

For all the Saints: Men and Women who have turned the world the right way up.

Luke 6: 20-31

Rev. Sharon Smith

Backpacking along the beautiful shoreline of Western Scotland, I encountered so many people who were tracing their ancestry. MacDonalds, MacLean, MacKinnon, Mackenzie. Something in us is wired to lean into a long view of time and discover what makes me, me.

Ancestry.ca and Ancestry DNA promise to give you much more than just the places you're from. With geographic detail and clear-cut historical insights, they promise to connect you to the places in the world where your story started—from unique regions to living relatives.

Today, we are asking a similar question, where did our story start. Who were the ones who are our spiritual ancestors?

Who are saints in your family of faith? Who washed your feet, showed you God's love? Going back further, who formed them?

Br. Luke Ditewig, SSJE

These are the lives that were oriented to living out values that turned things around:

- Where poverty, weeping, hunger and exclusion are experiences that have hidden deep within them gifts of strength and resilience.
- And where getting ahead may lead to an unawareness of others.
- And because the core motivation is to do to others as you would have them do to you,
- Justice and mercy are favored over winning.

Today I want to simply read a sampling of letters written by some of my spiritual ancestors. These have been God's gifts to me. I invited you to consider your ancestry as you listen...

Maya Angelou "*Letter to my daughter*"

Dear Daughter, This letter has taken an extraordinary time getting itself together. I have all along known that I wanted to tell you directly of some lessons I have learned and under what conditions I have learned them. My life has been long, and believing that life loves the liver of it, I have dared to try many things, sometimes trembling, but daring, still...

I have made many mistakes and no doubt will make more. When I have seen pain, when I have found that my ineptness has caused displeasure, I have learned to accept my responsibility and to forgive myself first, then to apologize to anyone injured by my

misreckoning. Since I cannot unlive history, and repentance is all I can offer God, I have hopes that my sincere apologies were accepted.

You may not control all the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them. Try to be a rainbow in someone's cloud. Do not complain. Make every effort to change things you do not like. If you cannot make a change, change the way you have been thinking. You might find a new solution...

Be certain that you do not die without having done something wonderful for humanity. I gave birth to one child, a son, but I have thousands of daughters. You are Black and White, Jewish and Muslim, Asian, Spanish-speaking, and Native American... You are fat and thin and pretty and plain, gay and straight, educated and unlettered, and I am speaking to you all. Here is my offering to you.

I am moved by her poetry, the strength of her voice to stand up for her convictions and to speak out her story. I am moved by her Christian faith that leant on her ancestors:

To her Grandmother she wrote:

You said to lean on your arm
And I am leaning
You said to trust in your love
And I am trusting
You said to call on your name
And I am calling
I'm stepping out on your word.

And all I have to do is continue trying to be a Christian...

Henri Nouwen: *Love, Henri: Letters on the Spiritual Life*

Henri's honesty about each season of his life, gave me permission to be honest about my own path. This letter was especially helpful for me during my years of study... and my learning about offering hospitality to myself as I learn to love others as I love myself.

NOVEMBER 7, 1974

Dear Jim,

Many thanks for your very good letter. I was happy to hear from you and read about the “too much,” which is a joy and a burden at the same time. I know what you are talking about!

Be sure to keep your priorities straight. You are in school to study and to have a chance for a real concentration on “no-emergency” issues. That is what school is all about. In order to live a hospitable life—not just a hospitable year—you need a lot of time for yourself to read, to write, to study, to meditate, to pray, to just be alone. If you do not claim that for yourself, you are not hospitable enough because you do not create the quiet restful place where people can find healing.

Sometimes this requires that you are very clear-cut in your decision, the way you spend time, the parties you go to, etc. etc. But never forget that the majority of your time—during this period of your life—should be for reflection. If you can't get it at Y.D.S. [Yale Divinity School] take off for a few days regularly to be just by yourself.

Go to the Mercy Center (Madison, Connecticut) or a similar place alone or with a friend and just read, study, meditate and pray. An exhausted, irritable host will never be able to give what the guest is looking for!

And don't forget the early hours. Between 5 and 9 a.m. people tend to leave you alone! Somewhere you have to make a few clear-cut decisions; let your friends know about it and stick to it. In that way you mean a lot for them simply by showing that you try to live from the center and so encourage others to try the same.

Meanwhile I keep enjoying my life here very much. Many good experiences. Time for prayer, for study, for reading, for writing and a real atmosphere of brotherly love. It is indeed as the fathers say: Life is like a wheel. God is the hub. By focusing on the hub of life you come closer **to** God. The closer you come **to** the center, the closer you also come **to** each other. Everyone travels on a different spoke, but as long as we travel **to** God we travel **to** each other. What about that image for a bike specialist?!

Wishing you many blessings,
Love,
Henri

And the last letter is from my Mom and Dad:

Our dearest Sharon, On the occasion of your ordination into the Priesthood,

You were named after the Rose of Sharon and Plains of Sharon.

It was our hope and prayer that you would become a follower of Jesus and your faith and commitment has been an inspiration to us from your earliest years.

This call into the Priesthood, we believe is a perfect for your life and giftedness. We will continue to pray for you every day. We love you dearly and know that God will work in ad through you as you touch many people's lives.

Love Mom and Dad

Who are saints in your family of faith?

What words, images and memories do you hold in your heart that keep you journeying on the path as a follower of Christ?

Maybe its time to right some letters.