Columns
Social Justice



Stained glass depicting Jesus, at St. Mary of the Presentation Catholic Church, at Geneva, Indiana (Wikimedia Commons/Nheyob, CC BY-SA 4.0)



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When I was growing up, the house that I lived in had a backyard that ended with a slope down into what we called the hollow. It was a ravine with a little flowing creek that ran the length of the entire neighborhood. It was, we discovered, a traveling path for homeless men as they made their way from somewhere to the railroad yard that was only a few miles further. Hoping for a ride to yet another somewhere.

My mother always thought that one of the travelers had at one time put some kind of a mark near or on our house. A beacon to the hungry men that it was a safe stop.



Margaret Cessna's mother, "Mum," is pictured in this photo (Courtesy of Margaret Cessna)

Mum would answer the back door to simply hear, "Can you spare me a little food?" At a very young age I came face to face with real hunger and thirst. She would welcome them to take a seat on the back steps as she prepared hearty food and drink, packed for their journey. I came to understand that her generosity extended to every neighbor, well-dressed or not. Clean-shaven or not.

It was never the same guy at the back door. And it did not happen every day or every week. But often enough to make Dad nervous. He forbade her to continue. *It's dangerous*, he claimed. *You could get hurt or robbed*. Even then, years ago, she was her own woman. She continued. She just didn't tell Dad.

A simple act of making a sandwich, of welcoming the stranger, of ignoring danger is required. It is what she taught her children. And wherever she is, I believe that her expectation to this day is that we listened. Without words she taught us what mattered. She was our flesh and blood catechism. This is why God made us

We were not created to be deprived of food. From human beginnings, ways were found to feed families. Hunting. Gathering. Fishing. We know that history. We also know that from the earliest days that we know about there was a search, in all cultures, for something or someone "beyond." It was the only way to explain wonder. Then. And now.

The hunger and thirst of the spirit for wholeness, for holiness, is timeless. As we all hopefully grow into grace, we often engage in the personal struggle to release fear, to quench the thirst, and feed the hunger in us that longs to discover — really discover — the part of us that is more than body.

We read books. Attend conferences. Sit still for prayer. Make retreats. All helpful. If we can overcome the shame of being privileged in a world that is hungry, coming face to face with human need might just be the door that will set free the spirit which shows us the way to really understand the Gospel message. That "love one another as I have loved you" message brings a kind of peace, a kind of new spirit, and perhaps a road to travel — not unlike the hollow behind our house — that leads not to a boxcar but to the goodness that we yearn for.

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I believe that we all have such teachers somewhere in our lives. If we listen carefully to our own life we will recognize the models, the heroes who unexpectedly show us the way. Paying attention is mandatory.

Somewhere in some universe beyond the beyond, I think that my mother is being addressed as St. Mary — the one who changed her world with generosity and grace. Her very being reached beyond the back porch as she shared her kindness. With family. With friends. With strangers.

On the night that she was dying I sat on the edge of her bed and held her in my arms. I thanked her over and over. I told her that we had understood. That we would take care of each other. That her work was done. That it was OK to go. She did. A few hours later.

My mother. Before my eyes she grew in grace. She continues to welcome and to feed through the lives that she touched and left behind. Those who watched. And listened. And believed.

Jesus then. The model of all models. He laid out the plan. It is not even necessary to read between the lines. Just open the book. It is all there.

Mum now. I believe that there are real people in all of our lives that truly magnify his teaching.

To this day she is my model. My hero. My spiritual home.

And I am grateful.