

Episode 6: The Third Floor

ERIKA LANTZ: Hey everyone. Heads up: We talk about suicide in this episode. There are some links to resources in the episode description if you need them.

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JOAN WURSTER: I loved everything about my life. and then I joined this convent to follow God, thinking in my mind that everyone was going to love everyone, and it was going to be double what I had at home, and it was completely different.

I said, "Meet me up on the third floor." And then she came up, and I just was crying and saying, "I just, I can't do this anymore." So I said to her, um, "Can you... I don't know how to get out. Like, how do I get out?"

ERIKA: From Rococo Punch and iHeartRadio, this is "The Turning." I'm Erika Lantz. Part Six: The Third Floor.

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SUE WEBER: I'm Sue Weber. Do you want like that little brief bio, blah blah, or?

ERIKA: You don't have to do the whole bio. You can --

SUE: So I'm Sue Weber.

ERIKA: And who are you?

JOAN: I'm Joan Wurster.

ERIKA: And how do you two know each other?

SUE: We're sisters. (laughter)

ERIKA: So let me clarify. Joan and Sue are former sisters with the Missionaries of Charity. But they're also sisters. Like actual, real-life sisters.

SUE: And we're the same age for 13 days.

ERIKA: Joan and Sue live in Pennsylvania. They huddle over a computer at Joan's house to video chat with me, squeezing together so they can both fit in the frame.

SUE: I'm, I'm far more stubborn than you are, wouldn't you say? Or you're pretty stubborn.

JOAN: We're all stubborn.

SUE: We're all stubborn. It's a family trait. (laughs)

JOAN: In a positive way.

SUE: I don't take a lot of things personally at all.

JOAN: I'm more sensitive.

SUE: Yeah. She's much more sensitive.

JOAN: Very.

SUE: You're super protective, too --

JOAN: I am.

SUE: For people who get hurt.

JOAN: Mhmm. I seek for justice a lot.

SUE: That's a commonality.

JOAN: And I think that has to do with the convent, but I've come to seek justice and truth in everything that I do and say.

ERIKA: Joan, the younger sister, has a certain gentleness. Sometimes she goes for a while without saying anything; she just listens. Joan says her intimate relationship with God drives everything she does.

JOAN: I was the type of person that was always trying to please God. And then I realized that that he loves us unconditionally, and he loves us no matter where we are in life.

ERIKA: Sue, the older sister, is bold and open. Short haircut, big personality. Says it like it is.

SUE: I'm out there. I'm like up for anything.

ERIKA: Joan and Sue both joined the MCs and, like every sister, they followed the vow of obedience.

The vow commits you to the power structure in the MCs. You vow to obey God by obeying your superior -- promptly and without question. You become "a pencil in God's hand," as Mother Teresa said. Or as a former sister put it, "A tool without will or opinion of your own."

That didn't work for Sue and Joan. Their story shows how power works in the order. Who has power, what happens as a result, and what happens when you push back on it. Sue would grapple with this from above -- as a superior. Joan from below.

Sue and Joan grew up in the 1970s in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, a small city in the middle of Amish country. They went to Catholic school.

At the time, Joan, the younger sister, toyed with the idea of going to college on a track scholarship. But, she told me, "In my soul, until I die, I know I was meant to be a nun."

So in 1980, she joined a Franciscan order of nuns. She was 19 years old. But something was missing. The Franciscans she was with took a vow of poverty, but she didn't feel they took it far enough. Life was too comfortable. And then she learned more about Mother Teresa.

JOAN: I started reading some books about her, and I'm like, "Oh, my word, she has it."

ERIKA: While Joan was thinking about switching to the Missionaries of Charity, Sue beat her to it: she joined the MCs herself. Sue was 20, and she says the life suited her -- especially helping the poor.

When I asked her to tell me about some of the moments she found beautiful, she didn't know where to start.

SUE: Thousands! Literally, there are thousands of incredible, incredible beauty. Working among the poor, potentially making a difference in their lives.

ERIKA: Six months in, Sue got news: Her mistress told her that Joan was joining the MCs. She was leaving the Franciscans and coming to the same convent as Sue. The mistress cautioned Sue: "Remember, no preferential love. Even for family."

When Joan joined, she learned the MCs had a different approach. For starters, no psychological test. The Franciscans required aspiring nuns to take one.

JOAN: I actually think it's super important, because I think what happens is you're getting women who have mental issues, right? And Mother would just say, "Just love the sisters -- no matter what." But we had to live with them.

ERIKA: Daily life was different, too. The MCs were much more regimented. And she noticed the MCs didn't hug each other, while the Franciscans she'd been with hugged all the time.

JOAN: Nobody looks at anybody, nobody talks to anybody. It's grand silence.

ERIKA: And Joan felt the MCs did poverty right.

JOAN: The poverty was, in my estimation, sensational. Like everything we owned fit in a bucket. I loved the simplicity.

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ERIKA: Since Joan was new, it was nice to see a familiar face.

JOAN: But my sister was rooted into the Missionaries of Charity way of life, right? So when there was complete silence, you know, I'd walk by her and kind of wink and do the things that I would do, because I was just beginning. I'd nod or smile and you know, she did do that when it was just her and I, but when she was in the group, she would pass me and not look at me (laughing) and I'd be like, "Oh!"

SUE: 'Cause I was following the rules.

JOAN: She was. She was a good nun.

SUE: Oh no, just in the beginning. (laughing)

ERIKA: A year later though, when they'd both be in a convent in San Francisco, they'd be more

... flexible.

SUE: In the novitiate, we did sneak off a lot of times. (laughing)

JOAN: On the third (laughing) floor.

ERIKA: Really!

JOAN: On the third floor.

SUE: Well, my mom would send care packages, like, of cookies, especially around the holidays.

ERIKA: They had to turn any packages over to the superior. From there it was usually given to the poor or shared with the whole convent. But sometimes Sue would say to herself:

SUE: Oh, these are my favorites. These are Joan's favorite. So then I would, like, hide them. And then I would see Joan in the hall and I'd be like, (whispering) "Meet me up on the third floor!" And then we would sit up on (giggling) these stacks of mattresses and eat the cookies. (both laughing)

JOAN: And we enjoyed every moment. Be worth any penance!

SUE: But we never got caught! (laughs)

JOAN: No, we didn't. We were good.

ERIKA: You guys have both referred to penance, and I was just wondering, when you say penance are you thinking of 'the discipline,' chains, that kind of thing.

SUE: (laughs) You can --

JOAN: You can go first. Go ahead.

SUE: OK. So. Um, I only share with very intimate people, which was like my fellow sisters who left. I don't know if Mom even knows, does she?

JOAN: I think she knows.

SUE: Oh, she does? OK.

JOAN: Well, she saw your chains. It's a question she asked.

SUE: That's true. Oh.

JOAN: Had to answer the question.

SUE: So. I didn't --

JOAN: It's a bracelet! (laughs)

SUE: But here's the thing. And I will make my full confession right here, right now, that I was not

faithful to my penances, because I thought they were crazy.

ERIKA: Joan's group of aspirants learned about 'the discipline' a few months in.

JOAN: So then they said, "You can go to the bathroom," then I go into the stall, and I just -- I couldn't do it. And I heard the sister next to me, who was totally into penances, and she was beating herself, I could hear her. I'm thinking, "Dear God." I'd be yelling, "Ow!" you know? And I thought, "OK, I gotta do something, because they're probably listening to me as I'm listening to them." So I hit the sides of the walls of the toilet. (Sue laughs) And I was just going, you know, *ch ch*, hitting the sides instead of hitting myself. And then gradually I began to do it. And I then didn't have problems with it, because I do believe that if you do sacrifice yourself, I can gain grace with myself, and I can also help someone else's soul. To this day, I believe that.

ERIKA: Soon Joan took 'the discipline' every day. Then she got the spiked arm chain, which she wore during mass.

JOAN: I put it on, and you're supposed to fold your hands, because then it digs into your arm. And I felt Christ. I felt him as I've never felt -- I mean, I *felt* him.

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SUE: I think the injustice came when rules were different for different people. So for example, one of the rules was "You can't go home, because we have to live a life of poverty," but then a regional superior who really liked another sister, she got to go home for her parents' funeral. It's ... everybody's at the mercy of whoever has power.

JOAN: They become the voice of God for you. That's all they keep saying. I'm the voice of God for you at this moment.

SUE: Under your vow of obedience.

JOAN: Under your vow of obedience, right, no matter what it is. And they use God as the weapon.

SUE: Mmhm.

ERIKA: Joan felt that weapon. And this is where her story diverged from Sue's.

JOAN: In New York, I got something in my stomach where I was really, really sick.

ERIKA: She was in so much pain she had to crawl down the stairs. Her mistress didn't offer support.

JOAN: I would go to her and say, "I'm really sick." And she would say, just, you know, "Give it to Jesus, offer it up, you'll be fine."

ERIKA: One day, a volunteer saw Joan and the condition she was in.

JOAN: And she said, "This little child needs to go to the doctor."

ERIKA: But Joan's mistress said no. It was the superior's decision to make. And the superior

was away.

JOAN: So I just continued on every day, crawling down the stairs. She made me come down to church no matter what, whether I was sick or not. I had to come into -- try to work, which I couldn't.

ERIKA: When the volunteer came back, she decided to take charge.

JOAN: She said, "Sister, go get your shoes. You're going to die. You have to go."

ERIKA: Joan found out she had pancreatitis -- left untreated, it can be really serious.

JOAN: So that's how it started.

ERIKA: Joan stayed in the hospital for a week. When she returned to the convent, she says something changed with her mistress. She targeted Joan. And she was relentless.

First, she accused Joan of being too friendly with a man -- a seminarian who had prayed with her while she was in the hospital. Then of trying to seduce the men coming into the soup kitchen for meals.

JOAN: I was, like, shocked. I was shocked that she was saying it. I'd never even thought it. I'm not going after anyone. So she accused me of that and so much more.

ERIKA: Joan says it was impossible to please her, like the time her mistress told her to teach English to some sisters from South America. Joan didn't know any Spanish. She says she did her best to teach them. But every time one of the *sisters* made a mistake in English, the mistress made *Joan* do penance.

JOAN: So I used to tell them to not speak. (**SUE:** Wow!) I said, "Can you please not just speak? And save me from my penances?"

ERIKA: Sometimes her mistress made her kneel in silence beside the refectory table, while everyone else ate and talked. These humiliations, the accusations, the little digs -- they all piled up.

JOAN: She would tell me I wasn't holy, tell me I was prideful. Tell me that, "Jesus knows you're a fake and a phony" and all these kinds of things she would say to me, right? So, um --

ERIKA: That must've been really hard to hear.

JOAN: It was. Very hard.

ERIKA: Joan began to question her vocation -- is this really what God wanted from her? After 6 months, she was sent to a convent in Chicago for postulancy with a new mistress.

JOAN: I thought I died and went to heaven. She was wonderful. Beautiful.

ERIKA: Free from the belittling mistress in New York, Joan could focus on the parts of religious life that fueled her: visiting shut-ins. Working at the soup kitchens and shelters.

But then, word spread that the mistress in New York might be transferred to Chicago. Panic set in.

JOAN: One sister in my group, she took an iron and burned her leg as penance.

ERIKA: Penance so the mistress wouldn't be assigned to Chicago.

JOAN: That's how much people did not like her.

ERIKA: But the penance was in vain. The mistress transferred to Chicago, and Joan says she started right in again.

JOAN: She would call me in, and she would scream at me and tell me that I'm very irresponsible, and she would yell at me and say, "You're stupid."

ERIKA: There were times when Joan had no idea what she'd done wrong. She cried in the chapel and prayed.

JOAN: "Why is this happening? Why are you allowing this to happen to me? I only wanted to come and serve you." I was angry and hurt and sad, and I was all of those.

ERIKA: Finally Joan spoke with her superior, the nun above her mistress. She tried to explain it all, but the superior told Joan to forgive her mistress.

JOAN: She said, "Can you try and love her?" I said, "OK, I'll try."

ERIKA: But there was only so much Joan could take. She was at a breaking point. So she turned to the one person she thought could change things: Mother Teresa.

When Mother Teresa visited, Joan had a one-on-one meeting with her. She says she told Mother Teresa everything that happened with her mistress.

JOAN: And I was crying and sobbing, and I said, "I don't know. I don't think Jesus wants me here, Mother. I don't know what to do." And she said, "Sister Maria Fatima, be only all for Jesus." And of course in my head, I'm thinking, "Really? That's all you got? That's what you're going to tell me? You're not going to take this evil woman away from me? You're not going to stop this abuse? You're not going to do anything about it? You're just going to let me continue to suffer?" That's how I felt.

ERIKA: And did you say that? Or that's what you were thinking?

JOAN: No, I was thinking, I didn't say a word. It's Mother Teresa. You know what I mean? I didn't say a word. That's the difference between me and my sister. My sister would have told her. I would not. I just kept quiet. I just accepted it.

ERIKA: By now, Joan had been in the order for a year. It was time to become a novice, which, for her, meant a transfer to San Francisco -- the same convent as Sue.

Before she left, she had a meeting with her mistress.

JOAN: And she said, "I know that I've been very, very hard on you. I wanted to break your spirit.

I wanted you to become humble, because I know you're going to be something great in this community." And I said to her, "And I'm going to tell you something. You, as a mistress, have the power to make or break a vocation, and you have broken mine. And you live with that."

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ERIKA: In California, Sue had no idea what her younger sister was going through. Even now that they were in the same convent, they couldn't really talk about it.

Joan hung on, but she was fragile. And then she got a package from her mom. It was full of family photos.

JOAN: Pictures of our family reunion. And I think because I was struggling so much there at that moment, that when she sent those pictures, it was a trigger for me.

ERIKA: So that day, Joan found her big sister and told her to go to their spot.

JOAN: I said, "Meet me up on the third floor." And then she came up, and I just was crying and saying, "I just, I can't do this anymore." Um, (whispering) I'm gonna get emotional ...

SUE: I know me too, (laughs) because ... we're both going to be crying right here.

JOAN: And so I said to her, um, "Can you... I don't know how to get out. Like, how do I get out?"

SUE: You could tell that she was suffering. Like you could just physically tell she was suffering. And I was super clear if she stayed, it would have been so massively unhealthy.

JOAN: And she said, "The only way you can get out is if you say that you can't live the celibate life, (Joan crying, Sue laughing) because every other way they would talk you into staying." So I went down to the sister and I said, um, "I can't live the celibate life. Like every time I go on the tram car, I look at guys." It was all lies. It wasn't true. But I told her that, and she said, "If you would've said anything else, I would have asked you to stay, but because you said you can't live the celibate life, I understand that that's a gift from God."

And from there, it was kind of quick, like, "Call your parents." And I said to meet me, and I was getting on this flight. And then it was all like, kind of quietly done, like hush, hush. Go down to get clothing. At this time, I was super skinny and kind of sickly looking. But, I put clothing on and ... I still felt that I was called.

SUE: She truly felt called, and then there was no healthy soil for that call to grow.

JOAN: (crying) The saddest part for me was that my soul didn't want to leave, because I love the work and I love the prayer. I loved the whole life, but mentally, I was losing Joan.

And then I went into the chapel, and my name was Sister Maria Fatima, and everybody there was singing this "Our Lady of Fatima" song. And I was kneeling and I was crying. It was like I was having an out of body experience. When I walked out the door, I left my soul in the chapel. The very depth of my soul was still there, because I didn't really want to go. But my body was taking me out.

SUE: And it was so painful to watch. And then for me, the fear of like, "Is that going to happen to

me? Am I going to lose myself?"

MIDROLL

ERIKA: Even though Joan left, Sue stayed.

She progressed through the ranks of the order, took her first vows, took her final vows. She became a superior, and she stayed in the MCs for over a decade, working all over the country in women's shelters and soup kitchens.

Sue says her outspoken nature helped, and she knew how to navigate the system. Like the time Mother Teresa visited the MC house in Baton Rouge, where Sue was running a summer camp.

SUE: She'd be like, "How's it going?" And I basically lied. I basically said, "Oh, it's just really hard," because I knew she wouldn't transfer me.

ERIKA: Wow.

SUE: But if I would have went in and said, "Oh, I love it here." And I probably would've got transferred.

ERIKA: You kind of learned the code to continue doing what you wanted.

SUE: Correct.

ERIKA: 'Cause I've definitely heard from other people, you know, expressing a lot of enthusiasm for something and then getting pulled off of that job. Like, "Oh, she's enjoying that too much."

SUE: Yes, I think that happened a lot, and I'm super intuitive that way? So as soon as I know the code, I'm in.

ERIKA: Sue had been in the MCs for about 10 years when she became a superior. She was transferred to the MC AIDS hospice in San Francisco. It was a three-story wooden house. The sisters lived on the first floor.

SUE: So when I first got there, there were six of us total. And there were three sisters that I would say could function and carry out duties well, and there were three that were really struggling.

ERIKA: First, she had to learn to manage the house. With no training

ERIKA [IN TAPE]: So you kind of go in blind --

SUE: You don't kind of go in blind. You go in blind. Just pray and you'll get the grace to do what needs to be done.

ERIKA: So she relied on her intuition in the hospice. It was rewarding to care for these men with AIDS who were dying.

SUE: Most of these men were rejected from their families. Like when we tried to reach their

families, they didn't want anything to do with it. I mean, that was the early '90s. The stigma was still there.

This one young man, Lamont -- he was young, beautiful, funny. We contacted his family. I mean, at this time, he couldn't get up, he couldn't sit up. I mean, he was completely bedridden.

And so I said to him, "Hey, I have a surprise for you." And then he said, "What?"

First, I just brought his mother. And he just burst into tears, and she burst into tears, and then she came over and held him almost like a child again, got underneath him and held him and just kept kissing him and telling him how much she loved him and ... Oh, he sobbed, sobbed, sobbed, sobbed.

And and then the siblings came in. They were a very exuberant family, and so you would just hear 'em laughing, and they would sing. And then for like three days, it was just like, party time. (laughs) It was so sweet.

The mom had put an eight track tape -- we had a little tape recorder thing -- and she put the eight-track tape in and hit the button. This voice and song was unbeliev -- it gave me chills. And I said to her, "That is so beautiful." And she goes, "That's Lamont." He had an exquisite voice.

And then he passed away like a day after that.

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ERIKA: As a superior, Sue was now technically the "direct voice of God," though she never thought of it that way. Now she could make her own rules. She could eat what she wanted. Even form relationships outside the convent. Having power for the first time in years led her to act in ways she didn't expect.

SUE: When you are in an organization that suppresses the human spirit in the ways that it had done, you always think, you know, "If I were superior, I would never act like that. I would be kind, I would listen." And what you realize is the second you became superior, you had a lot of freedom and power that was suppressed for many, many years.

ERIKA: One time a nun under Sue's supervision told her she was sick.

SUE: She would say, "I can't do X, whatever." But I remember going, "Yes, you can. You're not that sick." And I had the power to make her do those things.

ERIKA: One night, while the sisters slept, Sue snuck out to the chapel. Just sat alone in the quiet.

SUE: And all the sudden, there was this moment of, "Oh my God, you are being exactly, you're doing and being exactly the things you said you weren't going to be or do. What is wrong with you? You're wielding power." You know, the whole infamous "absolute power corrupts absolutely."

ERIKA: And you had absolute power.

SUE: In that microcosm, absolutely. And then I shifted completely.

ERIKA: Sue decided to change her whole approach. She'd listen, not reprimand. Not humiliate. She'd start with kindness.

But she was about to learn that her "absolute power" wasn't really absolute. One day, Sue got a call from Mother Teresa about a transfer. A new nun was coming to work at the hospice.

SUE: And she said, "I'm sending you Sister So-and-So. She's a gift from Jesus, and you just need to love her."

I mean, the standing joke as superiors were if you get a phone call from Mother or a regional superior and they say, "Oh, we have a gift for you. We're going to send a sister to your house," that was a big red flag. Because that was like, "Oh, we're getting somebody who's they're struggling somewhere else, and they're moving them." So it was a standing joke. We're like, "Eh, you can just keep the gift." (Sue laughs)

So this sister comes in. Now we're in a wooden building with non-ambulatory patients on the second floor. No elevators, no nothing. Like if there's a fire, you have to carry them down the stairs and out the door, OK? I think it was like day three, and everybody's in bed and we all sleep in a common dormitory.

ERIKA: And Sue wakes up. She smells something. Maybe smoke? So she hops off her cot.

SUE: I'm like throwing on my sari, and I I fly past the chapel, and out of the corner of my eye, I catch flames.

ERIKA:She rushes into the chapel. The new sister is inside.

SUE: This sister had taken all the trash and put it under the altar, and lit it on fire and was just kneeling there, staring into the fire.

And I don't know why I didn't panic, but I didn't. And so I went next to her, and I was like, "Sister, do you know that there's, there's a fire under the altar?" And she turned to me, and she looked me right in the eye and she goes, "Do you know I am possessed?"

And I said, "I don't know about that, but I know I have to put that fire out." (laughs)

ERIKA: The next morning, the sister tells Sue she has no memory of the fire. But then she does it again. Soon, Sue says, this sister is setting fires every few days. Of course, Sue's a wreck. She's losing sleep. She doesn't know what to do. She calls her regional superior, who says, "Just talk to her." But that doesn't help. So she calls Mother Teresa. Sue suggests sending the sister to a psychotherapist.

SUE: And I said, "I'm really struggling." And Mother said, "Just give her time, Sister, and just keep loving her." And when I hung up, I had great clarity. There is no way that I'm going to be able to manage this.

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ERIKA: While all of this was happening with Sue, Joan had to make a new life.

When she left the MCs, Joan did the only thing she could do with no money, and no practical work experience, and really no sense of what was possible: She went home to Lancaster, Pennsylvania. But, her Mistress's words followed her. She says they were like tapes. These memories of every terrible thing her mistress said, playing over and over again.

JOAN (IN FLASHBACK): *Jesus knows you're a fake and a phony. You're stupid. Serves you right.*

ERIKA: Joan still felt called to be a nun. She went to church, but now she felt like an imposter.

JOAN: And then people would come to me and say, "You're so holy." I would leave that church and go to another church, so that no one would know me. And so I could not be noticed. And that's the worst thing that to this day, I don't want to be noticed.

ERIKA: There was another tape that played in her head. The words of one of her confessors -- that's a priest you confess your sins to or who serves as a spiritual guide. Father Donald McGuire was a Jesuit priest. He was convicted of sexually abusing boys and eventually sentenced in 2009 to 25 years in prison.

But before that, he was often assigned as a confessor for MC sisters, including Sue and Joan. Years before he was sentenced, Donald McGuire told Joan something that would haunt her.

JOAN: And he said to us, "If you make it to the novitiate and you leave, you'll have handicapped children, you'll get divorced and bad things will happen to you, because God wants you here."

ERIKA: This stuck with Joan, because she *had* made it to the novitiate and left. Once she did, she felt like Father McGuire's warnings started to come true.

JOAN: I went home in January. Now, mind you, for the last two years, no love, no nothing. I met this man. He said he loved me, went to church with me, the whole nine yards.

ERIKA: Eventually, they got married.

JOAN: I had this huge wedding. Nuns were singing in my wedding. I mean, it was huge.

ERIKA: But Joan wasn't happy for long. She says the relationship ended horribly after three months.

JOAN: OK so now here I am -- an ex-nun, and a man leaves me.

JOAN (IN FLASHBACK): *And he said, "If you leave, you'll get divorced, you'll have handicapped children, and bad things will happen to you."*

JOAN: So I thought, "OK, I can't be a nun. I can't be married." So I went up to, uh, this place we have called Pequea Pinnacle.

ERIKA: She hiked through the woods up to an overlook on a tall hill near home.

She could see water and trees stretched out below. This place was special to Joan. She used to talk to God here. It was where she felt her call to religious life. This time was different.

JOAN: I was gonna jump, right? Kill myself. Because, um, God must hate me. So ... (crying) I went up there, I went to jump, and a snake slithered up in front of me. And, um, I hate snakes. So I was scared to death, so I ran back to my car and got in my car and then went back home.

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JOAN: Hi! (laughter) Hi, baby girl! Do you wanna meet Erika? Let's go meet Erika! Look here! Look, look! There's Erika ...

ERIKA: Now Joan is a mother and a grandmother. Her daughter Hannah has a toddler, and they live next door.

JOAN: I try to live in God's will, and let God unfold the will. So right now, the will for me is to be a great mom and a grandmother, and I lead a company.

ERIKA: She remarried to man she calls kind and patient named Tom.

JOAN: Before we got married, I said, "Don't marry me, because I can never love you the way you deserve to be loved, because I love God ultimately to the nth degree. God is what I love the most. And that's where I spend most of my time."

ERIKA: But that didn't deter Tom.

JOAN: And he just said, "No, I, you know, I love you."

ERIKA: Joan made a life outside the convent. She built a small chapel for prayer in her backyard. She lived her faith in a different way.

And then one day, someone showed up in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. A woman in a white sari with blue stripes.

It was her sister: Sue.

MIDROLL

ERIKA: In the years before Sue Weber returned to Pennsylvania, her time as a superior had brought her a step deeper into the organization. It also gave her a new vantage point.

SUE: When I became superior, and I had more time to think, that opened the door to really question a lot of things.

ERIKA: She already had a growing list of concerns about the Missionaries of Charity -- like how sisters were treated, and how sisters in leadership roles used their authority.

SUE: So you have sisters who were amazing and, in my opinion, didn't even wield power. And then you had sisters who wield it to the nth degree. Everybody's at the mercy of whoever has power.

ERIKA: There was something else that bothered her: She thinks Mother Teresa founded this order based on what worked for *Mother Teresa*. She got to follow *her* calling -- she founded her own order, she established the rules. The Missionaries of Charity was an extension of her

personality and drive.

But the way Sue saw it, the sisters inside this order couldn't follow their *own* calling. Just obey. Just follow assignments, regardless of feelings.

Sue says the one-size-fits-all doesn't work, especially for a group of women from around the world. One former sister told me a convent she was in had something like 27 nationalities all living together. It sometimes led to language and cultural issues. Sue tried to explain that to Mother Teresa.

SUE: Trying to get her to understand that everybody is not the same. Everybody's coming in, all of us, with our baggage. And in her mind, the second you crossed the threshold to the order, all of that disappears, or it should disappear. And in the utopia of life, that would be lovely, wouldn't it? Like --

ERIKA: Right.

SUE: Everybody just goes in, and then we all just love each other.

ERIKA: Instead, Sue saw sisters struggle. They were tired and stressed and grappled with language barriers. Some needed psychological care. And no one seemed to fix the problems.

SUE: I realized that the order was wired that you had very little time to think. So you had your morning prayer and your adoration. I can't speak for anybody else, but all I ever did was worked really hard not to fall asleep during that time --

ERIKA: I've heard that from a number of people --

SUE: Which should have been the time where you can think and have your thought process. If you're in a bad relationship, if all your energy is in the bad relationship, you don't have the capacity to look at it through another lens.

I could no longer live what I felt I was being called to.

ERIKA: At one point, she learned about a letter Mother Teresa wrote.

SUE: She was struggling with, "Do I serve the sisters or, or do I serve the poor?" And I will never forget this. She wrote a letter to the Pope. And the Pope wrote back, and this is what he said: "Give necessary care to your sisters, and *loving* care to the poor."

And I was like, W-T-F. Seriously? That is insane! Give nece -- like the very people who are carrying out your work. The reality is without her sisters, the order doesn't exist. Women who were willing to dedicate their life to the service of the poor -- you're going to give them *necessary* care only?! And you're giving loving care to the poor? Yeah, I went, I went off the deep end on that one. (laughs)

ERIKA: 'Cause you wanted loving care for the sisters.

SUE: Yes! Because anybody understands humanity, you can't give what you don't have. So if you have an order of sisters who are not being filled with love, how are they going to be loving?

And you see that in houses where we've been accused, and rightly so, of mistreating people. And for me, it wasn't about "these sisters are bad people." They were empty. They were empty. And you can't live that kind of a life if you're empty.

ERIKA: By 1993, Sue felt like she was on the verge of a breakdown. So she asked for a temporary leave. She went back to her parents' house in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, still wearing the sari. She kept her MC rituals: She rose early, she prayed, but something had changed. Maybe she wasn't called to life in the convent anymore. But someone else did feel the call: Joan.

JOAN: I still felt that I was called, no matter what. And I don't think it ever changes. For me, it never has changed. And I fight that constantly.

ERIKA: So it was hard for her to see Sue back in their parents' house, dressed in the blue and white sari -- a superior.

JOAN: When I left the Missionaries of Charity, I kept a lot to myself. Again, I don't share a lot with people. I mean, I'm surprised I'm sharing what I'm sharing with you. I think at one point, I felt weak that I couldn't do it. (choking up) Um, and so I was probably a little jealous of her that she got to stay in and she was doing it. And then also --

SUE: If you only knew. (Sue laughing)

JOAN: And then also I was a little hurt, because I guess I wanted her to sway me to stay when I told her I was going to leave. So for a couple years, I probably blamed her that she didn't think I had a vocation, but I knew in my soul, I did. And so I was kind of hurt by her. But it was me. It wasn't her. She wasn't intentionally hurting me. But I felt hurt by that, because I felt like she didn't defend my vocation.

ERIKA: That must've been really hard. Have you talked about this before? What is it like to hear that, Sue?

SUE: I'm not surprised, and it makes sense that she would feel that way. For me, it wasn't about saying somebody had a vocation or not. For me, it was more of a protective "you're not going to be who you are if you stay here."

ERIKA: After nine months in Lancaster, the reasons for Sue to *leave* began to outweigh her desire to stay. She stopped wearing the sari. She wasn't going back.

SUE: I was recognizing that I was no longer true to myself and I, that I couldn't be true to myself if I stayed in there.

ERIKA: Mother Teresa asked her for a meeting in Harlem -- one last attempt to change Sue's mind. Joan drove her there, and the two of them walked into the convent together.

SUE: There was a woman who made sure nobody saw me, snuck me into a parlor. And then when all the sisters had gone to the chapel, she snuck me from the parlor to where Mother's room was.

Mother had her head down. I knelt down to get her blessing. She blessed me. And then I sat on the chair, and then she immediately was like, "You need to come back. This is where God's

calling you. Mother Mary wants you here.”

Mother Teresa, she had all her little axioms. She had all her little snippets that were exactly the same every single time you went to the table. So I felt like I was not being heard. I wanted to be heard.

And finally I said, “Mother, I don’t know if I want to come back. Things would have to really change for me.”

She said, “You need to come back. Sister Chiara is in Russia. She converted this many people to Catholicism.” And that just made me like rear up, and I looked her right in the eye, and I said, “Yes. And you have over 3,000 women religious dying in your community.”

ERIKA: At this point, Sue was yelling. Joan could hear it from the next room.

SUE: And then she kind of sat back, pulled up and then I really felt like I was being heard.

ERIKA: But by then, it didn’t matter. Nothing Mother Teresa could say would change Sue’s mind. She left.

* * *

ERIKA: Not long after she left the convent, Sue went on a spiritual retreat to reflect and figure out what to do.

SUE: I was doing a three-month retreat, silent retreat. I was in this tiny little like 300-square-foot cabin in this vast forest and incredible beauty of nature and wood-burning stove. So all the wood was stacked outside. It’s winter, and I just took a lot of books and -- all written by priests and stuff.

And I started reading this book. There was a section that said, “There are,” I forget how many, 10, I think, “10 signs that you are in a cult.” And I’m reading this book and I’m just like, “Oh my God, this is the Missionaries of Charity. This is a Missionaries ...” And I felt like it was the first time I was reading something that was, like, validating my experience.

And all of a sudden, I get to the end of the book, and this priest says, “A perfect example of a non-cult is the Missionaries of Charity.” (laughs) I literally get up off my sofa, I open the door -- it’s snowing like crazy -- I fling the book out across the lawn. I end up taking all the wood and pitching it out.

I -- I w I was -- I was livid. Like *livid*.

I was like, “This is ridiculous.” So I go back out in the snow, looking for the book that I threw out. I find it. I bring the book back in, and I sit down and proceed to write this man a letter and basically say, “For you to have made a statement like that, never having lived in that order, is not only dangerous, it is untruthful.”

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ERIKA: Thanks so much for listening, and stick with us, because there’s a lot more in the coming weeks.

TOM DOYLE: This is the first time that I have ever encountered, uh, any form of sexual, uh, violation or abuse in the Missionaries of Charity. That doesn't mean it doesn't exist.

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CREDITS

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