

Lynn Wolff: A Woman of Principle

By Louise Charach



"There is no higher authority than the individual human conscience" is a quote by a Unitarian that once guided a decision of Lynn Wolff's. A complex decision was to be made and it was subject to varying interpretations with ethical implications. As I listened to Lynn share highlights of her life story for the UCE History Project earlier this month, I saw threads of her highly principled self at every turn.

Lynn's early years: Learning

Lynn was born in Brantford, Ontario, May 26, 1948. (Another person of note was to make that town famous a few years later-hint #99). When she was eight, she moved to Toronto with her parents and her two brothers Ron and Jim. Her older brother Ron has a PhD in medical biophysics with specialty in toxicology and younger brother Jim is a retired auto mechanic. Lynn has three degrees: A BSc from the U of Toronto, a Masters degree in Science from Memorial University of Newfoundland and a Masters of Applied Science from the University of Waterloo. She also has completed coursework for a PhD. She did not stay with the program because she could not tolerate the unhealthy environment of sexism, politics, and a less-than-helpful advisor. She put her principles first.

Her family of birth were close and enjoyed time together camping, exploring, trying new things. Her father led the way with an adventurous spirit and great humour. Lynn described him affectionately as "a character". Her parents were traditional in some ways and, as was the prevalent thought at the time, wondered if Lynn's choice to attend University was a productive idea, seeing as she would "only" find a partner and take on the role of wife and mother. Lynn had a few thoughts of her own on that subject and expressed them!

Several years later, it was clear that her parents (and particularly her father) had changed their minds about the role of women. It was a compliment to Lynn when her mother noted that Lynn was the only one who could change her father's opinion on important ideas. As for her mother, she finds it comforting that her mother really came into her own in her later years, becoming feisty and allowing her own witty humour to shine.

Lynn's grandparents had roots in the West. Her mother's parents homesteaded a farm near Imperial Saskatchewan from 1905 to the 1960s.

Searching

Lynn and her family were active in the United Church. It was a social hub of her community with youth groups, parties and many opportunities to connect with each other. Lynn often led groups and initiatives among these friends. It is with these positive experiences in mind that Lynn encourages the UCE community to promote church school and youth programming.

Finally, we received the gift of Lynn to Edmonton in October 1984. Lynn had accepted a job with Catholic Social Services as a family counsellor where she worked for 12 years. She became a registered Psychologist in 1985.

Connecting

Lynn was led to the Unitarian church in January 1985. Jack Harmer, a Unitarian, had recommended she attend, but it was more than that encouragement. Many forces seemed to be at play that day, and some of these hint at a destiny unfolding. Lynn cried through a service given by a new interim minister. Readings and selections of music were centred around the sermon topic: Beginnings and Endings; the song "Memories" was the first recorded music selection and "Morning has Broken" was the first hymn. A long way from home, a new job, a recent divorce, and an unknown future turned Lynn's tears into sobs and prompted Ed Holmes to comfort her. Lynn and Ed went for lunch after services and a relationship blossomed into a romance and marriage September 30, 1989 at Westwood. Ed came into Lynn's life with a readymade family of three, Travis, Darcie and Adam (a big time saver for Lynn). As part of this new family unit, Lynn says she learned to be more flexible and to care for others in her new and rewarding role. Humour helped too. Alas, she was once a gourmet cook but raising picky eaters meant more peanut butter sandwiches and less focus on tarte flambé.

Flash forward to today and her stepchildren are aged 43, 41, and 39. Travis is in Australia, married to Lelia with children Manon and Sylvain. Darcie is married to Curtis with children Ella, Emelia, and Quinn. Adam and his wife Kim are parents to Willa and Sylvie. Darcie and Adam are in Edmonton so, happily, Lynn and Ed get to see the grandchildren frequently. Ed is in private medical practice at Abbotsfield Mall and Director of a Family Care Clinic in East Edmonton. Ed and Lynn are very supportive of each other and have shared many adventures together.

Serving

Lynn's work at Catholic Social Services was a very positive experience. Not only was she a dedicated and caring therapist, she was active in many areas and this high profile meant that when she became self-employed in her own practice, in 1996, she was already in demand. Among other opportunities to come her way, Lynn was an active President of the Alberta Association for Marriage and Family Therapy. Lynn taught supervisors how to supervise as part of her role. As a leader in the Education area of the AAMFT, she organized conferences and brought in many high profile speakers.

Lynn works as a counselor to this day and brings her gifts to these relationships. She is genuinely interested in the stories told to her in trust and she actively proposes support, empathy, and new perspectives to consider. Lynn is sensitive to the needs of the persons who come to her for help and she responds accordingly. She once had a dying patient with whom humour was just the right medicine.

As Katharine Weinman, an Edmonton spiritual coach, says: Knowing how to place yourself in the centre of the pattern...to say just the right thing at just the right time to just the right person, that is poetry.

Lynn has been a very active member of the Unitarian church over the years and has served in many capacities. Lynn and Ed have been dear friends over many years with Jan McMillan and her late husband, Jim. As their kids were the same age, they were very close. David, Cathy and Jill McMillan played their stringed instruments at Lynn's and Ed's wedding. Among Lynn's many roles at UCE were trustee, teaching religious education, social justice committee, treasurer, and vice president. She is currently on the UCE Board and serves on the HR committee. The UCE is a strong community of supporters for ideals such as social justice that she holds close to her heart. It is a spiritual home, too, where one can refresh and share optimism that social change is possible.

Lynn shared thoughts on "the Spirituality of Failure" at a service in the early nineties. The basic thesis was that failure brings us much more richness in experience, in relying on others and in fostering resilience and comedy in life success.

Lynn recalls *May Madness* in the children's program and the service auction organized by Blaise Szekely, both of which were much anticipated fun events. One year, Jim McMillan had to leave the event early, so handed his bidding number to Ed. Ed used it to bid up the price for a week at the McMillan's cottage, risking that theirs would be the final bid, without their knowledge, that is, until Jan noticed. Ed and Jim were a wild pair, remembers Lynn.

Lynn knows firsthand the profound sense of community in shaping lives — first with her experience with the United Church and then as a long time active member of the Unitarian church. Her advice to newcomers is to get involved with UCE — join groups, launch a club, show up, start initiatives, speak out, support events, volunteer. This is the most rewarding part of being a church member.

Our current UCE vision highlights the pillars of searching, learning, connecting and serving. Lynn is the embodiment of these principles for action. She is a gift to our community and to this world.

Interviewed by Louise Charach, April, 2017

