July 1, 2025

Hi Marsha,

I just reread your heartrending, honest and provocative letter to the OE community about your 23-year journey as part of the OE, EI community 1964 – 1987. Thank you so much for your willingness to describe your experiences, their effects on you, your deep questioning about what you were encountering, and finally your decisions about where and what to do next. I applaud your decision to have your “truth” included in the larger account of the history of the Order.

I’m 83, sixteen years your senior, and so was one of the young interns to arrive in Chicago in 1968, with my husband, 14 years my senior. I think as we were moving into the West Side your family, among many others of the original “permanent House Church” were being deployed as priors to the new crop of Religious Houses across the nation. I remember the Marshalls went to Boston and I think the Hahns went to San Francisco.

Joe and I were married in 1967, and having taken EI courses, and after Joe’s bishop, James K. Mathews, assigned him to the Ecumenical Institute, agreed we would move to Chicago for one year. We lived in one of the apartments in 321 Holman, and I got a job teaching at Chicago City College in the northwest part of the city. Joe was assigned to Property with Frank Hilliard that first summer and made keys, bailed out flooded basements and exterminated rats. Both of us had been deeply moved by the EI’s course work in support of renewing the local church, and as an educator I found imaginal education profoundly empowering.

That first year I was assigned every other weekend to teach Emerging Generation children, grades 4-8. Teaching college kids during the week, I loved letting my hair down and working with my group, that consisted of 4 Boivens, 3 Grows and one or two others. You probably can remember who those would be: Patty, Mary, Keith & Kevin Boiven; Rebecca, Brad and Cameron Grow; and others I can’t recall. Since I put the kids to bed each night, and our families were dispersed a bit across the campus, I got to see the homes the children were living in. All our quarters were cramped, but my hat was forever taken off to Iris Boiven who had yet another younger child, Carrie, and always had a huge pile of laundry ready to fold. That configuration of kids was a handful for me, but I had begun my teaching career with grades 7-8, so I cherished the energy and creativity of these kids. I was only 26 at the time and threw myself into adapting the EI curriculum to what made sense to (and was fun for) older elementary kids. I learned later on that sadly, we didn’t always assign the best suited adults to EG structures.

Nine months after our arrival, Joe and I were sent on a three-month teaching trek through northeast and southeast Asia, and ended up in Singapore where we helped staff the first International Training Institute in 1969. We stayed in Singapore as an “outpost” of the Kuala Lumpur Religious House. Our twin sons were born in June 1970, and then, with our babies, we travelled to Hong Kong and eventually to Sydney Australia.

I taught in two different girls’ schools in Sydney that year, and the Sydney Religious House established its own mini school: David Duffy, Kim Morton, Luke Morton, Ben and Jon Crocker. I missed caring for my sons on a daily basis from ages 4 months on, but I felt my kids were well and truly cared for as part of Jim Bishop’s Presbyterian Church Preschool, staffed by Betsy Morton and Isobel Bishop. I grew very fond of Rebecca Bishop who was then an extremely precocious elementary schooler who did not back away from asking pointed, deep questions. I keep in touch with her, off and on, even today, and she sits on my meditative council.

After Sydney, Joe and I were assigned to do International Training Schools in India and Ethiopia (during which time our sons were with us), and we finally returned back to the US in 1971. Setting up care for two babies whilst “on the road” was daunting, but we were fortunate in always finding local “motherly” caregivers who showered our kids with love and affection.

We spent 1971 -72 as priors of the Philadelphia Religious House, and 1973 -75 as priors of the New York Religious House. All this time our sons were with us. Upon arriving in Manhattan, we discovered that the lease the Busses (who preceded us as priors) had negotiated with the Episcopal Church in Gramercy Park had lapsed, and the 25 NYRH residents were virtually put out on the sidewalk. We “farmed out” our kids to movement colleague families, while we scoured the terrain for a place to live. Joe Crocker used his connections to find us a place in Patterson, NJ, where we squeezed into a “starter home” space for one year (that is another whole story) until Townley was able to secure the new NYRH on Clarendon Street, right next to the Interchurch Center (known fondly as the “God Box”) on the Upper West Side. All the preschoolers in the NYRH attended a bilingual school on the Lower East Side of NYC, and Jon and Ben continued there after Joe and I were assigned to be part of a global trek to initiate the first 8 Human Development projects. Sally and Jim Fenton moved right into our apartment to care as guardians for our boys.

Not much time had been afforded for me to digest our new assignment to be part of the team to launch the first 8 HDPs. Joe and I had a week to return from Chicago to NYC, update our passports, get our visas, and head out from Kennedy Airport to Sydney Australia, via Seattle, WA. I cried my eyes out all the way from NYC to Seattle, heartbroken over leaving our 5-year old sons. Separation at such an early age was painful, unnatural and guilt provoking.

Yes, you are correct in asking “Why did so many unhealthy practices …..occur in the midst of positive intentions and ideals?”

I’m not sure but I can brainstorm some:

* The state of the church, which had in the early ‘60s become captured by the suburban “good life” (*exposed by books such as The Suburban Captivity of the Church)* and the Civil Rights Movement urged young sensitive clergy to seek a way for Church Renewal. The Ecumenical Institute offered that.
* The cultural transformation of the 1960s – women’s empowerment, folk songs promoting freedom, a growing global consciousness – invited creative, imaginal experimentation. The Ecumenical Institute offered that.
* The concept of a New Religious Mode, grounded in ancient practices of the Church, *poverty, chastity and obedience* was compellingly inviting. The Ecumenical Institute offered that.
* And finally, and probably the most influential was *the sense of utter urgency to address the horrifying abyss between the “haves and the have nots”.*

In 1976 when Joe and I were assigned to return to India on staff of the first Human Development Training School, Judy Weigel, Mimi Shinn and I agreed we would not spend the next year separated from our children. I was nominated as the spokesperson to venture into the “cubicle” to speak with JWM. Perhaps he had anticipated this. He simply asked that we make a list of the pros and cons of taking our children with us, assessing the village conditions into which we would be living and then decide. His basic question was, “Will it be safe to take your children there?”

Mimi, Judy and I made our lists and decided, “Yes, our kids will be safe.” Soon thereafter, the boys and I headed for India alone, since Joe left earlier to lead the Kelapadua Consult with Jim Wiegel in Indonesia.

Your story about looking out the window and wanting so much to help the old woman rummaging through the garbage cans reminded me of a similar “being called to serve” that our son Jonathan experienced in India. He was very despondent one afternoon and told me, “I saw a man on the bus coming home from school that had such skinny legs, and he couldn’t even get up to sit on a seat**. I wanted to give him a rupee or something**.” That kind of awakenment was precious for any child at such an early age. It was one of many gifts our sons were given during that year in India.

I hear your description of “arrogance” and “group think”. As a permeator, I had to be careful about how I described my family’s engagement in mission. When I had to break my contract with Chicago City College to suddenly leave mid-term on the 1969 Seapac Teaching Trek, Kay Lush and Fred Buss visited the Dean and explained why I was then en route to Singapore and wouldn’t be back in September. The Dean was so impressed with what they shared that he said, “Tell Marilyn that whenever she wants to come back, she will always be welcome.”

Like you, I hated that families who chose to leave the Order felt they had to sneak out in the dead of night. I vociferously shared that in 1976 when I was part of the team working on the Polity Document. “Why can’t we have a ritual of separation?” I asked. A few weeks later David Morton, who had been part of the document writing team knocked on our door at 10 PM. He said, “Betsy and I are leaving the Order, but I didn’t want you to think we are sneaking out without telling anyone.” Joe and I stayed friends with the Mortons for decades later, and I spoke at David’s Memorial services in January and July of last year. His second wife, Denney (after Betsy passed) is my very dear friend.

For me, the Order was intellectually stimulating, spiritually nurturing, and socially engaging. I am so sorry you experienced your time until your 30s to be intellectually confining. I’m so glad you went back to college and experienced an awakening. I understand how that can happen: I returned to do my doctoral work at age 50 and found it exhilaratingly meaningful.

Marsha, your parents were some of the most inspiring and kind leadership presences in the Order, wherever they showed up. Joe and I loved and admired them. We were so honored when they came up to our farm in West Newfield, ME to visit us. I know they loved you and Shelley unconditionally.

How sad it is when parents and children cannot speak truth to one another. I know that, as our sons have chosen to distance themselves from me since Joe passed, and it breaks my heart. Your abuse by a colleague is unconscionable, and he should have been excommunicated, NOT reassigned – like what happened in the RC church for decades. If I had known of any such abuse going on under my nose in a RH I would have “gone to the wall” to rout it out.

After the OE Reunion in 2000 I contacted all the First Generation children, now adults, to whom Joe and I had been “temporary Guardians”, and stood present to the abuses that happened under our “watches”, and apologized, on behalf of any abuse we had directly or indirectly involved. It was wrenching to learn that much abuse had happened long before these youngsters were assigned to live with us.

One of my happiest memories of you is when I waved off you, Mary Boivin and Mark Jewell at O’Hare to launch the first international Youth Forum in Europe. You youth rocked! We were so proud of you. And that year, when you three college students were assigned to Research Centrum, you brought such an energizing presence to us old fogeys, John Epps, David Morton, Bill and Nan Grow, and Randy? (the guy who promoted “pure research”, which I never understood.)

That was also about the time when Kim Refos came back to Kemper, and I had the good fortune to hire her as Executive Secretary to the boss of Sumner G. Rahr and Co. Inc., a fundraising consulting firm where I worked, as did Guardian Betty Hill. Kim became the “golden girl” of the firm, so beautiful, charming and kind. She stayed there for many years long after Joe and I were reassigned.

I was intrigued with Patrick’s reference to JWMs comment that “children were a block to mission” because they were a detraction from parents being involved in mission. JWM came to Boston to officiate at our marriage, and I never felt that message. However, when we arrived as interns in 1968 we met with the “Permanent House Church” to propose we expand our family (I was 26, Joe was 40). Donna McCleskey asked, “Have you considered adoptions?” Which we had, and had a reasonable response – we wanted our own children. We were excused and later were asked to wait, because there was an assignment they wanted us to take the next year. And we did wait. But, finally when we got to Singapore we felt time was slipping through our fingers.

Dear Marsha, I could go on for a long time more to dialogue with you about the important and profound questions you have raised. And I hope the dialogue among colleagues, across generations will continue.

I sign off tonight with love and deep respect,

Marilyn