

**“WHAT I LEARNED FROM THE SISTERS”**  
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Two years ago, Labor Day weekend 2006, I began a pilgrimage that ended the first of May, but that will last a lifetime. I left everything behind – shelves and shelves of books, an apartment’s worth of furniture, and a seven-year ministry - and made my way to the Community of the Holy Spirit, a small women’s religious community in the Episcopal Church.

So, you might well ask, “What’s a nice Unitarian Universalist minister like you doing in a place like that? What ever prompted you to go live in a convent?” And, the more I think about it, the more I realize that my motivations were complex.

I left our UU tradition for a time, to live a life foreign to most UUs. But the impulse that led me there has deep roots within Unitarian Universalist tradition. I’m thinking specifically of Henry David Thoreau, who is part of our heritage, even though he wasn’t much of a churchgoer. When Thoreau explains why he went to live at Walden Pond, he expresses the monastic impulse very well:

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 in the presence of God. This is the desire that led Thoreau to Walden Pond – and that also, for centuries, has led women and men 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 my ministry – that felt cluttered! I felt swamped by inessentials, what Stephen Covey calls the “urgent but not important” – in other words, not doing *ministry*.

Some kind of radical shift was needed, some way of getting back to basics. During my various ministries in different parts of North America, 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. In the absence of a UU community to join, I turned to the liberal wing of the Episcopal Church.

The Community of the Holy Spirit, or CHS, was founded in Manhattan’s Morningside Heights in 1952. Soon after, the sisters founded an elementary school, St. Hilda’s and St. Hugh’s. Later, the community acquired rural property, just over the line from Danbury, in Brewster, New York. There they established a second convent, “Melrose,” in an 18<sup>th</sup> century farmhouse, along with the Melrose School, with which some of you are familiar.

Decades later, after both schools became independent, the sisters had to discern new ministries for themselves. The Manhattan sisters pursued some of the classic monastic vocations: hospitality, spiritual direction, and retreat ministries. But in Brewster, the sisters took a different path. They joined the “Green Sisters” movement, already strong among Catholic sisters, and developed an environmental or “earth” ministry. Originally, the idea was to create an environmental learning center, an extension of the community’s teaching ministry. Later, it morphed into something else: a small organic farm, an experiment in sustainable living.

Altogether, I spent 20 months with the Community – almost eight months in the Manhattan house, and then a full year in Brewster. I imagine it will be months, or even years, before I understand all the ways that experience has changed me. This sermon, half a year after leaving, is only my first attempt to come to terms.

At one level, I acquired many practical skills. I could put together a long list of these, all under the rubric “Things I Never Learned in Seminary.” Some of them may be old hat to some of you, but they were new to me. For example, I can now walk fearlessly into a halfway well-stocked kitchen, open the cupboards and refrigerator, and immediately go to work improvising dinner for seven or eight. Before entering community, I was willing and able to do that for *myself*, but was leery of doing it for others.

I’ve gained confidence in growing vegetables organically – in fact I keep gazing longingly at all the land around our building! I’ve also learned many ways of putting up produce: canning, freezing, drying, pickling - or in the case of hot peppers, doing what they do in Santa Fe, which is to braid them into *ristras* and hang them as decoration. I know how to make fresh cheese and yoghurt, and to save seeds for the next growing season. And I’m reasonably confident that, given a few sugar maples and the appropriate equipment, I could tap the trees and make a little syrup. Sugaring off takes over Melrose every February and March.

Beyond the new skill sets I’ve acquired, there is personal growth. Whatever your personality type, I can guarantee that religious life will challenge and stretch you. If you’re a Myers-Briggs “P” – someone who likes to go-with-the-flow – the structured life of a monastery will instill discipline. If, on the other hand, you’re a “J” who thrives on structure, the very 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. If, on the other hand, you’re an introvert who thrives on silence, 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 place one is challenged to grow and change in such ways. If we’re open to it, any relationship will stretch us, at home or at work. What’s distinctive about religious life, and what makes it so intense, is the absence of distractions - the kind that for most of us provide temporary respite from issues and problems. For example, if we were feeling out of sorts in the community, it wasn’t that easy to retreat into another room and turn on the TV, 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. In the process, we had to face our own shadow, for good and for ill.

As I reflect on my learnings from living in community, it occurs to me that some of them correspond to the three-fold monastic vow of **poverty**, **chastity**, and **obedience**. No doubt many of you have already heard of that triad; every religious community I know of has some version.

Before I went into Community, a reporter for the Weston, Massachusetts newspaper interviewed me about my decision. She wondered why I had chosen such a “conservative” path. I had to tell her that to me, it seemed like a “radical” path, maybe the most radical thing I had ever attempted – and I’m a child of the sixties! The monastic vows may have a quaint ring to them, and in fact they go back centuries. But each, properly understood, speaks to our time with radical urgency.

Take **poverty**, for example. At Melrose, 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 community grows most of what they eat - about 75 percent of it - and they do it without any pesticides or chemical fertilizers.

What the sisters can’t grow themselves, they buy locally as much as possible, thus reducing the use of fossil fuel to bring food to the table. If you’ve read Barbara Kingsolver’s wonderful book, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, you’ll have a pretty good idea of what’s happening at Melrose. From sharing the Sisters’ life with them, I’ve learned a great deal about the connections between food, social justice, and the environment - and how our own daily practices make a difference.

One note of caution, though, about monastic poverty. At least in affluent countries, it’s different from literal, involuntary poverty. It’s about renouncing personal ownership, not living hand-to-mouth. Life on the farm is about abundance, not scarcity. In fact, most contemporary monks and nuns acknowledge that they live quite comfortably, and that to refer to their lifestyle as “poverty” is an affront to those for whom poverty is not a choice.

There’s a story of a Franciscan friar visiting a well-appointed Benedictine monastery in Santa Barbara. Upon entering the beautiful and elegant main hall, he said, “Hmmm...If this is poverty, I’d like to see chastity!”

That brings us to the second monastic vow, that of “**chastity**” or “**celibacy**.” Many people assume that monks and nuns are celibate 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 divine gift. They surrender the possibility of the physical expression of love, not to win some reward in heaven, but rather to achieve a certain kind of freedom. The fruit of this is monastic hospitality. As Kathleen Norris points out in *Amazing Grace*, “[Monks and nuns] do not mean to scorn the flesh...The goal is being free to love others, non-exclusively and non-possessively, both within their monastic community and without.”

By the way, it’s worth noting that “chastity” and “celibacy” are not quite the same. One can be chaste without being celibate. Couples in faithful, committed relationships practice chastity, whether they think of it that way or not. And within a monastic environment, “chastity” can be understood in a metaphorical as well as a literal way. It goes beyond the reference to physical expression, and includes many ways of respecting personal boundaries – one’s own, and those of others.

This respect goes even so far as taming our thoughts. By this, I don't mean our creative thoughts, or our ideas. Rather, I'm talking about troublesome thoughts, the "seven deadlies" that weigh us down like a lead weight - pride, envy, resentment, malice, and so on. I can guarantee that living in a monastery, or anyplace where one is in silence a lot, will put a person in touch with all those thoughts, and more.

Meg Funk, a Catholic Benedictine sister, goes so far as to say that *the primary* work of monastic life is becoming aware of such thoughts, and then taming them. Such taming sets us free to love others – and allows us, in her words, to "hear the ever so small voice of God deep inside." If you don't like God-language, try substituting "conscience," or "the authentic self."

In my own case, I tend to think of myself as a fairly easygoing, non-judgmental person. But one of the things I learned in community is just how judgmental I can be – and this includes the practice of judging others whom I deem to be judgmental. It's not a pretty picture! In community, I learned that judging others is its own kind of boundary violation. It does its own kind of violence, both to the other, and to ourselves. Jesus of Nazareth and other spiritual teachers have it right: "Judge not, lest ye be judged." The judgments we make against others come back to us in full measure. Once we *know* that we're judging, we can begin to tame that impulse. In doing so, we grow in compassion – towards ourselves as well as others.

**Obedience** is the third monastic vow. Of the three, it's probably the most difficult. No doubt many of us cringe when we think of obedience. It may conjure up images of drill sergeants or Mother Superiors, and thoughts of mindless compliance. But "obedience," in its Latin root, simply means "listening." In community, that "listening" takes many forms. Sometimes it does include putting aside our own desires to do what someone asks of us. This is hard sometimes, but it also teaches detachment, which is a blessing.

But "obedience" carries broader connotations, too. At its best, it includes listening to the whole community, and participating fully in its mission. It's not a matter of one person having power *over* another – rather, it binds together the whole community, leading to a sense of power *with* others. Sometimes I wonder: What would our UU congregations be like if we practiced *this* kind of obedience – listening to one another, attending to a common vision?

"Obedience," properly understood, also extends to ourselves. That is, it includes listening to the still, small voice within our own heart. It means attending to our deepest desires. Such deep listening has nothing to do with mindlessness, nothing to do with abdicating adulthood. Quite the opposite, in fact - it means the realization of our most authentic self.

It was obedience to the deep inner voice that led me into the Community of the Holy Spirit - and it was the same obedience that led me back out again. During Lent this year, in February and March, when things had gotten very quiet around Melrose, an insistent inner voice came bubbling up. What it said, very clearly, was that it was time for me to come home.

Here's how it happened: I awoke one bright Saturday morning, got out of bed, and the very first thought that came to me was this: "You know, Sue, your *real* passion is congregations." "Oh!" I said. It stopped me cold, and immediately I knew the truth of it.

Other unbidden thoughts backed it up in the days that followed, and nighttime dreams offered confirmation. The most vivid one involved missing a bus, full of women clergy in bright stoles, with whom I had planned to travel. I woke up from this dream deeply agitated. Now, some dreams are hard to interpret, but not this one! I began to understand just how deeply I missed parish ministry.

And so, in the end, the most important thing I learned from the sisters was a renewal of my own vocation, and of my ordination vows, made in 1985. In retrospect, I did need a sabbatical from parish ministry – but I discovered that it’s part of my lifeblood.

Please keep in mind, however: “vocation” is not just for ministers and rabbis. It’s not just for monks and nuns. The task of all of us is obedience - to hear, and follow, the inner voice that tells us who we really are. It’s not an individualistic voice. It’s not about doing what we please. But it’s also not about trudging along, governed only by “shoulds.”

Novelist Frederick Buechner has this definition of vocation, or calling: It’s the place, he says, “where your deep gladness, and the world’s deep hunger, meet.” In discerning our calling, we *do* ask what the world needs, by all means. But let’s also be sure to ask what makes our own heart deeply glad.

In commenting on Buechner, the Quaker educator Parker Palmer points out, “the world needs everything.” But vocation begins “in what brings the self joy - the deep joy of knowing that we are here on earth to be the gifts that God created.”

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, to live from the depths of our being – and to be the gifts that we were created to be.