

had started to happen to sisters when I was in leadership, and I can remember saying, "I don't think I could ever do that—not live with my own sisters."

I don't want to be anybody but an Amityville Dominican. No way. I am so sure of where I belong. That's a singular grace—I have never really doubted that. When I was finally accepted in ministry here, that was exciting; and yet it was tremendous upheaval. I asked the leadership if I could have a room at the motherhouse. I said, "I have to be rooted in the congregation." Now some of our sisters who go away for ministry don't have that need. They don't have a place there that's called their own space. I needed to know that I belonged there, that I had a room that was my room, and that when I was free I could go back and be with the congregation. So that was the trade-off, and I came here.

I know I can't be here forever. So when my time is over, I will go back to the congregation. The one thing I did experience on a faith level in the two years that were so traumatic was that God will take care of me. I now believe that in the depths of my being, in a way that I never believed it before. And so my whole prayer journey from that time on has been a journey of trust. Really trusting.

Now this will be my last story. This is very significant. After I knew I was going to be in ministry here, I went to a workshop, because I had already arranged it. [The group was] gathered together in this great big hall before they started the procession down to the parish church. I was feeling very alone and still getting ready for this uprooting. This young laywoman said to me, "Do you want to walk over together?" I said that would be nice. She was also alone, and we were together for the readings; but all of a sudden I got separated from her, and however the procession formed, I was at the end of the line by myself. I was the last one. And I was so overwhelmed with the sense of separation and loneliness that I said, "I can't be here." I wiggled my way all the way up through that line until I got in the middle and was surrounded by people. It was very symbolic of where I was at the time.

They had this pool set up at the rear of the church, decorated with these absolutely exotic plants. It was just beautiful. And the man who was preaching said, "What I want you to do is either come to the water by yourself and pray—or come with a partner." And they were playing "Come to the Water," that beautiful hymn.

I stood there absolutely frozen and isolated. I said [to myself], "I cannot go up to that water alone. I can't do that." So I said, "Then ask somebody to go with you." And I started to lean over toward somebody, and someone else came. It looked like everyone else was paired. I was totally alone. And I was crying because I couldn't move. I couldn't move to that water.

All of sudden someone came and took my hand, and it was this young woman. And she said, "Irene, let's go to the water together." I felt like Jesus Christ had taken my hand and led me to that water. It was such a profound experience. I went through the rest of the liturgy in tears. (March 1991)

Sister Janet Ruffing

Sister Janet Ruffing, 48, is associate professor of spirituality and spiritual direction in the Graduate School of Religion and Religious Education at Fordham University in New York. She not only serves as a spiritual director; she also trains others in spiritual direction. She has published two books and several essays on the subject. Tall and thin with blue eyes and tightly curled light-brown hair that is slightly gray, she is a Sister of Mercy from Burlingame, a Californian still getting used to life on the east coast. The interview took place at her apartment in the northern reaches of the Bronx.

I was seven when my father said, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" I said, "I want to be a nun." He said, "Don't you want to be a mommy and a secretary like your mother?" I said, "No," and I never spoke about it again.

And then the sense of calling reemerged at significant times. It came back again when I was maybe 13 or 14, finishing seventh, eighth grade. And I wasn't terribly interested; I really did want to marry and have a family. So there were long conversations about this with God. When I was in high school, I'd be in the middle of a dance and God would be so present, I could not ignore it. And I'd say, "All right, leave me alone. I'll come to mass tomorrow morning. Just leave me alone now."

I didn't talk to nuns about this. It wasn't that I didn't want anybody to influence me. I didn't want to be treated differently; I didn't want to be singled out as the prospective nun by the nuns. So I just kept it to myself. In my family there's a strong Nordic temperament, a very strong reserve.

My mother was somewhat fragile in her health all of her life, so my father always did a lot that needed to be done. And as kids [my brother and I] had to do a lot of the work around the house. Mom was never cut out to be purely a homemaker. She was very brilliant, very creative. Both she and my dad were Depression kids, and they didn't have money to go to college. My mother started working as a school secretary when I was seven or eight, and while she was in the school, her principal encouraged her to start college. Now this was in the 1950s; middle-age women weren't doing this. She was 38 when she started college. She went straight through four years, graduated third in her class at San Francisco State. When she started college I was 11, and on my holidays I would go to college with her. I guess what I saw in my mother was that you could make major changes in your life as an adult. When I was 16, my mother asked me what I wanted to be. She knew; she's very intuitive. And I said, "Well, if I don't enter the convent I would like to be a college professor, and I would either teach philosophy, psychology, or theology." And she said, "And if you enter?" I said, "Well, then I don't know. I'd probably be lucky to teach high school."



Sister Janet Ruffing.

I was 18 when I entered, right out of high school. I was acquainted with five different communities, so [selecting one] was a very conscious choice. At the time, the most I could articulate was [that] I was profoundly touched and developed spiritually by the Sisters of Mercy in the one year I had them. The Sister who had the Sodality taught us how to do mental prayer, and it opened a contemplative dimension that actually my second-grade teacher had opened, but I didn't know how to get back to. There was a deep biblical and liturgical spirituality that was part of the community that was more authentic and rich than the devotion I saw in the other communities.

I was very, very happy as a postulant. I liked the studies; I knew it was right. The postulant director was really warm and loving. The novitiate was terrible. We were completely isolated from everything familiar; all of our communication was controlled. There were 45 of us in the novitiate, and we had a novice director who was herself a contemplative, a very mystical person who did not understand teenagers and who was afraid of showing affection to anybody for fear of developing favoritism; and so she showed affection to none of us. So it was two years of isolation and total deprivation from any positive feedback. I was very close to a nervous breakdown in those two years.

After I made first vows, the juniorate director knew something had gone very wrong. She had apparently been the person who answered my letters

when I was exploring the congregation, and she [had been] taken with my creativity and intellectualism and independence. She observed that I was a changed person, and she literally loved me back into life. She said, "Well, you were fine before you got here, so all I'm asking you to do is be yourself." And I couldn't find myself. I couldn't find myself. I did, I guess, about six to eight months of therapy. It took maybe three years—the initial working through in therapy, and then this sister who just loved me to pieces. I was very clear that I wasn't going to leave the community until I was myself again, that I felt the community owed me that. After three years I said, "Well, I think we've undone it all." And it was at that point that I made the vocation choice all over again. I had a completely open question: "God, is this where you want me?" [The answer] was, again, an intense experience of "Yes, this is where I want you."

I was a postulant when we started getting the documents from the [Vatican] Council. So I read every single document from the Council as it arrived from Rome all through those years, one after another after another. I knew after three years that if a lot didn't change I couldn't stay. My juniorate director said to me, "If you can hang on for a couple of more years, then I think it will be all right. You will be able to be a lot more self-determining. I would just encourage you to wait and see." And at that point she relaxed as many of the regulations as she could on my behalf, because she knew that if I had enough freedom over my schedule, I would be able to function better.

By the time I started teaching—you can't believe how weird it was. I started teaching in 1968. I'd entered in '63. I had missed the civil rights movement. And I landed in a high school in which we had young teachers who had done sit-ins and the moratorium and all that stuff in college and then introduced it into the high school. So it was an incredible situation. I can remember the first dances I had to chaperone. When I entered, it was soft surfer music; and this was hard, acid rock and it hurt my bones.

And yet I was living in the motherhouse, so it was two completely incompatible worlds. There were funny rules. We weren't supposed to stay overnight with the girls or do late-night things with the girls. But the married women [on the faculty] were supposed to do that. [We said,] "This is ridiculous; it's not right for us to ask our lay colleagues to do things we're not willing to do." Those were the years we began to change, so that none of the arbitrary regulations impeded the actual ministry we were doing with people. So that was going on at the high school. In the meantime we didn't have keys to get into our own house. We'd be up at school until 10 or 11 o'clock at night, depending on what the school activities were, and then find that we'd been locked out of the house because, you know, nuns are supposed to be in by a certain time. We'd be throwing rocks at the windows, trying to figure out who we could get up to let us in. And it got so intolerable.

What happened was, there was a marvelous group of women who created a subcommunity among the people in the high school; so those of us who were

newest on the faculty were welcomed into an already functioning underground community. There were 70 professed sisters in the house, and we were a group of 25. So there was a sense of belonging and of caring for one another within this kind of impersonal house.

[After four years] I was changed to our high school in San Francisco, which was a very difficult place. There were a lot of tensions in the house. I am the last generation that had a long enough taste of everything old to understand everybody older than me in the community. Those who entered two years after me, because the Council had affected us so dramatically so quickly, never had an understanding of the rest of the community in terms of what their formative experiences were. So at the ripe old age of 27, I was told I was middle-aged and was sent with other people around my age to bridge the generational differences in the house. It was a terrible time for me. It was awful. Every year several sisters moved out of the house or left the community.

I taught there three years and then was moved back down to Burlingame. In the mid-1970s, the very first programs in spirituality became available, and I discovered that I could study my passion. So I started a master's degree program at the University of San Francisco, which began with a 30-day Ignatian retreat. What was more significant for me than the prayer experience, which was profound, was the reawakening of my intellectual life. I came alive intellectually.

I have received some really nice mentoring in my community. I was still teaching high school in Burlingame when a sister who had taught me in college and was on the general council told me about a summer program [in spirituality]. I said, "I'd really like to do this, but it isn't academic enough. What I really want to do is a year at the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, in a renewal program called the Institute for Spirituality and Worship." But nobody was let out for a sabbatical; sabbaticals didn't even exist. So she, wise woman that she was, said, "Oh, Janet, if you write all that up, they won't say yes to you. So just apply for the summer program and after you've done that partway through, apply for this other." And it went through. Now, is that not help? Someone is saying, This is how the system works and, yes, I think you should do it, but try it this way.

So I got my year in Berkeley. I was in Berkeley one week—classes had not even started—when I knew that I should be doing a doctorate. It had to do with being in an academic environment in which I fit for the first time in my life, where there were more people who were like me than different from me. I had assumed—as a sister, as a woman religious—that these two realities were incompatible. And when I was in the theological school, three-quarters of the people there were—guess what?—religious, men and women.

Classes hadn't even started yet. It was so clear; it was absolutely so clear. I can still remember Columbus Day. I go down to Burlingame, thinking, "I'd better tell the president of our community that I need to do doctoral studies. It's not fair to her for her to be surprised in the spring, that I don't want to go

back to high school." Well, I was quite unprepared for her inability to understand and appreciate what this was about. She was completely nonreceptive. So that set off probably the worst crisis in my entire religious life, because I knew inside myself that I was never ever going to deny who I was again. I had already done that once. I knew I was still called to religious life, but it was really questionable whether I could continue in the community I was in. And I had some good friends in Berkeley who would say to me, "Well, if you ever find you need to leave your community, we would love to have you." At the same time, I knew no [community] was going to want a transfer who was demanding higher education.

I had broken all the "rules" about self-initiation. At that point there was no process for requesting full-time doctoral studies. You were supposed to wait to be asked. I was being uppity; I was wanting too much. While I was in such pain over the conflict with the community, I had another mentor—another Jesuit mentor, who became a colleague and a friend—who said to me at that point, "You would perhaps be happier if you became a feminist." Now again, this is the great irony. My feminist consciousness was mediated by Jesuit spiritual directors and teachers. By the time I got to the Graduate Theological Union [at Berkeley] it already espoused a complete feminist agenda. Jesuits in theology had written their observations on the 1976 Vatican declaration on why women couldn't be ordained, criticizing the arguments. They were absolute leaders in supporting women, women's ordination. So I was imbibing a Christian feminism while I was there.

So this priest friend, mentor, said to me, "I think you should read widely in feminism. You are extremely articulate about your experience. You think it's just your experience, but it's every woman's experience." And he said, "I think you would feel less isolated if you could recognize what part of your experience is primarily because you're a woman, and not because you're Janet. And you could do a great service for other people by articulating in those broader terms your experience as a woman." Well, that really gave me a clue. That's when I became a feminist.

See, I had not identified with feminism, because I saw an aggressive, harsh, strident side of the feminist movement. And in my family the gender stuff was very, very subtle. I had a brother and I was allowed, or effectively able, to do anything he could do. So there was a sense we were not unequal. My worst experiences [of discrimination] happened in the Church, beginning when I couldn't become an altar server. I had really wanted to be a priest, not a sister, at age seven. And that was when I found out I'd never be an altar server or a priest. The summer I made final vows, '71, a priest who was in residence at the motherhouse at that point, who taught in the local seminary, asked me if I had ever wanted to be a priest. At that point he thought women were going to be ordained in 10 years, so he was already cultivating the call to ordained ministry. And that was very foremost in my mind when I went to study. Even when I was presenting my reasons to my president—why I should do these

studies—I said to her, “We need to have our own theological competence. We need not to be dependent on male theologians for interpreting our lives for us.” And I said, “I think I’m called to be of service to the Church in this way.” And she said, “But nobody’s asking you to do that in the community.” I said, “No one’s asked me to do anything but sew and arrange flowers. No one’s asked me to use my best gift in this community. They’ve been using my auxiliaries.” What she was trying to say to me was, somehow I didn’t quite fit. The implication was, there was something wrong with me. And I said to her, “I think I would have better relationships with women in this community if there was a place for my intellectual life to live. It wouldn’t insert itself in the chitchat, which is what annoys people.”

[After I finished the year at Berkeley] I was assigned to a high school in San Diego, which is about as far away from the headquarters as I could be—which was fine—and asked to chair a religion department, and that was fine, too, because I could at least work with the kids. I had not been assigned to study. And there was no indication that I was going to be assigned to study in the near future.

So I went to San Diego. I decided I was not going to get depressed or sick, so I was living a very healthy lifestyle. I ran my first 10K race. I consciously decided not to get depressed because of the frustration and consciously decided not to take it out on the people I was living with or the kids I was teaching. In the fall of that first year, I was still pressuring my leadership [about doctoral studies]. I finally said to the president, “How do I get in line? Where’s the line?” Well, it was very ironic, because I was elected to the secondary education advisory board, and the business of the first meeting was two other women who were requesting doctoral studies in theology. I was furious. One of them was five years younger than I was and had not made final vows. The other was two years older than I was, and she was given permission to start her studies because she didn’t fit in high school. They wouldn’t let me out because I did a good job. So I was very angry and I said, “You’re punishing me.” Well, that made them very nervous. As they said, it was very confusing to feel my feelings.

The great irony—and this was part of what galvanized my feminism—was that in November I was told [by the community] I was so essential to the school that I couldn’t leave. In April the superintendent of schools tried to fire me and replace me with a priest. So I then called back the people [in my community] who voted against me and I said, “You won’t believe this, but they don’t think I’m necessary.” So I then elicited the same women in a fight for women, and they all rallied around me to fight for this job.

The charge against me was that I could not work with priests. Well, the principal knew it was garbage. He said, “You’ve had 15 [of them] in here. As far as I can tell, the only priest you can’t work with is the [associate pastor] across the street.” He’s the one who went to the superintendent. It took about six weeks before the decision was reversed. But the principal—his contract was

withheld for two months because he supported me—was very good to me. It was just awful. It was very disillusioning, because the superintendent of schools did not care what happened to the kids; he did not care what was best for the school. He only cared about his own career. And I had never met anybody in the Church like that before. For me it was the first time dealing with somebody who was vocationally bankrupt. So anyway, it ended up that I kept my job. I had three priests who reported to me for the ministry programs for the last year I was there, and we had a really good year.

[In the meantime it had been decided that I would be approved for doctoral studies—after a two-year delay.] So the pressure was reduced when I knew I would be going. Now the amazing thing is that somehow all that has healed in the community. Really, once I started my doctoral studies, all those tensions disappeared.

I went for the doctoral degree in Christian spirituality to the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley in 1980. And I was there six years. While I was there full time, the community was very generous. Once they gave us something, they gave it to us. So I had no financial obligations the first three years. I got all my course work in. Then after I finished my comprehensives in ’83 I started working in the permanent diaconate formation program for the Diocese of Oakland and doing a lot of free-lance spiritual direction, retreat work, and then wrote my dissertation on spiritual direction. Presently I’m associate professor of spirituality and spiritual direction, in the Graduate School of Religion and Religious Education at Fordham University.

Part of what I was asked to do when I came was to develop the program in such a way that it included specific training in spiritual direction. Basically, spiritual direction is a one-to-one pastoral relationship in which the spiritual director is helping the person coming for direction pay attention and respond to how God is acting in their life. What happens for the directee—and this is the major thesis of the book I wrote [*Uncovering Stories of Faith*—is the creation of an oral identity. The identity that’s being formed is the Christian identity of the self, and that’s an identity that’s not allowed in public discourse in our culture.

For me, people who come for spiritual direction are people who are conscious of God’s presence moving in their lives. So it’s people who have undergone a spiritual awakening and who have a desire to respond in some ongoing way. At this point I have all women, which was never the case before I came to this part of the country. And I have mostly feminist women, and at least half of those are academic women, because they’re the ones who have the hardest time finding someone who will respect both their intellectual lives and their feminism. I have also had some gay men, because gay men and lesbians have a harder time here. The religious culture is so repressive here [on the east coast]. If you don’t quite fit standard vanilla, it can be harder to find people who are going to treat you well.

Rosemary Ruether said something at a public lecture in San Diego that stayed with me. She talked about her own knowledge of the history of the tra-

dition, saying that leaving the Church never changes it. It creates a new group, but it never causes change in the group that was left. I understood that to be [a challenge]; I feel a real call to change this Church. What I do in the ministry of spiritual direction and in teaching is freeing people to respect the movement of the Spirit and to be faithful to their conscience. I think I'm doing a lot of "subversive" damage, creating pockets where renewal can happen. So I can stay [in the Church] because I do experience that real clear efficacy. I have a very meaningful ministry. I'm helping people stay in the Church.

I'm now 30 years in religious life. When I started to celebrate my own jubilee, I started trying to articulate what the life was about, because we're living in this very strange paradox. I look at people in my community, and for the most part we're vibrant, we're alive, we love what we're doing. Our relationships with one another are deep and loving and compassionate, nonjudgmental. So that's incredibly exciting. But what I'm beginning to understand is that the Church—and by that I mean most laypeople and the clergy—only identify religious life with the work we did in the Church, not as a lifestyle of total dedication to God. There's something about the very core of religious life that seems to be invisible. Anything we do, any layperson can do. So we can't be defined by the ministry. And here in the east there's still a lot of anger at religions, for oppressions of one kind or another. In the west, that's pretty much gone now. But I find absolutely no social support among clergy or laity for religious life at this point.

My understanding of history tells me that you get a thrust forward and a thrust back and a thrust forward. Until more of the Church is going in one direction, we're not going to get anywhere. Women who are in religious life right now, even those who are living it in the most faithful way they can imagine, are being conspired against by the disharmonies in the Church and the huge paradigm change that's going on in the culture as well.

I think my own religious life will always be transitional. I'm not at all sure I'll see the new form. When one has to live a life that may not live on in the next generation, the validation all has to come from inside. It's not self-validating by virtue of public acceptance or social support. Each of us has to have the capacity to live our vocation with such confidence and spiritual rooting that we know, "This is what I am called to do, and this is what grace has been given to me." That's very hard.

What I found when I came to celebrate my jubilee was deep—profound—happiness, and I couldn't account for it. You know, I shouldn't be able to account for it, if religious life is a dying institution. I think religious life is supposed to be an icon, a window onto the sacred; for some people a relationship with God is so compelling that it requires a total focus. And that is healthy for the Church because it says something about God. It says something about what we're all called to do, even if we're not all going to do it in the same way. (November 1993)

Sister Annette Covatta

Women's liturgies are one of the most painful and divisive issues facing women religious. Many of the sisters had strong opinions—pro and con—on the subject, but there was also a marked reluctance to share, in print, their personal experiences. Given their honesty and openness in other areas, this subject, so closely allied to the ordination of women, may be the last taboo.

Sister Annette Covatta, 64, was one of the few who spoke freely about participating in such liturgies. She described the dramatic changes in her spiritual life from the time she was a novice to her current work as founder and director of Fulcrum, a ministry devoted to holistic spirituality. She now travels from Georgia to Montreal conducting retreats and workshops for women. A member of the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary, she lives alone in a small rented house on a winding country road in upstate New York. Flowers bloomed just outside her front door. A grand piano dominated the living room, testimony to Sister Annette's past as an accomplished pianist.

I'm a funny person. On the one hand, I'm a wild woman with lots of creativity and open to change and living boldly and wanting the fullness of life. Early on in the novitiate, I was so struck by what Jesus said: "I've come that you may have life and have it to the full." I could see this cornucopia overflowing with life. And in those days it was pretty much the romantic, pleasant side of everything. I since see that being alive is also struggling with pain, because it's part of the human condition.

The other side of me is a very controlled person. I have "to do" lists, and I meet my deadlines, and I'm always punctual. That part of me really got nurtured in the novitiate. Everything was very prescribed, and I loved that. I liked the predictability from one thing to the other. And I was totally caught up in the spirituality.

I accepted it all with enthusiasm, but every once in a while something scratched at me. We had no freedom—that scratched at me. But then I said, "Well, that's what the vow of obedience is." You see, the spirituality of that time was perfectionism: You achieve holiness through being perfect. Being perfect is a hard road, and so the more you suffer, the better chance you have to be perfect. When you have a choice, choose the hardest way, because there's more merit in that and you'll be closer to God. When I had a hard time as a human being and as this person that had so much life in her, I said, "That's what I'm giving up for this way of life."

What I believe now is that the way I live is intrinsic to what I do. That was not an early belief of mine. We ate an active community, and therefore the life of service or ministry was where you really got your sense of worth. I was measuring myself on how hard I was working on the ministry. And, of course, the ministry in those days was teaching in the schools. You were what you did.