Welcome to the Franciscan Spirituality Center in La Crosse, Wisconsin’s “What is Spirituality?” podcast. Your host, Steve Spilde, is the associate director at the Center. His guests talk about their evolving understanding of God, prayer, healing, and wholeness.

My name is Steve Spilde and today I am joined by Sister Mary Kathryn Fogarty. Welcome Mary Kathryn.

Thank you.

It is a pleasure to meet with you. I've known you for seven or eight years. I started getting involved here at the Franciscan Spirituality Center and you were on staff as one of the spiritual directors. Let's start by having you describe your understanding of what spiritual direction is.

I would say listening. Maybe listening at the heart level, from the heart space.

How long have you been doing spiritual direction?

I actually started, probably, in the mid-70’s doing spiritual direction. Then I was in leadership for a while and during that time, like eight years, I didn't do spiritual direction.

Do you remember the first time you received spiritual direction?

Yes it probably was when I made a directed retreat in Prairie du Chien. That was the beginning, after that.

What was your expectation of what it was going in - and then maybe - how is it different from what you expected?

I don't know that I really had any expectations. I don't think I even knew exactly what I was doing. But I have had good spiritual directors who helped me to share about my life and soul work.

Was that challenging for you?

Being a spiritual director?

Receiving it.

Receiving, probably, because I'm not as articulate about things. I’m pretty introverted from that point of view. So they probably had to work harder. Just invite me to reflect on things. It wasn't hard reflecting, but articulating the reflection is often difficult for me.

But then you became a spiritual director and really worked at listening to others in a deep way. Was that more natural for you?

Yes, by all means, yes. And I would say again, we all come to find our identity, how we are as spiritual directors. I definitely, even in working with the people spiritual direction program, I don't say a lot. When I'm doing spiritual direction, I can wait a long time.

Were you comfortable with that from the beginning or did you have to become more comfortable?

No, I think from the very beginning I was that way. I would say you know again it was a learning for me. I was definitely more comfortable just listening. But I also had to learn that the work was not mine to do. It was really God's to do. Not getting too anxious about the movements.

Have you always been like that? Have you always been a good listener even when you were young?

Probably. Um-hmm.

The family were born into, can you describe that for me?

Okay, we were people of the land because we were a farm family. Very stable family, hard-working, and lots of extended family because my father's side of the family was a large family and they all pretty much lived around where I lived.

Which was in Iowa.

Yes. West Bend Iowa. We had good neighbors and just really good people. I was surrounded by goodness really and I think we were alike. I come by it naturally. But most of my family is quite quiet. I leave I like to read. My father liked to read. There just wasn't a lot of noise when I was growing up. Then on weekends and during the summer vacations and Christmas vacations I stayed with my grandmother, who at the time would've been probably in her 80s and she was very quiet. Like at the age where I am. She couldn't hear. So why would she want have a conversation? I just loved it because of course I like the quiet. I like to read. She liked to read.

How many kids were in your family when you were growing up?

There were six of us and I'm the oldest one.

Okay.

We were spread out because I'd already left home before my youngest sister was born. Six is not that many to be spread out over 18 years.

The image I am getting is that your whole family was pretty reserved. The atmosphere was one of introverts.

Yeah.

Describe your family's relationship with faith.

Growing up, oh yeah, very faithful. My parents would've been pillars of the church if you want to use that terminology. My grandmother was the same way. So yeah, very faithful. And of course, when you live on the land, you pray, because everything is so dependent on God for rain and good weather, good crops.

Your earliest memories - what was your image of God?

That's a good question. I don't know if I had an image of God. But I think it would been around the land. God was probably the weather person in our house. You know, just good weather. Yeah - image of God - I just I don't remember an image.

And did you go to parochial school growing up?

I did for grade school. In high school we didn't have a parochial school for high school. But my grade school years were at the Catholic school. Eucharist every day as part of our day. And my grandmother was also that way with Eucharist. So, summer vacations, weekends. We went to mass every day.

Was that a positive memory?

Yes. Positive. Very positive. There again it was quiet, and I suppose ritual. And at that time, it was Latin. I mean we had our prayerbook and we read it in English. What would you call that? I think it's so mysterious. I didn't even understand the language.

But you were intrigued by the mystery?

I think so. Yeah. I was comfortable with that.

When did the thought of becoming a sister enter your consciousness?

Probably my junior year of high school. I don't remember in grade school that I thought about it. But the reason I really started thinking about it was because I wanted to be a teacher and the only people I knew that were teachers, not for just a couple of years, but for life, were the sisters. I always say I didn't realize that I would have to love Jesus in this process. I just want to be a teacher. That was what really drew me to religious life.

Your sisters when you were young wore the habit.

Yes. Until, in the 60s. I think probably mid 60s or a little after that.

You wore in the habit for a few years?

About 10. And religious life fit me. I came from a family that was so quiet - I fell right into it. I was at home immediately.

They were honored by you becoming a sister and you got encouragement with that? In my family?

Yeah.

I don't know that. Nobody ever really talked about that part of it. We didn't have sisters in our family so they probably didn't even quite know what I was doing. But that would've been typical of us.

In that age - when you are like a junior or senior in high school – if someone had asked you why were you becoming a sister? What would have been your answer?

I want to be a teacher.

Okay.

I don't think I even told anybody except my family, my mom and dad. I don't think I told any of my classmates or anything like that so I doubt they even knew I was going.

In those days you came here to La Crosse?

Yes.

And just as other people graduate from high school and they go off to college, from high school you came here.

That's right. And in the fall when everybody else is going to college.

Did you start at Viterbo college at the same time?

Yes. In the fall. And it was an all girls school at that time and most of us were sisters - part of the community.

Okay, so of a big portion of the student body were sister.

Yes. Yes. I don't know when they opened it up to lay women but there weren't that many lay women in the beginning. But there again, a lot of young women of that age at that time, didn’t go to college either.

So at that point in your life, early in college, how did you understand God? Or if I had asked, “What is your image of God?” - How would you describe that?

My answer probably would've had something to do with Eucharist and comfort maybe. Maybe at-home. At-homeness. An image – I’m just not sure. I’m not sure I had an image. But a feeling? I would say probably comfort, home. That sense of God. Community. And like I said, not everybody had that experience, but for me, I just loved it. This was great.

Did people use the term spirituality when you were that age?

No.

If someone had asked you - did that word mean anything? And what were some of the meanings that word held?

At that time if somebody had said spirituality, it probably would've been prayer. Devotions. That sort of thing. That would have been it.

There wasn’t much of a distinction between spirituality and religion was there?

No. It was considered religion. Nobody talked about it. And what we learned, even in the classes to become a woman religious - even that was a lot about rules and the regulations. And the doctines and the dogmas. We can learn a lot, even much about prayer. Prayer was pretty much rote and out of the book.

As you think about how your understanding of spirituality has changed throughout your life, what were some early moments – some important moments when that started to change and evolve?

Probably in my mid-30s. It was retreats. I went on my first directed retreat.

Prior to that it was always community retreats – preached retreats. We didn’t have directed retreats. My first directed retreat, that was definitely a changing point for me. Now my experience of Christ and God was personal. It was a personal relationship.

That was for sure one of those moments.

Then, in the 70’s, maybe six or seven of us, the community asked me to make a 30 day retreat. And the purpose being that we would become spiritual directors and give retreats or spiritual direction.

For someone who has not been on retreat, when you use the term “directed retreat”, what does that look like?

I would not use that. We would have to talk about what the retreat is going to be. What is a retreat? What do they understand about it?

What did your first directed retreat look like? What were the boundaries?

It was amazing. I had a Jesuit priest that was giving the retreat. Because we were making the retreat, but then he was also teaching us. Because of course that was also part of it.

We would have a class each day on the Ignatian exercises so there were some things that I was really good at. Some things I couldn't figure out. You know just in the whole thing, even in my own prayer time. But there was so much grace and so much gift in the whole thing. Again, it just was my cup of tea. I didn't have to talk to people.

So “Directed Retreat”, the standard understanding is that you go away for silence, and then once a day, you meet with a spiritual director. Correct?

That's right. That's what I would say. And then you have prayer times, like guided prayer times by the director.

So for you that was a fish to water.

Oh my! I loved it. It was good.

But it sounds like in those periods of silence you had a more direct experience of God. Yes, yes. For sure. I learned about prayer. Like I hadn’t learned a lot about prayer, but I really began to learn about various ways of prayer that was helpful to me.

This was in preparation for you becoming a director so you could lead others on retreat?

That was the intent of the community. Yes. Because we just didn’t have anyone. We had never done this before.

Was this at the time of Vatican II?

Yes. It would have been after Vatican II.

So you were getting an invitation to do more retreats?

Right. Yes. And none of us were prepared. This was the community’s attempt at moving this forward. So this would have been in probably 1975, maybe 1976. So the Spiritual Direction Preparation Program began 9 years later.

You went through a program to learn how to be a spiritual director for other people and then there was the invitation to create the Franciscan Spirituality Center so you could first train the sisters to do that, right? And eventually open the doors to people.

To other people? Yes, yes. So it grew out of the Vatican II, the whole thing grew out of Vatican II and how do we respond to what the needs are now.

The group that was there with me, maybe three of us actually continued on and started doing spiritual direction. I don't think the others did.

You described that it was really natural for you to be a listener. What were some of the skills you had to refine though, to become better as a spiritual director.

Probably learn ways of inviting people to share more in their feelings. And maybe for people that are very verbal, having to slow them down. Learn how to slow them down. Invite them to reflection. And always I had to keep coming back to this, “This is the work between God and that soul. This is not my job.” Always having to remind myself that it's not my job to change them or to save them. To let God directly work with them. And how did I help to facilitate that.

It sounds like that was more natural to you than being a teacher. Can you contrast those experiences?

I thought I wanted to be a teacher and I love teaching. I did like teaching. I didn't do it very long. The community probably knew better of what I needed to do rather than what I thought I wanted to do.

From the early days of the spirituality center until now, would you say your understanding of spirituality has evolved?

Definitely, but you know, like when I came here, by the time I came to the spirituality center in 1988 I had pretty well figured out religion and spirituality and the difference there.

And I had been at Berkeley for two years. And did a lot of study around spirituality. It was pretty eclectic.

So when I came here a lot of the programs we had were just really geared to spirituality. The sister who was the director before really worked with parishes and so it was more like what today we would call an RCIA type of thing. Not as much connected to spirituality. Much more connected to religion. I had pretty much come to an understanding of what I thought spirituality was. And it was not religion. It was much broader than that.

What are the elements of spirituality in your mind?

It is larger than a church and encompassed much more creation and body and Spirit. Community some, but it wasn’t instruction as much as getting in touch with the Spirit, I suppose you could say.

I don't want to put my words in your mouth. As I listen to you, I hear it being more of a full body experience. It’s not just an experience of your mind.

By all means.

It’s your emotions - where you feel it in your body - what movements enhance that connection.

And God is present in all of it, not just in a building or a church or the doctrines. Yes, it was just much more life-giving. I think for me and for the people that came here also. They responded to their desires and needs.

Helping people connect to their understanding of God or their experience of God?

I think with all of us. You know like we first have to get in touch with ourselves before we can have that experience of being. Although there again, grace can do all kinds of things without us. But I think in the beginning I would've said that for most of us that were coming here, we had the desire to first get in touch with ourselves and the experience of the divine. Can't make that happen. No matter what you do. It has to come out of - has to be their experience.

So as I listen to you, my sense is of you as a spiritual director is really entering into their experience - in trying to see things through their eyes. Is that a fair description?

That would be fair. And just to facilitate and empower them to trust their experience, whatever that is, whoever their God is. That's probably also something I’ve always had to remember – check in: Who's their God? It's not my God. Mine is mine and yours is yours.

How would you describe that now?

Now I don't even know who God is. So I would say it’s such a mystery isn’t it? It's just such a mystery.

I sense presence. And sometimes when I'm walking around, it’s like there's a presence. Within – surrounding me. Yeah, I didn't have an image when I was a child. I don't have one now.

But you can feel a presence now that you couldn’t feel then?

As a child I might've felt it but didn’t name it.

Is that part of what you do as a spiritual director then to help people verbalize their sense of presence?

However they name that. How are you experiencing that? Or how is that person

experiencing it. And you know we’re all so different and so unique in that experience of presence - for somebody else that experience of God or however they name it.

That sense of uniqueness – has that been part of your journey - of identifying your own uniqueness and kind of embracing that?

I think so. I got so much help from community and their trust. Their trust and asking me to do this or to do that. I would never have done those things myself. It just wouldn’t have come into my mind.

So they saw giftedness in you?

And they mentored me so well in so many things. I've had many many wonderful experiences so I think you know that certainly helped with my being able to claim who I am - claim my uniqueness. And there again, I don't think about that but you know I've had a very lovely - very lovely life and it's just wonderful. I think that's been my experience in community. I'm just very blessed.

My sense though is that the community has shifted in that understanding too. Because when you first joined - when you first came – sisters were wearing habits.

Oh yeah.

The formation was much more.

Yeah. I think it was more around rules and regulations because that changed after Vatican II. It broadened out so yeah that changed – all of that. But there again I loved that. I didn't mind the other either. Well, one of the things I always used to say, you know, like again, that's probably just a part of who I am. You know they’d say you have to do this. I would to it but I’d just I say to myself, I mean this really is kind of ridiculous. But I could do it. I didn't fight it. I know some of the women that were here with me and know they just made their life miserable because of their resistance to it. I could do it even if I thought it was stupid. And there were things that were. “Why we are doing this?” But again it's like we've always done this. This is how we do it.

As I listen to what I hear – Over time, spirituality has become more personal.

Oh yes!

And more authentic to who you are?

I also hear kind of a growing sense of grace that you're like it's going to happen with or without me, so I might as will join the flow.

Right yeah. Grace is big I think. It’s that presence too. I have lived a very full and blessed life and I'm always grateful for that. I don't have a worry. I have no worries - so well taken care of.

Thank you for the influence you have been on me and hundreds of people who have come to the spiritual direction preparation program. That sense of trust - that sense of gratitude - and helping people to find their own story.

Yes. Thank you.

If you have any questions about any of the programs that they offer at the Franciscan Spirituality Center in La Crosse, Wisconsin, we invite you to call us at 608-791-5295. You can also visit our website at [www.fscenter.org](http://www.fscenter.org/). Thank you for listening.