

Joy in People, God in People

A Memoir by Sister Laurie



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Some Places I Find God

I find God very present in nature. The first time I saw a mountain I almost had a heart attack; it was so beautiful. That was in middle school. I was just overwhelmed with the beauty of mountains.

I see God in other people. That's very present for me today. I find God in joy, and when I'm very happy. And then also - I think it's taken me awhile - but I also see God in sorrow. I've lost a lot of siblings. We were seven children and five of my siblings have died. When the first couple died, I was kind of numbed for some reason; maybe it's just a way to deal with it. When the last one died, it had begun with Alzheimer's, yet it was very sudden. The last time I saw him he was quite physically fit, and I thought, how much longer is he going to live in that kind of nebulous world? I thought he could live till he was 90. And then he died shortly after that. In that sense, I guess I saw the mercy of God, saving him from having to live through that. I felt that he wasn't gone. He is very present in memories and in the family, as are all my deceased siblings. And from that, I've learned to find God in sorrow.

Growing up

I came from a Catholic family, but it wasn't overly Catholic. I don't recall thinking of God manifesting himself to me as a child, but I felt there was a religious atmosphere, that I was safe and cared for as a child. There was a practice to say the rosary at night, after dinner or before dinner as a family. I don't remember when we did it but usually something funny happened when we were supposed to be praying; one of us would always do something that got us laughing. That was kind of fun family time. There was a reference towards faith in my family, but it wasn't pushed down our throats or anything. It was just who we were. So I always felt that I was part of the faith, part of the religion. I didn't question it in those days.

Decision to Become a Sister (Nun)

I had a great aunt who was a nun. One was my dad's aunt. I had never met her, but I had heard people talk about her and they liked her a lot. I never did really think about becoming a sister myself, but I ended up at a Catholic high school taught by sisters. And then, even the nuns used to talk about this great aunt of mine whom they liked very much.

I didn't have one thought of joining the religious life until I was a sophomore in high school. One of the things our high school did was to take our turn at an outdoor shrine once a month. I was at the shrine one night saying the Rosary and all of a sudden a thought came to me that I was supposed to be a nun. It just came to me. Literally, it came and I could not get rid of it! I didn't tell anybody for two years. When I was a senior, I finally went and talked to one of the sisters with whom I was especially friendly. That was the first time. She asked, "Well, have you said

anything to your family?" I said, "No, I haven't said a word to anybody." But I finally decided it was a calling and I could not get rid of it. So I didn't enter a religious order dragging my feet, but I really didn't feel it was my idea, if that makes any sense at all. So that's how I ended up in religious life. I had no idea what I was getting into because the nuns I had in those days had very strict rules: we never saw where they lived and we never saw them outside of school. I didn't know what the life was like at all. So it was, in a sense, a great leap of faith.

I entered and I found that I felt like I belonged. I didn't question that decision at all in those days. I didn't question it at all until the changes in the Catholic church came about during and after the Second Vatican Council, when the church re-evaluated things. The church loosened up a bit. We didn't have to wear the habit if we didn't want to. There were lots of changes. In the beginning that was kind of freeing, but also very scary. I began to question it when a lot of my friends began to leave religious life because they found that a lot of things they joined to do they could do outside of the convent. When we graduated from high school, our decisions were pretty much to go to college or get married. There wasn't anything like the Peace Corps. People didn't really do service work or anything by themselves. There weren't all the organizations there are today that one could join to work with a group of people to do missionary work, or other kinds of outreach. I went through a re-thinking at that time, whether or not I really belonged. And again I made the decision that I really did belong. Some of my best friends left. They never rejected the religious order; for them it was time to take a new approach. I found this very hard at the time. I kept thinking, "Why are they going? Why am I staying?" The fact that we have kept in touch over the years has been very special to me.

Joy in people, God in people

Within the congregation, when we have big celebrations and beautiful liturgies with meaningful music, at such times, I feel like God is especially present. It gives me a very strong sense of community. Just last year, we had a prayer service in the chapel at our motherhouse. The chapel was packed. It was mostly quiet prayer. I felt an incredible sense of community, and we were not talking to one another! We were all praying together. That doesn't happen often with such a big group. It was quiet and meditative prayer, and it really was one of the strongest feelings of community I've had in a long time.

Music gives me great joy. Seeing people who are on fire with what they're doing, that makes me happy and gives me a sense of the presence of God. Some people are so committed to what they're doing that the passion of God is palpable in their lives.

Prayer

God has manifested Himself/Herself to me through prayer. When I am praying, I am in touch with God. When I was a novice, we had a lot of set prayers and we recited them together. I never found that real prayerful. I did it because it was our prayer, and then also we were supposed to meditate every morning in the Chapel.

I don't think I caught on to meditation until I was introduced to Buddhism. I began to read about the people who were talking about how Buddhist ideas weren't all that different from Christian ideas. I went on a Zen Buddhist retreat. It was a Catholic priest who directed it, but he practices Zen Buddhism. The whole retreat was just sitting there quietly. At the end of that retreat, I don't think I have ever been so relaxed in my entire life. Nothing could bother me for days. That's what I think meditation is: where you really try to let God in, not thinking about anything. It is the practice of trying to clear your mind, and be in the present moment. I don't always succeed, but that's the kind of prayer where I feel much more like I'm in touch with God. You don't push away any thoughts, but you acknowledge each thought and then let it go. I don't know. It's very, very peaceful. I try to do it every morning to some degree.

I think that my prayer has changed too, not only was I learning the Buddhist mediation, but also because I got to go to Japan early on in my study. I was so impressed with the Japanese as a people. They were kind and welcoming. There was a reverence that I found attractive in them. And then I found out that only one half of one per-cent of the population is Christian. And I remember thinking, how can all these people who are so good and kind be wrong in their religious practice? Why should they have to become Christian? That whole notion of converting people became a big puzzle to me.

I think that whatever people have as their religious grounding, gives them peace, and puts them on the road to whatever they think is the ultimate in their lives is fine, as long as it does no harm to anyone. I don't really think they have to be Christian. I think that God is bigger than one religion. I don't think that we alone have the truth. How can we say that? And it doesn't mean that I don't believe in my religion. I believe others have a right to their religion. All religion is practiced within a culture. Christians began proselytizing all over the world, and trying to change other cultures to the Christian way of doing things. So thought made a dramatic change in my outlook on mission activity. I can't criticize another group for their religion and religious practice. When I think of the blood shed over religion through the years, it makes no sense to me. It's crazy! I think, why? Religions should be bringing people together.

He/She

In my early life, I saw God as a male, a father figure. Now, I'm more comfortable with God being female, but then God is beyond gender anyway. The change came probably in the late 70's when I got into understanding a little bit more about the women's movement. I saw and had seen how women had been suppressed. One of the ways women were suppressed was through the notion of a male God, which automatically made men more important than women. The notion that God is genderless appealed to me, and then the thought that God had the gentle attributes of many females made God more approachable.

God is everything. To just confine God to being a man suddenly didn't seem right to me because God is bigger than that. God doesn't always have to be male. God can have female and male attributes. The church today does not want us to use inclusive language in our liturgies. That bothers me a lot. The Catholic Church itself is a very sexist organization; the male hierarchy does not allow the women to be a part of it. A lot of women, who had gotten away from abusive

husbands and children who had been abused by fathers, found solace in the belief of a female God. I didn't have any of that. I didn't have an antagonizing feeling towards men but I just felt more comfortable allowing God to be bigger, especially for the people who had suffered at male hands, or who had suffered through the church. It just became much more comfortable to me, the language, to allow God to be however we saw God. Because nobody fully knows who God is. No one, so I figure, we don't have anyone who can say this is what it's like.

Distance from God

The first time I think I experienced distance from God was when I questioned whether or not I should stay in the BVMs. I don't know how I worked through that one. I guess I was waiting for as strong a feeling that had pulled me in to take me out. I wasn't scared to go out. I just didn't ever get the feeling that this is what I'm supposed to do. And then there was another time when I was having a hard time in my life. I was just kind of down and that was the late 70's and I just thought, "I don't feel like I have a spiritual life, I don't feel anything." I talked to a BVM who I respected a lot and she suggested that I talk to a priest friend of hers, a Jesuit. This priest was a wonderful, wonderful man and I made a directed retreat with him. He listened to me, asked questions, suggested prayers and things to think about. It was a very, very powerful experience for me. That was a beginning of a change, where I began to get in touch with myself and realize that I didn't have to think like everyone else thought. If I wasn't getting the nourishment from the group prayers, I could do it my own way. I was giving myself permission to do that, to believe in the God that gave me nourishment. It was more a direct sense of God coming back into my life. God was always there; it was I who was pulling away. I had lost trust. The retreat made a big change in my life, and since then I haven't felt that distance from God.

That turned out to be a life changing experience because I was able to get to the bottom of why I felt so bad. It was the first time I began to get in touch with all the pain or whatever it was that was making me feel so distant. I learned that talking to people helps. Trying to figure it out all by myself is crazy. And I had to talk with people I respected. God doesn't go away. And that's, for me, a very comforting experience.

Where is God's response?

I was thinking of the founder of our community. I studied and read about her life, about what she went through, the faith she had. She was somebody through whom I see God. She had such a faith in God. And she led a very quiet, non-public life; yet she did so many things. She is one person who, when I think about her, I think about being close to God. She had tremendous faith. And she believed God listened and responded. She drew no attention to herself at all; in fact it was quite the opposite. She didn't want attention.

An earthquake is a natural disaster, but I really don't understand how a person who is already down and out can handle more disaster in life. I guess that's where I trust God. God isn't causing this. When I look at what's going on in Haiti then I have trouble; I don't know how people get through that. The tremendous loss of life and family kind of throws me, but I trust that somehow or other God has not abandoned those people. I personally feel incredibly blessed.

I don't understand why people have to kill each other. I don't understand why we can't find a way to live with each other in peace, without bloodshed. It has been like that since the beginning of time. Why can't we learn? I can still trust in my beliefs and keep hoping that we will be able to figure things out, and live in a world of peace. I do believe that will come some day.