Voices of Sisters
Horizons
Religious Life



The wisteria bush that inspired the author's reflection. (Kelly Williams)

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So, here's the thing: Figuring out where one starts to write is always an adventure, at least for me. My preference is to turn to the daily readings and just kind of run from there.

For this piece I thought, "No, no, have a plan first!" And I did. The Holy Spirit has been pondering with me in nature a growing thought for the past few years, and I felt it was time to put key smash to screen (I don't think today's tech can top the visual of putting pen to paper.) But I peaked at the readings for today and couldn't help but squeal with delight.

It was Ruth and Naomi and the greatest commandment (Matthew 22:36) So, I prayed, "God, what do you want me to see?"

I remembered that a few years ago, while fairly new in community, I was on retreat somewhere in the midwestern part of the United States, trying to convince God to talk louder and help me see what it was God wanted me to see. Each day, I went for a walk trying to listen for how I might become holy overnight and suddenly have those greatest commandments locked down so I could get to what God really wanted from me. (Some days you really realize you, too, would say just as entertaining things to Jesus in front of a crowd as the Apostles did).

On my path was a huge grove of giant trees that were lined up in order, all the same height and just powerful-looking. Sitting in front of those trees was this sweet, comparatively little pine tree that resembled a Christmas tree.



A small pine stands in front of a row of tall pines, a reminder of how the author once felt in religious life: like a little tree sheltered and supported by the canopy of sisters whose foundations and commitment gave her space to grow. (Kelly Williams)

I remember feeling like that pine tree. That there was a whole crowd of sisters who had grown together in religious life, and their commitment and foundations gave space for me to be a funky little Christmas tree safely shielded from high winds because of their canopy. That's what religious life felt like: me being myself in a

group of women who had grown up together, and still we are all called to walk together on the same path.

More recently, one of the sisters in my house and I have been on a quest to create a front porch oasis. We've learned a lot about pruning, fertilizing, watering and waiting with our porch plants. The view from our porch includes admiring our giant wisteria bush a bit further out in our yard. It seems my pine tree thoughts on religious life are blossoming into quite the vines!

The wisteria's cycle has been bare winter, floral spring, green and growing summer, and shedding in fall. I think religious life — and really much of life around me, as structures seem to be collapsing in frightening ways — feels a bit like this cycle.

In the United States in particular, religious life's floral spring has already taken place. What a beautiful and fragrant time it was, and the gifts of that time are unfolding into a lot of green, wiggling vines trying to feel out what is yet to come. Sometimes, in the green, you get a few more blooms. (As I was on the phone with a sister looking to find the picture I wanted for this article, she asked what I was looking for. I said 1 to 7 blooms. We both noted that there may be something in seeking 1 to 7 blooms … but perhaps that is for another day!)



A blossom on the wisteria bush that inspired the author's reflection. (Kelly Williams)

Those small blooms are beautiful in their own way, nestled among the green and having a very different impact than the large bloom had in their abundance. And yet we do not know what the next spring will bring. Still the words of Ruth to Naomi ring out: "Wherever you go I will go!" (Ruth 1:16)

Ah, I've only just realized something! You aren't going to believe it, but can you guess when I spent a lot of time with Ruth and Naomi? You guessed it: during the same retreat I spotted the Christmas tree!

I was invited by my retreat director to read the Book of Ruth in its entirety — a 10 out of 10, really! She opened my eyes to look at religious life through the lens of Ruth and Naomi and their dynamic.

And isn't it wonderful? Two widowed women of very different ages and cultures, who did not seek a life of celibacy, but whose lives and commitment lend themselves to reflection for those who have sought a vowed celibate life. (Everyone else is, of course, welcome to reflect, too.)

When I first encountered these two women, I really felt the Ruth side of dramatically latching on with the first fervor of religious life. I wanted to shout, "Where you die I will die, and there be buried! May the Lord do thus to me, and more, if even death separates me from you!" (Ruth 1:17)

We've all been there. We've all had that lack of chill. In all fairness to Ruth, the amount of planning burials and deciding where to be buried comes up far more often in religious life than I anticipated. She surely knew what community living includes.

Today, when I pray with Ruth and Naomi, I'm fascinated by Naomi. She has led this seemingly incredible life, and when she enters what might look like a time of retirement, her life is completely turned around. The loss of her husband, her sons and their prospects has returned her to her roots and to a place she once walked away from.

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And yet, Ruth doesn't have to do this alone — she will walk this road with Naomi, in it for the long journey ahead, entering into the unknown arm in arm.

Religious life is ever-evolving, and in the living history at this time, we have seen the blossoms. We are unfurling our vines to see where to go next, and all we can do is twist among each other and stretch out into the unknown as we grow together.

I'll close with the words of Jesus (he tends to have a good handle on things) because, in these days ahead — when famine, war, fear, deportations and destruction seem to be at every turn — I think these two commandments are imperative for how we are called to bloom:

> You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart,
>
> with all your soul, and with all your mind.
>
> This is the greatest and the first commandment.
>
> The second is like it:
>
> You shall love your neighbor as yourself.
>
> The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.
>
> (Matthew 22:37-40)