

Ep 31 - Non-anxious presence, rocky soil and peacebuilding with Rod Friesen [transcript]

VO: Hi everyone - welcome to season six of Undercurrents! We're kicking off this exciting new season by sitting down with a friend and MCC colleague who, by the time you hear this episode, will be finishing his time with MCC and indeed throwing off the yoke of the forty hour work week altogether and shifting into a well-deserved retirement. More on my conversation with fly fisherman, peace teacher and administrator for the Lord, Rod Friesen in a few minutes.

VO: Undercurrents is sponsored in part by Kindred Credit Union. Kindred helped to get Undercurrents off the ground back in 2020 and have been a faithful supporter ever since. And lest you think I'm one of these podcasters who only raves about a sponsor after they've become a sponsor, I will have you know that I've been a member of Kindred for nearly 30 years starting back when Mary Lou Gingerich helped me open my first chequing account (Shout out Mary Lou!). **Kindred is all about helping you Make Peace with your Money—through real, human advice and by using money as a force for good in community. How many banks can say that?** Go to kindredcu.com to open an account today!

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VO: "Relief, development and peace in the name of Christ." That's MCC's mission in a single sentence. For many of us, the relief and development parts are easier to understand. A relief kit to a family whose home was washed away in flood - great, show me where I can pack a kit. A small grant to a farmer to help her learn new farming techniques to adapt to the effects of climate change - amazing, where do I make my donation? But peace - what does that mean? What does it look like? And how do we get there?

A 30 second scroll through the headlines will give you a glimpse of a world desperately in need of peace. But peacebuilding is not only needed in Palestine and Israel, or Ukraine, or in South Sudan. Peace is needed in our own communities and in our own lives. In my conversation with Rod, he shares three stories of peacebuilding from his career- and I think we can learn something from each of these stories and apply them in our own lives.

VO: Rod has worked at MCC for 8 years but his career in the not-for-profit sector goes back nearly forty years. Interestingly enough, the pivotal experience that set him on his path, was a volunteer placement with MCC's Serving and Learning Together program, otherwise known as SALT. Today, the SALT program is better than ever - it's free, in fact you get a monthly stipend - and you can serve all around the world with one of MCC's partners. Back in the 1980s though, there was an option to serve domestically, and Rod's placement took him from his home in Vancouver, BC to Markham, Ontario.

Rod : I was matched with an organisation that served individuals who were coming out of mental health hospitals at the time. And at that time, individuals needed life skills support to reintegrate because they had largely been hospitalised in a setting where they didn't need to do anything. They didn't need to do their laundry or cook or clean or even know how to walk to the store because these were often closed settings. So my role in MCC was to help people learn those life skills, walk to the store, learn to do recreation in the community, and a whole variety of things.

Rod : And many of the stories they told me, they were coming from background where they had developmental delays, but they could often share their stories about being incarcerated in these institutions. So it was an eye- opener for me, and it was at a very instrumental time in my career path to

start learning about how we work with people who are marginalised in the community and just learning even our own attitudes and beliefs about people who are on the margins.

Ken: So when did Peacebuilding, even now for folks, as we've learned peacebuilding even now is sort of an abstract thing. What does that look like? When did you start recognising your work or that you had an interest professionally in peace building? What did that look like?

Rod : It started, I was a programme director at an organisation that was housing people who are men who are homeless men and women who had been transitioning through into permanent housing and people coming out of federal prisons. And it was during that time I was also starting to see a need in the work that I was doing for good human resources management.

VO: I'm not sure what pops into your mind when you think of HR but for Rod, his work in HR was nothing short of a calling. He half-jokingly referred to administration as his spiritual gift. In any case, Rod's role in HR was a challenging yet fertile field in which he could live out peacebuilding in a practical way.

Interpersonal peacebuilding

Rod : There were lots of situations that I was getting into in my work, where I needed to mediate situations, situations that involved a lot of conflict. Particularly I was involved with union and labour relations for the management of one organisation. And I can remember on an interpersonal level a situation happening. There was a grievance that was filed against a supervisor and I was the HR person who was representing the employer. And the union was very upset at this situation. And the union steward that was working with the employee was very angry. And I remember just staying calm and I think it was a training that I was getting, and they got very angry and I said, you sound really angry. Am I right? And the person kind of barked back at me in a very angry tone and said, I'm not angry.

Rod : And so we kept talking and I stayed calm, and about five minutes later the person said, "maybe I am angry!" And so then that was a whole opening for me to ask them, well, if you're angry, what is it you really need? And we were able to talk about what their concerns were. And in doing that, even though the grievance was upheld by the employer and it was a valid issue that we were concerned about, the steward and the employee went away feeling like they had been heard, they had heard from us, and we resolved that situation in an amicable way. And that's just an example I think, of remaining in a state of being a non-anxious presence when you're in those types of heated conflict situations and really reaching out and asking people what they're feeling and what they're needing. Because at our deepest level, that's what people want. They want to know that they're heard.

VO: "They want to know they've been heard." You don't have to be in HR or labour relations to put this lesson to work. If you are in ANY relationship with another human being, this will be useful to you. Nowhere has this lesson been more powerful or hard-won in my life than in my thirteen years of marriage and ten years of parenthood. Time and again, I have to overcome my instinct to be right, or to fix the problem (as I see it), and to instead, remain a non-anxious presence, to listen as deeply and patiently as I have the energy for, and to acknowledge and repeat back to them what I've heard them say to make sure I've understood them properly. Just that process alone goes a long way in resolving the conflict. OK. Back to Rod where he shares about the importance of creativity in peacebuilding.

Creativity in Peacebuilding

Rod : It really struck me that we have to move from trying to dominate and control situations to try and collaborate more with people. And that takes creativity, particularly when harms happen. People have done things that have hurt people, whether physically or emotionally. So I think to begin it is really about

helping people understand that we're hardwired to see people, especially from other groups if we're talking about the things we see on the news as less than human. And I think the important thing is that we do recognise that we are all human and we all have human tendencies and misunderstandings and miscommunication and different perspectives.

Rod : And so not only just learning not to control or dominate, but learn to collaborate. And if we can go into them in a more non-anxious way and we can be curious and collaborative and creative, we can ask better questions and we can find out what people are feeling, what they're needing, we can tell others what we're feeling and needing, and we can go farther when that happens.

[music]

VO: Helping someone feel heard, being creative and collaborative - these are great first steps in building peace with one another. You've understood them, you haven't over-reacted, you've made them feel heard. But what happens if you don't agree with the other person's perspective? What if you want to change someone's mind?

System Change Through Interpersonal Change

Rod: It can be hard to balance that because often in our work of peace building we want to see change and want to see the dial moved. And it takes a lot of time. And I think I have the benefit of now working for four decades with people in all kinds of different situations on different projects and different problems, and particularly in the human service areas that I've worked in with people who are marginalised, homeless, maybe experiencing mental health, substance use, addictions that can be quite a polarising field to work in because people have very different views about how to fix or repair the problem. And I'll give you an example. This happened to me when I was working at the time for an organisation and I had to give regular updates to a regional committee of this municipality on how we were spending the money and how we were helping the homeless.

Rod: And at that time, that city was going through a lot of, not in my backyard, issues because of the programmes and services that we were operating in their local community and in the neighbourhood. And as a result, they saw proliferation of what they felt was because of the social service that I was managing at the time.

Rod: And people who are disenfranchised in this community in doing this would have question time from the different counsellors that were members of this committee. They were regional counsellors and one regional counsellor in particular was very difficult. They asked very difficult questions, very challenging questions. I responded to all of their questions over the years that I had been in that role. And often the staffer would follow me out and apologise for this person's questions because they were quite difficult sometimes. And you kind of knew that the person was getting it more than they were asking. They were trying to trip me up in some way.

VO: Rod, ever the peacebuilder, is using tactful language, but you've probably heard these same kinds of comments on your social media feed or in the news. How would you react when hearing this comments directed at you, personally? But Rod followed his training, kept calm, and answered the questions.

Rod: And so each time I would do this, I would get these very pointed questions about why aren't the homeless people working? They want to work. And so I would respond with different things like many of the people that we work with have disabilities or they don't have the ability at this point in time, they need housing. So they're not in a place that's stable for them to be able to work. And it wasn't until years later, and this is the benefit of time, we don't always know the impact of our actions. I was in a new job and I happen to be invited by my boss to attend this gala dinner with them. And this counsellor was now

the mayor of the town and was at the table and they said, “Rod, it's good to see you after all these years.” And I wasn't sure of what to expect because this person had done and said some difficult things both publicly and to me about the work I had been doing in the community.

This person said publicly to everyone around the table. “I just want you to know that I've known Rod for a number of years and he's really changed my mind about homelessness and the issues surrounding homelessness.” And it was just a great moment to realise that it can take many years to change somebody who's very oppositional to people who are marginalised. And that's just one example.

VO: It takes time. This is both reassuring and frustrating. If you're a listener of Undercurrents, I can assume that you are a conscientious person who wants to make a positive impact in the world. If you've ever been to a political protest or rally, you've probably heard the chant “What do we want? [name your thing]! When do we want it?? NOW!” But Rod's lesson here is that change rarely happens now. In Matthew 13:3, Jesus gave the parable of the farmer who scattered seeds on rock soil, or among thorny plants, and some on good soil which bore lots of good fruit.

VO: There's a lot of wisdom here. I do like to think of conversations we have as seeds we plant - we might not have seen the change or the introspection or shifting of the needle in that interaction. But it might've planted a seed. The question is - has it landed in good soil, or rocky soil, or weedy soil? Here's where we can dig deeper, if you will. The good news is, as any gardener or farmer can tell you, even poor soil can be rehabilitated to become rich and fertile again. What does that mean for us when we're trying to plant a seed of peace in a thorny relationship? Maybe we need to work in the compost of compassion, or the nutrients of non-anxious presence, or the fertilizer of mutual respect and grace.

I'm sure Rod was lamenting the rocky field he was having to till with this combative city counsellor. But this story shows that, with time, there is hope that good fruit can grow from the even toughest soil.

[music]

VO: The final story of peacebuilding from Rod is at the highest level yet: he was invited to teach restorative justice principles to leaders of a national prison system in Zambia.

System Change

Rod: Yeah. In 2019, I got an email from Issa Ebombolo from MCC Zambia, and he wondered if I would come to Zambia and teach restorative justice principles and practises to officers and supervisors from the Zambia Correctional Service. The individual officers were handpicked because of their attitudes and behaviours that had been seen in the institution by their supervisors, but also because of the inmates who were in peace clubs. So the inmates who were already doing peace clubs with Issa in the Zambian correctional settings were endorsing these officers to go forward.

Rod: So they were picked because the Zambia Correctional Service shifted from being a prison service at that time to becoming a correctional service. Now, it doesn't seem like a big shift, but when they changed from Zambia, when service to Zambia Correctional Service, they were signalling a change from moving from punitive, a very colonial system that was passed down through their history when they started institutional prisons to looking at these institutions as being more restorative and more rehabilitative.

VO: Just a couple of quick points. One: I love the shout out to Issa Ebombolo who is an absolute legend in the peacebuilding and MCC world in Africa and beyond - the peace clubs that he started in schools in Zambia have spread across Africa.

Secondly, how cool is it that Zambian prisoners themselves were consulted in naming which officers would be a good fit for the restorative justice training? This is already a sign of restorative principles being put into practice. I asked Rod where and how the seeds were planted for a different way to do things? It turns out that part of the answer is in the hand-made comforters that MCC volunteers make by the tens of thousands every year.

Rod: One of the top leaders came to Canada a number of years ago and visited Grand Valley Institution for Women and visited, so was local to Kitchner, but also had visited some other prisons in Canada because they wanted to explore this restorative system that's more restorative than what they were doing. And in doing that, they got involved with MCC through the blanket making programme, and blankets started going into the prison in Zambia. And that's what started this commissioner getting interested in MCC and what else MCC had to offer and found out about our peace building, our restorative justice programme, our work with inmates and our work with people being rehabilitated and coming out and reentering the community and doing that safely.

VO: Ironically, modern restorative justice and victim offender reconciliation programs that originated in Canada have had a hard time surviving here as federal funding has been unreliable. As of this writing, funding for many restorative justice programs has been cut entirely, resulting in the closure of many RJ programs, including MCC's. However, the legacy of this good work lives on around the world, including in Zambia.

Rod: It was an amazing experience for the length of time that I was there. I was there a very short amount of time. And in that time I really saw how receptive this group of people was to engaging in restorative principles, practises, and restorative dialogue. We did a lot of role playing. And so they practised how to do this because these were the people that were then going to be the restorative justice and peace building unit for over 60 prisons across Zambia. So these individuals were trained, and at the end of the week, the media was there and they launched the restorative justice and Peace building unit. And I came back to Ontario and I continued to do some teaching online. The next stage of the project was equipping four of their college lecturers to begin to be able to train this programme to every new recruit within the Zambia Correctional Service.

Rod: I just heard from Zambia Correctional Service, I was on a webinar recently that they've done over 2,400 victim offender reconciliation meetings and have had an incredible amount of success just having individuals reintegrate back into the community after doing these meetings with people that they've harmed.

VO: The seed of restorative justice and peacebuilding has borne fruit in Zambia and in a kind of pollination of peace, the restorative justice programming has spread to neighbouring Malawi's correctional service as well. Also, both Zambia and Malawi's correctional services have adapted the materials to include their respective traditional Indigenous ways of thinking to truly make it authentic.

[music]

Conclusion

VO: Thank you to Rod for sharing with us a few stories from his many years of peacebuilding. We learned that a non-anxious, deep listening posture is helpful in diffusing conflict. We learned that peacebuilding and particularly changing someone's mind can take time! A seed that's planted even in the best soil doesn't sprout overnight. And finally in Rod's story from Zambia, we've learned how once that seed of peace has sprouted, it can spread and cross-pollinate which is hopeful - we need to hear these stories of hope, too.

VO: I want to finish with action items or action questions. My colleague Scott Morton Ninomiya who leads our Indigenous Neighbours program, talks about truth and reconciliation work in three stages of increasing scope, starting with:

Change perspective - that's the internal work each of us does when we learn something new.

The second stage is *change relationship* - that's when what we've learned changes the relationships around us, how do we relate differently to others?.

And the third stage is *change systems*: how do we then harness our changed selves, our changed relationships, to then change the systems to be more peaceful and just for all?

So in light of those three lenses, let me ask you this:

1. Was there something from today's episode that changed your perspective? Or maybe it affirmed something for you that you already knew, that's OK, too.
2. Now taking this new learning or reminder, is there someone in your life you need to relate to differently? Maybe a friend or family member whom you love and want to get along with, but there are some wedge issues that are driving you apart. Could you seek to understand them? And maybe plant a small seed, understanding that it will take gentle, loving watering and maybe a lot of time to bear fruit.
3. What "system" are you a part of that needs changing? We don't have to go all the way to federal policy level. It could be a workplace - maybe you are in HR like Rod used to be and there's a way to make your workplace more compassionate and generous.

VO: Maybe you have other suggestions - leave them in the comments on your podcast app or on youtube, wherever you find this. I also want to let you know that there is a discussion guide with each episode that you can find in the show notes or on the website - that's an easy adult education hour at church right there for you.

I hope you enjoyed this episode, rate and review Undercurrents wherever you listen to podcasts, thanks for listening, stay tuned for the next episode in two weeks! My name is Ken Ogasawara, have a great rest of your day.

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