

LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE OF WOMEN RELIGIOUS
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Grief as a Catalyst for Transformation and Hope

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Maureen Geary, OP

This moment, this now that God gives us.
We live only in this permanent NOW.

MANY times in these “pandemic” months I have longed **NOT** to be in **THIS** now! I much prefer a different now. For weeks I kept saying “*this can’t be happening. I will wake up from this bad dream.*” I thought constantly about Wuhan, Italy, New York City, and Detroit. And then came the news from the Sisters at Maryknoll and Livonia, Michigan. And then India. Peru, where I have Sisters. Brazil. South Africa. Mexico. And more US cities and more and more.



The email came on March 12 that a lockdown would be in force at the retirement home where my 100-year-old mother lives. *This can’t be real. This is not happening.*

Sisters unable to see sisters. Families and worshiping communities separated. People isolated, ill, unemployed, hungry, afraid - dying.

This isn’t happening. I am going to wake up from this dream.

But it has happened, and it is happening. This is my now. This is our now.

These months of the **pandemic of COVID-19**, the murder of George Floyd, and the long-delayed awakening of white people to the devastation of the **pandemic of racism**, have filled me with **grief**. Grief for what **is**. Grief for what **will not be** – because of lives cut short, broken hearts, the suffering of the living and the dead, the smothering blanket of racism, economic devastation.

The moments... days... weeks... months have been disjointed yet all of a piece, surreal yet all too real.

And I have not been able to **FIX** any of it. A nightmare for a perfectionist, who perceives the world is not what it should be and wants so badly to make everything right. I have felt inadequate. Ineffectual. Utterly unable to **make things** - to **make ANY** thing – all right.

The opening quote is from a retreat reflection: “we live only in this permanent NOW.” I understand a momentary **now**. Or today’s **now**. But it has become the 2020 **now**. And the pandemic **now**. And the racism and its devastating effects **now**. All of this is a **permanent now**. We can’t go back. Life will never be the same. All of the future **nows** God gives us will build on **this now**.

Last year Sister Pat Murray shared Belden Lane’s wisdom that “*The starting point for many things is grief, at the place where endings seem so absolute.*” This NOW is a place where our many endings seem absolute, permanent. Lane continues, “*In the beginning you weep. This is what the teachers of the spiritual life insist.*”

I preached at our Easter Vigil service. Thoughts of the tomb, I confessed, had become my **whole** Lenten reflection. I felt sealed away by the immense stone of the coronavirus. I had many “**weeping nows**,” both sealed *inside* and keeping vigil *outside* the many confinements of these days. I wasn’t doing too well on the Resurrection faith part....

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary “kept sitting there opposite the tomb” (MT 27: 61). They sat opposite the tomb in their new permanent now, with Jesus dead, with the stone still in place. They sat, faithful, present to *their* now. **We** know the rest of the story – but in their waiting, they did not.

I was drawn back to the 2016 Assembly where we faced the racism of our congregations, our church, ourselves. Dr. Shannen Dee Williams called us to own our history. To own the NOW.

And I was drawn to the 2017 LCWR address *Will the Circle be Unbroken? Leaning into the Mystery of Resurrection Faith*. Dr. Christopher Pramuk moved me to tears with **amazing renditions** of Black spirituals and **deep insight** into the meaning of the songs. He quoted the conviction of W.E.B. Du Bois that “through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs *there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things.*” Du Bois asks: “Is such a hope justified? Do the Sorrow Songs sing true?”

Sorrow and weeping are both *somewhere to begin*, along with songs, dreams and love as Sara Thomsen shares in her beautiful rendition of the song *Somewhere to Begin*. Sorrow and weeping - and song and dreams and love are places to begin. They call us to **Resurrection Faith**, a place where we know hope is justified.

Gradually, hope was enkindled for me – perhaps through a crack in the stone covering the tomb. Sitting there opposite many tombs, accompanying others no matter what has sealed us away, confined or burdened us, we are enough. And God is with us in this now.

I love the series “Call the Midwife,” set in an impoverished yet resilient area of London in the 1950s and 60s. A recent episode closed with this wisdom: *The present will soon pass and the way we embrace it will determine everything.*

The present will soon pass and the way we embrace it will determine everything.

The space that grief creates is where God works transformation. For me this seems a slow transformation. And VERY incomplete. But I am *being transformed*, a little more each day in another permanent NOW.

I offer one more song: Leonard Cohen's *Anthem*:

The birds - they sing, at the break of day.
"Start again" I heard them say.
Don't dwell on what has passed away or what is yet to be.
Ring the bells that still can ring.
Forget your perfect offering.
There is a crack, a crack in everything.
That's how the light gets in.

The LCWR names the core of leadership as "the ability to reflect on, digest and learn from one's experience and do so in solitude and community." I carry this as a hope for growing in leadership ministry.

The present passes, leaving a new permanent now. And in it, we live. The permanence is infused with the grace of the now. The contemplative pose of waiting by the tomb, accompanying, is the grace of the reflective now.

What have I fixed? Nothing – the solutions are still beyond me.

I struggle to know my own heart. I struggle to hear God speaking. But still I persist.

Still we persist. We sit by all the tombs of our day, waiting, faithful, receptive. There are bells that still can ring. There is Light streaming through the cracks in everything. Embrace this NOW. Our hope is justified; the Sorrow Songs sing true.

Rebecca Ann Gemma, OP

The spirit and desires of our General Chapter in 2019 were captured in writing on a half-sheet of paper. It is entitled, *A Prayer for the Life of the World*. Many of us pray it each day, some have it memorized. Each section represents the current movement of the Spirit in our lives calling us toward deep listening, fidelity to Christ, and right relationship with all creation. The first stanza has become the inner lining of my daily offering as I pray, "**Holy Mystery, ever ancient, ever**



new, we, the Dominican Sisters of Springfield, come before you aware of our interconnectedness in the cosmos, and in solidarity with the rostros concretos of the marginalized.” Although *rostros concretos* literally means “specific faces,” in Castellano it is understood more broadly to include any oppressive situation which relegates people or any part of creation to the margins. Never could I have imagined how these words would be tested by our experience of a worldwide pandemic, systemic racism, global economic collapse and abuse of power within our nation and Church.

One evening I was watching the national news. The stay-at-home orders had been in effect for over 70 days; Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd had been killed; protests were rampant throughout the country; national leaders were ranting; and politics had once again made its way into ecclesial settings. In a news segment not more than a couple minutes long, I saw individuals on both sides of the *Black Lives Matter* movement yelling inches away from each other’s faces; a police-lined barricade ready to engage peaceful protesters; persons running toward the scene while others were running away; and there to the side, stood a child of color with a sign that read, “**See Me, Listen to Me, Love Me. I am here!**” I darted from the room with that image emblazoned in my heart and it haunts me, challenges me, and is transforming me ever since.

The Haunting

I seem to be going through a “Hound of Heaven experience” these days not unlike the time 40 years ago when I was seriously discerning God’s call to religious life. The child holding the sign comes into view as I pray, read, speak, and wander throughout the day. Like the pursued in Francis Thompson’s poem, I hear the footsteps of those made invisible not only in history texts, but in my own life of privilege. Those whose lives are on the other side of access, recognition, influence and power are calling me to embrace consecrated religious life with a new heart, a different way of being. My vows of poverty, celibacy, and obedience seek new expression in a fractured world where institutions and systems no longer defend those most vulnerable. I am being hounded by the vision of a child crying out, “I am here” as Holy Mystery, prompts me to see, listen and love anew.

The Challenge

The challenge before me is personal and it also engages my congregational leadership. As a Dominican sister, I lean into the grace of our charism which is to seek Truth. In an age of 24/7 broadcasts and online news, we can be tempted to assume that we already know the Truth from all perspectives. Yet my lens of privilege often blinds me to seeing how my comforts stand in stark contrast with the suffering of others. Due to the pandemic, many people have become homeless, unemployed and hungry. I have the benefit of living in community where food, shelter, and clothing are too often taken for granted. I am not preoccupied with my safety due to the color of my skin; with concern that medical care will not be provided; or that I will be on the streets if I don’t bring in a salary. Have I really given up all to follow Christ? How does my

religious life, obligate me to be in solidarity with the *rostros concretos*? What does this solidarity mean today?

I have come to realize that “fixing it” is neither the responsibility nor a possibility for leadership. However, I do believe those of us in this ministry of service are called to promote healing as we see, listen, and love. Who are the invisible in our communities, those relegated to the margins due to illness, mental distress, or broken relationships? Who are those front and center that loudly voice their disapprovals yet feel unseen? Who are the lonely, confused, and despairing longing to belong? I recognize anew the challenge to companion my sisters with honesty, tenderness and humility, as I recognize my own frailties and proclivity toward being judgmental. But it cannot stop there. Trusting our interconnectedness with all creation, I believe as a congregational leader, I am also called to challenge myself and my sisters to recognize how our engagement with one another affects the health and unity of all life. We are neither powerless, nor exempt, from our responsibilities toward all creation. Yes, we are to claim our own needs, but at the same time, must continually be aware of and attentive to the needs of those in our neighborhoods, cities, countries and universe. This comment is not to be heard as a cliché, nor is it reserved for those in certain age categories or with specific physical capacities. The challenge for all consecrated religious is to manifest with our individual and collective behaviors the belief that we are one in our Creator: if one suffers, we all suffer; if one is rejected, no one is whole; if one is healed, we are all made anew. This certainty pushes us beyond treating all as equals with identical needs. This worldview is making real the values of justice and equity expressed in caring relationships and the distribution of resources, where diversity is respected, the underserved are given priority, and abuse of power no longer divides us into the haves and have nots. This worldview is best shaped through prayer and outreach.

The Transformation

Sometimes maxims take time to drift off the paper into our hearts and spiritual DNA. One such age-old motif held in great esteem by members of the Order of Preachers has done just that in recent weeks. It states, “Contemplate and give to others the fruits of your contemplation.” For the past four months, I have been struggling with feelings of inadequacy, loss, and vulnerability stemming from these significant global events. What can I really do? What can my congregation do? I have been drawn into more frequent and intense times of contemplative prayer. The fruits of my contemplation are rarely articulated using words, as there seem to be no well-defined answers to my many questions. I have however experienced a deeper recognition of the Spirit’s presence, that of suffering Earth, and most frequently, persons on the margins calling out, as did that miniature prophet in the newscast, “I am here!” Taking a verse from our *Prayer for the Life of the World*, I daily plead: “Free our hearts to recognize and attend to Christ in hidden and unexpected places.” I trust that our God of abundance is fashioning something new in me, in religious life, and in all creation. Let us all see, listen, and love.

Antoinette Gutzler, MM

Good morning / afternoon to you! I'm happy to have this time together to share my journey from grief to transformation through my love of Chinese characters especially the character of – ren –

忍

This character has two parts: the first depicts the edge of a knife

刃

that pierces one's heart, 心,



and brings about – in the words of Jayne – a *holy disquietude*. It opened me to an inner journey that births endurance – the strength of heart – to meet and work with whatever life brings.

I'm sure that, for you too, everything since March has been a bit surreal as life as we knew it came to a screeching halt. Early on, we had to transfer 24 of our sisters, who were being tested for COVID, to another facility for the care they needed. Three Sisters died of the virus while seven who tested positive died but had underlying conditions. So far, we have had 14 deaths – with no wakes and no funerals.

Changes abounded as I told my sisters that we would not be praying – or doing anything – in common until “who knows when.” Our “open door” welcome mat was closed – no visitors allowed – including visits to our own sisters in assisted living or nursing care!

I've shared conversations and emails with our sisters over the world about whether they should “stay or leave” their place of mission. And in the midst of this, we tried to prepare for our elective general assembly.

And so, a grief began to settle over me – a wrenching experience of learning to live and to “let go” in this unprecedented time. My tears are still close to the surface – but never shed for fear they may not stop.

Somehow (I don't know how), there was a Spirit-led invitation to journey into a transforming “holy disquietude” in three areas: spirituality, mission and identity.

The first *disquietude* was in *spirituality*: Not being able to pray together, especially when we could not be with our sisters in their dying hours, brought one kind of grief. But another grief

took hold as I noticed the number of “virtual” masses that were on TV and on the internet. It came to me that, once again, the people of God were relegated to being “observers” at the Eucharist rather than participants stirring up memories of pre-Vatican II days.

COVID has laid bare the reality that, despite some changes, nothing has substantially changed in our church even though we profess that all are “equal in baptism.”

I found myself reflecting on the rich spiritualities we Maryknoll Sisters have experienced in our mission lives. We have lived with peoples of myriad cultures throughout the world and have been transformed in deeply spiritual ways.

And in this pondering, an unsettling question rose up 刃:

How might I have participated in the sin of inequality within our church?

I saw this “sin” in my omission of not doing all I could to bring the voices of the Americas, East and South Africa, East and South Asia to the table of spirituality as a small, first step toward transformation from a western way of “doing” liturgy to a diversity that springs from the heart of our local churches throughout the world.

I realized that “ren” 忍 is an invitation and a call to persist in the struggle for diversity and inclusion in all areas of life. The challenge: how will we do this in the future?

The next *disquietude* from COVID was a transformative understanding of mission. The “action” that traditionally defines the missionary could not be our primary way of being during this pandemic as we all “sheltered in place.”

Something new and deeper was happening – a two-pronged journey. There was a journey into grief that what we have known and rejoiced over in the past way of being in mission has come to completion.

And then, a journey into transformation bringing with it a fragile hope of coming into a new, life-giving era. The prophetic voice of leadership for this transformation is found in the space between “knife” and “heart”

刃

心

where, as Paul Tillich tells us, “The first duty of love is to listen.”

I realized how I need to listen to where we are being called today and to the collaboration and partnership that beckons to us beyond our own borders. This means that in this “change of eras,” there will be the grief of leaving missions where we have put down roots and where we love deeply. Dare I ask my Sisters to leave the places and the people with whom they have fallen in love to go to other places of need? I fear my courage is not that great for I, too, know the heart-breaking grief of separation.

But the challenge to “let go” and sink into the turbulence of our times is clear. “Ren” 忍 is a communal call to break open our hearts to the realities of our changing and ever-fluid world and with great “endurance” forge the future of mission.

The third *holy disquietude* is that of our Maryknoll Sisters’ identity, a continuing conversation that relates to the racial awakening and resultant turmoil churning through our country at the time of this taping.

Throughout the past several decades, we have endeavored to address the reality of who we are as a Congregation begun in the United States. From our earliest days, we have had Sister-members from other nations – first identifying ourselves as international →→→ then as multicultural →→→ and now we have launched into the journey of engaging our complexity and becoming intercultural.

At each step, we struggled to address the racism, biases and privilege which exist in our congregation. We work hard always knowing there is much more work to do, but now COVID has shed a brilliant spotlight on the complexities of our struggles.

For example, in community life or in various workshops there is always something one can hide. But when you are with the same people “sheltering in place” day after day – conflicts, attitudes, biases, etc. come closer to the surface and erupt in ways that must be dealt with through sometimes quite difficult conversations. There is no escape hatch of leaving a workshop for the “comfort zone” of home.

My challenge, within the grief of knowing that we all – myself included – have much work to do, is to have the courage to drive the “blade of the knife” 刃 into my own heart and that of my sisters 心 so that we have the “endurance” to continue to birth a new way of being together in the diversity and wholeness of our God.

Grief creates a space for us to co-create something new together with God. No one asks for grief. It comes unbidden. But *transformation* is a CHOICE born from within the crucible of pain

and uncertainty. It is a choice that demands nothing less than an unswerving courage and endurance to carry on.

The words of Isaiah echo in our hearts: “Behold I am doing something new . . . do you not perceive it?”

