

9/25/22

I'm starting to wonder if surrender is the new conquer. If it is, this mysterious yet strong call to religious life doesn't surprise me as much. After all, the most consistent prayer I've uttered, over the last few decades, is three simple words: "Use me up".

"Spiritual but not religious" is how I've always categorized myself—on everything from dating profiles to government forms. But, here I am on my first ever vocational visit. If you're like me and aren't familiar with the term, vocational visit, it's where you visit a religious community to explore whether or not it would be a good fit for you, to see if you are truly called to religious life.

I have been here fourteen days, but it feels like four. We pray five times a day in a quaint chapel, where the sisters face each other in two rows, and I sit in the back.

God's arms stretch out across my days here, elongating them with a stillness of heart and spaciousness of mind. I am reminded of what St. Clare said, "The road to heaven is *also* heaven". This comforts me, knowing that the road to discernment is also discernment.

I often completely zone out in the Divine Office, and lose my place on the page. The other day as the sisters recited the psalms, I saw, in my mind's eye, a billowing white tarp covering the entire globe. The tarp was pinned to the earth in countless places. The pins holding the tarp down were the sisters and all the world's committed prayer warriors. They appeared to me as tiny, colorful worry dolls (those knitted miniscule figures from Guatemala that you place under your pillow at night).

With this tarp, the religious were holding the earth and its creation together with their prayers and love, to keep it from falling apart from all its brokenness. Tears began to roll down my face and wet my COVID mask.

Today, I lost my place in the readings again. The psalms were being sung chorally and angelically. This time, I let them wash over me instead of flipping through the book to find my

place. Looking up at the two rows of sister, I saw that we were on a boat, not in a chapel. The boat was flanked by sisters, five on each side, and they were dutifully rowing. They were carrying me across a large body of water, like a sea. I couldn't see the other side. I wondered why I didn't feel guilty, for not having an oar, to help them row, for letting myself be carried. I was going nowhere and everywhere at once, and yet I felt guided. A soft peace enveloped me.

I like to think that God knows the contours of our hearts, so it's not a big deal if I lose my place in the readings, or that I don't know where the tide is taking me. Whatever this pull is, it was strong enough to lead me away from a dream job that landed on my lap less than a year ago. Before coming here, I taught writing to graduate students at Columbia University in the Department of Narrative Medicine as a Faculty Associate. It was my first job in higher education, and this fall would have been my second semester there. I was given an additional class to teach, a raise, and an opportunity to work alongside another professor whose writings I deeply admire. Because it was a position that I felt so proud to hold, a teaching experience that I would have done for no pay, I cried when I sent in my resignation. However, when I began packing my bags to come here, an unexpected buoyancy swept over my heart.

The choices I've been making lately seem to be not so much between "right and wrong" but between "God and more God."

Maybe, to really be something in this world, to make a splash, as our culture encourages, or to rise to the top, as we are taught in school, we must let love have its way with us.

I have put up a bit of a fight, resisting this call, and perhaps there is still some left in me. (By fight, I mean will. And by will I mean resisting love. And by love I mean God). But I am more ready than ever to put it all on the line for love. To let all that isn't love, fall into the sea—to grab an oar and row with the others, toward the infinite shore.