Blog
Ministry
Spirituality



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Sometimes life – and cookie baking – does not go according to plan. (Julia Gerwe)

Editor's note: *Notes from the Field includes reports from young people volunteering in ministries of Catholic sisters. A partnership with Catholic Volunteer Network, the project began in the summer of 2015. This latest round of the series*

features volunteers in Orange California; Nazareth, Kentucky and New York City. This is Julia's first blog post. Read more about her.

I have learned many things in my 14 months serving with the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth through the Notre Dame Mission Volunteers. One is the power of storytelling.

Storytelling shapes our lives and the narratives we tell ourselves. Living and sharing stories of the experience of living help unite us to the past, present and future. Perhaps this is why I am so thrilled to be joining this Notes from the Field series. Primarily, I believe we can learn so much from the stories of those who experience this joy of living differently than we do. I hope that my writing will offer a new perspective to you in this way.

Secondly, I am selfishly excited to have the opportunity to utilize this storytelling experience as a living record of sorts. I look forward to looking back on these reflections as I move forward in my own life. How powerful our reflective mind can be in that way! I hope that in my writing you can find a piece of your own voice that can connect our stories.

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In addition to this immense power of storytelling, I believe in authentic storytelling. For this reason, I'd like to introduce myself to you from an authentic place: In this week of Christmas, I am immensely grateful for this season of rebirth as I stand here acutely aware of my own limitations. My busyness and perfectionism in this season have led me to feel isolated, suffocated and burnt out. This Christmas, I am learning to embrace the Eleventh Commandment — unwritten but indisputably important — "Thou shall not be alone."

How does a feeling of overwhelmed busyness and perfectionism translate to feeling alone? It circles back to a limiting belief that I and I'm sure many others hold: I am not enough. As to not limit myself in spelling this out, I'll continue: I am not enough unless I am *producing, succeeding, doing*. I am not enough *until* I am producing, succeeding and doing. Living as a volunteer in a new field sometimes makes this false narrative easier to swallow. How can I get *more* involved at my site? What *more* should I be doing to engage my community? What *more* can I learn and know

to do my work well? How can I be *more*? This season, I am leaning into the fact that I am enough, just as I am, and that I am exactly where I need to be in the order of the world.

The season of Advent is about preparing our hearts for the birth of the savior on Christmas Day — this I know. But in our culture, this season is about preparing our homes, bodies and gift closets for Christmas Day. No wonder it is so easy to measure our worth according to how much we "get done." Through my own overwhelm amidst the opportunities of this season — especially this season in which many feel a bit more freedom in social engagements, thanks to the COVID-19 vaccine — I have had to remind myself of what is sustainable for my body, mind and spirit. Less is often more.

To help in recognizing my own boundaries, a friend recently reminded me of a powerful truth: Don't confuse your desire for independence with our collective need for interdependence.

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As I serve with the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth's Office of Ecological Sustainability, I often witness the miracles of interconnected ecosystems in nature, perfectly tuned for survival and thriving right where they are. Not one plant is expected to "do more" and most plants actually experience a period of dormancy, or rest, during the colder months in which they literally do nothing. Nothing acts independently, and yet each species is magnificent in its own right. Isn't that what the universe/God/Goddess manifests for us? Isn't that what we should manifest for ourselves?

Recently I had an opportunity to bake and decorate Christmas cookies with some sisters in my community. We used cookie cutters to make festive shapes, but the cookies spread into a big blob upon baking. How did these sisters react amidst my partner's and my own anxiety at this outcome? They laughed. They got creative in the opportunity for new designs, and we all joked about the abstract art and new shapes that our (failed) cookie-cutter cookies took. In the end, we ate the cookies! The sisters and by extension, many women religious, are onto something here that I

didn't realize until processing my experience later that evening. Life doesn’t always go according to plan – in fact, life *usually* doesn't go to plan – but so long as we are together in the journey, we will be OK.

This is of great comfort to me, for though I am immensely privileged, I sometimes forget how small and non-unique my anxieties, fears and wonderings are. This understanding of interconnectedness also reminds me to be a stronger ally to communities on the margins. During this season in which light in the darkness takes the form of a Brown baby, born economically impoverished to migrating parents, let us remember that none of us exist in isolation. I write to you on land stolen from native peoples, from a campus at Nazareth partially constructed using slave labor. I write to you as a descendant of Italian and German immigrants, living economically comfortably in a community where roughly one out of every eight residents lives below the poverty line (as of 2019 and higher than that year's national average). This season, I am reminded that each of us was created as "enough" just the way we are. No matter what we do or don't do, our *being* is enough as is — and we only achieve true justice when this is fully recognized.

Engaging in and sharing this season of my life with religious women reminds me that life is designed to be cyclical: Community is meant to be shared and experienced, each season presents new opportunities for growth, and we are all connected. I, personally, feel better (physically, mentally, spiritually) when I feel connected. It seems that the exhaustion of my own doggie-paddling against the tide of the universe in this regard is all it took for me to return home (to myself) for the holidays. Merry Christmas!

***Editor's Note**: All views and opinions expressed in this article are current personal opinions of the author and do not reflect the views nor opinions of the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, or other organizations with which the author may be affiliated.*

This story appears in the **Notes from the Field** and **Advent** feature series.