

A Glimpse Through the Curtain:
Monologues of American Catholic Sisters

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“My father didn’t even know I had a voice until I was eighteen or twenty-one, because I was the meek—don’t rock the boat. Just listen, listen, listen.

So, the Sisters of Saint Francis [of Philadelphia] gave me a voice. Not to criticize, just to make people aware. This is a wonderful thing you’re doing, but it could be so much better if you had the whole story.”

-Sister Kathleen Parisi

Sister Petra settled into the chair in front of me. She shimmied back and forth until she nestled fully into the back of the chair, the tips of her toes barely brushing the ground. She lifted her shoulders and hunched her tiny frame slightly forward. I pressed record.

The life story that emerged from her interview not only shifted my goals as an oral historian, but allowed a peek into the ways Catholic sisters have been misrepresented in popular culture. In her mid-eighties, she spoke of her childhood in Philadelphia, the boyfriend who had died while serving in WWII, her work with children in the convent's orphanage and her lament over sisters who had passed on. Not only did she share poignant moments, but infused her stories with contagious humor and laughter. I was captivated not only by how intense and immediate her emotions were, but also the energy and description inherent in each story. As the interview ended, I walked away with a firm desire to share with others a portion of the emotional connection I felt while listening to Sister Petra's experience.

I should back up a bit to explain why this shift was so significant. I never intended to write a play about nuns. In embarking on my thesis project, I planned to record interviews with various Catholic sisters, analyze their narratives and hopefully ascertain some understanding of what initially drew them to religious life. Though I sought to understand these women in an academic context, I had personal reasons for pursuing the topic. My cousin, Sister Maria Pozzobon, left Italy when she was sixteen to join the Sisters of Saint Francis. By the time I began the project, she was well into her eighties. In visiting her and the sisters in her community, Sister Petra among them, I saw how rapidly their population was shrinking due to age, health and a dearth of new postulantes.

Since the first sisters set foot in New Orleans in 1727, sisters from various orders have shaped many facets of American culture. They cared for the wounded during the Civil War, raised orphaned and abused children, rehabilitated the incarcerated, educated countless numbers of students, and formed some of the largest healthcare and hospital systems in the nation, often receiving little or no pay in return (Sack). In 1965, at the height of their population, there were 180,000 sisters in America. Now just 56,000 remain. Many left after the Second Vatican Council, or Vatican II, released its recommendations in 1965. Those who stayed on aged and passed away, while the average age of sisters today stands at seventy-four years old (Winerip). Additionally, as female social roles have shifted over the decades, fewer young women have chosen religious life (Bogan).

In my own experience, as a woman who came of age at the cusp of the twenty-first century, the impulse to join a religious order where social choices seemed so limited, was perplexing to me. Living within a proscribed role, which prevented families and romantic relationships, appeared limiting; especially in light of the many careers now available to women that still foreground service to the community, and allow for many options regarding relationships and family. Additionally, like many other young women raised Catholic, I felt unwanted and abandoned by the church as I came to realize the limitations placed on women's participation in church hierarchy and very stringent rules regarding sexuality and reproductive issues. However, rather than leaving religion behind, I desired a way to better understand women's roles within the larger structure of Catholicism which simultaneously relies on and marginalizes them. I hoped the project could offer a way for me to quantify the reasons women dedicated themselves to the church, when I felt so ambivalent.

After interviewing Sister Petra, however, this desire for analytical understanding fell by the wayside. I could not simply write about her life in a paper, and cut and paste quotes to support my arguments. Her story had to be told in a way which preserved the liveliness and energy she transmitted as a living human being. In thinking of my own complicated connection to the church, I realized that many others would likely be as interested as I was to hear—in the sisters' own words—what drew them to their orders. Just as important, I hoped others could also feel the emotion behind their choices. A deeper aspiration emerged, in which I would set out to convey the life histories of a selection of sisters, allow for a representation of the multiplicity and individuality of their voices, and create a larger, nuanced understanding of what it has meant to be a sister.

With this new purpose, I struggled to find a more appropriate medium for the project. Film was not my area of expertise, and audio selections lacked the visual element I felt would be crucial to my retelling. As a creative writer with some previous experience crafting monologues, I then recalled the work of Anna Deavere Smith in documentary theatre pieces such as *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, *Fires in the Mirror* and *Let Me Down Easy*. As Deavere Smith explains, “Words are not an end in themselves. They are a means to evoking the character of the person who spoke them” (xxiii *Twilight*). By profiling select narrators in monologues, she could reveal not only the depth of their individuality but their broader connection to larger issues such as racism, health and social conflict. The power of the stories she portrayed not only replicated the live quality of interviews, but could draw audiences into the emotional experience shared by the characters she embodied on stage.

Delving even further into the idea of emotional transmission, Alison Landsberg has posited that, by experiencing the stories of others retold in a film or play, a viewer has the capacity to develop “prosthetic memories.” Absorbing the reenactments in their own memory repertoire, the emotional effects closely resemble living through the event themselves, and allow for a deep potential to empathize with protagonists (222). With this potential in mind, I realized that a play would therefore be an ideal medium to convey the emotional content I absorbed when recording Sister Petra’s story. My hope was that the audience would walk away from the play I would create, using the sisters’ own words, feeling a connection to each of them; thereby, not only seeing them as one-dimensional caricatures of nuns, but complex beings with emotions, relationships and hopes for the future.

It was important for me to include the stories of multiple nuns, rather than focusing on a single biography, in order to reveal that each sister is a multi-faceted and unique individual. Yes, I could profile just one sister and retell the events of her life, but doing so would seem to ignore the deliberate commitment sisters share to living in community with one another. In *They Say in Harlan County*, Alessandro Portelli discusses his work integrating various voices of his narrators to build a picture of historic events. He finds that while narrators may speak of one subject or event, “...this history is told through a multitude of stories spoken through a plurality of voices” (11). Ultimately, this range of experience, where each individual offered a new perspective and facet of a topic, could enable me to select stories from the interviews to create monologues, weaving them together into a larger script to tell the larger narrative of sisters in America. As one sister would offer a story to illustrate a point, another would follow up to share

their own, layering in a way that created a larger tapestry of stories woven from many smaller threads.

Ultimately, twelve sisters would contribute their stories to the project. After the two interviews I would conduct with Sister Petra, I reached out to additional narrators. A classmate shared a *New York Times* article, “Nuns who Won’t Stop Nudging,” which profiled the Sisters of Saint Francis of Philadelphia, a congregation committed to advocating for social justice. The main figure in the article, Sister Nora Nash, was Director of Corporate Social Responsibility. She and other sisters on the board regularly met with CEOs of major corporations to urge them towards ethical production practices. One of her main areas of advocacy was fracking regulation. Sister Nora became not only a pivotal narrator, but facilitated interviews with nine other sisters at her mother house. The sisters in her community, whom she connected me with, offered a tremendous range of experience from missionaries, artists, educators and even a comedian. Sister Tesa, from a separate community and a Sister of Saint Joseph, was the final interview. She, along with several others, had formed Hour Children, an organization in Queens, New York which fostered children whose mothers were incarcerated. Over the years, their work grew to include providing housing for women and their families after release, as well as job training and mentorship to help them reintegrate back into society. The array of sisters included in the interviews brought both breadth and depth to the project. The bonds they built with the people they served in their ministry, in addition to their willingness to discuss the doubts and questions which arose for them during their lifetimes, contained the emotional dimensionality I hoped to convey.

The monologues selected for the final script emerged from a painstaking process to transcribe each interview and cull stories around similar themes which emerged. As Portelli wrote in *The Battle of Valle Giulia*, “In many oral history narratives, all modes converge not only on pivotal events, but also on crucial themes” (34). Not only did he find themes woven through each narrative, but connections to institutional, communal and personal history came together to bring meaning and historical reference points for the speaker. I found this to be true in my work as well.

As the sisters interviewed ranged in age from their late fifties up to those in their mid-eighties, most had professed their vows beginning the 1940’s up until the 60’s. This time period coincided with immense social change, and upheaval of the traditional order. Add Vatican II, and the impact of the rapid reformations it enacted, the new opportunities presented to sisters both excited and worried them. Vatican II, an ecumenical meeting of religious leaders which produced several decrees, was unprecedented in its scope and suggestions for opening the church. In particular, the Decree on Renewal of Religious Life invited religious communities to reexamine their roles to better reflect the needs of their work and those served. It also called upon them to align this work to reflect the needs of its members (Gonsalves). This sparked renewal, reflection and a sea change in many religious communities.

During these subsequent transformations, many sisters chose more direct interactions with lay society. Some began to work with homeless persons and minister directly within social service groups. Each community decided the direction it would take and decisions to forgo the habit, while embedding more directly in society, led some mother houses to split into separate communities along conservative and progressive lines. Sisters who did not support or conform to

change, or lack thereof, either chose to leave or were pressured to by those in leadership positions. Visually this divide can be seen in sisters who wear the habit, coming from orders which hewed toward the traditional, and those who wear modified lay-clothes, whose communities underwent larger shifts. Representing a variety of these sisters in the play, those both wearing habits and not, seemed intrinsic to transmitting the differing experiences within religious life. Unexpectedly, the project occurred just as the Vatican opened an investigation into communities of women religious in America, to determine whether they were faithfully representing the teachings of the church or if they had become too radical in their outreach (Vatican II). This sudden investigation into the work of the sisters, and the unease over the reforms which might be thrust upon them, lent urgency to the direct representation of their voices on stage.

In addition to Vatican II, sisters' stories illustrated individual experiences intersecting larger historic events, like WWII. Such was the case for Sister St. Joseph as she recounted the story of her brother who died at the Battle of Iwo Jima. Her narrative conveyed the pain she and her mother endured as one brother returned home from war to tell them he searched for his brother's body among many strewn in the surf, but was unable to find him. In poignant moments like these, larger history permeated private experience poignantly. Taking themes such as family, love and loss, I then arranged stories in an order to create a narrative arc beginning with sisters' early lives, the reasons they joined religious orders, their experiences in service, the impact of Vatican II and their visions for the future of Catholic sisters. I also viewed as many plays as possible to absorb a sense of what might work on stage, reflecting this in my selection of stories.

Each monologue was drawn verbatim from the transcripts, and I only offered minimal editing to cut out filler language and to pull narratives together around the same topics.

The title came from Sr. St. Joseph's discussion of death. She told me:

I've been with hundreds of people when they've died. Sometimes, particularly when times were tough, I'd say, "You lucky bum." [Laughs] But other times I knew they went to something great. I've worked with policemen and detectives and some of them had afterlife experiences. These were hard nuts. They weren't people to be vaporized with visions of stuff. And they say, "Sister, don't be afraid to die," and then they tell you their experience. I've had enough experiences all through my life. Little glimpses like you get through a curtain or something, to know that God has good things in store.

The idea of glimpsing the lives of sisters in the same way Sr. St. Joseph envisioned glimpsing the afterlife seemed a perfect metaphor for the play.

In crafting the script I discovered answers to many of my original questions. Living a consecrated life was an opportunity and alternative to the rigid social expectations present in America when the sisters professed their vows. They were freed of the expectation to marry, live as housewives and bear children. As many told me, they could choose to focus on social justice and service with the support of their religious sisters, whereas the expectation of a married mother could easily preclude them from pursuing such work. So, while their choice seems so limiting in the present, it allowed for more freedoms than the other available option.

Once the script was nearly complete, I gathered a cast of six actors to rehearse and polish the play. Readings with the cast were essential to the ultimate production as they became workshops for the script and stories. I asked the actors to listen to the sisters' interviews and offer

their opinions on the script regarding which stories resonated the most. As a writer and director, hearing the stories read aloud while we worked enabled me to envision how each operated together, and ultimately the script was trimmed nearly in half. What remained were stories that conveyed each theme with impact, and also had a powerful emotional richness. This impact seemed to result from retellings which combined descriptive details of events moored by passionate feeling. It was also vital to provide balance. Wherein one story may bring forth strong feelings of longing or remorse, it could soon be followed by an example of joy and excitement as counterbalance.

As the actors came to know their characters, I wanted their portrayals expressed in a natural and genuine way. I felt listening to entire interviews, especially focusing on sisters' voices would help the actors learning the unique speech patterns and personalities of their narrators. I also hoped the actors could form a more rounded picture of each sister by hearing interviews in their entirety. There was so much content that could not be performed on stage that could help the actors understand the women as whole beings. Additionally, though several actors employed Deavere Smith's style in replicating the accents of their narrators, I did not require this of actors. It was more important for them to embody the personality and spirit of their characters without feeling required to merely imitate them on a surface level. The cast were decades younger than the women they portrayed. I viewed this as an asset, since the majority of the stories they acted out were from the sisters' younger years. Many of the most salient memories one possesses tend to be formed before the age of twenty-five. Since these are the years when people most often make decisions that impact the course of their lives, and the visceral impression of these seems to be more ingrained than those formed later in life (UNH). Therefore,

the youthful nature of the cast reflected the sisters as they would have been at the time the events originally took place, almost as if reflecting on the memories made the sisters young again.

The play was performed twice in New York City and once at Our Lady of Angels Convent in Aston, Pennsylvania. Each actor portrayed two sisters and successfully shifted back and forth between their stories and identities. Most of the actors had not portrayed living characters before, and were nervous as to how the sisters would react to seeing their stories on stage. During the second performance in New York, Sister Petra was seated in the front row. When the actor, Calaine Shafer, began her initial monologue, discussing the GI dances she attended during WWII and the fact that she still jitterbugs today, Sister Petra immediately recognized her story. She sat up excitedly in her seat and exclaimed, "That's me!" The comment immediately buoyed the actors as they not only seemed to receive permission to enact their monologues, but realized they would be met with enthusiastic energy.

Several months after the performances in New York, the production traveled to Aston, where an audience of over eighty sisters came to view the play, many of whom were the narrators portrayed on stage. Each narrator was recognized and gifted a rose to acknowledge her role in the play. As the performance drew to a close, all the sisters stood, reached out their hands and sang a Franciscan prayer to the cast. I have never felt an experience in which so much love and gratitude radiated from an audience. Afterward, the actors visited with the sisters, and some even returned to bring their families to visit with the sisters and see the mother house in person.

Several months later, I returned to the mother house to spend time with the sisters. Sister Mary Peter Kerner excitedly told me that she had something to show me. She went to her room and returned with the rose we had given her the night of the performance. Not only had the rose

survived, but the stem grew roots, which reached out across the water in the vase it occupied.

She planned to plant the rose in the grounds of the mother house where it would hopefully not only continue to bloom, but build new shoots.

Just as Sister Mary Peter's rose thrived and sprouted roots, so did this project. It formed bonds between the sisters and actors, brought their stories to larger audiences and helped forge my path as an oral historian, one who intends to continue employing documentary theatre to convey the narratives of those I interview.

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To protect the privacy of interviewees,
the script has been removed from this document.

Contact the Columbia Center for Oral History to read a physical copy.

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