

COVENANT

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THE COURAGE TO BECOME WHY GROWTH REQUIRES LOSING THE SELF WE THOUGHT WE WERE



During our recent April Renewal Program, a participant shared a story that has remained with me. A man had been stopped by the police. As the officer approached the vehicle, the rear window slowly rolled down and someone in the back seat asked, almost indignantly, "Do you know who I used to be?" The story is humorous, yet deeply revealing. Why did he not ask, "Do you know who I am?" Perhaps because there comes a moment in every life when the identities that once gave us confidence begin to fade. Retirement arrives. Health changes. Children leave home. Ministry evolves. Communities change. The roles that once defined us no longer seem enough. Few experiences are more unsettling.

Throughout life, we gradually construct identity through roles—spouse, parent, priest, religious, professional, leader. These identities are not false; they enable us to love and serve. Yet there often comes a moment when the very roles that once sustained us begin quietly to limit us.

A priest may become known more for competence than discipleship. A religious sister may become indispensable to her community while slowly losing touch with the woman God first called. A husband or wife may discover that years spent caring for family have left little space to ask who they have become. A single person, faithfully searching for direction, may begin to wonder whether life is passing while they are still waiting to discover their place. Sometimes what began as vocation slowly becomes self-definition.

The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard understood this danger with remarkable clarity. In *The Sickness Unto Death*, he wrote that "the greatest hazard of all, losing one's self, can occur very quietly in the world, as if it were nothing at all" (Kierkegaard, 1989, p. 43). We often imagine that people lose themselves through scandal or failure. More often, they lose themselves in success, performing a role so faithfully that it gradually replaces the person.

Contemporary psychology similarly observes that identity structures, while necessary for functioning, can become restrictive when they harden into self-definition. We begin to equate worth with indispensability, competence, or strength. Over time, what began as adaptive strategy is experienced as identity itself.

Perhaps this is why genuine growth often feels less like gaining something new than like losing something familiar.

Long before psychology described this process, St. Augustine experienced it personally. Reflecting on his conversion, he cried, "Late have I loved you, Beauty, ever ancient, ever new" (Augustine, 1991, Book X, §27). His conversion was not simply the abandonment of sinful habits. It was the surrender of an identity built upon ambition, recognition, and self-sufficiency. He discovered that becoming holy was not becoming someone else, but finally becoming the person God had always known. Thomas Merton would later express the same truth in a different way. He warned that we can become remarkably successful at being someone we were never meant to be. Beneath the identities we construct stands the true self, whose worth does not depend upon achievement, reputation, or usefulness, but upon being loved by God (Merton, 1961). This insight profoundly shapes the work we do at Southdown.

People often arrive seeking relief from anxiety, depression, burnout, or relational distress. These are important concerns. Yet beneath many symptoms lies a quieter question: Who am I now that the person I believed myself to be no longer seems sufficient?

Healing is rarely about returning to who we once were. More often, it involves the painful recognition that we cannot go back—and that this is not failure, but transformation. The priest who has relied upon competence learns to receive vulnerability. The religious person who has spent years caring for others rediscovers that she, too, is worthy of care. The leader who has carried every burden alone discovers that accepting help is not weakness but wisdom.

Healing is not becoming someone else. It is having the courage to become who, in Christ, we have always been called to be. Perhaps this is the invitation hidden within every season of uncertainty. The question is not whether we can recover the person we used to be. That person has already served their purpose. The deeper question is whether we have the courage to let go of what no longer gives life in order to receive the life still unfolding within us.

In the end, the Gospel is not an invitation to invent ourselves, but to receive ourselves as God has always known us. This is the quiet work of grace: the release of what no longer gives life, and the gradual acceptance of the life still unfolding within us. Perhaps that is the greatest courage of all—the courage to become.

Sincerely,
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President and Chief Clinical Officer

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THE WEIGHT OF THE UNLIVED LIFE

REGRET, CALLING, AND THE GRACE OF BEGINNING AGAIN

By Rev. Francois Diouf, O.S.B., Ph.D.
President and Chief Clinical Officer



We live in an age that leaves very little room for silence. Our days are filled with conversations, obligations, emails, news, podcasts, and the endless stream of information that occupies every unclaimed moment. We have become remarkably skilled at staying busy. Yet beneath this constant activity lies a quieter reality: many of us are not simply avoiding silence; we are avoiding ourselves.

More than three centuries ago, Blaise Pascal observed that “all of humanity’s problems stem from man’s inability to sit quietly in a room alone” (Pascal, 2005, §139, Lafuma numbering). He was not simply speaking about distraction. He understood that silence has a way of revealing the questions we have postponed, the conversations we never had, the forgiveness we withheld, and the life we imagined but somehow never lived.

For many people, especially those who have spent their lives serving others, this encounter can be unsettling. A priest may wonder whether he spent too much time administering a parish and too little time accompanying people. A religious sister may ask whether years of generous service left enough room for her own interior life to flourish. A husband or wife may question whether the demands of work, raising children, and meeting daily responsibilities have gradually eclipsed the dreams they once carried in their hearts. A single person, faithfully searching for direction, may wonder whether they have spent so much time trying to find the path that life has quietly moved on without them. A pastor may remember missed opportunities more vividly than the countless lives quietly transformed by faithful presence.

These questions are painful because they confront us with what might be called the weight of the unlived life—not only the mistakes we have made, but the haunting possibility that we have somehow failed to become the person we were created to be.

Yet psychology suggests that regret is not our greatest enemy. Viktor Frankl, reflecting on his experience in the concentration camps, argued that human beings can endure extraordinary suffering when they continue to believe that life still asks something of them. Despair begins not when life becomes difficult, but when we conclude that nothing meaningful remains ahead (Frankl, 2006).

In clinical practice, we often encounter this same pattern. People rarely suffer only because of what has happened to them. They suffer because they have begun to believe that their future has already been decided. Regret quietly becomes resignation: “It’s too late.” “This is simply who I am.” “Nothing essential will ever change.” Yet regret and despair are not the same thing.

Regret looks backward, but it still remembers that something beautiful mattered. Despair closes the future altogether.

Perhaps this is why regret, painful though it is, can become the beginning of hope. It reminds us that our deepest values are still alive. We regret neglected friendships because love still matters. We regret opportunities missed in ministry because our vocation still matters. We grieve the life we did not live because we have not stopped longing for the good.

Scripture offers a strikingly different way of reading these moments. Again and again, God calls people long after they believe their most important years have passed.

Abraham is 75 when he leaves everything familiar for a future only God can see. Peter receives his deepest commission not before his failure but after it. Even the good thief discovers, in the final hours of his life, that grace can begin where every human possibility appears to have ended.

The Bible is, in many ways, a book of late beginnings. It tells the story of a God who repeatedly refuses to accept the conclusions people draw about themselves.

That truth is not only theological. It is also one of the greatest privileges of our work at Southdown. Many who come to us are convinced that they have somehow missed their lives. They speak of years lost to burnout, grief, conflict, illness, disappointment, or emotional exhaustion. Beneath these different stories lies a common conviction: “Nothing truly new can happen now.” Yet this is rarely the deepest truth.

Repeatedly, we witness people rediscover the freedom to imagine a future. We see relationships slowly repaired, forgiveness cautiously offered, hope quietly returning, and ministry renewed—not because the past has disappeared, but because it no longer defines the future.

Accompaniment is not simply walking beside another person through suffering. It is helping them recover the confidence that God is still at work in a life they had begun to consider finished.

Perhaps this is where psychology and the Gospel meet most beautifully. Neither denies regret. Neither ignores failure. Neither pretends that suffering leaves no scars. Instead, both remind us that the past is never the final author of our lives.

Grace continues to write. As Christians, we believe in a God whose most characteristic work is making all things new. The Resurrection itself proclaims that what appears to be an ending may become an unexpected beginning.

Perhaps, then, the most important question is not, “What might my life have been?” The deeper question is: “Lord, what is still possible?” That question transformed Abraham’s old age, Peter’s failure, and the dying thief’s final hours. It continues to transform the lives of those we accompany at Southdown every day. By God’s grace, it may yet transform ours. ■

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COURAGE IN CONNECTION

REFLECTIONS ON 15 YEARS AT SOUTHDOWN

By Michelle Colangelo
Chief Operating Officer



For 15 years, I have had the privilege of calling The Southdown Institute part of my life. When I reflect on this year's annual theme, *Courage in Connection: 60 Years of Building Hope Through Relationship*, I realize how deeply these words capture not only the mission of Southdown, but also the everyday experiences that have shaped my own years here.

Southdown has evolved in many ways throughout my time here. I witnessed the final chapter of our six-month residential program and the transition to the 14-week program we know today. I experienced the construction of our new facility and was part of the move from Aurora, Ontario, to Holland Landing, Ontario—from one beautiful property of more than 100 acres to another peaceful and majestic setting on 37 acres. I experienced the excitement, and admittedly some uncertainty, that came with moving into a brand-new building and adapting to new ways of serving residents.

I have also had the privilege of working alongside remarkable colleagues. Some have retired after years of faithful service, others have moved on to new adventures, and new staff members have arrived carrying fresh energy and ideas. Through every transition, relationships have continued to form, evolve, and strengthen. What stands out to me most is how many people stay. At Southdown, we have staff members who have dedicated 10 years, 15 years, 20 years—even nearly 40 years—of their lives to this community. That says something profound about this place and what it means to work here. People remain where they feel connected, valued, and purposeful.

Like any season of transition, there have certainly been growing pains. Change can be uncomfortable—it certainly is for me. It asks us to release what is familiar while trusting that something meaningful can still emerge. Yet through every transition over my 15 years, one thing became clear early on: while buildings, programs, routines, and even people may change, the heart of Southdown remains constant.

That constant is what has stayed with me all these years. The constant of welcome. The constant of compassionate care. The constant of meeting people where they are, without judgment. The constant reminder that every person who walks through our doors deserves dignity, understanding, respect, and hope. And perhaps most importantly, the constant of relationship. Healing begins in relationship—often through the simple act of being seen, heard, and accepted exactly as we are.

This year's theme, *Courage in Connection: 60 Years of Building Hope Through Relationship*, captures something I have witnessed every day at Southdown. It takes immense courage for someone to come here. It means acknowledging pain, vulnerability, fear, exhaustion, grief, loss, and uncertainty. It means trusting others enough to begin the difficult work of healing. That kind of courage is not always loud or dramatic. Often, it is quiet. It is shown simply through showing up—crossing the threshold of the front door and remaining open, day after day, to the possibility that life can become different. Time and time again, I have witnessed residents take those brave first steps toward hope and connection. As staff members, we are privileged to witness that courage firsthand and to walk alongside each person throughout their journey.

Of course, daily life at Southdown also comes with its share of ordinary human moments—the moments that keep us grounded. In my role as Chief Operating Officer, some days begin with wondering whether the stove pilot light will cooperate or whether the sump pump has decided today is the day to test our patience. Sometimes technology refuses to work, schedules suddenly change, or the unexpected completely reshapes the day before lunch. And then there are the ever-regal creatures we Canadians affectionately call “the Canadian military”—the Canada geese—who act as feathered gatekeepers of our front entrance and walking paths with surprising authority, often requiring us to take alternate routes from the parking lot to our offices.

There are always unexpected challenges, small frustrations, funny moments, and countless uncertainties that come with community life. In many ways, this feels reflective of life itself. Life is rarely perfect or predictable, and neither are we. Perhaps that is part of the beauty of this place. Southdown has never been about perfection. It has always been about humanity—about showing up for one another in both the meaningful moments and the ordinary ones.

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RENEWAL PROGRAM

THREE-WEEK COMPREHENSIVE RENEWAL FOR CLERGY AND RELIGIOUS LIFE

Periods of sustained ministry can bring both meaning and fatigue. The Renewal Program offers a three-week structured experience for clergy and women and men religious seeking personal and spiritual renewal.

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I know the changes I have witnessed are only part of a much larger story. There was change long before I arrived at Southdown, and there will continue to be change long after me. Programs will evolve, leadership will shift, and new generations of staff and residents will continue to shape this community. But I believe the constant will remain: compassionate care, human connection, and the belief that healing and hope are built through relationship.

What has kept me at Southdown for 15 years is not simply the work itself, nor even the history, impressive as it is. What has kept me here are the people and the relationships. It is the privilege of walking alongside others during vulnerable moments in their lives and helping build hope through connection. Southdown has reminded me that healing is often found not in having all the answers, but in knowing that we do not have to carry life alone.

There is a saying that people may forget what you said or did, but they will remember how you made them feel. I believe Southdown has spent 60 years helping people feel seen, heard, respected, valued, and cared for. That kind of connection can be life-changing.

As I reflect on my own journey here, I feel tremendous gratitude—for the experiences, the memories, the laughter, the lessons, and even the challenges that have shaped these years. Most of all, I am grateful to be part of a community where hope is built through human connection, one relationship at a time. Southdown continues to offer something deeply needed in our world: compassionate connection and hope. I truly could not imagine it any other way. ■

BUILDING HOPE THROUGH CONNECTION GRATITUDE FOR OUR SOUTHDOWN COMMUNITY

As Southdown celebrates 60 years of service, we continue to be reminded that healing is sustained through relationship, compassion, and shared commitment. Our mission has always been strengthened by the generosity of individuals, communities, and partners who believe in the importance of supporting the emotional, psychological, and spiritual well-being of those we serve.

We extend our sincere gratitude to everyone who contributed to the success of our 2026 Annual Benefit Dinner, held earlier this year, *60 Years of Healing: Beyond Stigma, Building Hope*. The evening was a meaningful celebration of Southdown's history, mission, and the many individuals whose generosity helps make our work possible.

Thank you to our sponsors, donors, guests, board members, staff, and community partners who gathered with us in support of Southdown. Your generosity helps ensure that clergy, religious, pastoral ministers, and people of faith continue to have access to compassionate care and support when they need it most.

As we look toward the future, we remain grateful for the relationships that have carried this mission for six decades. Together, we continue to build hope—one relationship at a time.

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May God's blessings be yours in abundance.

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