

# Embracing the Future, Graced, Grounded and Free

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The heckling grew louder. Lead fans were chanting fake Indian war cries, a “woo-woo-woo” sound. Some fans were waving food stamps, a reference to the reservation’s receiving federal aid. It was the fall of 1988, in the gymnasium of the Lead South Dakota High School. Here the visiting Indian girls’ team would oppose the home team, Lead High School. Minutes before the game, the Pine Ridge Lady Thorpes Basketball Team waited in the hallway leading to the basketball court. They could hear the cry, “Where’s the cheese?” The mockery suggested that, if Indians were lining up, they must be expecting commodity cheese.

Amidst deafening boos the Indian team took the floor, led by SuAnne Big Crow, a fourteen-year-old freshman. She stopped in the center of the court facing the Lead fans. Using her warm-up jacket as a shawl, SuAnne began the Lakota shawl dance. As she danced, she sang in Lakota. The crowd went completely silent. In the quiet the only sound was the pure tones of the Lakota song. After a time of silence, the crowd began to cheer and applaud. Then SuAnne dropped her jacket, dribbled around the court, sprinted to the basket and laid the ball through the hoop. The fans cheered her wildly.<sup>1</sup>

So here we are in Orlando, Florida, thousands of miles and a world of culture separating us from Lead, South Dakota and SuAnne Crow. We are the leaders of respected religious congregations. We sit on the boards of schools and healthcare institutions. We make important decisions for our congregations and other organizations in our city. And yet, if we listen carefully, we might hear some “woo-woo-woo” sounds. If we listen carefully, we might hear the rumble of discontent. If we listen carefully we might hear complaints about doctrinal purity or radical feminism. If we listen carefully, we might hear the cry of aging members and aging institutions. If we listen carefully, we might hear the still quiet fear in our own hearts. We do not have to listen too carefully to hear the creeping reality of financial foreboding.

What is our song in the midst of this conflict and diminishment? What is our dance as we come center court in the media? How do we confront the historic and holy challenge of our time, our only time? One option is to ignore the disquieting sounds of our minds and hearts. Let the next administration deal with it.

As a first year teacher, a friend of mine was preparing for the visit of the school supervisor, Sr. Mary Alice McDade. The McDade Family was a prominent education family in the Chicago area, boasting of the McDade Reader, the leadership of

Father McDade of the Carmelite Order and the prominence of Sister Theresa Frances McDade as head of the BVM Board of Education. Sr. Mary Alice was herself a formidable figure, trumpeting the significant values of lesson plans and professionalism.

During the Christmas holidays the principal had moved my friend, Mary Therese from fifth grade to sixth grade. On the first week in January, she faced fifty sixth graders, and knew neither the content of the syllabus nor the names of the students. In this environment the visit of the school supervisor loomed. An imaginative teacher, Mary Therese devised a plan. She decided to teach a history class since Sr. Mary Alice was history major. She stayed up all night; she organized colorful charts, maps, and films strips for Sr. Mary Alice's 9:15 AM Monday morning appearance.

At 9:15 AM Monday morning, Sr. Mary Alice did not appear, but Mary Therese taught a brilliant History lesson. At 10:00 AM, Sr. Mary Alice still did not materialize so, Mary Therese, remembering her all night preparation, taught the same lesson. The students were mesmerized. They had never seen so many teaching aides. At 11:00 AM, Sr. Mary Alice appeared. Exhausted and out of ideas, Mary Therese instructed her students to take out their arithmetic books. Having done no preparation for an arithmetic lesson, she could not even find the key with the answers. Students ran back and forth to the board at random. Chaos ruled the classroom.

That evening, Mary Therese slumped into a chair to receive her evaluation from Sr. Mary Alice. Sister Mary Alice looked Mary Therese in the eye and remarked, "You have the best seating chart I have ever seen."

Sometimes we look for that one flicker of hope. Sometimes a sense of immediate short term compassion rules. But our deepest hope and our ultimate compassion arise from rock bottom reality, from responsibility for the future. This responsibility compels us to address the fact of no new members, the fact of scarce resources, the fact of a limited institutional future. The truth obliges us to plan, and counsels us to embrace a critical juncture in the history of our congregation and in the history of religious life. The truth urges to give conscious direction to the evolution of religious life. We do not want to be guilty bystanders. We desire to help shape the future through our focused contemplative response to the signs of our times.

In this response, in the discipline of planning, surely we experience anxiety, confusion and pain. In this experience we enter once again into the paschal mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus. We cannot do it alone. We need the solidarity of our sisters, the friendship of other congregational leaders and the expertise of the national organizations such as the National Religious Retirement Office (NRRO), the Resource Center for Religious Institutes (RCRI) and the Leadership Conference of Women Religious) LCWR. In this experience we remember the spirit of our founders, their

sacrifices, their lives of devotion and insecurity. In this graced history, we deepen the charism of our community.

Many of us remember an ancient invocation.

Send forth your Holy Spirit and our hearts shall be regenerated and you will renew the face of the earth.

O, God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit, did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may have a right understanding in all things, a love and relish for what is right and just and a constant enjoyment of your divine comforts through Christ Our Lord. Amen.

We religious leaders indeed desire the gifts of the Spirit. Confronted by complex, new circumstances and issues, we desire instruction. Listening to the suffering of a sister or brother who endure mental illness, we yearn for a right understanding in all things. Addressing moral issues like same sex marriage or gun control, we seek a love and relish for what is right and just. And on certain late Friday afternoons, when most of the staff has left the building, when the proposed agenda for the day lies in ruins across our desk, and the darkness of a February Midwest storm threatens, we may long for a constant enjoyment of your divine comforts. Such comforts may reveal themselves in a beer and pizza with friends.

In those long haul moments, we realize anew the charism of religious life. Charism means that religious life is directly dependent upon the Spirit, both in its origins and in its continually new forms. The charism of religious life is the fruit of the Holy Spirit who is always at work within the Church.<sup>2</sup>

Fidelity to the charism, the founding spirit is often troublesome. *Mutuae Relationes* tells us that, "Every authentic charism implies a certain element of (1) genuine originality and (2) special initiative for the spiritual life of the church. In its surroundings, it may appear troublesome and may even cause difficulties, since it is not always and immediately easy to recognize it as coming from the Spirit."<sup>3</sup>

Concretely and pragmatically, charism implies that religious life will always involve something the church has not seen before—or at least not seen in this way. Because of its novelty and its presence as an unforeseen impetus within the church, charism means the presence of the "troublesome" and the presence of new difficulties and challenges to the Church.<sup>4</sup>

You know these difficulties and challenges. You travel a journey which demands the deepest immersion in your charism, the richest investment in your wisdom, the widest opening in your vulnerability. Your journey is a journey into the unknown future. But it is God's future, and God's future is filled with life. We religious are

chastened now. We have suffered. We have experienced loss and humiliation. So we do not chose an alternative future and live happily ever after.

The strongest of us, the most contemplative of us, the most prophetic of us, endures confusion, disorientation, mistrust of our own decisions. Serious planning involves, searching our charism, confronting the facts, letting go, imagining a new reality and daily arguments with the nemesis of good planning, denial. As Constance FitzGerald reminds us "We are encumbered by old assumptions, burdened by memories that limit our horizons and, therefore, unfree to see God coming to us from the future."<sup>5</sup> We are at impasse, when, as FitzGerald suggests, liturgy may feel like "an empty shell," but God is coming to us from the future.

Yes, God is coming to us from the future, a future, compelling a right understanding all things, a future seeking a love and relish for what is right and just, a future relying on the profound center of our charism. We shall not find that future in our own virtue. We are all too weak for that. I personally identify with Martha Mead, a Sister of Charity of Leavenworth, Kansas, who arriving in the Montana Territory in 1869, declared, "I am not at all brave. A greater coward seldom traveled toward the setting sun."

But the Spirit's charism still calls us forward into God's alternative future. What does that future look like? Maybe it looks like a covenant relationship, maybe it looks like a merger, maybe it looks like living fully until we die. Maybe it looks like contemplation. Maybe it looks like justice. Maybe it looks like more public correction. Maybe it looks like exoneration. Maybe it is around the corner and maybe it will erupt in the era of our children's children. What is clear is our responsibility as leaders to read the signs of the times, to contemplate, to communicate, to plan and to act our way into the future.

Looking back in our history, we might remember the story of President Harry Truman's return to Washington from Independence, Missouri following his devastating loss to the Republicans in congressional elections in 1946, the Democrats' worst defeat since 1928. Arriving from Kansas City at Washington's Union Station on a depressingly gray morning, Truman walked off the train, silent, but smiling, and found no one there to greet him...

It was therefore with some astonishment that he saw that there was, after all, someone standing on the platform to meet him. In his elegantly tailored topcoat and Hamburg was his undersecretary of state, Dean Gooderham Acheson. The president was absolutely delighted to see him and asked back him to the White House for a drink.

Dean Acheson, on the other hand, was perplexed and deeply distressed at the absence of any high official from the government save himself. As he later

recalled, "It had been for years been a Cabinet custom to meet President Roosevelt's private car on his return from happier elections to escort him to the White House. It never occurred to me that after defeat the President would be left to creep unnoticed back to the capital. So I met his train. To my surprise and horror, I was alone on the platform where his car was brought in, except for the stationmaster and a reporter or two."<sup>6</sup>

As John Kennedy once remarked, "Success has a thousand fathers, but failure is an orphan." You might identify with such a moment after a difficult board meeting or a harsh chapter of elections or just casually talking about selling the motherhouse. These moments of loneliness, seeming failure and the human condition of misunderstanding compel a return to our true home, our foundation, our wellspring of meaning, the charism of our congregation, its spirit and life.

Send forth your Holy Spirit and our hearts shall be regenerated and you will renew the face of the earth.

O, God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit, did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be have a right understanding in all things, a love and relish for what is right and just and a constant enjoyment of your divine comforts through Christ Our Lord. Amen.

As we seek that right understanding, we do so, aware that certain principles enhance and develop the character of our leadership. What are some of those principles?

- **Satisfaction / Dissatisfaction**

Eliminating dissatisfactions does not create satisfaction. All the changes that freed us, freed us not just from something, but for someone.

Often, when the evils of individualism are condemned, the specter of a lone individual is raised. Picture some poor benighted soul thinking about herself, securing her place at the expense of others, claiming burnout before she has ever been lit up. Rarely is the individualism of congregations explored. Just as an individual must have a vision larger than herself in order to possess the fire of meaning, so too, a religious congregation never ceases remembering, developing, enlarging its vision. This vision may not be the one we originally imagined. It may be a vision of God doing a new thing with us.

- **Psychological Safety**

The distinguished organizational scholar Edgar Schein tells us that change in an organization requires the creation of psychological safety. The leader must have the emotional strength to absorb much of the anxiety that change brings

with it and the ability to remain supportive to the organization through the transition phase even if group members become angry and obstructive.

The leader is likely to become the target of anger and criticism because, by definition, he or she must challenge some of what the group has taken for granted. This may involve closing down the company division that was the original source of the company's growth and the basis of many employees' (members') sense of pride and identity.<sup>7</sup>

So psychological safety and genuine deep satisfaction enhance and develop the character of our leadership, so vital in our time. These are not principles at which we excel each day, but ways in which seek to live our charism. But as we choose our future we might well remember the counsel of John Fitzgerald Kennedy,

Mr. Nixon and I, and the Republican and Democratic parties are not suddenly frozen in ice or collected in amber since the two conventions. We are like two rivers which flow back through history, and you can judge the force, the power and the direction of the rivers by studying where they rose and where they ran throughout their long course.<sup>8</sup>

You can judge the force, the power and the direction of our congregations by studying where we rose and where we ran through our long course. You can judge the force, power and direction of the future of our congregations, not by our longevity or our numbers but by the strength of our charisms.

In spite of the troublesome nature of charism, in spite of woo, woo, woos, we have the power, the force and the direction to sing our song in its purest tones. We have the power, the force and the direction to choose our dance. We have the power, the force and the direction to renew our charism. As SuAnne Big Crow sang the Lakota Song, we too can sing the pure tones of the Spirit's song. In the quiet of contemplation the noise of ministry, in the discipline of planning, we cherish a haunting melody.

Send forth your Holy Spirit and our hearts shall be regenerated and you will renew the face of the earth.

O, God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit, did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may have a right understanding in all things, a love and relish for what is right and just and a constant enjoyment of your divine comforts through Christ Our Lord. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Frazier, "Modern Tales of Ordinary Life and Extraordinary Valor in the Hard Land of the Ogallala Sioux," *Atlantic Monthly*, December, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> *Evangelica Testificatio*, Apostolic Exhortation of His Holiness Paul VI, *On the Renewal of the Religious Life* according to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council.

<sup>3</sup> Sacred Congregation For Religious for Secular Institutes and Sacred Congregation for Bishops *Mutuae Relationes, Directives for the Mutual Relations Between Bishops And Religious in the Church*, May 14, 1978, 12.

<sup>4</sup> Buckley, Michael, J., SJ, "The Charism and Identity of Religious Life," Papers Prepared for the General Meeting of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, Collegeville, MN, 1985.

<sup>5</sup> FitzGerald, Constance, "From Impasse to Prophetic Hope: Crisis of Memory," *Catholic Theological Society of America*, 64 (2009): 21-42.

<sup>6</sup> Chace, James, *Acheson*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998) 9-10.

<sup>7</sup> Schein, Edgar H., *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> White, Theodore, *In Search of History* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978) 462.