

**God's Lure through a Lifetime****Carol Saussy<sup>1</sup>**

In the first draft of this “life story,” I started with my entering the field of religion and psychology in 1969. I soon discovered that I have to start much sooner. I am the fifth of eight children born to Virginia Airey Parker and Charles Walker Saussy. My mother was raised in New Orleans where we all grew up, my father was from Savannah. (In family systems’ terms, he married into her family.) On the day of my birth in 1934 I had sisters seven, six and five, and a brother three. By the time I was six, I had acquired a brother sixteen months younger, a sister aged two, and a new baby brother. We had a live-in nanny (but never used that word) who was hired when I was an infant, and stayed with the family until the youngest child was into school. Corinne, or “Cozy” as we called her, took major responsibility for the children, especially the younger four. On weekends she went home to her three children, all a notch older than we were. I learned a lot of care giving and care receiving in my family. I won’t go into personal family history except to say that I was a parentified child who learned to take charge, especially after my older sisters married. As a result, control issues have been a struggle in my adult years. (That’s why I wrote “Control: Power or Impotence” as my inaugural lecture at Wesley [Quarterly Review, Vol. 6, No. 2, summer, 1996]).

At age four I went to kindergarten followed by pre-primary at the Academy of the Sacred Heart in New Orleans, where I remained for fourteen years. I was very much a part of

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<sup>1</sup> Carol Saussy, Ph.D.

Professor Emerita Pastoral Theology and Care, Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, DC.

[Artist@Residence](mailto:Artist@Residence), [www.csaussy.net](http://www.csaussy.net)

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the school system, devoted to the nuns (though I turned mischief maker during high school, to the chagrin of some of the nuns.) Uniforms, silent study halls, silent ranks moving to and from classes or chapel or the cafeteria, small classes (26 in my graduating class), weekly assemblies at which each student's name was called and an account of her behavior for the week read aloud, very formal greeting with curtsy when we met the nuns along the corridors. Catholic practices, and especially devotion to the Sacred Heart and to Mary, pervaded the warm and loving, yet super-controlled system. There was also a powerful family myth that shaped the lives of the students and alumnae. Once a "Child of the Sacred Heart" always a "Child of the Sacred Heart."

I attended Louisiana State University for two years (with seven from our Sacred Heart class of 26), then broke out of my safety zone and transferred to the University of Colorado where I knew only one person, and graduated in journalism in 1956. During our senior year in college, four of our 26 Sacred Heart classmates, now scattered in different colleges, decided to move to the same city after college, find employment and set up house together. We landed in Chicago where I worked at McCann-Erikson Advertising for almost two years until I could no longer drown out what I felt to be a call to religious life. In October, 1958 I entered the Religious of the Sacred Heart in Albany, New York. After the novitiate and a year of graduate study, I taught literature and religion at Sacred Heart schools in St. Louis and New Orleans, and then was sent to Rome for five months of preparation for profession. From Rome I went into studies in philosophy and theology, first at St. Louis University, then to the masters program in theology at the University of San Francisco...then back in to teaching in St. Louis. Had anyone told me at any time between 1958-1970 that I would leave the order and marry I would have found it incredible. While I cherish precious memories of

nineteen years in the order, I would never repeat them. When my world view changed, with the openness of John XXIII and Vatican II, eventually there was no return. For about eight years my struggle was to find a new way to live religious life. By 1977 I knew I could not continue with integrity or enthusiasm. I officially left the order in July, 1977.

Now back to my first start at this paper: The last time I wrote what one might call a life story was in 1969 when I applied for a fellowship in the Menninger Foundation's program in Religion and Psychiatry, officially an ACPE program. Perhaps that step marks my entry into the movement of pastoral theology, care, and counseling. At the time I belonged to the religious community, was teaching at a girls' private high school in St. Louis, and was responsible for the religious studies program. I soon discovered that the students were far more interested in understanding themselves and how their religious faith defined them than in studying the church and its doctrine. In the religious studies program a colleague and I redesigned, juniors and seniors could choose from a number of electives; the majority of them chose to take "Religion and Psychology." This was the era of Psychology Today, Maxwell Maltz' Psycho-Cybernetics, and Sid Simon's values clarification, and I put together the 10 week course. I had completed a masters' degree in Theology, but had done little formal study of psychology. I knew I had to learn more. A member of our community had just completed the Menninger program and strongly recommended that I apply.

ACPE was new to me, and when I received the application materials requiring an autobiography as well as answers to many detailed questions, I knew how I would spend the long Thanksgiving weekend. I stated as my goal for applying: "to be prepared to teach psychologically oriented theology in high school or higher education." (I was already doing some adjunct teaching in theology at Maryville College in St. Louis.)

The Menninger program, eleven months in duration, focused on psychology/psychiatry taught by and to persons committed to the work of the church: ministers, priests, religious women, and an occasional rabbi. We were all placed in a clinical setting and received excellent supervision. My setting was the then called "Florence Crittenden Home for Unwed Mothers." (I will always be grateful to Dick Bollinger, my supervisor. Little did I know at the time that what started within me at Menninger would lead to my leaving religious life six years later. Much of that self re-discovery happened in supervision.) "Fellows" concluded the Menninger program with three units of advanced clinical pastoral education.

Following Menninger I worked as a counselor in the social service department of a hospital in New Orleans, where I soon became identified as the person ready to deal with dying patients and their families. My parents and a sister died within three years of each other in the late sixties; death had become a central part of my life. My interest in dying and bereavement was deepened when Elisabeth Kubler Ross lectured at Menninger on her recently published book, On Death and Dying.

After a year at the hospital, I was called to head a small pastoral care department at Maryville College (now Maryville University) in St. Louis, also teaching nursing students as well as liberal arts undergraduates psychologically oriented theology. Everything I learned at Menninger proved to be good preparation, but I knew I needed to go further academically.

I was accepted into the doctoral program in "Religion and the Personality Sciences" at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley in 1974. My advisor and professor Edward Stein invited me to intern at the Lloyd Center Counseling Service in San Anselmo after my first year of classes.

By now I knew I had to address the question of whether I could stay in religious life with integrity. I returned to St. Louis after completing my degree and made an eight day retreat, with a close friend in the order, Sister Gin O'Meara, as my spiritual partner. I knew it was time to leave, and I was leaving a group of women I sincerely called "sisters" and who counted on my staying. Saying "goodbye" was very painful. I spent the following week in New Orleans to share my decision with my family and spend time with them, then returned to San Francisco and was able to patch together a position as counselor at the Lloyd Center and adjunct teacher at San Francisco Theological Seminary. When I took over as Administrative Director of Lloyd Center Counseling (since renamed Pastoral Counseling) about a year later, I applied for "Fellow" in AAPC, continuing to do occasional adjunct teaching for the seminary and serving on the faculty as an educational administrator. Several years later the Lloyd Center applied to be a service center endorsed by AAPC

I thoroughly enjoyed the AAPC annual meeting as well as regional meetings. I still cherish friends I made through AAPC: Carolyn Bohler, Larry Graham, Joretta Marshall, Anne Stewart, Nancy Ramsay, Orlo Strunk, and the list could go on and on. I continue to serve on the editorial committee of the Journal of Pastoral Care.

Meanwhile, Frank Molony, whom I met in 1974 (the year we both moved to the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley), was struggling with his question about staying in the priesthood or leaving to marry me. We made our decisions independently during retreats in the summer of 1977. However my being a judging type, and Frank a perceiving type, I moved on my decision immediately (it had been tested in my imagination for years), and Frank needed to give his decision a year. What friends have been most interested in is how it happened. We began as "spiritual friends". I'll leave the details out and say that we married

four years later, in November, 1978 at the San Francisco Theological Seminary in San Anselmo.

In the spring of 1977 Rollo May taught a class at San Francisco Theological Seminary on the Meaning of Anxiety. His writings were surely not new to me, but at that time I read through them all. I asked Rollo if I could get into therapy with him to work through the decision I was making about leaving religious life, and the possibility of getting married if Frank chose to leave the Jesuits. He suggested I call him when I returned from New Orleans, but I got cold feet and put it off. When I saw him at a social event some weeks later, he reminded me that he had not heard from me, and I realized I was ready to begin. I worked with him for two years, a year before and a year after getting married. Those sessions surely had a profound influence on my life as well as on my way of being therapist. I won't forget arriving with a tape recorder at the second session because the first had been so powerful and affirming and I wished I had recorded it. It seemed like a good idea to play the tapes during the week between sessions. He said that was a first for him, but if I wanted to record them to go ahead. After several weeks, when I had failed to play the tapes as planned, I decided I would not tape for a while. His remark the next week, "you must not expect anything important to happen today; you have no tape recorder." It's also amusing to look back at our discussion about the fee at our first session. I forget what he said his going rate was, but I was starting over with very little money in the bank and a patchwork job without benefits and couldn't pay it, and asked if I could pay \$40. He agreed. A few weeks later I realized that even \$40 a week would be hard to meet, so I asked if we could reduce it to \$30. He agreed again.

Several years later Dayton Hultgren, the new president at SFTS, asked me to go to the North Central Ministry Development Center in New Brighton, Minnesota. He wanted the Lloyd Center to become such a center, and thought that if I went through the routine as if I were a candidate for ministry, I would be able to determine what resources the Lloyd Center would need to move in that direction. I dutifully filled out test after test (I think fourteen in all) and took off for Minnesota. To my surprise, what I learned during my time with the counselors evaluating my material was that I wanted to get back into the classroom. Dayton did not expect me to come back with that insight, but both he and Dean Browne Barr (a soul mate) encouraged me to go for a teaching position in a seminary. The position opened at Wesley, I applied and was called for an interview, and the next phase of my life began. (I've always felt that Browne's recommendation had much to do with my being offered the position.)

Between the interview process at Wesley and our move to the Washington area, I kept a commitment I had made a year earlier to teach at United Theological College in Sydney, Australia, during their winter, our summer, 1984. Leaving my familiar territory for ten weeks where I knew no one was good preparation for the move from San Francisco to Washington.

I moved to Wesley in 1984, retired (or as I say jubilated) in 1999. Those were important and productive years for me. The teaching was demanding, absorbing, and energizing. I had many cherished colleagues and students over the years. I took over responsibility for the CPE program at Wesley and served on the CPE advisory committee of Holy Cross Hospital (only briefly because they discontinued their program), Sibley Hospital, and Asbury Village. I was able to produce three books during my tenure: God Images and Self Esteem: Empowering Women in a Patriarchal Society (Westminster/John Knox, 1991), The Gift of Anger: A Call

to Faithful Action (Westminster/John Knox, 1995), and The Art of Growing Old: A Guide to Faithful Aging (Augsburg, 1998). I kept a very small counseling practice throughout my time at Wesley. Pastoral Theology, care and counseling was my life. I have given classes, retreats, and/or led Sunday adult education classes at many churches, more before jubilation than since.

The Society for Pastoral Theology was just starting when I went to Wesley; I attended its second annual meeting in Denver in 1986, and continued participating without a break until retirement. I had the privilege of serving on the steering committee for three years, chairing the committee for the last of the three. I remember with great fondness getting to know the other members who rotated on and off of the steering committee during my tenure: Herb Anderson, Nancy Ramsay, Han van den Blink, Andy Lester, Rod Hunter, Charles Taylor, and Judy Orr. SPT was indeed a very important part of my professional life.

I suppose that “change” should be my middle name. In the fall of 1999 I started my new career in the arts, taking Drawing I and Painting I at our local community college for starters. Since then I have taken numerous classes at Montgomery College and several others in artists’ studios: oil, watercolor, pastel, acrylic, Chinese brush painting, and my cutting edge—digital art In Corel Painter X and PhotoShop. I’ve exhibited in solo and group shows in art mansions, museums, churches, hospitals and schools. (Please visit my website at [www.csaussy.net](http://www.csaussy.net).) Many of my paintings have sold. I find a parallel between having a manuscript accepted and selling a painting. Not long before she died, Maxine Glaz and I shared our mutual experience of delight when a painting sells. It’s also a thrill to go into a friend’s home and see my painting on the wall.

I have always felt some indescribable continuity between my years in religious community and my 29 years of marriage to Frank. Likewise, I'm not sure what the connection is between my pastoral theology life and my life as "Artist@Residence," but continuity is there as well. Working through this life review helps me name it. My values are basically the same. I want to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with the Holy One. Frank and I have always been church-connected together. During our years in California, first in San Anselmo and then in El Cerrito, we were able to find Roman Catholic churches where we could worship together, although we did have to do some fairly extensive searching. In Maryland it was not as easy. We "tried" at least a dozen Roman Catholic churches, and usually because of the patriarchy or intolerance of homosexuals or lack of community we moved on. For over fifteen years we have been members of Rockville United Church, a combined Presbyterian and United Church of Christ congregation. We have not joined either of the denominations, calling ourselves "Catholics in waiting". At RUC we have had our turns at preaching, serving as liturgist, teaching adult education, serving on committees and as elders on Council. I especially appreciate the Sundays when one of us gives the homily and the other serves as liturgist. Presently Frank is the elder for Congregational Care, and I am a member of his committee. Surely my pastoral skills have been in service there. When I retired from Wesley I took on the task of visiting a few low income seniors through the Community Ministries of Rockville, visiting first an independent living facility and now a nursing home once a week.

For about eighteen years I have been a member of a small woman church group: Sisters Against Sexism or SAS (also referred to as Sisters Affirming Sexuality). We meet in one another's homes every third Sunday evening for a pot luck and a worship service, taking

turns as liturgist. Our gatherings are spirit-filled, creative, and a beautiful experience of community offering magnificent sisterly support and love.

### **Teachers and colleagues who formed my work**

It's hard to adequately spell out the people who have been most influential in shaping my identity, thought and work. I spontaneously think of my father, a very creative and forceful man whom I lost when I was 23. I have long thought that I owe my creative streak to him. He encouraged creative expression from the start. I carefully picked out a birthday card for him when I was in grade school. While he found the card amusing and was grateful, he said that it would have been even better if I had made the card myself. For years I have made cards, I guess I could say in memory of him. He encouraged my writing as well, and I think of him especially when I am writing a poem or song for a birthday celebration. His presence sometimes becomes tangible, like now when he is so much on my mind.

The nuns at school were deeply influential in my life. They taught me how to pray and pushed me to take leadership positions. And once I had joined the order, they became even more important to me. A few teachers and spiritual directors among them stand out, as well as wonderful women I lived with in community.

There are very few professors at the universities I attended who had much influence on me, save for a creative writing professor at LSU. While I took my studies seriously and stayed on the Dean's List throughout the four years, I was not what I would consider an intellectual. A passion for learning came in the convent years and thereafter. A first course in biblical exegesis with Jack Elliot at the University of San Francisco was a landmark for me, as was a class with Luis Alonso Schokel on the psalms. I embraced biblical studies as never

before. The theologians I most admired were Teilhard de Chardin and process theologians. A course in cosmology with Max Wildiers was perhaps my start. Bernard Loomer and Bernard Lee introduced me to Alfred North Whitehead. While I found Process and Reality exceedingly difficult to read, I persisted and the two Bernards really opened his thought to me. Marjorie Suchocki was dean when I moved to Wesley and invited me to join a process theology group that met monthly. Her book (God, Christ, Church) and our long conversations as well as playful times together were a great gift. Gordon Jackson's book, Pastoral Care and Process Theology helped me integrate process theology into all of my classes. I devoured many books on Family Systems Theory that profoundly shaped how I taught pastoral theology classes. Systems theory weaved well with process thought.

My love of feminist theology goes back to conversations with Clare Fisher at the Graduate Theological Union, and then my friendship with Mary Hunt who always challenged me to read more of the feminist's library. I read my way through dozens of books. At this writing the one that stands out among the most influential was Rita Nakashima-Brock's Journeys By Heart another process thinker. I learned so much from women in the Society for Pastoral Theology: Emma Justes, Shelly Finson, Carolyn Bohler, Christie Neuger, Nancy Ramsay, Joretta Marshall, Kathleen Greider, Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner, Maxine Glaz, Bonnie Miller McLemore, Brita Gill, Carrie Doehring, Pamela Couture and Gail Unterberger among them.

Finally, I've been blessed with close to thirty years of marriage to one of the brightest and most ethical, spontaneously generous and outgoing people I have ever known. Frank Molony remembers most of what he has ever read, and is a great resource in all of the writing and teaching I have done. He is philosopher, theologian, biblical scholar, besides being

linguist, classical scholar, lawyer, community organizer, leader, and magnificently caring person. Yes, without a doubt he has been the major influence on my life since we met in 1974. We are a team. We move into our always maturing years together with faith, hope, love and humor.