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Remembering our past and who we truly want to be

Joan Chittister | May. 18, 2011 From Where I Stand

On the 160th anniversary of my great-grandfather's birth, I stood on the ruined foundation of the small Irish house and mill in which he had been born in Donegal.

A piece of granite from that foundation now sits on my desk -- a monument to both the past and the future. It was a long time coming. I've wondered for years where my family was really from and how we got here and what happened to the families our ancestors left behind.

Then one day in December I opened my email to find a letter that began, "I am your fourth cousin." Thirty-two pages of single-space type poured out of my printer, describing one generation after another, down to my own birth date. Most of them were people I did not know but for whom I felt a great deal of fascination, admiration, and gratitude.

At that moment, looking at the long chart of my own becoming, the whole notion of what history actually is all about began to simmer and bubble in me -- a very living, a very real thing.

History is, for many, about human pain and human displacement. It is about rulers who abused and misused entire bodies of people for their own ends. It is about the tides of humanity that swept some away with the waves of change and drove others into the darkness of strange places and empty pasts.

It is about people who left a place knowing they could never get back to it and so left no footsteps in the sand -- no stories that bound us to the old; no contacts that continued the ties -- by which later generations might retrace their steps back to the families they were forced to leave behind.

Instead, for most, there was nothing except perhaps a few songs -- a scrap of faith, a few feast day meals to 'do in memory of them.'

As a result, new generations of us, now planted in another place began to think of themselves as part of a long lost past. A free standing, self-perpetuating new world. A people separated from the pain of our own past times and lives.

But that's not true. Instead we stand on the brink of becoming exactly what we left behind. Only this time as much the perpetrators of misery as its victims -- as much the victims as the perpetrators of a new kind of global pain.

The papers are full of the human debris that comes now with the cruelty of our own age and which this time we will not escape until we begin to see someone else's pain as our own.

In Japan, if it weren't for another earthquake, the story of ever present threat of nuclear devastation would soon disappear. But what happens in Japan will surely have ramifications for the United States.

For our own nuclear industry. For our energy independence in years to come. For the whole spiritual question of what happens to our souls when what we require for an ongoing technological life-style here deprives others of the energy necessary to heat their hospitals and power their schools and build their homes.

In Afghanistan, people are dying, of course, but who knows it and who cares. Except for the families of those lost in the deep morass of wars without warrant and wars without winners, the world is essentially silent about it. But just what is the end game there, both for them and for us. And more, what is the implied result of the end game.

How much of what we spend on this destruction will affect our own development here and now? What schools will not be built here, what teachers not paid, what public transportation systems never developed, what families will go hungry while we cut Medicare rather than bloated military expenses?

In Africa, headlines come and go but not with much sense of personal involvement. Like Irish-Americans whose families fled the famine, most African-Americans have little notion of where they came from or how they got here. They peopled a United States they never intended to inhabit. They carried its burdens and did its manual labor for centuries.

But, even though finally freed, too many of them live in poverty yet and make us all a poorer people -- a poorer nation in heart and soul as a result.

In the Middle East, there is a new wind blowing. But with what impact on the rest of the world? Is 'democracy' -- meaning participation in a government that listens to yout concerns -- really on the rise there? Or is a rampant fundamentalism claiming one society at a time?

Are these so-called revolutions only a blip on the political screen that will be crushed by old dictators of the region, many of whom stayed in power with our support? Most of all, how long will fear feed a new cold war between us and them when what we all need most of all is global cooperation?

Its easy to yawn and ignore all of these things. After all, they are all ?over there.? Somewhere else. Foreign and unrelated to us, just as our own families became a century ago. But clearly we are all in this together now.

From where I stand, the only question is whether we will seek to mitigate the suffering both here and abroad of this new historical inequity or if we will join the chorus of nations before us who abandoned the poor for the sake of the rich.

When oil prices go up and job creation goes down; when poor working people pay taxes while corporations that grow rich on their labor do not; when working families fear for their retirement; when one civil right after another begins to disappear -- then the stage is set for the destruction of a people.

Then, when the new lack of social conscience seeks to legislate into being a foreign version of the United States of America it is called in newspaper headlines "a bold, fresh plan" rather than the shameful, sinful plan it is. Then the temptation to be less than we are sets in.

Now is the time to consciously examine what our national policies prove us to be -- rather than simply repeat who we have always been told that, as a country, we are.

When the new wave of displaced peoples show up on the doorstep, homeless, jobless, adrift and abandoned -- just like our own forebears were a hundred years ago -- it is important to remember where we ourselves came from, what we needed then and who we really want to be now.

That, I tell myself, is the message calling to me from the piece of granite on my desk.

Tied together with Sr. Joan Chittister's book *Monasteries of the Heart*, the Benedictine Sisters of Erie have made a new online community. See *NCR*'s story:
New form of religious life offers laity a Benedictine pathway[1]

[Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister is a longtime contributor to *NCR*. Her Web column, *From Where I Stand*, is found on the *NCR* Web site: NCRonline.org/blogs/from-where-i-stand [2].]

Editor's Note: We can send you an e-mail alert every time Joan Chittister's column, "From Where I Stand," is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow directions: **E-mail alert sign-up** [3]. If you already receive e-mail alerts from us, click on the "update my profile" button to add "From Where I Stand" to your list.

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