

Rita Kowats
August 2024

At 17 I felt called to be a Catholic Dominican sister. Looking at this photo, I ask you, "Wouldn't every 17 year old girl long to wear such fetching fashion?" And just look at what's become of me now in orange and red. At 34 my community in Spokane sent me to Berkeley to study spirituality and theology in preparation to train women entering my community. I was exposed to many Bay Area counseling methods and spiritual direction. As you can imagine, after two years in Berkeley, I was never the same again. I no longer fit in when I returned to Spokane.

I was on fire with a desire to work for just peace, and after two years of trying to act on that vision, I realized that I needed to attend to my own view of just peace, and let go of "Sister Rita," and the privilege that came with the title. I had a vision of ministering as a lay woman alongside other lay people.

Four Discernment Practices helped me decide to choose a different way of life

I began with bike riding around the Spokane River, lingering for hours on a boulder, merging my heart with the rhythm of the river, weeping, meditating on poetry and writing my own. Gerard Manley Hopkins' image of the "dapple-dawn-drawn falcon," became my Holy Spirit prodding, poking, driving me. Another line recurring as a heartbeat was, "Margaret, are you grieving, over golden-grove unleaving? You, with your fresh thoughts care for, can you?" The poetry became my way to unveil (pun intended) my deepest and truest emotions.

I had brisk walks around the block with J.J. my Jesuit friend at Gonzaga, he urging me to stay, offering a different argument at every block. My heart broke as I struggled to be open to that option.

Professional Counseling sessions gave solace and clarity. Swimming and biking helped with the stress and a retreat attended to the movement of the Spirit.

Conversations with superiors and peers were gut-wrenching but so necessary to hear them out. One friend, feeling abandoned, wept and begged me to stay. I felt like the ancient mariner, "alone, alone, all all alone. Alone on a wide, wide sea. And never a saint took pity on my soul in agony."

Leave-taking

In February, 1982, I set out for Seattle, where I was raised, to begin a teaching job, still as Sister Rita but on leave of absence while discerning a permanent decision. I have never regretted it. In 1988 I joined the Ground Zero Community in resisting nuclear weapons, and life alone in the woods taught me that instead of a call to live in community, my call was to a life of contemplation, much like the life of Julian of Norwich. I now try to live this call in my little studio apartment in Shoreline. Full circle: I found you, and I can't adequately tell you what it means to have been called here with you, sharing in the priesthood of the faithful. It's the happiest time of my life.