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*Collective Transformation  
In an Era of Change*

## Collective Transformation in an Era of Change



*“A period of new beginning brings us into stark awareness of the God who is infinite, who is creative, and who has more of life in mind for us.”<sup>1</sup>*

Joan Chittister, in the above quote, expresses well that change is the inevitable reality of Divine, ongoing creation. This is powerfully evident for congregations as the torch is passed from one generation to the next. This generation is living in powerfully transformative times which means they are being called to live as a pioneer community. A prerequisite for entities choosing to be pioneering is to be centered in profound contemplation. This depth of reflection anchors them in their mission and charism while establishing an energizing and engaging narrative for social transformation. In 1966 this reality was articulated when Robert Kennedy shared this insight, “There is a Chinese

curse which says “May he [she] live in interesting times. Like it or not, we live in interesting times. They are times of danger and uncertainty; but they are also the most creative of any time in the history of mankind.”<sup>2</sup> Five decades later, this statement is just as poignant.

This article explores the critical elements necessary for a religious community to claim its internal passion to be a prophetic witness to the world. To be prophetic and transformative, it is vital for pioneering communities to exude enthusiasm and zeal for God’s call. This fervor expressed through mission and charism is the foundation for creating a bold direction, rooted in a compelling narrative that calls for transformative action rooted in the gospel.

A prior article entitled, *What if? A profound Spiritual Journey*,<sup>3</sup> focused on the spiritual path. The ‘what if’ question is the fundamental motivation for pioneers and entrepreneurial dreamers to explore seemingly unsolvable issues. It is their passionate and tireless explorations often against seemingly insurmountable odds that lead to innovation”. The ‘what if’ question is always rooted in a profound contemplative quest to enter into the mystery of God’s call to be prophetic voices and witnesses for the times. This internally grounded stance opens the congregation to explore and create a narrative of emotional hope and prophetic action that transforms

<sup>1</sup>Joan Chittister, *Radical Spirit: 12 Ways to Live a Free and Authentic Life* (New York: Convergent, 2017), Print. 69

<sup>2</sup>Kennedy, Robert F. "Robert F. Kennedy Speeches." *John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum*. The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, n.d. Web. 03 July 2017.

<sup>3</sup>Clarke, Mark. "What If? A Profound Spiritual Communal Passageway!" *Publications*. CommunityWorks, Inc, 17 Feb. 2017. Web. 05 July 2017.

society. All great breakthroughs have their genesis in an unflinching sense of purpose and mission. *This unwavering sense of purpose unleashes the passionate commitment to create collaborative relationships which model the gospel message of love and compassion.*

Today, religious life is squarely placed in the context of an evolving global and technological world. A time that no longer identifies with the symbols, metaphors and images of the industrial or pre-modern era. This historical period is where ethnic and religious diversity are a daily part of our lives. Where major events like the ending of Apartheid in South Africa or tragic events such as the bombings in Manchester England are consistently at our door step. We experience technological advances that significantly impact all aspects of our daily existence. Yet, the tendency is to cling to worn out stories, metaphors and symbols

that were created for another era.

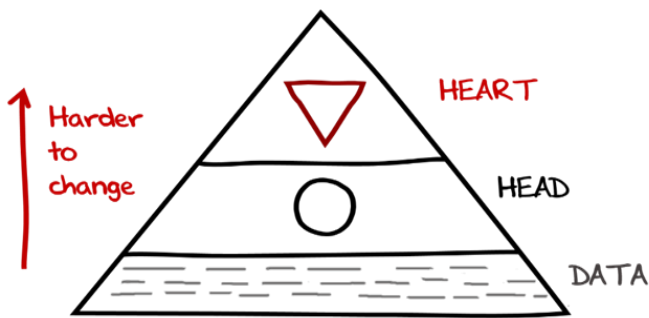
It would seem pioneering congregations are being implored by the Divine to establish a new narrative of prophetic hope. This is not foreign to the congregational path. The existential reality of every generation has been to seek a vision that responds to the gospel call to love. Today, this generation is called to reimagine the gospel of love and compassion for its time. The graphic below depicts this journey of re-imagining and of becoming in the midst of ongoing creation.

The wisdom of previous generational ancestors who have adapted to history gives today's congregations the strength and courage to risk renewing their charism for this epoch. This grounding and historic modeling allows them to participate deeply in the prophetic witness of hope. While technological advances evolve and continue to disrupt society, this grounding in one's congregational story fosters the courage to



act. It is in this historical context that the creation of an engaging narrative is vital to sustain the pioneer community. This compelling narrative is essential while living in the void of mystery and evolving into an unknown future.

Joan Chittister, O.S.B. in her new book, *Radical Spirit*, quotes the Japanese poet, Basho, who wrote, “I do not seek to follow in the footsteps of the men of old; I seek what they sought.” She goes on to say “In that practice lies our respect for those who have gone before us. It is not that we must continue what they did, for ideas or customs may have long ago dimmed. But we must respect their vision, their efforts, their values, their ideals, their perseverance, their gift of yesterday that makes today possible.”<sup>4</sup> This is a profound statement because all unfolding visions and aspirations are grounded in the past, yet must be rooted in the present, and realized in the pursuit of a transcendent future.



A good presentation shares new data.  
A great presentation changes what we know.  
An extraordinary presentation changes what we believe.

Dan Roam in his book, *Show and Tell*, describes the change process in three elements the heart, head and data.<sup>5</sup>

The evolving mission for the future implores the group to create a narrative that opens not just the head but also the emotions and heart to make a commitment to persevere in the struggle to see and eventually take for granted a new reality.

This direction has three important components:

- \* Re-envisioning the Congregation’s mission
- \* Creating a transforming narrative
- \* Taking heroic action to create the dream

### ***Re-envisioning the Congregation’s Mission:***

The first step to re-envision the congregation’s mission is entering into the mystery of contemplation by exploring the ‘what if’ questions for *these* times. The Congregation’s mission is the foundation of God’s ongoing call. It embodies both meaning and purpose. This call invites the pioneer community into ongoing, collective transformation. For this to happen, it is crucial for the congregation to reflect deeply on God’s prophetic invitation for the current time.

As the collective reshapes and develops the mission with a new myth and metaphors, it will demand a willingness to enter into at times the heart wrenching journey of detachment. For example, the iconic nature of motherhouses, ministries and property will need to be redefined in light of a pioneer mission and ministerial

<sup>4</sup>Chittister 45.

<sup>5</sup>Dan Roam. *Show & Tell: How Everybody Can Make Extraordinary Presentations*. NY, NY: Portfolio/Penguin, 2014. Print.

commitment. It is often easier to pursue these realities as tasks to complete rather than reflect on the symbolic richness of structure that shaped the congregation's current mental model and story.

*There is danger if these aspects are merely approached as tasks to be solved. The very act can leave the group stuck in its former purpose. If this happens, it will inhibit the heroic vision quest God may be inviting the congregation to explore.*



Perhaps this journey is best begun by living the Quero Apache Prayer:

*Looking behind,  
I am filled with gratitude  
Looking forward,  
I am filled with vision  
Looking upwards,  
I am filled with strength  
Looking within,  
I discover peace.*

Sheryl Sandberg in her book, *Option B*, reflected on the potent sense of grief with the sudden and tragic loss of her husband,

the love of her life. The depth of sorrow was acutely felt whenever there was a father-child activity and begrudgingly she realized that Option A, her husband Dave, was not an option. She was poignantly confronted with this heartache for herself and the children. In order to move forward, they were thrust into facing the painful choice of Option B.

As they dealt with this choice, they had to embrace and walk through the loss of all the images and metaphors of Option A. This painful shift forced them to grieve and face the difficult and painful choice of creating a new reality, a path without Option A, her husband and the children's father.<sup>6</sup>

*In many ways it is a similar experience for religious today 'Option A' is no longer available. Yet, the reality is that much of the congregational identity, existence and shared beliefs are centered around 'Option A'.*

As in Sheryl Sandberg's example, for religious, the rigorous path set forth by God is one of wrestling with their narrative for mission and choice for Option B or C or D. *The question that must be asked is, what is 'new' about our Charism and mission that is important and vital for this historical period?*

It is a penetrating search in the mixture of darkness and light to embrace the Spirit's invitation to explore a new "What if" for being prophetic and on mission for these times.

<sup>6</sup>Sheryl Sandberg, and Adam Grant. *Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Finding Joy*. NY, NY: Knopf, 2017. Print.

## ***Creating a Transformative Narrative:***

***“Stories have the power to ignite our fire, educate, simplify, motivate and launch movements.***

We’re all storytellers. We tell stories to sell our ideas; we tell stories to motivate teams; we tell stories that inspire our children to reach their full potential. <sup>7</sup>

This era is a time for creating new stories based on a world of 24/7 access; knowledge at our fingers tips; exposure to the various religious traditions; and instant exposure to global events.

Neuro-Science through the study of neuroplasticity is helping us understand how the power of narrative and story impacts our decisions and understanding of reality. Debbie Hampton in her article, *The 10 Fundamentals of Rewiring Your Brain*, shared that, “*neuroplasticity* is an umbrella term referring to the ability of your brain to reorganize itself, both physically and functionally, throughout your life due to your environment, behavior, thinking, and emotions.”<sup>8</sup> This is a new understanding of the brain previously thought of as static. It is now being understood as capable of reorganization. As the research evolves, it is reframing how we explore and understand personal transformation. This breakthrough is quite powerful when considered in light of organizational development. It becomes imperative in the transformative process to understand the vital nature of rewiring the brain to fit the congregation’s new story.

The question for the pioneer community is, ‘*what new story grounds them in their charisma for the emerging world?*’ This is where contemplation becomes critical in discerning the call of God. These new insights about re-wiring the brain mean that creating a new congregational narrative is truly transformative. Knowing this, allows the pioneer community to reframe its story and vision to have a powerful impact on society. This identity is more than a brand or tag line. It is about transforming the very essence of our story along with its beliefs, metaphors and myths for addressing our ‘What ifs’ for these times.

Just as Moses and the Israelites reframed their identity as they journeyed in the desert, today, the pioneering religious congregations walk in their own wilderness reimagining their identity, seeking their new promised land. As pioneers, they are entering the void to create a fresh story for these times. With each step, religious are scripting a new sense of their story and purpose. They are living in a world where diversity is no longer something read about in history books. Rather, the reality of diversity unfolds daily in our lives with the neighbor next door. We are experiencing immigrants who seek a new home, in countries like Europe or the United States. They see this as their new promised land. All of these realities demand that we reframe our narrative.

New narratives evolve over time, such as, the cosmic narrative. The chart below in an over simplified manner shows the impact of

<sup>7</sup>Carmine Gallo. *The Storyteller's Secret: From TED Speakers to Business Legends, Why Some Ideas Catch on and Others Don't*. New York: St Martins Pr, 2016. Print. 6-7

<sup>8</sup>Hampton, Debbie. "Neuroplasticity: The 10 Fundamentals Of Rewiring Your Brain." *Reset.me*. N.p., 28 Oct. 2015. Web. 05 July 2017.

space exploration on our shared spiritual narrative. Some people hold on tightly to the old myths, stories and symbols from the previous age. While others choose a more courageous narrative and myth that catapults them to transform their story and act to envision a new identity.

Each pioneer community is continually being shaped and molded by its foundational and current generational myth. Yet, today it is being impelled to frame its narrative as a smaller more dynamic pioneer community acting for

social transformation. This often moves religious congregations into a period of grieving and pining for current metaphors and stories even though they have lost their emotional meaning. The pain of grief at points can feel ominous. Yet, the invitation is to reaffirm, reframe and let go in order to enter into the pioneer mythic reality. This takes tremendous courage and grit to enter into this level of communal discernment. As the collective penetrates deeply into creating a revitalized story, they shape a pioneer story for this epoch moment.

*The chart below depicts how the evolution of space exploration has changed both our narrative and our spiritual identity.*

<b>SPACE EXPLORATION AND THE SPIRITUAL IDENTITY, DEVELOPED BY MARK CLARKE</b>		
<b>Historical Period</b>	<b>Narrative</b>	<b>Spiritual Identity</b>
Pre- human space exploration	<p>We were in awe of the mystery of the heavens.</p> <p>We could only imagine what was in the universe.</p> <p>US competing with Russia.</p>	<p>God was present out in the heavens.</p> <p>Outer experience of God</p> <p>You looked up to heaven and there was God.</p>
Moon Shot – era of 60’s and beyond from one-man flights to international space station	<p>Humans have now begun to explore the universe upfront and personal.</p> <p>We could see our own earth from space.</p> <p>US and Russia both participate in the exploration of the universe at the space station.</p>	<p>The movement to a more inward focus on spirituality and spiritual journey</p>
<p>Desire to colonize Mars – 1990’s and beyond</p> <p>The goal is in a 100-years to have a colony of 1 million people living on the planet Mars.</p>	<p>This question over the past has moved us even deeper into understanding the mystery of the cosmos.</p> <p>We begin to explore communication with a family member beyond earth to Mars.</p>	<p>The exploration of the cosmic Christ both on earth and in space.</p> <p>The concept we are all “one” in the mystery of creation</p>

Jesus says “no one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak. If he does, its fullness pulls away the new from the old, and the tear gets worse. Likewise, no one pours new wine into old wineskins.”<sup>9</sup> It is a profound pilgrimage to establish a new mental construct filled with sorrow and uncomfortable detachment so the new can flourish. The holding rigidly to old and tired sets of metaphors and symbols often inhibits the embryonic buds of the new. Congregations must risk challenging existing mental paradigms and stories in order to foster the pioneer narrative. This is critical in order to accomplish the mission through collective action.

One of the important aspects of creating a new narrative is reconciling the old with the new. In the late 90’s South Africa created the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to forgive the atrocities and injustices blacks suffered under apartheid.

*Bishop Tutu stated “that in South Africa there would have been no future without*

*forgiveness. Our rage and our quest for revenge would have been our destruction.”<sup>10</sup>*

The congregation’s rich heritage does offer a sense of stability and cohesion in the discernment process. Yet, the congregation is being implored by the Divine to hold in tension the past and the unfolding future. It is vital to be aware of how the old narrative can potentially block the new by idealizing the past or making the assumption that creating a plan means it exists. It is a mistake to consider latest Chapter directions and plans as if they already exist in fact. The challenge for a new story to emerge is integrating the head, what we know, with the heart, the emotional impetus to move forward. This integration of the mind and heart becomes a holistic journey of transformation.

*This rhythmic dance of mystery and conversion creates an energetic flow creating the emotional fortitude and resilience to persevere in the ‘what if’.*



All new adventures and myths require perseverance and risk as the trial and tribulations of the passageway reveals itself over time. In a world seeking information in sound bites, immediate solutions and instant gratification it is difficult to follow a course that emerges over time.

<sup>9</sup>Mark 2:21-22, NABRE.

<sup>10</sup>Desmond Tutu and Mpho A. Tutu. *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World*. New York: Harper Collins, 2014. Print. 3



The importance of embracing the new storyline is that it creates the courage to enter into heroic action for being transformative agents of change. As the new tale emerges, it deepens the understanding of the radical nature of the gospel call for these times.

### ***Taking Heroic Action to Achieve the Dream:***

*Meister Eckhart states "What we planted in the soil of contemplation, we shall reap in the harvest of action."* This is the challenge of the pioneer community—to act. It is essential to not become enmeshed in paralyzing reflection, recycling past wounds and disagreements.

Congregations today are asked to focus on impact in solving our most critical issues. It is a time when society is moving from a model based on charity to the creation of outcome and solution oriented planning around critical social issues.

*Constant disruptive change calls for continuous discernment, action and implementation.* For religious congregations, the desire is often to have everything clear, crisp and perfect. Only when these elements are present do they feel confident to move forward. The next generation and especially the millennials feel a penetrating sense of urgency to solve some of the most pressing needs. They recognize that the various social ailments

will only become more challenging and potentially catastrophic for themselves and their children if they fail to act. Therefore, they have to find their way in walking an undefined plan.

The integration of the evolving mission and story takes root in intentional and consistent action. One of the necessities to embrace something new is having a deep belief in the direction that overcomes the fear of the unknown. This is so well articulated in Mark Zuckerberg's address to the 2017 Harvard graduates:

*"... Ideas don't come out fully formed. They only become clear as you work on them. You just have to get started," he said. "If I had to understand everything about connecting people before I began, I never would have started Facebook. Movies and pop culture get this all wrong. The idea of a single eureka moment is a dangerous lie. It makes us feel inadequate since we haven't had ours. It prevents people with seeds of good ideas from getting started."<sup>11</sup>*

Action is the impetus that drives the transformative shifts. Each undertaking facilitates the process of moving forward. The focal point is always the "what if", the ultimate desired outcome. It is essential to see each action as a means to achieving the larger destination. Each step is a moment of discernment that allows the collective to learn and grow in achieving its dream.

<sup>11</sup>Fottrell, Quentin. "When Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg Sound the Same Dire Warning about Jobs, It's Time to Listen." *MarketWatch*. N.p., 17 June 2017. Web. 05 July 2017.

As one of the seminal thinkers of organizational change, Edward Deming, taught that it is important to plan, do, check and act. This is the rhythmic dance of each action which ultimately leads to achieving what cannot be seen.

Patty Azzarello's book, *MOVE* focuses on the middle space. Azzarello states *"It is easy to get excited at the beginning and define long-term goals at the end. It's the "middle" that's the problem! It's hard to keep an organization focused on doing something new and difficult for a long time. Since real transformation takes time, you need a strategy to maintain execution and momentum through the Middle."*<sup>12</sup>

The middle space is an intense sacrosanct pilgrimage to achieve the "what if". In order to move through this middle space there are five essential elements:

### **1 -Remain focused on the 'what if'**

Focus is indispensable. As the quote by Patty Azzarello states, it is difficult to sustain momentum when doing transformative change. The focus on the dream is especially imperative as moments of fear, sense of failure and doubt take over one's spirit. In answer to this, the congregation must continually maintain its focus on the 'what if'. This ardent focus creates the capacity to transcend moments of ambiguity and deep despair. Through contemplation the Divine call allows the members to remain anchored in order to achieve the emerging narrative and vision.

### **2-Systems alignment**

When an organization embarks on a new 'what if' it's critical to align the systems to this aspiration. Everyone needs to fully embrace the importance of their role and contribution to the vision. This alignment is difficult yet transformative because it means change, new learning and letting go of old patterns. "For even as the body is one and yet has many members,"<sup>13</sup> for the dream to be achieved each person must passionately believe in their importance to the ongoing process.

### **3-Celebrate small wins**

It is imperative to celebrate and relish the small wins along the path. Each successful achievement is a moment to savor that it is all worth the risk. Celebrations also foster solidarity and community that can often be lost in the day-to-day struggle to achieve the vision.

### **4-Develop collaborative partners**

One of the critical actions in the "middle space" is defining and building mutual collaborative relationships. It is vital to explore these relationships from multiple lenses such as who has the needed expertise, who can partner in-service delivery, and how can we establish an eco-system to generate the appropriate actions for achieving the vision.

<sup>12</sup>Azzarello, Patty. *Move: Getting Your Organization to Implement the Strategy You Keep Talking about*. Place of Publication Not Identified: John Wiley, 2017. Print.

## 5-Deep and reflective contemplation

When a congregation chooses to embark on a bold and audacious vision filled with success, peril, and risk, it can become terrorizing. Those times demand reaching deep inside. This is where contemplation becomes a profound gift. Entering into sacred moments of silence, allows both the individuals and groups to wrestle with the transformative change process. It is often difficult to remain in a still space with God when everything is chaotic and seemingly out of control. Yet, solitude allows the members to flow from a pure heart which leads to being radically detached from the outcome and trusting the process. This stillness creates being receptive to the grace and the wisdom needed to be transformed by the “middle space”.

*Contemplative reflection gives hope, and stamina to persevere in developing a new creation.*

When a congregation embraces the General Chapter direction to eradicate poverty, create a sustainable environment, concern for woman and children and other social issues, it *is a choice to impact the world*. An important question that needs to be asked is, ‘what’s the desired impact for this particular social issue?’

*Without taking collective action on these aspirations, they merely become wishful dreams.*

The transformative process is activated as a congregation acts and matures into the new metaphors and direction. Engagement by its very nature tests assumptions, raises new questions and defines what works. *Without collective action the mission and narrative become at best a theory at worst pious platitudes.*

<sup>13</sup>1 Corinthians 12:12, NABRE.

<sup>14</sup>John 1:14 NABRE.

<sup>15</sup>Hoffman, Andy. "The “Great Work” of Business Sustainability." *CEF. Corporate Eco Forum*, 27 June 2016. Web. 07 July 2017.

The very steps of moving forward invites the collective into deeper solitude and communal prayer. Each step catapults the congregation to implement the words of John’s gospel, “and the word became flesh.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, it is the energy of movement that makes authentic a new aspiration and thirst for social impact. Each action step is a deepening of the charism for these times. This is a heroic journey, a pilgrimage that integrates the head and heart. When a group responds to the celestial call through action they become the modern-day Acts of the Apostles. They are just like the early disciples and apostles entering a journey of transformation with a new mission filled with hope, anxiety and aspiration. Today’s congregations are asked to rewrite and live the Acts of the Apostles for these times.

### Summary:

The contemplative stance becomes a powerful antecedent to support transformation. In the stillness of contemplation, the evolving mission and narrative are formed within the embrace of God’s endless love. It is in the sacredness of each moment that we collectively embrace both our giftedness and shadow. This is God’s radical call to respond in love as we reimagine the missionary story as gift for these times, while simultaneously healing the unreconciled parts of our story.

*Reconciliation deepens the capacity to be people of compassionate vision, inspirational story and prophetic action.*

As Thomas Berry stated, “the success or failure of any historical age is the extent to which those living at that time have fulfilled a special role that history has imposed on them.”<sup>15</sup>

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