

THE SEASONS OF OUR LIVES

In our office waiting room there is an old framed poster of a path winding up a mountainside and disappearing around a curve. It reads, "What seems to be the end may really be a new beginning." I bought it for my office when I began at IFL in 1977. The poster has always spoken to me in the challenges and losses of my own life and in the accompanying anxiety about what may lie ahead. And many of our clients over the years at IFL have commented on the message of hope conveyed by that simple symbol.

Symbols hold deep meanings throughout known human history and pre-history. Whether they be religious symbols, icons, mandalas, ziggurats, pyramids, cave paintings, carvings, rings, totem poles, windows, walls, or mountain paths — symbols show up unexpectedly in our clients' dreams, fantasies, art, poetry, film, music, dance, and the stories of their lives. As I now prepare to retire from my work here in Toronto, and bid farewell to a very loving and gifted team of colleagues, I think about all those who have gone before me.

IFL founders Henry Regehr and Stan Skarsten welcomed me as a new therapist and supervised me in the foundations of family and couple therapy, augmenting my Masters degree in counselling psychology. Over the years we expanded our IFL therapeutic community to include medical doctors, addiction specialists, child and adolescent specialists, clinical psychologists, and spiritual directors. We have been enriched by the presence of Chinese, Korean, Caribbean, Jewish, Hispanic, and South Asian colleagues. In my own practice as a clinical supervisor, I have learned and grown through the

new Canadians who are working within their distinctive immigrant cultures.

Being a psychotherapist involves engaging with the common threads of the human tapestry: threads of birth, death, trauma, loss, and grief, yet also of surprise, joy, love, anticipation, and hope. These threads weave their way through life's passages of infancy, childhood, adolescence, mid-life, and aging. Beginnings and endings, and new beginnings. We at IFL are blessed by the time spent journeying with our clients and supervisees and with one another in our own life transitions.

We are not always successful (though I'm not convinced that the term "success" is appropriate to apply to therapeutic work). Sometimes we misunderstand and get confused. Many times couples are not able to be reconciled and divorce is the outcome. Those suffering from mental illness or addictions do not always find a healing path. Children are not always returned to their families. Such are lessons in humility. And it is at such times that we are most appreciative of the support and encouragement that comes from being part of a close team of colleagues. This work can be emotionally challenging, at times heartbreaking, and often draining. But most importantly it can be deeply rewarding, inspiring, and life-giving when we are privileged to truly encounter another in what the great Jewish philosopher Martin Buber called an "I-Thou" dialogue.

In the course of my own journey as a therapist I have worked with survivors and families of the Jewish Holocaust, of the Rwandan massacre, of the Vietnam War, of

the breakup of the USSR, of Northern Ireland's civil strife, and of Canada's cultural genocide of Indigenous peoples and the Residential School system. I've also worked with cancer sufferers and survivors of traumatic accidents; with victims of rape, of sexual abuse in churches and in homes, and of domestic violence. As a consultant to the Scott and Yonge Street Missions, the Lighthouse, World Vision Canada, Romero House, and L'Arche Daybreak and L'Arche Toronto during the past forty years, I have witnessed the ongoing social and environmental issues of homelessness, the lack of affordable housing, impoverished mental health services, unjust legal processes, family breakdown, climate crises, and profound loneliness. All these issues overlap with our work as therapists; I believe we need to be vitally engaged in conversations working for change.

As I leave Toronto and move to the West Coast to be closer to extended family and especially my grandchildren, I look forward to new opportunities to relax, walk by the ocean, grow flowers and vegetables, enjoy new learnings, sing, engage in reconciliation and drumming circles with the local First Nation community, and perhaps be led onto new paths. This life passage will hopefully, too, be a time to integrate all that I have learned, have lived, have dreamed, and have lost. Saying goodbye to Toronto, to so much that I have loved, to my work here, and to my friends and colleagues is indeed an ending. But it is also a new beginning. I leave with a heart full of gratitude.

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