

Episode 10: “Out There”

ERIKA LANTZ: Mary was out. After 20 years -- 20 years of uplifting moments of spiritual grace. Twenty years of vexing questions about her vocation. Mary Johnson put on her paisley skirt and gold blouse and stepped out of the convent in Rome and into a car. This was it. Mary left the Missionaries of Charity.

Her sister picked her up from the airport in Houston. On the way to her house, they made a stop. Mary would be living outside the convent for the first time in decades, and her sister said she'd need a few things.

MARY JOHNSON: “I need to pick up a mattress for you. I didn't know if you like the hard ones or the soft ones.”

ERIKA: Mary wasn't used to getting to choose a mattress, let alone having a real mattress. As a Missionary of Charity, they'd stuff their own mattresses with wool or whatever was around, and it was only about three inches thick.

MARY: (laughs) And here I was going to get to choose my own mattress from this enormous selection, so that was kind of weird.

ERIKA: But her sister had another errand in mind: She had a pool at her place, and she knew how much Mary loved the water, at least when she was a kid. So, of all things to do after 20 years of life in a convent, they went swimsuit shopping.

MARY: I mean, most of my body hadn't seen the sun in 20 years. And there I was, going to get a swimming suit, and I was just so embarrassed and, like ... I wouldn't let her come into the dressing room with me. And, anyway, we found a swimming suit that fit and brought it home.

ERIKA: Mary had her own room, and even though so much was new -- new mattress, new swimsuit, new bedroom -- she *still* automatically woke up at 4:40 every morning. It was like she was still in sync with the community she had left. As an MC, she felt that sense of community from the moment she woke up.

But now, early in the morning, she just lay there quietly -- alone. She might even go back to sleep, and she liked that, too.

MARY: No bell was going to ring that was going to force me out of bed and onto my knees. That was really nice; I could choose when I wanted to get up.

ERIKA: First thing each morning, Mary went to her sister's pool and swam. It felt luxurious. It felt free.

MARY: You can take off the habit and grow your hair and start walking around like a regular person. But inside, being a Missionary of Charity leaves a very, very, very deep mark. And for me, being there for 20 years and so deeply immersed, separating wasn't just simply a matter of leaving.

ERIKA: From Rococo Punch and iHeartRadio, this is "The Turning." I'm Erika Lantz. Part Ten: Out There.

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ERIKA: The world had changed since Mary joined the Missionaries of Charity in the late seventies. Some things she had a reference point for but a lot of it was completely foreign: pumping your own gas, going to the ATM, using a computer.

MARY: One time my niece made popcorn in the microwave, and I thought the house was going to explode! (laughs) 'Cause I had no idea what that was. (laughing) I had no idea, these noises! Popcorn in the microwave was a revelation.

ERIKA: When she left the order, a sister gave her 400 German Marks — the equivalent of a little more than \$200 for her 20 years.

MARY: I looked at that deposit slip, and I thought, "Look at that, they gave me \$11 for every year of service." (laughs)

ERIKA: Oh my gosh.

MARY: Talk about a minimum wage!

ERIKA: \$11 a year.

MARY: \$11 a year.

ERIKA: Mary still trusted in God, but that wasn't going to pay the bills.

One of her first jobs was at JC Penney in December of 1997: the Christmas rush.

MARY: I was used to to silence and prayer and here it was "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" and "Frosty the Snowman" playing all the time. And it was all these people with credit cards buying gift after gift, and a lot of the stuff in the gift department were useless tchotchke kind of things, you know? These little figurines, I couldn't figure out why people wanted little figurines. (laughs) I was used to repairing broken toys to give to kids who would otherwise have nothing on Christmas. It was strange. It was strange for me.

ERIKA: Mary still remembers the first time she went out to eat in a restaurant. Her sister took the whole family out to dinner.

MARY: I was faced there with this menu, with all these choices. It took me forever to make up my mind. I didn't know if I would ever again, you know, have a chance to choose what I was going to eat. It was like this momentous decision. I think everybody was getting kind of nervous with me, because I wasn't making up my mind, and the waiter had to come back, and then eventually I ordered something.

ERIKA: As Mary mapped out her new life, her mind wandered back to Tom. Father Tom had made the thought of leaving possible.

He had helped her imagine a life outside the convent. They pictured waking up together, making coffee, holding hands in public without guilt or shame. He'd given her a taste of a fuller life -- and she knew that's what God wanted for her.

When Mary asked the MCs for exclaustation, that year of contemplation before officially leaving the order, she had called Tom. He had asked her, "Does this mean you would consider marrying me?" She couldn't tell if he meant it. It was such an awkward proposal. But she needed time.

Now, she was in Texas, out of her sari and away from the convent.

MARY: So at a certain point, I knew I was ready to talk to him, and that if he was going to ask actually really directly if I would consider marrying him, I was ready to entertain that notion.

ERIKA: So she called him. It was the first time they talked since she left. But once she got him on the phone, it was clear Tom had decided to remain a priest.

MARY: I definitely had to honor that. That's that's what he wants. That's that's the way it is. And, um, yeah.

ERIKA: How did it feel to hear that?

MARY: I was prepared to hear that, you know. It it was, it was kind of sad. You know, it kind of shut one door. For me there's very often, even if something sad, if it comes with a certain sense of clarity, it's a kind of a gift. I appreciated the clarity. That was that was good.

ERIKA: And she moved on -- still trying to hear what God had to say.

When Mary left the Missionaries of Charity, she had work to do. Not just finding a way to make money or learning how to use technology. She had to face the way the MCs had changed her -- internally. She told me about a time when she was staying at a religious center. She'd moved out of her sister's house after a couple of months, and she found this center with sabbatical

programming and “wellness” treatment for clergy. It was around this time that she noticed how muddled her emotional responses were.

MARY: I was talking with the sister who was in charge of the place, and it was something very sad or upsetting. I don't really remember what I was talking to her about. But I remember that I was, I was very sad and I felt like I wanted to cry, but what came out was these giggles and this laughter! It was like, I don't know how to express my emotions properly anymore. Because Missionaries of Charity are not supposed to be sad. You're supposed to be cheerful all the time. You're supposed to smile. And I had just been disconnected from what I might be feeling inside, how to express that -- I didn't know. And so whenever there was something sad, I was like laughing instead of crying.

I think that one of the big things that I've been working on for many decades now is trying to reconnect my emotions and their expression, trying to reconnect my mind and my body, trying to be fully connected. I have been consciously working on that.

ERIKA: In a way, she had to relearn how to think and how to feel. God had called her out, but in the real world, it would take time to shift her mindset. She had to untangle guilt and questions about faith. Come to terms with her relationship with Mother Teresa. There was no one moment. No final epiphany.

Mary was at that center for priests and nuns when Mother Teresa died.

MARY: I found out from one of them who had heard it on television. And it was ... it was a shock. It was very hard to mourn Mother Teresa's passing alone. Without the sisters.

ERIKA: Why?

MARY: Well, imagine someone who's very close to you in your family and perhaps your own mother. And when she dies, you can't be with the family. You have to be off on your own by yourself. That's hard.

I had tried to call the sisters in Rome many times, but, uh, never managed to get through. Of course the phone there was always busy, even during regular times, so when Mother died even more, so I never managed to get through.

ERIKA: A few days after Mother Teresa died, there was a memorial celebration at a cathedral in Houston. Mary went and sat in the back. In his homily, the bishop spoke about how he met Mother Teresa once when her plane had a layover in Houston.

MARY: And he spent about half an hour with her. And there I was, who had known and followed and loved her for 20 years, in the back.

ERIKA: She knelt in the pew and cried.

MARY: And it all felt so strange. They had a big picture of her up at the front. And after nearly everyone had gone, I went and stood in front of that picture for a long time.

I felt like I had lost a family member or someone who knew me, someone who I cared for, someone who cared for me. Of course my last conversation with Mother had been very, very difficult. So that's also kind of hard, knowing that somehow I had disappointed her.

ERIKA: That feeling did not go away easily.

MIDROLL

ERIKA: Over the course of your life, there are times when you have to leave things behind. Maybe a relationship, a job, your family, home. Leaving the MCs is all of those at once. And that's just the first step. Then you have to make your own way.

SUE WEBER: I mean, the first couple of weeks, you're just happy to be back with great meals and a great bed and incredibly loving people around you. But for me, the other piece of the pain is you're gone for so long, and you're trying to come back into your family, and so many years of their connections and growth and life, you are not a part of.

ERIKA: Sue Weber is the sister who ran the AIDS hospice in San Francisco.

SUE: Even now, for me, there's elements -- and they're not good or bad, I think they're just, I think it will always be that way -- where you know you're a part of the family and you're super connected, but there's an element that there's so much that you missed, that you're, a lot of times, on the outside looking in.

ERIKA: People don't really know what you've been through. How could they? How do you describe what it's really like inside a closed community led by a celebrity saint? How do you get past people's assumptions?

When Sue first left, she still wore her sari. She was still weighing what to do -- go back to the MCs or leave. She'd moved to her hometown in Pennsylvania to live with her parents. She says when you wear the white and blue sari, everyone notices you.

SUE: You know, people would stop you on the street and be like, "Can can I touch you?"

ERIKA: It's like people didn't see *her*. They saw what she wore, and what that represented. They saw Mother Teresa -- the Mother Teresa they thought they knew -- and that got in the way of her decision making.

SUE: I couldn't come to any clarity, unless I took off the habit and was seen.

ERIKA: So, she wrote to the MCs and got permission to wear street clothes.

Sue's sister Joan, has been out of the MCs for more than three decades. She still has a picture of Mother Teresa in her office.

JOAN WURSTER: I love her to death. And she is -- I consider I have certain saints in heaven that I love and read about and call out to and ask for divine intervention many times. She's one of them.

ERIKA: So it was weird for her when she was teaching a religion class for kids, and a Mother Teresa impersonator came by.

JOAN: She puts an outfit on that looks like Mother Teresa's outfit and then she, like, hangs laundry and then she kind of tells the story of Mother Teresa's life. I don't know, it's really weird. It's just, you look at her and you're like ... I can't even explain it. It's like, you know what the demeanor of of a Mother Teresa nun is, you know what it looks like and what they do and, "Really? Do you know, (big laugh) you know, you're sitting there and you're like, "OK, that's not true, (laughing) that's not true." You know what I mean? It's like, they try to understand by her readings, or her or things that have been written about her, but they really don't know. And so it wasn't there, that's all I was just saying. It's weird for me to watch someone portray Mother Teresa.

ERIKA: Sue and Joan both knew Mother Teresa. It's a comfort that they can talk about their time in the Missionaries of Charity -- and they get it. It's part of what makes them close.

JOAN: There's not many people that understand the Missionaries of Charity. And no matter how many times you try to explain it, a lot of people look at you like you're weird because of the penances that you did and didn't understand where we were coming from when we did the penances. So, so I don't share my, I really do not share my story. (**SUE, in background:** Yeah, me either. I don't.) Because, people can't relate. If you haven't had the experience, you can't relate.

ERIKA: Mary Johnson doesn't usually tell people she was an MC. It's just easier not to go there.

MARY: Where it usually comes up, actually, is people will ask me, "Where are you from?" Because I still have a slight accent in my voice. And I'll say, "Well, you know, I I was born in Michigan, um, kind of grew up in Texas." "You don't sound like that." And then, you know, I eventually, I get around to saying something very vague, like, "Well, I lived for a number of years in an international community where we all spoke English but hardly anyone as their first language. And I had to develop a way of speaking so they could understand me with clear vowels and clear consonants." And they'll look at me with this big question mark on their faces, and sometimes I just have to explain what I did with my life for 20 years. And when I do, people who aren't Catholic, they say, "Oh, what a wonderful thing to have done with two decades of your life," and, "Tell me about Mother Teresa. What was she really like?" And nearly without

exception, Catholics, they say, “Why did you leave?” Because there are some acceptable reasons for leaving and some that aren’t.

KELLI DUNHAM: I had so much shame.

ERIKA: Kelli Dunham, the former sister who’s a standup comic, felt rejected, like Jesus gave up on her offer to give her life to him. And now, here she was on the outside with no money.

KELLI: And I really didn’t have any skills; I didn’t have any more skills that were applicable to the American workplace. Like I was 23, 24 years old, and I had almost a four-year gap in employment history; that was hard to explain, you know? And I remember I had a composition notebook that had like all the jobs I was applying to, and I’d cut out a New Yorker cartoon, and it was a guy doing a job interview and he said, “Am I a team player? Are you kidding? I was in a cult!” And I’d crossed out “cult” and put “convent.” Uh. (Laughs) And that cartoon actually helped me a lot. ‘Cause I felt so alone.

ERIKA: When she first left, she was embarrassed about leaving. But over time, she feared being judged for joining in the first place.

KELLI: Yeah, I was more closeted about it. I didn’t know anybody else who was an ex-nun. And then as I started going to something called the Conference for Catholic Lesbians, and that whole thing was full of ex-nuns.

ERIKA: Kelli was stunned to learn just how many lesbian ex-nuns there were. They had pool parties and prayed the rosary.

KELLI: Which I thought was like such a great thing to do at a pool party. And then, at some point, everyone took off all their clothes and went swimming! And I was like, “This is great. This is way better than the convent. This is really great.”

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ERIKA: When Colette Livermore left the MCs and went home in Australia, Mother Teresa sent her letters asking her to come back. She tucked little cards inside them.

COLETTE LIVERMORE: Three times, she sent me a card depicting a Christ figure.

ERIKA: In the illustration Jesus was covered in wounds and bleeding, with his hands tied.

COLETTE: With the her writing at the bottom saying, “Be the one.”

ERIKA: But Colette didn’t go back. Instead, she pursued what she’d dreamed of as a teenager: She went to medical school. Most of her classmates were 13 years younger than she was. She

says in med school, she learned “to think again, to doubt, to analyze the evidence rather than to give unquestioning assent” to what she was told.

But even as her worldview shifted, she still felt the shadow of her 11 years as an MC.

In med school, she avoided telling people she'd been a sister with Mother Teresa. They treated her differently if they knew. And, instead of volunteering for procedures, she'd find herself hanging back, hoping she wouldn't be selected.

COLETTE: My confidence was gone. I was very unassertive, as well. You know, in classes, you've got all these young people around you brimming with self-confidence. and they want to have a go.

ERIKA: As a doctor, for a while, she worked in northern Australia, and every week or two, she'd fly 280 miles on a mail carrier to a remote settlement and treat the Aboriginal community there.

Sometimes Colette worked alongside MC sisters. On a rare occasion when Colette got a chance to eat a meal with them, they asked her why she left. She explained, and Colette found that they, too, had experiences when superiors told them to refuse help to the sick. She was relieved; it validated her experience.

Colette's professional life was fulfilling. Her work as a doctor was busy, and she got a chance to travel and experience cultures that were new to her. Her life was full, but the MC imprint is there.

COLETTE: Well, I haven't married. I would have liked to have. I was really, really wanting to find a life partner, but it just just didn't happen.

ERIKA: Do you think the Missionaries of Charity had affected some of that? Was it timing or also just kind of it took awhile to break out of that mindset, do you think?

COLETTE: Oh, I think it was both. I know I did want a partner and to have kids, 'cause the biological clock was ticking. I had very poor self confidence.

I mean, lots of people leave the convent and find partners the next day, (laughing) so I don't know what it is with me. That's what I used to wonder. But yeah. I didn't, anyway. And I'd get very sad in thinking, “Everyone can find a partner except me, what's wrong with me, blah, blah, blah.” (laughs) And so, but I got over that in a while. I thought, if it happens, it happens, but, never did.

Oh, everybody gets lonely sometimes. I get hope from friendships, and I find hope in, you know, my nephews had a new little girl. She's beautiful. I've got great nieces. And I find a lot of solace in nature, in beautiful things. When I go bush walking and seeing flowers and beautiful vistas of the sea -- all that makes me feel happy. You get those moments where you just stare and it's everything.

The most important thing is love -- everything you can do to strengthen that is the most valuable thing.

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MARY: I would have been happy to date. There no ... nobody was interested in me. I really stuck out in Southeast Texas. You know, I wasn't really kind of dating material, also, in the beginning. And I was still trying to figure things out.

ERIKA: For a while, Mary Johnson toyed with the idea of starting her own community -- one for women *and* men, open to many faiths, even those with no faith. It would be only the good parts of the MCs -- a life focused on love and serving the poor.

Mary ended up working a number of different jobs. She ironed clothes, worked as a receptionist in a doctor's office, and as a liturgical director at a church. She went back to college, and then went on to graduate school to study writing. And that's where she met Luke.

MARY: And we just had an immediate connection.

ERIKA: About three years after she left the MCs, Mary was at a 10-day writing residency. On her first day, she was overwhelmed and intimidated. The people she met pontificated about authors she'd never heard of.

At lunch, a charming but shy fellow resident sat opposite her. They started talking.

Luke was a doctor, but he was studying poetry. He'd gotten frustrated with parts of being a physician, like dealing with insurance companies, and he felt like studying poetry was a way to restore his soul.

MARY: And I wouldn't even say that we ever really dated. It was this one week together. I went back to Texas, and, uh, you know, within a couple of months, he was inviting me to move in, and that was it.

ERIKA: Mary says Luke was a good listener -- creative, quirky, the type of person who wants to keep growing. Always improving with time, getting deeper, better somehow. They could talk for hours.

Moving in with Luke for the first time put on display how many habits from MC life were still a part of Mary. She apologized constantly for things that didn't matter, because that's what she did for 20 years.

MARY: If you broke a plate as a Missionary of Charity, you had to kneel down and kiss the floor and confess your fault for having busted this plate. And so I, you know, I was apologizing. I was

asking permission for things that nobody asks permission for, you know, “Would it be alright if I uh have a cup of tea now?” Well, you know, just ridiculous things! But, it took a long time for a lot of those things to fall away from me.

ERIKA: Getting closer with Luke allowed her to process some of her darker times with the MCs. She says he recognized what she was struggling with, partly because of his past experience. In college, he worked on a crisis intervention hotline.

MARY: And he had also been on a board of an abused women's shelter, so he was very familiar with the cycle of women who get stuck in abusive relationships of one sort or another. And I think he saw my relationship with the church, with Mother Teresa, with Jesus as having a lot of those elements of abuse and how very often that abuse can be something that actually strengthens the bond between the abuser and the abused, reinforcing feelings of guilt, reinforcing an unequal power dynamic, um, holding you captive in one sense or another. So I think he understood all of that even more clearly than I did.

ERIKA: Mary was wracked with guilt -- for disappointing Mother Teresa, for turning her back on her vows. In the convent, she had rituals that helped with the guilt. And she had ‘the discipline.’ Without those, it lingered, and she couldn’t hide it from Luke.

MARY: At one point, I was still feeling all this, like, guilt for all sorts of things, so one day I said, “Beat me! Beat me!”

And he knew about ‘the discipline.’ He had seen the calluses on my knees. He’d seen the scars on my arm. He he knew that history there. And he held me in his arms for a long time, and I cried. And, you know. It took a while for the guilt to go away. It took a long while.

MIDROLL

ERIKA: When Mary left the Missionaries of Charity, she often dreamt about the sisters she’d left behind. They weren’t happy dreams. She’d be in a tunnel trying to run away, the sisters chasing her. Or she’d be in a house with the sisters, and they’d block all the exits so she couldn’t get out.

MARY: When I wake from those dreams, I realized there’s this icky residue still kind of stuck to me. And I can’t get rid of this goopy, tarry stuff that’s clinging, you know, to me, metaphorically.

ERIKA: When she moved to Vermont to be with Luke, she stopped going to church every week. She was still religious, but things just didn’t feel as sure as they used to.

MARY: I began to feel more and more that the Church, in many ways, just wasn’t making a lot of sense.

ERIKA: Now she had a chance to explore her own spirituality. To reclaim faith for herself. To find a way to relate to God without that relationship being mediated by rituals and rules. It was liberating, but it was also confusing.

MARY: So it was just a couple of years after I'd left the sisters, and I'd been through so many different changes. I was trying to figure out, you know, do I even believe in God anymore? I don't know. And it was confusing because there'd been all these promises about how God was going to take care of you and this and that. And I don't know, it just didn't seem to be happening exactly in the way that -- everything was just so confusing.

ERIKA: She and Luke lived in an idyllic farmhouse at the end of a road with forest behind it. She went out on a walk one day.

MARY: And I went up on this hill in the Green Mountains, overlooking a pond.

ERIKA: She thought about this God that used to be her best friend, who she talked to and sang to on the playground as a kid. The God who became her spouse.

MARY: I just stood up, and I shouted. I shouted, "God, if you're out there, I need to know. I really need to know. Please tell me! Hey, listen! I need to know!"

And, um ... there was no immediate revelation. (laughs) But it was just a gradual coming to an awareness that what other people meant when they said God, that didn't seem accurate from my perspective.

ERIKA: Eventually, she became an atheist. She says the stories about God just don't ring true anymore. Physics and literature and music -- they feel honest. She says the mystery of the universe is exciting. She's OK living with questions.

MARY: It just became very clear to me that reality was a lot bigger than religion. And that any effort to contain reality in a box or in a story was doing a disservice. How much harm do we do by pretending to know things that it's impossible to know?

ERIKA: But she still thinks love is at the center of it all.

MARY: When you say love and is it a feeling or is it an action? Is it love something someone wills? Love is both a noun and a verb. For me, I seek that verb "love." I want to love.

ERIKA: In 2007 -- 10 years after she left the Missionaries of Charity, and 10 years after Mother Teresa's death -- Mary headed to Pennsylvania. She went to a conference marking a decade since what they called "Mother's entrance into heaven." A number of MC priests and sisters would be there; she might have a chance to talk to them. She wanted to be around people who knew her in her past life, and people who loved Mother. She felt, on some level, that celebrating that previous life might finally let her leave it behind.

During the conference, Mary attended a mass. She slid into a pew near the back. She could recognize some of the sisters from behind -- their gestures, a telltale slump, the way one leaned in during prayer. The superior general of the MC Fathers gave the homily. He talked about the growth of the MCs. That a thousand sisters had joined in the past 10 years. Mary thought, "He didn't mention the sisters who left."

After Mass, she watched a documentary about Mother Teresa, ate in a room where people sold Mother Teresa books, Mother Teresa dolls, CDs, medals. She wondered what Mother would think.

The next morning, during the final hymn of Mass, she hurried to the front of the church. She approached the Superior General at the time, Sister Nirmala. She recognized Mary. "Donata," she said. Mary bowed her head for a blessing, but Sister Nirmala put her finger under Mary's chin. She shook her head as if to say, "No. No blessing."

When the other sisters saw Mary, they greeted her with a bit more warmth.

MARY: Initially it was like, "Oh, Sister Donata!" And there was like, "Oh no, can't say that. Donata. Oh, no, Mary, uh, Mary, right? Mary." (laughs) Yeah, it was it was confusing for them because they, for them, I was always Sister Donata.

ERIKA: Being called Donata felt good to her, because it felt like she belonged. For some reason, she still wanted so badly to belong. She hoped she could sneak in to have lunch with the sisters, even though eating with outsiders is against the rules.

MARY: They ate in one place, and I ate in another place, and I didn't belong anymore.

ERIKA: At one point, she looked over the shoulders of a huddle of nuns and spotted the person she wanted to talk to most: Sister Prema.

MARY: I'd always, um, felt a certain affinity to Sister Prema. She was a very loving person. In fact, the name "Prema" means love.

ERIKA: When they were stationed together in Rome, Mary says Sister Prema even called Mary her twin, because Mary resembled Sister Prema's actual sister. Sister Prema eventually went on to become the Superior General -- the head of the MCs: a position she still holds today.

Mary called Sister Prema's name, and she eventually recognized Mary. She smiled, and took both of Mary's hands in hers. "Sister Donata," she said. At that moment, Sister Prema was motioned away. She told Mary, "Find me later." After a couple of talks, Mary was leaving the auditorium when a sister tapped her on the shoulder: "Walk with us. Sister Prema wants to see you." When Sister Prema finally talked to Mary, she told her she wished she could invite her to lunch, but Mary knows the rules.

MARY: We were talking and at a certain point, she turned to me and she said, “But you still love the sisters, don't you?” I said, “Of course I love the sisters.”

ERIKA: Had you heard that question from sisters before?

MARY: When I left, the sisters asked me, one of them, just a couple of days before I left, when everybody knew I was going, “Sister, will you still love us?” And I said, “Yes.”

And it's always very touching for me, because they knew that I loved them, and they knew that, for them, it was, that was an important question. I think it wasn't always obvious that people in authority in the Missionaries Charity actually really cared for their fellow sisters. It was a sorrow and a disappointment to Mother Teresa as well.

But, um, the sisters had felt that from me, otherwise they would never have asked that question, “Do you still love us?” And that it was still important to them, after so much time, was very touching to me.

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ERIKA: I've interviewed Mary for hours over many months. She says looking back at her story is strange. It's been a long time -- almost 25 years since she left. She leads a totally different life now. She married Luke. She taught creative writing and Italian. She officiates weddings as a humanist, nonreligious celebrant. She wrote a book. She helped create a community and platform for female writers. In their free time, she and Luke watch movies, go to film festivals. They bike. They read. They garden. They talk. She says when she looks back at that young woman in a sari -- that Mary is a different person.

MARY: I do remember once, when I was cleaning my office, I saw this box at the top of my bookcase, and I didn't remember what was inside it, you know? “What, what's in that box? Why am I keeping that box way up there?”

ERIKA: She took down the box and opened it, and she saw all of these things from her time as a Missionary of Charity. There was a scapular, which is a small wearable token that depicts Mother Mary holding Jesus. There was a rosary made by an MC sister from seeds. Miraculous Medals, Mother Teresa's hair in a plastic case. And then there was a cross the size of her hand, with an iron Jesus on it: the crucifix Mother Teresa wedged between Mary's sari and belt during her vows, when Jesus became Mary's spouse. She thought she'd wear this cross until she died.

MARY: And when I saw this cross, and I hadn't seen a crucifix for a long time, it struck me in such a completely different way than it had before. And it was like, this is a man being tortured to death. And it struck me as kind of a tragic thing.

ERIKA: For a while Mary wrestled with her relationship with Mother Teresa. It felt complicated. In therapy, she did the empty chair exercise to talk to her.

MARY: Where you, like, pretend there's a person in the chair in front of you and you talk to them. I did that sort of thing.

ERIKA: But nothing felt like closure.

When she left the Missionaries of Charity, Mary received a lot of letters from sisters telling her to come back. In one of them, a sister included notes from a talk that an MC Father gave after Mother Teresa died. The pages are crinkled now. The typewritten notes are crammed in tight, up against the margins, not to waste paper -- the MC way.

In this rough transcript, the priest described Mother Teresa at the end of her life, in the months leading up to her death.

MARY: And in these notes, it said that Mother was walking the halls of Mother House saying, "No one loves Mother in her own house."

We loved her, but she didn't, she didn't feel that. All those rules that kept us so far from each other and that we're never supposed to reveal ourselves really to each other. It's just, all of these wonderful women living in their own little cages of loneliness. And Mother, at the end of her life, whom all the world loved and admired, is walking the halls saying, "No one loves me."

I don't think that you have to be lonely to serve God.

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ERIKA: There are so many images of Mother Teresa in Mary's memory. Her toughness. Her sharp eyes. Mother's firm hand on her head for a blessing. When Mother pressed a crucifix against her lips when she was just an aspirant. When they traveled to Sweden together and shared a room with two twin beds. Mother hitting the desk in their last conversation as she pleaded with Mary to talk to Mother. Tell Mother. Explain to Mother why she wanted to leave. How Mary refused. Mother's disappointment.

Mary dreamt about Mother Teresa for a few years after she left the MCs. Those dreams weren't nightmares. They were calm. The last one she remembers, Mary was lying in her own bed. Mother Teresa walked in, and without saying anything, she went to the bed and lay down next to Mary, in this sweet way. They were side by side, just close to each other.

MARY: I don't remember that she said anything, but there was this, this feeling that she understood me. She wasn't mad at me anymore.

ERIKA: One thing that's helped Mary talk about her past is something her husband Luke said. He told her, "Just remember, it's a love story." I agree.

But love comes in many forms, and some aren't healthy. I've learned that in my own life, and I've learned it from this story.

Sometimes I think about all of the hurt I've heard about from these former Missionaries of Charity -- sisters who gave everything of themselves and suffered in the process.

"Love, to be real, has to hurt," Mother Teresa used to say. Maybe love hurts, but it's usually a side effect, not a goal. I don't think sacrificing people for the sake of a mission is right, no matter how much love they feel.

I'm grateful to the former sisters who shared their stories, but it hasn't been easy for them. Hurt was part of the telling, too. But they shared their stories because it felt worth it.

I think it's worth it to look at why we put people on pedestals, and what can happen when we assume someone in power is perfect.

You could say a series like this is digging up old dirt. And maybe it is. But you can also hear it as a story from people who are just as important as Mother Teresa — just as human, and just as valuable — who should also be heard. It's not easy to figure out exactly what's right when beliefs and God are involved. But it's worth talking about. It's worth listening to.

If you ask me, that's love.

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CREDITS

"The Turning" is written by Elin Lantz Lesser and me. Our producers are Elin Lantz Lesser and Emily Forman. Our editor is Rob Rosenthal. Andrea Asuaje is our digital producer. Fact-checking by Andrea López-Cruzado.

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Our executive producers are Jessica Alpert and John Perotti at Rococo Punch and Katrina Norvell at iHeartRadio. Our theme music is by Matt Reed. For photos and more details on the series, follow us on Instagram @rococopunch. You can reach out via email, too: theturning@rococopunch.com. I'm Erika Lantz. Thanks for listening.