

**Leadership Conference of Women Religious  
2024 Annual Assembly – Orlando, Florida  
Bryan N. Massingale**

**Our Time Is Holy: Grieving for the Sake of New Beginnings**

It is a joy to be with you! Thank you for the privilege of sharing some thoughts on your theme as you gather. Being with you allows me to publicly acknowledge the many ways I have benefitted from the ministries and friendships of women religious. Beginning with my grade and high school teachers, the School Sisters of Notre Dame, the Lake Drive Franciscans, and the Layton Blvd. Franciscans (I know that's not your formal names, but that's how I and folks in Milwaukee know you). Then the women religious who have accompanied me as retreat directors or spiritual guides (the Salvatorian Sisters and the Layton Blvd's again). I also acknowledge the ways that members of the National Black Sisters Conference have sustained me in friendship and prayer. I was going to make a list to acknowledge by name, but it grew so numerous, plus the risk of leaving anyone out, made that really impossible. All of this is to say: It is a joy and privilege for me to be here with you. Thank you for this invitation.

I come to you, my sisters, as a brother. As one who, like you, has been drawn by God to respond to an inner fire that urges us to spend our lives for the sake of the Reign of God. The "Reign of God." Such a pregnant phrase! [I will meditate upon it later in this address.]

The principal question I place before you as you contemplate the theme of "Our Time Is Holy" is this: *What does it mean to be a sign of courageous hope in a time that we do not know how to name?* What I offer is more of a reflection than a fully worked out thesis. Therefore, this is an invitation to dialogue and communal discernment. What I offer is the fruit of my own contemplative prayer as we – as a nation, a global society, and you as congregational leaders – face a world and church in the midst of unprecedented transitions and changes.

The inspiration for my reflections comes from a poem that may or may not be familiar to you. I invite you to listen to its initial stanzas as we move our minds, hearts, and spirits into this time together (the emphases are my own):

*For the Interim Time*

By John O'Donohue

When near the end of day, life has drained  
Out of light, and it is too soon  
For the mind of night to have darkened things,

No place looks like itself, loss of outline  
Makes everything look strangely in-between,  
Unsure of what has been, or what might come.

In this wan light, even trees seem groundless.  
In a while it will be light, but nothing  
Here seems to believe the relief of darkness.

You are in this time of the interim

Where everything seems withheld.

The path you took to get here has washed out;  
The way forward is still concealed from you.

*“The old is not old enough to have died away;  
The new is still too young to be born.”*

You cannot lay claim to anything;  
In this place of dusk,  
Your eyes are blurred;  
And there is no mirror.

I want us to dwell in this notion of being in an interim time, an indefinite time, a time unnamed and for now unnamable. We could use other words to describe this time, words such as “liminal” and “transitional.” They are apt, but they have become perhaps too familiar through casual use in our religious and formation discourse.

Interim time. Gap time. In-between time. You can’t go back, but you don’t know where forward is. The experience is of the collapse of security and certainty in the midst of the unknown and unknowable.

In a 2015 address to a national Italian Catholic conference, Pope Francis declared, *“We are not living in an era of change, but a change of era.”* It is one thing to live in a time of rapid and momentous changes. That is dizzying and disorienting enough. But to live in a change of era? To live on the cusp of exponentially different ways of being, thinking, living, praying, and doing? This is a challenge of an altogether different order. This is a time when “the old is not old enough to have died away, and the new is still too young to be born.” It is an anxious time, a fearful time. A time of loss. A time of (often unexpressed) grieving. And a time for relinquishing the old for the sake of the new. (Easier said than done). A time that calls for courageous venturing into the unknown. But how?

I offer “the interim time” and “a change of era” as apt descriptions of the “now” in which we live. I will discuss several “signs of the time,” that is, seismic developments or sites of disruption that illustrate how and where I see a “change of eras” occurring. I then discuss the deep anxiety that motivates the anger, violence and fear that grips so many in our nation and our world. I move then to outline how the deep transitions that grip our nation find a parallel in the dynamics of contemporary religious life. I then turn to the Christian tradition of lament, as a way of discussing what must be done to better navigate the severe challenges that face us. I conclude with how lament prepares us for the arrival of the new, and offer a final image that might inspire our thinking and praying as we live in this interim time of intense and massive change.

[Signs of the Time/Change of Era: Through the Lens of Where We Gather \(Florida\)](#)

We gather in Orlando, FL. It is an epicenter of many of the deep transitions – a site of the disruptions – we are experiencing in our nation. Here some of the most divisive tensions that afflict us present themselves, symptoms of a society and world in the throes of a change of era:

- In June of 2016, the worst act of anti-LGBTQ violence happened when a mass shooter killed 49 people and wounded 53 at the Pulse gay nightclub in Orlando. This hate crime/terrorist attack was the deadliest act of violence against the LGBTQ community in American history. At that time, it was also the country's deadliest mass shooting by a single gunman, until that record was broken in Las Vegas in 2017. Hate crimes, terror attacks, gun violence: these are scourges that mark our common life together, and which have only grown more pronounced and deadlier since. The violence and vitriol against LGBTQ people are further evidenced by the "Don't Say Gay" measures present in this state, measures that prohibit teachers from discussing gay issues or acknowledging LGBTQ students. We gather in a state where parents of trans children are leaving or seriously considering leaving the state to ensure that their children receive the life-saving gender-affirming care they need. They are "internally displaced persons" – terminology we typically use for refugees of war, not our own citizens.
- We gather in a state where teachers face severe constraints in teaching accurate history to their students. Florida is a leader in the drive against teaching students "lessons that would make a student uncomfortable about their race." But we need to ask, "Which students? Who's not supposed to be made uncomfortable?" The comfort of white students is prioritized, as lessons that teach the nation's troubled engagement and white complicity in Black suffering are censored. Moreover, Florida led the nation in revamping the Advanced Placement test in African American history, specifically demanding changes in the presentation of the history of African enslavement. Florida politicians avow that "slavery was good for Black people," as it taught these "migrants" useful skills for gainful employment.
- We gather in a state where that is an epicenter for the nation's anxieties over immigration and its changing demographic complexion. Florida is among the states, such as Texas, which forcibly transports undocumented asylum seekers to other (i.e., "Blue") cities and states, such as New York and Illinois. Women, children, and men who are fleeing persecution and violence find their lives further disrupted as Florida's leaders ban these people, scapegoated as "invaders," "parasites," "rapists," and "poisoning the blood of the nation" in our political discourse.
- We are meeting in a state that is at the forefront of efforts to dismantle and ban initiatives aimed at diversity, equity, and inclusion. Cultural centers on the state's college and university campuses that support historically marginalized populations are being closed. The University of Florida system "axed 13 full-time staff members and 15 faculty members who were specifically tasked with carrying out DEI duties." Efforts to curtail initiatives to recruit and retain underrepresented students, administrators and faculty members are advancing not only here, but across the nation. What we see here in Florida is also true in North Dakota, Texas, Alabama, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Wyoming, Tennessee, and North Carolina and Utah. But this reversal of too long-delayed efforts to redress past wrongs does not only have personnel effects on the composition of campus communities. It also has a chilling effect on expression and instruction, as people avoid topics that may cross a line or lead to controversy. Many professors of color are refusing academic positions in these states and/or actively seeking to relocate.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Khorri Atkinson, "Colleges Risk Talent Loss with Pushback on Diversity Initiatives," *Bloomberg Law* (July 11, 2024). <https://apple.news/AMS9p18AbTJu8bQ41gzyuzA>

- We meet in Florida, one of the most exposed states in the country to sea rise and coastal storms. “With its low lying coastal topography and 8,400 miles of shoreline, much of Florida and its coastal population are vulnerable to the impacts of rising sea levels.”<sup>2</sup> It is reported that scientists expect that the lower third of the Florida peninsula will be underwater by the year 2100, and some main roads in the Florida Keys by 2050.<sup>3</sup> And yet, efforts to respond to the reality and human disruptions of global climate change are stymied by political denial. The Florida legislature passed a law, which the governor has signed, that strips the term “climate change” “from much of state law” and reverses policies that promote green energy over fossil fuels.<sup>4</sup>
- The refusal to acknowledge the Covid pandemic and its lingering effects
- The support over efforts to disenfranchise minority voters through voter suppression and aggressive gerrymandering.

I provide this list not to “dump” on Florida, and not only to call to mind our need to be in solidarity with its residents. My point is a deeper one: The events, trends, and tensions we see here are a mirror or microcosm of trends we see in the nation and our world. The nation, and the world, are in the grip of massive, disorienting change. Ecological crises; upheavals over new understandings of sexuality; racial conflicts and antagonisms; displacement due to mass migration: these are not unique to Florida. These are pivotal signs of the time and they reveal something indisputable when we consider them in the aggregate. We are living in a change of era, a new time, a new age. A time of anxiety and fragility.

#### A Deeper Look at Collective Anxiety: The Fear of Loss

But we need to be more specific and name the cause for the fragility and anxiety of the present moment. Deep transitions are times of loss. Let’s explore this loss through a closer look at one of the major signs of the time, indeed arguably one that feeds into all the others I’ve named so far: the rise of white Christian nationalism. We cannot understand white nationalism – indeed, the rise of populist nationalisms around the globe (e.g., Hungary, Brazil, Poland, France, and the Philippines. In other areas, ethnic conflicts simmer and at times erupt in violent divisions, such as in Sudan, Eritrea, Nigeria, to give a non-exhaustive list).

Nationalisms are characterized by the exaggerated importance of a social in-group, usually defined by racial or ethnic criteria (e.g., language, religion, and skin color). They are also deeply conflated with gender norms, such as strong, assertive (read: toxic) masculinity; a privatizing of the feminine; and virulent rejection of non-heteronormative sexualities. Groups that differ are seen as threats to a desired social order marked by a so-called uniform/normative identity (e.g., “European” v. “Muslim,” “white Christian” v. “secular socialist,” “true American” v. immigrant, pure v. mixed). Such outsiders are cast as threats to social order and stability, and accused of taking benefits away from those deemed entitled by a mythic sense of belonging.

<sup>2</sup> Florida Climate Center, “Sea Level Rise and Coastal Risk,” <https://climatecenter.fsu.edu/topics/sea-level-rise#:~:text=Florida%20is%20among%20the%20most,impacts%20of%20rising%20sea%20levels>.

<sup>3</sup> Green Matters, “Florida Expected to Be Heavily Impacted by Rising sea levels,” <https://www.greenmatters.com/weather-and-global-warming/when-will-florida-be-underwater#:~:text=Scientists%20expect%20the%20lower%20third,2060%2C%E2%80%9D%20The%20Guardian%20reported>.

<sup>4</sup> Associated Press, “Climate Change could virtually disappear in Florida—at least according to state law,” (April 30, 2024) <https://apnews.com/article/florida-desantis-climate-change-environment-a3bee6775476d6f3e00b8c6cd500a3b1>

In the United States, white Christian nationalism can be defined as the instinctual, visceral, nonrational conviction that this country – its public spaces, its history, and culture – belongs to white Christians, and especially those that are heterosexual men, in a way that it does not and should not belong to others.

So, in our country the rise of white Christian nationalism cannot be understood unless we see it as a response to the anxiety aroused in many white Americans over living in a fundamentally changing social and cultural environment. Changing demography signals a changing national identity. To put it bluntly, we are no longer a “white Christian nation,” and many white Christians are nervous and angry. We can see an expression of such sentiments in the reaction of the influential political commentator, Bill O’Reilly, to the results of the 2012 election. After it became apparent that President Obama had been re-elected, O’Reilly lamented, “The demographics are changing. It’s not a traditional America anymore. . . . The white establishment is now a minority.”<sup>5</sup>

O’Reilly’s words and insight are so important, as they bring us to what is a central dynamic at work in our world. As we live in a change of era, a time of decisive transition, what many are feeling is a deep sense of *loss*. They feel unmoored, adrift in a storm of the unfamiliar. In a previous work, I described this as a sense of “culture shock.” Culture shock describes the anxiety one experiences when in an unfamiliar, foreign, or strange environment where the social rules, customs, and expectations are different from what one expects as “normal.” And one doesn’t know how to act, live, think, pray, or be in this new situation. For culture shapes our identity and self-understanding. When culture shock happens in one’s home, one’s nation – one’s congregation, but I’ll consider that later – it is experienced as an existential threat that undermines one’s self-identity and the foundations upon which some believe the country was built (for example, as a white Christian nation, or a nation where God intended white Christians to thrive and flourish).

Nationalism is a longing for a lost world, an endangered world, a mythical utopia – “Make America Great *Again*” – and the preservation of this “utopia” by aggressively asserting dominance .by the “real Americans.” In short, it is a misguided strategy to cope with unfathomable loss in the midst of mind-spinning and soul-bending change.

The Scripture scholar Walter Brueggemann describes this insightfully: “We, a certain ‘we,’ have lost the capacity to maintain ‘our kind of America’ that is populated solely by white neighbors, led by males, limited to heterosexuals. . . . That loss that touches every dimension of our common life is too painful to acknowledge.”<sup>6</sup>

But then he, almost prophetically, describes the consequences when such loss is unacknowledged, unprocessed, and I would say un-mourned: “Sadness over loss that is unvoiced, unembraced, and unacknowledged (a) turns to violence and (b) precludes movement toward new possibility.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> As stated on FOX News, November 6, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Reality, Grief, Hope: Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks* (Eerdmans, 2014) 80-81.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Brueggeman, *Reality, Grief, Hope: Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks* (Eerdmans, 2014) 82.

Or as the Black gay poet, Joseph Beam, expresses this truth: “Anger unvented becomes pain, pain unspoken becomes rage, rage released becomes violence.”<sup>8</sup>

Without grief, without lament, the pain and disorientation of seismic cultural change becomes rage and erupts in wrath. Sadness at loss that is unnamed and unvoiced becomes expressed in a lack of hospitality, vengefulness, and cruelty. It is not too much to suggest that the alt-Right protests in Charlottesville; the racist massacres in Charleston (SC) and Buffalo (NY); the sundering of family bonds as Brown refugees have their children separated from them; the mob violence of January 6; the threats of political violence that a major candidate continues to hold over the nation’s head; the exponential rise in antisemitic and anti-Muslim hate crimes; and the author of Project 2025’s saying that it will be a “nonviolent revolution, if the Left allows it to be” – all of these are expressions of a loss of racial privilege and normative white Christian heterosexual maleness that is seldom directly unnamed and thus goes un-mourned.

But even more, Brueggeman suggests, and I agree, that we cannot embrace the new era that is dawning, or struggling to be born, until and unless the loss so many are feeling can be named, grieved, and lamented. “Sadness over loss that is unacknowledged . . . precludes movement into new possibility.” We live in a time of unvoiced and ungrieved loss.

#### Parallels in Religious Life and the Lives of Your Congregations

It comes as no surprise to you that I suggest that religious life is going through a time of intense “culture shock.” Vowed religious, both women and men, are living in an “interim time” when “the old is not old enough to have died away; the new is still too young to be born.” You know this better than I do. Many have repurposed or sold motherhouses and founding sites that are dear with precious memories and significance. Some are experiencing the challenges of cultural bridging as white European founded communities become more truly global in their membership and leadership. Many religious institutes are wrestling with the reality that there are fewer sisters with the energy and capacity to effectively lead the congregation. Some are discerning alternative ways of governance. Many have suspended their vocational ministries and formation programs for accepting new members. They have embraced a move toward “completion.”

All of these are but the outward signs of a deeper seismic shift, a change of era, that is happening in religious life. Yes, younger sisters are excited about the possibilities for what religious life may witness in the future.<sup>9</sup> But even then, one cannot deny their future will look, feel, and be very different than it is now. Religious life, too, is in an “interim time,” a “change of era” that is more disruptive than a mere time of change.

These are difficult realities to face and discuss, much less accept. As with our nation and world, such dizzying and disorienting depth of change engenders strong and mixed emotions. Some among you, I’m sure, have face the situation with a feeling of “well, it’s inevitable so let’s get on

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<sup>8</sup> Joseph Beam, “Brother to Brother: Words from the Heart,” in *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology*, ed. Joseph Beam (Alyson Publications, 1986) 233.

<sup>9</sup> “In new book, younger sisters write about religious life of the present,” *National Catholic Reporter* (February 5, 2018): <https://www.globalsistersreport.org/news/trends/new-book-younger-sisters-write-about-religious-life-present-51791>; “Giving Voice National Gathering nurtures seeds of hope and joy,” (*National Catholic Reporter* (July 12, 2024): <https://www.globalsistersreport.org/columns/giving-voice-national-gathering-nurtures-seeds-hope-and-joy>.

with it.” Others are engaging with more contemplative grace and acceptance.<sup>10</sup> But in any case, unvoiced loss becomes a source of anger, depression, lack of hospitality, and a perception of the new as threat, not gift.

We are living in a change of era, a new time, a new age, one that does not yet have a name or know how to name itself. Ours is an age of anxiety and fragility. A fragility experienced personally, interpersonally, socially, and culturally. An anxiety over actual and impending currents of momentous change and the fear that reality – that we – can never again be the same.

Pope Francis, in an address delivered to vowed religious in Mozambique, gave an apt description of the challenge and summons that confronts us in this interim time: “[W]hether we like it or not, we are called to face reality as it is. Times change and we need to realize that often we do not know how to find our place in new scenarios: we keep dreaming about the ‘leeks of Egypt’ (Num 11:5), forgetting that the promised land is before us, not behind us, and in our lament for times past, we are turning to stone.”<sup>11</sup>

What I suggest is that if women religious, and religious life in general, is to be in solidarity with the “now” of this moment – if indeed this time is to be holy – it must be a solidarity in grief, in loss, in lament, as we all live in this age of exponential change, in this interim time, in this era of anxiety that so often causes inhospitality, vengefulness, meanness and cruelty. A refusal to lament is a form of privilege and escape. What unites all of us in this room with the world in which we live is a need to lament and grieve the loss of the familiar.

#### Lament for the Sake of the New: The Wisdom of Our Tradition

*“Lament: verb: to mourn aloud: wail; to express sorrow, mourning, or regret demonstratively; noun: a crying out in grief or complaint or agony. Synonyms: to grieve, mourn, deplore; to moan and groan in complaint.”* (Merriam-Webster app dictionary)

Dorothele Sölle, a German theologian, in considering the challenge of piercing through the callous of indifference to the plight of those who suffer injustice, writes:

If people are not to remain unchanged in suffering, if they are not to be blind and deaf to the pain of others . . . then one of the things they need is a language.<sup>12</sup>

One such language present in our faith tradition is that of lament. Lament is a profound response to suffering, one that stems from acknowledging its harsh reality and entails “simply being truthful, avoiding denial (which could be so easy) and admitting the pain and horror of the suffering. . . . We express our pain in lament [by] crying out [which] allows us to grieve.”<sup>13</sup>

Lament appears to be a universal human phenomenon. People across culture, location, and time have responded to suffering with expressions of sorrow and protest.

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<sup>10</sup> “LCWR members discuss stark reality of future leadership in religious life,” *National Catholic Reporter* (August 11, 2023): <https://www.globalsistersreport.org/news/lcwr-members-discuss-stark-reality-future-leadership-religious-life>.

<sup>11</sup> Pope Francis, “Address to Mozambique’s Priests and Religious,” (5 September 2019).

<sup>12</sup> Cited in Denise M. Ackermann, *After the Locusts: Letters from a Landscape of Faith* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003) 108.

<sup>13</sup> Kenneth R. Overberg, *Ethics and AIDS: Compassion and Justice in a Global Crisis* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2006) 152.

Laments are cries of anguish and outrage; groans of deep pain and grief; utterances of profound protest and righteous indignation over injustice; wails of mourning and sorrow in the face of unbearable suffering. Lamentation is a cry of utter anguish and passionate protest at the state of the world and its brokenness. Laments name the pain present; they forthrightly acknowledge that life and relationships have gone terribly wrong. They are uncivil, strident, harsh and heart-rending. They are profound interruptions and claims to attention. Laments pierce the crusty callouses of numbness, cynicism, indifference and denial.

Lament does not accept the status quo. Lament demands change.

Such emotionally laden protests in the face of suffering and injustice are a principal part of Israel's prayer and of our faith heritage. Walter Brueggemann, points out that laments and cries of personal and communal distress comprise fully one-third of the Book of Psalms. He concludes that the Hebrews' laments were exercises of "enormous *chutzpah*" and writes, "Israel did not hesitate to give full voice to its fear, anger, and dismay which are palpably present in life and speech."<sup>14</sup> The South African theologian Denise Ackermann echoes these sentiments after her rediscovery of this scriptural response to injustice and its harms:

These ancient people simply refused to settle for things as they were. They believed that God could, should, and indeed would do something to change unbearable circumstances. Their lament was candid, intense, robust, and unafraid. They complained, mourned, wept, chanted dirges and cursed. They assailed the ears of God, believing they could wring the hand of God and insisting their petitions be taken so seriously that, in doing so, God is put at risk. . . . I found a language that is honest, that does not shirk from naming the unnamable, that does not lie down in the face of suffering or walk away from God.<sup>15</sup>

Lament and lamentation protest the "normalization of racist violence." We declare, "This is not right! This is not just! This is not how it should be!" When we lament, when we grieve, when we mourn, we declare: "This pain ought not be!"

The world is not as it should be. Lament is a refusal to settle for the status quo. A refusal to be at peace with the way the world is. It is a strident rejection of complacency. And it makes demands of bystanders: "You will not remain complacent with how things are. I refuse to let you be numb to what is going on. You will witness my distress, my outrage, my pain. And you will respond and answer."

Put more academically, by the Black scholar-activist Chanequa Walker-Barnes: lament operates as confrontational truth-telling that proclaims the truth, demands justice and accountability, and lays bare the wounds of injustice and suffering.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Westminster John Knox: 2003) 280-291.

<sup>15</sup> Ackermann, *After the Locusts*, 112.

<sup>16</sup> Chanequa Walker-Barnes, *I Bring the Voices of My People: A Womanist Vision for Racial Reconciliation* (Eerdmans Publishing, 2019).



Lament is a grieving that mourns and protests and demands passionate truth-telling. Lament truthfully names the fears that hold so many of us bound and hostage. Lament names the false privilege that has served too few at the expense of so many. Lament helps us to grieve the passing of a world that benefitted “us” at the expense of “them.” Lament calls us to name our own complicity, at times unwitting and at times with approval, in a status quo that preserved a world that worked for “us,” even as we suspected, perhaps dimly, that it did not work for all.

Lament acknowledges the fears of white working-class people, who feel duped and taken advantage of. But it also names the scapegoating that makes immigrants and Black people falsely responsible for their plight. Lament grieves the devastation that we have wrecked upon the earth, our “common home.” And by naming the consequences of such devastation, and our responsibility for and complicity in it, prepares us for the costly changes that must take place for human survival.

Lament names the heterosexism that is deeply-rooted in our church traditions and which silences and harms so many who love and live differently. It grieves the fear and loss of life that threatens so many LGBTQ people. Lament declares: “This is not right. This is not God’s intent or vision.” And thus prepares us for a new age that is more consistent with God’s dream for humankind.

Lament, then, transforms bystanders into witnesses. It challenges us to join in protest, that is, to also become aggrieved (that is, to join in the grief). Lament pierces the social callousness that keeps us numbed to what is so obvious to others, to see and hear the world in disturbing ways that shake our awareness and disrupt our comfort.

BUT – and this is key -- lament becomes the prelude to action and change. As Brueggeman noted above, unvoiced pain precludes the acceptance of the new. Without lament over the past, the new is received only as a threat. Grieving and lamenting the loss of the present prepares us for the arrival of the new. Lamenting allows us to greet the arrival of the new as a gift, not a threat. Paradoxically, lament prepares the way for new beginnings.

To Dream Anew: What legacy will you leave?

I have long been taken with the power of the human imagination, especially the imagination of the despised, disdained and stigmatized. I am inspired by how, despite all that they – that we – have been through and still endure, yet people dream of new worlds. We persist in the hope that reality not only should – but *will* – be other than it is. Let me make this concrete by the following story:

One of my prized possessions is a huge gold-leafed, black leather-bound dictionary my grandmother gave me for my 8<sup>th</sup> grade graduation: *The New Webster Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language*. It contains over 973 pages of definitions, with an additional 500 pages of reference material, including how to write a letter to the president of the United States. Why would a grandmother give such a gift to a 14-year-old boy living in Milwaukee’s inner city? Her response: “Because some day, he will need it.”

“*Because some day . . .*” That is the essence of the Black imagination. My grandmother was not delusional. She did not live in denial of reality, of the fact that our neighborhood store was called derisively “rats and roaches incorporated” by my siblings and I. Her gift was a vision, an

act of hope. It was a dream, a hope, a reminder that the neighborhood, with its drugs, violence, and rodent-infested corner store with overpriced goods, did not define or limit who I could be. Her gift was a conjuring of imagination. My grandmother dreamed while being Black. She dreamed of a future that was gift, not threat.

Dreaming asserts a refusal to be confined to the options that are given us. Dreaming is a strong declaration of “none of the above!” Dreaming is a refusal to be limited by the evidence that is before us. Dreaming is a refusal to live within the limits of the status quo. In dreaming, we transcend the horizon of the present dwell, however briefly, in the land of possibility. We imagine an alternative, a new way of being, that can, if nurtured, makes us transformative agents of and for a new creation.

We dream inspired by our faith. We dream in the words of Jesus: “Peace is my gift to you.” Peace. He most likely used the Hebrew word, *shalom*, which means so much more than “peace.” It means wholeness and fulfillment, a world where no one – **no one** – lacks for what they need for abundant life. A world where no one lacks because of race, color, creed, accent, language, or because of who they love, how they love, and how they seek for love.

What does this mean for women religious? I suggest several things:

- 1) We need you to continue to lament and grieve the brokenness of our world. And to let your grief inspire action for a more just country. Specifically, in the wake of the dangers of white Christian nationalism and the fragility of democracy, I invite you to consider being poll workers, poll watchers, and poll chaplains in November’s elections. Your presence is a witness to the pain of a new world coming to be, and a witness that this world must be one where all can flourish in *shalom* as is God’s intent.
- 2) We need you to teach us, the church, and especially white North Americans, how to grieve the passing of a world that must end so that the new Reign of God may come to be. Just as you have offered us new models of leadership, and new models of engaging church conflict, we now ask you to teach us how to engage in public mourning.<sup>17</sup> You are doing so as you engage new forms of religious life that are not the same as the past. How do we grieve healthily so that we can welcome the new as gift and not as threat? Can you teach us how to move gracefully into the new?
- 3) To make that last suggestion more concrete, I invite you to ponder and contemplate: As you dream in this interim time, and contemplate a future when perhaps you will not be, what legacy will you leave “because some day we might need it”? My grandmother did not know how I would use this dictionary. But she gave out of the conviction that someday I would need it.

That’s why I hold onto that huge thick dictionary, even though I seldom use it anymore for its intended purpose. Everything it contains I now can find more easily on Google or by asking Siri. I cherish it as an ever-present reminder of those who dared to dream, and who through their dreams brought something new into the world. It encourages me to continue to dream. It encourages me to not settle for the status quo. Or to fear the new.

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<sup>17</sup> Annmarie Sanders, IHM (ed.), *However Long the Night: Making Meaning in a Time of Crisis. A Spiritual Journey of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR)* (2018).

What, then, will you leave for us, for the future? Out of the abundance of your charisms, wisdom, and collective experiences, what gift will you bequeath for us out of the conviction that “someday we will need it”? What wisdom do you possess that you will leave for a time when you will not be? This is not ghoulish or morbid. It is not “legacy” in the sense of “don’t forget that we were here.” Legacy here is an act of generosity and deep faith. Bequeathing a legacy for others to use, in ways that you perhaps cannot foresee, is an act of gracious opening to the new era that is struggling to be born. It provides a concrete witness of how to welcome the new as gift, and not as threat. What “dictionary” will you give to the future to use as it will “because someday they will need it?”

In light of dreaming while Black, I invite and urge you: Grieve. Lament. Dare to dream. To dream boldly. To dream audaciously. To dream subversively. For in the face of war, environmental catastrophe, xenophobic nationalisms, anti-queer hysteria and anti-Black violence, we don’t need less imaginative hope. We need *more*. We need *more*.

When so much of life seems poised on a precipice, as we live in times of health vulnerability, political upheaval, social division and ecological precarity, we need to cultivate practices of critique that are wedded to discourses of hope. The need for animating visions, sustaining dreams, and motivating imaginations is more, not less, urgent. We are invited – summoned – to attune and attend to the realm of the Spirit.

Let us end with the conclusion of O’Donohue’s poem, “For the Interim Time” with its final exhortations and words of hope (the italics are mine):

As far as you can, hold your confidence  
Do not allow confusion to squander  
This call which is loosening  
Your roots in false ground,  
That you might come free  
From all you have outgrown.

What is being transfigured here is your mind,  
*And it is difficult and slow to become new.*  
The more faithfully you can endure here,  
The more refined your heart will become  
*For your arrival in the new dawn.*

Notes and Scrapes:

We need you to show us, to give us public witness, of how to grieve, to lament, to mourn. To grieve the loss of a world that we really must let go of. For the sake of the new, the just, the true.

But not to stay stuck there, or paralyzed.

To be open to the new. Invitation to consider legacy, gift. What gift will you leave behind, out of the belief that “someday we might need it.”?

My grandmother and her 8<sup>th</sup> grade graduation gift to me: a dictionary.