

The Evolutionary Task Now: To Raise the Powers of Love Upward

Liz Sweeney, SSJ

Our role is no longer to merely ease suffering, bind up wounds, and feed the hungry, but through every form of effort to raise the powers of love upward to the next stage of consciousness.

—Teilhard de Chardin

Over the past 10 years, both personally and with small groups, I've steeped myself in the study and practice of integral consciousness, the great forward movement of consciousness and culture emerging now, and mapped out by pioneers like Clare Graves, Carol Gilligan, Robert Kegan and Ken Wilber. These theorists attest that cultures have emerged through dialectical shifts or stages in consciousness, each new level marked by a decrease of self-centeredness or ego and a wider embrace of inclusion and love. (1)

According to these theorists, there are four stages of consciousness that are active players in the world today. The first of these is **warrior/ego centric** consciousness which emerged more than 15,000 years ago. Pre-conventional, ruthless, and fearless, today it functions in warring hoards (ISIS), city gangs, and bullies. As a corrective to that, about 5,000 years ago, **traditional mythic** consciousness arose, imposing law and order onto society through hierarchical structures that value rules, roles, and discipline and extend care ethnocentrically to include family, nation, or religion.

Gradually over the past 500 years, through struggles to birth new ways of thinking (Descartes, Kant), new scientific insights (Galileo, Copernicus), new forms of governance (French and American revolutions), **modern** consciousness developed with the hope that reason, science, and democratic structures would solve the world's problems. While it contributed much to improving our quality of life, modern consciousness' industrial innovations also contributed to the destruction of the earth, the loss of species, and the consolidation of wealth in the hands of a few. So beginning in the 1960s, a system of **postmodern** values began to emerge that embraced world-centric morality, care for the earth and all her people, consensus decision-making, and a pluralistic world view. This very pluralism, however, has left postmoderns

looking for consensus without resolution, and thus to a loss of meaning and direction.

Human evolution is now at the threshold of a great evolutionary shift from the First Tier stages outlined above to what Don Beck terms the Second Tier. The difference between the two is that people and cultures in First Tier stages tend to believe that their values, perceptions, and judgments are the only correct ones. As a result, they can be intolerant of people in stages prior to theirs. (Postmoderns, for example, can harshly critique people who are more traditional). As humanity approaches Second Tier consciousness, critical judgments toward those who value and act differently are replaced by a desire for and vision of interconnectedness, a willingness to discriminate

through dialogue and to allow room for other ways of perceiving and acting. This evolutionary advance widens the vision of those in the Second Tier so that for the first time in history, humanity gains the potential to appreciate and integrate the previous levels.

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ue to create havoc in our world, this Second Tier of **integral** consciousness offers glimpses of hope for a cultural shift that may suggest a significant future direction for religious life. Thanks to the visionary leadership and communal transformation of the past 50 years, we women religious may already see in ourselves traces of some of the hallmarks of integral consciousness: a cosmological awareness of the evolutionary significance of the 14 billion year universe story, a deepening capacity for contemplative consciousness that transcends and includes the rational, an ongoing integration of science and spirituality, a movement from individualism to communion—from I to WE—and a vision of global economy and governance that cares about the common good of all, especially those most in need. These are potentially great contributions that we and many others are offering to the world.

Now humanity stands at a critical crossroads in history. For the first time, we have the terrible potential to destroy our planet and bring unimaginable suffering and destruction to earth's creatures and to our entire ecosystem. The stakes are high; the question facing us now is large. How can we respond so that children

and our earth community have a future? As congregations of consecrated women religious, what is ours to do?

At the heart of Jesus' message and the very source of its urgency and power is his consciousness that the reign of God, the reign of Love, is already irrupting on our earth and requiring our total investment. God is doing a new thing,

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right now, in 2016, in the midst of an old world with old ways of seeing—and we are urgently-needed pioneers of this transformation. As a direct result of our many years of reading the signs of the times and contemplating Jesus who dared to risk everything for the sake of God's reign, women religious already see

evidence in our communal lives of the presence of an integral worldview. Because of this, I believe, we are uniquely prepared to risk further by intentionally creating communities that can nudge this evolution of consciousness toward even greater love and inclusion. Contributing to this shift in consciousness may, in fact, be the imperative of our time and the most important thing women religious can offer the world.

How can we fulfill Teilhard's ideal and "through every form of effort raise the powers of love upward"? Are there practices and processes that we, individually and communally, can intentionally foster that will help us make this shift? While the way forward is tentative because creating something new is always experimental and depends on grace, right now some invitations from the future do seem to be emerging in our culture and among women religious.

1. The invitation to live the mystery of Christ more consciously

Recent groundbreaking scholarship (2) encourages us to ponder the Mystery of Christ anew so that we can experience Christ as the profound truth of our own lives. We are invited to realize the communion of human and divine both in Jesus of Nazareth and at each moment of conscious choice in our own lives. Christ is both the sacred energy that courses through history, driving evolution forward and the hidden life empowering our every gesture of mercy and compassion, of healing and reconciling love. We "live, not [ourselves] but Christ lives in [us]" (Gal.2:19); Christ works always and everywhere, laboring within us and through us—as "the center in whom and by whom [we are] illuminated." (3)

2. The invitation to become more intentional about engaging in individual and communal contemplation

Beatrice Bruteau claims that "the whole work of prayer is to change our sense of identity." (4) Over the years, as prayer becomes simpler, grace moves us from a protective, defensive

ego-centered sense of self to a sense of identity rooted and grounded in Love, in God. As we sit in contemplation and as we engage life's daily challenges contemplatively, our mystic capacity to find God and love God in ourselves, in all circumstances, and all people deepens. We are gradually, yet surely, led into a self-emptied, and fully conscious presence that is both embodied and spacious, opening into Love, into "I am," into Christ.

This higher consciousness, the transpersonal self, (5) lives with and in a deep sense of communion with God and with every "dear neighbor without distinction." (6) Because such consciousness is not defined egoically through roles, comparisons, and distinctions from others, but is experienced as a transcendent energy center, it can live inside others, flow into them, abide in them, share its essence with them. With such consciousness, we begin to live what Jesus knew when he invited his followers, "Abide in me as in me, as I abide in you." (Jn. 15:4) And this luminous Self (known classically as the presence of God's grace within us) is the root of our capacity for creative love that flows out freely to all without exception, knows no boundaries, and has no enemies. The practice of uniting with it and radiating it to others makes possible what Bruteau calls "communion consciousness," realizing our oneness with all. (7) Gradually, as dwelling in this part of the Self becomes more stable in us, we are transformed into vessels of healing presence, of engaged justice and compassion, able to love without reserve.

While this kind of transformation is an invitation for each of us individually, it will be facilitated by and have greater impact on us and on the world if we embrace the practice of contemplation as congregations, as communal bodies, when we are together in congregational meetings, assemblies, and chapters. "Where two or three [or more] are gathered," Christ is truly present in our midst. (Mt. 18:20) In groups, fields of communion can be created in which deeper states of consciousness arise that open us individually and communally to the Infinite presence of Spirit and Love. My experience with groups is that this inbreaking of the Divine happens often

and readily. Our work is to expect it, be alert for it, and especially to take time to dwell in those moments when we are touched by something More.

3. The invitation to create ways of coming together that deepen the bonds of relationship among us and expand the inclusivity of our love.

Since the movement into integral consciousness is a shift from I to WE, from individualism to communion, it invites us to design new ways of being

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together, of networking with one another in relationships across and beyond our immediate circles of local community and friendship. (See sidebar on page 7 by Annmarie Sanders, IHM on how her congregation facilitates these congregational-wide conversations.)



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Teilhard de Chardin taught us that evolution has progressed through creative unions (atoms —> molecules —> cells —> organisms). Beatrice Bruteau, an early disciple of his, uses the term Grand Option to suggest the way creative unions need to operate today: human evolution through energy sharing, through sharing our human capacities for knowing, willing and loving in order to give birth to the next level of human consciousness. (8)

In my 10-years of working with consciousness groups, I/we have found contemplative dialogue, based on the work of physicist David Bohm, provides a gateway into this kind of energy sharing. Through slower-moving conversations that invite a creative flow of meaning among us, we actually evolve our sense of union with one another as we probe significant ideas together and listen deeply for the truth in another's point of view. When we do this in wider circles of embrace, within religious congregations and beyond, we are readying the ground for collective transformation. Ken Wilber suggests that historically when 10 percent of the population functions at this higher stage, a ripple effect occurs that begins to shift the whole. To the degree that we can become communities of contemplative practice, religious congregations will be a leaven for that shift.

Perhaps the greatest gift women religious can offer our beloved yet stricken world is to foster among ourselves an abiding stance of integral contemplative consciousness able to heal the repressed pain that is at the root of so much suffering and so much violence.



ness purified through individual and communal contemplation, shadow work, and deep dialogue, we enlarge our capacity to create communities of love and compassion among ourselves and those we serve.

I realize putting time and energy into this communal transformation of consciousness may feel ambitious given the losses, stresses, and tasks many congregations of women religious are facing today. And yet, as Chardin foresaw, “through every form of effort to raise the powers of love upward to the next stage of consciousness” appears to be the way Spirit is alluring humanity forward at this moment in history. Happily, this is a direction in which our years of living in community, praying contemplatively, participating in communal assemblies, and even undergoing the purification of aging, give us a blessed advantage.

4. The invitation to be diligent about personal and collective shadow work

As Jungian psychology holds, the term “shadow” refers to the unconscious side of the psyche and includes those aspects of ourselves that we have split off, rejected, denied, projected onto others, or disowned because they felt scary and dangerous. The shadow holds parts of us, individually and collectively, that I/we cannot yet own though we see their effects in our anger, apathy, and hostility. The work of individuation and maturity requires us, individually and communally, to take the long journey of bringing these still unintegrated aspects of ourselves into the light of conscious awareness and compassion. Our task is to re-own them, to integrate them; otherwise they create stress and suffering for us and those around us. Our shadows limit our future because they imprison us to react to present situations out of the suppressed pain of the past. When we work consciously to integrate these shadow parts of ourselves, we free immense psychic energy for love and compassion toward ourselves and others.(9)

stance of integral contemplative consciousness able to heal the repressed pain that is at the root of so much suffering and so much violence. As we bring to every situation an integrated conscious-

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Liz Sweeney, SSJ (right) and Constance FitzGerald, OCD recently served as consultants to the LCWR Contemporary Religious Life Committee as the committee explored the call to foster among the conference a stance of integral contemplative consciousness.

Endnotes

1. Ken Wilber, et al, *Integral Life Practice*, Integral Books, Boston, 2008.
2. Ilia Delio, *Christ in Evolution*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 2008 and *The Emergent Christ*, Orbis, 2011. Raimon Panikkar, *Christophany*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 2004.
3. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton* (ed. William H. Shannon), Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, New York, 1985, p. 643.
4. Beatrice Bruteau, "Prayer and Identity," *Contemplative Review*, 16:3, Fall, 1983.
5. In *Thoughts in Solitude*, Thomas Merton called this consciousness the true self "which is beyond words and concepts ... and opens into the subjectivity of God's own self." *Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani*, 1987, p. 70.
6. A phrase significant to the Sisters of St. Joseph.
7. Beatrice Bruteau, *The Grand Option*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 2001, pages 49-57. The study of Bruteau's work has been foundational in my thinking.
8. Bruteau, *ibid*, pages 3-4.
9. Wilber, *ibid*, pages 41-66.

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Creating New Ways of Coming Together

In 2014, the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (IHM) of Scranton launched "Visioning the Future," an initiative to prepare the congregation members for a future vastly different from the recent past.

Visioning the Future is based on an insight shared in a 2006 interview for *The Occasional Papers* by Constance FitzGerald, OCD on creating a religious life that will be relevant for the future. She stated, "If we are to be capable of dreaming new dreams, we will need a continuing openness to new ways, without allowing fear to paralyze us. Religious identity will not be lost so long as those who dream and imagine have solid education, knowledge, and experience of the community's traditions and charism, and are grounded in prayer."

These three elements comprise the work of this initiative: deep grounding in prayer, fostering strong relationships, and deepening our education and knowledge. The initiative seeks to insure that at least three corporate learning experiences are provided each year for all congregation members. This has involved bringing in speakers whose presentations are also videotaped and live-streamed for those who are not able to be physically present.

Following each educational experience, any member who chooses then participates in a four-month process which we call "Practicing the Future." We chose this name knowing that while we cannot predict what the future may be like for our congregation, we can be fairly certain that religious life will require a commitment to prayer, contemplation, community, and a continuous reading of the signs of the times. Practicing the Future allows us to grow in our capacities in each of these areas.

Presenters are asked to prepare materials for the Practicing the Future process that follows their presentation which may include sug-

gestions of additional educational resources; readings, questions, poetry, or images for reflection; and conversation starters for small group gatherings – all related to the presenter's topic. Members are then asked to indicate whether they wish to participate in this round of Practicing the Future. (In our congregation of approximately 400 sisters, an average of 120 have participated in each round.)

Those members then commit themselves to personal prayer, additional education, and participation in a dialogue group. These groups of approximately eight people agree to meet at least three times, if possible, during the four-month period. Most participants ask to be randomly assigned to a group, while others form their own groups, often based on geography and a desire to meet in person. Other groups meet via videoconferencing, or include a mixture of some people meeting in person and others joining through technology. At the end of the four-month period, most groups disband so the members can be assigned to different groups for the next round, while others choose to be together for one more round – often because they feel the bonds among the members are just beginning to grow and they wish to strengthen them further.

A key part of the Visioning the Future process has been learning how to better practice contemplative dialogue (see *Liz Sweeney's article*). Dialogue groups are encouraged to utilize this form of reflection and sharing together, and most report that this practice has made a significant difference in the quality of the interaction and sharing.

At the conclusion of each four-month session, dialogue groups are invited to name any insights they gained for themselves and for the life of the congregation that they feel might be valuable to share with the whole congregation. At the start of the following educational weekend session, we "Gather the Wisdom" through a process that listens to the insights of any group that chooses to share. These insights are incorporated into the planning for the next Visioning the Future sessions.

-- Annmarie Sanders, IHM
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