Columns
Horizons
Spirituality



The author meditates in this backyard of her Chicago home. (Julia Walsh)



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On the Feast of the Assumption of Mary, I sat in my bedroom gazing into the backyard. The morning light illumined the foliage as I mused on the realities of uncertainty and chaos. I was thinking about personal and communal transformation, the paschal mystery, and how each of us, like Mary, can offer God a trusting "yes" to divine love. I was wondering if Mary's hope and faith were always strong, of if she — in her humanity — also felt disturbed and confused, like I often do.

Just then, a hawk landed on a telephone wire and all the animals nearby — sparrows, finches, cardinals, wrens and squirrels — hid and went silent. The hawk turned its head, switched its position on the wire and then dove into the row of cedar bushes lining the fence. I heard its giant wings rustling the branches and a racket of chirps. Birds fled from the bushes in every direction. I felt both horror and amazement until the little birds were silent: Was a raptor killing and eating another bird right outside my window?



When this hawk landed on the telephone wire, all the nearby animals hid and went silent. (Courtesy of Abby Rampone)

Horror and amazement. Uncertainty is powerful because it invites us into a nondual space. We feel uncertainty and doubt in religious life, as does everyone in their lives. With uncertainty we encounter hope and fear; trust and doubt; acceptance and denial.

The stories we tell ourselves when faced with uncertainty shape our identity and design our futures. Faced with adversity, are we dying or still alive? Faced with

changes in the size of community, are we in decline or changing shape? Faced with complexity, are we courageous and creative, or are we exhausted and overwhelmed? All these experiences are not only possible, but are likely to happen, concurrently.

Even though we may want to see only the beauty, there are times when the spiral of uncertainty is too dizzying to see anything at all. Uncertainty can intensify fears, and worries seem to be the greatest force in the stormy spiral. Sometimes this happens to me when I am faced with a new challenge or responsibility, when I am forced out of my comfort zone into a space of great discovery and growth. I don't know how to do this. I've never been here before. Faced with these thoughts and feelings multiple times in a day, it's no surprise that anxiety and confusion can cloud feelings of faith. It's no wonder my body aches and my sleep is restless.

As Dr. Oliver Page puts it:

> It takes courage to step from the comfort zone into the fear zone. Without a clear roadmap, there's no way to build on previous experiences. This can be anxiety provoking. Yet persevere long enough, and you enter the learning zone, where you gain new skills and deal with challenges resourcefully.

There are also times when uncertainty is exciting. I feel a shimmer across my skin and a lightness across my chest, as I dream and envision what's possible, as I lean into hope and faith. What's the difference? Why is uncertainty sometimes energizing, sometimes draining?

For me, making sense of the power of uncertainty at any given point — whether it's energizing or draining — comes from assessing how the intensity of the circumstances interplay with my actual needs. I was thinking about this recently in light of an upcoming overseas trip. Much of what would have felt like an exciting adventure just a decade ago is frightening to me right now.

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During a recent homily, I heard a priest proclaim that the Gospels show us that with Christ the beginning and end of the story is peace, but the middle is chaotic and

messy. The cross shows us that the middle can be awful. The point is to pay attention to where we are on the journey. And, the journey of Christian discipleship demands that we embrace suffering and uncertainty; we understand and accept that God asks for much. We say "yes" anyway, because we know that Christ deserves our faith and trust. We know how the story ends.

This message in the homily resonated because just a few hours prior, I was feeling stuck in the mess of a big project when I remembered that my life of faith has taught me that I must go through chaos and disorder before I can arrive to clarity and certainty. I don't have to trust the feeling of being stuck; I get to lean on my faith.

Compared to uncertainty, faith is a force that can help us navigate a path onward. Every major world religion and every religious community is built upon the mysteries of faith. And faith, as we know is: "the evidence of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). So, as women religious in the Catholic Church, let us have eyes of faith: Let us look for evidence of God's grace in the midst of predator attacks, storms, disasters, upheaval, polarities and the shifting landscapes of religion — let us search for grace.

When I am uncertain, I cope by searching for signs of God's grace at work. I look for evidence. Zooming out to our global experience of moving through the past few years of the coronavirus pandemic, I see evidence that we know how to adapt and imagine new ways of gathering, building community and tending to each other. I see increased consciousness about needs for rest, justice and equity. I see evidence that we desire health, wellness and connection.

Thinking about the shifting landscape of religious life, I see God at work, grace abundant, in new dreams alive such as at Magnificat House in El Paso, Texas, and at The Fireplace community (where I live) in Chicago. I see God's grace in the generosity of strangers, the encouragement and kindness felt in community, and even in the stunning wonder of a predator attacking prey.

Searching for grace allows uncertainty to shape-shift into a passageway, to become a bridge to a liminal space, where hope is stronger than fear. Personal and global: Much is uncertain, but we need not get stuck in the uncertainty. Instead, we can gaze into the landscape of reality and allow ourselves to be open to amazement and horror: All is possible. And with Christ, clarity shall arrive, even dimly. Even if you feel like a tiny wren escaping from a hawk in the morning light.