Columns
Horizons
Spirituality



(Unsplash/Karim Sakhibgareev)



by Tracey Horan

Contributor

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

February 5, 2021

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

I love praying near water. It doesn't need to be the ocean — give me a lake, a stream, water dripping down the side of a rock, and God tends to show up for me. Living in the desert, the closest I usually get in my day-to-day life is a sizable puddle during the rainy season. Although there are lots of arroyos, or dry creek beds, in southern Arizona, the nearest stream I can count on for flowing water year-round is about a 20-minute drive north of where I live. Last weekend I took our dog Pirulín with me for a hike along this stream, with the intention of reflecting on perpetual vows. More specifically, I am in the process of requesting tertianship, the year in preparation for perpetual vows with the Sisters of Providence.

It's been a sacred process thus far, with affirming conversations, a good dose of self-reflection on my years thus far in community, and meaningful evaluation letters from my housemates and Sisters of Providence (think letters of recommendation, but focused on your capacity to live the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience in community with others). What awaited me was a one-on-one conversation with our congregational leader and presenting the fruits of my reflection on this next step to our leadership team.

Although I entered into the hike without expectations, what I found at the stream was not what I imagined. Pirulín and I started down the trail until we got to the point where I would normally cross a bridge to the other side, where the trail continues. But the bridge now rested on the surface of the stream: wooden planks attached to a rope, bobbing in helplessness. The heavy rains of the last couple weeks must have washed it away. We continued parallel to the stream, and I looked for a shallow area where we could cross, but without success. So we turned back, and I continued to scan the water for potential crossings. We couldn't get to the grove of trees I loved unless we could cross the stream.

It occurred to me that I could put down rocks or a tree branch to make my own crossing. As I contemplated my strategy, I watched Pirulín prance through the shallow water. It was his first time encountering a stream. His excitement made me laugh out loud. There was so much beauty and purity in it, perhaps like the initial excitement I felt about embarking on the road toward religious life, a mysterious way of being which, like any vocation, I only vaguely grasped before I chose to step into it.

I put my backpack down and started searching for liftable boulders I could heave into the stream. It was exciting, and I found myself taking on the task like a child gathering sticks to build her imaginary cabin in the woods. I realized about halfway through that I could also take my socks and shoes off and walk through barefoot, if necessary. The possibilities opening up excited me. It took more time, but I didn't mind. I was enjoying the exploration, seeking the right sized rocks and basking in the creative energy of it all. I also considered that if I created this rock path, others that came after me might benefit from it.

As I gathered up rocks and threw them into the stream, I started thinking through my own path to this stage in my religious formation and the moments I experienced as troubled water without a bridge. I thought of how much I had desired to go back to the US-Mexico border the year I was applying to join the Sisters of Providence, and how devastated I felt when it didn't work out. Yet here I am, seven years later, and Providence has led me back to the border and to a profoundly sacred ministry. I thought of my disappointment when my postulant director rejected my idea to volunteer as a part-time labor organizer my first year in community (a decision that I understand now made sense). A few years later, I found my way to faith-based community organizing.

The deeper yearnings of my heart did not leave me, but they did change course. In the same way, my call to religious life has been transformed. The deeper impulse to build the reign of God with other single-hearted seekers remains unchanged. Yet storms have shaken some of the surface structure, namely my idealistic expectations that sisters would show me a neatly packaged, simple path to radical Gospel living, with a bow on top. (Spoiler alert: it doesn't fit in a box.)

Advertisement

When I moved to our Motherhouse to begin my formal integration process, I had no idea what the next seven years would hold. Setting foot on the trail, I did not have a sense which bridges might be out and where I might be forced to forge ahead off-trail. And I don't believe I would have been prepared to hold it all then. It's only now, after weathering a few storms, that I can gleefully throw boulders into the stream, with some sense of confidence and joy about the lifelong journey that awaits me on the other side.

I believe, too, that this deeper memory of trial, loss, recalculation and resurrection is what can bring us through these tumultuous pandemic years. I consider this not with a Pollyanna-like optimism, but in awe at the creative bridge-making that I've seen for many of us comes only after the storm.

The stream-side reflection did not disappoint. After my whimsical rock-tossing venture, I looked at the string of boulders I had positioned and prepared to walk across the stream. Although I had worked hard to prepare the path, I realized my reach just was not enough to build up the far side of the stream. In the end, it was beyond me. What's more, I could not control or predict how steady each boulder had landed. As my satisfaction and excitement melted into uncertainty, I realized there was no way to know whether or not my feet would be immersed. It was out of my control. That's where faith filled the gap.

So it is with my preparation for tertianship. Even though I feel a deep peace about where I am and moving forward, there is still so much I cannot possibly see or hold in this moment — storms I cannot predict, detours or dead ends I may face. As I contemplated my imperfect boulder path, the realization sank in that as much as I have prepared and prayed and listened, with a lifetime commitment, there will always be a leap.

In the end, my feet did get wet, but I didn't mind. It was a thrill to make my way across, squealing like a child. As we build our own wobbly paths into a beautiful, sometimes painful unknown, I pray that the Holy Spirit shakes our certainty and nudges us to get our feet wet in ways that we would never have chosen, but will one day treasure.