

*A love story. A daring experiment trying to live full-blown Christianity.
A continuing spiritual journey in a new/old home.*

THE SEARCH FOR GOD IN INTENTIONAL COMMUNITY

By Marylee Mitcham

I AM A SIXTH GENERATION MEMBER OF THE CHURCH and a convert to it of thirteen years. My husband has not joined and says he never will. I believe him. He says Mormonism has taught him that truth and goodness are not necessarily the same thing. He recognizes the Church as good, but not as true in the way it says it is. He's a philosopher by profession and a serious seeker of both goodness and truth. He attends the Catholic Church and calls himself a "practicing non-Catholic." Exactly what that means is known mostly to him alone. When we married, almost thirty-eight years ago, we were two young people with Protestant backgrounds who consciously wanted to "search for God." Eventually that desire led us to convert to Catholicism and subsequently to found an intentional community called the Families of St. Benedict.

Our community was located next to the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. The Cistercian monks who live there are known as Trappists and are a contemplative order traditionally living in silence. By the time we took up residence in the neighborhood, they had modernized to the point of speaking freely, but silence was still the norm among them. We did not seek to imitate them but were hugely drawn to their reverent ways. But I am getting ahead of myself.

CARL AND I married in the spring of 1965, in San Francisco. We had been friends in philosophy class at the University of Colorado in Boulder, and we had at some point decided that San Francisco was the place to be. We had both dropped out and headed there for different reasons and at different times; he was single and I was divorced with a five-year-old son from a teenage marriage. When we arrived a year after he did, Carl invited us to stop temporarily with him and his roommate, Bob, and within two months, I was a wife instead of a guest.



MARYLEE MITCHAM joined the Church in 1989. She and her husband Carl divide their time between an apartment in Golden, Colorado, and a house in rural southern Colorado. Marylee remains an active member to the best of her ability.

At that point, Carl and I were what I'd call "pious Bohemians" at the tail end of the Beat Generation. We were seriously romantic about setting aside convention for a life of voluntary poverty in communion with those around us—writers, artists, musicians, and street people. We had not yet formally returned to the Christian identity of our youth, but we were conscious of deep spiritual desires. One of my earliest memories in the city is having my heart burn within me as I watched Carl affectionately embrace a bum on the street. Another part of this nascent spirituality was simply gratitude at finding ourselves with each other. We have felt a soul connection even in hard times. And there have been plenty!

Yet along with our gratitude, we were fairly cynical, especially about the "establishment." The trend at that time toward materialism and military buildup disturbed us. We had many longings to go in the other direction and were uncertain about the future. For one thing, Carl had refused induction into the armed forces in the spring of 1964, and he had known since then that he might be arrested any time. Even with this realization, our minds were mostly elsewhere. Our new relationship and the fact that a year later he still wasn't in trouble, allowed us to hope that somehow he'd slipped through the cracks.

The San Francisco of 1965 was colorful and exciting. We lived in a large, cheap, and handsome loft with no running water except down the hall in a common shower. But life was good. My son—who became Carl's son too—went to nursery school and was thriving with a second Dad and an "Uncle Bob." But when we learned we were expecting a second child, we decided to leave the city for a calmer place. Plus, all of a sudden, we missed being in the mountains. So Carl hired on with the Forest Service in the Sierra Mountains. This choice stabilized us financially and gave a new romantic slant to our adventure. We were headed to a one-room cabin in the woods! We found ourselves sixty-five miles from the nearest paved road and 110 miles from Kernville, California, which was ranger headquarters. We were not hiding out in this new job, just honeymooning and bonding as a family.

In November of that year, when the fire season ended, we left California and drove east to Boston shortly before our first daughter, Jessica, was born. We envisioned ourselves going to

Spain and connecting with—who knows? An exotic Catholicism perhaps. I had been raised Episcopalian, and had always loved liturgy. Carl had Methodist roots, but was attracted to cultures abroad which, being foreign, better reflected the mystery of life that so haunted us. As it turned out, we only made it to Spain many years later. Financial realities dictated the need to pay rent and maternity bills. So Carl worked for the Peace Corps teaching carpentry skills to volunteers. He even made enough money for us to return to Boulder where we had yet to finish our undergraduate degrees.

From 1966 through 1970, we stayed in Boulder, went to school, had two more babies, became Catholics, and finally got arrested for draft evasion. How we did it all financially, I can't imagine! But, those were the days of great second-hand shopping. Three dollars for a beautiful quilt at the Good Will. Lots of hand-smocked baby clothes for a quarter. The good old days. We were resourceful and lucky. Blessed. It's clear to me now that, naïve or not, we were in a fast current of personal destiny.

At no time were we alone—I mean that in the mystical sense. In terms of family support, times were hard, especially compared to the rich extended family circles that some people are blessed with. Carl's parents and sister were deeply disturbed by his political intransigence. My only family member was my mother. She supported our anti-war stand but was ill with heart disease and not able to be around us much. Had we not lived so deeply in hope for the future, we might have faltered, but something held us steady.

During this time, we even became less anti-establishment. The FBI man in charge of Carl's case came to our home several times to gather the information he needed. There was something special about him. He was a kind, decent man, and even turned away one afternoon when I told him that Carl was taking a nap and couldn't see him. He tried hard to talk us out of our convictions but couldn't.

Eventually, he came to the house and told me the day we had dreaded had come. But Carl wasn't home—he was studying in the library—so I drew a neat little map for our FBI agent showing him exactly what carrel he would find him in. He thanked me and told me I had a fine family. Then he left to do his job, handcuffs and all.

Our experiences with this man remain a good memory. There was no revulsion either way, and no real polarity, as in *the truth is either this or that, me or you*. He, alone, left us more respectful of our government. We were shortly advised by our equally fine public defender that the best we could hope for was a year of prison time for Carl. That sounded better than we had expected, but we remained prepared for a heavier sentence.

I remember the trial as though it were yesterday. Carl brought along two books to read in jail, the Bible and *War and Peace*. I was eight months pregnant with our fourth baby and wore a lovely blue cotton dress a friend lent to me. It was very hot outside, and in the courtroom, and we were trying to stand tall, to live up to our convictions with some measure of courage and dignity. I didn't begin to cry until I realized the

judge had quit lecturing Carl and had begun lecturing the prosecution for waiting so many years to make their arrest.

After the judge had spoken scathingly to just about everyone, he turned to Carl and sentenced him "from the bench." He gave him three year's probation. The first year Carl could stay in school, but the next two years were to be spent out of state doing alternative service. Case closed. This was a total surprise—an almost embarrassing one.

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Our government has been very good to us. Carl never asked to be spared, only to serve in jail instead of on the battlefield. Years later, Gerald Ford sent him a presidential pardon which, according to the government's own specifications, he theoretically didn't qualify for. We were dumfounded ourselves. We had escaped the war and jail, but little did we know how much struggle and conflict lay ahead. As Pogo said, "We have met the enemy, and he is us!"

AFTER TWO YEARS of alternative service in Kentucky at Berea College, where we earned room and board by being dorm directors, we felt ready to move on. We had grown in our readiness to find a way of life that more fully expressed our deeper desires. I was very deeply drawn to prayer. Whenever I gave myself to it, it gave itself back to me. I realized I must be "called" to it. This must be what it was like to know you had a vocation to be a contemplative brother or sister in a religious order. I was perfectly satisfied as a wife and mother, but I could not deny that something else was happening too. And I wanted more of it. I wanted to hear what there was to be heard.

As for Carl, he was trying to find a way to live in a world he often felt estranged from. Our technological milieu was exciting but not life-giving. He felt it vitiated both nature and community, thereby dispersing the power to be had from both. In order to stay in contact with deepest reality, we need that power. Yet he saw how our culture neglects it. In fact, it hardly recognizes power from those simple sources.

So together we began to think about what kind of group we could form that would be meaningful to both of us. I was more consciously searching for God in prayer and participating in that effort. He was more consciously searching for a fellowship of like-minded thinkers who worked and served cooperatively. Both of us were consciously fascinated and inspired by the ancient traditions of monastic life within the Catholic Church, where perfection was still a goal, and where mercy was still practiced with something of its Christ-like vigor. At that time, we felt ordinary parish life was somehow "not enough".

The call to leave the world in order to really find it is perhaps rooted in Jesus' words to the young man who asked him

what he should do to have eternal life. He was already keeping the commandments but asked, "What lack I yet?" Jesus said unto him, "If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me" (Matt. 19:20–21).

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I, quite frankly, wanted to be a saint. (I still do, though I strive more for balance now and understand perfection more in those terms.) But then we were both filled with naive hope, energy, and zeal. We began getting acquainted with the monks of Our Lady of Gethsemani, a two-hour drive from Berea. Their lives are devoted to "*ora et labora*," prayer and work. They are cloistered, which means they do not mingle much with others or go out in the wider world to accomplish their acts of service. Instead, they practice more hidden, quiet works of mercy in honor of Mary whose life was also quiet and hidden but nonetheless important. To support themselves, they farm and make cheeses and wonderful fruitcakes laced with brandy.

I actually became a Catholic after reading *The Seven Storey Mountain*, the autobiography of Thomas Merton, who had been a monk in that very monastery until his death in 1968, the year we joined the church. Believe me, monastic life is a powerful spirituality for those who are called. And Carl and I felt it. We decided if we, being "in the world," felt we could in some sense make monasticism our own, then there were probably others who would join us. And there were.

Over the years Families of St. Benedict existed, there were six families, ten singles, and more temporary guests than I can count. Our life was arduously primitive on 120 acres of forested knob-land loaned to us in a loose, friendly arrangement with a well-to-do Catholic layman who was a friend of the Abbey's. With only part-time jobs to sustain us, we built our own houses mostly out of scavenged materials. We also grew our own food, kept a cow, goats, chickens, ducks, and bees—and managed to stay very healthy for the most part. Every morning we woke at 4 a.m., drove to Mass, came home and chanted psalms as a group, ate breakfast, bundled children off to Catholic school, chanted psalms twice more throughout the day, and had lots of meetings. It was a whole way of life.

In 1972, when the community was dedicated, our children were twelve-, six-, four- and three-years-old. Within weeks, another family with five children joined us, and we felt certain then that this was right for us and were reassured that others would actually come. For me, intentional community was an experiment with my faith. All my abilities were challenged (read: stressed). The monks helped us in various ways, and constantly brought visitors to us. Many other visitors found their own way to our place.

One summer evening at dusk, a couple rode up our driveway on bicycles. They were Dutch and had ridden all the way from Montreal to visit! They stayed two months and then rode off toward their next stop—Central America! In those days, everything seemed larger than life.

But in our search for God and transformation into new and more perfect human beings, we were amazingly hard on each other. We went straight for the truth, either face-to-face or behind-the-back, depending on each person's inclination. We were trying to speak the truth in love, but, developmentally, our love wasn't *that* far along! I was especially proud of my ability to give it and take it, and it ultimately took a nervous breakdown to humble me.

My ability to live in grief and pain was not as invincible as I thought. Yet it hardly ever occurred to me that this life wasn't good for everybody. I remember one time when I almost understood this. One winter evening, I was trudging in the un-electrified dark up an icy slope toward our house in the trees. My only guide to the path was the way my feet felt on the familiar ground. Both arms were full of groceries, and I had to cross a very slick, slatted bridge on my knees, pushing groceries ahead inch by inch. "No wonder it's men who mostly want to join this community," I thought. But the pioneer in me was still incredibly strong. I just took our situation for granted, thinking that the harder it was, the better.

Our communal life lasted ten years. Carl and I were the last ones in the group to accept the need to close the community. I always think of our time there like a marriage in which we shared love and many happy times. Yet we lacked the inner resources. We were too immature emotionally and spiritually to stay together. And too hurt. Living as we did, we upped the ante—a lot—for all the members. And even though we played our hands for all they were worth, we didn't make it. We were admired by the monks for our efforts, but it finally became clear that we had damaged and disappointed each other in many serious and important ways.

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No matter how hard we tried, there were always different points of view, different ways of doing things, different tolerances, different omissions and commissions. There is no like-minded person except oneself, and there's even conflict with that person! Add to this sleep deprivation, one bathtub for the whole community, unfinished buildings, and a never-ending stream of guests to adjust to, and you have stress of major proportions. Yet we also had nature and community and the life-renewing power from both. On Mother's Day some years later, I received a card from one of my daughters that said, "My childhood memories are full of wonderful times. . . . The negative memories do not have the power to erase or manipulate

the positive ones. And the much, much larger part of my childhood was the positive part. I hope you never feel or believe otherwise.” In spite of everything, I’m glad we did it.

Our experience with intentional community disillusioned me. It helped me grow up. It purified me. It cost me a lot. It damaged my psyche and many relationships. It developed my capacity for compassion. It gave me my testimony—the one I still speak from on fast days. I know God lives because I put myself in a situation where I had to depend on him to lead and uphold me—and he did. Even when my heart was finally broken, I could feel his peace. I knew it was broken, and I also knew in some sense everything was abundantly all right. He was there, and he loved me.

Looking back, I feel sure I also felt the power of my Mormon ancestors. (Actually, one of them had been sent by Brigham Young to found a United Order community!) I’d like to think they were perfect, but I know they were as deeply flawed and disabled at times as I am. But, they were blessed with deep beliefs, and I honor them for the times they failed as well as the times they succeeded.

I am the daughter of three generations of polygamy. It’s not much of a stretch for me to imagine what went into the effort of those challenging arrangements. How much faith it took, and how many failures there were to understand and see each other through! Some Latter-day Saints today are ashamed to talk about polygamy, but I’m not. I’m proud of that noble principle, although I know I couldn’t live it myself.

The difficulties of life have taught me that fervor and zeal are only *sometimes* good. St. Benedict said that monasteries need to be structured in such a way that the strong have something to strive for and the weak are not easily discouraged. I think that goes for intentional communities as well. At one time or another, we all need tender care.

AFTER THE COMMUNITY disbanded, we re-entered middle-class society with some amazing help from Providence. Carl was offered a job at Polytechnic University in Brooklyn, New York. But we found ourselves stranded like beached whales: we could breathe the air, but we couldn’t swim. On the one hand, we were grateful to be intact as a family and comfortable, and on the other hand, we were totally lost. Our dream had been destroyed. My husband finished his Ph.D., I became an R.N., and we were finally able to help our children with college expenses. We really had no reason to complain.

But neither of us was doing anything that felt like it counted. We were in a new city and were without a firm home in nature or community. Our parish of Brooklyn-born Italians with strong family ties felt like another world. So we languished. We continued to live out of the past, licking our wounds and being angry and hurt as we sifted through interior debris looking for salvageable pieces of ourselves.

Not until I found Sunstone did I begin to recover. (The story of my conversion to Mormonism is another paper in itself.) By this time, 1982, both my parents had died and I felt deeply alone in terms of family. But I had found out more

about my Mormon heritage, and that interest had led me to buy a second-hand copy of *Canyons of Grace* by Levi Peterson. It’s the first book I’d ever seen that brought to my mind Catholics and Mormons both. For instance, Paul Horgan, a Catholic writer I read often, endorsed *Canyons* on its back cover. And one of Peterson’s stories was titled “The Confessions of St. Augustine.”

Our experiment gave me my testimony—the one I still speak from on fast days. I know God lives because I put myself in a situation where I had to depend on him to lead and uphold me—and he did.

I read the book and liked it, wrote Levi and liked him. He expressed himself honestly and well, and he’s the one who told me about the magazine—which changed my life. Once again, I had a connection with a group with whom I could relate. Here were people who came together to winnow wheat from chaff, to listen to each other’s stories honestly told, to dream big dreams about what the Church could become, to feel their way toward greater authenticity. If it weren’t for Sunstone and that alternative bishop, Elbert Peck, I would not have found my way into the larger Church.

I found my way into Sunstone first and the Church second, and now I feel like I have what I need to move forward in faith. I can’t do without either organization.

Perfection for me now means something like the thirteenth Article of Faith: I believe in being honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous and in doing good to all. I believe all things, hope all things, have endured many things, and hope to be able to endure all things. If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, I claim the right, by Joseph Smith’s word, to seek after these things.

I try to open my mind and my heart and to give myself to the kind of healing work worthy of a true church and the real world. I even try to “hearken unto my husband’s counsel as he hearkens unto Heavenly Father’s,” though when I left Catholicism and became a Mormon without his emotional permission, I badly damaged my credibility. Life is full of ironies and paradox. But, my husband loves me. And I love him. And, in some real way, Christ has organized our lives, if not *in* the church, *as* church. Both of us would be much at fault if we were anything but grateful for what we have received on Earth so far.

I was inspired by Catholicism and many other Christian paths, and I still am. I am also inspired to be where I am, part of the Church of my ancestors. I know the good news, the Gospel, has been transmitted to me by grace over thousands of years and by thousands of saints. I hold this knowledge with a very full heart, and a deep desire to love others as I have been loved, so that I may take my place in their company. It still feels like quite the adventure! Amen. 