

## The Family Years

*Be prepared. This is a long story but worth the trip to cyberspace.*

I would be amiss if I left an impression that my personal life revolved only around a professional career as advertising executive and fine artist. Just because I have called the next chapter, "*Folio Years*," my journey was nevertheless a period of time perhaps better explained were I to call them the "*Family Years*," which I have. Because, to be honest, the professional years in advertising and marketing pale by comparison to the never-ending story of my (our) family. The Ad Agency in Toronto is long done, but my family keeps growing. Even though both family and Folio years were separate to some degree, they coexisted as somewhat of an alliance of all the experiences my life. Needless to say, implied in all the writings about *my* life is the blessing of Alice, a wonderful wife and fellow sojourner over the past 56 years (59 if I begin on the day we first met), and counting.

I must emphasize as well, that never in all the professional years of my career did I sacrifice my marriage and family for some vain-glory of an upwardly mobile career. That may sound like a giant boast, but history has been the evidence. Even the industrial giant, GM General Motors, whose president I made cry one evening, could not make me bend my knees in servitude to business at the expense of my family. I remember the incident as if it just happened yesterday. Our advertising agency had been given a lucrative contract to complete some major advertising designs for GM. Their marketing manager, with whom we dealt on a regular basis, was a pushy, self-centered man, whose idea of success was servitude to the company twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. He was a true slave.

One Friday he phoned me to ask (demand) if he could have the next set of design concepts on his desk by Monday. That meant working overtime, something I was always reluctant to do because I had a theory about business that proved to be fact, a fact that affected my decisions *not* to work overtime if it could be avoided. After some thirty-five years of business observation, I had stuck with my original conclusion, a conclusion I made back in the seventies, and a conclusion that applied to the General Motors as well. That conclusion was that nearly all "rush" jobs and production "panics," are either the result of gross mismanagement of time or the result of little men playing power Caesar-games with rank-and-file working class men and women. My "man" from GM was the latter. I asked him the reason for his "rush," a rush he was quite prepared to pay overtime for.

His answer was curt.

"I need it on Monday because I say so. I am the client."

I responded quickly and boldly.

"Do you *need* the work," I replied, "simply because you say so or because you have other deadlines to meet?"

He was quiet for a moment, so I continued.

"Do you really want me to say no to my four children and wife? You know: 'Hey, forget dad for the weekend. He's got other things to do, like satisfying a client with no apparent reason for the rush?'"

When I remember the incident I cannot help but wonder why I was so assertive. At stake were a major contract and a big client. In the advertising industry the name GM as a client wielded great power and prestige. We were a small agency and for a moment I thought I had lost

my cool and as a result lost the job *and* the client. What to say to my business partner who had always been inclined to jump when a client said “jump?” To my surprise, the GM marketing manager backed down and said he really didn't need the designs until the end of the following week. I took a deep breath and sighed with relief. A week later, Joe and I delivered the best creative he had seen in years. We made him look like a hero and the campaign was a success. As a result, the following year we were contracted to do one of the most prestigious events of the corporate world, the official retirement party for the president of General Motors Canada. Yet, through the entire overtime incident, all I could think about was not only my obligations to our growing family but also the joy of having a family. We employed twenty-six people and I was the only one with children. Even though I was somewhat of a novelty among my co-labourers, not one of my staff ever considered Alice and the children a liability to my creative journey or a detriment to my management skills, even if I was their boss. In fact, they were the best bunch of co-workers who wholeheartedly supported my family ventures and willingly looked at all the family pictures in which Alice and I celebrated life with the kids.

Now to the family years.

Alice and I were a family. As a family we did all the family things we were expected to do, and we thoroughly enjoyed doing them, especially when we drove to Sauble Beach.

No family destination has as special a place in our hearts as Sauble Beach. Whenever we could, and as often as we tried, whether it was spring, summer or autumn, we packed groceries, inflatables, towels, bathing suits, diapers, blankets, coolers, camera, film, and more in our trusted van. In the early morning hours we strapped sleepy kids into their car seats to head north to the spectacular and sandy shores of Lake Huron. The drive took just over two hours and was well worth the constant, *"are we there yet?"* questions. Sauble Beach is the northernmost of three awesome Great Lakes beaches. I have frequented all of them. First, Ipperwash Provincial Park with its wide beach on which I could drive my car. Second, Pinery Provincial Park, a camper's paradise. Due north along Lake Huron and well beyond the town of Southampton, stood the small town of Sauble Beach, a friendly place that boasted a public beach that rivaled Miami Florida. Sauble Beach was famous for some of the most awe-inspiring sunsets, mouthwatering French Fries and southern-fried chicken sold right on the beach, and of course endless golden sand that was like velvet to our feet. Lake Huron was always clear, always cool, and always refreshing. We usually managed a long day basking in the sun, playing in the water, and running on the beach, interspersed with generous picnic lunches and snacks. When the day was over we were a tired but very happy family reluctant to make the long trek home. During the summer months we often rented a cottage at Sauble Beach. No General Motors or any other client could ever take that away, not even the CBC. We were first and foremost a family.

Alice and I were blessed with four children during those years. Jeff was born in 1969. Wendy followed in 1972. Then came Angela in 1976 and Karen in 1979. Suzanne and Matthew did not arrive until years later in 1984 and 1987. Together, Alice and I learned the art of parenting, one step and one child at a time, with our only trusted companion, Dr. Spock's, *"Baby and Child Care."* That book, however, fell out of favour many years later because some childcare gurus proposed that children only needed nurturing not discipline, forgetting that one was impossible without the other. Contemporary childcare also began to shift towards toxic doses of freedom for children. Discipline became a dirty word. I still believe that most of those gurus or "experts" never had children themselves or their families were so small that between careers and daycare, the sum total of their child-rearing experiences was very little. They may have been gurus but they were not experts.

Many years later as pastors, when Alice and I began counseling people in life-skills and spiritual matters, someone had asked her, "What qualifies you to be a pastor?"

"Six children!" She replied.

I don't know why they did not ask what qualified me as a counselor. Probably because most knew I had university degrees. Six of them: two undergraduate, two graduate, and one doctoral, but above all a father of six children.

Another favourite place for the whole family was Alice's parent's cottage on Little Bald Lake in the Kawartha region just northeast of Toronto. The nearest village was Bobcageon and the nearest city Lindsay. I soon learned my oldest son loved fishing and one of the earliest photographs I have is of a little boy standing on a dock by the lake, holding a small sunfish on a line. It was a proud moment. Despite the fact that the cottage's doorways were too small for me, the beds too short and lumpy, and often the mosquitos too aggressive, the cottage was a lazy, laid-back place where time stood still except for the children's demands for hot dogs, hamburgers and gallons of Kool-Aid. A small aluminum boat with a little motor was tied to the dock. It gave us access to Little Bald Lake and Big Bald Lake. Just a short walk from the cottage was a large swimming pool that belonged to the Cottagers' Association of the area. Somewhere in my dusty past there is a large painting I made to commemorate a moonlit night over Little Bald Lake.

When Jeff was born in 1969, we lived in a Toronto apartment on Manor Road, right on the corner of Bayview Avenue and upstairs from Valentine Travel Service, the travel agency which Lukas Koops, Alice's father, owned. We bought our first family home a year later. It meant a move to the "burbs." But in the Metro Toronto region the suburbs were just another part of the greater metropex. But the move was minor culture shock for me, a city boy since birth. We bought a new but modest, semi-detached home on Playford Avenue in Clarkson, a bedroom community that later amalgamated with the communities of Streetsville and Port Credit to become Mississauga. The drive downtown to my office was a forty-five minute commute. Within a few years, the whole area had turned into one great metropolitan mass connected by freeways. When we outgrew our home on Playford Road, we were able to sell the place for a good profit and buy a new and detached home on a tree-lined, orderly street in Port Credit. Our new family home was on Pine Avenue just a few houses from Lake Ontario. Our street dead-ended in a little postage-stamp-size park right by the water. Even though we moved a lot, we never left the metropolitan area until our great migration to Gabriola Island, British Columbia.

Other street addresses were Chalkdene Grove, Gatineau Avenue, and Mesa Crescent. When I muse over the many adventures of our family and the joy of experiencing life with so many children, my favourite places, the ones that were really "home," were Pine Avenue and Gatineau Avenue. I have over three thousand slides that chronicle our happy family years.

Except for all that moving as the family grew. First enough to fill a small rental van, then a truck, and then a big tractor-trailer moving rig. I was no stranger to heavy lifting. Even the move to BC, still meant packing a large rental truck, despite garage-sales and giveaways.

After we moved to British Columbia, however, I felt we could never put roots down again as a family. Somehow the years (thirty and counting) have felt more like visitors. The move was so great and had left so many friends behind, we were literally without roots, except for our spiritual roots which thankfully remained deep and strong, although not exempt from testing in future years. The children did not put down roots on Gabriola either, but soon did begin to call British Columbia "home," a sentiment I shared as well, albeit reluctantly. I have always been Canadian but never with a strong provincial identity. The oldest two children, Jeff and Wendy, never really lived on Gabriola. The next two children, Angela and Karen, left home

a few years after we moved to Gabriola, leaving only Suzanne and Matthew. Suzanne also longed to get off the island, however, Matthew, well, he truly became an islander. Then Suzanne moved into Nanaimo and from there to Winnipeg. Matt began studies at Vancouver Island University in Nanaimo and after that he moved to Pt. Alberni. Not to jump ahead too far, but little did Alice and I know at the time that one day Susanne would return home with a beautiful baby boy and Matt returned home because he believed Gabriola was where he ought to be. Both now work at the Hope Childcare Centre which Alice and I founded in 2002.

Needless to say, we were a family and we were a diverse family. Each child was a unique person and as we saw them grow up, we realized how much joy there was in watching our children grow up to be who they are, rather than what we wanted them to be. Sure, we raised them, disciplined them, fed them, clothed them, housed them, and above all loved them, and still do, but we recognized that each child would eventually have to choose his or her own path towards tomorrow. Both Alice and I agreed long ago that the best parenting philosophy has been to teach our children to be independent and free thinkers with a will of their own. That included spiritual choices, even though we have taught all our children about the *Kingdom of God* and encouraged each and every one of them to embrace that kingdom. Following in the "*footsteps of mom and dad,*" and the *Kingdom of God*, would always be their freewill choice and not a mandatory one, even when we disagreed with our children's choices. Neither did we ever attach benefits and conditions to our footsteps. Whatever blessings we could bestow on any of the children we did so unconditionally. Family heirlooms and whatever inheritance may await them will never be on the condition that they did it *our way*.

I would be presumptuous to begin to describe each child in detail for fear of doing injustice to their personhood and forgetting what they may consider to have been important things and which I might have dismissed as minor incidents. For them they may have been major milestones. I write these words looking back with regret that times have passed too quickly. Were you to ask me, "Would I do it all over again?" I would have to reply, "Yes!" I could never imagine peace, joy, and happiness, without Jeff, Wendy, Angie, Karen, Suzanne, and Matthew, or without Alice. Our "yes" was *tbc*, to-be-continued in 2018 when Vincent was born.

That is not to say we had our "moments." Every real family has their moments. Some were joyful moments beyond words, other terrifying beyond description.

Imagine the terror one night when Alice and I returned home from visiting friends, only to find our front door wide open. It was late at night and very dark. Jeff and Wendy had been in charge, a task to which they rose often with great capability and absolute trust. All had gone well and the kids had gone to bed on time.

We pulled into our driveway late that evening to find the front door wide open. A stiff wind blew outside. Rain threatened. Instinctively I dashed inside and checked the bedrooms first. Everyone was accounted for except Angela. She was gone. We searched everywhere. Words cannot describe the feelings of a parent when panic threatens to choke mind and emotions because a child had gone missing. From thoughts of momentary separation in a busy shopping mall, to slipping out of sight on a busy beach, or going too close to deep waters in a lake, to outright disappearance, the cold icy grip that locked on my heart was horrible. Within seconds my mind recalled every abduction story and every movie and television program whose ratings depended on violence and abuse. Angie was nowhere to be found. We prayed hoping to override our fears with God's calm. At last we found her. She was under her bed and sound asleep, thoroughly wrapped in her big fluffy duvet that somehow had managed to fall off the bed on the floor. Like any child yearning for a safe warm place, Angie, in her sleep, had somehow

inadvertently "followed" the duvet, only to curl sleepily inside its deep folds of warmth. What a sigh of relief.

I also remember the time a neighbour's child came running into our house.

"Jeff has hurt himself and it's serious."

We dashed across the street and found our son with a deep gash in his leg. Somehow the makeshift rope and pulley he had assembled to stretch from a friend's house to a tree in the neighbour's backyard, had given the kids a bigger joyride than they bargained for. The ride was too fast to control. When his turn came, Jeff found himself speeding uncontrollably towards the tree. Not only was the tree a formidable obstacle, it had a huge rusty nail in its trunk. Jeff hit the tree at full speed and jammed into the nail broadside. I had to fight back tears as his little boy-figure sat on the doctor's table.

"This will hurt a bit," said the doctor as he began cleaning the wound and stitching it.

I think Jeff was more brave than I was.

I don't know who cried the loudest.

But such is my pain and anguish when children hurt, especially when they are my own children. That feeling has never left me and to this day, when I see a child, any child, in pain, I hurt. Often that hurt turns to anger when I realize it was an adult or some playground bully who caused the pain. Sometimes I forget to forgive and "turn the other cheek," and I jump into the situation. Once I grabbed an older kid's arms as he tried to bully a younger kid. I threatened to hold him pinned to the wall until he grew old and gray; reminding him I was infinitely bigger and stronger than he was. I endured a barrage of foul insults, but I just pinned him harder to the wall. In the end he conceded loss and I let him go.

One day I received a call from Queensway Elementary School.

"Karen has fallen in the gym and she's really hurt."

Could I come over quickly?

I drove the six or seven kilometres in about two seconds. It still angers me when I think of the complete incompetence of the school, a very large school with all sorts of resources but no brains. Karen had fallen badly on a slippery gymnasium floor. The fact she slipped instantly into shock should have warned the teachers. Instead, they had carried Karen to the nurse's station, not even wondering if she could move or not, or was in need of a stretcher. The designated school nurse simply ordered Karen to lie on a bench. No one called 911. You can imagine the scene when I arrived. I found a frightened little girl, my little "booboo" (that's what I called Karen), in complete shock. But, thank God, her dad was on the scene! Here came this big, six foot, four-and-a-half inches tall dad carrying his precious girl in his arms to the van to take her to the hospital. Everyone cheered except Karen. She had gone into complete shock. Regrettably, the hospital was a display of total incompetence as well. In my heart I knew something was wrong with my Karen. She has stopped crying and just stared into space, whining softly, and frozen in shock. I carried her into the hospital's emergency ward. Remember, I was not crying "foul" in school and hospital simply because it was *my* child who was hurt and I wanted so bad to stop her pain. No, even when I think about it objectively, years later, it was borderline stupidity the way both institutions handled the accident.

I said to the desk nurse, "get this child in X-ray - NOW! She's badly hurt!"

The nurse on duty groaned: "name please, address, phone, are you the father of the child, do you have an OHIP card, etc., etc.,?"

I answered angrily. "Yes, but that can come later. HELP MY CHILD!"

I threatened to take matters into my own hands. After all, I knew a lot about hospitals having worked as an orderly in one of the biggest hospitals during my student years. Not only that, I had been a patient myself with kidney stones, an infected appendix, twice a broken arm, a pulled back, and a groin injury, not at the same time of course.

They sat Karen in a wheelchair and there she remained for two hours while we waited for a doctor and X-ray technician. This was a big metropolitan hospital whose name I will not mention. All my efforts to expedite matters failed. At last they came for Karen. Amidst horrible cries of pain they tried to straighten her legs for the X-ray machine. I still can feel the rage I felt when the hospital staff totally ignored my daughter's cries. When it was all over, the verdict was in. She had a broken leg. The fracture was major. She spent many weeks in a large leg-cast. I tried to remain forgiving to the school and hospital. I have very low tolerance for incompetence, especially when basic first-aid is not even regarded as necessary in a large school, and hospitals are too busy "feathering" their own beds through management and union negotiations, to tend to the needs of a small child whose need was painfully obvious. All my professional training said: "use the media you know so well, and get even." My faith said, "it's not your battle to fight." Faith won.

Among our family moments of *angst* and helplessness also stand the monuments of laughter and unbridled joy. Jeff was a super paperboy. He loved soccer as well. Wendy took to liking ballet and hanging out with her friend, also a Wendy, but a Van Ravenstein. Angie and Karen were content to play in our family backyard pool during the hot and muggy days of summer. Angie had a knack for parading up and down the beach as if on some Parisian runway for fashion models. She grew up tall and slender with long legs. Karen loved a pail, a shovel and lots of beach sand. She loved eating the sand even more. We graduated our children from cloth diapers to those incredible disposable ones. Concerns for the environment took last place in light of years of diaper pails whose pungent odours crept everywhere through the house. We couldn't just throw them in a washing machine either. We first had to soak those smelly cloths, and then wash them. All our children were breastfed and lived to tell about it. Alice and believed it was and still is the best thing for a child. Nothing is more intimate than a mother feeding her child.

From first sounds, to first words, to first steps, the journey of our family was a living experience of joy the way it was meant to be. Of course we can remember sleepless nights when fever ruled our young household, and babies who puked all over themselves and us, or when a little bottom exploded so much that a thick and yellow mustard oozed from even the most sophisticated of disposable diapers. Then there were the times of pottie-training, graduation from liquids to solids, favourite junk foods, and not-so-favourite vegetables. But we always blessed our food with prayer. Again, they all survived.

I suspect that our children, when they read this memoir, will first of all look for any mention of their names in the text. Had I exposed some hidden secret or displayed some embarrassing moment of the past and for all to see? No, I had not. They will be hard pressed to find any such secrets. In fact, I did not intend to write to any great length about any of our children. After all, some day it will be *their* turn to add to the *Verstraete Venture* the account of their own lives. Suffice it to say, however, that each child has engraved in our conscience unforgettable memories. These memories are the stuff of which special people are made, and our children are special people indeed. Each one is an individual in his or her own right. No two are the same. It also remains a mystery as to which "side of the family" we can attribute any of their characteristics. I must not be too quick or too hasty to point the finger at the Koops family, and credit their legacy through Alice with such undesirable characteristics as an ingrained

determination, independence, stubbornness and a downright argumentative spirit often displayed in the *Koopsies*. Nor can I point my finger at more desirable and refined cultural attributes such as academic prowess and leadership qualities, a propensity towards anxiety and stress only to conclude they must be *Verstraete's*. I do know that when I consider math and the sciences, Alice's side of the family must take full credit. Alice's father was a genius with numbers. When I examine the roots of our musical and artistic talents, I concede that these appear to have greater presence in the Verstraete family. My father was a European master bookbinder. My mother was a poet, author of books for children, violinist, and grade school teacher. Even though my father's side of the family listed a lengthy heritage of ship builders and related trades, my mother's side boasted of accomplished Dutch fine art painters. There was, however, a certain Théodore Verstraete, who was a renowned Flemish naturalist painter, who lived from 1851 to 1907. Did I just say "Verstraete?"

When translated into the unique fabric of each of our children I see the writer, poet, and philosopher, in our oldest son Jeff. Is there a teacher hidden beneath his gentle demeanor? Wendy in turn, is a master in her own right of the complicated twists and turns of business and office management. Is there a community leader hidden beneath her organizational skills? Then came husband Ian and two daughters, Nicole and Justine. Angela continues in those formative years to excel in the fine art of music, with voice and piano, with specific application in the area of worship leadership in the church. Then she shifted to management of her husband's construction business. But, is she a pastor-in-waiting? But then she's also busy with hubby Jeff and daughter Haley, our first grandchild. After that Christian and Amanda. Karen definitely has her father's artistic genes with a cross-over between visual arts, voice and music. She denies the connection but I detect a smile in her voice. At last, someone who will walk in my footsteps? But then, she has a pastor's heart as well, like Alice's. Married to Doug and then children came along as well: Mathus, Keanna, and Willem. Suzanne displays a real passion for writing. However, that quality is better left hidden in secret journals and diaries for now. Her ambition has not ruled out some professional place in television, motion picture, and music video production either. A next-generation Spielberg perhaps? After a career in business in Winnipeg she came (with baby Vincent) to Gabriola to become Executive Director of the Hope Centre. Matthew seems to display mathematical and artistic skills whose only expression is in mastery of video games and playing guitar. Like Jeffrey, he also has a desire to play sports, specifically skateboarding, yet he finds time to discipline himself in learning to play electric and acoustic guitars. Will he walk in Alice's footsteps? Come to think of it, when I think of all our children and their talents, Alice and I have everything we need to manage and operate an "in-house" national arts organization and world-wide ministry. Would that Masterpeace Fine Art Studio and the ministry of the Christian Communications Centre could employ them all and give each the freedom to excel in whatever talents they have been given. Is that not the secret dream of every father and mother?

I would be amiss if I forgot to mention Benny.

Alice and I have never been dog lovers, but when the opportunity came in the late nineties, to look after Wendy's little Benny, we had nothing but affection for that friendly pooch. It helped a lot of course that Benny did not shed hair. He also ate well and responded favourably to just about every "treat" imaginable. He was perfectly trained. Except for an occasional hairball, he never dirtied the floor, soiled the carpet, or messed up the furniture. In Wendy's words, Benny has always been a "good boy."

I must speak, however, about one peculiar characteristic of all of our children, at least the ones who managed to survive those awkward teens. Our children developed or inherited a knack

for bringing strangers home. I know Alice's father was prone to doing the same thing, but I do not recall my father or mother ever exhibiting such hospitality. Somehow, our children managed to discover the needy, the homeless, and the fractured young souls of a dysfunctional world. What usually began as friendships soon turned into co-dependencies. Visits turned into sleepovers and family meals. Many were completely foreign to the idea of a family that ate and prayed together. To the best of my knowledge, our children have lived in peace with one another and have loved each other as true brothers and sisters. There have never been "family feuds" in our home. For many of the strangers who came into our house, this phenomenon called "a real family of love and peace," had been something very new and a pleasant experience.

It was a total surprise to Donna.

For a season Donna came to us and soon we became "mom" and "dad". Wendy brought Donna home one day. She was an aboriginal girl from a native band living on Bear Island, near North Bay, Ontario. She and Wendy were classmates. The Bear Island band council deemed it suitable to send Donna south to Mississauga to attend school. We witnessed Wendy and Donna grow up together through all phases of rebellion and obedience, complete with white, black and purple hair. They remained friends for many years and still are. Donna had become part of the family. One weekend Donna ran away. Wendy had a hunch she went back to North Bay. When I volunteered to drive all the way to northern Ontario to find Donna, Wendy's face lit up. It became a wonderful bonding journey between father and daughter. We found Donna. However, she had decided to stay in North Bay. At least the friendship was still secure, only now "visits" were by phone. How much later I do not remember, but one day Donna returned to the metropolitan Toronto area for a season, but her roots were in northern Ontario. In the end, however, Donna went back to her native home and stayed on Bear Island to raise a family.

On yet another day, Wendy came home with Katherine. That was over ten years ago and to this day she is still our special "adopted" daughter and we are "mom" and "dad." She was barely sixteen when she came into our family. Slender, with a south European complexion, Portuguese to be exact, and long black hair, she certainly was no Verstraete. We were destined to remain blond or light brown, with blue or brown eyes complete with an occasional blend of darker hair, and an overall fair complexion, the northern European kind. Katherine and Wendy became inseparable friends with ambitious plans to live their lives together forever, marriage or no marriage, career or no career. How can I ever forget her laughter and her generous hugs. There were others who came "home" to our cozy and loving family, but Donna and Katherine I remember most vividly. Eventually, as the whole family moved west, Katherine came to British Columbia as well. Yet, British Columbia could not keep her for very long. Soon she moved back to Ontario, got married and had a son. Wendy remained in British Columbia.

Perhaps, as the old proverb once said, "the apple did not fall far from the tree."

After all, I also brought people home to our family.

There was Tony, who I had met on a mission trip to Mexico. He lived with his mother in Mission, British Columbia. He was a bright and energetic young man who excelled in the art of dressing in-style, and "looking good" with the times. He joined us to help with the church we planted in Mississauga. His mission was to be a youth worker as well as assist our praise and worship team of which we had none at the time. We had high expectations of Tony, but soon, however, his mission changed from ministry work to a fancy for our oldest daughter, Wendy. Things did not turn out according to Tony's plans and he left for his home province.

Some years after Katherine came into our family, a young woman from Jarvis moved in. Her name was Bernice Stegenga. She began attending a young adults group in the church



where I was an elder at the time and in charge of young adults. The group had grown from a handful to over seventy. When word got around that my group was a lively and charismatic bunch, young men and women started to attend from near and far. Bernice was an "out-of-towner" from Jarvis, deep in tobacco country and farm heartland of south western Ontario. She was considerably more mature in her walk of faith compared to the other young adults. She also had a fabulous singing voice. She became a wonderful friend of both Alice and I, and one day she approached us with the news she felt God's leading to join our family and assist us in our ministry work. A few weeks later she joined the happy Verstraete clan to help Alice with homeschooling our children. She was a blessing to all of us and soon became an inseparable part of the family, as much as any of our children. Her room in the basement was a menagerie of books, sewing implements, decorator items, and a big old wooden dresser. When our journey turned west, we gave Bernice the freedom to choose to stay in Ontario or feel welcome to join us in our next faith adventure. She chose west. We towed her car behind a large moving truck as our little convoy threaded along the Trans-Canada Highway towards British Columbia. The year was 1993.

We made a comfortable "home" for her in a little wooden cabin right behind our small rented house, amidst the tall trees and dense forests of Gabriola Island. It was a cozy cabin just a step from our family diningroom to hot showers and the only washroom. It was also a cabin inhabited by too many spiders - big fat ones. Spiders, however, gave way to country charm when many deer visited our backyard just outside her cabin window. I must confess it will require another volume of the *Verstraete Venture* to recall all the adventures with Bernice, so I will encourage her to write her own account. All in all, and many years later, she's still part of the family, and our friendship continues to be an unforgettable adventure, an adventure that began an even greater chapter when she met David Dewinetz, who at that time was owner of the island's only supermarket and a die-hard fishing and hockey enthusiast. Alice and I will never forget their January wedding when bride, groom, friends and family, stood in our livingroom for the special ceremony. Dave installed outdoor spotlights complete with motion detectors to ensure the wedding guests would not trip in the dark as they made their way to our livingroom-turned-wedding-chapel.

Even though by the late nineties our family began moving out, our spiritual family kept growing. Wendy and Jeff eventually made their home in Nanaimo. Angie went off to Bible college. Then she met and married Jeff Jaggard in 2000, and moved to Colorado Springs. Karen fell in love with fellow islander Doug Jordan and they were married in 2002. Their home is Nanaimo as well. However, other precious names, perhaps only known to Alice and I and a few close to us, also became part of the family. These were and are a number of special people over whom we were given charge for a season. For many that season is still in full bloom. I risk inadvertently omitting some of them, but Alice and I will never forget them *and* all the others in Gabriola's *Church on the Rock* family.

Sometimes I feel guilty because I forget my own brothers and sisters, all of whom live in Ontario, except for my older brother Beert, who lives in Nova Scotia. But I am blessed when all our children face a wild and frightening world they often call or come home for the comfort of a home-cooked dinner, prayer, and words of encouragement. *That is family, every one of them.*

I began this memoir shortly after our granddaughter Haley was born in 2001, but 22 years later when I decided to begin posting the memories online, I realized how much had happened since. Many of the original entries were out-of-date. Nor have I told all. That would take many more volumes. Suffice it to say, that at least online I can add to the narrative anytime without

having to republish and reprint a book. Therefore this part of the story has already been amplified but with many more details to come.

However, I would be amiss if I did not jump ahead to February 9, 2023, when our entire family was shaken to the core. It was a time when everything that remained true about *family* and *love* had faced a devastating tragedy and yet remained strong in the face of it. That winter day, our eldest son, our firstborn Jeff, unexpectedly passed away from an unconfirmed heart condition. He was 54. There is a saying, “No parents should have to bury their child.” Although we knew about such tragedies in other people’s lives, to have it knock at our own door turned into a grief we had never known before. He will be missed always.