've made into lives and communities.

If you find yourself drawn to this mission of bringing hope to the work of mental health and peace in community, I invite you to join us in our mission! Reach out to us; we'd love to partner with you on this journey.

With much thanks,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jennifer Bowen".

Jennifer Bowen

Shalem is committed to best practices in mental health and is a member of Family Service Ontario. All services are offered in strictest confidence.

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