Opinion



Mount Rainier, July 2019 (NCR photo/Stephanie Yeagle)

by Rebecca Collins Jordan

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I am from outside a small town in Oregon, a sleepy, nearly coastal place — an hour from the big city, an hour from the ocean — and sandwiched between two major states on the West Coast. Growing up, it seemed everything important lived to the East: the great cities, the U.S. capital, Rome, the Holy Land, and all the other places that inspired my favorite writers.

Meanwhile, in my forested home, I disappeared in a Willa Cather-like way into the landscape that formed me. Mine was a world of foreboding firs, crashing waves and lonely lighthouses, a place that inspired a towering sense of wonder and creativity. I also knew that I lived on stolen land, the land of the Kalapuya and Atfalati in the Willamette Valley and the Multnomah and Clackamas tribes of the Portland basin area, among others. A descendant of white settlers, I was both resident and unwitting guest in a story of degraded land and, often, sparse modern meaning. I turned to my Catholic tradition for help.

It is hard to find models of faith in a land of ethical uncertainty, but I found them in Catholic women. I know I am not the only one for whom the West Coast was an inspiration and a vocational challenge, and today I wish to recognize a few of those people — Catholic women whose stories might mean little to most, but everything to me. On the West Coast, Catholic women live and have lived unsung lives of contemplation, active prayer and freedom of conscience. They weren't all devout or even fully attached to the label of "Catholic;" for some, like Denise Levertov, the church was a tradition to wrestle with creatively and loosely. Their lives of faith, questioning, action and spiritual searching taught me the way to an adult faith: reverence.

The Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary ran my high school, and some of their members taught me activism. Before I began my freshman year there, two nuns, friends of my family, sat down with me and handed me a necklace with the symbols of the order. They had far more important things to do — work at a nonprofit that one of them had co-founded, go to Portland to work at a women's day center, protest the ongoing war on Iraq — but on that day, they sat down with me to tell me that an education is holy and necessary to serve the common good.

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At my high school, the lessons continued. The Holy Names sisters of days past, it turned out, had taken the Oregon governor of the time, a Ku Klux Klan sympathizer, to the Supreme Court to fight and ultimately strike down an anti-Catholic and anti-Semitic piece of legislation on school choice. They had given spiritual counsel to people with HIV/AIDS in the 1970s, boycotted the KKK, taught generations of women and worked in prisons and among immigrants. At school, teachers stressed social justice as an imperative of faith.

Poets Denise Levertov and Madeline Defrees beckoned me in their pages to claim my artistic voice even if it meant disrupting hierarchies. Defrees, a Holy Names sister, left the order when she found that her religious superiors stifled her poetic voice. She went on to teach poetry professionally across the Northwest at universities, writing of the decision to leave the order:

> when two roads, gaining
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> speed, speed up to intersect, I cross
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> myself and lay the body down, arms open for what comes
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> to pass. Father, I am signing in.

The lines, which I encountered the day after she died as I completed an English degree at the University of Montana where she had taught, convey an expansive sense of vocation in a world that is larger than any one institution or power.

Levertov, a late-in-life convert to both the Northwest (she lived in Seattle before she died) and Catholicism, carried also a spirit of grandeur that, to me, reflects the Northwest. She helped me see the land I lived on as a sacramental gift worthy of attention and respect. She and my grandmother, another convert to the Northwest and the Catholic Church, shared an obsession with Mount Rainier. Inverting William Wordsworth's words in an early poem that meant much to me, Levertov writes, "the world is not with us enough. O taste and see, the subway Bible poster said," calling the reader to live in a world where desire is embraced, where joy and "the imagination's tongue" have free rein. The impulse to embrace the world, melt into its sacramentality, was always in her — and now always in me.

What does it mean that I admire both my church and the Northwest, this land on which I am a guest, and so many women who were also guests? I believe they cleared a path as others who made homes in a region that feels filled with older stories, and a tradition that often feels old and unmoving, and often filled with grave error. I doubt that they thought about stolen land as often as I do, but they found a way to show their deep wonder and responsibility to a place and community in time. Their Catholicism came out in creativity and reverence, service and sacramental spirits. It was a tradition with which they wrestled, just as they wrestled with nativism and war. I could do worse than live like them.

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