



The Soulful City

Stories of collective well-being



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What is this?

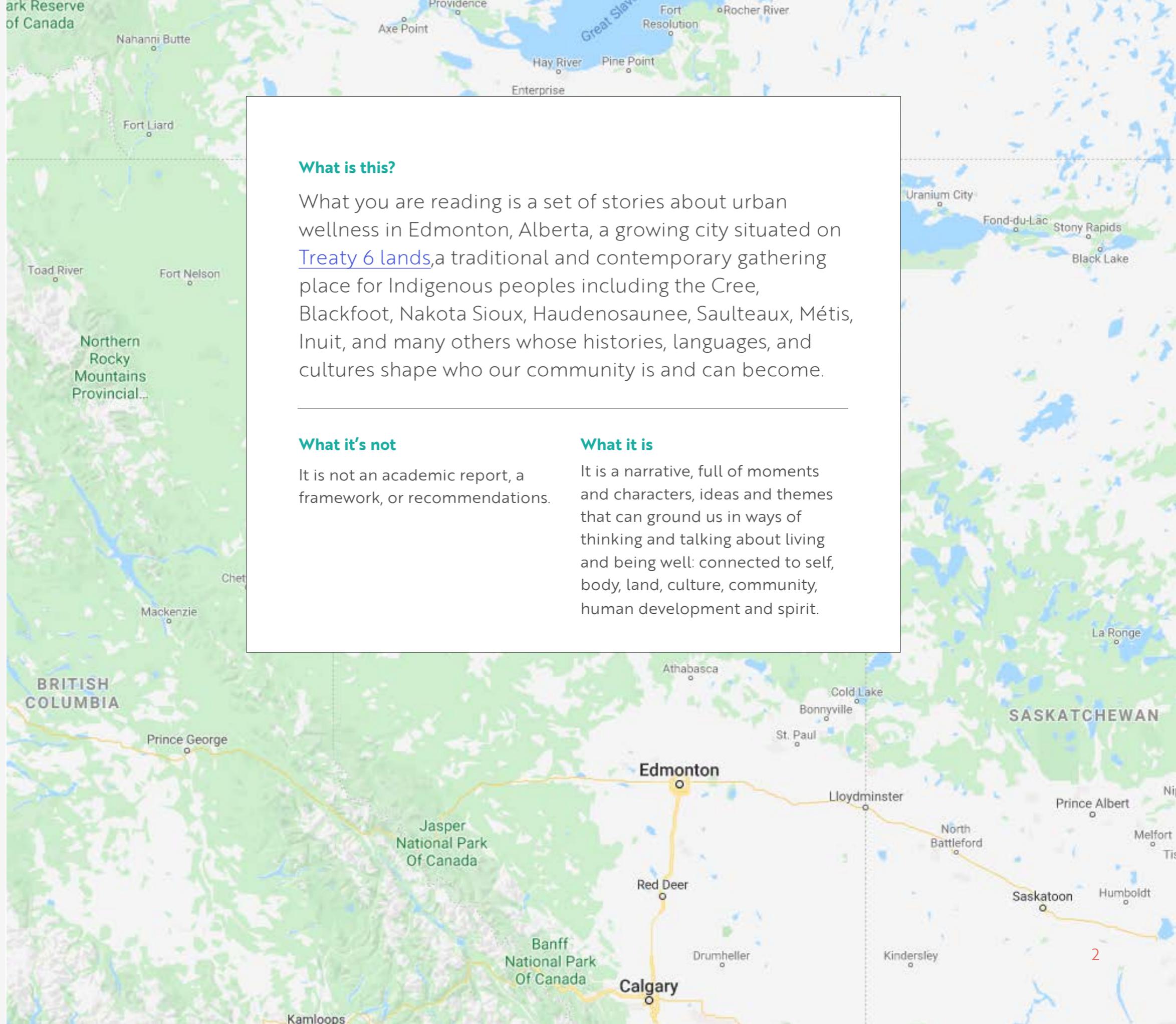
What you are reading is a set of stories about urban wellness in Edmonton, Alberta, a growing city situated on [Treaty 6 lands](#), a traditional and contemporary gathering place for Indigenous peoples including the Cree, Blackfoot, Nakota Sioux, Haudenosaunee, Saulteaux, Métis, Inuit, and many others whose histories, languages, and cultures shape who our community is and can become.

What it's not

It is not an academic report, a framework, or recommendations.

What it is

It is a narrative, full of moments and characters, ideas and themes that can ground us in ways of thinking and talking about living and being well: connected to self, body, land, culture, community, human development and spirit.



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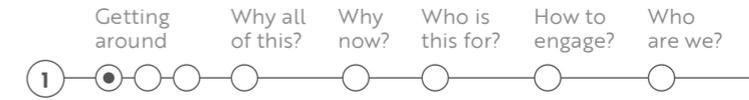
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A wellbeing narrative in five chapters



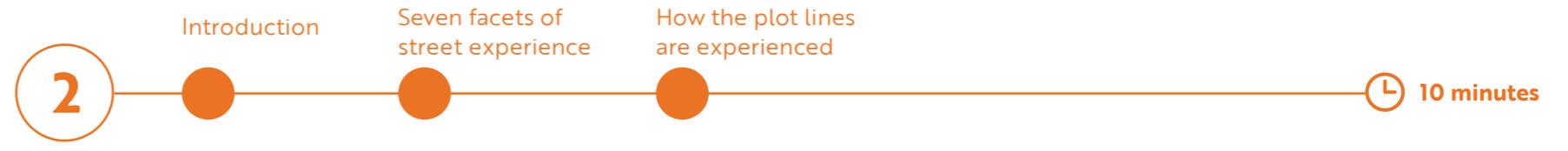
Introduction

Context and background, plus ways to navigate this narrative.



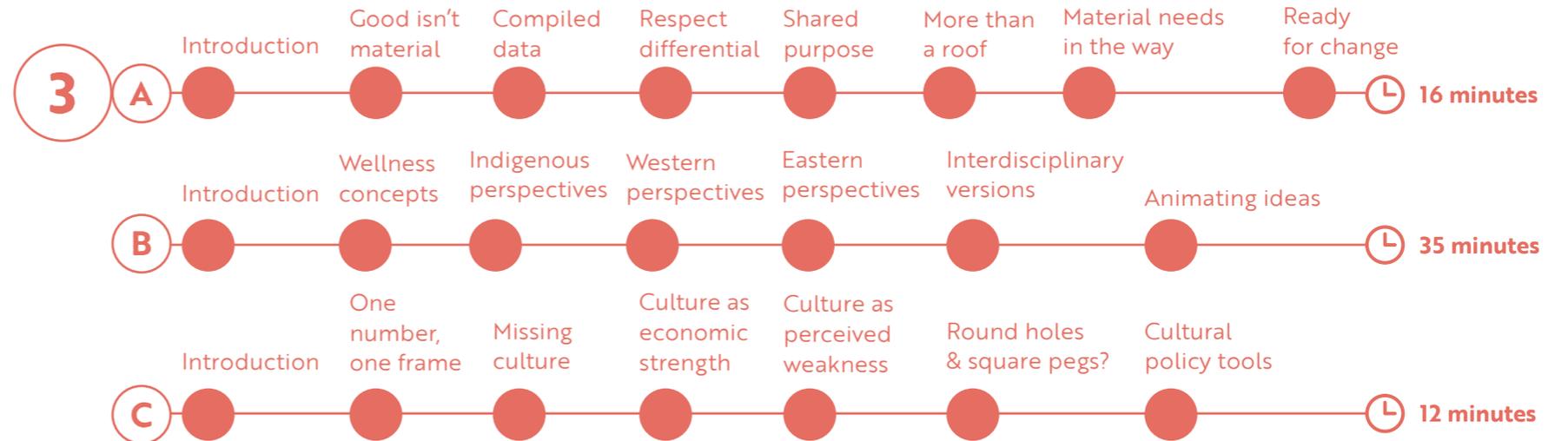
Starting with people

Grounding wellness in the every day realities of residents on the margins.



Exploring wellness

What local data and 3000+ years of human history tells us about living and being well.



Exploring Urban

Four themes to help us understand living and being well in the City of Edmonton.



Action

Conversation prompts and tools to unpack and enable urban wellness.



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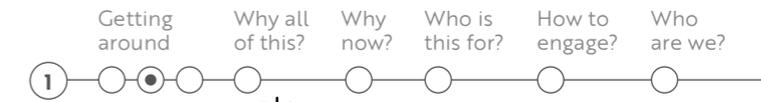
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Getting around

There are three ways to navigate through



This is how to navigate through a section. Just click on the circle and it will take you to that heading. It also helps you know how far along you are.



1. Use the left-hand menu bar to move between chapters.

2. Use the top-right buttons to navigate sections of each chapter.

3. Wish to read cover-to-cover? Use the next icon to peruse in order.

Each chapter begins with an overview of what it contains, like the example below.

Halfway through a section and want to go to another chapter? You can click here. It will always take you to the overview page and you can go from there.



Want to explore a different chapter? You can use these on the overview pages.

Want to jump ahead, find something in particular? Click on the orange dots to go to that page in the section.

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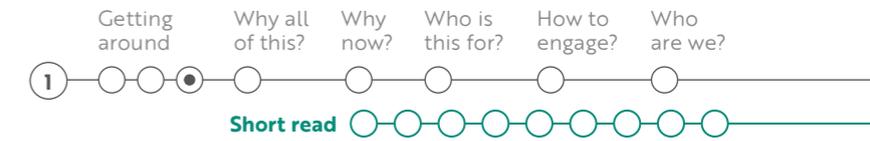
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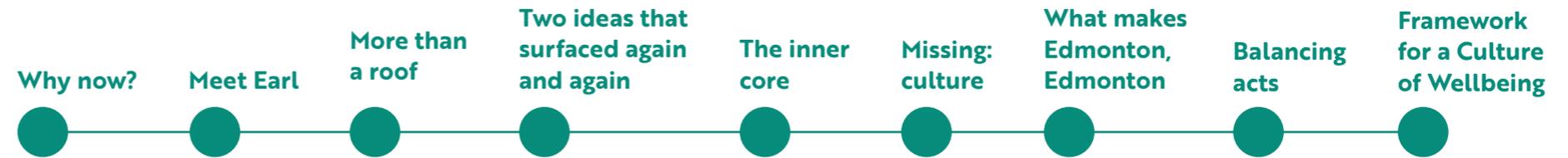
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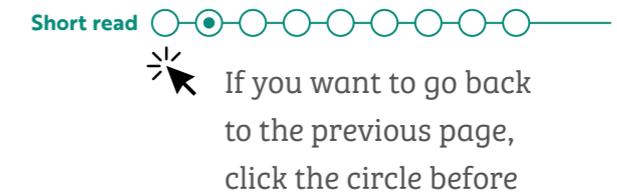
Only have 10 minutes?

Follow the teal navigation path to get a taster experience.



The short read navigation is positioned at the top right hand pages. The easiest way to navigate is to click a circle on the path.

For example



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Why all of this?

We know: this is a lot to digest.

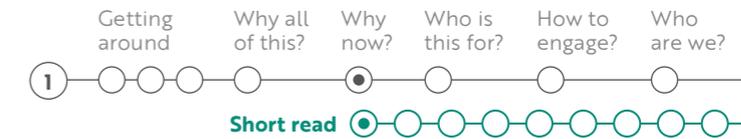
And, we're pretty confident that pausing to mull over a concept as primordial as what it means to live well, here, in Edmonton, is a necessary condition for actually living well, here, in Edmonton.

We might not think twice about words like wellness and well-being, but behind the words are ideas that shape how we organize our lives, distribute resources and define problems. When we don't stop to make visible ideas, we can inadvertently solve those problems using tired logic.

Albert Einstein said it best, if not apocryphally:

“We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.”





Why now?

In September 2019, the City of Edmonton published its [ten-year strategic plan](#). **Connection** is its unifying principle, and **wellness** is one of four overarching goals.

ABOUT HEALTHY CITY

Our healthy city encompasses both Edmontonians' well-being and the wellness of our communities. It requires that all people have the means to access and maintain a good standard of living. When they feel safe, empowered and supported as individuals, they are better able to connect with and enrich the community. It is about harmony, happiness and health as a whole.



From 2017-2019, the [City of Edmonton's RECOVER Initiative](#), alongside not-for-profits, businesses and community members, set out to improve **urban wellness** – to show, through small-scale actions, how the community might come together to enable wellness in the downtown core and Strathcona neighbourhoods. As RECOVER enters its third year of work, and a new decade, it's a time to step back to examine some of our most basic assumptions, resituate ourselves in people and place, and talk about what is called for, now.



Who is this for?

You.

We've brought together stories and data, literature and historical events, photos and audio to make visible people and concepts too often hidden from view.

For people with lived experience of marginalization, we hope you'll feel seen and heard, with fresh ways to articulate what matters most to you.

For frontline workers and social sector leaders, we hope you'll see the people you support, the purpose of your work, and the possibilities for action from fresh perspectives.

For community members, we hope you'll see your city and the people who live on its streets from fresh lenses, and come to recognize wellness as a collective pursuit.

For civil servants and decision-makers, we hope you'll wrestle with the big ideas and every day realities, and hold space for fresh conversations and approaches to change.

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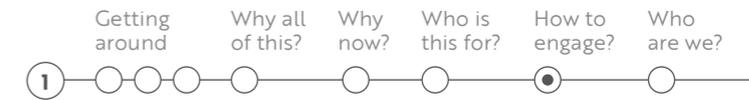
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How to engage

As you read, remember that words are mere approximations for things. We will use wellness and well-being interchangeably, alongside good living, the good life, and living well. Language is inexact and imperfect, as On Being podcast host [Krista Tippett](#) says:

“...And the words are all inadequate, and the words are awkward, and they mean different things to different people. But we have to be able to talk about this part of ourselves – about what it means – what have you said – to take a look, more deeply, at what it means to be human, we have to have a more fulsome understanding of the human in order to grapple with life and society in the way that we long to. That’s what this is pointing at.

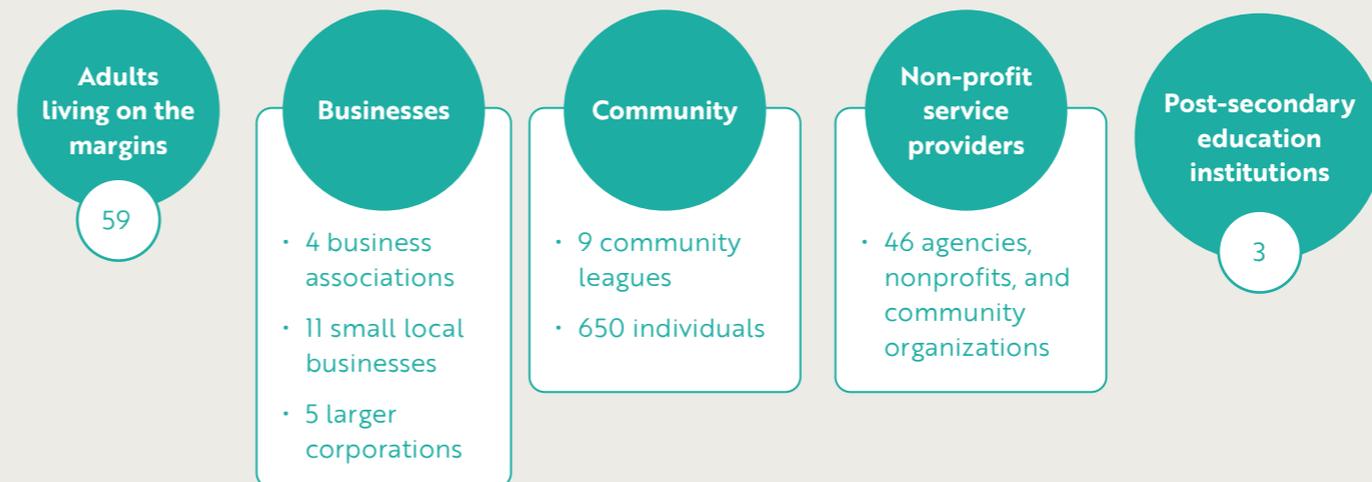
Source

Tippett, Krista. [“On Being with Krista Tippett.”](#) On Being with Krista Tippett, The On Being Project, 18 July 2019

Who are we?

RECOVER brings together multiple voices and perspectives. Over two years, hundreds of Edmontians have engaged with RECOVER – sharing their realities, needs, frustrations, ideas, hopes.

The approximate number of people engaged in the RECOVER process



Voices and perspectives have been curated by [InWithForward](#), a Canadian social design shop. Our team is mostly of settler and newcomer backgrounds, from families that have originated in Europe, and settled in South Africa, New Zealand the United States and Canada. Our team has included some diversity of gender expression, though, in the majority we are cis-gendered women. We make an effort to recognize our privilege, biases, and limits, and to source other voices and experiences. Our goal is to kindle the flame of conversation, and make space for still more perspectives.

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Why we start with people

 10 minutes

What does experience subsisting on Edmonton's margins reveal about urban wellness? Get acquainted with four of 59 people we met on the streets, and seven of the most reoccurring plot lines.



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Living and being well isn't some highfalutin topic for Albert, Brandon, Earl, Eileen, Jailene, Monique, Leroy, Wayne and Yvonne. Surviving on Edmonton's margins has a way of revealing what matters, and what stands in the way. Our values make themselves known when the constraints are high and the economic resources are scarce.

That is why over two winters and one autumn, the InWithForward team spent time with Albert, Brandon, Earl, Eileen, Jailene, Monique, Leroy, Wayne, Yvonne and fifty other adults living rough. Making sense of urban wellness meant listening to the people who intimately know Edmonton's city streets: its benches and dumpsters, rules and work-arounds, delights and indignities. The loss of material things comes with the full spectrum of human experience: trauma, grief, disappointment, shame, fear, pain, ambition, hope, camaraderie, mutuality, freedom and more.

Finding our way towards urban wellness requires reckoning with what connects us as humans in shared space. Labels like "vulnerable inner city population" serve to separate us, turning vulnerability into a definable deficit, rather than a defining feature of being human. Bearing witness to people's experiences on the margins disrupts us of the illusion of "us" and "them" – and puts into view our collective choices and actions. Wellness starts with "we."

[Watch the 10-minute documentary from Winter 2019](#)

Community conversation



You know the military... we pride ourselves on being peacekeepers, right?... And you know, it's keeping people from killing each other by killing other people, and yet, we call it peacekeeping.

I sometimes feel like our reaction to the vulnerable population is kind of the same. We kind of label it with things that make us feel safe and comfortable, rather than just calling it what it is: It's uncomfortable. It isn't always safe, it isn't always passive.



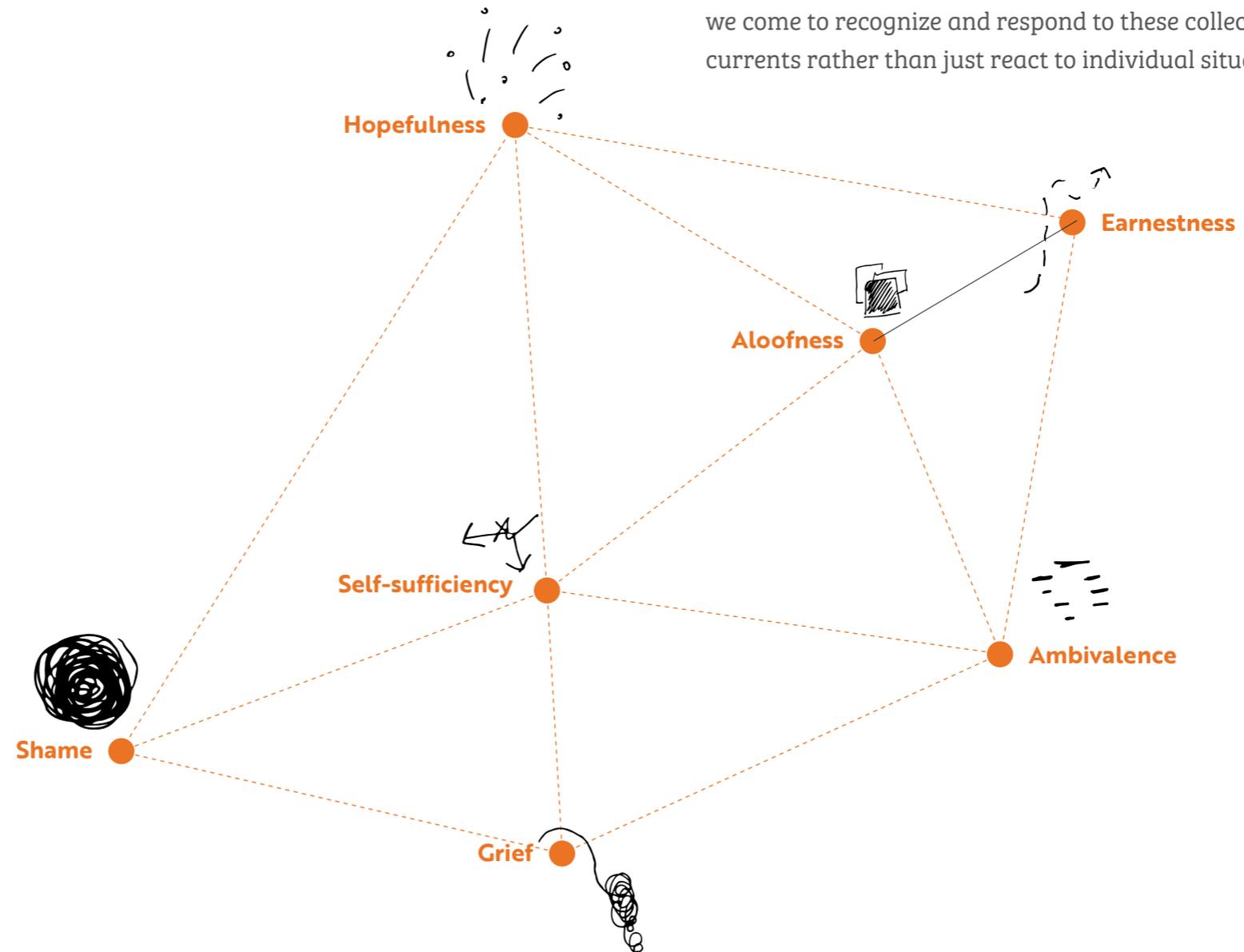
Dean Kurpjuweit
Executive Director,
The Mustard Seed

Story from February 2020

Seven facets of street experience

Fifty-nine stories cannot be reduced to a single narrative, or point in time. People's lives constantly evolve, with new and old characters, settings and events. While no two lives are the same, seven intertwining plot lines emerged. They are not static. One plot line gives way to another, sometimes over the course of a single day.

Unless we stop to understand the inherent emergence of human story, we risk reducing people to a series of one-dimensional situations: homelessness, drug addiction, mental illness, etc. Grief, hope, ambivalence, aloofness, earnestness, hope, shame, and self-sufficiency are familiar to all of us, and they are the currents which shape forward and backward movement. How might we come to recognize and respond to these collective currents rather than just react to individual situations?



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Plot lines

Hopefulness



Hope is often a quiet, seemingly invisible phenomenon. It's feeling of expectation and desire for a certain thing to happen that can subtly animate the day. It's in the speed with which someone's hard exterior falls away when they glimpse the possibility of a deeper conversation. Hope drives Dwayne to be playful with the fellow residents in his assisted living building, and Eileen to make a bracelet in colours of her native lands.

Hopefulness is an act of bravery because it opens the door to disappointment and heartbreak. Still, most of the people we spent time with – even those with a long-term relationship to the streets – took the risk of investing in thoughts and actions that could move them closer to their imagined states. By sparking motivation, however inconsistent, hope offers the possibility of disruption. The tension is when hope is met with lines, waits, hoops and hurdles.

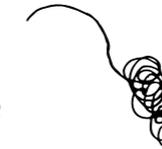
Shame



Shame rises in William the moment fellow bus riders turn their noses to him, unaware he is a veteran and former cop, shot while responding to a domestic violence call. A social cue, a system interaction, a word or memory can unfurl internal scripts of shame and inadequacy.

Shame seeps into minds and bodies, holding their masters captive to a belief they've let themselves and those around them down: that's shame. Those living out shame-based plot lines come to see themselves as unredeemable. The tension they experience is internalized: shame stands in the way of self-care, loving relationships, and the belief that living better is possible.

Grief



Everyone on the streets has something to grieve, but at times, grief is in the driver's seat, dictating directionless travel. The loss of relationships and identities is so wholly disorienting that people with grief in their plot lines lose track of time, struggling to be in the present, let alone, imagine their next moves. Going through the motions of life can make less and less sense in the blur of repeated loss. When left unacknowledged, grief plot lines have a way of solidifying, much like a blocked artery.



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Plot lines

Self-sufficiency



Renee camps outside, even in the depths of winter, her sense of agency and control stronger than the societal pressure to abide by convention. When people exercise courage and capability to colour and live outside the lines, the self-sufficiency plot line flashes into focus. Autonomy and freedom outweigh fitting-in. The conflict comes when self-sufficiency is perceived as a threat to law and order, and alternative versions of well-being are not allowed to coexist with dominant ideas of safety, security, and comfort.

Aloofness



Cruz gives glimpses of the vulnerability that costs him too much: a passing mention of the bullies in Yellowknife, untrustworthy friends, and his experiences of everyday racism. But what he mostly presents is swagger and style. The aloof plot line majors in performance. It's all about the presentation of an invincible facade to the world, a way to convince oneself of mastering the world. Showing up as apathetic, distrustful and composed, people living out an aloof plot line can be difficult to make an authentic connection with, though their armour serves them well on the streets. The conflict that arises is mostly internal: between the outward and hidden selves.

Ambivalence



Brooklyn wants to get off meth and be a parent again but she loves a man who's married to the street. "I want him to come with me (to rehab) but I don't want him to change," she says, conflicted. Ambivalent plot lines are some of the most uncertain: one moment is full of determination to start afresh, the next moment is laden with disappointment and familiar comforts. Habit and exhaustion are primary sources of tension. Strike when the iron is hot, and ambivalent plot lines can give way to the next.

Earnestness



To be earnest is to be of serious intention, purpose, or effort. The earnest plot line often appears with a change in setting. Newness to a part of town or to a particular situation (homelessness, treatment) can usher in new energy, and actions. Earnestness is to be serious about one's intentions and purpose: It's Matt making his way to the day labour site first thing in the morning, in case his number comes up; it's Brandon sitting apart from the boisterous crowd, trying not to drink. A mix of eagerness and anxiety opens up a window for new characters, tensions, and resolutions to emerge. Motivated to move on, or at least not get stuck, people in the midst of an earnest plot line are action-oriented. The conflict comes when their sense of urgency isn't matched by the peers or systems around them. Often this stems from a lack of system savvy, a mismatch with service offerings and logics, or the slow pace of help.



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Earl

In 1981, a young Earl follows a girlfriend down south to Edmonton. He's been smoking weed and drinking throughout his teen years, but it takes the city to introduce him to harder stuff. It's hard to look back and recall how the drugs got their hooks into him, but it happened with people he imagined were friends.

"I don't know what it was. I don't remember it...I know he had it, and he was doing it in front of me...I never seen cocaine until I was 24 years old. Lonely? Maybe, maybe. It's a good possibility, because I didn't have anybody."

Story from February 2019

2009

When Earl's son was born, his partner cleaned up, and so did he. Supporting the family with a trucking job felt good, and purposeful.

"I know I got a great big fuckin' dysfunctional family. I'm glad that addiction in my family stops at me, or, with [my son]."



February 2019

An unexpected job offer from an old friend ignites Earl's sense of possibility. He throws himself into it, determined to quit drugs and illegal work cold turkey.

"Things'll get better. I can make things better. I've got the choice."

As a young man, Earl sought meaning in relationships and helping others. Relationships connected him to drugs. They were never relationships that could support his change and development.

On treatment centres:

"I can't see how they help you heal... I don't think they cared, I didn't get that feeling, always in a hurry."

Hopefulness & ambivalence



Earl soon lost his job in the economic slump. He felt unappreciated at home; his pride was dealt a blow. Soon, he was back doing crack, and lost his relationship with both partner and son.

End of February 2019

Almost immediately, the opportunity is tainted by the old friend's own addiction and deception. But Earl perseveres, convinced he can make something of it. Ending up in jail, he feels used and angry. Trying so hard and coming up empty-handed is a big knock to his reserve of optimism.

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Mitch

The top floor of the hospital parkade offers expansive city views, the kind real estate agents might swoon over. For Mitch, it is both penthouse and prison cell. Confined to the hospital grounds since his broken wheelchair was lost during another emergency room visit, today Mitch needs a push. The hospital issued wheelchairs aren't made for independence. The loss of his wheels, like the loss of his leg muscles, is just one more indignity – but Mitch doesn't want a pity party.

Story from October 2019



Age 20

Mitch is the kid who held down two jobs plus school, while dreaming of environmental studies at an American university.

"I was the son who brought home the bacon."

Self-sufficiency

First, the front wheel of his chair fell off. Then, the chair went missing – at the hospital. No one has seen it; they dismiss his queries. He reaches out, calling 311 for help to get around. They label him a service abuser.

"I am not asking for people to throw me respect unconditionally. I want the respect that comes from getting to know me as a person."

Age 38

Mitch has taught himself to play on the free piano in the hospital lobby. There's so many things he'd like to accomplish, like teaching his girls theology, physics and math. Plus, he's an amateur inventor, with a head full of ideas. As the pain sets in, Mitch feels weary from aspiration and disappointment.

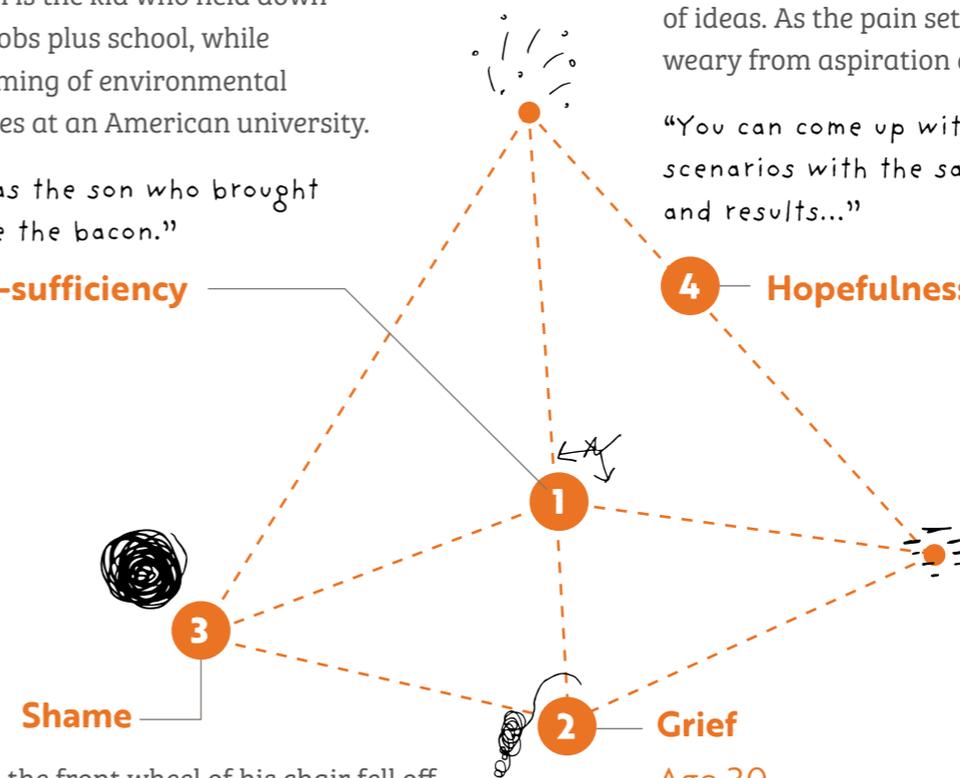
"You can come up with 1000 different scenarios with the same outcome and results..."

4 Hopefulness & ambivalence

Age 30

When Mitch was around 30, his legs stopped working. Diagnosed with a degenerative muscle disease, Mitch wrestles with the loss of mobility and independence. His mom is in denial.

"When you lose physical capacity, you lose that part of yourself that would make you laugh. It's almost at the point, with everything I've gone through in my life, I've been bled dry and all I am left with is anger and hatred."



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Clara

Clara was focused on grades and applying to universities when her mum kicked she and her girlfriend Tessa out. Never thinking they would find themselves in a shelter, the two were pretty uncomfortable and anxious. They kept to themselves at first, and were pleasantly surprised.

Story from January 2019

Mid-late January 2019

Clara and Tessa were impressed with the assistance they received from the youth shelter staff. It felt empowering, and they trusted that staff took their moment of crisis as seriously as they did. Clara could see how she would be able to get her life back on track.

“We get to pick our place ...we’re not too far from the Armoury if we’re downtown. We’re close to post-secondary, we’ll have resources, we’ll never be bored.”

Hopefulness

Self-sufficiency & hopefulness

Late February 2019

Close to being housed, Clara feels she’s learned a lot about herself through this experience. She’s expressing less fear and more confidence.

“I’m glad that I met people here that have like the same issues.”

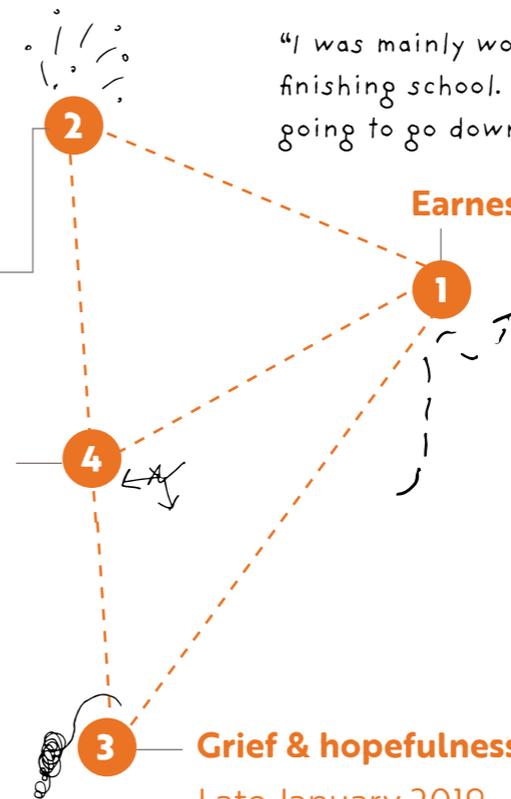


Mid Jan 2019

Clara and her girlfriend Tessa were kicked out of her mom’s suburban home, and police sent them for their first stay at the youth shelter. For achievement-oriented Clara, this felt like a threat to her carefully laid plans.

“I was mainly worried about not finishing school. I just thought it was going to go downhill from there.”

Earnestness



Grief & hopefulness

Late January 2019

Clara wrestles with the shadow side of gaining greater autonomy: her mum has sometimes been a source of instability in her life, leaning on her a lot for the care of her younger siblings, and she loves them all. What relationship can she expect if she leaves?

About getting their own place: “Tessa’s family will come over, but not mine.”

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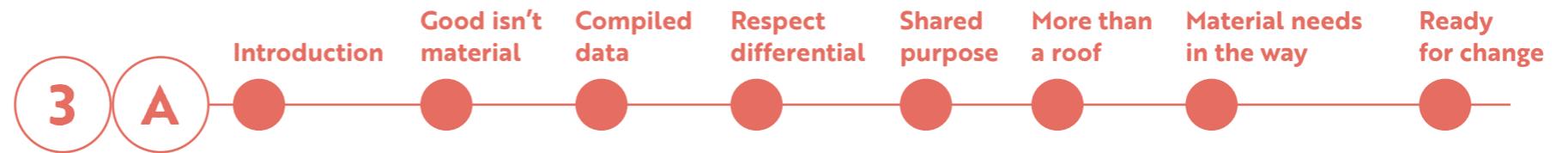
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Wellness in aggregate

 16 minutes

Looking across 59 stories from the street, what makes-up wellness? Dig into what matters most to the people most materially deprived.



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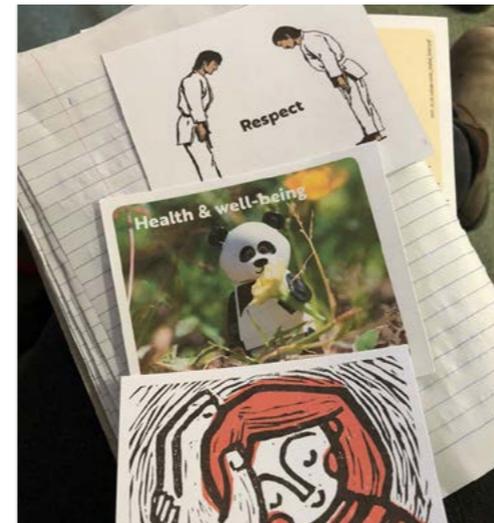
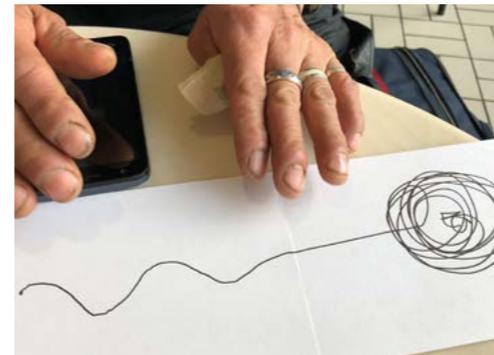
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So much of the writing on wellness starts, understandably, with the elements of a good life – without paying nod to the bad or ugly. For many of Edmonton’s marginalized residents, life isn’t one or the other. It’s everything in-between. How, then, do the residents furthest away from material conceptions of well-being – that is, the residents without steady jobs, cars, houses or savings – come to understand wellness? **What’s a good life according to them?**

Spending time with people, perched on the street, at McDonald’s, A&W, Tim Horton’s, or in the River Valley, we talked about what mattered most to people. Using decks of cards with pictures, patterns, and words, we opened up a dialogue. See some of the themes which emerged over the pages that follow.



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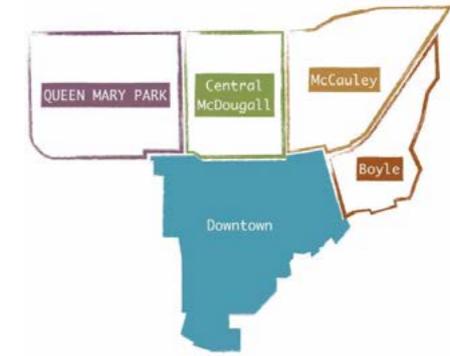


Good isn't material

Combined, the individual stories about the good life tell a surprisingly cogent narrative, and one that picks up on one of the core themes across Indigenous, Western, Eastern and traditions: **relationality**.

Wellness isn't the presence or absence of just one thing: **it's the relationship between self, family, society, nature and cosmos**. Despite living without some pretty basic material things, people's *non-material* desires are higher. Most important to the folks we met: respect, family/connection, and purpose. Interviews with community members in downtown reinforced connection as a core theme. *"People seem to desire a vibrant downtown core that is inclusive; one that can help nurture social networks and provide enriching experiences."*

Top three desired outcomes for people spending time on the street:



* The theme of "connectedness" is about fostering social connections and helping one another achieve personal goals.

Image

McKay, Hyun-Duck, et al. Community Ethnography Report for Recover Edmonton's Urban Wellness Plan. MaRS Solutions Lab, 2018, pp. 1-48.

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Respect, purpose and connection look like...

Community conversations



I am thinking about when I was in the military, right after the war in Bosnia. The war comes in, wipes out everything, kills their families, kills their crops, kills their house, kills everything...The people there didn't have any of the same things like we did coming from Canada. But they didn't want us to rebuild their houses. They were looking for connection to their people and culture; they wanted to find survivors and their families. And we would always be there trying to help them, thinking they had to get their houses in order. People were living in just one room, with the rest destroyed. And although they had nothing, they wanted us to come sit down and talk to them, and have coffee.

Now, maybe they weren't rebuilding because they weren't sure of the security situation. But, it seemed what they truly valued, and their baseline, was respect, purpose, and family connection. Once they had that, they could work on the other stuff.

It's truly very telling.

Same goes with the people we work with here. You move them into a house, but take them out of their community or out of their friendship group, away from the people they were on the street with who had their back or gave them a bit of their sandwich, and the house can mean nothing in comparison. Where are we, as a society or as a culture, putting our norms onto people?



Sgt. Lee Bieraugle
Heavy Users of Service,
Edmonton Police Service

Story from February 2020

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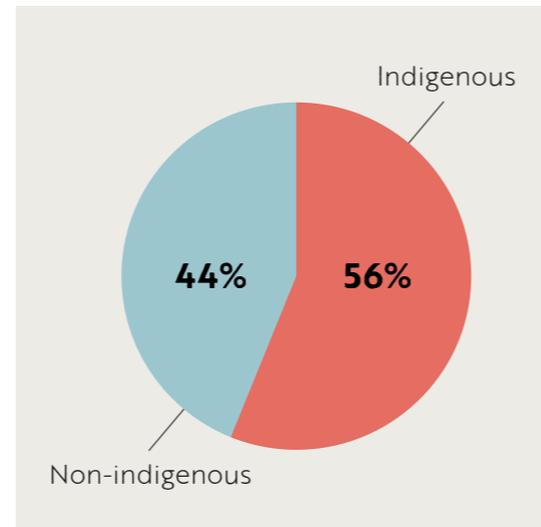
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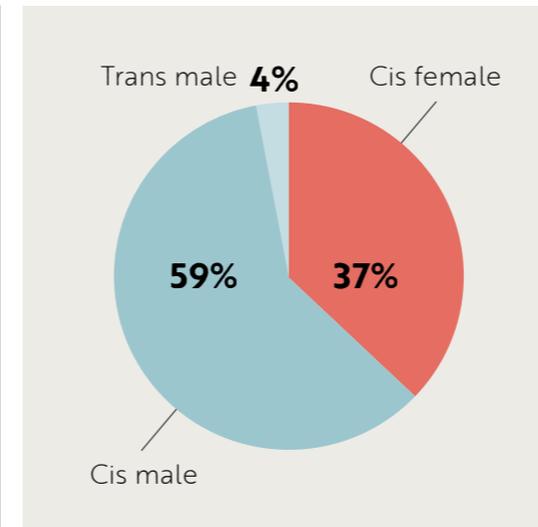


Compiled data

Aggregating 59 stories makes visible patterns and trends – starting with demographics. 56% of people identified as Indigenous; 59% as cis male; 37% were over the age of 50; and 63% were not housed.



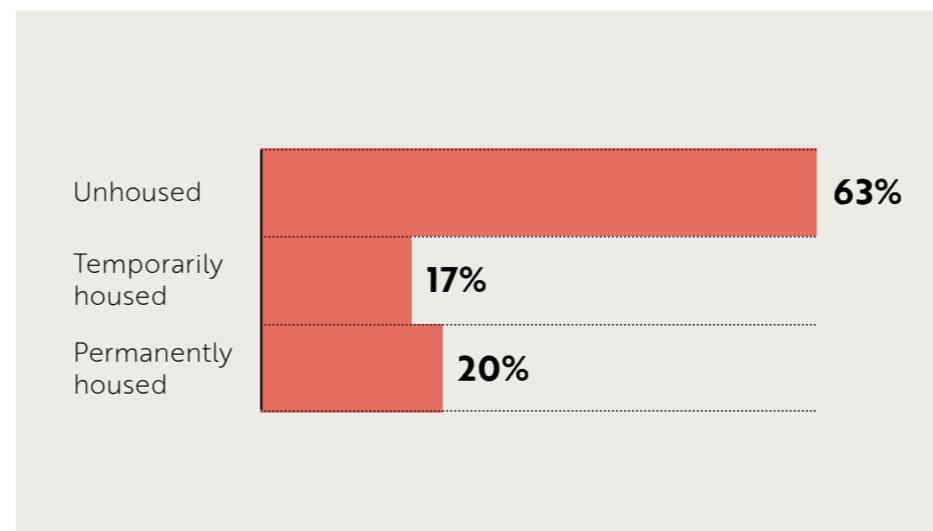
Indigenous and non-Indigenous



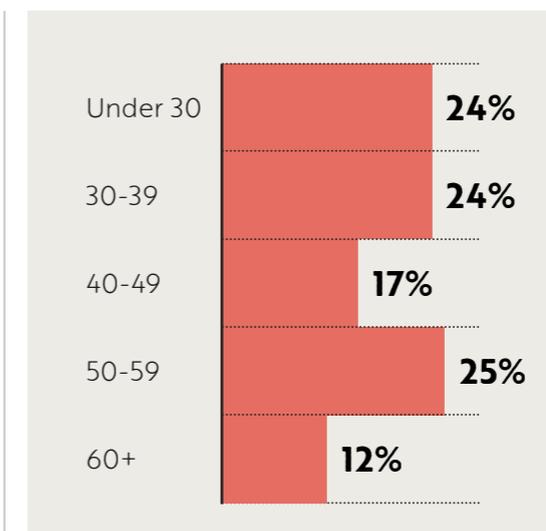
Gender

Definition

Cisgender, shortened here to 'cis' refers to people whose gender identity and expression matches the biological sex they were assigned at birth, unlike people who identify as trans.



Living situations



Age range

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Life just kept happening

Eileen never really had time to think about the good life. Life just kept happening: the good, the bad, and a whole lot of ugly. There was the forced separation from her parents as part of the Sixties Scoop, the abuse at the hands of her foster parents, joining the military, drinking, the abusive ex-husband, more drinking, the loss of her kids, kidney failure, more drinking, diabetes, and a few years ago, finding a home.

It's not the bricks and mortar she talks about so much as belonging to an Indigenous-led community full of ceremony, traditional medicine and art.

Re-engaging with culture helped Eileen give voice to what matters most:

- Being loved and having honest friends.
- Feeling a stronger purpose.
- Being straight up in the head.

Story from January 2018



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The respect differential

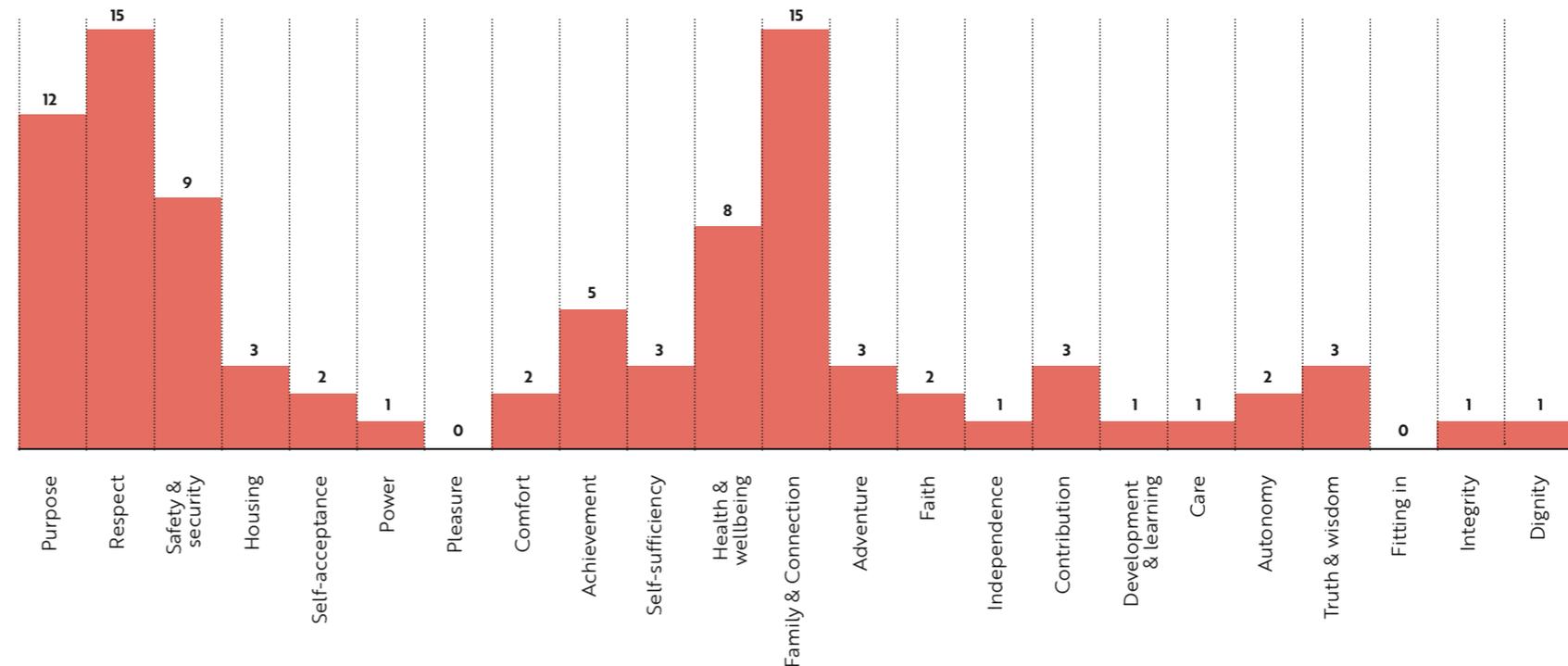
More than half of the people we spent time with described themselves as Indigenous. Respect, alongside family & connection, came up as the most essential elements to living and being well.



At 54, Dwayne's spent the better part of the last thirty years on the street, until an HIV diagnosis put him on the priority-housing list. These days, he keeps his socks in a cupboard in the kitchen, and his pants folded up in a cupboard beside the fridge. Having a place is good, but a good life must also contain dignity and respect. Persistent racism in the inner-city has left its mark.

"I know I'm no different to any human walking around. The least you can do is show respect to your fellow person."

Desired Outcomes, Indigenous



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For non-Indigenous Edmonontians on the margins, respect didn't feature in the top three essential elements of the good life. Safety and security was number one.

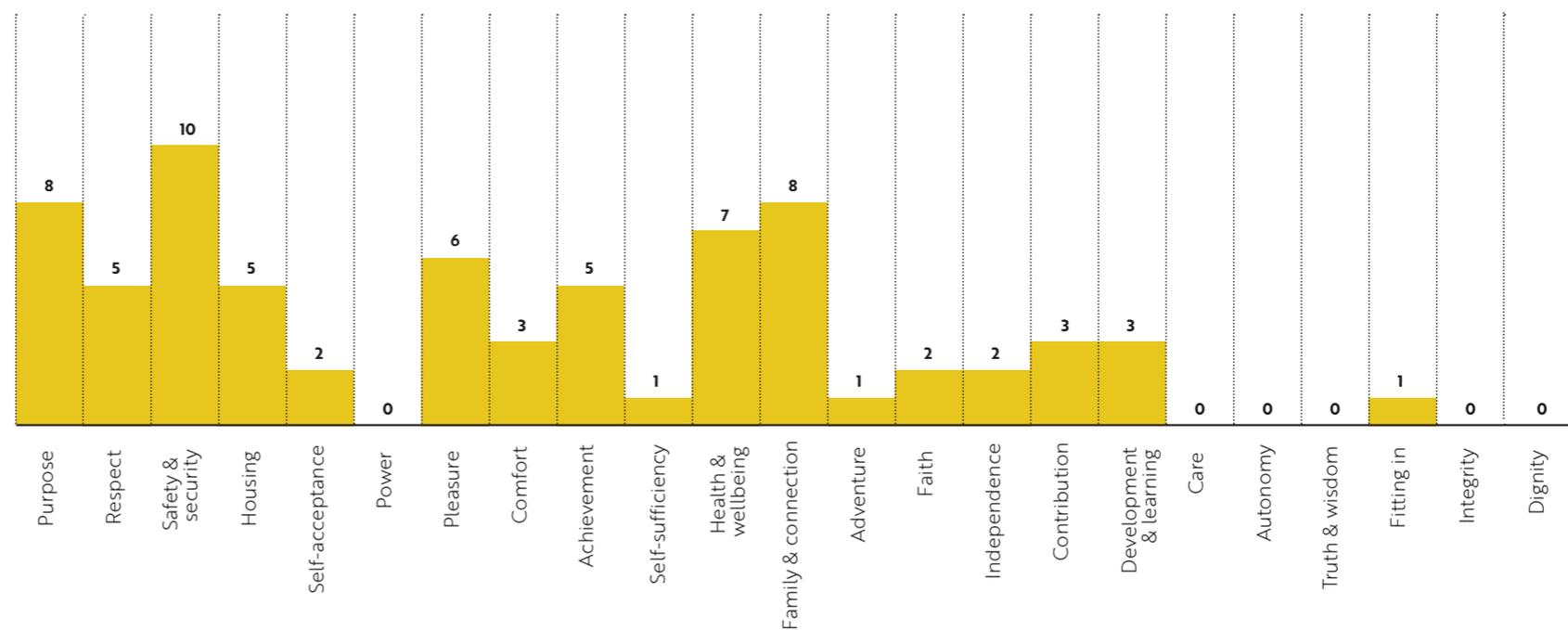
Jailene

At twenty-one, Jailene is new to the streets. It's her first time staying in adult shelters, waiting for the social assistance cheque to arrive and for her luck to change. Together with her boyfriend, she's ready for a more permanent, less transient life.



Now, we're both focused on the white picket fence: security, and no bullshit.

Desired Outcomes, non-Indigenous



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Shared in purpose

While Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents place different emphasis on respect versus security, both groups put purpose in their top-three ingredients to a life that matters. More than acquiring physical stuff, people want to acquire meaning.

People are seeking to put their experiences to use; to make the hardships count; to feel as if they are contributing to something bigger than themselves.



As Al sees it

“ I don't really like the work I get; it's not really about the work, it's about the role. Being a worker is too vague; it's too unfulfilling.”

Stuck in a long cycle of temporary work and shelter living, Al sees his unrealized potential: “I coulda been someone else, I coulda been the mayor!” A good life would be one in which he pursues some of that potential. Days would feel dynamic and fresh, not the same-old, same-old. “When you're on the street, it's pretty much the same thing week after week, month after month.”

Story from December 2017

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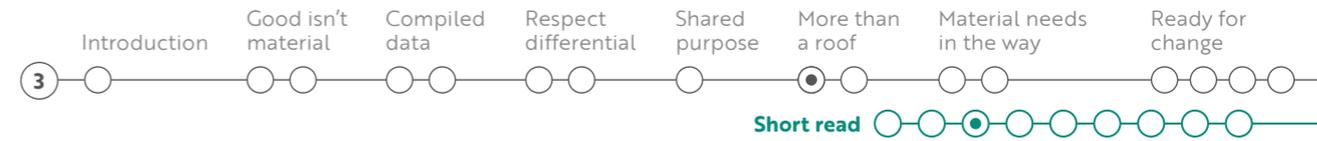
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More than a roof

Whether identifying as Indigenous, non-Indigenous, male or female, housing wasn't a prominent feature of peoples' good lives. Even among the folks we met subsisting in shelters, sleeping rough on the streets, or making do in temporary digs, well-being was more than four walls and a roof.

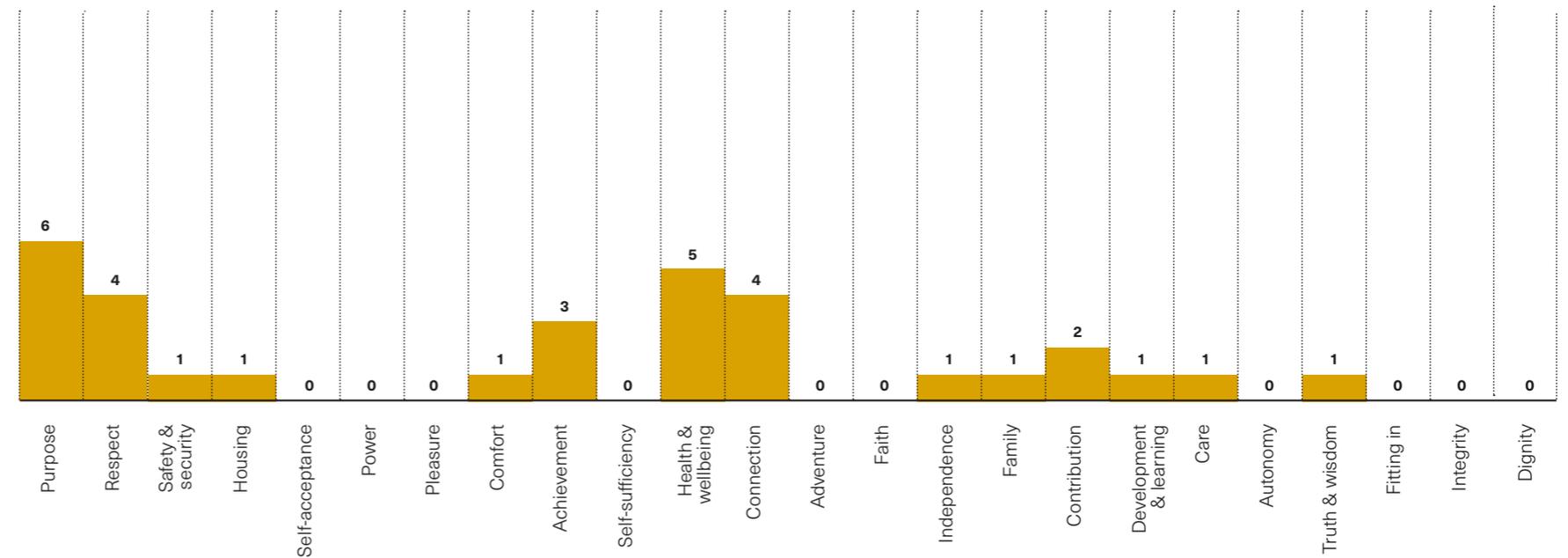
Maybe that had something to do with the disappointment that comes from repeated housing placements and evictions. Or maybe because of the repeated evictions, people got reacquainted with what mattered most: **close relationships**.



Bonnie

Bonnie's last place, like all the others before, ended with a pink slip. It was an especially ruckus night fueled by alcohol, and her son's drug use. There was an argument. It turned nasty. Still, she wouldn't permanently shut the door on them. So what if they weren't on the lease? Family comes first.

Desired outcomes, for those unhoused



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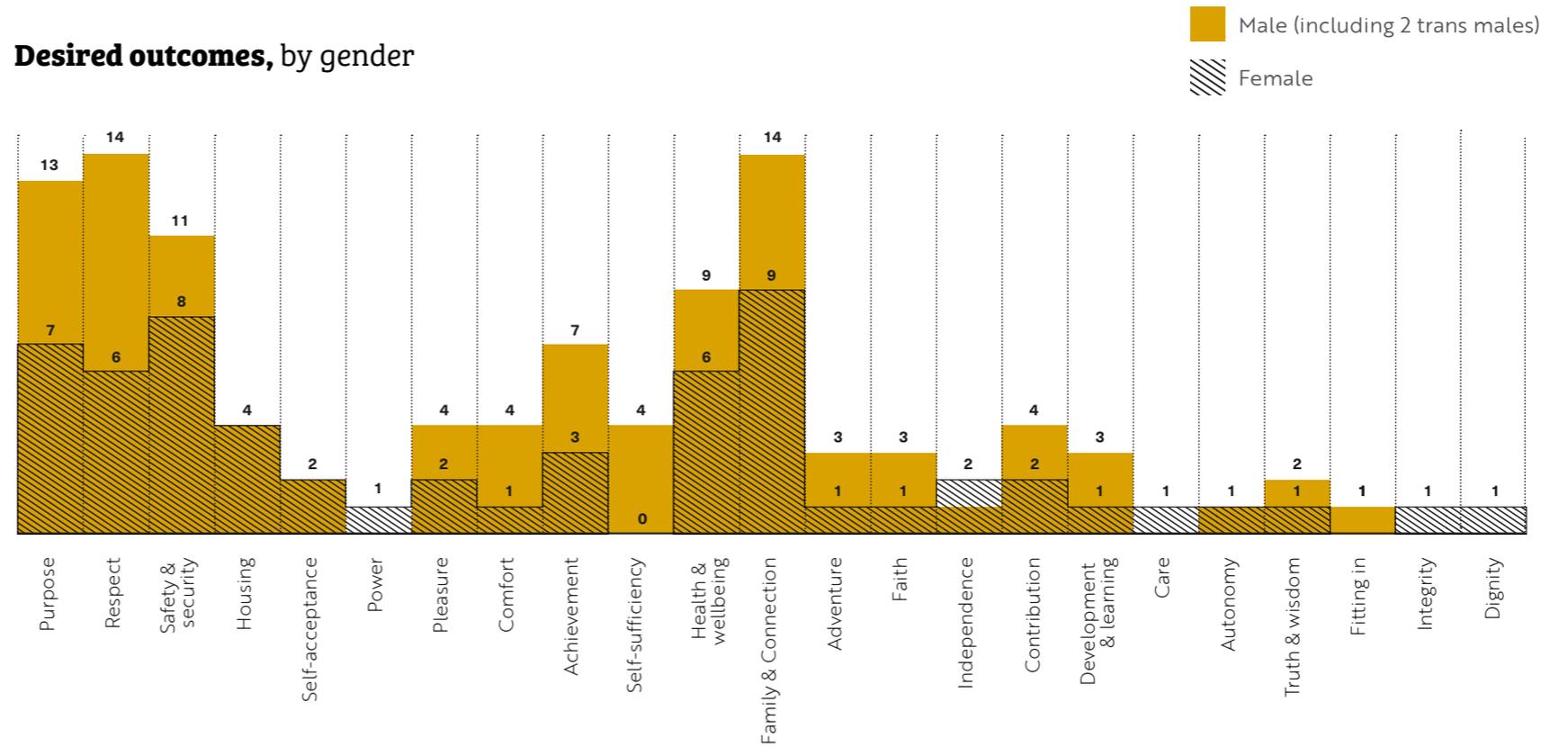
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Bonnie’s certainly not alone. For women, family & connection is the most important element of a life well lived. For men, family & connection is also paramount, tied with respect. For Krazy, who grew up not knowing his mother and who is now estranged from his father, he’s clear about what he wants: “People I can trust, and to maybe fall in love.”

Desired outcomes, by gender



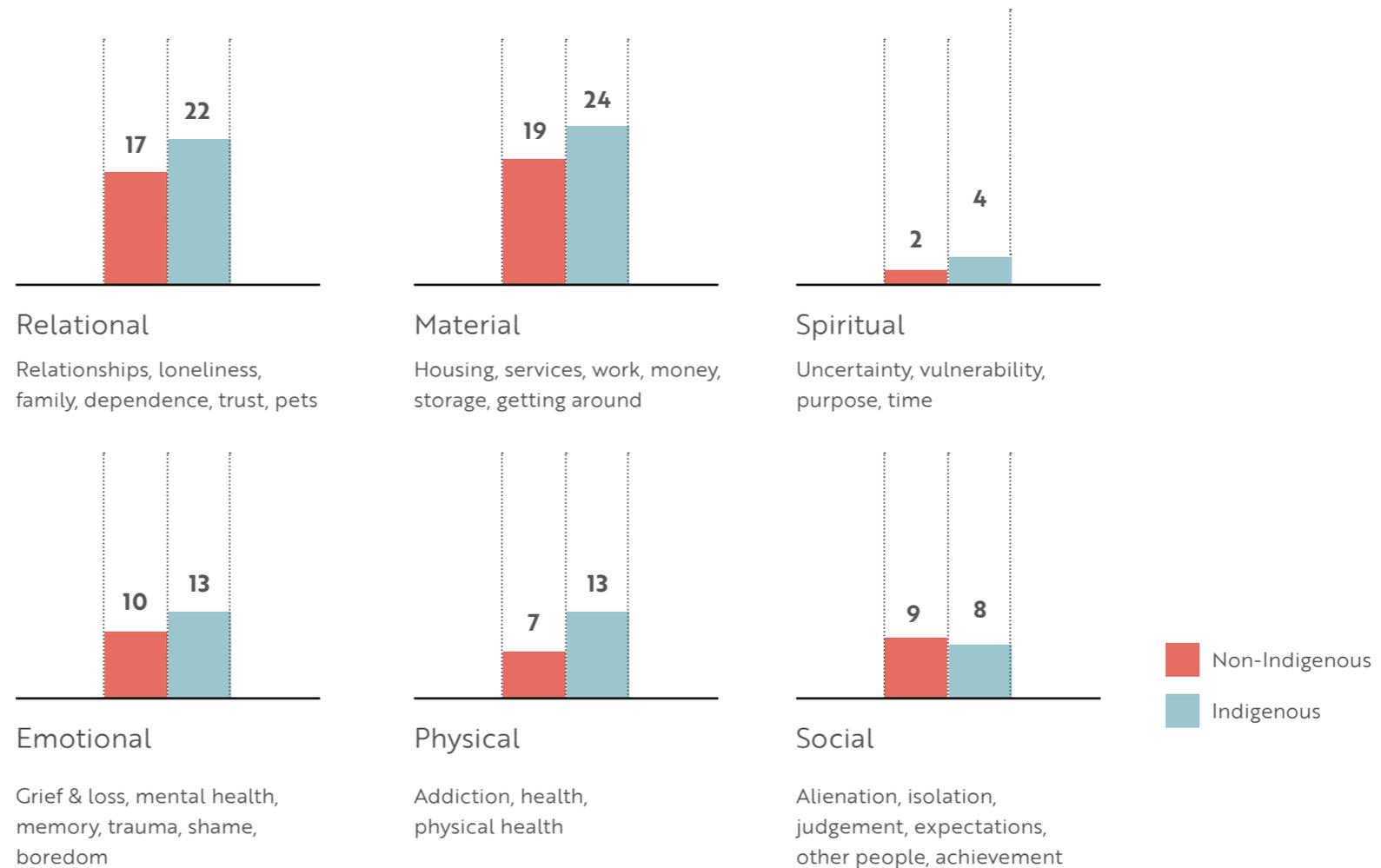


But, the material stands in the way

While materiality isn't a big part of how Edmontonians on the margins conceptualize a good life, it is the biggest perceived barrier. Housing, services, money, storage and getting around consume people's days; taking away opportunities for acceptance, calmness, peace of mind, etc. Relational stressors are a close second, upsetting harmony and balance.

While existing policies and services put much of their attention on addressing material needs, how they do so can shape overall outcomes. Focusing exclusively on material barriers can negatively impact non-material outcomes. For example, when systems house people away from their chosen communities, or place restrictions on living arrangements, people describe a palpable loss of agency, control, respect and connection.

Perceived barriers to change



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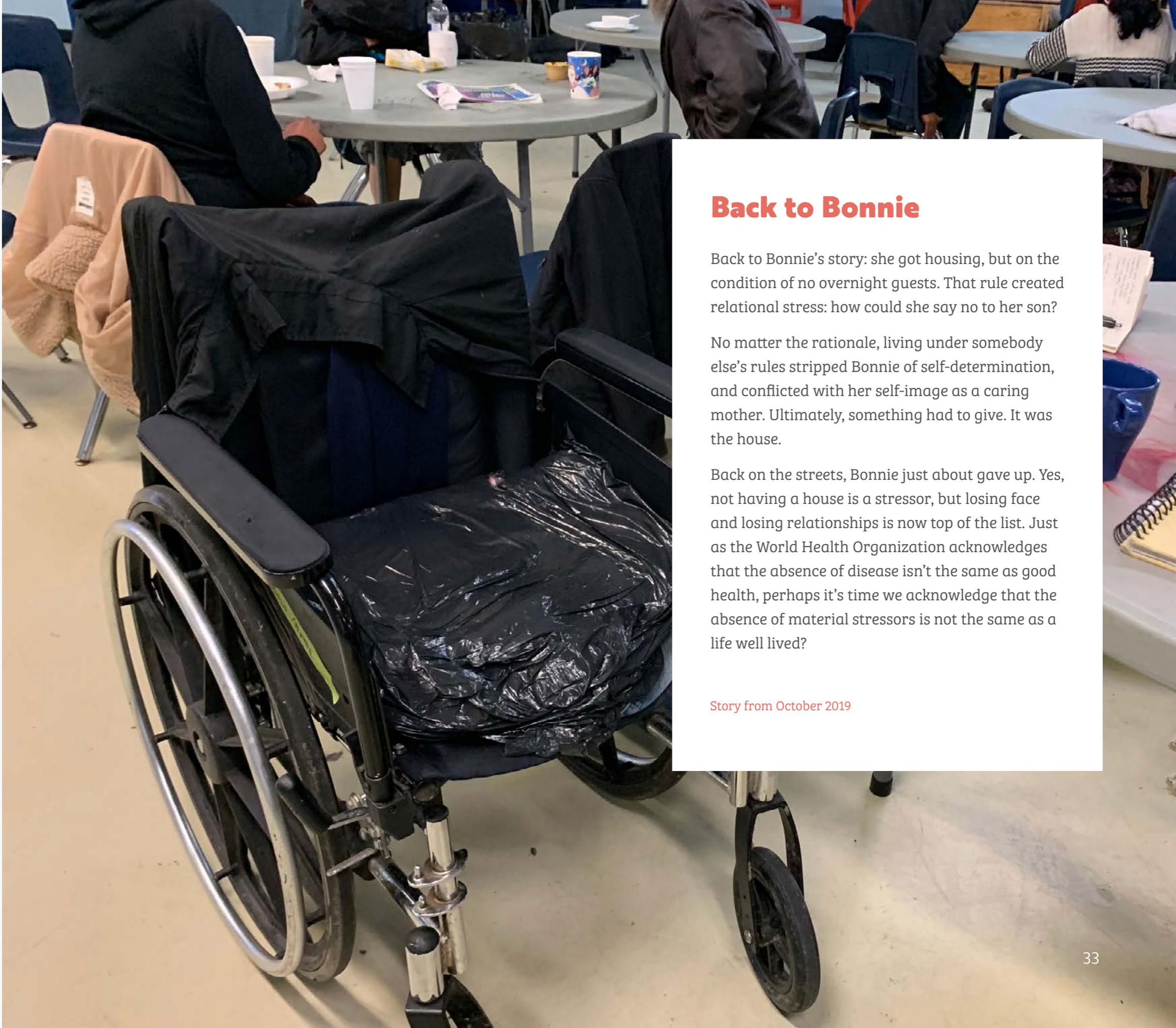
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Back to Bonnie

Back to Bonnie's story: she got housing, but on the condition of no overnight guests. That rule created relational stress: how could she say no to her son?

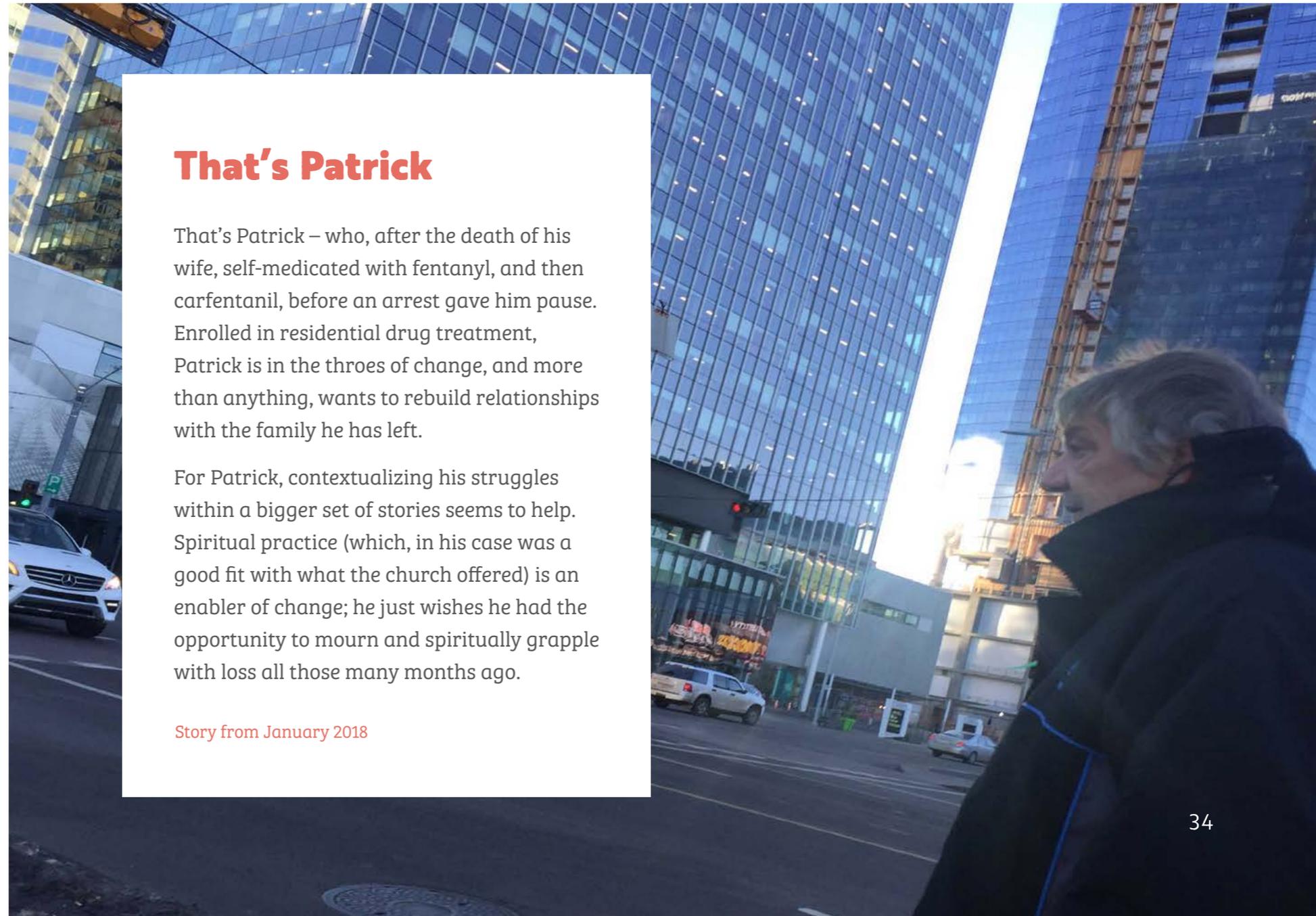
No matter the rationale, living under somebody else's rules stripped Bonnie of self-determination, and conflicted with her self-image as a caring mother. Ultimately, something had to give. It was the house.

Back on the streets, Bonnie just about gave up. Yes, not having a house is a stressor, but losing face and losing relationships is now top of the list. Just as the World Health Organization acknowledges that the absence of disease isn't the same as good health, perhaps it's time we acknowledge that the absence of material stressors is not the same as a life well lived?

Story from October 2019

Ready for change

Most folks (above 70%) see themselves somewhere on a path to change – be it contemplating a shift in behaviour or environment, planning and acting, or sustaining a shift they've already made.



That's Patrick

That's Patrick – who, after the death of his wife, self-medicated with fentanyl, and then carfentanil, before an arrest gave him pause. Enrolled in residential drug treatment, Patrick is in the throes of change, and more than anything, wants to rebuild relationships with the family he has left.

For Patrick, contextualizing his struggles within a bigger set of stories seems to help. Spiritual practice (which, in his case was a good fit with what the church offered) is an enabler of change; he just wishes he had the opportunity to mourn and spiritually grapple with loss all those many months ago.

Story from January 2018

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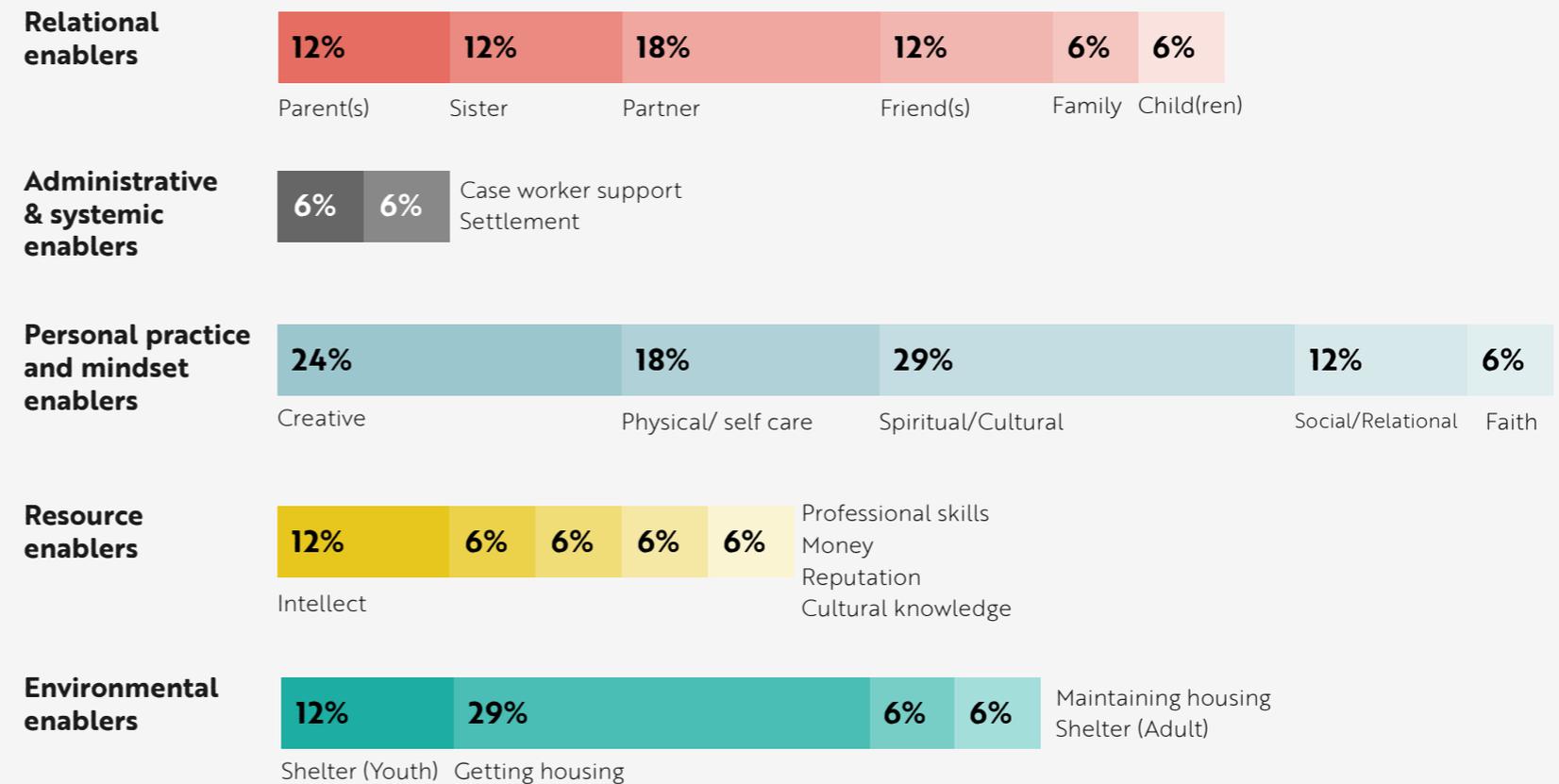
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Most people (89%) talked about the role of personal practices and mindsets for change – spiritual and creative practices were perceived as some of the most helpful, especially for people living with mental illness. Far fewer (12%) talked about case workers as enablers of change. About half (53%) saw housing as an enabler of change.

Perceived enablers for change

For 17 people living with mental illness



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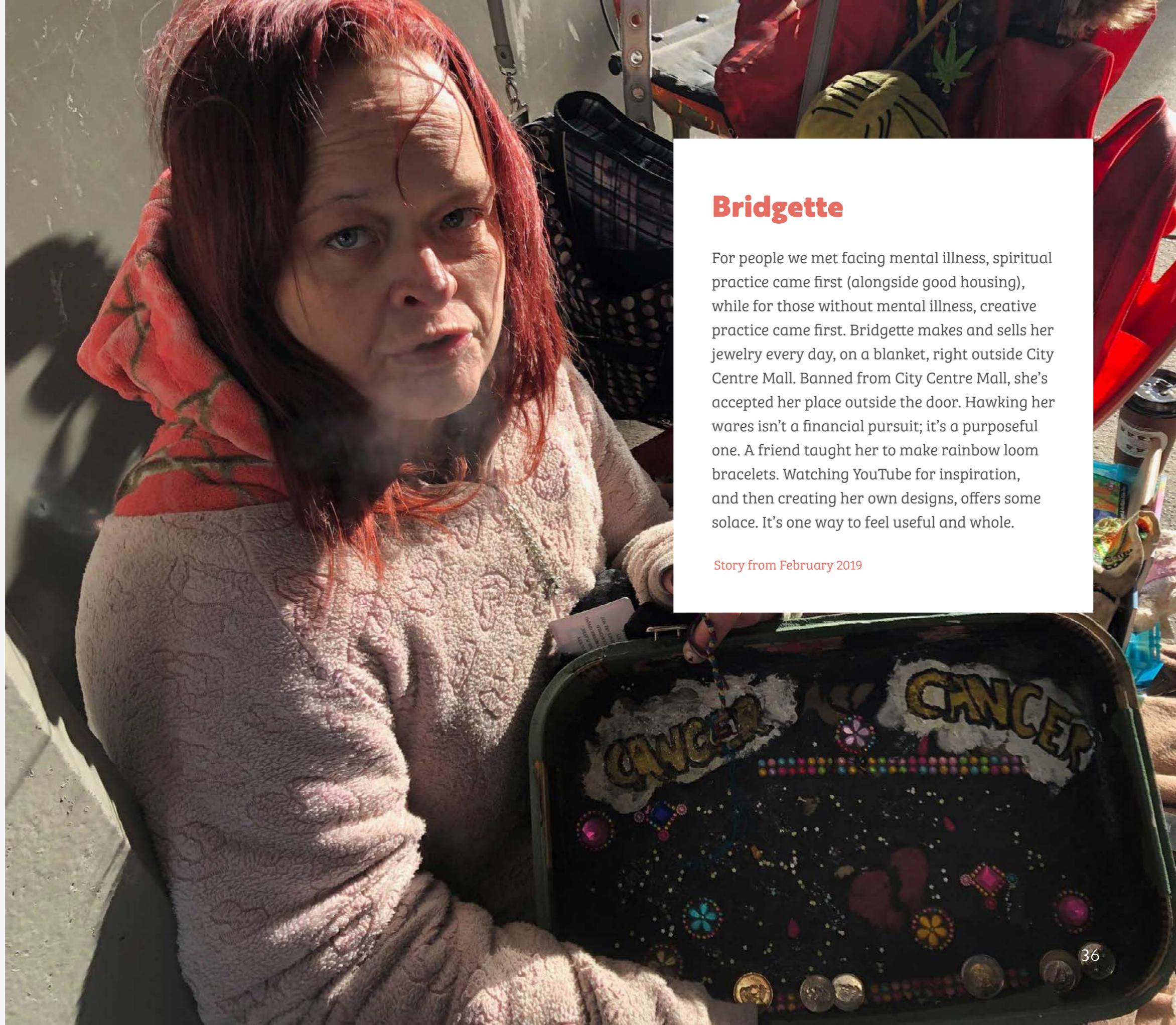
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Bridgette

For people we met facing mental illness, spiritual practice came first (alongside good housing), while for those without mental illness, creative practice came first. Bridgette makes and sells her jewelry every day, on a blanket, right outside City Centre Mall. Banned from City Centre Mall, she's accepted her place outside the door. Hawking her wares isn't a financial pursuit; it's a purposeful one. A friend taught her to make rainbow loom bracelets. Watching YouTube for inspiration, and then creating her own designs, offers some solace. It's one way to feel useful and whole.

Story from February 2019

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[Data collected](#) a decade ago amongst 2,614 Métis, Inuit and First Nations peoples living in eleven Canadian cities reinforces what we learned from 59 Indigenous and non-Indigenous people living in Edmonton

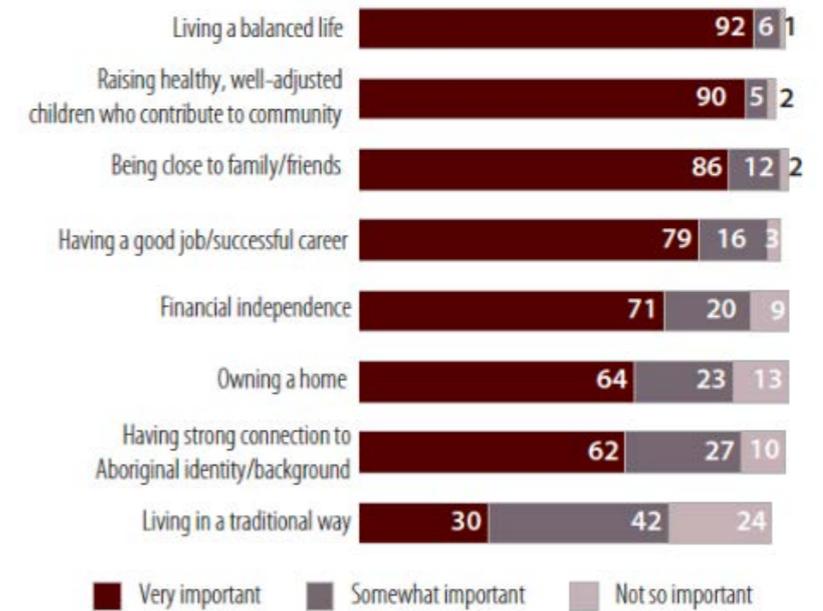
And that is, material security isn't everything. It's one piece of a life puzzle, where the quintessential aim is relational balance. For Indigenous Edmontonians, the legacy of colonialism and its deep-rooted and intergenerational trauma continues to throw off the balance.



Healing and recentering will undoubtedly take bringing the material and non-material together, in harmony. How might our policy levers follow suit?

Definition of a successful life

People define a successful life in a many different ways. Please tell me if the following are very important, somewhat important or not so important to your idea of a successful life.



Source

[Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study](#): Edmonton Report. Environics Institute, 2010, pp. 1–76.

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3 Exploring Wellness

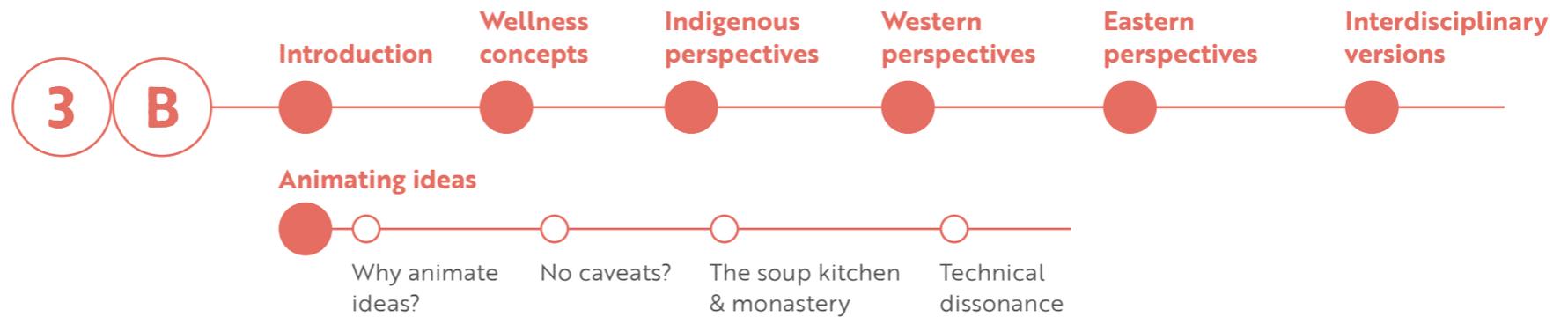
4 Exploring Urban

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Wellness in theory

 35 minutes

How do local conceptions of the good life compare with philosophical, cultural and religious takes on well-being? Take a brief tour through Indigenous, Western, Eastern and interdisciplinary notions of wellness. For all their differences, non-materiality is a through line.



Wellness in theory

Wellness isn't something that just happens to you, or is it?

Jenn had the house in the suburbs, the car, the job, the marriage. By objective standards, she ticked most of the well-being boxes. Until she didn't – choosing to give up the house, the car, the job, and the marriage to live in a tent, through the subzero winter, supported by her chosen community. What she lost in security, she gained in autonomy and camaraderie. By her own standards, she was now doing well. Life wasn't always smooth, but she found it purposeful and free.

There's two schools of thought:

Wellness as the actual conditions of life.

Wellness as what we make of the conditions of life.



Jenn speaking

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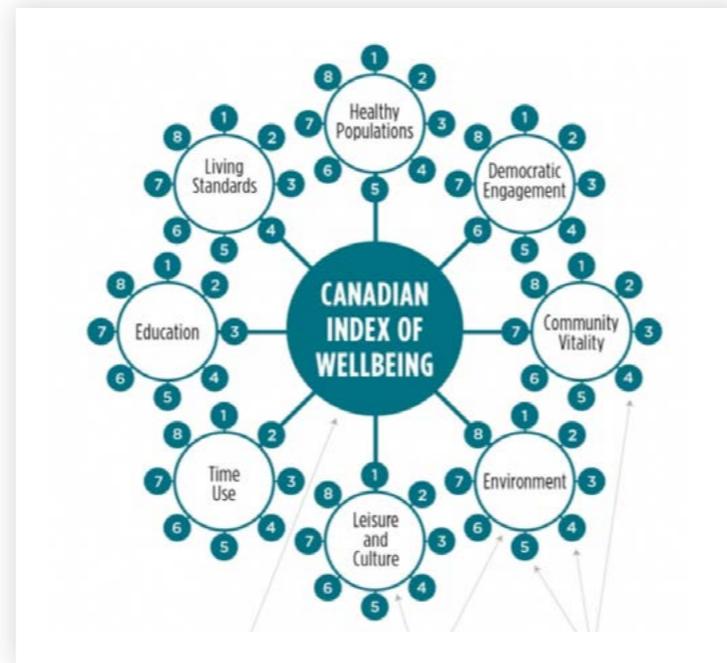
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As wellness has gained political currency, government officials have enrolled in the first school: **advancing wellness as a set of standard domains, indicators and targets.**

Wellness is the sum of a series of events society holds in high esteem: finishing school, having a job, earning money, inhabiting a house, voting, exercising, living a long time. **But, what if what gets left off those lists matters more?**

As wellness has gained a commercial foothold, businesses have gravitated towards the second school of thought: **trying to maximize how good consumers feel about life.** Click here, buy this, do that and you'll feel better about yourself. Wellness is the number of moments you feel happy and carefree, corroborated by the amount of likes and heart emojis. **But, what if feeling good is too fleeting to matter most?**



Image

["Why We Need the Canadian Index of Wellbeing \(CIW\)."](#)
Canadian Index of Wellbeing, University of Waterloo, 19 Apr. 2017

In 2017
Wellness was a \$4.2 trillion industry

Source

["Wellness Now a \\$4.2 Trillion Global Industry."](#) Global Wellness Institute, Global Wellness Institute, 6 Oct. 2018

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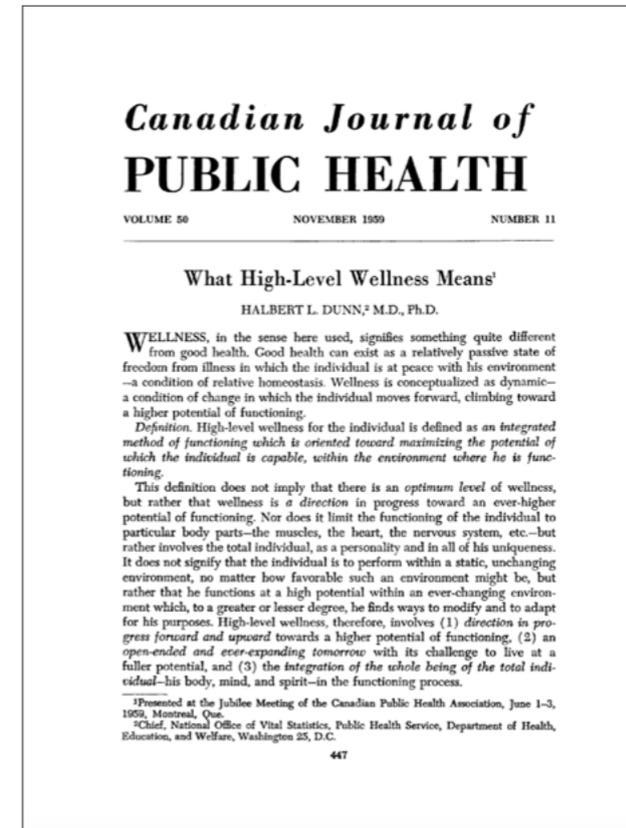
Wellness first entered our dictionaries in the 1650s, and crept into everyday use sometime in the 1950s.

That's right after the World Health Organization formed, and broadened the definition of health beyond "*the absence of disease or infirmity.*" Less sickness didn't equal more wellness. Enter **Halbert L. Dunn**, head of the U.S. Office of Vital Statistics, who laid out a definition of wellness in surprisingly *qualitative* terms.

“High-level wellness, he wrote, is an integrated method of functioning, which is oriented toward maximizing the potential of which the individual is capable.

Halbert L. Dunn

Dunn joined a long line of theologians, philosophers, scientists, writers, artists and everyday folks wrestling with what it means to live well and be well.



Source

Dunn, Halbert L. "What High-Level Wellness Means." Canadian Journal of Public Health / Revue Canadienne De Sante'e Publique, vol. 50, no. 11, Nov. 1959, pp. 447–457.

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Alex Michalos and Dan Weijers, in their history of Western traditions of well-being, point out that:

“ Since at least the fifth century BCE, the family of concepts connected to ideas of well-being has not been a well-defined family... Leading scholars and policymakers continue to disagree about the most basic conceptual distinctions, such as whether health is a component of well-being or various forms of well-being constitute health.



Eastern traditions of well-being, many rooted in fifth century **Confucian ideals**, similarly debate what constitutes versus enables earthly well-being and divine salvation.

Source

Michalos, Alex, and Dan Weijers. “Western Historical Traditions of Wellbeing.” *The Pursuit of Well-Being: The Untold Global History*, Springer, 2017, pp. 31–57.

Image

[Portrait of K'ung Fu-tzu](#) (Latinised to Confucius).

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It just might be that landing on **THE definition** of wellness is a red herring, reducing wellness to what we can articulate, buy or measure, and distracting us from the harder and more enriching pursuit: collectively grappling with the point of it all.

That's the perspective of scholars like **Iain McGilchrist** whose work on the divided brain shows how modern society disproportionately favours logic & rationality (left brain) over context & intuition (right brain). "Our attempts to convert complex intuitive knowledge into more mechanical, or abstract facts, he argues, is sometimes so reductionist, it misses the point altogether."



Source

McGilchrist, Iain. [The Divided Brain](#), Divided Brain Media, 2016,

Iain McGilchrist says:

“ Making things more explicit doesn't actually make them easier to understand: it means we understand something other than what it is we are seeking to know. ”

An alternative approach to pinning down wellness is building-up words, metaphors, stories, and practices for exploring wellness. And not just words, metaphors, stories and practices from one cultural, spiritual or philosophical tradition, but those located in the remarkably pluralistic place that is Edmonton.

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Unearthing and weaving together the diverse conceptual threads of well-being isn't so much a theoretical exercise as a necessary act of reconciliation.

When we don't make room for the many ideas which animate well-being – and are too often obscured by rather bland and secular rhetoric, we continue the dark colonial chapter of Canadian history. **Jacqueline Quinless**, in her apt-titled dissertation *Decolonizing Bodies: A First Nations perspectives of Urban Indigenous Health*, argues:

“A review of the literature on well-being frameworks and measurement tools reveals that dimensions and indicators can be limited based on their conceptual design, the people and communities for which they apply, and the lack of available and robust data sources...”

Part of the challenge is recognizing that the conceptualizations used to produce these frameworks and measurement tools are rooted in Western knowledge systems that do not adequately reflect Indigenous ways of knowing and seeing the world in a more holistic sense.

Jacqueline Quinless

Source

Quinless, Jacqueline. “Decolonizing Bodies: A First Nations Perspectives of Urban Indigenous Health.” University of Victoria, 2017.

So many concepts

No matter our geographic or cultural origins, really, there's no other set of questions that are as profound as: **Who are we? How do we live well?**

Credible answers to these questions are what give religion, government, and social groups (from cults to gangs to retirement communities) their legitimacy. Most of us agree to follow prevailing rules and norms in exchange for access to a good life. Spending time with people living outside prevailing rules and norms – some by choice, many by unjust circumstance – compels us to reconsider what constitutes 'good', who decides, and who is able to access the good life.

Loss has a way of stripping away the pretense, and hinting at the essentials.



Jenn, by giving up the house and car, has rejected wealth and security as the basis of her good life.



Patrick, by losing his house and car, has come to recognize that relationships are the heart of the matter.



Ko sees his eviction, hospital stay, and months of shelter living as a kind-of 40-years in the desert. For Ko, returning home is less about finding a house and more about practicing his values: self-sufficiency, achievement, adventure.

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Looking through the long and often tumultuous lens of history gives us multiple versions of the essentials. Indeed, there are so many possible constituent parts and influencing factors of well-being across Western, Eastern and Indigenous traditions that the assemblage below is, at best, an incomplete conceptual sampling. The versions can be loosely ordered on a few continua.



Aristocratic



Cree/naheyawin, Métis, Inuit, Confucianism



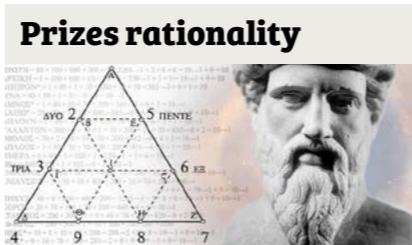
Epicurean



Aristotelian



Hinduism, Confucianism, Sufism



Pythagorean, Hippocratic



Hinduism, Sufism, Navajo, Inuit



Christianity & Judaism

For all the conceptual diversity, two ideas surface again and again: **the role of self and the essentialness of balance.**

Whether well-being is balancing the disparate parts of self; bringing the self in line with the collective; locating self within nature and universe; or transcending the self to reach cosmic balance, well-being seems to have a lot to do with situating our place and finding our ground. That makes well-being a decidedly spiritual pursuit, or at least one that goes beyond the material.

Spiritual = A sense of connection to something bigger than ourselves and typically involves a search for the meaning of life.



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Indigenous perspectives

Image

[Medicine wheel](#)

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Indigenous perspectives

At the same time as Sufism flourished in Africa and Asia, the Athabaskan people migrated from what is now Northwest Canada to the Southwestern part of the United States, establishing the **Navajo Nation**, and its set of philosophical beliefs, rituals, and stories.

Changing Woman, translated as Mother Earth, created the Navajo people from her own body, and continues to give life through the shifting seasons. To live well, on this Earth, is to walk in its beauty (Nízhónígóó Násháádóó).

The good life, then, is not comprised of discrete events, but regularly nurtured practices for being in balance with oneself, one's loved ones, one's community, the natural world, and the universe across time.

Source

Willeto, Angela A.A. "Happiness in Navajos (Diné Ba' Hózhó) in Selin, H., & Davey, G. (Eds.). (2012). Science across cultures: Vol. 6. Happiness across cultures: Views of happiness and quality of life in non-Western cultures.

To be connected with oneself is to bring beauty into daily living. To be connected to family is to participate in the sharing and receiving of the *"needs of the body, mind and spirit within an extended family configuration (Angela Willeto)."*

To be connected to nature is to respect and to understand a reciprocal relationship to the environment. To be connected to the universe is to honour the Navajo people's relationship with the Divine, and express gratitude through teachings, sacred prayers, medicines, songs, and dance.

The good life is accessed through

"Walking in beauty" practices

Reciprocal relationships with family, nature and the divine

Keeping alive knowledge, teachings, prayers

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Indigenous perspectives

Far North, in the Arctic, the **Inuit** – preceded by the Dorset and Tunitt cultures – also cultivated a way of life deeply centred on kinship and belonging to land. **Michael Kral and Lori Idlout**, through conversations with 50 Inuit in two communities, find “family life” to be the foundation of an Inuit life well lived.

Source

Kral, Michael J., et al. “Unikkaartuit: Meanings of Well-Being, Unhappiness, Health, and Community Change Among Inuit in Nunavut, Canada.” *American Journal of Community Psychology*, vol. 48, no. 3-4, Sept. 2011, pp. 426–438., doi:10.1007/s10464-011-9431-4.

For the Inuit happiness comes from this “mutuality of being” – expressed through talking, communicating, and sharing cultural knowledge such as sewing skin clothing and making harpoons.

As Kral and Idlout write,

“Their mutuality may be a sameness of being, as among brothers or descendants of a common ancestor; or it may entail belonging to one another in a reciprocal and complementary relationship, as between husband and wife. In any case, the relationship to the other, and in that sense the other himself or herself, is intrinsic to one’s existence.”

The good life is made-up of

Interdependent relationships

Cultural knowledge and practice (what is called Inuit Quajimajatugangt)

Collective self-efficacy

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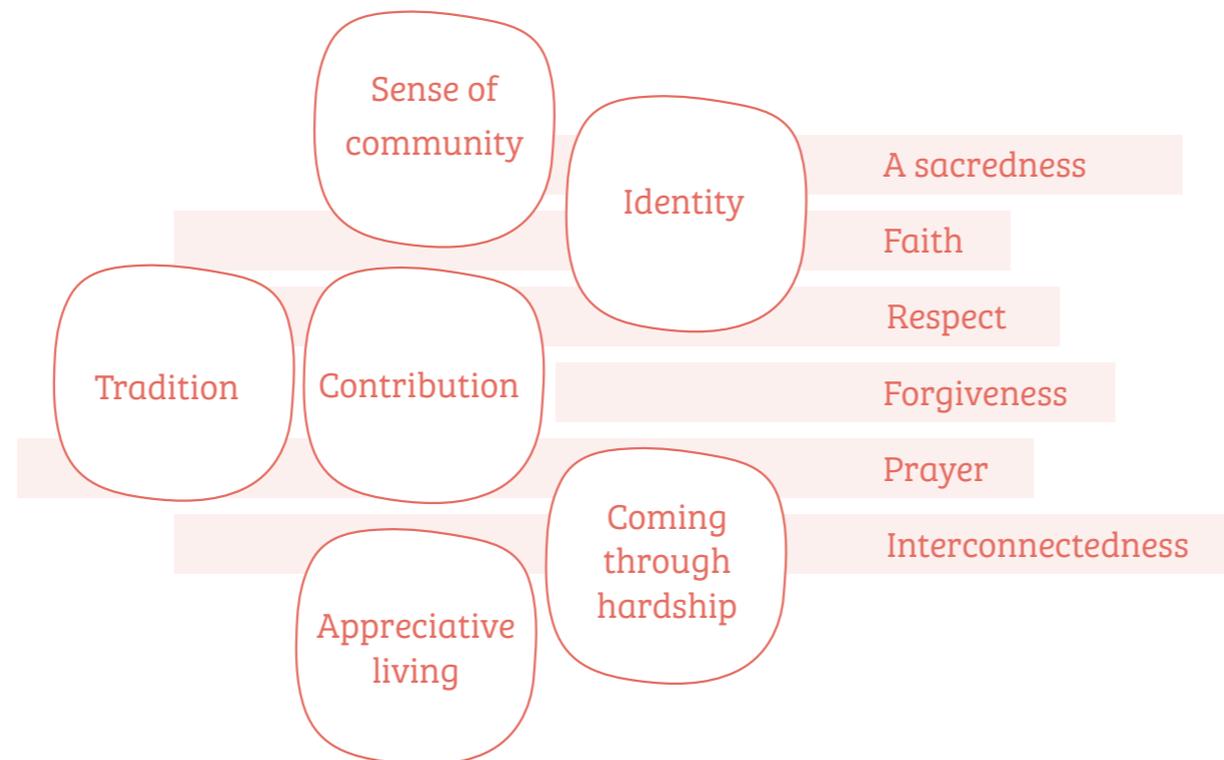
For Indigenous Peoples living in urban centres, often displaced from their lands, wellness remains bounded in culture and community.

Source

Uchelen, Collin P. Van, et al. "What Makes Us Strong: Urban Aboriginal Perspectives on Wellness and Strength." Canadian Journal of Community Mental Health, vol. 16, no. 2, Jan. 1997, pp. 37-50., doi:10.7870/cjcmh-1997-0005.

These concepts about wellness come from a different urban context and represent the knowledge and experience of many Indigenous traditions. That's what researcher **Collin Van Uchelen** and a team at Vancouver's Native Health Society learned from conversations exploring strength and wellness with individuals from multiple Indigenous cultures.

Six elements seem to be core to the good life. Woven through the six elements is a spiritual sensibility:



Components of the good life include:

Sense of community: acceptance, sharing, talking, laughing

Identity: connection to culture, language, family

Tradition: gatherings, ceremonies, prayer

Contribution: listening, kindness, giving

Appreciative living: self-care, self-worth, humour, respect

Coming through hardship: pain, perseverance, integration

Spirituality: faith, sacredness, interconnectedness

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Indigenous perspectives

Weaving together the multiplicity of Indigenous perspectives in Canada, [the Assembly of First Nations and the First Nations and Inuit Health Branch of Health Canada](#), introduced the First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework in 2015.

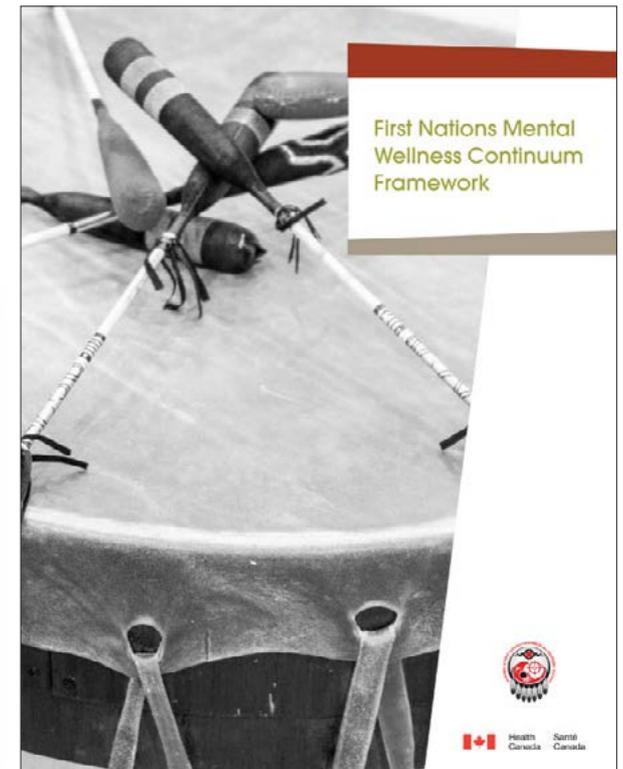
Their starting point? What Indigenous communities share in common.

Source

First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework. Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada, as Represented by the Minister of Health, 2015, pp. 1–64.

“ Indigenous Peoples across Canada have teachings about their relationship with land, animals, birds, fish... What we call Creation. Indigenous languages recognize all of Creation as ‘beings’ meaning they have a spirit, identity, unique purpose and way of being...”

Well-being requires the warm embrace of creation, and the active rejection of colonization. Colonization was a systematic attempt to assimilate Indigenous Peoples into white settler society through forced separation of families, placement into Residential Schools, and the disproportionate apprehension of children into the foster care and adoption systems. Returning to creation practices and stories means honouring and celebrating spirit and culture, which is the lifeblood of being and becoming well.



[First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework](#)

Hole in the sky

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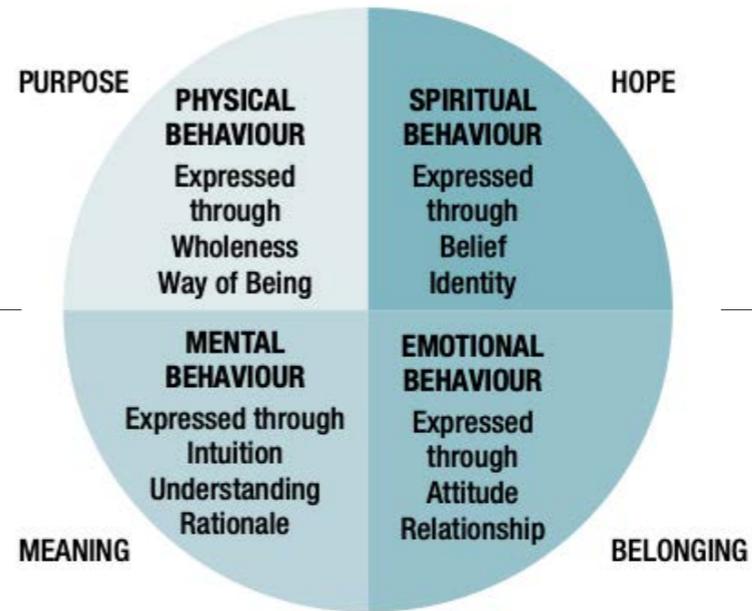
As the framework states,

“Mental wellness is a balance of the mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional. This balance is enriched as individuals have: purpose in their daily lives whether it is through education, employment, care-giving activities, or cultural ways of being and doing; hope for their future and those of their families that is grounded in a sense of identity, unique Indigenous values, and having a belief in spirit; a sense of belonging and connectedness within their families, to community, and to culture; and finally a sense of meaning and an understanding of how their lives and those of their families and communities are part of creation and a rich history.

Well-being is made-up of

Purpose as expressed through physical behaviour including cultural ways of doing and being, caregiving, learning, working.

Meaning as expressed through mental behaviour including intuition and understanding of place within creation and history.



Hope as expressed through spiritual behaviour including belief in spirit, Indigenous values, and identity.

Belonging as expressed through emotional behaviour including feelings of connectedness within family, community and culture.

Indigenous Wellness Framework

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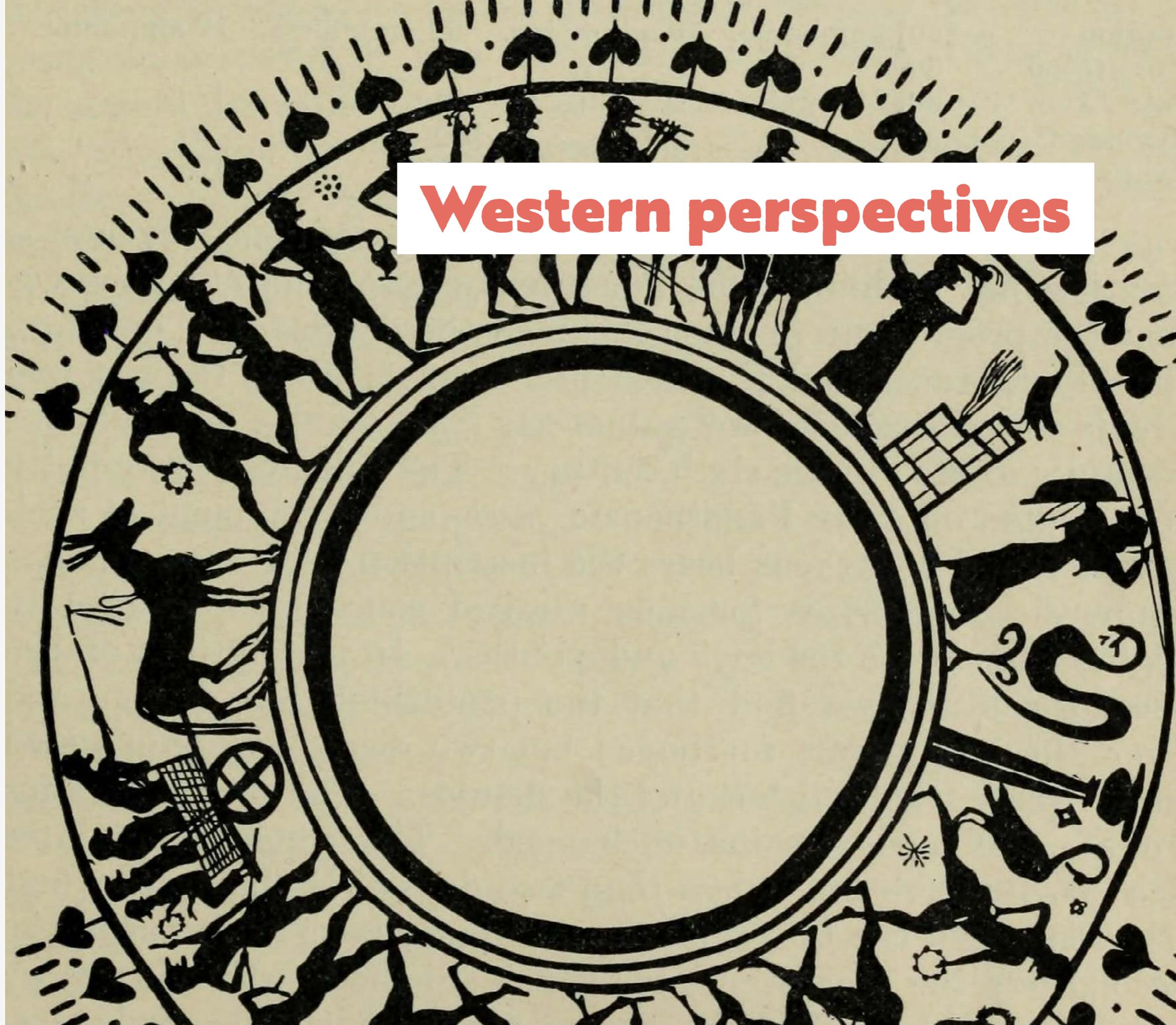
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Image

[Greek athletic sports and festivals](#)

Western perspectives



Western perspectives

According to some of the oldest works of Western literature – *the Odyssey and Iliad* – **good lives are big lives, full of strength and prowess.**

Good lives are made up of:

Nobility	Wealth	Beauty	Courage
Generosity	Pragmatism	Justice	Piety

Three hundred years or so later, *Pythagoras of Samos* (the guy who invented $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$) turned the focus inward. **The good life wasn't so much about power and privilege as inner peace and cosmic harmony.**

Good lives are influenced by:

Decent behaviour	Strong character
Unity with the cosmos	

Balance was also pretty essential to *Hippocrates of Cos*, who is considered the “father of medicine” (in fact, doctors still pledge the Hippocratic Oath). **A good life is all about harmony within the individual.**

Good lives are a balance of:

Individual constitutions	Diets	Exercises
Humors (bile, blood, phlegm and black bile)		
Geography	Seasonal climates	
Heavenly bodies		

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Western perspectives

For **Aristotle**, the good life was comprised of internal goods of mind and body like wisdom, courage, beauty and strength, along with external goods like friends and honour. **But, the good life wasn't about the acquisition of these goods; it was about their ongoing and active pursuit.**

Aristotle used the word **Eudaimonia** to capture doing good and being well. True well-being comes from the expression of virtue: from engaging in that which is worthwhile. Feeling good, then, isn't an accurate indicator of well-being. Nor is health, longevity, income, or any other externally-benchmarked measure.

We might have a job, money in our bank accounts and feel happy with our success, but that doesn't mean we're engaged in meaningful activity and actualizing our human potential.

Aristotle says:

“The many, the most vulgar, seemingly conceive the good and happiness as pleasure, and hence they also like the life of gratification. Here they appear completely slavish, since the life they decide on is a life for grazing animals.”

Well-being (Eudaimonia) consists of:

Virtuous action	Self-actualization
-----------------	--------------------

In contrast to Aristotle, greek philosophers like **Aristippus and Epicurus** conceptualized pleasure as the ultimate aim of a good life.

For Epicurus, pleasure was about body and mind. We feel good when our bodies and minds are at peace.

Pleasure (hedonism) is made-up of:

Tranquility of mind	Healthy body
---------------------	--------------

Epicurus writes:

“We call pleasure the alpha and omega of a blessed life. Pleasure is our first and kindred good. It is the starting-point of every choice and of every aversion, and to it we come back, inasmuch as we make feeling the rule by which to judge of every good thing.”

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Western perspectives

Where the Greek philosophers constructed a human-centric worldview posited on goodness, reason and excellence, over in southern Mesopotamia, the Hebrews architected a monotheistic worldview centred on the relationship between the Creator, humankind, and the land of Israel. Unlike the Greeks, with their many Gods in material form, the Hebrews (and their descendents, the Jews) declared there was only one god who resisted material form. Living a good life meant following God's Commandments and other actions for good. The concept of **Tikun Olam (heal the world)** is central to wellness in Judaism and refers to any activity that improves the world and brings it closer to the harmony in which it was created.

The Hebrew word for well-being:

It is also means:

Wholeness	Completion	Perfection	Peace
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Sources

["Judaism & Jewish Life."](#) My Jewish Learning, My Jewish Learning, 2020.

["Hillel."](#) Hillel, Hillel's Joseph Meyerhoff Center for Jewish Experience.

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Western perspectives

Whole-hearted belief and pious obedience were integral to early **Christianity**. “The early Church found shalom and happiness in God and His blessing of the earthly life. It was the Church who preached that our life here was weighed down not with shame, but with glory”. (Liang, Suiwen. “Christians, Pagans, and the Good Life.” The Dartmouth Apologia, 2012, pp. 2–7.)

Christian accounts of the good life:

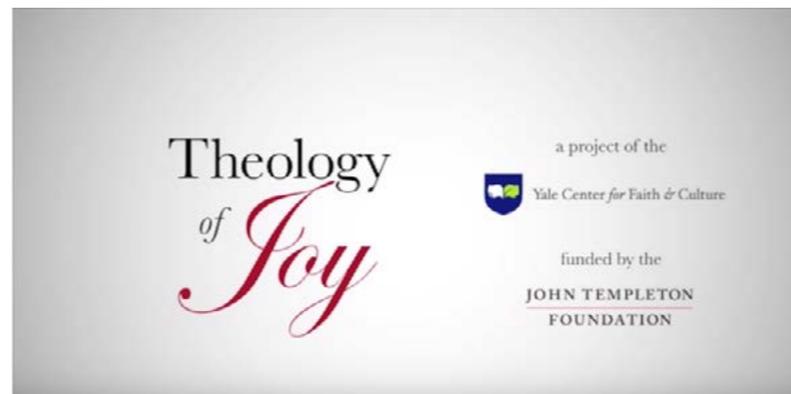
Glory	Joy
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Source

Volf, Miroslav. *Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World*. Yale University Press, 2017.

As **Miroslav Volf** writes in his book, *Flourishing: Why we need religion in a Globalized World*,

“In Romans 14, the Apostle Paul describes the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is not food and drink; it is righteousness, peace, and joy. Righteousness is acting and living rightly. Peace is living in circumstances that are conducive to a good life. And joy is the emotional side. For me, that’s what the good life is: righteousness, peace, and joy.”



[What is Joy?](#) Yale Center for Faith and Culture

Positioning joy as the interconnected thread, the Yale Center for Faith & Culture describe a good and full life as determined by:

How you feel (e.g. love, joy)

What you do (e.g. self-control, faithfulness, kindness, gentleness)

How the world is (e.g. materially and culturally)

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Image

[The dragon, image, and demon; or, The three religions of China: Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism](#)

Eastern perspectives



Eastern perspectives

Around the time (if not before) Homer penned the Odyssey and Iliad, the Vedic texts captured ancient Hindu thought from the Northwestern Indian subcontinent. Of course, no short synopsis can possibly convey the richness of the belief system, but unlike hedonism, **Hinduism** centres on self-emancipation or freeing oneself from bodily desires and material constraints.

Three concepts are especially salient: atman, brahman, and dharma.

- Atman is our innermost non-material selves.
- Braham is the one, universal spirit that grounds everything.
- Dharma controls all worldly and human affairs, and sets out virtuous action as that which upholds inner and outer harmony.

A good life is one where we realize that atman actually is brahman, and behave in accordance with Dharma. In other words, **a good life recognizes there is no distinction between self and spirit, and embraces the oneness of existence.**

A good life is comprised of:

Giving up illegitimate desires	Gratitude	
Non-violence	Limitless compassion	
Generosity	Self-control	A present mind
Enduring hardships	Experiential knowledge	

Source

Joshanloo, Mohsen. Eastern Conceptualizations of Happiness: Fundamental Differences with Western View. J Happiness Stud DOI 10.1007/s10902-013-9431-1

Eastern perspectives

Source

Joshanloo, Mohsen. "Eastern Conceptualizations of Happiness: Fundamental Differences with Western Views." *Journal of Happiness Studies*, vol. 15, no. 2, Apr. 2014, pp. 475–493., doi:10.1007/s10902-013-9431-1.



Confucianism, arising in China a few hundred years after The Vedas, also centres on concepts of harmony and equilibrium. But it's social relationships, rather than notions of self, that are the anchor. As **Moshen Joshanloo** writes in his review of Eastern Conceptualizations of Happiness:

“In a harmonious way of living, actions result from the individual's perceptions of their relationships with other people and not necessarily from private volition, emotions or needs. Instead of reinforcing and enhancing the individual self, Confucianism emphasizes the importance of self-cultivation, self-conquest, and self-discipline... self-cultivation [is] undertaken to obtain social virtues, and should not lead to one's isolation from society.

A good life is made-up by practicing:

Ren: the virtue of human-heartedness: feelings of love and compassion for others	Zhi: the virtue of practical knowledge and reflection
Yi: the virtue of honesty and justice	Xin: the virtue of integrity
	Li: the virtue of rites, ceremony

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Eastern perspectives

Sufism, emerging by the Islamic Golden Age, underscores a way of knowing about self, world, and universe rooted in experience and intuition rather than logic and rationality. Like Hinduism and Confucianism, compassion plays a starring role.

Where Aristotle and much of Greek philosophy prize reasoned action, Sufism views reason as inherently limiting and ego bound. **The good life is one where we detach from our egos and the material world, accept suffering and hardship, and find harmony and balance.** Far from trying to minimize pain and maximize pleasure, Sufism embraces loss and hardship as necessary for transcendence.

“Joshanloo summarizes,

The heart is thought to contain our deeper intelligence and wisdom...Understanding through the ‘heart’s intelligence’ is superior to understanding through the intelligence of the head.

The good life is comprised of:

Intuitive knowledge	Misery and hardship
Wholehearted acceptance	Inner harmony
Union with the Divine	

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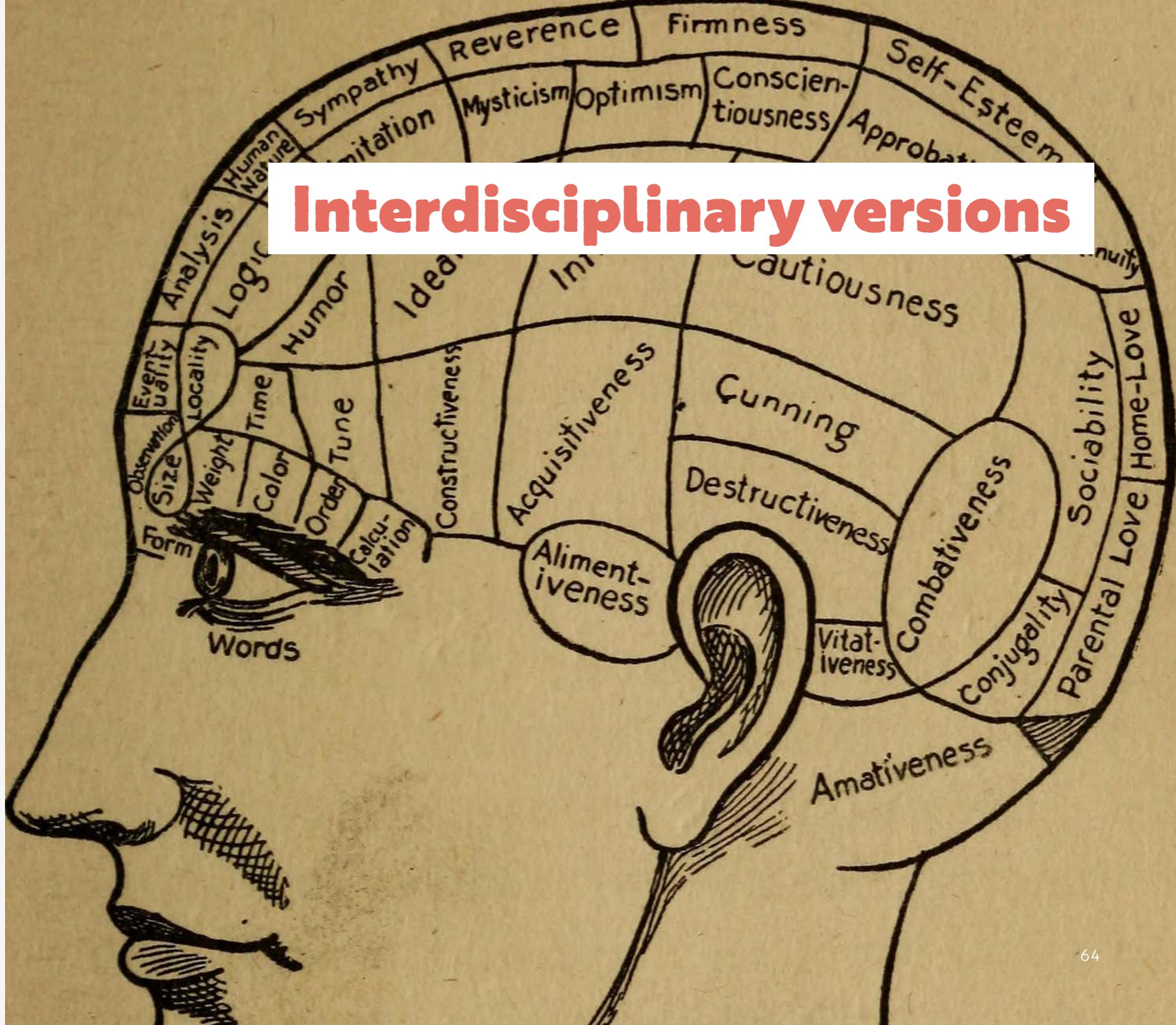
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Image

[How to know human nature: its inner states and outer forms](#)



Interdisciplinary versions

Alongside philosophical and cultural accounts of wellness sit empirical theories, informed by disciplines like sociology, psychology, psychiatry, and neuroscience.

Well-being is a well-studied phenomenon – a complex stew of variables and determining factors. For **Alfred Adler**, a medical doctor and psychologist who pioneered individual psychology, wellness was wholeness: it was about relationships between variables and factors.

A good and whole life is one of friendship, love, purpose and self-direction, underpinned by spirituality, or a deep sense of connectedness with ground and universe.

A good and whole life is one of:

Friendship	Love
Purpose	Self-direction

Alfred Adler noted,

“It is always necessary to look for . . . reciprocal actions of the mind on the body, for both of them are parts of the whole with which we should be concerned.”

Source

Ansbacher, H. L., & Ansbacher, R. R. (1967). The individual psychology of Alfred Adler. New York: Basic Books.

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Interdisciplinary versions

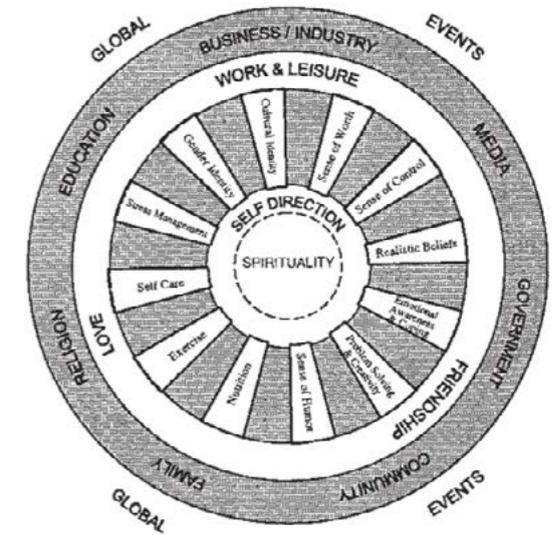
Nearly one hundred years after Adler described wellness as holism, the psychologists **T. J. Sweeney** and **J. M. Witmer** put together a measurable model. The Wellness Evaluation of Lifestyle (WEL) model looks like a wheel with five “life tasks” making-up the hub plus interrelated spokes. Spirituality is the most central of the life tasks, powering self-direction, love, friendship, work, and leisure. While spirituality and empirical science are often seen as at odds, the authors find evidence that, *“Spirituality is conceptualized as the core characteristic of healthy people and the source of all other dimensions of wellness.”*

Source

Myers, J. E., and T. J. Sweeney. “The Indivisible Self: An Evidence-Based Model of Wellness.” *Journal of Individual Psychology*, vol. 60, no. 3, 2004, pp. 234–245.

With spirituality comes a sense of perspective and interconnection, giving the individual strength to pursue the other core tasks of life. Data collected from over 3000 people has validated the model, and added more nuance. Self-direction is an amalgam of our (1) sense of worth, (2) control, (3) realistic beliefs, (4) emotional awareness, (5) creative problem-solving; (6) sense of humor, (7) nutrition and exercise, (8) self-care, (9) stress management, (10) gender identity and (11) cultural identity.

The Wheel of Wellness



Source

Myers, J. E., Sweeney, T. J., & Witmer, J. M. (2000). [The Wheel of Wellness counseling for wellness: A holistic model for treatment planning](#). *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 78, 251-266.

A good life, then, is comprised of:

Spirituality: a deep sense of oneness	Love: belonging, intimacy, trust
Work & leisure: a sense of achievement, mastery, and flow	Friendship: social interest, empathy, cooperation
Self-direction: a sense of worth, control, emotional coping, humor, self-care, cultural & gender identity	

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Interdisciplinary versions

With so many component parts to wellbeing, which ones to emphasise? How to order them?

Developmental psychologist **Carol Ryff's** approach is to avoid excess and extremes:

Source

Ryff, Carol D., and Burton H. Singer. "Know Thyself and Become What You Are: A Eudaimonic Approach to Psychological Well-Being." *Happiness Studies Book Series The Exploration of Happiness*, vol. 9, 2008, pp. 13–39., doi:10.1007/978-94-007-5702-8_6.

Carol Ryff

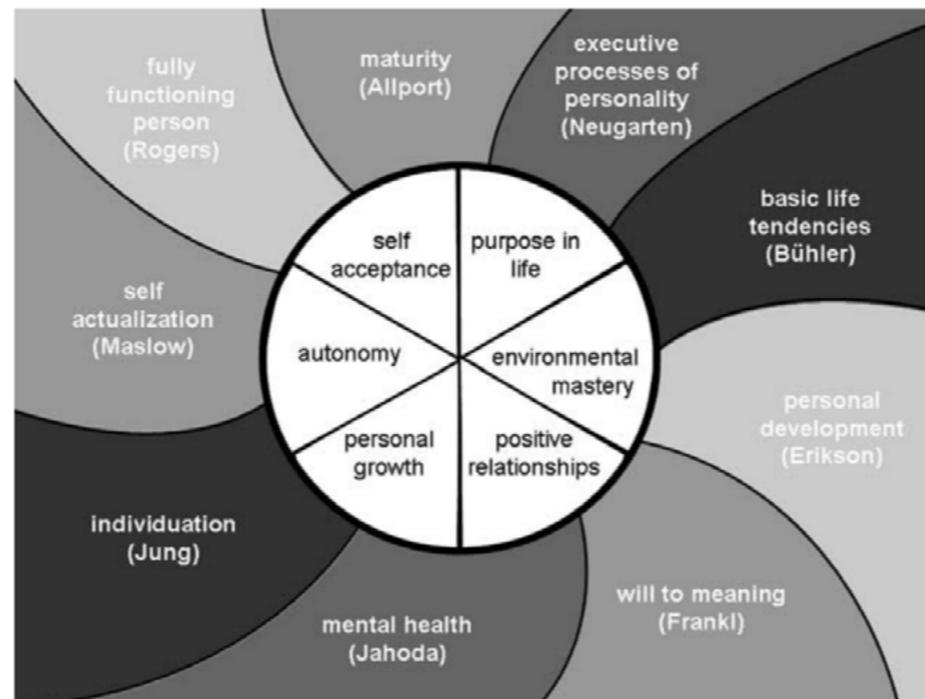
“ [W]e should avoid excess and extremes, whether it be a kind of wellbeing that is so solipsistic and individualist as to leave no room for human connection and the social good, or a version that is so focused on responsibilities and duties outside the self that inherent talents and capacities are neither recognized nor developed.

Living well requires:

- Holding yourself in positive regard
- Giving and receiving love
- Growing and developing
- Finding meaning via adversity
- Having autonomy and agency
- Interdependence with your environment

Source

[Core dimensions of psychological well-being and their theoretical foundations](#) (Ryff, and Singer, 2008)



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Interdisciplinary versions

Amid the ever-more-present realities of climate change, poverty, inequality and isolation, **Dr. Tim Kasser** examines the values underpinning how well we live together. Good lives embody and imbue a set of intrinsic values: values which are more relational, and less material.

Kasser notes,

“Extrinsic values – such as wealth, or preservation of public image – tend to undermine our levels of personal wellbeing. In general, the esteem of others or pursuit of material goods seem to be unreliable sources of satisfaction in life. Other, more inherently rewarding pursuits – such as those found in intrinsic motivations and self-direction values – seem to provide a firmer foundation.”

A good life premised on intrinsic values includes:

Acceptance	Affiliation	Community feeling	Freedom
Creativity	Self-respect	Equality	Unity with nature

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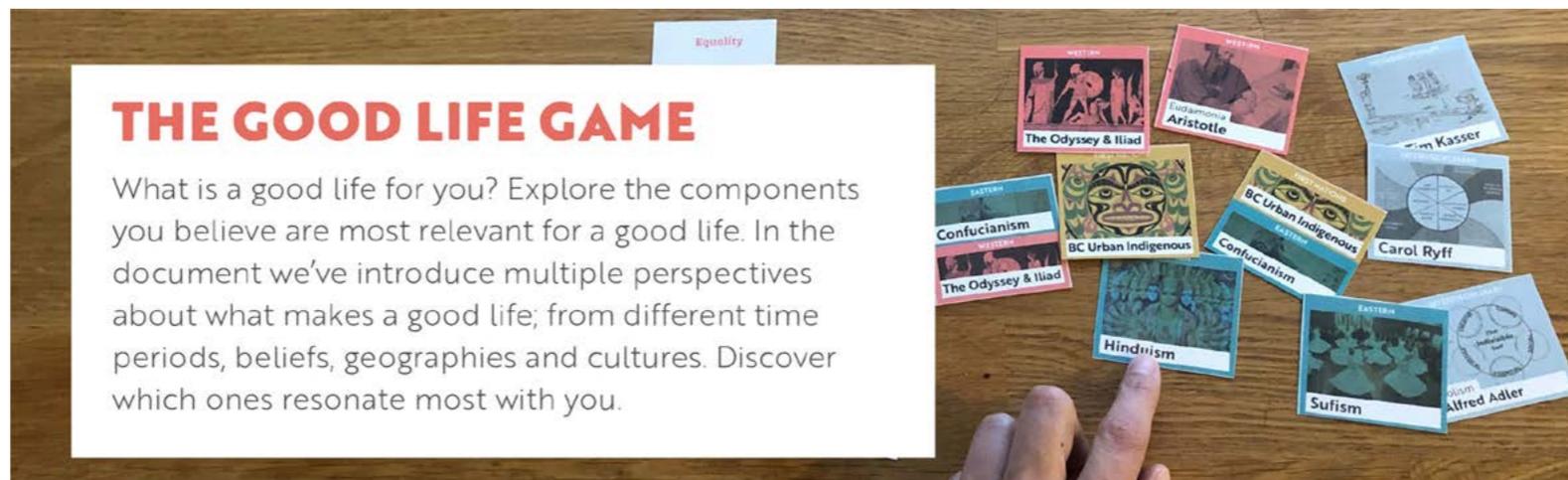
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How does your own definition of wellness compare?
What cultures, religions, or philosophical schools
of thought do you draw on?

Want to explore the perspectives and concepts in
a more tactile way. Download **The Good Life Game**.



Download
The Good Life Game

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Animating ideas

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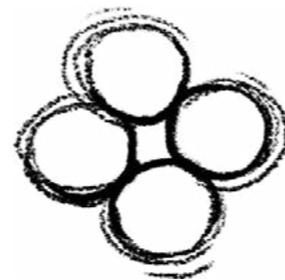
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What's also apparent is that most versions of the good life are nonhierarchical – elements are depicted as interrelated, rather than sequential. So, for example, self-acceptance need not come before positive relationships; they can co-occur and influence each other.



Many of us might be familiar with **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs** – perhaps we've seen the triangle with physiological needs at the bottom and self-actualization at the top. Suggestive in the triangle imagery is that “basic” needs precede “higher order” needs. First described in the 1940s, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is arguably the conceptual bedrock of modern day social services. Wellness has come to equal satiating needs, in order of material urgency.



Surprisingly, the language of needs is not a strong or recurring feature of the wellness literature we've read. Neither is the triangle or pyramid imagery. Wheels, spokes, concentric circles, and nestled dolls have come to better visually represent the interconnected nature of wellness. Where needs for things such as food or belonging are often perceived as a switch – they are either met or unmet – elements of wellness such as compassion and virtue – operate more as threads to be continuously stitched together.

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Two meals, differentiated not only by age, but by ideas



Beneath the lines, the cafeteria, the standard-issue trays, and the nice church ladies with hairnets was one dominant idea: hierarchy of needs. Safely satiating hunger had to come before all else.



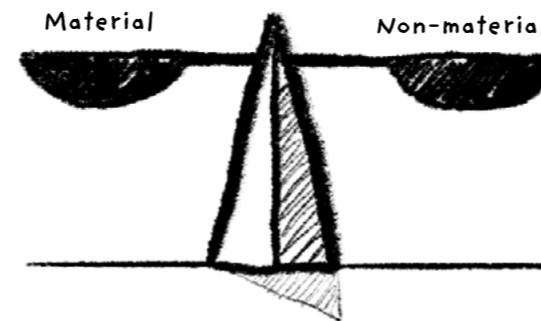
Beneath the gallery, the maitre-d, hand-painted mugs, aprons, shared table, sparkle lights and music was a different dominant idea: the good life as sense of community, identity, tradition, contribution, appreciative living, and spirituality. In this one, seemingly every day task of providing a hot meal, these distinct ideas took shape, influencing most everything about the spaces: their physicality and the human interactions within.

Recounting this story often raises questions – many pragmatic. Questions about scale and costs, and safety and security. A hierarchy of needs approach seems to more easily accommodate volume. We can fit more people into a cafeteria, at a lower cost per head.

- Then there's queries about who can really reach the good life?
- Is it possible for young people full of promise, but too late for adults with mental health challenges and addictions?
- Can hardened adults, under the influence, really partake in a shared meal?

No caveats?

Interestingly, there aren't really any caveats to the good life – at least not in our reading of the literature. There aren't different versions for different ages or afflictions; nor are there asterisks to indicate the conditionality of the concept. If anything, wrestling with pain, hardship and suffering are woven into multiple conceptualizations of wellness (e.g. Hinduism, Sufism, Indigenous).



Ideas, whether we can name them or not, frame what we see and consider possible. Saturated in ideas of *material needs* and *scarce resources*, it can be hard to imagine spaces for the most marginalized oriented first and foremost around ideas like identity, tradition, contribution and appreciative living. Steeped in these alternative ideas, you arrive at very different kinds of spaces and interactions: monasteries, for example, which also accommodate a high volume of people, but are in pursuit of a *non-material* conception of the good life.

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The soup kitchen & monastery

Many of us would see the soup kitchen and monastery as distinct. But might the monastery offer us clues in other ways a shelter might approach wellbeing?

Monastic living provides basic needs, but doesn't stop there. Non-material needs are given more weight. Our present-day separation of the material and the non-material isn't surprising to **Jonathan Rowson**, former Director of the Royal Society for the Arts Social Brain Centre, who is reintroducing the spirit as the bedrock of modern society.

He describes how non-material ideas have come to be defined as "private" matters, outside the scope of the public purse.

"So we've lived in a liberal hegemony for a long time, where the prevailing idea was that the public realm was for questions of resource allocation, and the private realm was where you figured out what was true and what was good and what was beautiful."



Technical dissonance

The material and non-material split runs deep. Whereas material considerations are deemphasized in most philosophical and cultural conceptions of wellness, spiritual considerations are missing from so many of the official versions of well-being.

Just look at how a trend-setting institution like the **World Health Organization** describes well-being:

“The basic determinants of human well-being may be defined in terms of: security; an adequate supply of basic materials for livelihood (e.g. food, shelter, clothing, energy, etc.); personal freedoms; good social relations; and physical health...”

WHO 2005

The **Canadian Index on Wellbeing** adds elements to the WHO version, but still excludes the spirit, conceptualizing well-being as,

“The presence of the highest possible quality of life in its full breadth of expression, focused on but not necessarily exclusive to good living standards, robust health, a sustainable environment, vital communities, an educated populace, balanced time use, high levels of democratic participation, and access to and participation in leisure and culture.”

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Oriented towards the tangible, the technocratic take on wellness centres on what you have, rather than who you are. So living close to a cultural centre becomes an indicator of well-being, rather than how access to culture shapes feeling whole and accepted.

Vicki Grieves, writing about Indigenous well-being in Australian policy, captures the difference between having and being:

“Spirituality is a feeling, with a base in connectedness to the past, ancestors, and the values that they represent, for example, respect for elders, a moral/ethical path. It is about being in an Aboriginal cultural space, experiencing community and connectedness with land and nature including proper nutrition and shelter. Feeling good about oneself, proud of being an Aboriginal person. It is a state of being that includes knowledge, calmness, acceptance and tolerance, balance and focus, inner strength, cleansing and inner peace, feeling whole, an understanding of cultural roots and ‘deep wellbeing.’

Grieves 2006

What would it look like to reconnect the material and the spiritual, and reconfigure the role of the public versus private?

Material elements like nutrition and shelter are included in Grieves’ account of wellness, but only as part of a person’s relationship to land and nature – as facilitators of a state of being. Seen in this way, industrial-scale food and shelter options, disconnected from the land and nature, could detract from the calmness, balance, focus, strength, cleansing, inner peace, and wholeness that seems to be the spiritual essence of wellness.

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Wellness in policy and service

 12 minutes

So much of modern social policy focuses on material deprivation: the lack of income, shelter, food, medicine, and service. Somewhere along the way, as farms gave way to factories, wellness was conflated with productivity. Take a look at the policy and program frames which shape how we define problems and solutions.



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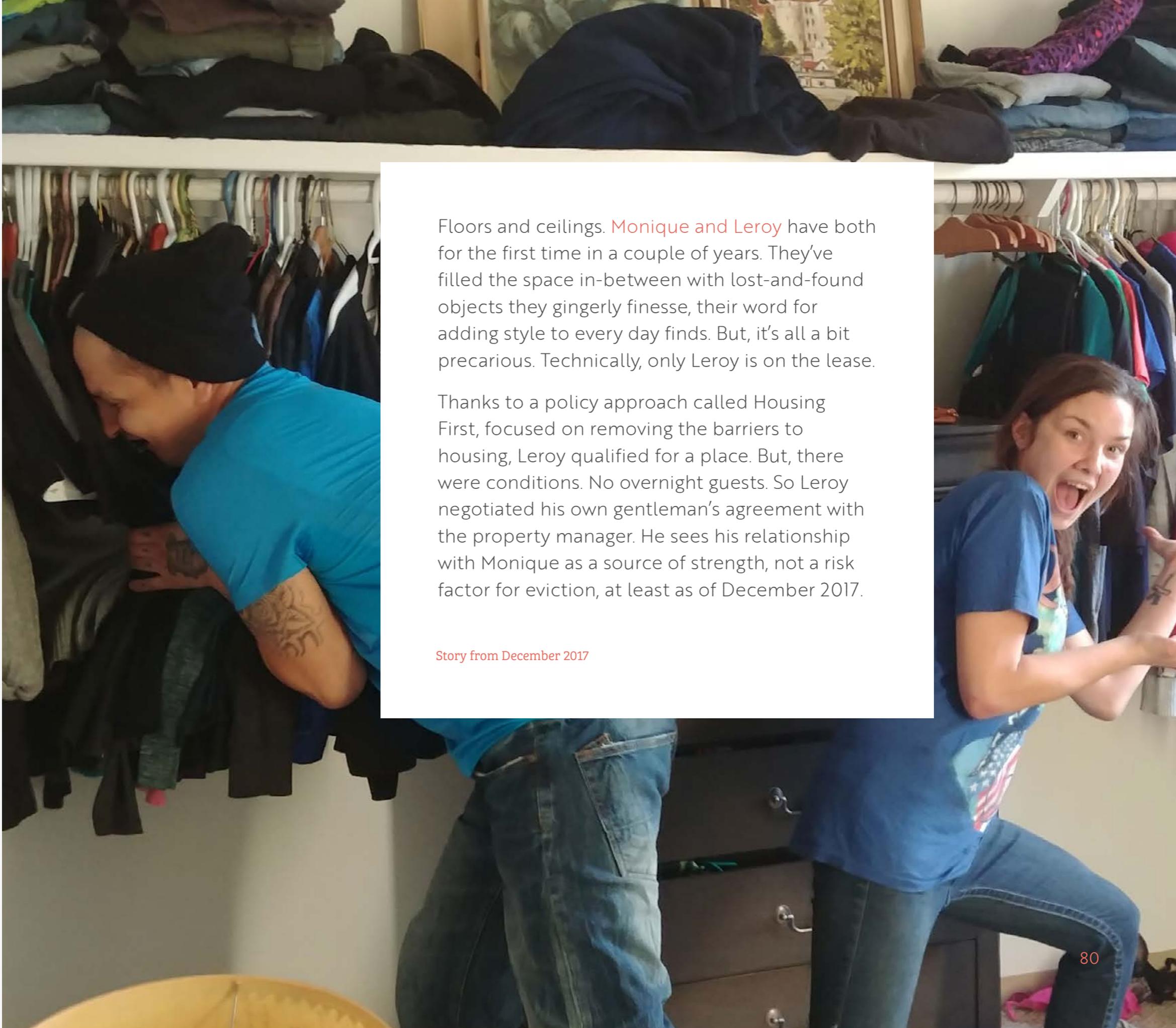
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Floors and ceilings. **Monique and Leroy** have both for the first time in a couple of years. They've filled the space in-between with lost-and-found objects they gingerly finesse, their word for adding style to every day finds. But, it's all a bit precarious. Technically, only Leroy is on the lease.

Thanks to a policy approach called Housing First, focused on removing the barriers to housing, Leroy qualified for a place. But, there were conditions. No overnight guests. So Leroy negotiated his own gentleman's agreement with the property manager. He sees his relationship with Monique as a source of strength, not a risk factor for eviction, at least as of December 2017.

Story from December 2017

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For the past hundred plus years, since machines and factories swept our landscape, the state has grappled with whether to provide floors and set ceilings.

Industrialization reconfigured risks and resiliencies. Living away from farm and family, an injury, illness and job loss could really knock a person down – and, at scale, a whole economy. Unemployment insurance, basic health care, pensions, housing subsidies, safety standards and wage regulations emerged across Canada with the promise of establishing a basic minimum life, a kind-of lowest common denominator for survival. Productivity was the real ambition, not wellness. The logic was something like: keep people going to keep the economy going. Or, if we're honest students of history: keep “deserving” people going to keep the economy going.

Timeline of key social policies, Canada



1914

Ontario offers first workmen's compensation scheme to protect workers injured on the job

1927

First old age pension scheme introduced for 'deserving' senior citizens

1930s

Grocery, fuel and clothing tokens offered, alongside employment camps

1935

Dominion Housing Act was first to provide \$20 million in housing loans



1938

First National Housing Act introduced

1940

Federal Unemployment Insurance Act comes into force, the country's first social security program



1945

The Federal family allowance passes, becoming the first social security program open to all, without income tests

1965

Canada establishes a federal pension plan



1966

The Medical Care Act shares costs of healthcare with provinces

Much of what has come to characterize social policy since the World Wars has been:



A focus on the material. It's about poverty lines, cash payments and transfers, subsidies and standards, housing and infrastructure.

These days, exemplified by poverty reduction strategies



A focus on the rational. It's about needs assessments, diagnoses, case management, compliance, surveillance, discipline and the normalization of deviant populations.

These days, exemplified by service coordination strategies



A focus on the professional. It's about organizations, services, processes and codified expertise.

These days, exemplified by organizational transformation strategies

Community conversations

Non-material goals

☞ We try to balance the material and the non-material. If we didn't, we'd have a pretty poor Christian world view. ...We will talk about how to do things 'with' people, not just 'for' people. And the material is always for people, always, always 'for'.

So, you need shelter, we give you a place to live, shelter, that's 'for'. You're hungry, we give you something to eat, that's 'for'. You need snow pants because it's minus gazillion in Edmonton again, it's doing something 'for' them.

'With' is always about the non-material. When we walk alongside people, that is when we enter into, not just a relational sense...

Forgive me, for sounding like a good preacher now: soul connections happen in 'with'. That is where the non-material begins to blossom. When people find identity, find wholeness, when they find that sense of full wellbeing. And so, at the Mustard Seed we try to do both those things.



Dean Kurpjuweit
Executive Director,
The Mustard Seed

Story from February 2020

One number, one frame

Around the same time the welfare state emerged, a single statistic captivated international attention.

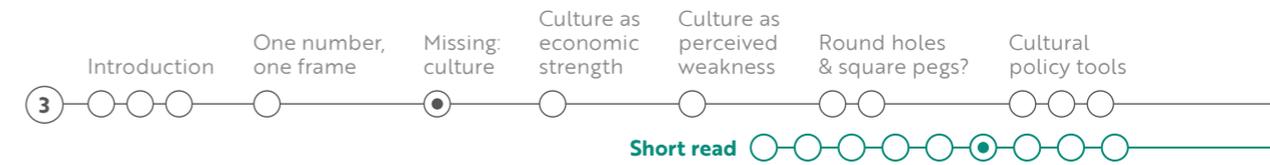
Gross Domestic Product, dreamed up by an American economist in 1937, rolled up all economic production by individuals, companies and government into one, parsimonious number. What it lost in nuance, it made up in clarity of purpose: growth. Social policy, any policy, really, was in pursuit of a higher number. Poverty depressed growth.

By the 1970s, there were some national naysayers. High in the Himalayas, the Kingdom of Bhutan declared, "Gross national happiness is more important than gross domestic product." Rooted in Buddhist ideas of the good life, gross national happiness elevates the non-material: compassion, contentment and calmness. But, fifty years later, GNH isn't a one-size solution and GDP remains Canada's one-key metric.

Non-profits and research shops have proposed more meaningful numbers. In 2011, the Canadian Index of Wellbeing, housed at the University of Waterloo, released their first national metrics. Alongside the typical material indicators are time use, social relationships, participation in cultural events, and perceptions of safety. Still absent are indicators on the qualities of being: on elements such as identity, belonging, cultural knowledge and spiritual practice.

“Like most countries, Canada lacks a single, national instrument for tracking and reporting on our overall quality of life. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was never designed or intended to be a measure of social progress, or overall quality of life. It fails to capture quality of life in its full breadth of expression...”

Community Health and Wellbeing:
[Shift the Conversation](#)



Missing: culture

Culture and spirituality have gone missing from most indicators and most social policies – for defensible reasons.

Where culture has appeared in academic literature, and picked up by policymakers, it's too often been used to find fault, stigmatize, and worse, oppress.

Take, for example, the “culture of poverty” analysis, popular in the 1960s, which argued that what keeps people in poverty “down” is a culture of their making. Rather than recognize values and norms oriented towards non-material ends, beliefs counter to the mainstream are pathologized and defined as deviant. Under the label of deviance, dominant society has rationalized all sorts of punitive instruments from fees to fines to tickets to apprehensions, and extolled all sorts of discriminatory language from lazy to welfare cheats to queens.

A number of well-known professors conclude:

“If one defines culture in its broadest sense as the unorganized and largely implicit values and norms represented in the behaviour of a community or nation then for the last fifty years academic social policy studies have almost entirely avoided the issue of its effects on welfare development.”

John Baldock in “Culture: The Missing Variable in Understanding Social Policy?”

“Culture was a “third rail” in scholarship on poverty for so long that it became essentially a black box, one now ripe for reopening.”

Mario Luis Small, David J. Harding and Michèle Lamont in “Reconsidering Culture and Poverty”



Culture as economic strength

Source

Hilton, Carol Anne.
["Indigenomics."](#)
Indigenomics Institute,
2020.

In Canada, [Carol Anne Hinton](#) has coined the term Indigenomics, a practice that draws on “ancient principles that have supported indigenous economies for thousands of years, and works to implement them as modern business practices.” Indigenomics rejects the colonialist notion that Indigenous culture and achieving economic equity are in conflict.

That’s the underlying assumption that Economist [Alfred Dockery](#), writing down under, draws attention to in his work:

“A recurring theme in Indigenous affairs in Australia is a tension between maintenance of Indigenous culture and achievement of socio-economic ‘equity’: essentially ‘self-determination’ versus ‘assimilation.’ Implicit in this tension is the view that attachment to traditional cultures and lifestyles is a hindrance to achieving ‘mainstream’ economic goals.

Dockery tries to debunk this myth, using empirical data to show that “strong attachment” to traditional culture actually enhances social and economic outcomes. He puts quotations around words like equity, self-determination, assimilation, and mainstream to show how we may update our language, but not our underlying ideas.

Just because we paint our policy documents with words like “economic equity” doesn’t mean assumptions have substantively changed. Rather than see the decimation of traditional culture as a driver of poverty, we view “deviant” culture as perpetuating poverty.

Indeed, any culture which *de-values* the material is tacitly (and sometimes explicitly) viewed as morally deficient. Under this economic-first frame, education, employment and benefits programs are designed to instill “the right” values, model “responsible” practices and incentivize “productive” work ethics.

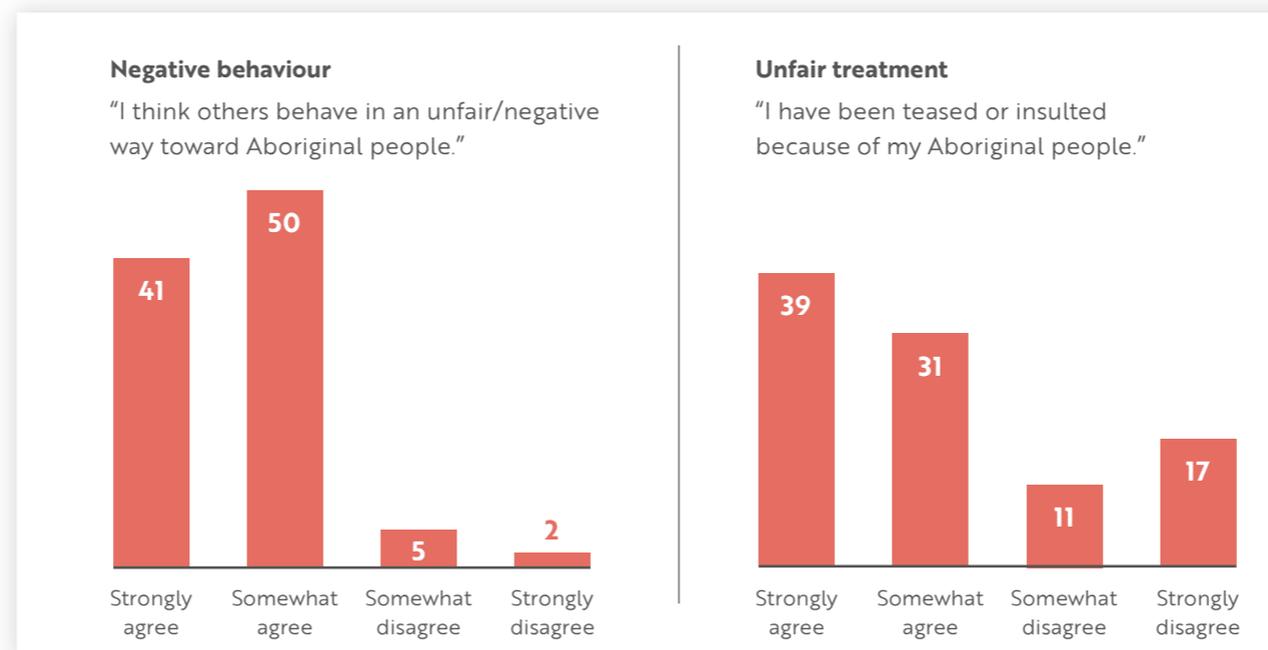
Culture as perceived weakness

The absence of culture in social policy isn't an academic argument. Indigenous Peoples also feel their culture is perceived as a weakness. This is particularly true in Edmonton.

In 2010, the [Urban Aboriginal People's Study](#) interviewed 2,614 Métis, Inuit, and First Nations folks living in eleven Canadian cities, exploring identity, everyday life, values and aspirations. More so than in any other city, Indigenous Edmontonians believe they are looked at negatively by non-Indigenous residents. Mindful of discrimination, Indigenous Peoples in Edmonton are less likely than those in other cities to actively engage in cultural activities, despite knowing those activities are available. Availability of cultural activities *is not* a good proxy for engagement in or acceptance of culture. Separated from cultural practices, the study found that those identified as First Nations peoples in Edmonton have a more diluted sense of connection to other Indigenous Peoples than do those in other cities – though this is not true for Métis in the city, whose larger numbers may explain differences in experience.

Read more

[Urban Aboriginal People's Study](#)



Round holes and square pegs?

Three to four times a week, Monique and Leroy head to a house behind the Dairy Queen for “biblical counselling.” A guy named Eskimo hosts. It’s not a program or service. He’s not a doctor or social worker. They’re just a group of peers supporting each other through their recovery, and talking about what matters.



We might call this the round hole, square peg problem. Well-being is the round hole, grounded in spirit and culture. Our usual policy tools are square and siloed boxes that just don’t quite fit – no matter how many strategies, action plans, frameworks, indicators and targets we engineer. Because, when you strip away the rhetoric, there’s two types of tools governments tend to lean on:

- **Direct income transfers.** Think: welfare benefits, housing subsidies, etc.
- **Programs and services.** Think: employment programs, mental health care, social workers, etc.

Juxtaposing the plethora of strategies, action plans, frameworks and indicators with the stagnant lived realities of Indigenous Peoples, [Collin van Uchelen and a team at Vancouver Native Health Society](#) can’t help but see the wrong tools and language in continual use.

“The focus on needs often results in recommendations that call for more services to fill identified gaps in the existing service delivery system. The underlying premise of this approach is that services contribute to well-being and provide effective solutions to existing problems... A serious drawback to framing the issues solely in terms of needs is that it fails to recognize the potential of Indigenous knowledge and existing strengths as health promoting resources.”

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Round holes and square pegs?

Programs, services and cash transfers are artifacts of the material world. They are about what you can count, and who you can count on. Professionals hold and distribute the resources. Not communities.

John Coates, Mel Gray and Tiani Hetherington look at how the social work profession, despite growing cross-cultural and anti-oppressive practice, still struggles to extract itself from particular Western ideas.

Only it's not just social workers who find themselves entrenched in a particular world view. Even religious institutions have increasingly found themselves in the program, services and benefits game where material targets (number of meals and socks provided) seem to outweigh the spiritual. Blending the material and spiritual can be rather tricky. When a faith-based soup kitchen incorporates prayer into meal time, it raises questions about imposing *one* versus honoring *multiple* spiritual views, especially when it may be the only service in a given neighbourhood.

“ Joan Coates, Mel Gray and Tiani Hetherington write

Social work expounds values and beliefs, such as universalism, professionalism and individualism, to name a few, that run counter to many indigenous beliefs and values (such as interdependence and inclusion)... Social work interventions must adapt to the realities encountered by Indigenous groups – realities that are frequently ‘unstable, complex and disorderly’ – and value their diverse contributions...

We contend that social work will never be able to incorporate diversity effectively until it moves beyond... beliefs that separate professional knowledge and lived experience, and that stand in the way of seeing indigenous perspectives as legitimate and credible.

Cultural policy tools

Beyond prayer, what even are non-material policy tools? That is, tools oriented towards the cultural and spiritual? How else might we shape well-being beyond income transfers, programs and services?

One answer might be found in adjacent fields like the arts, heritage, and culture.

When cultural versus economic goals are given the spotlight – and we recognize the poverty of spirit, alongside the poverty of income – a few different levers of change come into view:



Frames



Narratives



Routines & repertoires



Rules and norms



Interactions

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Frames are the lenses through which we make sense of social life.

They “define the horizons of possibilities, individual life projects or what is thinkable (Small, Harding and Lamont in “Reconsidering Culture and Poverty”) **Mario Small’s** work in Latinx social housing complexes shows how shifting a community’s frames can change how people engage in their neighbourhood. Framing the community in historical terms, and celebrating its history of political mobilization, increased participation more than framing the community in present-day terms, as an unsafe environment.

Frames come through language, messaging, imagery, symbols, etc.



Narratives are the stories we tell ourselves about our experiences, giving some order to the everyday jumble.

They help us figure out: if this happens, then that will... Our stories are constantly evolving, part of a body of living knowledge, passed between people, about how power and structure work.

Narratives are shaped by books, films, art, social media, conversation, storytelling, etc.



Repertoires are the “cache” of actions and strategies people know to deploy – like how to build a shelter, make a meal, or shoot-up.

When faced with a situation, and needing to act, we flip through our mental binder of options. Only sometimes we draw a blank, and fall back on the same old strategies even if they don’t really further our well-being.

Widening and deepening our repertoires comes through ancestral knowledge, cultural learning, peer modelling, YouTube, positive feedback, etc.



Rules and norms regulate “proper” behaviour; they are the “codes of conduct” we’re expected to follow.

Rules and norms might be written down, or shared interpersonally. They come to define institutions. A library is a place where adults and kids are supposed to be quiet and read. A playground is a place where kids can run around and raise their voices. Rules and norms can be so engrained it can be hard to fathom a place without them: would it still be a library with loud voices?

Changing rules and norms starts by making the implied ones visible, redesigning spaces, and reconsidering punishments and incentives.

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Interactions are what we come into contact with – from objects to other people.

Your day is probably made-up of hundreds of interactions: with your alarm clock, phone, shower, bus driver, barista, dog, pharmacist, park bench, the grass. It's through interactions that values get expressed, or discarded. The kind nod from the bus driver versus the rushed, unempathetic pharmacist. Adding up all these interactions either gets us closer to, or further away from, different conceptions of wellness. With just a different articulation of the pharmacist's role, or changing the order so that a shower comes before making a phone call, we might arrive at a different kind of day.

Frames, narratives, repertoires, rules and norms, and interactions might open-up the policy space, widening both how we conceptualize and shape wellness. And yet any policy lever can be weaponized – and, as history shows, have been weaponized. We'd be wise to remember: "State force has been abused so many times in the past (and even still now), that many people prefer that their governments provide them with the tools they need to pursue their own view of well-being in their own way, a way that is meaningful to them (Michalos and Weijers in "Western Historical Traditions of Well-Being)."

Community conversations

It's all about human interactions...

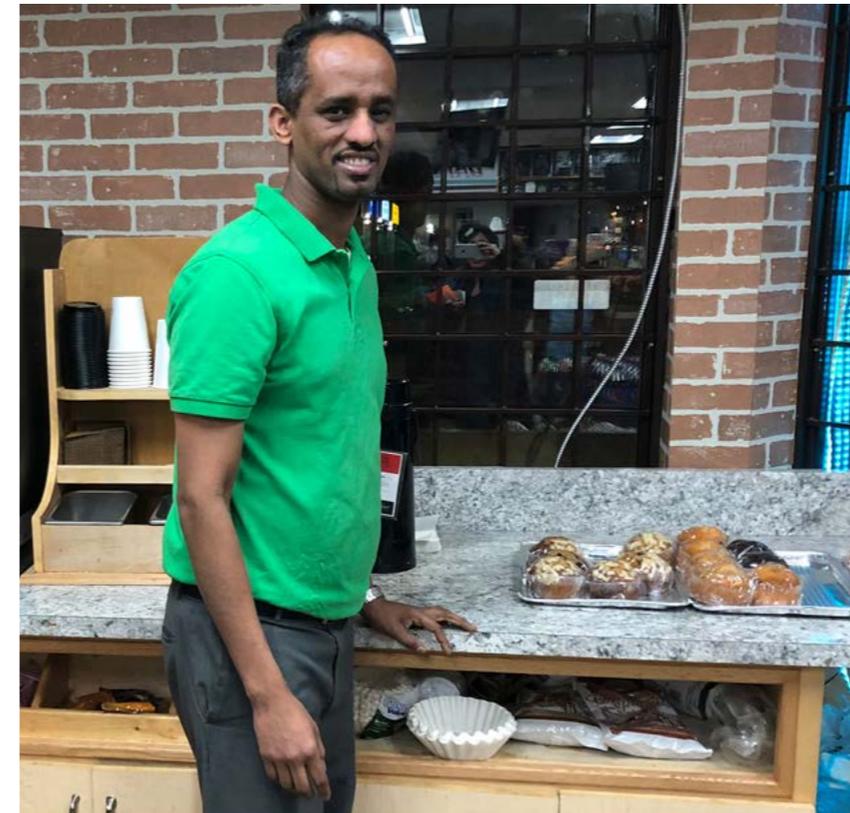
Usually what happens in the pharmacy world is people just try and deal with the issue presented to them. So man is discharged from hospital with a prescription at the pharmacy, and he's telling the pharmacist to fill it.

The pharmacist says, "You don't have coverage. How are you going to pay for it?" And then it just breaks down from there. But I think our approach has always been to listen to the person and their story, and then act as a human being to see what you can do about the situation.



Ron Wai
Owner, Mint Pharmacy

Story from February 2020



Image

Sammy at Stadium Mini-Mart

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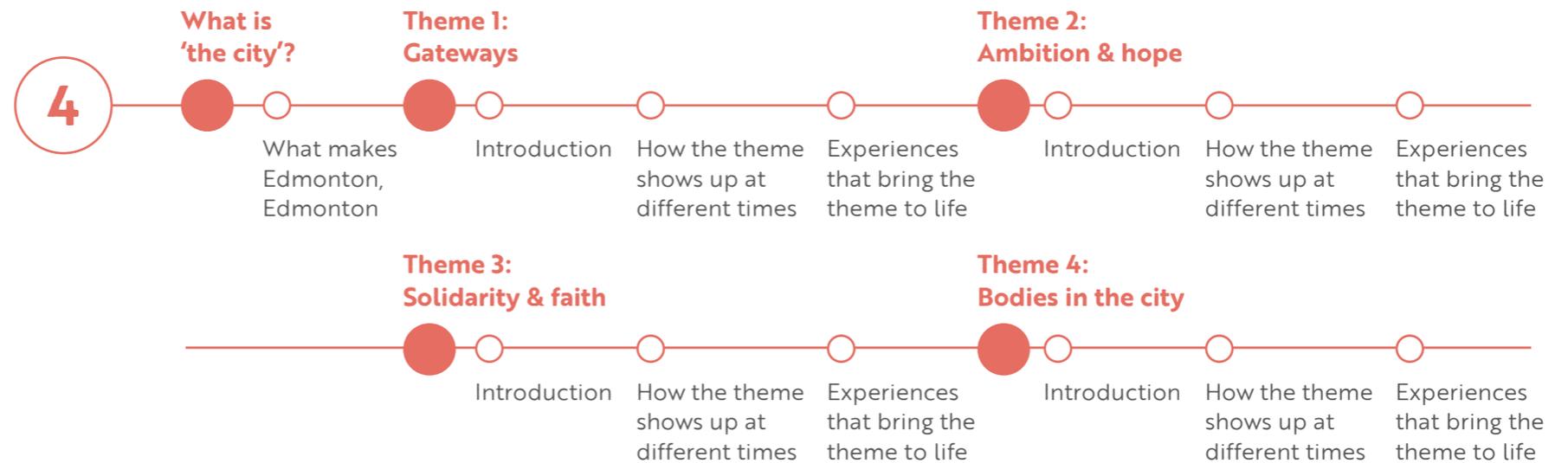
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- 1 Welcome
- 2 Why we start with people
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Exploring Urban

35 minutes

What does the 'urban' part of 'urban wellness' tell us? How do urban contexts shape our relationships to self, others, and environment?



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Image

Edmonton Skyline at sunset. Photographer: Amine Abassir

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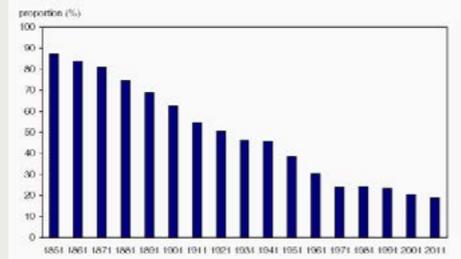
What is 'The City'?

When we think of the city, we envision its materiality: steel, concrete, asphalt, glass. Vertical structures jutting out from the land. Skylines paying homage to man. But, beyond its physicality: **what makes a city, and what defines urbanism?**

We can use the word urbanism to talk about the interaction between the city and its people. Not only as a stage for our lives, but as its own character in our stories. And that's where placemaking comes in, broadening our understanding to include the identity of a city.

By the numbers cities are on the rise – Edmonton included.

Proportion of the population living in rural areas, Canada



Source: [Statistics Canada](#), censuses of population, 1851 to 2011.

More urban than rural

Canada has been moving towards urban living since before it got started. Between 1921 and 1931, we became more urban than rural, and the trend has continued steadily.



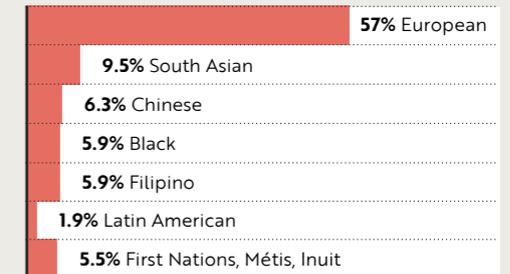
Eight in ten Canadians live in urban areas

Meaning cities, towns, villages or unincorporated settlements with populations greater than 1000 persons, or in built-up fringes of incorporated areas.

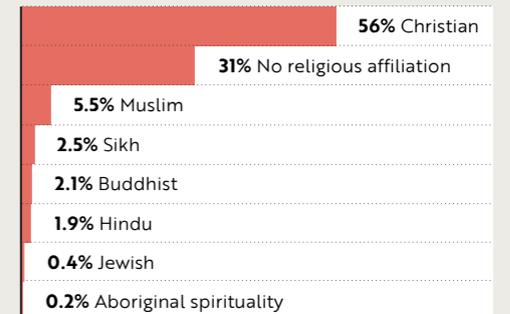


Edmonton is one of 19 cities in Alberta and the fifth biggest city in Canada, with a population of 980,000 and growing at 2.6% per year.

Edmonton cultural mix



Edmonton religious mix



My first memory of Edmonton...

I'm from the country and my parents brought us in to go to the Canada Day fireworks and we parked and I just remember, I was little and I was so excited about all the energy and all the people and I wanted to party with everybody... but I was little. It was my first memory of really realizing I'm really extroverted and this is really giving me a lot of energy.



Nova
Neighbour Centre staff

I was 10 or 11 years old. I went to the stores for the first time. I thought "what the heck?" It was overwhelming. We went to the art store, and I got a t-shirt with an iron-on patch of a truck. I thought it was so cool.



Geo
Artist, street-involved

I have a lot of 'first memories' of Edmonton: Coming back after moving to Toronto for two years for school. I quit my job. I ran across the country, I took my cat, I left my partner here. And I didn't come back for over a year and a half. So it was that first memory driving back from the airport ... and sitting on my couch with like, existential dread being like, what just happened? Did the last two years happen? I quit my job. Will I get another job?



Nor'Ali
City of Edmonton Staff

Well [the first memory of Edmonton] isn't a good one. I went to the university hospital for three months. I didn't like being as small as I was. My parents thought they would figure out if there was something that could help me grow. Well, at 12 or 13, I didn't really cherish the idea of being stuck in a hospital for so long.



Gil
Street-involved

I'll tell you a time when I felt belonging in Edmonton. It was at the Canoë Volant -the Flying Canoe Festival. And, I am a francophone. My family arrived here in 1605, and my relations are some of the filles du roi, daughters of the king who came here to marry French men, have babies, and create families. So, I have a long, French history in Canada. And the first time I went to that [festival] and we were walking into Mill Creek Ravine and right by the ravine was a Métis settlement, and they were doing the jig! And that's when I felt the most at home in Edmonton, because I've seen jigging all my life...and I just went 'yeah!' It was so beautiful.



Madeleine Smith
Co-Director of Community Initiatives, REACH Edmonton

From February 2020

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What makes Edmonton, Edmonton?

Driving from the Edmonton International Airport along the flat highway and darkened late afternoon streets of December, a visitor might be startled by their descent into a forested river valley. The news of ravines and an epic urban park comes as a surprise: those who have grown-up outside of Alberta seem to know Edmonton mostly for its epic urban mall. That just might be the first and least subtle of Edmonton's charms.

Edmonton has been shaped by many things: on the environmental side, the harshness of the winter plains, its northern latitude, the surprising lushness of its river valley, and of course, it's proximity to fertile soil and reserves of oil. The site itself was predetermined by many Indigenous Peoples who had been meeting and trading here for thousands of years. The fur traders came to where the action already was.

As a city, it's been shaped by ideas, like the bundle of evolving concepts that constitute **Prairies Urbanism**, a regional idea of the good life, mostly realized through built environment & planning. People, both prominent and unstoried, and their policies and patterns of movement have brought a piece of Southern and Eastern Europe to Edmonton.

Conversely, efforts to erase the influence and impede the cultural evolution of Indigenous Peoples of the northern prairies have created deep wounds and traumas, kept fresh through colonial and racist structures and practices.



Image

Indian Teepee and
Papooses, ca. 1890

City of Edmonton
Archives

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What makes Edmonton, Edmonton?

Edmonton is bold in its outward looking curiosity, with a simmering ambition that floats on a reserve of hope through booms and busts. The city has an appetite for challenge, and that blue collar-hands on sensibility.

There are the things that any city might have in common, and then there are the things that make Edmonton, Edmonton. Some standout characteristics of Edmonton compared to other Canadian and North American cities have been its oil industry-led economy, northern location, and explosive population growth, including significant increases in its urban Indigenous population. Within the province of Alberta, and compared to its southern sibling Calgary, Edmonton has been defined by its early support for the federal Liberals, capital-city status, blue-collar oil jobs (in contrast to the white collar oil executives of Calgary) and greater ethnic diversity, starting in the city's early years. (Barlow, 2019)

Mayor Iveson credits Edmonton with a quintessential humility, describing it as a late-bloomer identity-wise, with a palpable character that can be felt on its streets and through interactions with its people.

Edmonton is bold in its outward looking curiosity, with a simmering ambition that floats on a reserve of hope through booms and busts. The city has an appetite for challenge, a neighbourly-ness, and that blue collar-hands on sensibility. The neighbourly-ness is a sensibility reflected in its [2019-2028 Strategic Plan, CONNECTEDMONTON](#).

While competition with Calgary is as old as both cities, Edmonton's humility might be rooted in that blue collar character of its oil booms, where work ethic became the great equalizer across class divisions, if not always racial or gendered ones, and through which many experienced both high wages and unemployment, taking the good with the bad.

Sources

Barlow, Eliza. ["Burying the Hatchet?"](#) Avenue Edmonton, OdVod Publishing, 14 Mar. 2019,

[CONNECTEDMONTON: Edmonton's Strategic Plan 2019-2028](#). City of Edmonton, 2019,

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Perhaps the most obvious thing to say about Edmonton is that it is a young city that is emerging and coming into itself.

Four themes kept emerging over two years spent with people who know its streets all too well, those hanging on and dropping off, at the margins of Edmonton's economy and civil society.

Some have never had the experience of being on the inside of Edmonton's rapid growth and sense of solidarity, but many more have had a taste of it and can show us where the cracks and possibilities are.





The four themes that emerged



Theme 1
Gateways



Theme 2
A city of ambition
& stubborn hope



Theme 3
Solidarity & faith



Theme 4
Bodies in the city

Each theme is broken down into three sections

1. **A narrative** about how we might understand a theme from our ethnographic stories in the historical and environmental context of Edmonton.
2. **Moments** that might help us begin to think about how the theme shows up at different times and in very different ways.
3. **Experiences** that bring to life a theme, through the eyes of people living rough and those they interact with.



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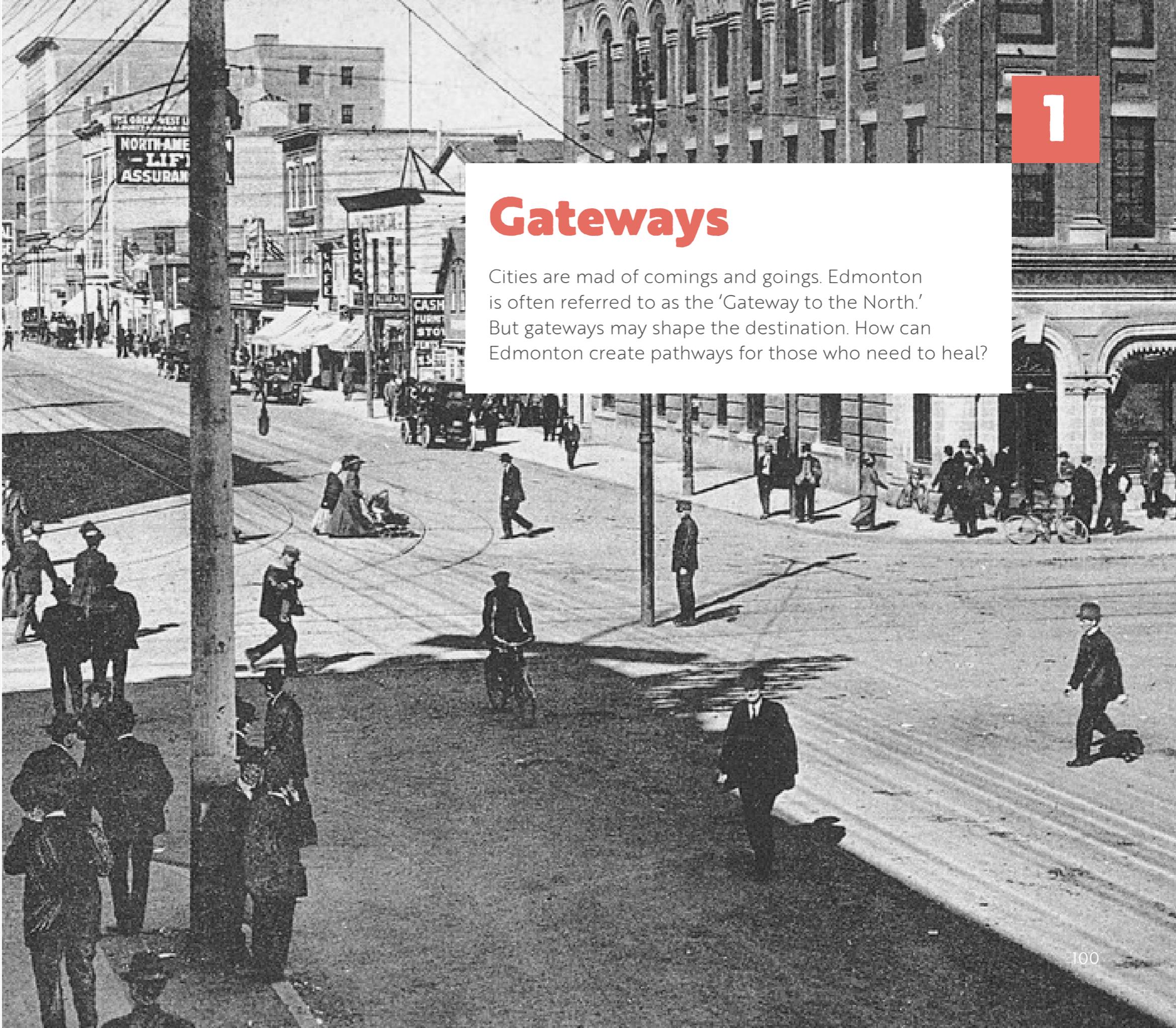
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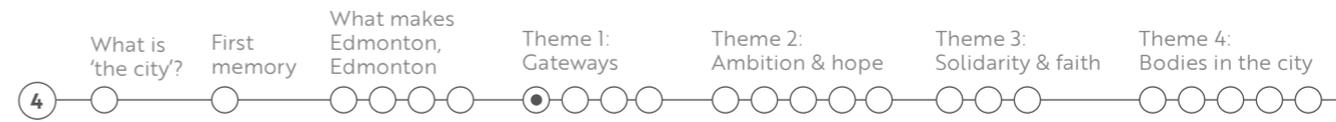
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Gateways

Cities are mad of comings and goings. Edmonton is often referred to as the 'Gateway to the North.' But gateways may shape the destination. How can Edmonton create pathways for those who need to heal?





Theme one

Gateways

Comings and goings are in some way the story of any big city. For Edmonton, it's mostly been on the arrivals side. The numbers have climbed steadily, and though a number of annexations of surrounding municipalities are partly to credit, there is a clear story of a near constant flow of newcomers, many of whom have made Edmonton their home.

Edmonton has been a pragmatic destination, as a hub for the oil industry, seat of provincial government, as well as the first big city on the way south from Canada's vast north. Now a metropolitan city in its own right, Edmonton has become a popular choice for international immigrants, and, in many ways, has proven a shrewd one.

"The percentage of new immigrants living in Alberta rose from 6.9 per cent in 2001 to more than 17 per cent in 2016 – a growth spurt greater than all other Western Canadian provinces."

(Charnalia, 2018)

Some researchers, including [Sandeep Agrawal](#) at the University of Alberta, argue Edmonton has excelled at integrating immigrants even during an economic slump. Notably, Agrawal found the main determinants of immigrant success were age, language and the timing of arrival, not education level. These are immigrants like [Sammy](#) and [Jean](#), now owning and managing small businesses and paying it forward, lending an ear and a hand to some of Edmonton's most marginalized residents.



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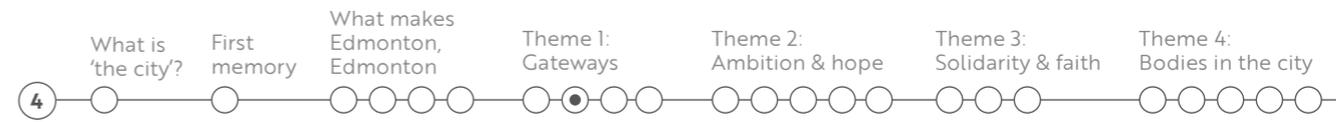
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Sources

Alberta Health Services, Addiction and Mental Health (2017). Alcohol and drug use in Alberta's oil and gas industry. Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

Charnalia, Ameya. ["Boom or Bust, Immigrants Are Choosing Alberta - and They're Thriving."](#) Thestar.com, Toronto Star Newspapers, 12 June 2018,

["Edmonton Population 2020."](#) Edmonton Population 2020 (Demographics, Maps, Graphs), World Population Review, 5 Dec. 2019,

The majority of people we met in Edmonton's shelters and drop-in centres were born outside of Edmonton, having only recently arrived or returned to Edmonton. Only eight percent were born outside Canada, most came from outside the city or province.

Agrawal's research shows that in the last decade Canadian-born arrivals were more likely to experience unemployment than new-to-Canada Edmontonians. Coming to Edmonton reflected a significant life transition: a return from the oil fields, the end of a marriage (often both), a youthful adventure to the city, or a search for work and prosperity. Too often, prosperity and troubles co-mingle.

For example, research shows oil and gas workers are more likely to drink more alcohol than in other industries. (Alberta Health Services 2017)

Whereas many international immigrants have been welcomed into vibrant ethnic communities, cash-poor Albertan, or Canadian arrivals to Edmonton might treat downtown shelters as a stepping stone on their journey, or end up there when their start-up fund falls short. Many are moving from one culture that leans heavily on substance use to another, without the introduction of other ways to cope with stress and unexpected challenge.

-
- How might the approach Edmonton uses to welcome newcomers to Canada be used to welcome other demographics to the city?
 - How might Edmonton be responsive to arrivals with latent or active trauma that affects their ability to weather a transition, and who may have substance use habits picked up at the workplace?
-



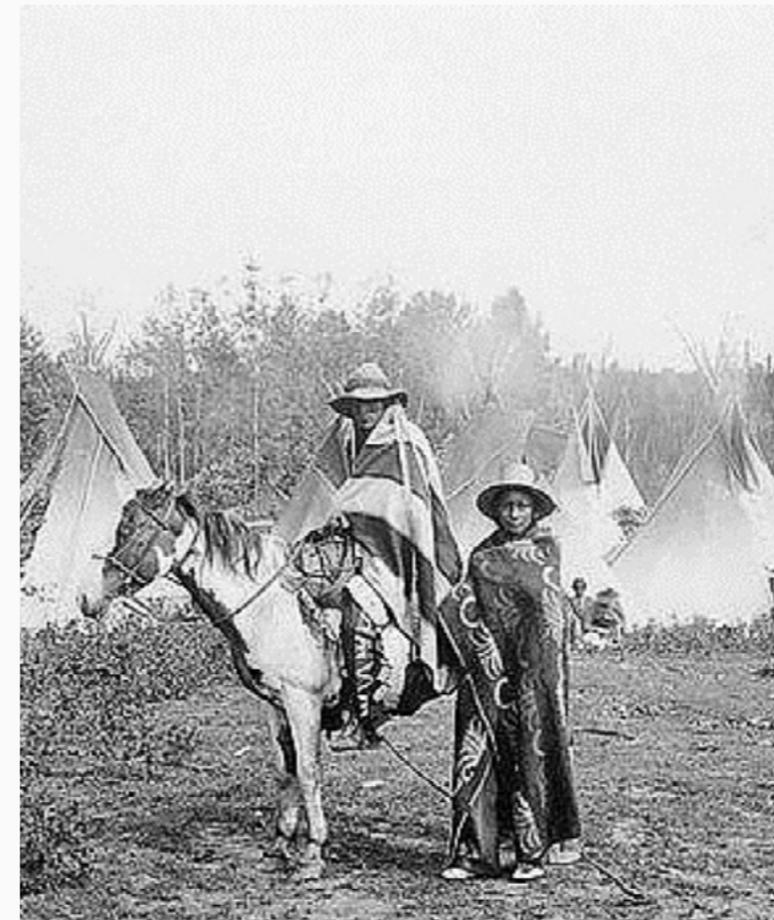
Moments



How new entrants to the Edmonton city stage remade the city in their image, early inhabitants are re-asserting their relationship to each other and place, and many more have come and gone - riding the (sometimes elusive) waves of opportunity.

1877: Scattering the Papachase First Nation

As Edmonton began to grow, the existence of Indigenous Peoples and their ways of life in the city fell afoul of the ambitions and preferences of government and European settlers. In 1877, **Papachase First Nation signed an Adhesion to Treaty 6**. At the time, the people of Papachase were living around Fort Edmonton. They had come down from the Lesser Slave Lake area in the 1850s to hunt and trade with the Hudson's Bay Company. Now, the Crown wanted the land they were occupying for settlement. As part of the terms of Treaty, the Band was given a small reserve in southeast Edmonton.



Image

An [archival photo](#) of Cree people in the Edmonton area. (Papaschase First Nation)

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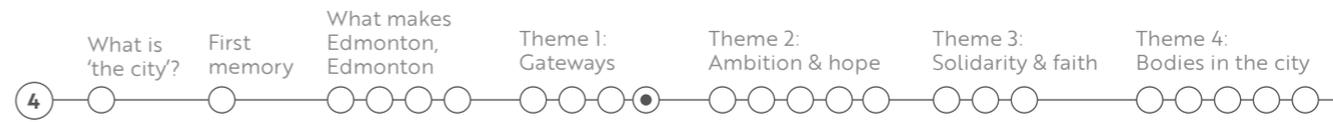
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Gateways

Experiences

Brandon was on his way outta here before he arrived: his laser focus on job-finding is stoked by lived experience of how the streets can trap you. That's been Nikki's experience: she's spent a decade in Edmonton trying to find a partner who was incarcerated here. Bill's come to find family separated from him by the Sixties Scoop, and Christopher isn't sure how to find his way back home, so he's taking a break from the loneliness of his apartment, at the shelter.

Explore the stories



01

Brandon's here to work



02

Bill's family-finding mission



03

Christopher's failed trip home



04

Women with missed connections

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Brandon's here to work

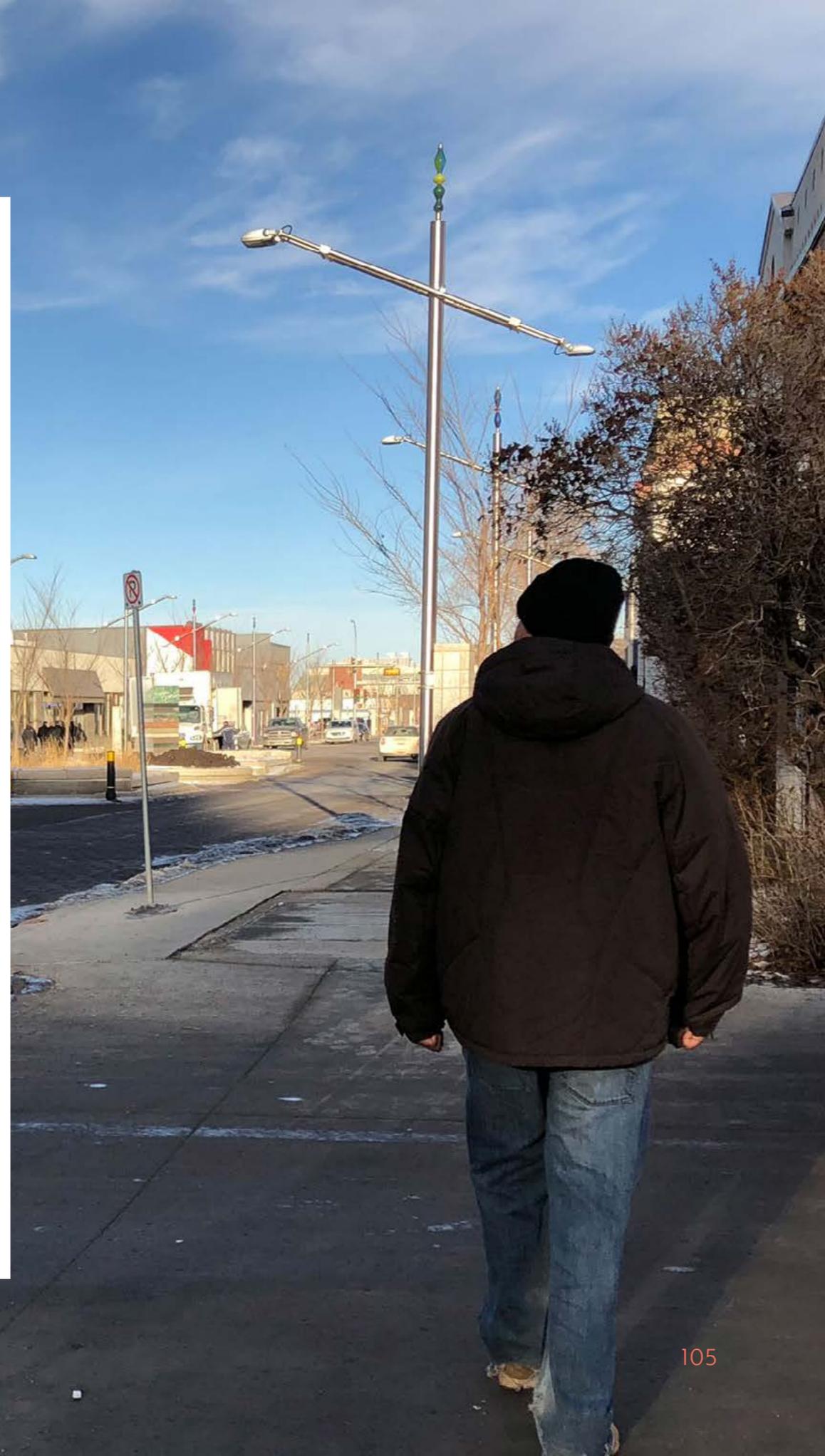
Brandon cuts an unusual figure in the buzzing 96th Street Mustard Seed at 10PM, sipping from a styrofoam cup of coffee, alone at a table. Keeping to himself is part of his plan. At 25, he's in search of something better than what he could imagine for himself back home in northern Ontario.

So, two weeks ago, after careful preparation, he landed on the streets of Edmonton to find himself a job. Staying at the Salvation Army, and eating at community meals, Brandon spends his days looking for work, taking courses to up-skill for the oil rigs, and exploring beyond the inner city.

He forges ahead but acknowledges that it's emotionally heavy. He has sought out traditional ceremonies, where it's okay to have a cry about it.

“ It's different being here, kind of lonely. It's lonely at home too but this is a different lonely. I'm far from what's familiar.

Story from January 2018



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Bill's family-finding mission

Bill's made an art form out of travelling light. "Home" is Vancouver, where he volunteers at a church and sleeps in its basement. He has a couple young kids on the east coast, and has travelled the world building sets for theatre, often using shelters for accommodation.

At age 57, he's in search of his baggage: he's come back to Edmonton where he was raised in residential schools and group homes. At age three or four years old, he was removed from his mother and his home in a nearby reserve. That was in the mid-1960s. In autumn 2018, he returned to seek out aunties, uncles, and cousins, before those who remember his toddler years pass on.

We met Bill in February.

Story from February 2019

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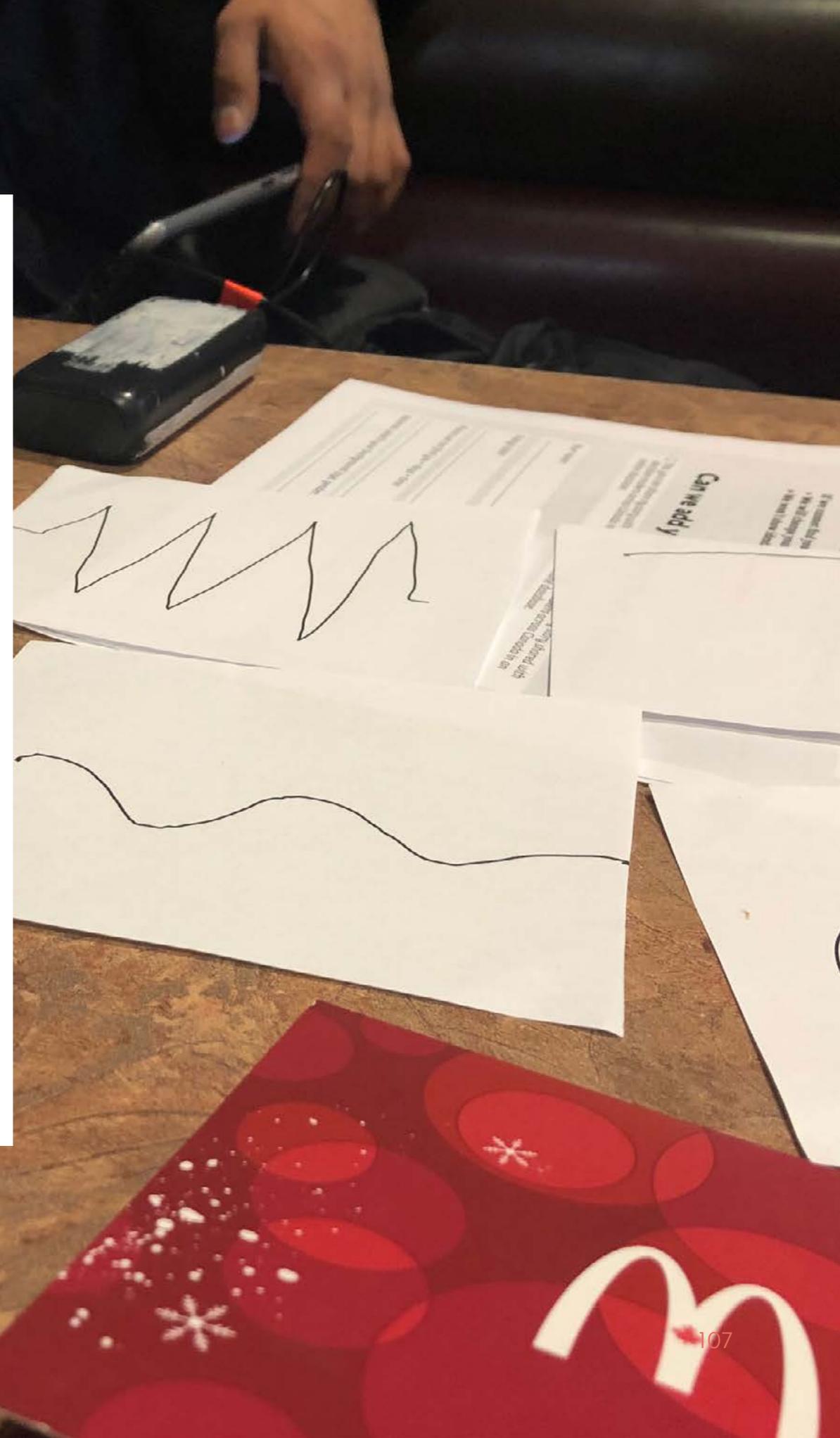
Christopher's failed trip home

Christopher hit a breaking point: three weeks inside his apartment with no one to talk to but himself... and he was talking to himself, voicing his racing, meth-fueled thoughts. He was generally freaking himself out.

So, keys around his neck, he left. He walked to the edge of the city with the idea of hitchhiking home to Cold Lake, suddenly craving the comfort of family. Some kind women, worried about his lack of outdoor clothing in January convinced him to turn around, and got him headed to the shelter. That was earlier this week.

Since then he's been coming down off the meth, which looks like sleeping all day. He moves from shelter to fast food restaurant, to library...until told to move on. He'd love to be free of the meth, but doesn't dare expect it.

Story from February 2019



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Missed connections

Nikki's in Edmonton on a ten year visit, more like a search. She's Sioux, from south of the border. Over a decade ago she gave birth to a baby who died young. Her soulmate, the father of her baby, was put in prison in Edmonton, and so she followed him here, to wait for him.

Her search for him continues, but she misses her grandmother back in Montana and thinks about returning to her. She bases herself at the health clinic, a place that feels safe, and where she makes money selling pills and found objects.

“Feels good to be piggy with your spouse. Being in a relationship is very powerful.”

Story from December 2017

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A city of ambition & stubborn hope

If ambition is calculating, hope is an expression of faith in what we know to be good. Early Edmonton was steeped in ambition; has modern Edmonton 'found itself?'





Theme two

A city of ambition & stubborn hope

In a discussion about Edmonton's relationship to Calgary, Edmonton Mayor [Don Iveson](#), described Edmonton as a "diverse and complex city," which had taken longer to "discover its identity." But now, "there's a renewed confidence in Edmonton without losing that humility that sets us apart a bit."

Canadian sociologist [John Porter](#) faulted reliance on an unstable resource-driven staples economy for Canada's failure to cohere around a national identity, arguing that fluctuations in the marketplace replace social planning (Porter, 1965). From this perspective, uncertainty about the wisdom of relying on the oil industry may be the catalyst for discovering an urban identity.

Nonetheless, in the street communities of Boyle McCauley, Strathcona, and beyond, this shift is unsurprisingly less evident. For people there, the city's coming of age has either coincided with their own descent, they are casualties of its growing pains, or it's a story they never felt part of anyway.

“Hope is a state of mind, not of the world. It is an orientation of the spirit and orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons.

Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously heading for success, but rather an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed.

Vaclav Havel

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Ambition & hope



Community conversations

Pastor Ed on connected culture

“ Culture and language are so intertwined: we cannot separate them. Language shapes our way of thinking. Three things that are critical to culture other than language: (1) stories, (2) symbols and (3) traditions. Those three things you have to have, to develop a culture.

Ed Major, Edmonton

What one might not suspect, is the degree to which even the most disenfranchised city dwellers partake in a spirit of hopefulness. Not, as Vaclav Havel points out, from a standpoint of expectation, but as a stance of personal emotional investment in the possibility of something good.

Many of those we met were drawn to Edmonton or Alberta by ambition and have had a taste of success. Most aren't dwelling on the past; they're future-oriented, but without a clear way to channel or act on their dreams.

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Ambition & hope

Having spent time in shelters and on the inner city streets of Vancouver, Surrey, Toronto, and Montréal, this hopefulness felt different and notable to our team of ethnographers. The shadow side of hope is culpability: a self-loathing for succumbing to the grasping depths of an economic bust, or riding too high on the boom, and coming untethered from the relationships and community that might have served to ground them. It's a lot to carry. Still, hope is a necessary starting point to envision a different, better future, and a willingness to try something different today.

Edmonton's past is full of these bold moves, and difficult passages to better times. It's a mix of hope, boldness of vision, and naked ambition. The city's identity has been much less clear than its sheer will to be different and great. From early boosterism, to bold monuments and facilities, and an evolving relationship to its natural setting, Edmonton remains stubbornly hopeful.

Sources

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-
- How would a more connected Edmonton leverage this sense of hope and goodwill to promote collective well-being?
-



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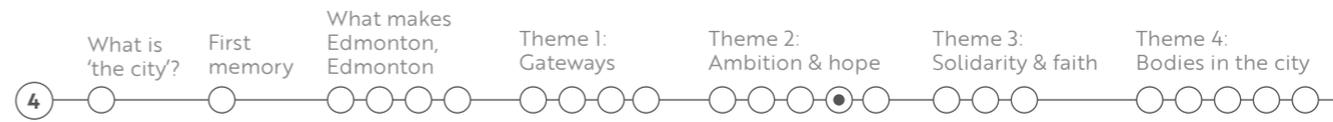
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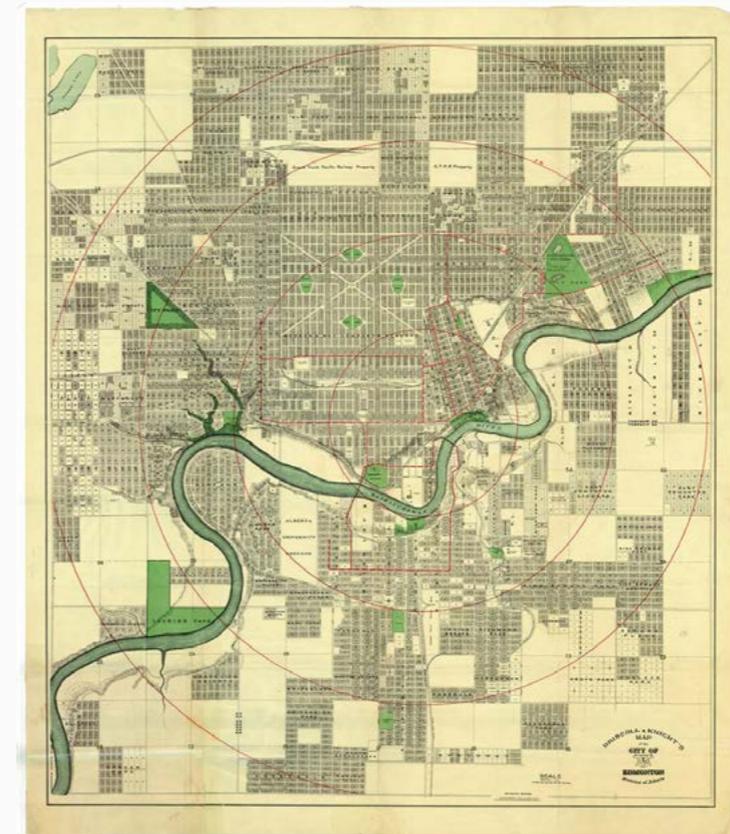


From early boosters who broke the rules on truth in advertising, to citizens that honoured and protected public utilities and health care, to a city that is becoming ready to reckon with the beauty and wisdom of the Indigenous cultures it once feared, denigrated, and repressed.

1912: A City of Vital Contrasts

Historian **John C. Weaver** describes the founding ethos of Edmonton as big bluffs in a long game that were largely made good on, producing a distinct and impressive city.

The prairies were having an urban boom with each city competing for prominence and status. “Edmonton consisted of as much fancy as fact. The city maps, bait for real estate speculators, sketched in streets that did not exist – some never would. Patches of green denoted parks, both real and fictitious, and to oversee the network the ambitious city had hired a German-trained landscape professional, **Paul von Aueberg.**”



Image

Driscoll and Knight Map of the City of Edmonton 1912. City of Edmonton Archives EAM-78.

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Ambition & hope

Experiences

Yvonne's hard-won healing is recognized by others as her gift to share, and Earl sticks his neck out to take on a purposeful role that might just give him a starting point to reclaim his life. Jean responds to challenges from street-involved clients by dreaming bigger and forging reciprocal relationships that bring everyone a bit of peace.

Explore the stories



01

A healing role finds Yvonne



02

Earl gets wind in his sails, briefly



03

Jean strives to make 'a peaceful place'



A healing role finds Yvonne

“When I was a little girl, I went to the people – to the adults in my life – and I told them what was going on and they told me I couldn’t talk about this priest because it was like talking about God.” This is what Yvonne told the Truth and Reconciliation tribunal, when she got the chance.

But she also tried to clear a path forward: “I want you guys to know that: I’m not blaming you, and I’m not blaming God – because it wasn’t Him. What happened was there were some people in power that should’na been around kids.”

Yvonne has spent her life protecting, listening to, and caring for kids. As a young parent, she called child services on herself, when her childhood came back in ways that made her feel unsafe. And they helped her get her agency back. She informally fostered over a dozen children. Lately, she’s been thinking about a way to make a positive impact in the lives of Indigenous kids. The week before we meet, she received a request that surprised and delighted her because it spoke to her sense of hope for the future.

Story from December 2017



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Earl gets wind in his sails, briefly

Weirdly it seems that it won't be Earl's addictions to speed, crack, or cocaine that will keep him on the street; rather, his deep need for purpose and contribution keeps tripping him up.

He hates being on the receiving end of handouts. Though the past has led Earl to believe he is basically rehab-proof, his experience has equally shown him that "a legitimate job, one that's nine to five, and you won't get thrown in jail for" is the best thing to help him put down the pipe. It's hard for opportunities like that to come Earl's way, so when an old friend asks him for help with a trucking contract, Earl jumps into action mode:

☞☞ Things are going to get better, I can make things better. It's up to me. I've got the choice. I'd like it to happen. I'd like to have a relationship with my son. I'd like to have a good relationship with my family, with everybody.

Story from February 2019

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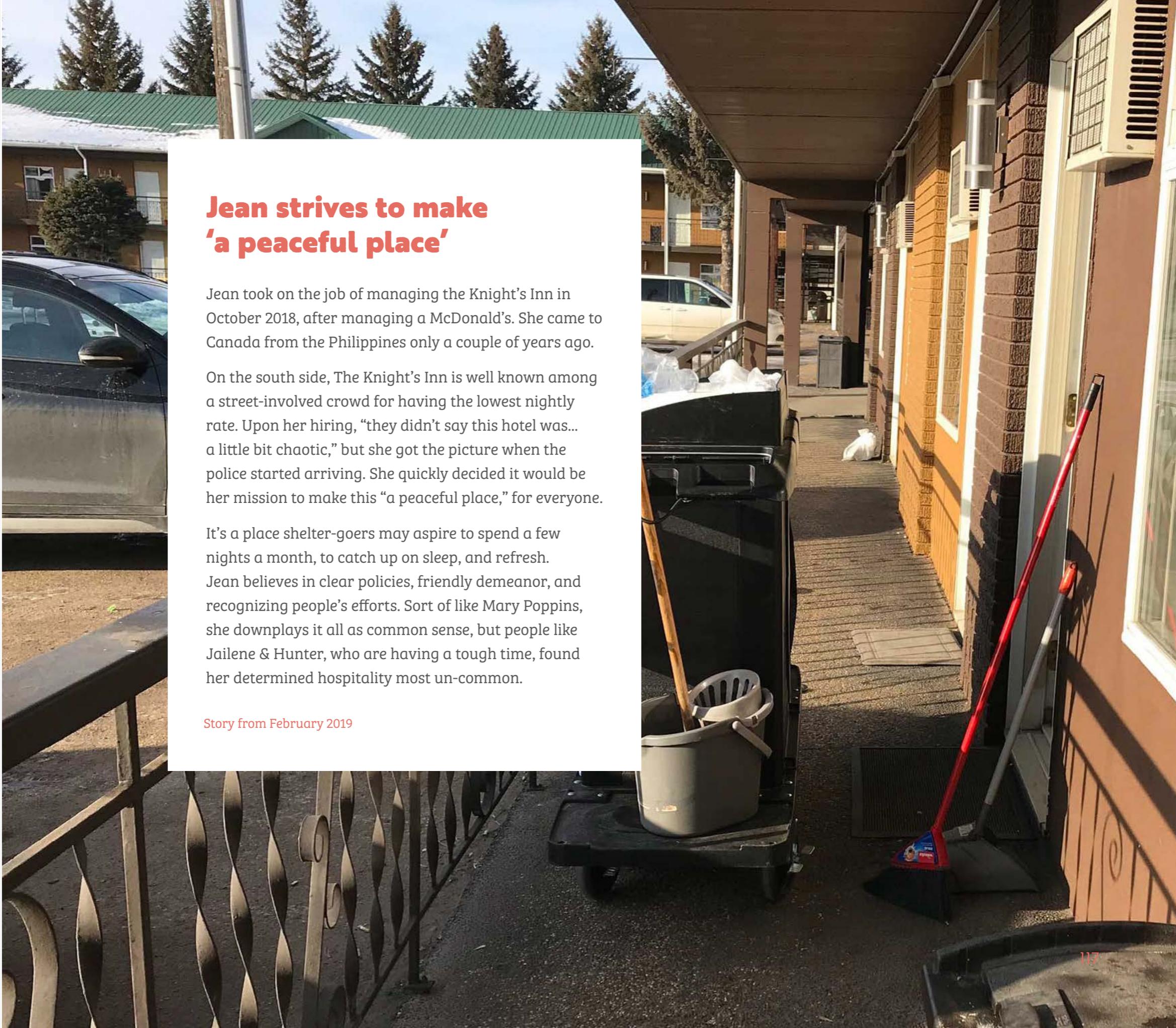
Jean strives to make 'a peaceful place'

Jean took on the job of managing the Knight's Inn in October 2018, after managing a McDonald's. She came to Canada from the Philippines only a couple of years ago.

On the south side, The Knight's Inn is well known among a street-involved crowd for having the lowest nightly rate. Upon her hiring, "they didn't say this hotel was... a little bit chaotic," but she got the picture when the police started arriving. She quickly decided it would be her mission to make this "a peaceful place," for everyone.

It's a place shelter-goers may aspire to spend a few nights a month, to catch up on sleep, and refresh. Jean believes in clear policies, friendly demeanor, and recognizing people's efforts. Sort of like Mary Poppins, she downplays it all as common sense, but people like Jailene & Hunter, who are having a tough time, found her determined hospitality most un-common.

Story from February 2019



Solidarity & faith

Government may be a secular activity, but seeking spiritual connection and greater meaning remains core to thousands of years of human experience.



Theme three

Solidarity & faith

Canada is a secular country, and Canadians have been increasingly identifying as non-religious. Alberta is no exception.

Though Canadians may perceive otherwise, Alberta is not more religious than the rest of the country and Albertans are in fact more likely than other Canadians to have no stated religion (32% compared to a national average of 24%) (DeCillia, 2019).

Religious institutions, once big players in the act of city and nation-making, have been challenged by the country's increasing plurality and rise of an individualist and consumerist ethos. They've been sullied by the paternalistic and violent roles they have played in the colonization of the land and people of Turtle Island. However entwined in imperialist power structures they may be, communities of faith have also provided social space for the big questions and hosted public ritual and ceremony that commemorate relationships, meaning, and mortality.

-
- *How can we resist the dominance of one belief system and its institutional structures while still embracing the effort to understand and connect with the world beyond ourselves?*
 - *What are the roots of a truly pluralistic, spiritual, meaning-making city?*
-



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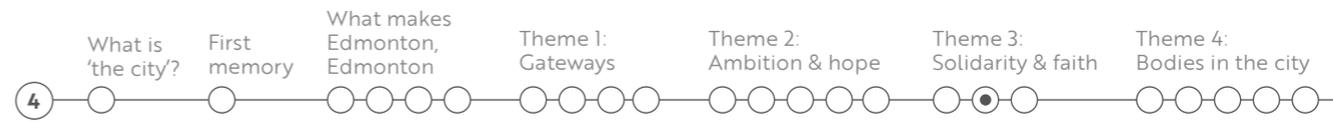
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Moments



In 1935, Christianity and politics unabashedly co-mingled, turning Edmonton’s pulpits into places for the impassioned staking of positions - but that didn’t stop a cross-faith fundraising effort to open Canada’s first mosque. Today, spiritual ceremony from a plurality of traditions, offer intimacy and hope on the inner city streets, if you know where to look.

1935: Bible Bills ushers in a new Christian ethic

In the 1930s, churches became houses of political debate, just as politics reflected questions of theological concern.

William Aberhart’s “charismatic personality and red-hot rhetoric propelled him from his Sunday radio sermons on CFCN, to the Premier’s chair in 1935. The school principal and Baptist preacher captured the imagination of a drought and Depression-weary electorate, sparking a landslide victory that swept the pragmatic and cautious United Farmers of Alberta Government out of office.” (DeCillia, 2019)



Image

[Portrait of Alberta Premier William Aberhart, circa 1935..](#)

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Solidarity & faith

Experiences

Monique & Leroy are part of a community of faith that deals in the gritty and mundane detail of recovery from addiction: everyone's a potential counsellor. Jenn's a street mum who's getting closer to her own values by renouncing the material world she once inhabited. And Dark Destiny is alone in the desert, desperate for ways to nourish his own humanity.

Explore the stories



01

Monique and Leroy find a spiritual home



02

Jenn is tending to her trapline and to her faith



03

Dark Destiny dreams of another path

The Soulful City

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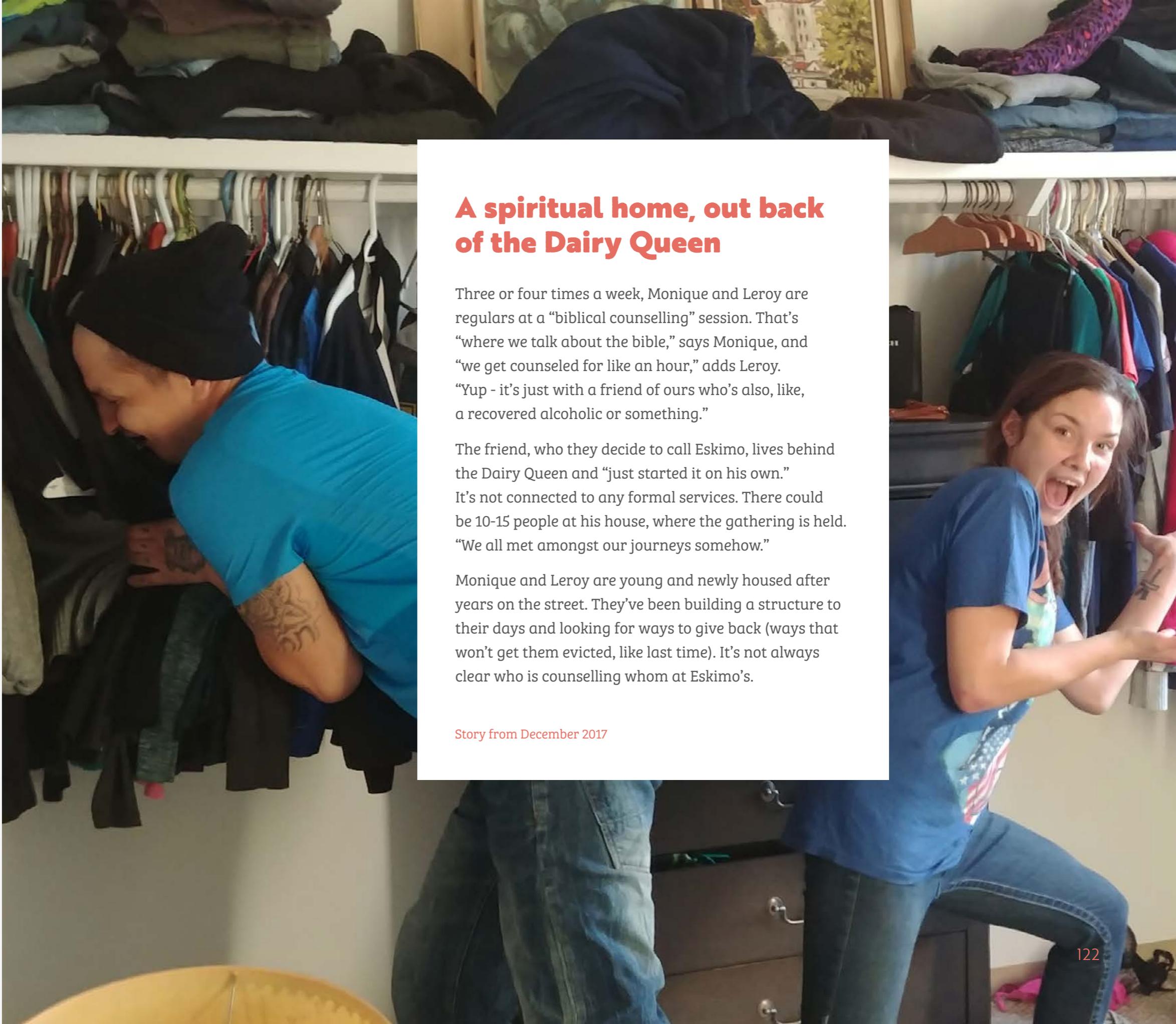
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A spiritual home, out back of the Dairy Queen

Three or four times a week, Monique and Leroy are regulars at a “biblical counselling” session. That’s “where we talk about the bible,” says Monique, and “we get counseled for like an hour,” adds Leroy. “Yup - it’s just with a friend of ours who’s also, like, a recovered alcoholic or something.”

The friend, who they decide to call Eskimo, lives behind the Dairy Queen and “just started it on his own.” It’s not connected to any formal services. There could be 10-15 people at his house, where the gathering is held. “We all met amongst our journeys somehow.”

Monique and Leroy are young and newly housed after years on the street. They’ve been building a structure to their days and looking for ways to give back (ways that won’t get them evicted, like last time). It’s not always clear who is counselling whom at Eskimo’s.

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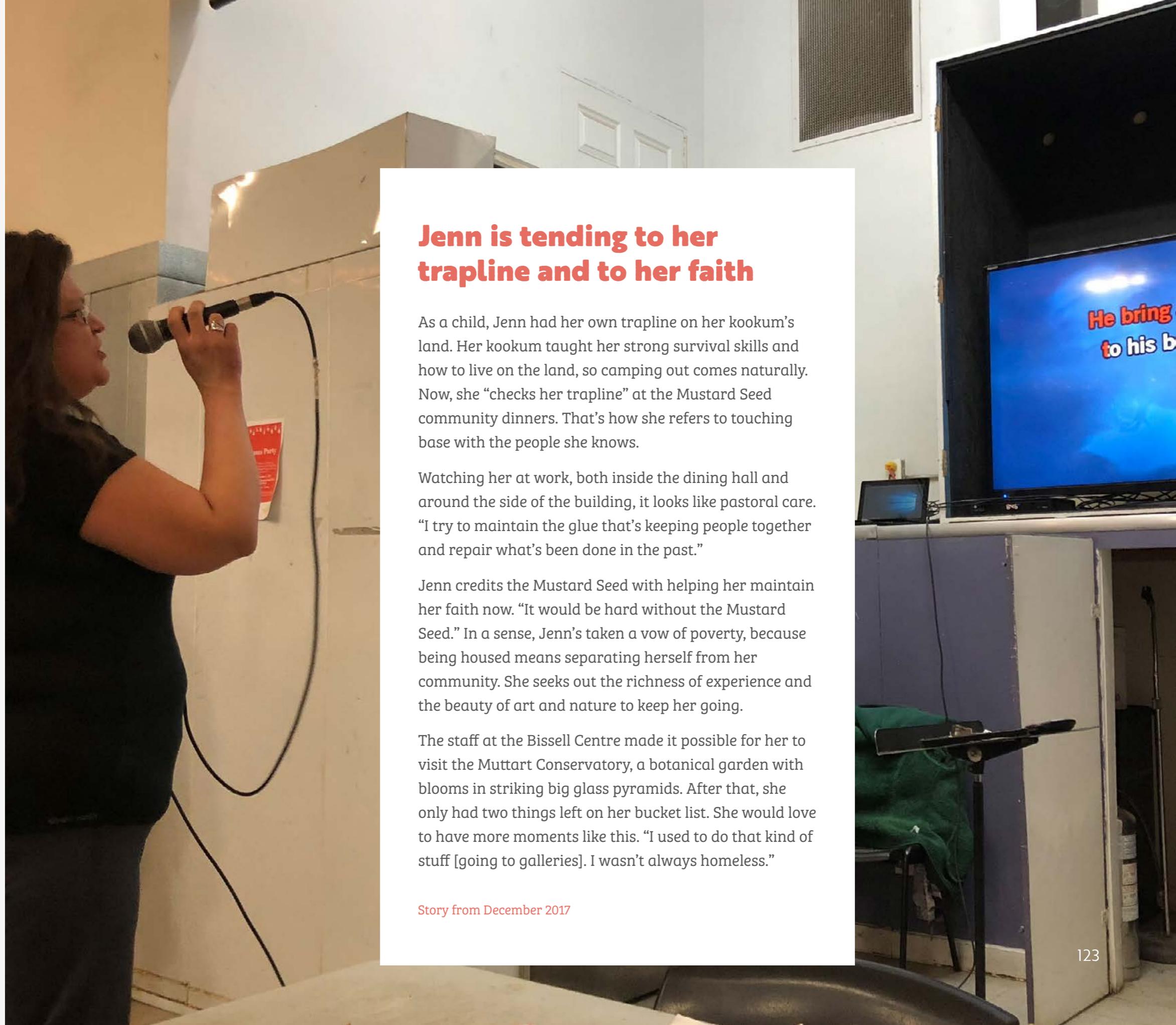
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Jenn is tending to her trapline and to her faith

As a child, Jenn had her own trapline on her kookum's land. Her kookum taught her strong survival skills and how to live on the land, so camping out comes naturally. Now, she "checks her trapline" at the Mustard Seed community dinners. That's how she refers to touching base with the people she knows.

Watching her at work, both inside the dining hall and around the side of the building, it looks like pastoral care. "I try to maintain the glue that's keeping people together and repair what's been done in the past."

Jenn credits the Mustard Seed with helping her maintain her faith now. "It would be hard without the Mustard Seed." In a sense, Jenn's taken a vow of poverty, because being housed means separating herself from her community. She seeks out the richness of experience and the beauty of art and nature to keep her going.

The staff at the Bissell Centre made it possible for her to visit the Muttart Conservatory, a botanical garden with blooms in striking big glass pyramids. After that, she only had two things left on her bucket list. She would love to have more moments like this. "I used to do that kind of stuff [going to galleries]. I wasn't always homeless."

Story from December 2017

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Dark Destiny dreams of another path

A drug dealer at the city centre mall, “Dark Destiny” sees himself as one of the bad guys, and it doesn’t sit well with him. In his thirties now, what remains of the spontaneity and indiscretion of youth is just mere performance.

The facts are that he is alone in this country and lonely. He is homeless, and aware of how he appears in others’ eyes: “a black guy who’s hungry for the money and willing to do whatever the fuck it takes.” But this way of surviving brings turmoil: “I robbed a lady’s purse once. Oh. My. God. The scream. I hear the scream still today... I never want to feel that way again. I’d rather find another angle, there’s got to be other ways.”

He has a sense of what that might look like: “I want to be reading my Quran and praying every day.” Things have gotten out of hand, but he knows he’s got “a lot to offer” and would like to achieve something.

Story from February 2019

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4

Bodies in the city

For many of us, it's not nice to acknowledge our unruly bodies, but it's dangerous to ignore them. Our bodies are a key to the emotional and psychological: a practiced connection to our bodies can return us to our sense of agency.



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Theme four

Bodies in the city

The city has an up and down relationship with the human body. Certainly the countryside or the North conjure up a greater sense of physicality – the kind required to survive and eke out a living on the land.

In the 1920s and '30s, cities were held responsible for withering, unused bodies, which was associated in some popular culture with a withering morality. In more recent times urbanites have celebrated the exertion of brains over bodies, by leaning into the convenience of cars, and elevators, and even, perhaps, by investing ourselves in abstract financial assets over more tangible ones.



Image

Crowds line for an early sound film, 1927.

“It’s very basic. But sorely lacking in our diagnostic system is simple things like eating and peeing and pooping because they’re the foundation of everything – and breathing. These are foundational things, all of which go wrong when you get traumatized. The most elementary body functions go awry when you are terrified.

So trauma treatment starts at the foundation of a body that can sleep, a body that can rest, a body that feels safe, a body that can move.

Bessel Van Der Kolk, 2019

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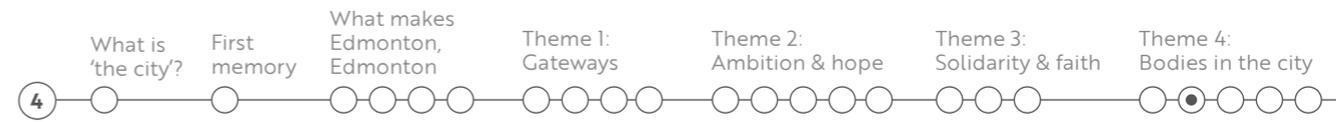
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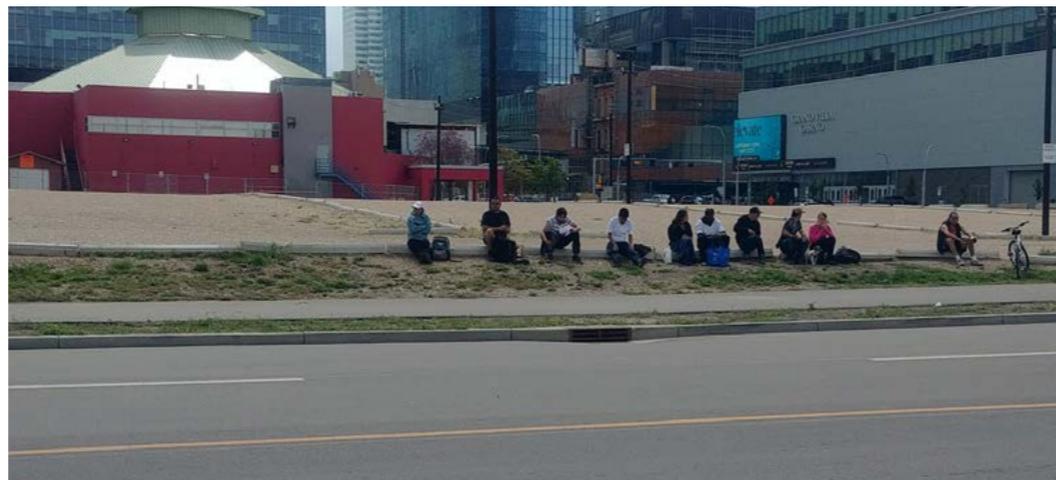
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Bodies in the city

On the street, there's no avoiding body talk, often for banal reasons, like the need for shelter, food, clothes and bathrooms, needs that occupy so much time but, produce so little pride or satisfaction, unlike the more wholesome and productive way we imagine bodies at work in rural contexts. Bodies are also a window into the experiences that brought people to the street and that mount up quickly once there. Everyone is carrying a lot of pain... in their bodies.

Yes, you get pain from sleeping outside on cold surfaces, and from contracting viruses from which you have little protection in over-crowded shelters or drop-ins, but also more mysterious pains. Because, as researchers keep discovering, the body is a dumping ground, for trauma, stress, and now we learn, loneliness too. Research is also showing that yoga and likely other practices that engage the body in a mindful and purposeful way are an effective part of treatment. (Van Der Kolk, 2019)



Community conversations

Connection to body

“ We're using brain science, brain development as well to identify that within iHuman we are working with the three parts of the brain: the trauma brain, in our caring services; the mid-brain, with our authenticity – which is where memory, and identification of family, your identity, personality is all there; and then your frontal and pre-frontal lobe, that's where you have insight, creativity, critical analysis, enlightenment, that's all there.



Catherine Broomfield,
Executive Director,
iHuman Youth Society

Story from February 2020

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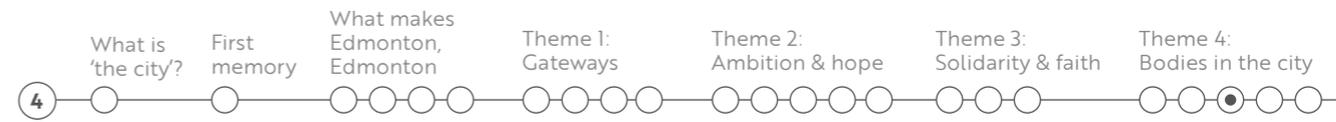
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Bodies in the city



Image

Downtown Police Officer checking on a sleeper.

There are signs that we are reclaiming our physical experience in urban settings: the re-design of streets and neighbourhoods for greater walkability, accessibility for people with reduced mobility, and the renewed relationship to winter in Edmonton.

The City of Edmonton's Lead Chaplain **John Dowds** publically promotes a message of bodily self-awareness and care (City of Edmonton, 2020). Other trends in wellness, more or less commodified, hold promise for those trying to reconnect with their bodies and heal: yoga, pilates, tai chi, sweats, smudges, and other gentle physical practices that incorporate mindfulness, community, and self-compassion.

- How can a city help people experience their bodies more mindfully?
- How could The City Rec Centres' proactive approach to becoming a welcoming inter-cultural space be mindful of the barriers to use for people living on the street? (Macdonald, 2015)



Sources

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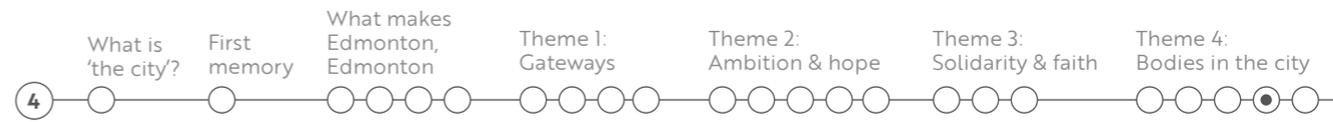
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Moments

A thread of embodied culture is woven through the city: from Fort Edmonton's Métis matriarch, to the morning tai chi rituals animating Southgate Mall, to Edmonton's transformation into an active winter city.



1810-1849: Fort Edmonton's Métis matriarch

In the early 1800s, Fort Edmonton came under the influence of a Métis woman who unapologetically embodied her culture - from her moccasins to her artisanal fingertips, to her Cree mother tongue. **Louise Umphreville**, country wife of HBC Chief Factor **John Rowand**, was a force in the days of Fort Edmonton. She maintained a living, breathing, physical connection to her Métis culture while assuming a position of considerable status. She practiced culture by “[speaking] Cree as her first language, [wearing] moccasins, and [teaching] her children to dress deer hide.”

At the same time, she was a recognized influence on the women and children of Edmonton, reportedly encouraging industriousness rather than idleness. The daughter of a Cree woman from the Saskatchewan River Nation and a fur trader, she was raised by her mother from infancy. Her marriage to John Rowand is believed to have been a loving one, into which she brought a significant dowry of horses, from her own well-to-do family. She was among the last generation of Métis women who held status in settler society, without being educated in, or acculturated to, European ways.



Image

[Lisette Louise Umphreville](#)

Sources

[“Edmontonians in the Spotlight - Louise Umphreville, 1846 Fort, Edmontonians In The Spotlight.”](#) Fort Edmonton Park, 18 Aug. 2014, Still, Gary. “PIERRE DUBOISHUE Dit BRELAND (1764-1829).” Pierre Breland (1764-1829), 18 Jan. 2014.

Bodies in the city

Experiences

Sammy's reconfigured his convenient store and it's hours to provide a precious combo of physical relief and total dignity. Wayne staves off anxiety and depressive thoughts by staying outside in the winter sunshine and moving; Gil too avoids nightmares by staying awake and in motion for as long as possible.

Explore the stories



01
Sammy's third space



02
Wayne keeps his calm on ice



03
Gil's sleepless nights

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Sammy's third space

Sammy remembers his lowest points on the journey from Somalia, through the UK, to Canada. What sticks out is the kindness of others: people who gave him bread and milk when he had neither.

Everyone who walks into Stadium Mini-Mart is a brother or a sister, and none will go without bread and milk. "Some of them are off the track, without anybody to rely on." Sammy wants to be a reliable presence, so he has extended the hours of his mini-mart and carved out a seating area for people with nowhere else to go. It's a place to rest the body, but also to feel acknowledged and respected.

☞ One of the reasons to be in this business is to contribute because it makes me so happy to.

Rather than starting from a position of fear (will they rob me?), Sammy takes a perspective of abundance (what do I have to offer, to share?)

Jenn and a couple of friends stumble in, hours after the Mustard Seed has closed, but still hours before their heads will hit the pillows. They are greeted warmly and invited to sit and sip a coffee, have a muffin, in the new seating area by the window. They catch up with each other, enveloped in the warmth and dignity of the moment.

Story from December 2017



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Wayne keeps his calm on ice

Wayne was waiting outside Winston Churchill Square, a meeting location of his own selection. Wayne could be seen from across the square, taking in the scene around him with pleasure.

A tall and sinewy Inuit man, he was accompanied by a short and wiry new friend he'd found at the shelter, another Inuit man. People were skating, a food truck puffed sweet smells into the air, and a light show danced on the snow and ice. It's mid December, and Wayne has been in Edmonton a month.

He spends every day outside, with breaks in the library. Over the course of the day, we explore outdoors, even drink a coffee on an icy patio, and he is delighted. When we move indoors, Wayne's mood quickly changes. He becomes distracted, aloof, and pessimistic.

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Gil's sleepless nights

At eight, Gil's mother died violently in front of him. At 61, he attests that he has never been a good sleeper. He avoids shelters as part of avoiding sleep. Sleeping so little means that he often nods off for seconds or minutes when there is a break in conversation. It's also intertwined with drug use (always uppers) and probably contributes to pain in his body. He accepts it as the legacy of losing his mother that way.

His doctors didn't have the vocabulary of trauma when he was a child, but he's come to understand his fear of sleep as just that. He lost his apartment after having too many people over. On the streets, he still seeks out company to make the nights less lonely, and catches a couple hours of kip in the public washrooms, or a friend's tent, if he's lucky.

“ I don't like sleeping at night because I have nightmares and I don't like sleeping during the day because I miss out.

Story from February 2019

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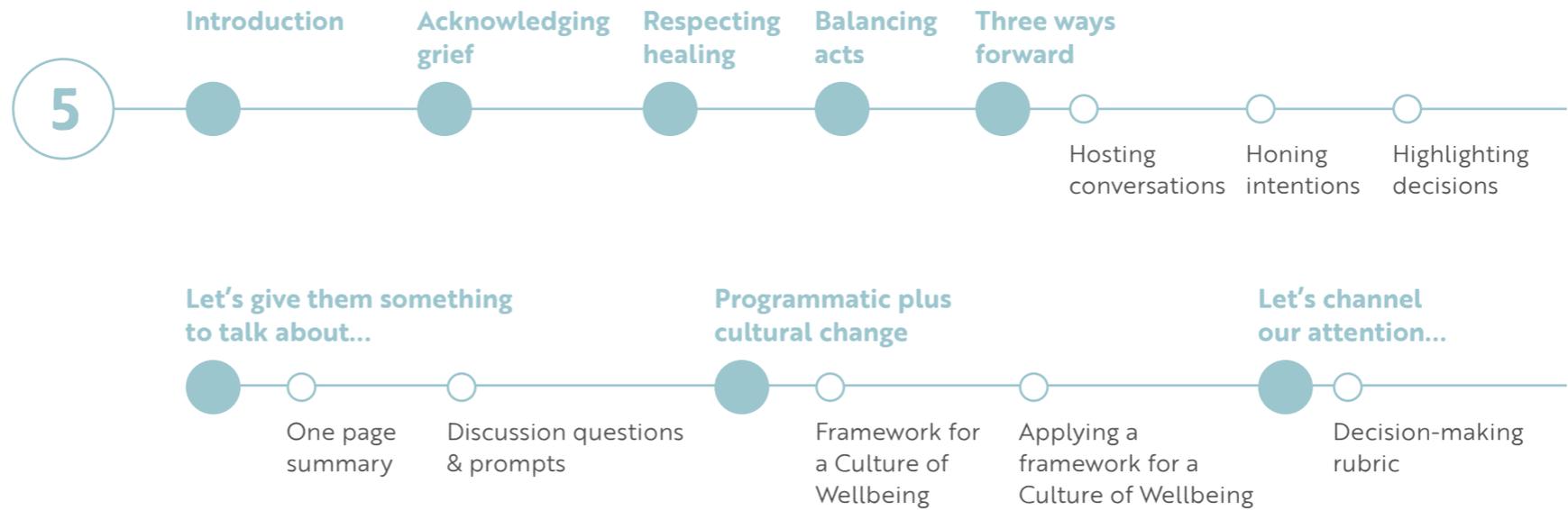
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- 1 Welcome
- 2 Why we start with people
- 3 Exploring Wellness
- 4 Exploring Urban
- 5 Action**

Action

 18 minutes

So what? Now what? Download and print prompts and tools to host conversations about urban wellness, and co-develop strategies centered on cultural and spiritual change.



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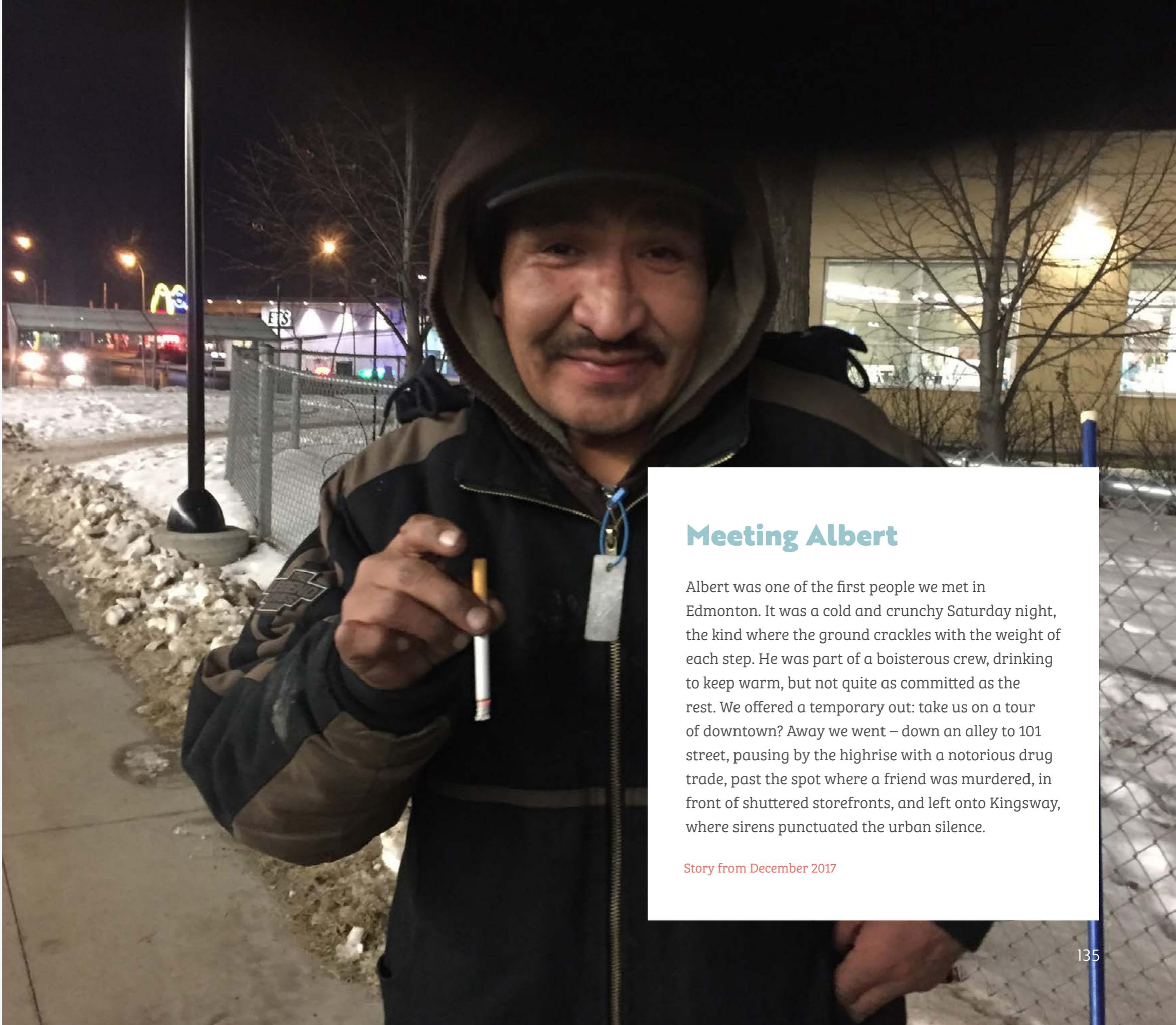
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Meeting Albert

Albert was one of the first people we met in Edmonton. It was a cold and crunchy Saturday night, the kind where the ground crackles with the weight of each step. He was part of a boisterous crew, drinking to keep warm, but not quite as committed as the rest. We offered a temporary out: take us on a tour of downtown? Away we went – down an alley to 101 street, pausing by the highrise with a notorious drug trade, past the spot where a friend was murdered, in front of shuttered storefronts, and left onto Kingsway, where sirens punctuated the urban silence.

Story from December 2017

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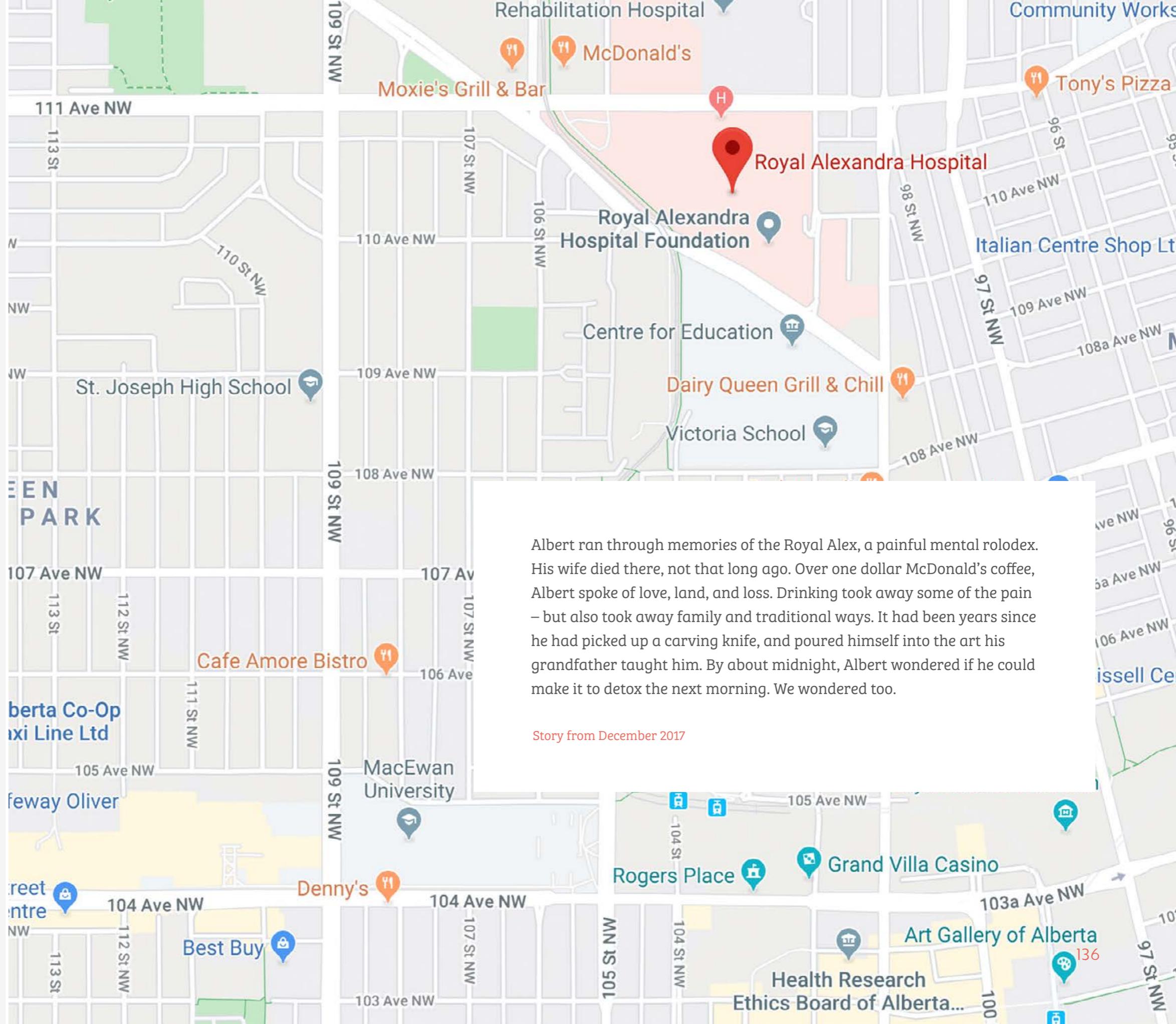
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Albert ran through memories of the Royal Alex, a painful mental rolodex. His wife died there, not that long ago. Over one dollar McDonald's coffee, Albert spoke of love, land, and loss. Drinking took away some of the pain – but also took away family and traditional ways. It had been years since he had picked up a carving knife, and poured himself into the art his grandfather taught him. By about midnight, Albert wondered if he could make it to detox the next morning. We wondered too.

Story from December 2017

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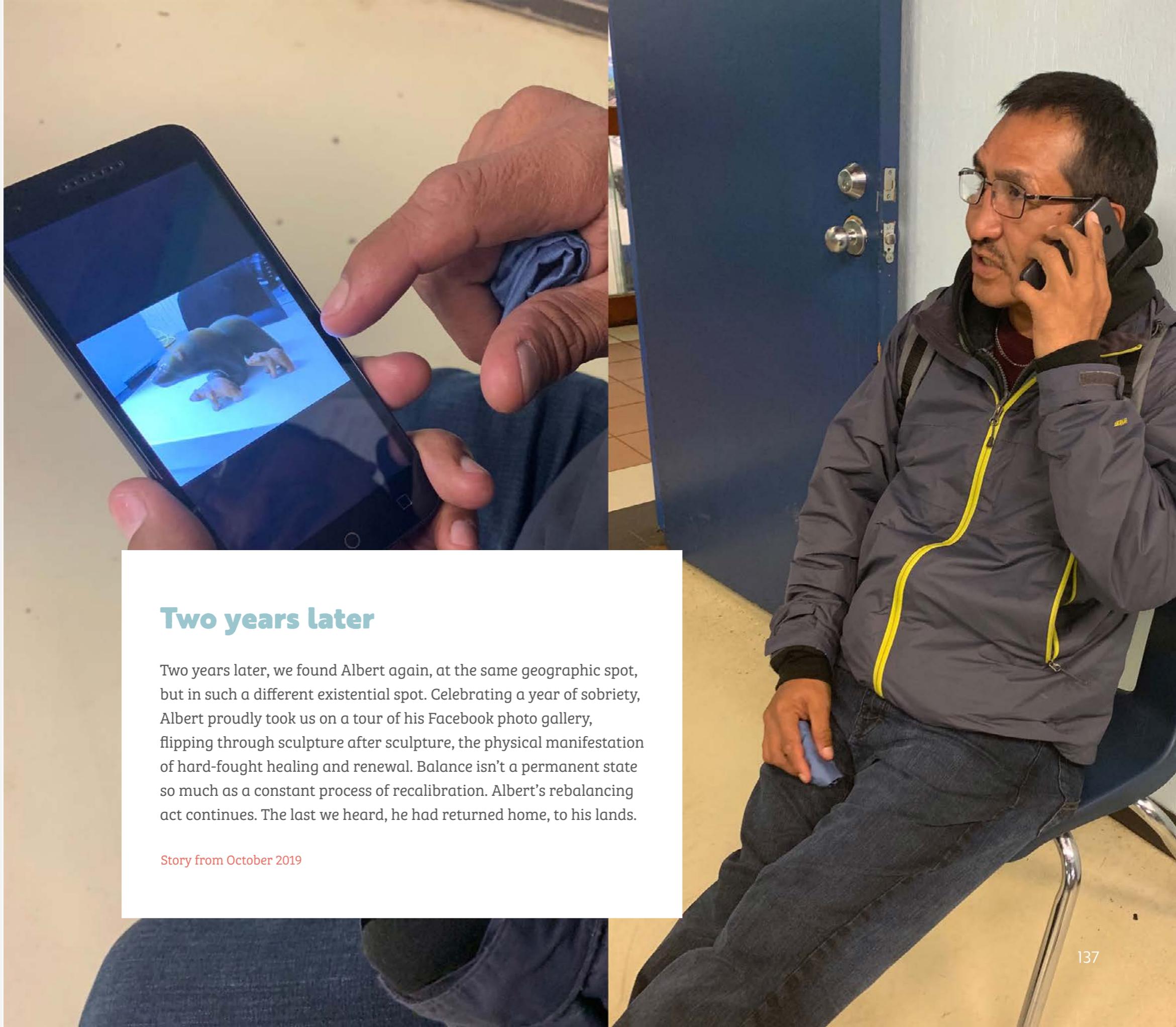
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Two years later

Two years later, we found Albert again, at the same geographic spot, but in such a different existential spot. Celebrating a year of sobriety, Albert proudly took us on a tour of his Facebook photo gallery, flipping through sculpture after sculpture, the physical manifestation of hard-fought healing and renewal. Balance isn't a permanent state so much as a constant process of recalibration. Albert's rebalancing act continues. The last we heard, he had returned home, to his lands.

Story from October 2019

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The path towards balance traverses through loss and pain.

Like wellness, healing is deeply intertwined with culture and history, language and tradition. And yet, across cultures, healing shares some core features: reconnecting mind-body-spirit, and reengaging community and environment.

Wellness doesn't just seem to be the pursuit of the good, but the integration of the painful.

Hurt, loss, and anguish are as much a part of wellness as love, acceptance, and purpose. Restoring balance requires reckoning with how big forces like industrialization and colonization elevated the material above the spiritual, systematically separating some people from land, culture, family, body & self.



- How, then, do we mourn the profound loss of connection whilst celebrating the profound possibility of reconnection?
- What if we embraced wellness as a grieving process?

“Healing is an intensely personal, subjective experience involving a reconciliation of the meaning an individual ascribes to distressing events with his or her perception of wholeness as a person.”

Thomas Egnew in The Annals of Family Medicine

“Grieving allows us to heal, to remember with love rather than pain. It is a sorting process. One by one you let go of the things that are gone and you mourn for them. One by one you take hold of the things that have become a part of who you are and build again.”

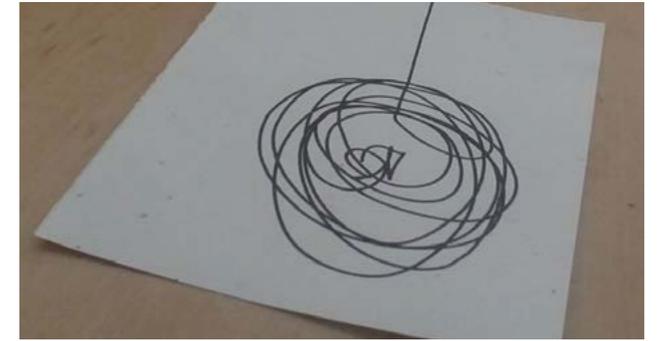
Rachel Naomi Remen

Acknowledging grief

Writing about *disenfranchised grief*, Professor Thomas Attig describes interference with the right to grieve as an empathic, political and ethical failure – not merely expressed through indifference, but through messages which “discount, dismiss, disapprove, discourage, invalidate, and delegitimize the experiences and efforts of grieving.”

[Read more about disenfranchised grief here.](#)

Nearly every woman we met who had a long-term relationship to the streets had also lost at least one child to the child protection system. Nearly every man we met with a long-term relationship to the streets had lost loved ones through divorce, estrangement, or death. No one we met had really grieved: perhaps they couldn't allow themselves, or had not been allowed by systems and publics so focused on finding fault, extending blame, and extolling shame. Whatever the reasons, it isn't just hurt that can pool, coagulate, and numb. Disrespect and indignity can too.



Community conversations

What does hope look like?

One of our community participants that we're tight with...passed away. So, we had a grief circle as a staff. Again, Christian organization so, do you know what Psalm 23 is? 'The Lord is my shepherd...?' so we broke up the six verses in it. I had three people talk about two verses each. So they would talk for a couple minutes on the two verses and then we'd give space for silence, for reflection, for silent prayer if that's what people wanted, and they we'd do it again...So, the valley of death is the second section.

The third section is hope. So I talked about hope at the end, and what does hope look like, and where to we find hope, in the midst of darkness? And it was probably half an hour, or 45 minutes, tops. And, the heaviness that we had felt for a week lifted by the end. When we all walked out it was gone and we were back to being a light, fun-loving, lots of joy in the workplace kind of place.



Dean Kurpjuweit,
Executive Director,
The Mustard Seed

Story from February 2020

Where do I belong?

A really interesting conversation we had was around family, and word usage, and whether iHuman is a family, because, the young people refer to iHuman as family and I, over the years...staff, board, I... have described iHuman as family. And through this process I realized the organizational use of the word 'family' was actually not good. And that it exacerbated grief and loss for young people.

If they understood us to be family and then at age 24 I'm saying 'there's the door: we only serve to age 24?... If we've said that we're family then we've just compounded attachment issues, the whole grief and loss around...'where do I belong?' ...

Staff did not like me telling them that we're not a family: we're colleagues, we work together, you have to have boundaries...we can be compassionate, we can be loving, we can be caring but we are not their family or their anchor point, because, you could leave tomorrow and then what? You have done a disservice to that young person.

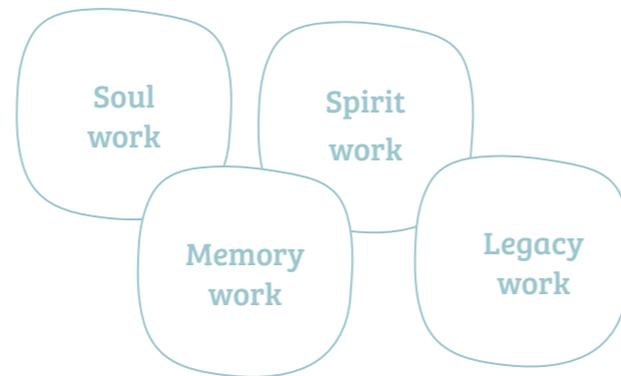


Catherine Broomfield,
Executive Director,
iHuman Youth Society

Story from February 2020

Respecting healing

Enfranchising healing takes deliberate work. Thomas Attig describes four kinds:



Where soul work is about finding at-homeness again – embracing not only absence, but abiding presence, spirit work is about coming to terms with uncertainty and making meaning “out of chaos.” Both spirit and soul work engender hope, while memory and legacy work foster love.

By “reaching through the pain” of what’s missing, we can hold on to what we still have: be it actual objects, stories, habits, ways of doing things, and activities of the people, places and ideas we’ve lost and who live on through us.

Community conversations

Moments of healing

“ I was a pastor at an inner city church. I had a knock at the door...I opened the door and there was a lady who had just been beaten... so she was scared, she was shaking, she could barely speak. I just gave her a little moment there & invited her inside. I gave her my phone to call a friend. I was very careful not to over speak, or get too close. I just gave her the room to process what had happened but also to know that she was safe, that I was just there to listen and to support however I could... I offered her a ride to a safe location where she could connect with people she knew and would support her, and so she took me up on that.



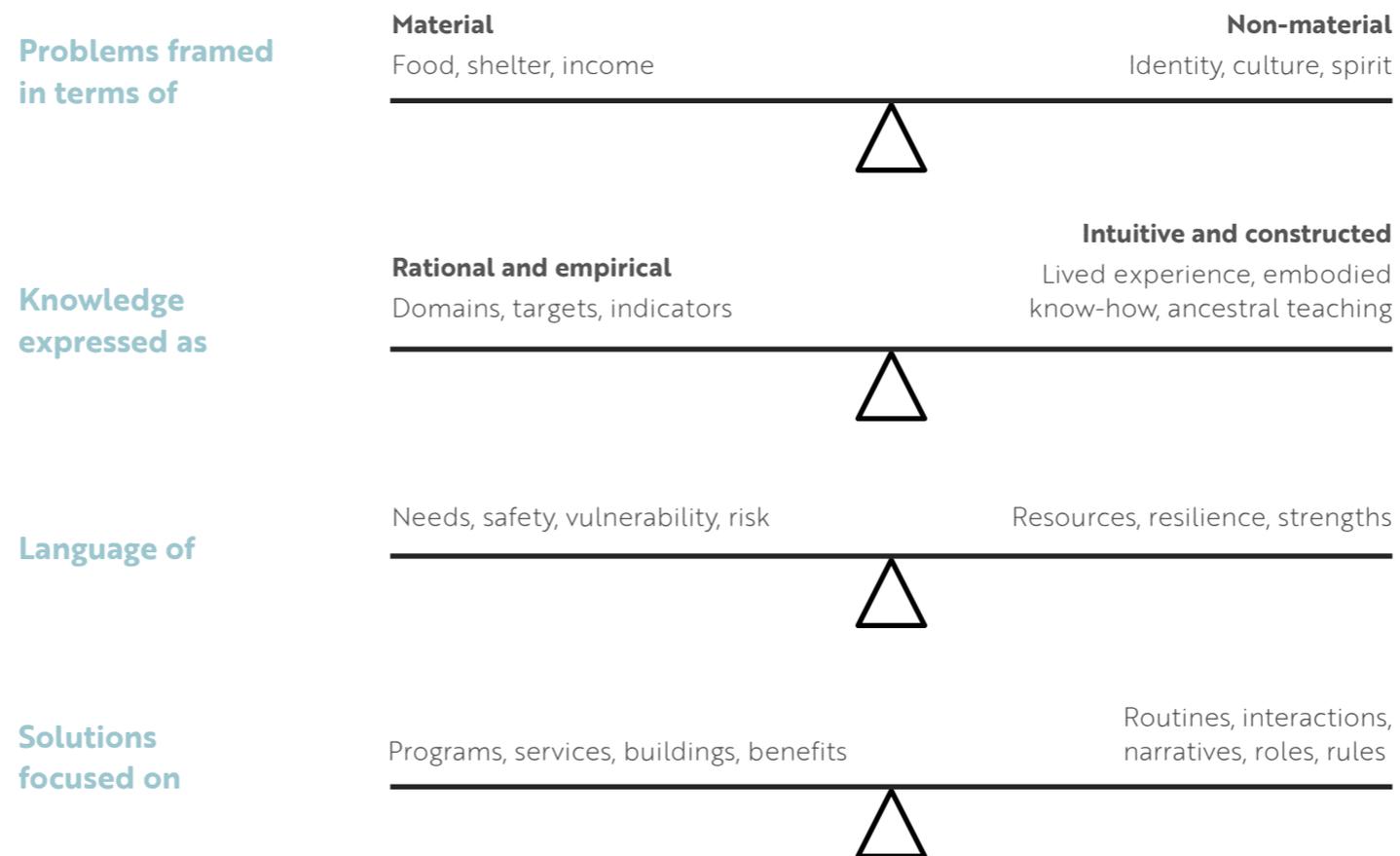
Phillip Telfer,
Former inner city pastor

Story from February 2020

Balancing acts

What is wellness work? How does a city, and its many intersecting communities, thoughtfully acknowledge grief, respect healing, and recalibrate balance? This is really the central question for the RECOVER Initiative as it grows into its third year.

Striking a balance between...





There are three ways forward:

1. Hosting conversations

Carving out more time and space to broach the awkward and uncomfortable; be honest and vulnerable; confront assumptions; and collectively dig to the heart of the matter. More conversation need not mean more meetings, communication plans and brands – but discussions where we stop taking ideas as givens, unearth their origins, and entertain alternatives.

The Talking Points section provides a short summary of the ideas contained in these pages, plus plenty of prompts to get conversation going.

2. Honing intentions

Talking doesn't have to preclude acting. Often, the best way to work our way through ideas is to deliberately act. Over the past two years, the RECOVER Initiative has experimented with many small-scale interventions – from neighbour dinners to alleyway gardens. We can begin to map these actions against a common theory of change, looking at how they shape the intersecting elements of urban wellness.

The Change Points section offers a Framework for a Culture of Wellbeing, highlighting the overlapping currents of cultural change. The aim isn't to rationalize or streamline action so much as to deepen and strengthen action.

3. Highlighting decisions

Alongside open experimentation must come open decision-making. What to say 'yes' and 'no' to? 'Ultimately, rebalancing the elements of urban wellness requires a reallocation of time, money, and emphasis. An explicit set of questions and considerations can help.

The Focus Points section includes a draft decision-making rubric, designed to assist RECOVER stakeholders with discerning which pieces of work embody the spirit of urban wellness.

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<p>What is the role of a city in engendering connection to land, to self, culture, family/ community, and the sacred?</p> <p>Should cities just provide infrastructure, or do they have a responsibility to go deeper?</p>	<p>What do you think it would look like for a city to support spirituality – in its multiplicity of forms?</p> <p>What might institutions (e.g. police, courts, schools, libraries), services, and cultural organizations do more or less of?</p>	<p>What do you see as standing in the way of connecting Edmontonians to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Family and friends• Body and self• Culture• Land• Human potential?	<p>Should it be the job of professional services to connect people? Or is that the community's job?</p>
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Let's give them something to talk about...

Part of what makes a concept like urban wellness so hard to pin down is the inadequacy of language. While most recognize the limits of reducing well-being to a series of tick boxes, most also gravitate towards definitional clarity.



Download the one-page summary



Browse discussion questions and prompts.

Defining wellness in terms of living standards and health domains feels so knowable, comfortable and manageable. Adding the soul and spirit into the mix feels so much the opposite. The words are awkward, clumsy, and fraught – wrapped up in religion, they can feel exclusive and at odds with multiculturalism and secularism.

And yet, they don't have to be. Pretty much every belief system grapples with notions of self, soul and spirit. Rather than avoid that which we don't quite know or understand, we're inviting you into a conversation about what it really means to live and be well in Edmonton. **What are wellness programs and services, clinics and centres, health and social care professionals, targets and indicators ultimately in pursuit of?**

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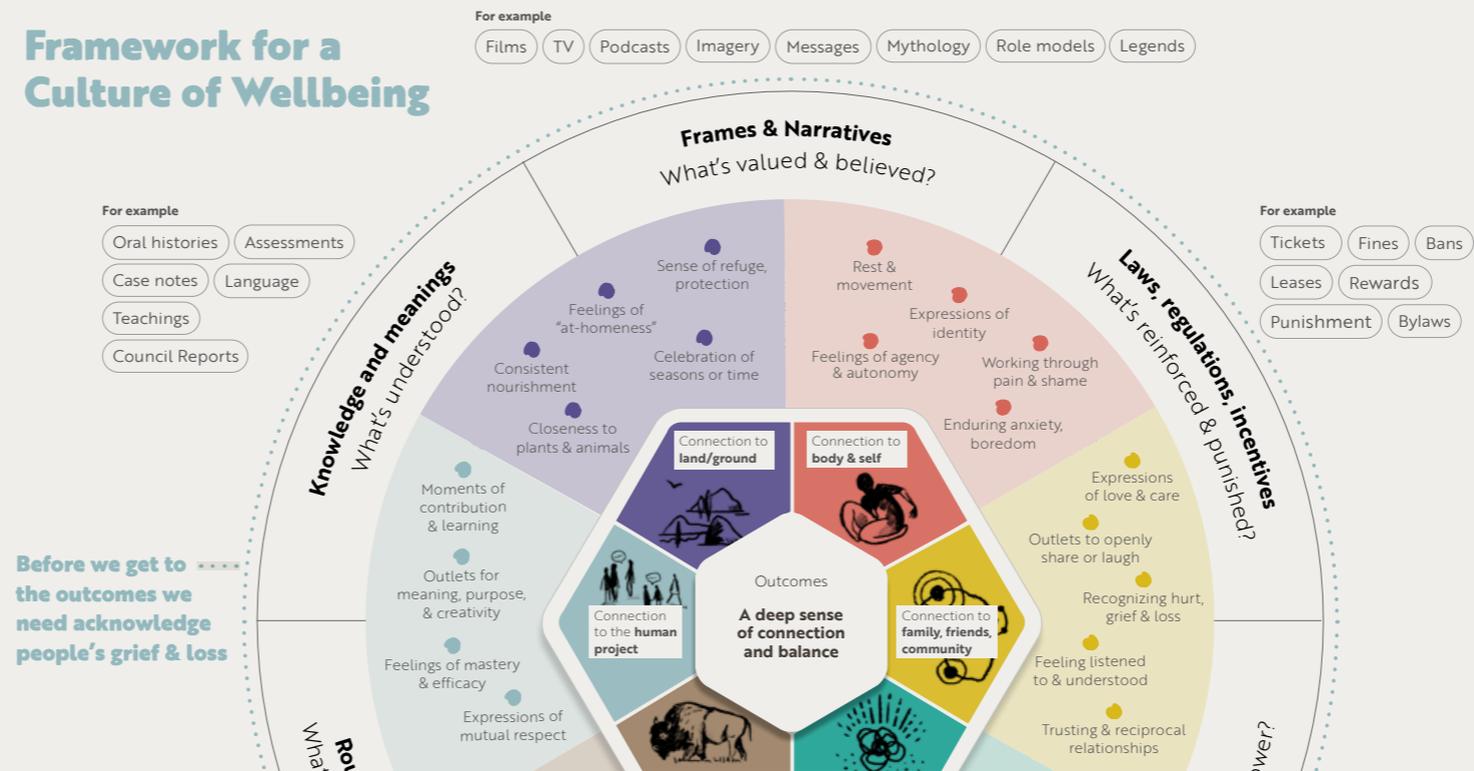
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Framework for a Culture of Wellbeing



Programmatic plus cultural change

Wellness isn't a linear pursuit, so much as a circuitous journey. Rather than reduce wellness to a hierarchical list of factors, we can identify lots of interwoven elements.

These elements can be enabled, or hindered by the rules society sets, the narratives and messages we hear, the interactions and routines we have, and the roles we assume. Rather than see wellness as the responsibility of programs and services, how might we see wellness as the responsibility of our collective culture? We can think of rules, norms, narratives, interactions, routines, and roles as cultural change tools. They can either bring about (or take away) elements like trust, acceptance and identity, which underlie our connection to self, community, land, culture, human potential and the sacred.

[Download framework for a Culture of Wellbeing](#)

[Apply the framework to your interventions](#)

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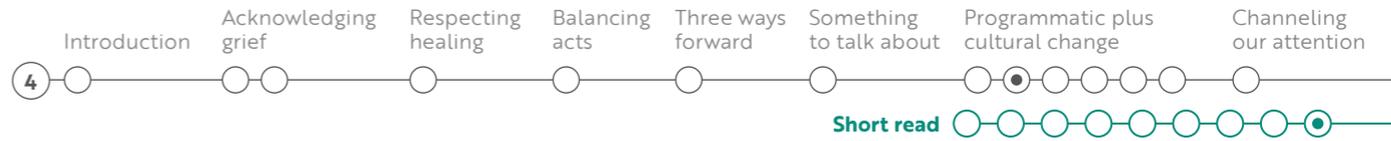
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Framework for a Culture of Wellbeing



For example

- Films
- TV
- Podcasts
- Imagery
- Messages
- Mythology
- Role models
- Legends

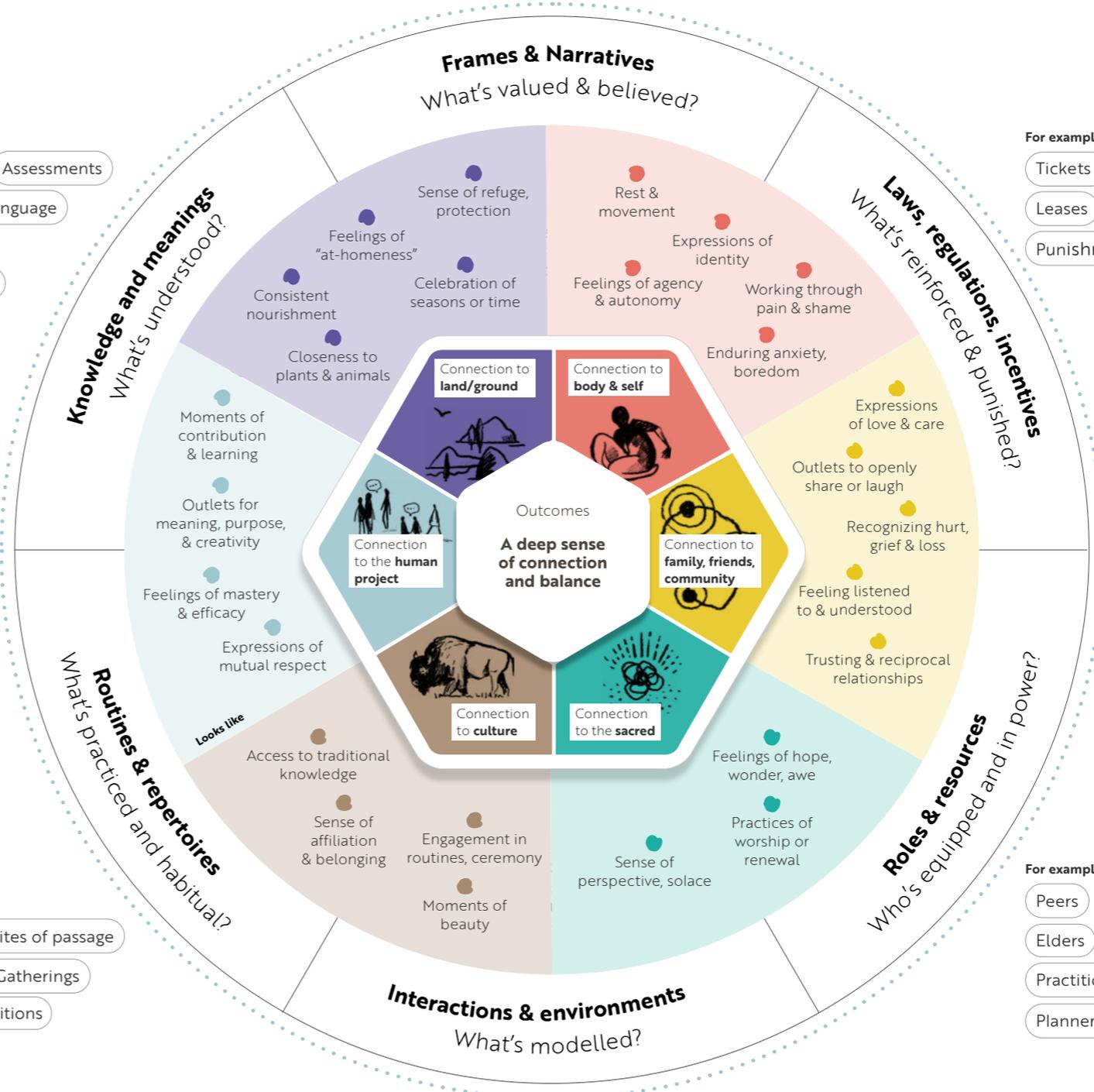
For example

- Oral histories
- Assessments
- Case notes
- Language
- Teachings
- Council Reports

For example

- Tickets
- Fines
- Bans
- Leases
- Rewards
- Punishment
- Bylaws

Before we get to the outcomes we need acknowledge people's grief & loss



For example

- Meals
- Conversations
- Movement
- Animals
- Space
- Layout
- Use
- Artifacts

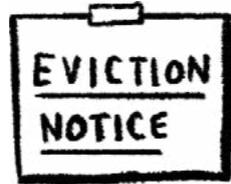
For example

- Peers
- Allies
- Healers
- Elders
- Doula
- Brokers
- Practitioners
- Artists
- Musicians
- Planners
- Researchers

The difference is in the details

Story from February 2019

What really happened:



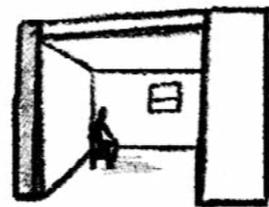
Deborah's last eviction didn't surprise her. She'd let people stay with her, despite a lease which barred overnight guests.

Back on the streets, at 58, Deborah felt protected by her crew. She wasn't lonely – but her health wasn't so good, and she was racking up tickets for public sleeping.



In and out of the hospital and shelters, Deborah was referred to a case manager. She liked her. The case manager navigated the system, helping her get a new ID, qualify for housing again, and acquire furniture for a new place.

Deborah was excited and unsure about her new place. She couldn't have overnight visitors for more than a few days at a time. And she wasn't sure how she'd deal with her insomnia, all alone.



A speculative story of what could happen with the new Framework for a Culture of Wellbeing:

For Deborah, a life full of camaraderie and friendship is a life well lived. She says hello to every passerby, even when they don't smile back.



Instead of tickets for public sleeping, Deborah earns a ride on the sleep bus, where she's treated to a comfy chair (rules/norms). Dropped off at The Nook, one of twenty cafes in the breakfast network, she banters with the staff and customers (environment).

Afterwards, she wanders over to the liquor store, where she picks up her Blackstone vodka. The guy behind the counter tells her about a natural medicine event going on at the city's equine park – would she like to take the purpose bus there? Her friend Jimmy wanders in; there will be tobacco and ceremony (routines).



They go; Deborah's feeling pretty relaxed after, but worried about a night at home, alone. She and Jimmy head back to hers – she calls her Night Owl (a role) to let her know that Jimmy's coming over. The Night Owl checks-in, brings by some tea to help Deborah sleep, and assists Jimmy to the shelter around 3am (interactions) Deborah's slowly finding a balance between self and friends.

Community members' responses to the Framework

A first memory of land, culture & belonging

☞ I was three years old. My grandparents owned property in Cold Lake; it bordered military property and also First Nations traditional lands. I was there with my dad and my grandpa; they were closing up the cabins. I remember walking on the beach and wandering off. I came around this bend and could see there was a group of Indigenous men in regalia having a fire ceremony. There was a chief in a headdress. And they were sitting cross-legged...

They called me over and sat me on the right side of the chief, showed me how to cross my legs, and then gave me this piece of fish and continued having their ceremony until my dad and my grandpa came ... That was one of my first core memories and I think it was pivotal. From a very young age, I had an Indigenous lens and my experience told me the stereotypes weren't true...



Lynsae Moon
Co-Owner, the Nook Cafe

Story from February 2020



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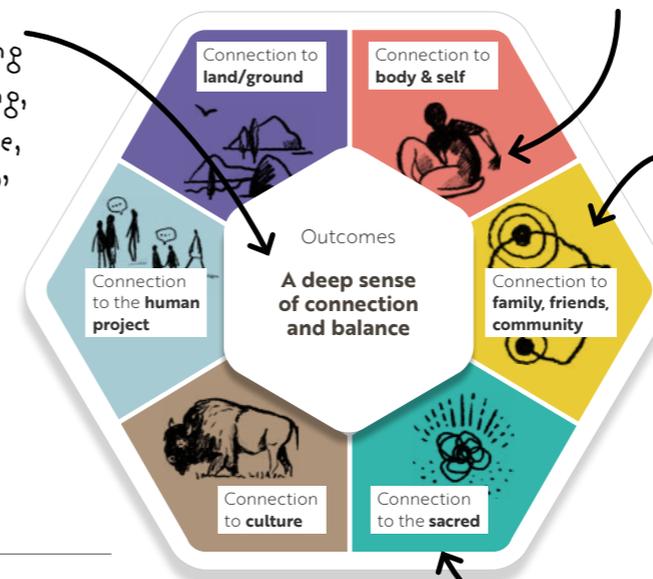
Conversation with Renee and Geo

February 2020

A moment of balance...

Geo: "Drawing is a living and breathing part of me. In remand, I carved a chief's face. With 20 pieces of soap using a fork and a pencil and a staple for the wings."

Renee: "We go walking and it keeps you going, gives you the exercise, keeps you breathing."



Disconnection from self & body...

Geo: "Right now, I feel disconnected. I broke my hand. I didn't go see the doctor... Yeah, it's painful, but I take it upon myself and heal when I'm done being mad at it."

Disconnection from friends and community

Renee: "I've been losing touch and feeling distant. Everybody asks, 'How's your kid?' I don't know... It makes me feel like a space case. When I woke up, I couldn't go back to sleep."

A routine that brings balance ...

Geo: "Well a healthy routine is I do artwork, sell it, dances, pow-wows... It's been years since a pow-wow."



What home tastes like ...

Renee: "A lot of what I miss from home [the Northwest Territories] is the wild meat. Living off the land. I miss caribou the most. I grew up on it. I eat it every day for the first eleven or twelve years of life. After that, we switched to moose. We'd cut it up, fry it, boil it, dry it. The one thing I didn't learn how to do is make dry fish."

[Even GrandFather Bear Dreams...](#)

Geo's artwork

Connection to faith ...

Renee: "I don't believe in church, but I do believe there is something bigger than ourselves out there. Why would you need a building to go pray in if God is everywhere? When I was growing up, my uncle told me I was a throwback. My grandparents lost two younger babies and I looked like one of them when I was born."

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Conversation with Lynsae Moon
Co-Owner, the Nook Cafe

Interactions as an essential change tool – supported by roles & resources, regulations & incentives

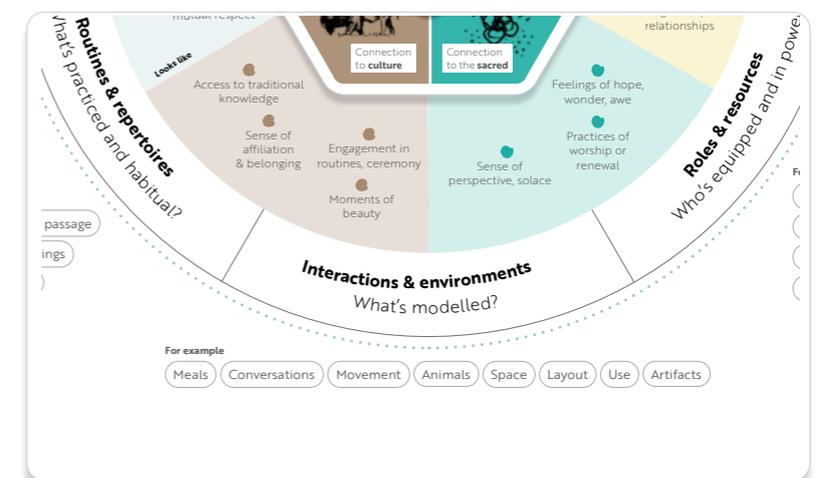
Sarah: What could help support you with the extremes so you felt you had the energy and capacity for the 10-minute interactions?

Lynsae: There are days when it is traumatic to help people sort through their trauma. Part of being good at this business is listening. People talk to you. But we don't have benefits in this industry. We can't just take a mental health day. There's not a human resource department or a counsellor to talk it through. And there's just not a business model for what I'm doing. If the city could identify a handful of businesses in each neighbourhood and provide support – even if it was just resources for mental health first aid, that could make it more sustainable.

Story from February 2020

Interactions are the heart of the matter ...

Lynsae: “I want to be known for helping people rise to their highest selves because somebody took time to love them... I think the goal is to let people be seen where they are – because I wasn't always: I was a “difficult child” who was apparently hard to love. I just want people to be seen. Everybody deserves to be greeted with a smile.”



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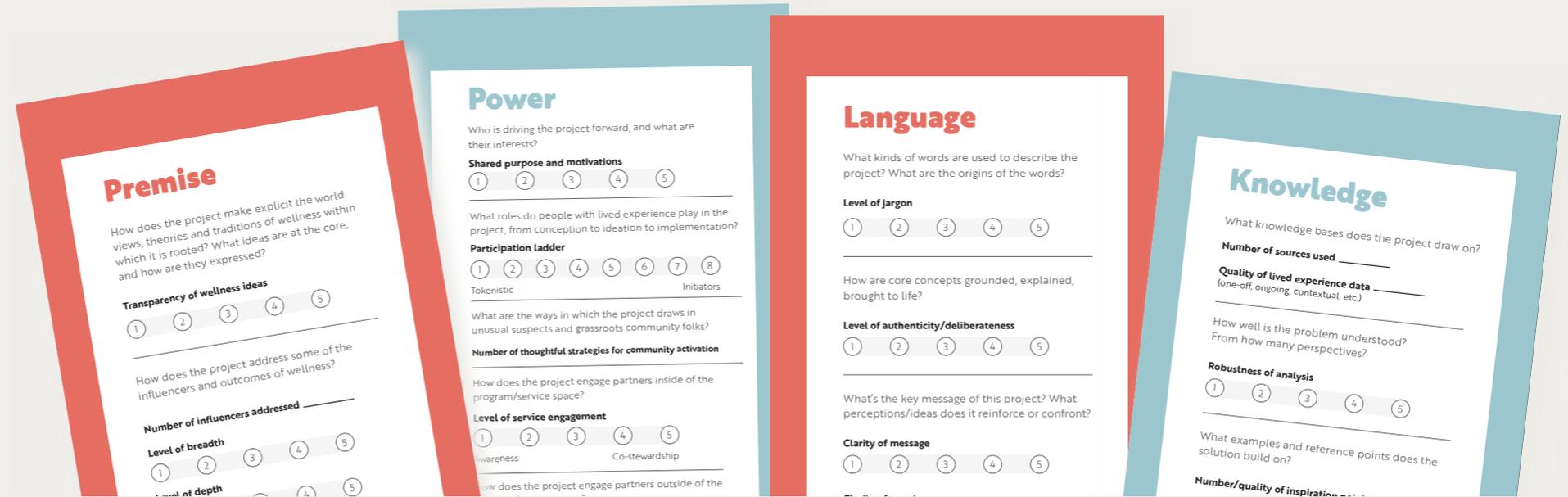
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Let's channel our attention...

With so many interwoven elements, how best to focus RECOVER'S efforts? Doing a little bit of everything is likely too diffuse to bring about significant cultural change.

Reconnecting the spiritual and material parts of wellness means paying attention to the details: to how a proposed project doesn't just spawn a new thing – be that a program, service, object or space – but how that new thing enhances specific elements of wellbeing and connection. By applying a consistent set of questions to every piece of work, RECOVER can start the rebalancing act.



Download a decision-making rubric