

From The Heart About The Heart Of The Matter¹

I LOVE THE TRADITION

by Jane Barter Moulaison

Benjamin Franklin once quipped that “autobiography usually reveals nothing bad about its writer except his memory”. Insofar as the following words are autobiographical, Franklin is surely right. Yet, it is to be hoped that, in keeping with the intent of the *From the Heart* series, these words are not merely autobiographical, but testimonial. More than stories of my dim and corrupt memory, they point, I hope, to how my real life, even in its brokenness, was and is “hidden in Christ in God” (Col 3:3).

My earliest memories of the church are of being on its peripheries, and this is a theme that has remained constant throughout much of my life. Some of my exile was unchosen; much of it willed, arising from a temperament too cautious to be truly rebellious, but too rebellious to remain settled. Much of this has changed now in middle age, when being settled is a far more welcome prospect than I had imagined. I often think that being a stranger is the special calling of the Christian, but the church ought to be a reprieve from ceaseless wandering, and this, in my case, has only recently been my experience.

After years of wandering as a soldier, my father retired from his 30-year career in the armed forces, just shy of age 50, to chase after the dream of home that spurred both his youthful valour and melancholy — a peaceful life among his family in rural Nova Scotia. Unfortunately, rural life in Nova Scotia was not the dream of his Dutch bride, whose own hope for liberation from the pain of post-war Amsterdam could not be won by her

¹This is the first in a series under this title that we hope to carry over the next few issues of the journal.

Canadian soldier. As far as I know, the church offered no word of comfort, forgiveness or lament for their lost youths, or for their lives scarred by poverty and war. It offered instead, in its irrepressibly Calvinistic way, counsels of perfection that they were unable to meet, and which they therefore intemperately defied.

We moved to Antigonish County when I was only three, and yet I remember always feeling different from my Canadian cousins, for whom the cadence of the Highlands of Scotland still lingered on their tongues, and among whom church life was as natural and as predictable as harvest after sowing. I was taken to church, with neither parental encouragement nor reproof, by a loving and faithful aunt. For me, the small and humble United Church was an exotic surprise. Here, my proper Presbyterian family and neighbours sang hymns about beauty, glory, passion, and transcendence in their subdued voices. Who would have thought that underneath their decorum these staid hearts were gladly rejoicing? To me, their songs and stories presented a hope for a world far greater than my own.

By the time “the lady minister” came to our pastoral charge, just a few years after my father died, I was ready for a conversion. My altar call was the gospel of the divine feminine and a cry for social justice. Marian was patient and scholarly as she prepared me for confirmation, and she helped broaden my faith beyond that which sought deliverance from the parochial (my chief theological tenet) to a liberation from the political forces that hemmed us in. Along with atonement I learned about apartheid. Marian introduced me to prophets of both past and present.

Confirmation class gave way to youth groups, and by the time I crossed over to my land of Canaan — Halifax’s University of King’s College — I fancied myself a radical Christian, praying (to paraphrase Augustine) to swear off patriarchy and hierarchy, *but not yet*. It was in the Foundation Year Program at King’s that

I realized, rather distressingly, that whatever solidarity I had forged with Mary Daly, this paled before my love of Dante and Donne. Some years later, as a student at the Atlantic School of Theology, I confessed rather guiltily to a sympathetic liturgical theologian that “I loved the Tradition”. By the time I was in my Ph.D. studies, I longed for a liturgical tradition of the kind that once informed the church’s good works. I believed still that I could change the world, but I longed for some theological companions to change it with me, while I needed the liturgical tradition to shape my political agency to one of self-donation rather than self-styled insurrection.

It is only recently that I have inhabited the theological and spiritual home that seemed for many years to evade me. This is due to the constellation of graces in my life too deep for adequate telling. Marrying Glenn, my Catholic husband, enabled me to trust in the goodness of God’s mercy, even, unimaginably, for me. The grace that I have received through family life, as wife and mother, quite simply, *perfects* nature. Thanks to Christ’s reconciling love, exile is not the final word. I no longer believe that I need to change the world, because I believe that the world has already been changed through Christ. It is my task simply to (as my Presbyterian ancestors would have it) “come before him and rejoice”. This coming does not preclude political activism, but rather it gives activism its distinctly *Christian* character and limit.

I was confirmed in the Anglican Church a year ago last spring, and as my Bishop laid his hands upon me, I smiled and wept quietly for the young and anxious girl who had been confirmed once before at the hands of the wise and unorthodox “lady minister”.

I continue to love the United Church and am grateful for all it has given me — a commitment to social justice, a love of theology, and, above all, its presenting me the Christ who called me first in its sanctuaries to be his servant. My Anglican identity

affords the practices to form and sustain all these things, and thus I discern that conversion is not erasure but a transfiguration of precisely those gifts that were offered me in my first church home. I pray I may come to hand down the traditions that others have bequeathed me with, like grace and wisdom, until that day when the truth of my life is fully revealed.

SACRAMENT

*Communion always begins with bodies....We get spiritual,
but God got carnal. (Kenda Creasy Dean)*

Dissolving our *me* into *we*,
God names us the object of his proposition:
Come to me all who labour, and I will give you rest.

And when I come he cradles my head in his hand
scoops up the water, lets it run through his fingers
 onto my forehead
(a little scared I try not to cry)
In the name of the Father, and the Son,
 and the Holy Spirit
I'm now wet
 clean
 safe
 embraced.

I'm made brand new,
 so when I fall (and yes, I'll fall)
 He kisses it better.

My hungry hands uplifted
searching for even a morsel of this Otherness—
When I ask for bread he won't give me a stone
 but delicious clear full-bodied wine
 of glorious maturity.

God, your sacraments are a kiss
 on the mouth of human living
 — Donna Kerrigan