Opinion
Spirituality



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May 8, 2019

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Problem: Time is ruthless. It plods on with no regard whatsoever for our own pace of change. It plants tomorrow and uproots yesterday to such a degree that if we live in one city all our lives, we will die in the same city but never recognize it when we go. The old neighborhood market is long darkened. The major department store downtown is now a fast-food lunch counter and a string of strange offices.

The old city center is uptown not downtown, a veritable city of small stores next to a freeway exit off which people pour in from three adjacent states to buy in megastores, to find bargains, to avoid state taxes. No one really lives next to any of them. No one passes all these places as they walk to work these days. In fact, almost no one walks to work at all anymore.

The once main businesses in town are long gone. Warehouses, their windows boarded up, now occupy what were plants and machine shops in an earlier era. The major products of the country that had been manufactured there — and that fueled the local economy for what we thought would be forever — are now being made elsewhere and usually outside the United States.

Ten churches of 10 religious denominations stood fewer than 10 blocks from one another in midtown, too, but they are all closed now, as well. The denominations haven't died but their congregations have. Downtown has become "the inner city."

So, the unspoken question is a clear one: Is there really anything left anywhere? Or do we just slough off one era after another in less and less time than ever before in history? Is change really possible or is change actually an excursion into unmitigated and even irreparable loss?

Well, it all depends what you mean by "left." Which is where the eighth step of humility comes in. The eighth step of humility, the Rule of Benedict says, is "that we do only what is endorsed by the common rule of the monastery" (insert as needed your own community's name: family, culture, generation, country). In the midst of the swirling, changing, disappearance of one culture after another, there begins the discussion of the difference between tradition and the traditionalism. Between carrying on and hanging on.

The major question of modern life, you see, is deciding what needs to be kept if we are to stay what we are — Christian — and what we need to let go of if we want to be what we say we are.

The eighth step of humility is about values that never change. It is not about customs, rules, "the old-time religion." On the contrary. In the Rule of Benedict, for instance, he says about prayer, the most important dimension of monastic life, after laying out 20 chapters on its daily order, that "if any monastic knows a better way," they should do it.

Tradition is clearly not about holding on to past forms of it. It is about holding on to the roots of a common purpose while we prune some of its dead limbs. It's about understanding why we exist and being willing to start over again, if necessary, to maintain that. It is about listening again to the hard-won wisdom of the generations before us and making it real in our own times.

It is not about turning life into a wax museum of exotic but useless oddities. It's about bringing new fire to light from old coals in a dimmed and dreary time.

It's change that is undertaken with the tradition in mind that counts. And for that, a sense of history becomes a kind of angelic guide through a tsunami of possibilities. Every spiritual community needs a community memory to help it trace the values and purpose that drove the high and low points of its development.

It's not the actual way we did things in the past that counts. That's simply traditionalism. It's why we do what we do that is of the essence of tradition.

And that's where Benedict's insight into the spiritual value of the eighth step of humility gives us a lighted path through change: It is the memory of the community — its recollection of opportunities missed, its recall of life-changing risks that catapulted the community into a totally new life cycle of success — that makes change a sacrament of hope.

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The eighth step of humility liberates us from slavish commitment to the customs of the past. It frees us to move into the light of the Spirit with hope and with faith. Then, breathing the freedom tradition brings, the next period of our lives will be

even more attuned to our place in the present than the last. It frees us to accept the grace of change. It stretches us to go beyond ourselves into the mind of God for the world and make ourselves a living part of it.

As Benedictine Fr. Godfrey Diekmann, monk and liturgist put it, "Tradition is not the stuff we pass on, it is the passing on of the stuff." It is passing on the values and the purpose of life that counts rather than clinging to its past forms.

The humility inherent in the eighth step of humility is the call to inherit the world of the others.

Our communities — our churches, our institutions, our cities, our national heritage and vision — free us from having to reinvent for ourselves all the wheels of life. In every group is the wisdom of the universe. It is simply a matter of wanting to tap into it. In every group is the answer to itself.

We don't go to a group to lose ourselves. We go to groups in order to become our best selves while we enable everybody else there to become their best selves, too. We come to find the acumen we ourselves lack and become part of the enlightenment, the tradition, that is at the heart of the group itself. In other words, as Aristotle said, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

From where I stand, our communities are the world in microcosm. It's there that we can see the value of tradition and the depth of communal wisdom. Dynamic groups shake off the dry leaves of the past. They prune the tree of the tradition over and over again so that in every age it lives on.

The Benedictine symbol of Monte Cassino, Benedict's monastery, is a tree. The inscription at its base says, "*Succisa virescit*," Cut down, it grows again. And so, the order, the tradition, moves on from generation to generation, flowing here, being pruned there, always adapting to the soil in which it's planted. And so do we as people.

And all the while, the message is clear: There is no room in a group for rigidity, for the worship of the past, for the fear of the future. It's exactly here where we can ourselves become the tradition and seed the future with the wisdom of its past because living things are meant to grow; not to fossilize.

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Editor's note: *We can send you an email alert every time Joan Chittister's column, From Where I Stand, is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow directions: Email alert sign-up.*

A version of this story appeared in the **Oct 4-17, 2019** print issue under the headline: A sacrament of hope.