

Episode 1: No Turning Back

ERIKA LANTZ: I wonder if you could tell me that story about the time that a sister had to go to the hospital and you thought, “This is going to be my chance”?

MARY JOHNSON: So one of the sisters, she had been in the hospital recently, and she needed to go back and have a check-up. It felt like this opportunity fell from heaven into my lap. And I would, I would escape.

ERIKA: Why, why didn't you just walk out? Just tell someone, “I'm leaving,” and just walk out the door?

MARY: We always went out two by two. We were never allowed just to walk out and do something. So, I wouldn't have been able to go, you know, more than five or six paces before somebody ran up to me and said, “Where are you going?” But I knew, because I had been in that hospital and was familiar with it, that there was a room where there was a collection of clothes that the patients had left behind. So I knew where that was. I could find myself some clothes there. Some normal clothes. I thought, “I'll drive in with this sister who's ill, and then when we get there, I would just leave.” I would leave her there and I would have at least, you know, a few hours before anybody figured out what I'd done.

So, I took some phone tokens. And I got in the car. And there in that car on the way to the hospital, I was perspiring, my hands were clammy, my heart was racing. It was so hot, and as we left the city, and we drove towards the seashore, there was a breeze, and it started just to feel really nice! And there were palm trees! And there was this sky! You could see the water off in the distance! It was like a breath of freedom. It was like -- like a way to breathe again. And I just wanted more and more of that air. That freedom. That life. That light. I thought, “This is my chance. I just have to take it.

ERIKA: There's a box in Mary Johnson's house. A box she rarely opens.

MARY: Well, you know, I've been talking with you lately about all of these things, and so I brought this box down from the top of my bookcase, because I think these things do help me remember better and get back into the feeling.

ERIKA: We all know this box -- the one full of memories of a version of yourself that with time and experience becomes more distant, hard to relate to. But we keep these things as proof, out of view. It's there in case we need reminding.

Mary's box holds mementos from 25 years ago -- a time when she was devoted to a different world: an insular community that asked her to separate from her family and her past to focus her life on one thing: love.

MARY: Well, first there's this, this plastic display case, like you might get some earrings in or something like that. And underneath, it's just little tiny pieces of Mother Teresa's hair.

ERIKA: Wow. It's probably ... four strands or something, would you say?

MARY: Yeah, that looks like four strands and they're arranged in a cross shape.

ERIKA: So I mean it's hair of a saint that you have in a box on your bookshelf.

MARY: (laughs) It is. And it's not only hair of a saint I have in a box on my bookshelf, but the hair of a woman that I knew and had a very complicated relationship with.

ERIKA: Mary Johnson has these strands of hair in her keepsake box because in 1980, she made a vow. A vow to devote herself to serving the poor and God. She became a religious sister with the Missionaries of Charity, the Catholic order formed by Mother Teresa.

MARY: So I, I did spend a lot more time alone with her than most sisters had the opportunity to do. And I loved her. I loved her deeply.

NEWS CLIPS: "Mother Teresa, helping the poorest of the poor ..." "Revered by popes and presidents, queens and princesses ..." "Practically anything that's known about her is shrouded in mystery and myth."

ERIKA: Though fiercely private, the small nun in a white and blue sari became an icon. And thousands of women abandoned their previous lives to follow her.

SISTER KATHLEEN HUGHES: We were to love the unlovable.

MARY: If you feel God is asking you to do something, it doesn't matter how hard it is.

SISTER KATHLEEN: She was so close to God and, and you knew it when she was there. Everything changed you know?

ERIKA: I heard a lot about Mother Teresa when I was a kid. She seemed like the ultimate example of selflessness, of someone who saw poverty and actually did something about it. She seemed like this perfect person with a simple message.

But the more people I've talked to, the more I've realized how little I understood her. How unusual her spirituality actually was. How her legacy was filled with controversy. And how thorny and complicated her order could be for the people inside it.

SUE WEBER: The order was wired that you had very little time to think.

COLETTE LIVERMORE: You're only getting input from one source. You're isolated from everyone else. That's what I mean by brainwashing.

JOAN WURSTER: They become the voice of God for you -- that's all they keep saying, under your vow of obedience, right?

MARY JOHNSON: One doesn't always know where to draw the line between religion and cult.

ERIKA: When Mary was 19 years old, she dropped out of college and joined Mother Teresa's order of nuns. There was no legal contract, nothing physical that bound her to the group. She could leave at any time. But from the beginning, she was convinced there was no turning back.

As she went deeper, she learned more secrets about this way of life. She saw vows taken to extremes. She felt the rigidity of rules, how separate this society, this culture, this world really was.

Many former sisters like Mary, entered the order seeking love and purpose, only to lose themselves along the way. And it was a long road back.

MARY: My story is the story of a woman who disappoints the most admired woman in the world.

ERIKA: From Rococo Punch and iHeartMedia, this is The Turning. I'm Erika Lantz. Part One: No Turning Back.

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RONALD REAGAN: Mother Teresa was busy, as usual, saving the world. And I mean that quite literally.

ERIKA: It's 1985, Ronald Reagan is in front of the french doors of the West Wing of the White House.

REAGAN: Her order of the Missionaries of Charity has spread throughout the world, serving the poorest of the poor.

ERIKA: Mother Teresa stands beside him in her white and blue sari, a foot shorter than he is.

REAGAN: Mother Teresa is a heroine of our times. And to the many honors she has received, including the Nobel Peace Prize, we add with deep affection and endless respect, the Presidential Medal of Freedom. (applause)

MOTHER TERESA: I am most unworthy of this generous gift of President Reagan and his wife and you people of United States. But I accept it for the greater glory of God, and in the name of the millions of poor people, for this gift, in spirit and in love, will penetrate the hearts of the people. For in giving it to me, you are giving it to them ...

ERIKA: Mother Teresa founded her congregation of sisters in Kolkata, India in 1950. She called them the Missionaries of Charity -- MCs for short. And she became famous for tending to what she called "the poorest of the poor," especially in her Home For The Dying. She explained her mission with a Bible passage.

MOTHER TERESA: Jesus said, "I was hungry, and you gave me to eat. I was naked, you clothed me. I was homeless, and you took me in. I was sick and in prison, and you visited me, and you took care of me."

ERIKA: Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity believe that each sick person on the street is "Jesus in disguise."

MOTHER TERESA: That's the same Jesus in the distressing disguise of the poor.

ERIKA: The Missionaries of Charity are still headquartered in Kolkata. But Mother Teresa expanded her mission far beyond India. She founded convents in other countries. And she created new MC branches for fathers and for brothers.

As her order grew, so did Mother Teresa's fame. People loved her message. She spoke of love, of having compassion for everyone, of doing your small part to help others.

It's a message that appealed to Mary Johnson.

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ERIKA: Mary grew up in Michigan and Texas in a Catholic family. She was the oldest of seven kids. And at a young age, she had a special relationship with a higher power.

MARY: I had always found church to be something I enjoyed, if it didn't last too long. I enjoyed Catholic school when I was in class, but on the playground, at lunchtime, I really didn't have any friends. And so I would find someplace on the distant side of the playground, and I would just talk to God. And I think that's kind of where it started for me.

ERIKA: In second grade, Mary's teacher told the class to write about what they wanted to be when they grew up.

MARY: "Boys, you could be firemen, you could be doctors, you could be policemen," and she gave this long list of careers, possibilities. And then she said, "Girls, you could be nurses or teachers. So, write your essay now." I didn't know what to do, because I wanted to be either an archeologist or the director of the New York Philharmonic. I used to watch Leonard Bernstein on television, and I just loved that and I thought it was the best thing in the world.

ERIKA: Just two options for girls. Neither interested Mary. Here's what she wrote in the end:

MARY: “When I grow up, I will be whatever God wants me to be.” (laughs) I figured that way, God has plenty more possibilities in his head than the sister does. And so I thought, “That’s it.” But somehow it wasn’t just an essay for me; it was like a pact. It was like, “OK, God, you show me what you want, and I will do that thing.”

ERIKA: When Mary was 12 years old, her parents got into Charismatic Catholicism. They were pretty involved in it. The local group often met at their house. They’d pray and speak and sing in tongues, but Mary didn’t quite connect with that type of spirituality. She waited for her own message from God.

In high school, Mary joined the debate team. She wrote for the high school newspaper. And then, when she was a senior, the message arrived.

MARY: And I was walking past our library, which had glass windows, and I saw the cover-of Time magazine, and there was this face of this wrinkled nun with a, with a white veil with blue stripes and she had these eyes! And and I took that magazine from the shelf, and I started reading, and the bell rang for French class and I didn’t care. I just sat there, and I read about this nun in Kolkata who was doing these fantastic things with taking in dying people and caring for them.

ERIKA: She was attracted to the MC’s focus on love and working with the poor. But it was their commitment to their vow of poverty, to live like those they were serving, that grabbed her.

MARY: I mean, the Missionaries of Charity took poverty really seriously. And one of the places in the Bible where Jesus talks about poverty is during the Sermon on the Mount when he says stop worrying about everything. Look at the birds of the air. Look at the lilies of the field. See how your heavenly father takes care of them? He knows what they need and he makes sure they get it. It’s going to be less for you? He has every hair on your head counted. What do you think he’s gonna let disaster strike? No, no. Just consider the lilies.

ERIKA: The article just pulled her in like nothing before.

MARY: This was like my whole heart on fire. And I really felt like that was God talking to me. And by the time I got up I said, “This is what I got to do,” and I went home and started writing letters and trying to figure it out.

ERIKA: Mary wrote to Mother Teresa and asked to join her order.

MARY: You know, and it’s just kind of that impulsivity of a teenager.

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ERIKA: It was the summer of 1977 when Mary arrived in New York City. She made her way through the city to a new life as a Missionary of Charity.

MARY: I'd never been in a big city like that before, um. These enormous buildings and these wide streets and all of these people out on the street. So many cars, so much action, and it was exciting!

ERIKA: Mary was headed to the Bronx. That's where the main MC house in the United States is, and it's where she'd join new sisters in training. She carried a cardboard box tied with string. It held two skirts and two blouses. That's all the sisters said she'd need.

New York was a different place in the summer of '77. A widespread blackout shut down the city and led to looting. It had nearly gone bankrupt just two years before. Landlords were setting fire to their own buildings to cash in on insurance. And one of the biggest manhunts in New York City history was on for the Son of Sam serial killer, who was shooting and murdering young women.

But when Mary arrived, what she noticed was the energy.

MARY: I do remember very clearly emerging from the subway station there and walking into all of this sound: Spanish music, Spanish speaking. I'd see mangos on the sidewalk there in front of the fruit stand and just all the excitement and the energy of the South Bronx in the summer of 1977.

There were these groups, especially of young men and older boys, gathered around boomboxes doing these enormous gymnastic moves, just very, very impressive break dancing. And it just feeling like I had walked into a completely different world than the one I'd known.

ERIKA: The convent looked like any other house in the area: a simple brick building.

MARY: So I ring the doorbell and wait a little while and wait a little while. And then finally Sister Rochelle comes down. She welcomes me with a big smile, and she knows my name and she knows what I'm there for. They've been waiting for me. And I went inside and everything inside was quiet, and Sister Rochelle whispered to me and she says, "Welcome." And she says, "Let's go say hello to Jesus."

ERIKA: After a quick stop to pray in the chapel, they climbed the stairs to the refectory -- the room where they did most everything. They ate their meals in the refectory, studied how to be a sister in the refectory. Inside was a plywood table, two benches and a stool.

MARY: I was kind of amazed at how bare it was, how minimal it was.

ERIKA: On the wall, hung side-by-side, images of Mother Teresa and Jesus. There was also a plaque with the motto for new sisters -- a quote from the Gospel of John: "Jesus must increase, and I must decrease."

Then Sister Rochelle showed her the dormitory -- a sacred space that must stay silent; they were never to speak inside it. It was one room with 13 cots, and they were really close together -- just enough room between them to get into bed.

Mary was excited for this unadorned life.

MARY: Things can weigh you down so much. And there was a sense of freedom to it. How you gonna get along with just these few little things? But it's nice -- it's the lilies of the field and the birds of the air ... you don't need much.

ERIKA: Mary arrived in time for Adoration. She and the other sisters filed into a pewless chapel. They knelt in rows and put their heads to the floor.

MARY: The center of this life was God. Nothing else mattered in the way that those moments of prayer did -- that time, that time with God.

ERIKA: Their chanting mixed with the sounds from outside: backfiring cars. Boomboxes. She felt like she'd entered a distant, peaceful planet she didn't understand. She prayed she'd have the strength for this life.

At dinner that night, Mary and her 12 new sisters gathered around that plywood refectory table.

MARY: And Sister Carmeline said, "Praised be Jesus Christ." And everybody there started clapping their hands and singing this: "*We welcome, welcome sister. We welcome, welcome sister. We welcome, welcome sister from our heart.*" Um, just as they had sung to each new sister who arrived and would continue to sing to each one after me.

MIDROLL

ERIKA: When a woman enters the Missionaries of Charity, she starts as an aspirant. Mary's aspirancy would last six months. She wore a conservative blouse and skirt. The white sari would come later.

She quickly learned that days in the Missionaries of Charity were strictly regimented. A bell rang to signal, "Time for a new task."

MARY: The bell marked absolutely everything we did. And whenever it rang, whatever it rang, Mother told us we were to stop immediately doing whatever we were doing, because the bell was the voice of God.

ERIKA: The sisters had a tight timetable. Wake up at 4:40 in the morning. Pray. Make beds. Clean the house -- only 20 minutes for that. Wash clothes by hand. Attend mass. Eat breakfast -- all before 8 o'clock. Then go out to work in the community.

There was also the kneeling and praying. Hours of it. Every day.

MARY: I loved the fact that prayer was so central to the lives of the Missionaries of Charity, but my knees hurt like hell.

ERIKA: There were times for spiritual reading and instruction. And they got 30 minutes of what they called recreation -- basically when they all sat in the refectory and caught up on work like mending clothes.

The aspirants reported to a mistress in charge -- the aspirant mistress. She taught them how to follow the rules.

MARY: I was under very close scrutiny, and my aspirant mistress would correct every mistake she saw, and she'd do it publicly and she'd do it loudly. Kind of like the drill sergeant.

KELLI DUNHAM: The idea behind the Missionary of Charity training is just like military training to break you down into nothing.

ERIKA: This is Kelli Dunham. She also joined the Missionaries of Charity, and began her training in the same convent as Mary -- but 17 years later, in 1994.

KELLI: In those first months, it seemed like the whole idea was to make you feel as alone as possible, with the idea that you would depend only on God.

ERIKA: Kelli says that like in boot camp, you did what you were told, whether or not it made sense to you. She struggled with that, but she loved the moments of beauty, working as a group for a cause and their nightly songs.

After evening prayer, all of the sisters would walk outside and stand around a statue of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

KELLI: And then you sing a little song to Mary and everyone does like a little silent prayer and usually touches the statue, I think, on the feet, and then goes up. Created a moment, a moment of honoring something bigger than yourself. And it's just like by candlelight, right? So it's actually extremely, like, poignant and it's a moment, right? Like, it's a moment. I still can almost get tearful thinking about that. I can remember one night. We were all standing around the statue of Mary with all the sisters, their faces reflected, lighted up, by just the candlelight, and I remember thinking, "Oh man, I get to be with all these beautiful women the rest of my life."

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ERIKA: Mary Johnson had been in the convent for two weeks when there was a big announcement: Mother Teresa was coming.

MARY: We got so excited, you know? We just shouted there. Just, ahh so excited. She told us during dinner, so it was a time when we could speak -- and we did.

ERIKA: Mary couldn't believe she'd finally meet this woman people called a living saint.

MARY: You know, I'd heard about Saints. Some Saints had these abilities where they could read people's souls. If she was like that, she probably wouldn't like me, I thought. And the other thing I was scared about was what would happen if it turned out I didn't like her?

I decided what I would do was I would go to the top of the staircase, because Mother Teresa would come in the front door, and if I positioned myself just right on those stairs, I'd be able to see her.

And when the door opened, and Mother was the first one to come in, and I saw her there -- this, this tiny short woman with so many wrinkles! And she just looked so small and so determined. And the aspirants who had been waiting and were down there on that floor -- "Oh Mother, Mother!" -- and they were saying things, and she was like, "Let me say hello to Jesus first! Mother must say hello to Jesus!" It was the first time I heard her talk about herself in the third person, which was something she did all the time, but I didn't know that then. I thought, "Oooh."

ERIKA: Mother Teresa looked utterly focused as she took off her sandals and walked to chapel. Then she knelt to pray.

MARY: I had never seen anyone somehow that connected with God. I felt that something holy was happening there.

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ERIKA: One day, Mother Teresa sat down at the aspirants table to talk with the young women entering her order.

She shared a clear message -- one that would reverberate in Mary's mind for the next 20 years.

MARY: "God called you to come here. Jesus did not call your sister, did not call your neighbor. Jesus called you to be here." And she said, "God has called you. You must be faithful for life, or pack up and go home right now." And she was so clear and so strong and not a little bit scary.

And she was saying this to people who had been there for, for two weeks, basically, and hadn't figured it out yet, didn't know exactly, "Did God call me?" That's a very amorphous question. But

Mother was sure. She said, "You're here. That means God called you here, and now you must be faithful for life."

ERIKA: She brought the 12 aspirants to the chapel and had them kneel in a row at the front. Then she went down the line and gave them each a crucifix. She brought the crucifix to each sister's lips for a kiss.

MARY: She pressed that crucifix so strongly against my lips that, you know, you can hardly respond with any sort of kiss, because she pushes it there and then she pulls it away. Mother did everything forcefully, wholeheartedly.

You know, you feel that kind of electricity when something special is happening, where your whole body just kind of tingles and feels alive. And at the same time, there was a kind of a --- I think the reluctance wasn't so much in my body. The reluctance was more in my mind. But, physically, I was very excited, I was kind of full in. I remember whenever Mother spoke just being so taken in by her words and by her conviction and by the power of her own belief, that you really just looked at her and could not look away.

"Okay. Now I have to be a better person than I have ever been in my whole life. The bar's been raised."

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ERIKA: When Mother Teresa told Mary and the other aspirants that they were chosen, she said it came with a lifelong commitment. It was like a marriage. They must be faithful to God, and their vows.

All Catholic nuns take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Mother Teresa added a fourth vow for her sisters: the vow of wholehearted and free service to the poorest of the poor.

Mother Teresa said to succeed in your vows, you just need to do one thing: Follow the Constitutions. That's the governing document of the Missionaries of Charity. Legend was that early on, while everyone slept, Mother Teresa wrote the Constitutions by candlelight. Then the Vatican authorized it as an infallible path to holiness.

The Constitutions laid out a life of love and service -- in the extreme.

MARY: The attraction is really that life of sacrifice. You want to do something different, you want to do something radical, even if it's very conservative. It's also very radical.

ERIKA: To do this, the aspirants had a daily rule class taught by the mistress. Mary's mistress wore glasses. She was short and stern.

MARY: Sister Carmeline sat on her little stool at the head of the table, and she passed out the Constitution books, page to open to, which number on that page to read, and we'd read it together, and then we'd close the books. And then at the end of class she would collect them. And it's kind of like, I knew there were things in that book she did not want us to see yet. And I was curious about those.

ERIKA: Gradually Mary learned the rules from her mistress. She learned how to walk:

MARY: Briskly, quickly. You don't want to waste any time. But not like wild elephants!

ERIKA: How to talk:

MARY: We weren't supposed to talk about really anything that went on outside, you know, whether it was books or movies.

ERIKA: How to wear her hair:

MARY: Make a ponytail like decent girls.

ERIKA: How to keep custody of the eyes:

MARY: We weren't supposed to be looking around at anything, really, but especially not billboards or newsstands.

ERIKA: Even how to fold a napkin.

MARY: Always in a triangle with an extra part hanging down. And that was that triangle is the Trinity, and you should think of the Trinity every time you fold it in this particular way.

ERIKA: Your superior was considered the direct voice of God. And the vow of obedience meant "obey your superior without question."

MARY: Anytime a superior entered the room, we were all to stand and to sit only when she sat or indicated in some other way that we should sit.

ERIKA: Then there was the vow of poverty.

Pretty much all Catholic nuns take a vow of poverty, but Mother Teresa took it a step further. She explained it in an interview on Irish TV.

MOTHER TERESA: If you would really want to know the poor, we must know what is poverty, and that's why in our society, poverty is our freedom and our strength.

ERIKA: The Missionaries of Charity relied on donations and divine providence, and over the years, the order received large donations -- millions of dollars worth because of the interest their work inspired. But the sisters lived meager lives. Regardless of how much money the organization raised, they lived as though they didn't have any, for the sake of their vow.

KATHLEEN: The life of poverty, of the Missionaries of Charity is um ... is a very poor life!
(laughs) It is a poor life.

ERIKA: This is Sister Kathleen Hughes.

KATHLEEN: I remember my first breakfast in London, I'd never forget. It was kind of moldy bread, and then we got the airport cheeses from the air, you know, somebody would bring us these little individual cheeses from the planes, you see. And, uh [laughs] they were overripe by the time we got them. So I had a mouth full of moldy bread, and this overripe Camembert cheese, and I remember saying to the Lord, "Is every breakfast for the rest of my life going to be like this?" (laughs)

ERIKA: Oh no! (laughs)

KATHLESS: It was an initiation. It was a test!

KELLI: The Missionaries of Charity don't have fans or air conditioners.

ERIKA: That's Kelli Dunham again.

KELLI: And in the Bronx, at that time, we weren't even opening the windows during the night. You know, so it was really, really hot. So we didn't wear deodorant. We were wearing like three or four layers between the outside, so even when you sweated, it didn't make you cooler, because it wasn't evaporating -- it was just getting trapped by the outside layer. Um, and I remember saying to the sisters, like, "We don't smell very good." And she's like, "Oh, such a blessing to help with chastity, no?"

MARY: Mother Teresa was very concerned about maintaining the vow of chastity, really almost to the point of paranoia about it. And she passed that on to everybody else.

ERIKA: In rule class, Mary learned chastity meant more than not having sex. For Missionaries of Charity, it meant no touching -- period. The sisters should never touch each other. And the people they cared for? Mother Teresa said touch them as little as possible.

MARY: She would say, "Sometimes of course it's necessary; you have to touch the babies, you have to feed the babies. But as soon as that baby is fed, you put that baby down."

ERIKA: The vow of chastity is why talking was so controlled: to make sure sisters didn't get too close. They could only talk at approved times, usually when they were all together. When sisters

walked outside the convent, always in twos, they didn't talk. Instead, they prayed the rosary aloud together -- on sidewalks, on buses, everywhere.

MARY: You could not have a friend. This was very specifically prohibited. They called it "particular friendship." If somebody saw you getting kind of closer to one sister than to another, you would be called out on it.

They were afraid that if you got too close to somebody, everybody else would feel excluded. And then the other fear was that "particular friendship" was kind of a name for like relationships of a homosexual nature.

If you got too close to somebody, it was really, you were playing with fire.

MIDROLL

ERIKA: I'm cutting in here right now because I think for a story like this, it's important for you to know where I'm coming from. And to do that, I'd like to introduce you to someone. Her name is Elin.

ELIN LANTZ LESSER: So hi, I'm Elin. And I'm your sister, Erika. Like, actual sister, not religious sister.

ERIKA: Yeah.

ELIN: And over the past year, we've actually been working on this podcast together. We've been producing it together.

ERIKA: I'm curious. I mean, when I called you and asked you to work on this project, what did you think?

ELIN: I thought, "You know what? That makes a lot of sense."

ERIKA: Really?

ELIN: I think it's because, you know, we went to Catholic school when we were young, even though we weren't Catholic, and we had nuns as teachers. And I think you really looked up to them, Erika.

ERIKA: Yeah, I looked up to them, and I was also really interested in them. Do you remember they lived in a house like right by the school? It was down the drive from the school. We'd pass it every day? It was white.

ELIN: Oh yeah. Yeah.

ERIKA: Whenever we went past that house, I would look at it and just wonder what their lives were like in that house. What are the rooms they're sleeping in? How did they become nuns? Like how do you make that choice? It's weird to look back, but I actually think in second grade, I made a list of all the things I wanted to be when I grew up, which was a really long list, but one of the things I included was to be a nun, which is strange to think back on now. But I was really taken with them.

ELIN: Yeah, you were.

ERIKA: I kind of feel like, in a way, this podcast, it's like I'm getting to look inside that house, you know?

ELIN: Hmm.

ERIKA: You know, that's one reason I wanted to work on it with you because you have a PhD in psychology, and you're really interested in the extremes of human behavior and why people do what they do. And I feel like that's a big part of this, too, because the Missionaries of Charity, it's an intense way of life.

ELIN: Yeah. When I first heard about this story, I thought there would be a lot of beautiful moments, and also how life as an MC is difficult at times, you know, but I guess what we ended up finding was there was a lot more darkness than I realized.

ERIKA: Hmm.

ELIN: And, you know, just hearing these women talk about even how years after leaving, they were having nightmares about times as an MC ... I don't know, it's just hard to grapple with all that. It's just hard to keep all the beautiful stories and all the dark ones in my head at once, and so I'm constantly changing how I feel about this.

ERIKA: Yeah, it's a lot more complicated than I thought.

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ERIKA: Early on, maybe a week into Mary's time at the convent, she saw what it was like to be on the wrong end of a rule.

It was the end of the day, so Mary took her nightly shower. Then she walked out of the bathing room.

MARY: So I'm there with my bucket full of my dirty clothes, I'm wearing my nightdress, and I walk out the door and immediately standing right there, so I can't even move, is Sister Carmeline.

And she says, "Sister Mary, you took the shower." I said, "Yes, sister." (laughs) And she says, "And you did it last night, too. I heard the water falling. You took the shower!" "Yes sister." "Have

you no shame?" I mean, it was really -- she was getting very upset. She ended up calling me all sorts of names, that I was vain and lazy and immodest, and I could not figure this out. What on earth had I done that was wrong? The water coming from the shower head was cold water. I hadn't broken poverty by turning on the hot one. I hadn't taken very long; I was really pretty quick about it. I couldn't understand.

ERIKA: Earlier that day, Sister Carmeline had taught the aspirants how to respond when corrected. You were supposed to stay silent -- never talk back -- and only speak when it's clear your superior is done. Then there was only one thing you could say: "Thank you, sister. Sorry, sister."

MARY: And so all the while my mind is racing, trying to figure out what on earth I've done wrong. At the same time, this instruction is coming back: stand there silent like Jesus before Pilate, Sister Carmeline had said. And even that morning, that had caused a little confusion before me because I knew before Pilate, Jesus did not stand silent. Jesus and Pilate had a conversation. And Jesus talks about the truth; Pilate asks, "What is truth?" There's this dialogue between them. Jesus was silent before King Herod when he was brought before him. But at the end I could only say those five words: "Thank you, sister. Sorry, sister."

ERIKA: The next morning Mary asked another sister what she'd done wrong. "MCs don't take showers," she said. Instead you're supposed to pour water over yourself with a tin can.

MARY: And then at the end I said thank you and just kind of tapped her on the arm and she got so furious. She said, "No, don't touch, don't touch!" You know, I was like, "Oh, I can't do anything right!"

* * *

ERIKA: Mary started her training with 11 other women. Six months later, only she and one other aspirant remained.

Each time a sister left it felt abrupt. They'd only find out after the fact from their mistress -- no explanation, just that they'd left. The remaining sisters didn't get to say goodbye, and they weren't allowed to talk about it. It made Mary wonder about her own vocation.

MARY: Inside of me there were all these questions about -- so what does it mean to be called and how do you know if you're called?

ERIKA: Mary prayed over and over to know whether she should go home or stay.

MARY: And it just always came back to this tug, this pull to come and join Mother Teresa in following Jesus. It was like, "Yes, this is what I was meant to do. This is it!"

ERIKA: Mary finished her aspirancy, So she was ready for the next step. And I should say, there are a lot of steps to become an MC -- or any kind of nun. They each have different names, and it can get confusing, but don't worry about it -- I'll help you along the way. Basically, first you're in training, then for awhile you take vows that last for a year, and finally, you take lifelong vows.

But Mary says even before those final vows, Mother Teresa believed you were committed for life. Any urge to leave was the devil's temptation.

MARY: "Yes, in the book it says you take your vows for one year, but you know in your heart, you do not tell Jesus yes for one year. You say yes for your entire life." I think Mother Teresa took everything to its most radical conclusion.

ERIKA: It's a lot of pressure for anyone, especially a teenager.

At this point, Mary was ready to become what's called a postulant. And for that, she was sent to Rome.

MARY: I arrived in Rome at the beginning of 1978; I was still 19 years old.

ERIKA: Rome was full of life and history: the Colosseum, the Roman Forum, the Pantheon -- they were all nearby. At the time, the city was in turmoil, too. Fights in the streets. New divorce and abortion laws that led to protests.

But Mary's life centered around the convent at the San Gregorio church -- a little world inside this bustling city. Across a gravel yard and through a gate was the convent -- block of low, cement buildings.

As a postulant, she still wore her own skirt and blouse. No sari yet. Whenever she felt overwhelmed, she remembered Mother's words.

MARY: "You're here, that means God called you here. And now you must be faithful for life."

ERIKA: After postulancy, Mary became a novice, and that meant it was time to take a new name -- one she picked for herself: Sister Donata.

MARY: "Donata." It meant "freely given."

ERIKA: There was also a ceremony.

Mary and seven other sisters lined up in a chapel in front of Mother Teresa. One by one, Mother called the sisters by their new names. When Mary heard Mother Teresa call her new name, "Sister Donata," it felt like a wave crested over her. It carried away "Mary the postulant," who struggled with all the rules.

MARY: And so, I suppose, in that sense, my old self was decreasing.

ERIKA: Mother handed her new clothes. In a few moments, Mary's skirt and blouse would be gone forever, replaced by the white saris of the Missionaries of Charity. Mother had Mary kiss the habit. She said, "Let the world be nothing to you, and you nothing to the world."

Then a sister handed Mother Teresa a pair of scissors to take the first snip of Mary's hair.

MARY: Mother Teresa cut just one little lock of hair and laid it on a tray.

ERIKA: Another sister cut off Mary's ponytail. They were all singing this song:

MARY: *"I have decided to follow Jesus. I have decided to follow Jesus. I have decided to follow Jesus. No turning back. No turning back."*

And we got dressed in our new clothes. And then as we were leaving to go back into the chapel, we were given that ponytail to hold into our hands. And we were told that this is like the bouquet of flowers that a young bride would carry to her wedding. And so we brought that ponytail, holding it in our hands, and laid it there in front of the altar in a little basket that was there.

ERIKA: After the ceremony, Mother Teresa ate dinner with the new Novices. Mother explained that cutting their hair was a sign of a sacred commitment to God.

Once dinner was over, grand silence began, like every evening. No talking allowed until breakfast the next day. But that night, something unusual happened, without anyone saying a word.

MARY: One of the sisters began to pull each of us new novices aside and then she signed to us that we should follow her, and we went into a back room.

ERIKA: A fire was burning.

MARY: And so the room was quite hot.

ERIKA: The ceremony wasn't over yet. No one spoke.

MARY: There were four stools in the middle of the room. There were eight of us novices waiting there, wondering what on earth was going on. And then the first four got motioned to sit on the stools.

ERIKA: The professed sisters held scissors. While Mary watched, they removed the novices' headpieces. They trimmed what was left of their hair.

MARY: Cutting it shorter and shorter and shorter.

ERIKA: Down to the scalp.

MARY: The sisters were saying, “Hail Mary, full of grace,” and we were answering, “Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us.” And I remember one was -- had tears in her eyes as her hair was falling, and others were just kind of sitting there with their eyes shut as tight as they could. That was kind of... kind of frightening to see it all happen all at once like that. It became very real.

ERIKA: Then it was Mary’s turn to sit on a stool.

MARY: And the cutting started. There’s very little hair there. There’s, and now there’s less, and there’s less. Until there was really just just nothing. As close as you could get with a pair of scissors.

ERIKA: After it was done, someone handed Mary a bucket of water. She took it to the bathing room to wash herself.

MARY: Just as I was finishing my bath, this horrible smell came through the bathing room door. It was just like this acrid, awful, awful smell. And I followed that smell back into the room where our hair had been cut. And I saw there our novice mistress was tossing our ponytails into that fire. Just tossing our hair into the fire.

And I could hear again that hymn that had been sung earlier that day: “No turning back. No turning back.”

And it really felt that way.

* * *

CREDITS

ERIKA: The Turning is written by Erin 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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President Reagan’s remarks and presentation of the Medal of Freedom to Mother Teresa and her remarks in the Rose Garden on June 20, 1985, were used courtesy of Ronald Reagan Presidential Library under a Creative Commons license.

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