

One night in the middle of February this year I joined up with the Sage Clan – a group of volunteers who go and walk and drive the streets around 20<sup>th</sup> St and the downtown to find people who are homeless and struggling and provide them with blankets, clothing, food, water, handwarmers.

On the night we went out it was -19 degrees – 27 below with the wind

I was cold within five minutes of walking, though I tried to dress up for it.

We started at the parking lot West of Station 20 West.

We met a woman who had a blanket over shoulders and was clearly very cold. We offered her a pair of snow pants that she could pull over her pants to provide more insulation. She was thankful but it became pretty clear she was too cold to get her shoes off and pull these over top on her own.

Sage Clan volunteers helped her take her shoes off and slowly pull the pants on. They put footwarmers in her shoes and put them back on. We asked her where she was going to go and she wasn't sure. We told her the hours and location of the warm up facility and she walked on

The next place we headed to was the entrance to the Freda Ahenakew Library right behind Station 20 West.

As we were walking up I recognized a young man who I will call Johnathan.

I first met Jonathan when I went out on a ride along with the Saskatoon Tribal Council Saweyihtotan outreach workers in the summer.

He had been sitting in an abandoned lot at the time off 20<sup>th</sup>. He was very high when we saw him. His hands and arms were extremely swollen and he was very dishevelled. We gave him water at the time and asked him where he was going to go next. He said he had a sister and he was going to connect with her and that he didn't need anything

I saw him again in January when I went to the overnight warming Center that has opened at St. Mary's church off 20<sup>th</sup> St just this year. This is a livesaving facility that is run by the Salvation army. It is only supposed to have 70 people in it but has been housing between 100-200 people through this last winter because of the number of people who have become homeless or have come to Saskatoon and have had no other options.

When I saw Jonathan at the warm up center he looked much much better. His swelling had gone down, he was lucid and articulate and proud that he had been reducing his drug use.

He was trying to find a place, and had managed to get a place for awhile. He had a cat that he had become very attached to as a source of comfort and he said he lost the place because he wasn't allowed to have a pet. He said he was hoping to.

So when I saw him outside of the Library I was curious to know where things were at.

He told me he was not able to go back to the Warming Center, he said he had gotten in a fight. I asked him where he was going to sleep that night – he said on the riverbank. He said he would hollow out a cave in the snow and sleep there, that's what he had been doing for awhile.

All of his belongings were under a tarp in the foyer of the library – he said 'I've been making it work, I've got blankets. I shuddered to imagine that.

As we were talking a Saweyihtotan outreach worker walked up to us. He recognized Jonathon but not me at first.

He asked Jonathon if he had talked to the staff at the STC Wellness Center to have a chance to be on the waitlist and get in there. He said he had been trying but had trouble connecting to get on the list – no phone and no way to get around with his belongings.

The staff person from Saweyihtotan committed to Jason to work to help him get into the STC shelter.

Then Jason said – hey I'm talking to the Mayor – and he pointed at me.

The STC worker then recognized me. We talked for a bit. I asked him how many people he thought were sleeping outside that night – outside of the Saskatoon Tribal Council Wellness Center, the Salvation Army Shelter, the Warm – Up center, the YWCA shelter.

He said that he thought it would be about 100 people

This number shocked me.

Even though this issue has dominated my agenda for the past months and years I didn't realize this. I thought that between the shelters and the emergency warm up facility that the Salvation Army opened up in November that we had been able to get most everyone inside.

Just a few weeks after this encounter with Jonathan,

in response to a significant outcry from fearful parents of school children and parents of kids playing hockey at the arena next door.

Saskatoon City Council made a decision to stop the development of a 30 bed emergency shelter in Sutherland in it's tracks,

and go back to the drawing board in the search for the two sites needed to open the 60 emergency shelter beds that the Province has committed to building in Saskatoon if we can agree on locations.

We have been struggling to find locations for months that could be adapted quickly, fit with zoning and ensure some transportation connections and other services.

I couldn't stop thinking about Jonathan, the woman who was so cold she couldn't put on snowpants – and all of the other people we met.

Then I looked at the scripture passages for week.

Admittedly I was lazy when Patrick asked if I wanted to suggest scripture or have Denelda do it.

And Denelda picks words vs. deeds.

15 <sup>2</sup>If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, 16 <sup>9</sup>and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good<sup>2</sup> is that? 17 So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

Saying soothing words – wishing people well – but not taking action to change their circumstances

Is a sign of a faith that is DEAD

This is uncomfortable

This is uncomfortable for me personally

as Mayor and as a neighbour here in Saskatoon.

I am someone who has said many words about building Truth and Reconciliation in our community.

About our need to build a community to live out the true intent of Treaty 6 – to treat one another as Relatives build good relationships – Miyo Wahkotowin.

And on that night I said soothing words to my brother Jonathan, and the woman whose name I don't know who was so frozen she couldn't put on snow pants.

And then I went back to my home and had a warm bath and climbed into a warm bed.

And Jesus message of words and deeds also holds up a mirror to who we have become as a society

Over generations of policies and stories our culture has told ourselves that people who are poor are there because of their own failings, and that those of us who are comfortable have earned it and so it's ok to have our own neighbours – brothers and sisters living in our same community with nowhere to go in freezing temperatures or digging through the garbage we leave behind from our parties to survive.

And then two weeks after I saw Jonathan and the woman chilled to the bone

in a warm Council Chamber watched as my colleagues chose to kick the can down the road of getting a badly needed shelter in place in the Sutherland neighbourhood

Responding to the fears and worries of people who I know did not want for people to be homeless but also did not want to have the orbit of those brothers and sisters get too close.

And I don't dismiss those fears as simply NIMBYism. The reality is that there are people gripped by these horrendous drugs who have become unpredictable and threatening as they fall through the cracks of society.

And the reactions of these neighbours are also a product of a wider society and culture that has justified and rationalized the poverty and inequality that permeates our community –

rooted in a colonial history that has meant that so many of the people struggling are doing so because they carry traumas inflicted by our own government, churches, and communities historically and with many systems still today.

Jesus asked us to be our brother's keeper.

Treaty Elders envisioned that in the signing of the treaty the Crown was making a solemn commitment under the creator who their pipe was raised to

A commitment that we would live together as relatives – share the land and it's bounty so we could support each other to have a good livelihood – Miyo Pimatisiwin

The Treaty Elders also share a powerful teaching that is a core principle at the heart of First Nations belief systems across Saskatchewan called Miyo-Wicetowin

The law of good relations

The law of good relations tells us that a fundamental basis for a nation or society to have the ability to nurture, care for, protect and heal it's people is by ensuring that there is a strong circle of relationships among everyone,

And that each member of that society or nation has a role to play in fostering this principle of Miyo Wicetowin.

In our society today we measure GDP, job numbers, the stock market, inflation, how many times Taylor Swift appeared at the Super Bowl

We don't measure the health of our relationships – and how well we are doing at treating one another as relatives

Which Jesus asked us to do. And which was at the heart of the commitment made when Treaty was signed.

I talked earlier about the outreach program Saweyihtotan

The Saweyihtotan Outreach program was started in 2020 a few months into the pandemic

After the Fire Department closed down the North Woods Inn because it had become uninhabitable – but it meant that we needed to find places for 200 people in very precarious situations to find housing

The Fire Department teamed up with the Ministry of Social Services, Health Authority, Saskatoon Tribal Council, Salvation Army, Sanctum, Prairie Harm Reduction, YWCA and others to work together to transition people into other housing.

The Tribal Council and the CBO's worked with the government agencies to come up with plans for people that sought to better understand the human realities that each person was facing, and walk alongside them.

It wasn't perfect – but it showed these more institutional partners how you can have an impact by taking time to understand the humanity of the people affected and build plans that reflected their realities.

As a result we realized that we needed to have more people going out to people on the street who were homeless to work with them directly – and the Ministry of Social Services and the City teamed up to fund this outreach team.

Tribal Chief Arcand reached out to elders and asked to come up with a name for this program.

They went to ceremony and came back with the name Saweyihtotan – which means – let us bless each other by seeing the humanity in each other from me to you and you to me.

When the program began – the Outreach staff gave their reports – and when they talked about the people they met on the street they didn't call them homeless people, clients, or patients, or participants – they called them Relatives – Or Wahkomagan

Just this act of bringing the world relative in to refer to the women and men who mainstream society has lumped into the faceless category of the homeless or clients revealed a way that people have been dehumanized.

In the wake of the pandemic it has felt like the inequalities and systemic failures that shaped so many people's lives have been blown apart even further.

We had those early months where our sense of interdependence and willingness to sacrifice for each other was almost renewed (remember banging pots and pans for health care workers?)

And then those binds began to unravel and we are faced every day with an increasingly angry and polarized world, and an increasing gap between the haves and have nots.

And everyone has been affected. And it is in this context we have to find a way to build a community and society that lives out what Jesus calls us to be – to see each the humanity in each other

To recognize that the only way we can build a society that will be able to nurture care for and protect the generations to come is to recognize the barriers that are put up to our ability to see the humanity in each other

To begin to measure the health of our relationships

and build the partnerships, policies and programs that are rooted in our interdependence.



No one in this room can bring about this transformation on our own. I have certainly learned this as Mayor – even though many think or hope I can

In a conversation recently when I was lamenting how hard it is to bring about changes in our systems a mentor said to me

You know Systems aren't things out there separate from us.  
Systems are people

So the only way to bring about that change is to create a critical mass of people who can move together in that direction for change.

Each of us can play a role. Our relatives on our streets need more people to see them as our relatives – whether in your interactions with them as you encounter them on the sidewalk,

in the support you give to the organizations who help them – or how you advocate to governments for programs and policies that see their humanity and work to support and heal them rather than criminalize them.

In the midst of all of these challenges there are amazing people out there providing support. And the resilience and generosity of our relatives on the street is something that blows me away every time I spend time with them.

The day after the Council meeting where we said no to the shelter I was struggling and discouraged.

I came across a video of a recent talk by the amazing Peacebuilder John Paul Lederach talking about Martin Luther King as a way of finding a way forward in such challenging times.

He reminded us that Martin Luther King always held the tension of responding to the fierce urgency of now with an understanding that

we are on a long journey as human beings as we try to bend the moral arc of the Universe Towards justice.

That we must continue to do this important work responding to crises all around us – while grounding it in the long story we are part of.

Toward the ultimate vision of a beloved community that King so often talked about. A Beloved Community where we recognize our lives are inextricably linked and so we see we are relatives. A beloved community that sounds an awful lot like what the Treaty Elders also prayed for our future together on this land.