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# The Making of an American Mystic:

## *Reverend Dagmar Braun Celeste's Ever-ascending Spirals on the Journey toward the Beloved Community*

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**ABSTRACT:** This article explores how one might integrate spiritual praxis holistically into one's own life and daily practices so a more just and compassionate world can be realized. Instead of providing a mechanical process for doing so, it describes the life of the Reverend Dagmar Ingrid Braun Celeste, a devout Catholic and one of the Danube Seven, as well as a former First Lady in Ohio. In particular, the article focuses on how she skillfully and courageously integrates spirituality and praxis in a way that challenges unjust structures in religion and in the world.

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This article discusses how one might integrate spiritual praxis holistically into one's own life and practices so a more just and compassionate world can be realized. Instead of providing a mechanical process for doing so, I will describe the life of someone who skillfully and courageously integrates spirituality and praxis in a way that challenges unjust structures in religion and in the world. Her name is the Reverend Dagmar Ingrid Braun Celeste.

Celeste holds a unique place in the history of Christian religious practice and feminist theological praxis in the United States of America and worldwide. In June 2002, she was one of the members, and the only U.S. citizen, of an elite international group of seven devoted Roman Catholic women who put their bodies, minds, spirits and, most importantly, their souls on the line when they submitted to the call of the Divine to be

ordained by recognized bishops who were duly authorized by the Roman Catholic Church to ordain only men. After years of prayerful study, reflection, discernment, and faithful devotion to Roman Catholicism, Dagmar acquiesced to the unrelenting call to be ordained and prepared to fully embrace the responsibilities connected to the vocation of Catholic priesthood, in direct contravention to Canon Law.<sup>1</sup> According to Celeste, although she was initially fearful of the probable repercussions, she was divinely compelled to this action<sup>2</sup> despite being keenly aware that the ordination of women contravenes the gender-based dictates of the hierarchical organization and imperial structure of the Roman Catholic Institution.<sup>3</sup>

This original group of women became known as the “Danube Seven” because they were ordained while sailing down the Danube River on a ship accompanied by family members, friends, and the press to witness the historic moment.<sup>4</sup>

Because she remained obedient to God, prayerfully moving through the discernment process, and, finally submitting herself to the transformative ritual of ordination, Celeste was able to withstand the whirlwind that ensued as the news of this controversy echoed around the world; in the midst of it all, she found calm assurance of her obedience to God.<sup>5</sup> This assurance grounded her disciplined spiritual practice, enabling her to appreciate the gifts that others contribute; to sit in quiet and meaningful contemplation; to act boldly when needed; to open one’s heart to the earth’s beauty; to remain alert for signs of divine action; and to pray for peace for all. What I present is, in short, a story of how one woman learned to stay awake through suffering, to share how her example has been a model for me, and in hopes that she can be an inspiration for others as well.

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<sup>1</sup> Dagmar Braun Celeste, personal interview by Leslye Huff, April 26-27, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Dagmar Braun Celeste, personal interview by Leslye Huff, August 15-16, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> John L. Allen Jr., Vatican correspondent, “‘Seven Women ‘Ordained’ Priests June 29. In Ceremony They Term ‘Not Licit, but a Fact.’” National Catholic Reporter NCR online, July 1, 2002, [http://natcath.org/NCR\\_Online/archives2/2002c/071902/ordinations.htm](http://natcath.org/NCR_Online/archives2/2002c/071902/ordinations.htm).

<sup>4</sup> Allen Jr., Vatican correspondent.

<sup>5</sup> “Rev. Dagmar Braun Celeste, Personal Interview by Leslye Huff, April 26-27, 2016.

This Interview Was Conducted at Her Home.”

## In the Beginning: A Short Biography

In a society that seems to prefer the rare “either/or” experiences of life and seems to avoid the pervasive “both/and” realities of life, it is a challenge to describe the complex person that is Dagmar Celeste. She is inadvertently controversial.<sup>6</sup> She is both celebrated and reviled. Notably, one intimate, would-be biographer, wrote in the foreword of Dagmar’s memoir that Dagmar has never...

... conformed to [the writer’s] expectations, whether of feminist work, political work, family work, or religious work. She is infuriating and loving – to such an intense and passionate degree that she draws people to her like a magnet. But that same magnetism draws critique and hatred as well. She has struggled with pain that is deep and wide but has kept her head mostly above water, using the rare submersions to help herself and others understand more of the ocean.<sup>7</sup>

According to one biographer, Dagmar is an “Austrian-American woman-priest, mother of six children and numerous grandchildren, and former feminist First Lady of Ohio during her marriage to Governor Richard Celeste.”<sup>8</sup> In the preface to her memoir that was written over the expanse of a decade and published in 2002, Dagmar Braun Celeste described herself as “a woman who was born, raised, and married in Austria; awakened in India; liberated, divorced, and now recovering in America.”<sup>9</sup>

This article describes a survivor and a transcendent renaissance person who is committed to peace. Embracing peace is an act of spiritual courage, an internal process. peeling off the layers of distraction and the masks that inhibit authentic non-judgmental engagement with others. These layers and masks also prevent humanity’s humble admission and acceptance of humans as integral parts of nature, no more or no less

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<sup>6</sup> See, “Plain Dealer, January 15, 1984: 196, Accessed December 12, 2019, <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/resources/doc/nb/image/pag>,” n.d., 196–99.

<sup>7</sup> Dagmar Braun Celeste, *“We Can Do Together” Impressions of a Recovering Feminist First Lady* (Kent: The Kent State University Press, 2002), xii.

<sup>8</sup> Parker, 952.

<sup>9</sup> Celeste, xiv.

important than other manifestations of nature. According to Dagmar, a key to peace is admitting to fears that built walls which, while intended originally to protect others, have become prisons; weighing their usefulness in one's current life; offering gratitude for their services; and releasing those that no longer serve. Celeste's story presents a coping model for anyone courageously embracing a fully integrated journey of heart, mind, body, and spirit through this thing called life.

### *A Child's Heart in Times of War*

Dagmar Braun Celeste was born in Krems an der Donau, Austria, on November 23, 1941. She was "born into a raging, warring world"<sup>10</sup> to a relieved 18-year-old optimistic mother and a disappointed father. Throughout our interviews and her memoir, Dagmar refers to her parents by the German equivalents of "Mom" and "Dad": i.e., "Mutti" and "Vati" respectively. Similarly, she called her widowed maternal grandmother by the German "Oma."<sup>11</sup> Mutti, Vati, and Dagmar lived with Oma. Dagmar was named after a sibling who had died the year before her birth after living a single day. Her mother believed that because she was born on a Sunday, Dagmar brought good luck to herself and her family; her very disappointed father wanted a son to help him on the battlefield that was his world.<sup>12</sup>

Vati was an attorney; his older brother was a philosophy professor. Mutti was born in Austria and spoke German; Vati, a polyglot, was born in Trieste, Italy. Each of Dagmar's grandparents grew up in the Austria-Hungary Empire; both of her parents were born and raised in it until the Empire disintegrated during the course of WW I. During Hitler's and Mussolini's usurpation of power in the region, Vati and his older brother, Egon, joined the Nazi army; "Egon, who was [an idealistic] true believer in the myth of the thousand-year Reich, became an officer, while [her cynical] father, who believed in neither God nor the Führer, remained a lowly soldier."<sup>13</sup> Fluent in French, Slovenian, Italian, and German, Vati was

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<sup>10</sup> Celeste, 5.

<sup>11</sup> See Dagmar Braun Celeste, *"We Can Do Together" Impressions of a Recovering Feminist First Lady* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Celeste, *We Can Do Together*, 27.

posted in the Village of Malo, Italy, to serve as a translator of intercepted messages.<sup>14</sup>

Up close, war makes all families suffer, and Dagmar's was no exception. In the spring of 1942, less than a year after Dagmar's birth and shortly after her father returned to the battlefield, Dagmar's mother discovered that she was pregnant again. In December 1942, thirteen-month-old Dagmar became the big sister of another girl whom Dagmar called Utzi.<sup>15</sup> Her widowed grandmother, her mother, herself, and her infant sister endured the violence of World War II (the "War") and its horrific aftermath, courageously, without aid and support from Dagmar's father.<sup>16</sup> By the end of the war, Dagmar's mother received notice that her husband was missing.<sup>17</sup>

In the first in-person interview, as Celeste recounted memories of the war and reflected on the myriad ramifications that ensued, it was difficult to remember that the war started over eighty years ago. Moreover, any attempt to imagine the sensations, images, impressions, and deprivation that threatened to extinguish the soul of a child born into this zeitgeist of violence and the chaos of war and its aftermath failed in the presence of the transcendent well-grounded adult person sharing candidly.

After those conversations, re-reading sections of her memoir evoked visceral responses to Dagmar's "earliest childhood memories [that Dagmar admitted] are riddled with images of war."<sup>18</sup> First, I identified with Mutti and Oma. I could imagine the fear carried by Dagmar's maternal grandmother, who had survived World War I.<sup>19</sup> From those experiences, Oma knew no matter how bad things were, the struggles could get worse. I empathized with Mutti, worn by the vagaries of years of war, barely twenty-one years old. She was startled awake in the middle of the night by air raid warnings or the sound of approaching planes. I imagined them hurrying to gather up Dagmar, not yet three years old and Utzi, not quite

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<sup>14</sup> Celeste, *We Can Do Together*.

<sup>15</sup> Celeste, 8.

<sup>16</sup> "Rev. Dagmar Braun Celeste, Personal Interview by Leslye Huff, April 26-27, 2016. This Interview Was Conducted at Her Home."

<sup>17</sup> Celeste, *We Can Do Together*.

<sup>18</sup> Celeste, 5.

<sup>19</sup> See, Eric Solsten and David E. McClave, eds., *Austria: A Country Study*, Second Edition, Area Handbook Series, ISSN 1057-5294, continuing series (Washington, DC: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1994), <http://countrystudies.us/austria/>. After WW I, Austria-Hungary Empire was decimated and divided into

two. With toddlers in tow, these brave women raced to caves that lay beyond their orchard in the darkness of the night praying to reach them before the air raids began as the sound of the planes' engines grew closer – louder. These women were determined to keep their babies alive.<sup>20</sup> Dagmar described herself as too young to be fearful during raids until a particular night raid in 1944, that began as just another of many similar adventures but quickly changed to horror.<sup>21</sup> She said, “They barely made it . . . inside the caves before a raid began . . . that night the planes dropped their bombs so close to [their] sheltering cave that [Dagmar] could smell the smoke and dust and see the flames.”<sup>22</sup> That night, an American plane dropped bombs on its designated target, a rail line; one bomb hit an apartment building and killed Dagmar’s godmother and her son.<sup>23</sup> “That night [Dagmar learned to fear for [her] life and hate war.”<sup>24</sup>

#### *War: What is it good for? Nothing.*

Dagmar was three years old when, “[o]n May 8, 1945, Germany surrendered.”<sup>25</sup> However, the turmoil engulfing Austria is long-standing.<sup>26</sup> In June of 1934, according to an official U.S. Government publication, Hitler solidified an alliance with Benito Mussolini, Fascist Prime Minister of Italy<sup>27</sup> when he “denied any intent to annex Austria . . . [However, secretly, Hitler embarked on a more radical course. He and] Austrian Nazis conspired to seize top [Austrian] government officials and force the appointment of a Nazi-dominated government.”<sup>28</sup> Through subterfuge, Hitler succeeded in marshalling Austrian Nazis sympathizers to circumvent the democratic

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<sup>20</sup> Celeste, *We Can Do Together*.

<sup>21</sup> “Rev. Dagmar Braun Celeste, Telephone Conversation with Author, October 21, 2016.” n.d.

<sup>22</sup> Celeste, *We Can Do Together*, 6.

<sup>23</sup> “Rev. Dagmar Braun Celeste, Telephone Conversation with Author, October 21, 2016.”

<sup>24</sup> Celeste, *We Can Do Together*, 6.

<sup>25</sup> “Austria - World War II and the Defeat of Nazi Germany,” accessed December 13, 2019, <http://countrystudies.us/austria/41.htm>.

<sup>26</sup> “Austria, in Its Many Permutations Has Been Embroiled in Territorial, Ethnic, and Religious Conflicts for a Millennium. T,” n.d.

<sup>27</sup> Eric Solsten and David E. McClave, eds., “Austria - Growing German Pressure on Austria,” in *A Country Study*, Second Edition, Area Handbook Series, ISSN 1957-5294, continuing series (Washington, DC: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1994), <http://countrystudies.us/austria/37.htm>.

<sup>28</sup> “Austria - RESTORED INDEPENDENCE UNDER ALLIED OCCUPATION,” accessed December 13, 2019, <http://countrystudies.us/austria/42.htm>.

process to isolate Austria. By March 1938, “Hitler marched the German army into Austria.” Moreover, the cruelty of Soviet occupation continued unabated for a decade after WW II ended.<sup>29</sup>

According to Dagmar, for women and children, post-war Austria was as dangerous as it was before the shooting and bombing stopped.<sup>30</sup> Scarcity characterized post-war Austria. Precarity of body, mind, and spirit characterized the Austrian women and children.<sup>31</sup> Dagmar’s childhood memories include the struggle for food and safety during the war despite being protected by an industrious and creative mother and a hardworking grandmother. They had no ability to remove the threat of death from Allied bombs and the aggressive demanding presence of the German soldiers. The Nazi German army was defeated. Nazi occupation ended. American and Russian soldiers, who were self-described liberators, replaced them.

When asked to distinguish the Nazi troops from the American and Russian soldiers, Dagmar explained that they were equally desperate aggressors. Regardless of the nationalities or ethnicities of soldiers who had been immersed in both violent deaths and other atrocities, accompanied by intense [male] bonding necessary for survival and mission success in the context of the risk of imminent death for the duration of the war, Dagmar is certain soldiers and sovereigns treat the rape of women and girls as entitlement, a reward for their service – women and girls were objectified essentials of the spoils of war. Further, Dagmar believes rape and pillage are integral parts of war and primary war crimes that mostly go unaddressed or unnoticed by those who are at a safe distance.<sup>32</sup>

Initially, both United States soldiers and Russian soldiers were in control of Austria’s cities and towns.<sup>33</sup> The U.S. soldiers had more financial resources than the Russian soldiers: “at least [U.S. soldiers] could afford to reward to women and girls they chose to ravish.”<sup>34</sup> They exchanged Spam – any food, chocolate, peanut butter, chewing gum, and especially cigarettes,

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<sup>29</sup> “Austria - RESTORED INDEPENDENCE UNDER ALLIED OCCUPATION.”

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Celeste, *We Can Do Together*.

<sup>32</sup> “Rev. Dagmar Braun Celeste, Personal Interview by Leslye Huff, August 15-16, 2016. This Interview Was Conducted at Her Re,” n.d.

<sup>33</sup> Celeste, *We Can Do Together*.

<sup>34</sup> Celeste, 9–10.



or coveted nylon stockings. On the other hand, the depleted Russian soldiers offered only brute force - rape. These women and girls who had managed to survive the Nazi German incursion and the Allied forces' bombings were ill-equipped to resist or say no to coerced non-consensual sex, regardless of compensation. The contemptuous Russian soldiers became the official occupying force in post-war Austria.<sup>35</sup>

At the end of the war, Dagmar's mother was only twenty-two years old; Dagmar was unable to delineate the number of times Russian soldiers raped her mother. All of the women and girls were at risk of starvation, rape, and other forms of violence especially when the Soviet Union became the principle occupiers. When the Soviet-occupied Austria formed a provisional government, unilaterally, and planned to seal off its occupational zone, Western Allies did not recognize it. Austrian people were again at risk of being isolated from Western Allies who were concerned that it would become the Soviet Union's puppet. The provisional government abandoned its plan to seal it.<sup>36</sup>

The Soviet Government occupied what was left of Austrian communities, literally. Russian soldiers moved into the homes of already devastated Austrians with sovereign authority. The sacrifices made by Mutti and Oma to provide food and security amidst the violence were incalculable and in the midst of more intimate daily violence, they still found time to make toys and even illustrated books by hand for Dagmar and her sister Utzi. The toys and books were well decorated with aesthetically pleasing images. The renderings of ladybugs were most delightful to young Dagmar. In the midst of such grim circumstances, the colorful ladybug brought Dagmar joy and hope.<sup>37</sup> Dagmar still uses the ladybug gleaned from those precious times in remembrance as a symbol of joy and hope even in the midst of ordeals.<sup>38</sup>

Dagmar and her family survived "near starvation" hunger, rape, theft, assault, and the usurpation of their living room by "lonely, uneducated, starving Russian troops" during Austria's post-war

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<sup>35</sup> Celeste, *We Can Do Together*.

<sup>36</sup> Solsten and McClave, *Austria*, 1994.

<sup>37</sup> "Rev. Dagmar Braun Celeste, Personal Interview by Leslye Huff, August 15-16, 2016. This Interview Was Conducted at Her Re."

<sup>38</sup> "Rev. Dagmar Braun Celeste, Several Telephone Conversations with Author, September 2016 through September 22, 2019.," n.d.

occupation.<sup>39</sup> It has taken many decades for Dagmar to feel empathy for the Russian soldiers, once thought monstrous, who “commandeered” the living room of their one-bedroom apartment and cruelly stole from five year old Dagmar and her four year old sibling, their meagre yet prized homemade “Christmas presents to send to their own children in Russia.”<sup>40</sup> That she has done so, is a testament to her spiritual practice.

After the devastation of World War II, Austria’s complicated war-time relationship with Nazi Germany subjected its people to foreign occupation by Allied forces.<sup>41</sup> Despite the promise Hitler had made to Benito Mussolini in 1934, four years later, Nazi Germany, conspiring with Austrian Nazis, annexed Austria via coup d’état by capturing the elected leader and convening a faux plebiscite as cover for the taking. Nazi intimidation and the promise of economic revitalization succeeded inside Austria. “European powers failed to oppose; Mussolini acquiesced<sup>42</sup> in exchange for being allowed to retain South Tirol.”<sup>43</sup> During the war, Nazi Germany took Austria and extorted, coerced, and bribed Austrian citizens to acquiesce to the takeover. Once under control, Nazi Germany conscripted Austrians into military service.<sup>44</sup> Dagmar’s own father, the brother and the husband of her godmother, Anni, were conscripted.<sup>45</sup> It is unclear whether Dagmar’s father was forced or induced into the Nazi German controlled military. According to Dagmar, her father did return to them eventually and admitted that he was reported missing because he deserted the military and ran away to Italy until he could come home. Dagmar’s grandmother had to perform as surrogate godmother at Dagmar’s baptism, because Anni’s husband refused to let her come to the Catholic church. For similar political and security reasons, he refused to get married in their Church; in

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<sup>39</sup> Celeste, 5 – 11.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 9

<sup>41</sup> Celeste, *We Can Do Together*, 8.

<sup>42</sup> Eric Solsten and David E. McClave, eds., “Austria - THE ANSCHLUSS AND WORLD WAR II,” in *Austria: A Country Study*, Second Edition, Area Handbook Series, ISSN 1057-5294, continuing series (Washington, DC: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1994), xxxiii, 314, <http://countrystudies.us/austria/38.htm>.

<sup>43</sup> “South Tyrol’s History – Ötzi, Tyrol, Italy, Autonomy,” accessed December 16, 2019, <https://www.suedtirol.info/en/this-is-south-tyrol/people/history>.

<sup>44</sup> See Solsten and McClave, *Austria*, 1994.

<sup>45</sup> “Rev. Dagmar Braun Celeste, Personal Interview by Leslye Huff, April 26-27, 2016. This Interview Was Conducted at Her Hom.”

order to marry him, Anni had to consent to a double ceremony at city hall with the Nazi leader of the occupied region.<sup>46</sup>

### *When One Door Closes...*

By the time she was 6 years old, because of the War and the post-War Russian occupation of Austria, Dagmar had experienced more than her fair share of loss and deprivation, but she still could rely on the presence of her mother and dear grandmother to sweeten her world despite the hunger, violence, and chaos. Dagmar credits her mother with the foresight to use the earnings from her hard work to buy an orchard with a “small wood cabin [that] became [their] sustenance, [their] playground, [their] sanctuary.”<sup>47</sup> During our many conversations for this project and throughout the years, it has become clear that Dagmar respects and delights in those serendipitous moments that seem to blossom from tragedy or sorrow. Not only did the orchard provide sustenance; just a few meters beyond the orchard are the caves that offered safety and adventurous creative play space for herself and her beloved sister.

The door to that sanctuary closed for six-year-old Dagmar, when her family decided to participate in a Red Cross initiative that sent sick or starving children from war-torn Austria to live with families in Italy, an Allied country. This opportunity afforded young Dagmar is another example of creative life energy circling and spiraling to use a negative force as compost to manifest something life-enhancing. It is a point of fact that Benito Mussolini was the fascist prime minister of Italy until 1925 when he appointed himself dictator expanding violent attempts annexation of other countries before and during WW II. It is reasonable to characterize him as one of the most notorious members of the Axis powers, second only to Adolph Hitler. In 1940, under Mussolini’s leadership, Fascist Italy joined forces with Nazi Germany in a nearly successful attempt to usurp vast areas of Europe. However, “[o]n October 13, 1943, one month after Italy surrendered to Allied forces, it declared war on Nazi Germany, its onetime

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<sup>46</sup> Celeste, *We Can Do Together*, 7.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

Axis partner.”<sup>48</sup> So, by the time that six-year-old Dagmar desperately needed nourishment and respite, Italy had become an Allied country.

Qualifying children had to be the oldest in the family and malnourished. By way of a small, unheated bus, Dagmar was sent across the Alps in winter to a host family in Trieste, Italy; she felt powerless and terrified.<sup>49</sup> Worst of all, she spoke no Italian and her hosts spoke very little German.<sup>50</sup> Yet, where there is loss, there is gain to be found. Dagmar slowly began to trust her host family of two sisters, a medical doctor, and a retired teacher. With plenty of nutritious food, she grew stronger in body and mind. She continued to learn to appreciate the beauty in nature and art. She learned to speak Italian and learned to love her host-mothers.<sup>51</sup> A stronger, healthier Dagmar returned to Austria a year later but continued to spend summers in Trieste. In doing so, she carried a longing for her host mothers with her to Austria and a longing for her mother and sister with her to Trieste.<sup>52</sup> I believe that it is in this season of her life that a sense of displacement, exile, and loss became Dagmar’s companion and would shape the healing role her spiritual practice would take for years to come.

### *Windows Let in Sunshine*

During one of our cross-country telephone conversations, when I told her the working title of this paper, she laughed heartily – then, with a little chuckle, Dagmar said “as far back as [she could] remember, [she’s] wanted to be a saint.”<sup>53</sup> I recognized that statement from a passage that I had read in Dagmar’s memoir.<sup>54</sup> In elementary school, Dagmar came to realize that her peers had their own birthday celebrations and also had their “name” day celebrations because they were named after Roman Catholic saints.

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<sup>48</sup> The Learning Network Network, “Oct. 13, 1943 | Italy Switches Sides in World War II,” [nytimes.com archive - Learning Network blog, \*The Learning Network\* \(blog\), October 13, 2011, https://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/10/13/oct-13-1943-italy-switches-sides-in-world-war-ii/.](https://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/10/13/oct-13-1943-italy-switches-sides-in-world-war-ii/)

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Telephonic conversation with Dagmar, October 21, 2016, 2:00PM, PST – 3:45 PM,

<sup>54</sup> Celeste, 106

The day of death of a Roman Catholic saint is designated as the saint's feast day and any namesake of that saint can celebrate it as their "name' day."<sup>55</sup>

When Dagmar asked her mother to tell her about Saint Dagmar so that she could also celebrate her own name day, her mother laughed and said "there is no such person..." and said that Dagmar would "have to be very good and become [her] own saint." For Rev. Dagmar Braun Celeste, this remains an intriguing notion.<sup>56</sup>

In 1950, Dagmar received her First Communion after an entire year of preparation in that tradition.<sup>57</sup> In her memoir, she admits to barely hearing the sermon, describing instead a feeling of "palpable happiness" in the moments preceding communion that blossomed into a mystical experience when a "single ray penetrated the large stained-glass window, exploded into multiple facets, and landed, like a shower of rainbows, on the steps leading up to the altar." Dagmar knew this was a message from the Divine and promised to "always protect this secret place inside [her] where [she] would remain an innocent and untouched virgin forever, and only the Divine could enter and play." That place remains to this day.<sup>58</sup>

A few years later, when Dagmar was only fifteen, her younger sister whom she adored died when her father lost control of his car and her head was crushed by the telephone pole he struck. Dagmar confided that over the years, she had forgiven him, for never loving her and for his chronic expressions of anger, battles with her mother, and dissatisfaction with his own life. But it was only a few weeks before he died that Dagmar realized that she had buried hatred for the loss of her sister. Wanting and needing to be free of its contamination, she spent time in meditation and prayer until she was able to send a telegram to him that told him she loves him – he kept the note until he died – but he was never able to express any form of appreciation or love to any member of his family.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Celeste, 24

<sup>59</sup> "Rev. Dagmar Braun Celeste, Personal Interview by Leslye Huff, April 26-27, 2016.

This Interview Was Conducted at Her Hom."

## *First Feminist First Lady*

Dagmar's life is filled with achievements that, but for her candor, would completely over-shadow her tragic early life. The purpose of nearly all of these accomplishments was to help manifest a more just and compassionate environment for all. Every place she lived, Dagmar took the initiative to make the world a little better because she was in it. For example, during her (now former) husband's four-year posting in India as the Executive Assistant to Chester Bowles, United States Ambassador,<sup>60</sup> Dagmar volunteered to work with Mother Teresa despite raising three children.<sup>61</sup>

Her areas of concern are reminiscent of her family's early struggles. Dagmar makes this common behavior exceptional by transforming her early tragedies and struggles into something beautiful. For example, prior to becoming a public figure as Ohio's First Lady, upon noting how much poverty surrounded her home, Dagmar helped create the first Hunger Center in that area of Greater Cleveland by involving the churches in the area.<sup>62</sup> Dagmar and her now former husband, Governor Richard Celeste (Hereinafter "Dick") chose to lease their personal home to the first battered women's shelter for one dollar when her husband's election to office required them to relocate to Columbus. Dagmar's marriage of over thirty-three years can be viewed through a similar lens. From its inception to its end, they aspired to an egalitarian partnership in public life as well as in their private relationship. When Dick decided to pursue a career in public service, Dagmar was an integral part of the decision-making process, the development of strategies, goal setting, and, especially, shaping and articulating the underlying philosophy and values of the work. Most of the major projects that Dagmar spearheaded during her two terms as First Lady were directly relatable to her early life challenges. She served as co-chair of the Council on Holocaust Education; served actively on the Women's Action for Nuclear Disarmament; and chaired the Ohio Recovery Council. She also led the drive to create "the first state-sponsored on-site

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<sup>60</sup> Celeste, *We Can Do Together*, 89.

<sup>61</sup> "Rev. Dagmar Braun Celeste, Personal Interview by Leslye Huff, August 15-16, 2016. This Interview Was Conducted at Her Re."

<sup>62</sup> (Celeste 2002), 124.

child care center, and the Ohio Employee Assistance Program.<sup>63</sup> She was also a loyal supporter of the Women’s Community Fund of Cleveland and remained an active member of the Cleveland-based National Peace Institute despite her relocation to Columbus.

Dagmar’s most notable contribution to the people of Ohio as First Lady was conceiving the innovative multi-disciplinary Governor’s Task Force on Family Violence, an initiative I had the honor of serving in. Until Dagmar entered the Governor’s Residence, no leader in Ohio State government had thought of the possibility of an integrative wholistic approach to familial violence. Those who worked on behalf of disparate target populations rarely had an opportunity to share knowledge or insights. Mandated state agencies such as Child Protective Services or Adult Protective Services were more likely to compete for state funds than to cooperate. Physicians, trial court judges, social workers, police officers, nurses, shelter providers, and juvenile court judges were more likely to work at cross purposes than to address systemic family issues effectively. Wisely embracing Dagmar’s master plan, Governor Celeste convened thirty professionals from disparate fields. He explained the hands-on nature of this commitment. The rural, urban, and regional nuances required professionals with expertise in these areas of the state. The Governor commissioned each task force member to two four-year-terms to develop best practices. The Task Force’s work led to deep structural change by reducing the systemic impediments to the eradication of abuse and neglect of Ohio’s elders, children, spouses, and other family members. Given Ohio’s political and social climate, inspired reflection was needed to envision and advance such an initiative. Dagmar’s inspired comprehension of the intersectional, systemic, and multifaceted natures of family violence was reflected in the multidisciplinary membership of the Task Force, and the mandated responsibilities of its members. Her courageous leadership laid the groundwork for developing forty comprehensive recommendations to review and implement in the State of Ohio. Inspired by Dagmar’s relentless courage, members of the Task Force worked diligently and tirelessly throughout both of Governor Celeste’s terms of office to discover and,

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<sup>63</sup> “Rev. Dagmar Braun Celeste, Telephone Conversation with Author, October 21, 2016.”  
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when needed, create best practices that could be implemented in Ohio to address systemic challenges to reducing abuse and neglect.

These are a few of many examples of how Dagmar Celeste's early life experiences grounded spiritual exercises that informed, bolstered, and deepened her work to create a more just and compassionate world. On reflection, it seems that even before we are mature enough or wise enough to intentionally select spiritual practices in which to engage, the experiences of living may serve us well by providing grist for the mill of a prophetic life of leadership. Many of her achievements occurred while she raised six children, obtained a Master's degree from the Methodist Theological School of Ohio, all accomplished under the often-extreme scrutiny of the people of Ohio. So staunch a champion was she of women's rights that she has come under fire for her outspoken support for battered spouses and LGBTQ individuals before it became popular or even acceptable.

### *Toward the Danube*

Through it all, Dagmar has kept her balance or regained it by choosing to be a "spiritual warrior" and maintaining feminist sensibilities.<sup>64</sup> She defines a "spiritual warrior" as "somebody who is not afraid of 'power and principalities,' and is willing to risk her own life if necessary, but not someone who is willing to kill."<sup>65</sup> More clearly, "it is not that you're not afraid of the consequences. You are aware of the consequences; you are fully aware of the consequences. And you are afraid, too, at times. But, not to the point of letting yourself be deterred!"<sup>66</sup> As we will see, no one – not even Dagmar nor the Bishop of Rome – could stop the call of the Spirit when the time is ripe for Dagmar to say, Yes.

### *When I am Called...*

Rev. Dagmar Braun Celeste is known internationally as the first American Roman Catholic woman priest. On October 17, 2019, she celebrated her nineteenth year of service as a priest to her selected

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<sup>64</sup> "Rev. Dagmar Braun Celeste, Personal Interview by Leslye Huff, August 15-16, 2016. This Interview Was Conducted at Her Re."

<sup>65</sup> Parker, 269.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.



communities. On June 29, 2002, reporting from Passau, Germany, the National Catholic Reporter's Vatican Correspondent, John Allen, announced that "...aboard a specially chartered pleasure boat on the Danube River, seven Catholic women [,] ... four Germans, two Austrians, and one [anonymous] American were ordained before some 200 family, friends, supporters and journalists, on the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul."<sup>67</sup> The event itself was dubbed a "Danube Seven Ordination" and the women, the "Danube Seven."<sup>68</sup>

Initially, Dagmar was an anonymous participant. Fully intending to be open about her call to ordination, yet realizing her high profile as a Former Ohio First Lady, Dagmar delayed her announcement until after her daughter's wedding so as not to overshadow that public holy sacrament with the controversy that was sure to come upon her announcement.<sup>69</sup> On October 17, 2002, Dagmar Braun Celeste, ex-wife of former Ohio Governor Richard Celeste "revealed [] that she was secretly ordained as a Roman Catholic priest earlier [that] year and then excommunicated by the [Catholic] church... The [Catholic] church excommunicated the [7] women on August 5, after warning them that they must renounce their posts by July 22."<sup>70</sup>

If Celeste had taken this action only for herself, the action would still be notable and worthy of review. What makes an account of her life momentous is the paradigm shift that is occurring in the wake of the ordination of the Danube Seven women as more people on the margins seek to be fully included in all aspects of committed religious life.<sup>71</sup> Manifesting this paradigm shift is becoming increasingly meaningful as more people, worldwide, refuse to continue to be victims of religious leaders' misuse of power.<sup>72</sup> Many more are finding the courage to share

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<sup>67</sup> John L. Allen, Jr., "Seven Women 'Ordained' Priests June 29 In a ceremony they term 'not licit, but a fact', posted July 1, 2002 National Catholic Reporter Online, accessed October 22, 2016.

[http://www.natcath.org/NCR\\_Online/archives2/2002c/071902/ordinations.htm](http://www.natcath.org/NCR_Online/archives2/2002c/071902/ordinations.htm)

<sup>68</sup> Parker, *The Spiritual Journey*, 10.

<sup>69</sup> Mystic Vision.

<sup>70</sup> Lloyd Vries, AP, "A Former Ohio First Lady Reveals a Secret," *CBS News*, reported October 17, 2002, October 22, 2002. <http://www.cbsnews.com/nees/former-ohio-first-lady-reveals-a-secret/>

<sup>71</sup> Bridget Mary Meehan, *Roman Catholic Womenpriests: The Case for Women Priests*, accessed February 19, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?gl=SN&hl=fr&v=qGBIRvc6J2k>.

<sup>72</sup> "Opinion | The Catholic Church Has a Long History of Child Sexual Abuse and Coverups," *Washington Post*, accessed February 19, 2019,

their traumatic stories<sup>73</sup> of being the victims of various forms of “church abuse.”<sup>74</sup> The persons who have dedicated themselves to nurturing this shift<sup>75</sup> are clear that the time has long past for the androcentric caste system<sup>76</sup> that created an untenable split in the body of Christ that demeans and mischaracterizes some of God’s children while unduly lifts the stature of others.<sup>77</sup>

From the onset, this organized campaign to include women in all aspects of the religious life of Roman Catholics has identified itself as a part of a larger continuous quest to be true to the Biblical basis of the equality of all and the efforts have been for the good of all.<sup>78</sup> People all over the world are becoming aware that any environment so constructed on caste and secrecy<sup>79</sup> is likely to be rife with abuses of the most marginalized and vulnerable among them.<sup>80</sup>

An ordinary person, regardless of gender, will likely recognize as inspired Dagmar’s original intent to bring to our consciousness the implicit biases that threaten to continue to destroy the lives of many who remain devoted members of the Roman Catholic Church. Celeste’s life story reveals her consistent efforts to remain a loyal member of the church. Her social justice work is an integral part of her religious devotion. A review of her life shows her strategic use of a feminist lens to analyze human designed systems that tend to form barriers to the full inclusion of many who are marginalized.

Moreover, if prayerfully studied, her life leaves bread crumbs that suggest pathways by which we, ordinary people can help to heal the harm

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[https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-catholic-church-has-a-long-history-of-child-sexual-abuse-and-coverups/2019/02/18/53c1f284-3396-11e9-af5b-b51b7ff322e9\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-catholic-church-has-a-long-history-of-child-sexual-abuse-and-coverups/2019/02/18/53c1f284-3396-11e9-af5b-b51b7ff322e9_story.html).

<sup>73</sup> “Sexual Abuse of Nuns: Longstanding Church Scandal Emerges From Shadows - The New York Times,” accessed February 19, 2019,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/06/world/europe/pope-francis-sexual-abuse-nuns.html>.

<sup>74</sup> “Opinion | The Catholic Church Has a Long History of Child Sexual Abuse and Coverups.”

<sup>75</sup> Bridget Mary Meehan, *Roman Catholic Womenpriests*.

<sup>76</sup> “Rev. Dagmar Braun Celeste, Personal Interview by Leslye Huff, August 15-16, 2016. This Interview Was Conducted at Her Re.”

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Maureen Fiedler, “Celebrating the Philadelphia 11, 40 Years Later,” Blog, National Catholic Reporter, 7:45am, <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/celebrating-philadelphia-11-40-years-later>.

<sup>79</sup> “Sexual Abuse of Nuns: Longstanding Church Scandal Emerges From Shadows - The New York Times.”

<sup>80</sup> “Opinion | The Catholic Church Has a Long History of Child Sexual Abuse and Coverups.”

of androcentric misogyny at the core of the organizational structure of many of our institutions, particularly, religious institutions such as a corporate church, which claims to be the universal church. Finding the threads of courageous feminist action from her early life, which evolved in tandem with her growth and seasoning as a devout Catholic may prove inspiring. For example, in several interviews with Rev. Celeste, she discussed her childhood in Austria during WWII; she gives a detailed account of what it was like after the war for her mother to be forced to board Russian soldiers in the home she shared with her younger sister, her mother, and her absent father. This work offers a brief hypothesis about the impact of these early encounters and Dagmar's well-developed commitment to social justice, including a multifaceted approach to family violence issues, and her brand of feminism that believes in the equality of all persons, regardless of gender or sex, race or racism, classism or caste, able-ism or age-ism, nationality or cultural identity. Celeste's experience of the "holy" has evolved to include animals, forests, earth, air, water, and pervasive spirit – all inextricably related.<sup>81</sup>

### **Dagmar Braun Celeste's Mindful Living Spiritual Practice**

As a womanist Black lesbian feminist, I acknowledge the value and inevitability of subjectivity – all knowledge is contextual and perspective matters – I will use or lay aside, as needed, any previous impressions about Dagmar and plumb the depths of my discoveries gleaned from that research. Over many decades, Dagmar has developed her own unique spiritual practice that is integral to her leadership work and style, whether she is focusing, sagaciously, on the needs of her adopted home of Greater Cleveland, Ohio; advocating for women or prisoners state-wide in Ohio; advising regarding peace in the national arena; or advancing the cause of justice and peace internationally. I have known this gem of a woman for more than thirty years, having watched her from afar and up-close as the refiner's fire of life and the lapidary of time moved her ever closer to the "call" that each of us must answer; I am witnessing how she shaped her unique answer to that call. She described her arduous discernment

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<sup>81</sup> "Rev. Dagmar Braun Celeste, Personal Interview by Leslye Huff, August 15-16, 2016. This Interview Was Conducted at Her Re."

process, simply, “well, you protest! ...before it is clear that you[‘ve] *got* to do it (emphasis included)!”<sup>82</sup> Her story, however, interweaves with her spirituality and her theological interpretation of the world. Thus, our conversation moves to discuss the general characteristics and important questions in her theological and spiritual worldview.

In an interview at her retreat house on Kelleys Island, Dagmar was asked to describe her spiritual practice. In response, she explained that her spiritual practice at this point in time includes “ordinary encounters with the Divine in everyday experiences: looking deeply at all of nature, seeing the Divine Creator in it. Daily practice of wrote prayer; she swims her Rosary; simply resting in God; daily meditation.”<sup>83</sup>

Her readings are structured in the form of *Lectio Divina*, a traditional Benedictine practice of scriptural reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation.<sup>84</sup> It visibly and liturgically embodies being in conversation with the Divine in the “ordinary.” Moreover, Dagmar no longer believes that there are only seven sacraments; she believes that there is sacramentality in all elements.<sup>85</sup> As she reflects, cultivating a capacity to see the Divine in everything, finding inspiration in everything, is her meditative path to guidance and inspiration.<sup>86</sup> It is part of her spiritual practice and also her work as priest.<sup>87</sup>

### *Are Dogma & Radical Inclusivity Compatible?*

The very act of maintaining one’s composure while in exile is spiritual practice. Perhaps the exile that Dagmar experienced when she was a mere child, who was sent away for her own good by those who loved her, prepared her for the Vatican’s official practice of separation from the Divine through excommunication. In fact, Dagmar believes that their

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<sup>82</sup> Jacqueline K. Parker, *The Spiritual Journey Toward a Danube 7 Ordination, Conversations with Companions of Conscience: Rev. Dagmar Braun Celeste, Evelyn Elizabeth Hunt, Roberta Steinbacher. An Oral History*, (Washington, D.C.: Constellation Press, 2009), Kindle edition, 316-321.

<sup>83</sup> “Rev. Dagmar Braun Celeste, Personal Interview by Leslye Huff, April 26-27, 2016. This Interview Was Conducted at Her Hom.”

<sup>84</sup> “Rev. Dagmar Braun Celeste, Telephone Conversation with Author, October 21, 2016.”

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> “Rev. Dagmar Braun Celeste, Personal Interview by Leslye Huff, August 15-16, 2016. This Interview Was Conducted at Her Re.”

excommunication was a blessing in disguise because it shed an international light on the Vatican's absurdly intransigent position on the matter; without being exiled, this remarkable story would have been buried like the women known forty years earlier as the "Philadelphia 11"<sup>88</sup> or worse, it would have died.<sup>89</sup> Looking back, Dagmar acknowledges that "the universe provided a good outcome for my first 'exile' and this one is not nearly so bad as [Dagmar] expected . . . If the Vatican had ignored the Danube Seven, our movement would have stalled; as it is, we have over 200 Roman Catholic women priests!"<sup>90</sup> Dagmar's faith is a buoy to her resilience and steadfastness, which she uses well in her service to others.

### *Of Spiritual Practice and Spiritual Evolution*

According to Dagmar, "Jesus was not a Christian."<sup>91</sup> Jesus had no church building; no celibacy; no performing the Eucharist in a particular way; no wearing certain attire; no unquestioned obedience to a bishop; no pope."<sup>92</sup> According to Celeste, all of those are signs of dogma.<sup>93</sup> "Jesus did not ordain; Jesus was not ordained; Jesus did not select or ordain Mathias to replace Judas."<sup>94</sup> Christianity, according to Rev. Dagmar Celeste, is a stage of spiritual evolution. "We haven't lost paganism just because we became Romans, or Celts, or whatever... the Muslims haven't lost Jesus. The challenge is to figure out who are you? who you are to become – not what you want to be – naturally - and going with your natural flow. Then you're home and you can give [radical] hospitality because you are whole."<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Fiedler, "Celebrating the Philadelphia 11, 40 Years Later."

<sup>89</sup> Dagmar Braun Celeste et al., *The Spiritual Journey Toward a Danube 7 Ordination: Conversations with Companions of Conscience*, Rev. Dagmar Braun Celeste, Evelyn Hunt, Roberta Steinbacher, *an Oral History* (Washington, DC: Constellation Press, 2009), 289.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> "Rev. Dagmar Braun Celeste, Personal Interview by Leslye Huff, August 15-16, 2016. This Interview Was Conducted at Her Re."

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> "Several Phone Interviews between, September 2016 through September 22, 2019, for Clarification with Rev. Celeste.," n.d.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> Mystic Vision.

## *Mystics Must Meet*

“Most people are afraid of mysticism,” according to Dagmar, “fear will keep you from venturing out doing something different, *especially*, if you are good at doing what you have always done.”<sup>96</sup> The trouble with dogma is that it encourages fear and trepidation; if well learned, it makes one repress spontaneous reaching out and in for divine guidance. She said “mysticism is going deep; consider Jesus and the fishermen; they had been out all night and caught nothing. Jesus said ‘go back out; cast your nets on the other side; they were the fishermen; they knew all about fishing; they said ‘who is this guy trying to tell us about fishing; but Jesus said ‘go out and do something different.’<sup>97</sup> Mysticism is clearly accepting a way of life that is not understandable and the church [as an institution] is afraid of that and many people themselves are too.”<sup>98</sup> The “trouble” with mysticism is that mystics are difficult to corral and control; they are led by the Spirit.<sup>99</sup> More today than ever in recent history, we need visionaries and mystics to suggest new ways of being and experiencing this ever changing world. We need those who can embrace the divine, courageously, and hold on till the blessings flow. Mystics help humanity to evolve.

Dagmar’s is a priesthood of “presence,” not merely consisting of presiding over gatherings. Dagmar understands her priestly vocation as a conduit of the Divine; a bridge connecting all beings to the Divine. In this paradigm, there is little room for conceptual frameworks that exclude and, hence, the dilemma.<sup>100</sup> Religions’ tendency to exclude, for the purpose of clearing the path to the “one true god” induces competition especially among proselytizing religions and has caused or contributed to war for a millinium. Exclusivity has the opposite effect of what was intended: it is a source of fearful self-doubt; it creates masks of faux-faithful certainty that hides a fragile vulnerable self. Ironically, exclusionary efforts to experience God are like attempts to hold water in a sieve. Finding the courage to open yourself to all of the joy of the divine

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Here, Rev. Celeste is referring to Luke 5:1-11.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> “Several Phone Interviews between, September 2016 through September 22, 2019, for Clarification with Rev. Celeste.”

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

In her gatherings, Dagmar is a coping model for leaving space for each person to simply be, authentically. She advances the understanding that all is holy by conferring her respect for all. Regarding her work as Roman Catholic Woman priest, Dagmar explained that she still convenes the First Friday liturgical gatherings that have been ongoing for many years, but have expanded after her ordination nearly seventeen years ago.<sup>101</sup> For several years, I was a semi-regular attendee at the First Friday gatherings. The spiritual practices embedded in these gatherings are meditative and communitarian. I found them to be inclusive, despite their Catholic origin and the fact that I was the only African-American attendee. I have learned from them and have been inspired by participating in them. I continue to be intrigued by Dagmar's leadership style, her intellect, and her carefully protected, yet open heart. From the First Friday in January 2016 through the First Friday of June 2016, I served as Dagmar's guest presenter. We attempted to share some of my own spiritual practices with this group of women; only time will tell whether the sharing was useful.

#### *Feminist Mystic – an Oxymoron?*

Also, Dagmar maintains Tyrian Network, “a 501(c)(3) inter-spiritual network created to awaken the artist, healer, and peacemaker in each of us.”<sup>102</sup> Its mission statement affirms that Tyrian is “an intentional learning community founded in the year 2000 on Kelleys Island, Ohio, and dedicated to Brigid, both the goddess and the saint. [The Founders] named the organization for the Tyrian color of Brigid's legendary mantle.”<sup>103</sup> Over a decade before my initiation into Ifá priesthood, Dagmar prophetically asked me to assist in blessing a house that the Tyrian Network had purchased to convert it into an oasis for spiritual respite, study, and meditation. I obliged gladly and later, served on Tyrian's board until my schedule no longer permitted me.

The Tyrian Network is reflective of Dagmar's ministry of presence. “Right now, [her most important] work is ‘being present’; it is really a way of life: manifesting the Divine so that others can touch It as well as be touched by It. And, seeing ‘priestly possibilities in everyone, is another

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> The Tyrian Network, “*What is Tyrian*,” <http://www.tyrian.net/tyrian>

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

aspect of [her] work.”<sup>104</sup> This daily practice reinvigorates her work. Moreover, her relationship with the Divine has shifted from “religious” to “spiritual” to “beyond.” “At the end of ‘religiosity’ we encounter the ‘spirituality’; at the end of ‘spirituality’, we meet ‘reality’ and at the end of ‘reality,’ we encounter ‘no-thing’: that cosmic oneness, bliss, but in which we could not function at the human level – both ‘no-thing’ and everything.”<sup>105</sup>

The purpose of the work in which Rev. Dagmar engages, the holy *raison d’être* of her call to Roman Catholic priesthood and her work as priest, have evolved as her spiritual practice deepens her relationship with the Christ. Her work in the world as a result of her ordination has shifted somewhat at least in emphasis and is informed by her emerging status of elder.

An example of this shift is clearly demonstrated by Rev. Dagmar’s long-held identity as a feminist. This identity has been the hallmark of Dagmar’s character for her entire adult life and is as strong as ever. However, her elevation into the status of “crone,” in feminist parlance, and her increasingly intimate relationship with the Divine, enhanced by her spiritual practice, now informs her feminism and deepens her understanding of womanism. Rev. Dagmar expressed it in these terms “becoming a priest is a feminist act not only because it ‘broke the cathedral ceiling’ for women to have equal rights to equal ‘rites,’ but, more importantly, [her] feminist acts are making women aware of the need to experience the Divine in everything and everyone,” to see the priestly potentialities in everyone including men.”<sup>106</sup> From her perspective, embracing a womanist theology, her act of being ordained, in contravention of current canon law, is an inspired and holy gift to the Vatican or any empire, in the form of an invitation and admonition to move from a quest for power over the people to become a power with the people. Not only is it a blessing to women to be ordained into Roman Catholic priesthood, it is at least equally important for the Vatican, the church, to become open and accepting of the “other,” no matter their gender, no matter how diverse their perception of the Divine and no

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<sup>104</sup> Telephonic Conversation

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.



matter the form of spiritual practice. Rev. Dagmar has come to believe that exclusionary religious tenets deprive [one's perception of] the Divine of Her fullness. "An exclusive God is an incomplete god. Language is inadequate to convey the deeper meaning of this. Simply put, it is better to err on the side of inclusion."<sup>107</sup>

"It is the hermeneutics of Jesus. Jesus started out exclusionary, but it was women who opened him to up to inclusiveness: the woman at the well, the Samaritan woman, for example. Jesus only used a few of passages of [what Christians commonly call] the Old Testament and those were inclusive. Seminaries, churches, religions, by definition, are exclusive; but Jesus modelled inclusion."<sup>108</sup>

In her spiritual practice, Rev. Dagmar says that she "finds nuggets of truth everywhere; everything is speaking the beauty of the Divine, if we but listen."<sup>109</sup>

During this telephonic conversation, Dagmar recommended a book that she is reading as part of her meditation, *The Hidden Life of Trees*.<sup>110</sup> In it, Dagmar learned that trees planted by humans have less capacity to communicate with each other than trees than those growing naturally in the wild. She has learned that trees need and maintain community; and moreover, the progeny of elder trees support their ancestors to the extent of continually feeding the stumps of trees via a fungal connection. This learning about trees is consistent with what she experiences while engaging in her spiritual practices. From this, Dagmar concludes that species "superiority is an illusion of separation; there is no such thing in nature, no such thing in God."<sup>111</sup> In reality, "[w]e are all one."<sup>112</sup> Dagmar quipped, "It takes a grove to live a healthy life."<sup>113</sup> She further stated, we humans "must collaborate, not compete; depend on the 'weak' as well as the 'strong'; all have something necessary for our survival."<sup>114</sup> Moreover, the strong, young plants continue to feed the tree stumps, via their root

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees The Illustrated Edition Unabridged*, trans. Jane Billinghamurst, Illustrated Edition (British Columbia: Greystone Books Ltd., 2018), [www.greystonebooks.com](http://www.greystonebooks.com).

<sup>111</sup> Telephonic Conversation.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

fungi connections, long after we humans think the tree stump is dead and, as many frustrated homeowners know, a new shoot often emerges from the stump to create a “reincarnated” tree from its ancestor.

At the governor’s residence, while mindfully refurbishing the long-neglected gardens, Dagmar discovered that “once [she] began to work along with nature, [she] learned to become flexible. Just when [she] thought the planting plan was perfect, nature intervened; yet, if [she] tried to proceed without planning, weeds took over.”<sup>115</sup> From this, Dagmar conjectured that “maybe nature is just like [her] – a good feminist. She [i.e., “Nature”] wants both/and not either/or – a gardener patient enough to plan and humble enough to change the soundest plan to accommodate [nature’s] best surprises.”<sup>116</sup> Through this serendipitous mindful activity, Dagmar is learning [and teaching us] how to become willing to do planful planting and wise enough to let the Divine have Her way in our lives, and to maintain enough curiosity [and humor] to embrace the surprises offered by the Divine season by season.<sup>117</sup>

## Conclusion

Reverend Dagmar Braun Celeste’s spiritual practices are complex, but not complicated. To those who hold fast to human-constructed mandates and proscriptions, or fear following their consciences and calls, Dagmar Celeste may remain an enigma. To those willing to let go of the reins of one’s life into the care of the Divine, Celeste’s journey offers a coping model. This article elucidates and describes the role those practices have in her work as a leader who is committed to creating and maintaining a just and compassionate world. I have also attempted to describe how she integrates her spiritual practices into her work life and daily living through vignettes and other examples. One goal of recounting highlights of Dagmar’s spiritual journey into religious leadership is to inspire others who may be experiencing a similar call; another is to caution them to be aware of the costs. The challenges to current and future priesthood and social change work are many and deep. Because Dagmar and I have worked in

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<sup>115</sup> Celeste, 135

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 136

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

the same settings and occasionally worked together in both spiritual and social venues, I have done my own brand of exploring the trajectory of her life.

I have asked myself “what now?” and “what resources, what tools, what weapons do I have in my spiritual practices bag that I can call forth and bring to bear on this season and these circumstances of my life?” In response, I say “I have many and none.” Much like the notion of “grace” that is just sitting there waiting, but one must also “... stand up and take [one’s] bed and go to [one’s] home”<sup>118</sup> in order to access it.<sup>119</sup>

By getting to know Dagmar’s life, I have learned that when one’s spiritual batteries seem to need to be recharged, sitting quietly while paying attention may be helpful. Finding the Divine in the ordinary may also help to reinvigorate. Remember that these actions are tools, not deities. While attempting to use these meditative tools, initially, one may become more aware of the pummelling aspects of the ordinary: e.g., too many memories about race/racist assaults, too much despairing news about the environment or the economy; too much political grouching while ignoring important things; if so, stop. The tools are not set in stone.

Simply put, this introductory study of the life of Reverend Dagmar Ingrid Braun Celeste offers a model of how one wise woman learned to stay awake through suffering; to maintain a disciplined spiritual practice that holds particular meaning for oneself; to notice and regard the gifts that others have to contribute; to sit in quiet contemplation; to act when it is needed for reasons beyond oneself; to open one’s heart to the beauty of the earth; to remain alert for signs of divine action; and to pray for peace for all.

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<sup>118</sup> The New Oxford Annotated Bible New Revised Standard Version With Apocrypha an Ecumenical Study Bible, Newly Revised Fourth Edition, editor Michael D. Coogan, Oxford University Press Oxford/New York 2010, Luke 5:24, p. 1839

<sup>119</sup> This reflection came out of a very brief conversation about “grace” with Rev. Ann Jefferson after a Spiritual Transformation for Leadership class, Pacific School of Religion, Fall 2016

spouse of thirty-seven years. As an initiated priest of the Ifá Religion, an African-originated international religion, Huff is also known as Qyasùúrù Ifáwárinwa.

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