Columns
Religious Life



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"*Kiss today goodbye/ And point me toward tomorrow.*"
—"What I did for Love," from "A Chorus Line"

Life in a religious community for 60 years has not been a life of hardship. Of isolation. Of loneliness. It has been a life grounded and centered in graced love.

There are so many stories of this love life. I hugged a young girl as she told me about home, where she was whipped with an extension cord. I helped her to report it. On a cold day in winter, I visited the family of a student where the only heat was from the flames on the stove. A deep discussion with a young high school student who was struggling with her vocation choice. A thank-you letter from a woman in Bolivia who had sent me things to sell — placemats, napkins and stoles that she wove on her backstrap loom.

Helping a priest in Haiti sell his students' artwork so they could help to feed their families. The thanks for my service at Catholic Charities Refugee Services from a father who had escaped with his family from torture in his homeland of Burundi. The love I shared with a 16-year-old boy who returned my love for him with a welcome into the story of his tortured life. I had some success with my attempts but not always. Sweetness and sorrow.

These are not my stories alone. I believe that all sisters in the U.S. have their own stories to illustrate this graced love. The first-grade teacher who taught babies to read and write. The high school teacher who pulled her students to success with humor and yes, with love. The nurse who held and comforted her dying patient. The social worker who found gloves and underwear for those who slept in the street or found clothes and hope for women in a shelter. Sisters establishing havens for women who needed safe space. Lawyers who fought in the courts for those who could not fight for themselves. Scholars whose words and insights urged us on. Graced love. We took it seriously.

As we turn toward tomorrow, we realize — as energy fades, as we often walk with a limp, as we savor memories — that we would do it all over again.

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The thousands of us in the heyday have become older and fewer and fewer. We worked long hours in the classrooms, in nursing homes, in hospitals, in the streets. And not to forget the heroines in the kitchen who kept us nourished so we would have the energy to do our work. Our work in fact became their work as well. And after long hours we made time for silence and meditation asking for help, not for ourselves but for those we served. And in gratitude for when help arrived.

In 1966 there were 181,421 of us in the United States. Today there are less than 42,000. Now is the time to pass the torch. The fire of love and dedication. Young men and women who volunteer a year or two of their lives. New social organizations that fight for the oppressed and the tortured. The teachers who surround their students with dedication and warmth. The peacemakers who march and demand rights for all and for dignity for all women. Those who rescue children in trouble and wrap them in love and tenderness. The ones who support people in the LGBTQ community because they are children of a loving God and deserve love and respect.

Activists who do whatever it takes to eradicate gun violence. They are authentic in their embrace of diversity. They do not undervalue any person or group. And the young people who take politics seriously and never miss a vote and who speak out with gusto for those who have no voice. They are brave and fearless with their voices and their energy. Instead of canes they have the tools and the power to change the world and to save the planet. We need to make sure that they know that they are receiving the torch.

All of our yesterdays were filled with dedication and purpose. We worked hard and dared to dream. We recognize that even without being as much in the streets, in hospitals, in schools — that we continue to do the best we can despite aging and infirmity. But in our heart of hearts, we know that our purpose has been inherited. It is time to pass the torch to those with energy and promise. With determined effort to make the world kind and peaceful. They are all around us and ready to go. These are the ones who are fearless and who resolve to live their lives with promise for the future. Those we loved paid attention. Now is their time.

Today has become tomorrow already and is filled with peace, with sweetness for us. The world is in good hands. We can relax (being careful when we walk!) and know that we did what we could. And what we could do was good enough for then. But the work, the love, is not finished. Time to welcome others. To cheer them on. To thank them for their energy and their goodness.

And then to cherish their stories.