

Q&A
CALLED
By Marlena Fiol, PhD and Ed O'Connor, PhD

Question: Your relationship with your father figures prominently in both your memoir and inspires your new book *CALLED*. What were the challenges and rewards of writing about that relationship?

Answer: Yes, one might even say that my father is the main character in both books. In many ways, he was larger than life, and writing about him was, indeed, both challenging and rewarding. I'll begin by describing a few of the challenges.

First, by writing about some of my father's failings (as well as my own), Ed and I have broken an unspoken rule in my family: We never talk about the bad stuff. In fact, a few of my siblings are still upset about us airing our family's "dirty laundry."

And telling the story of my father from such differing perspectives was sometimes not easy – from the intimate first-person coming-of-age story in the memoir to the sweeping multi-character epic tale in the new book. Someone once asked me after reading my memoir, "Can you write objectively about the brutal father you describe in your memoir – even though the two of you reconciled at the end?" My response: "No one writes objectively. We're all biased. But my biases lean in the direction of respect, pride, and honor for a man who gave his all to make this world a better place."

Writing about my father was also very rewarding. It has truly been a privilege to come to know both of my parents deeply through their extensive personal diaries, journals, and memoirs, which they opened to us. I suspect very few people get to know their parents as well as I have.

And it has been gratifying to honor my remarkable father and mother, and to publicize their many contributions. Much has been written about them in specialized medical and Mennonite outlets, and we are indeed honored to bring their story to the general public. We've also been able to add depth and nuance to what has been written about them, by delving deep into their inner journey, which we drew from their personal writing.

Finally, it's important to Ed's and my relationship that we work on something meaningful together – this has indeed been meaningful. In writing this story, we were often brought to tears – and for us, that is its own reward.

Question: Can you describe the process of turning real-life and historical events into a riveting story?

Answer: I love this question because it allows me to emphasize that the book is, in fact, an accurate representation of the lives and work of Clara and John, based on the extensive records that are available to us. These include 740 written sources, as well as personal experiences and conversations. Because *CALLED* spans six decades, we compressed parts of the story by selecting characters and events that represented a compilation of many of the detailed instances in the narrative – while remaining true to the real story of my parents' lives. For example, Konrad Wolf – a Nazi supporter who was one of John's most powerful enemies in the early years, and eventually became a staunch supporter of John and Clara's work – represents the traits and behaviors of numerous actual people rolled into a single person. And for reasons of privacy, we have given fictitious names to several of the characters.

Question: How does your own spiritual journey over your lifetime come through in the spiritual journey of your characters?

Answer: That's such an important question, and I'd have to say that in this case, the causality is the other way around. The spiritual journey of John and Clara Schmidt has become for us a model to which we can only aspire but will likely never live up to. To name just several of their inspiring qualities: selfless passion for the well-being of others regardless of opposition or costs to themselves, integrity and honesty, belief in the dignity of all people, especially the oppressed, and dedication to improving not only the health but the overall quality of life of their leprosy patients.

Another admirable aspect of our characters' journey that Ed and I hold as a model for our own lives is that John and Clara developed and grew from rigidly adhering to their beliefs and righteously imposing them on others, to graciously accepting differing

perspectives, all the while never wavering in their own beliefs. What a lesson for our broken world today!

Question: What lessons do you wish to impart, if any, about how strength of conviction can cause personal turmoil or troubled personal relationships?

Answer: Oh boy! Our main character, Dr. John Schmidt, was a master at creating personal turmoil and stressing personal relationships in the name of his strong convictions. He aggressively took on Nazism, corrupt governments, his own defiant children, angry and fearful villagers located near his leprosy compound, and well-meaning but ignorant North American sponsors. The many battles left him a broken man with numerous enemies. But they could not thwart John and Clara's brilliant contributions to making this world a better place.

Question: Please talk a little about how you see a connection between John and Clara's leprosy work in 1951 and the COVID pandemic in 2021.

Answer: I'm no expert on COVID or leprosy. But having lived through over a year of the virus; and having researched and written about leprosy in the early 1950s, when Dr. John traveled to Paraguay to treat people with the dreaded disease, I cannot help but see multiple similarities.

First, both leprosy in 1951 and COVID in 2021 are poorly understood. What causes them and how do they spread? Because of the general lack of understanding, many conflicting opinions have surfaced as to the nature of both diseases and their treatments.

In the case of leprosy in 1951, people were routinely locked up in colonies because of fear of the disease. OK, so we haven't been locked up during COVID, but certainly we have been constrained and confined due to similar fears.

Finally, John and Clara devised and implemented a risky and revolutionary new model for leprosy treatment without proof of its efficacy. While proof has been gathered to support the COVID vaccines, the current vaccines have not fully gone through the lengthy traditional approval processes for new drugs.

As I write this in 2021, we still have very few definitive answers regarding COVID. Happily, and due in large part to the pioneering medical work of Dr. John and Clara Schmidt, leprosy is no longer the dreaded mystery disease it once was. Although over 200,000 people worldwide are still infected with leprosy, and an estimated two to three million people are living with leprosy-related disabilities, those with the disease who are being treated with antibiotics can live a normal life among their family and friends.