

An Australian Volunteer's Reflections on Her Iona Experience

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A couple of days after returning from the Wellspring Gathering in Canberra in March I received an email telling me that I was successful in my application to be a volunteer for the Iona Community on the island of Iona, off the western coast of Scotland. Instead of joy, I was actually panic stricken – what was I letting myself in for? I was asking myself, 'Will I cope with the sheer weariness of the work and with meeting all those strange people, with the travel and finding my way around?'

I asked myself, 'What are my reasons for going to Iona?', and I listed them thus:

1. it was a way of living overseas, preferably Scotland, for a short while (note, only Summer, not Winter);
2. it was a way of living in COMMUNITY for awhile, of being SERVANT to others;
3. it was a way of taking myself out of normal routine and familiar environment;
4. it was a way of allowing myself to be CHALLENGED (physically and emotionally) by the unknown, the other;
5. it was a way of PILGRIMAGE;
6. it was a way to experience God more deeply.

Was it, deep down, this promise, and would the Iona promise hold true?

Finally there remains the spirit of the place, of Iona itself. God is present everywhere and can be sought and encountered even, and perhaps especially vividly, in the places of greatest need. But there are also some places which in their clarity and peace render people particularly open to experience God, where the veil that separates the earth and the Kingdom seems tissue-thin. Iona has been such a place for countless generations of pilgrims. ('What is the Iona Community' p 8)

Let me say, the journey was all of these things, in lesser or greater degree.

I pondered all these thoughts over the weeks before, during and after being on Iona. One of the questions we often asked of each other, perhaps especially the volunteers but also of the resident staff, was what our expectations were of being on Iona with the Iona Community. Why had we come?

Pilgrimage

I needed to ask the question, What is Pilgrimage? I found a helpful definition in the Iona Community publication *This is the Day*:

Pilgrimage is an opportunity to travel lightly, to walk free of daily routines, to meet people, to make friends, to enjoy and celebrate God's creation. An opportunity too in the traveling, the conversations and the silences to reflect

on the journey of our lives and on our journey homewards to God. (Month 1 Day 16)

But I like this definition best: *Everyday is a pilgrimage and each of us is a pilgrim. Pilgrims are those who cope with the unpredictability of life, accept human vulnerability and see life's ups and downs in terms of opportunities for human growth.* Pilgrimage is traditionally a journey to a holy place – a place where saints have walked, a place where God has met people and blessed them. But this second definition suggests that we are on a pilgrimage daily wherever we are, we don't need to go to some far flung foreign 'holy' place to find the pains, joys and wonder that Pilgrimage offers.

I was setting off to live for eight weeks in a community, doing a physically demanding job (housekeeping in the Abbey) and living in dormitory accommodation with a group of people I did not know. In one way it was also a 'paid holiday'. Once I arrived I had board and lodging as well as receiving a small amount of pocket money. I tried to be honest with myself about my motives. 'I feel I have always been inward looking, subjective, selfish. This is, I hope, a way of taking me out of myself and of having to live with others, trying deliberately to be there for others, to serve the people who come to the Iona Community', I wrote in my diary. Fear was part of my initial reaction – fear that I would find traveling so far just too demanding, fear of not coping with a new, perhaps uncomfortable, environment, fear of meeting difficult people and not being able to handle the situation, finding it difficult to cope with the strangers I was yet to meet – and the busyness of community life. We were warned that:

We don't pretend that life here is always an easy one. All of us at some time have been challenged, puzzled, even frustrated at our life here. In the middle of a busy season, things can seem hectic and pressured. (Vollies Handbook)

Volunteers come, from all over the world, bringing energy, enthusiasm, questions, helping in the task of sharing the common life of work, worship, meals and recreation with those who visit the centres – the Abbey, the Macleod Centre and Camus. We all meet many new people (each week, more new people), learn new skills or different routines for doing things (colour-coded housekeeping items!) and become part of a large team of volunteers and resident staff.

For me what was possible was limited. Within a week of arriving I came down with a chest infection, which never left me while I was on Iona. This complicated my asthma, which normally is quite mild. I managed to fulfill the volunteer tasks I'd come to do, but it was the extra activities – the ceilidh on Monday nights, the full off-road pilgrimage around the island, the evening services, the choir, and the Staffa trip to see the puffins and the geological formation - that I missed out on. I wanted so much to socialize with the staff and volunteers, especially on those (late) nights when groups adjourned to the Martyr's Bay Pub for drinks after the service!

The Iona Community Experience

Much has been written about this sacred, magical, small island off the coast of Scotland, with its restored Abbey gracing the green fields of the crofts, just along the road from the village.

I feel I have but scratched the surface in this pilgrimage, in this visit to Iona, yet at the same time I have been deeply touched in unaccountable ways. This is how I see the aspects of this experience:

1. The natural environment. The beauty of Iona, whether bathed in perfect sunshine, or blasted by icy Atlantic winds, is stunningly breathtaking.
2. The history of Iona, from the days of pagan rituals, through St Columba's arrival, the building of the Abbey by the Benedictine monks, the restoration under the direction of Rev George MacLeod early in the 20th century, to today's island residents and Iona Community, is a history that inspires and draws people from around the world. Some come searching for a closer walk with God, walking on that holy ground where the saints have trod, but these days many also come to walk and explore the wonders of its natural gifts, the rocks, beaches, vegetation and bird life.
3. The Iona Community (and the way work and worship is combined in the life of the Community) is made up of
 - a. resident staff (those who come for terms of 1-3 years and who may have originally come as volunteers),
 - b. volunteers (and the volunteering experience) who come from 6-12 weeks, and who often come more than once,
 - c. the guests who come for a week's program or for rest and reflection - the people, all those pilgrims who have come across the sea from countries like Holland, Sweden, Germany (Northern European Protestant countries), USA, South Africa, Australia, and even Paraguay,
 - d. and the day visitors, who eagerly listen to the descriptions and stories of the Historic Scotland guides, and those who come to services who may perhaps learn that there is joyful, loving ways of doing Church that is not so well known back home in their traditional, hidebound, parishes.

It's all this. But the overriding experience has to be one of COMMUNITY, formed by all these people who meet together in this place. When asked, no one answered, "I've come to live in community", but I'm sure that deep down this had to be part of the attraction. The more common answer had to do with 'volunteering' (helping others?) or the liturgy/ worship aspect (for many came because they had used or knew of the Wild Goose publications and in particular the music and worship resources).

Many of us are looking for community, feeling that our modern materialistic, individualistic society values are failing to offer us the nurturance, the caring, the meaningfulness, the loving support that we assume is what community means. Do we find that on Iona? There are two points to make.

First, we have the experience of having to rely on others (when I got sick, the doctor was some kilometres away on the island of Mull, and it was the Office staff who took control and provided my transport thither, and told me I was too sick to work!), of having a pleasure enhanced by doing it with others (hanging the washing in the drying room was a great occasion for a chat), of seeing ourselves as a part of others, dependent upon them, and they on us. But it's not only that we have to rely on each other, it is the fact that we actually work together. We each have tasks to do, and the quick completion by each person of their allocated task, benefits everyone – cleaning bathrooms, hanging washing, changing sheets, washing up, pouring tea – doing tasks and singing and laughing together.

Kathy Galloway writes that:

In six years of living in Iona Abbey, and welcoming visitors from all over the world, but mostly from the churches in my own country, I was at first struck, and then shamed by the profound and bitter isolation in which so many people exist. I remember on numerous occasions people saying to me at the end of the week, "This has been the best week of my life". For those of us who lived there in community, it had probably been a run-of-the-mill kind of week, full of the mosaic of tensions, arguments, frustrations and joys of just living with others. But for people who never get close enough to others to experience real sharing, whether they live alone or with others, even tensions were perceived as a blessing. (A Story to Live By p 60)

This experience of Community seems to mean that people come to trust one another very quickly and to share more openly, to somehow be more real and authentic than ever seems possible in ordinary life. And I'm sure that what really brings this about is first, working together, but in such a way that there is much eye contact, proximity of bodies, touch (there's not much space when 6 or 8 or so people are washing and wiping up in the scullery of the Abbey or the Macleod Centre). And then, passing from the Refectory with wet sticky hands to the Abbey for worship, to be reminded that we are profoundly, deeply, loved by God and that we are to love others as we are first loved by God.

Second: this sounds very idealistic. It sounds like I might have closed my eyes and ears to the reality of this place. So, yes, there is another side to this experience. That it is also a place, this place, where what you are is what you bring with you. If you come in order to escape something, particularly yourself, then you will be disappointed. Collective living isn't the escape one might hope it to be. Collective living brings into sharp focus all your faults, your failings, your weaknesses. Here we come up against the obdurate realities of others, and, worse, come up against ourselves in the mirror of those others.

Early in my stay I wrote in my diary:

This is a strange place. Perhaps full of spiritual presences that some are very sensitive to, some experience fear (a quiet island, surrounded by sea and a long way from anywhere); some disappointment, especially at (their perceived) lack of support and cohesion. Services are about brokenness and

healing and care, but somehow it doesn't quite eventuate. It's a normal community, people here for all sorts of reasons, agendas, with emotional problems, some to find themselves, others God – some pretty human saints, I'd say - and there is no escaping the normal 'norming' processes of any human group. Some fit well, others don't - but the level of pain does surprise me.

So there are some who do not cope, some even sliding back into the psychotic state which is their demon; some, finding that a small isolated island, surrounded by sea, is a terrifying prospect – no city distractions, no supermarket, no coffee shop, no cinema - to enable one to escape oneself. I found the first two or three weeks distressingly lonely, and I wasn't the only one to feel this, but as we slowly slotted into our routines and everything and everyone became more familiar, friendships were formed, until there was that high point when the whole community goes down to the jetty to wave farewell. We are sad to leave.

Hospitality, generosity and friendship

The 2007 Wellspring Community Diary (p. 6) has a quote from Ray Simpson's book, *Exploring Celtic Spirituality*, where Ray tells us that

The Northumbria Community pledge themselves to 'availability'. To be available means that we are willing to give time, shelter or sustenance to anyone, if Christ inspires us. We do not do this upon demand; that would be to become a doormat, and would prevent us being available for God's priorities but we will be open to it, and we will always have a hospitable heart.

The Iona Community could be called upon daily if it were known that it took in 'destitute travellers', and one such occasion did occur when a young man arrived, told us that he had found the B&Bs full and had slept the night on Dun I (highest hill on Iona). We gave him breakfast. There was some discussion about this with the Abbey Warden, and even though we had spare beds in the Abbey, we sent him on his way. We did not want to set a precedent for those who came without having made prior arrangements. We continued to see this young man around the island for some weeks, and he remained somewhat of a mystery to us.

In reflecting on what I think it means to be hospitable, my experience on Iona led me to understand that while (the practical tasks of) time, shelter or sustenance are important features of hospitality, it is the 'hospitable heart' that is the key. A hospitable heart is an attitude, an attitude of generosity, of openness, of 'being there for others', of willingness, a willingness to share, whether we are called upon to do so or not. At the heart of hospitality and generosity is the 'entertaining' of another person within ourselves, an imaginative incorporation of all that the other is within ourselves. It also involves quietness, listening, even silence. Such was the hospitality and generosity I experienced with, and gained from, staff and volunteers on Iona. It was the beginning of deep friendships.

A Spiritual Experience

Was it a spiritual experience? I tried to go without expectations, so that the experience was 'itself', not something I fantasized and then was disappointed because the reality didn't match the expectation. I can speak only of my own experience, but I think that to some extent I speak for other volunteers. Perhaps the problem might arise in our definitions of 'spiritual'. I didn't have some kind of supernatural experience if by that we mean an experience out of the ordinary, some 'numinous' extra-sensory experience, although I was aware that I was in a very special place when I worshipped in the Abbey. My God-experiences came when I walked the land, climbed Dun I, gathered stones on North Beach, woke to the sun sparkling on the sea and sand and hills of Mull or watched the golden sunset over the western seas, which really took my breath away. No wonder St Columba, the Augustinian nuns, the Benedictine monks and all the pilgrims who have traveled this way since, have felt that this is God's own kingdom and that God is very, very close. The sheer beauty of nature in this place left only a wordless 'thanks' in my heart to its Creator.

But to say more of the vollies' experience: we worked hard. In the case of the Kitchen and Housekeeping teams, because of the hours we worked it was most often not possible for us to be involved in many of the activities. Programs were organized for the paying guests who came each week, but it really was not possible for us to join in these. Even the 'staff night' was out as it began at 7.30 and my team didn't finish to closer to 8 o'clock. Nevertheless, we could attend the morning and evening services, partake in the service by leading the worship, but I found that my thoughts were often still focused on the house-keeping duties of the day and reluctant to focus on the spiritual.

So vollies' experience, because of our hours of work and the shorter time of our stay, was different to the guests and the resident staff, and to the daily visitors. Many plan to return some time in the future so that they can do the Historic Scotland guided tours of the Abbey, or to explore the island in even greater depth, or simply to absorb the spiritual aura of the island (that is, do a retreat) that had escaped them while working. Already I long to go back again!

The Iona experience seems to work on a number of levels. For some, it was a life-changing experience, and some people were aware of this at the time it was happening. Age made no difference: one would expect it of the young people who had not seen much of the world, but it was life changing for older people as well. Sometimes it was positive, but it could be negative. I think in particular of the Pastors who came (mostly on sabbatical leave), accustomed to being the leaders – the movers and shakers – of their parishes, and who experienced what it was like to be invisible and powerless! For some, and this was my experience, it was an affirmation of the peace and grace already experienced in their walk with God, and an affirmation of their personhood. But whatever the experience, almost without fail, parting words included, "There will always be a part of me which is Iona, a heart-felt experience I will never forget." Iona has a permanent place in our hearts.

Of all these days, the picture I have in my mind is of beautiful Holly, my Abbey housekeeping friend, and myself as we sat relaxing one evening in the Argyle Hotel, and reflecting on how we could understand our experience. It seemed to

be beyond our understanding, this experience of the sublime, and we were searching for words and images that might explain what it was that encapsulated the Iona Experience for us. In my email home I wrote:

Time seems extraordinarily different here, both to stand still and to race by; one becomes aware of the ebb and flow, of constant change, and yet of absolute permanency. No wonder the early people felt very close to God here, no wonder it is called a 'thin' place, a place closer to 'heaven' than we find in our normal places of living. The immediate is the community life; the context is Nature herself – here, the two flow together: time and timelessness.

It is always a great experience to travel, to fulfill a dream, but it is also nice to return home. While there was much I couldn't do, still I have made the journey – I've been to Iona, I've lived there for 8 weeks, I've worked and worshipped with the Iona Community. Travel heightens one's awareness of 'there' and 'here' and throws into relief one's understanding of life. And so, I find myself remembering T.S. Eliot's words from 'Little Gidding' (Four Quartets): *We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.* Home is 'here', but now tinged by the beauty and wonder of Iona and heightened by a deeper experience of God's amazing love for all creation.

The Iona Community is an ecumenical Christian movement seeking new ways of living the gospel in today's world through working for peace and social justice rebuilding community and in the renewal of worship.