

What's A Leader to Do?
Holy Mystery Revealed in our Midst
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What I was asked to talk about for a brief time this morning is how we go forth from here as leaders. I want to start by saying I have good news for you, and bad news. The bad news? That maturing love I was talking about yesterday, well it's never really finished. It's not once and for all reality, it is not like we arrive. Now the good news is that maturing love that I was talking about yesterday is something to which we never fully arrive. So the two are not so dualistic. Our living in faith is always developing. It is not having the answers, but about being at ease with all that is unsolved and unfinished. So my advice for all of us is to continue to lean in to what we don't yet know and understand. And to accept that at this time of Holy Mystery we are all being converted and changed constantly. Our constant call, first of all as members of religious life, but certainly as leaders is to keep ourselves in the place of listening to Holy Mystery.

What I'd like to do this morning is some reflections on "What's a leader to do?" I will suggest five things: one is a bit of a summary from what we've been learning here, and then four things from my experience.

- From Carol, we were reminded how critical it is that as leaders we really know where we are and pay attention to that reality, because she said to us revelation happens in that reality. In many ways as leaders we are conductors of the melody, the harmony, the timbre, the silence of the music. And when we do that well we can help our congregations sing to the Lamentations.
- From Margaret, we heard that as leaders we need to beg like mendicants for Lady Wisdom and deepen our longing for her.
- From Ana Lydia, we were reminded that as leaders we are enough, we are enough for God, and we are enough for our congregation, even on the days when it doesn't feel like we are.
- From Nancy Conway we were reminded that in the mystery of leadership we are often called to lead from a different place, perhaps not even from the place of all our skills and expertise. They gave us great advice, didn't they.
- And remember some of the images we heard in our prayer: remember the video of "who will speak if we don't," and "may all we do be for the healing of the whole." Remember how we were learning from our executive sessions how to deal with the issues that challenge us, whether in this body or in our own local churches, dioceses, county seats, or whatever the situation. And then, in yesterday afternoon's presentation we were reminded that as leaders we always need to be about the critical issues facing us, -- so we are grateful for the challenge to think about fossil fuels.

In addition to these things, what's a leader to do? The first thing I suggest, and this is a bit of a return to my reflection on Tuesday evening, is that in this time of mystery, and of seeking to know something of God's revelation to us, one of the most critical things we can do as leaders is to go into the cave of darkness, knowing that it is a rich place of wisdom. Remember, life starts in darkness, a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, Jesus in the tomb, it all starts in darkness. Think about the spiritual leaders whose lives were changed in caves, in silence, in darkness, with the smell of the earth surrounding them. We know that Buddha meditated regularly in caves. In Buttan there is the tradition of the great spiritual masters praying in deep caves. We know that Mohammad prayed in a small cave outside of

Mecca for days at a time. Jesus was born in a cave and he sought out isolated places. So my first encouragement is not to rush, but to spend time in contemplative reflection.

Think about the three days related to the new moon; paradoxically the nights when the old moon vanishes from sight are the same nights that the new moon is being born. So let's walk around in leadership in a way in which we become part of the night so as to enter more sensitively into the great mysteries. Remember the night inside you where that which is new within you is always being fashioned in the dark. Remember Jonah in the belly of the whale for three days, Jesus in the tomb for three days, Paul, blind in Damascus for three days. It seems like maybe people had to learn from ancient times how long they had to wait in the dark before that little sliver of a new moon started to break forth.

So, what I want to say first as we go forth as leaders, is that I think the most critical work we can do is to take time for contemplation. Now this is not something you do on our day off. It is leadership work. But we don't usually schedule it that way, do we? We say "I need a little break, I'll take a reflection day. No, this time for contemplation is as critical as any meeting you attend, as any other work you do. This making contemplation a priority takes a huge amount of discipline. My experience is that it takes discipline because it is so easy to let the calendar fill up. My practical advice is to go home and fill in your calendar. Mark the time you will take for contemplation as the work of leadership. Realize that the deepest truths always take time to reach us, so our job is to wait on them. We have to pay attention to what is moving within us and within the congregation. As Pema Chodron says, "Nothing ever goes away until it has taught us what we need to know." So staying with the questions we have, and the issues we are facing until we've been with them long enough so they release something of their power, and their wisdom takes a lot of quiet. There is another fun quote I've found: "When things fall apart they make a lot of noise. When things come together they do so quietly and slowly so we often miss them." So, as we go forth as leaders from this conference, that is my encouragement: move in a contemplative way as leaders and receive the wisdom that God wants to give us.

Denise Levertov has a lovely poem to help us know this:

Days past when I forget the Mystery
Problems insolvable and problems offering
 their own ignored solutions
jostle for my attention, they crowd its antechamber
along with a host of diversions, my courtiers, wearing
their colored clothes: caps and bells
 And then
once more the quiet mystery
is present to me, the throngs clamor recedes: the mystery
that there is anything, anything at all,
let alone the cosmos, joy, memory, everything,
rather than void: and that O Lord,
Creator, Hallowed One, You still,
hour by hour, sustain it.

It is important that we do this not only for ourselves so that we have the wisdom to lead well, but look at what is modeled to your sisters. Don't you get discouraged when they tell you how busy they are? Busy doing this, and that. It is all good work, don't get me wrong, but our life is about more than the work. So model contemplative living for your sisters.

The second thing I want to say is write and speak about what you learn in the dark. Have these reflections be as important as your reports to the congregation. as your financial data, your demographics, and your plans. Speak of your dreams as Plenty Coups did, even when the how is not clear. It's the vision that's important. For this I want to give an example from Dr. King. You know, when he gave that wonderful speech he said things like this: "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed... I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the children of former

slaves and the children the former slave owners will be able to sit down together... I have a dream that one day, even in the state of Mississippi, the desert state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heart of oppression, Mississippi will be transformed into an oasis of freedom...I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will be judged by the content of their character."

Do you notice that he doesn't say exactly how this will happen. What is important is that he puts the vision out there. He probably didn't have a complete plan of how to implement the dream, but he certainly had a clear sense that this dream was about God's purpose.

I think as leaders we sometimes we get shy about setting forth a vision and a dream when we may not know all the practical steps. It is not practical steps that move people, it is vision. I encourage you today to be courageous in setting forth vision, even when you are not clear about the steps. It is what Jesus did when he told those wonderful parables. He didn't have practical answers, rather he told people what he dreamed and left it up to them to figure out how to move in that dream.

Do this, not only with the congregation, but I encourage you to do this as team members. Are you talking enough with each other about your dreams for the congregation, about how to do those things we were talking about yesterday; maturing the life of the community, clarifying vision, negotiating the difficult middle space issues, and growing our prophetic response. Or do you just go about business as usual. It is very easy and a huge temptation as a leadership team to do all the things the leadership team before you did - business as usual. Stop periodically and ask what has accumulated onto leadership in your congregation that is not really essential to leadership. You'll be amazed at how many things could fill your days just because somebody before you did those things. I remind you that having conversations about the meaning and purpose of our life is your most critical work as a team and as a congregation. There is a business principal that says spend 80% of your time doing the 20% of that which is most critical. It is easy to let that slip. So as teams figure out what is most critical - what are the critical conversations your group needs to have? And then spend a lot of time working on them. There are other folks who can do the other work.

Third, in every way possible draw the group into the exploration of wisdom and God's revelation for our time. Assist the members in articulating their faith in this mysterious time. Yesterday I gave you the image of trying to thicken the speech as in the exile. This is your job as leaders: thicken the conversations that your sisters are having with each other. Create spaces where we can really be honest with each other about what we are learning about "holy mystery in our midst," safe places where we can be deliberate. Actually it was Cathy Bertrand working with our congregation this summer who quoted someone as saying "May we never speak least about what matters most." So encourage those significant conversations about our identity, our purpose, who is Jesus for us? And as leaders please don't be afraid of the resistance that might arise in the group. In the resistance, if we follow it down, is the place of deep knowing. There is wisdom in that place, the revelation of God is there.

My fourth suggestion: keep discovering the close relationship between individual heartbreak, what's happening in the congregation, and the broken heartedness of the world. I think it is critical that as leaders we immerse ourselves in these places of suffering and brokenness. And, that we call out and awaken the passion of our members for radical responses to critical needs. Now I want to challenge us with something that I know is terribly difficult to do as leaders. Make at least one space for yourself where there is some real connection with the suffering of the world, not vicariously, not by knowing about it on television, or by visiting our sisters in another country or in a critical situation. Don't only be a visitor to suffering. Find some way to give yourself a real connection with suffering people.

I'll tell you a story on myself. One of the things I committed to do, about once every four or five weeks, to spend an overnight at a women's shelter in Dubuque. Every time my turn came up I'd say to myself -- "why do I do this? I don't have time." Every morning when I left the shelter I would say, "I think this

is one of the most important thing I am doing in leadership." I learned about drugs in our city, struggling with addiction, raising kids, the abuse of women. And those are the things that were critical for keeping alive my passion for religious life - because that is what we want to be about, responding to those needs. This also creates a sense of authenticity in our asking our members to respond to those same critical needs.

So the second half of this point about responding to the brokenness of the world, is that I encourage you to cajole, beg, take away every excuse from sending your sisters into areas of greatest need in our country, our church, our world. Speaking of this reality, I think we should send the sisters in Missouri to Ferguson, to make peace. So our St. Louis sisters, we will pray for you as you go back home. You've got a very difficult, challenging situation there. Call forth your sisters who know how to be peace makers. Send them to Ferguson.

What is a leader to do? Step into the Mystery of the maturing process of our congregational life by
going into the cave of contemplation,
writing and speaking about the wisdom you learn there,
drawing your sisters into conversation about the things that matter most, and
always make the connection between individual heartbreak and the heart-brokenness of the world.

So when someone asks you what you did today you can say: "I walked around in the mystery, looking for God's revelation." They'll probably think it more important if you went to six board meetings, or sold the hospital or built a new building. But what is ours to do is walk around in the mystery looking for God's revelation, God's call to us. They may think it strange, but I remind you what Frederick Nietzsche said: "those who were seen dancing were thought to be insane by those who couldn't hear the music."