



## Growing, Thriving in Sacred Soil

### *In the Spring Garden with Sister Mary*

*All creation is a garden and we just happen to be wandering through it.* Sister Mary Schmidt, OSB

*We are God's co-workers.* 1 Corinthians 3:9

It's spring and Sister Mary Schmidt, OSB is in her glory. She has already planted lettuce, spinach and broccoli. She will put in tomatoes and other warm-weather vegetables a little later. She'll ring the garden with marigolds ("the rabbits don't like those") and plant zinnias and sunflowers too.

She will do it to help put fresh food on the Sisters' table, and to nourish her own soul. "I try to take this little space and make it as beautiful and full of good food as I can," Sister Mary says.

#### **Sacred Soil**

Here in the garden, science and spirituality blend happily. Kneeling to dig a shallow trench,

peppering it with tiny seeds, covering the seeds with earth, we begin again the miracle of creation that is scientifically predictable and understandable.

The seeds sprout, roots reach down for nutrients, stems and leaves reach up to the sun.



"The garden is a place of prayer for me," Sister Mary says. "It's quiet out here as I work with God to bring forth new life. I pray here."

She's in good company. Adam and Eve were created in the garden. Jesus went to the garden to pray. Scripture is filled with references to gardens.

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Sr. Sandra Brunenn, OSB

## Letter from the Prioress

As our issue of Connecting Point is coming together, Pope Francis is again making the news. He has published an Apostolic Exhortation titled *Amoris Laetitia* ('The Joy of Love'). It is an expansive reflection on family life. One of its themes corresponds with the focus of one of our articles: discernment. Francis speaks of the importance of personal and pastoral discernment as people face challenging situations in their lives and seek to make choices in harmony with God's Spirit.

Here at the monastery we have been practicing personal and communal discernment as we focused on the call to leadership in our community. In our fast-paced, ambitious, and competition-driven society, discernment is an invaluable practice as we make significant life-decisions as well as daily choices around, for example, the purchases we make, leisure activities we pursue, or voting choices we act on.

As you read Connecting Point I hope your hearts will be strengthened to listen and respond to the nudges of the Spirit that are continually being offered. As Benedict invites us, "Let us listen with the ear of our hearts to the voice of God calling to us daily."

Eastertide Blessings!

"The beauty of creation began with a garden," Sister Mary says. "And life ended for Jesus in one."

*To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
And Eternity in an hour.*

**William Blake**

A microcosm of the world, the garden. Every color and shape grows there, either above or below the soil. No matter which plant it is, it needs sunshine, nourishment, water. Some plants grow better alongside one neighbor than another. Some need sandy soil, some loamy.

"The garden reflects the merciful, gracious God who creates for us," Sister Mary says. "I can't wait to hear the birds sing in spring, and the baby birds begin to peep. I can't wait to see the little green things begin to grow. It's such a wonder. Each little seed knows what it's supposed to be."

### Vessels of the Altar

Whether working in the garden of the world or in our own little backyard patch, Benedictine Sisters share a core value of stewardship. That is, everything comes from God and must be cared for with reverence, to be preserved for following generations.

Sister Mary says our culture is not succeeding at that.

"We are all responsible for the earth," she says. "We are depleting the materials of the earth because we value them more than we value people. We value coal more than the miners."

Anything we touch becomes more important than the worker.

"Our earthly garden is a mess today. We need to remember that it isn't really ours to begin with. It's God's. It reflects God's generosity to us. We need to begin showing our gratitude by taking care of it."

As Pope Francis says in his encyclical, *Laudato Si*, "It is not enough to think of different species merely as potential 'resources' to be exploited, while overlooking the fact that they have value in themselves. Each year sees the disappearance of thousands of plant and animal species which we will never know, which our children will never see, because they have been lost for ever. The great majority become extinct for reasons related to human activity. Because of us, thousands of species will no longer give glory to God by their very existence, nor convey their message to us. We have no such right."

And as St. Benedict said more than 1500 years ago, "Treat all goods as if they were vessels of the altar."

In the monastic garden, Sister Mary says that means composting, recycling, weeding and caring for the tools. It also means harvesting and preparing fresh food to nourish her Sisters.

### Some Practical Matters

Of course, some seeds don't sprout, some seedlings wither, some plants don't bear fruit, and others suffer blight.



Then there are the marauding deer.

"They managed to eat the plants even through the netting that I put up," Sister Mary says. "I finally sat on a bench one night to see how. I imagine 20 deer watched me from nearby and thought, 'Sure, that's Mary sitting there. We won't show her how we do it.' I finally did catch a buck slitting the net one night though. He reared back on his hind legs and sliced the net with his front hoof."

It's safe to say that Sister Mary has a fraught relationship with many of the animals other Sisters find charming. As for the seed or plant that fails to grow, Sister Mary has some advice.

### Try again ...

"The asparagus didn't grow last year. It was too cold and rainy. So I'll try again this year."

"If something isn't growing, put your hands into the soil. If it's too cool and wet, most plants won't grow well. Give the soil time to warm up. Reseed. My squash seeds rotted several times last year. I reseeded two or three times."

### ... and plant in the right place.

"I don't bother with carrots anymore," Sister Mary says. "They don't grow well here. Must be something in the soil. Plants have their likes and dislikes, just like we do. They won't thrive where they don't belong."

"Some people are planted where they shouldn't be, too, whether in jobs or other activities. We all need to be in the right soil to thrive."

### Planted in the House of the Lord Psalm 92

Whoever, whatever, wherever we are, we depend upon the actions of all for our own wellbeing. In the garden of the world or in the garden of our own tilling, each of us makes a profound, daily difference. "I can't go into the garden without feeling I'm a very small speck in all of this," Sister Mary says. "I'm here only by the grace of God."

"That's true of everyone. We are called to be cultivators of our own lives. To sow seeds of love. To nourish what is good within us, and to produce mercy."

Because we are all part of the whole, the actions we undertake – recycling eggshells for the living ecosystem of the garden, handpicking weeds without bee-killing pesticides, foiling rabbits and deer without harming them – ripple out, as gentle waves upon a lake.

"The whole idea of compassion is based on a keen awareness of the interdependence of all these living beings, which are all part of one another, and all involved in one another," Thomas Merton writes.

Planted shoulder-to-shoulder as we are, we are as interdependent as droplets in the water we drink and molecules in the air we breathe. Your breath becomes mine, and mine, yours, in the garden we all share. ☘

*Sister Mary offers spiritual direction at Benet House. Contact her at [mschmidt@smmsisters.org](mailto:mschmidt@smmsisters.org) or (309) 283-2100.*



## Making Hard Choices, Knowing Peace

Mass had just ended at the Des Moines cathedral. Stefanie MacDonald reached for her purse, intending to get back on the road to her home in Cedar Rapids following a short family vacation.

Then a new priest entered the sanctuary, leading a group of habited nuns. The priest introduced the nuns to the congregation. Like Stefanie and her family, the nuns had taken time to rest and pray at the cathedral before continuing their travels.

Seeing the nuns turned out to be the sign (or, as she puts it today, “the slap upside the head”) she needed to “get it,” and restart active discernment of her religious vocation.

Today she is Sister Stefanie MacDonald, OSB.

Discerning a religious vocation is one example of how the practice of prayerful decision-making is – or should be – used. In fact, if you ask a Benedictine Sister to share her

experience of discernment, she will talk more about discernment as a lifestyle than a tool.

“Discernment is living in the mystery of God’s presence, listening for the voice of the Spirit,” Sister Ruth Ksycki, OSB says. “It leads and guides me in whatever decisions I have to make, from the smallest to the largest.”

*Listener up there! Hear you ... what have you to confide to me?*  
**Walt Whitman**

Culturally, we use the term “discerning” to mean anything from using good judgment to being selective and sophisticated in our tastes. For the Benedictines, it means calling on the Spirit for guidance.

“Discernment isn’t about thinking you’re better or more refined than anyone else,” Sister Mary Core, OSB says. “It’s not about choosing which pie you like best. It’s about deep listening and waiting.”

It’s about living with the ear of your heart open, as St. Benedict urged, attentive to the Spirit in all creation.

This stance of deep, intentional listening prepares you to be ready to “get it,” as Sister Stefanie did on that day eight years ago in Des Moines. It leads to a quieted, receptive mind.

*You take a step in the right direction to pray to this silence.*  
**Annie Dillard**

The practice of silence is as old as human beings themselves. From the words of the prophet Isaiah, “Keep silence,” to those of the mystic poet Rumi, “The words, God said, spring from silence,” and the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, “Elected Silence, sing to me,” silence has always been heralded as the great teacher.

Sister Marlene Miller, OSB says the practice of silence engages one in silent dialogue with the Spirit, and is essential to discernment.

“Place yourself in a quiet atmosphere every day,” she says. “Don’t turn on the radio or TV first thing in the morning. Just be silent to create a quiet, sacred space for yourself. Walking in nature or being in chapel quiets me. Then I can wait for the Spirit to fill the emptiness inside.”

Wherever you are, attentive quiet promotes being over doing, which allows you to attend to the Spirit, and the path you are being led to or along. It’s not hard, but it does take intention. Sr. Ruth advises, “Try something as simple as listening to the birds in the morning to help ready you for God’s word.”

### Discernment as Tool

For major decisions, following a formal discernment process will yield good results. While doing so is key for an individual pondering a life change, it’s especially useful for a community – a parish, a business, a family – considering a change that will affect all its members.

“In our community, we don’t just change jobs because we want to,” Sr. Ruth says. “We consider how it will affect other people. We look at the cons and pros that our decision will present to everyone.”

Making a list of “cons and pros” is often the first step.

“I think you’re better off to list your cons first,” Sr. Ruth says. “If you list your pros first, you might get carried away with wanting to do it, whatever it is.

## Discerning a Major Change?

### Create Your Own Ritual to Ease the Transition.

1. Make a list of the experiences – good and bad – that you’ve had in the place or at the job or with the person you are leaving.
2. Light a candle and read – or, if you’re with others, take turns reading – the list.
3. Give thanks for the blessings that have been yours; for the experiences that have allowed you to grow.
4. Pray for courage and guidance as you leave one path and begin the next.
5. Pray for those who will be affected by the decision; that they, too, will gain the courage and guidance they need.

“Really be honest with your list, but also don’t shrink back from considering a new challenge.”

### Discernment How-To

*The community members are to express their opinions with all humility and not presume to defend their own views obstinately.*  
**St. Benedict**

Preparing to discern a question of, say, whether to take a new job, retire or move to a new residence all require an openness on the part of those persons – probably family members, in these cases – who will be most affected by the ultimate decision.

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Here is an outline of the process for the entire group. Adapt as needed.

**1. Pray.** Pray to the Spirit for the guidance you need to make a decision that will be most beneficial to all concerned.

**2. Gather data.** This might be a list of cons and pros, or benefits and disadvantages. If changing jobs would result in more money (pro) but require an undesirable move to a new town (con), those might cancel each other out. “Not everything is weighted the same,” Sr. Marlene notes. “Maybe the need to pay off bills outweighs the discomfort of leaving home.”

**3. Listen to each other with humility and patience.**

Listen to your own reactions. If you find yourself reacting defensively, ask yourself why.

“It’s important in today’s world to really listen,” Sr. Ruth says. “It helps you realize we are not in a static place. Things are not always going to be the way they’ve been. It’s difficult because we like what’s familiar.”

**4. Ask the next question.**

When you can see you’ve come to the end of a discussion – say, the question of whether leaving home is a good idea – recap the group’s reaction. Then ask the next question.

“That was one of the basic things I had to do as prioress,” Sr. Ruth, who served in that position from 1996-2004, says. “When we were discerning whether to close our school, I presented the data and then asked, ‘What do you hear from this data?’ We would listen to what everyone said they heard. Then I would rephrase the question to, ‘What do you hear the community saying?’ After listening to everyone again, I would say, ‘This is what I hear you saying.’ Then I would ask the next question. It takes time, but it’s worth it.”

**5. Speak up.** The process must engage everyone, requiring that all be heard. That includes those people who tend to hold back, believing the other, more confident speakers are right. “Never assume you are wrong,” Sister Mary says. “You are responsible to share your

wisdom too. Even when it seems you are sitting out on a limb by yourself and everyone else is on the other side of the tree, speak up. Other people might share your feelings but be too timid to do so publicly.”

**6. Take time to reflect prayerfully.** Go for a walk, sit in a park, stroll through a museum: spend quiet time alone as you ponder all you’ve heard.

**7. Repeat the process until consensus is reached.** That is, ask the next question, listen, recap and ask the new next question. Continue to take time away, in quiet. Note that sometimes the next question is, ‘Are there any other options?’

“The process keeps developing,” Sr. Ruth says. “Finally though you will have to say, ‘It looks like we’re leaning toward a decision. Do we want to do this?’ At that point, everyone has to say Yes or No, or, ‘It wouldn’t be my choice but I can live with it.’ “There were times we sat in a circle and passed a microphone into which each Sister had to speak,” Sr. Ruth says.

“One of the most amazing memories I have is when we were voting on whether to close the school. One of our Sisters said, ‘I wanted to write No but I couldn’t. I listened to the Spirit and wrote Yes, in spite of how difficult it was.’”

**8. Reach consensus ... and feel peace.**

“You should have a sense of ease when you make your decision,” Sr. Marlene says. “It won’t necessarily be a light bulb moment, but you should feel peace. If not, you need to discern some more.”

Sr. Ruth agrees. “The result of a good decision is that you’re at peace with it. When we decided to close the school, sell our property and move to Rock Island, it was very hard on everyone. But each time we discerned a decision, the community was at peace.”

“Do everything with counsel, and you will not repent when you have done it.”- Saint Benedict

The philosophy behind discernment is simple: We don’t have all the answers. Without the company of the Holy Spirit – through others, Scripture, nature – we operate with limited understanding, often to the detriment of ourselves and those with whom we live and work.

As House Coordinator, Sr. Marlene says she relies on daily discernment to oversee monastery employees.

“I’m a person who follows the spirit of the law, not the letter of the law. So when an employee is late to work, I say, ‘Yes, I know you are late, but you have a sick husband at home so I’m going to cut you some slack.’ This is why you need to know people and their situations.”

**Use Ritual to Ease Your Grief ...**

Tough decisions can feel right, yet produce grief and regret. If you’ve lived or worked somewhere for a long time, for instance, it will be natural to experience sorrow upon the decision to move ... even if you feel a sense of peace about it. (See sidebar, page 4.)

The Benedictines experienced both peace and regret as they faced the sale of their 130-year-old monastic home. The use of ritual helped them acknowledge the significance of their decision, feel gratitude for their past, and create a new, sacred memory to carry into their future.

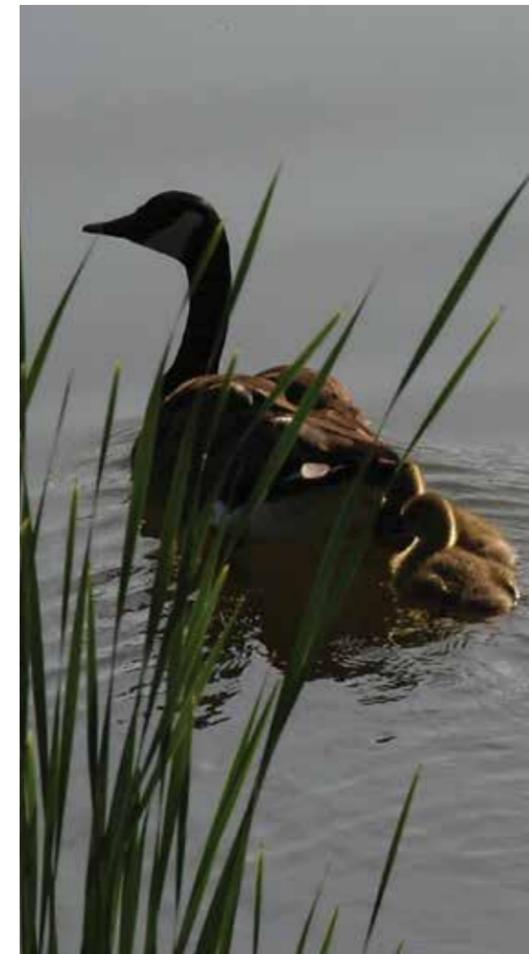
“Ritual was key for us,” Sr. Ruth says. “When we decided to sell our buildings, we gathered in each area to memorialize what had happened there. We started in the chapel with a prayer service. We listed all the professions, graduations and funerals we had celebrated. We did the same in the school, the dining room and the community room. It was our way of remembering the blessings and experiences that had been ours, while readying ourselves to leave.”

**... And Move On**

Today, the Benedictine Sisters are happy in the Rock Island home they have shared since 2001.

“It was hard to leave Nauvoo, but it was the right decision,” Sr. Mary says. “We are still together, which is so important for us. Also, we have had many, many blessings we would not otherwise have experienced if we had remained in Nauvoo.”

As Sr. Ruth says, the world is not static. If we are to live, we must sometimes change paths. And discernment can help us do so in a healthy, graced way. ☘





## Discerning Together: No Campaigning Allowed!

When Sister Jackie Walsh, OSB stepped into the monastery dining room on the morning of April 1, she felt something different. The room was the same spacious, window-lined, table-filled place in which the Sisters gather to eat every day. But now it was quieter. Holier.

She took her place at her assigned table as the other Sisters arrived. In silence. When everyone had taken her seat, prayer began. And the Chapter of Election was called to order.



*Sr. Jackie Walsh, OSB*

St. Mary Monastery's prioress election cycle mirrors the American presidential election cycle in its four-year pattern. That is,

the Sisters vote for prioress in the same years Americans vote for president.

But the similarity ends there. Benedictine Sisters forego campaigning, electioneering, political punditry and persuasion. Instead, they listen together to the Holy Spirit.

### A Philosophy of Shared Wisdom

Discernment is "seeing with the eye of the heart," Sr. Johnette Putnam, OSB writes.

"It's ... a way of life, the way of life of the Gospel, of the Rule of Benedict. The process simply facilitates the surfacing of the necessary information, i.e., the content of the decision, and helps to create an environment for attentive listening with the heart, freely sharing, and prayerfully reflecting together."\*

When Benedictines gather, then, they listen with the ear of the heart, see with the eye of the heart, and prayerfully reflect both alone and together as they move through the election process.

Sister Mary Benet McKinney, OSB calls communal discernment "a philosophy of shared wisdom."\* She continues:

"While there is no one way to do discernment, there are certain attitudes and behaviors that are critical to the process. Trust

is essential. People must trust themselves and their personal wisdom, they must trust each other, and they must trust the Spirit to be at work within the group.

"Holy indifference is another critical attitude. It is a very difficult stance but it is absolutely necessary if the Spirit is to be free to function within the group. Each person must approach the process completely open to all possibilities. To decide in advance who you will vote for or who you will not vote for is to interfere with the work of the Spirit."\*

### The Election Process

Although few specifics – beyond who won – are shared following a Benedictine election, the process follows a common trajectory:

A facilitator – in this case, Sister Mary Jane Vergotz, OSB, Mount St. Benedict, Erie, Penn. – leads



*Sr. Stefanie MacDonald, OSB*

the community through formal periods of questioning, sharing, listening and reflecting, alone and in communal prayer. The questions surround concerns, issues, names:

What do you sense the future holds for the community? Which Sisters do you feel called to name as possible leaders for this particular time, and these particular needs? Following the sharing and reflection periods, new questions are posed, and so on. The process continues for three days.

### Newest Members Awed by Sacredness

While many Sisters have been through this process more than a dozen times, Sisters Stefanie MacDonald and Jackie experienced it for the first time this spring.

"The prayerful silence that was maintained throughout the process was amazing to me," Sister Stefanie MacDonald, OSB says. "Discernment was our work – our intensive Ora et Labora – for the weekend. We put our outside life on hold and sat in the presence of God and the Holy Spirit."

"It was truly awesome," Sr. Jackie says. "For those of us who are new, to share our piece of wisdom the same as those who've been here 60 and 70 years, wow. It was humbling. It was quite unlike anything I've ever seen."

"There was such a feeling of sacredness and holy ground," Sr. Jackie continues.



*Sr. Sandra Brunenn, OSB was re-elected prioress during a discernment process in April, facilitated by Sr. Mary Jane Vergotz, OSB, right, and Federation President Sr. Kerry O'Reilly, OSB, left.*

"I worked in business for years. We would come together for projects, too. We might share a goal, but each division or department had its own agenda. There were no individual agendas here. It was all for the good of the community. Religious life is amazing and mysterious."

***In choosing a prioress the guiding principle should always be that the one placed in office be the one selected either by the whole community acting unanimously out of reverence for God, or by some part of the community, no matter how small, which possesses sounder judgment. St. Benedict***

Laid out 1,500 years ago, St. Benedict's Holy Rule prescribes the election process still used today.

"The whole community was involved in the election," Sr. Stefanie says. "That's one of the advantages of the small size of Benedictine communities, as compared with other orders. Every voice is heard."

In the end, Sister Sandra Brunenn, OSB was re-elected to serve the second of her two terms beginning immediately. The next election will be held in 2020. But it's not the next time formal communal discernment will be used by the community. Monthly council meetings, weekly committee meetings and life formation groups all employ it. And on a grander scale, strategic planning for the next 10 years is underway, with full community discussions and discernment set for late summer. ☙

*\*Discerning Community Leadership: The Benedictine Tradition, published by the Conference of American Benedictine Prioresses, 1993.*



## SMA News

**Mary Schuman Kaboski, '60** says she and husband Lee stay busy with volunteer work and traveling to visit family and friends.

**Cathy Hines Warren, '65** says entire family is fine. She and her husband are considering taking a river cruise in Europe.

**Roberta Pence Avery, '48** says it was a pleasure to visit the monastery last summer.

**Nelly Cardenas, '90**, writes, "The Mexican girls (photo below) enjoyed a reunion in Monterrey, Mexico, last August for four days. We had a wonderful time!"



**Cam Ackley, '60** says she was touched by the stories in a recent Connecting Point.

**Gloria Gillespie McConkey, '55** says she enjoys having lunch every month with other SMA alums in Peoria.

**Kathy Owens Reuland, '67** says she and Cathy Hines Warren, '65 enjoyed breakfast together last summer. "How did 50 years pass by so quickly?!"

**Alice Gavin Enderlin, '55** says one of the highlights of the year was her 55th high school reunion at St. Mary Monastery. She was accompanied by her niece, Connie, also an alum.

**Rosemary Boylan Woolley, 58** is enjoying traveling again after her knee replacement.

## In Memoriam ...

**Mercedes O'Kelly '39** died in Nov. 2014.

**Mary Bachman, '81** died

**Kathleen Wolfe, mother of Carolyn Wolfe, '81** died Aug. 2015

**Jo Ann, daughter of Becky Horn Stout, '59**, died March 23, 2016

**Beatriz Eugenia Angelita Orozco, '78** died

**Mother of Linda Haas, '67 and Susan Maerz, '68** died Feb. 13, 2016

**Harold Siegfried, husband of Jeany, SMA Staff**, died Feb. 2, 2016

**Joann Heinzmann, '41, mother of Peggy Ekerdt, '68 and Jane Genzel, '73**, died

**Marjorie Gasper Basfield, '57** died Nov. 16, 2015

## Reunion Announcements

### In Rock Island:

**Class of 1952**  
May 14-15, 2016

Class of 1956  
(Classes of '55, '57 included)  
June 3, 2016  
10:00 am - 4:00 pm

**Class of 1996**  
July 22-24, 2016

**Class of 1970**  
Aug. 12-14, 2016

**Class of 1976**  
Sept. 9-11, 2016

**Class of 1962**  
**(72nd Birthdays)**  
Sept. 30-Oct. 2, 2016

**Class of 1981**  
Nov. 4-6, 2016



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