

Garbage, spirituality and mental health by Lloyd Robertson

A walk in the bush can be spiritually uplifting. Feel the autumn sun on your shoulders as you listen to the soft breeze in the trees. Climb over rocks left by some previous ice age; smell the moss; catch glimpses of small animals hard at work before winter; look for cranberries; observe piles of used pampers, tin cans and mouldy milk cartons. Breathe deeply to catch the mood.

I knew about the piles of garbage in the bush behind our crescent before my brother-in-law, visiting from Winnipeg, commented on it. It does no good to tell him to wait until winter and we can ski over top the garbage without knowing it's there. Some people bring their garbage into the bush by skidoo. They just cannot seem to wait until Thursday when the town will take it to the dump.

A good friend of mine wanted to know why I would be doing a column about garbage when there are more serious problems facing La Ronge. What about the legions of young children, effectively abandoned without adult supervision every evening?

Bingo orphans are a more serious problem than garbage in the bush by the town. Sometimes prioritizing problems and issues is necessary to get anything done. On the other hand, sometimes a holistic approach is the only way to get to root causes.

The people who insist on dumping their garbage behind their back yards are fouling their nests and the nests of their neighbors. They are showing a lack of respect for their neighbors, their children and, ultimately, themselves. Perhaps they have lost that connection with nature that others find spiritually uplifting. Perhaps, for them, their world, their life, is one massive garbage dump. If this is true then they are spiritually ill.

As every psychologist knows, a person's attitude toward themselves and others is key to their mental well being. We need to respect others in order that we respect ourselves. We need to care for others before we can care for ourselves. One frequent "assignment" in combatting depression, for example, is do volunteer work for others. By focusing on the problems of others we gain perspective and our own problems become more manageable.

We must place a value on others beyond consideration of what they can do for us. We need to be able to recognize ourselves in them, building a sense of our common humanity. We must respect and value more than humanity, but life itself. Beyond life, we need to value and respect our planet, our solar system, our universe.

When we walk in the bush and feel a connectedness with nature, that is spirituality. When we walk under the stars and feel a combination of awe, wonder and humility, that is spirituality too. When we feel compassion for troubled people half way around the world, that is spirituality. When we feel love for our children and place their well-being first, that is spirituality too.

This "baseline" or secular spirituality is uniting; it can be shared by all humanity regardless of politics and regardless of whether or not one chooses to have religious beliefs. Ideology that

demeans others not of "the faith", views them as evil, sinful or otherwise "unworthy"; these ideologies weaken our connectedness with humanity. The great atrocities of history have been religiously or politically based. Be careful of your religion, it could be dangerous to your spiritual health.

A person with a healthy spirit will have a positive and hopeful outlook. He or she will be empowered knowing that he can control himself, making choices daily that will affect his future. She or he will be respectful of others and of nature. Such a person will pursue socially useful goals having social interest as a priority. Family will be important to such a person, in deeds as well as in words.

A healthy spirit is an important component of mental health. Failure to respect the environment, the rights of others, or the needs of children to adequate care are all symptoms of an unhealthy spirit. There will usually be more than one symptom. Were we to study it scientifically, for example, I suspect we would find that those who fowl their environment and ignore the rights of others are also more likely to neglect their children.

Perhaps it is time to start a dialogue about "root causes".