

LCWR Presidential Address

Mary Whited, C.P.P.S.

August 4, 2008

We come to the mountains to gain perspective. At this height the view is spectacular, the air is fresh, and the beauty takes one's breath away. Being at a mile-high altitude has a way of expanding our vision, deepening our sensitivities, and surfacing our priorities. Our sacred story is replete with others who had the courage and the stamina to climb: the Chosen People who sealed a covenant with Yahweh, a prophet who spoke boldly on behalf of the oppressed, and a Samaritan woman who conversed with a Messiah about where her ancestors worshiped. On a mountain, Jesus was transfigured in the presence of his disciples, and followers of Jesus learned the way of the Beatitudes. Jesus went up to Jerusalem to die and to rise.

In that tradition, we, women religious leaders, gather on this Holy Mountain to step back and to take a long look at these key questions that churn deep down in our hearts: "How do we attend to this moment in the life of our congregations and our leadership conference? How do we "midwife" religious life into a future that is unfolding even as we assemble? How do we encourage our members to hold on to what is needed and to let go of what is not essential so that we are freer to climb? Can we risk conversing about the hopes and fears that stir in our hearts? Are there other mountains we need to be climbing? Are the mountains we are scaling even worth the climb?"

I began to reflect on this address by calling upon some wonderful women whose life-giving perspectives helped to reframe difficult realities into situations of hope. There were so many – Catherine of Siena, Philippine Duchesne, Elizabeth Ann Seton, Theresa Weber... the Hebrew midwives, Puah and Shiprah, whose courage, imagination, and daring are highlighted in the very first chapter of *Exodus*. Let's listen to their story:

The king of Egypt spoke to Shiprah and Puah, the two midwives who assisted the Hebrew women. "When you help the Hebrew women give birth," he said to them, "kill the baby if it is a boy; but if it is a girl, let her live." But the midwives were God-fearing and so did not obey the king; instead, they let the boys live. So the king sent for the midwives and asked them, "Why are you doing this? Why are you letting the boys live?" They answered, "The Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they give birth easily, and their babies are born before either of us gets there." Because the midwives were God-fearing, God was good to them and made them fruitful. (Another translation says: "God made them heroes). Exodus 1: 15 - 21

These midwives are incredible! They speak to power on behalf of God's people who are unable to speak for themselves. Finding a different way to respond to the orders of Pharaoh and conversing directly with him guarantee new life and fresh hope for the People of God. Being the responsible leaders they are, these midwives seek to ensure

both a safe delivery of Hebrew children and a vital future for the People of God. The history of salvation lies in their hands. Shiprah and Puah cannot be silent with a “shared future” at stake. New life must be birthed, whatever that takes!

How often it is the sacred work of women to present an alternative to the dominant culture that exerts control over others! Puah and Shiprah are up to the task as they embrace the vulnerable, suffering, frustrated, hurting, and weary people of Yahweh. Alignment with Yahweh is essential to nurturing dreams. The midwives’ alignment with Yahweh is key to delivering new life and birthing new hope among the people chosen by Yahweh. The midwives realize that Pharaoh’s command will lead to the demise of God’s people, yet their attention is not on diminishment. They focus on delivering new life and nurturing hope! Some would call this stance prophetic. Rabbi Abraham Heschel describes a prophet as one who “combines a very deep love, a very powerful dissent, and a powerful resolve with envisioning hope.” Shiprah and Puah’s love for God’s people, their courageous dissent, and the resolve to nurture new life, whatever it takes, all clear the path toward a vision of hope among the people of Yahweh. This stance is prophetic!

Sitting with these wonderful leaders and companions on the journey, I marvel at how Shiprah and Puah can reframe a seemingly hopeless situation into a life-giving reality. Their wisdom and their deep caring about the future of God’s people allow them to face this frightening question that must have lurked in their hearts: “What will it take for this remnant to flourish?” If Puah and Shiprah were here today, I wonder what they might say to us to whom leadership has been entrusted. What new perspectives could they offer us in our attempts to lead our people? How would they support new life and stir hope in our congregations, our Church, the world, and, especially, in the places of ache and weariness within our own spirits? Surely they would encourage us. Surely they would remind us, “Tend the places where new life is stirring.” Perhaps they would challenge us to lead from a midwife’s perspective - a communal, reconciling, contemplative, and hopeful perspective.

Communal Perspective

For women religious, nurturing new life is a communal enterprise. Side by side. Shoulder to shoulder. Face to face. Like Puah and Shiprah. Assisting in the birth of new life requires sharing dreams and imagining together. As the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, we know these patterns so well. When we began to engage in the process of our “Shared Future,” we reflected on these powerful words:

What we do together as leaders: sharing our personal visions, clarifying what is important to us, learning to see with new eyes, unearthing our mental models, creating the capacity to think together, and making new connections is an act of hope and imagination that has a life beyond ourselves and our time.ⁱ

As a leadership conference, we imagined together how best to address the devastation from Hurricane Katrina. And new life is blossoming in New Orleans! On our fiftieth anniversary, our leadership conference initiated a traveling exhibit to celebrate the dreams of Catholic Sisters from the time they stepped foot in our country. *Women and Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America* is coming to birth in artifacts, sound, color, and printed words. To not remember the determination and faith of women religious working together would surely neglect their tremendous contribution to church and society. To not tell the stories of those who have paved the way before us would surely create a vacuum in our legacy and fail to highlight a powerful story of delivering new life.

When congregations imagine the future together, our work is labor-intensive. Because birthing a new reality is a difficult, focused process, it should not be rushed. Rightly so, the mergers, reconfigurations, and development or divestment of properties require a tremendous amount of discernment as well as leaders' attentiveness. And, shifts in ways of organizing create new opportunities for a community, or for our leadership conference, to dream together. Organizational changes are significant and do require our time and energy; however, we miss the point if these changes fail to deepen our commitment to one another and our determination to stay with the climb. They miss the point if they fail to rekindle the passion so needed to birth new life now and into the future.

In the past several months I have had a recurring dream. Details change, but the patterns remain the same. I am wending my way from room to room in old, familiar surroundings like our motherhouse that dates back to 1875 or my grandparent's home. I suddenly find myself in a maze of rooms I have never stepped foot in before. The surroundings are unfamiliar. I feel alone and hesitate to take another step. I'm tempted to retreat, and I glance back over my shoulder. The rooms from which I have come have vanished. I can no longer go back. I am aware of a Mysterious Presence who urges me forward. I relax and take the next step. And another. And another. I sense that I am being led.

Many times I have tried to unravel the many layers of meaning in these dreams. For me, of course, but perhaps for us as well. Leadership sometimes feels like walking through a maze, working our way through the complexities and challenges that confront us each and every day. Along the way we encounter strong forces, within ourselves or among our members, to stay with what we know. Yet, strength to move forward comes from a sense of being grounded and knowing we are not alone. We must go forward together, even when "forward together" might seem like a circling back. Didn't the Hebrew people wander in the desert for forty years before reaching the Promised Land? Can you, too, sense the Mysterious Presence who invites us to take another step? Do you, too, sense that we are being led?

Puah and Shiprah did not realize their conversation with Pharaoh would lead to the exodus out of Egypt into the wilderness. Their risking prods us on. And as we walk, we leave behind our familiar motherhouses, provinces, structures that have served us well, and ways of living and ministering that deter us from being together. We grieve deeply when older members die. We ask “why” when death plucks younger, vibrant, members of our communities from active ministry and vital community living. Amid the “letting go’s,” we risk the exodus journey. Drawn forward by the Mysterious Presence, we are led into the desert, the place of ultimate trust.

In the desert we are invited to address the very essence of our lives as women religious and to reclaim our identity as God’s Chosen people. Together we honestly seek to name what is happening within and among us and how we feel about this climb. We talk about the cost of leaving Egypt, and we grieve what we have left behind. We open our dreams to one another, and we share the fears of today and our hopes for tomorrow. We attend to the deep yearning to belong that never goes away. In the desert we look for life in places that seem barren. Possibly we discover there are some things we should have left in Egypt. Possibly we reclaim what we have lost along the way. And, perhaps we come to see that being together on the journey touches the core identity of who we are today and who we will be tomorrow - women of God, ecclesial women, a community chosen by God, and midwives of a future that unfolds in us even as climb together.

Reconciling Perspective

The charism of my Community, the Sisters of the Most Precious Blood, is to be Christ’s reconciling presence. Reconciliation colors how I see myself within the church. And so I often wonder: “What will it take to heal a painfully divided church?” I hold the weariness of women who can’t find their voices in a church they love and serve. I hold the frustrations of persons and groups who are disregarded, labeled, or divided into camps because of differing perspectives – liberal/ conservative, right/left, people of God/ institutional church, religious who live an “authentic” religious life/ those who don’t. Anyone who has climbed a mountain knows that that top can be reached by various paths. So what will it take to embrace the differences? What will it take to span the gaps?

Puah and Shiprah recognize that new life can only be born by conversing with Pharaoh. They weigh their possibilities of talking with Pharaoh against the greater risks of keeping silent, confronting, opting out, or acquiescing to Pharaoh’s wishes. They know that countering power with the same kind of power might restrain it but, in the end, that will not lead to peace.ⁱⁱ Speaking to a dominating power in kind will only jeopardize any hope of delivering new life. Not as victims, but out of integrity and from a different perspective, they speak with Pharaoh. They have no hope of changing Pharaoh’s mind or transforming his oppressive regime. Yet, their actions, and their refusal to act on Pharaoh’s order, pave the way for new life to be born and hope to stir among God’s Chosen People.

What will it take to bring a reconciling perspective to a painfully divided church? This past year our presidency has continued to engage in significant conversations with Vatican officials, U.S. Bishops, and the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious. We bring our perspectives as women religious, and LCWR, to each of these groups. In talking with the Vatican, hope lies in our willingness and determination to stay in the conversation for the long haul and to not lose heart. As we talk with U.S. Bishops, hope lies in our addressing together issues of concern: causes of migration and rights for immigrants, an end to wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, relief for those who have suffered natural disasters, and the primacy of life. As we talk with the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious and experience different understandings of church and different expressions of religious life, hope lies in a willingness to explore the common ground on which we stand as women who are religious.

Such efforts do not ignore past or present hurts. We remember, but we remember differently. We stay in the conversation so that women religious do not become merely an adjunct to the church. We are ecclesial women who love a church that is both institution and the people of God. If we do not claim both, we lose a prophetic edge as well as any hope of healing the rifts. Spanning the gaps is a matter of the heart, even more than a matter of the head. Closing the gaps requires a “heartfelt” response toward reconciliation and healing.

Walter Brueggemann writes: “It is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of imagination, to keep on conjuring and proposing future alternative to the single one the king wants to urge as the only thinkable one.”ⁱⁱⁱ Puah and Shiprah imagine an alternative to what Pharaoh orders. Wise midwives that they are, they know when to push and when to simply breathe. Their reconciling perspective urges us to engage in the difficult and honest conversations, to imagine alternatives that can bridge the gaps, to acknowledge our part in perpetuating the divisions, to cultivate unity even as we speak the truth, and, perhaps most importantly, to know when to push and when to simply breathe.

Contemplative Perspective

Let us take a moment to sit in silence and breathe deeply together. (*Pause*) For the realities we hold require not only a depth but also a breadth that cannot be reached by sitting alone. As leaders sit together in silence, wisdom emerges, compassion grows and we support each other in labor. Together we hold our concerns about the present and our anxieties about the future of religious life, the Church, the world, and the earth. Beyond a sense of duty, we touch into the call and the privilege of being leaders today. We prioritize our deepest beliefs and focus energy in the places that have most potential for new life. We sense our alignment with that Mysterious Presence who accompanies us up this mountain. We gain the confidence that God’s Chosen will be sustained in

exile. In contemplation, we meet the Puahs and the Shiprahs within who long to deliver new life. We hear the voices of these midwives address the pharaoh that lies within – who needs to control, who attempts to dominate, or who resists being transformed by the circumstances of our lives and by the grace of God. We find our voices and the willingness to speak our truth with love. Alignment with the Sacred deepens the integrity out of which we speak to the pharaohs in our church and world.

As leaders, this is our time, and we are the ones called to lead the climb. The daily pressures and complexities with which we deal often slow the climb. We seek times and spaces in our busy lives to pause and breathe with other climbers who yearn for peace of mind and heart. We sit together, attending to who we are becoming in the midst of all we do. In contemplation, we hold the weariness and suffering in both church and world. We tend to the new life that stirs - within, among, and around us.

Contemplation takes us inward. It also takes us to the mountains where we behold the earth as a sacred place and see how humanity is embedded in the earth. From this perspective we find ourselves connected to both the hopes and anguish of the people of our world and the groaning of creation. On this holy mountain we are consciousness of the globe and, even at times, the universe. At this height, the gaps seem less significant, and the possibilities of closing the gaps increase. We cease praying to the God who will keep us safe. Instead, we dwell with a Mystery who invites us to risk. Serenity is no longer enough. We are called to responsible action. Dorothee Soelle describes the shift in perspective: “What really happens in mystical union is not a new vision of God but a different relationship to the world – one that has borrowed the eyes of God.”^{iv} This perspective creates the capacity for hope!

Hopeful Perspective

When pain becomes overwhelming, it is easy for numbness to settle in. Yet, Puah and Shiprah are not numb to the despair of God’s people. They enter the pain and anguish so that they can advocate on behalf of those who suffer. When they speak to Pharaoh, they express neither anger nor rage but speak with a “candor born of anguish and passion.”^v Brueggemann claims that the primary calling of a prophet is not be an angry social critic. Instead a prophet is someone who is willing to take an honest look at upsetting and unsettling realities that are ignored by society at large and the powers that be.^{vi} The midwives pierce a numbness that keeps God’s people powerless!

Today it is so easy to become numb to the growing poverty across the globe. (How can anyone grasp the immensity of it all much less do something about it?) It is so easy to become numb to the increasing numbers of Iraqi refugees; to the migration of peoples who are searching to meet their basic, human, needs; to the women and children who are trafficked and terrorized each and every day. (There is too much to do. How much farther can we be stretched? Our resources are limited.) It is so easy to become numb to

the global realities of climate change and ecological devastation. (We try to recycle. Isn't that enough?) It is so easy to become numb to the violence on our local streets. (It's brought into our living rooms between commercials.) Who will pierce the numbness? We, women religious, are aware and have access to the suffering of people all over the globe. Are we up to the challenge of piercing the numbness? Are we up to the challenge of delivering new life on behalf of those who feel hopeless? We, who realize that all is connected, know that, when we hold the suffering and weariness of those whose lives we touch each and every day, we pierce the numbness in our society, our Church, our world and, especially, within our own congregations of women religious.

But we cannot pierce the numbness alone. The complexity of the global challenges we face requires combining our efforts with partners and collaborators. Donna Markham said, "We need each other to test out ideas, to share what we're learning, to help us see in new ways, to listen to our stories. We need each other to forgive us when we fail, to trust us with their dreams, to offer their hope when we've lost our own."^{vii} According to Meg Wheatley, "the world doesn't change one person at a time. It changes as networks of relationships form among people who discover they share a common cause and vision of what's possible."^{viii} As a leadership conference, linking our efforts with other groups and conferences, such as the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, the Canadian Religious Conference, and the Conference of Latin American Religious enables us, collectively and consciously, to address global challenges in very strategic ways. Together we discover leverage points for change!

Realizing our deeper connections to those who are hungry moves us to say "no" to hunger. Recognizing our deeper connections not only to those who are being terrorized but also to those who are terrorizing stirs us to say "no" to the terrorism. When we connect our energies around a resolution directed toward climate change, we say "no" to environmental devastation. In the process, we come to see how we are integrally connected to one another and to the earth. As we speak to and act on any issue, we discover how that issue is intertwined with so many other issues. In opening our eyes and hearts to the sufferings of our world, hope can be awakened, a hope that allows us to see from the perspective of God. Midwives never settle for a future that is less than hopeful. This is the price for being aware. Midwives never settle down. This is the price for growth in compassion. Midwives never settle in. This is the price for being channels of hope.

Channels of hope! We stay the climb in the footsteps of those women religious who have scaled the mountain before us. Since the skills of midwifery must be passed down from one generation to the next, we feel a responsibility to those women religious who will come after us and whom we invite to join in the climb. They too will voice their truth, probably different from our own, and pay the price so that God's visions and dreams can surely be born anew.

Beyond the first few verses of *Exodus*, we hear no more of Puaah and Shiprah. These midwives deliver new life and then, like us, let others take the lead. But they leave behind a communal, reconciling, contemplative, and hopeful perspective to assist the next leaders who will also climb the mountain. In the end, the value of climbing a mountain is not measured by the numbers who climb but rather by a remnant of chosen people who stay the climb with hope, determination and passion. After all, hope “is never generated among us but always given to us. And whenever it is given we are amazed.”^{ix}

(music and slide)

These days we, women religious leaders, gather together *On This Holy Mountain*. As we meet, perhaps we are gaining some perspective on how God is leading us personally and together as this leadership conference of women religious. We become aware that, in each of us and among all of us, there lives a midwife, who is both mystic and prophet.^x She aligns with God toward comforting the weary, attending to dreams, speaking to power, reconciling gaps, piercing the numbness, and nurturing new life, whatever the costs. She supports our resolve to continue the climb – shoulder to shoulder, face to face, side by side, step by step, like Shiprah and Puaah. She tends to labor and birth. She keeps us climbing when we are weary, and she helps us let go of what hinders the climb. She is present to us as we gather here. She is fanning the slightest stirrings of hope!

Climbing the mountain has become a way of life for ecclesial women who desire to see from the perspective of God. These days we open ourselves to a new moment of grace when that Mysterious Presence, whom we call Spirit of God, leads and supports us in climbing the mountain. In her presence, we will not be deterred from the heart work and head work that are essential to climbing.

As a Leadership Conference of Women Religious, we hold a “shared future,” a future that is not only beyond us but also resides within and among us. We shape this future as we sit together and share our dreams and visions of what is possible. The Spirit is with us. She will help us give voice to what lies in our hearts. She will rekindle the flame when the fire goes down. We cannot be silent with so much at stake – the future unfolding for women religious. Hope seeking rebirth *On This Holy Mountain!*

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Introduction to Process of LCWR Shared Future, 2008.

ⁱⁱ Robert Schreiter, *The Ministry of Reconciliation: Spirituality and Strategies* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1998), 29.

ⁱⁱⁱ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2001), 40.

^{iv} Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2001), 273.

^v Brueggemann, 45.

^{vi} Brueggemann, 3.

^{vii} Donna Markham, “The Leader’s Mantle: Creating Connection in Chaotic Times,” (Toronto, Ontario: University of St. Michael’s College, Kelly Lecture, November 18, 2004).

^{viii} Margaret Wheatley and Deborah Frieze, “Using Emergence to Take Social Innovation To Scale”, 2006. <http://www.margaretwheatley.com/articles/emergence/html>.

^{ix} Brueggemann, 79.

^{ix} Mary Ruth Broz and Barbara Flynn, *Midwives of an Unnamed Future: Spirituality for Women in Times of Unprecedented Change* (Skokie, Illinois: Acta Publications, 2006) 174.

OTHER:

Peter Senge, C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, Betty Sue Flowers, *Presence: An Exploration of Profound Change in People, Organizations, and Society*. (New York, New York: Doubleday, 2004).

Anthony Gittins, *A Presence That Disturbs: A Call to Radical Discipleship* (Liguori, Missouri: Liguori/Triumph, 2002).

Nancy Sylvester and Mary Jo Klick, eds. *Crucible for Change: Engaging Impasse through Communal Contemplation and Dialogue*. (Boerne, Texas: Sor Juana Press, 2004).

Elaine Prevallet, *Making the Shift: Seeing Faith Through a New Lens*. (Nerinx, Kentucky, 2006)

Rufino Zaragoza, *Longing Heart* (Portland, Oregon: OCP Publications, 2002)