



Writing and Righting the Past

***Preserving the Legacy of
American Women Religious Through Memoir***

Dan and Kathy Vaillancourt

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Dedication

Recently, two good friends (both women religious) died a few weeks apart from one another. Both of these remarkable women had exercised a singular influence on my life.

I met Sr. Louise French, BVM, in August 1971. She was serving as Chair of Philosophy at Mundelein College in Chicago, and she needed a philosophy instructor to replace one of her tenured professors who had decided to move to California just a few weeks before the opening of the school year. In a panic, she called her good friend, Dr. Gerald Kreyche, DePaul University's philosophy chair, and asked him to send one of his doctoral students to Mundelein for an interview. Dr. Kreyche told me about the opening, and added, "If you make a good impression, this opportunity could turn into a tenure-track position." I interviewed for the job, and, to make a good impression, I brought my wife Kathy and our two children with me. The rest, as they say, is history. Sr. Louise guided me in the development of my syllabi, she counseled me through rough emotional periods, and she encouraged me to spread my wings by creating and teaching new courses, many of them interdisciplinary. She was a great boss, gentle guide, and close friend.

Perhaps the best phrase with which to describe Sr. Joan Frances Crowley, BVM, is "the other woman." In 1972 at Mundelein College, Sr. Joan Frances and I created and then team-taught the course Marxism and Communism at least once a semester for 18 years. We also co-authored two

editions of the interdisciplinary book *Lenin to Gorbachev: Three Generations of Communists* (the second edition was expanded to include the Gorbachev years and the beginning of the Yeltsin rule). Some days, I spent so many hours with Sr. Joan Frances that Kathy and the children referred to her affectionately as “the other woman.” During the 18 years we worked together and then for two decades after that, we never exchanged even one heated word. In fact, we were notorious for lavishly praising each other’s performance in the classroom and for apologizing profusely for extending our lectures beyond the allotted time. I relished every minute I was with her.

Each sister put me on a path leading to this book. Sr. Louise, by bringing me on board at Mundelein, introduced me to the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVMs) and, more broadly, to the aspirations and concerns of women religious in the United States. Sr. Joan Frances exercised a more immediate and direct influence on the book. She vigorously recruited additional BVMs so that I could meet a minimum threshold of sisters to launch my work in “memoir-izing” them. Sr. Louise and Sr. Joan Frances traveled with me a long way, but they were unable to reach the destination with me. This text, therefore, stands as a tribute to them.

May they rest in peace.

Dan Vaillancourt
July 9, 2010

Acknowledgements

Intellectual journeys can sometimes meander in strange ways. Before we ever thought of addressing the crisis of legacy among women religious in America, we worked with one small group of sisters living in retirement in Chicago, Illinois. The Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVMs) had employed Dan at Mundelein College for almost two decades, and so we thought the sisters may be open to working with us by telling their stories to Loyola University Chicago students in two experimental aesthetics courses. The original draft of the syllabi called for retired BVMs to relate their stories to the students in what, we hoped, would be powerful intergenerational experiences. From this whiff of an idea, the courses evolved a civic engagement/service-learning component to address the BVM crisis of legacy. The movement toward the writing of memoirs to address the crisis would never have occurred without the reconnoitering work of Sr. Ann Ida Gannon among the sisters living in retirement and the unflagging recruiting of BVMs by Sr. Joan Frances Crowley. The other sisters who completed the initial journey must be remembered and thanked, because they transformed the lives of the student interviewers/writers, and they pushed the journey until the destination was clear: memoir is an ideal genre to address the crisis of legacy. The other 17 BVMs are: Sr. Gracita Daly, Sr. Mary DeCock, Sr. Bernadita Finnegan, Sr. Catherine Gibbons, Sr. Mary Pat Haley, Sr. Ann Harrington, Sr. Katherine

Heffernan, Sr. Dorothy Hollahan, Sr. Carol Frances Jegen, Sr. Mary Jo Keane, Sr. Mary Kelliher, Sr. Katie McHugh, Sr. Marie Fitzpatrick, Sr. Monica Seelman, Sr. Mary Alma Sullivan, Sr. Therese Von Holdt, and Sr. Doris Walsh.

Loyola University Chicago has generously supported us in multiple ways. Chris Skrable guided us in the development of the course service-learning component. The President's office awarded us a President's Engaged Scholars grant to create the aesthetics courses and to provide financial assistance to the BVM community, and the Joan and Bill Hank Catholic Intellectual Heritage Center provided us with funds to develop a national memoir model to address the crisis of legacy among American women religious communities. The Hank grant permitted us to hire three energetic university students—Nesreen Tawfic, Lydia Gajdel, Kathleen Fulton—to interview and to write the memoirs of six more BVMS: Sr. Christine Athans, Sr. Joellen McCarthy, Sr. Therese Von Holdt, Sr. Bernadita Finnegan (an expanded memoir), Sr. Dodi Dwight, and Sr. Marina Kennelly. A talented Loyola graduate, Chelsea Andres, interviewed and wrote the memoir of Sr. Vivian Wilson, and another talented Loyola alum, Katherine Hall, edited the entire text of *Writing and Righting the Past*. The two Loyola alums, three students, and seven BVMS constituted an elite intellectual community guiding the development of the national model articulated in these pages.

Our brilliant graduate student, Hilary Bussell, has worked with us on almost every leg of this long, circuitous journey. She wrote the initial drafts of the grants, she edited

the student interviews of the BVMs, and she pulled together the materials for the writing of this book. When not directly researching sources for the courses, working with student writing, or drafting parts of the grants, she taught classes, graded essays and quizzes, and performed myriad other activities so that we could keep traveling on the memoir journey. We could not have asked for a brighter and more cooperative young scholar to help us advance our projects.

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Chapter One

Introduction: To Tell or Not To Tell

“In the midst of the great revolutions in which we find ourselves, women will find themselves forgotten, if they forget to think of themselves.”

-Louise Otto, 19th century author of *Frauen-Zeitung*

The phrase “retired sister” is an oxymoron. Many sisters retire from lifelong careers only to assume two or three part-time jobs or full-time employment in an area different from their career work. Take, for example, Sr. Vivian Wilson.¹ After a distinguished teaching career and then employment as a director of religious education for a local parish, she volunteered her time doing catechetical work for the Archdiocese of Chicago. This work led to a position as Project Manager for the Archdiocese, which required her to help write a major religious education document, to organize and to participate in six committees, and then to oversee the implementation of the findings in the document. Sr. Vivian’s story represents the norm, not the exception. Sisters are givers—they willingly offer their talents and their time to help others in deed and prayer, and they continue to do so long past official retirement. Generosity may indeed characterize the sociological modus operandi of sisterhood. Many questions, then, often arise in

¹ All sisters in the book, unless indicated otherwise, belong to the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVMs).

the minds of sisters when they are asked to tell their stories. When is there time for reminiscence or life review? Will not life review work take precious time away from the paramount task of ministering to the needs of other people? Is not storytelling about one's past life self-centered, even immodest? Other questions may relate more directly to the practice of reminiscence among sisters. Have some sisters already embarked on the journey of reminiscence? If so,

Is a sister also a nun?

A highly regarded recent publication on Catholic women religious in the United States, *Double Crossed: Uncovering the Catholic Church's Betrayal of American Nuns* (New York: Doubleday, 2006) by Kenneth A. Briggs, reminds readers that "the terms 'nun' and 'sister' are now used interchangeably" (X). Until a few decades ago, "nun" referred to a woman religious living in a cloister and "practicing contemplation and rarely if ever venturing outside"(X) while "sister" identified a woman religious who left her convent "to work in Church institutions such as schools and hospitals"(X). Notwithstanding the history behind the terms, the authors will follow the example of Briggs, and use "sister" and "nun" interchangeably, throwing into the mix "woman religious" as a third identifier. Briggs views "religious" as "more outdated and confusing" (X). However, the authors have encountered no difficulty with or resistance to the phrase "woman religious," and will continue to employ it.

why did they do it? How did their congregations get moving in this direction? Was there any assistance available to them?

Content of *Writing and Righting the Past*

Writing and Righting the Past addresses these questions. Chapter Two answers the "why" question (why reminisce?) by describing the crisis of legacy of sisters in

America. Sisters must write about their past for historians to understand the role the sisters played in building America. In other words, sisters need to write the past in order to right it in the future. As nineteenth century educator and author Louise Otto once said, “[W]omen will find themselves forgotten, if they forget to think of themselves.”² It would be a great wrong to forget these women in the accounting of America’s development. Chapters Three and Four respond to the “how” question, that is, how to interview and how to create a memoir from the interviews. Chapter Five frames the memoir project by describing the preface (written by the interviewer) that precedes the memoir and the steps that walk the memoir to the archives. Throughout the chapters, excerpts from the memoir packages (prefaces and memoirs) of Sr. Therese Von Holdt and Sr. Joan Frances Crowley illustrate key points. *Writing and Righting the Past* overviews the recent history of nuns in America, and then presents a model process—supported with real examples—to record and preserve that history, one sister at a time, for future generations.

² Document 12: Louise Otto, "Program," *Frauen-Zeitung, Ein Organ für die Höheren Weiblichen Interessen*, no. I, 21 April 1849. Translated by Susan Groag Bell. Reprinted in Susan Groag Bell and Karen M. Offen, eds., *Women, the Family, and Freedom: The Debate in Documents, Volume I, 1750-1880* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1983) 263-64.

The Model Process

The proposed model process did not originate in the ethereal regions of ethnography and aesthetics. On the contrary, the process evolved from real-life reminiscence and life-review work with the BVMs. In 2008, twenty-one Loyola University Chicago students, most of them natural and social science majors, enrolled in two aesthetics courses and, as part of their course work, interviewed nineteen BVMs about their childhood experiences, discernment of vocation, novitiate years, and the evolution of their leadership styles over decades of service as teachers in classrooms and as advocates for people living at the margins of society. The students interviewed the sisters about an hour a week for six weeks, and then transformed the digital recordings into 12,000-25,000 word memoirs capturing the unique stories of the BVMs in the sisters' own words and stylistic voice. Prefaces written by the students introduced the memoir packages and articulated the impact of the sisters on the lives of the students. In a sense, the students were explaining through their own examples how the sisters might have impacted the lives of thousands of people throughout their years of service and ministry. In other words, the power of the sisters' presence had probably affected the lives of the people with whom the sisters had interacted as it had influenced the students' lives. Thus, the memoirs might be read like case studies as much as records of the sisters' memories. After the sisters edited and approved the documents, the project leaders (Dan and Kathy) delivered the

packages to the archives at the University and the BVM motherhouse in Dubuque, Iowa. The project continues, and, to date, has “memoir-ized” almost 100 BVMs and other sisters, some of the recent ones as part of a grant to the writers and others as part of Dr. Norm Freund’s Peace and Justice philosophy course at Clarke College in Dubuque.

The experience of working with BVMs for two years suggests that the most difficult tasks in the entire process appear at the beginning. The first challenge for the project leader involves the recruitment of volunteers. The sisters may hesitate to assume yet another responsibility in their lives. The second challenge steps on the heels of the first one. The project leader may wonder how to initiate and then to move the project along. Is there a person available to provide support, assistance, and guidance? Perhaps addressing these challenges would be helpful.

Reasons to Reminisce

Can any words ever carry sufficient power to persuade socially committed or contemplative women religious to tell their stories? The task risks failure—in the sense that sisters may still not want to tell their stories—but the most promising words are “unique legacy,” “influence on young adults,” and “inspiration for future generations.”

Preserving an historical legacy. Such is the impact of the more than 400 Catholic women religious congregations in the United States that it is difficult to imagine the development of the country without their

pioneering work, teaching, and ministering. In education, for example, sisters were teaching 40,000 children in 1880, 1.7 million children in 1920, and 4.5 million children in 1965.³ BVM President Sr. Mary Ann Zollman wrote that her community sisters made their presence and ideas felt not only in education but also in “literacy and advocacy programs, senior and spirituality centers, parishes and prisons, research institutes and hospital rooms, counseling and administrative offices.”⁴ She could have added hospice care, grief counseling, homeless shelters, soup kitchens, food pantries, care for orphans, and numerous other areas. Each congregation participated in some, if not most, of this work according to the mission and charism of its founder. But, in most cases, the intense daily press of responsibilities prevented the sisters from telling and recording their stories. Now, as a result of the diminishing number of nuns in the country, there exists a significant crisis of legacy. If the memories of the sisters alive today disappear with them, how will future generations of Americans ever understand how women religious helped build this country, that is, how they impacted through their service and prayers the neighborhoods and broader communities in which they lived and worked? Even Pope John Paul II underscores the importance of preserving sisters’ stories in his 1996 apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata* where he says, “*The elderly and*

³ Helen Maher Garvey, BVM, “Why Are You Afraid of a Little Exhibit? A Story of Development” in *Salt*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (Summer, 2009): 10-12.

⁴ Mary Ann Zollman, BVM, Mira Mosle, BVM, and Teri Hadro, BVM, “Seasoning” in *Salt*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (Fall, 2009): 3.

the sick [religious] *have a great deal to give* in wisdom and experience to the community, if only the community can remain close to them with concern and an ability to listen” (italics in original text).⁵ The community is now asking for this rich and irreplaceable wisdom.

Impacting young adults today. To date, most of the sisters’ interviewers have been college students, who have done the work enthusiastically and with aplomb.⁶ Is it any wonder? These young adults have spent 18 or more years in the company of their classmates, teachers, and family members; and many of them yearn for other meaningful relationships with people who have lived outside their classrooms and family homes and who have wrestled with life’s big questions and thrived in the midst of the struggles. The big questions are familiar ones to sisters. How do I choose my life’s work? Will my talents and my work help alleviate suffering in the world? How do I develop relationships with my family and friends if my work takes me away from them, or with God who sometimes appears hidden from me? Young adults come to the interviews ready

⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, given in Rome at Saint Peter’s on March 25, 1996: #44 or pp. 20-21. Document can be accessed online. See

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031996_vita-consecrata_en.html Accessed 2/15/2010.

⁶ Of course, interviewers could be high school students, retired nuns, or adults in the community. However, the BVM projects at Loyola and Clarke utilized college students in part because the project leaders worked in those communities and in part because they wanted to create unique and powerful intergenerational experiences.

to listen to the sisters and eager to learn from them. One young interviewer said, “I wanted to do medical research before I met Sr. Joan Frances, but now I’m thinking of becoming a teacher like her.” Another explained, “I couldn’t talk to my father before I started interviewing Sr. Marie. She helped me break the barrier I had created between him and me. Over the Christmas holiday, my father and I went ice fishing together.” The experiences with the sisters impacted the students in different ways, but not one person remained unaffected by the stories and the presence of the sisters. One young adult, who had never before seen sisters in real life, rather than on the television or theatre screen, summarized the feelings and views of his classmates when he said one day, “They’re cool.”

Inspiring young people tomorrow. Many young people yearn for the stories of extraordinary service, commitment, leadership, and devotion to community and God as told and lived by women religious. These sisters—university presidents and school principals, professors and teachers, catechists and contemplatives, social workers and nurses—can serve as models for young people, who, despite their drive to change the world, often feel overwhelmed by the enormity of the challenge. The memoirs of the sisters can inspire, motivate, and instruct young people on how to provide assistance where it is needed and, in the process, to lead extraordinary lives themselves. Memoirs feature another advantage: they continue to inspire and instruct for generations to come.

Hopefully, the words about legacy, young adults, and future generations will tip the balance for sisters wondering whether they should come forward to work with young adults for a few hours. The investment of these hours has always yielded incalculable rewards for both the students and the sisters.

Help Is Available

The second challenge involves the availability of assistance, since a model process does not always lead easily to concrete activities. Sometimes a guide can facilitate and accelerate the walk over the bridge from the bank of theory to the other bank of practice. If any sisters wish *pro bono publico* assistance to structure or to initiate a memoir project for their community, they should contact the authors of this text. Conversations with the authors, exchanges of emails and letters, or even on-site visits by the authors will never cost sisters a penny. The work of the authors extends a lifelong commitment to education, and, besides, it generates its own rewards.

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Chapter Two

Crisis of Legacy

“Let’s be honest.... In the past 40 years the Church in America has seen a disastrous fall in the number of women religious.”

-Philip Lawler, Catholic editor

A crisis of legacy is besetting most women religious communities in the United States, and it is screaming for attention. A strong word, “crisis” conveys well the alarming implication of the diminishing number of sisters. It means that younger sisters simply do not exist, or exist in insufficient numbers, to gather and to record the unique wisdom of the older sisters in their communities. It also signals a missed historical moment, the opportunity for older sisters to articulate, through the stories of their lives, the singular charism of their communities. “Crisis” remains, nonetheless, a better word than “tragedy”—a crisis, after all, can still be resolved, while a tragedy remains irreversible. In this sense, “crisis” is a hopeful word, and as such it walks many steps ahead of “tragedy.” Perhaps a review of the crisis through numbers will help determine how far—or close—crisis leads tragedy.

Crisis In Numbers

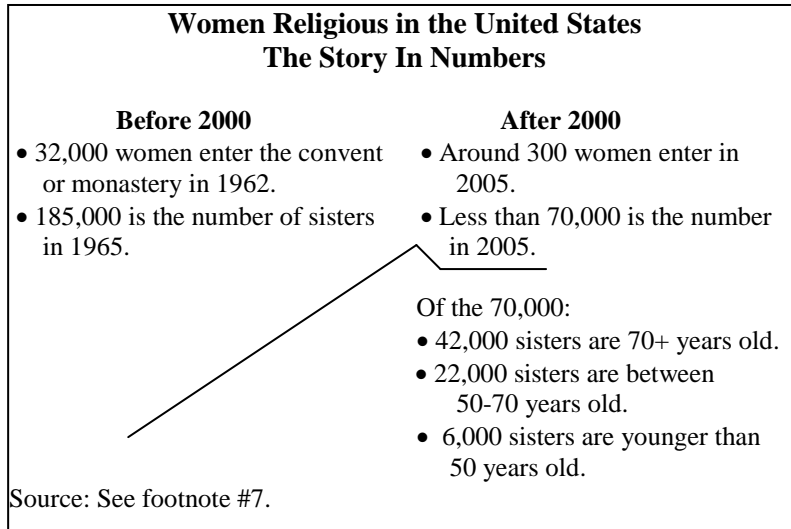
Three sets of numbers create the context for the crisis of legacy faced by Catholic nuns in the United States: 32,000

and 300, 185,000 and 70,000, and 42,000 and 6,000. The first set of numbers speaks to the desire of women to pursue life as a member of a religious congregation. In 1962, 32,000 women entered the convent or monastery, but in 2005 only about 300 aspired to walk in this direction, and many of them might still turn around and leave before committing themselves to the lifestyle through final vows. In the words of Kenneth A. Briggs, author of *Double Crossed: Uncovering the Catholic Church's Betrayal of American Nuns*, "the applicant pool has nearly dried up."⁷

The next set of numbers identifies the size of the sister group in American society. In 1965, 185,000 sisters prayed and worked in this country, most of them easily recognized by the congregational habits they wore. Four decades later, the group had shrunk to less than 70,000 sisters with most of the sisters out of habit and donning secular clothing. But 70,000 sisters still constitute a significant number of women, capable of exercising a powerful influence on society, until, that is, the next set of numbers comes into play.

⁷ Kenneth A. Briggs, *Double Crossed: Uncovering the Catholic Church's Betrayal of American Nuns* (New York: Doubleday, 2006) 1. The three sets of numbers originate from Briggs 1-2. Such large numbers are not sacrosanct. For example, Dr. Sandra Schneiders in her excellent essay "Why They Stay(ed)" lists 120,000 nuns as the high point in the 1960s and 60,000 as the number of nuns today (2009). The point of the numbers is to show a direction and a trend, not to list absolutes. See Dr. Sandra M. Schneiders, "Why They Stay(ed)" in the *National Catholic Reporter*, online. See <http://nconline.org/print/14432> Accessed 10/6/2009.

Nuns are graying quickly. In 2005, three of every five sisters (42,000 of 70,000) had already crossed the 70-year-old threshold, and the two remaining sisters were more than likely over 50 (22,000 between 50-70 years). Some quick math reveals that only 6,000 sisters were younger than 50, a slim thread of women religious vitality in America, especially when coupled with the 300 women entering the

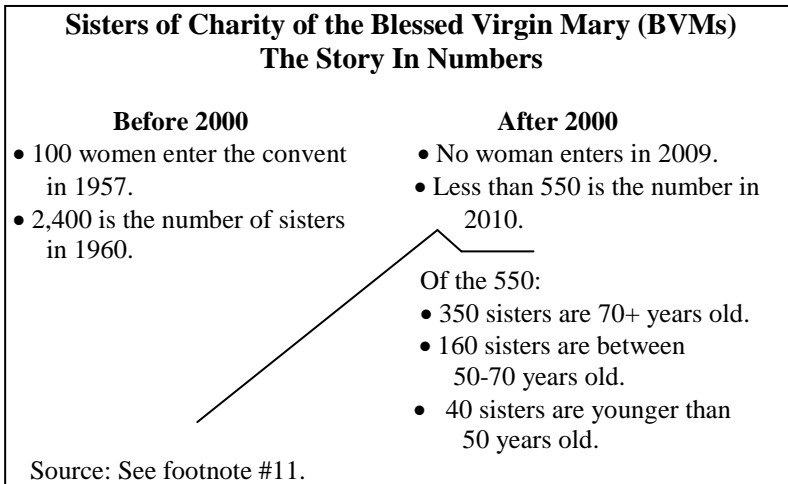


more than 400 religious orders each year. Perhaps these two numbers, 6,000 and 300, prompted Catholic editor Philip Lawler to describe the downtrend in the number of women religious as “disastrous.”⁸

No human imagination can place faces on numbers in the tens of thousands. The numbers are so large that they

⁸ Quoted in AD 2000 Report, “American Women Religious: Vatican Apostolic Visitation,” online. See http://www.ad2000.com.au/articles/2009/apr2009p7_3007.html Accessed 8/4/2009.

tend to read like abstract math problems, divorced from reality. For this reason, the rise and fall of one religious community, the BVMs, will provide a more focused view of the history of women religious congregations during the past five decades, a view the mind can more easily imagine in reality.



Mary Frances Clarke (BVM founder) and her four companions⁹ opened Miss Clarke’s Seminary in Dublin, Ireland in 1832, but moved in 1833 to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania “to teach Irish immigrants,” according to historian and BVM Ann M. Harrington.¹⁰ Under the direction of a diocesan priest, the women became the Sisters of the Blessed Virgin on November 1, 1833 (eventually the

⁹ Margaret Mann, Rose O’Toole, Eliza Kelly, and Catherine Byrne.

¹⁰ Ann M. Harrington, *Creating Community: Mary Frances Clarke and Her Companions* (Dubuque, IA: Mount Carmel Press, 2004) 1. Rose O’Toole joined the group in Philadelphia sometime later.

Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary or BVMs). Since the founding date, almost 5,000 women have joined and worked as BVMs. In comparison to the numbers for all American nuns, the sets of numbers creating context for the BVMs are 100 and 0, 2,400 and 550, and 350 and 40. In other words, 100 young women entered the community in 1957, and none in 2009; and, from a height of 2,400 members in 1960, about 550 sisters remain in 2010. The most disquieting set of numbers includes 350 and 40—350 sisters are septuagenarians or older while a mere 40 sisters are younger than 50 years of age. Of course, the shocking numbers are 0 and 40, and they currently paint a grim picture of the future of the BVM community.¹¹

Reasons For The Crisis

Multiple and complex causes—some cultural and congregational, others personal—account for the precipitous decline in BVM (and other religious community) membership. Two in particular have regularly surfaced in histories of women religious in the past half century. They are major cultural events that gained traction during the 1960s: the growing momentum of the women’s rights movement and Vatican Council II’s call for religious communities to renew themselves.

¹¹ The sets of numbers for the BVM community originate from multiple sources within the community, including Harrington, the BVMcong.org website, individual sisters, and estimates by the authors. The numbers should be read as indicators of trends rather than facts, since they are changing constantly.

The first cultural blow to the women religious communities came as an unfortunate byproduct of the women's rights movement. Before the push for women's equality in the United States during the 1960s and 70s, most women customarily cared for their husbands, children, and homes. Women working outside the home had few opportunities to rise to positions of authority and to receive a wage equal to that of their male counterparts. By contrast, religious life offered a rare arena where women could assume roles of authority to serve the needs of the people in their communities and where vows of poverty substituted for a driving concern for money. Many of these women also went to school during summers to earn degrees in higher education. Briggs says, "For a long stretch of U.S. history, nuns were, as a group, the best educated women in the nation and even the best educated among the Catholics."¹² The BVM community supplies a case in point of congregations educating their members for positions of authority in society. As early as 1915 the BVMs established their own Board of Education, and in 1951 Superior General Sr. Mary Josita Baschnagel announced her intention, writes Harrington, "to have sisters complete college before going out to teach."¹³ The BVMs also founded and staffed two liberal arts colleges in the Midwest, Mundelein College in 1930 and Clarke College in 1901 (originally Mt. St. Joseph College and, before that, St. Mary's Academy established in 1843). Over time, however, the attraction of religious life diminished in

¹² Briggs 3.

¹³ Harrington 138.

direct proportion to the advancement of the women's rights movement. As many married women looked beyond the home for fulfillment in their lives, so too did many single women look outside the convent. The promise of equal opportunity in society (one good) outweighed the attraction of religious life (another good).

The second and more serious cultural blow to women religious followed on the heels of Vatican Council II, summoned by Pope John XXIII in 1959. Harrington, who lived through the period of the Council (1962-1965), has commented on its purpose and interpreted its impact on the BVM community. She said that the purpose of the Council was "to study and reform the Church"¹⁴ and that one of the sixteen documents of the Council, "Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of Religious Life," concentrated on making "religious life more relevant to the modern world."¹⁵ In order to keep step with historical times, both women and men religious initiated dramatic changes in their communities. For example, BVMs in 1965 left their classrooms and other institutions to march for civil rights in Selma, Alabama, and BVM college and school curricula reflected "the civil rights movement... women's equality... and the new thinking in theological circles."¹⁶ Change also occurred in BVM governance and rules: the sisters began to wear secular clothing (which meant they looked like other women and did not stand out as women religious), they

¹⁴ Harrington 140.

¹⁵ Harrington 141.

¹⁶ Harrington 141.

chose their own ministry, they decided on their own personal place and time of prayer, and so on. Although some BVMs found these changes exciting and welcome, others who had loved the traditional way of dress and life experienced them as unsettling and upsetting, and many of the sisters left the community as a result.¹⁷

Whether for changes occurring too rapidly from the fallout of Vatican II or for widening employment opportunities made possible by the women's rights movement (or for other reasons), membership in women religious communities declined sharply, placing sisters today face to face with a "crisis of legacy". It is true that some communities have written about their founders and leaders and collected a few oral histories, but the work remains sporadic. The BVMs, for instance, have published or commissioned works on the history of the community from the documents of its leaders, but, except for a few oral histories and the memoir project, the individual memories of the majority of the sisters die with them.¹⁸ The call is urgent:

¹⁷ Harrington 141.

¹⁸ Here is a partial list of major publications of the history of BVMs: Harrington; Jane Coogan, BVM, *Mary Frances Clarke: Foundress* (Dubuque, IA: Mount Carmel Press, 1977); Jane Coogan, BVM, *The Price of Our Heritage: History of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, 2 Vols. (Dubuque, IA: Mount Carmel Press, 1975, 1978); Jane McDonnell, BVM, *Counterpoint Melodies: Mary Gertrude Regan, BVM and Cecilia Dougherty, BVM* (Dubuque, IA: Mount Carmel Press, 1991); Ann M. Harrington, BVM, *BVM History from 1919-1945* (forthcoming); Kathryn Lawlor, BVM, *From Here to There: The Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary from 1942-1972* (forthcoming); Doris Walsh, BVM, *Two Pioneer Mothers: Gertrude and Cecilia* (forthcoming).

only the preservation of the memories of the sisters alive today will explain how these women lived out the charism of their communities and how they impacted the neighborhoods in which they lived and worked. The question is, how to do this?

One option is to interview the sisters and to write their memoirs.

Chapter Three

Craft and Art of Interviewing

*“As I listen to your story
I learn and grow
in ways I do not yet know.”*

-John Kunz, BSW, MS, founder, International
Institute for Reminiscence and Life Review

This chapter initiates the description of the model process to gather and preserve the stories of American women religious.

Once sisters have indicated their interest in the project, they will invariably ask about the commitments they need to make. The project leader must address their concerns in detail, as illustrated in the following response—a kind of consent form— given by the authors of this text to a BVM.

A designated student from the class—always under our supervision—will interview you for one hour once a week at your convent. You can expect six meetings, scheduled at your convenience.¹⁹ After each meeting, the student will transcribe the interview and

¹⁹ Life review pioneer Barbara K. Haight claims that six meetings are optimal: “Research shows that 6 weeks of intervention provides an opportunity to forge trust, establish a relationship, and recall a life.” See Barbara K. Haight and Barrett S. Haight, *The Handbook of Structured Life Review* (Baltimore: Health Professions Press, 2007) 25. Whereas Haight attempts to deliver therapy through life review, the memoir work with sisters aims at capturing a legacy. Still, the six meetings work best for the collection of legacy, too.

organize it into a chronological memoir (we call it a functional art memoir), which will be printed and given to you at the next meeting so that you can read and edit it during the week (the student will type in the edits you make each week). At the conclusion of the meeting series, the student will present to you, as a gift, a package containing a preface written by the student and the complete functional art memoir, already reflecting the changes you made on the pages. (The student may also submit to you a second memoir, which we call the fine art memoir.) We suggest that you read and edit the pages until you are completely satisfied with them. Once you give the seal of approval, we will deliver the documents to the congregation archives. At the conclusion of the project, your recorded interviews will be destroyed, unless of course you supply different instructions. You should also know that you may drop out of the project at any time, no questions asked.

With this agreement in place, the interviews may begin.

The interviews should resemble conversations with new friends, not clinical interviews with subjects. The sisters should feel comfortable to choose and articulate their memories, knowing that they can always return to the questions asked of them, and they should feel free to express themselves idiosyncratically, employing their unique vocabularies and speech patterns (for voice). These two goals—the comfort and voice of the sisters—should drive the interviews.

This chapter unfolds in three parts: before, during, and after the interviews, with a real-life example of a sister's interview segment (Sr. Therese Von Holdt) transcribed verbatim in a personal "shorthand" by Loyola University Chicago senior Nesreen Tawfic. A "to-do" structure organizes the parts, though strong interviews require as much art as craft. Interviewers profit from guidelines, but in their work they proceed differently from one another, developing their own style to assist the narrators in articulating memories. The style of the interviewers facilitates the development of their art.

Before the Interviews: What To Do?

Interviews require careful preparation. Equipment must be purchased, an appointment made, questions formulated, and so on. This attention to detail sets the scene for the first interview (and subsequent interviews) to play out smoothly.

Purchases. Human beings possess their own style when they express themselves, a style manifested not only in word selection and sentence rhythm but also in body mannerism like hand gestures and eye movements. For example, when one sister discussed her years in the classroom, her fingers danced across the table; she was thrilled to be discussing her work with students. To capture these physical aspects of the sisters' voice, interviewers must focus their attention on the sisters, not on pads of paper. Consequently, note-taking is not recommended. A \$40

digital recorder (and a pack of back-up batteries) will record the interviews and permit the interviewers to observe the unique characteristics of the sisters and to engage them in conversation about their lives.²⁰

Appointment. Typically, the project leader recruits the sisters and then matches them with the interviewers. Thus, the first phone call is significant. It introduces the interviewer and sister to each other and provides the occasion to pinpoint a day and time to conduct the first interview. Here is a sample first phone call.

Hi, Sr. Therese, this is Nesreen Tawfic. I'm a Loyola student, and work with Dan and Kathy Vaillancourt on their memoir project. I hear you're quite an extraordinary woman, and I can't wait to meet you and hear your story.

I'm calling today to set up a day and time for our first interview. It should last only an hour or so. When are the best days and times for you to meet with me....

I really appreciate you working with me on this project, and I'm eager to start! My number is...just in case you have any questions or need to reschedule. See you next Tuesday at 2:00 P.M. Have a nice evening.

Questions. To be profitable, the interviews should proceed within a framework of specific questions. After an overview of the sister's life (often completed during the first

²⁰ The digital recorder must be capable of voice file transfer to a computer.

interview), prepared questions should guide the sister to articulate stories that can contribute to the community memory of her congregation. For example, the BVMs found the following questions helpful to select the life events that led them to become sisters and to live out the charism of their congregation:

1. Can you tell me about your early years, in particular about your family and your schooling, and what it was like growing up in your neighborhood?
2. About your discernment of vocation and your novitiate years?
3. About the service you performed or the jobs you held?
4. About your leadership style?
5. About the way God was manifested to you throughout the various periods of your life?

Whatever the questions, they should require full responses instead of yes-or-no answers. The questions are doors, opening to rooms overflowing with reminiscences, anecdotes, evaluations of past events, and reconciliations with painful memories. The recollection of these memories provides the sister with the opportunity to tie the memory pieces together into a coherent narrative.

The Day Before. Four items require attention the day before an interview. First, the time of the interview needs confirmation. Second, the digital voice recorder should be tested by recording someone's voice for one minute, rewinding, and then playing back (the extra batteries are

packed with the recorder). Third, interviewers should function as young professionals, with appropriate attire and plans to eat before meetings to avoid grumbling stomachs or loss of concentration. Lastly, flowers for the sisters serve as wonderful good will gestures.

During the Interviews: What To Do?

Society tends to shun older adults, including sisters. One BVM said, “When you get old, you get put on a shelf, out of the way, and people forget about you.” The interviews reverse this unfortunate social trend. They place figurative spotlights on the sisters, spotlights created by the interviewers’ attitudes and actions during the sessions. An engaged demeanor informs sisters that they are not “on a shelf”; on the contrary, it highlights the significance of their lives for now (the interviews) and the future (their stories preserved in the archives). The following items explain in detail the meaning of engaged behavior for the interviewer.

Setting the Tone. The interviewer should strive to set a tone of eagerness and gratefulness for the opportunity to hear the unique stories of the sister. He (or she) should arrive ten minutes early, and then greet the sister as if meeting a special friend—by introducing himself, shaking hands, and presenting a flower. But engaged behavior will not overcome faulty recordings. The recorder should be tested with the voice of the sister (for about 15 seconds), rewound, played for clarity and volume, and then positioned with the battery light in view of the interviewer. Finally,

issues related to comfort should be considered. Are the chairs comfortable? Does the room carry good acoustics? Is glare blocked out and the air temperature about right? Are glasses of water on the table? This attention to detail, coupled with the enthusiasm of the greeting, engages the interviewer and says “thank you” to the sister.

Conversation. Human beings generally enjoy the give-and-take, the unpredictability, the surprise, and the pleasure of conversation. Interviews with the sisters should yield the same enjoyment, since the interviews model conversations. The open-ended and compound questions open doors, and, once inside the rooms, the sisters usually want to relate everything they “see.” Still, interviewers should keep three thoughts in the forefront of their minds. First, they should not hesitate to probe for details. If a sister is talking about her early years as a student at Sacred Heart Academy, the interviewer may ask, “Who were your special teachers at Sacred Heart and what qualities made them special to you?” Details enhance the vividness and authenticity of the project. Second, interviewers need to guide the conversation in a few ways. Transitions organize the stories and help move the talk along from topic to topic. For example, the interviewer may suggest, “We’ve been talking about your life as a young girl in your family, and now I’d like to know about your school years.” Another time to guide the sister is when she turns a side comment into a major topic. She may require gentle redirection, as in the following example: “That’s a very interesting story you just told me about your first visit to the Mississippi River.

But, I'd really like to know more about your novitiate years." From a million stories the sisters can tell, they want to know which stories will help the interviewers accomplish their tasks. Human beings welcome direction. Third, moments of silence during conversations should not prompt interviewers to panic. Silences enable sisters to evaluate what they articulated, to reflect on the direction of the conversation, and, most importantly, to recall details to flesh out the skeleton of a thought. Silences ultimately add weight to the conversations and contribute to their pleasure.

The Unexpected. Sometimes interviews swerve off course, moving in unexpected and fruitful directions. Interviewers need to recognize these surprises as significant moments pregnant with wisdom, and they should be ready to explore them. One time, a sister was recounting her experiences in the novitiate when she mentioned in passing that she was having difficulty hearing God's voice clearly. The interviewer seized the moment, and asked, "How has God spoken to you or been manifested to you throughout the different periods of your life?" This question prompted the sister to request an extra interview session so that she could reflect on the topic and then, at the next meeting, articulate in ample detail her encounters with God. The unexpected turns in conversations add excitement to the interviews, and can lead the two persons down a path of profound discovery.

End of Interviews. Endings can flow into beginnings. After peeking at a clock or watch a few times to stay within the allotted hour, the interviewer should negotiate the next appointment, and then write the meeting day and time in

dark ink on a 3” x 5” index card for the sister. The card should also contain the interviewer’s name and contact information. Individual interviews reveal varied interests, but multiple interviews in a sequence can display the strength and integrity of a life lived well and wisely.

After the Interviews: What to Do?

Transcribing an interview presents a stiff challenge. Conversations seldom move forward in straight lines; speakers zigzag with their words—with side comments pertinent to questions asked 30 minutes earlier and with second visits to themes already discussed but requiring amplification. Speakers also wrinkle their talk with fillers like “um” and “you know” as well as rhetorical questions such as, “Do you know what I mean?” Smoothing out the conversations without losing the unique voice of the speakers requires time and hard work, usually three hours of concentrated work for each interview hour.²¹ The process requires multiple steps, beginning with a verbatim transcription. However, before writing one word, interviewers must think ahead to the next interview.

Next Set of Questions. Detailed preparation almost always leads to a strong interview. Thus, the first charge after the interview is to prepare the next set of questions. This is done by reviewing the previous interview and

²¹ Fillers and rhetorical questions may contribute to the unique voice of a speaker. However, they become distractions to readers if transcribers include more than one per page.

determining what life events require elaboration or introduction.²²

Verbatim Transcription. The smoothing and organizing of a conversation also require flattening the conversation from four to two dimensions. A live conversation occurs in a physical space characterized by a certain length, width, and depth; additionally, the speakers display hand movements, facial expressions, and other body motions when they converse—an animation that can be interpreted as a fourth dimension. Transcription compresses these dimensions into the length and width of words on a flat surface, and this process begins with the verbatim transcription, the notes from which the interviewers will write the memoirs of the sisters. Interviewers frequently develop their own methods of transcribing, but veteran transcribers recommend the following efficient method: 1) Download the interview from the digital recorder into a computer; 2) Open a word processing program (like Microsoft Word) and then a document on the computer; 3) While listening to the recording, type using a personal form of shorthand to accelerate the process. The use of complete words and sentences comes in the memoir stage of the process (see next chapter).²³ Nesreen Tawfic has provided

²² Some interviewers formulate the next meeting's questions after they transcribe the most recent interview. As one interviewer said, "That way, I can literally see which areas on the transcript are smaller."

²³ Many interviewers skip the verbatim transcription. They have the talent to listen to a small portion of the recording and then to organize what they hear and to type it in complete sentences without losing the unique voice of the interviewee.

below the opening paragraphs of her verbatim transcription (with personal shorthand) of the first interview with Sr. Therese Von Holdt.

“Family Life. Father was of Ger. descen, & grew up in CO. He only went up to 4th grade bec during tht time the level of educ was not req. His father was literate & ran a newspaper. The family needed him at home & tht is where the value was at during tht time.

Mother was educ.; she went through all 8th grade & then she went to bus. school.

My parents met in Chg. & I asked my Mom when I was younger “Why did daddy come here to Chg. from CO? It’s so beautiful there.” Chgo was the center for opportunity for work.

I grew up during the Grt Depress and tht gives u a whole different set of values.

Many mechanical necessities (a kind of craft) drive the interviews with the sisters. Interviewers purchase their digital recorders and learn to use them, and they set up appointments, devise questions for the interviews, guide the sisters through pleasant and relaxed conversations, and transcribe the interviews. But craft yields to art when interviewers move beyond the nuts and bolts of the process. This can happen when interviewers open their hearts and minds to the sisters, recognizing and voicing unasked questions and finding wisdom sometimes hidden in stories. On these occasions, interviewers are contributing to the

creation of word canvasses that go far beyond the data collected in prepared questions and answers. Interviewers, on these occasions, also create art that can change them as much as other people. John Kunz, BSW, MS, founder of the International Institute for Reminiscence and Life Review, describes in “Shared Life Stories Are Heaven” how this transformation can take place:

“As I listen to your story
I learn and grow
in ways I do not yet know.
...I open my ears and heart...
[and I wait] for the WISDOM
of the story
to be
unveiled....”²⁴

²⁴ John Kunz, “Shared Life Stories are Heaven” at <http://www.uwsuper.edu/cee/lll/reminiscence/index.cfm> Accessed 11/18/2009.

Chapter Four

Craft and Art of Memoir Writing

*“An autobiography is the story of a life....
Memoir, on the other hand, is a story from a life.”*
-Judith Barrington, author of *Writing the Memoir*

The children of storytelling are legion, possibly exhausting the space on this page if all of them were listed. Some of the more prominent ones are myth, fable, fairy tale, short story, tale, novel, autobiography, and memoir. Storytelling gave birth to her children at different times in history, endowing each one with distinctive talents. Autobiography, for instance, appeared very early in Western culture, and claims as its talent the ability to tell the story of the writer’s life in the first person. Augustine in his *Confessions*—composed in 397-399 and possibly the greatest autobiography ever written—says in the opening page: “How shall I call upon my God, my God and Lord? Surely when I call on him, I am calling on him to come into me. But what place is there in me where my God can enter into me?”²⁵ The narrative of autobiography is all about the “I,” in Augustine’s case, about the struggle to let God enter into him when he was a boy and young man. Memoir, on the other hand, represents the most recent (coming into its own

²⁵ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, Tr. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 3.

in the twentieth century in the West) and probably the most modest of storytelling's children.

Nature of Memoir

At a quick glance, memoir and autobiography look like twins, since their points of view are identical. The two art forms employ the same first person (singular) point of view to write about the author—they are “I” narratives. However, the similarities end there. Memoir, knowing its limitations, is far more moderate. It lets go of autobiography's grand aspirations of telling a factual life story in order to relate instead a segment from the author's life.

Memoir and autobiography both appear on the time spectrum of “I” narratives but at opposite ends of the spectrum. As a pure form, autobiography covers an entire life (from birth to the time the author is writing), whereas memoir ideally explores a segment of that life—as limited as one minute or even a few seconds. But pure forms rarely drop from the pens of writers. More likely, extant autobiographies and memoirs fall at a distance from the ends of the spectrum. In his *Confessions*, for example, Augustine admits that he remembers little about his life as an infant: “I do not remember having lived, but I have believed what others have told me and have assumed how I behaved from observing other infants.”²⁶ His story really begins in school,

²⁶ Augustine 10.

where he remembers being beaten when he was lazy,²⁷ and it ends in his mid-30s when his mother died. (We are excluding the final four chapters, which present aspects of his Neoplatonic philosophy.) Moreover, Augustine is writing about these three decades of his life ten years later in 397-400. A preeminent autobiography, *Confessions* still appears at a distance from the pure form.

Existing memoirs are not any purer. The memoir included later in this chapter is a case in point. The first chapter of *You're So Fresh*—the memoir of Sr. Joan Frances Crowley written by Dan Vaillancourt for illustrative purposes—covers two hours in Sr. Joan Frances's life, and the other chapters, intended to reveal the values and the spirit—the soul—of this incredible woman, take place over a period of eight months. Sr. Joan Frances gave the interviews for the memoir a few months before she died at 90 years old. Thus, *You're So Fresh* may appear toward the other end of the time spectrum, but like *Confessions* it does not take residence at a pole as a pure form.²⁸

²⁷ Augustine 11.

²⁸ Works appearing in the middle of the time spectrum will be difficult to identify as memoir rather than autobiography or vice-versa. An example is Annie Dillard, *An American Childhood*, is known as memoir, *Confessions* as autobiography. Does the longer period of years in *Confessions* nudge it closer to autobiography on the spectrum? Where exactly is the dividing line on the spectrum, between autobiography and memoir? In answer to the latter question: we are comfortable letting the art forms merge into one another, since any watershed year would be arbitrary. And in response to the former question: the literary world—authors, publishers, critics, scholars, librarians, etc.—create the attribution, and then usage adds weight to it.

But memoir sacrifices breadth to gain something significant: unlimited depth. In his work *The Wisdom of Memoir: Reading and Writing Life's Sacred Texts*, noted memoir scholar Peter Gilmour writes: "Memoir is an icon of experience. [...] This metaphor for memoir reflects what Philip Phenix terms the 'sacred secular,' ordinary experiences that reveal infinite depths of meaning."²⁹ As with the poles of the time spectrum above, unlimited or infinite depth suggests a kind of pure form, an ideal-limit that philosophers identify but writers as imperfect beings rooted in a specific space and time (for example, Chicago on June 21, 2010) can never achieve. No writer can plumb infinite depths with limited talent and vocabulary. In *You're So Fresh*, for instance, it is not possible to explicate an infinite number of meanings of a curfew infraction in a student dormitory at Mundelein College in Chicago. But memoir, instead of listing life events in a chronological series as does autobiography, chooses one life event purposefully, like a curfew infraction, and then lingers over it, sometimes developing the event into a full-blown story, other times dialoguing with the event to learn why it was so painful earlier in one's life, and still other times exploring the emotional and spiritual content of the event then and now. Memoir utilizes assorted literary techniques to dig deep into an event in the hope of revealing what is deeply personal and vital to the person, what some philosophers and

²⁹ Peter Gilmour, *The Wisdom of Memoir: Reading and Writing Life's Sacred Texts* (Winona, MN: St. Mary's Press, 1997) 17.

theologians have named the soul of the individual.³⁰ Thus, memoir represents perhaps the ideal art form to capture the stories of women religious, because its nature—its ontology—is to articulate the personal depth (dare we say the sacredness?) of their experiences. This ontology of memoir can be further developed through its three key characteristics: truth, contexts, and tools.

Truth. In his memoir *Palimpsest*, Gore Vidal writes, “A memoir is how one remembers one’s own life, while an autobiography is history, requiring research, dates, facts double-checked.”³¹ Thus, memoir explains not so much what is factual for history as what is truthful for the author. A better way to state this distinction is to refer to factual truth and emotional, even spiritual truth. Memoir does work with facts such as the date and city of a family member’s birth, (and a good memoirist takes the time to check the accuracy of the facts), but it prefers to address the author’s impressions and feelings concerning the birth. English teacher Nancy Zuwiya articulates this characteristic of memoir well when she explains, “[Memoir] tries to capture certain highlights or meaningful moments in one’s past, often including a contemplation of the meaning of that event at the time of the writing of the memoir.”³² In other words, memoir displays an adventuresome spirit, delving into an

³⁰ Autobiographies certainly include powerful spiritual passages (the scene recounting Augustine’s conversion in *Confessions*, for example), but generally this is not the *raison d’être* of autobiography.

³¹ Gore Vidal, *Palimpsest* (New York: Random House, 1995) 5.

³² Nancy E. Zuwiya, “Memoir,” online. See <http://inkspell.homestead.com/memoir.html> Accessed 3/13/2008.

event, exploring its emotional and spiritual meaning, relating it to other pivotal events, and then articulating the discoveries in a compelling manner. For example, the initial sentence below communicates numerous factual truths—the place and time of the birth of the author’s grand-nephew. The rewritten version includes the facts but also explores the significance of the event—its emotional and spiritual truth—in great detail, so much so that the factual truth of the statement fades into the background.

- Initial sentence: “My little grand-nephew was born on October 5, 2001 in New York City.”

- Rewritten version: “The birth of my little grand-nephew in New York City shortly after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center couldn’t have come at a more propitious moment for me. The senseless Trade Center deaths— isn’t the total around 3,000?—had sent me into a depression. I couldn’t hear God speaking to me any longer, and, as a consequence, the world had turned gray, devoid of color. But the arrival of my little grand-nephew—with his smiles, cooing, tiny fingers—gave me hope. One day, he wrapped his whole hand around my index finger, and I felt God’s presence again. Yes, life is still beautiful. I was just looking in the wrong places.”

Thus, memoir digs deep into the factual truth to uncover the personal meaning—the emotional and spiritual truth—of a life event. Truth, then, is the first key characteristic of the ontology of memoir.

Contexts. Noted memoirist and teacher Judith Barrington warns in her work *Writing the Memoir* that the author, by delving too deeply into the truth—factual, emotional, spiritual—of an experience, can shut the world out. She says, “[W]orking on your story can sometimes pull you into greater and greater communion with your psyche, until your narrative becomes stranded on the island of your personal life—stranded there with no connection at all to the mainland.”³³ This isolation from the world may work for a private diary but not for memoir, which represents a public art form, intended for readers. Accessible contexts must ground the memoir. Barrington suggests that the author can embed the presentation of a life experience in as many as five contexts, phrased here as questions:

1. How have the author’s family or other intimate relationships impacted the experience?
2. How have friends or neighbors influenced the event?
3. Did the political, labor, or worship community shape the event in some way?
4. What was the influence of mass culture?
5. Finally, did world events color the personal experience in any way?³⁴

These contexts serve the memoir in three significant ways. First, the contexts remove readers’ difficulties in accessing the memoir. In the writing, the author may have

³³ Judith Barrington, *Writing the Memoir*, Second Edition (Portland, OR: The Eighth Mountain Press, 2002) 141.

³⁴ Barrington 147-148.

constructed a magnificent literary structure without considering its accessibility to readers—a locked door may be barring entry. The contexts supply keys to open the building’s main door as well as the doors to the inside rooms. The contexts, in other words, establish common ground between the author and readers, and once inside the story readers can, as Barrington says, “venture into the unfamiliar.”³⁵ In the grand-nephew example above, the rewritten version establishes through depression, for example, some common ground between the author and readers. Most people have experienced gloomy or depressive episodes at some point in life, and, from this familiar experience, the author can pull readers into the unfamiliar, say, into the religious rituals of sisterhood.

Second, the contexts situate the story in a time and place, allowing readers to interact with a concrete and familiar world. The initial sentence of the grand-nephew’s birth reveals accurate facts, but it does not engage readers in the story’s world as well as the rewritten version, which leans on a world event (the terrorist plane attacks on the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center) and existential experiences to draw the attention and emotions of readers into the story early and quickly.

Third, the contexts add authenticity to memoir. Barrington even asserts that memoir “becomes more true [authentic] as you add more layers.”³⁶ The memoirist incorporates contexts in the story to benefit readers, in effect

³⁵ Barrington 144.

³⁶ Barrington 146.

to help them separate the memoir from fiction. This authenticating process is clearly operating in the second version of the grand-nephew story. Whereas the first version could be read as the opening line of a novel or memoir—the only difference being the author’s claim to fiction or truth—the second version references a major historical event for Americans, and the truth quotient of the event casts its long shadow over the birth of the grand-nephew (and the author’s depressive episode, renewal of hope, and so on), thereby tying birth and historical event together and augmenting the authenticity of the birth for readers. Incidentally, well-written fiction also employs the same technique to ground readers in a setting and time. The difference is that memoir begins with a true event.

Thus, contexts resolve a potentially major problem for memoir. As writers dig deep to uncover the profound personal meaning of a life event, they risk writing idiosyncratically and for themselves only, forgetting about their readers. The writing can appear opaque to readers. Concrete contexts resolve this problem by adding recognizable texture to the writing and the personal meaning of an event, thereby making the account of the event accessible to readers. Contexts, then, are the second key characteristic of the ontology of memoir.

Tools. Human experiences contain all manner of complexity—emotions rifle them, symbols shape them, meaning adds weight to them, and time colors them. Each experience is like a mineral-rich mountain, capable of being mined for valuable ore, its depth seemingly never fathomed

or exhausted. The ordinary experience contains, as Gilmour says, “infinite depths of meaning.” To make the explorations of these depths possible, memoir limits its focus to specific life segments. But stories do not arrive on paper fully formed, the way a little grand-nephew emerges out of the womb as an autonomous entity. Stories require construction one word at a time, and this work needs special tools.

Memoir possesses the picks and shovels, as it were, to dig into human experience. As a narrative, memoir utilizes the customary elements of story like setting, plot and character development, imagery, conflict, symbolism, figures of speech such as simile, metaphor, hyperbole, understatement, irony, euphemism, and so on. These tools can mine human experience—dig into its depth—and unearth its valuable gems for everyone to see. The grand-nephew passage utilizes most of the story elements, including plot, character development, and imagery, to draw readers into the depth of the author’s experience and consequently into the significance of that experience. Perhaps the celebrated Christian theologian Martin Marty had memoir in mind when he described narrative theology as “talking about God by telling stories of humans.”³⁷

Truth, contexts, and tools are three key characteristics of the ontology of memoir.

Two Types of Memoir

³⁷ Quoted in Gilmour 70.

Serious writers leave a mark as distinct as a fingerprint on everything they write. Thus, memoirists create narratives as varied as their personalities, talents, and life experiences. This wide range of memoirs notwithstanding, the genre admits at least two broad types: the memoir as functional art and the memoir as fine art. The two types strive to attain the same end—to uncover and present the profound personal meaning of a life event—but they do so in different ways. The functional art memoir takes the material given in the interviews, and organizes it into a coherent, chronological narrative; the interview questions limit the breadth of this narrative while at the same time permitting the explanation of events in depth. By contrast, the fine art memoir selects segments of the narrative presented in the functional art memoir, and develops them into first person short stories, relying heavily on the tools of storytelling to do the job. The following sections include more detailed explanations, with examples, of these two types of memoir.

Memoir as functional art. This memoir type requires a close partnership between the interviewer and interviewee to assure accuracy of voice, truth of content, and relevance of contexts. Thus, the memoir evolves gradually as the transcribed pages move between the two persons after each interview (see inset “What to Do?”). On the one hand, the interviewer writes the memoir in the first person point of view, using the voice of the interviewee (as if the interviewee were writing it). This style establishes greater immediacy to the memoir and greater intimacy between

readers and the memoir's central character. Some of the other operations the interviewer performs on the verbatim script to create a memoir include arranging the material in chronological order, inserting historical and cultural details as appropriate, and organizing the material into accurate

What to Do?

1. After the first interview, the interviewer creates from the recording a verbatim transcript (see example on p. 31).
2. The interviewer transforms the verbatim script into a functional memoir by performing the following tasks before the next interview:
 - a. Writes in the first person point of view and voice of the interviewee, as if the interviewee were writing the memoir.
 - b. Arranges the material in chronological order.
 - c. Expands through research the contexts mentioned in the anecdotes, if the added materials clarify the anecdotes.
 - d. Includes rhetorical questions like "Do you know what I mean?" and fillers such as "like," "um," and "you know" judiciously, and excludes the ones that disrupt the reading of the memoir. A rule of thumb is to retain no more than one filler or rhetorical question per page.
 - e. Corrects the punctuation and grammar, and arranges the writing in appropriate paragraphs.
3. The interviewer prints a copy of the memoir, and presents it at the second interview to the interviewee, who edits the copy between the second and third interviews. Sometimes, editing requires the adding and subtracting of details or anecdotes, as appropriate.
4. After each interview, the interviewer corrects the memoir as indicated in the edited pages and lengthens the memoir by repeating step #2 above, making sure to keep the material dealing with the same topics together.
5. The interviewer prints a copy of the new memoir, and presents it at the third meeting to the interviewee. The process continues until the memoir is complete, and the interviewee approves every word.

sentences and complete paragraphs. This work aims at

presenting on paper the events and anecdotes (revealed by selective questioning) of a living and unique human being in the voice of the person. On the other hand, the interviewee relates the stories and then edits the script each week to assure accuracy of detail and voice. The memoir represents, in the end, the written legacy of a portion of the person's life and work.

Why is this type of memoir an example of functional art? Throughout the millennia—as far back in Western Europe as 30,000 BCE with the limestone figurine of a woman known as the “Venus of Willendorf” to today with the sleek design of automobiles like sports cars—human beings have fashioned objects for utility and beauty. The “Venus of Willendorf” honored female fertility, whereas the sports car promotes mobility with style and comfort. A similar rationale applies to the memoir. Some memoirs aim for beauty and function, the beauty of expositional clarity, organization, coherence, and detail, as well as the function of preserving the events, stories, and wisdom of a living human being in the voice of the person. The following segment, the first page of Sr. Therese Von Holdt's memoir written by Nesreen Tawfic, is an excellent example of a functional art memoir.

My Family History. I was born on May 17, 1925.

It was the same day that St. Therese of Lisieux, fondly referred to as the Little Flower, was canonized. Hence, I was baptized Mary Therese. I grew up in Chicago during the Great Depression and that gives one a whole

different set of values. I always felt I never had much financial security but had much security emotionally.

My father was originally from Colorado. He only had schooling to the fourth grade and then helped at home. His father came from Hamburg, Germany, which was a very anti-Catholic area and he had no religious orientation in his young life. He met my grandmother at the hotel his uncle owned. She was the head cook at that hotel. He moved to the United States and through the Homestead Act procured a plot of land in Norton, Kansas. After he was settled my grandmother came and they were married. After a few years they moved to Denver.

My mother was born in Remus, Michigan and raised as a Catholic. Her parents were from central Germany and moved to the United States and first settled in Canada and then moved to Michigan and acquired a farm in Remus, where they raised ten children the youngest of which was my mother. My mother completed grade school and then went to business school.

My Family Life. I was called Terry at home and Mary in school. I am the second youngest of six. There were Ruth, Dick, Bill and Jack. Then there was my sister, Barbara Jean, who died of pneumonia when I was a baby. Then there was Bob and I. Bob and I were considered the babies of the family because of the six-year gap between the first four and the two of us. When I was five years old my father was not working because

of the Depression and my parents were having a difficult time providing for us. My aunt Pauline, who was working and had a six-room apartment on Winthrop near Sheridan Road in Chicago, invited all of us to live with her.

I once asked my mother, “Why did Daddy come here from Colorado? It’s so beautiful there.” She answered, “For a job.” You see, Chicago was the center of opportunity for work. My father always had great curiosity, even though he had limited schooling. Later on he started teaching at the Art Institute and was a commercial artist. He had no training for it but observed a lot. One day he and I were talking and I told him, “Daddy, you are one of the smartest men I know.” I admired him because he did not let himself vegetate. He always believed that he would find answers.

Memoir as fine art. In a sense, the fine art memoir stands to the life reminiscences of the interviewee the way a telescopic view stands to a panoramic scene of nature. It focuses on one scene and magnifies it. Narrow focus and amplification account for the two major differences between the functional art memoir and fine art memoir, but the differences are ones of degree, not kind. On the one hand, both memoir types construct a focus, but the functional art memoir does it on an entire life by asking selective questions, while the fine art memoir works with a few anecdotes from that life. Like a telescope zooming in, the focus narrows progressively from functional art memoir to

fine art memoir. On the other hand, the closer looks amplify what is viewed, and at the same time transform the views. A panoramic view of a forest can become a good look at a bur oak tree and, even closer, a sighting of a black-and-white warbler “walking” down the trunk of the tree in search of insects. Similarly, the functional art memoir creates a narrative from the anecdotes related to career or family life, for example, and more narrow still, the fine art memoir selects a few anecdotes so that it can delve deep enough into the experiences to reveal the unique character—the spirit or soul—of the interviewee in short stories. The fine art memoir is the telescope zoomed in to its strongest magnification.

The fine art memoir gets its work done in all kinds of ways. Annie Dillard in *An American Childhood*, for example, writes about her early life from five years old to the time she knew she would attend Hollins College in Virginia. In a brilliant early chapter, she introduces her vivid imagination to readers by describing how, at five years old, “I would not go to bed willingly because something came into my room.[...] If I spoke of it, it would kill me.”³⁸ Readers learn at the conclusion of the chapter that the monsters slithering over the walls of her bedroom were shadows created by the headlights of cars passing in front of her house and window. In a different example from another writer, Kathleen Norris explores in *Dakota* not a time period but a theme in her life—how the Great Plains evoked for her

³⁸ Annie Dillard, *An American Childhood* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987) 17.

powerful spiritual experiences (she subtitles the book, *A Spiritual Geography*). A snowstorm helps readers understand how Norris marries geography and spirituality. After driving some time in a whiteout where “you drive with one hand on the steering wheel and the other on the car door, which you open a crack to try to see the median line through the blowing snow,”³⁹ she stops near Summit, South Dakota at an elevation of 2,000 feet, and gets out of the car. “I faced the wind, ate snow, laughed, and suddenly relaxed. It was glorious to be in a world in which the sky and land had merged, where everything was painted in shades of white.”⁴⁰ Norris and Dillard demonstrate that fine art memoirs can present the *animus* (or *anima*) of an individual in multiple ways.

The fine art memoir represents the type of memoir published in recent decades, the writing in these books extraordinarily focused so as to reveal the soul of the writer. Besides the Dillard and Norris books, other outstanding examples of the fine art memoir are *Angela's Ashes* (1996) by Frank McCourt and *Personal History* (1997) by Katherine Graham, both works winners of the Pulitzer Prize. These memoirs and others like them are the reason why the 1998 statement of William Zissner—writer, teacher, and former Book of the Month Club editor—appears prophetic today: “This is the age of the memoir. Never have personal narratives gushed so profusely from the American soil as in

³⁹ Kathleen Norris, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1993) 67.

⁴⁰ Norris 67-68.

the closing decade of the twentieth century. Everyone has a story to tell, and everyone is telling it.”⁴¹

The following fine art memoir of Sr. Joan Frances Crowley, *You're So Fresh*, uses a curfew infraction in a women's college dormitory to show how Sr. Joan Frances dealt with the people around her. She said frequently, “Every human relationship entails an eternal responsibility.” This is the first chapter of the memoir.

I could be lippy with the best of them, especially the boyfriends of the Mundelein College girls. No boy ever got the upper hand on me. I remember one boy when I was Dean of Residence at Mundelein—I think it was in the late 1970s. He was visiting his girlfriend in Coffey Hall one night, and he stayed about 30 minutes past visiting hours. The woman on duty at the front desk reported him to me. “Sister, Carmela's young man hasn't checked out yet.”

You know, the girls themselves through their elected representatives had decided on the visiting hours (and curfew), and so I expected them to abide by the rules. I marched up to the third floor, and knocked on the room door. The laughter inside the room drowned out my knocking, so I tried again, this time louder.

⁴¹ William Zinsser, *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, Revised and Expanded Edition (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998) 3.

“Come in!” The voice was deep and strong, Carmela’s voice for sure.

I leaned close to the door and said, “It’s Sister.” I liked to let the girls know who was on the other side of the door in case they needed to straighten out the room or themselves a little.

After a few seconds and some ruffling noise inside, the door opened but not too wide. Carmela was a lovely Italian girl, a few inches taller than I, with coal-black eyes and matching hair falling in waves over her shoulders. She was dressed in black Jordache jeans and a red Mundelein sweatshirt. Her boyfriend was wearing gray sweats, and he was sitting on the floor in the middle of the room. It was a typical dormitory residence with two of everything—beds, desks, chairs, and closets. He smiled up at me and said, “Come on in, Sister, and join us.” You would think he owned the place.

“Carmela, dear, my lower lip is trembling.” I touched her arm as if to underscore the point. “It’s past visiting hours.”

Before she could respond to me, her boyfriend—I think his name was Andrew—said it was all his fault.

I noticed another girl in the room, Carmela’s roommate Betsy Buntz. She was sitting on the lower bunk against the wall, looking at everyone. If Betsy was there, it meant that Carmela and Andrew were behaving themselves.

Andrew, mind you, never stood up to greet me. Instead, he challenged me. “Sister, what if I refuse to leave?”

His tone was not belligerent. In fact, he was generally a well-behaved boy. But he was testing me to see what I would say.

I played along. “Oh, you’re so fresh! May God forgive you.”

I turned to Carmela. “I don’t know what you see in him.”

Andrew jumped up from the floor and stood close to Carmela. “I’m her knight in shining armor. Right, hon?”

He was enjoying himself, but Carmela had a Mona-Lisa smile frozen on her face, and she was seesawing from foot to foot, probably hoping he would not push me too far.

He did not. He said something about coming back tomorrow to see Carmela.

I pointed my bony index finger at him. “Andrew, you had better come during visiting hours. Otherwise, I’ll have to throw my body across the entrance door, and you’ll never be able to enter the dormitory.”

Mind you, I was all of 100 pounds sopping wet, towel included, and he was a Loyola University Chicago athlete, probably over 200 pounds.

He laughed. “You’ve got me there, Sister.”

I purposely never addressed his initial tease about what I would do if he refused to leave the dorm room. I didn't want to push him into a corner. Nudging him in the right direction was what I was trying to do. Generally, it worked out well. Andrew, like the others, was a good boy, just lippy sometimes.

“Carmela, can I count on you to take your knight downstairs to the front desk and to sign him out?”

“Yes, Sister.”

“And would you please stop by my room sometime tomorrow so we can have a little talk?” The girls knew I meant business when I suggested “a little talk.” I pushed the room door as wide open as I could, and then left.

I went to my room on the first floor to prepare my Russian history lecture for class the next morning. My room resembled a big book with small fold-outs on each side, in the right fold-out my bed and study desk, and in the left my kitchenette and bathroom. I walked across the open living room into the right fold-out and sat at my desk. I had just opened the history text to the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, when someone knocked on my door. It was after 1:00 A.M., but I opened the door anyway (I could never keep my door shut on a student). There was little Betsy Buntz, a wisp of a girl, so frail and delicate. She looked especially fragile this early morning in narrow-legged blue jeans and a short-sleeve pink tee-shirt. I always worried that if someone exhaled on her, she would tip over.

“May I speak with you...a few minutes, Sister?” Her voice was low and breathless, as if she had just run up a flight of stairs. But I knew Betsy couldn’t run, even walk up a steep incline. This darling girl had been born with a serious heart defect—a blue baby, they called her—and she was fortunate to have lived this long. She had arrived at Mundelein in March for the third trimester, gone home (she lived in Rockford, Illinois) for the summer like the other girls, and now enrolled in the first trimester of the new academic year. Her parents had begged the College to accept Betsy, because it was the only school in the area that had elevators to take her to her dorm room and then to all her classes. Mundelein would allow Betsy to live the life of a normal college student without requiring that she climb one flight of stairs. Her parents, such darlings, had teary eyes when they dropped Betsy off at Coffey Hall. They didn’t want to live a minute without her, but they knew Betsy would be happy at Mundelein, and their daughter’s happiness came first.

“What’s on your mind, Betsy? Are you feeling well?” I scanned her face and noticed the telltale tint of blue around her lips.

“Oh...it’s nothing like that, Sister. But I was wondering...do you think I’ll ever have a boyfriend? Am I...pretty enough?”

That was how she spoke, innocently and in spurts. I thought she was very pretty, with light brown hair falling to her shoulders, a delicate mouth and nose,

and the most unusual eyes I had ever seen—light orange and big and round like saucers.

I invited her in, and led her to the couch that separated the large living space from the opening to the bedroom and study desk. Then I poured each of us a glass of ice water. “Maurice my chef has left for the evening, so water will have to do.”

Betsy laughed, as she always did when I joked about my imaginary chef. And she laughed again when I told her that I hadn’t dated any boys recently, but I’d do my best to help her out in the boyfriend department.

I don’t know why I did this, but I started with stories about my years as a young girl—that I was a tomboy and could run faster and climb higher than all the boys in the neighborhood, and that I was on a grade school basketball team and helped win a city championship by scoring eight points in the final game, and that I thought my life would be free as a breeze and filled with games. But God had different plans for me.

“I’m sure God has someone special for you, Betsy. But you must be patient. God’s plan for us unfolds in time.”

“You really think so, Sister?”

She looked at me with such sincerity, with such trust, that I wondered if she was just too sweet and innocent for this world. I took her hand and squeezed it, trying to reassure her that everything would turn out just fine. “Now go get your rest. Class time is just six hours away.”

When Betsy left at 2:00 A.M., I was exhausted but at peace. God wanted me to be here for girls like Betsy.

Ultimately, memoir loves digging for details to uncover something significant and deeply personal about the person. Two types of memoir accomplish this task in different ways. The functional art memoir receives its depth from the questions and research of the interviewer. For example, Tawfic questioned Sr. Therese about her life as a young girl to learn what influences might have predisposed her toward the vocation of sisterhood. The memoir segment brings out some of these influences. The fine art memoir, by contrast, narrows its focus to a specific life experience, and then mines the experience with true statements presented in real-world contexts using the dramatic tools of storytelling. The first scene of Sr. Joan Frances's memoir, for example, covers a few hours of her life as Dean of Residence at Mundelein College, though she held the position for nearly two decades. This close focus permits deep digging, such as the dialogue and details of the scene with Betsy Buntz. Sr. Joan Frances could not recall what exactly she said to Betsy 30 years ago, but she could have engaged in the little banter about her imaginary chef Maurice, since he regularly made an appearance in her dialogues with students. What is true or could be true for Sr. Joan Frances takes precedence over fact—the fact is the two participants in the conversation do not remember what was said. Other details surface in the contexts of the late 1970s, including clothing (“narrow-

legged jeans”) and speech patterns (Betsy’s halting speech for a medical problem that was untreatable at the time). This scene also moves beyond memoir as functional art to memoir as fine art with the extensive use of the tools of storytelling, for example, plot development (will Betsy find a boyfriend?) and expressive language (“my life would be free as a breeze and filled with games”). Hopefully, the memoir dug deep enough into this life segment to reveal the spirit or soul of Sr. Joan Frances—how she planted the seeds of eternity in her relationships with other people.

Chapter Five

A Beginning and an Ending

Preface and Archives

“Sometimes an ending is just a beginning.”

-Anonymous

Two important tasks related to memoir-writing come at the end of the process. The writer composes a preface and then delivers the preface and memoirs to the archives. In the first task—the preface—the writer places the subjects and themes of the memoirs in the larger context of the sister’s life and reflects on the personal impact of the memoir process and the meetings with the sister. Although usually written after the completion of the memoir, the preface appears as the first document in the memoir package. The second task falls on the shoulders of the project leader. The memoir documents require editing, printing, and approval by the sister before they can be delivered to the community archives. The project leader serves as the negotiator in this process. But once the task is done, the three individuals—project leader, writer, and sister—reap the rewards of knowing that a legacy is secured for history.

Preface

In the preface, the writer introduces the memoirs and sister to the readers. Speaking for the first time in the voice

of the interviewer (as opposed to the sister's voice), the writer addresses readers directly, explaining the relevance and importance of the life segments developed in the memoirs to the structure of the sister's life as a whole. This discussion helps readers to engage the material of the memoirs more readily and intimately.

The preface can also benefit the writer directly. It presents an opportunity for the writer to articulate the personal impact of the sister and the memoir process. The nature of the impact varies considerably, evidenced by the reflections included in Chapter One (see "Impacting young adults today"). There, the writers credit BVMs for prompting a career change and resolving a family conflict. In other instances, writers have described how the sisters have given them courage to continue their school work despite overwhelming emotional obstacles before them, like the death of close family members or the daunting challenges of being a mother caring for three young children while at the same time being a student completing five demanding courses at the university.⁴² These heartfelt tributes are important for the writers who articulate them, but they often make for compelling reading, too.

In the preface, readers learn about the sister and the interviewer. In a sense, the preface presents a case study of the sister's impact on one person, and may, by extension,

⁴² Dan Vaillancourt, "Using the Arts to Impact Society: How the Art of Memoir Preserves the Legacy of Women Religious" in *The International Journal of the Arts in Society*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (2009): 134-135.

help readers understand the possible influence of the sister on the thousands of people with whom she interacted throughout her life. Hardly an appendage, the preface sets the tone, through the writer's testimony, for the dozens of stories to come in the sister's memoirs. The following preface to the fine art memoir of Sr. Joan Frances illustrates how the author attempted to carry out many of the tasks above.

The old joke goes this way: If you want to make God laugh, just tell God your plans. Sr. Joan Frances and I were supposed to write her story together, just as we had written a book and taught a college course together. But it didn't turn out that way, and in the distance I think I heard Someone chortling.



In fall 2008, I taught 21 students in two aesthetics courses for the philosophy department at Loyola University Chicago. The students interviewed 19 Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVMs) as part of a service-learning project involving the memoir art form. Meeting an hour a week for about two months, the students asked the sisters about their family lives as young girls, discernment of vocation and novitiate years, service to others, and leadership style. The students then transcribed the interviews into chronological narratives, and selected a life segment or two from the narratives to develop into memoirs written in the voices of the sisters

(in the first person as if the sisters were writing them). After the courses ended, the sisters edited the documents, approved their final form, and permitted their delivery to the archives at the University and/or the BVM Motherhouse in Dubuque, Iowa.

Sr. Joan Frances participated enthusiastically in the project, working as an energetic recruiter of other BVMs to the project and an eager interviewee for two students. She fell in love with, as she said, “the lovely girls,” and in the end she agreed to the placement of the documents about her life in the archives. However, she felt the students had missed the spark in her heart, the glow that warmed her interactions with people. They had not explored adequately in their writings how every human relationship entailed an eternal responsibility.

I asked her if she would be willing to start over with me as the interviewer. And would she agree to share her story with a public audience, perhaps as the lead chapter in a book featuring the stories of people who had lived inspiring lives? I would title the book, *A Million Decisions*, since the stories would demonstrate how the selected people (like herself) had made at least a million tough decisions to fashion lives that held significant meaning for them and that others might view as inspiring for themselves. We could work together on the story, include photographs, documents, and testimonials, and decide later how to camouflage sensitive biographical material. She said simply, “I can’t

imagine who would be interested in my life, but I trust you.” Those were our plans.

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I conducted my last recorded interview with Sr. Joan Frances in early May 2009. She was 90 years old and living on Chicago’s north side with other retired sisters at Wright Hall, the ten-story retirement home for the sisters on Sheridan Road across the street from erstwhile Mundelein College but now part of Loyola University Chicago.

Her head of shocking white hair lit up the hallway of the home’s first floor as I watched all 80 pounds of her baby-step toward me. She had fallen on her bedroom floor the previous week and broken a rib, so she had to take millimeter steps and stay hunched over to tolerate the pain. She wobbled a bit as she approached me, making her look inebriated. I took her arm and said, “Have you been nipping on martinis again?” The remark was a longstanding joke between us, because at social gatherings where the hosts served liquor she regularly requested a martini, though no one had ever seen her finish one.

She lifted her head and peered up at me with cataract-dimmed blue eyes. “You’re so fresh,” she said. “May God forgive you.” Then she smiled and decades of wrinkles and age spots fell from her face. She looked young and vibrant again, and it could have been 1972 when I first met her.

Back then, she had tinted gold-blond hair trimmed below the ears. Stylish glasses magnified her twinkling eyes, which were as quick as her feet, darting back and forth at the ready to greet students and fellow professors. Add a knee-length colored skirt, white blouse, and low leather pumps, and she might have passed for one of the professional women completing their college degree in a continuing education program.

I met her in the elevator of the Skyscraper building of Mundelein College, an all-women's college in Illinois and one of the few remaining women's colleges in the country at the time. I was 25 years old, about to complete my Ph.D. dissertation, and hired in a tenure-track position to teach philosophy.

After some small talk, she wasted little time. "May I ask you what you studied in graduate school?"

My response of "continental philosophy, especially phenomenology and existentialism" was met with silence, so I threw in some big names like Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty.

"What about Marx?"

"I've been hooked on him since I was a teenager, when one of my uncles gave me *The Communist Manifesto*."

Her eyes widened. "You would be perfect then, that is, if you're interested."

Before I could answer, she explained that she taught Russian history courses and would like to cover the post-1917 Marxist period, too. "But I need a

philosopher to do the Marxism. I just don't get philosophy. It ruffles my hair as it flies over my head."

The self-deprecating comments would come often enough, but they were misleading. This woman, who barely weighed 100 pounds and stood a mere two inches over five feet, packed the pulling power of a large magnet. She asked questions; she smiled; she told stories; and she joked with everyone, especially the boyfriends of the women students. Once in her orbit, people felt pulled to come closer, to be with her, to be her friend. And I was no exception.

We set up a time to meet later in the week and to begin building the course. Then, the elevator stopped and the doors opened on the seventh floor. As she stepped out to go to her office, she turned and said, "I'm sure the girls in class will enjoy looking at a handsome young man." Her blue eyes sparkled as she raised her right hand to waive. "Nice meeting you. Bye now, and God bless."

And that's how our friendship started. We created and then team-taught the course Marxism and Communism at least once a semester for 18 years, and we co-authored two editions of the interdisciplinary book *Lenin to Gorbachev: Three Generations of Communists* (the second edition was expanded to include the Gorbachev years and the beginning of the Yeltsin rule). I relished every minute I was with her.

I could say of her that she was "pure" (as a good friend said of her), that she was a "mischief-maker" (as

my wife Kathy referred to her), or that she was a “party pooper” (as the students called her when she left their rooms at midnight to go to her own room to prepare for early morning classes in Russian or French history). These descriptive words or phrases would all lead to interesting stories from Sr. Joan Frances’s life. Instead, I want to relate two stories of my own that capture the measure of the person and that define for me who she was.

That October afternoon in 1978 was unusually mild, and I had just completed my lecture on Stalin’s “Dialectical Materialism” in our Marxism and Communism course. I was sitting in the back of the room trying to listen to Sr. Joan Frances discuss Stalin’s purges, but I was distracted by several students fanning themselves with papers and slumping in their seats. Suddenly Sr. Joan Frances stopped in mid-sentence and said, “Dan, would you mind opening a window? It’s warm in here.” I walked to a window in the front of the classroom, and, as I was prying it open, she said, “See, class, there is a use for men after all.”<sup>43</sup> After the loud laughter died down, she slipped back into her sentence and continued the lecture—to a now energized audience—as if nothing had happened. (She will tell her own version of this story in the memoir.)

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<sup>43</sup> This incident happened before the days of political correctness, and, besides, our close friendship and affection for each other opened a door that allowed us to use one another as joke bait.

The second incident occurred when we were grading papers during our first trimester together. We agreed to evaluate the student argumentative essays independently of one another and then to come together to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each essay and to assign a grade. Every teacher knows that strong and weak essays virtually grade themselves, but the essays in the middle—with both strengths and weaknesses—give teachers headaches: is the essay a B+ or A-, another essay a C- or C, and so on? When Sr. Joan Frances saw me agonizing over a B or B+ for a paper, she said, “When in doubt, shouldn’t we assign the higher grade? We want to err in favor of the student.”

These two stories incorporate the characteristics I admired most in Sr. Joan Frances. Her quick wit drew out humor in the most mundane or trying situations, and she displayed a concern for others manifested in daily details, like a half step higher in a grade. She summed up this other-centeredness in a line she quoted frequently to me: “Every human relationship entails an eternal responsibility.” Unfortunately, this line sailed over my head when I was younger, but I now understand how Sr. Joan Frances made it her life’s mission to cultivate the seed of eternity in each human relationship. “I was only living the Gospel,” she said.

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Sr. Joan Frances died on October 6, 2009 at the BVM Motherhouse in Dubuque, Iowa. She did not have

enough time to work with me on her story or to collect photographs and documents, and she never identified sensitive material or edited the text. However, her close friend Sr. Jackie Burke read a few chapters of the first memoir draft to her, and the two of them laughed and cried at descriptions of some events. Sr. Joan Frances told me, “You make me look too good. I’m tempted to ask that your interpretation of my life be buried with me in case I need it when I come knocking on heaven’s door.” We both laughed, because we didn’t know that she would be at heaven’s door in a few weeks.

The opportunity to get the full story of Sr. Joan Frances’s life with her help has slipped away forever. I even considered throwing away the pages I had written, the pretext being that if I couldn’t get the story right I might get it all wrong. However, I chose to persist and to complete the job, knowing that the story could never claim to be a full and accurate account of the life of Sr. Joan Frances. So, what is it?

You’re So Fresh reads like a memoir. It is told in the first person using Sr. Joan Frances’s voice (as if she is speaking to readers) and with incidents from her life with which I am familiar (though the names are changed, except for historical figures). The memoir technique allows me to present Sr. Joan Frances as a real person—the one I knew—with an authentic message to share with readers. What *You’re So Fresh* loses in factual accuracy, it gains, I hope, in the ability to draw readers into the soul of the person to understand how she nurtured the

seed of eternity in each human relationship. It is not the story I planned to tell, but in this instance the laughter in the distance encouraged a venture into the realm of wisdom. I hope the wisdom of Sr. Joan Frances will trump all else.

Archives

Interviewers are collecting the stories and wisdom of women religious to preserve them in the congregation's archives. If the community does not have archives, one sister should seek permission from her superior to designate herself as the congregation's archivist and to collect the documents. The process of archiving documents requires, minimally, three steps.

First, the project leader should assume responsibility for collecting the documents and getting them archive-ready. The leader should work with a checklist similar to the following one:

- Are the documents complete and qualitatively uniform? Specifically: Are the anecdotes related in sufficient detail to be clear to readers? Are spelling, grammar, punctuation, and paragraphing accurate without the requirement of being perfect? The documents represent the work of imperfect human beings, and they stand, too, as historical artifacts. Clarity of communication should be the line the leader draws in the sand.

- Does the sister approve the documents for the archives? Often enough, the sister raises the quality threshold

for the documents when the discussion shifts to the archives. What is acceptable as an interviewer's project necessitates more scrutiny when it represents an official record of the sister's life. This greater quality demand by the sister requires the project leader to negotiate adjustments to the documents until the outcome satisfies the sister.

- Does the sister wish to set stipulations on the documents? Stipulations vary to match the extraordinary fecundity of the human imagination. For example, one sister still taught courses at the university; she requested that her memoir remain locked until she retired (she did not want her students reading about her life). Another sister loved the work the interviewer had completed; nonetheless, she did not want any part of the memoir read at her funeral. In this same vein, a sister insisted that no information from the memoir be included in her obituary. Whatever the sister adds as a stipulation to the memoir package should be written down by the project leader and added as the front page to the archive-ready documents.

- Does the sister want any copies of the documents for herself, friends, and family? How many? For the majority of the sisters, the documents exceeded their expectations in terms of accuracy, detail, and overall quality. One sister said, "It was like having my own private secretary. I couldn't have done any better myself." This sister and many others requested between two and four copies of the memoir package to pass on to nieces and nephews so that, as one sister said, "they can finally understand what my life was all

about.” Since the goal of the writer is to be read, this task generates its own reward.

Second, the project leader, after establishing a contact at the archives, delivers or mails (U.S. mail) the memoir packages to the person (and requests confirmation of their arrival if sent by mail). Some sisters believe that so much talk about themselves reflects a posture of pride that borders on immodesty. They are reluctant to bring their memoir package to the archives. The best strategy for delivery is for the project leader to do so personally.

Third, the archivist labels and catalogs the documents, noting the stipulations accompanying the packages. In the BVM archives, a sister photocopies the documents and inserts the copies in the personal files of the BVMs so that they can have easy access to them if they wish.

In sum, the memoir process ends with the writing of a preface and the delivery of the memoir package to the archives. The preface provides the opportunity for the interviewer-writer to articulate the personal impact of meeting the sister and memoir process, and presents readers with a preview of the sister in the memoirs. However, the “stars”⁴⁴ of the process remain the memoirs, the works of art that find their final destination in the community archives. The memoirs (and the preface), once in the archives, preserve an important part of the sister’s legacy and an irreplaceable moment of the community’s history.

⁴⁴ The real stars of the project, of course, are the sisters. Without them, the project does not exist.

Chapter Six

Start Now!

“If you keep waiting for tomorrow, nothing happens today.”
-Anonymous

It is hard to exaggerate the importance of getting started right now. Initially, the process requires two people: one to talk and the other to listen and to record the conversation. If transcribing the interviews presents a burdensome problem at any time, please contact the authors for assistance. They can access a pool of transcribers (student volunteers) at the university. (For author contact information, please see p. 9.)

A different approach gathers like-minded sisters together to discuss the formation of a memoir project. The first meeting must not end without the selection or appointment of a leader who can keep the project moving forward between meetings.

Whatever approach suits the sisters best, the paramount point is to start now!

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From the Introduction

“The memoirs of these sisters can inspire, motivate, and instruct young people on how to provide assistance where it is needed, and, in the process, to lead extraordinary lives themselves. These memoirs feature another advantage—they keep inspiring and instructing for generations to come.”

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The process to preserve the legacy of American women religious began in 2008, when 21 Loyola University Chicago students interviewed 19 Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVMs) about their childhood experiences, discernment of vocation, novitiate years, decades of service, and leadership styles. The students interviewed the sisters for about one hour a week for six weeks, and then transformed the interview into fine art memoirs capturing the sisters’ unique stories in their own voices. After the sisters edited and approved the memoirs, the documents—preface, interview transcript, and memoir—were placed in the BVM archives at the motherhouse in Dubuque, Iowa. The project continues today, and has “memoir-ized” about 50 BVMs to date.

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Dan Vaillancourt is Professor of Philosophy at Loyola University Chicago, and Kathy Vaillancourt is a writer and educator. They co-author books and articles on the power of memoir to capture the wisdom of people, like the American women religious and older adults.

