



Broken Open— and Emerging More Whole: Loss, Joy, and Reinvention through Community

By Thomas Mengel

*There is a particular kind of exhilaration that comes not from soaring,
but from choosing to jump.*
—Søren Kierkegaard

I have jumped many times. I stumbled often. I hope to jump again.

I have not always jumped with exhilaration or from solid ground. Some of my most important leaps began with a slow, private recognition that something essential had stopped working—a marriage that no longer provided the closeness I was yearning for, a faith whose beliefs no longer matched my understanding, a professional identity which has run its course. The jumping came later. First came the long, uncomfortable season of sensing or knowing that something is off.

Looking back across 25 years of transformation, what strikes me most is not the difficulty—though there was plenty of that—but the extraordinary richness that came from taking those leaps honestly: acknowledging both what was broken and what was possible. Each jump opened a world I could not have imagined from the ledge before it. And each world, it turns out, was populated by remarkable communities of people who became the real substance of my story.

This is an essay about reinvention—the full version, which includes both the courage of the jump and the weight of what precedes it and of what is left behind. About what happens when you choose, repeatedly and with your whole self, to grow. And about why the communities we build and belong to are not the backdrop to that journey. They are the journey itself.

A Life Lived in Bold Chapters

My first major leap came in the late 1990s. My marriage, after years of growing apart, had become a place of quiet pain—the particular ache of two people who care for each other but have ceased, somewhere along the way, to be building the same life. Leaving was my choice, and I made it with as much care as I could. But choice

does not insulate you from grief and guilt. The end of a long, shared life carries loss even when—perhaps especially when—you are the one who decided to go. Separation and divorce in a Catholic context come with the stigma of sin, of acting against God and the church community. Even though this was my choice, I still had to work through grief, guilt, and shame.

What followed, though, was remarkable. A new relationship began—one that, over two decades later, continues to be the great adventure of my life. In 2002, my partner and I packed everything we could carry and immigrated from Germany to Canada. We arrived as strangers to an enormous country, buzzing with the particular electricity of people who have chosen the unknown over the familiar. Everything was fresh, including the loss felt from moving away from family and friends. Everything was possible, including building new rela-

tions and visiting with friends and family.

By 2005, I had reinvented myself professionally, leaving project management consulting to become a professor of leadership studies—a field that gave me the privilege of thinking seriously, for nearly two decades, about what it means to lead a meaningful life. We had moved across the country, from the magnificent and breathtaking Slocan River Valley in the Kootenay Mountain Range in British Columbia to the charming and civilized capital area of New Brunswick. We left behind the adventures of the West and traded it for the communities and academic opportunities waiting in the East.

By 2008, a long and earnest spiritual journey had carried me from the Catholicism of the first 40 years of my life through Protestantism and Progressive Christianity to a secular humanism I now embrace with genuine conviction—a worldview grounded in compassion, reason, and human dignity, richer for having been so honestly earned. The philosopher in me found the searching exhilarating. The human in me found some of it genuinely painful.

Each step of that journey involved the loss of a community, a language, a set of rituals that had carried me. And these steps also freed me from constraining experiences and the hurt, guilt, and shame resulting from breaking or not living up to rigid religious rules and behavioural expectations that did not align with my need for freedom of choice, rational

thinking, and the unconditional love of and compassion for all human beings.

This is what I have come to understand: the pain and the exhilaration are not mutually exclusive opposites. They are two sides of the same experience. What psychologist Kenneth Doka calls *disenfranchised grief*—grief over self-chosen losses that society doesn't readily validate—is real, and it is worth naming. Every *decision*, after all, is etymologically a *cutting* (from the Latin *caedo*): something new is opened, and something else is genuinely left behind. Learning to honour those departures, rather than rushing past them toward the next horizon, turned out to be one of the most important skills a life in motion requires.

When the World Tilted—and What I Did With It

Even someone who thrives on change encounters moments that arrive not as chosen adventures but as pure rupture. For me, the years 2020 to 2023 were that kind of time—and they started with the traumatic experience of the death of my father during COVID.

The loss of my father in January 2021 was not a transition I chose or could prepare for. COVID took him at a distance, in circumstances stripped of every ritual that ordinarily holds the dying and comforts the living. I could not travel. I could not be present. I could not hold his hand or sit beside him in those final days or gather with family in the shared physical space of grief. What I received instead was a phone call and then silence.

That absence—the inability to do the one thing a son should be able to do—left a mark that time has softened but not erased. The loneliness—the inability of my father to die within the community of family and friends—created an almost painful yearning to do better. I found myself writing and thinking more seriously than ever about how we age, how we die, and how we ensure that we and others go through those experiences with as much human dignity and with as many meaningful choices as possible. Most importantly, I started to help build communities that can hold people through both, aging and dying. Loss, I was learning again, has a way of identifying your next work.

Retirement arrived across the same compressed window—officially on March 1, 2023, after several years of preparation. I had been an academic for close to two decades, and I won't pretend that leaving was simple. Academic identity runs unusually deep: it is not merely what you do but how you think, who you are, and where you belong. Relinquishing that was genuinely disorienting, in the way that all significant losses are—even chosen ones and ones that you thought you had prepared for. But I had learned, by then, to sit with that disorientation rather than flee it, and to ask not



Photos by Thomas Mengel



“what am I losing?” but “what am I feeling?,” “what do I make of this?,” and “what does this make possible?”

And then—Newfoundland.

In June 2022, my partner and I relocated to Pouch Cove, on the Avalon Peninsula: a landscape of rugged, salt-washed, improbable beauty that felt, from the first day, like somewhere a person could genuinely become and be home.

A new province. A new community. A newfound land—in every sense. The latest and, so far, most surprising chapter of all.

The Answer That Was Always Community

Here is what I know after the recent 25 years of reinvention: the most transformative force in a human life is not solitary resolve. It is being in and building community.

Community was what drew us to Newfoundland in the first place. A cohousing project developing near Portugal Cove–St. Philips had caught our attention—the prospect of intentional, cooperative, communal living was exactly the kind of leap we recognised as our own. We left New Brunswick, our home for 17 years, with genuine excitement and leapt with both feet into the leadership team of what would become the Killick Ecovillage Co-op. The timeline stretched beyond what we wanted to wait for, and we eventually settled in Pouch Cove instead—but that “detour” turned out to be anything but.

In Pouch Cove and across the Avalon Peninsula, I found my community in the fullest sense. My wife and I cofounded the Killick Coast North Seniors Co-operative; I helped develop the Sunrise Funeral Co-op, joined the Social Justice Co-op, and became involved in the NL Federation of Co-operatives. Each of these organisations is animated by the same conviction: that people, acting together with compassion, care, and shared purpose, can build something better than any of them could alone. Working alongside people who share that conviction has become, frankly, one of the great joys of my life.

I also began volunteering with the Nav-CARE (Navigation: Connecting, Advocating, Resourcing, Engaging) program through Newfoundland and Labrador Health Services—accompanying people through rehabilitation, geriatric services, and palliative care. Sitting with others at the edges of life, being genuinely useful in moments that matter enormously, has given me a particular sense of purpose I had not felt so vividly since my volunteer work with a crisis line 40 years earlier. It is extraordinary what becomes possible when you simply show up and offer your presence.

What these communities give me cannot be reduced to support or belonging,

though they offer both. What they give me is *aliveness*—the vitality that comes from being needed, from building things that didn’t exist before you arrived, from being known not as a résumé but as a person. Research on flourishing in later life points consistently to purposeful engagement and social connection as the core ingredients. I concur.

Writing as a Way of Making Meaning

Alongside the community work, I write. Writing, creatively, professionally, and academically, has been an important component of my meaning-making since high school. More creative writing has been at the core of my retirement plans. And writing, too, has become a form of community. In my journal, in my various publications, and in collaboration with others I have been tracing the arc of a life that, despite its ups and downs, has taken so many unexpected turns it can only be described as an upward spiral.

Viktor Frankl, whose work on meaning-centred psychology has shaped my thinking for decades, argued that suffering ceases to be suffering when it finds meaning. I would add that meaning-making is both relational and intentional. It happens when you tell your story to someone willing to hear it—and in doing so, discover what you think. It happens when you orient your actions toward the values that matter most to you. And it

happens, reliably, when you choose to frame your life not as a sequence of losses and recoveries but as an expanding conversation with the world.

Writing has been, for me, that conversation made visible. Each book, each essay, each blog post is a way of saying: this happened, and here is what I made of it. Not a lament. A report from the frontier.

The Chaplain I Didn't Know I Was Becoming

In August 2025, I began training as a humanist chaplain with Humanist Canada—and when I tell people this, some immediately respond: “Of course you did.”

It makes a certain perfect sense. Someone who holds graduate degrees in theology and the arts and sciences; who has traveled sincerely through four spiritual traditions and arrived at a secular humanism grounded in compassion and reason; who lived through his own losses and who has spent years accompanying people through suffering and hope; who has spent a career thinking about meaning and leadership—that person is perhaps unusually well prepared to offer spiritual care without the scaffolding of a specific theology. After my accreditation in August 2026, I will offer that care, providing existential presence, through Newfoundland and Labrador Health Services, their Nav-CARE program, and the community outreach program of the interfaith Pastoral Care team.

What I bring is not certainty about why we suffer or what lies beyond death. What I bring is genuine compassion, backed by the loving communities I am part of, and insatiable curiosity about what it means to live well—and the hard-won conviction, drawn from a life of many chapters, that every person's story, however complicated, however full of detours, contains something worth honouring.

What 25 Years of Jumping Has Taught Me

If I could offer four things I've learned from a life of honest reinvention, they would be these:

- The jump and the grief belong together. Every decision to move forward also closes a door, and what lies behind that door deserves acknowledgment before you turn away. It is not weakness to grieve a life you chose to leave. It is the precondition for fully inhabiting the life you are moving toward.

- Identity is not a possession to be protected but a capacity to be developed. You are not less yourself for having suffered losses and changed profoundly. You are, if anything, more. Getting there is not a straight line. It entails setbacks, grief, and wounds that often, but not always, heal.

- Healing and growth are not private projects. They happen in community—in the act of showing up for others while they show up for you. The co-ops, the volunteer programmes, the conversations over coffee: these are not the support structure for a meaningful life. They are the meaningful life.

- The next chapter is probably the most interesting one. Not as a performance of optimism, but as a pattern I have observed, in my own life, reliably. The willingness to jump—to sit with the dizziness of freedom rather than retreat from it—has never, not once, led somewhere smaller than where I started.

The communities waiting to receive us—the co-ops, the volunteer programs, the palliative care wards, the writing groups, the living rooms where people gather to build something together—they are not consolation prizes for a life that didn't go as planned. They are meaningful opportunities. They may become part of our lives.

Let's jump. 🐦

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