



## Helen Wilkes

Who am I?

Born in a country that no longer exists at a time hopefully never to be repeated, I have spent 80+ years in a state of watchfulness mixed with daily gratitude for the gift of life. Daily gratitude also for family – two daughters who have become amazing human beings, and four delightful grandchildren who are clearly embarked on becoming all that they can be, each in his/her own way.

I'm deeply grateful also for friendship and community, blessings that I lacked for many years. I grew up on an isolated farm at a time when anti-Semitism was the social norm in Canada. School was a horror. University at least opened my eyes to wider horizons, leading eventually to a Ph.D. and a teaching position at SUNY. It also plunged me directly into ethical issues, including the Vietnam war. On the one hand, I was out marching and protesting; on the other hand, the system gave me the power of life and death. Each time a male student failed a course, he would lose his draft exemption. I fled for a second time to Canada in search of safety, and ended up at UBC.

Religion having never been a part of my life other than as a source of shame, I married a non-Jew and raised my children to be kind, compassionate and caring. That they are, indeed, and so much more. Over and over, I have learned from them, and I continue to learn what it means to be a *Mensch* – in the finest sense of the word.

Busy years flew by in a flash, and only on the verge of retirement did I give thought to the purpose of my continuing existence on planet earth. In an idle moment, my eyes landed upon a box that had belonged to my father who died in 1958. I knew it contained letters from his family, but I had never found time or reason to read them.

Reading them changed my life, along with a chance encounter that led me to Or Shalom. There, I found people who inspired me. Equally important, for the first time ever, I heard the Barchu. *When I call on the light of my soul, I come home.*

I have no sense of religiosity on which to fall back, but I knew that I had indeed, come home. It was as if a door had opened to admit a slight puff of air. A tiny breeze, akin to the light that shines through in Leonard Cohen's "crack" in all things.

Much has entered my awareness through that small opening:

-that we are all sparks of The Divine

-that God has given us a magnificent universe, but relies upon each of us to be His/Her hands. The cure for Covid-19 will not fall from the sky. Instead, it will be the work of meticulously

devoted scientists and researchers. The care of the elderly and the sick and the untold millions who for whatever reason need a helping hand, that task requires both trained experts each one of us. We must do whatever we can, wherever and whenever we can.

- that Tikkun Olam is incumbent upon us all. The healing of the world, the brokenness that separates us from our planetary brothers and sisters, the dream of peace, this is ours to bring into being. So too is the cessation of destructive practices that have led to climate change and to the extinction of species that were once a part of this immeasurably immense and varied universe.

How has this consciousness changed me? With every passing year, I have become more aware of my good fortune, and more grateful for all my blessings. This despite never quite shedding my awareness of history, of how easily people can be led astray, and of how often Jews have been both envied and targets of hatred. I work at building bridges, at healing rifts. The rifts in my own heart, and those that needlessly divide “us” and “them.”

Awareness and gratitude are inseparable. The brokenness of the world and our own personal blessings co-exist. The fragility of life exists alongside its preciousness. The tragedies that surround us are real, even as we shelter in our homes or walk safely among giant cedars or gaze out to sea.

Awareness and gratitude reach out to encompass the gift of life itself. They embrace the gift of family and friends and community. I’m so thankful to be living in a time of peace, and for being part of Or Shalom where my grandsons celebrated their B’nei Mitvah. Long may the Light of Shalom, the light of peace, of harmony, and of wholeness shine forth.

P.S. Although my given name is Helen, you are welcome to call me by my adopted Hebrew name - Ora.