

# STILL ON FIRE

*Field Notes from a Queer Mystic*

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# PREFACE

When I started this project, it was meant to be a straightforward spiritual memoir. Gay kid raised Catholic, saved from suicide by a nun, enters the convent at 18, kicked out at 20, spends next 40 years learning to heal, forgive, find her voice. It was an “If I can, you can” story about disentangling from outdated beliefs, breaking free of fear, creating a life of adventure and purpose. It was a tale of transformation—from indoctrinated Catholic to original thinker, trauma victim to change agent, international photojournalist to spiritual contemplative. A sweeping narrative arc peppered with conflict, loss, turbulence, and triumph.

Then came COVID. Then Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and a litany of others. Then the protests, the rage, the grief, the isolation. And the question for me, a Black Lives Matter ally, a cultural activist, and maker of change: How does this book matter now? Who will be served by the story of a white girl’s spiritual journey?

I stopped writing. I protested, marched, and socially distanced. I prayed and pondered and listened to the wind. Eventually I remembered: *My activism is my spirituality in running shoes*. It is one energy manifesting in two forms: as wave and particle, yin and yang, thought and action. My faith is the sum of my spiritual commitments. My commitments are the foundation for my action in the world. My action in the world is a spiritual force of moral consequence. It culminates in kindness and leans toward justice.

One’s spiritual journey, if conscious, is an evolutionary experience. It involves transformation. One often begins with inherited doctrines, established traditions; families, churches, and cultures lay out the rules and regulations. Then one matures, begins to think independently, asks new questions, and arrives at her own conclusions about matters of divinity.

Stories of transformation are necessary today as we attempt to evolve the moral infrastructure of our troubled nation, asking questions we’ve not asked before. *What can we learn from the Earth about change? How do we transform a culture that is rooted in injustice? What are the requirements of this hour for a species on the edge of an abyss?* Every transformed life is a

resource here.

Philosopher Jacob Needleman once wrote that group pondering will be the art form of the future. Suddenly, faced with demands for isolation and social distancing, millions of people around the world are group pondering on Zoom, tackling issues in every imaginable language. *Evolution is progressing us*. It is causing us to find each other, speak to each other across continents, benefit from the diversity of our experience. For some reason, we were unable to move forward on our own, but the demands of the pandemic led to an outcome we've needed for years: people learning how to be sociable, strategic, collaborative, and collectively creative.

Much of what we know we know from the stories of others. I learn from the storytellers to examine my experience, forgive the trespasses, harvest the wisdom, give thanks for the growth. When people share the events of their lives, it awakens me to this truth: that while life happens *to* me, it also happens *for* me and *through* me. I am an agent in the matter. The circumstances I face, I have helped to create.

The stories in this book begin in the convent where I prepared to make vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. I wore a veil. I confessed my sins. I prayed to be different, to not be gay, to not love whom I loved. But that did not happen. I was sent home before vows, an unbearable rejection I barely survived.

Unnavigable roads exist between who I was then and who I am now. The terrain stretches from a Catholic school in upstate New York to a Buddhist retreat in the Japanese Alps, a mountain path in the Himalayas, a Hindu ashram in Gujarat, India. The path weaves through Selma, Alabama; Little Rock, Arkansas; the Navajo Nation; Nagasaki. I remember the peaks, the feeling of awe, the wet smell of monsoon, the cliff's edge where I stood frozen, afraid to move. It's a mystery, this evolution from frightened to fearless, this resurrection of a life from death to rebirth. The veil is thin between silence and song.

To blend contemplative practice and social action is a spiritual discipline, an exercise rooted in the word *disciple*. I am a disciple of the teachers who preached kindness, justice, care for the forsaken. "What you do for them, you do for me ... and what you see me do, you can do and more." Those words of Jesus inform what I do, influence what I believe. *You belong to each other. Be food for each other.*

Prayer in motion is illumined action, and illumined action rises from a sea of deep peace.

The Buddha, it is told, said to his students, “Engage with joy in the sorrows of the world.” This is the story of my attempt to do that.

# INTRODUCTION

—San Diego, 2020

I'm a photographer. I've been looking through the lens of a camera for 50 years, and through its tiny aperture, I find myself wherever I look. Images are my currency. They tell me everything I need to know. They tell others what I want to say: This is who I am, this is what I cherish, this is what happened.

Every story is made of pictures: "She knelt by the bedside." "She entered the dark cave alone." "She watered the flowers with her tears." Always, a beginning, a conflict, a resolution, an ending. The story may be short, but an arduous journey separates beginning from end. It is fraught with danger. Questions crash like waves against the shore of our minds. *What are you made of? What are you after? How will you survive this?*

Tribulation is the medium of self-definition. I know who I am through my dealings with trouble. Conflict is a mirror, reflecting my grit—every struggle an opportunity to see what I will live for, suffer for, die for.

When I was a child, I prayed to be a martyr. I memorized the Baltimore Catechism. I hated myself for being queer. I read the lives of the saints and went to daily Mass. The Catholic Church owned my imagination. It colonized my brain before I was 10. I thanked God I was born Catholic, though it was my religion that made me wish I were dead—such an evil, sinful person I thought I was.

My quest to disentangle from the Church has been a struggle for self-preservation. I am who I am because of the Church, and yet I was forbidden absolution, denied the sacraments for being a practicing homosexual. These contradictions are grist for a genius if Baudelaire was right and I keep my sanity.

I am one of millions in a modern-day Exodus movement, abandoning religious institutions, rejecting traditions that are sexist, homophobic, patriarchal, and hurtful. I am the author of my own Apostle's Creed. I write my own psalms and lamentations. I do not study the mystics and prophets of the past. I am in conversation with the mystics and prophets of today, and together we are cocreating what the future is calling forth.

The story you're about to enter into is a tadpole to frog story, told in human terms. We witness transformation everywhere we look—caterpillars to butterflies, embryos to toddlers, winter to spring. It's all we know. Life, death, rebirth.

Biologically, evolution happens to us. But to evolve spiritually, we must engage in the process consciously. It requires our complete participation—body, mind, soul. To evolve our own lives is an act of unrelenting will, a commitment to rise above the binary. It is the supreme performance art, the act of melding into Creation Itself and recalling ourselves as Nature, perfecting our human talk as trees do their tree talk and rivers their river talk.

The gateway to our spiritual path swings on the hinges of conflict. We meet up with trouble and we make choices in the face of it. We pivot one way or another, letting hindsight, for the most part, determine the efficacy of our decision. But there is another way to do it. There are ways to minimize the danger and maximize the outcomes, practices that tone the spiritual muscles, silence the voices that demean us, dissolve beliefs that belittle our magnitude. Everywhere around us are lifelines that can keep us afloat.

There are turning points galore in all our lives. Turning points when we change direction, change opinions, change careers or lifestyles or lovers or our bodies. Nothing alive escapes the winds of change. We set our course Monday morning and by Friday find ourselves heading east instead of west.

Some of the changes we create. Some of them are creations of others that we become enmeshed with. Tragedies and tribulations occur. Since we *are* Nature, our lives follow Nature's course. Redwoods do not rail against the forest fire. The shore does not run from the tsunami. But we are the meaning-makers, and every one of us makes a different kind of sense from sorrow. Even now, in a global crisis, some grieve the losses while others make art of its gift to us. It's a mystery, all of it. As the physicist Niels Bohr wrote, "Opposite a true statement is a false statement, but opposite a profound truth is another profound truth."

Once we know our turning points, we can compile the story of our life, find its meaning—a sacramental undertaking to a story-driven species. Whether you recall your pivotal events chronologically, plot them graphically on a spiral, or open a world atlas and draw a circle

around every location where your life fell apart or opened up, it doesn't matter. All roads lead back to your center. You survived. The minefield of your life is safe now. You can revisit the past and pick up the pieces.

In order to make sense of the story of my life, I looked back at the points where I ran into the demons, lost my way, got rescued by a beautiful princess, narrowly escaped being thrown in the moat, found my power just in time, and lived happily ever after. Turning points—the ones many have known (the sad stories, the divorces, the early deaths, the suicidal son, the ex-con, the transgender family member in transition)—this is where the juice is. These are our bodies; this is *our* blood.

Every day is a new canvas, and the past offers us perennial reference points for guidance. Sometimes we look backward to remember mistakes we want to avoid in the future; sometimes we just sit there in the mudpuddle of it all until the water settles and we can see our way clear. The past holds us to it until we process it—assess what it took from us, what it gave to us, understand who we are now because of it. After that ritual dance, we can bow to it and bid it *adieu*. For a while.

I have gathered my stories to share because I am a storyteller before I am anything else. I am the product of the events of my life. I am derived from them, as I am derived from the sugar maples and red cedars and white pines of my youth. I am who I am because of them. I am the standing rock in the canyon shaved by the winds, shaped by the floods, sanded by the droughts, naturally exposed, a daughter of the Mother, an activity of Nature.

My life is a mosaic of broken glass, a work of art composed of fragments, gathered from the past, and handed to the future. These are simple stories, *finally*. The tempests have subsided. The blood has dried, the tears evaporated. Angst has given way; awful has turned to awe.

Life hides its wisdom in dark corners. Tragedy begets insight if one reaps it, works for it, braves the dark until a pale blue light rises in the East. These times may be prophetic times, may be our opportunity to rise up and become the people our sacred texts call us to be. The upheaval of what we knew may be giving way to a new dispensation. This may be our chance to right our wrongs, or not; clear our waters and skies, or not; create a just and equitable society, or not.

Only time will tell. Only the future will reveal whether we as a people

accepted our power, shone our light, and took this whole world into *our* healing hands.

## *My Gratitude to Catholicism*

Thank you for the Mysteries—  
joyful, sorrowful, glorious—  
and for teaching me early  
that the Divine is too ineffable  
to ever comprehend.

Thank you for the communion lines  
I watched every Sunday—  
for the holy water font  
with something wet and real  
to dip my fingers in and feel  
the difference between before and after.

For the Bishop's slap on my cheek  
confirming me as a warrior for peace;

for the flame in the sanctuary  
that let me know God was  
in the house;

for the Stations of the Cross  
that gave me a path to walk  
with the love of my life;

for the ciborium full of hosts,  
the ever-changing rainbow of vestments,  
the gold monstrance of Benediction,  
the frankincense, the Novenas,  
Perpetual Adoration.

For the ashes on Wednesday,



the washing of feet on Thursday,  
the tears on Friday,  
the tabernacle—empty—on Saturday,  
the Hallelujah Chorus on Sunday.

For the statues of the saints  
lined up on my dresser, giving me heroes  
a cut above what my culture offered.

For the scapular tangled up  
in my undershirt, the miraculous medal,  
my white Missalette,  
St. Christopher on the dashboard.

For the fish on Friday  
that made something sacred  
of an average day;  
for two years in the convent to learn  
the necessity of solitude and prayer,  
community and service.

I loved you then  
and thank you always—

but I will not return  
until you open your doors to me  
as a woman, a lesbian, a prophet and priest.

My altar now  
is the world at large.

The candle announcing  
the presence of God  
burns day and night  
wherever *I* am.

I am a servant of unity.

The language of this church  
is my mother tongue,  
but I would rather be fluent  
in the language of Love.

# CHAPTER 1

## FINDING THE FORMULA FOR BLISS

*I tell you this because the story you are about to enter amazes me still.*

*Knowing who I am today—an original thinker, a cultural creator, a social activist—it is astonishing to me that my first steps as an adult were into a religious community where I wore a veil, pledged obedience to my superiors, prepared for a life of chastity.*

*It's taken me 50 years to unravel this mystery. Fifty years to understand how and why I created these circumstances, which (as you're about to discover) took me to unimaginable heights and depths.*

*Who was this girl who chose a life where a veil was required? What would cause a creative young woman to decide on a career that forbade sexual expression, insisted on obedience? How did she acquire a belief system that devalued her worth, and why did she let it guide her?*

*This happens to women.*

*This is how it happened to me.*

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—St. Joseph's Provincial House, Latham, New York, 1967

It was a balmy fall day in September 1967 when my family dropped me off at St. Joseph's Provincial House, never knowing when they would see me again. I'd waited six years to trade the hazards of my life as a queer outcast for the safe shelter of a quiet convent. The world was in turmoil, I was in a tailspin, and a house full of prayerful women seemed like paradise.

I decided at age 12 to be a nun. This was because Sister Helen Charles, my sixth-grade teacher, kept me from killing myself. I couldn't change who I was, and from everything I'd learned from the Catholic Church, I was on a path going straight to hell. At least that's what I thought until Sister Helen Charles came along. She turned me around like no one I'd ever known.

Nuns had to have some kind of superpower if they could save a kid like me, and that's what I was going for—a superpower that saved lives. Whatever happened to nuns when they put on that habit, I wanted that to happen to *me*. I wanted to save lives too.

It was being homosexual that made me want to kill myself. As far as I knew, there was nothing worse than being queer. They were perverts, sinners, hated by God, hated by just about everyone. Lezzies, bull dykes, fags, queers, lesbos—all damned—and there I was, one of them.

The Motherhouse, as it was called, was only four years old when I got there, built to accommodate the growing numbers of women who were checking the Bride of Christ box as their career choice. In those days, classified ads were still broken down into "Male" and "Female," and careers for women were limited. Teacher, nurse, nun, housewife, secretary, clerk typist, maybe gym teacher if you were lucky. In my graduating class at St. Anthony's, girls never talked about being anything other than one of the above.

Four hundred sisters lived in the expansive structure: teaching sisters, nurses, college professors, and retired, sick, and hospitalized nuns. An entire wing of the building was dedicated to the novitiate, and there were more than 130 women in different stages of novice training. I was about to become part of a "sisterhood" unlike any I could have ever imagined.

Closing the door on our red Chevy Bel Aire that day felt like closing

the door on trouble. The Vietnam War was raging. Race riots had erupted in 150 cities. Police from New York to San Francisco were attacking homosexuals, and soon our nation would be weeping over the My Lai Massacre and the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. As fast as I was running toward a life of prayer, I was running away from a life of turbulence, both inside and out.

Twenty-nine others joined me that day to begin life as a Catholic sister. We were a homogenous group, mostly 18-year-olds and recent Catholic school graduates. We arrived from every part of New York State, all white, lower to upper middle-class, and all similarly indoctrinated into Catholicism. Once all the parents had left, a few novices showed up to give us a tour of the novitiate and show us to our bedrooms. We were told to change into our convent clothes and promptly return to the postulate, our main meeting room. It was there we met our Superior for the year, Sister Mary Matilda, a short, pudgy, soft-spoken postulant director who had me questioning my vocation the minute she spoke.

Sitting at her desk in the front of the room, she gave us a visual once-over then launched into her first lecture. Barely moving her lips, she uttered words I hadn't heard in my entire lifetime. "Sisters, you are in training for the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. We take the rules seriously here and disobedience will not be abided. You will carry out your assignments in silence, maintain silence in the hallways, and once you have made your final visit to the chapel at night, you will be under Grand Silence," a phrase that fell from her lips like a boulder.

I looked around the room to see how this registered with the others. Eileen Gregg sat across from me and I caught her rolling her eyes. She was a few years older than the rest of us and from somewhere close to New York City. Way more sophisticated than I was, I could tell. Her dismay set me at ease.

"Once you leave the chapel and begin Grand Silence, you will keep custody of the eyes." Again, a new phrase. It sounded like something from a divorce trial.

"This means that you keep your eyes lowered. Once you are under Grand Silence, there is no communication. You go to your room, brush your teeth, and turn off your light by 9 p.m."

Our days began at 5:30 a.m., when a clanging bell obliterated everyone's dreams. Sisters on three floors scurried to the bathrooms,

slipped into their habits, and glided down the dim hallways to get to chapel in time for Lauds. It was a stunning sight, the sanctuary full of sisters chanting prayers that monks and nuns had been singing for centuries. Lauds was followed by Mass, which was followed by a breakfast of oatmeal, eggs, white toast, canned fruit, prune juice, and coffee.

The dining room, referred to as the refectory, was large enough to accommodate everyone in the house.



*The refectory where everyone sat for meals three times a day.*

Sister Marion Ripski was the provincial director and the “Queen of Everything.” She sat at the head table with her very important assistants. Hand-picked novices waited on them like royalty. I knew the minute I saw those novices I never wanted that job. Too much pressure. When Sister Marion was done with her meal, she rang a little bell and everyone in the room stopped talking, stood up, said their grace after meals, and piled their dirty dishes onto the stainless-steel carts.

After breakfast, we were off, each to our assigned charges. Some worked preparing meals for the house, some of us washed dishes in a steamy room, piling plates and bowls into a machine the size of a rhinoceros. Another team worked in laundry, washing linens and

underwear for everyone in the house, with a few sweating at the mangle, pressing sheets from breakfast till lunch.

Corridors on every wing were dotted with novices on their knees attacking scuff marks with pink erasers. A few put their lives at risk polishing linoleum floors with buffers weighing more than they did. I once saw 4'11" Carleen Scarsi swinging off the handles of a rogue buffer. As for me, I was stuck at the hot end of the dishwasher.

After finishing our morning chores, we stopped in chapel for prayers, then headed to our classrooms on the ground floor. After class, more prayers, meditation, service to the elder sisters or other charges (the convent term for work assignments), lunch, work in the refectory, postulant training, recreation, more prayers. Every minute of the day was planned for us and by the time each day was over, we fell into our beds exhausted. This was a boot camp I hadn't anticipated.

I had no idea what would be expected of me when I entered—what vows were and why we made them, what I'd have to forfeit of myself, or deny or suppress. Didn't know and didn't care. It seemed that the rules were deployed mainly for discipline, so I decided for myself which ones to abide by. I'd learned growing up to follow my own guidance system, since I didn't trust anyone else to keep me safe.

People betrayed queers all the time. You think you have a girlfriend until she latches onto a boy and there you are, left alone. You write a love letter to a high school friend you have a crush on and the next thing you know she's sent to a boarding school out of town and you can't go out for a month. Confide in one person about your secret and before long you're the laughingstock of the class.

Peoples' decisions to be "good"—good Catholics, good citizens, good anything—often lead to some weird backlash on the other end. The more fervent some Christians are, the more hateful and intolerant they become of others who don't measure up, like "good Catholics" carrying God Hates Fags" signs at a Pride parade. Who'd ever think of that except religious zealots pretending they know what God likes or doesn't?

I rarely measured up to people's social expectations, as in *well-behaved, follows orders well, eager to please*. I was a renegade on a path of her own making and that's why it was a conundrum to people who knew me, why in the world I was joining the convent. Why would a

spirited, freedom-loving, adventure-seeking girl choose a profession that required a veil, a habit, and vows of poverty, chastity, obedience?

What they didn't know was that it all went right back to sixth grade and the nun who resuscitated my love for life. It was a miracle how she entered right into me, and fired up an ember that was barely burning. How she knew I was suicidal, I'll never know. How she knew exactly what to do, well, that story comes later. For now, let's just say the only thing that made sense about my being in the convent was that I was there to learn how to keep kids from hating themselves, same as she did for me. That's what I signed up for. Like so many of the young men who went into the military after Pearl Harbor or September 11. They didn't give the rigors of boot camp a single thought. They didn't worry about freezing cold bivouacs, long runs carrying heavy equipment, the loneliness of being halfway around the world and separated from their loved ones. They had a mission in mind and they kept their eyes on that. My eyes were not focused on the short term, the training, the discipline. My eyes were focused on the final outcome, and whatever it took to get there, I was prepared to do. At least that's what I thought when I entered.

*The only  
Friends  
Visiting  
Day we ever  
had. I'm in  
the middle  
here, with  
best friend  
Bonnie's  
hand on my  
shoulder.*





## *Bad Postulant*

Skipped  
confession; broke a plate; wanted  
everything; smoked in the woods;  
fell for a novice; rabblouser; burned  
with desire; cried out for help;

*Remember  
O Most Gracious Virgin Mary  
that never was it known  
that anyone who fled  
to thy protection, implored  
thy help or sought thy intercession  
was left unaided.*

stole  
priest's food; hungered for justice;  
stole kisses; complained about rules;  
stole wine; laughed out loud; refused  
to obey; lay down with the novice;

*Inspired by this confidence,  
I fly unto thee,  
O Virgin of virgins, my mother;  
to thee I come, before thee I stand,  
sinful and sorrowful*

loved  
too much; whistled in the hallways;  
spoke when forbidden; on fire with  
longing; stood out; black sheep; failed  
sewing; kissed in the night;

*O Mother of the Word Incarnate,  
despise not my petitions,  
but in thy mercy hear and answer me*

clowned  
around; owned her ideas; spoke out;  
spoke back; stood tall; stood  
too tall.

*Amen.*

And so it was. I did everything in my power to stay true to myself while getting through this training so I could get on with the work of saving lives. Despite my hubris and short-sightedness, lessons from the Far Beyond orbited my way, disguised as usual in chaos and conflict.

I struggled to preserve my autonomy and resist self-effacement, but was summoned to the superior's office repeatedly for "sitting too high on your horse." An unruly soldier, I readied for battle because that's all I knew. *Resist all forces that belittle you.* Their mission was to reshape us, but I never welcomed their attempts at reconstruction. They felt like an assault, as if the goal was to replace the person I was with the person they wanted me to be. In the Superior's office I'd hear the same lines:

"How you feel about this, Sister, is of no concern to me."

"What makes you think your opinion carries any weight?"

"If you didn't have so much pride, this wouldn't be a struggle."

The girl who entered that convent in 1967 would be hollowed out, stripped of the old, readied for the new. Oddly enough, while a part of me resisted it, another part prayed for it. I embodied paradox. I wrote songs that signaled my surrender even as I held my ground, and the whole community sang right along with me:

*Come Lord Jesus into my heart  
make it your home, Lord,  
make it your dwelling place  
and reign forever in peace.*

*I want, O Lord, to be with you always,  
to leave you never alone;  
may I be there wholly, awakened in faith ,  
offering, loving, adoring.*

*My whole being aches to be emptied  
and filled with your precious love;  
this grace I desire that my life shall be  
not mine, but a radiance of Yours.*

*With joy and gladness I sing alleluia  
in praise to you my God*

*in thanksgiving for the love You have shared  
I offer my life to You.*

While I reared up like a stallion against the rules of the novitiate, in chapel I knelt in adoration. In this house of many women, I met my demons, went to battle, and took a few early steps on my hero's journey. As I stood at the gate between adolescence and womanhood, the community mirrored back to me the woman I was becoming. Faithful, strong-willed, resilient, vital. It was a house of belonging and more often than not, I felt I was home.

The activist/journalist Anna Louise Strong wrote in *I Change Worlds: The Remaking of an American*:

We humans are herd animals of the monkey tribe, not natural individuals as lions are. Our individuality is partial and restless; the stream of consciousness that we call 'I' is made of shifting elements that flow from our group and back to our group again. Always we seek to be ourselves and the herd together, not One against the herd.

I did my best to be *myself and the herd together* and failed as often as I succeeded. To be both required a willingness to dissolve boundaries, to detach from self and its wily whims, it called for a humility I did not possess—to surrender, to trust, to freefall into the fray of community life itself. In the postulate alone were 30 women still under 20, biologically ready for mating rituals, studying how to live chaste lives. From one angle, it was impressive; from another, a crime against nature. I was one of them sitting in the front seat of an emotional roller-coaster ride.

Both our inner lives and our outer lives were under scrutiny every waking hour. Community living demanded attention. Living together, dealing with each other's idiosyncrasies, rising above concerns of the self and giving more care to the needs of the whole—this did not come naturally.

Then there was the prayer life, the hours of meditation, private prayer, common prayer, Lauds and Vespers, the Stations of the Cross, daily Mass, weekly confession, which was fraught with the stress of inventing sins when none had been committed. With so much

prayer and meditation built into our days, internal combustions were commonplace. *I thought this and now there is that. I was one way and now I am another. I used to grumble about meditation, now I can't get enough.* My interior landscape shape-shifted like desert dunes in a windstorm.

Our lack of exposure to the outside world—we watched no news whatsoever—kept us in a state of grace that counterbalanced the turbulence unfolding around us. The cultural zeitgeist of the late 1960s did not penetrate the walls of the novitiate in any visible way. I couldn't have told you a sexual revolution was going on, that Marvin Gaye just released "I Heard It Through the Grapevine," that the Big Mac just went on sale at McDonald's and cost 47 cents, or that CBS aired *60 Minutes* for the first time.

I lived in an alternate reality, shrouded in silence and prayer. While all hell broke loose in the streets of America, all heaven was breaking loose in the safety of our Motherhouse. I couldn't see the cities on fire, sparked by racism and outraged citizens who'd reached their boiling point. I couldn't see the escalating peace movement or the rise of a new wave of feminism—but the spirit of those movements, the hopes, the struggles, the changing of the guard: that was in the air I breathed.

While I was praying for peace in the world, 475,000 troops were serving in Vietnam and peace rallies multiplied as protesters against the war increased in number; Muhammad Ali was stripped of his boxing world championship for refusing to be drafted into the U.S. Army; in Detroit, 7,000 National Guard were bought in to restore law and order as race riots consumed the city; the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated; Robert Kennedy was assassinated; the first Black power salute was seen worldwide on television during an Olympics medal ceremony; President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1968; the Beatles released the *White Album*, featuring songs written when the band was in India attending a meditation camp; Pope Paul VI banned Catholics from using the contraceptive pill for birth control; 50,000 people participated in The Poor People's March on June 19 in Washington, D.C.; students occupied Columbia University to protest its affiliation with the Institute for Defense; NASA launched Apollo 7, the first manned Apollo mission; and down the road from me, Joseph Campbell was teaching mythology at Sarah Lawrence College and encouraging people to "follow their bliss."

I never laid eyes on a *Follow Your Bliss* bumper sticker, but I shared the sentiment. The whole idea of it would have been admonished by our superiors—*your happiness has nothing to do with what we're doing here, sister*. It would have been rebuked as self-seeking, self-centered, the antithesis of what we were there for: the sake of the whole, not the one.

Ironically, while they would have pooh-poohed the pursuit of happiness, the community delivered the recipe for it on a golden platter. *We do not care if you are happy or not, but oh, by the way, here's the formula for bliss*. The superiors divided our days into four parts—for prayer, solitude, community, and service. Time to be alone. Time to be with others. Time to pray. Time to serve. While I agitated for change about every other petty thing, our days unfolded in bliss-bestowing balance. I wasn't conscious of how this worked. I didn't reflect on the relationship of a balanced life to deep joy. I just knew I loved my life there, until I got called out for my failure to obey.

I hadn't entered the convent to learn obedience. I entered to become a nun who would save lives. I pushed back against the rules, hellbent to complete the training on my own terms, but *that*, as it turns out, was impossible. Nothing was going to happen on my own terms. Within months I'd fallen in love, and my superiors, suspecting the worst, shifted into gear and reined me in, starting a conflict I barely survived.

I was a toddler then, about to take my first step on a path to the Promised Land. I wobbled all the way.