



## Chapter 13: Book Review of *Dispelling the Clouds: A Desperate Social Experiment*, Wilma Derksen

---

Wilma<sup>1</sup> and I have been friends since when I first met her while a journalist with *Mennonite Reporter*<sup>2</sup> (now *Canadian Mennonite Magazine*<sup>3</sup>), in about 1990. Her daughter, Candace, had been murdered in 1984.<sup>4</sup>

Wilma has been for me constant reminder that, on the receiving end of violent crime is the victim, is the community: both profoundly grieving, needy, bewildered, fearful. We Restorative Justice advocates — of whom she is one! — must bear that constantly in mind.

Her contributions to the victim community in serious and violent crime, and to Restorative Justice, have been immense and immeasurable.

---

When Wilma asked that I be a pre-publication reader of her new book, I felt honoured. When I sent her a quick email upon completion of reading it (at 2:00 a.m.!), I ended with a single word: **Wow!** The following review is of that earlier manuscript. The completed one is what you may find in bookstores or online.

Wilma is a captivating storyteller. Not only is she great at this craft, she uses an economy of words that invariably are apt and keep the story crisply moving. Though one is often compelled to pause and linger.

She is also a gifted writer who engages her readership as if you are listening to her in a small circle of intimate friends. She has honed her writing craft over many years and books, not to mention a long career as a journalist. In many ways her writing matches her proficiency at presenting to a wide array of those impacted by crime, an equally practised oral skill set over decades before many audiences.

Those impacted are easily categorized as: “those harmed by crime” — preferable to “victims” in pointedly putting the entire onus on the perpetrator; “those who harmed others” — preferable to “offenders” since in our multifarious humanity we are never reducible to a singular act or label; and “wider community” immediately impacted by crime — and by extension all society.

In our last visit together, I was delighted to hear that celebrated author Malcolm Gladwell<sup>5</sup> had returned to Christian faith due in part to his researching her story for his book: *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants*.<sup>6</sup>

This highlights Wilma’s utter authenticity. My first encountering Wilma three decades ago was in that way uncomfortably challenging: how can an offender-oriented prison worker *really* get it about serious and lethal harm done to a family member? And how can a Restorative Justice worker *really* get it that *forgiveness* is the *F-word* when initiated by the harmed, not invited.

---

<sup>1</sup> See: <http://www.wilmaderksen.com/>, accessed August 23, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> See: [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Mennonite Reporter \(Periodical\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Mennonite_Reporter_(Periodical)).

<sup>3</sup> See: <https://canadianmennonite.org/>, accessed August 23, 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Wilma tells her story in *Have You Seen Candace?*

<sup>5</sup> See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malcolm\\_Gladwell](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malcolm_Gladwell), accessed August 23, 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Gladwell, *David and Goliath*.

Short answer: *He can't! (Immediately)*. But one can listen, and hopefully work at learning to change . . .

Wilma's first book about her daughter's murder was: *Have You Seen Candace?*<sup>7</sup> The subtitle was arresting: *A True Story of Faith and Forgiveness*. There was that F-word right out there (but hers and her family's to use as deemed by them and that community to be appropriate —not all did/do.)

In that book and again in this, the reader will learn how she and her husband Cliff took on the mantle of that excruciating, elusive affirmation: I am going to *forgive*/I have *forgiven*. **Wow!** — for many the reaction in first hearing her story; the reaction ever since by so many — and by me. **Wow!**

Well, except initially and at other times for the exclusive community she and family were brutally thrust into: those who had lost a family member to murder. Wilma's referencing repeatedly this group is invariably and artfully empathetic.

In this book, Wilma writes:

I was living an experiment.

Consciously or unconsciously, it was just an experiment. . . motivated by desperation.

So the reader is drawn to wade in . . . to the uncertain waters of a life course with a chosen lode star named *forgiveness*. But what does it mean? And how navigated?

Well, the reader follows Wilma with her family guided by that at times barely-twinkling celestial orb. The reader is in for a ride; once heartily having climbed on board. We are in turn directed by those guided by this star: a journey, a star — at our great peril possibly — not to be missed! Else in Archbishop Desmond Tutu's words, we might bitterly too late discover there is *no future* — for you, for me, for anyone! — *without forgiveness*.<sup>8</sup>

The chapter titles of this two-part voyage are likewise sparse: often one, no more than two words. They invite and entice . . . one to perhaps like me stay up to all hours to experience somewhat — *at least try!* — the expedition! For Wilma offers something emotionally palpable, that if allowed, journeys us along towards an uncertain, complicated, unknowing but deeply rewarding destination. She in fact directs us towards *home*.

Along this journey one finds multiple pearls of wisdom forged as in an oyster of calamity, through great trauma and hardship. They are freely accessible however again and again. The reader will doubtless select a necklace of wisdom gems different from mine: multiply offered, arrestingly impactful.

Wilma also sustains use of metaphors throughout:

- shapeshifting monsters;
- stormy clouds (whence the title);
- “entirely different” life path chosen from many murdered children's families.

As in all Wilma's books and presentations read and heard, Wilma's faith is persistent backdrop that infuses the journey. But for those without a *Christian* faith, it is not presumptuous nor imposed.

---

<sup>7</sup> Derksen, *Have You Seen Candace?*

<sup>8</sup> Desmond Tutu ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Desmond\\_Tutu](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Desmond_Tutu), accessed August 23, 2024), *No Future*. Please see the “how-to” of this in a very practical book, by the Archbishop and his daughter, Mpho Tutu ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mpho\\_Tutu\\_van\\_Furth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mpho_Tutu_van_Furth), accessed August 23, 2024): *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World*.

My wife and I, in spending a weekend on retreat, doing the exercises, reading and discussing together, can attest to its potency — with relation to two personal situations of conflict at that time.

Evoking Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken,"<sup>9</sup> her closing words are (emphasis added):

*I guess the question now is: Would Cliff and I have been as fulfilled and creative at the end of our lives — where we find ourselves now — if we hadn't forgiven? I don't think so. At the bedroom door, when we saw that dark, frightening presence on our bed — we chose the word forgiveness. And I do believe it has made all the difference.*

In conclusion: "It was just an experiment". . . **Wow!**

## References

Derksen, Wilma L. *Have You Seen Candace?: A true story of faith and forgiveness*, Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers Inc., 1991.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Confronting the Horror: The Aftermath of Violence*, Winnipeg: Amity Publishers, 2002.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Dispelling the Clouds: a desperate social experiment*, Wilma, Winnipeg: Amity Publishers, 2020.

Gladwell, Malcolm, *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants*, New York: Back Bay Books; Illustrated edition, 2015.

Tutu, Archbishop Desmond, and Mpho Tutu. *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World*, San Francisco: HarperOne, 2015.

---

<sup>9</sup> See: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44272/the-road-not-taken>, accessed August 23, 2024