

Get Me to a Nunnery

By J. COURTNEY SULLIVAN DEC. 21, 2017



Three years ago this week, I was a guest at a cloistered Catholic abbey in rural Connecticut. I spent my days in near-silence, waking before dawn for Mass, working the farm alongside nuns in full habit. When bells rang at regular intervals, all work ceased so that the nuns could chant in Latin.

In the past 12 months, I've found myself returning again and again in my mind. I long for the quiet, the natural beauty, the sense of timelessness there.

It has been a year. I gave birth to my first child in June, the greatest joy of my life. But I worry about the world we brought him into. I wake each morning with a pit in my stomach, afraid to see what new bile the president tweeted while I slept. The worst mass shooting in modern American history occurred two months ago, and it seems that bad news piles up so fast that we've all but forgotten it. My parents got divorced this year. A dear friend was handed a cruel diagnosis. The image of that starving polar bear making the rounds on Facebook will never leave my mind. I still haven't finished my Christmas shopping, and I didn't buy Bitcoin in 2015 when my college friend's cousin's husband told me to.

At a time when the country is painfully divided, it's a comfort to cast myself back to the abbey, to the cozy guesthouse where I stayed with a handful of women from all walks of life. We bonded as we sat chatting and reading in the lamp-lit living room. We were expected to be in for the night after 7:30 prayers and to avoid the distractions of cellphones and the internet. No typing was allowed. I found myself writing in a journal by hand for the first time in years.

My younger self would never have believed I was there by choice. Raised Catholic in the 1980s, I was a skeptic from the start. At age 4, when my parents explained the concept of heaven, I told them I wasn't buying it. Years later, a budding adolescent feminist, I railed against Catholicism as sexist, hypocritical, shame-obsessed. When my mother found out I was skipping confirmation class to stay home and watch "General Hospital," she invited the parish priest to dinner to talk sense into me. As he passed the potatoes, I horrified everyone by asking him why God, with all that was wrong in the world, would possibly care about birth control.

I married a fellow lapsed Catholic. In him, I see certain positive traits that I attribute to a Catholic upbringing: goodness; service; a sense of moral clarity. Catholicism stays with you whether you like it or not. The Hail Mary is a muscle memory that comes to me in times of trouble. I say it reflexively when I'm scared, or late, or when I hear an ambulance siren. But my feelings about the church have remained over time, only intensified by the sexual abuse crisis.

And yet, seven years ago, I found myself glued to an episode of "The Oprah Winfrey Show" about young women joining a cloister in Ann Arbor, Mich. In a world full of options, they had chosen to take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, relinquishing both their free will and their iPhones.

I was reminded then of a story I had heard in my own family, about a woman who, in the 1970s, joined the cloistered Abbey of Regina Laudis. Her name is Mother Lucia. She's the sister of my aunt's best friend. For years, my aunt had been telling me that the two of us should meet, that we'd really hit it off.

I couldn't imagine what I'd have in common with someone who had spent the past four decades in a convent. But I kept thinking about nuns, and reading about them. In 2012, as working nuns were becoming the quiet heroes of a crumbling church — advocating same-sex marriage and contraception, even as the Vatican continued to dismiss both as sinful — I wrote to Mother Lucia.

She invited me to come for a parlor, a conversation held through a wooden grille. We talked for two hours. I learned that she was a lover of Shakespeare with a Ph.D. in English literature from Yale, who had first visited the abbey seeking peace, community, social justice. I liked her instantly and admired her. Before we parted ways, she invited me to return for several nights.

During my stay, we followed the Benedictine motto "Ora et labora," pray and work. Because the nuns are meant to be silent for most of the day, they can't always communicate with visitors directly, but they find their ways, slipping guests notes after Mass. Often the plan for the particular work of the day is communicated to a guest by a tiny note slipped into her hand.

When you work with the nuns, they talk. I gardened with an older nun as we discussed the fate of bees and the films of Judi Dench. I rode around on a John Deere Gator with a nun in her early 30s who wore a novice's white veil, as well as a nose ring. She wanted to join the abbey as soon as she graduated from college, but hers was a modern hindrance — a cloistered nun cannot have debt, and she had student loans to repay.

The abbey's inhabitants include a former movie star, politicians, businesswomen, artists of all kinds. Some came in reaction to a moment in time that defied understanding — the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the Vietnam War, the acquittal of the police officers who killed Amadou Diallo.

Right now feels like one of those moments to me. And so I sometimes dream of throwing off the trappings of our troubled world and joining them. The fantasy is not strictly female. With each horrifying news story lately, my husband has taken to asking, "Is it time for the abbey?" We talk about living in the (nonexistent) caretaker's cottage, raising our son up in fresh air, far from the evils of corrupt politicians and Pornhub.

It's Christmastime again, and I feel the longing most acutely now. At the abbey, even the smallest act is considered an act of devotion, so that every dish washed or loaf of bread baked takes on heightened importance. I couldn't have understood this as a kid, arguing with the parish priest. But I see it now. There is something powerful about being in the presence of faith when you yourself are doubting.

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