

An Antidote to Anti-Social Media

by [Larry McCloskey](#) (March 2024)



The Ursuline Nuns, by Jean Paul Lemieux, 1951

We live in a commodified world. Our self-esteem, fortunes, relationships and the circuitous route to realizing our many expectations are tied to how others perceive and judge us. We exist to the extent others acknowledge our existence and judge us worthy of existing.

Death by the absence of a thousand likes is, of course, the problem of existing for validation in the age of social media. We are our story, our causes and our external identity parts, and see no reason to sweat the complexity of an inner life. The thought of seeking an inner spiritual life is about as relevant to modern sensibilities as are dinosaur bones in a museum.

It was no always so—the echoes of another understanding of life only a historical heartbeat away. Twenty years ago, my wife and I visited my Aunt Isobell, sixty years a nun, at Mount St. Joseph convent in Peterborough, Ontario. The Mount, as it was otherwise called, was a huge and beautiful Gothic Revival building on a large and equally beautiful parcel of land in central Peterborough. The building served as the Sisters' motherhouse from 1895 until the convent closed in 2008.

In 2009, the convent was sold to a private developer, and sat empty until 2013—victim to diminishing convent population rather than market forces. The fate of the building and land garnished some passing media interest, but the fate of nuns and convents not so much. The building was quickly designated under the Ontario Heritage Act, whereas the nuns continued with their designation as irreverent.

This contradicts their history. Completely. The Sisters of the Congregation of St. Joseph began in France in 1650, came to the United States in 1836 where they lived in a log cabin and founded a school for the deaf. In 1851, they expanded to Toronto where they took over an orphanage before extending themselves to provide social services and health care. Nuns from Mount St. Joseph excelled at providing health care in Peterborough at a time when their services—and devotion—were often the only game in town. The Peterborough diocese went from west of Lake Ontario, beyond the western and northern end of Lake Superior— a size equivalent to four present day dioceses in northern Ontario. The irrelevant convents of

recent history were once considered essential by the communities they lived in and served.

The fourteen sisters who began at Mount St. Joseph in 1890 were volunteers committed to fulfilling an endless task, as follows:

It had been arranged that they would take over the academy in Lindsay, and staff the newly opened St. Joseph Hospital in Peterborough as well as the existing houses. To further complicate the task, the new hospital was to care not only for the sick, but also for the forty of Peterborough's elderly poor who were at the time residents of the House of Providence in Toronto. –Mother Vincent, (one of the caregivers).

Convents have closed and religious orders have shrunk to the point of extinction throughout the western world without a hint of media or public interest. Endangered species status for nuns has been swift, going from approximately 180,000 in 1965 to an estimate of [less than 1000](#) in the United States by 2042. The death of convent life is a colossal modern non-story because with relevancy adjudicated by social media exposure and likes—for doing nothing in particular—even language articulating the concept of sacrifice and devotion is not understood. The great irony is this: convents were the exemplars of providing care to their contemporaries in need, while living ancient monastic traditions; and having escaped modernity, they came to be ignored by it.

But in visiting my aunt at Mount St. Joseph for the last years of her life, there were many surprising aspects of convent life that could not be ignored. At some point, Aunt Isobel convinced my wife and I that the drive from Ottawa to the Mount was too long for a single day and we began staying

overnight. Being around the convent for meals and into the evening, we met and got to know many nuns with unexpected results. The first surprise was that nuns could surprise, and often did. They were as varied and diverse as any group of people, were well-informed about secular issues, and could be collectively characterized as being 'with it,' including many closing in on 100. Also, the biggest surprise was nuns didn't much talk about God or religion. If in dispelling one stereotype I am reinforcing another, so be it—being accomplished, intelligent, independent, funny and fun seems a worthy stereotype for any group. It was also true.

And there's more. There was something about convent life, its sense of purpose, camaraderie, and lack of pressure to be anything other than themselves—not sure—but nuns seemed happier, more content, less afraid than most people, and not only looked decades younger than their age, they out-lived all other demographics. The obvious lesson being that without a preoccupation with self, nuns stumbled upon, or else consciously discovered the formula for a well-lived and long life.

But don't expect a resurgence of convent life in this lifetime. For hundreds of years, monastic life was characterized by contemplation, self-sacrifice, and service to others. That life has been disparaged and abandoned by moderns looking for likes in all the wrong places. Today, the thought, or perhaps skewered assumptions, of convent life—especially the restrictive cloistered version for those few who understand the term—can be summed up in one word: weird.

Consider the following once-upon-a-time Hollywood story, how it played out, and how different the modern interpretation would be. Dolores Hart was a talented and vivacious aspiring actress whose star rose from obscurity, shone brilliantly, and was extinguished long before she was 25. The trajectory of Dolores Hart's star power was not due to personal tragedy, she was not another Hollywood hopeful whose early promise fell

victim to fickle audience tastes. Dolores chose to end her Hollywood career—a career that had been her greatest ambition—in order to become a postulate in a cloistered convent at the Abbey of Regina Laudis. In 1963, her announcement was a surprise; today it would be inexplicable.

Inexplicable because in our modern obsession with fame, money, and validation from adoring millions we will never meet, we cannot fathom that someone would achieve the holy grail only to give it up for nothing. But Dolores did just that, except for the interpretation of nothing.

More inexplicable, she knew what she was doing, the efficacy being that she never looked back with regret. She had loved her sensational rise to fame, beginning with winning a role in an Elvis Presley film in her screen debut. In 1957, Dolores was cast as Elvis' sweetheart, with both actors having their first on-screen kiss. And yet, even in the midst of this Hollywood dream, while filming *Loving You*, Dolores turned down Elvis' request for a date. (Poor Elvis, I hope you were comforted by the fact you asked the only teenager in the world who would have turned down loving you. You were probably further consoled by the greater disappointment Dolores' fiancé Don Robinson felt when she later broke off their wedding plans for the convent.)

Despite the lack of off-screen romance, the on-screen chemistry with Elvis and the audience reception was stellar, and Dolores starred in another Elvis film, *King Creole*, the following year. Dolores was an overnight success, followed by earning critical acclaim in ten films, with a bright career ahead.

When Dolores [announced](#) she was leaving her bright career she was prepared for Hollywood's predictable reaction. "I never felt I was 'walking away from Hollywood. I felt I was walking into something more significant and by that, I took Hollywood with me."

Though film star was no longer a career ambition, she later made a series of videos reading Scriptures, and participated in a documentary made about her life called *God is the Bigger Elvis*, nominated for an Oscar in 2012. She and a friend founded The Gary–The Olivia Theatre at the Abbey in 1986. Dolores' primary role, bigger than acting as Elvis' love interest in Hollywood, was realised in her role as Dean of Education at the Abbey, beginning in 1970.

Interestingly, Dolores' [primary goal](#) as Dean was to establish a new expression "in which contemporary professional women can be awakened to the classical precepts of monastic life through an arduous process of self-knowledge and conversion of heart."

At this point, I should clarify that I've always been drawn to the concept monastic life, but have never wanted to be an active part of it. Spiritual contemplation in the absence of physical distraction is a noble pursuit, and I wish I had greater capacity for it. Still, I recognize its value even as it has become regarded as valueless.

Monastic life was structured to create conditions, discipline and community for fostering an inner life. I know arguing the need for an inner life lacks gravitas especially during daytime distraction, but ruminating thoughts of 3 am informs us otherwise. Simply put, if we don't have an inner life, we will have to eventually resolve inner turmoil that no amount of distraction can pierce. Central to this dilemma is the question of meaning, which cannot be answered by the fulfilling of wants and desires. Trying to answer why we are here and where we might be going is an archetypal and worthy lifelong pursuit, even in the absence of finding satisfying answers. Absence is bolstered by the potential presence of eight billion others, which certainly mitigates feeling alone.

The fragmented politics of the modern age is truly perplexing, particularly for young people. Belief in self as substitute for the scaffolding of civilization that modernity has

levelled, is no solution to the question of what it is to be human. Seeing commonalities, examining archetypes, achieving some sense of the Buddhist concept of the continually residing mind of consciousness, is discouraged by the modern narrative of impenetrable difference. We are to believe in the primacy of our own subjective story, our particular external attributes, our various grievances.

Still, a glimmer of hope this week in an *Epoch Times* [headline](#): “Diversity Training Increases Prejudice and ‘Activates Bigotry’ Among Participants, New Study Says.” I love academic research findings that tell us simple notions of what we already know. Dividing the world according to race was wrong; same for dividing the world according to perpetual grievance during the least racist time in history. The most basic definition of racism is differentiating on the basis of race, and both instances qualify. The antidote to racism is to not be racist.

Indigenous peoples from the beginning of history—from which we all originate—had archetypal reverence for mystery and wonder as the preconditions for understanding life, with recognition that we cannot expect certainty, cannot control destiny. In its quest quiet, stillness, and contemplation coupled with its conscious separation from world distractions, monastic life attempted to replicate something of the same. Inner life cannot be achieved with the application of outer distraction, just as personal happiness cannot be achieved in the pursuit of personal goals separate from those with whom we share the planet.

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Larry McCloskey has had eight books published, six young adult as well as two recent non-fiction books. *Lament for Spilt*

Porter and *Inarticulate Speech of the Heart* (2018 & 2020 respectively) won national Word Guild awards. *Inarticulate* won best Canadian manuscript in 2020 and recently won a second Word Guild Award as a published work. He recently retired as Director of the Paul Menton Centre for Students with Disabilities, Carleton University. Since then, he has written a satirical novel entitled *The University of Lost Causes*, and has qualified as a Social Work Psychotherapist. He lives in Canada with his three daughters, two dogs, and last, but far from least, one wife.

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