

EMBRACING
VULNERABILITY
ON THE SYNODAL
JOURNEY



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Embracing Our Vulnerability and Its Transformative Potential

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This is what the LORD says:

*“Stand at the crossroads and look;
ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is,
and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.”
But you said, ‘We will **not** walk in it.’ Jeremiah 6:16*

This is a time of reckoning. It is in these times of trial that we are tested, tested to our very soul. Life as we have known it, including Religious Life, is over and there is no going back to the way things were. We stand at a crossroads now, and we have a choice. We can choose to steel our defenses, fend for ourselves and remain as comfortable as we can for as long as we can, or we can choose to embrace our vulnerability, look for the

ancient path and, together, give birth to a new way of being. The question remains: *What path will you choose?*

Outwardly there is chaos; inwardly there is a new world stirring. Listen to the heartbeat of the New. The change and tumult in our world are unprecedented. Add to this the complex and rapid changes facing you as leaders, and it easily becomes overwhelming. Trying to make sense of it all is like trying to drink from a firehose. It's hard to assimilate what to really think and feel about it all. It's hard to see the forest for the trees, stay grounded, and make wise choices. We can easily lose track of what matters most to us, as well as the people who matter most to us. The press of daily demands too often takes precedence over our care for one another, our common home, and our God-given purpose for living.

Fortunately, we've carved out some time to slow down and breathe, to listen to what is stirring. Let's take this opportunity, the time we have together, to let things sink in and get in touch with what life is trying to tell us. At these graced crossroads, amidst the whirlwind of change, what might be the *deeper invitation*? What is the soulwork we need to do to listen to the heartbeat of the New? What does it mean to embrace our vulnerability and its transformative potential? These are the kinds of questions I'll be inviting you to ponder and share with one another.

As we begin, let me first say, Congratulations! You have chosen a theme that is completely contrary to the prevailing paradigm of our world. *Embracing our vulnerability*, speaks to me of the essence of humanity and the very heart of transformation. Embracing our vulnerability requires that we embrace the fullness of our being: life's beauty and austerity, the full cycle of surrender, gestation, and birth, and all manner of anguish and love. With each new cycle of life, in order for us to grow, we must not only humbly recognize our vulnerability, we must also embrace it. In other words, embracing our vulnerability, is part and parcel of the inner and interpersonal work of transformation. It is not a question as to whether or not you like being vulnerable. The question is: Can you see the value in it and, therefore, will you choose to embrace this kind of heart-work for the transformative potential it holds?

Before I go too much further, let me pause and ask a simple question:

What is it you are truly seeking? What is your deepest desire or most urgent longing as you plan for the future of your community and your own personal future?

Using your handout, jot down a few words or phrases in response to my question. I'll give you moment of quiet.

A Great Turning

We cannot travel to the future without honoring our past, our ancestors, and our traditions, but these cannot lead us there. We need to include and transcend the past, loosen our grip on time-honored traditions and ghost-structures of the past, in order to make room for the New. What leads us into the future is our *courage, creativity, and tenacity* to give life to our deepest longings called forth by the lure and love of God. Honoring the past cannot mean living in the past. Honoring our ancestors cannot mean living as they lived. If we truly honor those who have brought us to today, we must do for the next generation what our ancestors did for us: We must make room for the New. “For our lives to be meaningful,” said Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, “we must succeed in continuing the creative work of evolution.”

Our entire globe is at the brink of a massive transition which we, as a species, are partially responsible for creating. The fate of the planet, humanity, and the nearly 10 million other species that inhabit our common home are all tied together. We will either evolve into a new way of being or devolve toward extinction. I believe we have a moral responsibility to reckon with the damage we’ve caused and do everything in our power to transform our lives. While there are no guarantees, I believe that we have the capacity to transform this crisis and aid in bringing forth the next evolutionally leap in the ongoing story of creation.

However, it won’t be our clever brains, alone, that will determine our fate. We seem to be much better at making tools than using them wisely. Our future rests on our ability to make wise choices. We need to recognize the collective vulnerability we are all facing and partner in this work of transformation. Our future rests on our willingness to come together through intergenerational, interdisciplinary, interfaith, and intercultural collaboration.

The “I alone can fix it” hubris, and “might makes right” mentality of our leaders, will be the death of us. Our patriarchal caste systems that subjugate women and marginalize minorities will be the death of us. The racism, sexism, and ageism, and all the ways we have destroyed the dignity of difference and richness of diversity, will be the death of us. We will, in other words, either all hang together, or we will hang separately.

During this time of transition, I trust that you spend a lot of time thinking about how to best care for your members, manage your finances, and obtain the highest and best use of your land and buildings. But what about the highest and best use of your members’ talents, time and energy? What about the sustainability of your charism and mission? How will you care for the soul of your community? Like it or not, communities are compelled to change during this time of transition, but might there also be a deeper invitation, the possibility of transformation and the emergence new life?

Before we explore that deeper invitation, let me describe the crises we are facing in our world more fully and invite your reflections.

There is a Great Turning taking place across our planetary home. Do you not perceive it? A mixture of natural and manmade circumstances has brought our planet to a tipping point: global warming, rising sea levels, species extinction, and rivers of migration. We can add the pernicious pandemic to the climate crisis, the festering wounds of racism and classism, misogyny and hegemony, human trafficking and slavery, economic injustice, LBGTQIA inequality, violence, war, and the toxic and polarizing politics that are bringing all of us to our collective knees. Eckart Tolle refers to these as the “Bells of Mindfulness,” all of which are tolling ominously, signaling the existential threat to our planetary home and humanity’s future.

Countless luminaries and scientists believe that we are teetering on the edge of a sixth great extinction of our planet. Greta Thunberg minced no words when she said: “We have raped and pillaged the planet and jeopardized our children’s future.” It is an existential, evolutionary crisis in which our species will either evolve into a new consciousness and a new way of being or devolve into an abyss of death and destruction. Hope lies in our willingness and determination to collaborate in taking the next evolutionary leap to a new level of consciousness. The question remains: *How relevant is this in your life and what is your response to this Great Turning?*

What impact are these planetary threats having in your own country? Are these merely the backdrop to your lives? Ilea Delio once said, “Creation is not a backdrop for human drama but the disclosure of God’s identity.” I couldn’t agree more. The world in which we live is not just the context for your life, or for Religious Life, it is the ground from which life springs and the object of all its endeavors. I believe you have a key role to play in both the transformation of our world, as well as the transformation of Religious Life.

Within this Great Turning are the tectonic shifts taking place across the religious landscape. You know these, as well. In the United States, for example, there is a rise in the hunger for spirituality amidst a decline in the membership of all mainline religions, especially Catholics. Those with no religious affiliation, Nones, are now the largest subgroup, outnumbering Catholics and trending larger.

I won’t present all of the demographic changes for Catholics across globe. You’ve seen them all before and are experiencing them firsthand. Suffice it to say that the demographic shifts represent only the tip of the iceberg, one small portion of the challenges facing religious communities. Nonetheless, the practical impact of these demographic changes is demanding enormous time, energy, and resources just to maintain life as it is today. Consequently, there is little left to shape a vision for tomorrow.

Adding to these challenges are a host of deeper issues that cascade down to the very soul of communities. For example, individualism, co-dependency, workaholicism and entitlement are undermining the foundations of community, namely, interdependence, co-responsibility, shared power, and mutual accountability. Consumerism, scandals of abuse, questions of relevancy, identity confusion, mission drift, and other vexing challenges strike at the very soul of communities.

The good news is that Religious Life is not dying. It is transforming, just as it has through many lifecycle changes since the time of Jesus. It is on the leading edge of an emerging consciousness in support of our planetary evolution. The good news is that you are a part of this Great Turning! You are, no doubt, working hard to make sense of your future and plan for it. The denial that persisted in recent decades is finally giving way to more proactive efforts to adapt and change.

The good news is that death, while it is a part of this transition, will not be the last word. This cyclical transformation is natural to all living systems. Death is never the last word; it is always a new beginning. This is *God's promise*: "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25-26).

Religious Life will rise again. But there are hard choices ahead and no quick fixes or off-the-shelf solutions. All of the options you have will require hard work. There is no escaping it. Even if a community were to come to "completion," there would be tough decisions and complex plans to implement just to take care of business, say nothing of grieving the losses and negotiating the inevitable differences of opinion regarding all the decisions they must make. You know these complexities all too well. The only solace, perhaps, is that God is with you and will not abandon you. This is *God's covenant*.

Thomas Merton once said: "Humans have a responsibility to find themselves where they are, in their own proper time and place in the history to which they belong and to which they must inevitably contribute either their response or their evasions, either truth and act, or mere slogan and gesture." Take a moment to reflect upon these words and jot down a few thoughts in your response to this second question on your handout.

There is a Great Turning taking place across our planetary home as well as Religious Life. What in this Great Turning holds relevance for you and how are you responding?

When communities are introduced to the notion of transformation, without much thought, most will resonate with the idea of transformation. Sure, why not? After all, who would be against transformation? It's like saying you're against motherhood or world peace.

Unfortunately, despite their enthusiasm for the *idea* of transformation, most communities will not put forth the concrete resources, or exert the emotional grit and spiritual discipline, needed to make the hard choices to transform their lives. They will not calendar the time, commit their monies, or engage their members in the hard work it requires. They will choose, instead, the well-worn path of least resistance. The pressing needs to care for their members, plan for what to do with their land and buildings, and simply to maintain life as it is, fills their calendars and eclipses the deeper work.

Unwittingly, bit by bit, communities make choices driven more by fear than by courage, choices that all but guarantee their demise.

Some communities, a smaller percentage, will discover and dispose themselves to the fullness of grace at these crossroads. They will listen for a deeper invitation. They will seek to transform their lives and discern God's call to new life. They will plan, not only for the external changes that must be made (e.g., finances, healthcare and the bricks and mortar of their lives), they will also open their lives to an inward journey, into the forest, through the dark night of the soul.

There are many options for change available to communities. No matter what option you choose, you simply cannot continue to live and function as you have in the past. Absent the "inner work of transformation," these options will amount to little more than surface changes meant to ease the administrative burdens and make for a smoother path to "completion."

What got you today won't get you to tomorrow. Helen Keller said it this way: "A bend in the road is not an end in the road, unless you fail to make the turn." The vast majority of communities will fail to make the turn. Some will wait until it is too late and, by the time they wake up, they will have exhausted their resources and their will to change. Others will make only incremental changes, believing they are doing what's needed, only to discover their safe, small changes are not nearly enough. And some of the most resilient communities will successfully make this bend in the road and bring forth new life. They will have a hand in facilitating the emergence of a new Religious Life.

Adaptation is absolutely necessary, but how you adapt is key. According to Thomas Friedman, the amount of change we will experience in the next 100 years will exceed the change experienced in our entire human history.ⁱ Our capacity to adapt to this accelerating rate of change is being greatly challenged. The vast majority of communities will become extinct during this cycle of Religious Life because their efforts to adapt will be unsuccessful. Fortunately, we know why.

Here are seven of the most common misguided efforts. They will:

1. **Make new improved versions of the past.** Just like the new improved versions of toothpaste or soap, communities will make new and improved versions of themselves. They will attempt to do what they have always done, only a little bit better.
2. **Try harder, not differently.** They will try harder to tighten their belts, reduce expenses, postpone retirement, downsize, rightsize, and repurpose buildings, hoping for a different outcome, rather than try differently.
3. **Play it safe, rather than innovate.** They will play it safe, rather than innovate, out of a fear of making bad investments, losing their reputations, or of failing. As it turns out, playing it safe is the riskiest choice of all.

4. **Engage in incremental, rather than deep change.** They will favor small changes where the outcomes are predictable, conversations are manageable, and things are more controllable, rather than the chaos of deep change.
5. **Avoid something bad, rather than create something good.** They will worry more about making mistakes, rather than focusing their attention and resources on new possibilities.
6. **Download the same information, rather than create a new operating system.** They will download the same information using the same operating system, rather than create a new operating system, a shift in consciousness, that allows novel possibilities to emerge.
7. **Focus on external change, rather than the inner work.** They will focus on changing what's on the surface of their lives (land, buildings, finances, ministries, and the number of people in leadership), and largely ignore what's underneath, the personal and interpersonal work of transformation.

The common denominator here, if you haven't caught it, is *fear*. If communities are not to remain an analogue culture in a digital world, they will need a great deal of courage to adapt and change. Take a moment and jot some thoughts in response to this third question.

Is your community experiencing any of these misguided efforts? Which ones and how do you understand this?

While adaptation and changes are necessary, these efforts alone are not enough, *if* the desire is to transform. There is, still, a deeper invitation. To get to that deeper invitation, let me draw the distinction between change and transformation. Change is an external event, a new arrangement of things and, sometimes, an invitation to transform. However, as they say in Alcoholics Anonymous, "You can change where you live, but you take your patterns with you."

In other words, if we change only the surface things and ignore the deeper work, the old story will migrate to a new venue. We take it with us to our new relationships, new places of ministry, or new places of living. Over the years we become imprisoned by these old stories, old structures, old ways of thinking and patterned ways of living. This is what Freud called "repetition compulsion" or what Einstein called a "betrayal of the soul." In other words, you can make external changes, but that's not the same as a transformation.

Transformation, in contrast, is an internal process, a journey that shifts the meaning and purpose of our lives. It shifts the patterns and practices of our lives and the structures that support them. It shifts our identity and realigns our soul with its outward expression. It is what Carl Jung meant when he said: "The greatest problems in life can never be solved, only outgrown." Transformation is not problem solving. It is a maturational leap, a soul to surface realignment of life.

The most obvious example here would be your decision to enter Religious Life. This was more than a change. It was a transformation. You didn't just change what you wore, where you lived, or your title. You transformed your primary relationships and commitments, your rhythm, practices and daily routines, your values and worldview, your identity and life's meaning and purpose, and you transformed your relationship with God. It was a soul-shifting experience that opened up an entirely new narrative for your life. It is the Paschal Mystery, not as a cerebral knowing, but as a living faith and experiential knowing.

However, every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end. Crisis always precedes transformation, but does not insist upon it. A crisis, by definition, is a situation in which our capacity to cope is exceeded by the stressors we face. When in crisis, we have a choice to either change in an attempt to ease the pain or we transform the pain into a new beginning. More often than not, we try to *change* by either reducing the stressors or increasing our capacity to cope. Sometimes, however, we choose the road less traveled, a path of *transformation* that brings forth new life.

What happens at a graced crossroads? On the reverse side of your handout, you'll see a table with the words, "Graced Crossroads" and "Deeper Invitation." Let the left side represent your personal experience, and the right side represent your communal experience.

Now I'm asking you to reflect for a moment on two kinds of transitions. The first will be one of your own, personal, life-changing transitions, past or present. The second will be the transition your community is now facing. The purpose of this reflection is to draw upon your personal experience as a means for helping you to appreciate what your community is now facing.

We have all been here, where the ground beneath us shifts and we are brought to our knees, only to be transformed, not merely changed. Recall for a moment a crossroads in your own life, one from the past or a current one. This might be a serious illness, a job loss, the death of a family member or close friend, or a broken relationship or commitment you once vowed to preserve. On the left side of the paper, jot down a word, phrase or image that captures your personal crossroads experience. Recall, also, its deeper invitation and jot that down. I'll give you a moment to recall such an experience and its deeper invitation.

Now reflect upon the transition your community is now facing. How would you describe this crossroads? On the right side of the paper, give it a headline. Jot down a word, phrase or image that captures the crossroads your community is now facing and what might be its deeper invitation? I'll give you a moment. Now hold both your personal and communal experiences in your minds and heart as I describe some of things that happen at these graced crossroads and deeper invitation they might offer.

Alcoholics Anonymous call these experiences "hitting bottom," the point at which we are forced to admit that there is a grave problem and we need to reach out for help. It is not

a time to throw in the towel, but a recognition that, alone, we are not enough to bring about our own healing or open a new door to the future. People of a Christian faith might call this a “dark night of the soul.” For communities, as in our personal lives, this can be a “graced crossroads.”

A graced crossroads, while it is a painful place, can simultaneously be a profoundly freeing place to be, if we let it. It can be a place of refuge where we gladly “take the yoke” (Matthew 11:29). As painful as it is, at a graced crossroads there is a feeling of liberation and relief once we let go of denying our own suffering or fighting against it. It is liberating for us, for a community, once we let go of all the unnecessary suffering that comes from our exhausting and futile attempts to cling to what is no longer working, to control what is outside of our control, and to deny, blame and shame ourselves or others for our suffering.

When we hit bottom, we begin to know what’s really real, who’s there for us and who isn’t, who believes in us, and who doesn’t. When we hit bottom, and finally accept the hand we’ve been dealt, we begin to ask questions for which there are no immediate answers, but for which answers must be found. With our denial gone, we can begin to listen and search for these answers. We can begin to hear that still, small voice whispering a deeper invitation (1 Kings 19:11-13). The Celts call this a “thin” time, or a place where the veil between the two worlds of heaven and earth is thin. Christine Paintner, in *The soul’s slow ripening*, calls this a “threshold time,” when we are moving from one time and one awareness to another. It is a place where we can make “deeper connections with the divine.”ⁱⁱ

Grace flourishes in every nook and cranny of creation, but never are we more aware of its presence and amenable to its ways than when we are at such a crossroads. Grace comes bidden and unbidden, whether we are aware of it or not. When we arrive at a crossroads, individually or as a community, the pain we must endure hollows us out. We are emptied of all hubris and stripped of our defenses. It is here in the deep quiet of own soul’s searching that we come face to face with those parts of ourselves we have rejected, hidden from ourselves and from those we loved. It is here, at these crossroads, that grace works its way into every nook and cranny of our being.

A graced crossroads, for individuals and communities, is a place wherein God continually puts before us choices between life and death. God beckons, beseeches us to choose life, but these choices are always ours to make. Religious communities are now at a graced crossroads, a threshold between what was and what is yet to come. Here, at these graced crossroads, is a *deeper invitation: Choose life* so that your descendants might live. *Choose life* so that you might live more fully in whatever time you have left. *Choose life* so that you might have a hand in the transformation of Religious Life and our planetary home, bringing Christ into our world.

In every crisis, at every graced crossroads, there is a deeper invitation. Look again at what you noted as your graced crossroads and its deeper invitation. I’ll give you a moment to jot down any further reflections that might be emerging within you.

What is your experience of your graced crossroads and its deeper invitation?

The Divine Paschal Mystery of transformation is beyond our comprehension, but it surely does not happen without our active participation. Sitting in a prison cell, a young Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote, “Human progress never rolls on the wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men (and women) willing to be co-workers with God.” You can either try to plan your future or create the conditions for grace to intercede. To do the former, you must presume to know what the future is. To do the latter, you need to learn how to cooperate with grace and do the inner work of transformation.

Not far from where my daughter, Kelly once lived is a place called Death Valley. Death Valley is the hottest, driest place in the United States. Nothing grows there because it doesn’t rain. Hence, its name. However, on rare occasions, against all odds, it does rain in Death Valley. And when it does, the entire floor of Death Valley becomes carpeted in flowers, a phenomenon called a “super bloom.” What this tells us is that Death Valley isn’t really dead. It’s dormant. Right beneath the barren surface are seeds of possibility waiting for the right conditions to come about. In other words, in organic systems, *if the conditions are right, life is inevitable. It happens all the time.*

When you think of shaping your future, it might help you to think of it as an approach based more on the principles of farming. Now, I’m not a farmer, but I know enough to recognize that farming, like human growth and transformation, is not a linear or mechanical process. It is an organic and emergent process. And you cannot predict or engineer the outcome of organic processes. All you can do, like farming, is create the conditions under which life can flourish; plant the seeds, and let God take care of the rest.

What is the inner work of transformation that helps create the conditions for grace to intercede and for life to flourish? In my work with religious women and men across different cultures, I have offered them an approach that relies on the principles and processes of transformation. It is a means for cooperating with grace that I’ve described in my book, *Graced Crossroads*.ⁱⁱⁱ I can’t describe these in detail, but let me give you the shorthand version. You have a handout on these, as well.

These are the five dynamic elements that, when woven together, constitute the key processes for personal and communal transformation:

1. Shifts in consciousness: creating a new narrative
2. Reclaiming our inner voice: the seat and soul of everything that lives
3. Reconciliation and conversion: the womb of our becoming
4. Experimentation and learning: acting our way into a new way of being
5. Transformative visioning: listening to our deepest longings

These five dynamic elements comprise the inner work of transformation, ways of cooperating with grace and creating the conditions for new life to emerge. What these

processes come down to, and this inner work requires, is exactly the theme for this gathering: our willingness to let down our defenses and embrace our own vulnerability with radical dependence on the grace of God. It requires that we take off our masks and embrace the full measure of what means to be human, not just our joys and talents, but our foibles, frailties, and raw emotions.

This pathway to deep change and transformation, as I said, is not for the faint of heart. It takes courage to risk rejection when we open our hearts and share our true selves with others. It takes courage to surrender and let go of the people and places we once loved, a way of life we once cherished, to give way to the new life. It takes courage to reconcile, to offer and seek forgiveness, and to pursue our deepest longings in the face of resistance from our family and community. And for communities who choose to go down this path, to take this Exodus journey, they will need leaders who courageously embrace their vulnerability and help their members do the same.

Courage, of course, is not the absence of fear, but the willingness to act in the face of it. The root word for “courage” is heart; it means to have heart. We need to dispel the myth and masculine norms that being vulnerable is some kind of character flaw. Somehow, we have this myth that leaders are supposed to portray unwavering strength, to act professional, to barricade themselves in certainties, and to mask any emotions that could belie this portrayal. They are supposed to armor themselves against hurt or rejection and pretend that they are cool and calm when they’re not. They are supposed to speak from their intellect and hide their heart. It’s lunacy and death-dealing!

Cross-cultural studies on leadership make it abundantly clear that the most important qualities of a leader are to be grounded, honest, real, and relatable. A credible leader is someone courageous enough to risk the possibility of failure or of looking like a fool in pursuit of something more noble. Isn’t that what your founders and foundresses did? How can you be a credible leader if you are not grounded, honest, real and relatable, generously sharing your gifts and talents, as well as your foibles, frailties and feelings?

People need leaders who are compassionate, not just clever; empathic, not just smart; real and relatable, not lofty or aloof. We need leaders who inspire us because of their humanity, not in spite of it. Wasn’t this what Jesus did for us? He didn’t armor-plate his heart and grow a “thicker skin,” as so many leaders are advised to do. He didn’t hide from others or preach from the pulpit. He was right in there with us, entirely vulnerable, risking it all, utterly divine in his humanity. Isn’t this why we are inspired by the lives of Nelson Mandela, Mother Theresa, Mahatma Gandhi, Teresa of Ávila, Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, and Oscar Romero? Isn’t that what moves us when we hear the Dalai Lama, Greta Thunberg, Desmond Tutu, Amanda Gorman, Thich Nhat Hanh, Malala Yousafzai, and anyone who gifts us with their utter passion and presence, their humility and humanity?

Embracing our vulnerability is a paradox, like so many biblical teachings. The literal interpretation sounds foolish. Its wisdom, for those who listen, lies beneath the surface. “For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:11). “The last shall be first, and

the first last” (Matthew 20:16). “For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it” (Matthew 16:25).

Embracing our vulnerability, living in the fullness of our humanity with hearts wide open, is what transforms us. The only people who don’t experience being vulnerable are those without empathy or compassion. Those who embrace it know its beauty, its creative potential; they know that being vulnerable is what makes us human and has the power to heal and transform hearts. They have come to know that we can’t selectively numb out our fear, shame, or guilt without also extinguishing our joy, love, and compassion. Those who embrace it in themselves can embrace it in others. I’ll give you a moment to note your reflections to this question.

Embracing your vulnerability is key to the inner work of transformation. In what ways are you and your community embracing your vulnerability and engaging in the inner work of transformation?

Summary

There is a Great Turning taking place across our planetary home. The old stories are crumbling as new ones are emerging. There is no going back to the way things were. We stand at a graced crossroads now and we have a choice. We can react out of fear and take the well-trodden path of least resistance or we can wake up and respond with courage in search for the ancient path.

It is easy to lose hope during times like these when the challenges are so massive, complex and rapidly changing. During one of the darkest moments of my personal crossroads, I confessed to my wife, Beth that I could no longer permit myself to hope because I couldn’t stand the pain of disappointment. Beth put her arms around me and said, “I’ll carry the hope for you.” Never have I felt so loved. Hope for new life does not rest on your ability to recruit new members or extend your longevity. It rests in the hearts of existing members or there is no hope at all.

Carry the hope for each other, for members who no longer hope and for our world where hope is in short supply.

The world needs not only your hope, but your active participation as agents of transformation. What could be more needed now than *incarnating wisdom* in a world increasingly unmoored from truth, mesmerized by the media, and manipulated by self-serving politicians. We need your *compassionate presence* in our wounded world so prone to shaming, blaming, and scapegoating. We need models of *living community* in our world wherein we seem more interested in building walls than bridges. What could be more needed now than for you to *incarnate the Gospel values* of love, kindness, inclusivity, mutuality, forgiveness, restorative justice, and mercy in a world so polarized and prone to violence?

Thomas Merton tells us that grace is granted to us in proportion to how well we “dispose ourselves to receive it.”^{iv} We have only to create the conditions for grace to intercede and dispose ourselves to receive it. For a community to do this, it will need to engage not only in organizational change but choose to embrace the *personal* and *interpersonal* soulwork of transformation. Admittedly, the personal and interpersonal work is far more messy, intimate and painful than organizational change, and that is exactly why most groups avoid it. Yet, members, and the communities they create, are the heart and soul, the glue that holds it all together. If there is no concentrated focus upon personal and communal transformation, *what will you have, and who will you be, at the end of all of your organizational change?*

Transformation is not a boardgame and does not come in a box with a set of instructions. It doesn't take place as a result of a great speech or one-and-done assemblies. It does not fit neatly into artificial timelines, such as leadership terms or Chapter cycles. It is not a strategic plan. In this sense, it is more a pilgrimage than a plan, more about the sort of people you are becoming, than an effort to create some kind of grand vision. If you want a strategic plan, discern what will make God smile, and then implement it. There's your strategic plan.

Transformation is an ongoing process of conversion that takes place over time as a result of our courage, creativity and tenacity. Doing this kind of soulwork requires that we embrace our vulnerability, admit that we are human, blessed and broken, and stop the lunacy of speaking only out of our heads. We have to pull together and rebuff this madness of individualism. No one is a soloist. The ancient African language of *Ubuntu* tells us: a person is a person through other persons, that my humanity is caught up, bound up, inextricably, with yours. We need to remember that we belong to one another, that we are made for each other. Mother Theresa once said, “If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten one another.”

Now is a time of reckoning, and it in these times of trial that we are tested, tested to our very soul. Now we will learn how large or small is our heart, how merciful, how caring, how faithful, how responsible we have yet to be. I pray that all of us have the strength to remember that life is fragile. We are all vulnerable. We will all, at some point in our lives, stumble and fall. We must carry this in our hearts: What we have been given is very special; it can be taken from us and, when it is taken from us, we will be tested to our very souls. It is in these times, and in this kind of pain, that we are invited to look deep inside ourselves, follow the ancient path and count on our Love to pull us through.

During times of transition, when all hope seems to vanish, the veil between ordinary life and the Divine Presence becomes thin, and grace does more abound. Here, at a graced crossroads, there is a *deeper invitation*. Listen to the lure and love God calling you to choose life, not only for ourselves, but for all those to whom we profess our love, our descendants, and future generations. The world needs you now as leaven, as salt, as the remnant God can use to transform the world. No matter your age, your ministry, or circumstances, you can be a presence that transforms.

Let me ask again: What are you seeking? A journey of transformation is for those who are courageous enough to listen and respond to a deeper invitation. It is for those who, by embracing their vulnerability and doing their inner work can learn to cooperate with grace and participate in this Divine Mystery of transformation. Those who participate in these ways will have the opportunity not only to transform themselves, but they will help facilitate the emergence of a new Religious Life, a new world stirring. They will put their mark on this Great Turning and add a page to the ongoing story of creation.

Thank you for the privilege of your presence.

*“Stand at the crossroads and look.”
What are you seeking and what is the path you are walking?*

ⁱ Thomas L. Friedman, *The World Is Flat : A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, 1st further updated and expanded hardcover ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

ⁱⁱ Christine Valters Paintner, *The Soul's Slow Ripening : 12 Celtic Practices for Seeking the Sacred*, (Notre Dame: Sorin Books,, 2018). p.1.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ted Dunn, *Graced Crossroads: Pathways to Deep Change and Transformation* (St. Charles, MO: CCS Publications, 2020).

^{iv} Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth*, A Harvest/Hbj Book (New York ; London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), p.5.