

New language for new era

– Timely Metaphors in our Religious Lives

JANET MALONE, CND

The future enters us... in order to be transformed in us long before it happens
– Rilke

Janet has written before for RLR. Her vision and her faith-based optimism about the present and future role of religious life lead her to outline here with increasing conviction that there is much learning to be done, within our monasteries and convents, in order to become more aware of and ready for the mission that is there, awaiting the contemplative prophets of our time! The choice of linguistic tools to highlight and clarify that mission is a further challenge Janet does not refuse.

METAPHORS: THE INEFFABLE IN OUR LIVES

It seems we use metaphors when conventional expression fails us. This is particularly evident in our meetings and discussions, including our reflections on themes like ‘religious life in the future’. During a 2004 Congress on Consecrated Life held in Rome, for instance, use was made of the ‘metaphors’ of the Good Samaritan and the Samaritan Woman at the Well. Then, in addition, there were the nautilus, the snake and the egg metaphors used at the Canadian Religious Conference (CRC) forum on religious life a year later. Last year’s Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) used the ‘frontier’ metaphor (some preferred ‘margins’). The theme of the 2008 CRC Assembly, ‘Remembering the Future’ and that of the 2008 LCWR-CMSM Joint Assembly, ‘On this Holy Mountain’, can each evoke many metaphors of kenosis, metanoia and transformation.

What metaphors would you choose to elucidate what is happening in religious life today? What about Alice in Wonderland’s looking glass, or binoculars, a compass, string vibrations (String Theory), black holes-light, tortoise and hare, a spindle, peril and promise, rainbow, medicine wheel directions and seasons, a sieve, tipping point, twilight and dawn, dark night, threshold, memory, mountain top, ashes (*grieshog*)...?

Perhaps we need to stand back a moment and ask, What are we trying to be in touch with when we use metaphors? In our efforts to connect reality with hope, the prosaic with the poetic, perhaps we yearn to touch that deeper essence of who we are and who we are becoming.

Do metaphors help us unbind the constraints and strictures of the rational? I tend to see the use of metaphors in a positive light. I sense that metaphors offer us this poetic bridge to explore the difficult and prosaic realities in these end times of present models of religious life. They can help us with the naming, owning, blessing, letting go and moving on in our response to the signs of these times. As Rilke notes, ‘The future enters us... in order to be transformed in us long before it happens’ (*Letters to a Young Poet*. NY:Vintage, 1986, 84).

CHANGE: BALANCING IN THE LIMINAL

Be the change you want to see in the world

– Gandhi

As that still nebulous future germinates deep within us, we are at the same time in a profound dark night of grieving over what has been. We might hope that when the light of day shines again, this crisis will have been just a bad dream. However, the reality of the signs of these times is moving us on to where we may not want to go. Religious life in the twenty-first century ‘...must come from one kind of religious life to begin another in a new and different world’, as Joan Chittister, OSB, said during the 2007 LCWR Assembly).

We know change is more than a decision; it can only happen when there has been a change in the meaning of our present beliefs about what constitutes religious life. For real change to occur, we must move to that liminal place within, where, in our insecurity and confusion, we become open to the unknown. Change, it has been pointed out, cannot be mandated because it is not a linear blueprint. Rather, change is an organic process in which everyone affected must have the option of being involved in creating the new reality. Otherwise, change occurs only with great flourish on the printed page but makes no impression on an individual’s or a congregation’s daily life.

Those of us within religious life are aware of the many changes that have occurred since our congregations and orders were founded. Still, in our liminal balancing, we are also aware from that deep silent space within, prophetic change comes from the poetic essence of our lives. There, the vision of what must be in the new reign of justice, particularly ecological justice, is hiding, waiting for the door of our hearts to open to its promptings. In other words, change, despite all our well intentioned, but controlled planning cannot be scripted; it is always written in a new language that comes from a prophetic reading of the signs of the times.

As we learn to stay in the uncomfotability of this new language, we stay with all of the questions that arise. Again, Rilke has cautioned us not to hasten ersatz answers to these questions because we may not be able to live the answers. Rather, in their own time, such ineffable questions do become a new vision.

COMMUNITY: THE SACRED WEB OF ALL LIFE

The good news of the gospel – the new vision – is intended for all creation, not human beings alone.

– Judy Cannato. *Radical Amazement*. Sorin Books, 2007, p 58

How do we view community, writ large? Today, we must look at the big picture of our place with all other life in the world, and our place in the planet and cosmos. We call this our worldview or our story of ‘home’. Do we recognise (in our present story with its ways of being and doing) that we consider ourselves as subjects and all other beings as objects for our use (and abuse)? With the wonderful bridging of science and religion, we now know this is our old story of life here on Planet Earth, our old worldview.

In our new story, we are learning from the convergences of so many disciplines that humans are derivative of the primary source of life, the planet, the universe in an interdependence of differentiation, intimacy and communion. From this new story, we realise

that there is no dualistic, mechanistic notion of us as subjects and all other beings as objects. Rather as Thomas Berry OP, the renowned prophetic eco-theologian, has insisted, all beings on this planet are an interdependent communion of subjects, each with its own essential self-referent mode of being. No longer can we humans, in our lack of awareness at one level, and our consumeristic greed at another, continue to live the way we have been living. Indeed, in his book, *The Great Work*, Berry unequivocally asserts that in the emergence of this new age, he calls the 'Ecozoic Era', it will be 'the period when humans will be present to the planet as participating members of the comprehensive Earth community' (1999, 8). The challenge is to discover our place in this new story of one earth community. Berry goes so far as to challenge us to establish a 'Bill of Rights' for Planet Earth, an Earth Jurisprudence which he elucidates in one of the appendices of his last book, *Evening Thoughts* (2006).

The new story of a communion of subjects of all life (I-I), not just humans (I-Thou), challenges us religious in the twenty-first century to take the prophetic step of creating a new vision of religious life. As one integral life community, religious congregations will only flourish if we create a new way of being, and a language to cradle the birthing of this burgeoning and delicate new story. Out of this new story will come a new sense of what community is for congregations, what belonging in congregations means, 'for there is no community without a community story, no earth community without the earth story, and no universe story without the universe story. These three constitute the great story. Without this story the various forces of the planet become mutually destructive rather than mutually coherent.... Only then can we evoke the vision as well as the psychic energies needed to enable the earth community to enter successfully into its next great creative phase' (Thomas Berry, in, *Religious Life*, Cassian Yuhaus, (Ed), 1994, 172, 169).

The Vision '*Without a vision the people will perish*'
– Habakkuk

For the most part, both monastic and apostolic congregations are looking at the same scenarios of aging members, few or no new members (with a significant departure rate of those who do enter) and ministries that are no longer integral to the essence of our charisms. Can we admit honestly, then, that our future is not in these present models? Can we recognise the signs today are obviously different from the signs that precipitated our founders' dreaming? On the one hand, we know this. On the other, perhaps because of habit, or the need for a semblance of order and security, we continue to live and work from our original dream, vitalised in another culture, another reality with other needs, and one, no longer viable. For example, many apostolic congregations were founded because of the need for educators, health care workers, social workers, and missionary work. Today, we know those are not the signs of the times for our congregations yet we continue to speak about these signs/needs as though we are not aware that they are now government/lay sponsored. In addition, we no longer have the personnel and age to respond to them. Nor should we.

So, what are the signs of the times today? With climate change, global warming, depletion of the ozone layer, melting of the polar ice caps, the signs of these times are ones each of us is experiencing in different parts of our world, our planet. Which religious at some level of her/his being is not concerned about climate change, global warming not just for the effects on humans but the effects on all life? Are we convinced this planetary-cosmic crisis is the result of our mistaken self-importance as the apex of creation?

What shape does reading these signs take for our congregations? I would suggest that a prophetic vision of religious life today must be about ecological/global/cosmic justice; no living being can be healthy on a sick planet. The urgency of this justice issue is such an

obvious sign of the times that we religious must walk our talk about creating a new vision for religious life in the future. For example, what congregation does not speak about this issue in assembly, chapter, and justice documents? Here, our vision of religious life in the twenty-first century is already appearing as tentative and fragile shoots of new life, a vision that lies untended and forgotten on our shelves of fearful forgetting once we return home and get back to the 'normalcy' of our daily lives.

We know a vision for any organisation comes out of that delicate balance of living into the insecurity of letting go of the tried and true. Then, in the complete emptiness of that scary void, we can allow our starved inner beings to slowly nurture a new vision, already in us and around us. 'The present moment that we need to become aware of in silence and solitude is the present moment of today's world. We read the signs of our times in order to live in the here and now of our unfolding universe — which is the only place where God can be found' (Albert Nolan, *Jesus Today*, Orbis 2007, 99).

CONTEMPLATIVE-MYSTICAL PROPHETS OF GLOBALISATION

For a new vision of religious life, we must ask how are we called to live in these times in which we have been co-opted, for the most part, by the values and mores of an upper middle class consumerist society? How often have we heard that religious life, by its nature, is prophetic? And how often have we reflected on the prophets of old to learn time and again, that in order to denounce a system's pervasive injustice and concomitant violence, we cannot be part of that system? In order to announce the new reign of eco-justice, indeed global and cosmic justice, we must choose to be liminal — socially, politically, ecclesially. Such marginality can only happen within a contemplative focus in our lives whether apostolic or monastic/contemplative orders. (Sandra Schneiders, *Finding the Treasure*, 2000, 138-141).

Being prophetic is a reality most of us shy away from, evident in how we treat anyone in our congregations who might be seen as a 'dreamer'. Being prophetic is integrally connected to daily, ongoing contemplation in that unitive mystico-prophetic dynamic or what I named elsewhere, the prophetic dynamic of denunciation and annunciation. 'Prophets are people who speak out when others remain silent... who stand up and speak out about the practices of their own people and their own leaders...', not just for the effects on humans but the effects on all life (Albert Nolan, *Jesus Today*. Orbis 2007, 63).

As women and men religious life in the twenty-first century, we know being prophetic necessitates a lived contemplative stance. 'Contemplation is the place, the locus, of the increasing coincidence of the contemplative's view with the divine view. In contemplative prayer, we pass through the center of our own being into the very being of God where we see ourselves and our world with a clarity, a simplicity, a truthfulness that are not available in any other way' (Schneiders, 2000, 139). Living in such a driven, multi-tasking society, we may delude ourselves that, in our excessive busyness, we are getting more done for the new reign of justice. The temptation is to abandon both the necessity and discipline of silence and solitude and to throw oneself into action for the oppressed. Thomas Merton, back in the 1950s and 1960s, reminded us such drivenness is just another form of violence. A contemplative stance fostered in intentional silence and solitude, results in a new vision, derived not from the status quo, but from God's promises of 'making all things new'.

A new vision requires new images, new metaphors, a new language, new ways of praying, all of which can only come out of our daily sitting in silence and listening, 'sitting till the self falls off'. It may require us to let go of our 'book' prayers and live into the scripture of the rhythms of our earth, our planet. 'We might well put all our written scriptures on the shelf for

the next twenty years until we learn what we are being told by unmediated experience of the world around us' (Thomas Berry 1994, 17). Our call is to a contemplative global-cosmic spirituality.

FACES OF LEADERSHIP

If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more, be more and become more, you are a leader.

– John Quincy Adams

Today, the role of religious can no longer be the church and society's dedicated but cheap work force. Rather it must be a transformative leadership role of advocacy, informed by ongoing learning about religion, spirituality, theology, economics, systems theory, quantum physics and the latest scientific advancements in our co-evolving universe. At the 2007 LCWR Assembly, Joan Chittister spoke of four faces of leadership: intellectual leadership, reformist leadership, revolutionary leadership and charismatic leadership. For example, intellectual leaders compare what is, to what must be. They dare to question. They raise the issues. In other words, they are prophetic. I believe this is a significant role for religious life in the future. It points to our responsibility for ongoing learning, challenging reading, stimulating discussions to replace in part, our daily menu of gossip, TV shows, and the latest in our diminishment sagas of surgery, medications and the like. Only when we have done our homework can we name blatant injustices and become change advocates for the mutual enhancement of all. To be outside the system in all its agonizing ambiguity, especially when we have been co-opted by the system in so many ways, challenges us to become aware of, name and challenge the contradictions and violence in our systems and ourselves.

CONCLUSION

There are many of us religious who wonder about religious life in the future. We wonder and we care what will happen. Why else would we keep reading, writing, dreaming about its possibilities? I began these reflections with a plethora of metaphors we have offered in our many congregations and religious conferences as stepping-stones down into the aquifers of our beings where the future is gestating. When we touch that ineffable, the prose of our lives becomes mute and we move into the poetry of the prophetic imagination in each of us. We deepen our contemplative-mystic stance of sitting till the self of control and surety fall off. Only when we can let go of our micro plans for congregational survival can we focus the macro issues of religious life anew in the future. We know this future is coming to birth in us. So, in this here and now, we contemplatively nurture our metaphors, slowly, gradually becoming transformed in their poetic thin spaces and moments. This transformation may not be in our time but in the fire of our ashes. In these in-between times of our *grieshog*, we dare to live passionately in the love of a future we may never see. And this is enough.

Religious Life Review, July-August 2008, Printed with Permission

Janet Malone, CND recently passed away on May 8, 2013.