Blog
Spirituality



I stand alongside Sr. Kelly O'Mahony, left, of the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, Kentucky, and Carolyn Cromer, director of ecological sustainability with the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, two women who have been incredible mentors and friends of mine since I started at Nazareth. I am grateful for them and my larger support network at Nazareth as I reflect on my service experience. (Courtesy of the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth)



by Julia Gerwe

View Author Profile

## Join the Conversation

May 25, 2022

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

***Editor's note:*** *Notes from the Field includes reports from young people volunteering in ministries of Catholic sisters. A partnership with Catholic Volunteer Network, the project began in the summer of 2015. This is Julia's final Notes from the Field blog post.*

I have long loved to travel. Whether a road trip to a nearby state or a longer jaunt to a new place, I am always rejuvenated and inspired by the people and places I encounter.

I recently embarked on a trip to visit a dear friend pursuing her master's degree abroad, in Scotland. With the gracious blessing of my team at the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth in Kentucky, I was able to take 10 days to rekindle this friendship and experience the sights and sounds of the United Kingdom. What a joy it was!

Something about this trip felt different from my other travels, however. Amid the excitement of visiting castles, palaces, landmarks, and attractions, I realized that the embodied *journey* of our trip — the living, breathing, and doing — was most enhanced by time spent connecting to the places around us. I felt most grounded and excited when I was able to appreciate the history and stories of each place. This connection-building breathed life into my journey.

When I first arrived in Scotland my friend offered a cheeky substitute to "welcome home" by borrowing a line from the Canadian TV show "Schitt's Creek" by saying, "Welcome to the town where I currently am!" This unusual greeting quickly became an inside joke between us, but in retrospect, it carries a sort of nuanced wisdom about our place as travelers along life's journey.



I smile and embrace my friend, Claire (left), as we visit Tower Bridge in London. My trip to visit Claire was an opportunity for us to reconnect and for me to get a glimpse into the place where she currently is, in the United Kingdom. (Courtesy of Eli Terry)

Aren't we all products of the landscapes, as much as the experiences, that shape us? Aren't we all wandering along the paths of those before us, drawing wisdom from the world we inherit?

In seeking to answer these questions, I invested in a book (to no one's surprise!) recommended to me during my travels: *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot* by Robert Macfarlane. In it, Macfarlane writes:

> "The two questions we should ask of any strong landscape are these: firstly, what do I know when I am in this place that I can know nowhere else? And then, vainly, what does this place know of me that I cannot know of myself?"

The introduction of this practice offered me a certain clarity in reflection that provides a nice bookend to my contributions to Notes from the Field. As I near the final months of my service journey with the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, I reflect upon my connection to Nazareth and the people and stories that have deepened my connection to, and appreciation for, this place.



I pause to breathe and reflect atop Arthur's Seat in Edinburgh, a hike I recently took when visiting my friend Claire in Scotland. (Courtesy of Claire Kaelin)

What is it about Nazareth and my community here that have provided space for such rich reflections and insights? What, as Macfarlane poses, do I know when I am in this place that I can know nowhere else? What does this place know of me that I cannot know of myself?

I'm not sure I can answer the last question yet, but I believe the answers to the first two lie in a compilation of the many beautiful moments, feelings and interactions I've experienced since being here.



I smile for my mom's camera from the doorway of my apartment when I first moved to Nazareth for my years of service in August 2020. Little did I know how healing and transformative this experience would be! (Courtesy of Judy Gerwe)

As I've shared before in this series, my time at Nazareth has been healing. Slowing down the pace of my life and reconnecting to this land have been transformational for my mental, physical and spiritual well-being.

Here, I'm grateful for mentors who have taught me how to reconnect to the natural world, including learning how to plan crop rotations in line with nature's natural cycles, how to respectfully and lovingly bury our deceased, and how to know what to look for in the woods through each season.

I'm also grateful for the solitude that has accompanied me at Nazareth. Living by myself has taught me the difference between loneliness and being alone. Yet it has also allowed me to realize that I'm never truly alone, which I learned with some help from new friends and mentors who have supported me through regular check-ins, phone calls, game nights, and (adopted) family outings.

Further, living and serving with a supportive, encouraging and loving community have allowed me to cultivate this care within myself and to take the time to intentionally reflect on my experiences. So many Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, coworkers, and community partners have grown to be close friends who always seem to see me beyond my role and embrace me on a deeper, spiritual level.

Finally, encountering new perspectives throughout service has allowed me to grow both spiritually and personally, further expanding my vision and vocabulary as I see and describe the world "where I currently am." I am thankful for this journey at Nazareth that has prompted me to learn an ever-evolving language of description, giving me keener senses by which I can experience morning dew on grass as I walk to my office, genuine care and love in an afternoon greeting, and warm hugs from a sister when we share cookies and tea.

Advertisement

Yes, the many unique, beautiful, everyday moments here define "what I know when I am in this place." In fact, being at Nazareth has taught me how rich life can be when we live in the present moment, an act that is radical in today's world on its own.



It is possible that paths like this connect us to more than the trail ahead? "The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot" has prompted me to consider how the sacred act of walking becomes a "reconnoitre inwards" and how "we are shaped by the landscapes through which we move." (Julia Gerwe)

It's almost as if my journey at Nazareth has prompted everything I see, learn and know to be challenged, awakened and ultimately strengthened. Here, living a lifestyle harmonious with the land and my community has changed my worldview.

Inspired by this development, I am leaving my years of service more confident and at home in myself than I've ever been yet more unsure and curious about all that exists around me. I'm satisfied by this — for someone who thinks deeply about nearly everything, this seems to be the natural order of life. I realize I will never stop learning so long as I never stop walking slowly and lightly upon this Earth.

It is my hope that, in sharing the narratives of my service journey, you have found a connection and kindred spirit in your own journeys. As I've found my footing in sharing my experiences at Nazareth, I hope that some of my stories have resonated with you in reading and connecting to my experiences in your own way. For me, deepening my own reflections help me to live in the present.

As for my next steps, I am thrilled to continue listening to my call to serve by working as member coordinator of an environmental education-focused AmeriCorps program in Kentucky. Staying in Kentucky after these two years of service wasn’t always my plan, but my own reflections have prompted me to think about rooting further into my Kentucky community, and I don’t yet think my work here is finished. It will be a fresh pivot in my life of service, and I’ll only be an hour away from my friends, the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth!

As we part ways for now, I invite you to join me in prayer, meditation or reflection through this prayer that has grown to be a favorite of mine through my time working with the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth: "Walk Lightly."

> Each leaf, each petal,
>
> each grain, each person,
>
> sings your praises,
>
> Creator God.
>
> Each creature on the earth,
>
> all the mountains and great seas
>
> show your glory,

Spirit of love. ...

God our Father, show us

how to step gently,

how to live simply,

how to walk lightly,

with respect and love

for all that you have made.

This story appears in the **Notes from the Field** feature series. View the full series.