

# Janet MacArthur INTERVIEW Aug. 3, 2025 FINAL

## **Bill Locke**

Thank you so much for agreeing to talk with us today, Janet. Let's start with your background. Since your last name is 'MacArthur', I'm thinking that gives us a clue.

## **Janet MacArthur**

True! My great grandfather was an immigrant from the Isle of Lewis in Scotland, and so the MacArthurs were real Gaelic-speaking Highlanders when they were "cleared" to the Queen's Bush of western Ontario in 1851. Ancestry is something I'm quite interested in, and I've done a lot of personal research on it. All four of my grandparents have roots in the U.K. Two of them were immigrants - one from Wales, and one from England. Two others were born in Canada, in Ontario. Very typical of many Albertans of my generation. One of my grandparents was out here in 1896 building houses. I would say there was a very British flavor to my upbringing. Many of the ancestral stories I heard as a child were about the 'mother country'.

I was born in Edmonton in 1952 and my parents were both born in Alberta as well, in the 1920s. I have two brothers who are younger than me, and my parents both came from big families. I had about 32 cousins altogether, and they all lived in Alberta, up and down Highway Two. My parents were from central Alberta - Red Deer and Innisfail. I have a lot of happy memories from my childhood, of visiting aunts and uncles and grandparents, and always that huge sense of family, and family support. My mother was very sick when I was around 10 or 11 years old, and I remember that a lot of other family members supported our family in many ways. That was a great life lesson for me; you know, that family sticks together. My family moved around quite a lot when I was a kid, because that's how my father got ahead in his company. I lived all over Alberta, and for a while in Saskatoon. But then we came back to Calgary when I was in grade seven and we stayed. I went to the University of Calgary right out of high school; I had a scholarship from my dad's company. I was probably too immature to really enjoy university the way I could have; but when I was older and went back to do graduate work, I was much more engaged and much more appreciative of it.

Looking back, one of the things I learned growing up was certainly resiliency. I was weaned on stories of people in poverty, because in the 1930s both sides of my family were really hit hard. Also, the war; my father served in the Second World War, and an uncle of mine was killed then. But, you know, I think one of the things I learned from my early years was certainly hope and faith. My paternal grandparents were church goers, and that grandmother was a big influence on me. She used to really probe us in terms of what was 'the right thing to do'. It was grounded in her knowledge of and faith in Christianity, and she was a great example for me. I wasn't raised in the church, though we did go to the United Church off and on. My grandmother was Anglican, and my grandfather was Presbyterian. My immediate family were pretty secular when I was a youngster, but then my mom started to go to an offshoot of the Lutheran Church called The Church of God when I was in my teens. She stuck with that church for a large part of her later life, but it just wasn't to my taste. It was a too fundamentalist for me.

I was about 21 years old when I graduated from the U. of C. with an Education degree. At that point I'd been in school almost all my life, but I'd been going to Banff in the summers to work. I really loved it up in Banff. I worked at the Banff Springs Hotel, and it was so much fun, plus I just love the Rockies. I lived in Banff off and on for five years, and traveled internationally in the off season. That was very good for me. I grew up a little bit more, and then I went into teaching for a few years because I thought I'd better get a permanent teaching certificate and not blow all this education. I thought I'd just try it out and see if teaching was what I wanted to do, though I was pretty sure it wasn't. I taught in northern Alberta for a couple of years in Valleyview, which is near Peace River. After that, I travelled to Europe. And then I drove across Canada with a friend. I wanted to live somewhere other than Alberta. We thought that we might go to Ontario, where we knew people. My friend's sister was living in Toronto, so we stayed there for a while. I was in my late 20s by that time and realized I'd better go back to school. In the meantime, we decided Toronto was too much for us, and because I had some friends in Halifax, that's where we ended up, and we stayed there for a while. I love the Maritimes and started an MA in English at Dal. Later I went to UBC in Vancouver. Afterwards I did a doctorate back in Calgary at U. of C. Being back in Alberta really consolidated my sense of being from Alberta as well, and helped me appreciate the strength and breadth of Canadian literature, and the great writers in Alberta. Plus, I got more plugged into the Arts Community here in Calgary. I still know a lot of people from those days.

### **Bill**

That's so interesting, Janet.

### **Janet**

Anyway, I graduated – finally – in 1988 with a Ph.D., and I was offered jobs here and there. I decided I didn't want to live in central Canada so did not apply much down there. It was too far from my roots, and I didn't want to be that far away from family and friends. I was offered a job at what was then Okanagan University College. They were just starting to grant degrees through UBC. I thought, well, I can teach all levels of English, and it's probably going to turn into a university soon, which it did, and I can be on the ground floor of that. So, I spent 30-some years at what became UBC Okanagan! I had a lot of opportunities there that I don't think I would have had if I'd stayed in Calgary and been, you know, "the student who wouldn't leave". I ended up living in Vernon and Kelowna for many years, and I still spend a lot of time there. One of my daughters is there, and so I have a place to hang my hat, when they can put up with me. I try and get out there quite a lot. There are many things I love about that area ... but I don't miss the "contained" sense of it. I think maybe I'm a prairie girl at heart. Anyways, I moved back to Calgary about two or three years ago for better medical care and to be near one of my daughters who, like many Okanagan kids, left for opportunity.

I started to shop around for a church when I moved back here. I went to the Cathedral, and I went to St. Lawrence, and I can't remember what other churches I tried! But I live fairly close to St. Stephen's, in the Beltline, and I really like that it's quite progressive. I started to go to the Bible Studies at St. Stephen's, and that's when I got to know Charmaine and some other people. It's been very good for me. I had been attending St. Michael's Cathedral in Kelowna for a long time, and I was quite active there.

**Bill**

Who are some of the people who've influenced you – who perhaps were mentor figures.

**Janet**

I think I mentioned one of my grandmothers. There was also an English professor at the University of Calgary who passed away at quite a young age, when I was still in the program. He was my supervisor. His name was Dr. Charles Steele, and he influenced quite a lot of us who did English at the U of C, but Dr. Steele went over and above for students. I would also say the Reverend Nissa Basbaum, who was the Dean of the Cathedral Church of St. Michael and All Angels, in Kelowna. She was a convert from Judaism, and so her 'take' on many things was really fascinating to me, because I've always been kind of a student of some aspects of Jewish history. So, those three people were a big influence. There were, of course, many others, but those three come to mind.

**Bill Locke**

I would guess that your views on faith, or your faith per se, have developed over time.

**Janet**

Yes, it has. Early on, I would say, there was a little pocket of things that made me grudgingly acknowledge a 'spiritual reality', but I was pretty much convinced that the only reality is a material reality. But then during my midlife I went through a pretty tough time. This was when I was living in Kelowna, and I was diagnosed with a chronic disease. I was worried about losing my career. I was on my own because my marriage had broken down, and I had a young child. There's a great line at the beginning of Dante's *Inferno*. He talks about being in a dark wood, a 'selva oscura'. In midlife, I found myself in a dark wood.

And so, a close friend of mine in Kelowna and I started going to different churches, and we ended up at Saint Michael and All Angels Cathedral, because that was her background. And I'm kind of split between being really left wing and progressive on the one hand, but also being a traditionalist, because my PhD was in English poetry of the Renaissance period in England. I have to say that I did a lot of thinking about biblical narratives and biblical characters and the poetry of the Bible through the lens of English Literature, because it's everywhere in Renaissance literature – and Shakespeare, of course, is riddled with references to the Book of Common Prayer and the Bible. So, the Anglican Church was a good fit for me. I was a bit concerned, because, like a lot of people, I had this attitude towards Christianity that it's all this big monolith that is racist, sexist, and colonial. I don't think I'd realized how far the Church has come in its own meditations on some of these issues that vex all of us. I came to realize that there was much, much more going on than I realized.

So, I started to go to Saint Michael's in Kelowna, and I was very busy raising my girls. I have two daughters. One is 29 and married; her name is Clare, and her husband is Matt. They live in Calgary. And I have another daughter who is 27, and her name is Larissa. She still lives in Kelowna. I also have a nephew that I'm very close to, whose name is Neil. He's 29 as well. But getting back to my faith journey, it really started to evolve. I realized when I was raising my kids that they were getting a lot of good things at school, but they really needed some direction as they were growing and starting to sort out really tough questions about life. They, like other kids, were confronted with things even at ages 7,

8, 9, or 10 that need sorting out. And in the part of Kelowna where we lived, there was a lot of what I would call 'conspicuous consumption'. Of course this goes on all over Canada, and in parts of every city. So I wanted them to have something beyond that kind of model, and it wasn't easy. Neither one of them were that interested in church because we'd started going when they were older, and there weren't many kids at Saint Michael's.

I think a big part of my learning in the last 20 years or so has come from reading more and thinking more about spirituality, and meditating, just as the philosophers suggest, on what is a good life. What is a good person? What do I want to model? And, life being what it is, what are the valuable things I want to leave behind? What endures?

**Bill Locke**

You mentioned how you got connected to St. Stephen's, but what *keeps* you connected?

**Janet**

I was invited to sit on Church Council, which was great. I'd served on Council at my old church, and that's a good way to get to know people, and also the inner workings of the church and some of the challenges. I also really like the diversity at St Stephen's. A lot of people in B.C. look at me as though I'm out of my mind when they hear that I moved from Kelowna to Calgary. The stereotype of Calgary among so many people I know who live elsewhere in Canada is very bad. It's unfortunate that some of the more radical right-wing types have really done a number on our image nationally. But I really like the diversity at St. Stephen's, and I also think that Rev. Nicole has done a great job of bringing people together in really significant ways. My church in Kelowna was very good for me in the area of spiritual growth, but it was a little more formal; the people more distant. And, you know, we used to joke about good old 'Anglican reserve', and that was very, very much a part of the ethos there.

But, at St. Stephen's, it seems to me there are a lot of people who are very open about their faith journey. I also think that Nicole has encouraged some really good things, and more dialogue, even within the church service. Sometimes, because I'm such a traditionalist, I kind of miss the Liturgy a little. You know, I understand Elizabethan and Jacobean English. The Book of Common Prayer and the King James Bible really resonate with me. So, I like to go to a more traditional service once in a while. But I've met some really great people at St. Stephen's, and a number of people who are new to Canada – from China, and the Venezuelan community. I love listening to their stories. Those are some things that have drawn me to St. Stephens. I think I've found a very good place to be.

**Bill Locke**

Beautiful. Thank you so very much for taking the time to talk with us, Janet.

**Janet**

You are very welcome. It's been a pleasure.