

Along the track

Bringing the Past to Life

Over the past twelve months I have been writing the family history. Rather than a catalogue of facts and statistics or a genealogical table, it has been an attempt to give some insight into the story beginning in 1858 of Michael, the heavily pregnant Catherine and their two little boys who left their home country knowing they would never return.

It is simply amazing how much information is so readily available about this poor, rather obscure Irish family who settled in a little known area of Victoria and why they chose that place. It was also surprising how it was possible to come to 'know' them, despite having never met them. That was a reminder that we all leave traces of ourselves wherever we go. Wittingly or unwittingly, we leave a legacy of stories, events, achievements, possessions and memories. We make our mark.

There is something within us that urges us to connect with others, to seek a sense of belonging, of being at home somewhere. We want to know that who we are and what we do matters to someone. Visits to the cemetery provided a link to these people, their decisions, their hopes and dreams for a new life for themselves and those who came after them. It was a reminder that, in a very real way, we remain connected to one another in life and in death, the past, the present and the future. Just like theirs, our decisions affect others now and will continue to do so long after we have gone. It is not that we live our lives looking for a kind of fame that will give us immortality, rather it is so that we might hear the words Jesus spoke about in our final judgement: 'Well done good and faithful servant'. Being good and faithful happens every day if we are true and committed to our beliefs, if we live our lives in the service of those God puts in our path.

In our culture we have put a great deal of importance on passing on material things. We are encouraged to make a will and that is as it should be. Yet our material possessions are the least important part of our legacy. How much attention do we give to passing on our values and beliefs, our learnings and wisdom, our hopes and love for those we leave behind? They won't know if we don't tell them. There are so many stories, so much wisdom and love, so many dreams that get lost because they are never articulated. Sometimes we hear parents say that they are going to let their children make up their own minds about religious affiliation. But how will they choose if we do not show them or tell

them what we believe and why? Being a role model is not making up their minds for them but it is a vital ingredient in helping them to make an informed choice.

Starting a new life in this unfamiliar and unfenced land, to look towards a future that was unshaped and uncertain was a courageous and difficult decision for my family. Visiting the cemetery made me think of how struggling with life's challenges changes us. Struggles make us grow up, even from a very early age. Struggle cultivates in us a depth of character and spirit that comes from knowing pain as well as pleasure. Avoiding struggle and tough choices isn't always the best action to take. Struggle can help us acquire understanding and endurance. We grow in compassion for others; we develop empathy to walk with others in their struggles, too. The Book of Genesis 32:22-32 includes a rather intriguing story of Jacob wrestling with the stranger. After an all night struggle, the stranger says: 'let me go, no one is going to win this'. So Jacob lets him go and the stranger hits his hip with a staff and for the rest of his life, Jacob walks with a limp. The stranger is, of course, God. The story is really a metaphor for life, how struggle changes us and leaves its mark.

Struggle sometimes drives us to find God within us and in the life that surrounds us. In wrestling with belief in God and the challenges of life we learn things about ourselves and our beliefs. We come to understand that God is not a puppeteer or a magician. Our daily decisions, be they great or small, shape us, and through them we shape the world around us. That's what God asks of us.

At the end of the day, whether we are remembered 30 years or 300 years from now is not all that important. What is important is that when we die, we know the mark we have left bears the imprint of one who cared about the past, present, and future of this family and the earth.

Regards
Jim Quillinan

Email: jquillinan@dcsi.net.au