

What I Learned from the Sisters

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Over six years ago, when I was pushing 60, I began a pilgrimage. It ended in May 2008, but it will also last a lifetime. I left everything behind - shelves and shelves of books, an apartment's worth of furniture and clothing, and a seven-year parish ministry in Massachusetts - and made my way to the Community of the Holy Spirit, a small community of sisters in the Episcopal church.

"Hmmm!" you might well ask. "What's a nice Unitarian Universalist minister like you doing in a place like that?" And the more I think about it, the more I realize the complexity of my motivations.

I left our UU tradition for a time, to live a life foreign to most UU's. But I believe the impulse that led me there also has roots in our tradition. Henry David Thoreau expresses the monastic impulse well, I think, in explaining his move to Walden Pond:

"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."

To live deliberately. To front only the essential facts of life. To live in a state of radical simplicity, in communion with nature, or with the divine. This is the desire that led Thoreau to Walden Pond - and that also, for centuries, has led women and men out to the desert, or into convents and monasteries.

In retrospect, one of the reasons I felt drawn to monastic life was that my own life felt cluttered. Physical clutter was part of it - too many books, too many papers, too much *stuff!* But more important was work; my ministry felt cluttered. I was feeling swamped by inessentials, what Stephen Covey calls the "urgent but not important."

Some kind of radical shift was needed, some way of getting back to basics. But what might that be? During the course of parish ministry, I had learned something about monastic communities, mostly from going on retreat at monasteries and feeling deeply at peace. I wondered if such a community might provide the key to my dilemma. Not having a UU community to join, I turned to the liberal/progressive wing of the Episcopal Church.

Altogether, I spent 20 months with CHS. I began by spending eight months in the Manhattan convent, a large brownstone with a guesthouse in Morningside Heights. It was a block from the Hudson River and just down the street from Columbia. From there I moved to the community's "Earth Ministry" in Brewster, New York, where four sisters live in an 18th-century farmhouse, operating a small organic farm.

Though it's been five years since I left the community, I imagine it will still take time fully to process the experience, and to understand how it changed me. At one level, I acquired many practical skills, all under the rubric of "Things I Never Learned in Seminary." I learned to grow vegetables organically, to preserve that produce, and to save the seeds for next year. I also learned to make fresh cheese and yoghurt, to tap sugar maples and turn the sap into syrup, and to improvise fearlessly in the kitchen.

Beyond those skill sets was personal growth. Whatever your personality type, I guarantee that monastic life will stretch you. If you're a "perceiver" on the Myers-Briggs, someone who likes to go with the flow, the structured life will instill discipline. On the other hand, if you're a "judger" who thrives on structure, the predictable disruptions in the schedule will teach you flexibility.

If you're an extrovert, who gets energy from having people around, the silence built into the life will force you to turn inward, assuming it doesn't drive you crazy. On the other hand, if you're an introvert who thrives on silence and being alone, living with the same people 24/7 will pull you out of yourself and force you to enter the "interpersonal playing field" in an intense way.

Obviously, monastic life is not the only kind of life that forces us to stretch and grow. What's unique about it, what makes it so intense, is the absence of distractions. In the community, if we were feeling out of sorts with ourselves or others, we couldn't easily retreat into the TV room, or put our feet up with a drink, or get in the car and go shopping. We were pretty well stuck with whatever it was, and forced to work it through. It put us smack up against our own shadow, on a daily basis. It also taught us something about how hard it is to love our enemies - and perhaps even more challenging, to love those who get on our nerves.

As I reflect on the lessons I learned in community, I realize that many of them correspond to the threefold monastic vow of *poverty, chastity, and obedience*. To my knowledge, every monastic community has some version of that triad. These words may sound quaint or antiquated, and they are indeed ancient. But I think that properly understood, each speaks to our time with radical urgency.

Take *poverty*, for example. At the farm, the sisters observe this vow through their food practices. They seek to live simply, in harmony with Earth. Although they wouldn't express it this way, they observe the UU Seventh Principle, "respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part."

The sisters grow most of what they eat, and they do it without pesticides or chemical fertilizers. What they can't grow themselves, they buy locally whenever possible. Since leaving the community, I've tried to do the same, with uneven success.

It's worth noting that monastic poverty is different from literal, involuntary poverty. It's not about living hand-to-mouth, but about renouncing personal ownership in favor of communal. Most contemporary monks and nuns acknowledge that they live quite comfortably. Some even believe that to refer to their lifestyle as poverty is an affront to those who didn't choose to be poor. They suggest that "simplicity" might be a better description of their vow.

In this connection, there's the story of a Franciscan friar visiting a well-appointed Benedictine monastery in California. Upon entering the beautiful and elegant main hall, he said, "Hm...If this is poverty, I'd like to see chastity!"

Which brings us to the second monastic vow. In a monastic context, *chastity* does mean "celibacy," though it has a broader range of meanings than that - for example, faithful married couples are chaste.

Many people assume that monastics take a vow of celibacy in order to be good or virtuous, with sexuality representing “the sins of the flesh.” But the monastic communities that I know affirm human sexuality, gay or straight, as a holy gift. Their practice is not a matter of abstinence to gain some heavenly reward. Rather, it’s seen as a path toward a certain kind of freedom, the freedom to extend love and compassion to a wide circle of people. The fruit of this surrender is monastic hospitality.

Within a monastic environment, chastity can be understood in figurative ways as well as literal. It goes beyond reference to physical expression, or lack thereof, and includes many ways of respecting peoples’ boundaries. This respect extends even to taming one’s thoughts. Not our ideas, or creative thoughts, but rather the thoughts of the aggressive ego - things like pride, envy, or resentment.

We may believe ourselves free of such thoughts. But I’m here to tell you: living in an enclosed community, one discovers they’re always lurking just below the surface, and it doesn’t take much to bring much to bring them to consciousness. Meg Funk, a Catholic Benedictine sister, even says that taming thoughts is the primary work of monastic life. It’s an ongoing process that gradually frees us to love others, and to “hear the ever so small voice of God deep inside.”

To give an example: I tend to think of myself as a fairly easygoing person, accepting of others. But one of my most disconcerting learnings from living in community is that I can be very judgmental - especially of people I deem to be judgmental. Believe me, it’s not a pretty picture!

Judging others turns out to be its own kind of boundary violation. It does its own kind of violence, both to others and to ourselves. Once we begin to tame this tendency, we grow in compassion toward others - and also toward ourselves, as we learn to accept our imperfections.

The third monastic vow is *obedience*. Of the three, this is generally acknowledged to be the most difficult. Even to hear the word makes many of us cringe, calling up images of drill sergeants, severe mother superiors, and mindless compliance. But “obedience,” in its Latin root, simply means “listening.” Benedict of Nursia, one of the guiding lights of monasticism, spoke of listening “with the ear of the heart.”

In community, that listening takes many forms. Sometimes it does mean putting aside our own desires, to do what someone else asks of us. Although this can be very difficult, it does teach detachment.

But obedience also carries broader connotations. At its best, it means listening to the entire community, and participating fully in its mission. This isn’t a matter of someone having *power over* others. Instead, it binds the community together, leading to a sense of power *with* others.

Sometimes I wonder: What would our UU communities be like if we practiced this kind of obedience? What if we listened deeply to one another with the ear of the heart? What if we listened deeply for a sense of common purpose?

Obedience has yet one more meaning. Properly understood, it also extends to ourselves - that is, to our deepest, most genuine selves. Obedience means listening to the still, small voice within our own soul, and attending to our deepest desires. Such listening has nothing to do with mindlessness, or with abdicating our hard-won adulthood. Quite the opposite - it means realizing our most authentic being.

Obedience to the quiet inner voice led me into the Community of the Holy Spirit - and it also led me back out again. During Lent of 2008, when around the farm, an insistent inner voice started bubbling up. What it said, with increasing clarity, was that it was time for me to come home - that is, home to parish ministry, and to my community of Unitarian Universalists.

Here's how it happened: I awoke one bright Saturday morning in February, and got out of bed. As my feet hit the floor, a thought popped up out of nowhere. "You know, Sue, your *real* passion is congregations." This took me aback. All I could say was "Oh!"

Other unbidden thoughts backed this one up in the days that followed. One day I stood washing dishes, looking out the window at a redbud tree starting to bloom: "By leaving ministry, you've cut off your right arm." Again, "Oh!"

Confirming dreams started coming in the night. In the most vivid one, I missed a bus full of women clergy in bright stoles, with whom I had planned to travel. I woke up from this dream quite agitated. Now, some dreams are hard to interpret - but this one seemed pretty clear!

In the end, then, the most important thing I learned from the sisters was a renewal of my own vocation, and of the vows I made at ordination, by now almost 28 years ago. Looking back, I realize that I needed a sabbatical from parish ministry. But it's clear to me now that I also needed to return.

This kind of obedience is for everyone. It's not just for ministers, not just for monks and nuns. Life invites us all to listen for the inner voice that tells us who we are. This isn't an individualistic voice. It's not about doing what we please, without regard to the people and places with whom we're in relationship. But neither is it about trudging along, governed always by "shoulds," by a misplaced sense of "duty."

Perhaps you're familiar with novelist Frederick Buechner's definition of vocation. It's found at the place "where our deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."¹

Commenting on this, the Quaker educator Parker Palmer writes, "The world needs *everything*." But vocation begins in what brings us joy - "the deep joy of knowing that we are here on earth to be the gifts that God created."²

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), 119.

² Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000), 16.

An invitation comes to each of us from the heart of life. For each, it will take a different form. But always the call is to live from the heart, from the depths of our being - and to be the gifts that we were created to be.

What's *your* deep gladness?

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Have you already found a way to live it out, connecting it to the world's deep hunger?

Or does it still lie dormant within you, full of potential, waiting for the spark that will release it?

Whatever your deep gladness, please know that it's a gift - and that *you* are a gift.

You are a gift, with the power to bless the world.