

**Christine Mary Smillie**  
**June 16, 2018**

Christine was a wonderful friend. As one of many, I am honoured to share a small sense of what her living has meant to me and so many others. These words join all the others that have been written and spoken and will continue to accompany us as we learn to live without her. As a paramount storyteller herself, Christine would love this. It is so wonderful that her sons gathered some of those stories and shared them with her in the last days before her death.

The Student Christian Movement (SCM) was the place where we met while at University. Norah McMurtry and I remember Christine getting off the bus at a summer camp in Minden, Ontario for the SCM National Conference in May 1974, with her big suitcase and pillow. This large suitcase became a symbol for Christine's friends as she travelled about the world. Louise Casselman, a friend from LAWG days, shared a hilarious account of Christine and her large, heavy suitcase, replete with iron as they travelled around Europe in the late 1970s.

In retrospect I realize this SCM national meeting was a place where threads of Christine's future years in Toronto began to knit together. Bob Carty, Frances Arbour and Pat Bird of the Latin American Working Group (LAWG) were there as resource people and in a few years' time, became Christine's colleagues at LAWG. Barbara and Brian Ruttan were there with their baby daughter Ruth. Christine and Norah would live in a co-op with them for the year that Christine was Student President of the SCM.

In 1975, at the Cross Lake, Alberta SCM National Council Christine was elected Student President and came to Toronto that Fall to begin a year of living in Toronto, travelling across the country visiting SCMs and dealing with the fall-out of a conflict between the SCM and the SCM Book Room's Manager, Bob Miller. Christine's strength and clarity of thinking in her early twenties, was forged in the midst of serious conflict. I can't help but think that was a good formation for someone who would work in the social and NGO sector throughout her career.

Christine was courageous in all parts of her living. As the eldest of the Saskatoon Smillies she did not shirk from speaking truth to power. But as many of her friends and no doubt family know, she could speak truth to love as well. She

didn't avoid naming what she saw unfolding that she didn't think was good for us. She loved fiercely and with high expectations. She was aware of her own vulnerabilities and needs as well and sought out help whether of friends and family or counsellors or medication. She did not pretend that she was self-sufficient or strong without cost. She was open to input as well. She recently let Norah know that she had remembered Norah's reminder to be kind, after Christine had trounced someone's ideas in no uncertain terms at a meeting long ago.

We were so lucky to have this four decade friendship which developed during the years Christine was in Toronto. There she experienced living communally and the housemates at the Sarah Binks Co-op of largely transplanted Saskatchewan folk, became life-long friends. Judi Coburn remembers their satisfaction in demolishing the kitchen and the hands-on work of reconstruction. She remembers the everyday communal good times. Christine carried this experience into her work along with Glenn and others to found the Wolf Willow co-housing home in Saskatoon that she loved dearly.

Judi also remembers Christine's loyalty in coming to Toronto regularly around her birthday in June to enjoy the Shaw Festival, and catch up with Toronto friends and family. Betsy and Norah balanced these summer visits with treks to Saskatoon in February or March to visit Christine and our mutual friend Heather Musgrove, transplanted to Saskatoon in 1985. We shared those wonderful and exhausting years of motherhood across the miles but also in joint holidays and mutual visits. The spirit of these special times are captured in a series of pictures over several years on Heather's classic, rose-coloured couch.

Christine was a prairie girl and while she loved Toronto, she felt called to return, not just because of Peter Prebble, who she would marry in 1980, but because the west and its people, were where she was at home. Judi remembers their fateful road trip from Toronto to Saskatoon where they ran out of gas because Judi was busy cross-examining Christine about why she wanted to move back to Saskatchewan and was she sure.

But this was who Christine was. She cared about whether it had rained and if the farmers had been able to start seeding. She knew all the small towns that she had travelled to when working for the Caravan program of the church one summer. She knew how to communicate as a westerner with the folks beyond Toronto in the

efforts to create solidarity networks for Central America, Chile and Brazil. After she returned, Saskatchewan Working Women was one of the communities that helped ground Christine through all her years of political activism and they were looking forward to celebrating her 65<sup>th</sup> birthday at their monthly Sunday Brunch just days before she died.

“As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (Joshua 24:15) has always conjured Christine and her prairie Christian roots for me. Daughter of Ben Smillie, a prairie social gospel and liberation theologian, she brought lots of questions and a deep and grateful faith to her lifetime as a Christian. She loved St. Thomas Wesley United Church and served and supported its mission in so many concrete ways, teaching Sunday School, chairing the Board, singing in the choir, helping to call a wonderful minister to serve among you. She was grateful.

Most of all she was grateful for her family, her parents and siblings and her wonderful sons and their partners and her grandchildren, Isabelle and Henry. She was grateful for her life with Glenn and the communal home they built together and which she trusted would support Glenn in his life after her death. She told me in 2007, the weekend of their wedding, as we planted flowers in her garden, that she would die young. And she prepared for that while embracing the fullness of life as it was offered to her.

Her 60<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration is surely a highlight memory for many of us as she took to the dance floor with Glenn, Heather and Rene. In the Fall of that year, Norah and I shared a wonderful visit with her to New York where we sang along with Janis Joplin at a musical, careened on our bikes through Central Park and walked through Union Theological College and Colombia University, setting of her father and mother’s studies when they moved as a family to New York in the mid-sixties. So many, amazing, funny and poignant stories. New York in the midst of the civil rights movement, student movement, and Vietnam War – what a formative time for a girl from sleepy Saskatoon!

I heard of Christine’s departure from this earth in a beautiful Ontario conservation area, as we were waiting for my daughter Sarah’s wedding rehearsal to start. The beauty of the earth, the songs of birds, the mystery of life and death, Christine’s inimitable, unique and lovely life and all she means to so many of us is contained

for me in that moment. Beth's email to me as I responded to the news, "Go with the songbirds" blessed me for the wedding weekend of joy, undergirded by sorrow.

May these wise words of Henri Nouwen, bless us as we celebrate Christine's beautiful life among us and mourn her death.

*Celebration can only really come about where fear and love, joy and sorrow, tears and smiles can exist together. Celebration is the acceptance of life in a constantly increasing awareness of its preciousness. And life is precious not only because it can be seen, touched and tasted, but also because it will be gone one day. When we celebrate a wedding, we celebrate a union as well as a departure; when we celebrate death we celebrate lost friendship as well as gained liberty. There can be tears after weddings and smiles after funerals. We can indeed make our sorrows, just as much as our joys, a part of our celebration of life in the deep reality that life and death are not opponents but do, in fact, kiss each other at every moment of our existence.*