

Letter to my younger self.

Dear Julie

So you are sensing a call "to leave your nets behind you" and to follow Jesus "to the ends of the earth". What a wonderful aspiration.

As a vital part of your discernment, be prepared to look at all sides of the question - the enthusiasm and excitement as well as the doubts, coming from yourself and from others - and looking at it all with naked honesty and creative courage. As you probably already know, motives are always a mix. I trust you have wise counsel near at hand. I imagine Mom and Dad are involved in your of-going conversations.

It has been said, in a variety of expressions, that the purpose of life is to discover your gifts while the meaning of life is to give your gifts away. If religious life is your final decision, you will have many opportunities to both discover and develop your gifts and you will be offered daily, even hourly, occasions to give them away - and you have been blessed with a myriad of gifts, some being very unique for there is no LCD [lowest common denominator] in Julie!

2015 is a significant year to be in discernment regarding a life choice. Pope Francis has declared it a year to honor Consecrated Life; Ilia Delio has declared it "The Year of Love".

While we are all consecrated by our baptism, in declaring 2015 the year of Consecrated Life, Pope Francis has in mind the women and men who have dedicated their precious lives to God in a special way and a prophetic way. Following on Francis dream for the Church, our Holy Father wants us "to wake up the world" and to empower the Church to be the home and school of communion. This is a strong challenge and, like yourself, it calls us, as a community, to be in discernment.

Ilía Delío, a Sister of St. Francis and theologian of note, wants this new year dedicated to love because it is her sense that we are inwardly "bone dry" and we need to return to the deepest energy of life – to love. Ilía, a student of Teilhard de Chardin's profound wisdom, in declaring 2015 the Year of Love, quotes Teilhard as saying "love is the building power that works against entropy and under its attraction the elements feel their way towards union". Love is embedded in the fabric of the universe and apart from love we are not at home in the cosmos. Interconnectedness lies at the core of all that exists and to live in God is to live in deep communion and to know oneself as part of the whole.

In this year of the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, Ilía uses the life of Etty Hellesum as a model for The Year of Love. Etty, a young Jewish woman who died in 1943 in a Nazi concentration camp, 'lived' through the experience of the camp by focusing her mind on God. Through prayer, Etty's 'inner space' expanded. She came to believe deeply that every time we release a little love into the environment, we are changed and we change the environment – a lesson so simple and profound.

Life is a beautiful mystery and we are always 'on the way', listening and learning – we are never finished! God is a big enterprise! Francis and Ilía are reminding us – all of life is about love. God created us to lure us into a lavish love affair. This God of passion and fire constantly longs for us; longs for our growth and development and for our infused, reciprocal desire for God. St. Augustine spoke of this wondrous mutual love, as he experienced it, saying 'our hearts are restless until they rest in God'.

You will know this unquenchable yearning in the marrow of your bones; in the depths of your one, precious and wild being. As you are faithful, you will come to know with a conviction no one can take from you, that it is ultimately God's desire for you that ultimately matters! "Let it be divine love alone which keeps you faithful" was the way Euphrasie Barbier, our foundress, expressed this wisdom.

With all the vim, vigor and vitality of your young life, you are embarking on a life long journey. Be of good heart for as you cooperate, step by step, with God's grace, you will know how to attend to the movements of your heart - all of them - for none of our 'human conditions' are foreign to God. This is a 'treasured knowing' and, as I have already mentioned, is the fruit of on-going honesty with God and the accompaniment of a wise spiritual companion ... and God does provide for all our needs.

Knowing the scope and diversity of your gifts and capabilities, I suspect you will be asked to serve in leadership - in community and perhaps even congregationally - and it will probably start by you being asked to be principal of your school. A secret that worked for me was to 'always' picture myself as simply one of the group now being asked to serve to the fullness of my gifts.

In religious life, in earlier years, sometimes leaders were placed on pedestals and expected to do everything or, harder yet, not allowed to do anything. That's over - thank God!

Leadership in a religious community today can be a challenge and there is no 'one size fits all'. While we are a small entity, we can be complex and often issues keep coming, calling and demanding new energy, new resolve. For leaders there can be much imploring of divine assistance. Sometimes the juxtaposition of life can demand a 'super-human' response - for instance, amid meetings dedicated to strategic planning and long range planning a call can come informing leaders that a Sister is preparing to pass through the 'thin veil' on the final journey of her life ... and the singing of 'may the angels guide you along the way' takes center stage, gives 'strategic planning' a new depth.

If you are asked to serve in leadership, I think its greatest gift to you will be your coming to know the humanness of yourself and of the Congregation with a new heart and you will find yourself naming the many great companions who share the journey with you. If asked to serve, you will be standing on very strong shoulders that stretch back in history - in both your Madden family and RNDM family.

Religious life as I have known it is over. For years those of us who have gone before you have been reflecting and praying and discerning and having conversations, attempting to bring religious life forward in a form that meets the needs of today – believing God continues to call persons to serve, to empower the reign of God; believing religious life remains a real option. God is faithful, we experience that faithfulness and we believe ‘the way’ is being made known and not yet!

In these uncertain times, the unfolding of our way of life calls for deep faith and trust. This is no time to be afraid. Someone speaking of fear described it as the ‘cheapest room in the house’ – with an aside saying ‘and I’d like to see you living in better conditions’. When we believe in a good and loving God, there is “no room in the inn” for fear.

So, dear Julie, as you continue your discernment, keep your eyes on God; live the question(s) in faith and trust; keep an open mind and heart; share with others; find ways to support and of being supported and wise insights will be given to you as needed. Whatever choice you make, you will be a strong container for its specific demands – capable of holding diverse opinions, a variety of expressions and perhaps some tension.

This letter is already too long and I have not said much about our particular RNDM way of living life nor have I included two very significant aspects of my own life. In that each of these touches into the very depths of my being they will need to be the subject of another letter. Let me say but a few words about each.

Vatican II was a watershed experience for me and I continue to trust the vision it formed in me. The other significant gift was the discovery of Celtic spirituality which has gifted me with a deep respect for the diversity of influences that have made me who I am. There is a nostalgia in me for the land – my home ‘the earth’ and for the patch of earth that shaped me and that shaped my forebearers.

If your decision is religious life and you sense a call to the Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions, I will be delighted and I will send you a copy of our newly approved Constitutions and Directives [approved December 8, 2014]. These Constitutions flow from a process of inviting and receiving 'input' from all of the RNDM Sisters around the world over a six year period. They describe the dynamics of our shared missionary life according to our understanding and lived experience of the charismatic gift given to our foundress, Euphrasie Barbier. We often refer to this as Euphrasie fundamental intuition and it was her profound understanding of our sharing in the Divine Missions.

The Constitutions articulate the particular way in which we are to live the Gospel. I appreciate their depth and clarity. To whet your appetite:

"To be called to the Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions, is to receive from God the gift of sharing in the Divine Missions in the spirit of Mary, who received everything from God and returned all to God. Attentive to the Word, she was a woman who hastened the coming of salvation to the nations. Like Mary, we are impelled by the Spirit and inspired by love, supported by faith and nurtured by hope, to live fully our consecration for the reign of God."

Wishing you, dear Julie, new discoveries, treasured memories and all the happiness your heart can hold. I love you, like God, with an everlasting love.

Your elder self,

Sheila Madden, rndm

January 28, 2015