

Storyteller Norris has monk's eye for the sacred

By Alicia von Stamwitz

Kathleen Norris is a poet, storyteller, preacher and essayist with a monk's eye for the sacred. Many readers first encountered her spellbinding prose in *The Cloister Walk*, a memoir of her nine-month stay at St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minn. She is a Protestant Christian — the direct descendant fiery pioneer preachers — but she credits the Benedictines with anchoring and deepening her spiritual life. In 1986, she became a Benedictine Oblate at Assumption Abbey in North Dakota, sealing her association with the Catholic community.

These days Norris lives in Honolulu, Hawaii, but she travels to the mainland each year to give lectures and promote her books: most recently, *Acedia & Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer's Life*. The interview took place at St. John's Abbey in Minnesota.

Q: You once said, "Fear is not a bad place to start a spiritual journey." What did you mean by that?

I was talking about the biblical phrase "fear of God," because that

not necessarily a negative fear. It might be a sense of wonder, it might be just a sense of discomfort — and that probably is a healthy thing because it's going to lead you to someplace new.

Q: Would that differ from the desert experience — the more traditional metaphor for discomfort on the spiritual journey?

I think so, because the desert experience is a particular place that we all get to at some point. You're not talking about comfort zones at that point. You're talking about real loss and grief and serious deprivations, whether they're physical, emotional or spiritual. It could be the death of a child or the loss of a job. It's usually something major that really unhinges you. And that's one of the strengths of the whole Christian church — that it can be a place to go during that experience. It provides a community of people who can share that experience with you.

Q: You've written about the importance of community, particularly when you were a caregiver for members of your family. Is that when you connected with the Benedictine community most deeply?

No, I actually wasn't caregiving when I first encountered Benedictines. My husband and my parents were all in pretty good health then. I was on a religious search of some kind, but I wasn't sure if I was even a Christian and all of that. Then I discovered this tradition of communal prayer, daily psalm readings and monastic spirituality, and I think it's one of God's gifts to me. I was pretty well grounded in it by the time I really needed it, when my husband in particular was getting very frail and my parents were in their last years of life.

Q: Somebody reading this interview may be in that role right now, caregiving, and feel burdened by it. What did you learn from your experience?

Well, first of all, caregiving really is a burden. When you're caregiving for someone who's terminally ill or an aging person, it can get depressing. The last year of my husband's life, the first task I had every morning was to clean the commode by the bed — a nice smelly chore — but I just got so that I was indifferent to it. It was a sign my husband was still alive, he was still functioning. It really wasn't a negative thing. When you can get to that state, I think that's healthy.

But the main thing I learned with my husband and both of my parents is that as burdensome as all of this is, this is really precious time too. The people I feel the sorriest for are the people who say, "Well, I want to remember this person as they were. I don't want to visit them in the nursing home setting." And I think, *You're missing out on so much good time, and you can't get it back because once*

they're gone, that's it. So looking back on this — about 15 years of caregiving — I think this was the best time in the world. I have so many good memories of my father and my husband and my mother, just smiles and laughter and little things that we did together.

Q: You do quite a bit of public speaking these days. What do you most enjoy talking about?

Well, it's two things, I'd say. The first is sharing poetry with people, especially audiences that don't think they will enjoy poetry because of the way it's been taught to them or whatever. This includes a group of North Dakota state legislators once, and also my favourite audience was at a bull sale in North Dakota.

The other thing, especially with Christian audiences, is talking about ancient concepts that we've lost sight of, like *acedia*, the topic of my latest book. It's really fun to share some of that ancient literature because it's much more accessible than contemporary theologians, and it's powerful stuff. Like John Chrysostom; his name means "golden mouth." He's very concrete and vivid. He once wrote, "You're having your maids collect your excrement in silver basins while a man made in the image of God is freezing to death on the street!" You hear that and you go, *Boom. Yeah.* He got in trouble with the empress and got exiled from Constantinople, because in fact those words probably were directed at her. She had a nice silver bowl for her poop.

Q: So you're saying even ordinary Christians would find these writings interesting and relevant?

Yes. In fact, a while ago, I found an ad that a woman had taken in a newspaper, and she said, "As a western European I have no tradition." She was writing off Christianity as no tradition, and she was looking for Native Americans who could help her discover *their* tradition. That's a very American thing, just buy somebody else's tradition and claim it as yours. Did you know you can actually buy an Indian name for yourself? I mean, it's

awful. But what really struck me is that here's someone who comes from, as she described it, a "white European background," which



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means Western Christianity, and somehow this is nothing to her. It's "no tradition."

One time, I read a passage from Gregory of Nyssa to some very skeptical people; he has this passage that sounds almost identical to Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce. After I read it, the people said, "Oh, what Indian chief said that?" and I said, "Well, it wasn't an Indian chief, actually. It was St. Gregory in the fourth century. *Nyah nyah.*" I was giving them a hard time, but I wanted to point out that this wisdom is in the Christian tradition too.

I think of that early literature and the monastic tradition as kind of an underground stream. It's always been there, but it hasn't been the main emphasis in the West. Even when you look at someone later, like Thomas Aquinas; I mean, he wrote all of that very analytical philosophy, but he also wrote mystical poetry and hymns that are still sung today. And of course in the Middle Ages nobody thought that was a contradiction — you could be a scholastic philosopher and a mystical poet.

Q: In your early writings, you mention going through a difficult time and experiencing a great betrayal. Would you have advice for someone who is going through that? In other words, the problem of forgiveness.

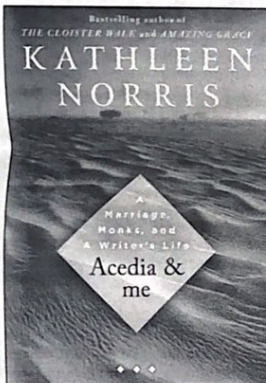
I had a similar question not long ago in an audience. Somebody said, "How can I honour my father and mother when I've been abused?" I said, That's a horrible struggle if you have suffered psychological or physical abuse from a parent. That's about the worst

thing I can imagine. Obviously, you're going to have to try to heal from that first, however you can. But, I said, in terms of the biblical commandment, you can broaden that. I explained that I've started to do this myself now that my parents are gone. If I'm out in public and I help a senior citizen with something, even giving him a seat on the bus, whatever — I'm honouring my father and mother by honouring the older generation.

If you've been abused, you have to deal with that wound, but at the same time you can honour the elders among us. That is a good thing to do, and it fulfills the commandment. It isn't just *your* father or *your* mother: it's a whole generation that you want to honour and help. Sometimes the smiles or the little comments you get from some of these strangers that you've helped in some way — the gratitude and the little conversations you can have with these total strangers — are pure blessing. They're just wonderful and they can help, especially if you are healing up from something really bad.

That's one of the reasons the psalms are so great too, because they talk about personal betrayal, they talk about so many of the things we do to each other. The Bible is full of the bad things that we do to each other, and some people say, "Oh, we don't want to read that depressing stuff," and I think, *Well, wait a minute. It just reflects human nature, it reflects reality — human reality.*

In a monastic community, they're reciting the psalms over and over again, lamenting psalms, and psalms that are just bursting with joy. You can find everything in there, and it can be a real comfort. When you're feeling down, you can read one of those psalms that reflects your mood, and it can be good. And if you're feeling up when you read a lamenting psalm, then you can pray it for someone else, someone you know who is lamenting, because there always is someone in the world who is grieving or lamenting.



Among Kathleen Norris's books is *Acedia and Me* — part memoir and part meditation on *acedia*, a debilitating condition of the soul.

is so misunderstood. When trendy atheist people say, "Fear is bad," I say, "Well, not really." The ancient concept of fear isn't like the fear from a horror movie. It's a much healthier concept of a proper sense of awe and wonder at the universe. God's power is part of it, beauty is part of it.

I think fear can be described as anything that takes you out of your comfort zone. It is often a place where you're going to begin the spiritual journey, because something is troubling you. It's

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