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CHANGING COMMUNITIES...
TRANSFORMING THE WORLD

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A Meditation on
Letting Go
and Letting
Come

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The dawning of the 21st century ushered in new understandings about systems, consciousness, emergence and complexity. While there are many thought leaders who offer scholarship in these areas, the two who have shaped my thinking and informed my consulting practice the most are Otto Scharmer and Margaret Wheatley. Scharmer's understanding of transformational change and Wheatley's insights about emerged and emerging systems offer us new 'maps' for living in these complex and turbulent times. Both draw heavily on ancient spiritual traditions and practices; especially the spiritual disciplines of mindfulness, contemplation and discernment. What I find most intriguing and compelling about their work is the degree to which they draw on ancient wisdom while applying their contemporary thesis of systems in very practical ways.

Both Scharmer and Wheatley remind us that clarity, openness and compassion are essential if we want to survive our crumbling institutions while we simultaneously work with the creative possibilities of what is trying to emerge. Scharmer repeatedly reminds us of the disciplines of an *open mind, open heart and open will*ⁱ, and Wheatley says that we have to *hold our work differently* and be faithful to the practices of *compassion and insight* as we navigate the landscape of this strange new world in which we find ourselves.

Both authors describe the importance of contemplation for engaging the complexity of the 21st century. In the book *Radical Optimism*ⁱⁱ, Beatrice Bruteau states that a fundamental aspect of developing a contemplative attitude toward life is the capacity *to be still and open*. A contemplative life stance includes the capacity for relaxing one's ego consciousness in order to make room for what Thomas Merton described as the 'True Self'. Our ego consciousness works to ensure that our individual desires and propensities run the show. It is an awareness that is very comfortable with black and white thinking and usually seeks the company of others who think and act much like us. It encourages us to be 'for this' and 'against that'. Our egos have served us well in helping us navigate the fierce and unpredictable landscape of our lives. However, there is a deeper awareness within each of us that invites us into a broader awareness of the world, allowing us to see the unity and interdependence that is all around us. This 'truer Self' is comfortable with ambiguity, is able to postpone instant gratification in service to a greater good and thrives when exposed to diversity of perspective and awareness. We must intentionally 'choose' this truer self, which often requires us to enter into a more contemplative and reflective approach to our lives. A contemplative person is continuously learning how to 'let go in order to let come'.

*There is a big difference
between liking the poetry
and living the poem*
John Renesch

Meister Eckhart, a thirteenth century mystic, described this ability as *Gelassenhiet*, the ability to let things be as they are in their uncertainty and mystery. This 'letting' is not to be confused with passivity or apathy. It is more of an attitude or way of being in our lives that allows us to be in the midst of uncertainty, loss, and suffering without trying to control, deny or fix. The ability to 'let' as he describes allows us to live in the paradox of suffering and joy, desolation and hope. We move beyond our black and white world and are able to see a fuller spectrum of what life holds. This deeper consciousness opens us to greater compassion and empathy for ourselves and others. In order to fully grow into this awareness, we have to let go of old patterns of thinking, behaviors and beliefs. This 'letting go' is usually hard won but necessary if we are to touch into the greater wisdom of the Divine.

The Psalmist strikes a similar cord in the Psalm 46:10, 'Be still and know that I am God'. The Hebrew translation of 'be still' is *rahpa*, literally meaning to let go or release; to go slack or become disheartened. This psalm suggests that in order to 'know' God, we must relax or surrender to the encounter.

Scharmer actually compares his four stages of change to the degree of openness that is needed for each. He illuminates the difference between a response that *restores* a system to its current state of equilibrium to the types of responses needed to *transform* a system into new ways of being and doing.

He describes the first level of change as *reacting* to an issue or problem. One reacts to a problem out of existing habits and world views. The second level involves *re-designing structures and processes; still* primarily relying on existing patterns of beliefs and operating assumptions. The third level of change is *reframing*, which involves a shift of awareness. At this stage, we not only look to the past, but we begin to pay exquisite attention to 'the field'; the present context in its fullness. Old patterns fall away and the system learns to reframe old ways of thinking and acting. At this level, systems (and individuals) learn how to 'see with fresh eyes'. The Hebrew translation for repent is *metanoia*; to have a 'new mind'. So, if we allow ourselves to 'see with new eyes', to think in new ways, we are *repenting!*

He describes level four as *presencing*. At this stage, one connects to what is trying to emerge, or as Scharmer describes, to get in touch with our future potential. The word presencing is a portmanteau of the words presence and sensing. It is the capacity to be so present to the moment that we actually 'lean into' and collaborate with the emergent future. He uses the language of co-creating and implies we co-create with an emergent future as well as with others! Clearly, this stage requires great capacity, awareness and grace. His thesis suggests a transformational and spiritual aspect to change that aligns his contemporary theory with ancient spiritual traditions.

In her book, *So Far From Home: Lost and Found In Our Brave New World*ⁱⁱⁱ Wheatley insists that once systems have emerged, they are here to stay. If the emerged system has fallen into decay, corruption or dysfunction it is not possible to reverse engineer it or break it into its component parts in order to make things all better. The only way to create something new is to start over, to begin again. She explains by starting over one must name for themselves the values that they hold dear as opposed to the values they see operating in the systems they find themselves in. So, we greet corruption with virtue, greed with generosity, scarcity with abundance. We offer an alternative narrative to the dominant narrative. She believes that the place to begin again is where we find ourselves locally and to avoid trying to change the world on a global scale. We connect with others around us who are not rushing around trying to fix what is broken but who are willing to work either within or outside of the system and offer new ways of thinking and seeing. Although she believes that we are living in dark times, her antidote to the darkness is to confront it with wide eyed clarity and open hearted compassion. She is also very clear that it is not for us to worry about whether or not our efforts will make any difference. Our focus must be working with others who also want to offer a counter narrative and alternative way of being in the world without regard as to whether or not we will be successful in accomplishing what we want. That is what it means to hold our work differently.

For us there is the trying.

The rest is not our business

T.S. Elliot

In my work with religious congregations, there is much conversation about how the life form currently known as religious life will shape shift into the future. Many congregations are conducting gatherings of their sisters below the age of sixty in order to explore questions related to belonging, mission and ministry, and the future of their particular charism. They understand the power of helping a particular and often minority co-hort group ‘find each other’ as they anticipate their unknown and unfolding future. During these conversations, I have found it helpful to distinguish between religious life as it has emerged as an *institution*, and the future of religious life as a *life form*. Institutions and an era of institutional life are falling away. New ways of being in the world are emerging. The question is, are we aware of what is trying to spring up? Are we able to ‘let go’ of what was and be open to ‘let come’ what is yet to be? Is it possible to name what is no longer working within the institution of what has emerged as religious life and to begin to imagine new ways of being prophetic and apostolic religious in the world today? The maps offered by Scharmer and Wheatley are helpful here. Both offer insights about the importance of radically letting go of what is dying in order to make room for new ways of being in the world. Both suggest that it isn’t about ‘fixing’ what doesn’t work, or tweaking policies and procedures. If I am sure of anything, is that clinging to old habits and customs while desperately trying to preserve the institution is not what letting go looks like.

It is helpful to think of the practices of letting go and letting come as *two sides of the same coin*. They are not as linear as our left brain might understand them---one can’t really exist

without the other. A poetic imagination is helpful here. The poets give us language and images of letting go and letting come that prose often cannot do.

In his poem *A Zero Circle*^{iv}, Rumi, a thirteenth century Sufi mystic says:

Be helpless, dumfounded,
Unable to say yes or no.
Then a stretcher will come from grace
And gather us up.

The imagery of ‘a stretcher from grace’ is beyond my modern sensibilities and yet is profoundly comforting. Rumi helps us to see that only in complete existential surrender can we open ourselves (our institutions) to transformation.

There is often a gap between the ‘letting go’ and ‘letting come’ times in our lives. Living in this *in between* space involves uncertainty and ambiguity and requires not only courage, but compassion and community. We must find others who are willing to be afraid with us, others who are willing to live with uncertainty and avoid the tendency to find quick fixes, others who admit how hard it is but are committed to staying awake and attentive to all that is trying to emerge.

*Fear is the cheapest room
in the house. I wish you
better living conditions.*
Rumi .

In this in between space, we must admit we actually know nothing about what this is all about and that our only choice is to surrender to that place of unknowing and uncertainty. Rumi offers us hope as he concludes his poem:

When we have totally surrendered to that beauty
We shall become a mighty kindness.

Our world and our systems need nothing if not a ‘mighty kindness’. This ancient text aligns with the contemporary thinking of Scharmer and Wheatley. Each in their own way tells us that transformational change and the capacity to meet the unfolding future requires not only great process but great practice! As our systems and institutions crumble before our very eyes and we can only glimpse what is yet to come, we are called to receive all that is happening with wide eyes and an open heart. If we are to walk together into the mystery of what has yet to emerge, we must be willing to let go of what no longer is of service and to resist a nostalgic rearview-mirror perspective of our lives and the world. Nowhere does anyone suggest that any of this is easy. However, the signs of these times seem to be saying that nothing less will save us from ourselves.

PERSONAL REFLECTION/JOURNALING:

Reflect on the following questions. Review each question, and reflect on the one or two that most speak to you.

What occurs to you as you reflect on what you just read?

What aspects of the *institution* of religious life are falling away? In what ways are institutions clinging to a past era or holding onto the past?

In what way would you describe efforts within your congregation that are reacting to issues or problems as a way to keep things the same, to preserve the status quo?

How is your congregation reframing issues and ideals or 'leaning into the future' in order to support an emergent future?

How do you understand the distinction between religious life as it has emerged as an institution and ways in which a religious life form might exist in the future? What signs do you see emerging that signifies a shift or change of awareness of consciousness from what has emerged to what is emerging?

What else are you noticing from the readings, the poem, your own reflections?

[*Use this link to share your insights with us. We would love to hear from you.*](#)

ⁱ Scharmer, Otto. *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges*. SoL. Cambridge, MA. 2007

ⁱⁱ Bruteau, Beatrice: *Radical Optimism*. Sentient Publications. 2002

ⁱⁱⁱ Wheatley, Margaret. *So Far From Home: Lost and Found in Our Brave New World*. Barrett-Koehler. San Francisco. 2012

^{iv} Rumi, translated by Coleman Barks

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