



Pilgrimage to Iona

by Marybeth Toomey

One of the things I have realized is that sometimes dynamic ideas and experiences need their own time to develop internally before they are ripe enough to be transformed into words and further actions. Perhaps this is what is sometimes referred to as “God’s time; not ours.”

This has been my experience as I attempt to conceptualize the ways I can impart my Iona experiences and move forward actualizing the learning into shareable actions. Then, I will see where I am next led.

Iona is a small island (3 miles by 1 mile) in the Inner Hebrides Islands off the west coast of Scotland. It is a remote, bare, stark, pristine, challenging place with a very small population of year round residents and a large population of sheep and sea birds. It is bone chillingly beautiful from the dramatic ocean and rock formations to the little, brilliant and sweet wild flowers.

Unquestionably the center of island life is the Abbey (see photo at the head of this newsletter), founded in the 6th century by Saint Columba, an Irish monk who was exiled from his homeland as a penance. The legend is that he and 14 fellow monks washed up on the south shore of Iona and proceeded to establish a community dedicated to deep spiritual practice, advancing Christian theology throughout Northern Europe and providing radical hospitality in an inhospitable environment.

The Abbey has withstood centuries of turmoil, both man made and nature inflicted, but has emerged as a destination for spiritual pilgrims of all different persuasions. It is known to be a place of great serenity and great disturbance; and a place where the veil between the natural worlds and that of the spirit is dynamically thin. Within the Abbey community, there is a strong commitment to peace and justice. The Abbey and the entire island has become a place of prayer, meditation, insight, transformation, encounter, healing (but not the Lourdes or Fatima type), and deep respite for spiritual seekers.

I have been exploring spiritual practices, the purposes of which are to bring the seeker closer to an experience of God moving in the world and within oneself. These include different prayer

practices, use of beads and icons, singing and chanting, walking meditation, writing, artwork and many more. But for me the most powerful is the experience as a pilgrim on a journey to recognize places and moments when God breaks through and shows up in our lives. Because of this, I felt a call to travel to Iona to work as a volunteer, participating in the life of the community and learning to better listen for “the heartbeat of God.”

In order to best communicate, I have distilled my experiences on Iona into five categories:

1. Liminality
2. Living in community
3. Radical hospitality
4. Work and worship
5. The power and awe of beauty.

The word **liminality** is derived from the Latin and means “threshold”--an in-between state, situation or “condition characterized by the dislocation of established structures, the reversal of hierarchies . . .” Liminal space is a place where boundaries dissolve a little and we stand there, on the threshold, getting ourselves ready to move across the limits of what we were into and what we are to be.

I am moved by the concept of liminal space, a place outside of one’s ordinary comfort zone. It speaks to me of the courage to take risks: to step off into the unknown in search of deeper, spiritual meaning in our lives. It speaks of faith and taking the paths in life which will require radical reliance on faith. Traveling on a pilgrimage to Iona is crossing that threshold into liminal space. It requires trust in God’s care and love and belief in one’s strength and capacity to follow a leading. Whether it is a secular self-actualization, the Buddhist enlightenment or a communion with the Christian God, it demands one to step out into the unknown, untested, open-hearted free-fall of liminal space.

The experience of living on Iona was one of private contemplation and sometimes lonely, isolated moments but it was also one of committed community life. Island dwellers need one another in very essential ways. But Abbey residents need one another as spiritual companions, living together in ways that reflect faith and belief systems; to share meals, care for one another during difficult times and to participate in and celebrate the joys to which each person is gifted is authentic community. It was a great relief to know the person I met on the road to the north end of the island, or the person I sat next to at dinner, or the person turning over in the bunk above me or the person chanting Taize songs in the dark chapel totally understood and accepted my commitment to my faith and to my sense of God’s presence.

As my contribution to the Abbey community, I was assigned to cook meals for residents and visitors. Initially, I wondered why this was anything to do with developing a spiritual sensitivity or following a path. I was sometimes tired, stressed by the physicality of the work, irritated by yet another obscure food request, allergy or preference, and daunted by the primitive food service equipment. But God had a plan and once again time was the agent. I began to understand how radical hospitality is a spiritual practice as real as sitting in the Abbey in prayer.

As I prepared porridge for 45 for breakfast each morning, this question came to me: “Who is the stranger?” My job was more than food preparation. It was providing the space and nurturance for others to do their own spiritual work. It was to offer support, sustenance, a cheerful heart, and breathing space. To be present as others grappled and struggled and experienced “ahah” moments. This was hospitality beyond merely meeting physical needs. It was a greeting of the stranger with the same openness and generosity of spirit regardless of relationship. Every new person was and is a companion on the road to Emmaus.

It is a lovely gift when important areas of life slip into harmony. On Iona, the integration of work and worship is a given. Each day and each task is an act of worship. The well-known version of this is Brother Lawrence’s little book, “Practicing the Presence of God.” Of course, daily worship services in the Abbey Church are times of meditation, celebration, contemplation, scripture lessons, singing and community involvement. But in walking out of the door, one is called to maintain a disposition of worship whether peeling potatoes, fixing one of the community bicycles, pouring tea for a staff break time, hanging wet sheets in the drying room or whatever task is at hand. It is a non-verbal prayer. It is done with a consciousness of God’s presence in the very act of doing. Work and worship on Iona are one.

I am compromised when I attempt to describe the beauty of the land and seascapes of Iona with words. Standing on the highest rocky point of the Island, or on pure white sands or in the midst of rolling machair meadows, the feeling of life pulsing in all directions is visceral. The depth of the quiet is unearthly and frightening until I remember to reach into my own faith and heart to find safety. It is impossible for me to have stepped into a place, touched the rocks, heard the seabirds cry, watched the purple, golden sunset, with so much beauty to offer and not believe in the grace of something outside of myself.

Pilgrimage is about transformation. The call toward that threshold space continues throughout one’s lifetime and it is a gift and a blessing.



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