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## US IS THEM: *Elsiewhere of Abbotsford*

ELSIE K. NEUFELD

“In the cynical Internet climate of the post-suburban hipster, and attendant aging hipster haters, [your Facebook page is] a breath of fresh air.” Dave, Facebook follower of *Elsiewhere*

It started on May 1st, 2013, when I spontaneously approached a stranger—a man in his upper-sixties—at a diner, and asked, “What’s the meaning of life?” He looked up, and without hesitation, replied, “Have fun!” I noticed his gold earring, and a light-hearted banter ensued.

“Why did you get your ear pierced?”

“It was my fortieth birthday and my co-worker dared me to. So I did.”

“Do you have a plethora of earrings?”

“Nope. Just this one. I have a small tattoo, though, but nobody can see it.”

“May I see it?”

“Sure.” He lifted his shirt.

“Is that Celtic?”

“No. It’s the Seven Summits. I rode it with my mountain bike. It’s in the Kootenays. And that was quite something, so this is to remember.”

“Are you a Mennonite?”

“Yes.”

“Really? I said to my friend over there, ‘there’s no way that guy’s a Mennonite from Abbotsford.’”

“I’m not. I’m from Mission.”

“Do you speak Low German?”

“Low German, High German . . . I used to speak all the Germans. And I had some Russian, too.”

“Were you born in Russia?”

“No. My father was.”

(the man was a retired Canada Post worker and avid mountain biker)

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By January, 2014, it had progressed to this: She was sitting alone at a table, seemingly lost in thought. Or, perhaps, was imagining her afternoon nap.

Lunch had been served, speeches delivered, door prizes awarded, and the approximately 100 women who had gathered for a Volunteer Appreciation Event in the Best Western Banquet Room were slowly dispersing with loud “thanks!” and cheery “goodbyes.”

I roamed the room on my own, in search of a story. I was crouched on the floor to photograph a newborn baby asleep in a baby carrier when I spotted her, half-hidden by a beam. Light from the wall of windows behind her illumined her short, silver hair, and blanched the elbow of her left sleeve. She was clearly the eldest woman in the room.

*The youngest and oldest in attendance; there’s my next story.*

I headed towards her and said, “I noticed you from across the room. Purple,” I added. “You’re wearing my favorite colour! May I ask what brought you here today, how you’re connected to the Women’s Resource Society?”

“Oh,” she said, seemingly startled. Her blue eyes widened, warmly. “Sure.”

I sat down beside her. Righted her cane, which I’d inadvertently knocked to the floor.

“I walk the streets,” she said, chuckling. She paused. “Well, it’s coming to an end, but that’s what I do.”

“You walk the streets?” I repeated, not sure I’d heard correctly.

“Yes. I walk with the girls.”

“Oh!” I said, intrigued by her unexpected response. I knew immediately she was referring to sex trade workers. Some are clients of The Warm Zone, a drop-in center for street-engaged women of Abbotsford, where I had begun volunteering in June of 2013, led there by happenstance, and a Facebook writing project I’d initiated a month earlier to explore the diverse citizenry of Abbotsford. Someone who followed my posts suggested that if I wanted to hear some amazing stories, to visit the Warm Zone, so I did.

Unbidden, I told her of my volunteer work at The Warm Zone. “And I walk the streets, too! I talk to strangers, then post their stories and photos on a Facebook blog about the people of Abbotsford. It’s called *Elsiewhere*. But you!” I said. “I want to know *your* story. How did you get involved?”

She chuckled again and met my gaze.

My writer’s eyes lapped up details: Her grooved face, like a crumpled paper that refused to be smoothed, was rife with stories I wanted to hear, stories I sensed through the window of her eyes. She was lovely, had just the right

amount of pink on her cheeks and faded matching lipstick. Her dangly bead-and-pearl-drop earrings jiggled whenever she moved. Draped loosely at her neck was a silk-screen scarf awhirl with turquoise, lilac, yellow, and scant streaks of the same rich shade of her solid purple fleece vest which somehow negated the colour-clash between scarf and blue paisley shirt. She wore a brooch, the kind a woman of my Russian-Mennonite mother's generation might wear, though nothing about the this woman appeared Mennonite.

"Your brooch," I said. I leaned towards her. "M. Is that for your name?"

"Yes. It's Marguerite."

"Marguerite. Like the flower?"

She nodded, and fingered the gold pin.

"Oh. Oh! Your nails, Marguerite. The color! Is there a story there? May I take a photo?"

She held up both hands, and laughed. "It's not the color I chose. I asked for a soft pink. I could see it was the wrong shade after one hand was done, but I didn't want her to have to start fresh." She was amused, not self-conscious, about the gaudy, yet elegantly applied polish; her fingers flashed through the air like hummingbirds as she spoke.

"Was it for a special occasion?"

"Yes. My brother-in-law's funeral."

"What colour is it? Does it have a name? Something orange?"

"I don't know, but it's not Number 19."

And so it began, the first of a two-part story to post at [www.facebook.com/elsiewhere](http://www.facebook.com/elsiewhere), the online site I created to post stories and photos gathered as a flaneurof Abbotsford.

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I had seen and been inspired by *Humans of New York*, a Facebook page about the people of New York City, and thought, *if there, then why not here* – in *Abbotsford, British Columbia*? Abbotsford's population was only 135,000, but surely its demographic in 2013 was as varied as New York City's. And surely, Abbotsford was more than its reputation as "The Bible Belt of B.C." After all, I reasoned, people are people, wherever they are. That, then, became my guiding principal.

*Elsiewhere* was to be a three-month-long project, but by that time the site had drawn up to 2,000 hits per post—locally, from across Canada, and parts of the United States. Followers were diverse, too, and included people of all ages, faiths, and professions. The most far-reaching included Joan, a photographer and genealogist from Toronto whose grandparents were Russian Jews; Horace, an African-American from Alabama, who was a mattress salesperson and ordained Mennonite minister; and Charlie, a Bronx resident with his own Facebook blog *Marginalized Mennonites*. Charlie and I promoted one another's sites. One local city councillor told me he read every word I wrote, though he hadn't formally "liked" the page, whereas two others had. A local journalist urged me on with: "You've added a dimension to Abbotsford's online presence that nobody else could possibly provide. The world needs to see more of the beautiful, friendly, weird and wacky, strange and wonderful people of this city."

Marguerite was one of the beautiful, friendly, and wonderful people of the city. Not only was she the eldest person at the Volunteer Appreciation Event, at ninety-two (yes, 92!), she was also the eldest of the approximately 400 strangers I met during the nearly year-long Facebook project. Her story, along with many others', was reprinted in the online newspaper, *Abbotsford Today*.

Most of the stories were gathered in a one-time encounter that lasted between one minute and up to three hours, but occasionally subsequent visits occurred, either in person or through offline conversations, via Facebook. Marguerite wasn't on Facebook, and invited me to her home several weeks after we'd met. Over tea, she told me stories that confirmed my initial impression of her extraordinary compassion for, and acceptance of, Abbotsford's most vulnerable and marginalized citizens, and the courage to "walk the streets."

Marguerite had lived near Historic Downtown Abbotsford for the past two decades. She was a retired nurse who had worked in the toughest, most remote ("fly-in") communities throughout British Columbia. The "worst" of Abbotsford was "nothing" compared to what she had seen elsewhere. She had known many personal sorrows; the greatest was her son's death of cancer in his late 30s. She had also known great joy; after her husband left her for a much younger woman, and her children had left home, she realized a long-held dream to own a farm in B.C.'s Interior. When she'd first moved to Abbotsford from there, she'd volunteered at a long-term care facility, but it wasn't a fit for

her skills. She felt she couldn't provide the kind of "spiritual care" the residents there needed. (Marguerite was a member of the United Church, but shared that detail only at the end of our several hours' long visit, in response to my question re the presence of a Bible concordance on the bookshelf behind her.) Following a more fulfilling volunteer position that involved re-organizing the local chapter of Canadian Institute for the Blind, she was ready for something new. Her first encounters with "the girls" were in the parking lot of a run-down building in which Abbotsford Learning Plus, a seniors' organization, rented space to host continuing education classes. (Synchronistic as life is, Marguerite recalled she'd taken the first class I'd taught for ALP, in 1998, though in a different location. I didn't remember her!) The building was next to Jubilee Park, the city's oldest park, a known hangout for Abbotsford's homeless, addicts, and hookers. Some wandered into the parking lot, so, for safety reasons, the students were encouraged to walk from cars to building in pairs. Marguerite wasn't afraid. "I never carried cash, so I never felt at risk. When I was asked if I had any spare change, I could honestly say, 'I have no money.'" She did, however, start bringing food from home, and arranged to share the leftover snacks provided at the classes. Whereas other class participants were disgusted by the litter, and occasional human waste, left behind by those who wandered about, Marguerite brought a shovel, and quietly cleaned up.

Soon, she began knowing the "regulars" by name.

Then she began walking the streets in the surrounding area. The same streets I walked: Essendene, Laurel, and Montrose Avenue, occasionally on Pauline and Homeview Streets—the stroll for Abbotsford's female sex trade workers. Marguerite greeted everyone, but focused on the women. She walked "Mostly around Jubilee Park, behind the library, past the tennis court, up the alley [formerly *Crack Alley*], towards the church. I bought them coffee or a sandwich at the 7-Eleven."

"I like the street," she said. "I was just going along . . . at the right moment. I'd say, 'You look as if you need a pair of socks. May I walk with you? Shall we sit here? I have a few oranges; would you like an orange?' They were so tired. I'd say, 'I'll sit beside you. I'll take all your valuables. I'll watch them. Just lay down for a few minutes. Come on. You need it. You're played out. I will not touch you. I won't let anyone touch you. I'm going to be like an angel sitting over you, so all is safe.'

“Sometimes they would. Maybe ten minutes. They’d jump up and away they went. I’d say, ‘You need more; if you want more, I’m with you.’ I think they felt . . . as if they had betrayed themselves.

“In hindsight? You do what you do at the moment. In my own way, I sort of steered them a little bit towards what it’s all about . . . I’d stop and say, ‘You are loved, you are truly loved, not just by me, there’s someone bigger than you looking out for you. May I say a prayer for us both?’ and if she agreed, I’d say, ‘God, please take care of both of us.’ I didn’t want them to think they were special, just the leavings in a cup. We’re all in this together.”

“*We’re all in this together.*” That’s what had struck me when I discovered the Facebook page *Humans of New York*, and what I had hoped my Facebook blog might convey: that it’s not “Us and Them.” It’s We.

It wasn’t what I had known growing up in Abbotsford in the ‘50s and ‘60s. Then, Abbotsford was divided into two towns: Clearbrook and Abbotsford. Clearbrook was “Us” (Mennonites); Abbotsford was “Them.” All non-Mennonites were lumped into one, and referred to, as if a homogenous group, as the *Englaender*. The English.

Mennonites lived, socialized, worshipped, and shopped mostly in Clearbrook, where shopkeepers spoke German, and old men stood on street corners visiting in Low German. There were two exceptions: the Royal Bank in Abbotsford, which Dad visited on his own; and Midway Shoes, across the street. It was owned by Schuster Neufeld, a one-legged Mennonite bachelor whose spinster sister, Anna, worked as store clerk, along with their first cousin Annie, also a spinster. I recognized them in church Sunday mornings. We shopped there twice a year on Saturday afternoon, when Dad was home; Mom had no driver’s license.

In my child’s mind, Abbotsford was a kind of Sodom & Gomorrah. I knew this for certain the evening two deacons stopped by, and disappeared with my parents behind the closed living room door. Soon, my mother’s loud weeping trailed into the kitchen. The topic of transgression was this: my two teen-aged brothers had joined other Mennonite youths in Downtown Abbotsford on Friday evening, had played pool in the Park Hotel. Dancing, alcohol, and cigarettes may or may not have been involved.

Fifty years later, I recalled that censure as I walked, alone, past that very place on Pauline Street, and strolled along nearby streets, back alleys, and not only followed the railroad tracks, but crossed them to The Other Side.

I had no plan. My tools were an iPhone, a pocket-sized notepad and pen. I was spontaneous, guided by whatever caught my eye. I was genuinely curious, quick to laugh, and consistently offered a way out for those who preferred not to talk. Most people did. I confess: I avoided those who appeared Mennonite. I thought I knew “my people” well enough, but there were repeated surprises. The Abbotsford of my childhood was gone, and my “Menno-radar” had also changed. Numerous Mennonites “came out” to me during my wanderings.

Readers were empathic. Sometimes they requested follow-up stories, shared the stories on their own Facebook pages. They were co-voyeurs, and sometimes filled in the blanks. “That’s so-and-so,” they’d comment. Most poignant was after I’d posted a photo of a memorial bench dedicated to a woman whose year of birth matched mine. Who was she? What happened? A reader said she’d been her high school classmate. Another post about and photo of an elderly couple encountered while waiting to have bloodwork led to their identification from several readers: they were a Mennonite couple; he pastored the oldest General Conference church in Abbotsford. They had sat across from me in the waiting room for an hour; he stared at the clock, and she, relaxed, quietly hummed “The Old Rugged Cross.” I commented, we exchanged names, and that led to a conversation in German. They identified themselves as Polish Germans. I had assumed they were retired farmers.

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I approached people wherever I strolled, sometimes while on errands, other times with the intention of serendipitous meetings. Conversations were prefaced with introducing myself by first name, as a writer, and describing my project. Questions usually began about something external: a tattoo, an item of apparel, a piece of jewelry, hair colour or style, an interrupted activity.

On Essendene Avenue, I stopped a young black man dressed in all khaki, riding a bicycle. His huge grin revealed bubble-gum pink gums and large, yellowed teeth. That wasn’t the draw; it was his T-shirt logo: YOU CAN’T SEE ME. I’d see Gordon again; he was a resident at a local Recovery House for Men with Addictions, and often bicycled through town. His birthplace was Haiti.



Around the corner, I asked the young woman having a smoke outside the Fraser Valley Inn Liquor store if she had any life-advice for someone younger than she. “Oh, yeah. Get a head on your shoulders, and do it fast. Go to school, and stay in school. I wish I had. I’m saving up to go back.” She was a clerk, working for minimum wage.

Sometimes, to lighten things up, or, rather, hoping to lighten things up, I’d ask small “shallow” questions that I hoped would keep the conversations brief. It did, and then it didn’t.

To the young-adult female kitchen staff behind the counter at Lepp Farm Market, peeling and grating carrots at lightning speed, I said with unabashed envy, “I’d have cut myself by now.” Laughing, but not slowing, she quipped, “Good marriage prep.” I left it at that. To the young man shopping nearby, his left arm tattooed with a statue of Moses, I said, “Tell me about your tattoo.” His goal was to cover both arms with images of statues in the Vatican. “Are you religious?” “Yes. Roman Catholic.” Russell, 20, worked at Lilydale, a local poultry slaughter house. “Do you kill chickens?” I asked. “No, I maintain the machines that kill the chickens.”

“Why are you wearing red; chefs usually wear white?” I asked Vern, the owner of O’Neill’s, a plain soup & sandwich cafe, in Historic Downtown Abbotsford. I expected a hurried reply. Answer: “Because I’m a socialist who’s tired of consumerism. I was a Catholic Liberal, and now I’m a secular humanist socialist.” He’d opened the shop three years earlier, and the thriving business was due to word-of-mouth. He quoted Thoreau, ‘. . . and it may be that he who bestows the largest amount of time and money on the needy is doing the most by his mode of life to produce that misery which he strives in vain to relieve.’ “I disagree,” said Vern. “This is not misery; I love doing this. Love meeting people. Telling stories.”

I did, too. Loved meeting people. Listening to stories. There was no pattern. Every encounter was astonishing, especially for the openness of people. “Sure, you can take a picture of us,” said a woman no more than five feet tall, with a thick, Eastern-European accent. She was purchasing cauliflower from an Indo-Canadian man who towered over her in his navel-grazing white beard and burgundy turban. “She’s going to put us on the Facebook,” she told him excitedly. The two of them smiled for the camera. Afterwards, she told me how she came to Canada from Romania. “What would you like to say?” I asked

another nearby Indo-Canadian man seated in the back of a produce truck. “I love Canada,” he said.

It was Sunday, at the local flea market. There, too, I’d spoken with a female vendor whose name was Jeannette. She sold jewelry, and looked about my age. “What life advice would you give to someone younger than you that you wish someone had given you earlier?” I asked. Her eyes teared up, and she struggled to speak. “When you get married, be really sure that’s the one you want to marry. And if there’s a drinker in your family, go to Al-Anon....” We parted with a hug. “*Thanks, Jeanette. Come, healing,*” I wrote at the end of that post and her photo.

Once, I pulled over to talk to a woman who appeared to be in her 70s, selling dahlia tubers from her garden in a roadside stand. Her name was Helene; she was born in Norway, and she loved dahlias more than roses, because dahlias bloom until the first frost. “What advice would you give someone who’s inching towards 60?” “Just keep doing stuff. Exercise. Eat right. Eat good foods. Start now, so you don’t end up like me, a diabetic, on insulin.”

When I’d pulled over to talk to Helene, the muffler fell off my car. Away I went to see my trusted tire-and-brakes man, Dennis. While waiting for the muffler to be replaced, I told him about my Facebook page, and asked if I could interview him. He agreed, though he didn’t feel he’d have anything of value to contribute. “I’m trying to think of some Big Questions to ask you, Dennis,” I said while I snapped his photo.

“Elsie, there are no Big Questions,” he replied. Then he told me his Big Story, how his wife had left him, and he’d raised three children on his own, one of them wheelchair-bound. “In the end,” he said, “you just have to keep moving forward.” And from where did he get the strength to do this? “I’m Ukrainian,” he said. “We’re tough.”

“Great perils have this beauty, that they bring to light the fraternity of strangers,” said Victor Hugo.

From early on, the Facebook page did just that. First, between strangers and myself, and then between Facebook followers and the people whose stories were posted. Some stories were heart-rending, and not every shared detail was included on-line. To distance myself somewhat, I wrote all the posts in the second person. Laughter helped, too; there were plenty of humorous moments. Once, I approached a young couple in a parking lot, who agreed to participate.

“Are you from Abbotsford?” I asked.

“Yes, we are.”

“You’re not Bible thumpers, are you? ‘Cause if you’re Bible thumpers I don’t want to talk to you.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say I’m a Bible thumper, but I am a Christian,” she said.

“Oops! I take that back. But will you still talk to me?”

“Sure.”

That post elicited hundreds of hits, and a reader identified the couple as Mennonite.

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In Mill Lake, I approached a white-haired couple sitting on a bench, and asked if they were married. They were, and had been for 54 years. I asked what the secret of a long-time marriage was. “Tolerance,” she said. “Do whatever she says,” he replied. I hadn’t foreseen that they were Mennonite. “You look so urban,” I observed. Indeed, they’d retired from Vancouver. Mary had worked in banks, and John had worked his way to a top administration position for the Canadian Grain Commission, then had a successful career as a realtor. They retired “well-off” in a high-rise with a view of Mill Lake and the city. Here, in retirement, John became involved in establishing Abbotsford Gleaners, a non-profit Society that gleaned local farm fields, then dehydrated the produce to ship overseas, to Third World Countries. John had experienced starvation and displacement in his youth before, during, and after WWII. After our meeting, he would record that story.

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For the first weeks, I stayed within my comfort zone, and ventured mostly into well-lit, public places: Willband Creek, Tim Horton’s, McDonald’s, and Abbotsford’s ethnic Chinese, Japanese, and Thai restaurants. I went into Historic Downtown Abbotsford’s music shops, thrift stores, pharmacies, grocery stores, gas stations, a Vintage clothing & record store, and a fishing & gun shop that had been in business already during my childhood. I attended Canada Day celebrations, the annual Agrifair, Abbotsford’s Berrybeat Days, and Concerts in the Parks. I did not enter churches, the hospital, or the fire hall, but I did encounter paramedics, a Minister of Parliament, three Catholic priests who had

just played a round of golf, police officers and fire-fighters, city councilors, and the mayor.

As already mentioned, I'd become a volunteer at The Warm Zone, a drop-in centre for street-engaged women. Once a week I had dinner with the women there, and listened to their stories. When the time seemed right, I offered to help individuals write their stories.

Colleen, who had just completed another prison term for drug-dealing, and who was only several weeks clean after a 35-year-long addiction, was one client with whom I connected. "Go ahead, put me on the Facebook," she said the first time we met. She was enjoying a free haircut, and I sat watching. Afterwards, she sat beside me, and asked me why I was there, and told me a bit about herself. A few weeks later, she asked to speak to me in private. "I want you to write a book about me," she said. I countered with an offer to help her get started, and to edit what she herself would write. Spelling and punctuation didn't matter; I could fix that for her, but it was important that she write it herself. I suggested she write as she talked. She was disappointed, and left. Two weeks later she showed up with 20 pages of hand-written material in which she described the agony of living "real." We sat in an office alone, her eyes on me as I read the pages. I'd not ever read anything that wretchedly raw and beautiful. "And here you are, in this room, alive," I said. "After all that." At meeting's end, she rushed out of that room, not like a haggard 50-year-old woman, like a child who'd just won first prize in a writing contest. A month later, she handed over another 15 pages. Heart-rending stories she augmented with even-more gruesome verbal details. "What is it you hope people will conclude after reading about your life?" I asked. "I just want to be seen as a human being," she said. "That's all."

Lynda was another who was immediately keen. She had taken me under her wing the first time I walked into the Warm Zone, in June 2013. "Elsie," she said. "My mom's name is Elsie." From the start, she was my teacher; she told me I'd been sent to redeem the name Elsie.

Lynda's mom was mean and abusive, and from childhood on, Lynda was told she was "the devil's spawn." Her parents weren't married, and her father was a heroin dealer who was murdered by a hit man when Lynda was in her late teens. Lynda herself was sexually and physically abused as a child. She told me much of this in our first meeting, as we sat on the patio outdoors, she smoking

and talking non-stop. It was then she also introduced me to her twin, Reanne, who “took everything.” After Lynda shared more details, I quietly said, “I have a twin, too; his name is Ernie. But he’s real.” By some act of fate, or perhaps merely coincidence—though Lynda would say it was another sign we were meant to meet—Lynda’s uncle, whom she’d always believed was actually her illegitimate brother, is also named Ernie. We found other commonalities, too. Lynda makes borscht and her bloodline is Ukrainian. My Mennonite parents emigrated from the Ukraine.

“Today’s the day that everything changes. One way or another,” said Nick Cassidy, a character in the movie *Man on the Ledge*. That was true each time I met another stranger, but most especially when I met Lynda.

“I was your subject first,” she wrote by email. “And then we became friends.” Our friendship continues. We are so different, and yet, at heart, we are the same: both human.

Lynda is 61. She’s been clean for six years now after years of heroin addiction and working in the sex trade. She’s done time in provincial and federal prison, and is determined to “live normal” now.

“It’s not nearly as much fun,” she says, “but the other was too exhausting.” She’s been pronounced dead several times, and has developed a kind of life sense and wisdom few people have. She refers to herself as a Princess Warrior. And she is! Here is a small glimpse into her world, through the first email she ever sent me:

January 9, 2014.

Dear Elsie.

I’m looking forward to 2014 being the year of newness, and trying to become the person I’ve always known I could be. ...And maybe, just maybe, give other Ladies the courage to believe that they can dig deep inside and reclaim the magic they lost so long ago, and stop trying to use drugs to get it back. That feeling is short-lived, and the things one must do to get it take a little more of your spirit until you feel just the nightmare of what you’re running from. Often you end up dead, consumed by the monster you ran from and needed to feed so you wouldn’t need to feel or think – just be gone. I hope to let all of the ladies know they can reclaim their innocence and help themselves from a journey

that can be the past chapters. And begin the new ones that they write. I'm going to write a book if only for myself, or to help someone else believe they can claim their soul back, 'cause it was always yours. Just face the monsters from the past that you let get too big. You're a Big Girl now. See you soon. My soul feels cleansed now instead of beaten.  
Lynda

The Warm Zone was one of two involvements of the Facebook project that I hadn't foreseen. Both enriched my life, and, according to my Facebook followers' feedback, "taught" others to see the human face in everyone.

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In the second month of my project, on June 9th, 2013, an Abbotsford City staff gave the order to spread manure on a piece of land near the railway tracks—under what the homeless persons living there referred to as “The Honey Tree.” The civic employee who devised and ordered the plan, imagined this act would finally solve the city’s “homeless problem.” It did not. Abbotsford has been in the news ever since. (In October, 2015, a Supreme Court Judge ruled that the city of Abbotsford’s bylaw that prohibits homeless people to sleep on city-owned land overnight, is illegal.) That day, my life changed, too. I strolled down Cyril Street, stopped at the “Honey Tree,” and began talking with some of Abbotsford’s homeless people.

“If you respect others, they will respect you,” said Bas, a retired corrections officer I met at a café during the first month of the project. I heard that advisement repeatedly in my interactions, and did my best to practice it when met people who were homeless. I made eye-contact, offered to shake hands, exchanged names, and listened to their stories with genuine interest in order to bear witness to their lives as accurately and in dignified manner as possible.

What I discovered is that people who are homeless are intelligent, funny, and exceptionally imaginative. They work hard to survive! Not one person sets out to become homeless. All have a story. All of them want to be seen as human beings, to be treated with dignity. Stan, Christine, Harvey, Norm, and Faye; I posted their stories, along with photos of Harvey posed with his broken-tailed cat, “Buddy.” I followed and wrote about Faye, as she shopped in Value Village for hats. I sat on the ground with Norm, a forty-year old, whip-smart First

Nations man, and waited as he carved a twig with a pocket-knife, then slowly told me of his childhood, of his mother's and his own addiction. We sat outside his tent, which was pitched among trees, near the Honey Tree. He'd been there when the manure was dumped, and had returned after the area had been cleaned. I sat in court with Stan, Christine, and Harvey, and others who were fighting for the right to stay in a tent village they'd constructed. I observed the demeanor of the sheriff who stared in our direction throughout the hearing, and wrote of the shift in her expression as a lawyer read their stories to the sitting judge--the sheriff's expression shifted from derision to tearful compassion. She wiped her eyes, then crossed the room to hand the group a box of Kleenex. Our group dined at the Spaghetti Factory afterwards; people stared openly in our direction. I took photos of my lunch-mates, and posted the story of that day.

"We're invisible; hear our voice," said Faye in a two-hour-long visit we had in my car near her tent. I tried to do that.

"Wherever there is a human being, there is an opportunity for a kindness." (Seneca)

I was treated with great kindness by the poorest of people in Abbotsford. I saw the best and worst of behaviour towards the homeless and marginalized of Abbotsford by people in power, and by professing Christians. Thankfully, I also witnessed this: "The everyday kindness of the back roads more than makes up for the acts of greed in the headlines," said Charles Kuralt.

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One rainy afternoon, a friend and I went to distribute clean socks and to serve coffee and donuts to a group of homeless persons who had formed a tent village in Jubilee Park in protest to how the homeless of Abbotsford had been treated. We set up under a tarp, and residents left their tents to join us. A fire burned in a teepee. Suddenly, an Indo-Canadian family of four appeared carrying heaps of blankets. New blankets. "We want to distribute these," said the teenage daughter. They were soaking wet from the walk from their vehicle to the tents. The mother took charge, and the family dispersed, calling at each tent, "Would you like a blanket?" They had twenty.

"May I ask why you're doing this?" I asked the mother.

"We had a fire. Our house burnt down. We lost everything, so we know what it feels like to be homeless. We received a bigger sum of insurance money than

we'd expected, and we wanted to share that, so that is why we brought these blankets."

With that, they were off. And yes, that story went onto the Facebook page, along with their photo. Readers were inspired, and shared stories of their own quiet involvement. Many asked how they could be of help. Others expressed regret for earlier, negative perceptions of people who were homeless.

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Just when I thought I'd met the most interesting person in Abbotsford, I met another—at Abbotsford's First Gay Pride Parade. He was a striking young man, dressed in a dapper black hat, a pressed white shirt, and dark suit. He was cradling a pet chicken.

"Is this your first Gay Pride Parade?"

"No. I attended some in Toronto. My friends who marched would leave their boyfriends with me, to keep them out of trouble. They called me Grandma Cory." Laughing, he admitted that his conservative background is still with him.

And the chicken?

"This is Georgina. You can call her George."

Georgina hopped into the hosta bed. "She always comes back," he said. "You might wonder about her. She keeps me grounded. She reminds me to 'keep it simple, farmer boy.' I grew up on a chicken farm. Southern Ontario. A small town. Mennonite family. Holdermann. From Kleefeld and Altona, Manitoba, so you can imagine."

"Does your family support you?"

"Sadly, no. When I came out to my mom a few years ago, she categorized me with pedophiles. And I had to say, 'This conversation ends now.' Sometimes you have to walk away with more grace than what you are shown."

"Are you estranged from your family?"

"Oh, no. They love me . . . and try to understand, but . . . their background. As I said, sometimes you have to be the one to give grace."

"And to what do you attribute your capacity to do that? To not be angry or bitter about such responses?"

He thought before he spoke. "I tap into the past. Into what I learned in Sunday school. 'Judge not lest ye be judged.' God is . . . God is beyond our thinking."



God came up often in conversations. Once, during a conversation with two Indo-Canadian men in Seven Oaks Mall, Darshan and Dosondu, professors in the Punjab, farm workers in Abbotsford. Sikhs.

“And do you both attend temple?” I asked, after a brief discussion of our then Prime Minister, Stephen Harper.

“We have three temples.”

“And which one do you attend?”

“Any one. God is everywhere. Not only in the church,” said Dosondu.

“God is one,” declared Darshan.

“Is God in nature?” I asked.

“Nature is God. It controls this universe. If you understand Nature, you will understand God.”

“To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts,” said Henry David Thoreau. Repeatedly, the participants—interviewees and followers—of *El-siewhere* in Abbotsford affected the quality of my day. More than that, to quote Debbie, a woman who, seeing me photograph her cats, came outdoors, and invited me into her home, to introduce me to her entire cat family of 9 by name. Then, tearfully, she shared the pain of her young-adult son’s gang involvement and subsequent incarceration. At the end of the telling, she sighed, and said, “A mind broadened by experience can never return to its old dimensions.” She wouldn’t have wished for the experience, but she had grown as a person. We embraced as mothers, and I left with a heavy heart.

Once, a reader sent this note: “You have found your richness in your wanderings . . . but I am always amazed at how you find the wealth in the people. You sense a glimmer, and dig a little, and then reveal it for your readers. . . . How do you survive that endless unveiling of the pain?”

Yes, how. As stated, I wrote all the posts in second-person. An excerpt from a posted conversation with Jake, an 89-year-old man I saw shooting golf balls on a field near my home, hints at my belief that the stories aren’t mine to hold.

After Jake told me his life story, which included profound loss, and financial success, I asked if he had any regrets. He recalled a haunting memory. A Mennonite, he was a Conscientious Objector during WWII, assigned to work in a mental hospital. He was sitting with a resident. “This person, a very mentally ill man, was dying, and terrified of dying. Over and over he shouted, ‘I’m falling.

I'm falling. I'm falling.' And that's how he died, shouting those words. Utterly terrified."

Jake was silent. In a trembling voice he added, "I didn't sleep the entire night."

Into another silence, I offered my belief. "I think . . . I want to believe that God was there, and somehow caught him, and somehow continues to hold him, even now."

"I hope so," said Jake.

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That is where I put the stories entrusted to me. I told them online, at [www.facebook.com/elsiewhere](http://www.facebook.com/elsiewhere), and let them go . . . to fall wherever they fall, to reach into the eyes and ears of those who need to hear them.

Though it's been almost eighteen months since I last posted, people continue to visit the site, and leave comments such as this: "Some of your posts have deeply touched me. Through you I am learning things about Abbotsford (and life) that surprise me. Thank you!"

What I learned from walking the streets of Abbotsford, talking to strangers, is this: Them is Us. And we are all of us hoping to be seen as human - a mix of muck, madness, and glory. All of us are held.

Facebook has been critiqued as a hotbed for narcissistic personalities, a shallow cyber address to post selfies and pet photos, a place to whine or brag about one's own or family members' achievements. At its worst, Facebook is a dehumanizing time-waster. At its best, it connects people with people, walking along cyber-street.

Dave, a regular Facebook follower, concluded the same. "We motor about, to and fro in a city of drivers and stranger pedestrians. What you write here, El-siewhere, are humanizing accounts of strangers become neighbors that affirms their life, worth, and personhood. And they become we and thus you affirm us. Keep shining that light."