Voices of Sisters
Horizons
Spirituality



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I love wandering around gas station convenience stores. That may sound strange, but I really enjoy seeing what interesting or oddball items I can find in them. A fun convenience store experience can be the highlight of a road trip.

I have found all kinds of intriguing things in these stores, from candy bars 2 feet long to s'more cappuccinos to jalapeño brats — and that is just the food! Many convenience stores also sell all kinds of non-food items, such as clothing, toys, tools and alcohol.

The fun part is you never know what you will find, especially when you are traveling in a new place. The stores often reflect their local surroundings. I live in North Dakota and at one of our convenience stores you can find chokecherry-flavored popcorn; a shirt featuring Salem Sue, the world's largest cow; and buffalo "droppings," pieces of chocolate made to look like ... well, you know.

Because I can get mesmerized by the sheer variety of choices in convenience stores, a quick stop during a road trip can turn into a break that is far too long, if I am not careful. I love checking out myriad choices, and being surprised when I encounter new or different items. I am also slow while poring over the shelves at the public library where I work. So many books look intriguing that I sometimes leave the library with 10 new books to read.

But the place to find the most wonderfully odd collection of diverse items is definitely a garage sale (sometimes called a rummage or yard sale). There are a lot of summer garage sales in the town of Bismarck where I live, and the many signs beckon me. Sometimes I suddenly forget my original destination and careen off on a side street to follow a series of garage sale signs until they lead me to the grand prize: a driveway filled with someone else's junk and my potential treasure!

A few years ago, I found a box of books about Catholic saints at a garage sale. As I paged through the books, I was struck by the variety and diversity of the saints.

As a cradle Catholic, I have heard about saints all of my life, but it was not until I was an adult that I could appreciate their distinct human sides. They were prayerful people whose great love for God often showed through in their enjoyments and pleasures in life, things I could relate to.

For example, St. Gianna, a medical doctor who gave up her own life for her child, was an energetic woman who clearly loved having fun; she enjoyed fashion, theater, opera, mountain climbing and skiing.

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St. Philip Neri, a priest and missionary, had a great sense of humor and liked to spice life up a bit with jokes and unexpected antics. During a sermon, he once pronounced most of the words wrong to shock a stoic bishop who was attending the Mass. Other times, he arrived at events with half his beard shaved off, or wore heavy coats int the middle of summer.

These two saints, along with many others, lived full and interesting lives, balancing fun and humor with service and the pursuit of prayerful study.

Choices, diversity and variety are not bad things, even in religion. I am Catholic, but I know that God is bigger than one particular Christian religion. Jesus did not go around in the Gospels claiming to be one religion or another; he was about compassion and kindness and tolerance — as we all should be.

I am inspired by the saints and by teachings from the Catholic Church, but over the years I have also been stirred by various aspects of other Christian and non-Christian traditions. Like my delight at finding some new treasure at a convenience store or garage sale, I am often surprised by the beauty of what I discover when I keep my mind and heart open as I encounter the belief systems of others.

During this pandemic, I have found myself frequently encouraged and inspired by the preaching of some of my pastor friends as they broadcast live on Zoom from their respective Lutheran, United Church of Christ, or Unitarian traditions.

Similarly, while attending a local Baha'i celebration a few years ago, I came across a statement of their beliefs on a half-sheet of paper. I was so touched by them that I taped the paper to the wall behind my desk so that I would see it regularly. The statement included ideas like the entire human population as one united family, the equality of women and men, the harmony of science and religion, and justice and equality as the foundations of peace.

Recently, I was attending an online book study when a participant mentioned the Jewish prayer *Hashkiveinu*, and provided a YouTube link to a version sung by

members of Central Synagogue in New York City. I clicked the link to the video without really expecting much and found myself nearly weeping at the beauty of the ballad and the voices singing it.

I looked on Google for the meaning behind the prayer and found out that it is a kind of night prayer or lullaby sung before going to bed. Rabbi Hara Person of the Central Conference of American Rabbis describes it in a sentence: "We ask for God to watch over us and guard us as we sleep, enabling us to rest peacefully and wake up again in the morning restored to life."

The *Hashkiveinu* prayer reminds me of the comforting Catholic compline prayer that monastics and many others recite or sing before retiring each evening.

Continuing to explore the internet, I came across a deeply meaningful *Hashkiveinu* prayer done by members of the Jewish community for the Standing Rock Tribe during the 2016 Dakota Access Pipeline protests. What a beautiful blending of religions and cultures and goodwill toward other members of the human race!

Our lives can be so much richer if we are willing to look beyond our own surroundings, our own beliefs and our own expectations. Embracing the diversity and variety we encounter in the world may be a little scary, but ultimately it is very fulfilling.

Today, many people seem closed off to ideas and people that seem different or "other" to them. Instead of becoming more polarized, let us try to find and celebrate the beautiful diversity in each of us. Like the saints, we are not just one thing or another; all of us are made up of a variety of distinct strands of personality and character.

The time we spend looking at product choices at gas station stores and garage sales should also be spent looking at the people and ideas in our lives to see what makes them most unique and special. I love finding a great deal while shopping, but the joy I feel when finding the right item at a knockout price is just a microcosm of the kind of joy we experience when discovering that inspirational God-spark in other cultures, religions and peoples.

[Hannah Vanorny is a Benedictine sister at Annunciation Monastery in Bismarck, North Dakota. She joined her community in 2006 and made her final monastic profession in 2013. She has served as the assistant director of Campus Ministry at

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