Interview with: KATHLEEN NORRIS
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SALTMAN: In The Cloister Walk, you quote Walter Brueggemann, who says, “A sense of call in our time is profoundly countercultural.” What exactly is a call and what makes it so radical?

NORRIS: Well, I guess in our culture, there’s this notion that people need to be educated. You know, parents want to send their kids to college, so that they will get a good job which they need, which basically means making more money or having a financial leg up in a sense. I was educated that way. I went to prep school and then Bennington [College in Vermont] where people would assume that you would have a career and not just a job.

If making money is your goal, it doesn’t matter who you are, what you really love. The whole notion of calling is radically different from that. So, there’s this conflict often between the sense of calling and that careerist thing. I’m thinking of people who are teaching history in high school or they were bank Vice Presidents. They just kind of came to the realization that “No, this really isn’t me. This isn’t what I’m meant to do. I’m meant to go join a monastery and maybe pursue something more than just a job and income and a nice car.”

I haven’t had a 9 to 5 job since 1973. But I’ve somehow managed to make it work, to be a writer and holding a whole bunch of part time jobs. But that sense of calling and the sense that writing really was what I was always meant to do never left me. There always was uncertainty for many,

many years, like “Is this going to work? How long can I work at six jobs and still write?” It’s not an easy thing in this culture.

SALTMAN: I can think of people who are compromising their family lives, compromising their sleep, compromising everything, because it feels so important that they get this job and make $2 million before they’re 25? Is that a call?

NORRIS: I don’t think so, because I think they mostly know they’re compromising a whole lot. I think with a call, what you realize is that you won’t compromise. You’re sort of surrendering to this larger thing that might not have the status and might be very uncertain, but you’re going to be true to yourself.

If you look at Genesis when Moses first meets God on Mount Sinai and the burning bush, he says, “How am I supposed to give everything up and how do I know that you’re really God?” And God says, “Well, do all these things, and then you’ll find out.” It’s really scary.

SALTMAN: So, it’s a matter of trusting God, or oneself.

NORRIS: And the voice. It’s not very dramatic. It’s not like a movie voice booming at you, but that inner voice. Learning to discern what’s a misleading voice or a false instinct and what really is going to put you on the right path is part of growing up.

SALTMAN: You mentioned earlier the kind of nonproductive life which is so countercultural, and is shared by the poet and the monk. Do you see the poet and the monk as functioning similarly?

NORRIS: Objectively from the outside looking in, from the cultural point of view, monks and poets are bums. They're useless. They're worthless. At the same time, if you said, "Would the world be a better place if monks and poets didn't exist?" Most people, but the worst kind of redneck, would probably would say, "Wait a minute. No, no, no, we need them. They must be good for something. We just don't know what it is." So, there is that. I think it was in The Cloister Walk where I basically called monks and writers and artists degenerates, which is actually what the Nazis called a lot of artists in the 30s.

Then the other thing with monasticism, what you still hear people say is "Well, these people are just useless. What are they doing all day? They're wasting their life, because they're just sitting in church and praying, and that's not doing anything." When you look at monasticism and what it's meant for Western culture and Eastern culture, monasticism in its quiet way is actually pretty important. It's here for a reason, and it has survived a couple thousand years of human civilization for a reason. To look at them strictly in utilitarian terms is just silly.

It's not just that they're doing something. It's that [other] people are drawn to what they're doing, too. People come in for retreat, and they get an experience they can't have any place else. They become a part of this praying community for a little while, and then they go out. So, the ministry is there for people to come and sort of partake of and just knowing that there are people

around the world praying 24 hours a day. There's some monk or nun praying. And somehow that matters. It's not a useless activity.

SALTMAN: How does being an oblate [an associate of the church] work for you?

NORRIS: Well, it worked very differently when I was still living in the Dakotas, because I would go up to the monastery maybe once a month, for a long weekend or sometimes even for a week. Now that I've been apart from them, I've only been back I think three or four times in the last eight years. They have other oblates who only come once every couple of years. They've got an oblate in Germany who comes very rarely.

So, there is that connection, and we share this history together. Every year, I renew my oblate vows. That has to be enough. I do get to other monasteries occasionally for retreats. I try to go at least once a year for some kind of a retreat, because I really need that, especially since I'm doing a lot of caregiving still for my mother. And that's a really aggressive, rather strenuous and demanding thing. So, to be on a retreat is really important.

SALTMAN: What are oblate vows?

NORRIS: The oblate vow at least for Benedictines now in America, it's basically you try to live the rule of Benedict insofar as your situation in life will allow you. It doesn't really mean that you're going to show up at the monastery. In fact, very few oblates do show up that often. They might go twice a year for the conference; maybe once a year for a retreat.

So, it's a rather flexible thing, and I'm really glad, because I had to come back to Hawaii, because of my husband's health. That was eight years ago. And now I'm here mostly because of my mother's health, and I'm not able to get to the Dakotas and get to the actual monastery as much. But I've come to realize that that's not really the key. I mean, it's more of praying the psalms and living the rule of Benedict and just sort of reminding myself that this is really who I am, that this still matters, even though I can't get to the monastery very often. The minute I go to a monastery, it's just great. It really does feel like coming home. Entering that life of prayer again, getting into that rhythm, I absolutely love it.

SALTMAN: I am interested in the fact that the two places where you've settled— the Dakotas and Hawaii—have been so extreme geographically.

NORRIS: Yes, I'm an extremist. Ironically, I've always found that the Dakotas are an easier place for me to write. In Hawaii, there's something about the physical beauty of it and the lushness of it, it's like "We don't need you. You don't have to write here." The Dakotas is actually more stimulating to me as a writer. That may be changing, because I've actually been in Hawaii for a while. But I've always kind of sensed is that it's actually easier for me to write in a more austere environment.

The other thing too is that Hawaii's where I grew up. I mean, I've living a block from my old high school which is also Barack Obama's old high school. We were both scholarship students there, although he graduated 14 years after I did. Actually, we shared a couple of the same

teachers, but not so many. So, this is kind of where I grew up. So, I think in a sense it's harder to write in a place where you grew up, for me anyway.

SALTMAN: In The Cloister Walk, you mentioned gated communities. You say that "gated communities are a sad commentary on our ability to accept the responsibility of freedom." How do you see a gated community and a cloistered community as being different?

NORRIS: I guess you could see a monastery as a gated community, but the gate is always open. One of the most striking things in the whole rule of Benedict is that all guests are to be received as Christ, which first of all presumes that any monastery worth its salt is going to have guests and that you need to welcome them with really radical hospitality.

So, the whole point of the monastic/gated community is to let people in. The whole point of a gated community of million dollar homes is to keep people out. If you suggested, "Well, let's welcome all visitors as Christ," the security guard at the gate would just call the cops and have you sent to a mental hospital.

There's a wonderful story in the life of Benedict. He's basically fled from civilization, and a guy shows up at his hermitage and interrupts him at prayer and everything. You think, "Oh my God, what a terrible thing." The guy says, "I just came to tell you it's Easter." And Benedict says, "I know it's Easter, for I've been given the blessing of seeing you" which is really, again, radical hospitality. It's not you're interrupting me at prayer. It's like, "Oh, what a blessing you've come. God has sent you to me, and this is a great blessing."

SALTMAN: Can you talk a little bit about the tension between conformity and community?

NORRIS: There's a conformity that you can find in a gated community. You have to keep your lawn mowed to a certain level. You have to do all these things, so that everything looks the same and is comforting to the realtors who come. It is almost as if signs of human life should be erased—the kid's tricycle in the front yard, you know, might be terrible. You gotta move it to the garage or the backyard, so nobody sees it.

One of the striking things about any monastic community, and I think this would probably be Buddhist as well as Christian from my knowledge of monastic people, is that there's an outward conformity in the schedule. You know, people are on a schedule, a common schedule, common mealtime, common prayer, and usually a common form of clothing, although even that changes.

SALTMAN: Common haircut.

NORRIS: But you will find the most incredible individuals, eccentricities, interests, political and even religious views will vary just radically.

SALTMAN: You don't think that's true in the gated community?

NORRIS: People feel really compelled to keep that hidden. Whereas in a monastery people are almost proud sometimes of being an eccentric, an oddball and all of that. I think the pressure to

conform is really there in the gated community, in the restricted community, where there are all these restrictions; where in a monastery, it's actually a much more liberated environment where you're more free in a funny way.

SALTMAN: I would like to talk about *Acedia*. It's quite a book, I have to say.

NORRIS: Thank you.

SALTMAN: Acedia, the condition, is the profound malaise of not caring, pulling away, not being inspired. Right?

NORRIS: Yes, it's basically profound indifference and often to things that used to matter. You know that deep down they're important. And the spiritual aspect of sloth is one way I would describe it, and then that profound indifference is another.

SALTMAN: You write very eloquently about this not-caring. Yet throughout it all, you're taking care of your husband who was so sick. From the perspective of the reader, it seems like you were doing a great job caring. You were really in it. I know that you weren't necessarily experiencing acedia at every moment. But how did you manage to care so well?

NORRIS: Well, actually, there was caregiving. But also my husband was really good company. I mean, we were really best friends. He had episodes over the years, but in the last five years when he was really much more dependent on me than he'd ever been in terms of getting around and

mobility and all those things, we actually had a really good time together. It wasn't just the drudgery of caring. It wasn't all grim; it wasn't all drudgery. We had a lot of laughs. We did a lot of things together that we really enjoyed. So, there was that.

That's one of the hard things about being a caregiver, that you're always prepared for the next crisis…so, in a sense, you defer acedia. You know it's there, but it's not really going to surface until there's a lull, or in a couple of cases where just too many burdens all at once came on. But I think the real struggle with acedia in terms of my husband came after he died. Whatever I had repressed or deferred in a sense came to the surface. What point is there now? I don't have to change a commode every morning. I don't have to do these things.

Of course, I was finishing the book, so I had that to sort of spur me on. But that was the question, I think. It's like we keep ourselves so busy that in a sense we're deferring acedia. It's sort of lurking there. When we stop being busy and active, that's when it will surface.

SALTMAN: You say the thing that makes acedia a sin as opposed to depression is that it's a conscious choice.

NORRIS: There is a consciousness to it. See, I really don't like the word "sin." I had to use it in the book to talk about it, because it's in the tradition. But I really think what the monks talk about—eight bad thoughts and the corresponding virtues—that makes so much more sense, because everybody knows what the bad thought of anger and pride are; jealousy, greed. We all

experience these things. It's just part of human psychology. The word "sin," makes people want to run for the hills. It's such a loaded word.

SALTMAN: But do we have a choice about those thoughts?

NORRIS: Once you recognize it, there is a consciousness involved that I think certainly isn't involved in clinical depression, a real medical illness that's treatable. With acedia, there is this more conscious thing saying, "I'm feeling this, and I know what it is. Am I going to give in? Am I going to resist it?" There is that a little bit more conscious thing. Now, sometimes the events of life will simply overwhelm you. Maybe you're not as conscious as you might be. But I think there is that conscious element, with a temptation—and once you recognize it as a temptation, as a bad thought, it can be resisted. You've got a little bit more to work with. And of course, it won't work with clinical depression.

One of the big problems we have is that we use the word "depression" now for everything from mild disappointment to serious illness. It's almost a useless word because of that. So, that was something I knew I had to delineate in the book. Of course, with acedia, there are these two elements to it. There's the indifference and the ennui and the boredom, but there's also the sadness and despair. We tend to look on indolence and indifference as not mattering, and we tend to look on despair as a medical condition these days.

So, it's kind of funny. Some people actually have objected. They say, "Well, why are you using another term for depression?" I say, "Well, it's not just depression. All this stuff is involved. It's

restlessness and boredom; indifference and despair. It's this contradictory, crazy thing that people have been writing about for a couple thousand years." So, I think it matters. I think the word matters and it might be useful to have another term.

SALTMAN: Not just for spiritual practitioners.

NORRIS: Not at all. This really is psychology.

SALTMAN: You write about your relationship to motherhood. Can you talk about that?

NORRIS: It wasn't that I didn't want to have children. But it was this sense that I felt I'm not cut out for this. Talk about a calling. This is not something that I'm called to do. It's just not suitable in a funny sense. I never quite understood why that should be. But it was very strong from the time I was about 15 years old or so.

SALTMAN: I was very impressed by your ability to work through your feelings and not indulge them, which is an important attribute for a parent, or a monk, for that matter.

NORRIS: It overtakes me sometimes. But at the same time when I get really impatient, I understand that the problem is with me. It's not the other person. I'm the one with the problem. I have to figure out if I'm going to continue trying to help here, I need to cope with that. That it's my problem and not theirs. Again, with an adult it's easier than with a child, because a child, can't participate. They just complain. They know something's not right. An infant or a toddler,

they really don't have any coping mechanisms at all. And they're going to gripe and complain and be unhappy. And you feel like, "Oh my God, there's really not a whole lot I can do." You know? It's kind of a frustrating experience.

SALTMAN: I certainly can be. The whole question about whether one—an adult in any case—has control over one's feelings is an interesting one.

NORRIS: I really love the whole monastic tradition and, again, a spiritual tradition of thinking about your thoughts. And so, thinking about your thoughts, that really is taking charge of your life in a way that's very healthy.

SALTMAN: And that's what we call mindfulness, right?

NORRIS: Mindfulness, yes. That would very much correspond with Buddhist mindfulness. Absolutely.

SALTMAN: In *Acedia*, you quote an early monk as saying, "A disciple who bears insult is like a tree that gets watered every day."

NORRIS: Yes. It's really helpful when you're dealing with family.

SALTMAN: How do you help people understand that in a culture where people tend to self-flagellate all day long?

NORRIS: Well, people self-flagellate, but also inflate themselves too. You know, “I’m special. Don’t you know who I am? I’m deserving of some kind of special treatment.” That seems to be the mode under which so many people operate now. When you get road rage and you hear about people having fits at airport check-in counters, that kind of thing, it’s like, “Wait a minute, I’m important. You can’t treat me this way.” But the truth is “Hey, you know, you’re just one of the crowd.” Nobody wants to be told in America that they’re just one of the crowd, because we’re all special. But there’s this totally inflated, very unrealistic sense of “I’m special, and you better treat me like I’m special.”

It’s like that wonderful monastic sense of “Get a hold of yourself. Who do you think you are?” You know? That little voice is so important, and again thinking about your thoughts. When you’re feeling self-inflated and about to act in a really rude way or something, if you notice that’s what you’re doing, go, “Hmm, who do I think I am? This is pretty silly.” Maybe, just maybe you can control it. You can say, “Okay, I’ve seen myself now in a more truthful light. I don’t want to act this way. I want to act in a more humane, constructive, balanced way.” Whatever terminology. And so, in a more mindful way would be one way you could say it. It’s a really valuable perspective, and it doesn’t take religious belief or anything like that. It just takes mindfulness and maybe seeing yourself in a more realistic light.

SALTMAN: And the desire to do something different, which is huge.

NORRIS: Yeah, once you see yourself in this more realistic light, you say, "Well, you know, this is obviously not appropriate behavior. This is silly. This is not what I want to be doing. This is not who I want to be." I really find this is so valuable with my mother, because there are times when I get really impatient with her. Sometimes it's because she's done things that really are annoying, and she knows better. But there are other times. And I really have to try to remember, you know, she's 91 years old, almost 92. There are things she can't help anymore, and I can. So, there you have this distinction, "Well, then who better get control of herself here?"

SALTMAN: It's like with a child.

NORRIS: Yes, I'm the one who needs to work on my impatience and my anger. Be aware of it. And when I'm in a really foul mood, sometimes I'll just tell her, "I'm in a really bad mood today, and I'm going to try to watch it." Sometimes I get really annoyed. Then I have to say, "Okay, wait a minute." That's when I ask, "Who do you think you are, what are you doing?"

SALTMAN: How many times a day would you say you have to say that to yourself?

NORRIS: Sometimes not at all. Yesterday was a really good day. The day before, it was like every five minutes.

SALTMAN: In terms of bearing insult—you have to be able to have a strong ego to sort of take a teaching like that.

NORRIS: Oh yeah. That's something that writers have to be able to learn to do, not only to take criticism from a writing teacher, say, even as early as high school or college. You have to learn how to take criticism and use it, because you know it's going to help make your work better. You really have to learn to do it for yourself. Whenever I've taught a writing workshop, that's one of the main things I've said. Because when you're an adult, you're out in the world, you're working and you're trying to write, you're not necessarily going to have a teacher or a college professor or somebody to give you advice, to critique your work. So, you have to learn how to do it—at least some of it—for yourself.

I think just knowing how much you need that, that what you write really is going to need revision and need work. It kind of translates over I think into the spiritual realm for me, at least. It makes sense to me that my own behavior can also stand improvement. If somebody's really insulting, I've actually more or less tried to see the comical aspects of it. I think if you can get to the comedy of it, when someone is going to the trouble to insult you, isn't that interesting? Even if they're being rude and insulting and really crazy, they're demonstrating some kind of concern for you that's usually inappropriate. I mean, it's crazy. Why are they going to the trouble to insult you?

There have been times actually, both in writing, I think, and in life, when I really have been grateful for a criticism because it's brought me to my senses. I've said, "Oh, yeah! That's not who I want to be. That's not what I want to be doing." It's almost like good advice. Even if the person really meant it in a malicious, sometimes it's actually a helpful thing to be told something that you don't want to hear.

I was at a conference a couple of years ago, and a Buddhist nun was there. She said one of the hardest lessons for her, but also one of the best ones, is that all things teach. All things teach you, if you let them. And that means the good things and the bad things. There were a couple of other Buddhists there. But it was mostly Benedictines. It was interesting to see them nodding, "Uh-huh. Yes."

SALTMAN: Which doesn't mean that we stay passive and say, "Oh, I'm going to learn from this terrible situation," right?

NORRIS: It's not like just giving in and allowing some kind of insult or abuse to undermine your legitimate self-esteem at all.

SALTMAN: I think that's where we go to extremes. We think we're the best. We think we're the worst. We don't have a stable sense of self.

NORRIS: Yes. It's sort of prideful attitude. "I'm the worst. Isn't that wonderful? I'm so proud of myself." I mean it's weird. People can get themselves twisted in all kinds of knots. I think one of the points of any kind of monastic perspective—whether it's Buddhist or Christian—is to maintain some kind of balance, some kind of equilibrium, so that you're not the best, you're not the worst, you're really just like everyone else. That's not a popular message either. You're just one of the bunch of human beings that has to struggle with this stuff.

SALTMAN: In Acedia you say, “Self-consciousness feeds on sincerity, and both have attained cult status in America.” What’s wrong with being sincere?

NORRIS: I think sincerity is good up to a point. But when it combines with that sort of self-consciousness, it’s like a mask you hide behind. People might be sincere about what they believe about a situation, but that doesn’t necessarily mean they want to really know what’s going on. There’s a kind of a mask attitude when it reaches that point. I mean, when a child is being really sincere, that’s one thing. But I think for an adult to just rely on sincerity as something that’s all they need, that’s going to get them through life, that’s almost a dangerous attitude. It’s kind of false.

SALTMAN: Can you give an example?

NORRIS: Al-Qaeda’s sincere about what they’re doing. They’re really sincere. They really want to kill the great Satan. Well, that kind of sincerity is rather limited in its outlook. That’s really an extreme example. George Bush might be a good example. He was actually really sincere about a lot of the things that he believed, but he just didn’t know much about them.

SALTMAN: How has taking care of your husband in his final days affected your sense of things, your relationship to God?

NORRIS: It was weird, because I wasn’t necessarily sensing God’s presence in my life, but I knew it was there. It was a really curious thing. And until my friend asked me that question, I

hadn't really thought about it. She said, "Did you lose your faith?" "Of course not." My faith was there, even though I wasn't experiencing God's presence, say, his joy or anything wonderful at all. I just knew it was real. God's presence was real and there. It was this odd kind of feeling.

SALTMAN: That's true faith when it's not clear, right?

NORRIS: Yes, I think it is.

SALTMAN: There's something there that you trust.

NORRIS: It was also true that I wasn't really thinking about it that much, because I was pretty busy with David and just trying to enjoy our life together as much as we could under the circumstances. So, I was really preoccupied with that, much more than my own idea of faith or anything like that.

SALTMAN: In Buddhist practice, we meditate in order to sort of watch our minds pull the tricks you are talking about, and then over years, watch it begin to quiet down. I know that there is a large contemplative aspect to the Christian tradition. Are you engaged in that kind of practice?

NORRIS: Not so much. I think the act of writing itself kind of brings me into that state more or less. But I also know that when I'm in a monastery setting for a very long time and I'm going to choir every day with the monks, the psalms tend to take over. I find myself meditating on them all during the day. Lines from the psalms will pop up and give me something to meditate on

maybe at lunchtime or when I'm walking in the afternoon, running to the post office. Whatever I'm doing, it doesn't matter, because somehow the psalms have penetrated.

I certainly know some Benedictines who don't do any kind of formal meditation at all and others who do. And of course, they have that thing called the holy reading or Lectio Divina which in most monasteries they devote at least an hour a day to it, of private prayer, meditation and/or reading something, not like you'd read a mystery story or not for information, but to allow for meditative space. So, I do that sometimes also where I will find myself just kind of with—but the psalms are still the mainstay for me, the triggers really for meditation.

SALTMAN: As part of your daily life?

NORRIS: Yes.

SALTMAN: I have another question about acedia, the state of mind. If what you're experiencing is that kind of boredom, that ennui, that indifference, how does one discern whether or not those feelings are a sign that it is time to move on and change something, as opposed to an internal state that needs to be worked through? I am thinking of monastic people, especially.

NORRIS: Well, often the ennui and the boredom of acedia are often accompanied by restlessness, and so there is inertia, but also restlessness. I think in myself when I find those two in combination, I get a little suspicious. I think, "Hmm, this is where I'm a little bored and nothing seems to satisfy me. Nothing will help." And I say, "Ah, well, wait a second." You

know, that's a kind of state that I recognize. I think being able to name acedia, just the same as being able to name the other bad thoughts, naming anger, naming pride—part of the problem is that we tend to think of sloth or boredom are insignificant, because often, they really are. I mean, they're triggered by insignificant things, and they are insignificant.

But when I find myself restless and bored and growing indifferent to things that I know I deep down really do care about, it's then I know it's acedia. If I say, "Well, I have to get out of here, I have to abandon these people, this situation," right off I'm on a false path. There is a pre-Christian philosopher who wrote about this. When you're experiencing this kind of boredom, you have to change yourself and not the climate. You recognize that state where you want to flee and you want to escape, but you're not going to be able to run from yourself.

It's mindfulness and being aware of what's really going on. If your motivation is to escape, it's not going to work, because you're probably just trying to run away from some aspect of yourself. There are all kinds of good reasons why you might want to leave, but not just to escape, because the grass is greener somewhere else or you have a fantasy about escaping and suddenly turning your life around without doing any work—"I'm gonna go and become a rock star." Well, that's not really a very realistic thing to run away from a wife and four children, say. But people do that. People can get all twisted up.

Discernment is what the Christian tradition calls it, and I think mindfulness might be what the Buddhist tradition calls it. Analyzing and saying, "Wait a minute." Stepping back and not letting

your feelings dictate this, but thinking about your thoughts and saying, “Okay, what’s really going on here?”

SALTMAN: It seems like the monastic situation would really bring that kind of a thing to a head, because in a lay life, we have many different spots where we can land. We work. We are with our families. We play. We’re physically moving around all the time. So, the feelings come and go. Whereas if you’re going through this as a monastic, there’s really no end in sight.

NORRIS: One of my favorite things that a monk ever said to me, and this is very early on, he said, “Most people don’t understand how really boring our life is, our routine. The daily routine is really—and sometimes that’s very liberating, and sometimes it can feel like it’s really crushing you.” I remember one time I was fascinated, because there was a young guy who came, because he thought he wanted to be a monk. He didn’t even last a week. I think when he imagined doing this for the rest of his life, he just panicked and fled. The monks said, “Well, sometimes that happens. He might be back, if he decides he wants to try it again.” And they would take him back, of course. I thought—less than week, hey, that’s really something!

I remember feeling that it was a spiritual breakthrough where I’d actually been in a monastery setting long enough to feel that boredom. And I went to tell abbot. I said, “This is great. I just made a great spiritual breakthrough. I’m bored shitless.” And he said, “Well, join the club.” He laughed, you know. I said, “Yeah, this is pretty awful.” “Yeah,” he said, “try it for 25 years.” We were howling with laughter, but I could sense this “Wow!” It really is hard.

Of course, there are many things you can do about it. If you have friends in the community, you can whine to them, and they'll say, "Yeah, right, join the club." Right? Because they can all relate. Any monastic person can kind of relate to that. You can also get busy with things.

I think sometimes the best advice is still that ancient stuff. Go in your cell. Your solitude in your cell will straighten you out, which is the hardest advice. Nobody wants to hear that. One abbot told me, he said when people do come to him, especially if they're new, he said, "Get out and do something physical. Do something a little different from what you're used to, but also don't give up on the community. Join the prayers, the meals, the recreation time. You can go play pool or even watch some television, but you're going to be doing it with your confreres and at prescribed times of day. You do it when the community is doing it. But don't give up on the community, because the community will help you through this, whether they even know you're going through it or not." I think that is still good advice. I think acedia is a great disconnector and will tend to disconnect you from communities, church communities, families, whatever, friends. It really does tend to disconnect you from people who really might help you glimpse a way out of your foul mood.

SALTMAN: We haven't talked at all about *Amazing Grace*. Language is an interesting entry point into religious life. What else do you think pulls people in different spiritual directions?

NORRIS: People's journeys are so interesting. I heard about this man who was raised southern Baptist and ended up as, I think, a Greek Orthodox bishop. That's a journey. The retired Episcopal bishop of Hawaii, Richard Chang, was raised Buddhist. But the Buddhism that he was

raised in was the religion of his grandmother and was really kind of oppressive. He remembers being taken to temple and whacked if he did things wrong and just kind of—people's experiences are so various within the traditions.

But Hawaii is full of these stories. Like I have a friend in the Episcopal church that I go to that every August. She and her sister were raised in the Buddhist temple, Their parents were both Buddhists. They're actually Okinawan Americans. But their parents sent them to an Episcopal school, and one of the girls became a devote Episcopalian. I think the other one's kind of an Agnostic. I don't think she has any faith community at all. But every year, they do this Buddhist ceremony for their parents who are long deceased. And I've always thought that was kind of interesting.

In Hawaii these stories play out a lot differently than they do in a lot of other places, because of the immigrant community. What I've heard is that, say, the Buddhist temples here tend to be much more conservative than the Buddhist temples in Japan, because they were immigrants trying to cling to what they remembered, what they had been raised with. They weren't necessarily going to change with the times, because they were immigrants and they were pretty traditional about all this stuff.

So sometimes Buddhists come here from Japan, and they can't believe that the Buddhist temples here are still doing this or that, because in Japan, it's evolved. It's changed. But here, people didn't feel free to change. They wanted to cling to what they remembered from their homeland, which makes sense when you think about it. The other adaptation that the Buddhists made in

Hawaii was because the Christian churches had Sunday, so now temple is on Sunday too, because that was the time people had to devote to religion. In fact, on one street here, there's a Buddhist temple right next to a Baptist church, and everybody's there on Sunday. It's really interesting.

If you talk to adults who are attending a Buddhist temple or who are attending a Christian church and ask them, "Did you spend some time away from any formal religious practice?" They usually say, "Oh yeah, sure, 20 years, 10 years." Sometimes they say, "Well, we got married and had kids. We wanted our kids to have something. We didn't know what exactly. They should be going to Sunday school even if we weren't sure what we believed." So, they had to do that. I didn't have that excuse. I just sort of had this internal pressure.

But I think that journey is pretty common, because religion is one thing when it's your family observance and you're a kid going with your parents. But when you're older and have to figure out religion for yourself, then it becomes a whole different story. That's when the journeys go all over the map.

SALTMAN: What would you say to people who feel that they have a deep spiritual hunger and that the religions are all offering some similar, but that the form and the formalities kind of cover up that fundamental truth?

NORRIS: To some extent, it's true. But that's only because churches and temples are basically human institutions. When people say, "Well, I'm spiritual, not religious," I tend to be really

suspicious of that. I think what they mean is they really don't want to be bothered with other people. They want their own private, personal thing going on, but when you join a church, you join a temple, a monastery, whatever it is, and you're going to have to deal with other people and understand that as part of your own religious journey. I think a lot of Americans in particular say, "Oh, I don't want to deal with other people," I'm on my own little journey. Well, that's kind of sad. There's a real limit to that. People think that they're being free, but I think they're actually limiting themselves so much, because theirs is the only voice they're listening to. That's really dangerous, spiritually or a lot of other ways. Somehow, they're above this business of needing other people, or working out their faith with other people. It's like they're really trying to escape something that is probably an essential part of spirituality, which is dealing with other people.

SALTMAN: It also seems to go back to what you were saying before about everybody needing to be special and doing their own thing and people don't want to join a tradition.

NORRIS: Yes, because when you join something, you're just one of the crowd. I just found a wonderful definition of a church. I think Christopher Jamison who is the abbot of Worth Abbey in England. He's written two books now. Sanctuary With One. And this new book is called Finding Happiness. He's really a good writer and a good thinker, and he basically talks about a church as this gathering of really unimportant people, but who make everyone who comes feel significant, which I thought was a lovely statement. You sort of recognize, "I'm one of the crowd, I'm not important, I'm no more important than anyone else." To say that in America is really crazy, because we absolutely have this celebrity culture. We want the VIP room. We want the elite line. We want all that. If you're in a church, you're saying, "No, no, no, we're all kind

of unimportant here, but our job is that radical hospitality that makes everyone feel important and significant."

That's one of the most radical things to me about a monastery that they very consciously do — there are no VIPs. They select an abbot, but basically everyone feels sorry for him, because they know that's a really tough job. In some ways, it's the loneliest job in a monastery, but it's not like it makes him a VIP necessarily. It's really countercultural in a really profound sense to say that there are no VIPs. Everyone is human; therefore everyone is of equal value and importance. That's pretty radical.

SALTMAN: But isn't there always a natural hierarchy among people?

NORRIS: I remember one time, I was at a monastery, and there were some other women guests there, younger women. And one of them was very conventionally pretty, and she was nice and everything. But you could tell that she was used to being deferred to, because she was really, really pretty. There was another woman there who was homely and obese. She was not used to being paid any attention at all. What was really fascinating was to see how the monks paid her as much attention as this much prettier girl and to see how they both responded. She was like a plant that needed watering. She was just absolutely amazed to be treated so well. The more conventionally attractive woman was kind of thinking, "Well, what's going on here? Why are they paying attention to her and not me?" She handled it. She wasn't awful about it or anything. But you could just see that somehow being treated equally was an experience neither one of them had really gone through before. It was fascinating to see that happen.

SALTMAN: What are you working on now, besides taking care of your mom?

NORRIS: I may do something on Hawaii. Part of me says I would like to write a novel. I'm kind of torn. I'd like to do something more with some of my husband's writing. So, I've kind of got some ideas for things, but writing this last book, Acedia, really kind of wore me out. I had a three week book tour. The first leg of it was 17 cities in 21 days. I mean, it was really tough, and I knew it would be. I actually trained at a gym to get in shape for it. Not super training—I wasn't doing bodybuilding or anything. But I was going more often, just because I knew that this would be physically demanding as well as psychically. So, I tried to get in shape to do all this, and it really helped. It helped a lot. But I think I'm still reacting, recovering really in a sense from all of that. So, I'm thinking about some things. I'm talking to some people about some things I'd like to do. I'd like to do something a little different, and I'm just not sure exactly what.

SALTMAN: You seem to me like a very grounded person and also a hopeful person. Is that true?

NORRIS: I think so. And part of it is just my personality tending to be optimistic. I always think, "Why not look on the bright side?" Or maybe looking a little bit on the hopeful side, because doing anything else seems stupid to me. I mean, it doesn't seem to pay-off. You know, I can mire myself in self-pity or whine or whatever. That doesn't seem really useful. I like to give people the benefit of the doubt. Part of this really does come from my parents, because they were both very different from one another but both kind of hopeful in their outlook.

It’s really striking now with my mom who’s 91. In the last five years, first she was walking just fine, then she needed the walker. Now she needs a wheelchair most of time. And to see how her spirits haven’t really flagged at all. She’s enjoying life. Today or tomorrow, I’ll probably have to take her to the movies, or she’ll complain, because there’s some movies out there she wants to see. Sometimes she says, “I’m just bored here. I want to go out to lunch.” And so, we’ll go out to lunch. I would say maybe twice in the last year, she said, “I’m depressed.” Then I just muster my nieces and my sister, and I say, “Mom says she’s depressed, and so everybody’s got to call her up and talk to her.” Whatever. But she’s really not any kind of clinical depressed at all. It’s been amazing to see that.

I think it requires more imagination to be hopeful than to be totally despondent about everything. It’s that leap. The leap that’s actually in the word “hop.” There is that physical connection in the etymology. You can leap to some place, even though you can’t quite imagine it. You can imagine it being better. I think it is a more imaginative, creative state than letting yourself just say, “There is no hope. It’s all bad.”

So, I think part of it with me is probably just genetic. That personality. And then being raised with a family where, when really bad things happen they say, “Well, you know, things will turn out better.” Or just not letting things slow you down or giving in to hopelessness. That has helped certainly with what I’ve dealt with in the last ten years with my husband and with my dad dying, both within a year of each other. Just to say, “Well, you know, that’s life. People die.” And go on. That has helped.

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