

# So Great a Cloud of Witnesses

BY JEANIE MILEY

**We in the Church today must re-establish a connection with Christians who have gone before us in a way that is meaningful to those who will come after us. Could there be any greater wisdom, or harder challenge, than Jesus' injunction to love one another across generational lines as he loved us?**

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**U**nder a brilliant blue sky on a perfect summer day, I stood at the front of a ferry that was crossing from the Isle of Mull to the Isle of Iona. As the ferry moved across turquoise waters on my trip of a lifetime, I was almost breathless with anticipation at the opportunity to explore this small island off the western coast of Scotland where in 563 a man named Columba and twelve companions established a community that became one of the most important monasteries in early medieval Europe.

Reading the history of early Christians had brought into sharp focus the difference between the formation of my faith in a culture in which Bibles are easily accessible and that of those martyrs who went to unbelievable lengths to preserve and protect hand-written copies of Scripture. My faith has been formed in ease and air-conditioning while many who have gone before me sacrificed for their faith, suffering tyranny, ridicule, and death for their belief.

Iona draws pilgrims from around the world for short visits and longer retreats. Those who visit Iona speak of "tapping into ancient strength and wisdom" and "feeling the power of the early Christians" there. In the gift shop I bought a silver bracelet etched with designs copied from some of the ancient carvings in the abbey to remind me of those people whose faith has fed my own.

Walking slowly through the ruins of the nunnery and sitting in the stillness of the abbey where countless pilgrims and worshipers have gathered for centuries, I pondered these questions over and over:

*What is it that keeps people returning to this site, year after year?*

*How can we in the Church today retrieve and preserve what was good and true and meaningful from the past, and yet, live in the present?*

*Is part of the problem of Christian communities today related to a severing from our history and its people? Are we trying to grow without a deep rootedness in the rich soil of the past?*

*How can we who have been entrusted with the Church today re-establish a connection with the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us in a way that is meaningful to those who will come after us?*

The old ruins and rubble, relics of an earlier time and a way of life that is fading, remind me that each generation must decide how to relate to the past. Indeed, those who forget the past are destined to repeat it, and yet there is in all of us a striving forward into what lies ahead. The same scriptures which counsel us to tell our children the stories of God's activity with their forefathers also declares that "God is making things new." The ruins of the nunnery reminded me that we have not yet gotten it right about serving God, but the fact that pilgrims flock to those ruins indicates a yearning to retrieve something precious and rare from the cloud of witnesses who lived out their faith on that island.

Returning to the mainland of Scotland, I thought about how alienated the generations are within most churches, each with its separate programs and services. I thought about how much we need each other and how part of the problem is that we value what is new more than what is old.



In his novel *On Chelsil Beach*, Ian McEwan observes it was in the early 1960's that "to be young was a social encumbrance, a mark of irrelevance, a faintly embarrassing condition for which marriage was the beginning of a cure."<sup>1</sup> That condition, he notes, would end later in the 60's when to be young, look young, act young, and defy death would become prevailing values of a youth-worshiping culture. Those values and, indeed, the obsessions with the values of youth, would filter and flood all parts of our culture, including the Church. To be old today is to be considered irrelevant.

What have we lost? Can we recover a sense of community that allows the uniqueness of all its individuals while addressing the ills of individualism-run-riot? How can we restore the community of faith that honors all the generations? We need to explore together what a community might be and do, and perhaps the recovery of a sense of our history might be a place to begin.

"At some point, you have to decide what kind of relationship you're going to have with the past," a wise woman told me. "And that means *the* past and *your* past. You can't run away from the past, either the good stuff you want to inflate or the hard stuff you want to forget, and so you might as well decide if you're going to be a friend or an enemy to your history."

To say that we who are in the Church are conflicted about how to relate to the past and move into the future is a mighty understatement. In many cases, we are so afraid of being stymied by the past or we are so ashamed of our past that we have neglected to mine the deep veins of meaning in our history. We tend to discard yesterday's ways and buildings in a rush to see who can be the first with the latest trend.

We thoughtlessly disregard that which has had meaning in the past. Without reflection or consciousness, we urge each other to forget about the past and move on, and yet all of us carry our memories and our mentors consciously or unconsciously. Why not access the wisdom of that great cloud of witnesses by recalling and recounting and *honoring* that which has had meaning for us in the past? We need to remember that we are connected to each other and that we are interconnected across generational, cultural, and religious boundaries; reviving a sense of that connectedness with the past could counter the individualism and its accompanying loneliness, alienation, and separation that have eroded our communities in the last decades.

A young minister told me recently about how the older ministers in a peer group approach *him* to tell *them* how to reach young people. "I don't know why these older guys keep telling me they want to learn from me," this thirty-something minister told me. "I keep trying to find a mentor. I want to learn from somebody who has experience and can tell me what to do! I don't want to repeat what they've done, but I want to learn from them!"

Troubled by this conversation, I did some hard questioning of my own approach to mentoring and leading, teaching and training. I asked myself if I had become defensive about traditional methods or resistant to trying something new. I looked at whether what I want to pass on to the next generation does, in fact, have the possibility of being transformative and life-giving.

Is "the gospel" that I live grounded in truth, fed and nourished by the past, and yet bold enough to live on into the future? Do I give witness by my life to the faith of my fathers and mothers that was passed down in such a way that it can be fluid and flexible in a world that they would hardly recognize, or do I act as if what was old is bad and what is new is good?

Several years ago, a young man visited my Sunday School class on a day when we were discussing various methods of engaging the youth of our

families and the young adults who have rejected the Church. With a biting sarcasm, the man said, "Do you realize how desperate you people are? Why don't you do what has meaning for you and stop trying to placate and seduce the ones who aren't here?"

It was a question that made me examine whether or not I really did feel desperate about the future of the Church. This cynical young man forced us to look at whether what we had in our church offerings of worship and education, outreach and ministry were outdated, outworn, tired, and trivial, or whether what we were offering did, indeed, have enough life to it that it would be inviting and engaging for persons of all ages. Tradition does give stability, but when the tradition has lost its energy and its meaning, it does need to be evaluated. Some traditions continue to be life-giving, decade after decade; others stultify and constrict the life of the Spirit and the community of faith.

Later, in preparation for a dinner to honor the older women in our congregation, I asked them to write down for those of us I called the "youngers" and the "middlers" some wisdom from their life in the community of faith that they would want to pass on to future generations. *Without exception*, every woman I approached resisted. "I don't have anything worth passing down," several said to me. "Who, me?" some would ask. "What could I possibly say that would be considered *wisdom*?"

Was the resistance born of humility or lack of awareness about how profoundly their lives and their faith over a long period of time had impacted our congregation?

Were they afraid of appearing brazen or bold? Had they been so busy doing good and living out their faith that they had not taken the time, or not had the time, to own the good gifts they had given to others?

Or was there in them that terrible sense of shame about being old in a culture that worships youth? Were their reactions a result of coming to accept that whatever they might say would be passed over because, after all, what do the old know about life in this twenty-first century? Have we been so focused on the future and what is shiny and bright out in front of us that we have forgotten, neglected, and disdained the roots and rootedness that ground and stabilize us?

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*What is it that makes people take that arduous trip to the ancient Christian site of Iona? The sky is a startling blue there, and the water is glorious, but no more so than in the Caribbean.*

Returning from exploring those ancient and holy sites to my everyday world, I had three experiences that startled and stunned me into an awakening about how far my culture, religious and secular, has drifted from a healthy and nourishing relationship with the past that has the capacity to feed and nourish the present.

In fact, those experiences were so unnerving that I wanted to declare to the younger generation that we who are older need to make amends to them for neglecting to model and mentor in such a way that the young would know how to relate to the wisdom from the past that is a part of their inheritance. Indeed, my generation has been so busy trying to out-run age and to defy death that we have modeled disrespect of older people, disdain for what is quickly deemed irrelevant and outmoded, and a worship of “what’s happening,” what’s new, and youthful and “in.”

Opening my September 22, 2008 edition of *Time* magazine, I was mesmerized by an article entitled “The Truth about Teen Girls” and stunned by pictures of pre-adolescent girls made up and coiffed to look like adults, pictures that prompted images of *mothers* of adolescent girls dressing like adolescents! What is causing pre-teens and teen-agers to want to grow up too fast? Why do they want to look old while their parents will go to extreme measure to look young? What is it in young girls’ lives that is forcing them into premature sophistication and premature responsibilities, and whatever happened to letting children be children? No wonder our children are confused! Who are the adults in our culture, anyway? Where are the parents?

I looked at those pictures with sadness for the innocence of childhood that has lost in premature adulthood, as well as for the deep, eternal wisdom of adults that has been left behind in the ash heap of plastic surgery, a reckless abandonment of tradition, a terrible fear of growing older, and a relentless need to be relevant.

*Forgive us*, I wanted to say to the young, for not allowing you to be children and for refusing to act as adults. Forgive us for being so desperate to stay young that we have tried to be your friend instead of your elders. Forgive us for looking to you to show us how to live when all the time, you needed us to guide you faithfully and steadily into adulthood.

Later, I sat with members of a split church as they grappled with the impact of the brokenness of their congregation. The pain among the remaining members was palpable; I could feel it in every cell of my body.

"You don't get it," a young woman stammered to the group, the governing body that was charged with maintaining the building and the debt of the group that was left. "We who are the future of this church want to move on. We don't want to be tied to *your* music or *your* ways from the past. What met your needs doesn't do it for us and we don't want to keep on looking back."

The next weekend as I was leading a retreat on suffering, using the book of Job as my biblical reference, a young woman stopped me in the middle of the second day with the question, "Where did you get this material? Did you just make it up?"

In spite of being stunned at the edginess in her voice, I saw instantly that I was in the middle of a teachable moment. How I handled the moment and the challenge would both reveal my own nature and help shape hers. Later, however, I let myself feel the abrasiveness and arrogance of the young woman, recalling all the times I, too, wanted to discard the ways, but not the means, of my elders.

*Forgive us*, I want to say to the young, for not teaching you how to respect those who are older than you. Forgive us for what you have learned from us about ignoring and discounting those who are older will someday come back to harm you. Forgive us for teaching you to be disrespectful and dismissive, for we forgot that when you mistreat someone else, you are injuring your own self. Forgive us for letting you treat us with disdain, for in doing that we have set in motion cycles of behaviors that will only grow stronger in subsequent generations.

In the days after hurricane Ike mauled the Gulf Coast, those of us who live in Houston were disoriented and unnerved. Many were without power for over two weeks, and all of us had debris in our yards and in the streets. Almost all of the signal lights were down, and so every intersection became a four-way stop; at rush hour, the wait to get through those intersections was interminable.

There were many things in those days that were

disconcerting to me, but one of the most upsetting was the sight of countless huge oak trees that had been uprooted and thrown across streets, onto houses, and into yards. Once proud and tall, lining the streets of Houston and "holding hands" across the boulevards as shelter against the relentless Texas sun, those mighty oaks now lay with their roots exposed, dying on

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the ground. Driving through the streets of Houston day after day, I found the sight of those felled oaks depressing and disturbing.

Finally, I realized that those trees began to symbolize a reality in this time. All of our major institutions which have given our culture stability, comfort, predictability, and familiarity are in foment and, in fact, in some cases are being uprooted. All of those structures on which we have counted

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to be there for us as we manage our daily lives are going through massive sea changes; some will survive and some will not. All things will be changed, and we do not know how they will be changed.

I had always believed that oaks were sturdy and reliable. I assumed that their root systems went down deep into the earth

and that those older ones could and would naturally withstand the storms of this region. Curious about why those old trees fell to the monstrous winds of Ike while younger trees and trees of softer wood survived, I began to question people who know about trees.

"It's about the watering," a tree expert told me. "When you do shallow watering and when there isn't enough water, those roots come up to the top of the soil looking for water, and when that happens they spread their roots out in all directions. Without deep roots, even those mighty oaks won't stand the force of winds like we had."

Without deep roots, the trees become too big for themselves and are easily uprooted.

We who form the Body of Christ on earth, the Church, stand at a crucial juncture in history. The old ways are passing away, and the new ways are not yet clear to us, but in this in-between time—in the "mean" time of transition—we can call upon the wisdom of the ages and the wisdom of those who have gone before us to stabilize us and ground us in what is nourishing and life-giving. We cannot bring life back to what has died, but what we can do is water the roots of our souls with that which will cause those roots to go down deep enough to provide strength against the storms of life.



What can we do to access the wisdom we need to continue to produce healthy fruit? We can recall and recount the various ways that God has been

faithful to us in the past. Children love to hear the stories of how their elders did things in the past. They need to know the ways in which we overcame difficulties; they need to hear stories of faith that connect them with their own heritage, but inspire them into their own futures.

We can engage in conversations across generational lines about what kind of relationship we will have with the past. We can explore and examine which traditions need to die a natural death and which ones have life and energy to them. We must be able to own the victories and the failures of the past, and have the humility to learn the lessons of each without being too attached to either.

We must tell the stories of faith from the Bible and from the religious tradition that is ours. We must ground our children in those stories. We must teach and tell and live the truths that are in them, and we must consciously teach our children how to live in stout faith that can withstand the tough storms of life. We must be careful to put authentic heroes in our children's lives so that they will not have to substitute celebrities or pop "icons" where real heroes belong.

We can confront head-on, but with grace, our culture's worship of individualism and its accompanying "go-it-alone" traps and learn how to live in community with each other in faith, trust, and love. We can challenge the detrimental and destructive ideas of church as a capitalistic venture and a competitive organization and take a look at what it really does mean to be a New Testament church, striving to be conformed to the image of Christ, working to be the presence of Christ on earth, and taking our counsel from the Gospels and Epistles, as well as from the ancient wisdom of the Old Testament, instead of from the narcissistic behaviors of the worlds of consumerism, entertainment, sports, and marketing.

Could there be any greater wisdom or any harder challenge for us than Jesus' injunction to love one another across generational lines as he loved us?



In a recent conversation with my granddaughter, something came up about hurricane Ike. Abby looked straight into my eyes and said, "Mia, the hurricane was a very long time ago. Could we stop talking about it?"

When you are seven years old, six weeks is a long time ago, and when the adults in your world have walked the floor all night while you slept, watching over you while a wild wind blew hour after interminable hour, you do not really get the gravity of the situation .

Abby will eventually learn that we who love her will be her cloud of witnesses to God's protection and provision for her.



And I learned right then how important it is to let go of what no longer serves me and move on into the future.

Both of us, separated by decades of age and experience, need each other, and each other's wisdom.

#### **NOTE**

† Ian McEwan, *On Chelsil Beach* (New York: Anchor Books, 2007), 5.

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