Opinion
Spirituality
Soul Seeing



(Unsplash/Jon Tyson)

by Noel Koenke

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Living two lives breaks you. Having tried to live as a Catholic campus minister and as a lesbian woman, my authentic self, piece by piece, slowly broke apart. I was asked to hide, to "be discreet" about my same-sex marriage, and later was offered a severance package with an agreement to remain silent about the discrimination that I felt took place. I was shocked and couldn't help but feel shame and unworthiness.

At first, I thought I could be an "undercover Catholic," sacrificing myself for the good of my students. As a liturgist, I wanted to give them the experience of a radically loving and accepting church — the church I desired, but didn't experience. Being asked to discreetly hide my most authentic human relationship wounded me more deeply than I could have ever imagined.

I lived as a Catholic my entire life — born, raised, educated from kindergarten to master's degree. My entire career was in the church. It was all I knew; it framed how I saw the world and how I made decisions. I followed the rules. I lived understanding the shame of sin and strove for perfection because, after all, we are supposed to be like Jesus. I always fell short, and who else could I blame but myself?

I believed even illogical teachings because I was told "it's a mystery." So, even in times of questioning, the fear of discovering the shocking truth always forced me back to submissive belief.

But deep inside my heart, I knew something wasn't right. As I studied and completed my master's degree in theology, it became clearer that the institutional church so many of us have experienced was built for power and control. It is based on the ideas of a few at the expense of many, with resistance to growth, transformation, and change within itself.

I looked at my 8-year-old niece's religion lesson about sin and repentance and thought:

"No wonder we are so fearful to leave, no wonder we don't question or trust our own intuition. Every choice and thought has been made for us and indoctrinated since childhood. No wonder we struggle with self-worth and self-esteem. No wonder so many of us feel we must not be good enough for God to give us the life we desire. Worst of all, no wonder many of us start thinking we are inherently bad or unlovable."

I know this to be true after nine years of working with college students — many different people from many different places with similar stories of pain and struggles with self-worth. It's my story, too. Born in 1983, I am on the cusp of being both a Millennial and a Gen-Xer. I guess I am also a member of what Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister has termed the Catholic "in-between generation."

A recent survey conducted by St. Mary's Press and the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate found that approximately 12.8 percent of young adults in the U.S. ages 18-25 are former Catholics, and I can only anticipate that number growing. Millennials are aware of the hypocrisy as well as the harm the church is doing to its own members in losing sight of Jesus' Gospel message of love.

"Could the institutional church be wrong? Could it actually be doing harm?"

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I never thought those words would come out of my mouth. I wrestled with these questions for years, ashamed to talk about it because I was a campus minister. I also knew the answers the church would give; I was taught and trained to give them. Those answers didn't work anymore. We needed new questions.

- Could we be born inherently good instead of with "original sin"? What kind of person do you think a child could grow to be if from birth they were told they are inherently good and worthy of love? Less anger, less sadness, less depression and more authentically living the life God intended?
- Could we pursue happiness in this life instead of "carrying our cross" and waiting for a reward in the next? What does venerating sacrifice do to the self-worth of the individual? How does a life in pursuit of joy exist in any contradiction to the love of God?
- Could we simply be human and treat others with kindness, actively making time to connect with the universe and all that is in it, rather than having the "commandment" to love our enemies? Isn't love only love if freely given? Is commanding it of others with the threat of punishment a free choice?
- Could we radically accept all people, celebrating the diversity of difference rather than shaming their uniqueness? I speak directly in favor of LGBT persons who are marginalized and chastened for their honest expression of God's love. Where is Jesus in all this? What does the church lose, other than a monopoly of

> control, in loving and accepting and smiling upon all God's people?

My list of questions persisted. I asked and I searched and found not one intellectual, theologically convincing rebuttal to any of them. "Oh my God!" I gasped with the first true understanding of this journey ... the awe, the wonder, the freedom. My soul awakened to a more deeply rooted faith, a spirituality of love, and I chose to leave the institutional church that, in a way, had left me.

Yes, Noel, the campus minister of nine years. The high school religion teacher, the theology student, the altar server, the lector, the extraordinary minister of Communion, the music minister, the baptized/confirmed child.

I let go of longing for an institutional religion to be something it wasn't, while I struggled to be someone I wasn't in order to stay.

> Love your beautiful, authentic, messy, and incredible life. Love the universe and all who are in it. And be grateful, even for the darkest moments.
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For a time, my world was shattered and I lived in darkness for months. I felt broken, lost and ashamed. I felt my life wasn't worth living. The Catholic Church was my entire life and my vocation. I grieved for the religion Jesus intended it to be, and I fought for a long time trying to make it that way for others.

Nevertheless, I am emerging and my soul is seeing with new vision. I choose to live the Catholic spiritual realities and values that seem to have been forgotten in the institutional church I had supported my whole life. I let go of who I was "supposed" to be, who I was "told" to be, and, instead, embraced who "I AM."

I AM genuinely grateful, not resentful.

I AM actually hopeful, less anxious.

I AM learning to follow my intuition because that is God's way, the spirit of being in the universe, of connecting with me.

I AM finally looking in the mirror and saying: "Hey, girl, I got your back today!"

At last, I love myself and, in return, feel authentically connected to others.

I may have left the Catholic institutional religion, but not my faith. My faith is stronger than it has ever been. I have a deep, intimate trust in a God and universe that always provides, that is always seeking to be present and to bring me what I truly desire. That I could have never discovered these truths is scarier to me than any threat of punishment the church could construct.

So, I offer this message, especially to those who are suffering: Love your beautiful, authentic, messy, and incredible life. Love the universe and all who are in it. And be grateful, even for the darkest moments.

It is true: Night is always darkest before the dawn.

[Noel Koenke worked as a liturgist for the past nine years in higher education. She led her chapel choir to sing for the pope in Italy and participated in Music Ministry Alive for years. She lives with her wife, Adrianne, and two dogs in the suburbs of Philadelphia and is still discerning her next professional endeavor. All Soul Seeing columns can be found at NCRonline.org/blogs/soul-seeing.]

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