

winter 2016



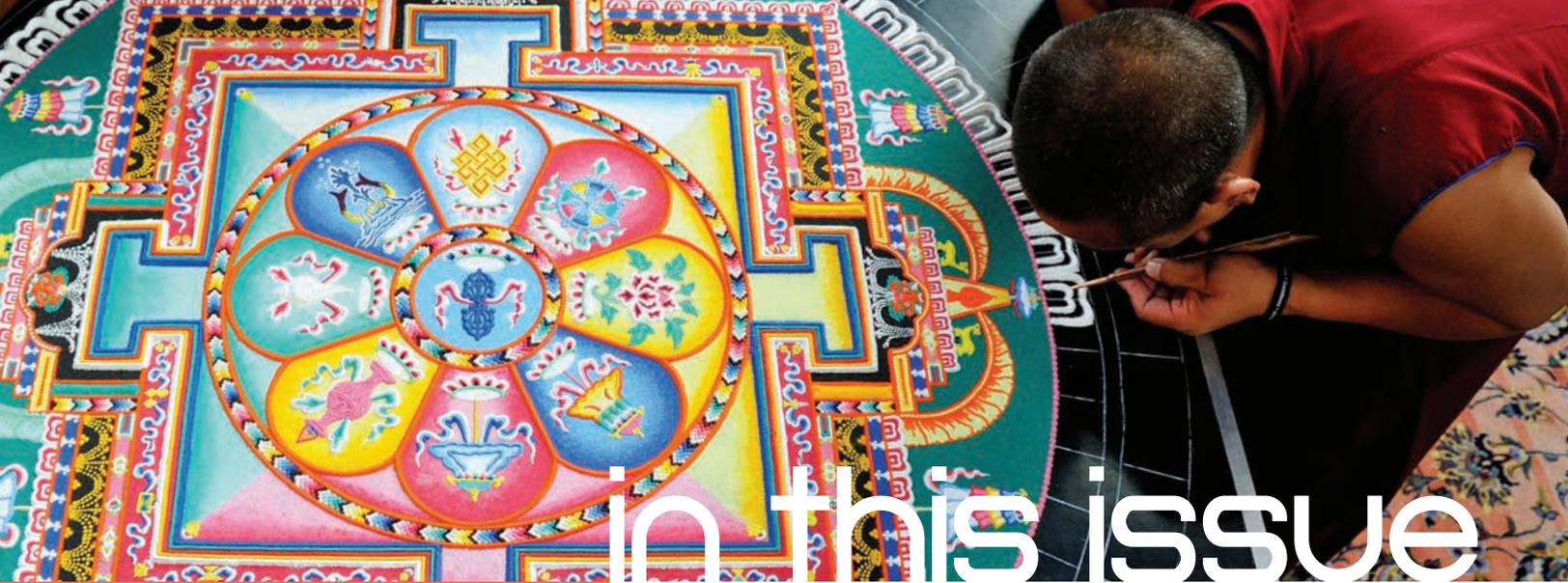
pursuing justice, we  
seek god's gift of peace.

# Living peace

congregation of the sisters of st. joseph of peace



Letting go



# in this issue



## Living peace

winter 2016

**Living Peace** is a biannual publication of the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace. If you wish to change your address, or if you or someone you know would like to be added to our *Living Peace* mailing list, please contact Linda Hanson at [lhanson@csjp-olp.org](mailto:lhanson@csjp-olp.org) or 425-467-5400.

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We owe the beautiful mandala pictures in this issue to Tim Keller, photographer, writer and musician. Tim lives with his wife at the base of Bartlett Mesa on the northeast outskirts of Raton, New Mexico. You can read more about Tim and find more of his work here: [TimKellerArts.com](http://TimKellerArts.com)

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The mission of *Living Peace*, a free biannual publication of the Sisters of St Joseph of Peace, is to build community with a diverse audience by engaging our readers in contemplation and action for justice and peace through informative and reflective articles, poetry and prayers.

# An Undreamed of Freedom

by Melinda McDonald, CSJP

**First as an AIDS nurse**, then as a hospice nurse, most of my professional life has involved helping people to let go. I've been privileged to accompany people as they transition from this life to the next. It is a time of intimacy and sacredness.

Before leaving, some people appear to live between two worlds for a time and occasionally share glimpses of the beyond with those nearby:

"Honey, you just can't imagine the colors, the incredible beauty..."

"My God how beautiful you are!" (this from an angry man who seemed to take pleasure in making others suffer)

"I hear the angels' voices – it's the most beautiful singing I've ever heard."

"The road is one. We are all one."

The distant delight that can glow on the face of a person in transition, nearly shouts the message that whatever comes next is very, very good. Arriving in that world of beauty, light and peace, though, requires an ultimate letting go of this world and all that we love. It requires a trust that letting go is followed not by a crash but by an

undreamed of freedom. Peaceful smiles on the faces of many who transition to death can reassure us of that truth. Holding on to the deep truth that we are a part of a reality much greater than ourselves can help us to let go of more immediate concerns, when necessary.

When I lived in Central Africa several years ago, surrounded by hunger, poverty and the scars of war, I felt helpless before so much despair. I emailed one of my sisters in our Congregation, a Zen master, who had taught me sitting meditation many years earlier. I asked her advice on how best to be present. Her response is one I remember and practice today: "Breathe in pain and suffering. Breathe out loving-kindness."

It is such a simple but challenging response to the misery we encounter. It helps me to remember that a person's pain is not just their own, but a part of the great pain inherent in living, the same pain we all share. In the same way, breathing love out to the world is not my own little love, but part of the great Love of existence.

Across congregations, many of us entered religious life with

the expectation that an attitude of personal letting go would become a practiced way of life. Our post-Vatican II understanding of vows included not grasping too tightly: to possessions, to time, to power, to surroundings, to relationships.

Today, in leadership ministry, I find we are challenged to prepare to let go on a larger scale. Now, a collective letting go seems to be required. We religious are no longer a highly visible young workforce of Catholic institutions. Ministries and lands that we have called our own are becoming part of the common good. It seems to be less a question of how many we can educate, house or heal, and more one of how we can hold, and be present to, the hurts of our world.

Here too, the assurance that we are a part of a charism larger than each of us individually can help us hold lightly the specific ways we live out our charism. I breathe in. I breathe out. I let go.

**Sister Melinda McDonald** provided patient care in multiple aspects of HIV/AIDS nursing for 25 years and was a hospice homecare nurse. She currently serves on the five-member Congregation Leadership Team.

## Unlocking the New

by Jan Linley

**From the cutting** of the umbilical cord to the last gasp of breath, life is filled with letting go, and if we are lucky, a constant process of learning how to do so with grace. It is no easy practice, and no matter how many times we must go through it—and we must—there will always be losses that bring us to our knees. Not all letting go is painful. Sometimes it is a relief—a good riddance, a freeing of spirit. Addictions, bad habits,

unhealthy relationships, unreliable cars, and unreliability in general, are but a few that land in that category. Ultimately, even when it's hard, letting go always unlocks the new and holds promise of conversion, large or small.

Like so many religious orders at this time, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace are faced with a nearly unimaginable amount of loss and letting go. At this writing, three

associates and 22 sisters (10% of the vowed population) have died in the last two years. The median age for vowed members is 79. Yet, it is a given in religious life that nothing is permanent, that life is held lovingly and lightly, that sisters go where they are needed and called; thus there is an expectation of constantly being willing to let go. This is an aspect of the sisters' lives that I find inspirational.

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In her 2014 address at the Communicators for Women Religious conference, Sister Annmarie Sanders, IHM, Associate Director for Communications for the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, described the larger numbers of women religious from the 1930s through the '60s as an anomaly. She said, *"Today, religious life is in a process of right-sizing, so to speak. Religious life is more naturally small. And we see over history that religious institutes often rise up to fill a particular need in society, and those institutes reach their fulfillment when the society meets the need for which that institute was founded. So, the closing of religious institutes – which we are seeing with greater frequency at this time – is not to be unexpected."*

Through a process they call Comprehensive Community Planning, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace have been taking a close look at their properties and demographics and making decisions about letting go and moving forward in the most conscientious way, choosing paths

that will honor their charism of peace through justice. Currently, the Congregation is in the process of letting go of two significant properties: Stella Maris, the longtime vacation home and retreat center on the sea in Elberon, New Jersey, and Rearsby, the regional center and home of some of the sisters in the United Kingdom. Susan Whitsell and Bridgetta Rooney share some of the history of these beloved places.

In other contributions to this issue, Terry Moran, Susan Dewitt, Brian Doyle, and Wendy Clarke open us to the possibility of peace, salvation and even momentum in letting go. Katrina Alton's article about three men in the military exchanging their war "trinkets" for peace is one example of transformation in letting go. Associate Frank McCann challenges us to free ourselves of our fears and misconceptions. Fiona Mackintosh, in *History and Roots*, takes us back to the sisters' beginning in Nottingham and shows how sometimes letting go brings us full circle. Maureen D'Auria has shared a number of questions that

are particularly helpful to ponder for anyone grieving a loss.

Mandalas are often used in meditation, which is all about practice, letting go and being present where the greatest moments of transformation take place. Sand mandalas are patiently and intricately created by a group of Buddhist monks working together to form a beautiful symbol that represents many things, among them, transformation and impermanence. On our back cover is a picture of Tibetan monks creating a sand mandala; on the front cover is that same mandala swept down, before it is carried away to the nearest body of water to release the blessings it contains for the healing of the world.

In every letting go, every cleaving of spirit from spirit, or soul from place, there begins a divine transformation that brings us closer to home, to light, and to Love with a capital "L." It is a journey made smoother without resistance, one that offers the possibility for each of us to heal ourselves, and in so doing, a bit of the world.





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