

EDITORIAL

WHOLENESS AS PURPOSE

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KEYWORDS: Purpose, Wholeness

I grew up in a Mennonite world. My dad was Mennonite and could trace his Mennonite lineage back more than two-hundred years. My mother was Mennonite and would recount the story of how her father moved from their traditional community in southern Ontario to plant the first Mennonite church in northern Ontario. Growing up, that church and my family were my universe, without any discernable lines between the two.

Then I went to school. It felt like an interstellar voyage. In this foreign land, they worshiped hockey and professional wrestling and spoke a different language (I was in a French immersion program). And it was often a hostile environment (in the '80s, hockey players loved to fight).

I tried my best to keep these two worlds apart. It was like I was two different people. At home, I was a boisterous imp – streaking naked from the bathtub to play at the park at the end of street, convincing my younger sister to eat dog food, narrating elaborate stories to whoever would listen. At school, I was invisible. My dad would recall with alarm when, at their first parent-teacher interviews, he slowly realized that I was the only kid in the class that didn't have a storage cubby. My early report cards implored me to "share more of my thoughts" with the class. But that was the last thing that I wanted to do.

Mennonites have a long (and often complicated) history of living out the Christian scripture that we are to be in this world, but not *of* this world. With roots in the 16th century protestant reformation, we quickly set

ourselves apart with a strict separation of church and state. My parents grew up adjacent to the old-order Mennonite community, which, to the uninitiated, would have been hard to differentiate from the Amish, and where church and farming are *the* pillars of life. None of my friends knew what a Mennonite was. And I did my best to keep it that way.

In grade seven, these worlds started to collide. The school Guidance Counsellor (who was also the Vice-Principal and Music Teacher) came to lead an activity with our class. He circulated a fill-in-the-blank worksheet about our future. *What do you want to do when you are older? Where do you want to live?* Until then, I had never connected school to these types of broader questions about life. This had always been the domain of my home world. Determined to fit in, I saw an opening to win some laughs. *I want to be a garbage man, I wrote. I want to live in a ditch.* I passed my worksheet around to my friends and landed some much-coveted validation. Then – to my horror – my Guidance Counsellor/Vice-Principal/Music Teacher collected up our responses.

A couple weeks later I was summoned to see him. His dimly lit office was long and narrow, and his rectangular desk nearly spanned its width. Backlit by a small, elevated window, he struck an authoritarian, god-like figure – much more VP than Counsellor. As I sat down opposite to him, he slapped my worksheet on the desk. *What the hell is this?* he demanded... I had no response. He waited a beat, then quickly picked it back up to read my answers aloud. I cringed. He waited. ... nothing. *What am I supposed to do with this?* ... silence. *Do you want me to send this to your parents?* No – that would be REALLY bad, I thought to myself, but remained frozen. An eternity passed. He broke the silence with a suggestion – *How about you just rip it up? Pardon me?*, I stammered. *Why don't you just rip this page up, right now?* Still stunned, I slowly realize that this was a very good idea. With torn pieces of paper piled on his desk, I was sent back to class without any further words exchanged.

After this, something started to shift. For the first time, I started to try at school. Up to that point all my effort had been invested in fitting in. I had never really thought about making more than the minimum effort in my classes. But my sense of place and purpose gradually shifted from my home world to school and the potential future it offered. My grades improved and I started to think about going to high school in town, where fewer of the students rode snowmobiles to class and smoked hash in the parking lot. During my grade 8 graduation ceremony, the only award that I remember receiving was a “Most Improved Player, Music Award”. Looking back, I wonder whether my Music teacher/Guidance Counsellor/Vice-Principal had simply created this award for me. Either way, for the first time in this world, I had felt seen.

It was in this foreign land that my professional ambition was birthed. Ambition – and the restless striving that accompanied it – was an alien impulse in relation to the world I grew up in and slowly acted as a wedge in my ability to connect to it. Initially, my ambition was grounded in developing a career in clinical practice

and could be readily aligned to the values that I grew up with – selflessness, compassion, service to others. The parts of physiotherapy practice that resonated with me most – listening with empathy, holding space with those who were suffering, nurturing and supporting others toward a better life – felt like an implicit expression of these values. However, as I transitioned from clinical practice to research it became more difficult to find this grounding.

Entering the world of research felt like, once again, I was travelling to a different planet. In this land, outputs and performance metrics were the primary currency. The holy spirit of striving filled the air, and all eyes were locked on the future. In stark contrast to clinical practice, the present moment only seemed to exist for the instrumental value it might hold for a better tomorrow – to work *like a machine* was the ultimate compliment. I slowly learned how to live, and then thrive, in this new professional world. There was excitement upon securing each achievement that helped me climb the initial rungs of academia, and comfort working in a system that had such clearly laid out trajectories for success. After I inhabited this world, I no longer needed to think about where I was headed, I just needed to put my head down and work – or, at least, so I thought.

Before I knew it, I had landed a coveted tenure-track faculty position at a leading research university. Securing this position culminated nearly a decade of professional striving. And yet, something was missing. I remember the feeling I had upon securing my first set of funding applications – a major landmark as a new investigator. I was so happy to be able to add the grants to my CV but dreaded actually doing the work. This feeling would come to haunt me. I began to feel like such a waste of potential. Here I was with some of the most professional freedom one could imagine but felt utterly lost in relation to my sense of purpose. The core values that first led me to clinical practice felt so disconnected from the focus of my work. I longed for something deeper and more meaningful but didn't know how to get there.

What followed, was a slow arc of professional transformation and refocusing of my research (which I've previously touched on in this space [1, 2]). Taking a cue from my Vice Principle/Guidance Counsellor, I needed to rip up this imagined version of my future and create a new path forward. What I've come to appreciate is how central *wholeness* was to this process. It seems that what I needed most was the exact opposite of my school-boy priorities – a deeper sense of purpose could only be found by building more robust connections between my fractured worlds.

This involved finding new ways to live in each of these spaces. I began to let my cloud of youthful insecurity drift away and re-engage with the world that I had grown up in – reconnecting with people that were part of my early life and letting myself rediscover the qualities that had first drawn me to them. I also re-engaged with the religious community of my upbringing by breathing new life into what felt meaningful, letting go of unhelpful dogma and finding small ways to contribute. In my professional life, I learned to decouple my

sense of worth from performance metrics and to stop climbing for the sake of climbing. I also needed to come to terms with my ambition – something that had no place in my home world yet is a part of who I am.

This also involved letting my worlds come together. Letting more of my personal life bleed into my work, and vice versa. This journal has served as an incredible vehicle for navigating this newly formed bridge – a rare space that both family and colleagues can engage with.

This world-merging process is very much ongoing. But I have come to appreciate that striving for wholeness is a purpose I can get behind. This sense of what might help me cultivate wholeness serves as a rudimentary compass for orienting my professional life – a feeling to follow, rather than a ladder to climb – helping me to discover meaningful ways to contribute that feel uniquely mine. And helping me to focus as much on the moment-to-moment process – the rhythm of each workday, the arc of completing projects, the feeling of slowly wrestling through challenges – as on the potential for future success.

The articles in this issue provide rich and diverse examples of personal journeys toward wholeness and developing a deeper sense of professional purpose. I hope they help you reflect upon how these themes might fit within the worlds you inhabit and where you may want to go from here. ■

References

1. The Bittersweet Pursuit of Transformation, TH Wideman, *The International Journal of Whole Person Care* 10 (2), 1-3
2. Some Reflections on Whole Person Research, T Wideman, *The International Journal of Whole Person Care* 11 (1), 1-4

Biographical Note

Timothy Wideman is a physical therapist and associate professor at McGill University. His research aims to help clinicians better understand and address suffering associated with pain, and to improve how future health professionals are trained to care for people living with pain. He has been serving as Editor-in-Chief since 2023.