Spirituality
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"It is a serious thing to be alive on this fresh morning in this broken world." — poet Mary Oliver (Lucy Bethel)

by The Life Panelists

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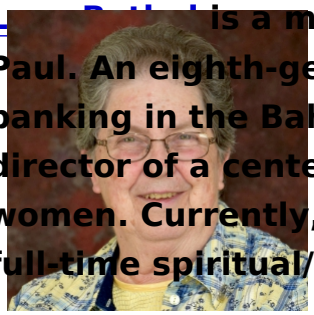
Editor's Note: *Would you like to be a part of The Life? We're collecting applications for our next round of sister panelists to answer questions about how sisters approach aspects of religious life and other things. Please go here and read about how to apply. The deadline is April 15.*

(GSR logo/Toni-Ann Ortiz)

Panelists shared their experience and wisdom from their own personal experiences of hurt, from that of former members, at the level of their communities, the church, and of the broader society. They also suggested strategies for dealing with brokenness in answering this question:

While living in a broken community/country/church/world, how do we deal with personal brokenness? How do healing and forgiveness happen, or how are they facilitated in your communities?



L is a member of the Sisters of Providence of St. Vincent de Paul. An eighth-generation Bahamian, she held various positions in banking in the Bahamas before entering religious life. Later, she served as director of a center providing full-time care for mentally challenged women. Currently, as director of Providence Spirituality Centre, she is a full-time spiritual/retreat director in Kingston, Ontario.

In her poem "Invitation," Mary Oliver writes: "It is a serious thing just to be alive on this fresh morning in the broken world." This captures for me the awareness with which I wake up each morning.

"Brokenness," though just one aspect of the human condition, is all around us and in the daily news of our world: violence perpetuated by human beings, natural

disasters in light of severe climate changes, abuse in its many forms. At times, it is frightening, and I am not always quick to welcome it into my own life, nor do I look forward to witnessing it in the lives of others, through my ministry, my community, the church and the world at large. We do not need to search for it: Brokenness will find us.

How do I deal with personal brokenness?

Recently, I read a phrase in a piece by Franciscan Fr. Richard Rohr that caught my attention: "Transformed people transform people." This statement confirms for me what I have come to know about the people who mentor me through difficult times and experiences of personal brokenness. They are wounded healers in every sense. They exude the compassionate presence of our God of Providence. I draw on the love and strength of such people who have the capacity to mirror goodness in me. I search for "at least one true mirror that reveals my inner, deepest, and, yes, divine image," as Fr. Richard Rohr says in *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*.

"One true mirror that reveals my inner, deepest, and, yes, divine image" — Richard Rohr (Lucy Bethel)

I dare say that some of the happiest, healthiest, most vibrant, resilient and life-giving people I have come to know in my congregation, among my colleagues/peers, and in my ministry are those who — through no choice of their own — have faced, entered and accepted experiences of personal brokenness. Through these experiences, they have become a Compassionate Providence Presence for others, instruments of peace in a broken world. Then, hand held out, they offer peace, the peace Jesus offers: "Peace I leave with you" (John 14:27).

In my life, and in particular my life as a religious sister, God blesses me with mentors — women, men and often children — who guide me through difficult times and experiences. Through osmosis, my experiences of their healing presence help me grow and become a life-giving presence for others.

"Transformed people transform people."

"Peace I leave with you." — Jesus (Lucy Bethel)

[M zan](#) is a Missionary Benedictine Sister from the Philippines. A noted theologian and author, she has served as president of St. Scholastica's College, as prioress of the Missionary Benedictine Sisters in the Manila Priory, and as national chairperson of the Association of Major Religious Superiors in the Philippines. She is a political and feminist activist who helped develop an Asian feminist theology of liberation and works with a number of organizations that deal with gender issues and women's concerns. Currently, she ministers as superior of the Manila community and as a member of the Priory Council.

I interviewed Gay Cotiangco, a staff member in our Institute of Women's Studies and a former sister in our community, who experienced illness and three exclaustrations before leaving the congregation. I asked her to share her experience of how her brokenness was responded to in community. She said I may share her story.

Gay had a happy childhood, except for a traumatic experience as a 4-year-old, when her family experienced violence as they stopped at a checkpoint. As a teenager, she began to feel judged and victimized. In her early formation in the convent, the same problems plagued her, and she asked for counseling, in the course of which she learned that her mother had tried to abort her at the insistence of her father, who was concerned for the mother's health. He cried as he asked her forgiveness.

She began recognizing the cracks in the vessel but was allowed to make her final vows. But she soon became stressed over her work and disenchanted with some sisters. Experiencing sleeplessness and anger, she was finally diagnosed as bipolar but did not take her medicine regularly, thinking it was too expensive or that a lower dose or something else would work just as well.

She became arrogant, judgmental and righteous and experienced extreme emotions; her friends did not understand, lost patience, or kept their distance. But her congregation did not lose hope in her and gave her the help she needed. She continued to receive treatment but began applying for dispensations. After three experiences of exclaustration, she eventually saw that her life in the convent was just a detour, God's way of helping her to see her brokenness.

It was hard for her to bid the sisters goodbye, but their continued support helped her to mend her "thousand broken pieces." She still feels that she belongs ("once a Benedictine, always a Benedictine") because the sisters are always there for her.

In the process, she has learned to love her illness, which she was able to tame and embrace as her most precious God-given gift. Her mending took years, but now she's helping other mentally challenged people to receive the gift that they are. Now she's "living a life of my own, happy and contented. The beautiful vessel is slowly getting back into its shape — broken no more."

Kintsugi tea jar by Eiraku Tokuzen made in the second half of the 19th century: Kintsugi is the Japanese art of mending a broken vessel with resin mixed with precious metals like gold. This accentuates the "history" of the object, even its brokenness, and makes it a thing of beauty. You can see the gold lines on this tea jar. (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

S[illegible]Agyeman (Ofia) is a Ghanaian member of the Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit. She began her ministry in a school in Ghana as an account clerk, helping with registration and admission. Later ministries there included pastoral work with people living with HIV/AIDS, ensuring their children's education, and organizing prayer experiences and recollections. For the past year, she has been attending the Institute of Formation and Religious Studies in the Philippines.

Here I am, sitting at the table in my "home" with sisters who at this point in my life are my family. Yet the greater part of the conversation is carried on not in the language we all know, but in a language unknown to me. Has the conversation been coded to conceal something from me, the outsider? When this happens, for a moment I feel I don't exist. I feel like I am in coma with my spirit wandering on a foreign soil, where no one can relate to me. I imagine myself in a dark tunnel where no one notices me. I look at the faces of "my" sisters and I feel a broken "koinonia" (Christian fellowship). This experience leaves me in a broken state in which I feel invisible, sidelined, ignored and irrelevant.

After every meal, I just move on, deliberately ignoring the damaging effects of my experience. Until a friend from my home country asks me, "How are you coping there?" Both the question and whatever my answer would have been touch on an emotion I have tried to suppress. I presumed I wasn't hurting. Before I can answer, I break down in tears. It is brokenness and loneliness in a home where the very people who should help me integrate into a new environment are the very ones who directly and absentmindedly plunge me into disintegration and dejection.

When our church is battered with clerical sexual abuse, church buildings abandoned due to intense secularization; when our economies are damaged by our chosen leaders; when religious communities are disintegrating for lack of enthusiasm and authentic love and human beings are inhumanely treated or betrayed by family and friends — all that we can see is darkness. How did we become disconnected from the way that Christ intended his followers to live?

My experience is a lesson, a lesson about life. I learn that we need hearts filled with a renewed energy that embraces those who hurt us and helps them see the effect of their actions and inactions — the willpower to put the pieces of life back together and forge ahead. We need to gather our strength and look to the Lord, who gives his

people strength.

I have been hurt, and I have decided not to hurt back and never to do to others what I have experienced. Being excluded, I have decided to include. Experiencing hearts closed to me, I will be open-hearted and open-minded to the plight of expatriates. I will be the change I want to see in the world.

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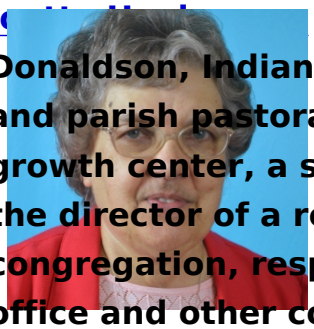


[Jo] is a member of the Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ in Donaldson, Indiana. Early ministries included teaching, religious education and parish pastoral associate; later, she was co-director of a personal growth center, a staff member/spiritual director of a house of prayer, and the director of a retreat center. She is now serving as provincial of her congregation, responsible for associates, communications, the justice office and other community programs.

There is a parable in the Gospel of St. Thomas about a woman carrying a broken jar, from which the meal leaks out as she walks. On her arrival at home, the jar is empty (Thomas 97:7-14).

This story illustrates our individual and societal brokenness. What we do, whether good or evil, affects both others and our Earth. We are all interrelated. Darkness and failure, goodness and kindness affect the web of our relationships.

When I entered religious life, if we broke something or did something "wrong," we had to kneel before our superior and beg pardon. However, that practice did not last after Vatican II.

In pre-Vatican II days, people left the community secretly, with no time for goodbyes. As a community, we have held several gatherings for our former members, allowing for exchanges of stories and leading to some healing and forgiveness.

During both the apostolic visitation and the doctrinal investigation of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, we gathered as a community in support of one another, especially our leadership. We dialogued, looked at both sides of everything, and stayed at the table. This led us to prayer, made us stronger, and gave us a voice

and inner conversion.

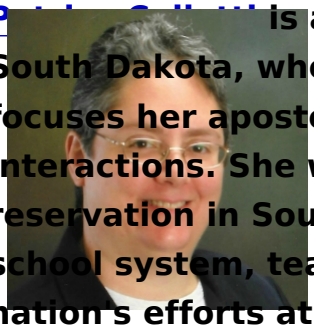
With the news of sexual abuse, we made a day of reparation, coming together as a community to pray for healing and forgiveness. Our formation committee continues to educate us with a series of retreats, "Crafting Authentic Communities," reviewing communication skills and sharing new ways to address conflict.

When our county announced it was going to add to an already large jail, we wrote a letter to each of the officials, asking them instead to move toward restorative justice. We continue to dialogue with one of them.

In one community meeting, we looked at our history of sin as well as our history of blessings, reminding ourselves that we are human and need forgiveness but can grow and change, and through our many gifts, we can work together for the greater good of the world. Matthew 5:23-24 tells us that we need to be reconciled with our neighbor before we can have that relationship with God. We cannot be right with God until we are right with others.

Our congregational symbol — ripples of water with a cross in the center and our initials below — constantly reminds me that our ministry and actions affect others. Our baptismal grace ripples out as blessing to others, through our actions.

Community Symbol of the Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ (Courtesy of the PHJC community's communications office)



P is a Salvatorian Sister (Sisters of the Divine Savior) in South Dakota, who helps lead the Kateri Initiative, a pastoral ministry that focuses her apostolic religious community on authentic, culturally sensitive interactions. She works on the Sisseton Wahpeton Sioux Tribe's reservation in South Dakota, serving as an educational leader in the tribal school system, teaching, mentoring teachers and supporting the tribal nation's efforts at self-determination and its claim to sovereignty.

World or national news offers too many examples of brokenness. For those who minister "at the margins," suffering and brokenness are daily realities. Brokenness can be as close as our own lives.

The jagged edges can affect every relationship, even the relationship between humanity and Earth. Brokenness seems part of the human condition: devastating, destructive, painful and ubiquitous. For my Salvatorian community (sisters, priests,

brothers and lay members) and many other communities, brokenness is embedded in our DNA — part of how and why we came to be. Yet the Gospel to which we're committed and our charisms that continue to energize us reveal that brokenness can also offer an opportunity for transformation and for salvation. The saving love of Jesus can take brokenness and create wholeness, even from the jagged shards.

Brokenness seems part of the human condition: devastating, destructive, painful and ubiquitous. (© Sr. Patrice Colletti, Sisters of the Divine Savior)

One of our Salvatorian priests noted in a homily: "God does more than interact with us through the parts of life that feel good at the time, [but] interacts with us through *all* life and experience." In fact, God interacts with us especially through the parts of life that don't feel good at the time.

Our vows remind us: God is with us no matter what.

Poverty: Keep God, not "things," as most important. Their loss may feel devastating, but things are merely things. God is central.

Chaste celibacy: Keep our relationship with God as the central one, freeing us to love. Deaths, departures, fissures in relationships, decline in membership, even personal losses of self-confidence, health or self-efficacy are pain-filled. Even as we mourn, we can embrace our primary relationship with God, supported by our prayer lives and our community connectedness.

Obedience: Listen closely, discern faithfully and respond with trust to God's living word, expressed in Scripture and in the moments and movements of our lives. That's not always easy. That's why we rely on the prayerful support of our community members.

Community life is very much human life. When our median age is in the late 70s or 80s, life reflects both the challenges of age and the gifts of wisdom and experience. Where members are younger, we are challenged by ministries. Regardless of age, we support each other in witnessing to the good news.

Instead of turning inward and focusing on brokenness or diminishment, we can choose to turn outward with confidence, to go "into the whole world, and proclaim the Gospel" (Mark 16:15). The cross of Christ is not about brokenness. It is most vitally about life.

The cross of Christ is not about brokenness. It is most vitally about Life. (© Sr. Patrice Colletti, Sisters of the Divine Savior)

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