Bad Midwest Feminist Podcast - Episode 4

00:05
HOST: Bad Midwest feminist listeners, I am desperately excited for you to listen in on my conversation with Sister Mara Faulkner, a Benedictine sister, at St. Benedict's Monastery in St. Joseph, Minnesota. I drove up there with my mom. Shoutout to her, by the way, for holding my camera while I shot my reel footage around the monastery, which was just gorgeous, by the way.

Sister Mara grew up in Mandan, North Dakota, to a farm family with a genetic condition which slowly degraded their eyesight. A lot of my questions stemmed from her memoir, “Going Blind,” which I read in preparation for our conversation, which, in addition to covering her family history and the series of events which led her to becoming a nun, also deep-dived into Sister Mara's personal reflections about feminism, hard-working women, and the patriarchy. So let's get into it.

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HOST: Now, Sister Mara. Do you identify as a feminist?

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FAULKNER: I think I do, but, like I think many women, I want to, I don't want to say create my own definition, but I want to describe feminism the way I see it, rather than the way it sometimes is presented.

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HOST: And what's, what's your definition of feminism?

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FAULKNER: My definition of feminism is that women, like all human beings, are capable of great things given half a chance, and that anything that stands in the way of their full development is something that we need to resist and work against from the time girls are little till until the day we die.

And, I want to be able to help work for those things in whatever way I can. And so in this religious community, Benedictine community, I live in, many people, many of the sisters, would say, if you ask them the same question, are you a feminist, they would say, well, no. And then they would say, ‘but.’ And ‘but’ would include all the stuff that I include in feminism, but they, but they don't want some things about, I don't know, I don't even want to say radical feminism because we have to be radical. But there are parts of feminism that they would resist. And so it's a combination of, I think, living as feminists and resisting some of the public parts of it that they and sometimes I can't embrace.

02:27
HOST: What, what, what kind of parts do you think you can't embrace?

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FAULKNER: For many of us, abortion has been a great problem because I, like many people, don't think that life can come from death. And I believe that, I know we want to sanitize it by talking about fetuses rather than babies. But I think a baby is a human person, and I just don't think that women's, I can see that there are times when it's the only option for women who are in desperate situations. But I don't think that life can come from death. I just don't. And so there used to be a group called “Feminists for Life,” and that was a group that I couldn't completely embrace.

But, I think they’re, I haven't heard about that for a long, long time, so I think they're out of existence. And I think that if you were part of a feminist group and said, ‘I'm not, I'm opposed to abortion,’ they would then say, well, then you can't possibly be a feminist. And so I think that has been a conflict for me and for many of us, ever since 1973 on down to, up to today. And so you'd think then that we would be applauding Trump and voting for him six times and things like that, but it doesn't work out that way because we see the absolute antifeminism, misogyny of so much of what he and his followers are doing. And so to say, well, he got rid of Roe v. Wade, so therefore we need to vote for him and embrace him and say, I don't know what to say, whatever horrible things he says. But to say life is way.

So, life is way broader than bringing a baby to birth. To walk that line, that conflicting line has been difficult, I think, for many people like me who would say, ‘Of course I'm a feminist.’ Of course, I embrace and want to defend all the things that feminists stand for, with that one exception, and that it's a hard one. Every election, I’ve been a Democrat since the day I was born because my dad would’ve died if he’d ever known I’d ever voted for a Republican. So, I support the Democratic ideals most of the time. But then with every election, I think there's that. But then you weigh it against all the other stuff, and you just have to decide. You just have to decide which way you're going to go.

05:03
HOST: Yeah.

05:04
FAULKNER: In most elections, I can't possibly vote for the Republican candidate at any level, even though they say they're pro-life, because they really aren't in anything except that. And so it’s, that is, kind of, in some ways, a cutting thing for me. It is, and often creates a conflict. But I think that's how life is. And you, we live within contradictions all the time and have to decide what we're going to do with that.

05:35
HOST: Yeah.

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FAULKNER: And then, and it's not just casting a vote, but it's doing all kinds of things too. And then so if you're going to say, well, 'I'm opposed to abortion,' well, then what are you doing to help women who are in difficult situations, in difficult circumstances? And, what's your stance toward, how do you care for, unmarried mothers? How do you care for mothers in general? What do you do to be sure that children who are born actually have something to eat, and health care, and all those things? So that is, it's a difficult point, but I think we need that's where we are. So, that's what we have to live with.

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HOST: Yeah. So you think there's a world in which feminism exists, without abortion access?

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FAULKNER: I could, but I don't think it does. And I think that it seems to be either one or the other.

06:34
RACHEL KOHL: In the Midwest, people don't like to talk about death. But what if it didn't have to be that way? My name is Rachel Kohl, and I'm the associate editor for Urban Plains. This semester, my project is about researching how the Midwest is rewriting the narrative surrounding death in a two-part feature series that'll be out at the beginning of December.

Talking about death helps bring us closer to one another and to accept that one day we'll all find ourselves somewhere six feet under. To keep the conversation going, go to urban-plains.com to check out the stories of a hearse collector and a death doula based out of Des Moines and learn what they have to say about funerals, grief, and confronting the most uncomfortable aspect of what it means to be human: dying.

07:23
EMMETT MCMENAMY: Visit urban-plains.com to read the story.

07:33
HOST: Now some, some might say that the Catholic Church is one of the most fervent examples of patriarchal values. How do you see identifying with your own version of feminism and still kind of operating under this patriarchal institution?

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FAULKNER: As you can imagine, it's not easy. And so many women just abandon it.

07:55
HOST: Really?

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FAULKNER: Yeah. I'm out of this church. They're raised in it. They grow up in it, and they, in my family, of my six sisters, four of us are still practicing Catholics. Two are not. My nieces and nephews, you know, if they went to Catholic grade school, and Catholic high school, sometimes Catholic college, they would just shrug it off. And because of these conflicts, I think I don't know, some people talk, well, we call cafeteria Catholics, where you pick what you believe and discard what you don't. And in some ways, I do that. I know I do that. There's just a whole bunch of what Catholicism teaches that I don't believe. But there's a whole bunch that I do believe, you know, and so I hang on to and try to live by what I believe. And the rest of it, I think, is going to go away eventually.

08:49
HOST: What makes you want to stay as a Benedictine sister in this community?

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FAULKNER: Well, partly because I'm a Benedictine and I want to believe, and I fervently believe in the things that our order, that our community believes in and tries to do, but also because there are so many things about Catholicism that I love. For me, incarnation. God becoming human is really at the center. And so I think this world is a world that is just filled with God, and that one of the things that the Catholic liturgy and Catholicism does is celebrate that. But the other thing is that there are lots of Catholic organizations all around the world that are working to make life better for people, and I want to be there. And that doesn't mean it's the only people and the only groups that do that. Certainly not true. Lutherans are fabulous.

I think they're better than we are most of the time. But I want to be part of something that's way bigger than I am. Bigger and older. And, and most of, a lot of it, I believe. What I don't believe is that strict patriarchal structure, that continues to say men are on the top and says men are better than women. That's what it says. And there's no way to argue with that. And so I don't know if it's just being, I don't know, mentally lazy or what it is to say, I can reject that, which is sort of a central tenet of Catholicism. Can I reject that and still say that I'm a Catholic? I hope so. It's like saying I can reject this, this part of feminism, and say that I'm a feminist, because I don't want to let a label limit me or limit the way I live my life.

10:40
HOST: In your memoir, you specified that one of the reasons for becoming a nun, which you didn't realize at the time, but you kind of thought about later, as you grew up in the monastery, was because you didn't want to have a marriage like your parents. What did you mean by that exactly?

10:58
FAULKNER: I think my parents had a pretty traditional marriage, and I think they loved each other a lot. But my dad was in charge. And my mother asked permission for stuff, even permission to spend money on things. And she worked at least as hard as he did, you know. And we had this grocery store with a giant garden, and I just, I thought about her a million times

and thought about how hard she worked, and how much she worked, and because he was blind, or almost blind, she had to do a lot. And she was skilled at so many things and so smart, but didn't get to go to school, nor did he. And I knew, and I see her looking to him for permission. And him thinking that it was his job to give permission. And neither one of them would have thought, she challenged it once or twice, that I saw and I saw her doing it. Saw her straightening her spine and saying I'm going to do this even though you dad might be angry. And I thought, I can't do that. I can't fit myself into a marriage like that. And of course, I knew, at least I thought I did, that I must be marriages that were different. But I didn't see very many of them around me in the 1940s, 50s, 60s. I just didn't. And that taken for granted idea, that the father knows best, I just couldn't, I couldn't do it.

Even as a young person, I thought, I can't do it. I can't fit myself into that pattern. You know, I think they were partners, but they were somehow unequal partners, and I just didn't want that. I couldn't, I suppose I could have done it cause you do what you have to, but I wouldn't have wanted to. I never know if I want to ever tell this story because it seems so, I don't know, almost silly. But when I was in college here I was going with this guy for a couple of years on, and he graduated and went back home to New York. And he invited me out there to meet his family. And so I went, and within 15 minutes of being in that house, I knew who was in charge.

And it was his father, and him, and his brother. And his mother and his sister were just saying, 'Yes, sir.' I thought, I can't do that. I can't marry this guy, because that would be the end of so many things that I want. Yeah. And I don't know, I mean, I don't know that thought and the freedom to think your thoughts and to create and all that, are important for everybody as they are for me. But for me, it's absolutely crucial not to have anybody saying, 'This is what you can think.' These are the questions you can ask. I think there are no unaskable questions.

13:53
HOST: Yeah.

13:54
FAULKNER: And no unthinkable thoughts. And I think it's one of the things I tried to say to my students or tried to help them arrive at for themselves in all the years of my teaching: Ask your questions. And if they're uncomfortable, that means they're real.

14:15
LILY WASSERMAN: My name is Lily Wasserman, and I am serving as this year's accessibility editor for Urban Plains. I'm excited to present you with a restaurant that is the only Indian restaurant for 40 miles, in the town of Grinnell, Iowa, a town of 10,000, and is called I-80 Dhaba for its place on Interstate 80.

14:34
MCMENAMY: Visit urban-plains.com to read the story.

14:44
HOST: Also, in your book, you mentioned that you've read and, heard about all these other feminist, hard-working writers and how that kind of led you to see your mother's life in a different light.

14:57
FAULKNER: Yes.

14:58
HOST: Yeah. In what ways did you see her in a different light? Her life?

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FAULKNER: I think I started out seeing her, not seeing her in her fullness. I think I had borrowed from the culture, the idea, well, she's just she's just a housewife. She's just a homemaker. And I think that there was one point in that wave of feminism when that was the common idea. If all you do is raise kids, or if all you do is cook or something that's not were worthy of anything. You're not supposed to admire her for that. There's that great poem by Sue Standing. It's called “Cellar Door.” I wasn't supposed to love her for this, or the way she smooths my hair. It’s just, it's just a wonderful poem and then I began to see that ordinary women, who had become my passion, ordinary women, were doing extraordinary, extraordinarily brave and strong and, and, enduring things, but totally unrecognized by the mainstream culture, except to say, 'Isn't she a nice, sweet little lady?’

And but also, I think back to a certain wave of feminism. If you were supposed to break through the glass ceiling in some way or other, and you couldn't break the glass ceiling as a housewife, as a mother, and so, you needed to be the first something, the first astronaut, the first something, the first secretary of state, and then you would receive admiration from the feminist movement. You have to be in the Fortune 500 club. I don't think that's not the kind of feminism that I belong to. I mean, those are admirable things, but I don't think they're nearly as admirable as the endurance and creativity and hard work. And, we need to I think we need to honor the courage or persistence of what I, people I call ordinary women.

17:00
HOST: Do you would you say that there's more of that ordinary care and love, is that more present in the Midwest?

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FAULKNER: I don't know. It is very possible. I never thought of that. But it might be.

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HOST: Yeah, ‘cause, you know, there's still things that happen in even a place as small as St. Joseph.

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FAULKNER: Yes.

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HOST: You know, and would you say that those things that happened there just those, it's just those ordinary aspects of things that really do change people's lives versus, versus a woman being the first something of something in a faraway place that, you know, that you don't live in?

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FAULKNER: I do. Yeah. I do, yeah. I, you know, I admire Hillary Clinton, I admire Kamala Harris. I mean, I admire those people, but they're not the strong women I know and admire. Really. Primarily, anyway, the people I know, and the people I admire, they're just, they're extraordinary people. And sometimes they're doing something that is so hidden, like, I've on occasion, because I, they tell you when you're 80 you just start falling apart, but I'm meeting a lot of wonderful healthcare people, like the ordinary CNAs that take care, that do the real down and dirty stuff when they're taking care of you.

And they are wonderful. And I don't know if anybody would call them heroes, but I do, you know, because they come back day after day after day and they feed you, and they help dress you, and they do all this stuff that you can't do for yourself. And they do it with a smile. And that is totally admirable to me, you know? And so I think I just learned to admire a different set of qualities. Not that stepping out and running for office, I mean, like Amy Klobuchar, I really admire her and like what she's doing. And I admire her. I mean, it's wonderful that there are women and men who want to do those things, but there's this whole mass of people who make that possible. And that's what I firmly believe. I really know that when I'm reaching for strength because I don't think I have enough, I turn to my memory of my mom.

19:11
HOST: Do you think that your mother was a feminist?

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FAULKNER: She would never have said so, but I think so. I think she's absolutely was. And I would never say that I couldn't learn as much from her as I learned from Hillary Clinton. I learned much more from her. I think there's, there's these seeds of feminism, and there's so many women who had never, maybe never heard of the word. My mother never heard that word; she would never know what we were talking about. And the desire to help people and to be there when they needed you, no matter what that took from you she, she did that. And I think that's what women have always done. And we thought, well, they're just subservient. And they weren't.

19:56
HOST: Yeah.

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FAULKNER: A lot of them weren't. And I think that's true in lots of cultures where it looks like the men have absolutely all the power. If you look under the surface a little bit, the men have the public power for sure, but there are women who are doing little acts of resistance all over the place. I was reading about Iran, and there's resistance going on, even though the Taliban is cracking down. Even the act of reading books where you're not supposed to read books, or reading hard books, or finding a way to get yourself educated and to get your kids educated.

I know that this story is in “Going Blind” about my mom. When my oldest sister wanted to come to college here, wanted it desperately, and we didn't have any money, of course. And so she cashed in her life insurance policy and handed the money over to my sister. And my dad said, “Are you really going to do that, Ma?” And she didn't say anything, but she did it. I mean, it doesn't seem like an act of courage, but it was absolutely, that's absolutely what it was. That's what I admire, because I think so many acts of courage are little rather than big.

21:05
HOST: Yeah.

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FAULKNER: And if we can keep on doing those things, if there are enough of them, it'll make a difference, I hope, because I think feminism still has a long ways to go.

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HOST: Yeah. Do you think that's something that makes maybe feminism in the Midwest really special? Is that there is kind of this, you think that you know, it, it, it is here. There is feminism in the Midwest, but it's a little, it’s a little more hidden, it’s a little more subtle.

21:37
FAULKNER: I think so. I absolutely do think so. I think most feminists would look at a religious order that, looks at us sisters and says that we are just little servants of the patriarchal Catholic religion and church, but they don't know the inside at all. People in our community, since the very our first day in this country, have lived as feminists. We have, we run the place. We hold all the...

22:00
HOST: The monastery?

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FAULKNER: The monastery. We hold all the offices. We founded this college. We founded the hospital in St. Cloud. We actually the whole healthcare system in this area. We've taught in hundreds of grade schools and many high schools. Because we wanted to have a college that was accredited. People had to get educated. So sisters, women right off the farm, here in Sterns County, went to places like Catholic University to get a Ph.D. in theology where no women had

ever done it before. Or they would say, well, we really need a chemistry teacher. How would you feel about getting a PhD in chemistry?

22:39
HOST: Why not?

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FAULKNER: And so, yeah! And so she did. And physics and aeronautics and all these things that women weren't supposed to do. And we just did it. And, we did, we did have, most of the time, we didn't have a man looking over our shoulder and saying, 'Well, we'll run the place, and you can just teach.' It just didn't work out that way. It was partly the way it was. It's just you had the job to do, and you did it. And so to say you're these little meek people who just say, 'Yes, Father.' 'Yes, whoever.' 'Yes, whoever.' We just never do. We never have.

And we've studied theology so that we know, so we, so we have a, I think, a feminist theology. Many of us will say that God is father and mother, and we don't have this. Even though Catholicism is still a very patriarchal religion, we have, I don't know if the word is modified it, but we've done something to make it, to make it inclusive, the way it ought to be. And to say that, God doesn't make these silly hierarchies. We make, we humans make these silly hierarchies.

23:59
HOST: Also, in your in your book, while I was reading it, I thought I found the notes about your your dad and patriarchy, just so, so interesting. And you, you had this one line. I'm just going to read it to you: "Men whose manhood is threatened in the worlds of work and social power often tried to reclaim it in the intimate relationships of marriage and family." Do you think that there are ways in which that is Midwest-specific?

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FAULKNER: There is something about the a midwestern way of looking at things. But I think in the Midwest, for men, the idea about power and status and all that kind of stuff, manhood is different than it is on either coast or in a big city. That's one thing for sure. And so if you. And also, there's a strong, strong traditional, obviously, you know, there's a strong leaning towards traditionalism in the Midwest.

25:02
HOST: Oh, yeah.

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FAULKNER: Where you don't make changes very readily. But on the other hand. That's an interesting question. My dad, before he got married, was part of the Nonpartisan League, which was an almost socialist resistance to the status quo. And he was he was a, well, he, he belonged to it, but he also was a spokesperson for it. And so he was a rebel from day one.

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HOST: He's an Irish rebel.

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FAULKNER: Oh, he absolutely was. And so in some ways, my dad didn't fit into the Midwest. No, I never thought about that, but he really didn't. And he really had traveled quite a bit. Grew up on this farm and in western North Dakota. But then they were so poor that they went for some time to Canada, and spent some time in Washington state. So and, and then he got involved in politics, small time politics. But still, that's the Nonpartisan League was national. I saw in him a kind of resistance that I often didn't see in the other men who are around us. So, I think it was a Midwest tendency towards the status quo or the solidity of how things are that I never saw in my dad. And so if one of the, certainly one of the people who pulled me away from saying, well, whatever is, is what should be, it was him. My dad created a kind of restlessness in us. It's interesting. And so I think you're right that looking for feminism in the Midwest, you have to look harder.

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HOST: Would you say that your decision to become a Benedictine sister was that a feminist decision?

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FAULKNER: Yes. Yeah. Though it wouldn't have looked like that to the outside world. For me it really was you know so many of us, we're just farm girls from little towns somewhere. And to go from a farm, to get a PhD in English, I mean, people didn't do that. But, I don't know, I would say that many of us came from families that were somehow or other, they would never have, feminism wasn't even a word. But like my dad we had, there were seven kids in our family. We had no money at all, and six of us were girls. And in that area, people would always say, you know, 'What do you want to educate those girls for?' Or, 'They'll just get married and so it will all be wasted, of course,' now that old saying. But my dad would say, "Get a good education girls. It's the only thing the bastards can't take away from you." He wasn't big on big money or big government or any of that stuff. And so we came to this school, all, all six of us girls.

28:05
HOST: Your sisters?

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FAULKNER: Yes. Came here with no ceiling above us. Nobody's saying, 'Well, you can't do that.' 'You can't learn that.' if you paid attention, and thought your own thoughts, you could do it. Now, I think that's part of feminism. And in this community, this community is filled with women who are exactly like that. Just name a town. Avon. Albany. Paynesville. You know, there's somebody here who came off the farm or from some small, small business and, got a degree and then became a principal. And then became a superintendent. And then became a college president. And then became the administrator of the hospital. And there was nobody saying within the community, I don't know what they said outside the community, but within the

community, ‘Oh, well, we can't do that. We'll have to hire a man.’ We just never did. And so if that is part of feminism, as I think it is, then I would say that no matter what label we would give ourselves, we live as as feminist, as feminists, within a feminist community.

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HOST: Wow. And do you think that that is really special to St. Ben’s Monastery, or have you seen that in other monasteries elsewhere outside of the Midwest?

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FAULKNER: I seen it in a lot of monasteries. Even the one that we came from, this one place in Eichstätt, Germany.

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HOST: Oh, my.

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FAULKNER: That was our founding place. And I was lucky enough to go to visit there. Quite a few years ago, but it was wonderful. And then the prioress. She took second place to nobody. And when she was, they still wore full habits; there are pictures of her standing next to the bishop of that area. He's got his bishop's crozier and she's got her, and she's got her staff in her hand. And the look on her face says, ‘I'm not subservient to this guy.’ And they just aren’t.

On the other hand, there are ways in which the church hierarchy can put the kibosh on things and say, well, you can't do this, or you can't do that. But then you try to find a way kind of around it. So they're just, the Catholic Church has such dumb rules. Anti-feminist rules, really. For example, that women shouldn't give homilies at Mass. The sermon after the gospel.
You're not supposed to do that.

30:27
HOST: Oh?

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FAULKNER: It has to be a priest. We've done it for years and years and years. And every now and then somebody goes to the bishop and says, You know, ‘That’s what these sisters are doing?’ And then he'll say, and then our prioress, our leader, will go and say, ‘Well, you know, we heard this is going on.’ He'll say, ‘Don't ask permission, because if you do, I've got to say what we supposed to say. So just do what you do.’ And so we do.

30:56
HOST: And that concludes our fourth episode of Bad Midwest Feminist. Special thanks to Sister Mara for taking the time to speak with me, sharing her openness and her key insights into Midwest feminism. The thing that I took from our conversation is that feminism in the Midwest is present, but you just need to look a little harder and a little deeper for it. Just like Sister Mara's mother's firm acts of defiance against her husband. Those moments might have been few and

far between, but that doesn't make them any less significant. Feminism is not always big speeches and big firsts, although that is absolutely a component. Midwest feminism can be seen in the small amounts of resistance that are sprinkled in Sister Mara's family history, and I'm sure, listener, your own.

Now, this next nugget of wisdom was written by Sister Mara herself, and can be found in a brochure detailing the history of the St. Benedict's Monastery: "Benedictine women, like women in every walk of life, every social class and every age, take what life gives them, the oppression and freedom, poverty and riches, the containment and scope, and try to make something useful and beautiful. The sisters and their friends and neighbors who worship here take in their arms the inconsolable sufferings of the world and turn them into song." Make of that what you will. And until then, I'm Caroline Siebels-Lindquist, asking you to just keep talking.