

I am open and I am willing
For to be hopeless would seem so strange
It dishonors those who go before us
So lift me up to the light of change

(Holly Near)

December 2006

Dear Friends:

The refrain above is from a wonderful new song by Holly Near. Like many other folk singers, she has been a consistent and forceful champion of human rights over the years. Her song has been my adopted anthem in recent months. But not the only one. In a few weeks I'll be 64, so that song by Paul McCartney has been a constant companion as well. (Since he beat me to that age by a few months, he presumably now knows the answers to his song's questions: "Will you still need me, will you still feed me...?")

In October I had the privilege, and great fun, of joining a bunch of other 63 and 64 year olds at our 50 Year 8th Grade Reunion at St. Paul of the Cross school in Park Ridge, Illinois. Aside from congratulating each other on still being alive, we did a lot of "waxing nostalgic", recalling hilarious and poignant moments from our time together.

So as the end of the year approaches, I find myself not only looking to the future, but also remembering, and determined to not "dishonor those who go before us". Here is a sample of some of the items swirling in my mind and heart these days.

The standard rap on parochial schools, pre-Vatican II, was that they were horribly rigid, regimented, religious boot camps that shaped kids into unthinking, narrow automatons. And while I know there's some fire behind all that smoke, I also know that most of my thoughtful, questioning and committed friends are products of that system. I also trace some of my own passion for justice and peace to those classrooms. Every one of them had a "missions bulletin board" that graphically portrayed some part of what we would later call "the third world", and dramatically reminded us that there were many people living in squalor and poverty and that we dare not pretend that their lives and our own lives weren't somehow connected. Whenever we heard the siren of a passing fire truck or ambulance, we stopped whatever we were doing and prayed for the persons in crisis to whom those vehicles were responding. Again, they may have been anonymous, but they were not strangers. (For the record, the Sisters of Mercy

not only planted a bunch of peace and justice seeds that bore fruit later, but also taught me to read, write and play the piano. They tried to teach me Math too. Sisters of Mercy - not of Miracles.)

No one who knew my parents would think of them as “justice and peaceniks”. (For instance, my father regularly pounded the table and announced that the worst mistake he’d ever made was voting for FDR the third and fourth times. I remembered that, of course, when I visited Franklin’s and Eleanor’s graves at Hyde Park a couple of autumns ago.) But I will always cherish the memory of going with my mom and dad to take food and clothing to a priest they knew at St. Malachy’s on Chicago’s west side. (It was a desperately poor parish 50 years ago and still is today.) Christmas, I learned from them, wasn’t only about what gifts I was going to get.

Thanksgiving weekend, 1960. I was home from my first semester at Notre Dame, and on Saturday night, went to hear Leontyne Price sing MADAMA BUTTERFLY at Lyric Opera. (And, as many of you know, I’ve been crazy ever since.) I was with my sister, Marykay, and her friend, Shirley Hill. Afterwards, we walked across the Madison Street bridge for dessert and coffee at one of those Pixley & Ehlers that were everywhere in Chicago. One side of that bridge was The Loop. The other side was the beginning of Skid Row. As we were about to retrace our steps to the nice side of the bridge, an old woman in rags came in, walked over and confronted us, demanding, **“I’m tired and hungry. What are you going to do about it?”** Forty-six years later I can still see her and hear her voice. I decided long ago that she was some sort of messenger, sent to remind me that I’d better not plan on spending all my life’s energies swooning over fabulous singing.

There’s an old French saying that “God writes straight with crooked lines.” I’m truly thankful, in this season of shorter days and longer nights, that those lines have brought me straight here to the City of St. Francis. And I *love* working alongside great colleagues here at St. Anthony Foundation, feeling privileged to come to work every day and be inspired by God’s favorite people, the poor. I want to honor those who have gone before us and shown us the way. And that includes so many of you, my friends. A blessed Christmas, Hanukkah and rebirth of light amid the real and dreadful darkness!

Lots of love,

