



RUNNING TO CATCH UP WITH THE SPIRIT: SPIRIT OF HOPE

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week ago, crunched by the limits of time and the overload of making the transition of returning home to Jamaica after 15 years in the USA, I found myself literally sprinting after the Spirit for inspiration for this presentation. In a moment of lucidity, no doubt triggered by seeing Don Bisson's name on this programme, I remembered a dream I had many years ago prior to a retreat Don was directing. In this dream, I was in a large empty field with nothing in sight. Suddenly there was a herd of cows dashing towards me, threatening to trample me. Startled and petrified, I tried to outrun the cows, only to realize that this was a hopeless attempt. What I needed to do was to run with the cows. As soon as I began to run with the cows, I woke up. Later, Don was to explain to me that in Jungian terms cows symbolize femininity, a piece of information that has some bearing on what I hope to develop later in this presentation.

This dream came at the end of a project, organized many years ago, for women religious to experience the reality of Haiti. I am getting old. These days, not only do my memories coalesce around events that occurred long ago but one memory leads to another. And so, as I continued to run and catch the Spirit's message for this presentation, bits and pieces of this experience came to mind: the realization that despite the restoration of democracy and the promises of the "international community," nothing has

significantly changed for the people of Haiti, the ancient Creole proverb “after the dance, the drum is heavy” is a daily lived reality in the absence of means to address the legal, social and economic circumstances of the people, the problems of poverty, hunger, and unemployment; I thought of the people’s high level of political consciousness and the difficult task of birthing democracy. I tasted once again snatches of conversations with groups of people, especially women, from every walk of life who were not afraid to lament and complain, who dared to say out loud how overwhelming were their feelings of powerlessness and despair at times, how great their anxiety, how deep the consequent fear. At the same time, they had a marvelous way of putting things into perspective, for example their artful use of strategy, the knowing chuckle at the incongruity of life, the burst of laughter at their own expense. I am reminded that people struggling with issues of truth and justice are not simply left to their own limited resources: they are deeply touched by a light and a strength not of their own making. This is hope, a piece of God’s purposefulness moving like sap through our being. (Cynthia Bourgeault)

Each conversation would be an interesting subject to consider for this presentation but it is a photograph that most stirs my imagination and touches the strained absence of meaning I feel in the face of inexplicable poverty and suffering. The photograph focuses on a tiny Styrofoam cup that seemingly someone has placed behind the huge back tire of a truck, as if to halt it in its track. Underneath the photographer has neatly penned: You’ve got to have high hopes. A tiny Styrofoam cup holding back and resisting the powerful force of a huge tire? Incongruous? Ridiculous? Hopeless? Perhaps. Yet it tells another story. At the end of his life, Napoleon Bonaparte is said to have remarked, “Do you know what astonished me the most in the world? The inability of force to create anything. In the long run, the sword is always beaten by the spirit.” Hope is the great reality, the spirit of the Haitian people, which reaches into the recesses of their daily lives and informs their incredible ability to survive.

These memories draw me beyond Haiti into the awareness that these stories are not unique to Haiti. All over the world similar stories are being told and heard of how people live lives of economic deprivation, fear and violence, degradation and oppression, how they confront chaos and confusion in their lives and emerge full of hope. For them hoping is an ethics of liberation. (Robert Raines) They are creating survival structures that engage communities at grass roots. They meet, sometimes at great risk to themselves, to share their gifts and talents, teaching one another technical skills, developing literacy programs and household banking systems. They call

upon the spiritual resources of prayer, study, art and drama, music, consciousness raising, anger at injustice, community organizing on small and large scales, mentoring and the power of friendship.

Hoping is also an ethics of resistance. There is immense power in these groups, formed around the daily needs and lives of ordinary people, reaching out to share with kindred spirits, and digging in their Gospel heels to bring about small transformations wherever feasible. They began at first to support one another in the struggle against political oppression; they now direct their energies to economic struggles in many of these situations. And here is where I see them crucified — stretched vertically by their deep desire for sustainable development and systemic change and pushed and pulled on the horizontal by their daily and immediate need for food, clothing, shelter, health and education, essentials of which they have so little. As I replay my encounters with scores of people who are in dire straits and whose lives are in jeopardy from the culture of violence and death that surrounds all of us, I see how impossible it is to understand this spirit of hope apart from their deep awareness of God’s spirit at work within the context of daily life. This awareness gives rise to their realization that the Gospel is political in the deepest sense, that it is their vocation to participate in the work of the Spirit and resist injustice in their community and nation. For them there is no other option than to remain in solidarity with each other and to struggle with the “power of death” in order to understand and live through it. “If we cannot overcome, we can refuse to be overcome,” one woman told me. She was a member of a small group of merchant women whose businesses and inventories were destroyed by the military.

A fascinating aspect of all this is how often I would see glimpses of the scriptural images of God, e.g., the fiercely protective love of the mother bear when someone attacks her cub, or the strength of the eagle spreading out her wings to protect her young — we would see these images of God reflected and alive in the strong and angry love of the mothers and wives from Rwanda, the mothers who go hungry so that their children can eat, the mothers who watch whole villages in Africa die of AIDS, mothers who demand justice and jobs for their sons and daughters.

I am belaboring all this to make the point that these stories are about all of creation. They are about you and me and the places in our lives and in our world where God’s spirit is indeed present and intimate, defying God’s mission in our world as She drives the Church and perforce religious women and men to run after Her, to catch up with Her vivifying and healing presence and to realize the power of love in history and the power of justice and right relations in our world. (Gary Riebe-Estrella SVD)

Pondering on this reality has led me to two convictions that I would like to further develop. The first conviction I would like to explore is that there are people of faith “running after the Spirit” and giving a new definition to community - an eruption of compassion and solidarity. All over the world, Kosuke Koyama contends, the life experiences of people from the under side are coming into our consciousness like a rush of wind at Pentecost. People from the underside are re reading the gospel from the stance of their lived experience and with alternative imagination; they are reclaiming the sub-version of the Gospel. All over the world, in pockets of hope, the gospel is speaking powerful words about Jesus’ solidarity with history. So boundless is Jesus’ mercy and compassion that he continues his healing and rebuilding ministry where he can and follows us into the pain of humanity and the anguish of creation. All over the world, the gospel is speaking powerful words, articulating crucial aspects of the gospel which have long been ignored about harmony with all creation, wholeness and integration, sharing and partnership. This “partnership” paradigm talks of people as having unique stories to tell, invites relationships based on equality, mutuality, and sharing and emphasizes service and power as energy. We hear the gospel telling us of connectedness and interdependence, of integration and wholeness, conservation not exploitation, abundance not scarcity, solidarity with and not competition against, inclusive humanity and transformation of consciousness. It proposes an alternative form of discipleship that urges us to recover the fundamental community orientation of the gospel that calls us to cross over from where we’ve been secure and comfortable to stand in solidarity with others who have nothing but their memories, faith, and hope with which to create alternative options to the culture of death that surrounds them.

Can “solidarity” mean for secure, well-fed, well-educated, well-clothed people what it means for people whose lives are constantly in jeopardy? Do you ever stop to think how profound must be their ambivalence when they relate to those of us who seem to have so much?

Last year in preparation for the Institute Chapter of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, I mentioned to my congregation that being in solidarity with others may well be the crux of our transformation and the biggest challenge that faces us as Church and as women and men religious. Today I am more convinced that this is a critical dilemma that needs our thoughtful exploration and it bears repeating here as I address you who play such a vital role in the formative processes of newer members in religious life.

Many years ago, Albert Nolan, a South African Dominican priest gave us a lucid description of the summons of the gospel in our contemporary

situation of gross imbalance and suffering. As he sees it, being in solidarity is a spiritual journey of transformation that goes through “different stages with its own crises or dark nights and its own discoveries or illuminations.” This journey takes us through and beyond compassion, through and beyond the rigors of intellectual analysis and understanding of what causes such anguish, confusion and despair to discovering the disturbing fact that those whom we thought were in need of our assistance can and will save themselves with or without us. Suddenly we, who are accustomed to be in control, find the shoe on the other foot. Those whom we thought we were liberating are in fact our liberators. We cannot be liberated without them. In theological terms, Nolan points out, we have to discover, not merely in our heads but in our lived experience that it is those who are vulnerable and in jeopardy of life who are God’s chosen instruments for transforming the world. Real solidarity begins, Nolan says, when we recognize that we are a part of the process of solidarity that the poor and distressed of the earth are building with one another, and we understand the way the spirit is moving and working in us and through us.

In spiritual terms, he says, this can amount to a real crisis for us and can lead to a very deep conversion, a different way of walking together with people in the struggle to fullness of life. Gloria Albrecht is thinking in a similar vein but states it more starkly:

Learning how to use the power of the dominant for the purpose of liberating others from oppression and ourselves from dominating is a conversion to a new way of walking ... It is a risk of faith for (white) privileged Christians to turn and walk with those who are living lives of resistance to the oppression created by our privilege. It is a risk to use our resources to support the ongoing resistance of those whose success will de center us.

Here, I think, is the crux of our challenge as people of faith: to turn and walk with those who are living lives of resistance to the oppression created by our privilege, to learn from them what it means to be de-privileged / de-centered. What this would mean concretely I honestly do not know. I am painfully aware of my lack of imagination in this matter. Since I have returned to Jamaica not a day passes that I am not confronted by this dilemma and no concrete answers to give but a suspicion that what is needed is some genuinely radical rearrangement in our life experience, a transformation of consciousness which, according to Beatrice Bruteau, calls for “a gestalt shift” in the whole way of seeing our relations to one another so that our feelings (energies) and behavior patterns are reformed from the inside out. This brings me to my second conviction which I believe is

closely connected with what I have been saying. All over the world people are running to catch up with the Spirit. We women and men religious are being invited to be a part of this larger consciousness of God's Spirit at work blowing where it will to make things new that never were.

As I read the papers delivered at the recent LCWR Annual Conference, I was fascinated by how often the speakers called for contemplation and transformation. Immediately Beatrice Bruteau's insights came to mind. She sees contemplation as an experience and a consciousness. To do justice to her incredible thought process, I would now like to invite you into a kind of lectio divina mode and ask you to listen attentively and with care to these smatterings of insight from her book, *The Grand Option*.

- We are living at the end of an era, on the threshold of a new ageWhat makes the coming age so truly new is that it will be ushered in by some genuinely radical rearrangement in our life experience. When we speak of "revolution," we do not mean something like a mere coup d'état whereby one set of rulers is replaced by another set while the structure of ruling itself remains basically the same - that is only a rebellion. A genuine revolution must be a gestalt shift in the whole way of seeing our relations to one another so that our behavior patterns are reformed from the inside out. Any revolution worthy of the name must be primarily a revolution in consciousness.
- There are many ways of approaching a speculation about the new consciousness, but one of the places in which the veil that hides the future from our eyes has worn thin and become partially transparent is the area of the rising feminine consciousness of the world. Indeed, perhaps of all the shadows that the coming age is casting before itself, this is the most revealing, for it touches all levels of our life from the materially biological and technological, through the economic and political, to the emotional and social, the artistic, the religious, and the metaphysical.
- What do we mean by feminine consciousness? Feminine is a polar word, significant by its contrast with its complement, masculine. The axis of polarity can be variously chosen and its orientation makes a critical difference in how we conceive ourselves and our world, submissive/dominant, dark/light, feeling/thinking, domestic/worldly. As a polarity generalized beyond the relations of female and male, these axes have characterized much of the perception, organization and operation of our world. We have only to think of racial discrimination, economic exploitation and political domination to

realize how the sexual paradigm has modeled many aspects of our lives.

- When those who feel themselves oppressed by these social patterns begin to resist, they frequently attempt merely to move from one end of the axis to the other...It is important to recognize that such a movement does not herald a new age. A significant future will not be born until the orientation of the axis itself has been shifted to represent the reality that neither pole is more valuable than the other. The method of feminine consciousness ... works not by excluding but by incorporating. And so the new feminine consciousness of the future can be expected to take up the masculine rational contributions into itself to hold and absorb them, embed them in the matrix of its own intellectual insights, and eventually to bring forth a new being, a new world.
- We need this new perspective in which to view our elementary personal, social and economic relations, and we need new images in which to represent them mythically to our imaginations, which in turn will direct so much of our life. If the sexual polarity is paradigmatic for larger social relationships, we will do well to explore alternative ways of experiencing it.

I read Bruteau to be saying that the new feminine consciousness is not a reclaiming of instinctual feelings and emotions, psychic sensitivities and magic characteristics of earlier times in human development nor the operation of reason and dispassionate objectivity so highly valued in recent times. This new feminine consciousness is something else - the next spiral of advance - an intellectual intuition or insight, an act of the spirit that integrates masculine consciousness which is focused, analytical and specialized with feminine consciousness which is general, synthetic and wholistic. This new feminine consciousness grasps what it understands as a whole - one large life circulating through all. Bruteau holds strongly that the only way to change the way we believe is to change our way of imaging ourselves in relation to all that exists. We must see ourselves relating to others not in terms of our complementary dependency, or lack of, but in terms of our abundance, our maturity and our overflowing energy. And we have this overflowing energy. It is none other than God's Spirit alive in our hearts.

At the beginning of the Religious Formation Conference's jubilee year, Gary Riebe-Estrella uttered these powerful words:

The Spirit, who from the beginning has been God's active presence in the world, drives Israel, then Jesus, then the Church to run after

Her, to catch up with Her vivifying and healing presence, to point to Her as She leads people to human flourishing and the reconciling of their differences to tread gracefully on the surface of the earth whose inner energy She is. It is the spirit, who, by her activity, defies God's mission in our world. And that is the mission of God that has been entrusted to the community of faith, the Church. ... The Church is the community charged with catching up with the Spirit. If running to catch up with the Spirit is the function of the Church, perforce it is the driving power (of/underneath) religious life. It is what produces the movement in hope.

I have been made to understand that the word spirit in the Greek is neuter, in Hebrew feminine, and only in the Christian era have we masculinized it. However we name the spirit in order to articulate God's unfolding self-revelation, the spirit remains ever dynamic, ever enigmatic, always healing and consoling, but also always disturbing. As I grow more convinced by Bruteau's insights, it seems to me that the Spirit is indeed luring us into some disturbing places of transformation.

For me, this consciousness of being charged with running to catch up with the Spirit is nothing short of a summons, a call that is related to the pervasiveness of God which gives freedom and distance and perspective in relation to all other concerns. I am here tuned into Walter Brueggemann's understanding that such a call is not simply a formal notion or an energizing experience. It is not simply a meaningful event. It is an ongoing dynamic of a growing and powerful claim on hearts that want to be faithful. As Brueggemann sees it:

An evangelical sense of call concerns the yielding up of our safe world... We need to recognize that such a sense of call in our time is profoundly countercultural because the primary ideological voices of our time are the voices of autonomy: to do one's own thing, self-actualization, self-assertion, self-fulfillment. The ideology of our time is to propose that one can live "an uncalled life," one not referred to any purpose beyond one's self.

This is certainly a call for conversion and it suggests an intriguing dance between human freedom and divine purposefulness. Divine purposefulness engages us in a struggle, a relational struggle to understand how ferocity and gentleness can co-exist, how hardness and softness come together, how compulsion and liberation are compatible, how deliberateness and letting go interface, and how these boundaries have to be negotiated in the process of change, metanoia. And here we are in the belly of a paradox. Metanoia is not about what we choose to change so much as it is about being

changed by responding in faith to situations not of our choosing, and which perhaps of ourselves we would never have chosen from the beginning.

It is a big leap for many of us to understand that what God wants for us, what God desires for us, what we have so often termed “God’s will” abounds in our daily lives. It meets us around every corner, in very ordinary situations. And it is only when we surrender to pursuing God that something new can happen. Only when we yield all the way into the mystery of this divine presence that compels us towards the Beckoning Horizon and moves us towards the fulfillment of divine purpose can we know the deeper, more intense, more intimate revelation of the heart of God and the Spirit of Hope.

In conclusion, I want to admit that it is extremely risky, costly business to truly believe that God’s spirit is present and alive in our human history, enlightening and empowering peoples and their communities, and inviting them to participate in God’s enveloping mercy and creative acts of hope and liberation. It is risky and costly because we are summoned to a world in which the crucially spiritual issues of power and love, generosity and selfishness, violence and compassion engage us in the daily struggle of discovering what is God’s will for today. It is dangerous because it means involvement in the life of this world on terms that always mean risking death in some form. Great is the risk when we have to turn away from safety and walk into the fractured, dislocated points in our world where God’s spirit lures us to experience what someone has called “troubled faith” — when the absence of God is experienced as more real than God’s presence and the only tangible thing at hand is our powerlessness, anger and outrage at the suffering, greed, wreckage and intractable cruelty around us.

But we can take courage when we remember that we are in a participatory relationship with God who loves this world. God in Christ emptied himself of divinity to stand in solidarity with us so we may learn how to turn and walk with those who are living lives of resistance to the oppression created by our privilege. Jesus crosses over to show us how to love inside our fearful selves, inside our broken world. He crosses over to teach us what love is inside the cruel cold of a cave full of animal sounds and other things, among other travelers and strangers, in the painful, bloody mess of birth. As terrifying, strange beings pour out of heaven, men and boys and sheep are utterly dazed and sore afraid. Frightened people like you and I must now bear the message of love, tenderness, and justice to our world longing for hope.

And Mary treasured these things, pondered them in her heart and exclaimed: “My being proclaims the greatness of the Lord!”

In these days of Advent may it be for us to turn to Mary, virgin and mother and breaker of boundaries, who embodies the scandal of the incarnation. Who better understands watching and waiting, listening and receiving? Who better understands and can teach us the meaning of “crossing over” from fear to accepting an unseen, unborn, and unknown love? Who better understands and can teach us how to weave into the fabric of our lives the delicate threads of grace God holds before us in the fierce purposefulness of the Spirit?

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- Kosuke Koyama in his keynote address to the International Association of Mission Studies (Hawaii, August 6, 1992).
 - Gloria Albrecht, *Character of our Communities* (Abingdon Press).
Beatrice Bruteau, *The Grand Option* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001).
 - Ibid. I hope I will be forgiven for taking so much liberty with Beatrice Bruteau's work. I have quoted her freely, sometimes verbatim; sometimes I have edited and at times interpreted her words throughout this presentation.
 - Walter Brueggemann. *Hopeful Imagination, Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).