

The church sanctuary is huge: wide rows of dark-wood pews with a centre aisle and four red-carpeted steps up to the pulpit. Behind the pulpit is a large choir loft which sits under a vaulted ceiling elevated to accommodate not one but two stained glass windows.

It's the kind of elaborate building the Methodists put up in the late 1800s to the glory of God but which also showed off their wealth and standing in the community. It seems rather contrary to the message of their founder, who famously said, "None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."

I think of this every week I stand behind that pulpit and look over the small congregation gathered in that lofty sanctuary. As a writer and first-time author living in rural Nova Scotia, I'm fortunate to find part-time employment using my speaking and writing skills: I'm a lay worship leader, providing services to churches when they don't have a minister due to vacation or sabbatical, illness or retirement.

Service. This word has several meanings associated with the work I do. I create a service of worship that includes hymns, prayers, and a message (a sermon); I am called to be in service to these congregations; and each week we listen to a brief message from the United Church's Mission and Service Fund, which supports a variety of national and international organisations.

Before I became a lay worship leader, however, I learned what it meant to be *in service* when I became a caregiver for my father after he was diagnosed with dementia. This happened in 2002, when my father was sixty years old and before "early onset dementia" was even a type. My marriage had ended at about the same time, so after I'd landed back home and learned of the diagnosis, I knew I would live with my parents to help take care of my father. It was a struggle, partly because of the changes the disease produced on an almost daily basis and partly because of the lack of resources, but mostly because of me.



House and Home by Amber Solberg

After my father died in 2009, I spent a lot of time reflecting on my time as a caregiver and, in hindsight, the degree of my selfishness shocked me. To this day, I've not let go of the guilt of not giving myself—my time and my energy—entirely to my father and his care in those seven final years of his life. The worst thing that could happen to my father became the best thing to happen to me because it taught me about compassion, acceptance, and advocacy. The single most important lesson I learned from my father's illness, from his suffering and his death, was this: Dementia is a profound call to be in service to someone.

I still weep when I type that.

I weep because there was one way I could have been of greater service to both my father and my mother and I failed to realise it, failed to act on it.

"Would you take your father for a drive, please? And end up at Tim's so he can have a coffee and a muffin," my mother had asked me one Sunday afternoon.

Not an unreasonable request and I'd have been happy to do it. But, one, she shouldn't have had to

ask me and, two, I should have done it every day.

Every single day, I could have given my father some pleasure, some feeling of normalcy, of familiarity. Every day, I could have made life easier for my mother by giving her time to herself at home. Yet I was so caught up in going through a divorce, in feeling lost, in not knowing how the rest of my life would unfold that I couldn't give myself over completely to the urgent needs of my parents. The epiphany came too late.

Becoming a lay worship leader also happened unexpectedly but rather necessarily. I was working for the local community newspaper and part of my responsibility was to update the church notices each week. It became apparent that one rural pastoral charge, made up of three churches, didn't have a regular minister. I thought, "I was raised in the United Church, I know what to do." I phoned the person who provided the information to the newspaper and learned that they were scrambling to find enough people, ordained or otherwise, to provide long-term pulpit supply while they figured out how to attract a minister. She booked me for right after Christmas.

On January 6, 2013, I walked into a small, white, clapboard church on a country road surrounded by snow-covered blueberry fields. The sanctuary was small enough to make the congregation of twenty look like a full house. It was Epiphany Sunday, when many Christian churches mark the visit of the magi to the infant Jesus; the theme of this service often involves the idea of a journey. I called my sermon "Going Out Not Knowing" and talked about the signs that pointed me in the direction of home just when my parents needed me most. Little did I know it would be the same with becoming a lay worship leader: a sign showed me an opportunity I'd never anticipated, taking me on a journey that has taught me about myself and what it means to give yourself over to someone's needs.

In that first sermon, I wrote, "Journeys aren't just about understanding others; they are about understanding yourself. All you need to do is listen to your heart, listen to what the voice inside you is saying. That knowledge, even if it's scary or confusing or surprising, is your true path, your star-lighted way."

Supporting my father through his dying could have been a scary and confusing time but it was only surprising. Being with him through his final days and hours, through the drug withdrawal and his return to awareness, provided my first epiphany. After he'd passed, after we'd sat with his now-peaceful body and listened to the finches chattering at the feeder outside his room, after the nurses came in to say it was time for his removal, I walked out of his room and thought, "I will never be afraid of anything again."

I still weep when I type that.

My father was a funeral director and he set an example of what being in service means. When he was responsible for the funeral of a person who had no family, particularly those considered "indigent," my father would ask my mother to sit in on the service. He offered respect and dignity to everyone. He offered himself in service to everyone. Yet he made an even greater effort for those who needed more.

I'm now into my fifth year providing pulpit supply to rural churches in my area. This experience, however, has not convinced me to pursue full-time ministry. I would not be great as a minister; I am more suited to being a lay servant. But whenever I stand in a pulpit looking over a vast sanctuary built for two hundred people and see only a few dozen scattered around the pews, I remember what my father taught me and also recall the words of that guy I quote a lot: "Where two or three are

gathered, I am there.”

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