

**Reverend Ellie, Homemaker's 2007**  
**Sarah Scott**

At the end of the tumultuous summer of 2002, Eleanor Clitheroe drove up to a simple cottage on a grassy plain just outside of Toronto to begin a journey into unknown spiritual territory. This would be her first silent retreat, five days of deep silence punctuated by interviews with a Jesuit priest. It sounded very appealing to Clitheroe, a slim, blond, hardworking executive who, at 47, had just endured six weeks of public humiliation after she was fired from a high-profile job as CEO of Hydro One, Ontario's electric transmission utility. She still felt shell-shocked. She hadn't even cried yet, maybe because she wanted to protect her two children, age 2 and 3. Or maybe it was because she still hadn't allowed herself to feel anything. Whatever the reason, she knew she needed to deal with it. What was she going to do now? How was she going to handle what they were saying about her?

She had worked hard to get to the top, to be one of the few women at the pinnacle of corporate Canada. But that career evaporated into thin air when the company's board fired her for what it called "inappropriate conduct." Then she had to read things about herself she didn't like - like how she was the poster girl for corporate greed because she had a \$2.2 million salary, membership in seven private clubs, and had expensed the company (and the taxpayer) \$330,000 over three years for a driver and car to ferry around her two kids. But that picture, Clitheroe thought, was grossly unfair. The board - the previous board that had just resigned en masse -- had approved the whole thing. The board had given her the driver to encourage her to stay on the job after she and her husband Randy had adopted the kids. She hadn't even taken maternity leave! As for the new board's complaint that she had charged \$40,000 of home renovations to the company, she had already identified the bill as a simple mistake, and repaid it. Right after her firing, Eleanor hired a high-profile Toronto lawyer to launch a multi-million-dollar lawsuit against Hydro One. But now she had to contend with a deeper challenge: What had the corporate life done to her soul?

The critics' complaints were still ringing in her ears as Eleanor settled into a spare bedroom with a single bed, a desk and a picture on the wall. "Is this what I have become?" she asked herself. Where was Ellie, the spiritual soul who once took a year off a demanding bank job to sail solo down to the Caribbean and back, the woman who decided her second husband should not be a fellow corporate climber, but a rugged outdoorsy woodsman, a boat builder by trade. Where had Ellie gone? So began the long journey to recover Ellie, not the CEO on her impressive CV or her now useless business card, but the Ellie she was deep inside, a woman undergoing a profound transformation.

Eleanor had a guide, a Jesuit priest named Father Veltne. He suggested a spiritual exercise that might lead her to the place where she'd find the

answer. Imagine yourself, Father Veltne counseled, as Mary, the friend of Jesus. Imagine how Mary felt as she walked toward his tomb after the crucifixion. "I felt very old, very sad, a dressed in black moment of me," Eleanor recalls. "I was very crushed." Then the priest suggested she consider Mary's sister Martha, the one who did all the household chores while Mary was learning from Jesus. "I really saw myself in many aspects of both of those women. I clearly had been the Martha for several years, being very focused on task and accomplishment and getting things done and keeping things in order. That Martha had been very crushed by what had happened to her." And Mary? She was still there, but the Mary inside Eleanor felt "very bereft. My well of spiritual resources was not as deep as I thought it had been."

Martha and Mary had been jostling for space and time inside Eleanor for a long time. As the daughter of a churchgoing parents, Eleanor began carrying around a small bible at age 13. Even then, she loved the stories of how humans could transform themselves. But the Martha part of her was a formidable taskmaster.

Eleanor earned a law degree and an MBA and started to climb the corporate ladder. The

Bay Street fast track led her from the bank to the provincial finance department, to Ontario Hydro as its CFO, and finally, CEO.

Eleanor never forgot her spiritual side. She enrolled in theology courses at the university, connected with a Bay Street chaplaincy, and co-founded the Canadian Centre for Ethics and Corporate Policy. But somewhere along the way, she started to identify with the person on that impressive CV, not the spiritual soul within.

As she left the retreat, Eleanor knew she had only begun, tentatively, to explore the terrible sadness inside her. But at least she was no longer afraid to confront it. "Being human is not about avoiding trouble," she said to herself, "but going through it." The suffering, she hoped, would transform her, create a new life. She was ready. So she signed up for another silent retreat, this time at Niagara Falls. It was a big stone monastery set against a hill. Father Bruce, her spiritual guide for the retreat, showed her a geodesic ball. "I want you to squeeze it to the extent you feel passion or emotion," he said. "I could only squeeze it a little bit," Eleanor recalls. "I realized how one could suppress emotion." She also realized how that protective shell was insulating her from true joy. She wanted to feel that again, the beauty of joy. When she opened her bedroom door one day, Eleanor found a gift -- a red rose, a symbol of the fullness of life, of deep spirituality. Eleanor took the rose with her to prayers at the monastery's simple chapel. "I was bringing my emotions and my troubles to God," she said. "I was not alone." She left the rose at the altar. The healing had begun.

In the next few days, Eleanor still wasn't sure where this path would take her, but one day while she was sitting in the common room with a cup of tea, she picked up a piece of paper and pencil.

People were always encouraged to draw at this monastery. So Eleanor started to draw a house, a red brick house. She had no idea where it was, but perhaps it was a spiritual community where she'd like to live one day.

It was clearly time for a change. When Eleanor got home, she told her husband Randy she'd like to sell their 5,000 square foot dream home in a high-end neighborhood of Toronto.

He quickly agreed. Randy didn't put too much stock in the high life anyway.

Still, on the day she signed the papers, selling the house for a cool \$2 million, Eleanor sat on the stairs and cried. She was saying goodbye to her vision of a suburban family life - the backyard, the garage, the fireplace, the works. In the next

few weeks, she enrolled in University of Toronto's Wycliffe College to do her masters in divinity. Then she moved the whole family into the seminary on campus. Now they were living in a modest

\$1,500-per-month, three-bedroom apartment. Dinner

was served in a cafeteria with the other residents. Eleanor knew at once that this was where she wanted to be. The house she had drawn on her retreat was the same place where she had once taken religion classes -- Wycliffe College, where she now lived.

Life has changed in many ways. Eleanor no longer has a company-paid Mercedes, or a driver. The family car is a Ford truck. "It's hard to sell your house and move your family into residence," Eleanor says. But that was nothing compared with the challenge of dealing with the

isolation she felt after being fired. Even though she got over 100 messages of support, Eleanor felt disconnected from society and the financial ecosystem where she had once thrived. "That disconnection led me to have a really deep compassion for people who are socially and economically disconnected," she said. At least she had the family, the education and the money to build a new life. But what about the people who don't have those strengths? "If I feel this disconnected, how do they feel?"

She would soon find out. After she graduated in 2005, Eleanor accepted a job at the Prison Fellowship, a faith-based charity that aims to steer prisoners away from the life of crime. Volunteers run chapel services and bible study groups, or just listen to prisoners, to encourage them to choose a different path when they get out. As the Fellowship's executive director, Eleanor is chief organizer of an unpopular cause, but a needy one. Half of Canada's prisoners, Eleanor learned, are teenagers, and up to 80 per cent of them will re-offend when they get out of jail. She believes that by offering teens an alternative way of life, spiritual one that nurtures their self-esteem, volunteers can cut the rate of re-offending to 30 per cent.

One of the first prisoners she met was a mother who had killed her abusive husband. Here was a woman who had lost everything - her freedom, access to her children, her work. And yet, Eleanor noted, she was still filled with strength and compassion and love for her children. She went to hell and back, and survived. She's gone home to the children now, and Eleanor still sees her from time to time: "I thought she was the most remarkable woman."

Eleanor is now Reverend Ellie, assistant curate in the tiny Anglican parish of St. Cuthbert's in Oakville, Ontario. Weekdays she's working with the Prison Fellowship, but on weekends she's in Oakville, where she delivers Sunday sermons and flips pancakes with church's teenagers. "I'm calmer, more in touch with my values, my emotions, my spiritual life," Ellie says, as she sips a coffee in a campus coffee shop near the musty historic building in mid-town Toronto where she works at the Fellowship. She's wearing a plain woolen skirt, no makeup over her smooth skin, and no jewelry apart from small diamond stud earrings. "I have a sense of joy about my life." She feels it all the time, especially when she's doing some 'holy loitering,' as her rector would pit it, just hanging out with the kids or with her parishoners. "I've come through something that for my life has been challenging. I've learned from it. I've been scarred by it. But I've also grown from it.

"Martha is alive and well," she says. "I'm still very task oriented." Even while she was in divinity school, Eleanor served as chancellor of University of Western Ontario until 2004. These days she also gives motivational speeches and sits on the board of Opportunity International Canada, which offers small business loans to struggling entrepreneurs in developing countries. "I still have a list of things I want to achieve a mile long," Eleanor says. Yet "I think Mary and Martha are living more in balance today." We walk back slowly to her office, and just before we say goodbye, Ellie spots a penny on the sidewalk. She picks it up and hands it to me. "It's not lucky," she says, "unless you give it to someone."