

Surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses

Installation Response, Sunday 25 November 2012

Honoured guests, cherished colleagues, students, family and friends,

You are the witnesses.

You are the witnesses to the generous words, sounds and symbols offered today. These are gifts, and I receive them with honour on behalf of Canadian Mennonite University. At the same time I invite you to share in the joy, the beckoning and the challenge that rest in these gifts. For you are the cloud of witnesses that surrounds all that has been entrusted to this university.

This may sound grand but I dare not deceive. For the clincher is this: much of the time we pay little heed to the clouds. After all, who seeks understandings that are credible and hearts ever faithful from those with their heads in the clouds? Don't we just write them off as totally distracted and incapable of follow through? And by comparison, consider the profound wonder and insight we claim to gleam when we gaze at the stars...or of how we wait for the clouds to part so that rare gems of light and truth can break through.

It probably was at some moment when the clouds parted that the Latin words "lux" and "veritas" – light and truth – were chosen to be engraved on the emblems of some world-class universities. But, I'm not persuaded there are good enough reasons why no university has etched "nebula" – clouds – together with "veritas" – truth – in its heart and its stone. Of course, that's different from saying I don't get why not. We tend to think of clouds as elusive, nebulous, mostly grey sorts of things, and subject to change at the whim of prevailing winds.

Still, hold on a minute...are those really the images that spring to your mind when you read about the cloud of witnesses in the epistle to the Hebrews? Clearly, this cloud is no empty set – in fact, it's brimmed right full of witnesses gone on before. And wondrously, this cloud is persuasive. It offered a way for early followers to look to Jesus, and to pursue mutual love with all peoples and reconciliation in all things for the sake of the joy set before them.

So, now with joy set before us let's encounter the CMU story as it is gifted and "surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses."

Firstly, CMU is called forward by women and men commended for these things: Forming relationships, habits and decisions on the basis of trust and not out of fear, and practising faithfully what they could not perfect or bring to completion on their own.

The Hebrews account tells stories like these. Miriam, the sister of a baby named Moses was touched by his beauty, chose not to be afraid, and went and hid him in the bulrushes. And many years later Moses himself stood up for the welfare of an oppressed people rather than securing personal safety and success. Neither Miriam nor Moses assumed such a thing as perfect conditions in which to make the right move. Nor did Abraham, who is reported to have been as good as dead as he led the way to a land lying beyond the grasp of his dreams.

And here's my favourite bit in Hebrews 11: the people of Israel passed through the red sea not because it was but as if it were dry land. Now I know the phrase "as if it were" is a rather odd way of speaking. So here's an experience that helped me to see why we need this odd expression to live with the whole of our beings.

Once upon a time I heard a fine musician proclaim from the stage she was playing the "most beautiful music in all the world." My first impulse was to scream, "bbbbbut what about....?" My second impulse was a sad plea: "couldn't you just invite us to listen *as if it were* the most beautiful music in all the world? That way so much more would be at stake, in need of care and persuasive in this very moment, and so much else would be possible in other times and places."

You see, practicing faithfully without perfection has nothing to do with cutting corners in the library or lab, taking foolish risks, living without conviction, or even, necessarily, being "ahead of the times." Instead it has to do with trusting those things we propose as good science, good change, artistic depth, sustainable practice, business innovation, restorative justice and sound theology as if there were always something or someone at stake. For then our proposals would be worthy of garnishing with rigorous intellect, fervent imagination, dexterous skill and grace-filled action. And, at the same time we would recognize our best understandings as always imperfect and ever requiring new places in which to take root and flourish, or else to rest and be revisioned anew. This is what we sing about – as we did a few minutes ago – when we sing along with the witnesses of a vision of our homeland as the deep, high, broad love of God.

And this is the gift of freedom with which CMU is entrusted.

Secondly, CMU speaks with this freedom at the threshold of what is personal and impersonal.

I trust you will confirm with a nod that the world is not geocentric, that is, the earth is not the centre of the universe. And I trust you'll also agree that most of us struggle with how to call anything true without depending on the self-centredness of personal experience. Here's one way of approaching the distortion we feel as we are pressed to find credible ways of speaking in common and sharing life's goods.

In the '60s and '70s of that long ago time called the twentieth century, when it was urgent enough to reach for a radical openness through songs without endings and stories without closure in any dimension that could be engaged or deflected – and common enough for the worst of them to try way too hard with indulgent sloppy run-on sentences that betrayed the tedium of their excessive despair and for the best of them to be silenced as they risked to confess that babbling on and warring forever will never engender a greater shalom or equality amongst people and peoples...yet still felt the need to scrub over and over at those battering layers upon layers of misunderstanding and self-righteous living that mar the earth's skin, the literary figure Calvino simply offered this: 'Will I ever be able to say, "Today it writes," just like "Today it rains?"'

(Italo Calvino, *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler*, 176.)

Now I know Calvino's simple question is unusual, and that it's rare for us to stumble over when to begin a sentence with *I* rather than *it*. But consider this way of flinging our very selves into a flow that transcends our individual beings. I find it easy, even if unpleasant, to say "it's snowing" in Winnipeg in November. But, when I utter "it's raining" in Winnipeg in January I'm confronted with my role in those conditions that tip what might have been snow to be rain. And I lament that in some measure "I rain."

Or think too of how we give value to whatever we download and copy. As a society we're struggling fiercely over when there's enough *it* – that is, common knowledge – in our writing for free-flowing access to open source materials, and when there's enough *I* in what is produced to warrant extreme alert levels of copyright protection.

As a university CMU needs to engage the intersection of it and I – that is, the world as it is neither wholly within nor wholly beyond the responsibility and making of humankind. And, as a university born of the church, it – we – enter this fray of it and I through invitation to a relationship with God. There we find a place to give voice to the truth of what we see and hear, hope and lament. And there we to release to God, God's people and the world at large the task of discerning which of our utterings are worthy of trust in this creation that we love and share.

This is the gift of confession with which CMU is entrusted.

Thirdly, CMU, and indeed all the earth, is nourished simply and richly by what clouds do: hang around and embrace the earth, with lots of breathing space – or – swell up and pour down rain.

In calling for new ways that organizations, people and disciplines might work together today Margaret Wheatley offers this: "We need to take pleasure in letting new ideas swirl within us. They begin as mist, take form, then transform and dissipate in various ways, like clouds. Clouds are spectacular examples of fluid and responsive systems, structured in ways we never imagined possible. After all, how do you hold a hundred tons of water in the air with no visible means of support?" (p.90)

Such pleasure marked the bold collaboration that brought CMU into existence, including three colleges, two church bodies – Mennonite Church Canada and the Mennonite Brethren Church of Manitoba, the province of Manitoba, and a great many committed friends. And it's the ongoing trust, resilience, and imaginative networking of these bodies that keeps CMU vibrant as it also connects with an ever-diversifying ecumenical communion, the local communities of our campuses, U of Winnipeg through Menno Simons College, in a new way with Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary Canada, many other fine institutions, with our Board & Council, alumni, with practicum partners and the Outtatown program throughout the world, with academic societies, business communities, social agencies & many other friends.

I am deeply grateful for all these partners who encourage and nurture CMU. They – you – gather in the great cloud of witnesses together with those who founded this place. And those founders in turn stood on generations of witnesses who taught us that the love of God and of learning and of the land and indeed all of life are not to be trusted when approached in isolation but require a wild and delicate balance. For what's longstanding and what's caught on anew in CMU's programs and vision are ways of tearing at the tenuous veils – between thinking and doing, theory and practice, the arts and the sciences, research and justice, community and constituency, and even more vitally, matters of faith and manners of reason.

There's a story I hear over and over again about students and faculty who nurture one another to not be afraid of befriending what is lonely or lovely. This happens through a willingness to let what they study together to read and confront, redirect and make joyful the ways that they love. I conclude thus in tribute to the students scattered all over and this fine cloud behind me. For together with all of you they embody the gifts of collaboration and communion with which CMU is entrusted.

And in this we take courage, for God is our witness.