Columns
Spirituality
Religious Life



As a result of these and many other experiences in my spiritual journey, I have received new gifts and insights that I treasure every day. (Unsplash/Ekaterina Shevchenko)



by Laura Hammel

Contributor

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This time of separation and isolation due to the threat of the viral pandemic, as well as the resulting economic and political upheaval in our country, has given me time to think. Time to look back on my life and the decisions I have made. In doing this, I am aware of having a deeper understanding of myself and others. For me, these gifts of understanding are part of the treasured gifts of my spiritual journey.

In college I pondered questions like; "Who am I?" "Where am I going?" and "Why am I here?" Gradually these philosophical questions turned into questions about the meaning of life. Did this or that choice help me understand the reason for life or contribute to life's well-being?

After high school, I took a year of technical training to become a lab technician. I worked in the county hospital. I liked doing the work; however, soon boredom and routine got the better of me. I looked out the hospital window and wondered what other people were doing. I joined the Peace Corps and worked in Tunisia. That changed me. The strangeness of everything both challenged and delighted me. However, the hardest issue was language. They speak several languages: Arabic, French and their own dialect of Arabic. While I knew the very rudiments of Arabic from six weeks of language school, it was not enough.

From this experience, I learned the value and comfort it is to communicate with others. Unable to say much more than my basic needs, I was very isolated and lonely. I have some of those same feelings of isolation and loneliness with our current "stay at home orders."

Later in my 30s, I became part of the contemplative order of Poor Clares. This turned out to be a very formative decision. Living with a variety of women, who were often very different from any I had previously known, reshaped me in ways I could never have foreseen. I discovered that living with others who are intentionally dedicated to the spiritual journey is both supportive and challenging.

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I learned, as I lived with the Poor Clares, that being part of community living has a way of slowing down quick judgments and opinions. Time and willingness helped me to unlearn some of the rash behaviors that I had developed while growing up and defending myself against my three brothers. I slowly learned that I had to understand other points of view. I learned that I had to tame my ego. I had to learn new ways to respond to others. Once that happened, I remember that life's interactions changed for the better.

Let me give you one example: I am amused as I remember an adventure when we decided to replace the carpeting in our chapel. We agreed on the color, put down our money and decided to do the project in stages. The carpet installer took up the old rug and, to our surprise, underneath we found red oak wood flooring. It was in very bad condition, but it could be refinished.

This situation presented all the ingredients for a community challenge. There were four of us making the decision. There were two sisters who did not want a wood floor because of the loud and hollow noise made by people's shoes. My choice was to keep the beauty of the red wood floor and refinish it. The fourth sister didn't care which way the decision went.

I presented my case with very convincing facts and figures. The other two sisters were unmoved. They simply did not want the wood floor. I listened to them carefully in order to understand their points of view. When I heard their reasons for wanting the carpet, I finally could let go of my need for the red wood floor. I could accept having carpeting.

Realistically, it was not all that altruistic on my part. I realized that I did not want to live with two sisters who were jarred by the sounds the wood floor created as they prepared to pray. I agreed that the carpeted floor would be quieter and softer, which I must reluctantly admit, turned out to be true.



Our community's meditation chapel, with quiet carpeting (Laura Hammel)

The decision did take a while to resolve. We had to give each other time to see the others' point of view. The waiting time was not to allow the opportunity for us all to create better arguments for or against the carpet. The waiting time was to allow me to let my desire for the ascetic value of the wood to be open to the sincere feelings the others had about the carpet.

By this time, you have realized this is not about a carpet or wood floor. It is about something I learned as I lived in community. I learned to harness my will and allow room for the will of others.

I now work to honestly see another's point of view. In doing so, I gained something better than getting my way. I am learning more about myself, and know that I am more than my personal preferences. As a result of these and many other experiences in my spiritual journey, I have received new gifts and insights that I treasure every day.

I'm reminded of an often-repeated statement the late Bishop Untener was fond of saying; "Come the kingdom, all that matters is how we have treated each other."

[Laura Hammel is a member of the Sisters of St. Clare, a Poor Clare community in Saginaw, Michigan. In addition to the prayer ministry in her diocese, she has developed and maintained a website introducing different prayer forms useful at certain times of the year, including an Advent calendar, contemplation using Stations of the Cross, a Pentecost Novena and Mysteries of the Rosary.]