

Episode 9: Highway of Broken Glass

ERIKA LANTZ: From Rococo Punch and iHeartRadio, this is The Turning. I'm Erika Lantz. Part 9: Highway of Broken Glass.

Over the time I've worked on this podcast, one word has come up again and again.

MARY ANDERSON: It was like a cult thing.

KELLI DUNHAM: If you look at the characteristics of cults, it's like unswerving obedience to a charismatic leader -- check.

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

COLETTE LIVERMORE: You're only getting input from one source. You're isolated from everyone else. And that's what I mean by brainwashing. And that's why it sometimes reminds me of a cult.

ERIKA: I tried to leave the word "cult" out of conversations with former sisters, or at least not be the one to bring it up first. My fear was that once that word was on the table, it would shade the sisters retelling of their time in the MCs. But the comparisons kept coming up. For example, control over media -- how the Missionaries of Charity are only allowed to read books that their mistress assigns to them.

COLETTE: You couldn't read the newspaper, hear the radio, anything like that.

MARY: We weren't supposed to be looking around at anything, really. And that was called "keeping custody of the eyes."

ERIKA: Another example: Sisters are cut off from their families and past lives.

MARY JOHNSON: I didn't know that I'd only get to write a letter home once a month. I didn't know that I'd only get to visit my family once every 10 years. I had no idea about all of that.

ERIKA: Limited sleep. I've heard so many sisters mention the late nights and early mornings -- always waking at 4:40 a.m., which might impact a person's ability to think critically. Early morning meditation was a struggle.

MARY JOHNSON: I was always tired as a Missionary of Charity, and so most of that half hour -- very often, not always, but very often it's just a struggle trying to stay awake.

SUE WEBER: Sisters were seen as more holy if you needed less sleep. You were strong. You could take a lot of physical pain and not complain and offer it up. There was, whether it was conscious or not, there was a lot of value put on that.

MARY ANDERSON: And every day we scrubbed the same patch of floor for half an hour. And I was exhausted. And I remember thinking, "I could have used that extra half hour of sleep instead of scrubbing the same piece of floor that was clean every morning."

ERIKA: Then there's the claim that the MCs kept sisters from thinking for themselves.

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

ERIKA: And the rules -- a rigid enforcement of rules. Mary Johnson says that as she rose through the ranks, she was told by a superior that she should be more firm with sisters under her. For example, if a sister fell asleep during meditation, Mary should take the sister to the kitchen, cut an onion and make the sister put its juice in her eyes.

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ERIKA: Do you think you were in a cult?

SUE: I think we had cultish tendencies. This is my personal opinion, obviously. I think to be in a cult, the leader has to have clarity of what they're doing. And I definitely, unequivocally do not believe that was the purpose. Like. I believe some of the outcomes happened, um, but no -- that's the -- that would be the only reason I wouldn't think we were in a cult, that I was in a cult. Do I think people who come out of it need help deprogramming on some levels? Absolutely.

ERIKA: Clearly it's complicated. So when people ask me outright, "Are the Missionaries of Charity a cult?" I don't have an answer. I'm not even sure what exactly a cult is.

ELIN LANTZ LESSER: And I'm even hesitant to use that word, just because it's such a charged word.

ERIKA: This is Elin Lantz Lesser. She's a producer on this show, and you might remember she's my sister. And she dug into this question: What is a cult? Do the MCs qualify? And this is the first time I'm hearing what she learned.

ELIN: So, I reached out to a cult expert, a sociologist named Dr. Janja Lalich. She's written books on it. She's researched it.

DR. JANJA LALICH: I mean, I was in a cult myself, and so for years, I wanted to leave, but I couldn't figure out how to leave.

ERIKA: Oh.

ELIN: And she says she was in a Marxist-Leninist-Vanguard party cult --

ERIKA: Oh wow.

ELIN: But eventually it was dissolved.

DR. LALICH: And so, in the end, we all got out at the same time. But when you've so internalized the belief system, it becomes very difficult to leave because, you know, you doubt yourself when you have these thoughts, you have negative thoughts, you have to immediately shut them away, because first of all, there's no way to talk about them. There's no way to entertain those ideas. And you're also, at the same time, kind of chastising yourself for even having those ideas and thinking that, you know, there's something wrong with you -- that you're, you're not being as good a true believer as everyone else

ERIKA: That sounds familiar. That almost perfectly describes a number of former sisters we interviewed -- how they felt.

ELIN: Yeah, that feeling of, "Am I alone in these questions or doubts?"

ERIKA: And also they're not able to have personal conversations with their fellow sisters, so they think that "I'm just the problem child."

ELIN: Yeah. And you didn't talk about why people left.

ERIKA: Oh yeah.

ELIN: So I described the basics to her: how the sisters are extreme in their vows, how sisters joined the order not knowing what it really entails, the emphasis on suffering for the sake of salvation, you know, the limited contact with the outside world.

DR. LALICH: It sounds like a cult to me (laughs.) I mean, it's obviously very extreme and using techniques that really break a person down, which is what happens in cults. Yeah. That doesn't sound good.

ERIKA: Wow.

ELIN: Yeah.

ERIKA: That's that's not what I think I expected to hear her start with.

DR. LALICH: To me, this would certainly fit a lot of the criteria of being a cult.

ERIKA: So what are the criteria for a cult?

ELIN: Basically, there are three criteria she mentioned off the bat.

DR. LALICH: Well, first of all, there's the the authoritarian leader who demands all loyalty, who cannot be questioned, who cannot be criticized.

ELIN: There aren't any checks and balances on that person and whatever they say kind of goes.

ERIKA: Hm.

ELIN: Second: There's a structured sort of belief system.

DR. LALICH: Sort of what I call a transcendent belief system, which gives you the answers to everything -- past, present and future.

ELIN: That belief system will guide you.

DR. LALICH: And requires uh self-transformation to allow you to be on that path.

ELIN: And then third, basically there are these strategies that are in place to reinforce the indoctrination and basically keep you in the group and keep you isolated from the outside world.

ERIKA: Mmm.

ELIN: I mean there are examples of this in the MCs. Like the fact that you can only write home once a month, you're not supposed to really talk about your time inside.

ERIKA: One thing that strikes me, for example, with the first one is "authoritarian leader." Like the word authoritarian sounds so negative and --

ELIN: Mmm.

ERIKA: I, you know, I don't think the average person would think, "Oh, Mother Teresa is an authoritarian leader." Um, it is true that she set the rules for the order and anyone that was a superior had power without checks and balances. So maybe it is an accurate description? It's just such a harsh term.

ELIN: I think the thing about Mother Teresa is that she had this humility about her. Like I --

ERIKA: Hmm.

ELIN: She had this, like, focusing in all her speeches on the poor and love and on Jesus and sort of being this humble servant. I think of the Medal of Freedom speech where she says, you know, "This isn't about me."

ERIKA: Yeah. So it feels a little different than some charismatic leaders that are just so self-focused. It's sheathed in humility, so it does feel different, even though a lot of things feel the same.

ELIN: Definitely.

And something I didn't want to gloss over in this discussion is that the Missionaries of Charity are part of an organized religion. So what really differentiates a religion from a cult? Because I think sometimes there's this fine line and maybe there's even a gray area.

ERIKA: Yeah.

DR. LALICH: The way I see it, the difference between a cult and a healthy religion is that a healthy religion is going to have you worshipping some type of higher being, you know, whether it's God or Jesus or Allah or Buddha or a tree or whatever, right? But you're not expected to worship this human person right in front of you.

ERIKA: Hmm.

ELIN: Which I don't know if that fits Mother Teresa, because my impression is that it wasn't as if MC sisters were literally worshipping Mother Teresa.

ERIKA: Mhmm.

DR. LALICH: Well, you know, I think what I mean by that is that person becomes all-powerful. That person is clearly the one who is calling all the shots and the one who you must obey. While they may still worship God or Jesus, the human authoritarian figure intervenes and, you know, declares herself the voice of God.

ERIKA: Yeah, so when she says a leader who declares herself the voice of God, it's like, I don't think Mother Teresa would say, "I declare I am the voice of God," you know? Like that doesn't sound like Mother Teresa. Um.

ELIN: And yet.

ERIKA: And yet.

ELIN: The superiors are the voice of God. I mean, that is the phrase we heard over and over again. And she is the superior of the superiors.

ERIKA: General. (laughs) Yeah.

ELIN: And you know, one other question that I remember you brought up with me that you were wondering that you wanted answered at one point when we were reporting the story was do ethical cults exist?

ERIKA: Oh yeah.

ELIN: And so, yeah, I was curious about that, too. So I asked Dr. Lalich, and this is what she said:

DR. LALICH: In my opinion, there's no such thing as a benign cult, because part of what, for me, defines a cult is the person giving up their autonomy, giving up their self. And once you give up your autonomy, I don't see that as a good thing. So I don't care if it's a chocolate-chip-cookie cult. It's not good that you've given up your autonomy and your own decision-making powers.

ERIKA: I think it makes sense if you are someone who believes that independent thought is inherently a good thing. Any group that's taking that away would be seen as bad. Honestly it also makes me kind of question myself and whether I'm too easy sometimes on the Missionaries of Charity?

ELIN: Hmm. What do you mean?

ERIKA: I'm trying so hard to see everything from different people's perspectives. Like, I'm really trying to keep an open mind. And if -- am I keeping such an open mind that I'm not, um, seeing what's in front of me, does that help me see it better? Or does that actually blind me a little bit? Like we're going to have such different reactions from different listeners.

ELIN: Yeah. I mean, I think some people would say, "You talked to a cult expert in reference to the Missionaries of Charity?" They might be offended by that.

ERIKA: Yeah.

ELIN: But to me, what really sticks out about what she's saying is that giving up of autonomy, and if nothing else, if the Missionaries of Charity don't meet some of these other standards, they do meet this standard -- that giving up of self. I mean that literal emptying of self we've heard from the sisters. "Jesus must increase, I must decrease." It's just about the reduction of autonomy to be "a pencil in God's hand," and so they are discouraged from thinking for themselves.

But I think the counter argument is that their spirituality is about that -- that there's this intentional emptying or draining of self. There's almost like a knowing letting go of self, and there's something beautiful and meaningful about that for some of these women. In their perspective, it brings them closer to God.

ERIKA: Yeah.

ELIN: And why should others judge that?

ERIKA: It is a beautiful thing to let go of yourself and your own needs and desires.

ELIN: For a larger picture.

ERIKA: A bigger, higher purpose.

ELIN: Or meaning.

ERIKA: Yeah.

ELIN: So then, I mean, given all these barriers to leaving, I kind of thought, "Well, what allows people to eventually leave then?"

DR. LALICH: Well, I think what happens is I think everyone who's in a cultic situation, even the true believers, everyone has doubts and everyone has hesitations. And so because you can't do anything with them, the way I see it is that you keep shoving these things in the back of your head.

ELIN: And she used this metaphor of a shelf.

DR. LALICH: This shelf in the back of your head. And finally something will happen, you know, that'll break that shelf. It'll be one too many things. And once that shelf breaks and these doubts come spilling out, you know, then you kind of have this aha moment, like, "Oh my God, I've got to get out of here. There's some -- this is not healthy. This is --" whatever. You know, "This is wrong. I have to get out of here."

ELIN: It's not also as if once that shelf breaks, you immediately walk out. You have to come up with a plan for how to extricate yourself.

ERIKA: That also really resonates with what we've heard.

ELIN: Definitely.

But all of this just makes me think about what is it actually like when you're there? You're in your sari, your hair is cut short, you've been living this life for potentially years, and to feel like you want to leave. And we've heard that before from people of just those thoughts of like, "How do I get out? I don't know how to get out." And then like, to just look to the future -- "What will my future be?" I just can't imagine how difficult that would be.

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ERIKA: A lot of former sisters we spoke to didn't want to be recorded. And that includes all of the former sisters we talked to who were originally from India. That's an important perspective, because a lot of Missionaries of Charity are Indian. That was part of Mother Teresa's vision from the beginning. In my mind, not being able to hear their voices is something that's been missing in this podcast.

One phone call with a former sister from India hit us hard. She repeatedly said that being an MC was like slavery. She said the impact was like a quote "shadow on your mind" -- the way of thinking, the inability to make friends, the relentless guilt -- she said it stays with you. And she felt that life inside the MC society was so busy, it left no time to think. She said there was quote "a lot of brainwashing going on."

Colette Livermore, the Australian sister whose story we've been following -- she used the same language.

COLETTE LIVERMORE: What is brainwashing? Brainwashing is that you've only got one source of information. They know everything about you, even your most personal thoughts. And if you start to think you want out, they're there to sort of talk you out of it.

ERIKA: Colette tried to leave the Missionaries of Charity in 1980. She knelt in front of Mother Teresa in Kolkata and said she wanted to leave. But Mother Teresa pressured her to stay.

COLETTE: She's the saint. I'm the sinner. (laughs) She must be right. Uh. I just knelt there until she dismissed me.

ERIKA: So Colette stayed and took her final vows.

In our interviews, Colette repeatedly questioned why she hadn't left sooner. She often blamed herself. She'd say she wished she had more of a spine. More confidence to take action. But she also seemed keenly aware of some of the pressures that kept her there.

COLETTE: You're cut off from your family and you can't -- you haven't got a friend, and you're just struggling to survive.

ERIKA: Colette remembers how sisters would report on each other, like a time she was accused of having a "particular friendship."

COLETTE: The girl I joined with, Ruth, she and I had walked to Mother's house together. It just happened. And we were saying the rosary along the way, and we just happened to walk together. And this was reported, 'cause we're never usually together. And so I just exploded and ... and then I was -- and then you have to go through the whole rigamarole of kneeling down and confessing your lack of self-control and ugh it just went on and on.

ERIKA: Again and again her superiors admonished her for thinking for herself, she says. She learned to question the motives of everything she did.

COLETTE: It's a very negative atmosphere. You know, it's like emotional abuse, and it's not good for a person in any way, because if you suffer emotional abuse all the time, and insecurity all the time, there'll be a point where you'll just crack up, and you won't be kind. And I honestly feel that some people living under that regime have become more bitter and angry and not their true selves.

But I don't know. I feel like I'm being too negative, you know? Like, it wasn't all miserable! Like every time you see the sisters, they'd be smiling and everything. The spirit of the society was total surrender, loving trust and cheerfulness. (laughs) No matter what happened, you were supposed to be cheerful. But it was just these internal things that were problematic.

I'm mostly talking about the system.

ERIKA: Colette says the system taught you to doubt yourself. But she also started to doubt her place in the system.

MIDROLL

ERIKA: By 1983, Colette Livermore had been a sister with the Missionaries of Charity for 10 years. Then she was transferred to an MC house in Australia, her home country. So on the way to her new assignment, she was allowed to visit her family.

She met her mother and sister at a train station, and they ran up to greet her. All three of them were in tears. When Colette left Australia for the MCs, her sister was 10 years old. Now she was a young woman.

COLETTE: So I was in my own country, and the culture clash, the ... the way of doing things was even more ... jangly, you know, it just wasn't ... didn't feel right.

ERIKA: Colette was stationed in Bourke, in the Outback, about 400 miles from home.

COLETTE: It just seemed culturally inappropriate the way we were behaving with the Aboriginal people, trying to call them for Sunday mass when they didn't want to go, (laughs) the kids didn't want to go.

ERIKA: At this point, it felt like a daily struggle to stay in the order.

COLETTE: I knew that I couldn't go on like this. And I think if you're not true to yourself, you ... you quite literally lose yourself. You're not who you are.

ERIKA: Finally she told her superior. She was done.

The superior had her see a priest. He told Colette her desire to leave was the result of an evil spirit. Besides, he said, "What would you do? Where would you go?"

Colette said she wanted to study medicine, and he told her that pride was talking. It was an impossible dream.

A novice mistress whom Colette had previously worked with wrote to her. She said Colette had to walk through "a dark night of the soul." The crisis she was feeling would purify her. Colette says this was insidious, because it flattered her -- a dark night was a sign of saintliness. But even with that in mind, she says she felt like she was cracking up.

COLETTE: And so I finally wrote to Mother. I said, "Please don't delay this anymore. I really need to leave."

ERIKA: She didn't give the letter to her superior, like she was supposed to. Colette was often in charge of the shopping, and on one of her trips, she mailed the letter to Kolkata herself.

About six weeks later, Colette got her answer.

COLETTE: Mother Teresa's writing is very distinctive. I knew um what it was.

ERIKA: All of the other sisters in the house -- there were only four of them -- had gone to a nearby city for medical appointments. Colette was alone.

COLETTE: Which is unheard of. (laughs) The first time ever, in the whole time I was in the society.

ERIKA: She stepped out of the house and onto a dirt road nicknamed "the crystal highway" because of all the broken glass. She stood there, letter in hand, the shards glinting and lighting the way to the horizon. And she read:

(reading letter): *"My dearest child ... You are asking for a year of absence -- I personally don't like it -- but the Church permits it -- if you still want it -- you can go home to your mother for three months, without the religious dress . . . Be careful when you are out, for you carry in your heart the precious treasure, your vocation, your vows. I will pray much for you. Do not let the evil one deceive you. You belong to Jesus. He loves you. God bless you. Mother Teresa, MC."*

COLETTE: "Yes! I'm free!"

The superior was terribly distressed. Tearful. But I was out. (laughs) And it was a big relief. Yeah. I was out.

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ERIKA: Mary Johnson would stay in the order for 20 years. And she didn't know it yet, but her time there was slowly running out.

MARY JOHNSON: What made me want to stay, really, was the deep conviction that God wanted me there. That's why I stayed, because I felt like I was called and it, whatever the circumstances were, whether they were happy and beautiful times, or whether they were sustained periods of not-so-great, God had called me there, and that was what was important.

ERIKA: But there was something else major going on in her life: Mary had fallen in love.

One day, Mary was on a train back from a trip to Florence. It was 19 years in.

When the train entered a tunnel in a mountainside, everything went dark. She slid out the crucifix that was always at her side, the one Mother Teresa had given her many years before. This was the crucifix that she put on her pillow every night when she prayed. And every night before bed she kissed the crucifix -- kissed each of Jesus's five wounds.

On the train in the dark, she ran her fingers up and down its sides, and she started to think. She thought about her years as an MC, what it all meant, what she was doing with her life, how she was doing as an MC. She knew she'd broken her vows -- more than once. This time, she'd fallen in love with a priest. We call him Father Tom here, but that's not his real name.

And then there was the time she broke her vows when she was alone with Tom in the hospital. She knew she still craved intimacy.

MARY: Not too long after our experience in the hospital, Tom told me that he was being transferred. It was like, "All right, then. What can we do? That's the end of that."

ERIKA: She'd stashed a glossy photo of him in the folds of her spare sari. She would sometimes take it out and look at his face. She knew that this photo broke three of her vows: poverty, which didn't allow extra possessions; chastity, which forbade this type of relationship; and obedience, which required that her superior know about her possession of the item. But she couldn't seem to help herself. She hid the photo.

But now, Father Tom was far away. And she was still stuck with her doubts and questions.

They rushed through her mind as she rode that train back to the convent.

MARY: I just was holding Jesus on the cross in my hands and wondering, "What am I going to do? This is ... I feel so conflicted." And it's not just about Tom. It's also about being asked to do things that just don't really sit right with me. It's about feeling so conflicted about the things my superiors were doing. The organization didn't look like the one that I had joined so many years earlier. I had to make a decision, and I couldn't be, you know, kind of one foot in, one foot out.

ERIKA: So she made a plan. She decided she would spend one year keeping all of the rules.

MARY: Doing the best I can to be exactly the sort of Missionary of Charity that Mother Teresa would approve of.

ERIKA: She told herself that if at the end of the year she could be herself -- her true self -- and still be a Missionary of Charity, she'd make a firm commitment to stay. But if not, she'd leave.

MARY: Because I didn't feel like God wanted me to be somebody other than the person he made me.

ERIKA: Of course, to fulfill that pact, to be a good Missionary of Charity, she knew she'd have to give up Tom. And his photograph. So she took it from its hiding place and brought it to the chapel.

MARY: There was a candle burning, and I held that photo up to the candle and watched as the photo turned to ash.

And, it felt cleaner. It felt cleaner.

ERIKA: She gathered the ashes and blew them out the window.

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ERIKA: Mary was then assigned to be superior of a house in Tor Bella Monaca, at the northern edge of Rome. The previous superior had just disappeared. No explanation -- just left. She hadn't seemed to be in distress, but she was gone now.

Leaving without permission was considered a disgrace to oneself and the community. And now it was Mary's job to replace her.

Mary says she tried to be a compassionate superior. She let sisters sleep a little extra on Thursdays. She let one sister drink coffee early to fight off drowsiness during meditation. And another, she let work in the garden.

She also tried to infuse her mission work with new meaning.

MARY: I want to help the poor people get out of poverty, not just make them a little bit more comfortable being poor. You know, I had tried when I was superior to get some programs in place, which would actually do that, and I couldn't get permission to do it. "No, no we'll house them. We'll feed them, and then we'll put them back out on the street without any more help than that."

ERIKA: That wasn't enough for Mary. She felt like a robot just following rules. "We should help people live a full life," she thought.

MARY: And I wanted that full life for myself.

ERIKA: Throughout her time as a Missionary of Charity, Mary often attended vow ceremonies. They happened every six months.

MARY: There were first vows. There were final vows.

ERIKA: She'd always thought these events were joyful, hopeful occasions. They were a chance for her to silently renew her own vows to herself.

MARY: I knew all the words to that ceremony by heart (laughs.) Every single one of them.

ERIKA: But this time, when she attended an MC vow ceremony, she didn't know if she could silently renew those vows. Her mind kept flipping back and forth. This was the year she had decided to give herself fully as a gift to God. Then she thought, "But what right did he have to take everything?" She stopped herself -- no, she was giving, God wasn't taking. She was Sister Donata, the freely given one. But then why was it that as she screwed her eyes shut, trying to quell the built-up resentment, she felt tears streamed down her face? Finally she prayed: "God, I curse the day you placed that woman's wrinkled face on the cover of Time Magazine. This is not love."

MARY JOHNSON: As the sisters took their vows, something inside of me is like yelling, "Don't! Don't do it! Don't do it!"

I was like sitting back in the pews, and I just trying to stay in my seat there, but wanting to run from the church.

MIDROLL

ERIKA: It was 1996: Mary Johnson's twentieth year in the MCs. As the end of her 1-year promise to fully follow the rules approached, she asked to take double penance. She thought it would bring her clarity and strength. She'd tighten the chain around her arm and waist twice a day. She'd hit her legs double the number of times. She no longer believed God took pleasure in her pain. But she did it anyway.

You know, I've been thinking about this decision because it's such a big one, and I was trying to figure out for myself ... what was the last straw? What was the thing? And then I kind of I started thinking about my own life and times when I've made big decisions. And often there isn't a moment, or if there's a moment, it's not a moment of decision. It's a moment of realizing I've already decided, like I've kind of known for a while.

MARY JOHNSON: One of the things I've been doing for the past couple of years is studying the brain, the way we make decisions. And there's a lot of controversy about that among neuroscientists and people who study these things really closely. And it seems that a lot of decisions actually get made before the person is conscious that the decision has been made. All of these different experiments. Even just real simple things like "You can raise your hand whenever you want to raise your hand." And the scans of the brain shows that the brain knows that you're going to make that decision before you know that you're going to make that decision.

So I think the whole, you know, big decision-making thing, it's not necessarily like a moment that we are fully conscious of, that there are all kinds of background things going on in our psyches, in our brains that we're not always aware of, and then we become aware of them.

ERIKA: I think what Mary's getting at here is that by the time she actually took action to leave, something deep inside her already knew. Like there was an element of inevitability. I wonder if that's what allowed her to accept her own decision; she knew she'd sort of already made it.

Mary remembers on Christmas Day 1996, an MC priest shared his own story in a homily. Something about it struck her -- cut to the core of her decision on whether to leave.

MARY: He said that a year ago, he left the Fathers, because he didn't even know if he wanted to be a priest anymore. So he said he went away, praying and thinking and struggling, but at the end, he'd come to the conclusion that he would never be happier than as a priest.

ERIKA: So he came back to the MC Fathers. Then he told them:

MARY: "God works in very surprising ways, and we must not be afraid to follow the stars he sends us, even if the journey takes us to unexpected places."

ERIKA: That night Mary held a pillow over her head to stifle the sound of her sobbing. She didn't want the sisters to hear.

MARY: I just knew. But I cried and over the next few days, I wrote that letter.

ERIKA: On January 1, 1997, she wrote to Mother Teresa. She asked to start the official process to leave the MCs. It's called exclaustation. It would involve a year away from the MCs, before fully leaving the order, when Mary could pray and discern her path. It's sort of like a leave of absence. If after a year, Mary still felt leaving the order was best, she would request permission from the Pope for a dispensation from her vows.

Mary told Mother she loved the sisters and was grateful, but she was leaving and she would not change her mind.

Even though it was the first of the month, Mary decided not to cut her hair that night, as she usually did.

MARY: Mother Teresa had told us, “Never go a month without cutting your hair.” She said that that road only led to leaving the convent. But I was lucky because my hair was curly, and even as it grew, it didn’t grow out in a way that could be seen.

ERIKA: She also stopped taking ‘the discipline.’ She never would again.

MARY: I didn’t leave the convent without faith, without trust, without hope, without love. I had a lot of it.

I just ... I didn’t leave because I had turned against God or my vocation or because I was bitter or -- I left because I believed God wanted people to flourish. And I knew I wasn’t flourishing there, so how could it possibly be that God wanted me to stay? And lots and lots of prayer, lots and lots of discernment.

ERIKA: Mary felt called by God to a new place.

Around this time, Father Tom was still far away -- in another country.

MARY: Before he left, we had had an agreement that if anything important happened, we would let each other know. So I had his phone number. I called him and told him that I had received permission to leave the Missionaries of Charity on a one year leave of absence. And when I told Tom that I would be leaving for a while, he asked, “Does this mean that you would consider marrying me?”

And that question just kind of floored me, because I wasn’t expecting it, and it wasn’t really a proposal either. It was like, what, what did he mean? And I wasn’t leaving to marry him. I was leaving, really, to be myself, to find my own way.

And I felt like I loved Father Tom so much, and I was scared that it would be a distraction for me. I felt like I really needed to figure out what God wanted of me.

ERIKA: So Mary wrote him a letter -- pages and pages. She said she loved him. She would always love him. But she needed time to find her path.

She said during her year’s exclaustation -- her leave of absence, they wouldn’t contact each other. Not a phone call. Not a letter. When she finished writing, she felt peace.

And then she waited for Mother Teresa’s response.

MARY: By this time, she was quite old, and she wasn’t always remembering things, and I received a letter back signed by her. It was kind of a form letter, but she had signed it, giving me permission to leave.

ERIKA: She wasn't supposed to tell anyone about the news yet. She wouldn't tell any of the priests and volunteers she worked with until right before she left. When the time came, she would say as instructed: "I'm going to America to be closer with my family, as there is some trouble."

MARY: The sisters really wanted, uh, to contain any sort of public relations damage that might come.

ERIKA: Like any sister who was transferred, she'd have no contact with the people she left behind. She'd give up the relationships she'd formed over 20 years. But she wanted to warn the sisters under her care.

MARY: There were just six sisters, I was their superior. I told them a few days before I left that that was what was happening.

ERIKA: Did you feel like they understood?

MARY: I don't think they had any idea the degree to which I had been struggling and praying and discerning.

ERIKA: Whenever Mary visited the larger nearby convent, sisters would cry and ask her if it was true. The sister who'd once been Mary's supervisor in the kitchen when she was a novice 19 years before, the sister burned by boiling pasta water, she wept. Some sisters told Mary she was making a mistake, that she'd regret leaving for the rest of her life.

But, in the end, the sisters in Mary's convent helped her get ready.

MARY: They helped to sew some clothes for me, a skirt and a blouse.

ERIKA: A brown paisley skirt and a dark gold blouse. Mary called it her getaway outfit.

Mary didn't want to discuss her departure with Mother Teresa in person. She'd gotten permission to leave in a form letter, and Mother Teresa was 86 and frail. Mary thought the news might give her a heart attack.

But things didn't go as she planned.

MARY: She came to Rome where I was and somebody reminded her that shortly I would be leaving. And she came and she found me and she brought me to her room, and she says, "What is this Mother hears about you? What is it Mother hears about you?!" And I said, "Mother, I'm leaving." And she couldn't believe it.

And she tried to convince me to stay and just very, very, very, very difficult situation, um, conversation.

ERIKA: Mary knew Mother wanted explanations, and there were countless things she wanted to say. More than anything, Mary wanted to talk with this woman who had defined her life -- to tell her everything she felt. To explain.

“Mother,” she wanted to say, “Mother, my God isn’t like yours. Your God asks you to deny yourself. He counts each sacrifice. Your God is Jesus Crucified. Mine is the God of the resurrection, who says, ‘Enough of this suffering. Let’s heal the world.’”

Above all, Mary wanted Mother Teresa to know she loved her. Did Mother know how much?

Mother Teresa said, "Sister, listen to Mother. Talk to Mother." She hit her hand on the desk with each word.

But Mary knew if she started listing her reasons for going, it would turn into a dialogue. She knew what Mother Teresa would say, what persuasive arguments she'd launch into, and she knew Mother Teresa would be convincing. She still had a power over Mary's psyche.

MARY: At a certain point she says, "Mother could believe this about anyone, but she cannot believe it about you."

And we never had another conversation. That was the last conversation I had with her.

I left, and she died three months later. And, uh . . . I still dream about her from time to time.

ERIKA: On a spring morning in 1997, Mary Johnson woke up in the convent dormitory. But instead of putting on her sari, she reached for the paisley skirt and blouse. Instead of hanging the crucifix at her side, she picked it up and kissed it, then put Jesus in her bag.

What did it feel like to put on regular clothes after all these years?

MARY: The strangest thing about putting on regular clothes from me was I could feel the wind on my calves! I mean, my skirt didn't go all the way to the floor and like that, that part of me hadn't felt wind in so long, so that was really strange.

ERIKA: As Mary stepped out of the door, the short curls on her head moved every so slightly in the breeze.

More than half her life had been in a convent. She was 39 years old.

Now she just needed to figure out, "What next?"

* * *

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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