

Lynda MacGibbon

Foreword by Michael Frost



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Neighborhood

How Strangers Became a Community



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Fran from the Eleventh Floor

*Y*ou're new to the building," Fran observed, giving me a welcoming smile as I stepped into the elevator. She didn't bother to extend her hand, seeing I was clearly in no position to reciprocate. "What floor?"

"Fifteen. Thanks so much," I answered gratefully as she pressed the button and the elevator began moving upward.

My arms were full—one elbow was wrapped around an overgrown potted fern, while my hand clutched a three-legged table. I'd slung a bag over my other shoulder, stuffing it with a blanket, a table lamp, and a couple of small pots and pans and had pressed a framed watercolor of tulips against my side. Like most high-rise dwellers, I was becoming adept at carrying as much as possible from the underground parking lot up to my apartment. Unload in one trip. That was the rule everyone seemed to live by, even if it meant we were constantly dropping things along the way.

"I moved in a few months ago," I said, then gesturing down at my full arms, "I'm still getting settled."

"I'm Fran from the eleventh floor. If you need anything at all, come and find me."

"Thanks so much. I'm Lynda. It's so nice to meet you."

Then the door opened, and with a wave, she was gone.

A moment later, I was in my own apartment, setting the plant on the kitchen counter and propping the picture against a wall. I dropped my bag of odds and ends on the floor and surveyed the mostly empty room. A recently purchased couch was pushed up against floor-to-ceiling windows, and two lawn chairs and a folding table occupied another corner.

Placing the fern on the small table, I crossed the room and set them down next to the couch. Then I returned to the kitchen, untangled the blanket from the pots and pans, and carried it to the couch, draping it across the cushions. Standing back, I surveyed the room again.

“That’s better,” I said out loud. I’d been living in the near-empty apartment for several months, most of my furniture two thousand miles away in a house I’d not yet been able to sell. I didn’t want to empty the house too soon, thinking people were more likely to buy it if they could imagine themselves sitting on an actual couch, eating breakfast at an actual table. When it finally came time to drive my car across the country, I’d packed it with only a few necessities—the pots and pans—and as many treasures as I could fit. The plant, the picture, and the blanket were small but helpful comforts, familiar objects that made me feel a little bit more at home in a city I was hoping would one day actually be that. Home.

My thoughts went back to Fran, how friendly she’d been. *Would I have the courage to take her up on her offer of help? And even if I did, how would I find her?* She hadn’t given me her phone or apartment number.

“Fran from the eleventh floor,” I mused. “Will I ever see you again?”

Chasing a Question

The year before my fiftieth birthday, I upended my life. Sometimes when I'm feeling a bit stuck, I rearrange the furniture or cut my hair. But there have been a few times in my life when I've needed more than a room makeover or a good stylist to loosen whatever it is that is constraining me. When that happens, I recognize the need for upheaval, the kind that requires a moving truck.

When I was forty-nine, I said a nervous but hopeful yes to a new job, one that meant relocating from my small city in eastern Canada to Toronto, the fourth largest city in North America.

Moncton, New Brunswick, where I'd lived for twenty-two years, has a population of about 140,000 and one high-rise (with twenty floors). Toronto is home to more than 9.2 million people, many of them living in the city's more than two thousand high-rises (some towering sixty-five stories into the sky).

The size of the city was daunting enough, but Toronto also had a reputation, and it wasn't good: "Toronto thinks it's the center of the universe. Toronto drivers are crazy and the commutes unbearable. It's unaffordable. Unwelcoming. No one wants to live there unless they have to. And no one can buy a house. It's too expensive."

But I said yes. When the offer came, I already knew I'd been looking for a change—I just hadn't been anticipating one quite so

big. I'd become too comfortable and was feeling restless. More often than not, I was having conversations with myself that went something like this: "Is this it? I love my house. I have wonderful friends and a cat that loves me as unconditionally as a cat can. My work is meaningful, and my mom and sister's family live a three-hour drive away. I am most at home in the rugged, open landscape of Canada's east coast. But is this enough?"

At the time, I could not have fully explained why life as I knew it was not enough. I sensed it had something to do with how neat and predictable my life had become. How it felt small, confined. I had good friends, a purposeful job, and a church where I was so involved, I had my own key.

But I'd recently spent four summers living in Almaty, a Central Asian city about as different from Moncton as I could ever have imagined. Surprisingly, I'd felt at home among the 1.2 million people who lived there. I was intrigued by its diversity—Kazaks, Koreans, Uzbeks, and Germans are just four of its 120 people groups. I discovered I loved the complexity of a big city, the warrens of apartment complexes, and the way people lived their lives in public parks rather than private backyards.

When I moved to Moncton and purchased my first house, I told my real estate agent he'd never make more money from me, since I planned to live there well into my retirement. At the time, it was exactly what I wanted—a one hundred-year-old farmhouse in a part of the city that felt more rural than urban. The house was quirky with uneven floors and a stone foundation so porous crickets and mice came and went at their pleasure. In the living room, seven windows filled the space with light by day; a fireplace warmed the room at night. The kitchen, with its bay window and wicker rocking chairs, was the heartbeat of many parties. There were three bedrooms upstairs: one for me and two for my frequent guests.

The house was graced with ancient lilac and honeysuckle bushes, grape vines, birch trees, and a knotty crab apple tree that provided so much fruit neighbors helped themselves without asking. A massive Carolina Poplar towered above the house and yard, a sentry I saluted each time I drove across the bridge that spanned the river below my house. That tree, high on the hill where my house stood, was a stalwart friend, always assuring my home was in sight, no matter where I'd come from or how long I'd been away.

I gave it all up—my three-bedroom Cape Cod house and generous yard—for exactly what Toronto's reputation had suggested I'd get: a 900-square-foot apartment with a decent view but a kitchen far too small to provide life support for any party. I went from living close to the land to living high in the sky, fifteen floors off the ground. Fortunately, I wasn't afraid of heights.

I exchanged the Carolina Poplar for Lake Ontario, a far less stable sentry, but still a satisfying presence. I traded seventeen flowerbeds for a stretch of public parkland, hedged—to my delight—by swaths of untamed lilacs. I did not give up my love of gardening. Instead, I cultivated it to fit my new space, experimenting by planting purple coneflowers and daisies, along with chives, thyme, and rosemary. Every spring I watched to see what shoots would emerge from my small pots of earth, hoping some plants had survived winter on the balcony. As the season warmed, I planted Tiny Tim tomatoes, hot peppers, sugar snap peas, and carrots that were sweet but short in stature. Not everything was adept at growing so far off the ground. Rhubarb, which pretty much thrives anywhere, did not appreciate the confinement of my balcony garden. I was particularly frustrated by this discovery because in Moncton I'd been blessed with two sprawling rhubarb patches planted long before I'd ever acquired the property.

Over time, I became happier in my new home than I'd initially expected. My apartment faced Lake Ontario, and I could see

Toronto's skyline to the east and the faint plumes of Niagara Falls to the southwest. Sunrises were stunning, rays of red and gold spilling across the lake and filling my living room with light. Sunsets reflected off the towers in downtown Toronto, transforming the city center into a collection of glittering jewel boxes.

Who lives in all those boxes? I wondered as I gazed out my windows at the distant towers. And, who, for that matter, lives next door to me, in the half-dozen high-rises in my new neighborhood? Would I ever meet the people who lived so close we could exchange a cup of coffee across balcony railings? I wanted to meet them. I just didn't know how to make it happen.

It didn't help that the transition from one place to another had proved more difficult and disorienting than I'd expected. I accepted the new job in April, but my employer asked me to continue doing work in New Brunswick until the end of the year. For nine months, I traveled back and forth between Toronto and Moncton, and friends there started asking me why I was still around—hadn't I moved already? In Toronto, my relationships were limited to work colleagues and my brother's family who lived in a nearby town. I appreciated their anchoring stability, but I held back from relying on them entirely.

I did this on purpose. I suppose you could say I'd decided to engage in a social experiment, although I was more likely to describe it as wrestling with a theological conundrum, one that had been nagging me for a while.

Why did God command me to love my neighbor? What does this kind of love look like? What would happen if I tried to follow the command daily, not just when some random stranger seemed in need of my assistance?

I'd been pondering these questions for nearly a decade, ever since I'd heard a lecture by the Australian writer Michael Frost. He told a story of moving into a neighborhood with a few other followers

of Jesus precisely so they could live out what Jesus says is the second-greatest commandment of all, the one that summed up the ten given to Moses on Mount Sinai and the hundreds of others written in the Hebrew Torah. It's the commandment Jesus references in three of the four Gospel books of the Bible when asked what he considered to be the first and greatest commandment.

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength," said Jesus (Mark 12:30). But he didn't stop there. He added: "The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:31).

I've spent a lot of time in my life learning to love God with my heart, soul, mind, and strength. I was raised in the kind of Christian family that considered church an extension of our home life. I work for a nonprofit organization that helps young people discover Jesus and follow God for a lifetime. Back in my own university days, I was one of the students they helped, and much of my learning about loving God has come from surrounding myself with other believers who are both thoughtful and practical about their faith. And while there were lots of people in my life—classmates, extended family, coworkers—who did not share or approach faith as I did, the biggest investment of my time was reserved for those who were committed believers like me. As an adult, whenever I moved to a new town or city, I looked for friendship and community first among people who, like me, went to church more often than not and devoted at least one evening a week to a small-group Bible study.

That didn't leave much room for anyone else.

Specifically, it meant I didn't have much time for my neighbors, for the people I might encounter who did not share my beliefs about God or any of my other values either. Until I heard Frost speak, I wasn't even aware I was putting so much effort into loving

God that I'd missed the other half of the great commandment, the part about loving our neighbors. I knew it was a commandment, but I'd equated it with all the other commandments in Scripture. Jesus doesn't do that. Jesus says loving God, self, and neighbor is foundational to everything else. If we don't understand and practice these conjoined commandments, it will be harder to obey the rest.

Long before moving to Toronto, I'd figured out who my neighbor might be—anyone in my sightline. The Good Samaritan is in one of Jesus' most famous stories, and even people who don't know the details are often aware of what the phrase means: to honor, care about, help, and respect someone who is a stranger, who is nothing like you, who might even be considered an enemy but is still worthy of your consideration.

But what it meant to love such a person was a mystery to me. Like, enjoy, appreciate, welcome, tolerate, respect—these words all made sense when it came to interacting with neighbors. But love? How would that work its way into my relationship with people I bumped up against, especially the ones who lived nearby, but weren't family, fellow churchgoers, or lifelong friends?

It wasn't that my parents didn't believe in this particular teaching—they were gracious in their hospitality. Years after they moved away from the neighborhood of my childhood where they'd lived for forty-two years, they were still in touch with friends who shared our street, calling to wish them happy birthday, sending cards and flowers to mark deaths, making a point of sharing a meal when they returned for a visit. But, perhaps because church life took so much of our time, I grew up separating the world into two groups—those who were devout Christians and those who were not. Most of our close friends came from the former category, and while there were exceptions, they were few.

I doubt my parents intended for me to adopt the perspective that love was mostly reserved for fellow Christians. In fact, they

taught us that all people deserved our neighborliness—our kindness, politeness, and hospitality. I liked and appreciated people who didn't share my beliefs and rarely shied away from friendships that came my way. But it never really occurred to me to approach each person I encountered with a default inclination of love. That particular teaching of Jesus was lost to me.

Michael Frost made me helpfully uncomfortable, and his story attached itself to me like a small burr.

Frost seemed to set his clock by both neighborly and liturgical time. On Sunday mornings, he would often head to the ball field where families were hanging out with their kids. When an artist in his neighborhood expressed hopes for an upcoming show, Frost and his friends offered to design posters and cater the event—at no cost. Bible studies in his home attracted not only his Christian friends, but a diverse collection of neighbors as well, many of whom had never read Scripture. As I listened to him speak, I could tell Frost loved his neighbors and they loved him back. I was inspired as I listened to him talk.

And so, when I moved to Toronto, I made a conscious decision not to follow what had been my practice for the first forty-nine years of my life. I would not look for new friends primarily among my Christian colleagues. I wouldn't expect my brother's family to provide for my relational needs. I would be careful about how much time I spent at church.

When, after six months of searching, I settled into a church in my neighborhood, I met with the pastor, Jim, for the usual get-acquainted visit. Somewhat apologetically, I explained I wouldn't be there every Sunday because I was trying to leave space in my life for my neighbors, and Sunday mornings seemed to be when they were available. Tamping down my guilt, I said I wouldn't be available to serve on committees or sing in the choir or help with youth group or teach Sunday school: all the things I'd readily done in previous churches.

To my relief, Pastor Jim responded with enthusiasm, blessed my decision, and asked me to let him know how he and the church could pray for me and the people who lived around me. When I did show up at church, he always asked me how things were going in a way that I knew he meant it.

Even with Pastor Jim's prayers, meeting my new neighbors proved more difficult than I'd expected. I tried lots of things: I joined the condo gardening committee, brought meatballs to the annual Christmas potluck, and went to every business meeting in the building, smiling at whoever sat next to me. I said polite hellos to people in the elevator and even had a few extended conversations in the hallway with the woman who lived two doors from me.

But the conversations never went beyond a superficial hello, how are you, hope you have a good day. It helped if someone had a dog—then you could ask the dog's name, admire the color of its fur, inquire about its age. Somehow it was appropriate to ask questions about dogs; less so their humans. I rarely asked people on the elevator to share their names, but I always asked what they called their pets.

We were an arm's length away from each other, the hundreds of humans (and almost as many dogs) who made up my vertical neighborhood. We were stacked on top of and squished alongside each other, so close you would think it impossible not to become acquainted with one another. But it was. Walk along any hallway in my building and you'd see door after door, each looking exactly like the other. Walk by those doors often enough and eventually you'd stop seeing them, let alone give a passing thought to the people living on the other side.

In his book, *Incarnate*, Michael Frost encourages people to not only follow Jesus and obey God's commandments but to be like Jesus and to live fully into them.

An incarnational posture, writes Frost, requires that we move into neighborhoods. Be attentive, listen to the people around you.

Stay with people for a long time. He quotes the writer Wendell Berry: “Love your neighbors, not the neighbors you pick out but the ones you have.”¹

Frost helped me rethink my understanding of my neighbor. But I didn’t want to just think about it, I wanted to live it. Faith as a belief system alone has never satisfied me. I resonated with Frost’s words: “An inner conviction is only worthwhile to the degree it is embodied in action.”²

I wanted to live differently. I prayed a lot. Pastor Jim prayed. My conviction grew, but my actions seemed to keep hitting a wall. All those doors along the hallways of my apartment building remained closed to me. And then Rachel moved in, and everything began to change.

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