HIGHLINE

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Behold, The Millennial Nuns

More young women are being called to the religious life now than at any point in the last 50 years. What on earth is going on?

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iwent to a science magnet high school, graduating in 2001, but in my late 20s, I began to notice that some of my classmates were turning toward the Catholic faith. It surprised me: My high school was ostentatiously secular. We had a steel statue on the front lawn depicting the triumph of mathematical logic. Our senior class president wore a giant calculator costume to football games. When my government class held a mock debate over abortion, only two students out of 18 volunteered to argue the "pro-life" case.

And near the end of the 2000s, a half-dozen old friends I'd remembered as logical skeptics and trend-forward internet connoisseurs had become deeply religious. Some of them had been raised loosely Catholic, some had not. They blogged. They wrote Facebook posts about their conversions and shared memes about contraception-free family planning. They seemed to want to celebrate their lives.

One Catholic classmate chronicled her experience starting an organic farm with her husband and seven children, twinning advocacy for lefty, soyboy things like non-GMO baby yoghurt with tributes to the late Justice Antonin Scalia and pictures of homemade pizzas with tomato-sauce patterns meant to look like Jesus's wounds on the cross. My friend Meg, the center of attention at our high school parties, started calling herself a "hobo for Christ." She couch-surfed around the world and made her income from speeches booked off of her pop culture-savvy blog—only the gist of these speeches was a profound religious evangelicalism. "God," she wrote in one post, is "demanding radical discipleship." She also considered becoming a Catholic nun.

These people intrigued me, because they didn't quite fit. The presumption, I had always thought, was that the U.S. is on a steady, if bumpy, progressive drift. Books published about America's demographic destiny like to warn religious folks to be afraid of the young. Each successive generation, the thinking goes, wants to exercise more choice over what they eat, over how they live, over who they love, over their dreams, over their truths. The young aren't interested in tradition or moral constraints.

Catholicism seems especially out of step with contemporary American life. Protestantism easily accommodates rock bands and a personable, almost life coach-esque Jesus. But even liberal Catholic communities require submission to a gold-crowned pope who theologically can't be wrong (in certain circumstances) and who is chosen by a hundred-odd men—only men—who undergo a ritual of eating the literal body of Christ embedded in a cracker. To say the sex scandals didn't help is putting it mildly. A 2008 Pew Research Center study (https://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/26/us/26religion.html?mtrref=www.google.com) found that Catholicism lost more adherents in the late 20th century than any other religion in the U.S. About a third of Americans raised Catholic reported that they had left the church.

The contraction hit church staff, too—its priesthood and its community of nuns. In 1965, America had 180,000 perpetually professed Catholic sisters, the technical term for women who have pledged their lives to chastity, poverty, obedience and serving the church. By 2010, that number tanked to fewer than 50,000. In 2009, more Catholic sisters in America were over 90 years old than under 60.

But right around the time I began to notice my high school classmates' burgeoning faith, something flipped. After 50 years of decline, the number of young women "discerning the religious life"—or going through the long process of becoming a Catholic sister—is substantially increasing. In 2017, 13 percent of women from age 18 to 35 who answered a Georgetown University-affiliated survey of American Catholics reported that they had considered becoming a Catholic sister. That's more than 900,000 young women, enough to repopulate the corps of "women religious" in a couple of decades, even if only a fraction of them actually go through with it.

And the aspiring sisters aren't like the old ones. They're more diverse: Ninety percent of American nuns in 2009 identified as white; last year, fewer than 60 percent of new entrants to convents did. They're also younger: The average age for taking the final step into the religious life a decade ago was 40. Today, it's 24. They're disproportionately middle children, often high-flying and high-achieving. Typical discernment stories on blogs or in the Catholic press start with lines like "she played lacrosse and went to Rutgers" or she was "a Harvard graduate with a wonderful boyfriend."

You'll find these 20-somethings, like other 20-somethings, all over Instagram and YouTube. Some investigate which religious order to join on a website called VocationMatch.com, basically a dating app for nuns. You get the sense that these young women get a kick out of demonstrating their enduring link to "basic bitch" concerns like food Instagramming, college sports or Benedict Cumberbatch's facial hair—and then pulling a fast one on the rest of us with flinty tweets like "You die unprepared without the sacraments."

These young women have one last surprise: They tend to be far more doctrinally conservative than their predecessors. If you go deeper into their social media feeds, past the wacky photos of habited nuns making the hang-loose sign, you'll find a firm devotion to the most traditional of Catholic beliefs. They fervently protest abortion. They celebrate virginity not as a necessity to free up time to serve God—how some "liberal" sisters see it—but as something in itself holy. It's a severity that overlaps neatly, actually, with the OMG maximalism that dominates social media.

Patrice Tuohy, the publisher of guides for people considering the religious life, including VocationMatch.com, told me that not long ago she used to get only about 350 queries a year by phone and online. Last year, she got 2,600. And 60 percent of those women, Tuohy said, explicitly asked if they could join an order that would force them to wear a habit. (Currently, only about 20 percent of sisters in America wear one.) Amid all their freedoms, Tuohy deduced, these young women wanted to be led. Even constrained. She said she wished I wouldn't emphasize that point, however. Something about it seemed to make her uncomfortable.

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two years ago, Meg, the "hobo for Christ," introduced me on Facebook to a friend of hers named Tori. Tori was both discerning to become a nun and serving in the Army. As a first lieutenant, she commanded men older than she was, but when she spoke to me over Skype from a base in South Korea, she looked younger than her 23 years. The green military fatigues were baggy on her lean frame, her pale brown hair—dyed blonde on the bottom—pulled away from her sunburned face into a wispy ponytail. She said "wicked" a lot, cursed occasionally and referred to herself as "a super-duper paratrooper!" with a wink and a mocking thumbs-up. It didn't take me more than a few minutes talking with her to think: *This woman wants to become a nun?*

In high school, she said, she "had an automatic seat at the cool kids' table." She was known for her crazy, uninhibited dancing at parties. She hiked, she kayaked and she was good enough at soccer to earn a spot on a professional-development team. On her Facebook page, she can be seen photobombing group shots on snowboarding trips by sticking her tongue out at the camera. She always assumed she'd marry, have kids and work as a nutritionist.

When I asked Tori what made her stray from this path to become a nun, her whole demeanor changed. Her face got pinker, and she looked almost shy. She asked if she could read the full story to me from her prayer journal. This was too important to discuss extemporaneously.

One afternoon when she was a senior at her all-girls high school, Tori found herself drawn to the chapel. She wasn't deeply religious growing up, and the chapel was a space she usually avoided: small and dark and silent, with uncomfortable knee-high prayer stools. But on that day, as she sat to pray, a thought occurred to her that was so unbidden and forceful "that I stood up from my seat and physically ran. I mean, I *ran* out of the chapel. I was so filled with fear." The thought: What would it be like to wear a nun's habit?

She didn't want to be a nun, she explained. But in the ensuing years, she just couldn't get the vision out of her head. In the goalie box, putting on strapless dresses for dances—she kept seeing herself in a black veil.

And then one day, at a chapel on her college campus, she heard His voice.

"What does it sound like?" I asked her.

"It doesn't sound like anything. I just knew it was Him," she said. And His message was clear: "Evangelize."

Tori put down her prayer journal, looked up and started to laugh. She said she expected this story must sound "crazy" to me. She didn't seem to mind. Discerning the religious life, she explained, is "a process of falling in love."

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a few months after we spoke, Tori flew from South Korea to visit her mother outside Philadelphia. I went to see her there on a Fourth of July weekend. Her mother's house was big and airy, with a living room out of a decorating magazine and a gleaming kitchen overlooking a backyard deck. But Tori told me she wanted to take me somewhere else, the nearby town where she'd grown up. Compared to the upper-middle-class neighborhood where her mom lives now, she said, her hometown was "straight-up blue collar." We drove out of the stands of giant trees and into a grid of smaller white clapboard houses.

Tori put on the brakes and pointed one of them out. "We would play all these games here—digging a ditch, man-hunt," she reminisced. Some boys used to play beyond her back gate. "I'd jump the fence to play with them on the other side. See how it's a two-story now? It wasn't like that. It was just a really, really tiny house. A shoebox."

Her tone was affectionate. The house might have been small, but her father had lived there. By her own admission, Tori had been a "huge Daddy's girl" growing up. Her favorite memories as a kid involve hiking with him. "I was on mountaintops before I could even walk," she said. But then, when she was 7, her parents sat down with her and her older brother, Adam. "'You know how you two love each other?'" she remembered them saying. "'But, somehow, you need your space from your brother? And sometimes you like to get away? Well, Mommy and Daddy need space like that.'"

Tori was shattered. Her mother received primary custody in the divorce settlement, and Tori didn't see her father much anymore. For years after that, she and Adam were especially close, but then, as a teenager, he abandoned the family, too. Adam said shocking things—things that seemed intended to make explicit everything their father hadn't said, but had left to their imaginations. "l hate you guys," Adam would tell Tori and her mother. "l don't love you." He stopped going to Mass with Tori, and after 9/11, he signed up for the Army. Accompanying him to the bus stop, Tori had the eerie feeling that she was with a shell of brotherly love, just the husk of a thing that had left her behind.

The weekend I went to see Tori, her best friend Rachael had also come to visit. After we got back from the drive, we found Rachael hanging out with Tori's mother, making summer cocktails in the kitchen. While we waited for the drinks, Tori and Rachael hovered near each other, putting a hand around the other's waist or slinging an arm comfortably over the other's shoulder. They called each other "sisters." Rachael is the younger one, by a year, but in some ways she seemed older—elegant as a '40s film star in a snug top and long pencil skirt, and self-confident, with a ringing laugh. Tori, cozy in a T-shirt and soccer shorts, balanced the dynamic by mocking Rachael lightly. She is "so dorky," Tori said, poking Rachael, before grinning and amending it to "very, um, literate."

There are a lot of recent books for women discerning to become nuns. They sounded uncannily like the voice in my own head that whispers things I wished my parents or partners or colleagues would say.
Sometimes, Rachael took over describing Tori's personality because Tori doesn't like to brag. "Tori never gives up," she told me with a fierce pride. But Tori wasn't sure her bull-headedness was always a good thing. In high school, she said, she became a "perfectionist." She wanted to master everything she did. Her mother would tell her to try to relax more, maybe even watch a little TV. But Tori would yell back, "I don't have *time* for TV!"

Almost ferociously cheerful at school, she came home one day, sat down at the kitchen table with her mother, and jabbed at her heart. "I hurt," she said. "I am forced to do what I'm not good at every single day." Then she blurted out, "I want to go to Africa."

"Why?" her mother asked.

"I don't know why," she told me in the kitchen. "I wanted to work with malnourished people. I wanted to work in"—she made air quotes—"a third-world country."

She recognizes this was hubristic. But she felt a desire to help people. And she wanted to get away to a place of extremes where the kinds of pain she felt inside but couldn't really express—because that would be drama queen-y and silly and weak—were more visible. She hoped her modest gifts might be more useful and more valued in a needier place.

Rachael smiled knowingly. She'd also struggled to reconcile the person she hoped she would be with the person she was actually becoming. When she was very little, she was an academic wunderkind. Her first-grade teacher had her administer spelling tests to her peers "because I got hundreds on everything." But this achievement began to feel more like a burden. Every perfect score she got was a challenge to get another perfect score on the next exam.

Love was the worst trial. With a heart-shaped face and startlingly large eyes, Rachael is beautiful. But she didn't get much pleasure out of her crushes. As a teenager, she posted cryptic song lyrics online and then spent hours parsing the replies like a biblical scholar: Why had the boy from math class used two exclamation points instead of one? Three "y"s in his "heyyy"? One boyfriend dumped her right after he said he could see them getting married. Another broke up with her by just not answering her texts.

These rejections were especially humiliating because the articles she read about love suggested relationships were easy to get right. They worked according to scientific principles of attraction and could be mastered like any subject in school. If she was going to fail this test, she thought she might as well bow out of the contest of relationships altogether. She said she considered becoming a nun "out of spite."

It was partly a bitter joke, but partly a sincere thought. "There is nothing consistent in the secular world," Rachael reflected. Catholicism, by contrast, taught that "truth is a fact." Your obligations to other people and God couldn't be trumped by your "personal truth."

Still, Rachael continued to date. She couldn't give up the idea of being a mother. Tori, on the other hand, felt her call to the religious life grow stronger. In college, she characteristically overcommitted herself, doing ROTC, playing soccer, joining a band. "It's a good thing!" her friends and teachers would exclaim in sing-song voices when she complained she felt burnt out. Prayer offered a simplicity she started to crave. Not a stillness like the dead quiet of the car ride home after dropping off Adam for the Army. A stillness shared with a loving companion, God.

Her sophomore year, she drove eight hours straight from her campus to a "discernment retreat" in Ann Arbor, Michigan for hundreds of young women. One of the sisters gave the young women a lecture: A woman of faith, she said, was already majestic. She had nothing to prove. "You are beautiful," the sister told them. God loved them already, their already existing, imperfect selves, because He had made them that way. The ways that they were broken were the ways God intended them to seem broken, for His purposes.

It was a joy to feel that not everything was up to her. That she wasn't entirely responsible for answering questions like, "Does my existence have meaning?" and "Who's going to love me?" One night, experiencing anxiety while lying in bed, she rolled over and scribbled in her journal, "You are unconditionally loved," then fell into a sleep as deep as she could remember.

Several other young women I spoke to who hoped to become nuns recommended a book to me called "And You Are Christ's." Written by an American priest named Thomas Dubay, its subtitle is "The Charism of Virginity and the Celibate Life." I am Jewish, and I am not celibate by any stretch of the imagination. I also wasn't sure what "charism" meant (basically, it's a special gift conferred on a person by God). But almost immediately upon opening the book, I experienced a strange sensation. It was as if Dubay were speaking straight to *me.*

"Nothing is ever enough," Dubay writes of how it feels to live in the modern world. You are expected to give yourselves entirely, 24/7, without wavering, to careers, to hobbies, to lovers, to children. Ideally, you are supposed to spend zero time not loving your job in a dying industry or your husband who fails to absorb the concept of emotional labor. But this is impossible.

And yet, Dubay explains, there *is* one being who reliably rewards our efforts: Christ. The woman who loves Him, the religious sister, has a calling worthy of her complete devotion and that honors her sacrifices "many times over," as the Book of Luke says. She has found her "passion." She has "rest," "fulfillment," "enthrallment," "completion"—precisely the things that I, exhausted, have often wanted.

There are a lot of recent books—and Twitter accounts, and blogs—written for women discerning to become nuns. They, too, sounded uncannily like the voice in my own head that whispers to me late at night all the things I wished my parents or partners or colleagues would say. Words of quiet affirmation and acceptance I had, in fact, almost never dared to ask for. One of the books took the form of contemporary sayings God might tell a young woman.

[I] know you're angry ... and I can deal with it.

Even if you were completely incapacitated and incapable of work, your identity and worth would be completely intact.

Go for it! I trust you.

Write down the qualities you like most about yourself. God loves them, too.

You don't have to earn My love.

Are you worried I might ask for something too big in return? My love is free.

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john Olon teaches a junior year theology course at St. Mary's Ryken, a co-ed Catholic high school in rural Maryland. He describes Ryken as your typical Catholic high school—the incoming freshmen tended to have little to zero interest in contemplating the divine. Nevertheless, for years now he has invited religious brothers and sisters to his class to give "vocation talks."

Usually, the presenter's pitch would be, "Whatever you want to be, you can be it. And you can also be one of us!" "In a vacuum, that sounds like a good message," Olon told me. Sometimes a priest would "throw on a DVD with priests looking 'cool.'" But the kids seemed disengaged.

One priest projected a video of a colleague performing in a high school musical, shimmying his hips to "Greased Lightning" in a chorus line with teenage boys. "Do priests dance?" the presenter kept shouting before the two dozen aghast teenagers. "Yes, we do! We're just like you!"

Then, a couple of years ago, a sterner priest came to talk to Olon's class. He was dressed in all black and a tight clerical collar. The way Olon characterized him reminded me of Jude Law's Pius XIII in "The Young Pope"—at once glamorous and traditional. "You are called to holiness," the priest exhorted the class. "You are called to be saints."

"I'm sitting at my desk, wincing," Olon said. He was thinking, "Yeah, not *these* kids. We need to tone it down." And then "this one kid, a lacrosse player, very stereotypical, stopped to ask me, 'Is that guy coming back next week?'"

"Oh, no, don't worry," Olon reassured him.

"But I *want* him back," Olon remembered the lacrosse player saying. Other classmates agreed. "And I'm like, 'What?'"

A student named Mackenzie particularly appreciated what Olon was doing. In high school, she told me, "I was in a frenzy." She went to every party. "Nothing was satisfying me. I was aching for something to settle on." Waves of desire to be close to somebody—anybody—came over her that felt beyond her control, but the hook-ups that were customary in her crowd seemed like an empty solution.

I asked her what she had been "known for" in high school. The question, she told me, was hopelessly retro. In an age when we can be anything, Mackenzie felt she had to be everything—the hip kid and the goth, the ideal student and the rebel. Raised by a single father and relatively poor, she assembled what she called "palettes"—makeup, shoes, hair, jewelry, bag—for a dozen different scenarios in life. "If I was going to a concert, I'd wear skinny jeans and dark colors and lots of heavy dark makeup. If I was going to a dance, I'd make myself look more preppy or princess-ish," she said. "On top of this was the pressure of always being in great physical shape and extremely attractive." It was too much. By 15, she felt burnt out. When I mentioned to her that my high school friends and I had made mix CDs for each other in the '90s, she sounded sad. "Aw," she murmured. "That's kind of cool. I don't think we tried to get to know each other like that."

"The level of anxiety and sadness these kids have," said John Olon, "I don't think we can even understand it."
And then, at 16, she took Olon's class. She loved the way he talked about the saints' quest for virtue, and she decided to be baptized. Three years later, she joined a local parish's pilgrimage trip to holy Catholic sites in Europe. Visiting the giant marble church of Our Lady of Fátima in Portugal, Mackenzie couldn't stop staring at the middle-aged nun in a blue-and-gray habit leading the tour. "She just had this serenity about her," Mackenzie recalled. "And this peace. And this joy. And it wasn't superficial, right? I was like, 'What the heck? How do you achieve that? Because I feel so far from that.'" All of a sudden, she thought, "I could be a sister." She ducked outside alone and sat on the steps of the cathedral and drew deep breaths.

When I met Mackenzie several years later, at an IHOP just outside of Washington D.C., she had begun to volunteer with Mother Teresa's order, the Missionaries of Charity. She was happy. She told me she had finally found what she was searching for throughout her youth. She loved that the sisters "lived their vows so radically." They worked harder than almost anyone she had ever met, and they owned nothing but their habits. They showered out of buckets. They seemed to be able to endure it, she reflected, because "they believed their spouse was the Lord." They trusted that He had a plan for them.

The more Olon thought about his students' enthusiastic response to the hardcore priest, the more it made sense to him. Millennials and Generation Z kids report much higher levels of social anxiety, pessimism and depression than previous generations. He'd seen it firsthand in his own classroom. "When I ask kids what they want to do in their lives, they'll say, 'I guess I'll get a job,'" Olon told me. They would

explain that they had already done everything. They had destroyed worlds, fallen in love, built communities, made art. Then he'd realize that they meant they'd done this all online.

In real life, they were much more fearful. Everything they said—every youthful, experimental pose they struck—became a part of their permanent record on social media. The stakes seemed so high for even tiny choices. Sometimes, after class, they would ask him mournful questions like, "What have I ever really done that has any depth?" They reminded him of people having midlife crises. Yet Olon noticed that the more cornered they seemed, the more pressured they felt to do something truly wholehearted and unique. To be like Steve Jobs and take a huge risk that changed the whole world. Hemmed in on all sides, they also yearned for a *tabula rasa,* to tear everything down and start over from scratch.

"The level of anxiety and sadness these kids have, I don't think we can even understand it at this point," Olon said. "I think there are things these kids are experiencing now that we don't even have names for."

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when I was a teenager, my father—an academic who studied Friedrich Nietzsche—used to insist that, during my lifetime, the world, and America in particular, would turn back toward more conservative, moralistic forms of religion. His conviction felt unsettling, in part because there seemed to be little evidence for it. In the past half-century, every generation of Americans has attended religious services less than the previous one.

This trend felt at once inevitable—the more we were all forced into proximity with other people, the less we could be so sure of our individual creeds—and somehow proper. The feeling among many people who considered themselves enlightened was that religion was a crutch people needed if they weren't strong enough to face the real world on their own terms. That it was, in Barack Obama's words, something people cling to out of weakness. When Sister Cristina Scuccia, a 30-year-old habited Italian nun, competed on Italy's version of "The Voice" in 2014—she won—a baffled judge questioned her decision to become a nun: "To be able to sing like this—I'm at a total loss, you know?" The implication was that anyone who had the opportunity to do something remotely cool with her life would never become a nun.

But my father's comment also unsettled me because I periodically suspected he was on to something. In one of my earliest diary entries, at age 8, I confessed a desire to become an Orthodox Jew. I had cousins who were Orthodox. Their dress and rituals were strange to me, but part of me also envied them.

During my teens, I worried a lot about whether what I was doing was *right.* I liked the idea of saying the *shema,* a simple Jewish prayer you chanted at meaningful moments. It seemed to give life anchor points. I mocked but also envied Christian friends of mine who wore those What Would Jesus Do bracelets; the thought of having a *single question* you could ask yourself to resolve all of life's myriad dilemmas felt clarifying. For all our technological utopianism, my high-school friends and I were obsessed with quotes by ancient sages, poets and songwriters. We posted them as our AIM away messages. We decoupaged them onto our school notebooks. I even had a pair of cargo pants onto which I'd written, in permanent marker, about 20 beautiful quotes about how to live life. I thought they were artsy. In retrospect, I think I was walking around with the equivalent of a Bible on my trousers, proclaiming indelibly what I stood for and how I should live, so I and nobody else would forget it.

When I moved to Kenya for work, later, I noticed an equivalent. Taxicabs there are plastered, outside and inside, with stickers with scriptural sayings or affirmations, like "This Business Is Protected by the Blood of Jesus Christ." They are white and shiny with red text. They look like bandages covering things that are wounded.

We are a thing that is wounded, American society. People raised for the new millennium were to be a kind of final proof that democracy and American society was, indeed, the greatest that ever could be made, now that primitive superstitions had been cleared, tech and science and finance reigned, major political threats had fallen and our hegemony seemed complete. We were, and shakily remain, utopian in ways I would laugh at if I hadn't bought into them, too. More than half of millennials still tell pollsters (https://s1.q4cdn.com/959385532/files/doc_downloads/research/2018/Millennials-and-Money-survey.pdf) they believe they're going to be millionaires. Most of us expected to achieve idyllic marriages, even though so many of our parents had divorced. We were taught that anything you hoped for could be achieved with the right planning, that life is a series of *hacks:* fabulous tricks, but ones that have a reliable code for how to repeat them.

Of course, none of this was true. The tech bubble burst. There was 9/11 and the financial crisis and the surprise election of a reality-TV tycoon as president—all things that loosened our faith in the world's goodness and in our comprehension of and control over things.

I used to think I was the only one whose outwardly awesome-seeming life—I was following my "passion" in a rocky economy, maintaining my friendships, looking good on Facebook—bore almost no relationship to her roiling inner monologue, until a friend of mine showed me her diary. It was shocking because the sentiments sounded so much like my own and also so little like anything most of us are courageous enough to reveal: ceaselessly self-scrutinizing, ceaselessly self-punishing. "Am I less interesting at 24 than I was at 17? Where has all my discipline, all those self-imposed exercises gotten me?" She spoke of trying to recover some potential life and world that had, in her early 20s, already been lost. Contemplating her desire for securities like money and a nice husband, she wrote, "I'm realizing I'm much more conservative than I thought."

"I have heard over and over again from older sisters that celibacy is the easy vow to follow," said Mary Gautier. "The hard one is obedience." When I read this passage to Satya Doyle Byock, an Oregon-based psychotherapist who focuses on counseling young adults, she laughed grimly. "That's the essence of what I hear over and over again," she said. "We're raised in a quantitative culture with quantitative goals." She works with young people who believe society has given them all of the tools and the technology and the science to construct an ideal life. But they still feel like failures. And they feel shame for feeling it, and thus they are trapped in an ironclad double bind. Declaring everything achievable tends to dig a well of grief in people because it implies that any problem we encounter is a result of our miscalculation. "It causes suffering," she said, "by denying the necessity of suffering."

Nietzsche proposed that Western society had killed God, replacing Him with ourselves. But underneath that, he perceived, there still simmered a yearning for religion. For invisible beings who set standards for us and whose perfection—and whose interest in *us* despite our flaws—massively relieves our need to be in control all the time.

America started with a religious narrative—the city on a hill—and once you conceive of it, still, as a society grasping for religion, you see it everywhere. The free-floating moral rage, which affixes itself to targets like cucks or Aziz Ansari or libtards or MAGA bigots. The conviction, in the way we now talk about the climate or the loss of our "values," that the world will inevitably be ruined because of our sins. Things like Goop and the gluten-free movement are basically straight-up religions, promising spiritual renewal and healing from all sickness, only with a jade yoni egg as the Eucharist. We're fixated on minimalism and self-purification, be it by the methods of Marie Kondo or "inbox zero" or Jordan Peterson, whose popularity rests less on his insights about Carl Jung or lobster biology than on his idea that life can be boiled down to 12 rules—commandments.

Overall, organized religions in America are still leaching members. But it appears that young people who *do* seek religion are drawn to a stricter, more old-fashioned form of it. Orthodox Judaism is becoming more popular with young Americans today than other, more liberal Jewish sects. The majority of Jewish Americans who are reform or conservative are over 50, (https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/10/17/eight-facts-about-orthodox-jews-from-the-pew-research-survey/) while the majority of Orthodox Jews here are under 40. This isn't only because Orthodox Jewish families have more children. Orthodox Judaism's retention and conversion rates are much higher (https://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/chapter-3-jewish-identity/) than they were two decades ago. The memberships of "liberal" Protestant sects like Lutheranism (https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/18/mainline-protestants-make-up-shrinking-number-of-u-s-adults/) are rapidly aging while more doctrinaire Christian denominations—Baptists, Orthodox Christians—have younger adherents. A fascinating study (https://www.christiantoday.com/article/what-kind-of-church-appeals-to-millennials-its-not-as-trendy-and-modern-as-you-think/42706.htm) showed that millennials—even Protestants and atheists—are attracted to churches with old-

fashioned gilded altars and "classic" worship styles over modern ones. Young Americans are often *more* likely than their elders to believe in core elements of traditional religious belief like heaven and hell, miracles, and angels, and young religious people are more likely than older ones to assert that their faith is the "one true path to eternal life."

Pollsters have also observed that young people in America seem more open than their parents or grandparents were to authoritarianism, as if we possess a hidden desire to be ruled—that it would be a relief. In 2016, nearly one-quarter of young Americans told Harvard researchers that democracy was "bad" for the country—in 1995, only around 10 percent of young people said that—and they are consistently more likely than their elders to say technocrats or a strong leader should run America, even if that means doing away with elections. My friend Josh, a convert to Catholicism, told me he was drawn to the church specifically because it "doesn't hold a vote to determine the truth."

Several people to whom I suggested, recently, that Americans might become more religious said that couldn't be true. They pointed to surveys saying Generation Z is the most undogmatic and atheist generation ever. But the truth is that it's incredibly hard to read American young people. You can find surveys and news stories indicating they're more genderfluid, (https://www.forbes.com/sites/gregpetro/2018/10/14/gen-z-new-gender-norms-fake-news-frugality-and-the-rise-of-retails-next-power-generation/#1fd1068f7382) more committed to traditional gender roles, (https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/generation-zs-rightward-drift/) more rebellious, (https://www.quirks.com/articles/gen-z-and-the-challenges-of-the-most-individualistic-generation-yet) more uptight and moralistic (https://www.businessinsider.com/generation-z-sex-alcohol-driving-study-2017-9?IR=T) about drugs and sex, better with money, (https://www.marketwatch.com/story/4-ways-millennials-are-way-better-with-money-than-older-people-2018-08-22) lazier. (https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/our-changing-culture/201602/do-millennials-have-lesser-work-ethic) This may reflect internal contradictions, the kind that compelled some of the young women I met to seek a much more streamlined answer.

"Have you ever been on a 'wild mouse' roller coaster?" Rachael asked me. It's a particular kind of roller coaster, she explained, one that's designed to accelerate riders rapidly along a straight track, faster and faster, and then whip them around a turn they couldn't see. "You get to like going straight," she said, "but then you can't anymore."

That's what her life had felt like: She'd make a series of decisions, oftentimes encouraged by elders or friends, and as soon as she grew comfortable, some eventuality would whip her around a 90-degree corner, nauseating her, and she'd have to start the whole project of figuring herself out again.

History right now is like the "wild mouse." We know that we can't keep going straight in the way we're going, in terms of consuming the Earth's resources, in terms of the deepening of inequality and the specter of automation, in terms of proposing a complete mastery over the world and over the courses of our lives. We're fucking things up, but the turn remains hidden.

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last year, Tori was diagnosed with epilepsy and discharged early from her military service. She saw her diagnosis as a sign that God wanted her to move faster, and within a few months, she moved into a "discernment house" near Kansas City established for young women who want to know what it's like to be a nun. Sponsored by Catholic dioceses around the country, these houses are often a first step before formally entering a religious community. At Gratia Plena, Tori's discernment house, young women live with almost none of their old possessions, four-to-a-bedroom, each in a twin bed. They work ordinary day jobs while spending time with nuns at night.

Tori was looking at Franciscan orders, demanding communities whose sisters recite an hours-long set of prayers throughout the day. When they aren't adoring Christ, the sisters typically mop the convents, serve the needy by working at soup kitchens or hospitals, prepare meals—dinner can be two slices of bread, cheese, fruit and a cup of barley tea—and do needlepoint or play board games together. St. Francis of Assisi, their patron saint, was so devoted to living in poverty he sometimes gave away his possessions and subsisted on turnips, and Franciscan nuns wear plain tunics cinched with a rope, called the "belt of the poor."

"I'm so excited," Tori told me. "I long for it so badly. I want nothing more than to get rid of everything."

I wondered if nuns much older than Tori had experienced the life she was seeking. I called women who had already spent years as Catholic sisters, some for as long as a quarter-century. They were eager to talk—less about their relationships with the divine than about the everyday ups and downs of sisterhood.

The women stressed just how unready they had been for their transition from "ordinary life." "I remember not shopping for my own food because another sister was the 'grocery sister,'" Sister Mary Jo Curtsinger, from Chicago, recalled. She had never actually realized how much she had enjoyed the small, autonomous act of going alone to the supermarket: "I wanted to look at all the things and decide what *I* want." Sister Patrice Colletti, in South Dakota, told me she receives an allowance of about $85 a month for essentials: "socks, shoes, shampoos, toothpaste" or a few outings to the movies. In order to pursue a self-development activity like yoga, she had to explain in a short essay to the superior how it had benefited her: "I attended a nifty program that cost $110 and spent $10 on a yoga mat. The class was really good, and I continued doing yoga nightly after the classes were over."

Tori wished she could post pictures of Jesus on Facebook the way her friends celebrated their relationships. "I want to be like, 'Look! Look at my beautiful fiancé.'"
"One thing I have heard over and over again from older sisters is that celibacy is the easy vow to follow," said Mary Gautier, a director of the Georgetown study on Catholic life. "The hard one is obedience." There are layers of hierarchy: The women elect "superiors" who exert influence over their lives. These superiors can assign you to retrain to be a nurse even if you already hold a degree in law or move you from one city to another. When Sister Patrice's family members banded together to buy her a new bike, she was required to ask her provincial superior if she could accept it. Sister Susan Francois told me she had to seek permission to attend her brother's wedding. Prior to becoming a sister, she had been the elections officer for Portland, Oregon. In the beginning of her time as a sister, she barely asked to do anything, because it was painful to hear those childlike words come out of her mouth: "Please, can I buy an ice cream?"

Within each individual community, there's a commitment to group decision-making that is *intense.* Sister Patrice's order holds lengthy meetings to "discern" choices ranging from which big missions to pursue to the brand of toilet paper the sisters should use. "After several years of living as a very independent, self-sufficient single woman," she remarked, "someone who fixed her own car, built her own bicycle, worked in a career she loved, and had a huge circle of friends and acquaintances," she entered what she described as a combination of a "college dorm without the parties," a jury-sequestration chamber and a trial—of *her.* Part of joining a religious community, she explained, is also being judged a good "fit" by the existing sisters. "Imagine being 24/7/365 engaged in a performance evaluation not just on your work, but on your entire life," she said.

What got many of these women through, in the beginning, was the strength of their call. Over time, they said they eventually came to see the gnarly, human aspects of being a sister as a huge blessing. Sister Patrice's community became like family, supporting her through the death of her mother. Sister Susan found herself unexpectedly touched while celebrating a nun's 80th anniversary with the order. The elderly nun actually lived in England and Sister Susan had only met her once before, but because she was in her order, she felt like a loved one. "Her face just lit up when she saw me," Sister Susan remembered.

When I asked Sister Mary Jo if she believed someone could escape the insecurities and heartaches of the secular world upon becoming a nun, she just laughed. The religious life wasn't an exit from the world at all. She saw the church as similar to other large institutions—like Britain, newly upended by Brexit—insofar as it's subject to the same anxieties, internal arguments and flux experienced by every theoretical safe harbor in every corner of the earth. "Have I felt safety? Security? No," she told me bluntly. "My greatest security is in the love of God, but I have *no* idea what [my order] is going to look like in 15 years"—though she trusted it would be living out its commitment to "loving one's neighbors." As she aged, and new entrants achieved parity in her community, they might choose to take it—and her—in a totally different direction.

Sister Patrice has also experienced crises of faith. She was assigned to teach high school on a Native American reservation devastated by teen suicide, forcing her into hard confrontation with the limits of God's power and her own. And after an injury to her spine that resulted in constant, severe nerve pain that still inhibits her walking, she fell into a depression so deep she felt "fairly sure I wanted 'out' of everything, not just being a sister," she wrote to me. She feels her faith has deepened, becoming more rooted in the sense that God wants her to cherish "real life" in all its pleasures and difficulties. That *this* exposure is part of His "salvation." It doesn't bother her that "there are never angelic choirs singing" when she prays, she said, "nor pious candles lit."

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a year after I met Mackenzie, the young woman from Maryland who had interned with Mother Teresa's order, I called her up to check on her religious progress. Well, about that, she said. She had attended a discernment retreat where she told one of the sisters that she wanted to join an order immediately. "I know this is what I want to do," she had said to the older woman. *"Give me my habit right now."* The sister warned her to go slow. "She said I need to pray more and take some years off," Mackenzie remembered, because it would be a really big choice. "Initially, I was so upset. I wanted some of my struggle to be over. If your dad or whomever tells you to hold up, you won't listen. But for some reason, when a sister tells you something, you're like, OK.' So I waited."

She returned to Ave Maria, her university in Florida, a religious campus that stresses daily prayer. She meant to stick to the discernment path, but one day, early on in the school year, a boy placed his plastic tray down next to her in the dining hall. He had noticed her around campus, he confessed.

"We just connected," she said. "We had this *connection,* which I don't think is something you can control." They got each others' jokes. They listened to music and talked about their mutual interest in theology. The guy was a serious dude, scheduling talks to chat about their feelings, and it surprised her how much she loved that. She didn't know a human man could be so intentional, a quality she had largely attributed to God. Soon, they decided to date.

She worried: Would a relationship be too messy? What about her discernment? She also felt frequently disappointed in her boyfriend. Sometimes he "wouldn't say the thing I wanted him to say in the right moment. And he can be blunt, almost to a fault." When she and her boyfriend argued, she couldn't be sure he would come back. That terrified her. But privately, she started to warm to the mystery of loving a person who had wounds and flaws equal to her own. She was experiencing visceral joy not despite the uncertainty, but *because* of it.

After she described the beauty of this relationship for 20 minutes, Mackenzie let drop that she and her boyfriend had recently broken up. I said I was startled that she had reflected on the relationship so positively. She was *really* hurt, she admitted. "But after I had this relationship with this person, even though we broke up, and it was hard, that desire for marriage stayed. That desire for love. It was like, 'Wow, I want this. I want to have a family.'" She's not looking hard at religious orders anymore. As much as she still loved the Lord, she had found unexpected "excitement," she said, laughing a little over the phone line, in sustaining hope for something so earth-bound and imperfect. "Isn't it," she asked me, "in this weird way, an even crazier kind of faith?"

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afew times over the course of our encounters, I thought I heard a hint of anxiety in Tori's voice about the immensity of what she was planning. The day I met with her and Rachael, she was getting ready for a hair appointment. "Superficially, completely in my vanity, something that I'm not looking forward to giving up is my hair," Tori said. Some orders she was considering make their sisters shave their heads. And although she told me she'd made peace with the idea of forgoing a husband and children—"I no longer have the same desire for family that I used to"—she confessed she still felt a pang when she saw babies.

After she felt God's call to the religious life, Tori requested two things of Him. "Lord, when you propose, I ask you to sweep me off my feet," she prayed. She wanted God to send her a final sign that being a nun was what she should do with her life by offering a marriage proposal on top of a mountain, that favorite place of hers.

She also requested to meet the ideal boyfriend before she entered the religious life. She wanted to feel sure she wasn't committing for the reasons Rachael might have, loneliness and spite. "Lord, can you please give me the perfect man first?" she would pray. "I will never doubt."

Later, though, she retracted this demand. She hadn't found a perfect man, but she realized she was "completely selfish" to put any prerequisite on devoting herself to God. If you expect Him to love you unconditionally, you have to love His plan for you without any conditions, too.

Intriguingly, as she became firmer in her discernment, Tori's friends started turning to her for relationship advice. She—the future nun—was able to deliver the most feminist message about love, with the fewest caveats. Of their boyfriends, her friends would ask her: "Do you think this thing he did is ridiculous?" What if they dumped a problematic guy and then didn't find another one? What if accepting the unreasonable was just a part of being an adult? Tori's answers were empowering. The way their boyfriends sometimes treated them was often ridiculous and unfair. She knew what unconditional love was supposed to feel like.

Of course, there's the unanswerable question: Is Tori's lover really there? Or is He just another version of the fantasy bae, backed by a formidable institution with a long history? Sometimes what looks like a way out of a problem can actually be a doubling-down on it, and sometimes I wondered whether the young women I talked to wanted to be nuns because they'd recognized the impossibility of building perfect lives on their own—or whether it couldn't be an even more radical way to aim for that perfection. After all, we may be small in the eyes of God, but embracing the idea that He's in charge of the show means nothing we do can ever be an irretrievable waste of time.

Toward the end of the afternoon I spent with Tori and Rachael, another friend of theirs who I'll call Natalie dropped by. Rachael took the opportunity to tell Natalie about a great new boyfriend—Tori's brother Adam, who'd rekindled his close relationship with Tori. Tori had set the two of them up. In the hallway, Natalie screamed and clapped her hands. "Oh, my gosh! Are you happy?"

"We're *so* happy," Rachael said conspiratorially, and rushed to Natalie to show her pictures of the couple on her phone.

"You look so pretty," Natalie said.

Tori, marooned at the kitchen table, joked to me that sometimes she wished she could post pictures of Jesus, *her* beloved, on Facebook the way her friends celebrated their relationships. "I don't want to bring a camera into a church sanctuary," she told me. "But sometimes I want to be like, *'Look!* Look at *my* beautiful fiancé.'"

She called out to her friends. "*My* boyfriend," she said, "wrote me the best love letter. It's a whole book. The Bible." The other two girls laughed dutifully, then turned back to perusing Rachael's pictures.

Tori would have to abandon so much to become a nun. "I have to recognize," she said as we drove back to her mother's house, "that it's not going to be an easy transition. It's a hard transition, but one I am willing to embrace." Her voice was staccato and she stared forward, almost as if she was underscoring a promise to herself.

A month ago, I emailed Tori to ask how things were going at the discernment house in Kansas. She had actually left, she told me. She said the experience had its "difficult moments and joyous ones." But she still needed more clarity about her future. So she'd put her belongings in storage and set out from Mount Katahdin in Maine to hike the length of the Appalachian Trail. It would just be her, nature, and God.

When I first heard of that plan, the day before she left, I was startled. Her progression toward being a nun had been so steadfast. But then, when I thought more about it, it also seemed like the perfect choice for the woman I had gotten to know—at once determined to climb further to seek the God that she loved, and uncertain.

Credits

Story

Eve Fairbanks, a writer living in Johannesburg, is at work on a book about South Africa. Her stories have appeared in The New York Times Magazine, The Guardian and The New Republic.

Creative Direction and Design

Una Janicijevic is an art director in Toronto.

Illustration

Matt Wisniewski is a collage artist and photographer based in New York.

Research

Ben Kalin, formerly of Vanity Fair, is a veteran fact-checker and the founder of Fact-Check Pros, a full-service fact-checking agency.

Additional Reporting

Allya Yourish is a Fulbright grantee and researcher who lives in New York.

Development & Design

Gladeye is a digital innovations agency in New Zealand and New York.