

# The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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## Thin Place

*The Rev. Douglas C. Vest*

“Holy Island” is the name applied to several islands around the world, at least two off Great Britain. But why such a descriptor? Does some inherent quality attract people, or do people contribute to that honored state? My native curiosity and mild wanderlust combined to urge investigation of one such place. And since I needed to be in England for two intense work weeks anyhow it seemed a good opportunity for me to find out!

My choice was Iona, a small member of the Inner Hebrides lying in a jigsaw-puzzle array off Scotland's west coast. History and romance commended that site where Columba settled after leaving Ireland in the sixth century over what today would be termed a copyright challenge. Further, it is reputed that Macbeth and other Scottish worthies lie buried in Iona's soil. Columba and fellow monks lived there until repeated Viking raids could no longer be endured. Centuries later, Benedictine monks established a home on Iona, as did Augustinian nuns — all of this on a scant four square miles of land, fairly near the Highlands, which are fascinating in their rustic beauty. I could not resist visiting!

Suddenly, it seemed, late one summer day I was there, my backpack and luggage stored at Bishop's House. A short check-the-scene walk brought me to the two-block, one-sided “main street” of the island. My eyes scanning toward the east, I was startled by a most unusual light over Iona Sound's one-mile span — both restful and arresting. It was this curious light, I suspected much later, that sparked William Wordsworth's image, “extracting from clear skies and air serene, and out of sun-bright waves, a lucid veil.”

This striking introduction was followed by much exploration and a warm bonding with the isle. Near my stay's end — sort of a farewell gift — I saw the restored abbey's roof dotted with lovely white doves said to make their home on tiny Iona. What a coincidence that *columba* is the Latin word for dove! Back at Bishop's House, I pulled off my hiking boots and stretched out to read several verses of Psalm 55: “Oh, that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest. I would flee to a far-off place and make my lodging in the wilderness.”

Two years later, I returned to Iona with my wife Norvene. Her reflections amidst the ruins of the ancient nunnery could be the topic of another vignette, and helped to confirm a comment by the Reverend George MacLeod from the mainland that there are “thin places” where the spiritual and the material are felt to be inseparable.

I had planned to play at least one hole on the island's small golf course that is distinguished by a lively wind which commends marker flags be not upright, but lying on the greens. (It is my suspicion that those nine holes are among the very few in the world that are mowed by sheep.) I came prepared with one golf ball and a Swiss Army knife to fashion some sort of “club” in order to play one hole. But the word got out! One resident on hearing of my plan said to Norvene, “Oh, do discourage him. We have only three trees on the island, and any part thereof would be sorely missed!”

There is a time-honored saying that anyone who visits Iona will do so three times. Sure enough, a few years later, my frequent hiking companion, Rick, and I spent four days there, followed by a few more in the Highlands. This experience was most touching for us, so much so that I have expressed it in the following poem:

## A STONE'S THROW AWAY

I've wondered many times  
if it's still there —  
a seaside cairn of stones  
to which I added  
one surf-smoothed member.

But I'm ahead of the story,  
unique yet often told;  
for I am likely one of thousands  
over centuries,  
hiking to Columba's Bay  
and returning  
less burdened than when starting out.

Five smooth stones?  
No, those were pouched by David  
when goaded by Goliath.  
Five million spread before me?  
A high estimate, no doubt,  
but many, many  
in assorted colors,  
most of throwing size,  
all smoothed by ageless struggles in the surf,  
and momentarily  
resting on the beach —  
invitationally.

One spoke out of the multitude  
to be lifted,  
trusted,  
and confided in  
of something burdensome  
which it could carry for me —  
validating also  
its own returning to the sea.

I whispered my concern,  
cradling the gray spheroid near my lips,  
paused a moment,  
then cast it overhand into the waves.

A longer, thoughtful pause  
followed this ancient penitential rite.  
Should I leave an offering?  
A pink pebble volunteered,  
and was added to a half-completed cairn of three  
which would grow heart-high  
like its two companion towers of trust.

I can visualize the beach and cairn;  
but amnesia of absolution  
will not reveal the content I had shared —  
and the sea is quietly distant  
many, many miles.



The Rev. Douglas C. Vest lives in a sylvan setting in Altadena, CA, with his wife Norvene. He is the author of seven books and active as a spiritual director and retreat leader. Doug assists at St. Mark's, Altadena, and rejoices in hobbies of wood carving, gardening, hiking, and leading elementary school groups at the LA County Arboretum. Doug and Norvene (also an author and spiritual director) will be leading their eleventh two-week Benedictine pilgrimage in October, this time to Italy.