

2013 LCWR Outstanding Leadership Award Acceptance Speech

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Thank you very much. It is a particular honor to be recognized by one's peers. Thank you for this very moving affirmation and also for your support during the entire time of my service to LCWR. Your trust has sustained all of us in LCWR leadership and we are very appreciative. It has truly been an experience of grace, and of being carried by all of you and by God's Spirit.

I am aware that it is unusual for someone just leaving the presidency of LCWR to be given this Outstanding Leadership Award. I receive it in the name of all other LCWR leaders who have managed crises, conflicts and controversies. I have learned that that has been a continuous reality for LCWR over the years. Sometimes the difficulties have been more behind the scenes. Other times they have been very public. But each LCWR leadership time has had some minefield to maneuver. We have all done so in ways that are truthful and conscientious, sincere and soul-searching. As you honor me tonight, please join me in also honoring our 50 plus years of LCWR's outstanding leadership.

As you know, in my own experience in LCWR I have found myself publicly thrust into the crucible of our time: the reality of polarization, division and mistrust. Actually, all of us together have been placed squarely in the middle of the polarization in our church. It's very clear to me that what we are learning is not just for ourselves. The world around us is also searching for a way through very polarized landscapes. It's not at all easy. In my own searching, I've come to a few insights and conclusions. I've learned that it usually doesn't work to try to convince one another of different ideas or positions. Often we come from very different experiences or world views, and just hearing the thinking of another doesn't change our own. Suggesting that someone's thinking is wrong is even less effective. But then, divergent thinking is not the problem. As Margaret Wheatley has said, it's not our differences that divide us, it's our judgment of one another. Where there is judgment there is no safe environment in which to really see and hear one another. I keep asking what conditions are needed to create an environment that does feel safe for honest, courageous conversation. I know that what doesn't help are condemnation, power differentials, intimidation. That's pretty obvious. It's the

assumptions and biases we all have that are even harder to lay aside because we are usually so blind to them. So what does help?

I recently heard a talk by Parker Palmer in which he described how one group did that. People with highly charged opposing views on something came together for conversation. The only rule was that no one was allowed to express his or her position until the very end of the day. They could only tell one another stories about the experiences in their lives that led them to believe what they believe. The story telling forced them to walk around in one another's experiences and feelings. That sounds like a contemplative exercise, doesn't it, like gazing, like a long loving look at another person's reality? The quality of our presence and transparency to one another does help bridge the gaps. That kind of presence is a capacity, an ability, a skill to be cultivated. It's also a grace, an inner spaciousness that comes not from our own effort and striving but from God at work in us.

In parts of Africa people greet one another with the expression, "I see you." The response is "I see you, too." Isn't there something just simple and lovely about that? Another way through polarization is to really see another person and to really allow ourselves to be seen. To see someone requires the simple gift of attention and that in itself is an affirmation. To allow ourselves to be seen is equally as challenging. Expressing what we really think and feel, with transparency and vulnerability, is for the brave of heart. It is, however, what we are being asked to do in our current conflict. All of a sudden the world is looking to us. In response, we keep calling ourselves and one another to truthfulness and integrity, to a thoughtful sorting out of what that looks like concretely. I believe we're being invited to give voice to the perspective of our years of mystical and prophetic living. It's not the only perspective, but it is ours, and it is the gift we bring to the Church and the world. We can only walk by the light we've been given, trying to articulate what our experiences have allowed us to see. The apocryphal Gospel of St. Thomas says "If you bring forth what is within you, what is within will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you it will destroy you."

LCWR has been for me a forum of peers that has helped me to do that. We have walked together and that has made all the difference.

I'd like to share with you in conclusion Mary Oliver's poem, *Song of the Builders*, used at our last board meeting as a send off for those of us completing our leadership.

On a summer morning

I sat down

On a hillside

To think about God

A worthy passtime.

Near me, I saw

A single cricket;

It was moving the grains of the hillside

This way and that way.

How great was its energy,

How humble its effort.

Let us hope

It will always be like that

Each of us going on

In our inexplicable ways

Building the universe.

Thank you for this honor. Thank you for the opportunity to serve you.