

2016 Assembly of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious

Finding Ground in the Age of Groundlessness

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(Transcription of address, with light editing)

Good morning. I feel rather speechless, and this is not a good time to feel speechless! It is a great honor to be with you. I'm going to speak very personally today. I'm not going to talk about transformational leadership. I'm going to talk about my own journey, my own experiences in finding ground so that we can each choose to be the presence of peace, compassion, confidence, and clarity about why we are in this situation. Most of you have already chosen to be this. I want to talk about all of that and honor you for who you already have been and hopefully support you to claim with ever greater clarity who you need to be -- and who I need to be -- for the world.

The personal journey I'm going to relate to you began with you. It began with women religious in 1994. I think I began working first with the Sisters of Mercy with their large hospital system and then with the Sisters of St. Joseph of whom I am an honorary member -- and I take that very seriously and very gratefully. In those days -- and we're talking about 22, 23 years ago -- when I was speaking with nuns I enjoyed the freedom of bringing in my spiritual self. I could speak about my relationship with Mystery, my relationship with God, in ways I could not do in corporate America, or in government organizations. So I felt a kind of freedom that actually allowed me to expand and I'm very grateful for that. And then over the years I've worked with many different orders of women religious and stayed very close to LCWR through the very difficult trials and tribulations of the past few years.

Everywhere I go I say this, and I'm saying it to you, but I say it to everyone: nuns are the greatest women leaders on the face of the planet. It has been your commitment, your presence, your bearing witness, your willingness to stay in the very hard places that has made you the shining examples for the rest of us. So I hope that you can celebrate who you have already been. I also created a slogan which is: If you want it done, ask a nun. I remember one experience of this where I was doing an event in a place that had terrible lighting. It had too much light coming in so that none of the slides would be visible. We fussed with this for about an hour and we couldn't get anything to work and then suddenly a 74-year old nun arrives on the scene and she says, "If you just put this over here, and you just move this over here, you'll be fine," and we were. That's how my slogan was born.

So I want to talk about mystery. (*Projects an image.*) This is a mysterious image; what does it look like to you? Something beautiful, right? This is an image that just came of Jupiter as seen from its southern pole. It could be a great spiritual mandala, a painting of infinity; it could be a beautiful piece of pottery, but it's our gorgeous, gorgeous universe. You have on your table these cards. The one at my table has the quote: "We are called to be careful listeners to the still,

small voice that is leading us to the edge." I want to start with this thought, I want to talk about Mystery. We are called to be careful listeners to the still, small voice that is leading us to the edge. A long time ago I was told that the voice of God, the voice of the Holy Spirit, speaks as loudly as we are willing to listen, and that has been a great source of guidance to me. If I couldn't hear the voice of Spirit, I knew that it was my problem. It wasn't that the Holy Spirit had turned away from me, it's just that I had moved in the position of thinking, "I know what to do, I'm in charge here. Thank you, I got the inspiration now. I'm just running off with it." You know that wonderful quote, "That if you want to make God laugh, tell her your plans." Yes, that's been a part of my life for a long time.

But this still, small voice is not small, and I think part of our resistance, certainly my resistance, was where it leads us. That's what I love about this quote. When we listen to Spirit, when we really listen and tune in, we are led to the edge. Not a comfortable place to be. So there is enormous risk involved in being willing to be used by God. There is enormous possibility, but there is also enormous risk. Last night the quote was given that with mystery we need to bow down. I want to introduce a different approach which is my own direct experience, which is, we need to surrender. And what we are surrendering is our plans, our goals, our desires, our certainty, our arrogance. That's what we're surrendering, and it's a beautiful place once you arrive there, because the voice is no longer small. There is clarity and the feeling that you are working with and being used as an agent in something that goes far beyond the egoic craziness that has plagued humankind forever.

Truly surrendering to Mystery, surrendering to God, is a wondrous experience, but it takes a lot of work. It takes being mindful, it takes being contemplative, it takes noticing when our own ego needs, our own desires, our own personality just step in and say, "No, no, no, do it this way. No, you really don't need to go there, that's okay." How we approach uncertainty, how we approach this time when the very fabric of society is being ripped out, ripped apart by conflict and polarization is essential. How we are in that groundlessness?

For me, speaking very personally, I can only be in it because I have spent months in contemplation. I have made it a personal goal to want to work with Mystery, to want to work beyond my own little ego. The path to doing that requires a level of commitment and a desire to want to stay in the midst of the heartbreak of the world, to stay in the confusion, to stay in the terrorizing circumstances, and to want to be with people in their suffering; not to alleviate it, but to be with them in the experience of it.

Now I learned about bearing witness from all of you. I learned about standing with, being present for others, knowing that you couldn't alleviate the pain of their situation, but you could alleviate the pain of their situation by being with them, because whenever two or more are present, God is with us also. So I want to talk a little about staying, rather than fixing, and being with, rather than thinking we are going to change the terrible suffering that's going on. So I want to get very personal here and tell you that years ago I was talking to what I think you would call a spiritual counselor -- I would call her my teacher -- and I was very depressed about

the state of the world. Her name is Pema Chödrön, you may know her, she's a luminous presence teaching us about compassion and how to just be in the world. She's a Buddhist teacher. And I was talking to her about my despair for the state of the world, and she said very quietly, "You know, Meg, it's going to get a lot worse." I found that to be the most cheerful statement she's ever given me, because I know it's true.

I know that what we're experiencing now, what we've experienced the past several decades, is part of the pattern of human history, which is that we go through cycles, and we are in the cycle of collapse. There will be more suffering, there will be more terrorism, there will be more uncertainty and people will grasp for certainty; they will terrorize one another. This is what humans always do at the end of a vibrant civilization -- whatever one it was. We go into this pattern. When Pema said, "You know it's going to get a lot worse and we're going to look back at these as the good old days," I realized she was right. We can still be together, we can still take comfort in one another, we can still communicate easily, we can still move freely, we still have clean water and air and food. We are not refugees; we are not the 65.5 million people who are without country and without home right now. So we can use this opportunity, which I think is why we are here together, we can use this opportunity to strengthen our inner capacity so that we can stay present for people as the suffering increases. So I want to talk about that.

(Projects image) This is the Chinese character for perseverance. I recently learned that it has other definitions. It's the symbol for patience, it's the symbol for -- I found this really interesting -- for tolerance. So the very capacities that we want: to be tolerant, open, patient, persevere for the long term -- be there for people -- are all in this simple Chinese character. You know, the last time I spoke at an LCWR assembly -- when Brian Swimme was there, I was speaking about perseverance. I was writing a book called *Perseverance*, but I didn't know about this Chinese character until a sister came up to me and said; "Look at this Chinese character." What's interesting about the Chinese character is how much information it gives us. It's a knife over a human heart. So right there we see the path. It's the path with heart, but we're always in peril of having our hearts cut wide open -- which is both a painful and a joyful experience. It's a path of peril, because at any moment as we're persevering, working from our great heart energy, and then we may be cut to pieces by slander, by scandal, by violence, by being killed as has happened with people of great faith.

So how do we stay on this path? How do we persevere? How do we keep our hearts open and be tolerant? How do we have patience? You know my own practice now is to go on very long retreats. Every year I do about an eight or nine-week continuous, solitary meditation retreat. I need it. I don't do this as a nice vacation. I actually need that depth of experience with the sacred, with Mystery, so that I can stay in the difficult places I want to be in.

You already have worked in very difficult places. So my question to you or my offering to you is: What does it take for you to be able to stay and be the presence of love? In the face of terrible inhumane atrocities, what gives you the capacity to be the presence of love? To me, this is not theoretical at all. For me, this is a commitment that I made. I want to stay. I want to be available.

I don't want to get overwhelmed with rage and grief for what I am seeing. And I think that is the challenge for all of us. How do we not get overwhelmed by the terrorizing behaviors that are now growing more and more common on the planet? How do you be with someone that has been just been rescued from the sex trade? How do you be with someone whose whole life has been destroyed by drugs? How do you be with someone who has just experienced a terrorist attack? How do you be with someone whose family has been destroyed -- whether in Rwanda or elsewhere in the world? How do we be with these people who are experiencing the worst of life? That was my question. How can I be with them and not add to the aggression, and not add to the fear, and not add to the pain?

So that was my commitment. And the only way that I could answer that was to go into a very contemplative life style for part of the year. That was a great privilege, because my kids were grown. I could afford to not work for a third of the year. And now it's just become a constant source of nourishment. In fact, my kids, who are now grown with kids of their own, have said at different times -- often around November, because I do these retreats in January, February and March -- "I think it's time you go into retreat, Mom." And my children were right, because I could feel my aggression rising, my impatience rising. You know all the people that I want to develop this capacity of peacefulness for so I can better serve them, I just wanted them out of the way. So this, for me, is a lifesaver. Luckily I'm speaking to you, what is it -- it's only August -- so I'm still okay!

Last night Catherine introduced the image of when you are sitting by the beautiful lake and you see a turtle head come up and these ripples start. This is a very common image for thinking about our role in creating change in the world. But I realize that, for me, this is no longer possible. We're not these little drops of water that ripple out. Our behaviors cannot ripple out, because this is what the world looks like right now. Right? This incredible turbulence, this unpredictability, this uncertainty, this not knowing. How many of you now check the news daily to see if there's been another terrible terrorist attack? Or just feel a need to stay much more in touch because events, awful events, are escalating, and they will continue? So we're not drops of water.

I want to put in a different image -- and that is that we need to be the presence of peace wherever we are, wherever we are. In the midst of terrifying circumstances, we need to be the presence of peace. So in my own work, I am now training people who are in leadership positions, but what I'm training them is to be -- you may not like this word, but I will explain it -- warriors for the human spirit. And we use the word *warrior* in the Tibetan sense of -- and in other cultures as well -- one who is brave, but brave enough to not use aggression or fear. That takes a lot of work these days. How not to get angry, or not respond from anger. How not to feel overwhelmed by fear, even though were in a fearful situation. This takes developing a very stable mind which is only available through contemplation.

So every time here -- and every time in your practice over many years -- when you've been asked to discern -- that's the place of quieting the mind, of being able to watch your thoughts

and not instantly react. Now we're living in a time of constant reactivity. I work with a lot of leaders and I can say quite confidently that thinking has disappeared from leadership. Reactivity is at an all-time high -- doing something to get past the discomfort.

It's even gotten so bad that I realize now that you can present leaders with a well-thought out plan, with possibilities for action that would be quite wise because they take in the complexity of the problem. Some people on the leader's staff have spent a long time thinking through what would be the right action, what would really help resolve an issue. And the feedback they get from the leader is: "Just tell me what to do; I don't have time to think." And that's offered as a legitimate excuse. That's what's most horrifying to me. That it's now okay to say, "I'm not thinking any longer; I'm just doing stuff." You see this even with decisions that affect the future: budgetary decisions, program decisions, the EU decisions, Brexit in England -- decisions made in the moment which impact the future horribly.

One person called us "future eaters." We are eating the future by our unwillingness to use our great human capacities for thought and reflection and contemplation, and for working with Mystery which then does provide us with solutions, right action -- we know what to do. A Peruvian poet once said that we were undoing the future by our actions. So either way you look at it, we're really in a terrible situation. Some people think that when we get contemplative and reflective it means we're withdrawing from the world, but that is not my experience at all. It means we're getting wiser because we're not reacting in the moment, and we're also not working from ego, we are working with Mystery and Mystery is not really mysterious. Our willingness to enter into Mystery, to surrender to Mystery means we are abandoning our egos, we are abandoning our personality, we are abandoning the tight ways we hold ourselves. But once you surrender the experience, if you go back to any of the beautiful women Christian mystics in the church, their experience is one of rapture, ecstasy, clarity, clear-seeing, and complete confidence. That's not based on achievement, it just is.

So my own experience with this is when I do surrender, I am infinitely more intelligent, infinitely better at seeing what's possible and what's not, and infinitely more courageous because I know this doesn't come from me. That's the value of surrendering, not my will but thine, O Lord.

(Projects image: "There is no way to peace. Peace is the way. -- Thich Nhat Hanh) Thich Nhat Hanh the great Vietnamese Zen teacher whose life experience has been one of trying to bring peace and possibility to people and dealing with war in Vietnam, dealing with devastation from natural destruction, tells the story -- talk about faith -- that during the Vietnamese war, there was also a terrible earthquake and so many people up the river in Vietnam were devastated. They'd lost their families, they had no food, no clean water, mainly they were grief stricken because they had lost so many of their villagers or their family members. So he got a boat of supplies to take up the river and he's dressed as a monk; it's clearly visible that he's a religious person, and he's going up the river in this little boat filled with good things, and the troops and the rebels and the government people are just shooting at each other over the boat. Just imagine that, you

know he's on a mission of mercy and yet people are still continuing their warfare in his presence, plus pulling him aside and testing whether he's on the right side on this mission of mercy. That happened to him when he was quite young. And when I read that, I thought, talk about formation. That's a moment that forms you.

One of the things I would love you to contemplate is thinking about when you have surrendered and when you have felt you were working not as you, but in full relationship with the Divine. Think of those times in your life, because I'm sure you've had them. They're not something we think our way into, sometimes they just happen to us. So one of the experiences that I've noted over many years of working with people post-disaster -- when they've been in a hurricane or a forest fire, or floods that have just devastated lives -- when people are in those situations helping one another, they refer to those experiences as the most joyful of their lives.

This has led me -- and I think many people now know this -- to see that joy is different than happiness and joy is available no matter what's going on externally around us. Joy for me now -- this is how I've come to understand it, but interesting for you to think about this -- is an experience of humans being together in the fullness of who we are. The absolute fullness of being there together with one another so there's no distance, there's no separation, there's no sense of I am helping you, you poor thing. It's that we are together and this is the beautiful intensity of what communion feels like.

We need more of that right now and I think you have this experience when you're face to face with someone who's been suffering terribly, who has been abused, beaten, raped, at death's door. That feeling of communion transcends the physical experience, and that for me is what I would call Mystery. When we're working together, transcending our physical needs, our physical form, our personalities, our egos -- we're just here being present. And that's why I love this quote: there is no way to peace. We're not cultivating it, we're being it, step by step. And in those moments when we can be a peaceful presence for someone who is suffering, when we've done our own work in becoming less reactive, less needy, when we know what it means to bear witness, to accompany, to walk with, to join with, we have done our own contemplative practice, our own practice of prayer so that we feel confident that we can just be there. That's when God shows up. That's when joy appears and that is the feeling of peace. It's indistinguishable from joy, I think.

Sometimes the feeling of joy also has sadness in it -- that's not the right word -- but it's like this fullness. Originally what the word sadness meant was fullness. That's interesting. But I'd like you to reflect, when you have time -- perhaps in the deepening groups -- of when you've had this experience that transcends your humanness, but yet it feels that you're fully human in that moment. The experience of joy, sadness, grief, fullness -- and if you reflect on that I'm sure there was another person present, because for me that's the experience of communion. You can feel it in prayer. You can feel it when you're alone, but the really stunning experience of joy mixed with sadness is indescribable, the peace that surpasses all understanding.

For me, those are moments when we're with someone and the barriers disappear. And this is who I believe we all must be for this time. We are not going to solve the overwhelming, terrifying problems of this time. They have their own momentum; we cannot affect those in power to change. That is not a depressing statement for me any longer. What it does is it motivates me to prepare myself to be in those situations that are getting worse, where there is more human suffering, and to prepare myself through doing this inner work of contemplation and prayer that leads to surrender to Mystery, to God, to the Divine.

And for me the last thing I want to share with you is something that is particular to you, which is you are living a vowed life. (*Projects image: "We do not need hope. We have vow. – Daido Looi*) This quote I want to unpack a little bit, but not too much. It was based on Daido Looi, who is now gone from us, but was a wonderful Zen teacher and priest. And he was speaking about the vow that some Buddhists take, which I have taken, called the Bodhisattva vow. Because as Buddhists we believe we go on and on – this vow commits us for every lifetime to be of service to alleviate the suffering of the world. We won't go to our just reward until every creature on the planet is free of suffering. So, this is an impossible vow, right? And so he was saying in this teaching, you know it's just impossible to achieve, but it doesn't matter, because a vow doesn't give us the hope of results; it gives us the container for our life. I'd like you to think about your own vows. When you get in difficulty, when you don't know what to do, when you're despairing because all of your plans have come to naught, when you just see suffering and crisis escalating, we cannot be tied to a hope for results. As someone said, expectations of change are just premeditated disappointments.

So I'm not speaking of hope in the beautiful Christian sense, which extends beyond this lifetime, extends beyond our mortal years here. But I am speaking about what keeps us going. What's our source of motivation? It has to be more than hoped-for results, because there's only disappointment ahead. I often read a beautiful letter by Thomas Merton to another theologian where he said that we must abandon hope of results, because what I see ahead is only more disappointment and more failure. I'm sorry I didn't print it out, but I think I know it by heart now. He said, we're called to this work by God and we're only being used by God, and who knows about the results.

Vaclav Havel, the great Czech leader, said that hope is not the expectation that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something is worth doing no matter how it turns out. When we live a vowed life, we have set an intention, a direction, and a container that holds our work, and no matter what is happening, we know why we're here. And that's the power of vow; we know why we're here. And in order to be people who can be the presence of God, be the presence of Spirit, be the presence of peace, we have to do our practices, we have to take prayer very seriously, we have to take surrender as the path, and we have to take contemplation and reflection and contemplative prayer as the means to go deeper and deeper into this surrender to Mystery. And that leads to an incredibly blessed life that also blesses all those who come in contact with us. And for me that's enough to get through this time. I want to be the presence of

peace, I want to be the presence of the best human qualities imaginable, I want to be able to stay and not flee from the most difficult situations. And that is my prayer for all of us. Thank you.