OVERVIEW

Parents can’t understand why their children no longer go to church. They keep saying it just isn’t meaningful to them. Children wonder why their parents don’t get it. They really love God and say they are spiritual.

Former President Trump appears on the news saying once again that the election was stolen from him. You might find yourself yelling at the TV frustrated that MSNBC is giving airtime to this lie. Or you might find hope in hearing him as FOX again replays footage of stop the steal rallies.
I knew a different kind of response was needed, one that came from the deepest part of ourselves where God, Divine Mystery, dwells. A response that comes from a contemplative heart. And those insights wouldn’t be simply individual but rather shared communally through dialogue.

People advocate for vaccinations for the sake of the common good. People oppose vaccinations in the name of personal choice and freedom. Christians are pro-life; Christians are pro-choice. The climate crisis is seen by many as the critical issue facing us as a planet. Others are climate deniers for whom weather shifts are just normal.

The list continues as every issue facing us today seems to be cast in an either-or way. Polarities abound. Sides are taken and the space between, the place where we used to go and find some common ground, seems to have disappeared.

Living this way is exhausting. To cope one might hunker down, anchor oneself to a position or simply decide not to think about it or engage at all.

Perhaps this time we are living in is calling us to another response - one rooted in our faith which calls forth in us putting on the mind of Christ and engaging each other in ways that hold the potential for the transformation of ourselves and of our world.

I’ve come to this conclusion over a good many years. The teachings of the Second Vatican Council radically changed many of us. Gaudium et Spes (the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World) awakened in us our responsibility to be in the world, engaged in the political and societal changes as we read the “signs of the times…and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel.” The various movements arising in the 50’s, 60’s and 70’s – civil rights, feminist, environmental, as well as within the church - liberation theology and the 1976 Call to Action resolutions - captured our imagination, fueled our energy and changed how we saw the world.

After fifteen years working in Washington, DC, in the political ministry of NETWORK, a National Catholic social justice lobby followed by a term in elected leadership within my own community during which I also served in the Presidency of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, I realized that many of us were experiencing an impasse in both our ecclesial and political lives.
I knew a different kind of response was needed, one that came from the deepest part of ourselves where God, Divine Mystery, dwells. A response that comes from a contemplative heart. And those insights wouldn’t be simply individual but rather shared communally through dialogue. From those experiences emerged the Institute for Communal Contemplation and Dialogue which I founded in 2002. These last twenty years working with thousands of people only confirms me in that original instinct.

**KEY INFLUENCES**

Constance FitzGerald, OCD - a cloistered Carmelite from Baltimore, MD - likens the societal impasse we experience to the dark night of the soul of St. John of the Cross. She believed that “our experience of God and of our spirituality must emerge from our concrete, historical situation and must return to that situation to feed it and enliven it.” (Page 78, *Impasse and the Dark Night, Desire, Darkness and Hope, a Theology in a Time of Impasse*, edited by Laurie Cassidy and M. Shawn Copeland, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2021.) She wrote that “it is only in the process of bringing the impasse to prayer, to the perspective of the God who loves us, that our society will be freed, healed, changed, brought to paradoxical new visions, and freed for non-violent, selfless, liberating action, freed, therefore, for community on this planet earth.” (pg. 94 DDH)

As important as advocacy and working within the various social justice movements are to bringing about change, this time of increasing impasse and chaos is calling forth something more. That “more” is the transformative power of contemplative prayer. I knew that a contemplative heart anchored in Divine Love would be capable of responding to the issues of our day in new ways.

The new ways meant a new consciousness echoing Albert Einstein’s belief that we cannot solve the problems of today out of the same level of consciousness that created them.

**HOW CONSCIOUSNESS DEVELOPS**

The development of consciousness is the work of Ken Wilber and Don Becks especially as found in *Spiral Dynamics Integral* (SDi). Their work continues the seminal work of Clare Graves,
This framework offers a way to understand the polarities we are experiencing today among nations, within the US, between political parties, within ecclesial communities, within families, within oneself. It helps us understand why we can respond so differently to the same situation.

In very broad strokes, SDi offers a framework for how consciousness develops both individually and collectively since the beginning of humankind. Currently eight stages of consciousness are identified and seen as necessary in the developmental process. The first four stages are considered Pre-modern. The values are basic survival needs, tribal identity and connection to the spirit world, support of strong leaders, use of power, and obedience and loyalty to higher truth or authority. The fifth stage is the Modern stage valuing reason, democracy, personal autonomy, the scientific method, progress, and industrialization. The sixth stage ushers in the Post-modern with the values of equality, a caring, socially responsible community, multicultural diversity, personal growth, social justice and rights for all. These six stages comprise the First Tier of SDi. The vast majority of people operate out of one of these first six stages of consciousness.

Imagine a spiral whose trajectory shifts upward and then outward circling back but not in exactly the same place. Movement on the spiral occurs as persons and humankind evolve responding to new life conditions (LC) - defined as historical time, geographic place, existential problems and societal circumstances. Each of these stages offer values and are complete in themselves until the LC changes and a new stage of consciousness emerges which addresses the problems of that time in a new way with a new worldview. Each new stage is marked by greater complexity and diversity. Each new stage transcends the former one and ideally includes their values interpreted through this new stage of consciousness.

At whatever stage we are at, not all of the former stages’ values, wisdom and fears continue to exist in us in various degrees and resurface in us if triggered by the life conditions we experience.

Beginning about fifty years ago, Graves became aware of an emerging consciousness which was of a different kind altogether. An individual or a society who operates primarily out of any of the first-tier stages believes that particular stage is the best one or right one from which everyone else needs to operate. At second-tier - stages seven and eight - people understand how the wisdom and value of each prior stage contributes to the whole. They no longer need to impose their way of thinking on others. Graves called this a ‘momentous leap of consciousness.’

**“NEW” CONSCIOUSNESS: DIVERSITY WITHIN WHoleness**

Descriptions of this integral stage of consciousness or second-tier include: flexible and spontaneous; differences integrated into interdependent flows; self both distinct and a blended
part of a larger, compassionate whole; an interconnected reality; holistic, intuitive, cooperative, and a unitary way of thinking. Close to 5% live from this integral stage.

Potentially, we can have access to all the stages that have evolved up to this time. However, within societies and in individuals that development is not uniform. Not everyone operates out of the same stage of consciousness. Millions of people are simultaneously at different stages along the spiral.

This framework offers a way to understand the polarities we are experiencing today among nations, within the US, between political parties, within ecclesial communities, within families, within oneself. It helps us understand why we can respond so differently to the same situation.

SDi’s insight that consciousness evolves toward greater complexity and diversity shares Teilhard de Chardin’s understanding of evolution.

Teilhard saw energy as both a physical and spiritual power propelled forward to increasing complexity attracted by ‘love.’ This directionality of the evolutionary process he called amorization derived from the Latin word for love.

Insights coming from quantum physics deepen the resonance with the interconnections of contemplation, development of consciousness and evolution. Paul Levy writes in The Quantum Revelation, “Quantum physics…points out that the study of the universe and the study of consciousness are inseparably linked…The change in the concept of reality emerging in quantum theory is not simply a continuation of the past, but rather a radical break from it…Quantum physics is introducing us to a radically new way of seeing, conceptualizing, and understanding that profoundly impacts how we conceive of ourselves.” (xxviii-xxix)

(The Quantum Revelation, Paul Levy, New York: Select Books, 2018)
This new way includes seeing reality first as a whole and then in its separate parts; rethinking the classical scientific worldview; desiring to learn from as many perspectives as possible; and unifying the physical with the spiritual dimension of experience.

Seeing the world this way connects with second tier consciousness and echoes the insights and experiences of the mystics who experienced the world as a unitive whole and the self as both distinct and part of a larger, interconnected reality.

**WEAVING THE CONNECTIONS**

In our current evolutionary moment, we are experiencing the breakdown of our systems and structures. To choose breakthrough demands responses that emerge from a different stage of consciousness. A consciousness that can see reality as a whole and not fragmented. A consciousness that is compassionate and holds difference as gift emerging from our oneness. A consciousness that can embrace the wisdom of all the developmental stages. A consciousness that integrates the physical and spiritual dimensions of reality.

That consciousness is emerging and SDi names it second-tier, integral consciousness. Some quantum physicists allude to a similar emergence and call it quantum consciousness. Christian mystics describe their experience of the Divine and their transformed self and call it Christ consciousness. These emerging stages of consciousness might be what Einstein meant. It is time for another shift on the spiral that SDi describes. We cannot continue operating out of a consciousness - a way of seeing the world - that believes there is only one right worldview; one way of being.

In our increasingly complex and polarized world, perhaps an effective action we can take is to enter the space between and among those with whom we differ and find ways of healing some of the negative effects of our divisions.

**ENGAGING POLARITIES**

The growing divisions reflect the different ways of seeing reality from the various stages. One’s reactions, fears and solutions are different at each stage. To move forward, the needs and fears of everyone must be addressed.

It is a challenge to believe that somehow the values/wisdom of each of the stages holds out the promise of generating imaginative responses to the problems that confront us. To believe that is to believe that the way forward is to envision the future together, valuing diversity rooted in our oneness.

For that to happen we need to operate some or most of the time from the Integral stage of consciousness and from one’s authentic self.

Without deepening our own self-understanding and capacity to love, Thomas Merton warns us: “We will have nothing to give others. We will only communicate only our own obsessions, ego-centered ambitions, delusions about ends and means, and doctrinaire prejudices and ideas.”

Merton could be describing what happens when one is so convinced of one’s position coming from a first-tier consciousness. Even though one’s position might be salutary, that misuse of power and action is leading us to greater and greater fragmentation and dissolution of unity.

Responding from one’s authentic self emerges with contemplation.
CONTEMPLATION AND CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE

Through contemplative practice one’s spirituality is deepened as one opens oneself to the transformative power of God. Contemplative prayer is a non-discursive prayer, complementing our devotional prayers in which images, emotions and thoughts play a significant role. Contemplation invites us to be present to the “now” and to drop down deeply into a spaciousness where Divine Mystery dwells. You let go and consent to the workings of God within for your own transformation and that of the world.

Over time your letting go and surrender to God’s love enables you to become aware of your ‘false self’ - unrecognized motivations which govern behaviors driven by a sense of need and lack. You become aware of your biases, assumptions, and worldviews. You face your fears, your ego-centric behaviors. Eventually, you desire to be and act differently. You hone your capacity to “catch” yourself reacting in ways that are not healthy and eventually you are able to “respond” in new ways to a situation or a person whom you find disagreeable. You begin to live from Love, drawn to it like a magnet within yourself. You become closer to your authentic self. You begin to put on the mind of Christ.

Such surrender and letting go are key components in the interior journey known to spiritual directors and put into practice in places like Guest House and AA meetings. The lens of SDi deepens our understanding of how the needs for security/survival, affection/esteem, and power/control have developed over the centuries expressed through shifting worldviews affecting the development of individuals and cultures. As awareness increases of how these influences shape us, we enter new stages of consciousness and through contemplation we are being healed and purified,
That is not easy. It is demanding of us to respond from a very centered place. Therefore, a commitment to contemplation becomes critical. To be able to respond from our authentic and transformed self, we need immersion in a contemplative life-style.

ENGAGING POLARITIES FROM A CONTEMPLATIVE HEART

The structures and systems we have relied on are at a chaos point. We either continue breakdown or move toward breakthrough. Solutions are put forth that contradict each other. The chasm is widening. What is our role during this time of increasing stress and tension?

Jesus taught us how to live and what values to embody—love of neighbor as oneself; mercy and forgiveness; compassion; equality; peace and justice. The challenge is how do we live them “without misusing (our) power and action” in today’s world.

We need to move forward in ways that will address the needs and fears of everyone. We all need to understand that achieving the common good of social justice requires an appreciation of the earlier stages of consciousness in which people continue to view the world.

HOW DO WE DO THAT?

I suggest it is consciously putting on the mind of Christ and living out of an integral consciousness. This emerging second-tier consciousness develops in us the capacity to understand the importance of the values that are part of every stage of development. We can enter the space between the stages without judgment or shaming the ‘other.’ We begin the process of dialogue by asking generative questions, exploring positions, sharing experiences, and generating new possibilities rooted in love and respect.

We can hold our values and truth and at the same time be willing not to force them upon the other, always remembering there is something of value in what the other person believes. We can be passionate in what we believe and still be open to hear a different worldview.

That is not easy. It is demanding of us to respond from a very centered place. Therefore, a commitment to contemplation becomes critical. To respond like that means to respond from one’s authentic self, the transformed self, encountered through contemplation.

Then we can listen and speak from a contemplative heart: do our interior preparation, face our fears and needs, and observe what triggers a reaction and explore the whys. We can respond in ways that open the space within us and among those with whom we differ. We can engage in a dialogue that allows something new to emerge, a solution, a policy, an action that resolves the problem out of a new level of consciousness.

THE DIFFERENCE IT MAKES

Evolution is a slow process. Responding to the polarities from a contemplative heart is an investment in our evolutionary unfolding. It is an...
investment in hope. We are learning that nothing we do is in isolation from each other; rather, it is contributing to a growing interconnected whole, a new stage of human consciousness.

FitzGerald warns us that there is a “massive unconscious resistance to interdependence at work fighting against the new stage of cosmic consciousness that is struggling to emerge.” She offers us this hope. “Certainly, a sign that something - a new epoch - is already strengthening on the invisible level of spirit! We don’t know how long this emergence will take…but what vast energy fields of communion and interdependence would be created on this earth, in our cosmos, if our consciousness were more closely aligned with the consciousness of Jesus Christ…This union, this gift, is the goal of contemplative prayer…It is the heart of all engagement. Wherever, whenever these experiences of deep communion happen, the transformation of humanity and the evolution of human consciousness are more assured.”

(2017 LCWR Outstanding Leadership Award Acceptance Remarks, August 11, 2017)

As we deepen our awareness of our authentic selves aligned with Christ consciousness, we open ourselves to second tier consciousness able to imagine new ways of responding to the injustices of today. We become part of the emerging future and contribute uniquely to the call of this time as people of faith whose lives are committed to the love of God.

I end with a prayer paraphrasing FitzGerald’s words:

May we reach beyond the horizon of present expectation and imagination. May we be given the contemplative grace to carve deeper grooves of conscious relationality and communion in the evolutionary path we are treading so that others may follow. May we make our own evolutionary contribution toward laying down permanent capabilities for transforming love into the universe. May we be open to receive the unimaginable future to which God is alluring us and more…to serve as a doorway to it. May we be prophets of hope!

POSTSCRIPT

Much of what Nancy wrote about is developed in the Institute’s program, *Enter the Chaos: Engage the Differences to Make a Difference.* It is grounded in contemplative practice and processes; offers a framework to understand how consciousness evolves in developmental stages; and explores practical ways to learn to engage persons who operate out of different worldviews in hopes of healing the negative effects of the polarization we experience. It has been offered at various venues throughout the country and has been adapted to a ZOOM format for 2022. Find more information about ICCD’s programs and other resources at www.iccdinstitute.org.
1. Sister Nancy Sylvester, seasoned by decades of experience in community leadership and social justice advocacy, offers wisdom which resonates with St. Paul’s words to the Philippians, “Put on the mind of Christ.” Listen, speak, and act from a contemplative heart. According to your own life-situation at the present time, how does this insight help you in the midst of these polarizing times in the Church and the civil society? Think about concrete ways that a commitment to a contemplative lifestyle has transformed you and your ministry and enabled you to help others move to new awareness and consciousness.

2. The author refers to theories about stages of consciousness and how we are currently moving toward a “new consciousness” that sees diversity within the context of wholeness. Again, here, a contemplative mind and heart are critical to the movement into a greater appreciation of the interconnectedness of all things we do so we move from our “false” self to our “authentic” self. In what ways have you experienced such a transition away from self-preoccupation and defensiveness into genuine openness to gift, mystery, and surprise without fear? How have you been able to model this attitude for others?

3. The author refers a couple times to the insights of Sister Constance FitzGerald, OCD, a cloistered Carmelite from Baltimore, MD. Sister Constance compares our contemporary experience of painful polarization to a “dark night of the soul;” by bringing the “impasse” of this historical moment to contemplative prayer, precisely in and through the “darkness,” we discover the Lord and begin to see all things as God does. Have you lived through a spiritual “dark night?” Are you perhaps going through such an experience right now? Have you found that “darkness” of any kind (ex. addictions, anger, fear) actually helps us find freedom and hope?
Nancy Sylvester, IHM, founded the Institute for Communal Contemplation and Dialogue (ICCD) in 2002 in response to her experiences working for justice and right relationships in church and in society. Nancy is committed to the transforming power of communal contemplation in one’s life and the life of the community. She believes it invites the shifts in consciousness so necessary to embrace our evolutionary journey and engage the critical issues facing us in ways that foster dialogue, relationships, compassion and justice.

Nancy is an author and known national and international speaker. She has served numerous congregations and other organizations by designing processes to deepen both individual and communal commitments to contemplation and to invite deepening conversations on the issues facing them.

Nancy is one of the persons featured in the documentary, Band of Sisters. She wrote for and co-edited Crucible for Change: Engaging Impasse through Communal Contemplation and Dialogue, and currently writes for the Global Sisters Report, in a series “Contemplate This.” In addition, she has also contributed articles and interviews to a number of publications.

Nancy served in the Presidency of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious while she was vice president of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Monroe, MI. She served on staff of NETWORK, a national Catholic social justice lobby, first as researcher, then lobbyist and then for ten years as National Coordinator. Prior to NETWORK, Nancy taught secondary education in the Detroit, Michigan metropolitan area.

Nancy did her undergraduate work at St. Louis University majoring in philosophy and political science. Her graduate degree, from St. Mary’s University, Winona, MN, is in human development with a concentration in economics and theology.

To read more about Nancy and the Institute for Communal Contemplation and Dialogue, please go to the web site: www.iccdinstitute.org