

Annual Saskatchewan Prayer Breakfast
Wednesday April 15, 2009
Presentation by Heather Kuttai

Whenever I start a speech, I like to tell my audience this: although I have had the opportunity to travel through sport all over the world and experience some wonderful places, I will always call Saskatchewan home because it is, very simply, the best place on earth. I am a proud prairie girl. I love the feeling of connectedness and community here; I love Corner Gas; and I even love the weather. Well, it is easy to love the weather in spring, anyway. As Darrell and I drove to Regina from Saskatoon yesterday, I was looking out the window and was struck by the beauty of our big Saskatchewan sky and all the signs that spring is definitely here.

It always amazes me how the weather in Saskatchewan connects us as a point of conversation. The weather was definitely on my mind on June 4, 1976. On a scorching afternoon that day, my mother gave me the choice between catching the school bus to go home to our farm after I was finished with my school day or waiting a few extra minutes for her to finish up her meeting with the Catholic Women's League that was happening across the street. Although I was only six years old I had enough sense to know that the long bus ride home would be uncomfortable, sweaty, and hot. I decided to wait for my mom. Nevertheless as my mom and I drove home with all the windows rolled down in a wishful attempt to bring some relief the way only a cool breeze can on that kind of sweltering day, I lay down in the backseat of our car and imagined of how good a cool lemonade would taste under the shade of our garden's crabapple tree.

My day dreams were interrupted by what I can only remember as a chaotic mix of images: my mother's head cut and bleeding; of strangers talking in loud, urgent voices; and of feeling pain and discomfort from a sheet of cardboard behind my back and shoulders that someone had laid me on. I can still feel the asphalt under my fingers. With a strange calmness I realized I could not feel my legs.

My accident happened on a Friday afternoon. For many unknown reasons, I remained in my hometown's hospital overnight; by Saturday I was in trouble. I was given communion and the last rites by our parish priest. This is my earliest memory of prayer. I was rushed to Royal University Hospital in Saskatoon and had emergency surgery the next day – a Sunday. Amazingly, the word about my accident had spread around the province. I was later told that churches around Saskatchewan had become organized in a matter of hours to collectively pray for me during regular Sunday services while I lay in the operating room. Where else could this happen but in Saskatchewan? This is my second earliest memory of prayer.

Later that week, my parents were told that I had sustained a spinal cord injury and would be paralyzed and dependent on a wheelchair for the rest of my life. My mom told me that she overheard my surgeons talking in the hallway outside my room, apparently flabbergasted at how well I had come through surgery, how miraculous it was that I did not die, and how I really should have more discomfort in my recovery. One surgeon said to the other, "Maybe it had something to do with the prayers that were going on."

The other said, "If you had told me that a week ago, I wouldn't have believed it. Now I am not so sure." Again, I wonder, where else but in Saskatchewan would this be possible? Strangers

collectively coming together to pray for a 6 year old girl they had never met. This was my first experience with understanding the power of prayer combined with community.

Today I will tell you other personal stories. I hope to do this in such a way that enables you to reflect on your own lives and your own stories; and how and why our stories have common threads, and are part of the bigger prairie narrative.

Just a handful of years later, I started to grow fast, as all 11 year olds do, and with my growth, my spine started to curve. On a spring day much like this one, I needed an operation to install stainless steel Harrington rods to my spine to straighten it. It was a long, 12 hour surgery and I remember waking up from it long before I was supposed to. In fact, I remember waking up, opening my eyes, but being unable to move any other part of my body. I was initially scared, but after a minute or two, I started listening to the steady rhythm of my heart beat and then I focused my attention on the pointing finger of my right hand, and moved it. It was a profound moment that deeply affected me and it was my first experience with knowing for certain that I was more than just my body, and that there was a spirit in me.

Part of that spirit was a fighter, and was competitive. My Dad was the first to recognize and nurture that in me. When I turned 17 I went to the Canadian Nationals in Calgary. I got caught in the rain and I had to compete soaking wet. I even left a puddle underneath my chair while I was on the firing line. I was upset and although my emotions ran high, I did well and I made the national wheelchair target shooting team. After that emotional experience, my Dad put a heavy silver crucifix in my tool box that went inside my equipment bag. When I asked him what it was for, he replied, that it was a reminder to say 3 Hail Mary's before I begin my competition. I looked confused and he explained, "Heather, when you are competing, you need all the help you can get."

What he was actually telling me is that it is important to quiet one's mind before competition, to prepare, to get focused. What I did not realize then was how mental training, of nurturing that skill of talking to myself, of quieting my thoughts, of training my mind to focus, would become a coping technique that would help me time and time again. I also did not realize how he was teaching me a different form of prayer. A kind of prayer that took me deeply into myself, and by doing so, enabling me to be mindful, centered in the present moment, and connected to something bigger and more amazing than myself.

This mental training, this ability to turn inward helped me many times and particularly in times of crisis. 4 years ago when I was pregnant in the third trimester with my second child, I woke up one September morning and felt strange. When I looked into the bathroom mirror, I could see only my forehead and not the entirety of my face like I was used to. I quickly developed a fever. I was hospitalized and it was revealed that the rods that had helped to stabilize my back for 25 years had fractured and broke. This was at week 31 of my pregnancy. My obstetrician said, "Just get to 37 weeks. If you can hold out to 37 weeks, you will be giving your baby the best chance to thrive." I said to those who loved me who thought this was unfair torture, "It is just 6 weeks. Anybody can do anything for 6 weeks." I was right and I successfully delivered my baby girl into the world.

Soon after she was born, I learned that my back would not be operated on immediately, as I assumed it would. My surgeon explained that he needed a lot of information, tests needed to be done, and that he had to consult with several experts to make the best decisions about what to do. I waited almost 7 months. The result was the worst physical pain I had ever endured. Ever breath was a labour. I sweated profusely – sometimes through more than 6 shirts a day. My resting heart rate was over 140 beats per minute and my blood pressure was high all the time – a response to the pain I was having. My internal organs were displaced because I was obscenely crooked. I kept getting pneumonia because my lungs were so compromised. My mom took a breastfeeding cushion and attached long ties to it so that I could tie it around the back of my wheelchair. I leaned my elbows on that cushion all the time I sat in my chair in order to hold myself up –my elbows trying to do the job of my spine. They soon became red and sore and thin skinned. Getting through this was the hardest physical and mental work I had ever done.

This is where I started to talk to myself again, like I did when I was an athlete with a silver crucifix in my tool box. People around me called me “sick.” I refused to call myself sick; I said I was just broken. I talked to myself about how I felt and wanted to feel, all the time; I would say “My body is strong, healthy, and well. All 6 trillion of my cells are strong, healthy, and well. My cells choose life.” I said this like a mantra, all day, everyday. At the same time, I visualized health – in my mind I was playing with my children, what it would someday be like to braid my daughter’s hair; I would visualize my husband’s arms around me, laughing with my friends, and I could clearly see the smiling faces of those people I knew loved me.

And as it turned out there were many of those people. They rallied around my family and me. One friend organized a group of friends and created a spreadsheet of dates and times for them to take turns picking up my son Patrick after school; another friend drove him to his swimming lessons; I had friends travel from Calgary, Grand Prairie, and Comox, just to spend a few days with us; others picked up our son and took him mini golfing, wall climbing, and to the movies to give Darrell and I a break, but more so to offer Patrick some fun and support. He was so worried about me. I had regular visits from friends who would just come over to hold the new baby. His Honour called me, without fail, every Monday, and in addition to the regularity of which I came to depend on those calls, he also allowed me to be sad and scared with him – something not everyone else around me was comfortable with. Her Honour, Naomi, made us stews and chocolate cake. My son still talks about having those meals dropped off or finding them as a surprise on the doorstep. My mother-in-law from North Battleford quit her job a month before her scheduled retirement so that she could come and live with us during the week. My own parents made the trip back and forth from their farm outside of Battleford to Saskatoon at least once a week. Shortly before my surgery, I made a scrapbook of the people –my inner circle – of those people who I wanted to meditate on, whose strength and energy was nourishing me, giving me positive energy, and keeping me strong.

The day for my surgery came. It was mid July, 2006. It was a tough day for me, but it was also a tough day for Saskatchewan as I learned when I phoned Darrell from just outside the OR on my surgeon’s cell phone (I woke up early again) and asked him where he was. He had come to wait for me in the waiting room but soon left because the place was full with RCMP officers and the families of the officers who had been shot on duty, one of whom was the cousin of one of Darrell’s co-workers. They were victims that day, a day that all of us in this room will likely

always remember. Darrell wanted to give those people their space and his respect, so he left, thinking about how Saskatchewan is a big province, but still a small town in so many ways where you don't have to go far in order to find a connection. Although I wanted Darrell there, I understood why he wasn't. Much like during the surgery I had when I was six years old, there was an enormous community of people praying for me, but this time, the circle had widened. Included in it were the many Christians in our lives and church groups. And prayer groups, like that of my sister in law, Cindy's workplace - but there were also our Jewish, Baha'i, Buddhist, and Muslim friends, First Nations friends and Elders, Yogis and Yoginis, those who were not religious but were strongly spiritual; and still others who did not know what they believed but who were convinced that their positive thoughts could make a difference. This experience expanded and deepened my idea and practice of prayer.

My surgery was 13 hours long. I lost 5 litres of blood; all the stainless steel had to be removed – some of it with drills and pliers – and new hardware was installed. The pain afterward was tremendous. I was swollen and coloured in black, green, yellow, and blue bruises all over my face, neck, and chest from lying prone for all that time, and tubes were running out of me in various places, but despite all this, once I was back in the observation ward, my baby stretched out her arms to me and smiled. I silently offered my own prayer to those RCMP officers, their families, and their children, and when Darrell gingerly transferred my baby from his arms to mine, I felt truly, truly blessed.

I was discharged less than two weeks later but I still had a lot of pain. Something did not feel right. Very soon after I came home, my husband walked into our bedroom where I was getting dressed and asked, "What is that bump on your back?" I will never forget that moment. We went to my surgeon. X-rays revealed that the new hardware was failing; the bump Darrell saw was the beginning of a bursa sac that was being created between my spine and the rods. In other words, those new rods were coming right through my skin.

I had another surgery; another 13 hours, another 5 litres of blood lost. 2 titanium rods and 20 titanium screws were installed. I was the recipient of not just blood donated by the good people of this country, but I also received active bone cells from someone else's femur that were added to the vulnerable parts of my back to help with bone formation, healing, and ultimately spine stability. I was required to spend 8 weeks in bed at the hospital, with my bed at no more than a 30 degree angle, away from my family including my infant daughter.

I spent a lot of time reading, even more time writing. Yes, I had visitors, but I also spent a lot of time alone meditating, talking to myself, and staring out the window. My window was a life saver. I marvelled over and over again at the unique beauty of our Saskatchewan sky – its many colours; the way it can change from grey to clear blue in minutes; the breathtaking beauty of leaves turning colour and watching those leaves dance across the wind and fall to the ground; of enormous snowflakes swirling and twirling against the light of the moon. I would pray out loud, asking for strength, for hope, for healing. I would say, "My body is strong, healthy, and well. All my 6 trillion cells are strong, healthy, and well. All my 6 trillion cells choose life." And in those moments I was connected to the Spirit within myself, and the God outside my window making the great big Saskatchewan sky change and adapt and become beautiful. And in those

moments I felt more connected to the Universe than I probably ever had in my entire life and I knew for certain that I was going to be all right.

I like breakfast. When we ate this good food I am sure we were grateful for it – not everybody gets breakfast after all; and we enjoyed how it tasted and how it nourishes our bodies and will give us the needed energy to get through a good part of the day. But I also want us to deepen and widen our thoughts about this breakfast and think about the good people who served it to us; those who prepared it; those who purchased it and those who sold it; those who harvested it, grew it, and those who planted it in the first place.

Because we are all connected. There is a circle of community in this room. I am convinced that there is more here that connects us than divides us. When my rods broke, my life broke, and I do not live my life alone. We are never alone. That is why we have to take care of each other.

We are all in this life together, folks.

This is what and who Saskatchewan is: proud prairie people; champions of hope; and a caring, connected community. I challenge you to examine your prairie pride, to reflect on your hope, to deepen and expand your ideas about, and practices of, prayer; and to be always conscious of our connectedness.

I am a proud prairie girl and this is what I pray for.