

Insights for Living Authentically in “Middle Time”

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Introduction

First, I would like to express my gratitude for the opportunity to share some insights with you about our life as women and men religious, about living in this time, what I call *The Middle Time*. In addition, I also want to say “thank you” to you, and to all the women and men religious from Ireland who came before you, for your generosity and sacrifice as missionaries to the world. Your gift to the Church and to the world is immeasurable. I sincerely thank you.

Pausing for a Balcony View

Gaining perspective is critical at any time and especially at a time of crisis, change and transition. Honestly naming what is going on is essential for us to understand our current reality and our call to live authentically. How we choose to live today will create our future. Although it is critical for leaders and members together to name their individual and collective reality truthfully, we can at times be tempted to look the other way. Thomas Merton describes this tendency this way:

A certain kind of unanimity satisfies our emotions, and easily substitutes for the truth. We are content to think like others, and in order to protect our common psychic security, we readily become blind to the contradictions – or even the lies – that we have all decided to accept as plain truth.

I applaud this gathering as an opportunity to speak some plain truth and to pause and gain some balcony views, some differing perspectives on where we are as women and men religious, who we learned to be and who we are called to be, and how we might live more authentically now.

Our Time

Our life, religious life today, cannot be understood in isolation from the broader contexts of world, society and church. Many agree that we have reached the end of a paradigm characterized by the disintegration of established institutions and patterns of life and authority. We are living between two worlds – between what was and new life that is emerging. This “nowhere between two somewheres” is our “now here.”

How are we responding to this time of dramatic change and transition? For some, “it is a dark time because people are losing faith in themselves and each other and are forgetting how wonderful human beings can be, and how much hope we feel when we work together about things we care about” (Margaret Wheatley). When things are falling apart,

some become fundamentalists or restorationists, trying to hold things together, while others live life as an experiment, making it up as they go along (Pema Chodron).

For men and women religious, this is a critical transitional moment as we are called to tend the embers, i.e., manage disintegration and diminishment **AND** fan the flames of new life, to birth new ways of living our charisms. We are dealing with endings and losses that we must grieve and ultimately learn to let go of, as we search to see how God is gifting us through these losses. Fostering new life is also who we are called to be. And, I do not need to remind you, that we are also reeling from the sexual abuse crisis which has caused immeasurable suffering for the victims of abuse and for ourselves. Given this reality, might we feel like there is no way out, no way forward.

Is This A Time of Impasse and Being Lost?

Impasse – the experience that there is “no way out, no way around, no escape, no possibilities and where every normal way out is brought to a stand still” (Connie Fitzgerald OCD, a Carmelite theologian) - seems to describe the lived experience of many today. Some describe this time as one of multiple impasses: relational, ecclesial, societal, political, ethical, scientific, economic, environmental and cultural. Are we experiencing “a dark night of the world?” (Connie Fitzgerald)

When dealing with impasse or dark night experiences, we are faced with choices, some of which are dangerous for our well-being: ignoring the reality, numbing the pain through compulsive behaviors (including work!), escaping via internet and other diversions or substances, giving up, surrendering to anger, cynicism and despair, all of which lead- to disconnection from self, others and God. “Being down-and-out, alone, lost, struggling for meaning, and looking bad, is also a place to be; lost is a place too.” (Ronald Rolheiser, OMI)

Can Being Lost Be Good?

Being lost is a biblical and mystical place which gives us the consolation of knowing that we are in a valid place, a necessary place where many before, Jesus included, spent some time. (Ronald Rolheiser OMI) This does not mean, however, that being lost is an easy place to be, nor that we know how to respond when we are experiencing impasse or being lost. Connie Fitzgerald OCD, , describes a significant tension at a time of impasse. I call it the tension **to be both/and, not either or people**. Fitzgerald describes it this way: **to remember** truthfully wrongs suffered, leading us to be empathic, in solidarity with and seeking justice for those wronged **AND to forget and be open to radical transformation** of self and memory, to be open to the power of hope and Mystery (God) coming to us from the future.

To be authentic today, we are challenged to choose life, so that we and our descendants may live (Deut 30: 20). We are also reminded that religious life exists to say something is

possible in the era in which it is being lived. What are we called to say is possible today – not in words but in how we are living and responding to this now time? What is missing in our lived reality, our world, that we need to raise up for reflection, understanding and response?

Now What? Some Possible Next Steps ...

As a sister traveler, I am very aware that it is **easier to describe** what is, than to suggest how to respond, i.e., to offer some practical insights on how to live authentically in our “now here.” I also know it is even more challenging to make the necessary choices to be authentic. We cannot go home from this experience and be the same! Can we?

I would like to offer some practical and concrete suggestions, garnered from my own and others’ experience, that I hope will assist you and me to respond authentically to this middle time in which God has chosen us to live. My suggestions have to do with **being human, being intimate, being hope-filled and joyful** as authentic responses to an anxious, demanding and ever-changing environment.

Being Human

Our first response needs to be a genuine understanding and embracing of what it means to be human. Neglect of our humanity, I believe, is likely one of the root causes of some of the problems we face today. Fundamentally, being human involves: loving and being loved, discovering one’s gifts and giving them in service to others and being in relationship with Mystery/God. Although the second element is very significant, involving our ministerial life and how we continue the Incarnation by giving creative service, I will focus here on our relational life of love of self, others and God.

Love and Intimacy with Self, Others and God

Margaret Silf, especially in her book *Roots and Wings*, speaks of the evolution of the human person and that we are in the process of becoming human. We have been evolving for eons – physically (e.g. standing upright), intellectually (e.g., increase in brain size and function) and spiritually (e.g. recognizing that we are part of a mystery bigger than ourselves and that we search to be in right relationship with Mystery). Margaret reminds us that Jesus came with a forward-looking mission and message, inviting us **to be heart people**, to hear and understand more fully God’s dream for us, that we be loving and do what is the most loving thing to do. I think her most challenging insight is that we are called **to pair love and imagination**, not fear and imagination. What choices would we be making, individually and collectively, if we coupled imagination with love and not fear?

I am a firm believer that **intimacy with self, others and God** is critical to living authentically in our now. Our challenge is not to equate intimacy with sex, our western culture’s limited understanding, and instead to look to the root of the word to grasp its

full meaning. Intimacy comes from two Latin roots; *intimus* – what is innermost and *intimare* – to announce or make known, suggesting that the essence of intimacy is to make known what is innermost. Perhaps if we spelled the word this way - *in-to-me-see* - we might be reminded of its essence. Intimacy demands that we take the necessary risks to grow in self-awareness, other awareness and awareness of who and how God is with us. The courage to risk, to be intimate, is born fundamentally out of the conviction that we are loved, beloved of God. Now more than ever we need to know this truth ourselves. And, we need to help others to know this truth as well.

I am convinced that one of the primary tasks at this time is that we be more inner- or self-aware. Morrie Shectman offers an enlightening perspective, naming the time we live in as The Fifth Wave. The concept of waves was coined by social scientists and refers to the dramatic changes in human history that define and re-define the fundamental nature of society at a particular time. Previous waves have been identified as the Agricultural Wave, the Industrial Revolution, the Technological Revolution and our most recent, the Information/Communication Revolution, the wave of the past two decades. This wave is characterized by ever-evolving ways to collect, distribute and utilize information. Shectman suggests that the next wave, The Fifth Wave, is an *Intra-personal Wave*, focusing on the internal frontier within each person. This is not an invitation to narcissism or entitlement, but rather a focus on self-discovery, and the critical elements of relationships, commitment and accountability. Shectman points out that this focus allows individuals and groups to clarify and act on core values, which assists in the creation of a tangible and unified culture or identity. As women and men religious, would not this *in-to-me-see* way of being benefit us who are challenged to redefine who we are today and for the future?

Intimacy with others is a critical factor in meeting two fundamental human needs: to be known and to belong. Not limited to romance and friendship, it involves the capacity to share at deeper levels, to commit to others in relationships that last over time, to stay connected in the difficult and anxious times and to risk being vulnerable and confront the obstacles that keep us from opening ourselves to loving and being loved. I believe that we would handle conflict, diversity and be able to empathize with others more easily, if we are able to be intimate in this way.

Authentic life in the spirit calls us to an experiential union with Jesus and God, an affectively evolving, psychologically transforming experience of the presence and activity of God in the very depths of our being. In its joyful moments, it is an experience of being marvelously and intimately touched, loved, and cherished. In its moments of suffering, or dark night, we are challenged to stay connected and be transformed. Connie Fitzgerald speaks of the miracle of “contemplative grace” at such times that can lead us to a hope that is independent of one’s self and one’s accomplishments, an ability that John of The Cross describes as yielding unconditionally to God’s future. Given our proclivity for business and avoiding pain, escape may be a likely choice. However, to be authentic,

this middle time challenges us instead to make room for solitude, prayer and contemplation, real pathways to identity and a future of God's making.

Being Hope-filled

Living in a highly anxious time, a time of paradigmatic change, uncertainty, suffering and disappointments, we are in need of some new insights to help us to thrive, not merely survive. Understanding hope, and what it takes for a human person to hope, are worthy then of exploration as we try to make our way in this in-between time, this transitional time, a time when individuals and groups are especially in need of support and healing.

Hope is the ability to see the creating, loving, saving real presence of God in the midst of whatever our reality happens to be. Hope is a present reality, not a vision of the future. Hope is based on an understanding and acceptance of one's current reality and an openness to an unfolding reality, God's future. Hope is not to be equated with denial of reality, or with optimism, but rather is about spiritual and psychological transformation. Today, there is a renewed interest in hope, most likely in response to the highly anxious time in which we live.

Anthony Scioli, Ph.D., has developed an integrative theory of hope, incorporating contributions from psychology, anthropology, philosophy and theology. He describes three fundamental human drives - attachment, mastery, and survival - which give rise to the emotion we call hope. Scioli explains that nurturing these motives results in a "*hopeful core*," consisting of *an attached or connected self, an empowered self and a resilient self capable of surviving*. To be hopeful, we need to balance our efforts between achieving certain goals (mastery), cultivating loving relationships (attachment) and seeking comfort and relief from anxiety (resilience). He further suggests that it is by abiding in hope that individuals are able to achieve true success, develop loving relationships and secure a genuine sense of peace.

I believe that for us today, being authentic means that we ourselves are hopeful and that we are also hope-providers. First, we need to balance the development of all aspects of ourselves by making good choices, attending to self-care, and fostering healthy relationships with others and God. Overworking and leading unhealthy lives do not lead to hope! We also need to support and encourage one another to **pursue goals and dreams**, as we too desire and need to make a difference. **Being available and present to others** is critical because experiencing availability from another, helps us to have a "taste" of God's incredible availability. Presence encourages openness in persons as they seek truth and wholeness. The quality of presence to oneself and others leads to personal and communal wholeness.

Finally, we need to understand how **to be resilient**, a key component of hope. Resilience reflects the ability to maintain a stable equilibrium, relatively healthy levels of

psychological and physical functioning, especially in the face of loss and trauma. It is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity. Being resilient does not mean the absence of difficulty or distress as emotional pain and sadness are common. To be resilient, these key attitudes and behaviors are necessary:

- Commit to finding meaningful purpose in life; have a plan and move toward realistic goals
- Believe that you can influence outcomes; do not lapse into passivity and powerlessness
- View stressors as challenges and opportunities for learning
- Maintain a healthy daily routine with some flexibility
- Take breaks from worry and troubles

With the experience of hope come certain beliefs, feelings and actions: a sense of being empowered, having strength from within, feeling supported in goals and dreams, and having the ability to seek help when necessary. Hope does matter, and “the one who has hope lives differently; the one who hopes has been granted the gift of new life” (*Benedict XVI, Spe Salvi*).

Rubin Alves, a Brazilian liberation theologian, offers some additional and important insights in his poem *What is Hope?*

It is a presentiment that imagination is more real
and reality less real than it looks.

It is the hunch
that the overwhelming brutality of facts
that oppress and repress is not the last word.

It is a suspicion
that reality is more complex
than realism wants us to believe
and that the frontiers of the possible
are not determined by the limits of the actual
and that in a miraculous and unexpected way
life is preparing the creative events
which will open the way to freedom and resurrection.

The two, suffering and hope, live from each other.
Suffering without hope
produces resentment and despair,
hope without suffering
creates illusions, naivete and drunkenness.

Let us plant dates
even though those who plant them will never eat them.
We must live by the love of what we will never see.

Thus is the secret discipline.
It is a refusal to let the creative act
be dissolved in immediate sense experience.
It is a stubborn commitment
to the future of our grandchildren.

Such disciplined love
is what has given the prophets, revolutionaries and saints
the courage to die for the future they envisaged.
They make their own bodies
the seed of the highest hope.

Dates take 80 years to bear fruit. Hope-providers plant dates for a future they will not see.
Are we called and willing to be hopeful ourselves now and to be hope-providers?

Being Joyful

Perhaps now more than ever we are called to understand more fully Jesus' dream of joy for us; that our human path does not have to be such a grim affair. It is also an opportune time to explore what it will take to live authentically and practically in hope and joy.

Joy is frequently defined as the positive emotion resulting from well-being, success, good fortune or possessing what one desires. Given our current world circumstances, joy thus defined, would be considered unattainable by many. From a psycho-spiritual perspective, however, joy comes from a deeper place within us and can best be understood as what results from a series of conscious choices on our part. Joy does not depend on specific outward circumstances, or on situations being a certain way, nor on the presence or behavior of a particular person. Joy, a gift available at each moment of our lives, does, however, require tending.

Some Threads That Bring Joy

To live in joy is fundamentally to **live in the present**. This is quite difficult for many because it goes against our tendencies and habits, as many of us have learned to search for our happiness in a remembered past or in a longed for future. It is, however, impossible to experience joy in anything other than the present. In each present moment, in the good times and in the difficult ones, we have the opportunity to experience joy. The choice is available to us each day. If we expect the worst, we will get it. If we trust the flow of life and trust in the goodness of our God, we will expect the best and more likely experience joy.

Surrendering to what is, accepting our circumstances, feelings, problems, work, and relationships is critical to joy-filled living in the present. Acceptance does not mean resignation: "that there is nothing I can do." Acceptance allows us to relax and to be able to see better the next steps. When we "say a holy yes to the real things in our life as they exist" (Natalie Goldberg), then our energy is not expended resisting what is and we are more capable of seeing and experiencing joy.

We **practice gratitude** when we notice and appreciate each day's gifts. This does not mean that we deny the painful realities of life: illness, financial difficulties, strained relationships or work that is not meaningful. Rather, it means taking time to notice what is, not just what is not. Practicing gratitude means taking an active stance; it means choosing to notice what we are grateful for each day. Sarah Breathnach suggests keeping a gratitude journal in which we daily record five things for which we are grateful. She suggests that there will be some days with amazing things, some with simple joys and some tough days where we will have to go for the basics: a bed or a warm house. "Gratitude can turn what we have into enough and more." (Melody Beattie)

By **fostering simplicity and order**, we are better able to get back to basics and to learn what is really essential to authentic joy-filled living. The satisfaction that simplicity brings enables us to find reverence in everyday tasks. Paring down, ridding ourselves of excess, and knowing what goes where are all means for us to re-order our priorities and

to discover what really matters. Doing and having will become less important in our quest for joy than being and being with.

Genuine communion with self, others and God helps us to look to healthy connections with others and God and our own inner resources for comfort and nurturance. These intimate connections will require time, energy, skills and a willingness to take risks and be vulnerable. Through our human relating, especially through difficult times, we learn compassion and understanding love. The Gospel assures us that saving grace and love are continuously offered to each of us in the present, no matter how deficient our past. We need to be open, not give up, and not let the pain from early parts of our journey prevent us from going forward and experiencing the joy that comes from mutual, adult, intimate relating.

Finally, **creating an authentic life for ourselves and enabling others to do the same** is both a challenging and essential requisite for experiencing joy. Given our often unrealistic expectations of self and others, our attitudes toward and lack of real contact with our deepest desires, as well as our pace, this will be no small task. We will need to learn to listen anew, or perhaps for the first time, to the whispers of our hearts and not be afraid to explore what we genuinely love. Learning to pause, listen and consider needs and wants of ourselves and others, as well as balancing the expectations of ourselves and others, will be absolutely essential for authentic living. Taking time to reflect on what is working and what is not will help us to liberate ourselves and do what will bring healing and growth into our lives.

Joy is a gift we have been promised, as predictable as a morning sunrise. However, because many of us have learned to be more proficient at weathering storms or getting through the winters of our lives, experiencing joy, enjoying the sun, summer and good times, may require both an act of faith and that we do our part so that "our joy may be complete."

Some Concluding Thoughts

I would like to conclude by sharing some additional insights that I have found helpful on my own journey. First, the words of Vaclav Havel, in his poem, *It Is I Who Must Begin*, remind us of the importance of the now and beginning.

It is I who must begin
Once I begin, once I try –
here and now,
right where I am,
not excusing myself
by saying that things
would be easier elsewhere...

Jeremiah (29:10-11) also reminds us to remember God's promise to us,

*I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise...
For I know the plans I have for you...plans to prosper you,
plans to give you hope and a future.*

And finally, Lona Fowler speaks to us of *The Middle Time*.

Between the exhilaration of Beginning....
And the satisfaction of Concluding,
Is the Middle-Time
of Enduring....Changing.....Trying.....
Despairing.....Continuing.....Becoming.
Jesus Christ was the Man of God's Middle-Time
Between Creation and ...Accomplishment.
Through him God said of Creation,
"Without mistake."
And of Accomplishment,
"Without Doubt."

And we in our Middle-Times
of wondering and waiting,
hurrying and hesitating,
regretting and revising - -
We who have begun many things...
and seen but few completed—
We who are becoming more....and less—

Through the evidence of God's Middle-Time
We have a stabilizing hint
That we are not mistakes,
That we are irreplaceable,
That our Being is of interest.
and our Doing is of purpose,
That our Being and our Doing
are surrounded by Amen.

Jesus Christ is the Completer
of unfinished people
of unfinished work
in unfinished times.
May he keep us from sinking, from ceasing,
from wasting, from solidifying,

That we may be for him
Experimenters, Enablers, Encouragers,
And Associates in Accomplishment.

Amen!