

Authenticity

by Grace Surdovel, IHM, Ed.D

Hi Grace! Thanks for joining the team. I know you can catch and hit, so let's have you play center field!

I remember this interaction like it happened yesterday. I was probably eleven or twelve years of age and this was my first day with my new softball coach. I had known the coach and her family because they were friends with my mom, but because she was a few years older, we didn't have many conversations other than greeting each other or talking about sports and summer vacations when our families would gather at picnics or celebrations. I still recall the feeling of excitement in knowing that SHE would be my coach. Over the next five years, she would continue to serve as my coach, and we would often gather at her family home for cookouts after games. These exchanges afforded me the opportunity to get to know her and her story and enjoy what was by then a full-blown crush.

One day she gathered the team at the end of the season to tell us that she would no longer be serving as our coach. The team members were completing high school and she was preparing to graduate college. I expected her to tell us that she had found a teaching job and was moving out of the area. I was not anticipating her announcement that she was entering a religious community of women. This congregation would be the same congregation I myself would later enter after she had left the congregation. While our paths have taken different directions in more recent years, she continues to be a dear friend, along with her sister and extended family. To this day, I am most grateful for her support of me and my family when I decided to come out to family and friends many years later.

I remember one of my first high school crushes. I was a sophomore and the object of my affection was one of my closest friends. She was clearly heterosexual, dating a senior boy, so the crush was mine and mine alone. It was not until college that I finally met young women who shared the same sexual orientation. Although I did not date anyone formally, I did enjoy informal times or "date nights" that allowed me to finally confirm what I already knew. I was indeed a lesbian woman.

After graduation (while still investigating the congregation), I was able to formally date and further confirm my orientation. But because I was still exploring religious life, I found myself living in parallel universes at times. A committed lesbian relationship and committed religious life are very different life-paths, so I needed to make an informed decision. I was dating a wonderful woman at the time and we talked about a long-term commitment. She sensed that something was bothering me, so she confronted me with the question, "Are you still thinking of entering the congregation?" When I answered yes, she was understandably upset. We were able to talk through my dilemma a few times and decided that I would never truly know if God was calling me to religious life unless I entered the initial formation program. So we broke up and off to the formation program I went! This separation was hard but I felt that God was calling me to serve in religious life

I studied for my bachelor's degree at the college sponsored and staffed by the congregation. Join the convent but “leave your hormones at the gate.” This was an ongoing joke between my friends and me. While we knew this was not the case, a life of celibacy seemed foreign to what we observed as college students living in the campus residence halls. For those of us considering religious life (secretly, of course), making such a hard decision for the rest of our lives was scary. It wasn't that we were busy sleeping around. We just weren't sure we wanted to give “that” up forever!

I wanted to ask my sister-mentor how she managed the vow of chastity, but that seemed to be an inappropriate conversation to have with “sister.” Despite these concerns, my draw to religious life was very strong and my desire to enter this congregation of women even stronger so I continued the discernment process. In fact, I intentionally chose this college because of the young, happy, engaging sisters who worked there and whom I had met in my local parish. I wanted to be like them. For all that they had sacrificed to take on this vowed life, they were genuinely happy women and I wanted what they had. I wanted this deep relationship with God (which I did not fully understand), I wanted to serve the poor and those less fortunate, and I wanted to teach. The more I moved through the initial program of inquiry, the more drawn I felt. It was exciting and frightening at the same time.

Well over a year after my college graduation, I took the plunge and joined the congregation formation program. It was a cold; snowy day. I wore a skirt and carried my belongings through snow-covered sidewalks. Because I was more of a tomboy who rarely wore skirts, especially in the winter, this was a less than welcomed moment. When I arrived at the formation house, however, I was warmly welcomed by a group of mostly young women, willing to help me move in and get settled. Happily, I knew some of these women as we were college friends who were part of the clandestine group that “went away for the weekend” to attend vocation weekends at this same formation house. After lunch with the sisters, I was able to confidently bid my family farewell as they walked out the door to their waiting cars.

Although this first phase of formation was challenging for many reasons, including changes in program leadership and interpersonal issues with some of the women in formation, I managed to survive and moved to the novitiate a little over a year later. It was there that I had my first encounter with a former college acquaintance whom I knew was lesbian. At this point, I was aware of, and accepted, my own sexual orientation, but had chosen to keep that information to myself. After all, we were all celibate, so what difference did it make, or so I thought. This sister forced me to confront my sexual orientation by her physical advances and stories of feeling attracted to me. This rattled my peaceful life of denial. I told myself that I was living a lie and went into a tailspin.

I was soon called into the novice director's office. The director was my sister-mentor from college. There was a great level of comfort between us because we had journeyed together for the past four years. She was also a trained clinician and could see how depressed I was

becoming. We decided that I would see a college counselor with whom I had worked during the pre-formation evaluation and follow up. After a few appointments, I informed him that I believed the issue was that I was “gay.” I told him about the advances from the other novice, who had since been professed and was at her first ministry site. This conversation was a real breakthrough. I went back to the novice director and shared what had happened and what I was feeling. I expected to be told to pack my things because I was being dismissed from the novitiate. I could not have been more wrong. She was supportive and encouraged me to continue sessions with the counselor. She asked if I would be willing to sign a release for her to talk with the counselor and I agreed. They were friends and colleagues at the college, and I thought both were wonderful people. If their talking to each other would help, I was all for it! This process of collaborative therapy helped me to come to a place of wellness and self-acceptance, and I was able to return to my happy novice-self for the remainder of my formation program.

After temporary vows, I was missioned in another state at a high school led by one of our sisters and staffed by twelve other sisters. I had previously completed some of my ministry visitation at this school. The spacious convent was located on the school campus surrounded by athletic fields, neighborhoods, and local shopping areas. In a school of more than one thousand students, my initial class sizes ranged in the mid to high thirties. Because of my academic background in Art Education and my religious training in the novitiate, I was hired to teach theology and freshman art. The former advisor for the school’s theater productions had passed away the previous year, so I was asked to take his place in managing the stage crews, who were responsible for set design and construction, sound effects, and lighting. While these experiences were new to me, I loved them! My community life was fantastic, I loved the school, the students, and working with the theater productions. I truly felt that I had found my vocation in teaching. (Twenty-nine years later, I am still teaching, although now in college.) I spent five years at this school and community until I decided to return to my home area near the congregation’s motherhouse in order to study for my masters degree. My second ministry was in a very small school where I taught art, technology, and theology, and served as the technology coordinator. I also continued my work with the high school theater productions, though on a much smaller scale. It was here that I again experienced struggles with integrating my sexual orientation because of difficult and, at times, homophobic interactions with some sisters. Wisely, I knew the signs of what I was feeling and sought out a therapist outside my geographic area because I was not yet out to my family. For the next five years, I worked with the most amazing lesbian therapist who helped me to realize that full integration would never happen until I came out to those I loved in my family and community. A key experience was recognizing my deeply held shame because of my sexual orientation. This shame, she helped me to realize, was part of why I struggled in forming deeper friendships with my sisters in community. While I thought I was happy and comfortable with who I was, I still had not fully embraced the gift of my lesbian identity and how this gift could lead me to assist those also struggling to fully embrace their own orientation.

I have worked in higher education for eleven years and have had numerous opportunities to minister to students and staff who are struggling to fully embrace their sexual orientation. My coming to accept my own sexual orientation in the context of religious life has freed me to support those now walking a journey like my own.

Recently I was asked the question, “What about now?” How am I fully integrating my whole, authentic self into who I am and profess to be each day? My answer depends on the day and time. While I still believe that I have found happiness in the acceptance and integration of my sexual orientation and vowed life, there are presently, and will always be, challenges to face. The current political climate in the United States, the continued stance of the patriarchal church, and the sometimes-blatant homophobia of my own community members are just some examples of the types of challenges I and all lesbian women religious face each day, as do our LGBTQ brothers and sisters. Those who wish to silence us try to do so with fear and violence and it seems these acts are on the rise. Despite these risks, I will continue to choose authenticity.

An example of this conscious choice for authenticity is the sharing of my story with others beyond my small group of friends. Collaborating on this anthology meant that I would need to ask others to reveal personal information about themselves. How could I ask them to disclose their private lives if I were unwilling to do so as well. Confronted with the “safe” decision or the genuine one, I chose to be real and to be faithful to my authentic self.

The conversation with my congregational leader about this anthology and sharing of my own story has enabled our relationship to become more genuine. Each time I choose to tell my story or risk this level of openness with a sister or colleague, I feel freer, more authentic and more empowered. While I cannot predict or control the response I might receive from those with whom I share my story, my hope is that other sisters will find the hope and courage to walk the journey towards wholeness, joy, and self-love. Being my true, authentic self is the only way I can live a vowed life and minister to those with whom I am called to serve. I offer this same advice to any lesbian woman considering religious life and also offer my support as they embark on this journey towards authenticity, self-acceptance, and love.