

How Then Shall We Live?



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Naramata Centre
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An Open Letter to the Women at Naramata

Lois M. Wilson

It's tiring isn't it? Giving up fun weekends for "save the planet" weekends. There are dedicated folk out there already, trying to save the planet. So why me? And you would think that by now, somebody would have figured out how we shall live. Or are at least tried to figure it out..... even unto the 7th. Is there anything left to say? Let's try.

The Biblical narrative thinks in terms of generations, and of passing on the good news of salvation to those who are to come. "You are a chosen generation."(I Peter 2:9) "One generation shall praise your works to another."(Ps145)."My salvation is for all generations." (Is 51:6-8) "His mercy is sure from generation to generation."(Luke 1:50). And Joel 1:3 enjoins us "to tell it to your sons and they may tell theirs; let them pass it on from generation to generation." The legacy referred to is the good news—the gospel.

How can our lives be witness to the good news for our time as well as for future generations? How does this play out for our generation—beset by multiple interdependent issues, all of which seem critical and needing attention?

There is a growing consensus that environmental issues trump all others. Already we see that current wild weather patterns are affecting us- tsunamis, tornadoes, and hurricanes –which used to be strangers to us in the north. In Tuvalu in the Pacific, already 8 islands are just 4 meters above sea level and coral barriers have disappeared. Unless the planet can be saved, nothing else matters. Peace, human rights, diminishment of the human being, famine, armed conflicts, threat of nuclear war, global arms deliveries, growing hordes of refugees, internally displaced people, loss of meaning, growing gap between rich and poor, increased instances of torture,--you name it. None of these, many claim, are as important as saving the planet. For without environmental

sustainability there will be no life at all for future generations. How then shall we live in our context for the seventh generation?

My thesis is that environmental sustainability is inextricably linked with all other issues. We must of course, do all that we can personally to reduce our carbon footprint and advocate for responsible environmental policies, which have been ignored for so long. But our mandate is to pass on the fullness of Christian narrative to future generations. Are there Biblical insights that have been overlooked in the rush to reduce our conversation to one issue only?

In common parlance, we freely use the word “salvation”—can the planet be saved? In Hebrew, the word “salvation” means “wide, spacious, liberated, free”—room to maneuver and grow—space in which to move. Not trapped in a corner. In Greek the word means “deliverance from any power that subdues humankind and creation.” In Latin, salvation means “integrity or authenticity of being”—being sound, integrated.” So the gospel narrative informs us that salvation for the planet means all creatures, human and animal, all oceans, coral reefs,—all that IS--should have room and space to realize their potential, should be delivered from subjugation or domination by others, and should be recognized and respected for their own particularity. At environmental hearings for the disposal of nuclear wastes in Canada, an aboriginal panel member exploded one day, “I never used to believe this, but I do now. The rocks are alive, and we will not permit you to desecrate and kill them with your burial of toxic nuclear waste.” She was announcing the authenticity and particularity of the rocks in their own right—and not just objects for the use of humans.

But we know the Biblical narrative does not stop there. It goes on to link “salvation” with “justice,” both of which belong to the very character of God and the Creation. How can we bring justice to the earth, which, in its beginnings, was proclaimed in Genesis as “good” (“conformed to God’s intention.”) How guarantee justice to its animals? To its rocks? Trees, birds, oceans??

The Biblical narrative depicts nature as alive and ecstatic about justice. In Is 55:12 “the trees of the field shall clap their hands” and in Psalm 98:8, “Let the rivers clap their hands and let the hills sing aloud together, God will judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with justice.” All of Creation is alive, and humankind (mammals and animals after all) are not the centre of the universe but linked interdependently with all of Creation.

Psalm 85 is a wonderful description of how we should live to the 7th generation. It is a psalm crying for the restoration of a people alienated from their Creator because of their exploitation of the land and of each other, failing to live up to the claims of God. The cry of the people is not only for themselves but for the land. We are created to join with the Creator in bringing what is good (“conformed to God’s intention”) for nature and for the good of the whole.

“Justice and peace join hands; fidelity springs up from the earth;
And justice looks down from heaven. The Lord will add
prosperity,
And our land shall yield its harvest. Justice shall go in front of him,
And the path ahead shall be one of peace.”

Key words are not separated--they belong to the whole to achieve a cumulative effect.

The Biblical narrative always links heaven and earth, nature and humankind.

So it is in the story of Rizpah, concubine of Saul and mother of two sons whom David killed and left impaled on spears to die on the hillside. She took up her fast to shame David into giving them a proper burial “at the beginning of the harvest” when there was famine.” When David repented of his injustice and buried them appropriately, “the rains came” says scripture, indicating God’s approval of the just act, and the symbiotic relationship between nature and justice restored. (2 Samuel: 21)

Biblical narrative speaks to the indivisibility of all the issues that confront us. To lend one's weight to a particular issue—e.g. peace, or refugees, is to support the saving of the planet just as surely as riding a bike rather than driving a car. So “do not weary in well doing,” (Galatians 6:9). The seventh generation will thank you.

Lois M. Wilson

A Letter to the Western Women's Conference

Anne M. Squire

Your theme “How shall we live—for the seventh generation?” is an intriguing and a challenging one. After reading the contributions of the other women, who are also former Moderators, I will take a different approach and try not to repeat their suggestions. I would suggest that we should live:

- to learn from the past
- to live for the present
- to leave a legacy for the future

TO LEARN FROM THE PAST

When we look at what we inherited from the women who lived seven generations ago, we realize that what lurked behind each achievement was the sense that this world could be a better place if people acted out of a concern for others, and if actions were prompted by compassion rather than being self-serving.

Seven generations ago our female predecessors left a legacy for us by acting with compassion. They sensed that our country would be a kinder, gentler place if the voice of women was heard in our government. That concern prompted the efforts of the suffragette to work for votes for women. Women like Emily Stowe knew that health care would be more compassionate if women were doctors. Women like Adelaide Hoodless demonstrated the power of groups of women to act compassionately by founding the Women's Institute, and the Victorian Order of Nurses. Other women, like Nellie McClung, supported the Women's Christian Temperance Union to combat the problems for women that excessive drinking was causing.

All of these women, and others like them, took a look at their world, saw what was needed to make it a more compassionate place, and then did what could be done at that time.

TO LIVE FOR THE PRESENT

We live in an age very different from the one in which our sisters lived seven generations ago. Technology continues to astound us. The communication skills of our children and grand-children leave us bewildered and feeling behind the times, and we do our best to catch up. Global warming frightens us but makes us determined to do our share (and then some more) to reverse the dangerous route our world is taking. Our church is teetering on the brink of the precipice between the past certainties and the present doubts and we wonder if the current trend toward Progressive Christianity can lead us into a future which still honour tradition but is open to change.

Scientific study and biblical research have shown us that much of what we learned in childhood is no longer considered the truth - at least not literal truth, although great truth undergirds our faith. Change is needed in our theological underpinnings but unless that is done compassionately it may do more harm than good.

Now is the time for our young people to learn the difference between myth and history.

We do not want them to have to unlearn, as we did, that the virgin birth, the angels in Bethlehem, the miracles attributed to Jesus, and the resurrection and ascension were all added to history to make Jesus more appealing than other heroes. If we were to concentrate on teaching the compassionate side of Jesus we might encourage them to be compassionate themselves. Giving them an opportunity to learn compassion by involving them in acts of kindness would be even better than words.

At one time we may have thought that our truth was the only truth, that Christianity was the only true religion. Now we know, as Karen Armstrong reminds us, that “The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated

ourselves”. We need to live compassionately, accepting people of other faiths and other cultures. We need to learn from our children who have already learned in their multicultural environment that friends come in all sizes, colours, sexes and cultures. Like them we need to practice radical inclusion, to stretch our compassion to all who are different. We also need to include all who are lonely, depressed or challenged physically, mentally or emotionally.

How shall we live that all people may have a quality of life that is necessary for healthy minds and bodies? Some compassionate people may need to become dynamic people who campaign fearlessly for equality and human rights. Others may simply need to more observant about which neighbour needs a casserole or a “sitter” to provide a break for someone who is overwhelmed by unending care of a sick child or an elderly parent. When compassion becomes a way of life, our life is changed and so are the lives of others.

TO LEAVE A LEGACY FOR THE FUTURE

We owe our descendants a world that is in better shape than we found it. That is the ecological challenge, addressed so admirably by the other former Moderators.

We owe those who live seven generations after us the heritage of the best of our traditions and the legacy of our willingness to change what needs to be changed and to preserve what needs to be preserved.

One legacy that we, as women, can leave our youth is to demonstrate to them that both boys and girls now can grow up in a society that appreciates their talents, and judges them by what they do rather than by their gender.

If we can leave the world even a little bit better than we found it, we will be doing our part in assuring for those who live seven generations after us, a legacy of compassion. Anne M. Squire

Seventh Generation Letter

Marion Best

I hope for a world of peace and justice and a sustainable planet for future generations, so what do we do now? The question “How shall we live for the 7th generation?” seems to me to hinge on the importance of just, respectful, caring relationships: relationship with other people, with institutions, with the Holy, with creation and with our own body, mind and spirit.

How we relate to our children and grandchildren, nieces and nephews, friends and neighbours will have an impact on future generations. Sadly we have learned that children who were deprived of growing up in loving families have difficulty being parents themselves and their loss carries on through future generations. Anyone who has raised a family knows the challenges as well as the joys but even in the difficult times we strive to maintain healthy relations. As a parent (and sometimes as a grandparent) the hardest part is to know when to ‘help’ and when to stand back and trust they will learn by experience. It would be rare for relationships of depth to avoid hurts but one of the great gifts that the Christian faith affords is that of forgiveness. Through our lifetime we will all need to be forgiven and need to forgive ourselves and others.

One of life’s greatest joys is to have multi-generational relationships. To have good friends or relations who are a generation older and a generation or two (or more) younger brings wisdom, varieties of experience and knowledge. It broadens understanding and increases the ability for all ages to relate in ever widening circles. Over the years churches have been places where all ages have a sense of belonging. However many of our churches have become devoid of younger generations and an increase in ‘adult only’ living communities result in a lack of children and youth as neighbours. To be in relationships with younger

generations can take more effort than it once did but it is worth doing.

Relationships with those of other cultures and/or religions are increasingly important in order to have a realistic picture of life in Canada today. Many of us have Aboriginal neighbours living on reserves close by that we have never visited. Aboriginal populations are the fastest growing in Canada and although we live in close proximity we live separate from one another. In my experience there is openness from Aboriginal neighbours to building relations that are respectful and just but it requires time and patience. Some folks have built relationships with other cultures through refugee sponsorships. In some cities and towns there are neighbours of other cultures that afford opportunities for inter-cultural and inter-religious relations. The United Church has made studies on Judaism and Islam available and some communities sponsor inter-religious events. These opportunities call us to examine our prejudices, our lack of understanding and therefore lack of appreciation for others who are different from us. There is much to learn.

Our relationship with the Holy will be critiqued by future generations who will notice whether we live our faith with integrity. Do my beliefs match my behaviour? Prayer, study of scripture, attending worship and being in community as we praise God and seek guidance seem to me to be preparation for mission in God's world. We can't do everything that needs to be done but we can have at least one thing we commit to in order to promote peace and justice. How we use our talents, money and time send a message to the generations who follow.

We have a responsibility to pay attention to the relationship we have with our own bodies. That includes physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual health. They are all connected and all need our attention. We hear a lot about diet and exercise but our emotional health can also be connected to disease factors. Keeping our minds active and paying attention to our spiritual well being

models healthy living for the generations that follow. Our health care system is one we want to protect and it is reassuring to know it is there for us when we need it but we can also take responsibility ourselves for living as healthily as possible.

Institutions need care too and we can do that through relationships with the people and the structures that maintain them. Churches, schools, volunteer organizations and our political representatives need our attention, support, prodding and sometimes they need admonishing. Too often we take them for granted and don't build a relationship with them. There are ways to be involved: community meetings, voting, volunteering, making representations and these all matter.

Our relationship to the earth is primary and we know creation is increasingly fragile. There are huge challenges facing the world in relation to global warming, resource extraction methods and power generation that must be in our awareness. It can seem overwhelming but how we live our lives in relation to conservation and consumption is something we can have control over. The state of creation we leave for the seventh generation may be the most significant factor. I want to believe both the small changes we make in our household and farming practices as well as the pressure we put on politicians will make a difference. Sometimes it all seems too slow. Surely the floods, oil spills, droughts that have been experienced recently are going to impact governments to act. We have to keep the pressure on.

The health and nature of our personal relationships, the health of our bodies, minds and spirits, the relationships with our communities, the institutions we interact with and the care we show for God's creation are what we need to tend for the Seventh Generation.

Marion Best
Naramata BC

How Then Shall we Live...For The Seventh Generation?

Marion Pardy

THE CONVICTION OF COURAGE; THE COURAGE OF CONVICTION

Greetings to you who gather in the Spirit of Life at the Women's Conference, Naramata, September 23 – 25, 2011

I am grateful to God – whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did – when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day...I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you...for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. (2 Timothy 1: 3 – 7 selected. NRSV).

I am a student of the scriptures. As memorized bible verses and question and answer approach informed my biblical knowledge as a child so, as an adult, I am still convicted by the influential power of the scriptures, albeit with a considerable different approach.

My biblical approach tends to be one of “question and answer and question” in a continuous spiral; the power of the scriptures is its ability to empower critical questioning and courageous action. The context (political, social, and economical) in which the scriptures were written and heard is essential for understanding the scriptures “then”.

I chose the above third generation Bible reading for its influential “from generation to generation” faith and gratitude and its encouragement to God-given courage in the present and future. The passage portrays the elder, Paul, writing from prison towards the end of his life to the younger Timothy who will continue the work of leadership and faith.

Biblical scholars claim that it was written after Paul's death with possible snippets of Paul's own writing.

Grandmother Lois and mother Eunice were converts to Christianity; the references to them illustrate the important role of women in the early church and in the family.

How then shall Timothy live and lead? With a reminder of these strong women, Timothy is to "rekindle the gift of God within him" or, as the Greek suggests, "fan the flame". The gift of God is the spirit of love, power and self-discipline in contrast to the spirit of cowardice. These were gifts required for leadership and living in the first century of the Common Era.

I am convinced that these are gifts vital for leadership and living today and for the seventh generation. These gifts speak to me of the conviction of courage and the courage of conviction with persistent, patient passion, stemming from the flame of God. This flame of God waits to be rekindled whenever dying embers emerge within us, our church and our world.

I write from the context of having read recently Bonhoeffer: Pastor; Prophet, Martyr; Spy and SeaSick: The Global Ocean in Crisis and The Help (movie also). I write from the context of having re-lived the events of 9/11 on the 10th anniversary. I write from the context of the widening gap between the rich and the poor in our country and of a church in crisis (as presently established). And I write from the context of the "something" that is needed to carry most of us through each day in the midst of brokenness of body, heart and/or spirit.

Change in technology, social and physical sciences is occurring so quickly that it becomes next to impossible to predict what our world and lives will be like in 20 years, let alone for the seventh generation (100 plus years).

(We are told that China, within a few years, will be the largest English speaking country in the world. Today India and China make up one third of the world's population. Our oceans are at the crisis point and, thus, our planet.)

How then shall we live? I propose that we live with the God-given passionate conviction of courage and the courage of conviction, in gratitude to our foremothers and forefathers and with the utmost of care for the seventh generation.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was an academic. For him, as a person of the Christian faith, academic theories and church liturgy commanded action. "Only he (sic) who cries out for the Jews may sing Gregorian chants" he wrote (Bonhoeffer, p. 281). He preached and taught that those who worshipped God through music and word were compelled to protest the torture and murder of the Jewish people during the Nazi Regime. Bonhoeffer further involved himself in a failed assassination of Hitler, convinced that this was God's will for a suffering humanity. This courageous conviction and action by Bonhoeffer emerged after painful prayer and serious study of the scriptures, knowing that the consequences would be imprisonment and possible death. Bonhoeffer was imprisoned and executed in 1945.

In occupied Poland, two strong women, Irena Sendler and Mother Matylda Getter (Mother Provincial of Franciscan Sisters) saved numerous Jewish children and hid them with Polish families and in Roman Catholic convents. The risk was great. They knew that. They, too, possessed the courage of conviction and the conviction of courage. (Source: Wikipedia)

Roman Catholic theologian, Joan Chittister, describes courage in this way. Courage is the capacity to stand our ground, to speak the truth, even in the face of overwhelming odds. (Scarred by Struggle; Transformed by Hope. p. 50).

And here are a couple of other quotable quotes.

- There are lines women know not to cross. Until three find the courage to break through them... (The Help)
- Courage is the fear that has said its prayers. (American Actor, Dorothy Bernard. 1890-1955).
- Courage doesn't always roar. Sometimes courage is the little voice at the end of the day that says I'll try again tomorrow. (Artist and Writer: Mary Anne Radmacher).

Courage is the opposite of cowardice. Courage is not the opposite of fear; frequently, fear is the flame that produces courage. Courage is not so much a spectacular newsworthy action in an exceptional experience of life; courage is an attitude towards faith and life, grounded in the spirit of God, aflame within us.

I offer a couple of examples of how to live with the courage of conviction and the conviction of courage in our Church. The Church is changing. Do we have the courage to change also? As with “doctors without borders”, we might consider a “church without borders”. We, who were formed and transformed within The United Church of Canada, might be called to consider broadening our boundaries to include other Christians and other religious communities. We now have shared ministries among Christian denominations; we now have shared space between Christian and Jewish denominations. We now have United Church and Muslim shared space in, at least, one theological school. Surely, if the whole world is God's, we can courageously converse about how such expressions of faith might be the norm rather than the exception. How much richer our women's groups might be if they were comprised of women of all religious expressions rather than being limited to the Christian! I belong to a multi-faith group of Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus and others established to call upon our politicians to provide a vision of a fairer society and policies to close the gap between the rich and the poor. Stories of our diverse faith expressions frequently are shared, enhancing our personal lives and our commitment to the injustice of poverty in a rich land.

We often observe and experience injustice in our churches (local, region, and national). It frequently is unpopular to courageously speak and call attention to these injustices – far safer to speak about injustice in the community. Rekindling the gift of God’s courage within us, we are called to speak out against these injustices whenever and wherever they occur.

History will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the strident clamour of the bad people, but the appalling silence of good people. (Martin Luther King, Jr.) In our time, what is our response to King’s claim?

We collect and cherish stories of conviction and courage from across the ages – and from around the world. We admire and honour all those who dared to stand – alone if necessary – to initiate and support causes which they believe to be matters of consequence – matters of conviction. Such individuals and groups inspire us to examine the strength of our convictions and the measure of our courage to defend them. At the same time, they challenge us to fan the flame within us and become our own creators of stories – stories which will become visible through actions rooted firmly in our faith and convictions of what is right and good. In this present time and place, the torch is passed to us. We are called to action that will help shape and direct the future. Our challenge, then, is to create such stories that will help to ensure that love, goodness, compassion and justice will reign from sea to sea to sea, and from the heights and depths of the cosmos. . Our calling is to ensure that the “seventh generation” will receive as their legacy the conviction and the courage to continue the struggle.

I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother

Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you.... (2 Timothy 1: 5, 6)

Blessings, Courage and Peace,

Marion

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Sisters in Spirit of Western Women's Conference

Mardi Tindal

Dear Sisters in Spirit of Western Women's Conference,

I rejoice and give thanks for you, adding my prayers to yours as we seek the will of God in Christ, with the question: "How then shall we live for the seventh generation?"

This question may have been inspired by the Haudenosaunee, traditional peoples of the Grand River valley in Ontario, also known as the Six Nations. During my time on staff at Five Oaks, Naramata's sister centre, I was blessed with many opportunities to learn from these women and men who follow two First Nations traditions so faithfully that they have become identified with them: One is the duty to weigh every decision in terms of its impact on the seventh generation. The other is the duty of thanksgiving. So I begin answering our question with gratitude, and with curiosity about the decisions made by those who came before us.

Many Christian women of the early 1800s weighed their decisions in ways that have blessed us, their seventh generation. History has left most of them nameless, but some names we know, Konwatsi'tsiaienni (also known as Molly Brant) died just before 1800, and her influence as a Mohawk loyalist who was also Christian served to strengthen the relationship between the British and the Iroquois peoples. Then there was Florence Nightingale, a celebrated English nurse and statistician who believed that God had called her to this work. The Nightingale Pledge, taken by nurses in her day as a statement of intention and integrity, was not unlike the CGIT purpose that I learned as a girl.

Elizabeth Fry inspired Florence Nightingale. Fry was a prison reformer and social reformer, often referred to as the "angel of prisons". Her deep beliefs about the divine spark in every human being drove her to push for legislation that made the treatment of

prisoners more humane. She was the first woman to address the British House of Commons. Some criticized Fry for having such an influential role as a woman, and some said she was neglecting her duties as a wife and mother in order to conduct her humanitarian work. As a former volunteer with the Elizabeth Fry Society myself, I continue to give thanks for Fry's courage. I did my best to keep her memory alive when working with women in conflict with the law. When I had meetings with women in jail, I would simply announce myself as 'Elizabeth Fry' -- and in respect for her the big, heavy jail doors would swing open.

The more I learn about these women of seven generations ago, I see how seriously they took their own lives, though never more seriously than they took God. They attended to the health of their souls in order to discern their particular contribution to God's healing work. They acted on Spirit's leading in their own context and community. They led courageously with their hearts, moved by God's love and what they understood to be God's truth, for the sake of all.

We too must pay attention to God's work within our own souls, our community and in creation, if we are to live faithfully and for our seventh generation. Our spiritual practice and commitments made from Spirit's leading are both necessary. Prayer and action are like breathing. We wouldn't last long if we breathed only in or only out; their rhythm together sustains life.

My own soul is both comforted and challenged by these words of our faith, that we are called to live "with respect in creation" and "by grace rather than entitlement, for we are called to be a blessing to the earth". We are called to be blessing to the seventh generation.

In my twenties I served as a member of the General Council Task Group on the Environment. The theological power of that report and its proclamations continue to inspire. For example:

“In order to love each other,
We have to love the garden;
In order to love the garden,
We have to love each other.”

In the context of what Jesus described as the greatest commandment, today we confess that we have not loved God, garden and one another enough, that the ways in which we honour or exploit one another are linked directly to the ways in which we honour or exploit the garden. Life itself is jeopardized by our exploitation, as never before in human history.

Two decades ago, as we were becoming fully aware of the residential schools tragedy, my spouse and I asked ourselves, “How could they not have seen? Why didn’t they change?” And then we asked: “What is it that our children will look back on a generation hence and ask, how could we not have seen? How could we not have known? Why didn’t we change?”

Our answer came instantly, rooted in regular recitation of God’s call to live with respect in creation and surrounded by the evidence of deep trouble in God’s garden. How can we not see that our ways are not sustainable and represent a rejection of faith? As I see it, the crisis of Earth’s life support system is the most critical test we have ever faced as people of faith. If we destroy the conditions that sustain human life on the planet, we can have no pretence to obeying God’s greatest commandment.

Loving both neighbour and garden is a matter of integrity for disciples of Christ. Love of God, garden and one another calls us into a renewed covenant with God, and for the seventh generation. And each of us has a particular role in this covenantal work.

We discover our role with attention to the health of our own souls, discerning our particular contributions to God’s healing work. We act on Spirit’s leading in own context and community. We lead

courageously with our hearts, moved by God's love and what we understand to be God's truth for the sake of all.

How will those born in 2100 describe how well we did? May we give them reason to "Rejoice always" and may we "not quench the Spirit." (1 Thessalonians 5:16, 19.)

In the abundant hope of Christ,

Mardi Tindal

Moderator

The United Church of Canada/L'Église Unie du Canada



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