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Holy Bullshit

Several years ago, I found myself, a doe eyed middle schooler, sitting in a classroom packed full of my fellow seventh graders. We were conversing with one another and bouncing our knees in anticipation for the school bell to ring, whose pleasant trill would send us home for the weekend. I watched as my teacher walked up to the board, erasing the marks that displayed the exhausted week's schedule, and adding new ones to inform what was in store for next week. A wave of cheers filled the classroom when the word "field trip" was added to Thursday's agenda. My teacher began passing out permission slips that we all placed promptly in our accordion folders.

"Fieldtrip!", I exclaimed, my cheerful tone fueled by the idea of a day with no homework, no uniforms and no rules. A break from all of our grueling pre algebra, geography and grammar work.

Some intelligent little preteen decided to infer just where we would be going. What followed next was complete pre-pubescent rage. I can only describe the feeling as being promised ice cream and being given sugar free greek yogurt, or being told you are going on a vacation and then pulling up to Great Grandma Pearl's cottage. There would be no cool science displays, 4D movies or thrilling operas on this field trip. There wouldn't even be any boys. The girls would be spending the day at a convent, while all the boys would be headed to the monastery.

Growing up going to Catholic schools, I felt like quite the religious being as a young person. I attended weekly masses with my family, prayed before meals and would always try to follow the commandments. This being said, my idea of fun was not visiting a gang of religiously devoted ladies. I was completely turned off to the idea. There was a tiny silver lining, however, introduced to me when my teacher began to explain about the essay writing contest.

After our day of observation, study and prayer, we would return to school and be given a prompt from the brothers and sisters. We each will type out an essay about our experiences and send them back to the convent and monastery to be read by the lay people. Then, they will choose a winner, who will receive a cash prize.

Cold hard cash, now that did peak my interest. As I walked out of school that day I began brainstorming ideas for my essay. I thought of big Catholic words I could use such as “acolyte” or “gynaeceum”. I planned to flex my dad’s volunteer work within our parish, and how we always attend mass every Sunday. I became excited. I was gonna win the hearts of the nuns and win the money.



Thursday rolled around, we piled on the bus, our paper bag lunches in hand. I was buttoned up in my regular polo shirt and navy blue slacks, except one key detail differed, the gold crucifix hanging from my neck. I had found time this weekend to dig it out of the attic from my first communion keepsakes, making sure to wear it on Thursday.

The bus drove us from our city streets far into the country. We unloaded, and my friends and I were all wishing we had played hooky. Brick and bland, the convent seemed to be straight out of a horror film. Tall, dead tree branches blocked the majority of the windows and the vine covered siding was filled with cracks.

Sister Joan, a rather thin, senior lady opened the door and welcomed us in. We began the tour of the inside of the facility. There were libraries of religious text, activity rooms, an industrial sized kitchen and living quarters. The communal bunkrooms made my jaw drop, dozens of bunkbeds packed tightly in a matchbox sized room, like the convent was a summer camp. The last stop of the tour was the chapel where we sat for an hour of adoration. I knelt down and began to pray quietly, I wanted to look my holiest for the nuns. However, after thirty minutes, my knees began to wobble and I had to tap out of my kneeling position.

The nuns said that they would treat us to lunch if we helped them make it, so we could save our bagged goods. We began to whip up their famous cabbage and beef stew that contained all items fresh from their garden. My female classmates and I sliced, diced, sauteed and stirred, while jamming out to some Christian classics. We sat down after an hour in the kitchen to finally eat. We were all so hungry we started mowing down our food like the cattle in their fields. I looked up and gasped when I saw the sisters staring at my friends and me with their hands folded. We had forgotten about prayer.

Sister Joan led us in a whirlwind prayer, thanking the lord for all the ingredients for today's meal, mentioning Mable, the cow recently butchered for the fresh beef. I sat

there staring at the cows in the field, imagining Mable. Suddenly, I lost my appetite and wished that I could take out my peanut butter and honey sandwich.

After lunch, we said our thank yous and goodbyes to the sisters and piled back on the bus. It was announced that the prompt for the essay was to discuss the vocation you feel most called to and why. I spent the bus ride home reflecting and brainstorming.

I had many ideas written down, I spent hours the past weekend thinking of aspects of my essay that could wow the nuns. I seemed to be more prepared than any of my classmates when we compared the notes we took during our time there. However, when I sat down in the computer lab back at school, I was stumped. The click-clack of my classmates' nimble fingers filled my ears, as my paper remained blank. I would try to write a topic sentence over and over again. "My vocation is most definitely to be a nun"..... delete. "I really feel as though consecrated life is for me because".....delete. "Being a nun would make my life whole in many ways".....delete.

I couldn't find the right words to say, because I knew they were not truly my words. I wanted to tell the nuns what I thought they would want to hear, but at the end of the day I didn't feel called to be a nun. I thought the convent was creepy. The lack of expression in their clothing would make me feel unlike myself. I would never put an hour into cooking a stew, when I have Campbell's microwave cups in my pantry. I couldn't focus during prayer, and I knew that I wanted to be in the medical field and raise a family of my own. So that is exactly what I said. I knew I had to finish up my essay by the end of the day and that was the only way this seemed possible.

I explained to the nuns that although the convent was very interesting, and consecrated life is very important work, I knew it probably wasn't for me. I added in

humorous tones, “I am not sure I hold the passion for homemade things that you ladies do” and “I would probably disrupt the peace in the convent; I can never sit still.” I explained what I did feel called to do in life, and how I would still integrate religion into my vocation. In the end, I was proud of my essay.

Then, I did some peer reviewing with my classmates. My face got beat red. They had all said how, “lovely it was” and how, “they are now considering consecrated life as their vocation”. I was embarrassed to have taken the opposite path, but it was far too late to redraft. Knowing my prize money was forfeited, I handed in the essay and hoped the nuns would not be offended.

Several weeks later, my teachers got some letters back from the convent. My teacher placed my envelope on my desk, but no other students got their letters back. “Oh, great” I thought to myself, “they were so disturbed by what I had written they sent it back to me”. I peeled back the seal of the envelope to reminisce on my travesty of an essay. Alongside my folded up paper was a note and a two dollar bill. I won! The sisters said they really enjoyed the honesty and humor in my essay. I was so shocked and so excited. I vowed then to never again try to write what I think people want to hear.

Throughout my years in high school and thus far in my college experience, I have held true to this lesson. I did a research paper on drug legalization, I wrote an argumentative essay on why bench riders are just as important as all stars in the game of basketball, topics that I was truly passionate about. I wrote about strong, personal memories I felt changed me as a person, the areas I felt I had expertise in, no longer making up stories that I thought people would like to hear.

Being this creative and open as a writer helped me become a more confident person. I always offer my honest opinion and will share embarrassing stories with others to help them feel less alone, making me a coveted friend in my adolescent years. Writing without hesitation taught me how to live my life more fully, therefore I am forever grateful to those nuns for seeing what I was doing with that essay and reassuring me that it was a good thing.