Imagine this Cloud of Witnesses is a bright, luminous array like the Milky Way, which is not a cloud at all, but thousands upon thousands of distant stars, stretched across the heavens. You can see that celestial lightshow if you escape the streetlights of towns and cities, far from any source of light pollution. Choose a night when the moon is at the smallest of crescents, hope for a clear sky, and the bright band of the Milky Way rewards you with a luminosity all its own. Most stars that make up the Milky Way are too small to pick out with the naked eye. Were there but one of those distant stars in the sky, you would barely notice it at all; but together, their collective glow is quite striking.

I imagine this is what the writer of Hebrews is envisioning as he lists those anonymous martyrs who suffered in such interesting and disturbing ways. “Time would fail me to tell of their names,” the author says (v. 32); but these witnesses are those “of whom the world was not worthy” (v. 38). Their collective faith glows brightly for us to see and from which we may draw courage and inspiration.

The writer’s purpose in mentioning this great cloud of witnesses is revealed in a previous chapter: “Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours; it brings a great reward. For you need endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised” (10:35-36). The author of Hebrews wrote to Jewish-Christian believers who suffered greatly for their faith. This is a church undergoing hard persecution, possibly under the Roman Emperor Nero or one of his successors. The writer is desiring for them the spiritual gift of endurance, so they can get through this season of heartache and one day bask in God’s glory in this life and in the next.

These witnesses passed the faith on to us, and they still encourage us. Think of a footrace. A classic track-and-field event is the relay race. Four runners on a team, each passing the baton to a teammate. Of course, only the final runner crosses the finish line. Only the final runner on the winning team — pressing onward, lungs bursting — experiences the pulse-pounding joy of breaking the tape.

So, who witnesses this triumph? The spectators in the stands, to be sure, but there also are other witnesses: the other members of the relay team. They are more invested in the race’s outcome than anyone because they played a part in it. When the author of Hebrews celebrates a cloud of witnesses, he is not only talking about fans in the stands. The faithful martyrs are watching intently, eager to witness the triumph of the final runner.

In the movies, *Chariots of* Fire, Olympic runner Eric Liddell tells the crowd:

“You came to see a race today. To see someone win. It happened to be me. But I want you to do more than just watch a race. I want you to take part in it. I want to compare faith to running in a race. It’s hard. It requires concentration of will, energy of soul. You experience elation when the winner breaks the tape — especially if you’ve got a bet on it. But how long does that last? You go home. Maybe your dinner’s burnt. Maybe you haven’t got a job. So who am I to say, “Believe, have faith,” in the face of life’s realities? I would like to give you something more permanent, but I can only point the way. I have no formula for winning the race. Everyone runs in her own way, or his own way. And where does the power come from, to see the race to its end? From within. Jesus said, “Behold, the Kingdom of God is within you. If with all your hearts, you truly seek me, you shall ever surely find me.” If you commit yourself to the love of Christ, then that is how you run a straight race.2

In contemporary Christian usage, the word “witness” has become synonymous with evangelism. “Witnessing for Christ” means sharing the good news about Jesus with others, in word and in deed. Evangelism is laudable work, but evangelism might not be what the author of Hebrews has in mind. Maybe that parade of persecuted believers is not performing so we may see them and believe. Maybe, as they look on from the heavenly places, they are craning their necks to perceive the One who will break the tape: the risen and reigning Lord, Jesus himself.

As the author of Hebrews weaves this great tapestry of saints and martyrs and displaying it to his beleaguered congregation, more than anything else, he wants the people reading this letter want to know they are not alone. There are others who speak their language, who share their pain, who revel in the joy of small victories, and who sympathize with the weariness of repeated setbacks.

Richard Rohr, the Franciscan priest, and theologian, has a little something to say that recalls the cloud of witnesses in Hebrews:

The Body of Christ, the spiritual family, is God’s strategy. It is both medium and message. It is both beginning and end: “May they all be one … So that the world may believe it was you who sent me … That they may be one as we are one, with me in them and you in me” (John 17:21–23). There is no other form for the Christian life except a common one.…

We are now paying the price for centuries in which the Church was narrowed from a full vision of peoplehood to an almost total preoccupation with private persons and their devotional needs. But history has shown that individuals who are confirmed in their individualism by the very character of our evangelism will never create church, except after the model of a service station: they will use it as a commodity like everything else.…

Certainly, we must deal with individuals. But the very nature of our lifestyle and our church teaching must say from the beginning what the goal is — the communion of saints, a shared life together as family, the trinitarian life of God, the kingdom — here!3

This ecstatic vision of the cloud of witnesses puts the lie to one of the most notorious sacred cows of our American culture: our worship of individualism. A great many of us see our nation as the home of rugged individualists: the lone cowboy, strong and self-sufficient. Our homes are our castles. The ideal is to make our own way in the world, not relying on others for anything. Far too many of us distrust the yearning for community as a sign of weakness.

Our culture seems to be growing more individualistic and less communitarian, but the simple truth is that we desperately need one another. The message of Hebrews is about persevering in life, but it is also about enduring life *together*. We do not run this race alone, we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, both living and dead, who are constantly cheering us, guiding us, and celebrating with us. Keep an eye out for signs of that cloud of witnesses. They have a way of finding us when we need them most. They have a way of directing us to the presence and peace of God.

Prayer: Steadfast God, thank You for the many people of faith in Scripture who bear witness that Your Word is trustworthy and true. In the trials and difficulties of life, help us to keep trusting You like this great cloud of witnesses. Help us to discard every encumbrance that may hinder our Christian progress and witness and give us perseverance as we press toward the final goal. May we patiently endure all the obstacles in life in the power of the Holy Spirit and help us to be living witnesses to Your Word of truth. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

**Sources:**

1. “An original Apple-1 computer sells for $400,000,” *NPR Morning Edition,* November 9, 2021. https.//www.npr.org/2021/22/09/1053895250/an-original-apple-1-computer-sells-for-400-000. Retrieved February 7, 2022.
2. British Olympic runner Eric Liddell (played by Ian Charleson), witnessing to his faith, in the 1981 film, *Chariots of Fire*.
3. Richard Rohr’s Daily Meditation for January 5, 2022. <https://cac.org/creating-a-people-2022-01-05/>. Retrieved March 2, 2022.

**The Original Cloud**

Sunday, August 14, 2022 [Hebrews 11:29-12:3](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Hebrews+11%3a29-12%3a2&language=en&version=NIV)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Back in July 1976, at a meeting of the Homebrew Computer Club of Palo Alto, California, a 25-year-old electronic engineer named Steve Wozniak and his business partner, Steve Jobs, unveiled a new computer. The device had a plastic keyboard mounted in a wooden case. They called it the Apple I, and it was the first commercially successful personal computer. Recently, a fully functioning Apple I sold at auction for $400,000!1

Nowadays, it is difficult to imagine our lives without personal computers, smartphones, or tablets. Computers changed rapidly in those early years, particularly in storage capacity: magnetic tape cassettes gave way to floppy disks, then hard-plastic diskettes. Then the internet and the World Wide Web arrived, connecting us in ways we could not have imagined. Now there is an even more powerful technological development for storing information: that mysterious reality known as “the cloud.” The Cloud is quickly becoming the space where all our data resides. Everything syncs to the cloud automatically. No need to worry about losing your family photos or documents; they are out there, safely squirreled away in the cloud!

Cloud computing is a great innovation, but it is not the original cloud. That distinction belongs to another cloud, one that is equally invisible, more mysterious, and harder to wrap our minds around. We read about this cloud in Hebrews 12:1: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses…” The anonymous apostle who used this image says that there is a vast cloud of people surrounding us, cheering us on and supporting our faith and work. The apostle writes to us of the faith held by Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and Joseph, Moses, and the whole company of wandering Israelites. Even Rahab, that colorful Mata Hari character who helps Joshua fight the Battle of Jericho, gets a plaque in the Hebrews Hall of Fame.

There is a list of other, unnamed faithful ones as well: people who suffered mightily to keep the faith. Some “suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented of whom the world was not worthy” (11:36-38). This is a cloud of *witnesses:* martyrs of the faith who bore courageous and occasionally grisly witness to God’s boundless justice and love. They bear witness still, as they live on in this mysterious cloud that is eternal life.