Steve Spilde: Welcome. My guest today is Sister Jolynn Brehm. She is a Sister with the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. I’ve been blessed to know Jolynn for many years. She was a longtime supervisor in our Spiritual Direction Preparation Program. Welcome, Jolynn.

Jolynn Brehm: Thank you. Thank you.

Steve: Today we are joining by Zoom, and this is kind of a new experience for both of us. But it’s a testament that even old dogs can learn new tricks.

Jolynn: Exactly. We’ll either prove it or disprove it.

Steve: Sounds good. Sounds good. So tell me, Jolynn, how long have you been a Sister?

Jolynn: Well, I entered the community in 1954. So actually, that’s about 66 years ago. This year I would be celebrating my 61st year of profession. It’s been an interesting and wonderful long life.

Steve: Amazing. Tell me where you grew up, and tell me where the desire to become a sister, how that evolved.

Jolynn: I was born and raised on a dairy farm in Colby, Wisconsin, in 1939, and I was the first liveborn member of my family. The sister who was to be a year older than me, my mom and dad’s first child, was stillborn. So when I came along, I think they kind of favored me. Obviously they were happy I was alive, so that was my experience as the firstborn of my family. My family heritage, which is very interesting that I’ve kind of thought about with these questions and this opportunity … But I realize that on both sides of my family – paternal and maternal – we are four generations of farmers. So that is very significant, and it has allowed me now to really delve into why it seems my genetics are deeply, deeply grounded in the land. Everything about nature, everything about creation, everything about how I relate to life, to people, to living is all pretty much in the framework of anything that has to do with nature and creation. It would be understandable because having great-grandparents and great-great-grandparents who worked the land, they understood how to live with the land.

Steve: Were all of your relatives kind of around the farm there in Colby?

Jolynn: Yes, they were. I would say probably within maybe a one-hour radius we had at least five or six different homesteaded farms in both my father’s side and my mother’s side of the family was near Auburndale, Wisconsin. That’s the central Wisconsin area – all the same kind of area. I was led to think about religious life when I entered Saint Mary’s Catholic School in Colby, Wisconsin. The principal at that time was Sister Alice McMullen. For some reason or other, we already made a connection when I was already in the first grade. She would let me go over to be with my friends or whatever. Then she left Saint Mary’s in Colby when I graduated from the eighth grade. But the year of eighth grade, she, after afternoon recess, would stand behind my desk since I was tall and in the last seat, she would stand behind there and pray a prayer to the Sacred Heart. Then we also had a family in Colby who had three sisters as FSPAs. The dad invited some of us to go and visit La Crosse, Wisconsin Saint Rose Convent, which I did. From there on, I just sensed from Alice McMullen that I admired who she was, who the sisters were, and so she kind of facilitated my entering. I also had an aunt, a sister of my mother’s, who was also a member of the community. So I had a connection with FSPA, and that’s where I entered.

Steve: The Sister would stand behind you and pray to the Sacred Heart.

Jolynn: Yes.

Steve: For those who are not Catholic, please explain what that means.

Jolynn: That way of taking time out in our school day to have some quiet and to be attentive to the idea that we weren’t just who we were, that God was an entity in our lives. And as eighth graders, I don’t think we had any clue about what that really meant. But in our Catholic tradition, we have a whole, whole long history of people who created ways of connecting with the divine or God or that entity. So we have a long, long history of many, many prayers. The Sacred Heart Prayer has to do with connecting with Jesus. Jesus revealed in his earthly experience how to be a human being, how to be present to people. He really showed that he had a heart for all of humanity. His heart was really the focus for a lot of people to feel connected to our God. So for her to call upon that aspect of Jesus to bless us as kids and to help our lives be better. Somehow or another, that touched my heart.

Steve: She was just praying that you would be guided? Or that you would be guided specifically to become a Sister in La Crosse?

Jolynn: It was just a general prayer for all of us in our class. And it just so happened that because I was right in front of her – she was right behind me – somehow or another it felt we were more connected simply because we were that close in space to each other. That’s how I sensed that it felt almost like it was a personal prayer for me.

Steve: Nice. So then you went to La Crosse, and that’s where you went to high school?

Jolynn: I was a sophomore in high school when I entered the community. And at that time, yes, we had Saint Rose High School, which was located in the north portion of the Viterbo University building. That was our way of finishing our high school, plus we also went to summer school to make the process happen faster, and to give us something to keep us out of trouble. We went up to Modena, Wisconsin, where we had a school for the Native Americans, the Ojibwa Tribe up there. We helped out in the summer. We helped out with the farming that was there. We helped with creating the things to get ready for the school year, and we just basically had a feeling for one another, and kind of a sense of community.

Steve: I know you. I know that nature and connection to the earth, to the universe, is an important part of your spirituality. And it sounds like it was being formed in you already in some of these summer experiences.

Jolynn: Definitely, definitely. And because we were that plot of land that was farmland as well, we would talk about our farming background. I think at that time there were seven or eight of us in that process of needing the summer school, and as far as I know all of us were from farms. Some were from Iowa, so of course we would often talk about our farms and our families and things like that. I think it always entered into how we appreciated even the opportunity to work up there on the farm.

Steve: Talk about your experience with native spirituality as a result of that experience. Were you able to pick up any of that?

Jolynn: Not at that time specifically. But I’ve the privilege of ministering in the Woodruff Minocqua area, which is eight miles from Lac du Flambeau, Wisconsin, which is also the Ojibwa Native Reservation. Through the years that I was up there – about 30 years I lived up in the Minocqua Woodruff area and worked up there – I became acquainted with several of the people from Lac du Flambeau. We would have book discussions, we would have conversations. And one of the things I did was when one of the women especially from Lac du Flambeau would offer programs through the technical institute where I went in Minocqua, I would always attend. There was one very specific time when, Rochelle was her name, she offered the way in which the rituals of the native people were so significant, and we participated in some of those rituals. That really grounded me in the fact that you know, my religious tradition and my spirituality, we have a lot of rituals, so there was a link. It felt like a link between how rituals in their tradition, in their life, and in mine, rituals almost always had something to do with something from nature. Either stones or grasses or incense or sage or oils or animals – something like that.

Steve: Is it fair to say those experiences learning the native perspective on spirituality helped you to have a better understanding of your own Catholic tradition?

Jolynn: I would say yes, because what it allowed me to do was to say, ‘OK, what is the underlying way that all peoples are invited to be aware of the greater dynamic in their lives? How are all peoples invited to sense that spirit world?’ So when I sensed how the native people were so in touch with the creator and everything that was created and how all of earth was gift, I began to realize that in our Catholic tradition, yes, we too – all from way, way back when – use earth items as ways of entering into a ritual that seemed to connect us with the divine. So it felt like that two of them together. Also then, during that same time, I began to be much more attentive to, what are some of the other traditions? What are some of the other kinds of ways people connect with the divine, or that essence, if you will. I heard some things about the Buddhist tradition. I heard some things about other cultures, the Spanish-speaking people. I think connecting with the native people opened my eyes to, how broad is and how fundamental is ritual? And for me, how fundamental is ritual using things of nature as the visuals or the ways to connect?

Steve: Can you give me some examples of that within the Catholic tradition?

Jolynn: In the Catholic tradition, in many of the Old Testament stories, the ways that some of the people understood that God was present to them was usually in some walking that they did. And very often there were stones, or if there is a prophet who realized he is sensing God’s presence, he would lay down and put his head on the stone. It seemed to me that was a way of that. We have the whole reality of way back in the Book of Kings, the leader of that day was encouraged to feed thousands of people with minimal, minimal. It was the use of wheat in the bread and the wine of the grapes. In our Catholic tradition, that particular piece of bread and wine from the earth is very central to our way of ritualizing today. We also use water. Water was significant in the lives of many, many people. It was the sustenance and their way of honoring it. They treasured it. We use water to bless, to sprinkle, to call forth that blessing. Baptismal water is part of our rituals. We’re also very much in tune with the sense of the spirit, that there’s something beyond ourselves that is driving us. We use the image of fire for that. I think there are many people in our Christian tradition, including our Catholic use of fire very often. It kind of draws you into a sense of something much more overriding in our lives, and very powerful.

Steve: You used the word ‘presence.’ I’m interested in, looking back over your life, when you first became aware of that presence – even maybe not at the time, but looking back, ‘OK, I was already in touch with the presence.

Jolynn: For me, living on the farm we had our daily routine. And the routine that we did for, probably starting in April when some of the planting was already done, all the way until as late as we could before snowfall, our evening chores was to milk the cows. After milking the cows, we would go around the barn to what we called the barn approach. It was the leading way to get into the upper part of the barn.

Steve: Like an earth ramp that would go up to the highest level of the barn.

Jolynn: Yes, like an earth ramp. That was wide enough to accommodate all of the comings and goings of the horses pulling the bales and all of that kind of thing. My mom and dad and I – at that time I was very, very young; probably three or something like that – we would sit up there and face the west. We were finishing up milking most of the time at sunset. We would sit there and admire – not only looking over the fields and seeing how they were growing the crops – but also just to be totally immersed in that beautiful sunset in the sky. And of course, in the country you’ve got sky unending that you can see, so it was very overwhelming. I remember somehow the sense that that was God’s presence. And my mom and dad, I don’t recall words exactly, would have a sense that they named their gratitudes, that they were thankful for the farm, they were thankful for the crops, they were thankful for rain, thankful for family. So I sensed I also picked up that that was their way of honoring the presence of God in their lives.

Steve: I’m fascinated by that story. So many people today live in cities and the chaos of daily life. And they’ll go out into the country to retreat centers. It sounds very similar to what you experienced virtually every day of your upbringing.

Jolynn: Isn’t that true? Yes, that’s very true. And even more so now, I think people have become aware that it’s the places that are going to be calming and bringing a sense of well-being. Probably a sense of awe. A lot of people I don’t think have really looked at a tree, or up to a tree, noticed the things that are growing. Yes, [I] definitely [think] people want to find that.

Steve: Was there any experience in your life where you kind of came to recognize that those early experiences were spiritual for you as well. Was there kind of an awakening at some later point in life [when] you recognized, ‘This is new, but I’ve known this all along?’

Jolynn: I would say that some of the places where I was a teacher were generally country areas. The one specifically was Loyal, Wisconsin. That was in the 80s that I was the principal and the DRE there. I remember that at that time I said, ‘This is close to my land where I was born. What here do I want to do on Saturday to get my own sense of balance with all the hecticness of my ministry?’ Being the principal at a great school and religious [education] was a heavy, heavy responsibility. And I realized if I went to Neillsville, Wisconsin, there were two things. There was a veterans’ memorial that had been created, and there also was the river that was running through Neillsville, Wisconsin. I would spend my Saturdays going there and just spend my Saturdays noticing nature, walking in the woods; there’s also a wooded area there. I think that was when I began to realize that’s where I get my grounding. That’s where I get my sense of peace and balance, if you will, to the works I needed to do – the intensity of being present to people. And I also realized that another place that evolved in that area was in Willard, Wisconsin, which is now identified as The Christine Center. I happened to be able to go and visit the founder of that place, and we would walk around and we would talk about how the barn could become the meeting place, [and] the silo could become the special prayer place. I think the two things there really grounded me in, yes, this is where I will continue to ground myself to be whatever. It also, because of that, I think I started inviting the teachers in the school. We had an excellent, excellent sixth grade teacher. Science was her love in life, so we connected about, how do we get the kids to appreciate they’re raised in a rural area? That was also a very important part of what we enhanced at that school system: to bond the people there. One very interesting part is The Christine Center, of course, was a very special way of contemplation, meditation, getting people to quiet, be in silence – however you want to name that. They were talking to some of the farmers in the area, and the farmers said, ‘That’s nothing new. I sit on my tractor when I’m plowing and tending my crops all day long, and I’m sitting in my silence and beauty and my surroundings.’ I’ll never forget that. That was very interesting.

Steve: I was thinking of a place like The Christine Center, a beautiful retreat center out in nature. And people come out from the city to go spend a weekend or spend a week there. That’s the experience you had growing up.

Jolynn: Yes, exactly.

Steve: Is there a connection you had to the veterans’ memorial? You mentioned that was one of the things that would draw you to Neillsville.

Jolynn: There’s no one in my family except an uncle who spent time in the Army, so that’s not something that was a significant part of my family. What drew me there was the reverence that whoever put that together had, and they chose that spot according to the story I heard of it starting, they chose that spot because it most resembled the Vietnam landscape. That the environment in Vietnam – the rolling hills, the kinds of trees, the kind of landscape – was a reminder of the Vietnam landscape. I thought that was very interesting that they would search for a place that would have that link and not just a memorial place.

Steve: As I listen to you, the phrase that comes to mind is the spirituality of place.

Jolynn: Yes. Thank you, yes. I hadn’t really identified that, Steve, but that’s very true. Place definitely has that kind of … I like the word ‘grounding.’ I think, where do we get grounded in our lives? And how do we stay focused? How do we stay centered? How do we stay intact? How do we keep our integrity? I think places help to do that. You’ve invited me to really reconsider where are the significant places that I’ve been? But that does bring up this awareness. In my 60 years of being in community life, I came from Colby, Wisconsin, Marathon County. Four years ago, the Spirit led me to take the ministry at Saint Anthony’s Spirituality Center in Marathon, Wisconsin, Marathon County. It felt like, I was born and raised in Marathon County. Now, almost toward the end of my ministry life – which, actually, that was – Saint Anthony’s in Marathon these past four years was my last ministry place. It was kind of like, [I’m] reconnecting to my birth county. In fact, I walked to the woods at Saint Anthony’s, I said, ‘I want to find a piece of a root because this is my root county, my root land.’ Well, guess what? You don’t find a root when you’re walking through the woods. But I walked down to the river behind Saint Anthony’s, and there was an uprooted tree, and there was a perfect piece of root. So I have also connected with roots of trees, and I realize how significant the roots of trees are. Sixty years ago, I joined FSPA, headquartered in La Crosse, Wisconsin. And last year, about a year ago, I was letting go of my ministry at Saint Anthony’s in Marathon, and I was invited to come and live at Villa Saint Joseph near La Crosse, Wisconsin. It’s almost like my two beginnings: my birth home, my religious life beginnings, now have come to the fulfillment – come full circle, if you will. That’s another sense of place that probably, as you name it, has happened.

Steve: Full circle – circling back.

Jolynn: Full circle, yes. And of course I’m at the Villa Saint Joseph, [which has] beautiful farmland. It’s absolutely incredible farmland every direction. My heart is so happy. And of course, being with the sisters – the community, the people who formed and shaped so much of my relationships all through my life.

Steve: A lot of what you describe is experienced in rural places, out in nature. Even people who that’s not their experience, I think can perhaps relate in your story to when you were talking about working in the school system and being a principal and having a lot of responsibility and probably a lot of stress. That sense of work being stressful, really draining and making you tired, the answer for that was to go into a natural place and get reconnected, to get refreshed, to get your battery recharged. Don’t you think that’s a common experience for many people: needing to withdraw and retreat, and to recharge the batteries?

Jolynn: I would say that probably within the last 35, 40 years, I think that is something that I sense in many more peoples’ lives. They’ve realized that was an important piece. Work for a lot of people became much more intense as you speak of cities. And I think of people working in large, large corporations and businesses surrounded all day by machines, mechanical noise, a lot of business, a lot of pressure. I think that people began to realize, ‘There has to be more to my life than this.’ And true, I think our religious traditions – all the denominations – I think there was an awareness that our weekly or our way of gathering for services for worship wasn’t enough. It perhaps was fine, and it was there. We participated, but somehow or another people sensed more. And I think our religious traditions began to set up centers or set up ways that people outside of that could do ways of renewing on their own, either through books that were being printed. I remember some of the books coming out at that time where it wasn’t head knowledge. It wasn’t theological only. It was often connected with reflection – reflection of life, reflection on people, reflections on things. Then I think within the last 30 years there are many, many more books that incorporate questions. You may have a chapter talking about, what’s going on in my emotional life right now? Then at the end of the chapter would be questions that would lead people to understand how that part of life needed to have time to be processed, to be thought about, to be dealt with. Then the centers began to come about. I think also what was happening is, some of the centers were located in large, institutional, denominational places. For example, in Catholic tradition many of the convents realized they had some spaces they could transform into gathering spaces. I think some of the seminaries realized they had areas where they could help people retreat, if you will. Many of those properties had much land as part of their institutional structure. They realized their land was a way of having people come apart for awhile and spend time. I think that whole pattern within the last 30 years has really evolved. And the whole thing of hermitages, and what about Sedona in Arizona? I would guess that’s another one of those places where the pulse and the energy of the earth, the synergy of the earth, drew a lot of people.

Steve: When you use the term ‘center,’ you’re talking about retreat centers, spirituality centers, where people can go on retreat, they can recharge, they can rest, they can get re-centered, as you’ve described it.

Jolynn: Yes. And also, my sense is, what I have developed for my own sense through all of this is, what else was going on? I really think what people were doing was making effort – including myself – to listen to the presence of the divine. To listen to the presence of the essence of who we are, to really listen to what is happening in our own dynamic or life, what is happening in all of those pieces, and where is the divine in that or however we name that. I like that phrase. The phrase for me right now – what I’ve really named and claimed – [is] ‘Listen to the presence of our essence.’ Our essence, in my estimation, is our life source. I actually spent time coming up with comparable phrases like, ‘Embody the ground of my being,’ and, ‘Notice the reality of the spirit.’ I’m kind of into that three-name piece: the action, the what, and the who.’

Steve: You spent a lot of your life learning how to do that, refining how to do that, teaching others how to do that. It sounds, though, that perhaps your best teachers were your mother and your father.

Jolynn: Yes, I hadn’t thought about that – thank you. Yes, that’s what they were doing when I think of it. They were very much doing that very listening to that expansiveness of God’s presence. Yes, thank you.

Steve: At this particular moment in time, that’s not like any moment in my lifetime – and I know in yours as well – we’re all kind of locked down at home protecting ourselves and each other from the virus, what experiences have you had in your life that may be helpful to people? What would you tell people who are really in a bad place during this time?

Jolynn: That’s a very, very expansive question. I think what I have learned in my life experience is that if I sensed that what came about had the potential for something that was going to evolve … I think we know that life evolves. As long as I could hang onto during that time and be true … I have also learned in my life to be true to all the feelings and all the experience. If I’m sad, if I’m depressed, if I’m angry, if I’m feeling very resentful, to embrace all of those real, real feelings. Name them, claim them, and then say, ‘What’s the energy of those?’ Those all have a lot of energy. I can put that energy to destructive things, or I can put that energy – let’s say anger – to something that brings about new life or enables something to evolve from the experience. Through my lifetime – in fact, I’ve spent quite a bit of time these last three months thinking about that. What of this experience is probably going to make major, major potential transformation in our world? The fact that it’s worldwide, number one, it’s going to have impact on all peoples in some way, shape or form. Will our entire earth, our climate change, our awareness of what we’re doing to our whole earth – is that going to be maximized? And are people going to begin to say, yes, it is real and we want to do something about that? Also, in my own personal life, when I was confronted with a situation … For example, two times in my life I have been let go from a ministry. Those were very painful experiences. However, but for being let go from that first one, I would not have become the person connected with our Merrywood Spirituality Center in Woodruff. So that difficult experience, that feeling of diminishment, evolved into, open this to the opportunity that presented itself and I could say yes. The same is true of my leaving Marathon, Wisconsin. That was precipitated by a change in ways of operating, so I resigned, and look where I am. It’s absolutely incredible. I don’t know what I would be doing if I was living in that great big, old, 100-year-old building with no guests coming, no programs to do. I’m not sure what I’d be doing. Here I am, able to be present with my own Sisters. I think bottom line, as you asked that question, if we are as a people able to look at what happens, what shatters us for awhile, what puts us down for awhile, what causes many emotions to come forward … What if we can take a look at that and say, “What is going to evolve? How can I know this? What did the divine or God or the spirit really have in mind?’