

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

therapist, marriage counseling, mental health, bipolar

Dominic Kaiser 00:06

Welcome to The Contemplative Life. Three pastors, friends and spiritual companions help us explore spirituality through a contemplative lens.

Christina Roberts

I'm Christina Roberts.

Chris Roberts 00:16

I'm Chris Roberts.

Kristina Kaiser 00:17

I'm Kristina Kaiser. We're glad you joined us.

Hello, it's great to be with you. Today we're welcoming Sister Denise West to the podcast. Sister Denise first worked as a teacher, but her desire for spiritual growth inevitably led her on this surprising journey into monastic life. And so today, she's going to be sharing some of that journey with us. However, before we begin, we did want to let our audience know that as is true with so many of our stories, there are going to be topics that Sister Denise brings up today regarding mental health and attempted suicide, and those may be triggering, depending on your own life stories. So we wanted to be sure and let people know ahead of time so that you can make decisions about listening today that are right for you. That being said, and hearing about her spiritual journey, we hope that it's going to inspire this awareness for each of us. Because each of us collectively and individually, we're all journeying to connect with that Divine spark within that we're going to hear coming through in her story today.

Chris Roberts

Today, we are grateful to have a guest on our podcast, Sister Denise West. Sister Denise is a Sister at Holy Wisdom Monastery, and I've had the opportunity to get to know her over the past few years. And she has such a fascinating story that we want to share with our podcast listeners, Sister Denise, welcome to the podcast.

Sister Denise 01:36

I'm really happy to be here.

Chris Roberts

Often, when we picture a sister, we may picture somebody growing up in a faith filled family that encourages a path towards religious vocation. Yet that is not your story. So I wonder if you can tell us a little bit about your story of finding your way into religious life.

Sister Denise

I want to say a little bit about myself, my family dynamics growing up and how I think that led me towards a life of faith and that led me to really need to hear God's call in my life. Because my family was not exactly a model family, it was pretty dysfunctional. I had a father who was a psychiatrist, and my stepmother, who was much younger than him. After the divorce, he married someone much younger. It's kind of a rebound marriage, which he later said, it seemed like a good idea at the time. And then my mom was bipolar. It turns out my sister, my older sister is also bipolar. So she had struggles, we had struggles growing up. And I think that dynamic of my dad being a psychiatrist, and my mother being like, the patient sort of created this schism in me. You could be a healthy, intellectual, rational, stable person, like safe. That was my dad, he was my safe person, and not a man of faith. And he sort of kind of dismissed it really.

Then there's my mom, who was warm and loving, but really unstable. And she moved around, she would have to change jobs fairly frequently. She actually was very good as a nurse, then they would give her more responsibility and then at a certain point, she couldn't handle the responsibility and she'd get sick. So she was kind of moving around in and out of hospitals, moved to Florida and lived with her mom part of the time. So there was a great amount of unpredictability with my mom, and she was the one who believed in God. So I had this very kind of dualistic, this like choice in life. And for the longest time, I chose this intellect, the life of the intellect, of competence, of stability. That was the role I took on. The other thing is my mom was much freer with her emotions, and tender. And I sort of rejected that, like I had to pick one. So I think, you know, that lasted until actually in my marriage. When I was married. Naturally, I married someone who was a little bit more like my dad. And then at a certain point, he had his own mental health issues. He started getting headaches, actually really severe headaches and physical pain.

Actually, after his brother died, his brother tragically died at a young age. And my husband started getting these physical symptoms, and everyone around him, all of us, his family, could see that this was in part unresolved grief. He had his own issues. His own family was pretty dysfunctional. But he would say, well, the only problem I have is that I have these headaches. He would never go to any kind of therapist or anything, he became very depressed. That depression really freaked me out. And so I started going

into therapy, because I couldn't handle my husband's depression. It reminded me of my mom's depression and her instability. And my husband, who was such a good man, and yet we both came from such dysfunctional families that we didn't have the communication skills we needed. Neither one of us knew ourselves very well. So I was, at a certain point, actually going to church and starting therapy kind of happened at the same time. And I really look back and I see my starting therapy, and I had been to several therapists and sort of went short term, but this was someone I was with for 15 years in New York, starting in 2000. And I look back, and I think that was the beginning of my formation that led to my becoming a Sister.

So I started going to therapy to help myself or to help him, I didn't know how to help him. But of course, I needed help for myself. It led to my opening up this desire both for God, and for a deeper connection with my husband. A big, really important part of my faith journey is that I asked my therapist, who was a psychoanalyst in New York City, (New York City is not exactly a center of great spiritual dynamism, especially Christian spirituality. I asked her if she believed in God. And she just resolutely said, Yes. And I was surprised, I was both surprised that she told me because she was one of those therapists who didn't tell me anything. I never knew anything about her personally. So I was surprised that she told me. I was surprised that she believed in God, but boy, that really meant something to me, because she was very smart, I really admired her. And it gave me the permission from someone who was kinda like my dad, the therapist, the intellectual. And it kind of gave me a like permission to go ahead and be vulnerable, to talk to her about my church experiences and my God experiences and to go to church and deepen that relationship with the community at church.

Unfortunately, my husband needed some help. He went to all kinds of doctors and nothing, there was no physical cause for his symptoms. But he would not go to marriage counseling. Eventually, I guess, maybe four years, I was in therapy while I was married, I was also going to church and he wasn't interested in church. So our lives, I was really changing and growing, and we weren't growing together. So at a certain point, we would have started talking about divorce just because we had problems and we couldn't, neither one of us had the skills to work on it. So eventually, neither one of us really wanted to. We loved each other. But it became clear to both of us that we cannot continue. So I started moving out. Well, I don't quite remember what happened. Next is quite this is more than well, more than 10 years ago. But he ended up trying to kill himself. He actually, and it was only again, by the grace of God that he left a phone call message on his mom's voicemail at home. She normally would have been at work and she happened to go home that day. And she heard him frantically. This phone call he had been crying. So she called me and said, she didn't let on. And she just said, Would you mind just dropping by and checking on him? So I had moved out, but I went over

there. And as soon as I walked in the house, I just knew that he had had all these medications for his pain. And I knew he'd taken him. So I ran upstairs and the bathroom door was locked.

Fortunately, it was a flimsy door, I broke in and he was in the bathtub. And he had taken all these pills and he had cut himself. I called 911. And thank God, they came and he did not die. And it kind of gave us a little reprieve because he could no longer say I don't have any problems.

So we did start going to marriage counseling. But it was one of those things where it was by that time it was just Oh no, that's not what happened. It wasn't too late. What happened was, we started going to marriage counseling. This is just so tragic. We went to marriage counseling, and he started seeing a therapist. His therapist, unbeknownst to him, had cancer. And less than a year, he loved this therapist, and this is not very helpful for people who may want to see a therapist, but I guess it says something about really doing work. Whenever you want to see a mental health professional, he really formed a pretty good attachment. And then the therapist suddenly died. And he just was heartbroken. I mean, he didn't say that, he didn't talk about it. But he was like, that's it. I mean, he couldn't manage to go to someone else. So he was done with therapy.

And so that was when it became clear like, well, if we're not going to each do our work, and be in marriage counseling, you can't build a relationship and a life. I guess some people might stay together just for the sake of staying together. But I wasn't able to do that. So, we split up, and I continued seeing my therapist and going to church, and eventually being led here. But sometimes I do this thought experiment... *Well, what I would rather stay married, and have a family?* And I think it doesn't really matter what path we take. If we're seeking God and we're responding to a call, God is there no matter what. It's a matter of tuning in and listening to what really gives us the life that I think God wants us to live. I don't think God wants us to stay imprisoned in situations that are not life giving. It's really sometimes why it's really helpful to have a therapist, a counselor, or a pastor, somebody who is helping us to see what we can't see. Because I know I was limited in what I could see. So I needed someone from the outside to guide me. *Am I just trying to get out of an unhappy situation because I don't want to grow? Or am I really doing the work I need to do? And is the situation just not going to work?* I mean, I don't even know if it's possible for a person to know that without some kind of guidance from loved ones or a mental health professional. So there are lots of ways I look back on my life. And I think well, if my parents had had some help, then maybe they would have stayed married. I think therapists are one of God's greatest gifts to the world.

Christina Roberts 13:10

Yes, absolutely. Gosh, what a profound journey. My goodness, thank you for sharing that. And you know, even in that, you know, there was the therapist and the church and just where the mental health and the spiritual health come together and those are such important conversations.

Denise 13:26

Yeah. And, you know, my therapist in New York, not only was she Christian, but she had grown up Catholic, and she actually had some Buddhist practices. She was contemplative. And I think of all the therapists in New York, it's very unusual. We talked about it later, she said, yeah, a lot of therapists you ask, they're not going to really believe in God and bring that faith, welcome that faith. And so I just see the hand of God and that's who I was with for 15 years. That was very profound. It shaped me a lot.

Chris Roberts 14:03

Thank you, Denise, for being very vulnerable and open and talking about your journey. And, gosh, you have an amazing story.

Denise 14:13

Well, thanks be to God. I'm here to tell you about it. Yes. Yeah. Thank you. Thank you for your curiosity and welcoming and welcoming all of Yeah, I do. I look at my story, you know, it's kind of a mess. But it feels amazing to me. It's amazing to me that I'm here and yeah, that my life has been changed so radically from where it began. It's more just thank you. Thank you.

Christina Roberts 14:45

This is a breath of fresh air that someone is so honest and open and the redemption and your story is a story of hope, Denise and so, okay, great. So thank you for sharing the depth. It was very deep and I think people want that so absolutely. Yeah. Okay.

Chris Roberts 14:59

Well, I think I'm just taking that in Sister Denise. And maybe I can ask one last question. What do you feel like the greatest gift God has given you being where you're at right now at Holy Wisdom monastery, what's the greatest thing that you've received from God?

Denise 15:19

Just hearing that question brings me to tears. I need a minute. The gift here for me has just been the growing conviction that we can always return to God, that we are always

welcome. And it doesn't matter how far we stray, and how much we may go through a period of dryness. And how much we see in ourselves we don't like. I see parts of myself, I think, oh my gosh, here I am a Sister. And this is what I'm thinking or feeling or doing. And yet, it's always okay. I'm always loved. We're always accepted. So I think just realizing that over and over again.

Chris Roberts 16:02

That is beautiful. Thank you for sharing. The phrase, "this too belongs" comes to me, this too belongs. all the sunny things and all the dark things. They all belong and they're all pathways to God. Thank you so much for sharing your story with us and for sharing your story with our listeners and the people that you're going to invite to hear this story. It has been such a pleasure to be with you today.

Denise 16:36

Thank you so much, Chris. It's been a pleasure to talk with you.

Outro 16:40

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