

LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE OF WOMEN RELIGIOUS  
2020 Virtual Assembly

## Evening Prayer: Lessons on Meaning-Making

Reflections by:

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### Alicia Costa, SSF

George Floyd's words, "I can't breathe," have haunted my dreams and saddened my soul. The call to assure that no one is denied breath has become a focus of my thought and prayer during these past months. God created Adam in His image, who did not become a living being until God breathed the breath of life into him (Genesis 2:7). Everything we are and everything we have is a gift from God, including each breath we breathe.



I hear people refuse to wear a mask during this deadly pandemic because they believe it violates their rights, or that masks are uncomfortable and makes it difficult to breathe. But, imagine being black in America where black men have lost their lives because they were denied their right to breathe.

A democracy cannot truly survive without a moral compass. We can no longer be silent about the atrocities we see. The time has come to wake up, pay attention, and be agents to eradicate these injustices so all may breathe freely. As Dr. Martin Luther King once said: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." Women religious can become the moral compass to shape minds and hearts of our times – assuring that all will be able to breathe.

Paraphrasing Kathleen Sherman in her song: As long as we are in the world, we must be light for the world, a word of truth, a song of hope with hand outstretched for healing. We must become beacons of love for this weary world so as to be better beams of God's holy light. **NOW IS THE TIME** to bring hope and healing to a weary world that longs to breathe freely (*As Long as I Am in the World* by Kathy Sherman). May we not miss the opportunity before us.

### Jean Marie Fernandez, RGS

"In You I live and move and have my being." (Acts 17:28) This Scripture verse has become a divine metaphor for me during the pandemic. Our world has been racked by COVID-19 — a disease which steals the breath. Our society is suffocating from systemic injustice. Many vulnerable people are dying. "I can't breathe" has become a rallying cry of the mass social protests happening around the country. These events impact me, causing my breath to tighten and accelerate. Breathe for change keeps me in alignment with God, Mother nature and all of life.



Practicing breath awareness awakens my soul to listen deeply and to act with integrity. This change ignites within me a spirit of global solidarity, and a passion for justice especially for those silenced, whose very breath has been crushed out of them. God is so close to us more than we can ever imagine. Consciousness is a mirror of God's cosmic consciousness.

I work with people from all faith traditions, who recognize breath as the life force of the universe. We are co-creating together a paradigm shift through meditation, mysticism, and prayer as sacred dance.

I believe God's breath is healing our universe, navigating through our diverse charisms, strengthening us in new ways, so a greater good can emerge.

I take refuge in the aspirations of our foundress St. Mary Euphrasia, "May every beat of my heart be a prayer". May we all take a collective breath together.

### **Jennifer Mechtild Horner, OSB**

Every year at the end of our summer chapter, each sister is missioned for the coming year. In July 2019, as I sent each sister forth in mission, she was given a charm in the shape of an anchor to remind her that our anchor, our hope is in Christ.

Little did we know at that time what this year would hold for our community, our country, our world. Now, in these days of pandemic and racial unrest, I find myself trying to make meaning of all that is going on around and within us. Our world is crying out for healing . . . how are we to respond? My mind and heart wander back to our missioning, to the symbol of the anchor, a sign of hope.



As we live through this time of isolation and division, we are called now more than ever to be an anchor in the troubled ocean of our world. Being Benedictine our call to a life of prayer, work and hospitality lived in the context of community is a gift that we must share with the world. In a time of isolation, we offer community, an encounter with the other; in a time of division, we offer a place of welcome. Who are we called to be? Now? At this time? What does it mean to enter the fray, the struggle and walk with and beside the other?

I believe that as religious we are called to live our charism in a deep and profound way. Not to be other than who we are but to be more of who we are called to be. I am always amazed as I attend the assembly each year by the power of the charisms that make up the body of LCWR. Let us share our charisms now, more deeply than ever. Let us have the courage to risk and try new things that are grounded in the charism that we have been gifted. Together we, women religious, can and will make a difference!

## Jackulin Jesu, SCN

“Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love.” -- 1 Cor 13:13

These words of the Apostle Paul have been my source of sustenance throughout these months of uncertainty and anxiety. When life around seemed fragile, I was being nurtured in the tabernacle of my heart by the abiding presence of our loving God who offered Faith, Hope, and Love to break the barriers of fear, anxiety, and the injustice surrounding race and culture across the globe.

The leadership of our congregation had met in Bangalore, India in February 2020, which meant travel for some of us. Little did we know then that the world would come to a halt a few weeks after we returned to the US.

Lockdowns and masked faces became our way of life before we even grasped the gravity of the pandemic. We had all faced dreadful situations in the past. 9/11 is etched in our memories, as is the bombing of Mumbai (11/26/08) in the memory of every Indian. The devastating tsunamis, hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, and forest fires, including the burning of Amazon were calamities of a not distant past.

Yet, was there a single family that did not fear COVID-19? This virus was so unique that it spared no country. For this pandemic, humanity was one. Communities and countries fighting the pandemic as one united force augur hope for a unified global family. From the 34-year-old Dr. Li of Wuhan to the thousands of other medical professionals and people of all faith traditions who have died in the process of loving those infected, I have seen people laying down their lives for the sake of others. They inspire me. As the pandemic continues to spread havoc unabated, I, a daughter of Catherine Spalding, call myself to dare to risk my life in faith, hope, and loving global service.

## Janice Klein, PBVM

The image that brought meaning to me during the early days of the pandemic was that of a bridge with a clearly traveled path on one end and unclear misty fog on the other. Words from the poem *Trasna* by Sister Raphael Consedine, PBVM came to me. The poem describes pilgrims pausing, tired of a long journey and asking whether to continue or go back to the known road.

As the pilgrims discern their next step, they hear a Voice they knew:

“This is Trasna, the crossing place. Choose. Go back if you must...listen within and trust....this is Trasna, the crossing place. Come”



I was the tired pilgrim on that bridge; looking back to a past that seemed to disappear so quickly and forward to a future I clearly could not see. The sick, the grief, the deaths, the economy. I felt vulnerable, anxious for the safety of all those in my immediate world and the larger world. The bridge under my feet did not feel secure.

Then the second virus, which I had avoided, called me out of my comfort, face to face with my sin of white privilege. The fog toward which the Voice called became thicker. Looking back, the known path seemed easier for me, yet not for all. I was being stretched to see the world from others' perspectives.

The Voice I trusted called me to choose hope; include all; choose another step onward. Choosing to walk into the fog with others and to trust the new vision gave me strength and purpose.

### **Lourdes Leal, CDP**

In May, the newscaster on 60 Minutes said: "Time has been untethered and the spring has been taken from us."

I identified with being **frozen** in time. Each time I went to date a document, I wondered "but what month are we in."

I spoke with one of our sisters who is a counselor and she said the worse is when her client gets **frozen**. I quickly realized she meant the screen on her Zoom call got frozen. Then the recruiters for our sponsored University said that many students were **frozen**. **Frozen** in indecision should they sign up for fall classes or not. The image of **frozen** made me feel like we are paralyzed restrained, stuck in place.



So what meaning can I make of all this? The positive is the goodness of persons responding so generously helping each other. In our convent there is a renewed deepening of prayer, global consciousness. We are more intentional in engaging in conversation and reaching out to those alone in ministry.

This frozen time is a test of our resilience. As our founder says, "Leave the future to God's Providence and use the present well." It is forcing me to live in the present moment not planning ahead for events that keep getting cancelled.

The negative is too much loss of life; too much violence, with the second pandemic of racism. Maybe it is numbing my feelings, freezing my heart.

About the loss I read "If the love is real, then the grief is real." So if I believe I have given my life to love others then the news of so many deaths brings me real grief, and it brings communal grief. It leaves me with a deep sadness for the suffering.

I trust that Our Provident God gives me grace to keep on caring and keep my heart from freezing.

## Jocelyn Quijano, PBVM

What has been a big help during these times is an article from my congregation's constitutions: "We are called to awaken to the Spirit of God present and active in all that exists, to a Spirituality of Being in Communion." This communion, this oneness wrought by the Spirit's presence and action, became the lens through which I make sense of what is happening during these times of great uncertainty and hardships, but also of wonderful opportunities and graces.



*Re-called* to the communion that exists, that already *IS*, gave meaning to my participation in livestream Masses. I began the practice of putting my palm against my heart during the sign of peace, and for that quick moment, I become one with the joys and pains of the world. Communion propels me to be more intentional in connecting with people. It prompts me to dedicate 30 minutes daily to the news... to shed tears with people in their pain and grief, but also for the goodness and largeness of heart of so many people shown in actions big and small; to cheer for our front liners and for the people who recovered and re-joined their families, to smile at our kindred beings enjoying their natural habitats without human intrusion...

And the night I watched in horror and disbelief the murder of George Floyd, this communion, this oneness became the container that held my shock, my terror, my anger, and my intense pain. Communion continues to be the container that holds anything that just doesn't make sense....

This same communion grounds my hope, my trust, and my advocacy for a better, more sustainable world for each human being and for all of creation.

## Margo Ritchie, CSJ

Three things seem to be converging in my mind as I have mulled this over the past month.

First is that I think that meaning makes us. I do not intend this as some "cutesy" reversal of the phrase. I think all of us are good at making meaning of things. Somehow the process feels different now and requires a new way of experiencing. We are not so much the makers in this moment as the ones being made. This process of stepping back watching ourselves being made personally and as a global community is like watching, sensing, imagining something fermenting.



Secondly is an image from some work by Otto Scharmer on seeing the shadow and our blind spot as the source of transformation. It is the image of walls collapsing. He speaks of the Berlin wall collapsing 30 years ago in 1989 and he describes this moment, 30 years later, as the other shoe dropping. Thirty years ago a wall that was separating different economic systems and world views was taken down. Today as we speak many of us experience and feel in our bodies

the interior walls separating us from each other dissolving. And this 30-year interlude is all of one piece, one movement. It is all meaning making us.

I am a person naturally drawn toward the future, but what I noticed as the crisis deepened, was that only two words could carry me through. The first is NOW—listen, watch, be with the now coming toward you. Don't miss it. Don't avert your eyes or heart from it. The truth though, is that this word seemed incomplete without a second word—NEXT. What is being asked? What is the call in this moment? What is the next step or the next small piece? With whom? And so meaning is making me, is making us as the words NOW and NEXT are tethered together. No grand vision, no overarching plan—just two words summoning our faithfulness.