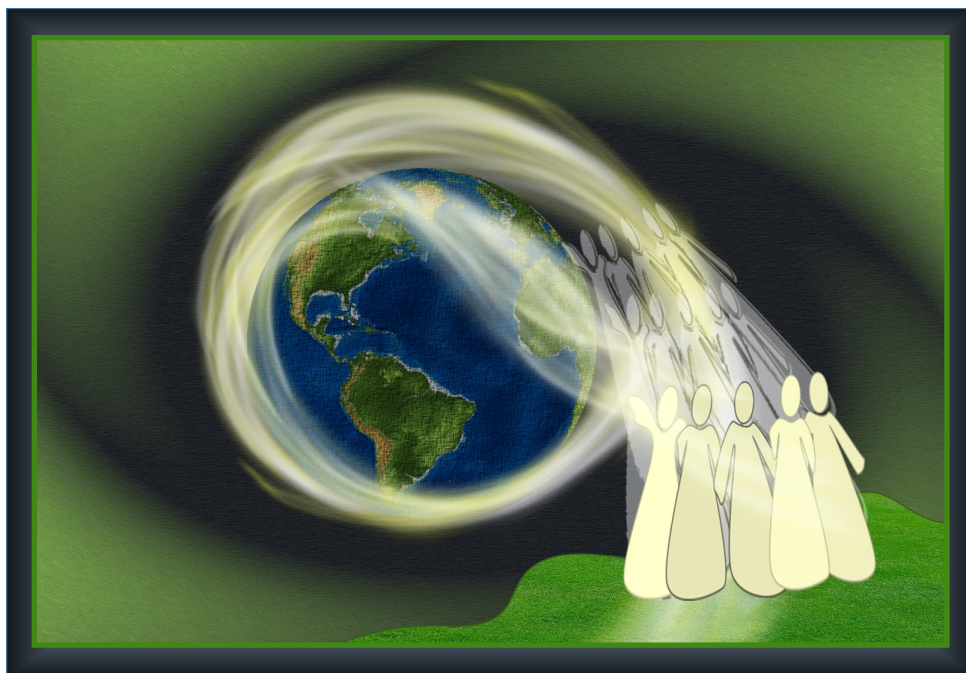



Mark Clarke

July 2018




## **Transformative Communities**

*Integrating Culture, Collaboration and Community*



*Transformative communities are grounded in a transcendent vision.*



This vision catapults the collective body to meet a critical social need by creating a culture and collaborative network to achieve an inspirational dream. These dreams are historically generated by a small cohort of people who passionately believe in a world not yet imagined. Today, transformative communities are the catalyst in a world struggling to form groups that seek solutions for the common good.

This reality is even more imperative as we move into an intercultural and interconnected world. There is a tendency to see natural catastrophes, poverty, and immigration as the issue. The more profound reality is the extreme loss of economic security, decimation of entire communities, and a sense of forfeiture of a broader purpose. For example, the unintended consequence of the catastrophic hurricane which decimated Puerto Rico led to people migrating to the United States. These types of human tragedies open both the compassionate heart and defensiveness of people. There was both an outpouring of deep compassion and hospitality and a simultaneous trepidation of more foreigners entering the United States. The nightly news commentary is a constant reminder of this dynamic tension.

We are evolving into an interdependent and intercultural world on multiple levels. In Ronald Rolheiser's book, Wrestling with God, he states, "*Globalization has reshaped virtually all our communities regarding ethnicity, culture, and religion. We are like pioneers settling a new world nobody has lived in before.*"<sup>1</sup>

In the past twenty years, advances in technology, such as social media and apps, strategic natural events, wars, and other conflicts, have increased this societal shift. These occurrences prompt a new question about cultural identity. What does it mean to collaborate and redefine traditional communities? This societal shift has unleashed both an outpouring of compassion and hospitality, and a more profound desire to protect one's tribe.

The renewed sense of culture, collaboration, and community are three vital elements to solving our most pressing social issues. These three C's offer a deeply rooted sense of identity, belonging, and purpose. Culture is the customs, norms, and behaviors of a group. Collaboration is the ability to embrace diversity and partnerships for a transcendent good. A community is a container that links culture with collaboration to establish a shared vision, a place of belonging, and a means to act. The integration of these three realities is the core challenge of any religious or civic organization.

The Christian tradition has a history of men and women who have responded to the divine call to make a difference through forming communities of love, compassion, and justice. Benedict, Dominic, Francis, Clare, Elizabeth Ann Seton, Catherine McAuley, and many others addressed the challenges of their eras through envisioning a transformative community on mission. They intended to create tangible solutions that shaped and formed the religious and civic communities of their times. So often, we worship these men and women rather than recognize and honor their struggles. Their aspirations were fraught with risk. It took great courage to establish a life-giving, communal culture and a sense of collaboration that created the foundation for envisioning transformative communities we know today.

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<sup>1</sup> Rolheiser, Ronald. *Wrestling with God: Finding Hope and Meaning in Our Daily Struggles to Be Human*. (Image 2018), Print. Preface

The creation of integrating the three C's is a spiritual path. It is a journey grounded in the Pentecost experience. *"They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim..."*<sup>2</sup>

*Each generation is entrusted with this timeless torch to create transformative communities for their time.*

As the Dalai Lama stated in his book, [An Appeal to the World](#), *"Now let the generation of the twenty-first century solve these problems. Peacefully through dialogue. So, the young generation is very important. The past is past. The twenty-first century is only 17 years old; the remaining 83 years are yet to come."*<sup>3</sup>

This historical moment asks us to reimagine becoming a transformative congregation that links a life-giving cultural narrative and fosters collaboration to create ongoing communities that shape a just and compassionate global society.

The fourteenth-century mystic, Julian of Norwich, thought that the most authentic spiritual life was one that produced *"awe, humility, and love."*<sup>4</sup> In our times, the spiritual is to embrace the beauty and richness of the diverse cultures and worldviews. This spiritual journey is demanding and arduous as we enter contemplative reflection that opens the hearts of individuals and communities to a broader sense of God's majestic gifts. **This path implores us to embrace new mental models, open our hearts to diverse cultures, and seek to build a community of transformation, creating solutions for our time.** As Julian of Norwich reminds us, we must deepen our spiritual life with awe, humility, and love.

This pilgrimage, this spiritual journey, calls us collectively to ask three critical questions:

*What is the new narrative that integrates the richness of our past with the emerging intercultural world in which we are living?*

*What is the capacity we need to immerse ourselves in a more diverse and collaborative network?*

*As we walk into the future how does communal discernment shape being a transformative community, calling us to action?*

**What is the new narrative that integrates the richness of our past with the emerging intercultural world in which we are living?**

Narratives are stories we tell ourselves.

**Take a contemplative pause and ask, what are you telling yourself as you read this article?**

Your reflection is a simple example of how a narrative begins to form. If you explore this article with others who understand it, a familiar story will start to take shape. On a fundamental level, this is the unfolding of a storyline.

The collective narrative nurtured through an individual's family of origin, the schools we attended, our native country, on-going education, and many other experiences teach us about values, accepted behaviors, and rituals. Often these norms become so ingrained that they become second nature. In many ways, groups can become so blinded by their cultural narrative it is accepted as if a universal truth. When an aspect of their culture is questioned or disputed there is often a powerful, emotional reaction that can lead to defensiveness and protection of one's accepted belief.

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<sup>2</sup> NAB, Acts 4:6-7

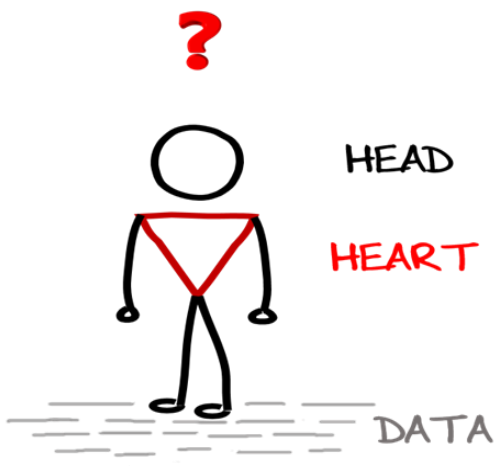
<sup>3</sup> Franz Alt Dalai Lama XIV/. *An Appeal to the World The Way to Peace in a Time of Division*, (William Morrow & Co 2017), Print. 79

<sup>4</sup> Greg Boyle, *Barking to the Choir: the Power of Radical Kinship*, (Simon & Schuster 2017), Print. 54

A congregation's culture, when taken for granted, will become challenged by technological breakthroughs in all disciplines, exploring the new cosmology and quantum consciousness as we go deeper into understanding quantum physics. Society's everyday experience of immigration, national catastrophes, and poverty provides a collision of story plots that fundamentally raise new mental frameworks. These new contexts both validate timeless truths and challenge time-honored customs.

This deep level of new understandings and experiences often propels unwilling religious and civic organizations into a narrative that fits more of an emerging worldview rather than a static worldview. As the traditional cultural identity and sense of belonging and purpose become confronted with new truths, there are two choices. To hold tightly and rigidly to the known or enter the mystery of the unfolding narrative. For the collective body, it means both are maintaining the tension of being rooted in the charism while being open to adapting to new customs for a changing world.

It seems simple, yet our collective culture is rooted in three levels: what we think, what we feel, and the data we accept as truth. Dan Roam shows these three levels in graphic form.<sup>5</sup>



The challenge is to change an organizational narrative through reframing all three levels as a community. The most rousing is the heart space. Groups become emotionally attached to their current metaphors, symbols, and rituals. The path of change can be heart-wrenching, paralyzing and challenging if the collective body opens itself to altering its universally accepted myths. The collective body's ongoing story has given it a feeling of security and more significantly, a sense of purpose. Different generations have unique lenses on the importance of the current culture. For example, groups have both technological natives and immigrants in the foreign land of technology. This generational experience and acceptance of technology can create tension in defining personal relationships, organizational solutions, and many other critical aspects of the culture.

Ilia Delio stated in her book, *The Emergent Christ, "Bonaventure and Meister Eckhart speak of a God who is dynamic, relational, communal and transcendent in love."*<sup>6</sup> In the cultural challenge of today, how can we establish civic and religious communities grounded in these timeless principles? This description of God allows us to enter into an emerging and evolving societal worldview that will challenge the status quo. Indeed, society's ongoing evolution is why reframing the congregation's cultural narrative is so imperative. We can recall the perilous path our foremothers and fathers took during their times of significant cultural shifts.

### **What is the capacity we need to immerse our congregation in a more diverse and collaborative network?**

The importance of having a collaborative network for the mission is to allow the religious congregation to focus on its core. Each group has its unique purpose and mission. As a congregation implements its

<sup>5</sup> Dan Roam. *Show & Tell: How Everybody Can Make Extraordinary Presentations*, (Portfolio/Penguin 2016), Print. 15

<sup>6</sup> Ilia Delio, *The Emergent Christ: Exploring the Meaning of Catholic in an Evolutionary Universe*, (Orbis Books 2013), Print . 40

chapter directives, a critical question to be addressed is, with whom can we partner? This question is linked to alignment with the congregation's vision and desired societal impact. Each collaboration offers a side benefit of building congregational capacity that impacts the quality of life for the larger society.

Society is yearning for more effective solutions to today's most difficult challenges. We are establishing mutual partnerships between government, nonprofits, and businesses. One of the essential by-products of these partnerships is maximizing collective talents and resources. It creates an increased commitment to construct a healthier community for those on the margins.

Heidi K. Gardner shares in her book, Smart Collaboration, *"The most important challenge faced by any organization is bringing that collective expertise to bear on problems that increasingly are so complicated and so sophisticated that no single expert – no matter how smart or hardworking – is in the position to solve them."* She goes on to say, *"Smart collaboration is a means to an end, rather than an end in itself: knowledge workers integrate their individual, specialized expertise to deliver high-quality, customized outcomes on complex issues."*<sup>7</sup> The statement also reflects the reality of religious congregations. The days when a religious congregation could stand alone have passed.

The painful reality is that congregations do not have the collective resources or capacity to solve their problems/issues alone. We have spent the past two-decades discerning based on the assumption that a community has both the resources and ability to address its mission and internal matters. It speaks of a mental model based on "individualism/independence" rather than having a collaborative framework based on community and interdependence.

Collaboration is a powerful spiritual journey that demands taking a narrow path. Abba Ammonas was asked, what is the narrow and hard way? (Matt, 7:14) *"The narrow and hard way is this, to control your thoughts, to strip yourself of your own will for the sake of God. This is also the meaning of the sentence, "Lo, we have left everything and followed you."* (Matthew 19:27).<sup>8</sup> At times, this is the feeling when the group moves into developing collaborative relationships. It can feel like we are helpless; questioning what we bring to the table and being asked to let go of our comfortable patterns. In our world of individualism, collaboration often seems like an oxymoron. Societal solutions of any lasting consequence happen by working together for the common good.

*If we are going to go beyond  
diminishment, we must expand our  
awareness of the potential of  
collaboration, the wealth of  
resources and insights within an  
individual congregation, and the  
entire eco-system of congregations.*

For example, there are so many congregations that have similar stances on immigration - those relegated to the margins, trafficking, and environment - that there is a diffused capacity to make a difference. Thus, it compels us to explore some 'what ifs':

*What if* we more intentionally - as a congregation - explore collaborative networks with other religious communities and organizations, letting go of protecting our charism?

*What if* religious congregations explored how a collaborative network would look around any one issue? What are the collective financial resources, political capital, talents and skills

<sup>7</sup>Heidi K. Gardner, *Smart Collaboration: How Professionals and Their Firms Succeed by Breaking down Silos*, (Harvard Business Review Press 2017), Print. 1

<sup>8</sup>Joan Chittister, *In God's Holy Light: Wisdom from the Desert Monastics*, (Franciscan Media 2015), Print. 57

existing among us that could solve a societal problem?

*What if* we developed a regional marketing, social media, and fund development strategy around environmental models and impact?

*What if* we quantified the impact of helping immigrants and explored a shared collaborative strategy to seek funding from national foundations?

These ‘what ifs’ are only the tip of the iceberg. The creativity and innovation existing among congregations, associates and lay co-workers, can open formidable doors for societal change. If a congregation expands its collaborative model, it will discover a myriad of organizations who share a passion for immigration, environment, etc. The sharing of resources creates a dynamic, communal and loving experience of God. This model allows us to affirm the words, “*God looked at everything he had made and found it good.*”<sup>9</sup>

### **As we walk into the future how does communal discernment shape being a transformative community?**

In Gregory Boyle’s book, Barking to the Choir, he asks three persuasive questions.

*“How do we open our hearts and minds to a new way of thinking?”*

*How do we open a path toward a transformed life?”*

*How can our eyes be open?”*

*These are fundamental questions that open our hearts to the Spirit. In the gospel of Mark, Jesus heals the deaf man by saying “Be Open!”*<sup>10</sup>

This is the invitation to communal discernment to

become open to new possibilities. God is calling congregations to discern what is the new paradigm that creates an emerging way of bringing the gospel to the now, a message that for centuries has been an instrument of love, compassion, and justice to those in need.

Joan Chittister states in Monastery of the Heart:

*Communal Discernment is a holy hearing of prophetic voices among us.*

*It comes out of listening  
to others  
and responding to them  
in the name of God,  
so that as a community  
we can move forward together,  
one heart at a time.*<sup>11</sup>

Transformative Communities have open hearts to listen intensely and reverently to the voices within and beyond, searching for truth. We live in a global echo chamber where we affirm some opinions and debase others. Eugene Cho in the book, Roadmap to Reconciliation, posits “*If we are not careful, it is quite possible and tempting to be more in love with the idea of reconciliation than to actually engage in the actual work of reconciliation – the arduous, painful and messy marathon work of reconciliation.*”<sup>12</sup> In these times, transformative communities model the benefits of engaging in such profound and deep soul work. The changes in our world call for this type of grief and resurrected integration.

The power of a transformative community balances the resurrection/transformation process with reconciliation/healing. We often focus on resurrection without realizing the importance of the need to be reconciled. The woman on the

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<sup>9</sup> NAB Genesis 1:31

<sup>10</sup> Boyle, 83

<sup>11</sup> Joan Chittister, Joan, *Monastery of the Heart: an Invitation to a Meaningful Life*, (Independent Pub Group 2012), Print. 148

<sup>12</sup> Brenda Salter McNeil, *Roadmap to Reconciliation: Moving Communities into Unity, Wholeness, and Justice*, (IVP Books, an Imprint of InterVarsity Press 2015), Print. Preface

road to Emmaus, Thomas, and Peter speak to this process as they encounter Jesus post-resurrection. On the journey to Emmaus, they confront their loss, grief, and fear. Suddenly, the power of Jesus meets their lives as they experience the resurrected Christ. Peter, who denied Christ, is called through forgiveness to experience the resurrection. Thomas, the doubter, is invited to embrace his fears and touch the resurrected Christ. The power of communal discernment as it explores culture, collaboration, and community, is entering this together to reenergize and model the resurrected Christ in a world hungering for wholeness.

### Summary

*Winston Churchill stated, "Success consists of going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm." <sup>13</sup> His statement echoes the challenge of our times to persevere when solutions seem impossible.*

As we explore new vistas of change, it is imperative to have an integrated approach grounded in culture, collaboration, and being a transformative community. This foundational anchor allows religious congregations the ability to endure in the darkness and celebrate the blessings of God as the world slowly becomes transformed. As we experience both the darkness and light, the resurrection comes from the painstaking willingness to amend the culture, to build collaborative networks and to envision being a transformative community. Elizabeth Johnson says in her book, *Creation and the Cross*, "Aware of this let us give thanks to God with all our heart praising and proclaiming the ineffable height of divine compassion, which acts beyond our expectation in such astonishing ways, showing such exceeding love and tenderness toward us, toward all of us in the community of creation." <sup>14</sup>



### ***Transformative Communities***

#### ***Integrating Culture, Collaboration and Community***

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<sup>13</sup> John McCain and Mark Salter, *The Restless Wave: Good Times, Just Causes, Great Fights, and Other Appreciations*, (Simon & Schuster 2018), Print. 334

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *Creation and the Cross: the Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril*, (Orbis Books 2018), Print. 226