

## Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Kelli Dunham and Mary Johnson

**JVN** [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious, I'm Jonathan Van Ness, and every week I sit down for a gorgeous conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by Kelli Dunham and Mary Johnson, where I ask them: What's it like to be an ex-nun? Welcome to Getting Curious, this is Jonathan Van Ness. I am so excited. I have got to welcome our guests. We have two guests, which is also a really special episode of Getting Curious, because we don't often have two people: Kelli Dunham and Mary Johnson, who are both, I need to switch back into my more professional podcast voice now that I got so excited. Who are both former congregants of the Missionaries of Charity. Mary said 20 years as a nun with the Sisters of Mother Teresa of Calcutta and Kelli served as a nun in the South Bronx. Those were, like, three really major sentences, and I'm also going to break my new journalistic rule: Kelli, your hair color is everything. I wish that this was a TV show sometimes so that people could see your hair color. It's everything. It's vibrant. And Mary, I gotta say, you have great texture, too. I love your curls. I love your waves. Your hair's gorgeous, too. Welcome both. How are you, Kelli? How are you, Mary?

**KELLI DUNHAM** [00:01:10] I'm doing great. Yeah, thanks. I don't have great attention to detail, so I just feel happy that the color is not on my ears, you know, and all over my house.

**JVN** [00:01:18] You played kitchen beautician? You did it yourself?

**KELLI DUNHAM** [00:01:20] I did, I did this myself. Yeah, I actually did it to distract, I had a large other change in my appearance that I didn't want people to comment on, and it works perfectly. Now, people don't comment on that. They just say, "Oh, I love your, oh, wow. Oh wow." It's excellent. It's perfect.

**MARY JOHNSON** [00:01:34] I'm really excited to be here with you, Jonathan, and I have the gray hair. But it started turning gray when I was, like, 30. And then when I left the sisters, I said, "I want to have fun with my hair," so I turned it all copper. And then during the pandemic, I let it go natural again.

**JVN** [00:01:52] Oh my gosh, how fun. What a story. And also, I just got to say, I started going silver at that, like, even a little earlier than 30. I know a lot of young, young, young folks who go silver so we can be young, gorgeous and silver-haired at any age. So first of all, who is Mother Teresa and who are the Missionaries of Charity?

**MARY JOHNSON** [00:02:10] Mother Teresa was born in 1910 in Albania. She was brought up Catholic in a community where there were Catholics, Orthodox, and Muslims. And so she had this kind of cosmopolitan flavor to her life from the beginning. But she was determined to become a missionary. She wanted to go to Africa. She felt God was calling her, but she ended up with the Loreto Sisters in Ireland, and they sent her to India. She was a nun, teaching in a school for girls in Calcutta for many years. She eventually became headmistress of that school. And while she was headmistress, she was sent to Darjeeling in the mountains, beautiful mountains in India, for a retreat.

And on the way, she had a vision. And in this vision, while she was on the train, she saw Jesus from the cross, saying, "I thirst," and asking her to found a community of sisters who would work for the poorest of the poor in order to quench his thirst for love of souls is kind of the complicated way that Mother Teresa heard the whole thing. And from there, the Missionaries of Charity were born. In 1948, Mother Teresa left the Loreto convent in Calcutta, and started out all alone, going into the streets. And the first sisters to join her had been her students, and they came one after another. And by 1950, they had approval from the church as a community, and it just took off after that.

**JVN** [00:03:46] What church did they get approval from?

**MARY JOHNSON** [00:03:48] From the Catholic Church, yeah, the Catholic Church. Yes, it's a process.

**JVN** [00:03:53] So the pope was, like, "This is working for me. Go on, Mother Teresa. We're living for what you're doing." So that's what happened from the Catholic Church in 1950. And then what happened?

**MARY JOHNSON** [00:04:05] And then young women started coming to Mother Teresa and becoming sisters, and they were working on the streets of Calcutta. They were taking babies out of dustbins, sometimes. They were teaching little children on the streets how to read and how to write. And Mother Teresa would always start those lessons by giving them all a bath in what would be the equivalent of a fire hydrant on the street. She started caring for the dying and bringing them to a very special place, to a Hindu temple in Calcutta that had been devoted to the goddess Kali. And that became a Kalighat, at the Home for the Dying, also known as Nirmal Hriday, in, in Calcutta; one of Mother Teresa's most famous works. And over the years, she started spreading all through India with opening new homes for the poor, and then, first to Venezuela, and then to Rome, and then all over the world. Right now, the sisters have convents and homes for the poor in what's, I don't have the latest numbers, but the latest, latest one I heard a few years ago was about 145 different countries. So really, just everywhere. Yeah.

**JVN** [00:05:19] Who are the members? Do you have to be a lady? Can you be a, can you be, like, non-binary person? Can you be, like, a man and be in the, in the convent? Or No? No. Because no nuns can be boys, right?

**MARY JOHNSON** [00:05:31] Well, all right. So it's true that no nuns can be boys. But it's also true that Mother Teresa wanted to be very inclusive, and she founded what she called these different branches. So there were the active sisters, people who were born female at birth, assigned female. And then there were the contemplative sisters who didn't do as much work with the poor and spent more time in prayer. Then there were the active brothers who were assigned male at birth and they did the same sort of work that the active sisters did. And there were the contemplative brothers, and then there were the priests. And then there were the coworkers who were lay people who didn't take the vows the way the sisters and brothers and priests did. And then there were suffering coworkers who offered their prayers. Mother just kept getting more and more inclusive, finding more and more ways for people to be connected with the group.

**JVN** [00:06:25] So at each convent, in the 145 countries, there's, like, that kind of whole thriving society of all those different branches, like, each convent and all the countries.

**MARY JOHNSON** [00:06:35] No, the convents are for the sisters. And you know, the sisters would have that, their convents and then there would be-, the men, I don't think they call them convents, but they would just call them houses, I think. And they weren't necessarily in the same places that, as the sisters more often, actually not in the same places so as to serve a greater number of people.

**JVN** [00:07:01] OK. OK. So, Kelli, did you watch Golden Girls, ever? Or no.

**KELLI DUNHAM** [00:07:09] I have watched Golden Girls, in fact. Yes.

**JVN** [00:07:11] So you know how, like, Sophia is, like, you know, "Picture it, Sicily." What were you doing before you became a member of the Missionaries of Charity? Like, what, what was your religion prior to joining the group? Like, where were you? What was happening? Tell us everything, that you feel like telling us.

**KELLI DUNHAM** [00:07:29] Yeah, OK, so picture it. Port au Prince, Haiti in 1989.

**JVN** [00:07:33] Literally, you were in Port au Prince, Haiti, in 1999?

**KELLI DUNHAM** [00:07:36] Yes, that this is true. I actually grew up evangelical Christian. Like, I grew up born again Christian and I was in Bible college, in Oklahoma City, Mid-America Bible College, which sounds like the name of a Bible college that if you were just giving it a fake name, but that's actually the actual name, it's just Mid-America Bible College, and that was not working out very well, was not fitting in very well for obvious queer reasons. Although I was not aware of it at the time, you know? And so I had a friend who was, had a friend who was, who knew about the school in Port au Prince, Haiti, where, for kids with disabilities, and they just needed somebody to help, like, do recreation. And they're like, "And you need no special skills."

And I was like, "Oh my God, that's me. I have no special skills," that fits me perfectly. So I was working there, and it was during a time of upheaval after the Duvaliers left Haiti. And so there's, like, one coup after another, after another and the school was really close to the national palace. A bomb went off and killed some people, and they sent the kids back to their back to their homes, you know, just for safety until the end of the year. And so, I'm kind of, like, kind of just sitting around in the school like, "What do I do now? What?" And there, an American dentist was, like, "Oh, hey, do you want to come to the home for the dying with me?" And I was like, I was young. I was enough of an adolescent to be like, "Oh, is that a challenge? Yes, I will say yes."

**JVN** [00:08:54] How old were you?

**KELLI DUNHAM** [00:08:55] Like, just over 20, like, I was still very, you know, still an adolescent. [CROSSTALK] Yes, yes, I was a baby. Yeah, so and so we walked through the door and I was, like, "Oh, you didn't tell me this place was run by nuns." Like, I didn't know anything about nuns. I was like, I didn't even know how to talk to them. I didn't know I was like, "You didn't tell me you didn't tell me it was from my nuns." And he was, like, "They're just people, Kelli." And then this nun, this beautiful sister. She was carrying a 60-pound bag of concrete, and she couldn't have been more than maybe, like, 5'1, 5'2, carrying a 60-pound bag of concrete on her shoulder. And then she slid it down her body and back onto her other shoulder so that she could take my hand. And she said, "Oh, Jesus must have sent you because he knew we needed help today." That was, like, my first introduction to the Missionaries of Charity. Like, my heart was, like, beating through my chest.

So I took care of somebody that was, you know, I thought was kind of dying immediately. And when I, when I was about to leave, she said, "Oh, wap vini demen?" "Are you coming tomorrow?" And obviously the answer to that is, like, if somebody who you just, like, took care of and is dying, is, like, "Are you coming tomorrow?" Obviously, the answer is yes. Like, there's no other answer, right? So I was, like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, I am." And then I thought that maybe she would die kind of quickly. I was like, "Oh, I'll just like, I'll just keep

going with these nice nuns until, you know, this person passes." And she didn't pass for, like, six months. And so by that time, I was, like, in love with all the nuns, you know, not like one specific nun, but, like, kind of as a group, I was in love with them.

**JVN** [00:10:19] So then what happened for you? What was, what was your story going into it, Mary?

**MARY JOHNSON** [00:10:25] My story, I was trying to figure out what to do with my life. I was a senior in high school trying to figure out what was going to happen next, and I saw Mother Teresa on the cover of TIME magazine in the school library. And somehow I just, I was so drawn to that and I went in and I read the article and the bells rang to go to French class. I did not go. I sat there and I read cover to cover and I read it again, and I looked at all the pictures and I felt like God was calling me. I felt like, "This is what I'm supposed to do with my life." It was 1976 and people were talking about Mother Teresa. This was kind of like one of her introductions to North America. She had already been kind of a little bit known in England because Malcom Muggeridge did things there.

But really, it was just, like, "Who is this person on the cover and what is she doing?" And I just got really excited, and I tried to get in touch with the sisters, that took a while. So I went to the University of Texas for a year. I really did love that. I just, I love studying. I love learning new things. When I heard the name of your podcast was Getting Curious, I was like, "Yes, yes, that's what we need." And so, I was at school, I loved it, but then the sisters finally did write me back and they said, "You know, come and spend a week with us in the South Bronx," which was at that time the only place in the United States that the sisters were. My grandmother came and cried on the bed and told me, "You can't do this, you can't do this." And my parents said, "If you want to do it later, OK, but you have to finish school." And I was kind of like, I told my mother, "When God calls, you don't put him on hold." And so I left school. I joined sisters that summer and I was with the sisters for 20 years after that.

**JVN** [00:12:19] I just have to give you a little bit of background about me. I went to, like, Christian Sports Camp every summer for 10 years it was called Kanakuk, went fuego for Christ, like, accepted him into my heart, 50,000 times until I realized I, like, loved dick and was, like, super into, like, you know, wearing all sorts of different things. Not to say that to two ex-nuns, I'm not trying to traumatize you guys, oh my god, I'm sorry! I just realized, you know, later on, I'm sure you've heard it all. But anyway, so but that is to say that, like, I don't know exactly where I fall, like, on things, but I think I believe in a higher power and stuff.

And I, and I think that I respect everybody's, you know, spirituality and, like, religions and people who practice them and, like, people who have left areas and and just all sorts of things, so I just didn't want you to think that I was, like, being, like, silly. So, and, I also think that the other thing that I was going to say is, it's, like, when I think about nuns, I think about Sister Act I and II. I think about Whoopi Goldberg, I think about harmonizing. I think about going to the all-state singing choir. I don't think about, like, your family throwing themselves on the bed to be, like, "Don't go," because I'm, like, why wouldn't I want to go hang out with Kathy Najimy and Whoopi Goldberg? And, like, you know, join a choir and stuff, like, it sounds so fun, but that's not what, like, the day to day is necessarily.

**KELLI DUNHAM** [00:13:34] Well, Sister Act, I actually had a couple of great pieces that were actually, to me, very much like convent life, and Mary might want to interject as well. But for example, the part where she's doing all the chores, where she's, like, washing the car and that by herself in punishment, I feel like it's the thing where she spits it out and goes, "What is this, a Pritikin order?" Best line ever, even though it doesn't even make that much sense? Because now, no one even knows what a Pritikin is, but that's fantastic. Like, the, the part about the food, and also the way that one nun is where she was like, "We were nuns," you know, like, "We, we slept on beds of nails and, you know, stuffed things up our, you know, stuffed salt up our noses." That I feel like that is more like with a little bit more joy is a little bit more like the missionaries of charity. Like, that's not so far off. So there are parts of Sister Act that are right on.

**MARY JOHNSON** [00:14:24] There are parts that have it right on. And one of the parts actually for me was the singing in this in this sense that the Missionaries of Charity in many different places, they don't sing real well, but you're singing, like, all the time, all the time, all the time you sing, starting at five o'clock in the morning until 9:30 at night. When you're there are times you're singing, not spontaneously like in a musical, but in the chapel, usually for prayer or, like, when there's a new sister who's come. You sing to that sister before you have your, before you have your meal with them, whatever.

**JVN** [00:15:03] That sounds kind of fun! [CROSSTALK]

**MARY JOHNSON** [00:15:03] And then in Rome, I was, I was the choir director. And you know, you got to have these big things, because the sisters would take their vows in Rome and we would do it in St. John Lateran Basilica or Maria Maggiore. And you'd have these big organs. And the music was always really important for me and a big part of everything.

**JVN** [00:15:30] So, like, what are, like, the main rules of, like, nunnery? Like, what can we-, what's on the table? What's off the table? We're not dating because you have to date Jesus or something?

**KELLI DUNHAM** [00:15:44] Oh, you're married to Jesus, you're married to Jesus. And the Missionaries of Charity have a very, very, almost sensual way, I feel, like, like, the, the professed sisters, so the sisters who had taken their vows, used to give us aspirants, sisters who were studying to be, to take our vows, they would give us Valentine's Day cards from Jesus. [CROSSTALK] And also that line, like, well, like, for example, the line from a song, Mary, do you remember? I don't know. All I remember is this one line. "I'm the spouse of my crucified spouse." It's so grim. [CROSSTALK]

**MARY JOHNSON** [00:16:23] The spouse of my crucified spouse. Yeah. And then there are things like, you know, they take it from maybe the book of Isaiah. I have loved you with an everlasting love, but then they'd sign it "Jesus," and give it to you.

**KELLI DUNHAM** [00:16:36] Yeah, yeah, very. And, like, a lot of sisters, like, gazing on their prayer cards, very like, "Hmm." And and also it's a sister was very joyful. You'd say, "Oh, she's such a happy bride." Of Christ. They take it way more seriously or more sensually, I feel, like, than, like, the teaching orders do.

**MARY JOHNSON** [00:16:59] Much more so.

**KELLI DUNHAM** [00:17:00] Yeah, it's both sweet and creepy.

**MARY JOHNSON** [00:17:01] Sweet and creepy. You know, Jonathan, one time, Mother Teresa asked me to bring her her prayer book, and it happened to be open.

**JVN** [00:17:09] Literally, Mother Teresa.

**MARY JOHNSON** [00:22:12] Literally Mother Teresa. I knew her very well. I was in for 20 years. Each of those 20 years I spent time with her. We knew each other. And she asked me to bring her her prayer book, and it happened to be open or fall open, I don't remember at this point, to a little prayer card that she had kept to mark her place. And it was this picture of Jesus on the cross, but just his face and the crown of thorns, and she had written with her own very distinctive handwriting. She had written, "Jesus, I love you so much." And it was, like, "I shouldn't have seen this!" I felt like this was, like, a person's most personal, personal thing that I should never have seen, but that was the spirituality that kind of imbued everything. This is personal love for Jesus, and especially as far as Mother was concerned, Jesus on the cross.

**KELLI DUNHAM** [00:18:07] Yeah, it's important that Jesus was suffering a lot. The crucifixes in the Missionary of Charity chapels are, like, bloodier than crucifixes you will ever

see. The one in the South Bronx is bigger than, Mary, don't you think it's bigger than life size, it's actually bigger than an actual Jesus would be?

**MARY JOHNSON** [00:18:25] You know, Kelli, when I joined, it was it was a relatively reasonable size, and every time I visited afterwards, they kept changing it, and they got bigger and bloodier and the crown of thorns would get bigger and thornier each time I went.

**KELLI DUNHAM** [00:18:41] And also, he is so ripped in the Bronx, like, his, he looks like Eric Heiden, you know, Eric Heiden, the figure skater? That is what Jesus' thighs look like in the South Bronx chapel.

**JVN** [00:18:51] How did you reference a figure skater that I've never heard of. I'm feeling violated, I'm feeling-

**KELLI DUNHAM** [00:18:56] Not figure, speed, speed skater, speed skater from the 80s, sorry, sorry.

**JVN** [00:19:00] Oh, okay, I was like, I don't understand how I don't know a figure skater if that's ever happened to me before. I'm worried about my health and well-being. I'm scared. So, then, for you, Mary, you're, like, minding your own business. You go to the Bronx since 1976, Kelli, you're in Port au Prince. It's, like, when was it for you, Kelli, that you joined, what year?

**KELLI DUNHAM** [00:19:22] Well, there's a longer story, but, like, ninety four, ninety five.

**JVN** [00:19:26] So you're just trying to put, myself, I'm like, I'm, like, Amy Chao. She had just, like, hurt her Achilles tendon, getting ready for her 1996 Atlanta games. Like, Shannon Miller had just, like, won worlds in ninety four. Like everything for me is all gymnastics and figure skating references for points in time. Seventy six. That's more of, like, that was, like, Dorothy Hamill era. If I'm talking about figure skating, gymnastics, I don't know as much about from the 70s. I actually get that together, but I'm just thinking about where you guys were, what was happening in your lives. You're both so young. Can anyone go to that church and go see that, like, big, bloody crucified Jesus? Or like, do you have to be a member, or do you have to be a volunteer? Like, is anyone welcome?

**KELLI DUNHAM** [00:20:06] People go to mass there.

**MARY JOHNSON** [00:20:09] Absolutely, yeah.



**KELLI DUNHAM** [00:20:10] People go to mass. It's a specific chapel for the sisters, though, where ripped Jesus is.

**MARY JOHNSON** [00:20:15] And it's in the South Bronx, and it's, you'd have to arrive at the right time, they wouldn't let you in just necessarily at any time, but if you did arrive at the time when they were praying they would bring you in and certainly invite you to pray with them, they'd be very open to that.

**JVN** [00:20:33] And so for both of you, and I think we've, you know, mentioned it a little bit, but ultimately what it was, well, tell me one more time. What drew you each to the group, to really like? I mean, for you, Kelli, you'd been there. It took six months and then you were like, "I'm part of it." Did you?

**KELLI DUNHAM** [00:20:54] No, it was way harder than that, because I had to convert from, I had to convert to Catholicism, and there are a little bit like, "Oh, nobody really does it that way." You know, I literally grew up, like, again, I went to Young Life Camp and actually, you know, I went to a Christian high school and, like, I had a very like kind of this firm born again Christianity. And so I had to do like I had to do my first confession, which is a lot harder at 20 than it is at six. I also had to do my first confession with a priest. He and I didn't speak. He was Flemish. Bless the priest they had there. He was from Belgium, so he only spoke Flemish and Creole and I only spoke English and Creole. So I had to do a confession in a language that was not my first language. I didn't even know the words. For some of the things that I did, I had to just describe them. And after about 20 minutes, he was like, "Uh, maybe just a summary, maybe just, like, the high points?" So I actually had to convert, and that took a while. And then I volunteered a long time with the sisters before they would allow me to actually join because I was a convert. So, and I think some other things as well. They had some reservations, so.

**JVN** [00:21:58] So, like, how do you join the group? How long does it take to like train to become a member? Like, what's all that, like, hierarchy stuff?

**MARY JOHNSON** [00:22:09] Yeah, it is very hierarchical and there is a plan for the whole thing. There are different stages, and the length of those stages of the training vary from time to time. Like when I joined, there was, aspirancy lasted six months, and then you had six months of postulancy and then you had two years of novitiate. So you're three years in and then you'd have the opportunity to take your first vows.

**JVN** [00:22:33] Oh my god, I couldn't take notes fast enough. What was that third phase? I'm just sorry. It's so many fierce terms, can I hear them again, I'm sorry, I'm freaking out.

**MARY JOHNSON** [00:22:40] Yes, six months as an aspirant, six months as a novitiate, and then it's six months as a postulant and then two years as a novice. And I think Kelli, you had pre-aspirancy because they changed things up by the time you joined. So what were your stages?

**KELLI DUNHAM** [00:23:02] So, well, there was a new, there was a new segment when I joined, called "pre-aspirancy," and it was to, like, you know, get people ready to become sisters. But that's supposed to be a month. And it took me a year and a half because they said I had "insufficient docility and too much self-esteem." I was not very good at the obedience part.

**JVN** [00:23:22] Insufficient what?

**KELLI DUNHAM** [00:23:24] Docility, like, I wasn't docile enough.

**JVN** [00:23:28] I didn't even know the word was until you explained it, but docility. I've never heard that saying, wow, okay.

**KELLI DUNHAM** [00:23:35] And that I had too much self-esteem, which is, like, it's, you know, I would say that's a termination notice you only get from the convent, right? Like, my job isn't, like, "Oh, you feel good about yourself. That doesn't work for us, sorry." Yes. So it took me much, much longer to even get to the aspirancy stage. But I was the first that was the first person that that ever happened to that many times. That was, you know, so that's not the usual plan.

**JVN** [00:23:56] So, OK. And then after aspirancy, postulance, and then novice and then after three years, typically then you become, like, a full-fledged nun.

**MARY JOHNSON** [00:24:06] Not quite. You get to take your first vows, so you take a vow of chastity, poverty, obedience and with the Missionaries of Charity, whole hearted and free service to the poorest of the poor. So you take four vows, but the first time you do that, you don't take it for life. You take it for a year, and then you take it for another year, and another year. And you renew that vow for a total of six times. And so you've been in for nine years, minimum, by the time you're allowed to take your final vows for life and then you don't have to repeat that whole process anymore.

**JVN** [00:24:46] Holy shit. That's a lot of vows. Poverty, chastity. What was the other one? [CROSSTALK] Service, obedience, obedience, and in service of? OK, so then what does daily life look like for people that are at different levels, like, do, do, like, does a full nun get treated nicer than someone who's, like, at the beginner phase?

**KELLI DUNHAM** [00:24:13] Unless, Mary, you know, something I know, I don't know. I felt like it was never nicer for the professed sisters. No.

**JVN** [00:24:20] So there was never, like, a hierarchy where, like, some nuns got, like, extra snacks or they didn't have to do as much stuff? Like, was there ever, like, a nun who's always, like, calling out sick or something? You're, like, "There's no sick days, Candy!" or whatever?

**MARY JOHNSON** [00:25:33] Yeah, there are no sick days. [CROSSTALK] No, unless you're really completely immobile. But, you know, if a sister got to be a superior, sometimes she, she allowed herself certain privileges, and that wasn't something that was approved of. But I have to say there were a lot of sisters who did that. You know, they might have special meals or they might, you know, give themselves a little more time to talk to people on the outside. You know, certain things like that. But nobody else but a superior could dream of doing those things.

**JVN** [00:26:16] And we touched on this a little teeny tiny bit, but I need to hear. I really would love to hear from both of you. Like, when you were just like in the thick of it, honey, because Mary, like you, you were there for 20 years, right?

**MARY JOHNSON** [00:26:28] Yes.

**JVN** [00:26:28] And then Kelli.

**KELLI DUNHAM** [00:26:20] Like, two years. Like, I was a volunteer with them for seven years and then two years in the convent, so, like, nine years of my life.

**JVN** [00:26:39] Heart palpitations from everybody. Well, not for me. Like, just in my, from the coffee. Nine years, it's a lot. Twenty years, it's a lot. So what was daily life like within the group, like for each of you?

**KELLI DUNHAM** [00:26:58] You know, it's such a combination of things that were so beautiful and also just really terrible, right? Because we're not both, we're both not there, and we both are living really different lives than we were when we were nuns, for sure. But there are spots, parts that were just, like, so, like, "Oh, this is exactly where I'm supposed to be, and I'm, like, living in community, and look at all these beautiful women." That was maybe just me, but. So there were moments of that. But then there were also moments of, and for me, the hardest part, really, like, you know, it was a very demanding, physically, life. Like, we were up at 4:40, you were on your knees. You're supposed to be on your knees

before the fifth bell, right? You're supposed to be on your knees praying, everyone all together, we all lived together in a dorm. You pull a sheet over yourself to get dressed. I don't know what they thought was going to happen if we saw each other in the dark, but very physically demanding work, a lot. We prayed four hours a day on a bare concrete floor, so all that was demanding.

But what, the part for me that was hardest was, like, the obedience and that you were trying to kind of at all times, suppress your feelings, your feelings, especially for other people. You weren't supposed to be attached in any way to other people. So for me, that was the, like it was such a juxtaposition of just such beautiful, like just feeling, like, I remember the day, like on the big holidays, like when we would serve, both serve a meal in the soup kitchen and take meals out to people, all the nuns working together. It was like this beautiful thing, like this beautiful act of, like, sisterhood and community. And then there would also just be, like, these terrible moments. You know, where you would be accused of like, I don't know, like going to the bathroom too often or something, you know, of not being obedient or not being, not denying yourself enough. So it's the juxtaposition of it that made the daily life hard for me anyway.

**JVN** [00:3285:46] What can denying yourself look like? Like, if you guys are making that food for, like, Thanksgiving for people who need, or who are in need or something and you're running, like, a soup kitchen for Thanksgiving? Like, would you guys get to eat the food? Like, would you guys get to eat from the food that you were giving to people? Or like, do you have to eat, like, something shittier or, like, less good or, like, before or, like, what happens?

**KELLI DUNHAM** [00:29:06] I mean, we always eat totally separately. We never ate with the people we served, which came from a place, and probably Mary could maybe explain the history of it more. The idea is, if you're visiting at somebody's house, you're not going to, if they offer you food, and they don't have a lot of food, then you're eating their food. And it comes from a good place. But also it makes this huge divide where nobody's ever seen a Missionary of Charity eat. It's like they're like aliens or something, you know? But yes, definitely there were not. There was, like, a lot of rules around food, and the food sometimes was pretty shitty. Like, if you had, like, for example, when it gets passed, like, a piece of bread gets passed, and it has mold on it. If it was a piece close to you, you had to take it and eat it. Whether or not it had mold on it, and I tried to be, like, "I don't think it's like, Would it be bad for our bodies which are married to Jesus that has mold on it?" But nobody wanted to hear that shit, really, to be honest.

**JVN** [00:29:52] Did you say that? And then would they be, like, "You're not being obedient? You're not, eat the moldy bread!" Yeah, everyone, you can't see them, but they're both just, like, nodding vigorously, we are nodding.

**MARY JOHNSON** [00:30:03] We are, vigorously, vigorously. [CROSSTALK]

**JVN** [00:30:08] So who says that?

**MARY JOHNSON** [00:30:11] The superior, the mistress, whoever's in charge. And you know, the food was more important than the people who were eating it. And that was evident in so many ways because you could not waste anything. And most of our houses, we didn't have refrigerators. So you would, whatever food was cooked that day, you had to finish that day. And so the person who was in the kitchen had this really important kind of juggling act because she wasn't supposed to let any of the food spoil. So she had, would have to use anything that was on the verge of going bad. But at the same time, if she cooked too much, she knew that that night at dinner, it had to be finished. And so the dish of the soup at night sometimes would pass up and down, and each time it would, you'd have to take something.

The thing that they would say when it passed in order to encourage you to take that spoon of soup, like, your 87th spoon of soup, it's just like you cannot put any more in. But they would say, pointing to that big bowl of soup that was passing for everybody to serve from that big bowl, they'd point to that and say, "Jesus is passing." And you are, it's like you're refusing Jesus if you refuse the soup. And, and sometimes it's just I mean, yeah, the food was really bad. We would beg food. We very rarely, I mean, it depended where you were. But in my experience, we very rarely bought food. You'd go to the wholesale market where they were selling produce and you'd get the rotten tomatoes and the half-spoiling oranges and whatever it was, and we'd go and beg at the supermarket and they'd give you the 14-day-old bread or whatever it was. We ate a lot of expired food.

And you know, you asked a little bit before, like, what is denying yourself? I mean, the Missionaries of Charity have more ways to deny yourself than you have hairs on your beautiful head, Jonathan. I mean, if the, if you want to sit in the front in the chapel, you should go kneel in the back. If you feel hot, you should go put on another sweater. If your soup is too salty, you should add more salt. If you, just, like, it was, the more ways you can find to deny yourself. The idea was, you know, you're being like Jesus on the cross who is accepting all the difficulties you're supporting. It was a kind of a glorification of suffering, that was verging on the insane sometimes.

**KELLI DUNHAM** [00:32:48] Yeah, I, once my, like, they just kept coming up with new things like in the training, right, like, "OK, we're not doing this anymore. We're not using-. Oh, it turns out we're not using, you know, we're not using toilet paper, we're just going to pour water all over ourselves, you know, X or Y." And I can remember my aspirant mistress saying, like, "Oh sisters, because we love Jesus," and that's always that's like the double dog dare. Right? That's a double dog dare of the convent, "Because we love Jesus." Like, we come home from working, you know, in the soup kitchen. And they say today, "Because we love Jesus, we're going to move the dining room into the dorm and the dorm into the dining room." And we do that because the only thing you were supposed to say is, "Yes, sister, thank you, sister." Right?

And then we move it back for no reason, except for just to check obedience, right? Like, "Are you guys going to be able to obey?" And then at one point, my aspirant mistress was like, "Well, if you really love Jesus, you deny yourself by going to the bathroom only once a day," you know? And I was like, "Oh, OK, call me Sister Mary bladder infection." But I thought she was kidding, but like, she was not kidding. Yeah, it's, it's kind of the, kind of, it's Olympic-level denying yourself, like, "Oh, I never even thought of denying myself that." I remember when she told us we shouldn't hold our books, like, when we're reading at the table, we should, we should hold our books above the table just to make ourselves uncomfortable.

**JVN** [00:34:04] What would happen if the sister was, like, "You're not denying yourself enough," like, what, what would, like, punishment for that look like, like, not moving up or like, what if you've already taken your life vow and you're not renewing every year and maybe you're having a bad week and you're like, naughty? Is there, like, or bad? Is there punishment?

**MARY JOHNSON** [00:36:23e] You were encouraged to inflict that punishment on yourself. Now, one of the things that we would do is, at a certain stage, not in the beginning when you entered, but when you'd been there long enough that you were pretty invested. They'd introduce you to the idea of the discipline, which was a handmade whip. We made it out of, of rope. And you would beat yourself with it every day, a certain prescribed number of strokes. And if you'd done something, as you say, "naughty," you would be expected to ask for double penance. So instead of using, you know, 25 strokes of the discipline, you would do 50. That sort of thing. We also had these wire chains that we made ourselves, they would go, they were spiked, so that the little spikes would dig into your skin. They were kind of like, they're like these chain-link things, and the links would dig into your skin and wander around your biceps and wander around your waist and you'd wear those during prayer. And if you had been especially naughty, you were supposed to ask permission to wear them twice as long, that sort of thing.

And sometimes the superior would find ways to, you know, punish you, in a sense. That, there were things, I remember once, one of the sisters had forgotten the keys. We're, like, we had the convent right here and right next door. We had the soup kitchen and she was running back and forth, bringing supplies from one place to the other, and she accidentally locked the keys to the house in the basement. And so what the superior did is, she said, "OK, if you all can't take care of the keys, you have to stay out of the house." And she stayed in the house and went about the things that day, and she locked the three of us out, and we were just there in the backyard because she had locked the soup kitchen, also. And we just, we were just there for, it was, like, three or four hours. It was during the time when we would have normally had our nap and that sort of thing and lunch and tea, and we couldn't get in the house. So we couldn't eat, and we couldn't have our nap. And, you know, but that was rare. That was a kind of, like, that only happened to me once. Certain, certain superiors would find ways to punish. I mean, it is kind of a, it's a punishment.

**JVN** [00:36:47] A recurring theme for me this year is, like, "both, and." So it sounds like there was both some good and a lot of bad, a lot of suffering. Was there any, like, standout moments, like, with the group that, um, like, Princess Diana, like, what was that like?

**MARY JOHNSON** [00:37:10] Princess Diana, yes, I was there. When Mother Teresa met Princess Diana for the first time. It was in Rome at the house where I was assistant superior and you'll see me there in those photos with Mother and Lady Di. It was exciting, sure, and you got those kind of perks every now and then because Mother Teresa was who she was. She'd won the Nobel Peace Prize. She was very admired throughout the world, always topped those lists of most admired women. So a lot of people would want to meet her. And being there when she met Princess Di for the first time was very exciting. But you have to realize also that by that time I'd been in the convent for about 15 years, and I didn't even know who she was. But the sisters who had been posted in England, some of them were in Rome at the time. And so I asked them, "Tell me about this Princess Di, who is going to be coming to meet Mother?" And they told me, and so I knew a little bit.

But when she arrived, she was just so, she was so shy, you know, and she, the height difference was astonishing because Mother Teresa was so short and tiny and Lady Di was so tall, and she had on those big black pumps as well. So she was just kind of looking down as she was. So she was bent over all the time, Diana was, looking at mother and talking with mother, and we sang for Diana when she arrived. And Diana and mother went inside their, Mother's room, in the convent, and they talked for a while, and then at one point they came out from the room and Mother told me, Mother also often spoke of herself in the third person, so she said, "Mother and Diana are going to the chapel to pray. I want

you to make sure that no one else comes inside while we're in the chapel." I said, "Sure, mother, sure."

So I got to stand there watching the two of them pray together in the chapel, and it was really very moving because-, for many reasons. One was that when they entered the chapel, they did what all of us did when we entered the chapel, we took off our shoes. And Mother Teresa's sandals were there, and her sandals had been mended so many times, patched, stitched, glued. They were just this conglomeration of pieces of something that held together, mostly by spirit and grace, I think. And then there were Lady Diana's, these big black pumps with the heels, and I doubt she'd ever worn those shoes before. But who knows? And I was standing there, trying to watch the shoes more than Mother and Diana, trying to give them some privacy. But at the same time, seeing the two of them kneeling together and. It was very moving because there's this princess and there was this woman who had nothing, who spent all her days really serving the poor, and you could feel even though that was the first time that they had met, that there was a bond there. And, and that was a bond that continued, they met after that many times. Not everyone knows this, but Mother had given Diana her rosary, the rosary that Mother had prayed with, and Diana was actually buried with that rosary. You know, I don't know many in the royal family who are buried with a Catholic rosary, but my Diana was.

**JVN** [00:40:46] I feel my mom crying on this episode, like, right now, she hasn't even heard it yet. So you had said that in that moment prior to her coming Princess Diana, that you hadn't heard of her. So it's one of the rules, like, no one would ever find themselves at, like, a grocery store by the checkout stand, like, buying groceries? Oh, because the wholesale markets, you're not going to the grocery store, and there's no TV, and then do you not have a radio in the car. It's like you never even heard, like, who is?

**MARY JOHNSON** [00:41:13] No tv, no radio, no newspaper, and if you happened upon a newspaper somewhere, you weren't supposed to read it. You were supposed to keep custody of the eyes. We weren't even supposed to look at billboards in the streets. We were just just supposed to, when we were out, we would always go to by two and we were always supposed to pray the rosary. And we were supposed to keep custody of the eyes, which meant we don't look anywhere except wherever is essential to look to make sure you're not tripping, and so that you can see the poor and do whatever you need to do to help them. But otherwise you're not supposed to look at anything, not supposed to read anything. We weren't keeping up with the news by any stretch of anybody's imagination. Sometimes a visiting priest or a priest who would come for mass would say, you know, "Pray for President Reagan and President Gorbachev. They're doing such and such." And so we would get our news that way, through these prayer requests that we've gone through. It was an odd sort of existence.



**JVN** [00:42:19] So after nine years for you, Kelli, it was 94, 95. And then, Mary, what year did you leave?

**MARY JOHNSON** [00:42:30] Ninety seven.

**JVN** [00:42:32] So, OK, so I'm sorry, just so many 90s references, intrusive 90s thoughts. Olympics gymnastics. Not going there again. I'm so sorry. Moving right past. So what was it like to, like, leave? What was the moment like? Were you doing something, were you like, "I'm not going to do this anymore?" Were you scared to tell someone, like, how do you leave?

**KELLI DUNHAM** [00:42:55] Well, first of all, it obviously was not going well for me, like, I got held back 18 times, essentially, right. In pre-aspirancy, so it was like failing kindergarten 18 times, you know? And so it was obviously not going well. In fact, when Mother Teresa came to the Bronx, she said she came in and she greeted us when we became aspirants, and she was like, "Oh, what's your name?" And I gave her my name and she was like, "Oh sister, I've heard of you," which was like, this Awkward moment. I was like, Yeah, I've heard of you of two, you know, I'd be like, I was like, I'm so bad at being a nun that she's heard about me. This is not this is not a good sign. There's not a telling sign.

**JVN** [00:43:27] But did they say that you were bad because you had been held back?

**KELLI DUNHAM** [00:43:30] Oh, yeah, yeah, there was. Yeah, nobody was pretending that wasn't true. Like the regional superior was, like, "It just seems like, like, it's, like, you're just picking always the wrong thing to say." And I was like, "Oh, I was, I thought I was picking the right thing to say. I don't know." You know, so. So it was obviously not going well. Nobody was pretending that it was going well, but they were trying to stick it out with me because I think I'd been. I think that because I'd been a volunteer for so long, you know, and they were, like, "Well, I don't know, these other sisters said she was OK, I don't know." But it was obviously not going well. And kind of what ended up being the straw, the proverbial straw, is we don't use, the Missionaries of Charity. We, them, *they* don't use disposable menstrual products. So we just basically wadded up diapers and put them in our underwear. And then we had to wash them out by hand because we didn't have, we watched everything by hand. Right? So in cold water.

So I had, my body, I think, just kind of rebelled against everything. And I had my period for four straight months. And we were cleaning, and, you know, just with the water up diapers and the cold water. And we were cleaning the women's shelter in Harlem. And there was, I was cleaning the top of somebody's dresser and there was a tampon on top of it. And I

was like, "Oh, I think I'll just borrow that tampon." And then I put it in my pocket. And as I was walking away, I was like, "I'm not borrowing this tampon. Like, I'm not going to give this tampon back. I'm stealing a tampon." And that was a moment where I was, like, "I don't know. Like, I don't know what this process, like, I don't know where I am in this process, but I can tell you it is not making me holy because I know what I don't want to be. And that is a person who steals a tampon from a homeless woman."

So I went to my mistress who was just like, I was like, "Do you think this is working?" And she's like, "Oh, let me think, no, no, it's not working." And she, all the other sisters now, until we did the podcast, The Turning podcast, I did not know this, but it seems like every other person who left the Missionaries of Charity they, like, begged them to stay and told them it was God's will. Now nobody begged me to stay. There was no begging Kelli to stay there just, like, "Bye, Sister Mercy. If you could just leave now." She I, my mistress, taking me to Port Authority, she took me to Port Authority. "Where do you want to go?" I was like, "My sister was in Philadelphia, I guess, to go to Philadelphia," just standing there. The biggest smile on her face. It was like the happiest moment of her life to be rid of me. There was no, there was no pleading. They were there, like, "You gave it a good try, bye champ," you know.

**JVN** [00:45:53] Did you have money? Did you have, like, an ability to, like, they were just like, "Who's your next of kin? Because you can't stay here anymore?" Just like.

**KELLI DUNHAM** [00:46:01] Yeah, yeah, they you bring in seventy five dollars, so they gave you the \$75 that you left with. I was wearing this crumpled up purple jumper that I had walked in with. So it had been in the attic the whole time. Yeah, I went to my sister's house. I had, like, nothing. I had, I think I had a pair of white pants in her, in her basement. I mean, and if I hadn't had a sister to go stay with, you know, she was just, like, "Oh, I guess, oh, I guess," she had a four-month-old baby. She just made room for me, if she hadn't had that and also I had no job skills, like, zero job skills, so I hadn't finished college. So I was really, really grateful for my sister. Also, I had a huge gap on my resume. You know, not as long as Mary's, I guess, but it's still, you know, it's a little hard to explain. Like, you know, like, when I first went out on job interviews, I had this New Yorker cartoon cutout where it said, like, the person's asking, you know, in a job interview, like, "Oh, are you a team player?" And the thing says, "Are you kidding? I was in a cult," and I crossed out "cult" and put "convent." You know, I was like, "Oh yeah, I was the team player. I was in a convent."

**JVN** [00:47:01] You're, like, "I could do that. I got it." So, so is that, like, what you call, like, taking, like, your leave? Is that, like, how we call it? Or do you, are you just, like, or, like, do will they say, like, "You can think about it and then come back." And also, too, Kelli, in that moment, like, was that just a complete watershed moment when you had that conversation

and went to your sister's, did you? How did you identify with, like, your faith and spirituality after having, like, dedicated you, yourself for so long and then it's, like, not working and you're not staying anymore. I would imagine that this would be, like, a really big moment.

**KELLI DUNHAM** [00:47:36] It was, it was it it felt like because it's such a dramatic act, right? Like, "Here you are, Jesus, I want to get married to you. Here is my life. I'm giving you my whole life." And then it's just like, you know, God is like, like, "eh," just flips it out, "No, thanks. I'm good. Thank you. I don't need that life. Thank you." It's a very, it feels very like it's such a huge act of rejection, like the biggest act of rejection that there can be. You're right. It's like God saying, you like, "I don't need your life. That's OK, that's-, I'm good." So that felt extremely that was the heart. I mean, there were parts of it that were difficult, you know, just kind of, like, feeling like a failure. But that was the part that felt like rejection and it actually took, because it just felt like, "Well, why am I like the wrong person for this wrong? Why am I the wrong person to just want to do something good?"

And it took actually until I was like later in life and had situations where I was like, "Oh no, I am the exact right person for the exact right *this* moment, I can really help in this moment, I can really help in this moment." I had a partner who was ill, still got ill very shortly after we began dating, and I'm also a nurse and, like, I had the right personality, I was, like, "Oh, *this*," it was so healing to be able to take care of her when she was dying because I had that moment of being the exact right person at the exact right time, as opposed to the Missionaries of Charity, where I felt like I gave my life and it was, like, I was *not* the right person. You know, somehow just who I was was wrong. So it took, actually, a really long time to heal from that. And what helped me heal was something that was actually kind of terrible.

**JVN** [00:49:04] Yeah, it's such a, it's such this common theme that it's, like, either or, like, you have to do this or and I just the older I get, the more I think it's about both and. Mary, can you tell us about, like, it's '97, Michelle Kwan had just won her first world title in 96? I'm sorry, that, that story Kelli, like, totally maybe have tears in my eyes, like, full tears. So I had to make a figure skating joke because I felt about myself getting emosh, that only happens every once in a while. So, Mary, can you tell us about what it was like for you?

**MARY JOHNSON** [00:49:38] I can. But first, I am also very emotional with Kelli's story, and I want to say something about that before I talk about other things. Because you know, Kelli, when I hear you say, you know, "It felt like such rejection," and I'm sure it did. I'm absolutely sure that's what it felt like. But I want to go back to where they were telling you, you know, "You just got too much self-esteem." You know, I want to just say, you know, it's a wonderful thing that you didn't fit into the Missionaries of Charity. It's a marvelous thing. It's a testament to your strength. It's a testament to your inability to accept bullshit. It's a

testament to your determination to live an honest, truthful life of real love and service that you didn't fit. Because while the Missionaries of Charity had this image of being, you know, totally devoted to service, Mother Teresa as an image of being the universal mother. And with that kind of love, you know, we know from our day to day experience that in order to fit in as a sister, you have to give up so much of what makes you you and thinks that you were unable to do that is a testament to your beauty.

And I just really want to say that, and I want to say that me not being able to be myself was really what convinced me I needed to leave because I couldn't, I couldn't believe that God would make me one way and that he, then he would want me to be completely different. You know, and for me, it was around a lot of different things. It was around the vow of chastity because, you know, I was 19 when I joined. I'd been such a dork in high school. I never had any kind of real relationship as far as you know, any kind of romantic anything. And when I was in the convent, there was a sister who was very interested in me. We had this, this connection that eventually got really weird and she got so manipulative. And that's a whole long story, some of which we do tell in the podcast and which I talk about a lot in my book. I had a connection with a priest. At one point we thought of getting married, but I really did realize that I needed human connection, and I needed human intimacy, and that I wanted sex.

You know, I didn't. I didn't know to what degree I needed it or didn't need it, that wasn't clear, but I wanted to figure out what that part of human life was. And I felt like God made us with these, I don't know, as we are. And human sexuality is a big part of being a human being for, for most people, that's something significant. And I really. And I just kept hearing over and over in my mind the words from the gospel of John, where Jesus says, "I came that you may have life and have it to the full," and it's, like, "Fullness of life! I'm experiencing fullness of life in these relationships I'm having that are helping me to grow, that are helping me to connect, that are completely against the vows I've made. That if the sisters knew about them, I don't know what they would do to me," because I had to do all of that in secret. And eventually, of course, some of it did come to light in various ways, and all of that's a big story.

But the story you want to hear is, right now, is why I left, and it was because I believed God wanted me to have a fullness of life. That it didn't make any sense for someone to deny who they were as human beings in an attempt to please God, don't judge them, make any sense to me. And, and that's really kind of what led me out because I've been involved for so many years and because I had been given real positions of responsibility, I was in charge of helping the sisters prepare for their final vows. Mother Teresa had entrusted me with revising the constitutions, the governing documents of the group. I just had a lot of responsibility. I was very well respected. But it was, like, "No, I, I want to be real, and I can't

do that in this group," because the group kind of takes over, unless you're a person like Kelli, who has enough self-respect to say, "I can't just mold myself into this little whatever you want me to be." You know, it's just not going to work.

**JVN** [00:54:37] Mmmm. But you ended up finding it, too, queen. And you ended up leaving, and so you found your self respect and your self love. That, I cried really hard for the first three quarters of that. I was, like, trying to not make a scene. So it sounds like in your case, you had had inklings that maybe, like, you were maybe going to leave, but then you would end up staying because your life ended up becoming totally integrated and completely, like, enmeshed with the missionaries. So it's like, that's your career, that's your life you spent all this time. So who is your version of, like, Kelli's sister? Like, where did you go when you finally, like, told the people that you were leaving? Was that like? Well, you probably haven't even already seen J.Lo in Enough? Or maybe you did, because I did come out, like, you know, 10 years later or five years later. When she has to, like, leave her husband, like, will they come after you? And you got to, like, put boards on your doors and stuff like when they go through your trash? Is it like Scientology status or is it like? Or like, could you just kind of get away, OK, because you were so high up?

**MARY JOHNSON** [00:56:41] So for me, the process was different because I already had vows. And there are sisters who just one day decide, "OK, I'm doing this anymore," and they disappear. But that's very traumatic for the sisters they leave behind. And I had witnessed that very closely because I was stationed in Rome and there was a sister who did that. She was superior of the house, and she just walked away, and nobody knew she was going. Nobody knew where she had gone, and it was really traumatic for everybody there. They were worried about her. They didn't know what was up, and I was sent to the community to take her place, to be superior of that community. So I did not want the sisters that I was with to go through that kind of trauma. So I did it all according to the book. And I spent an entire year, this was my decision.

I just said, "OK, so I've been bending the rules a lot. You know, I had these relationships. I've been making exceptions for myself. What I'm going to do is I'm going to spend an entire year keeping all the rules as best as I can, devoting myself completely and totally and forgetting. Now, I'm not going to let the thought of leaving enter my mind for a year. And then at the end of the year, I'm going to decide to stay or to leave, and I'm going to make that decision on the basis of, 'Can I be myself in this group?' If I can, I'll stay. If I can't, and I'm out." At the end of the year, it was just really clear to me: "I've got to go." And so I the first step was I had to write a letter to Mother Teresa saying that, you know, "I'd like permission to leave," and I had to give that letter to my superior, who then refused to pass it on to Mother Teresa, who kept it for weeks and weeks and weeks and weeks, in the

hopes that I would take it back. And then eventually, when she couldn't keep it any longer, she did turn it over.

And then I got a letter back from Mother Teresa saying I could have one year of exclaustation, which meant that I would still have my vows, I'd still be an official member of the community, but I would live outside the community. I wouldn't wear the habit. And in this letter where Mother Teresa gave me that permission, she said, "But you can't leave now. You've got to wait until the end of May, and you've gotta," because they kept delaying and delaying because they wanted me to change my mind. And I didn't change my mind. And the end of May came, and Mother Teresa was in Rome, and I had this horrible, heart wrenching conversation with her where she was wanting me to stay. And I just said, "No, Mother, I'm going." And that was the last conversation I had with her. I left in May of nineteen ninety seven. She died in September of that same year. When I left, I went, as Kelli did, to my sister's house. It's the sisters who come through for you when you need it, you know.

And so I went to my sister's house. I lived with her in her family for a few months and then I was for a few months in a center for priests and religious in trouble. And I stayed there for a bit, and then I had a job at JCPenney. That was my first job when I was out, and it was really weird because it was Christmas time, and I had just completely, Christmas in the Missionaries of Charity is a lot of hard work. You're repairing toys. You're preparing meals. You're stacking boxes with food, all sorts of things, and you're working for these people who really have nothing. And there I was in JCPenney and people were coming with credit cards and there was this Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, and it was just all so completely weird. But even before that year of exclaustation, that official year, kind of, "off," I knew that I wasn't going back. And so I wrote a letter to Mother Teresa again, I got a reply back saying, "You have to write a letter to the Pope because you have final vows." So I wrote a letter to the pope. I don't think the Pope ever saw it. I received eventually a letter back from the cardinal who was in charge of such things, dispensing me from my vows, and then my life on the outside world began again in earnest.

**JVN** [01:00:08] Wow, thank you both. Just to I want to take a little bit longer if you both have enough time, but thank you so much for sharing your stories with me. I'm not wrapping up quite yet. I'm just saying thank you so much for sharing your stories. It's really just so incredible. So this is a random non sequitur, but have you? Well, OK, no, I'm not going to do it. Oh, god. [CROSSTALK] Have you guys seen that Kimmy Schmidt show?

**KELLI DUNHAM** [01:00:35] [CROSSTALK] Yes! Yes! Kimmy Schmidt is the only character in pop culture that I relate to at all. Like when she says, I'm, "I don't know that, but for totally

non-weird religious reasons." That's, like, she's literally the only character I relate to in pop culture.

**JVN** [01:00:47] I wondered if that made, if that watching that, if that-, that story was giving me Kimmy Schmidt vibes, Mary. And I wondered if that was. And to that end, I mean, her character, like, deals with a lot of the feelings afterwards, like, can you both tell us something that you have both kept? Like, kept from your time there? And also, like, or, like, is it or is it like PTSD? Like, do you still wake up at 4:00 in the morning and you're like, "Ah!" Or, like, what? What has been something that's lingered with you both since you've left?

**KELLI DUNHAM** [01:01:19] I, I don't know if it's a Missionary of Charity because I also am, like, a Midwestern farm kid, but I get up still every morning. I rarely sleep past 5:00 a.m.

**JVN** [01:01:29] That must be a Midwestern thing, because me too, I can barely like the five is a little aggressive, but like 5:30 six, that's, like, I just naturally can't sleep past that time. I think we're just like early risers.

**KELLI DUNHAM** [01:01:44] If you go on vacation! Yeah, it's, like, if you go on vacation with somebody who doesn't do that, I'm, like, "Wait, half the day is gone, where's the day?"

**JVN** [01:01:46] "We're gone! And I'm stressed! And your stressed because we didn't even have fun on our vacation. And it's 11, and I'm so stressed out!" So waking up early. Is there, is there, is there any, like, where you both, like, what was, like, your first meal? Like, what were you like, "Oh God, get me to Taco Bell!" Or did you not even know Taco Bell? You didn't even fucking Taco Bell, did you know Taco Bell yet? Or no? Have you, Kelli? Did you guys even know about Taco Bell?

**KELLI DUNHAM** [01:02:07] We knew about, I don't know if Mary knew about Taco Bell, but, like, Taco Bell existed in the 70s. So yeah. Yes.

**MARY JOHNSON** [01:02:12] Yes, it did. But I didn't go to Taco Bell. I was just really happy to be in a place where I could decide when I wanted to eat. And you know, my sister is an excellent cook, so eating her food was just fantastic. And the first time that they took me out to a restaurant, I could not decide. I could not, could not, could not decide, you know, because it was the first time in over 20 years that anybody had asked me what I would like to eat, you know, and, and it seemed like such a momentous decision. And so, now I don't have that anymore. Now I'm like, "I don't care about the menu. I am here for an eventual meal, but I want to talk to the people I'm with. I want to be here. I just want to enjoy the ambiance." And so the first thing I land upon that attracts my attention, I'll order it. I don't

care, you know. But, but the thing that I keep most, I think from that time for me is, is the emphasis on the importance of love.

For me, you know, that is the heart of the Missionaries of Charity. It's what kept me in for 20 years, because I really do believe that treating each other with respect, seeing the good in everybody, no matter, you know, we all have our strengths, our weaknesses, our whatever. But everybody has something good there. And if you look, you will see it. And if you believe it's there, you will see it more easily. And just treating everybody well, and doing what you can to be of service. And that's, I think the thing that I keep most and you OK, cliché, whatever, it's love that makes the world go round. You know, greed and power may be driving a lot of things. But what keeps most people going and connected if they are, is that love. It's those human relationships. It's that, that joining together an appreciation of what a great thing life is, you know, loving life, just being amazed that whatever. I think that charity, that love that, that's, that's the thing I eat more than anything else..

**JVN** [01:04:42] Mmm. Where do you guys consider yourselves now in terms of like, do you consider yourselves religious spiritual people of like, you're like, "No, I'm Hindu now," what? Like, what are we? How are we feeling about this?

**KELLI DUNHAM** [01:04:56] So I will say that, like, everything I was looking for in the Missionaries of Charity, I'm still looking for now. Like, I still, not that I haven't found it, but it's like, still, I'm. I mean, when people are like, "Well, how did you go from being a nun to like, you know, a queer, you know, like, a queer nurse comedian?" I'm like, "That isn't even a right turn. That is literally just the logical conclusion." You know, like, to me, it seems very it seems very, just, like, straight on. It seems like the conclusion. And community for me is, like, the biggest I feel like is where my spirituality is. I run a storytelling show and, that happened, just happens to have it on Sunday, and I say, like, that's my church, you know, and kind of my main like I say that my mission statement is to connect people in laughter and hope and also not to be an asshole like my theology is do not be an asshole to people. So it's the answer. I go to the Church of the Anti-Assholes.

**JVN** [01:05:56] Where can people come see your show?

**KELLI DUNHAM** [01:05:58] It's at Caveat, which is a great space in the Lower East Side. It's nightlife for nerds. It's the third Sunday of every month at 4pm., so it's perfect. It's called Queer Memoir, so people can go to queermemoir.com. And it's also live streamed now.

**JVN** [01:06:12] Oh my gosh, we've got to come. I love that story. I know that I honestly could have you both back for like a second follow up because I was so excited talking



about the Sister Act that I couldn't get myself together for the first, like 30 minutes. But why would we just be remiss if we didn't mention? I mean, we did do one episode about cults on Getting Curious of where, and that is kind of why I'm obsessed with, like, all sorts of different religions and because I'm, like, "Oh my God," because our expert taught us that basically every religion is already satisfying two of the four things that qualify you, and you really only need, like, three of the four for it to be considered, in their estimation, a cult.

And since we're all already, like, two thirds of the way there, it's like, "Ah! Doesn't take that much." But you know, there is, it is just, like, the human experience I get. There's both good and there is bad. And Mary, to your point that is really beautiful is that you decided to make the choice to include yourself in the love and the acceptance that you are showering everyone else in. And I'm so glad that you made that choice to include yourself in having self-love and self-acceptance, and you're in honoring your humanity, and being willing to take the chance to experience that. I think that is so beautiful. I think you're such a special person. And Kelli, I think you're such a special person. Can you please tell us both a gorgeous ending moment of anything that would be remiss if we didn't attend anything? Any final thoughts? Kelli, you can go first.

**KELLI DUNHAM** [01:07:31] I was just thinking about, you know, the Missionary of Charity way of, like, kind of the way of motivating yourself. Is that you were supposed to constantly think about you're supposed to think about what a piece of shit you are all the time. Right? Like there was actually a meditation that we used to do. It's like, you know, you read it from this book where it was like, "We are more gluttonous than pigs. We are more sly than serpents." I don't know why all the animal comparisons. It was very graphic. And I remember I actually burst out laughing during the reading of this, because I just, I couldn't even contain the ridiculousness of it, you know, and something I've been thinking about a lot lately for myself is, like, "In what ways am I still constantly telling myself that I am a piece of shit and then expecting myself to act better?"

I don't know. So that is something that I've kind of kept with me, and I think about it a lot, like, is actually, I see myself as a piece of shit or like not fully realizing my own goodness instead of talking myself with like self-compassion they can, I'm realizing that I can get to a much better place with self-compassion. Like, yes, I, in all areas, of course, I want to be better. I want to act better. I want to be more kind, I want to be more compassionate. I want to work harder, but also, like, having compassion in the times where I have empathetic failures or compassionate failures, like, I want that for myself and I, and that might be something that somebody else might need to hear as well.

**JVN** [01:09:05] Kelli came to slay with the closing thoughts. Mary, what are your closing thoughts?

**MARY JOHNSON** [01:09:12] I'm just going to riff a little bit on what Kelli said, because for me, too, that that element of compassion and being tender with others and with yourself is just so important because, you know, sometimes I look back, not so much now, but there have been times when I look back and I say those 20 years from the time I was 19 til I was 39. And is it going to waste, in so many ways, I could have been so much more effective in so many ways because unless I was serving the poor, but I wasn't helping them out of poverty, I was just making sure they were fed and making sure they had some clothes to wear, which is good. But you know, the times I wanted to do things more, I could never get permission to do, it's, like, it was a very ineffective as far as actually helping people progress. You know, I sometimes think, you know, I am actually a big fan of Queer Eye. I've been watching it for a long time, and I love the way you guys go in and you treat these people holistically, OK?

You have that, you know, you kind of sparkle with love, and you give it your own flavor. But everybody who comes in contact with Jonathan on Queer Eye, you can't leave not feeling better about yourself, and you always feel better you if you look nice, also. So I see you approaching people who, you know, are doing kind of OK in some senses, but you're looking at all aspects of their lives and finding ways to make that better and to empower that person to continue that, and to really take that to their own and change their lives for the better in real, concrete ways. And as a Missionary of Charity, I wanted to do that for people, but instead it was just very ineffectual. It was. It was very wasteful in many ways, and you couldn't reach all of those dimensions of a person to really help empower them. And so sometimes I would look back at those 20 years and say, "What a waste. I could have done so many other things that I've done so much better." And then I just have to say, "OK, look, you were doing the best you could at the time. You could not have done otherwise."

I know, I would never have forgiven myself if I hadn't followed that call that I received there. You know, looking at that picture of Mother Teresa on the cover of TIME magazine. If I had just said, "Oh, I have this fire burning in my heart, but what a foolish thing to do." I would never have forgiven myself. So we do the best we can at the time. And then we readjust, we adjust when we sing, and we just need to give each other that grace. I think so many times we put too much pressure on ourselves and put too much pressure on others. We have to be successful. We have to be perfect. We have to do things right the first time. We have to have this many followers and that many likes and no, we have to be kind, to others and to ourselves and give ourselves that compassion and give it to others and, and let that, let that be. Let it grow.

**JVN** [01:12:34] Mary, thank you so much for giving me your time. Kelli, thank you so much for giving us your time. We're going to be including episode links to the podcast that you both did. We're also going to be including links to your book, Mary, and also to people to come see your show, Kelli, in the episode description of everyone listening to the show. Since we are going to just get people to follow up on your stuff, on that description and also on our social media, I'm so grateful to meet both of you. Thank you so much for coming on Getting Curious. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you so much.

**MARY JOHNSON** [01:13:04] Thank you, Johnathan.

**KELLI DUNHAM** [01:13:05] Thank you. Yeah, thank you for your time.

**JVN** [01:13:06] You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness, my guests this week were Kelli Dunham and Mary Johnson. You'll find links to their work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on. And please make sure to check out the podcast where we were first introduced to Kelli and Mary. It's called "The Turning: The Sisters Who Left." Our theme music is Freak by Quin. Thank you so much to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, introduce a friend, please and show them how to subscribe. You can follow us on Instagram and Twitter @CuriouswithJVN. Our socials are run and curated by Middle Seat Digital. Our editor is Andrew Carson. Getting Curious is produced by me, Erica Getto, and Zahra Crim.