

Undercurrents

Ep 26: Tending Tomorrow with Leah Reesor Keller

Pre-order or purchase ***Tending Tomorrow: Courageous Change for People and Planet*** now: <https://www.mennomedia.org/9781513813356/tending-tomorrow/>

Ken: Welcome to UNDERCURRENTS, my name is Ken Ogasawara. I'm part of the Communications team at Mennonite Central Committee in Ontario. This podcast is just one way of telling all the amazing stories coming out of our community of program participants, staff, partners and others. Undercurrents is brought to you in part by Kindred Credit Union. Kindred's purpose is cooperative banking that connects values and faith with finances, inspiring peaceful, just, and prosperous communities. This episode is about Tending Tomorrow.

My guest today is Leah Reesor-Keller. She is a speaker, leadership consultant, Transitional Executive Director of KAIROS Canada, and now - an author. We sat down to discuss her debut book, **Tending Tomorrow: Courageous Change for People and Planet**.

If you're looking for the one magic bullet solution that will fix everything for everyone, this is not the book for you. Leah calls for us to make room for all the ways each of us as individuals, as communities, as societies and beyond, can do our part in working for a better future. Tending Tomorrow is at once deeply personal and expansive, digging deep into her family's origin story, as well as sharing inspiration from around the world.

Tending Tomorrow: **Courageous Change for People and Planet** is available for preorder at your local book shop, or, if you're listening to this after June 25, 2024, you can buy it right now! After you've placed your order, get your literal and spiritual gardening gloves on and enjoy this conversation with Leah Reesor Keller.

Ken: Welcome to Undercurrents.

Leah: Hi Ken.

Ken: Thank you for lending me your book, Tending Tomorrow. I feel very special. This is like advanced reader copy. It's a beautiful book. So, the full title, Tending Tomorrow: Courageous Change for People and Planet. You've broken it down into five categories or chapters or sections, Redreaming, Retelling, Renewing, Reimagining, and Rewilding. I wanted to go through a few questions per section just to touch on the different themes that you've brought to us.

But first, maybe I'll just start with maybe a really broad question around what led you, because a book is not a simple undertaking and it's not a casual endeavour: "I think I'll just write a book about my family history and humanity's intersection with creation." That's not a light, yeah. How did you get to this?

Leah: The question that was on my mind as I started to think about all of these themes, these are what it means to be alive right now, what it means to parent, what it means to lead, what it means to be a citizen in a town, a city, a country, a citizen of the world. These are questions for me that we're shaping.

Well, how are we going to live in this world together and how are we going to be? Immediately, before I wrote the book, I had been serving as executive minister for Mennonite Church Eastern Canada.

In that role, I was constantly talking with people, people connected with Mennonite churches and congregations, people connected with other churches, with other community organizations, people who are all wrestling with this idea of, "What does it mean to be people of faith or people who have values that put the welfare of others and the welfare of planet ahead of their own needs?" I think all of us who are alive in this time, I hope, are thinking about, "What does it mean to live well and what kind of future is possible?" So that we can change this trajectory that scientists show us that we are on as they look at what might happen in the coming years.

So, to me, this question of "How are we going to live?" is, I mean that not in how will we survive, although for some people that is the focus of their study and their question, but more how are we going to live well and how are we going to live in a way that points us to a different kind of future? So sometimes we don't always know what a good future looks like, but we can think about what are the elements that we hope will be there. So, I've been really interested in what it looks like to go back to the roots of how we come together in communities, in congregations, in groups, in families, and what leads us, what inspires and shapes our actions.

So, how do we think about that leading in a different direction? Because we have a lot of technological solutions, especially when we think about climate change in particular. It's not that we don't know what to do. It's that we're struggling to figure out how to work together, who's going to make decisions, who's going to have a voice, and it's the leadership that's in crisis as much as the climate.

Ken: You've already answered my first question, which is focused on the Redreaming chapter. By the way, your book has very helpfully some great discussion questions at the end, broken down by chapter and very helpful for small groups and Sunday schools and book clubs. So, I straight up stole that first question. I'm just going to ask it, but the acknowledgement that you've already answered this, but many books talk about what we should do to combat climate change. This book looks at who we are and how we want to be in a world in flux. Why was this approach important to you?

Leah: First of all, I will say that I wrote this book to be read by groups for people to talk about together, because as you know, the book is not about what should we do because I think that answer comes out in conversation, in discernment, in community related to your context, related to the people around you. But I've really clearly stayed away from "How do we fix everything? What do we do?" I've tried to point it much more at prompts for internal reflection, for readers, for groups to come together and think, "Well, what are we going to do? What is this calling us into?" That was important to me because there is not one right answer.

So, to me, that brings us to the ending of the book about rewilding the future. This idea from nature that you plant seeds, plant native species, start to add elements back into an ecosystem, so that it can regenerate, but you can't exactly control what that will look like. For me, I think one of the things that's got us into trouble is saying, "This is the one right vision for the future. This is how things should be," because actually there's many visions. How do we create space for those? If there's anything in this book that is prescriptive, it is community, interconnection, interdependence.

Ken: A good part of your book, especially in the Retelling section, which is the next section, is about your own family history. Yeah. The importance of unpacking that for you and what the lesson is for the rest of us in unpacking our retelling where we come from. Can you share a little bit about what that journey was like for you and why that was important?

Leah: I have a really unique name. Well, I have two last names, but the last name Reesor that I grew up with is unique because it's a name, but it's also become like a brand name. It links me to the community of Markham--Stouffville area in Ontario Canada, which is where I grew up. The name Reesor, it was Reesor when my ancestors moved from Switzerland and Germany to the United States and then became Anglicised into the name Reesor when they moved to Upper Canada colonies, what is now Ontario in the early 1800s. My family has run businesses with the name Reesor in it, and it's come to be synonymous with Mennonite farming, upstanding, good Canadian values. So, I grew up feeling proud to be from this lineage, part of this big family, growing family.

But then I started to realize or to think about the other things that I was learning about Canada's history, about the history of indigenous peoples on Turtle Island, including the area where my ancestors first cut down the trees and put up fences. That started to really make me uncomfortable as I started to realise that my family story about being these virtuous, pioneering settlers who really struggled and then found this community. That's very much my community. I grew up on a farm. My children now are the first generation on both sides of my family as far back as we can trace my family history back into the 1400s to not live on a farm and be involved in farming.

But I'm coming to realize now that what benefited my family and how it was able to build a legacy related to farming actually came at the expense of indigenous peoples who lost access to land. My relatives had also been purchasers here in Kitchener on what is called the Haldimand Tract, land that had been granted to six nations to support them in perpetuity and land for which they have not actually been paid what was agreed to be paid to them. I learned that the farm where I grew up, which is now part of the Rouge Urban National Park, that there is an outstanding land claim related to that land as well.

So, this whole narrative that I grew up with connecting my Reesor ancestry to specific land in Markham to an early ancestor who had walked from Pennsylvania up to Ontario, bought this land, traded his horse for it, but kept the bridle because he was very thrifty and that was not part of the deal and then he walked back to Pennsylvania and then later came up in Conestoga waggons with the rest of the family. That didn't happen, but that was the whole founding myth. So, the more I looked into it, the more I realized the story I learned was not really supported by other facts or historical documents and records. It was certainly not the virtuous history that I learned. So, it's had me thinking a lot about how to honour my ancestors and what I've learned, but also to come to understand that legacy of harm that I am an inheritor of.

Ken: I mean, you talk about decolonizing your own history and reshaping your family's treasured origin story or broader themes of decolonizing how we've structured our entire extraction-based world based on ownership and based on this is mine to exploit at will. I don't know. That theme has come out a couple of times in this book. I don't know if now is a good time to dip into that.

Leah: Yeah, I think for me, a lot of this book is about telling my own story of how in ways that, well, to use some biblical language, scales have fallen from my eyes. I've been able to see in some new ways with some new perspectives as I've been grappling with ideas like decolonizing, but more clearly than I've learned anything about decolonizing is I've learned about ways in which I have been shaped by a colonial

culture in ways that I am very much part of that. So, for me, that means that I am in no way an expert on decolonizing because I've been so shaped by it.

So, I need to look to leadership from others, from indigenous peoples, Black peoples, other people in Canada who have experienced the harmful effects of white settler culture that set up not just white skin colour, but culture, values, ways of being hierarchical systems related to patriarchy and skin colour, cast, belonging that affect outcomes of privilege in the country that I live in and in the world. So, a lot of my own journey has been coming to understand ways in which I've inherited degrees of privilege and ways in which my own experience is not everybody's experience.

I have tried to offer that in this book. I've tried to be as truthful and open as possible about my own journey of learning, knowing that that's not complete and knowing that I'm putting some things that I've wrestled with out there in writing, knowing that for others who have had different experiences, they will see the ways in which I am still failing to acknowledge my own privilege that I don't know what I don't know. For me, it's the journey of wrestling with it and not the destination.

So, I hope that my book can inspire others to also go back and question the stories and narratives that they grew up with and look at who and what that story about their history is serving and if that is a true story, an authentic story, and what they want to take with them into their own future as they tell the story about who they are and where they come from.

Ken: The final question in the Retelling section that I'd had was in what ways do we need to retell our creation story, not just in the Biblical sense, but in the story that we tell ourselves about our relationship to creation?

Leah: This is an area where for me, I've also been coming to understand... I guess first, I've started to question, "Well, why do I think the way that I do? Why do I think my right to consume anything is more important than other creatures' right to exist or other people's right to live in health and wellbeing?" We had the conversation about electric cars briefly. Why is it my right to use electric cars knowing that some of the minerals that are needed to make these, the way that that mining happens is harmful to people, harmful to the Earth, harmful to water sources and the way that these processes happen, and how do we make these choices? What right do we have to make these? Who gets a voice and how?

I've done some reading around and studied in particular, some theological sources of thinking about my own Mennonite faith tradition and others. What does our confession of faith and our other things, what do they say about the relationship between people, creation, and God? And then how does that change how we understand ourselves? So one of the things that I've come to think differently about is a lot of the creation care theology perspectives that I grew up with are like God created people to care for the Earth, to have dominion over it, but dominion means we take care of it because we should be good stewards. That hierarchy doesn't feel like it's serving us, especially if you look at, I think it's Psalm 104 that talks about an image of God.

God waters the trees abundantly and provides food for the young lions and bread for people. That's an image of a God who cares about the abundance and flourishing of people and of creation, the rest of creation, because we are also in creation. The more we try to go down to the particles, we actually can't separate ourselves out. It's all in our heads that we're these separate beings. So, I've started to think about how in a way that's like a charity model. We people have power and we choose to use that power

as we choose and as we want to and as we see fit to help or care for others. I don't think that serves us. So, I've learned a lot from indigenous Christians perspectives.

I quote Dr. Randy Woodley in the book who writes about understanding people as having a duty to live in harmony with all creation. To me, where the power is laid in there is very different. That's not a command to be generous towards creation. That's a command to live in mutuality with and understand ourselves as part of and understands our responsibilities to not dominate, but to live in harmony. I think of it as almost like the difference between creation care as charity and creation care as empowerment, mutuality, interdependence. And I also quote from Austen Hartke who's a theologian who writes about the experience of transness as gaining new insights into the breakdown of the hierarchies into things being more nuanced and a lot more complex.

Leah: That has also given me new insights to think about myself in relation to the world and to think about living in a lot of the beautiful dusk areas and the marsh areas that are in between night and day and in between dry land and water. That's part of the complexity and beauty of the world. So, for me, as I've come to be shaped by those Christian perspectives and mixing that into the European Christian tradition that I inherited, I feel like that's given me a richer perspective on the world and it calls me to live in the world differently.

I had a lot of fun with this book of learning more about science. My background is studying social science, political science, and I got to just really enjoy reading and learning more about science. One of the books that really changed my perspective is I Contain Multitudes by Ed Yong, who's a really fantastic science writer. That book is about the microbes and the many other invisible things that shape us. But when you start to look at microbes, parasites, bacteria, ways that these things make up our bodies, it actually starts to question, "What is us and what is the microbes? Do I want to eat that brownie? Is it bacteria in my body who have a fondness for sugar that are signalling my brain that I should go eat that?"

The more you learn about science from that biological perspective, and also the more you learn about particles, electrons, the space between what we can see exist, you start to realise things are a lot more complex. What it means for us to exist as people in this world, we've created this idea that we are separate, but scientifically, we are not. We are integrated into the whole complexity and beauty of what it means to be alive on this planet.

Ken: I want to talk about the next chunk, another chapter, Renewing, and specifically renewing our hope and transforming despair. Throughout this book, Tending Tomorrow, you pull in Biblical examples, Biblical stories to illustrate certain points. Miriam, I know, but Shiphrah and Puah were two characters that were not as familiar to me. Could you explain who they were and what they can teach us about being in the world?

Leah: Yeah. When you look at the way that women show up in the Bible, there's not very many of them who are named and they don't speak as many words as men do. So, it really stood out to me to look at these two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, who they are named. Pharaoh's daughter isn't named. Shiphrah and Puah are midwives who worked with the Israelites when they were in slavery in Egypt. These two courageous women, they were ordered that they should kill all of the baby boys born immediately to wipe out the patrilineal lineage of this people group. They didn't do that. They did everything they could to avoid doing that.

I really like how they used the power that was available to them and all the ways they could to save as many lives as possible, knowing that they were just two people, that they could not do it all. They could not change the Pharaoh's decree, but they did what was in their power to do. At the end of the day, we don't know if they were directly connected to Moses's birth or not, but as Miriam at the direction of her family, as Miriam, Moses's sister, took this baby boy to the river as Pharaoh's daughter saw this baby and also decided that here was one life that she could save, that ended up being the key to God later working through Moses to bring the Israelites out of Egypt into freedom.

So, I find that story so encouraging because for the folks in this story, for Shiphrah and Puah, for Miriam, for Pharaoh's daughter, what they were doing was not unbelievable, unimaginable things. They were doing very simple acts of care at risk to themselves. But knowing that these simple acts of care, of showing up, of doing what they could to say life is precious and let's protect it, worked for amazing outcomes in the end.

Ken: So you told that story in the context of I believe before that came your acknowledgement that sometimes on your worst days, you're like, just, "What is the point of my scraping out this peanut butter jar? Why do I do these small acts, right? Do I plant this native species in the corner of my yard? Why do I bike here?" In the face of overwhelming of the odds that were stacked against the fossil fuel industry, our complete reliance on cheap energy, but if I'm remembering correctly, you shared those stories as like encouragement to say, it may not be, as you say, undoing the Pharaoh's decree, but those small acts matter.

Leah: We know that individual acts alone can't change the trajectory that we're on. I sometimes think of I have relatives, older folks in my family who have been carrying cloth grocery bags to the store for decades and that has not solved the fact that we have this giant floating mass of plastic in the ocean, but it's a commitment that this is possible and we can do it. What we see now, what's common in our community where we live in Ontario and Canada is restrictions on use of plastic bags by stores. There is the expectation that you should bring your own bags to the grocery store, and that's a normal thing to do.

So, sometimes the counter-cultural acts of saying, "We can live this way, this could be normal" combined with the structural systemic changes to do that at scale can make things happen. I know there's also some municipalities and some people who are advocating for municipalities to sue fossil fuel companies for the impacts of climate change on their communities. That is a fight that seems so unimaginable. How will we get fossil fuel companies, these large transnational corporations to in any way be accountable for their actions or work to change? How could individuals be able to make that happen? Yet we are seeing examples of where people are working against the odds to do something. If you don't take any action, no change is possible.

Ken: I just want to quote this one line that you referenced before we move on from the renewing our hope section. It's from researchers, Hayes and Kaba, but they say, "We don't need to believe that things will work out in the end." Well, expand on that, maybe just a few words around why you included that.

Leah: When I look at that quote, and this is a quote from longtime activists, people who have worked for a long time, especially in the prison abolition movement in the US, how oftentimes the odds, what we're struggling for, it seems like it might not be possible, but that doesn't mean it's not worth fighting for.

When I look at an example from here in Ontario, not too long ago, our provincial government and land developers were involved in all kinds of shady deals to strip environmental protections from land, a lot of which is farmland, so that it could be turned into large home developments. That is something that seemed inevitable that they would just have the power to do that and that they would just do that. But many, many, many, many people spoke out all across the province, different walks of life of people who said, "No, you can't do that. This is wrong. As citizens, we voted that this land, the Green Belt Land is important to us and we do not want to open that up, and we do not want to open it up to enrich the pockets of a few at the cost of a future for so many of us in terms of the importance of protecting this water, of protecting this land to grow food." For people who started this activism, journalists and independent grassroots journalists played really significant roles in making access to information requests and keeping the story going and getting it in the news.

It got to the point where then the government had to backtrack and had to change plans that they had made even after they had passed some laws to open up these lands. I would say that would be an example of a struggle where it was important to show up and say, "No, this is not how it should go." Even when it seemed at the time there was no chance that would have any positive outcome.

Ken: Speaking of many people acting together for a powerful good, in your Reimagining section, you tell a couple stories from your time with MCC, one of which really struck me. I wonder if you could share a little bit about how forestry is now managed in Nepal and how that came about. It's an incredible story of community and communal action.

Leah: I had the privilege of living in Nepal for five years working for Mennonite Central Committee, and I went first as a food security advisor and later served as co-country representative. A lot of who we worked with, with our Nepali partner organisations was community-based groups, was farmers in rural area. Nepal is an amazing country because it has every kind of climate you can imagine in and among its hills and flat places. That means it has the potential for a lot of biodiversity, but also it's been under the same pressures as other places in the world, of chopping down wood for fuel, for building materials... And one of the choices of how to manage that came about through the formation of forest user groups. These groups are, for one, they're connected into the Nepal government system. They are an official way that forests are managed and they bring together people who have a connection to that area, to that forest.

It's meant to be the people who are actually in there cutting fodder for animals, looking for firewood, looking for herbal products that come from the forest as well, mushrooms, other types of things, things like the early shoots of ferns, fiddleheads, if there's any fiddlehead fans out there. It's getting to be that time of year in North America, past that actually. So, the idea of the forest user groups is that the people who are making the decisions about how a certain patch of land of forest should be managed is the people who are driving their livelihoods from it who are connected into it. So, that it is everyone's shared commons and in everyone's interest to manage.

So, starting in 1970s when the Nepal government realised they were facing critical levels of deforestation, the management of national forests, so this was land owned by the national government and not by individuals, was turned over to community groups to be a local forest management committee. So, having that incentive to actively manage and protect public forests, as well as the access to the products that people need to support their livelihoods. So, in some studies between 1996 and 2016, the forest land coverage in Nepal nearly doubled. So, it went from 26% of the country.

About a quarter of the country had forest coverage to 45%, getting towards half by 2016. For researchers who looked at, "Well, what happened? What led to the significant increase?", they attribute it to the decentralised community-led leadership model. So, today, these national forests are stewarded by over 22,000 community forest user groups.

Ken: It's amazing.

Leah: Yeah, it's good news for people. It's good news for the pangolins and the red pandas and the creatures that live there and it's good news for the whole planet in terms of oxygen and carbon management.

Ken: Seven million - did I see that number, seven million Nepali citizens who -

Leah: Individuals, yeah.

Ken: Individuals who are now a part of the national forestry team essentially. What an incredible and all are welcome basically. That to me is so powerful.

Leah: Yes, change is possible.

Ken: Change is possible. I heard another person say that the world that we are envisioning is not fiction or an impossibility. It already exists in places. We just need to have the courage to be inspired by those ideas, apply them to our own contexts. In your Reimagining section, you also talk about what does it mean to reimagine the church as a movement as opposed to an institution.

Leah: We're in a time where a lot of things are changing around US. Old structures are changing. We see this in the demographics of who's showing up in the pews in the church buildings in different parts of North America. My focus really has been thinking about the North American church context that I know best, that I'm part of, but we know it's not just churches. In a lot of places, institutions are changing. So, with church, that's another example of what came as a decentralized movement of people coming together in house churches, in extended households, caring for each other, caring for communities to move forward, this alternative way of living and being in the world.

So, I think we need to bring that mindset in as well, especially as church and empire have gotten very entwined and we see the rise of Christian nationalism or even just increasing trends toward professionalism in church and other places. Everything needs to be done to a very high standard. I think this is running into the kinds of changes that we might need to make to be moving away from understanding church as the set of fixed institutions to understanding church as a fluid and agile movement that connects different groups and people together in this process of seeking to follow Jesus, seeking to put our faith into action, and doing that with others to build up a way of living that is good for everybody and for the planet that we live on.

I think that churches can be amazing places to build the communities, the kind of culture, and do the faith and values development that we need to help us learn from the past and draw on our own wisdom tradition that is very rich and deep and to provide that support and strength and community to imagine a different way of living and to help move that out into the world.

Ken: Your final section talks about... It's called Rewilding. Again, I'm going to poach a question from your discussion section at the back. This book explores many seeds of beliefs and values and practises that can have intended and unintended effects on the present and the future. What seeds are you trying to plant in your life, in your community, and in the world right now? That's a question you ask of the reader, but I'll spin it back to you. What seeds are you trying to plant? I suppose this book is one very big seed as well that you're scattering out soon into the world.

Leah: So these are very old seeds that connect back to the Anabaptist faith tradition. I often think of the term repentance and transformation as two seeds that I am trying to plant and tend in my own life. Repentance, we often think about it in terms of sin, renouncing sin. For me, I think about that more systemically in terms of what are the ways in which I want to learn and be accountable for, to turn around, to go a different direction.

So, that is a seed around repentance and accountability, taking responsibility to address what's been broken and look to move forward in more healing ways as well as the seed of transformation to believe that that change is possible, change for ourselves, change for others, that we can all be learning and growing and that things can change in ways that we can't know or understand or expect, but that can be a good thing to help us move towards flourishing.

Ken: Yes, thank you, Leah, for your thoughtful, just a very quick run-through of your book. It's well worth diving into, and I read this slowly. I'm usually a quick reader, but I read this book. It needs a slow reading actually, because it's very rich.

Leah: Yeah, so, John Paul Lederach, who is a long-time peace scholar and practitioner, he describes *Tending Tomorrow* as a book that is like a haiku in that it is short. It's a 200-page book. It's not long, but it is full of thoughts to chew on, to reflect on together about how to live in hope. No matter what happens that the time we're in now, things have been urgent and they will be urgent. So, we're not in a rush to fix everything, even as we know we must act together. We must act soon and we can. But this book is about how we're going to hold on to be people of hope together in whatever future comes our way.

VO: Huge thanks to Leah Reesor-Keller for coming on Undercurrents to share about her book *Tending Tomorrow: Courageous Change for People and Planet*. I hope you were challenged and inspired as I was. Check out the show notes for links to pre-order Leah's book *Tending Tomorrow: Courageous Change for People and Planet* which comes out on June 25, as well as a discussion guide for if you want to dig deeper in a small group or with friends.

This episode was produced with editing support from Christen Kong. Theme song is by Brian MacMillan; artwork by Jesse Bergen. Huge thanks to Kindred Credit Union for their ongoing support of Undercurrents. And of course, thank you for listening and sharing. My name is Ken Ogasawara, have a great rest of your day.