



A Reasons to be Cheerful project

Bridging Divides: Katie Gordon and Linda Romey (Nuns and Nones)

Even as young people eschew religion, some are forming unexpected bonds with sisters of faith through a shared commitment to social justice.

Linda Romey: Here in the monastery community is our call. We form community. We live together, we pray together, we work together. But it's out of that common — that community and that community prayer that we then go out and do the works we do to make this world a better place.

Scott Shigeoka: And so you've been in this monastery for 25 years, is that right?

LR: That's correct. More or less.

SS: And so I want to bring you into the story now, Katie. Where did you meet Sister Linda? How did that connection happen?

Katie Gordon: Although I was raised Catholic, I had left that tradition when I was young. I never knew sisters, I never met any Catholic sisters until I lived in Grand Rapids and would go to protests and marches downtown. And the Dominican sisters were always there. They were often holding signs for social justice, for solidarity.

And so ever since then, I've been intentionally seeking out these relationships with sisters and organizing gatherings with sisters. And so about two years ago, in the midst of some organizing with sisters, I was reading some stuff that Linda wrote on this emerging spirituality that women religious, that sisters are exploring. And she and I seem to speak sort of the same language, although she was a sister and I was a young seeker in divinity school. And so I reached out because it felt like we were exploring very similar questions, although from different sort of points of entry. And just from those initial conversations we had that so much has unfolded since then.



Photo courtesy of Katie Gordon

LR: Well, it was exciting to get an email and find that someone had read what I had written and that it resonated. And to find out that it was a young person who was seeking what I was seeking was really exciting. It was encouraging to me that young people are still seeking spirituality, seeking God, wanting to make a difference in the world, to change, to change the way things are, to be concerned about the environment, concerned about justice and immigration. It gave me hope.

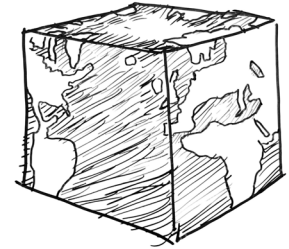
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SS: And did you have any assumptions or beliefs about young people that maybe started to shift because of your relationship with Katie and others you've met on this journey?

LR: Well, yes. I, like many, probably have this notion in my head that younger folks, millennials aren't big into commitment. And so to have this millennial call me and say she's interested about these things, and I invited her to come to Eerie and she did. And she kept coming. And I thought, 'Wow, millennials do make commitments. They are serious about this.'



One of the other things that I have learned from them is this whole issue of gender identity. It was that at one the first Nuns and Nones meetings I was at and we were all asked to introduce ourselves and to share our pronouns. And I thought — that was a first for me — I thought, well, obviously she and her. But it was the beginning of a new education for me and a new awareness, because I really was not in conversation or relationships with folks who are struggling with those issues.

SS: I really like that name, Nuns and Nones, and I'm really curious to learn more about what it is. Katie, could you tell me more about what Nuns and Nones is and what it's doing in the world?



Photo courtesy of Katie Gordon

KG: To spell it out, it's n-u-n-s, Catholic sisters, and n-o-n-e-s, which we like to redefine as spiritually diverse millennials rather than nonreligious.

And it really was in the beginning, it was these two unlikely groups coming together who on the surface are very different across generations, across spiritual traditions. But what we realized when we came together is that we actually have a lot in common. And we're asking similar questions about how to live really deeply and authentically with our values in a world that makes it really hard to live with your values at the forefront. And so what the collaboration became about was finding ways of life that

fit the world that we live in that are also responding to the needs of the time.

SS: And what was that experience like living in the monastery last year?

KG: You know, it really stretched me because I'm not actually Christian, although I really have integrated contemplative spirituality into my daily life and have been exploring and studying it for many years.

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But I don't consider myself Christian. And so I wasn't sure how I would enjoy the experience of prayer or just what it would feel like. But I really grew to love just the little things about living in a monastery, like having the bells ringing throughout the day as a reminder of taking a sort of contemplative pause in your day. And I really love living in community. It kind of felt like a return to like living in a dorm with friends, like there was even a night at the monastery where I went upstairs for a snack and there was a bunch of leftover pizza and a bunch of friends there that I hung out with late at night at the monastery.

So it was just a really beautiful experience of having so many human needs met within this one structure of life.

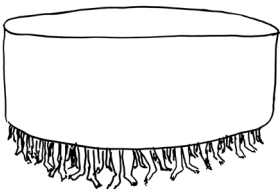
SS: And Linda from your perspective, why is it important for you to meet folks like Katie and to be connecting and working alongside of them on these important social justice issues?

LR: Now these millennials who've moved to and are working with us are now bringing new energy to this work that we're doing. And some of our sisters — our oldest is 102, soon to be 103 — many of them have been working for social change since the 60s. And so to have now these 20 and 30 somethings coming and saying 'We want to be a part of that, we want to walk with you to change our world.' They're bringing their perspectives, their commitments, their passion to what the sisters have been doing for decades. And now we're just really — it's inspiring to me. It's inspiring and it's hopeful.



Chicago Daily News photo, courtesy of the Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Marquette University Libraries

SS: Especially in the context of the connections that you have as a spiritually diverse millennial and as a nun, why is it important for people like you to come across these lines of difference and to meet each other and to understand each other in a deeper way to work alongside of each other? Why is this work important?



KG: Well, when I think back to 2016, late 2016, early 2017, when I started meeting with sisters, one of the most important pieces of that was that if people think back to that time, there was a lot of uncertainty and we were fresh into this sort of what felt like a new political moment and a lot of ways where people were sort of, like, throwing down and working hard for justice on a whole new level. And we were burning out very quickly. I was getting drained very quickly. Many of my friends who were involved.

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And by collaborating across generations and across traditions with sisters, we were sort of able to zoom out of our own particular moment in time and really feel like we were connected to a bigger story than just this year. We were able to learn stories firsthand from sisters who were showing up in the nineteen sixties to the civil rights movement and also learning about what an uncertain time that felt like for people who were living through that. And so there's something about particularly connecting across generations that sort of lets you live into a broader sense of time. That also sort of makes it feel sort of more manageable to be able to say, like, 'I will contribute what I can right now and this work is much bigger than me.'

LR: I would agree with Katie and what I would add is — in addition to the cross-generational connection, the religious traditions cross in our case centuries. You know, people come and they all say how wonderful it is here. And for us, it's our daily life — it just is. But I think what they find is that 1500-year-old tradition about how to be human well, and what does that mean? We're all human community and it takes all of us together across the generations, across whatever divides we think are there to create this world that will provide a just and good home for all of us.