



FINDING OUR BALANCE IN THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

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While walking in the desert near Tucson, Arizona, I began climbing a mountain and lost my balance. Instinctively I put out my hand for support from a large shadow looming beside me. Just as my hand landed, I retracted it, realizing that the shadow belonged not to a sturdy tree from which I could gain support but rather to a Saguaro cactus with spiky arms waiting to push away any intruder. Quickly pulling my hand away, I gained firmer footing on the desert terrain. I grounded myself, attaining balance from the inside out.



Continuing my walk, I couldn't stop thinking about this experience. Obvious as it was, I realized I wasn't thinking of how different the desert landscape was from my familiar landscape of Michigan. I wondered if this experience reflected where we find ourselves on our current political landscape.

Do we find ourselves on an unfamiliar landscape where we lose our balance if we operate out of instinctual, deeply embedded beliefs? Does this landscape hold danger and pain if, unaware, we proceed as we have in the past? Does it resist those who are different? Does it demand that we attain balance from the inside out?

My encounter with the Saguaro in the desert invites me to write this essay, to examine the shifting exterior and interior landscapes on which we find ourselves; to reflect on feeling off balance and facing into it; to address regaining balance; to explore our interior landscape; and to offer suggestions about how to move forward individually and communally.

SHIFTING LANDSCAPES

A landscape includes the solid ground on which we live. We all have certain landscapes that feel like home. I am most at home in the landscape of the Midwest cities where I grew up and continue to live and work. Another type of landscape, an interior one, lies within our consciousness, and from this home we interpret everything around us. It holds our beliefs, values, and assumptions: our shadow self and the fullness of self. It too feels like solid ground.

These landscapes are sacred, and they shape us. Yet they can also shift, rearrange themselves, invite us to new vistas or keep us within enclosed safe spaces. As I think about this moment in time, I believe that differing interior landscapes of consciousness which have co-existed for some time have begun to collide. Perhaps like the tectonic plates under the ocean, at different times, they can slide past each other transforming boundaries but creating nothing new. Or they can move away from each other constructing a new ocean basin. Or they move toward each other causing a continental collision. It

seems we can no longer simply share space sliding past each other but have begun to push and shove each other potentially erupting in massive disturbances and creating new configurations.

I believe such eruptions happen within one's self, upon one's inner landscape and at times in the collective consciousness of a nation when the force of differing world views erupts in the public places of our lives.

To be aware of and choose to change one's inner landscape is not easy. I recall one such significant shift in my life when I began to learn the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. Having grown up as a very pious girl in a very [Catholic Chicago](#), I felt the ground from which I viewed the world and my God shifting because of the insights from the Council. The tectonic plates within my consciousness collided. I was being forced to navigate very unfamiliar terrain.

Much of what I was taught about my Catholic faith had been formulated from the best of an earlier period's theology and philosophy. Now the articulation of faith began to integrate other disciplinary approaches--psychology, sociology, moral development, evolutionary theory--informing one's spiritual journey to God.

Because I had just entered religious life I found myself wondering if I no longer fit, if I still had a vocation, if I should leave. Wise leaders respected my doubts but invited me to remain a little longer within the congregation before deciding if I still wanted to leave.

This waiting time allowed me to become more familiar with this new terrain. Through a variety of experiences, I learned about other faiths with common roots yet different expressions, about inner authority and individual conscience. I understood that Scripture was rooted in the culture, language and philosophy of a particular time and place. I encountered the very rich tradition of Catholic Social Justice Teaching which invited me to regard faith as intimately involved in our economic and political decisions.

I struggled with competing claims and began walking toward a different and wider horizon. I knew where I came from – I could still identify the landscape – but I no longer felt at home there. This very painful but intensely necessary widening of my mind's geography continued in my life as I encountered persons of different races, sexual identities, and economic classes.

I am grateful that this journey into a shifting landscape happened within the safe and loving environment of my religious congregation, that I was held in community when the land beneath my feet shifted and gave way. However, many of my childhood friends and members of my family did not experience this same shift. Talking about faith and religion became more difficult. At times, I felt our tectonic plates sliding past each other.

It is not unusual to experience fear, guilt, anger, and confusion when your interior landscape encounters a new and widening terrain. It takes time to stop reacting defensively and it helps if you have a supportive community to assist you.

Could it be that as a nation we have experienced shifting landscapes over the last decades, although our experiences have differed? We share a geographic landscape called the United States and a

philosophical interior landscape of our democratic political system. Back in 1776 we were an experiment—definitely a new landscape. Other nations shared a common language, a common ethnic identity, a common faith. We on the other hand had as our common bond our democratic values. Immigrants from these other nations came to settle in this “New World”; these values grew on this new landscape; despite our differences, we embraced it as home.

In the past six decades, the shifts on our cultural, social, economic and political terrain have affected us differently. But each shift has caused us to consider values we hold dear. For some of us, the shifts expanded our sense of equality and freedom, widening our current landscape’s horizon. New laws were enacted to protect this larger space. For some, such a widening felt wrong, an assault on the values that make us who we are, who we have been. We were losing our identity. The new laws were obeyed, but the interior landscapes, mindsets, world views, stayed the same. Although we might inhabit the same geographical landscape, we began to separate from each other living on another terrain defined by our interior mindsets and world views.

I sense that we are experiencing the recent presidential election as a collision of significantly different interior landscapes -- tilting us, shifting us, moving us off-balance, unaware of what we are now creating.

FEELING OFF BALANCE

I believe that this is different than earlier times when other new presidents advocated conservative or progressive agendas. From my work with NETWORK in Washington, D.C., during three different Administrations, I am aware of a certain framework within which every administration worked. This time it is different.

I say this because, the Trump Administration is shifting the ground upon which the values dominating our political choices usually operate. President Trump might be trying to fulfill his campaign promises, but surely not everyone who supported him agrees with all the ways he is proceeding: refusing to make public his tax returns; appointing his political strategist to the National Security Council; questioning the legitimacy of federal judges who halted his executive order; failing to separate himself from his business interests which span 25 countries; constantly berating the press; or making policy through Twitter.

President Trump is ignoring most protocols and traditional expectations of a newly elected President. Although this pleases some of his supporters, I believe what is happening in these early days of this Administration sets most Americans off-balance. I certainly feel this. Trying to regain balance I took part in the Lansing, MI Women’s March; participated in a Monroe, MI interfaith prayer service; called congressional offices. Important and helpful as these actions are, I still feel off-balance.

I experience a much deeper sense of powerlessness: a feeling of “impasse.”

Feeling this way, I found myself recalling [Engaging Impasse: Circles of Contemplation and Dialogue \(EI\)](#) which the Institute for Communal Contemplation and Dialogue (ICCD) offered from 2003 to 2014. The indicators for ‘impasse’ include: “a feeling that things have gotten so complex that you don’t have the

answers anymore”; “a realization that all the ways you know for effecting change . . . are not adequate”; and that “you experience a low-grade anger or a grief that never seems to leave you.”

I think this is where many of us are now, in a situation of great complexity feeling anger and grief knowing the old ways are not working.

Constance FitzGerald, OCD, in her article, “[Impasse and Dark Night](#)” offers an approach to embracing such an impasse as part of the spiritual journey.

The experience of impasse can be a source of creative growth and transformation if it is fully appropriated within one’s heart and flesh with consciousness and consent ...[and] if the path into the unknown, into the uncontrolled and unpredictable margins of life, is freely taken when the path of deadly clarity fades.

Dark night shows up the “shadow,” the dark side of desire. If we refuse to read the signs of dark night in our society and avoid appropriating the impasse, we see cold reason, devoid of imagination, heading with deadly logic toward violence, hardness in the face of misery, a sense of inevitability, war, and death. And we witness the projection of our national shadow on others.

I am struck with how well Fitzgerald describes what happens if we refuse to read the signs of our societal dark night. I believe we are seeing the national shadow projected onto us. We are an immigrant nation now regarding immigration as a threat to our identity; a country of freedom and individual liberties now willing to sacrifice freedom for security; a culture of compassion and generosity now acting based on scarcity and selfishness; a society of reason now tolerating “alternative facts,” fake news, and privatization of truth. We are the most powerful country in the world that feels compelled to prove it through “might makes right.”

For FitzGerald and John of the Cross, hope lies in allowing ourselves to experience this impasse and “fully appropriate it within one’s heart and flesh with consciousness and consent.” It is to be invited into our soul space: an invitation to spiritual growth, which is an invitation to grow deeply so as “to take a long loving look” at the heart and mind’s landscape so that we may open ourselves to transformation.

The invitation to grow spiritually is an invitation to embrace shifting landscapes. As I read various analyses of where we are as a nation I am struck by how much time and thought are given to our lives’ exterior landscapes and how much less to their interior dimensions. I believe we need to learn the practices necessary to enter new interior landscapes and deepen those we have so that we can be more open to understanding our differences, more willing to see where our common terrain might be.

What if this is the level at which we must engage ourselves and each other? Our nation’s tectonic plates are in motion, and we don’t yet know what form the shifting will finally take. However, something deeper than the physical ground is shifting, something more than the external laws and policies. Is the interior landscape of our hearts and minds as a people, as a nation, where we will regain balance? Is the invitation to inner growth so we can engage in transformative actions?

REGAINING BALANCE FROM THE INSIDE OUT

There are many ways to grow in your spiritual life. One way is the path of contemplation which opens us to the working of God within us. It helps us “take a long loving look at the real” which is one description of contemplation. Growing up I thought contemplation was only for cloistered monks and nuns. However, I now understand it is for anyone and is a spiritual path of transformation with deep roots in Christianity.

[Contemplation](#) is a path of awakening, of seeing anew, of deepening our awareness. It complements the way most of us learned to pray using already-composed litanies and meditations. Contemplation is a non-discursive form of prayer that invites us into a silence that is in and of itself a fullness. Unlike other forms of meditation, it is not a silence awaiting insight, a vessel waiting to be filled up with thoughts, or a space to exercise our imagination. Rather, it invites us to be present to this moment; it is a surrendering, a letting go, into the deepest recesses of our being where the Divine dwells. It opens us to the unconditional love of God. Contemplation awakens us to what is already there, to the Divine Indwelling that is the cornerstone of contemplative prayer.

If this form of prayer is new to you, I recommend that you try it. You can find a simple way to begin with these reflections (the [ICCD website](#) or [Global Sisters Report](#)). If this way of praying attracts you then I suggest you read Cynthia Bourgeault’s book, [Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening](#), Lanham, MD (Cowley, 2004.)

Over time a contemplative practice awakens an awareness of our false selves, of our shadow, of our constructed self. We become aware of the interior landscape out of which we live. We see our biases, assumptions, beliefs, and world views that cause us to put-up barriers against others. Contemplation develops a capacity to stay connected to our Divine Center and let go of our need for security, esteem, and control. Eventually, we are closer to our real selves and we act out of these new realizations.

Perhaps our capacity to understand the depths of what is facing us as a nation is related to our ability to be in touch with our interior landscape—its strength and shadow. Would that free us to engage those who are also rooted in this nation’s values but living out of another world view, another interior landscape?

EXPLORING OUR INTERIOR LANDSCAPE

I have engaged in a contemplative practice for many years and as I explore my interior landscape I continue to become aware of my biases and my shadow. Like an onion, I have many layers to peel away, so I still react and judge situations. During the presidential primaries, I found myself putting Mr. Trump’s supporters into categories and the coarse language and mean-spirited chants at the Trump rallies only confirmed my sense that they were ill informed and boorish. Although I could speak to the economic situation and the rapid cultural changes that contributed to that anger and fear, I admit that I felt superior to them.

I had a set of assumptions about who did and who did not vote for Mr. Trump. Since the election, I have had some serious conversations with Trump supporters, and they have challenged many of my assumptions. I spoke with a registered Democrat, who voted for Bernie Sanders in the primary and then voted for Mr. Trump in the general election. She lived in a politically progressive city and was serious about deepening her own spiritual journey. But her experience in law enforcement and medicine moved her toward Mr. Trump. It became clear that the “fake news” about Hilary Clinton influenced her, but she concluded that both candidates lied. In the end, she wanted change.

As we talked I could feel a desire to react to what she said, to defend my positions, to try to persuade her to change her views. I was able to “observe” those reactions before I acted on them and so chose to respond by exploring her beliefs with her. It wasn’t that I didn’t share my position or indicate why I found it so hard to understand why she would vote as she did, but I was able to converse with her because I felt a genuine respect for her.

Such conversations invite me to pause, to explore what people are saying and what is beneath the words. These persons also grew up in the landscape of US democracy. They too hold the values that make us a nation. The way they want these values expressed differs from mine. I too believed that the system wasn’t working and that we needed change but their experiences led them to vote change over any other considerations.

I am observing my reactions to the new administration. Amid its rollout of a whole flurry of executive orders, cabinet appointments and tweets, I find myself screaming inside. I can hardly listen to his spokespersons’ explanations of the gross errors proclaimed by our President. I find his pouty looks and use of superlatives extremely irritating. I can feel the lines being drawn to keep him and anything he does outside of my landscape of possibilities. I don’t want to give him an inch. And then I pause. This reaction is exactly what keeps landscapes on a collision course. How hard it is not to posture, not to need to be correct, not to want the other side to win. Without stopping to take a long loving look at our interior landscape we may be reacting in ways that will only intensify the divisions.

Exploring your interior landscape through contemplation is not only an individual act. There is a power and a depth in entering this process with others. The processes developed by the Institute (ICCD) are rooted in communal contemplation creating a safe space to explore one’s interior landscape. In the Engaging Impasse Circles together we face into impasse. Although our modes of expression differ, we are considering a collective kind of impasse here. It’s important to own the anger, the grief, the sadness and share it with others who can hold the space and respectfully listen.

Part of owning our feelings is to get in touch with “why” we feel the way we do. Too often we ask ourselves this only once and our response is often obvious. In the Engaging Impasse Circles we adapted the Five Why process which originated as a rational problem-solving process in the Toyota Company and was further developed by Peter Senge, a leader in adult learning, to address the emotions we feel when experiencing impasse and the reasons behind them. This same process is part of many ICCD programs as the experience of getting in touch with how a current situation is making you feel and to share that with others who respect and listen to you is very powerful. It releases creative energy widening our landscapes and helping regain balance.

I doubt that I would have been willing to talk with these persons and be open to what they said if I were not rooted in both an individual and communal contemplative practice. Nor do I believe I would be willing to step back from my intense reaction flowing from anger, grief, and fear to discover what is really going on and to ponder other responses that might open new space for conversation and action.

How we got to where we are as a country is multi-layered, complex, and evolving. What I know is that for us to be at a different place in the future we need to imagine new ways of acting.

EXERCISING CONTEMPLATIVE POWER

When getting off balance in the desert, my instinct was to do what I always do—reach out and grab something for support. Grabbing a Saguaro would have probably startled me so that I would have stumbled even more bumping into the barrel or cholla cactus perhaps even falling onto a prickly pear! Doing what I usually do just wouldn't have worked in this new terrain.

When confronted with what I believe to be unjust or a misuse of power and authority I want to 'do' something. Anything seems better than nothing. Reacting swiftly often means reacting based on my usual way of seeing things—my usual way of judging. I react assuming my familiar landscape. Perhaps we are being asked to respond in new ways after taking time to assess the unfamiliar landscape so as not to end up in worse shape than before.

This doesn't mean not to act because it might cause pain or suffering. No, in fact acting from this deeper place might call forth actions which demand great risk and courage. I am saying that if FitzGerald's insight is correct then we need to face the impasse and enter into the transformative process that will enable us to imagine new ways of responding.

This will not be easy. We must learn new skills, but skills are not enough. It requires taking a long loving look at both our own landscape and that of "the other."

Over the last two decades, cultural and economic shifts have been affecting the landscapes we live on. Many people felt their landscapes threatened by these changes and couldn't widen their horizon. The acceptance of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer community has stripped moral order from some landscapes. Global markets with a free exchange of goods and services have dried up job possibilities on some terrains. Immigration has threatened the security of some people's home landscapes. During the campaign, Mr. Trump's rhetoric and statements, many rooted in fiction, kept strengthening these interior landscapes. Rather than inviting us to see how these shifts created a larger more fertile landscape on which all might live, he zeroed in on people's fear and anger. He described the US as a devastated landscape in need of strong leadership. He confirmed, cheered, and amplified the shadow within and among us.

We had few moral voices to call us to our better selves, to help us see that our interior landscapes are shifting, to share ways to face disruption and assist us moving forward. So, the loudest voice prevailed.

We are now faced with what do? There is no dearth of possible actions. Yet, what if the Administration's rapid succession of actions might be part of a strategy to make the opposition do what is expected: Try to block everything at every possible point so that the Trump Administration can simply dismiss the opposition as sore losers and continue to fan the flames and do what he promised. Or that it is a smokescreen for a ruthless exercise of power which could be missed in the flurry of activity. Yet, failure to respond signals that we are becoming accustomed to acts which are unjust and may threaten the Constitution. We are all challenged to decide which actions to join and when.

Yet, it is not enough to take action which only effects our exterior landscape. The laws and policies enacted will make a difference, of course, but Congress is polarized and the posturing which politicians seem to think is necessary to get re-elected will not help us now. Many of us also understand that in the hands of our contemporary political leaders our system of representative democracy seems to be failing us. The answer is not to dismantle it in the name of security or let it become collateral damage in the "collision" of worldviews. Is it not up to us--people who love our country and Constitution--to engage each other around our common values inviting all of us to widen the horizon of our landscapes?

In the next weeks, months, and years, we have to consciously talk with each other across landscapes. We must exercise contemplative power by initiating and collectively having conversations about our future as a nation. This term "exercising contemplative power" became the focus of the work of ICCD in [2012](#). We knew that for many this term was an oxymoron, linking two words that don't necessarily go together. But our initial reflection began to show the connection. Dorothy Soelle, a theologian, writes that contemplation is to see things as God sees them. Such seeing, she said, leads to active resistance to evil and inspires efforts to alleviate suffering, to see as Jesus saw when he defied his society's definition of "the other" and chose to relate to each person in an exchange of love and respect no matter the personal cost.

Immediately after the election I pondered if it would be possible to extend trust and stay alert to suspect behavior that might violate the values of our Constitution and of the Gospel. I believe by engaging with each other and with those who think differently, showing respect and honest openness to what we are sharing, we will build the kind of trust that might move our landscapes closer together so that when either "side" alerts us to suspect behavior we can find common cause and work together. My hope is that together we will be moving the vast middle in such a way that as we move forward it will change the trajectory and block the "collision" of our tectonic plates.

I believe we have to exercise communal contemplative power with our family, friends, co-workers, religious congregations, civic clubs, bowling leagues, school board members and parish councils with respect and openness so that we can identify the values and vision that help us move forward together. This stance challenges us to become more contemplative so we can be attuned to our own shadow and open the self to the needs and values of the other. We must invite people to become aware of their interior landscapes and explore a wider horizon able to embrace the values of our Constitution and the Gospel.

I would like to suggest a few ways to start:

- Make a commitment to your own interior growth.
- Use this essay as a way to discuss with others the interior landscape within which they live. Spend time with each major section see how it resonates with one's experience. Discuss contemplation as a prayer form. Take time to practice contemplative sitting. Share all the things that "hook" you and prevent you from "taking a long, loving look" at one another's landscape. Discuss how you can exercise contemplative power.
- Follow the "Five Whys" process I mentioned earlier. Start with people you know who feel the same way you do. Remember that we have to face into the impasse and this is a very good way to do that. Next you may want to invite some people whom you know but may or may not know how they voted. I was amazed at how many people are reluctant to talk about this election with their own families or congregation members. This might be a good place to start. Later, you might venture even wider inviting more casual acquaintances to do this with you. "Five Whys" allows you to share where you are without judgment. Click here for a [process guide](#) and the [5 Whys](#) sheet you can duplicate.
- Extend your outreach to people with whom you might disagree. This is hard but perhaps creating a prayer service in which people talk with each other about what they love about being part of the United States or asking to offer the prayer for a meeting in which you take time to reflect and then share about the values we hold as important to our democracy, might open further discussion. I wrote a reflection after the election [Becoming Communities of Cosmic Sentries](#). You may find this a useful image to invite people from varying backgrounds to join together to practice compassion and to be alert to decisions or policies that are not reflective of the Constitution or the Gospel. We simply need to be aware of how many opportunities present themselves to engage in this manner if we are not looking for moments to debate, argue, or convince the other of our position.
- Make sure you are in conversation with your Congresspersons. Share your point of view with them about the issues that matter. When I was in Washington, D.C., we "crossed the aisle" and established a good relationship with the elected official and his/her staff. I believe that is very important at this time. Organize a group to visit your Congresspersons. Make that first visit exploratory. Find out what s/he is thinking about the country's direction. Ask questions and explore possibilities.
- Use social media. Go to our Facebook page: Institute for Communal Contemplation and Dialogue, click "Finding Our Balance Post Election." Share this essay with all of your contacts and invite them to share it with theirs. It might not go viral, but it will spread.
- Organize. Whenever you bring people together take the opportunity to build a mailing list or a contact list. Create a way to keep in touch. You may want to call together the whole group to deepen your sharing or to share an appropriate action. Ideally you will be widening your outreach and building trust among people of differing views.

We all must do what we can. This election and its aftermath is moving us toward a collision of interior landscapes or worldviews. Our usual ways of responding will not work. This is a call to go deeper than our external realities and to become aware of the great mystery of God working within us, calling us to our best selves. Contemplation helps us to touch this dimension of ourselves and opens us to a wider vision and interior landscape embracing the values of the Gospel and our Constitution. We must act, and for some of us this action means exercising contemplative power with those with whom we disagree. My hope is that in appreciating each other's terrain we may find a way to move forward together.

When I pulled my hand away from the Saguaro I quickly began to focus on my feet and to ground myself to regain my balance. After I had landed and felt secure I continued my walk and took in the contours of this landscape. Yes, it was different than my "home" landscape, but I understood that both exist on our one Earth home.



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