

**However Long the Night:  
Holy Mystery Revealed in our Midst  
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**Introduction:**

It is an honor to be with you this morning to reflect on Holy Mystery revealed in our midst. Here we are a mystery ourselves within the great holy mystery that encompasses us, gathered as religious women of many charisms and expressions of religious life, of many languages and experiences. Beneath our differences of theology, and ministries and cultures, and ages we are sisters to one another bonded by a special unity in our call to leadership. Thank you for this generous service you are offering your congregations.

There is another mystery: you are here as an elected leader of your congregation now intimately involved in the life and direction of your group. Some of you are new in the ministry. Others are very familiar, yet all of us are making our way together in this mysterious holy work. Here you are doing this ministry with great love for your congregation and with personal sacrifice. In addition I know you are very concerned about the issues facing our world and how we as women religious might make a difference. Beginning or experienced, we are together learners in this new moment of the mystery of God's unfolding revelation.

We are doing this in a time unlike any other in religious life. It takes everything we can know, intuit, and discern together to lead well. It is a time of diminishment, - and not only in religious life. We know global crisis, institutional decline, and some very peculiar dynamics in the U.S. including political ineffectiveness, as well as a variety of challenges within our church. We also know the destruction of people lives by poverty and violence and all the stressors of living in our world today. It all makes leading now especially challenging. But then who are we to think that leading in the time of the "Black" Death or the Industrial Revolution, or the Lateran Council, was any more light filled. Who are we to think that responding to the needs of the Great Depression or the Civil War was any easier. We are standing on the shoulders of great women and must be about doing what is ours to do now so that there will be the possibility of a future for religious life for those who come after us. That being said we may feel like one of our contemporary leaders, Jean Meier CSJ a member of the St. Louis Provincial Team who died suddenly in May.

*"Risky business  
this surfing on grace  
I do not know if I will be carried  
on a powerful swell  
or too conscious of self  
will lose myself in the wake.  
What I do know  
is that even though swept under*

*I will emerge  
perhaps bruised and breathless  
to find grace afloat  
ready again to carry me  
safely home."*                      *Jean Meier CSJ*

What we do know is what Alice Walker tells us

*"When we let Spirit  
lead us  
it is impossible  
to know  
where  
we are being led.  
All we know  
all we can believe  
all we can hope  
is that  
we are going  
home  
that wherever  
Spirit  
takes us  
is where  
we  
live."*                      (When we let Spirit Lead us" Alice Walker)

I have been asked to reflect with you on the Holy Mystery Time in which we are living religious life and to include reflection on the essential considerations facing religious life and our leaders at this time. How is Holy Mystery being revealed in all that is before us?

What I will do with our time this morning is look at what I am naming a holy mystery in three phases: We will first situate ourselves by looking briefly at our experience in the fifty years since Vatican II. We will do this both to help us remember, but also to provide a context for what follows. Secondly we will talk about something I am calling "remaining in the middle space" with its despair and its hope, and thirdly we will explore the call to prophetic action in light of these movements. In thinking about all of this I have titled what we are talking about "However Long the Night" which is a claim to faithfulness to the entire process.

**Part One: The impact of Vatican II on the Identity of Religious Life - Claiming Our Identity by making our way through a long night.**

I was not a member of my congregation at the time of the Council, as many of you were not, but we have lived our entire experience in its wake. Now with the hindsight of fifty years we can see some things.

In a Church History course several years ago, Ted Ross SJ taught something that I have never forgotten. His thought was that the impact of a Council is not really known until about fifty years after the event. While there are certain immediately visible implementations, the real impact cannot be seen until the experience is mediated by some generations of the faithful. So now at our fifty year marker we can look with hindsight at the effect of the Council on Religious Life and can harvest some wisdom. Fifty years seems to be a kind of tipping point, a testing place to see if we have been true to the call.

Another comment about the Council: in recent fiftieth anniversary explorations we have heard that one of the weakness of the Council was that not enough documents included structures for implementation. The exception seems to be the Document on the Liturgy. I suggest we add Perfectae Caritatis as one of the most implemented of the Council documents. It is not that a structure was given, but there was such a structure in place in religious life and such responsiveness to the Council that implementation happened.

We have been in a process of maturing since the Council's call to renewal and I dare say that through the process we have become more faithful not less, more clear about who we are, not less, and more free to give expression to our call not less.

The directives from Perfectae Caritatis focused in four areas:

1. The call to follow Christ: #1 *"Indeed from the very beginning of the Church men and women have set about following Christ with greater freedom and imitating Him more closely through the practice of the evangelical counsels, each in his own way leading a life dedicated to God. ... The more fervently, then, they are joined to Christ by this total life-long gift of themselves, the richer the life of the Church becomes and the more lively and successful its apostolate. a) Since the ultimate norm of the religious life is the following of Christ set forth in the Gospels, let this be held by all institutes as the highest rule."*

2 and 3. #2. *The adaptation and renewal of the religious life includes both the constant return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original spirit of the institutes and their adaptation to the changed conditions of our time.*

4. #2 d) *Institutes should promote among their members an adequate knowledge of the social conditions of the times they live in and of the needs of the Church.*

In these four things asked of us, Vatican II invited us into walking around in a great mystery and to meet God there as we met ourselves searching out our deepest identity articulated in the areas of following Jesus, knowing our charism, adjusting to the changed conditions of our times and gaining adequate knowledge of the social conditions of our times.

We did the work and of course it continues. We came to know Jesus in new ways: both in theological halls of the great universities and in the view from below as we lived in the villages of Peru and Uganda, in Honduras and El Salvador, in inner cities and all the places we sent each other to respond to new needs. We came to know Jesus from the underside of theology, in the inner cities and homeless shelters, from immigrants and prisoners, with a view from prostitutes and from the children of slaves, from the scarred places on the earth, the places of

environmental racism. We are continuing to explore who Jesus is and the meaning of the incarnation in the new cosmology. We brought this learning into our contemplative prayer and faith sharing. In it we came face to face with the dangerous memory of Jesus, stripped of the layers of triumphalism that had accumulated and we had to ask ourselves "which Jesus are we called to imitate."

*"There is hardly any other figure in the western tradition who has been so thoroughly domesticated as Jesus. He had a lovely wildness in him. Every time religious institutions tried to box him in he danced away from their threats and trick questions effortlessly."* (Donahue p.163.) It would be fascinating to have the possibility of excavating the inner landscapes of Jesus' solitude to see what was dawning on him. How such tender and wild light was brightening in the clay of his heart. There must have been great disturbances and excitement in his mind. His decision to take on what he knew - to be driven by it --- this is the Jesus we want to know.

And as you well know, we also learned as much as we could about our charisms. We opened these gifts like treasures long buried, or perhaps never available to us before. We put out best minds to work on translating, understanding, and teaching their meanings as we took on the challenge of determining together what their inventive application to new needs and different realities might mean for us.

We not only studied, we experienced new realities. Having shed so many protective layers we immersed ourselves into the lives and needs of the new margin dwellers. It involved darkness: it meant sisters skilled in liturgy now staffing homeless shelters, and excellent classroom teachers moving to areas of the country and the world with the poorest ability to educate. It meant health care providers moving from hospitals to establish clinics in rural areas of poverty and lack of accessibility. Always we were responding to unmet needs.

The Council asked us to become more aware of social concerns and we did so with issues from racism to climate change, from trafficking to the nuclear threat, from the concerns of the LGBT community to global economics, women's equality and violence, ethics in health care, issues of abortion and the death penalty, drones, immigration and peacemaking. The very long list of resolutions from our LCWR meetings over the years reflects this commitment.

We adjusted to the changed conditions of our times and it was more than about habits, and convents, and schedules. Like a seed becoming a sturdy plant in the dark soil we developed new skills needed for a new time. Skills for new ministries of course, but also of negotiating diminishment, working through dramatic shifts in our world view and our place in that world. We bumped into many things in the darkness of this mysterious time and place. We realized some things along the way: that we had an authentic desire for conversion, that at times there was the cooling of our passion for Jesus and the Kingdom of God. We had to deal with our conforming to the standards of the world, and the weakening of our prophecy. We struggled with the weight of our intuitions. But we also came to know the strength of the rediscovery of the deeper meaning of religious life. This is a knowing born in the stripping away of superficial

definitions, taken off layer after layer until we are clear. It is not yet complete. We are not yet brave enough, not yet focused enough, not yet free enough, but I dare say we are faithful.

And in all of this what did we come to know?

With Johannes Metz we came to see that "religious life is an institutionalized form of a dangerous memory for a church over-adapted to the world." We came to know more clearly that our location is to be on the fringe at the point where social change first becomes noticeable. With Metz we asked ourselves the difficult question: Have not religious orders moved too far into that middle ground where everything is nicely balanced and moderate... so to speak "tamed" by the institutional church?"

With Marta Zeichmeister we came to know that while there are many authorities to be negotiated the authority of those who suffer has a special claim on the obedience of religious congregations

With Don Goergen OP we became more clear about our purpose. That religious life exists for the sake of the Gospel and that our truest historical role is responding to the unmet needs of our world and church.

With Sandra Schneiders we came to know that religious life is a prophetic life-form, not merely a collection of prophetic individuals.

We believed Pope Paul VI when he said of religious: "They are enterprising and their apostolate is often marked by an originality, by a genius that demands admiration. Often they are found at the outposts of mission, and they take the greatest of risks for their health and their very lives."

We celebrated Vita Consecrata when it reminded us that "prophetic witness is expressed through the denunciation of all that is contrary to the Divine will and through the exploration of new ways to apply the Gospel in history in expectation of the coming of God's Kingdom." (P. 155-156)

With Burno Secondin we claimed that "Mysticism and prophecy belong to the genetic codes of our identity and our mission for the Kingdom of God."

And with Pat Farrell we professed that "the vocation of religious life is prophetic and charismatic by nature, offering an alternate lifestyle to that of the dominant culture."

We came to know our charismatic prophetic identity. And once we know we can't go back. We cannot not know what we know.

I am not saying that all of this was a clear sighted journey. No it was in many ways a place of darkness in the good sense of the word. The great grace was as Barbara Brown Taylor says about darkness: "*God puts out our lights to keep us safe because we are never more in danger of stumbling than when we think we know where we are going. When we can no longer see the path we are on, when we can no longer read the maps we have brought with us or sense anything in the dark that*

*might tell us where we are, then and only then are we vulnerable to God's protection. This remains true even when we cannot discern God's presence. The only thing the dark night requires of us is to remain conscious. If we can stay with the moment in which God seems most absent, the night will do the rest."*

What all this has done has brought us to a rather odd place in our world and church - and to a clarity of identity and purpose which we cannot expect those who have not taken the journey, and done the work ever be able to understand. Things like the slow and unglamorous miracles of change in both members and the congregation as a whole. The communal sense of longing. It is difficult for others to see that the journey narrows the range of possibilities open to us, and at the same time increases the intensity of the possibilities that are chosen. New paths open toward depth and outward to new horizons. There is an additional reality. Many keepers of the great religious traditions now seem frightened by what we have come to know, they seem to find it difficult to converse with the complexities and hungers of our vision.

Sr. Miriam Ambrosio CRB, at the 2013 UISG meeting in Rome, reflecting on this experience said about religious life in Brazil (which I believe is quiet parallel to that in the U.S.) "Perhaps the most visible challenge to women's religious life in Brazil could be defined as the awareness of our "non-place" in society and in the church. Religious belong on the margins, with other marginated people. This is the place of our discernment and our loyalty. It is a theological place, it is the place of the biblical prophets. Here religious life is recognized by its being, being disciples of Jesus, and for its passion, for the establishment of the Kingdom of Jesus here and now." I add, it is the place Jesus knew himself to be when he said *"The Son of Man has no place to lay his head."*

The experience is like that of the biblical exile in which we have been so changed that we are no longer at home in the culture and church in which we find ourselves. This is not a bad thing - it is simply how God works at times. What is important is that we use well the wisdom we have gained in being so created, especially in solidarity with others in exile.

There are those both within and beyond religious life that are not comfortable with this "non place." Interpreted from the outside, especially in U.S. culture and from the perspective of a royal theological position, if we were on the correct path it all should look much more successful; that is success as defined in terms of numbers, power, and place. We would be larger, respected, and have an important even deferential place as we had known before the journey into the mystery. Certainly inside religious life we also have had to deal with this illusion. Our natural tendency is to want to be understood and accepted, applauded and appreciated but that is not our truest purpose and identity. It is not where we really belong and indeed we will sell our souls if we stay in the place of wanting to be part of the mainstream thus becoming something other than we were intended to be.

When we succumb to this temptation it also reflects our lack of understanding of the biblical tradition of Exile and its formation of a prophetic people. What the exilic tradition teaches is that on the other side of the mystery of exile is remnant, and location outside the places of honor and power. People who have not made this journey or perhaps done similar inner work

would like to keep us where they have known us. Jesus had this experience as well. After healing many the disciples suggested that he stay where he was but Jesus clearly made the claim that he must go elsewhere. (Mk. 1)

There is a practical application of all this: what we have experienced is never for ourselves alone. We are learning to walk in the darkness of diminishment and letting go and this has a larger purpose than negotiating our own current reality. It is not just about us. It is about having the inner wisdom to be able to walk with a world, a nation, and a church as these entities also deal with critical limits, diminishments, and crises of identity in a rapidly changing context. It enables us to be with immigrants who have also been forced to a non-place, to walk with women who are also homeless, and with those who feel excluded for whatever reason.

What has carried us through this journey is a belief in Holy Mystery, God revealed in our midst. Now, fifty years feels like a long time to me but historians tell us it is just a drop in the bucket of time. So there may be fifty years more. *That is why I say however long the night we will be faithful. We will seek the Holy Mystery revealed in our midst.*

## **Part Two : Revelation of Holy Mystery: remaining in the "middle space."**

This shifting within religious life and in world events has taken us to what I call a middle space. We find ourselves in this place of both creativity and disorientation. Much of what was is gone, and what is coming is not yet clear.

Movement into what I am calling the middle space is not easy as there are many energies holding us back. What follows are some indicators that we have moved there. As a leader I believe that *"God is doing something new,"* but what fills my days are: funerals, data on declining demographics, leadership team decisions to discontinue a precious ministry of the Congregation, worry about our sisters in Liberia and in North India, selling property, taking down buildings in trying to right size property and holdings. I believe that *"God is doing something new,"* but when being called to address the congregation at Chapter I wonder what to say that can provide hope and encouragement. Or as a leadership team we look at our reality and wonder if we need to find a covenant partner. I am greatly helped in this next section by the work of Shelly Rambo and her book *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining*. Rambo speaks about a theology of remaining in difficult places because *"when you enter certain worlds, they do not let you go."*

Though her work is with trauma survivors and in no way do I want to diminish the aspect of trauma, I do think some parallels with or experience can be drawn. The author focuses her experience on survivors of difficult situations such as Hurricane Katrina and the war in Afghanistan - life changing events. She quotes Deacon Julius Lee from New Orleans as saying that *"The storm is gone but the "after the storm" is always here."* Using this idea Rambo explores the space between life and death, what she calls *"the long night of mystery."* She challenges our

temptation to think of the line between life and death as clear and sustaining, and encourages further exploration of the mysterious place between the two which she calls *"the line that seems carelessly drawn and carelessly erased. It is the place where death haunts life."* And in this messy space, our problem is that we want to proclaim good news before its time. The rush to life can belie the realities of death in life. What theology must do better is to account for the excess, or reminder, of death in life, that is central to change. Insofar as theological narratives are read with death and life at opposite poles it will fail to witness the real experience. The problem with narratives of victorious new life following death is that they have often served to silence stories that attest to the less victorious realities of ongoing suffering, and struggle to come to life.

In describing this experience in the context of war journalist Dexter Filkins says: *"The boundary between life and death shrank so much that it was little more than a membrane, thin and clear. With hardly a step you could pass from life into death and sometimes, it seemed, from death back to life"*. (The Forever War, journalist Dexter Filkins describes his experience with Marines in Falluja) The middle is not a state in which one gets beyond death; instead death remains in the experience and life is reshaped in light of death, not in light of its finality but its persistence, sometimes unable to anticipate or imagine the life ahead. I want to talk about the middle space because that is where I believe we are in religious life at this time. And this is also the place of our larger world reality as we heard articulated in our last two LCWR assemblies by Barbara Marx Hubbard and Ilia Delio. We are in this middle space of the in-breaking of something new, of major shifts in world view, our cosmology, with the concurrent breakdown of so much of what is familiar.

The task of "remaining" in this uncertain place is to pay attention to the reality that does not go away. In this experience all of our theological categories are re-defined: concepts like love, divine presence, incarnation, and world view are reshaped. Knowledge, truth, and experience of our world are transformed, placed on much more fragile terrain because of the radical disruption;

Shelly Rambo surely isn't the first person to speak in this vein. In Hans Urs von Balthasar's *Heart of the World* he asks, *"And is this wellspring in the chaos, this trickling weariness, not the beginning of a new creation?"*

Cornell West likens this messy experience to Holy Saturday which he says is the day that most U.S. Christian churches want to ignore. "They want victory and good news. U.S. Christianity is a market form of Christianity, for the most part. It's all about identifying with a winner. That is why on Easter Sunday the churches are full but Good Friday they are empty. People will show up when the winner pops us. But don't tell me about the main protagonist being treated like a political prisoner by the Roman Empire. Don't tell me about a senseless death based on injustice. And certainly don't tell me about the Saturday in which echoing Nietzsche, "God is dead." Deep disillusionment, deep disappointment, deep disenchantment, and yet what? Endurance through suffering. Struggle through darkness. Why? Because it's not about just winning. It's about testifying and bearing witness. It is the movement and not the destination

that constitutes a Holy Saturday people. It is time of survivors, of those for whom movements from death to life are uncertain and precarious." (Lannan Foundation lecture delivered in Santa Fe, NM June 25, 2003.)

What these writers are getting at is that the promise of life ahead cannot always be envisioned. Death is not an event that is concluded. Neither is life a victorious event that stands on the other side of death. There is a middle to this narrative; it reveals a theological territory of remaining. However long the night!

The middle space is a largely untheologized site because the middle is overshadowed by the other two events. Because of its precarious position the middle can be easily be covered over and ignored. Importantly, this middle place calls for theology of witness in which we cannot assume presence or straightforward resolution. It calls for witness to events that exceed the parameters of death and yet cannot so easily be identified as life. It is about imagining the form of God's presence and power arising in the places when life is least discernible. It is precisely at these edges of comprehension, that the possibility of something else arises. In this time all of our fixed categories are broken open. In order to negotiate the space we need to be able to keep complexities in tension and speak from their creative crossing.

The danger, as articulated by Cathy Keller, is theology's entrenchment in certain patterns of thinking, revealing the ways in which theological commitments and orthodoxies silence, erase, and hold captive what is unfamiliar and different. She also speaks of the in-between space of the Spirit, keeping the Divine open and in process; *"The bottomless deep will not stop opening; the divine "manyone" will not stop unfolding."* The work of the Spirit makes possible this unfolding, always breaking open the logic that threatens to close down and seal off the multifold life of God.

What we try to do in the middle space is to describe events that shatter all that one knows about the world and the familiar ways of operating within it. What if from this place we simply witness to and provide testimony about this experience, with special attention to truths that often lie buried and are covered over. The middle has its own language - the language of the unsayable." says Annie Rogers." It refuses to be fully captured in thought, memory and speech, yet it carries within it an imperative to tell and be heard. There is in this process an attempt to give expression to what cannot be fully known. It is witness to a phenomena that exceeds the categories by which we make sense of the world. It exposes the insufficiency of our frameworks of understanding and calls for more listening, more hearing of words within words, a greater openness to testimony. What truths might emerge through this disorientation, this shattering? It requires unmasking certain assumptions that govern familiar interpretations not only of our biblical and theological texts but our world realities as well. What if the truths handed over were not truths only of what is known but truths about what is not known and not fully grasped? Like the disciples who remained at the cross, those who stand in the middle are bound together in the unknowing. They stand as witness, not to a truth easily or simply

communicated, but to indirect truths that bind them to each other. Their lives are constituted a witness.

Perhaps an image would be helpful: the setting is Mary Magdalen in her Holy Saturday middle place. After faithful time in that space between death and life she meets Christ and is given these instructions: "Proclaim, go and proclaim it to your brothers." We can think about Mary, as one who with her breath gave rise to a new expression of life. She witnesses to the unwitnessable territory, to the unboundaried temporal and spacial landscape in which experience can no longer be directly comprehended. She enacts movements out of death. The difficulty of her is attributed to the nature, the phenomenon of what she is witnessing. Through her testimony, focus is shifted from the content of her witness to the activity of witnessing itself. The territory that she inhabits in the wake of the cross makes it impossible to simply name what is taking place. She stands in the uncontainable depths of human experience - unfolding.  
(Rambo)

This middle space is the place from which we women religious are also called to bear witness: we bear witness to what we have come to know about religious life. We bear witness to what we know about diminishing organizations and declining structures, and changing world views and what can emerge from them. We bear witness to suffering and the struggle for justice. We bear witness to changing spiritual and theological landscapes. We bear witness to the interplay of new life even as so much around us in diminishment. And we use what we know from this mysterious middle place as wisdom for other organizations and institutions not because we are right but because we are faithful to the work of the middle space, it is the fruit of our contemplation, and our witness just may be the grace needed for our time.

Our prophetic identity then is not only in doing but being, seeing, telling about what has been learned in the night of faithfulness. It is about paying attention and speaking about what we come to know.

In this sense the role of religious life can be likened to what President Bill Clinton said about Maya Angelou at her funeral:

*"Her great gift in her action packed life was that she was always paying attention. In her writing what she was basically doing was calling our attention to the things she had been paying attention to. And she did it with a clarity and power that will wash over people as long as there is a written and spoken word. She just kept calling our attention to things, like a firefly that comes at unpredictable times and makes you see something you otherwise would have missed. Something right before your mind you've been burying, something in your heart you were afraid to face."*

In this middle space that is what we do: we call attention to things, things others might bury, or are afraid to face. That is why I say, however long the night we will be faithful and we will speak about what we are learning in the middle space. We trust Holy Mystery revealed in our midst.

### **Part Three: Urgent Prophetic Task: The Church deserves our mature love and commitment**

In this third section I want to conclude by reminding us of the revelation of God in the mystery of the long night of exile in the scripture. When the destruction of Jerusalem finally sunk in, it profoundly changed Israel, emotionally, politically and theologically. Emotionally it arrived at a deep sense of loss. Politically, the end of usual power arrangements was now acknowledged - there would be no "next king." The temple was empty. Theologically Israel now had to struggle with evidence that YHWH no longer stood behind all the structures they had known so YHWH's attentive fidelity to Israel was now in question. Does this not sound like a familiar experience? Surely there have been times when our questions were the same as that of Israel: "*Has God forsaken or abandoned me?*" Is. 49:14 "*Have you forgotten us completely?*" Lam. 5:20 "*Are your arms too short to save us?*" Is. 50:2 (Walter Brueggeman)

The exile reflects a shift from a sense of well being to one of loss, vulnerability and even abandonment. The new context for faith was one of free fall without a discernible bottom. Now if the story were to end here it would be a tragedy. But what God creates among the people is a remnant, a small group who found themselves in a prophetic role as they related to the dominant powers of politics and religion. Their prophetic task was to articulate hope, the prospect of a fresh historical possibility assured by God's good governance of the future even when the vision of what that will look like is not clear. (Brueggeman)

To explore how this happens I would like to use one more analogy: Jonathan Lear has written a remarkable reflection on the life and destiny of Plenty Coups, the last great chief of the Crow nation of Native Americans entitled *Radical Hope*. The first part of the book focuses on the loss and diminishment of the Crow Nation as it succumbed to white settlers. The tribe was reduced from nearly 15,000 to less than 2,000 members. The chief told Lear that after that "nothing happened." History ended, memory ceased, the hearts of my people fell to the ground and they could not lift them up again. There was little singing anywhere." (p. 3) We might say this is not unlike exiled Israel singing: "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, ( Ps. 137:1) or like the sigh that comes from a congregation when a group determines it has completed its mission.

The Crow experienced this as death of their established social role, of standards of excellence, and of their personal identity. (p. 42) The Crow entered a time when everything familiar and reliable ceased and they were required to "live a life that we do not understand." (p.56, 61)

Now what I found fascinating in Lear's account is not the descent into the abyss of despair. What I found amazing is the prospect of a future for the Crow Nation in the form of a dream that Plenty Coups had and that was received and interpreted by the tribal elders: The substance of the dream affirmed that

- all our traditional way of life is coming to an end... that the life we have known is about to disappear.
- we must do what we can to open our imagination up to a radically different set of future possibilities;
- we need to recognize the discontinuity that is upon us... we need to preserve some integrity across that discontinuity;
- we do have reason to hope for a dignified passage across the abyss because God (Ah-badt-dadt-deah) is good;
- we shall get the good back, though at the moment we have no more than a glimmer of what that might mean.

Plenty Coups is committed to the bare idea that something good will emerge. But does so in recognition that one's deepest understandings of the good life are about to disappear. This manifests a commitment to the idea that the goodness of the world transcends one's limited and vulnerable attempt to understand it. There is no implication that one can glimpse what lies beyond the horizons of one's historically situated understanding. There is no claim to grasp ineffable truths. Indeed this commitment is impressive in part because it acknowledged that no such grasp is possible. Even so, this reasoning shows that a very peculiar form of commitment is possible and intelligible, namely that though Plenty Coups can recognize that his understanding of self and world is based on a set of living commitments that are vulnerable, it is nevertheless possible to commit to a goodness that transcends understanding.

The sense of this dream is huge: Plenty Coups and the elders perceive that the dream comes from a divine source. and that kind of authority could conceivably provide something to hold on to in the face of an overwhelming challenge. (p, 91) Hope rooted in the dream comes in this: for Plenty Coups the question of hope was intimately bound to the question of how to live. Thus the issue of hope becomes crucial for an ethical inquiry into life at the horizons of one's understanding. (p 113) The dream gave assurance. Plenty Coups made a claim that if the tribe adhered to the dream they would face an inevitable devastation but they would survive. Indeed, they would come out the other side with new ways to live well. Thus his capacity to have that dream and to stick to its meaning is a manifestation of courage. This dream turned out to be a guide and an experiment to see a new way of living in the world, a way that avoided both the resignation of despair and the suicide of resistance. The dream permits a third way between resignation and destruction. The aim was not merely the biological survival of the members of the tribe, however important, but the future flourishing of the traditional tribal values, customs, and memories in a new context.

Thus the abyss between the old ways that ended and the new ways yet to emerge is now occupied by the dream, an elusive, God-given assurance that required trust in its reliability. The hope is based on a dream. It sounds like Hebrews: *"the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."* (Heb.11:1) It sounds like Isaiah, "I am doing something new."

It takes no great explanation to see the same structure of hope in the abyss in how the faith of Israel was shaped and how the Easter hope was born in a long Saturday, or how hope rises in religious life at this very time. This is not a time that can be filled with plans or blueprints or schedules or budgets or "six easy steps." What God gives is elusive at best. Among the Crow nation it was a dream, the dream filled a void.

This kind of dreaming makes me think of an Oscar Wilde quote: "A dreamer is one who can only find their way by moonlight and their punishment is that they see the dawn before the rest of the world."

From this I suggest that the prophetic task now, in our contemporary society is exactly to perform hope that is characteristically a tenacious act of imagination, grounded in a dream, rooted in the elusive but faithful authority of God. The prophet is the one who dares to speak such a future out beyond all evidence. The work is not simply to reiterate old acts of hope but to be informed by such old acts in order to perform acts that may be grounded in divine initiative.

So this is our work now in religious life. To hold the radical dream of Jesus for our world: both by doing urgent advocacy for critical causes, and equally urgent is the nurture of our imagination in which possibility is uttered, thoughts beyond our thoughts are thought, and ways beyond our ways are known. In such a time, walking by sight is likely a return to old ways that have failed. Walking by faith is to seek a world other than the one from which we are swiftly being ejected.

**However long the night:** so this is quite a journey in responsiveness to the call of the Council, through the middle space, and by way of the exilic experience of dreaming new dreams in the midst of shattering experiences. What comes to birth in this kind of mysterious night?

When this process happens in an individual we name it conversion and notice a more mature ability to love. While the dark night of the soul is usually understood to descend on one person at a time, there are clearly times when whole communities of people lose sight of the sun in ways that unnerve them. When a group negotiates this process it too becomes mature in its ability to love. Mature love is able to speak the truth, it does not pretend so as to impress, it cannot go back to holding things it no longer treasures. Mature love is courageous, it is not self righteous or rude, not boastful or arrogant. It does not lose itself in the other, it stands in its integrity and acts with courage for the well being of others. Mature love can claim when the old ways are not working any more. Mature love knows its true identity and acts on it. To do anything less would cost it its soul and reason for being.

Naturally mature love can be frightening in its power. Limping around like Jacob, clear like Esther, powerful like Judith, untamed like Jesus, leaderful like Magdalene, the apostle to the apostles, mission oriented like Thecla, wise like Catherine, persistently contemplative like Clare -- it can all be rather unnerving to others.

We are coming through this night of mystery and can say with Alice Walker "We are no longer girls. And to continue to act as though we are robs the world and the coming generations of our insights." We must bear witness to what we know.

Walker also offers this Image from tribal life: "Women during menopause drifted naturally to the edge of the village, constructed for themselves a very small hut and gave themselves over to a time without form, without boundaries. They were fishing in deep waters, reflecting on a lifetime of activity and calling up, without consciously attempting to do so, knowledge that would mean survival and progression of the tribe. (p. 53 Walker) We have been fishing in deep waters, and must speak about what we know from the long history of religious life. We must bear witness. It is our prophetic duty.

As the Hopi say: When the grandmothers speak and are listened to the world will begin to heal. (p. 123)

Though I could make a long case for the need, let me conclude simply by saying that the church and the world need our mature love. The journey through the mysteries of our time has carved too deep a path into the soul or essence of our lifestyle and our congregations for us to pretend to be other than we are. So we offer our mature love, and we offer the wisdom we have come to know from the middle space.

"However long the night! You might also like to know that the African Proverb I have used in this reflection concludes the first half of my title with this: However long the night the dawn will break!

#### **Endnotes:**

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