

Seeing with New Eyes: The Inner Work of Transformation Needed for These Times

Ted Dunn



Introduction

What is it that you are truly seeking, your ultimate goal, as you plan for the future of your community and your own personal future? What do you hope life will be like for you personally and for your community in the coming years? Undoubtedly, you are busy, if not overwhelmed, planning how to best care for yourselves, how to find sustainable ways to structure governance, manage your finances, and obtain the highest and best use of your buildings. But what about the highest and best use of your members' time and energy? What about the sustainability of your mission and caring for the soul of your community? Like it or not, communities are compelled to change during this transitional time, but might there also be a deeper invitation, the possibility of transformation and new life?

This article focuses on what I call a "graced crossroads" [1] and the specific pathways to deep change and transformation. It invites you to look beyond the surface changes of your lives and explore the inner work of transformation, the type of work needed to facilitate the emergence of new life. While communities need to adapt and change, there is yet a deeper invitation at these graced crossroads – to participate in the divine mystery of transformation and the unfolding of God's infinite vision.

A Great Turning

There is a Great Turning taking place across our planetary home. A mixture of natural and manmade circumstances has brought our planet to a tipping point: global warming, rising sea levels, species extinction, and waves of migration are marking the existential threat to our planetary home and humanity's future. Countless luminaries and scientists believe that we are on the brink of a sixth great extinction of our planet. It is an existential evolutionary crisis in which our species will either evolve into a new consciousness, and a new way of being, or devolve into an abyss of death and destruction. Hope lies in our willingness and determination to collaborate in taking the next evolutionary leap to a new level of consciousness.

Within this Great Turning are the tectonic shifts taking place across the religious landscape. Here in the United States, for example:

- There is a rise in the hunger for spirituality and a decline in all mainline religions, especially Catholicism
- While mainline religions are

declining, there is a rise in two ends of the spectrum: Evangelical Protestants and those with no religious affiliation (Nones)

- Nones are now the largest subgroup, outnumbering Catholics and trending larger; and
- Hispanics will soon comprise the majority of Catholics, though they too are filling the ranks of Nones and Evangelicals.

And within the Catholic population, religious life itself is facing its own set of crises. In the United States, priests and sisters are approaching 40,000. These demographic shifts represent one small portion of the challenges facing communities, but the practical impact of these demographic changes upon the life and mission of communities is demanding enormous time, energy, and resources. Adding to the loss of members, advancing age, diminishing pool of leaders, and financial strains are a host of deeper issues that strike the very soul of communities.

The good news is that religious life is not dying. It is transforming just as it has

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through many lifecycle changes since the time of Jesus. It is on the leading edge of an evolving consciousness in support of our planetary evolution. The good news is that you are a part of this Great Turning! Religious life will rise again. But there are hard choices ahead and no quick fixes or off-the-shelf solutions. The only solace, perhaps, is that God is with you and will not abandon you. This is God's covenant (Deuteronomy 31:6).

Challenges to the Divine Mystery of Transformation

When I have asked communities, "Might you wish to choose life, transform, or birth new life?" they invariably say, "Yes!" Unfortunately, most communities, despite their enthusiasm, will not put forth the concrete resources, or exert the emotional grit and spiritual discipline, needed to make the hard choices to transform their lives. They will not calendar the time, commit their moneys, or engage their members in the hard work required. They will choose, instead, the well-worn path of least resistance. Unwittingly, bit by bit, they will make choices driven more by fear than courage, choices that all but guarantee their demise.

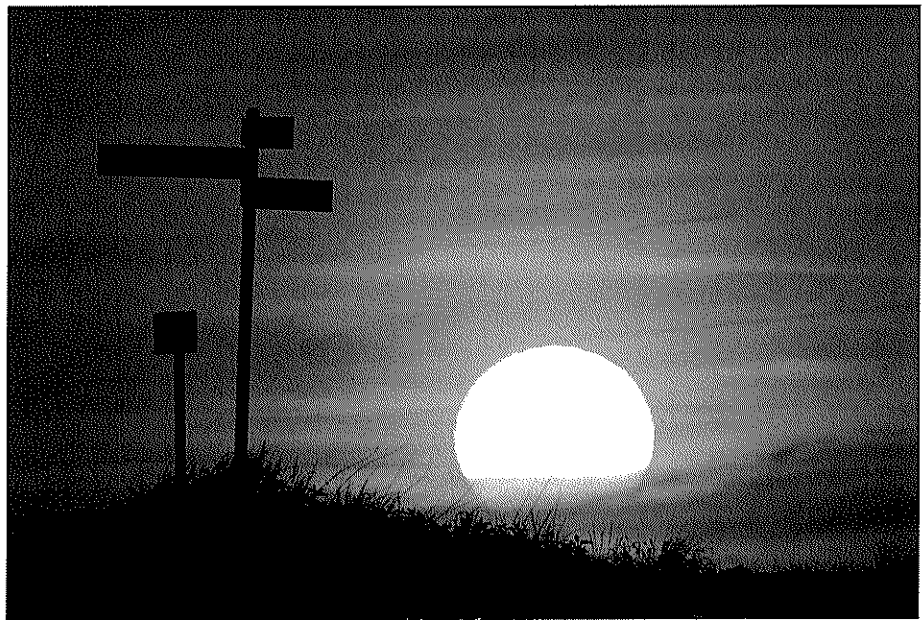
Some communities, a smaller percentage, will discover and dispose themselves to the fullness of grace at these crossroads. They will discover a "deeper invitation," and seek to transform their lives and discern God's call to new life. They will plan not only for the external changes in community (e.g., finances, healthcare and the bricks and mortar of their lives) but open their lives to an inward journey through the dark night of the soul. No matter what option you choose, you cannot go on as you have in the past. And, while there are many options from which to choose, absent the "inner work of transformation," these options will amount to little more than surface changes meant to ease the administrative burdens and make for a smoother path to "completion."

Communal transformation offers hope for new life beyond the numbing narrative of "aging and diminishment." Transformation is compelled first by the urgent need for change, but ultimately impelled by a deeper invitation beckoning you toward the lure and love of God. It is pain that brings us to a crossroads, but it is Love that pulls us through. Transformation requires deep, not incremental, change. This, in turn, demands that communities take a different approach to planning and visioning than what they have used in the past. The different approach I am offering religious communities is to discern God's call to new life through a journey of transformation.

There are a great many things about the current status of religious life and its future prospects that are uncertain and hard to grasp. No one can predict an unpredictable, unpicturable future. However, a few things have become very clear to me because of my work with communities around the globe. Here is

what I know to be true for communities standing at a graced crossroads:

"A bend in the road is not an end in the road, unless you fail to make the turn" (Helen Keller). Many communities will fail to make the turn. Some will wait until it is too late and, by the time they wake up, they will have exhausted their resources and will to change. Others will make only incremental changes, believing they are doing what is needed, only to discover their safe, small changes are not enough. And some of the most resilient communities will successfully make this bend in the road and bring forth new life. They will have a hand in birthing the future of religious life. Tired of the numbing narrative, some begin to say, "Let's not focus on aging and diminishment." Yet, these changing demographics are affecting virtually every aspect of community: those available for leadership, boards, and key ministry positions; finances and healthcare needs; vocation and formation efforts; utilization and maintenance of land and buildings; members' energy and capacity to plan and make wise decisions, as well as their mission and vision for the future. Avoid these realities of aging and diminishment and you will not make that bend in the road.



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What got you today, will not get you to tomorrow. Your numbers alone will not permit it. While numbers are not the heart of the matter, it is obvious that life cannot continue as it has been in the past because of rapidly changing demographics. Can you carry twice the load you are carrying today? Is your calendar half full? Most members and leaders I know are already over worked. Simply put, you cannot do in 10 years what you are doing today, at least not in the same way you are doing it now. By the numbers alone, tomorrow must be different than today.

John Gardner once said, "The last act of a dying organization is to get out a new and enlarged edition of the rule book."^[2] Communities that are dying tend to fall back on the old rules, not only their constitutions and directories, but that much larger book of unwritten rules (i.e., "the way we've always done things"). The way things have always been done may have worked in the past, but you will need to risk experimenting with new approaches to pave the way to the future. Change is not an indictment of the past; it is simply its natural evolution. The challenge is to learn from the past what is relevant for today and what might be a better approach for tomorrow. That is what got you to today and what will help you get to tomorrow.

Adaptation is absolutely necessary, but how you adapt is key. According to Thomas Friedman, the amount of change we will experience in the next 100 years will exceed the change experienced in the entire human history.^[3] Our capacity to adapt to this accelerating rate of change is being greatly challenged. Most communities will become extinct during this cycle of religious life because their efforts to adapt will be unsuccessful. Fortunately, we know why. Here are seven of the most common misguided efforts. They will:

- **Make new improved versions of the past.** Just like the new improved versions of Tide or Crest, communities will make new improved versions of themselves. They will attempt to do what they have always done, only better.
- **Try harder, not differently.** They will try harder to tighten their belts, reduce expenses, postpone retirement, downsize, right size, and repurpose buildings, hoping for a different outcome, rather than try differently.
- **Play it safe, rather than innovate.** They will play it safe, rather than innovate, out of a fear of making bad investments, losing their reputations, or failing. As it turns

out, playing it safe is the riskiest choice of all.

- **Engage in incremental, rather than deep change.** They will favor small changes where the outcomes are predictable, conversations are manageable, and things are more controllable, rather than the chaos of deep change.
- **Avoid something bad, rather than create something good.** Fear drives them to worry more about making mistakes, rather than focusing their attention and resources on innovating new possibilities.
- **Download the same information, rather than create a new operating system.** They will download the same information using the same operating system, rather than create a new one which can evoke a shift in consciousness that permits novel possibilities to emerge.
- **Focus on external change, rather than the inner work.** They will focus on changing what is on the surface of their lives (land, buildings, finances, ministries, and administrative offices) and largely ignore what is underneath, the personal and interpersonal work of transformation.

There is, still, a deeper invitation. If communities are not to remain an analogue culture in a digital world, they must adapt. And, while adaptation

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and change are necessary, these efforts, alone, are not enough, *if* your desire is to transform.

To get to that deeper invitation, let me draw the distinction between change and transformation. Change is an external event, a new arrangement of things and, sometimes, an invitation to transform. Transformation, however, is an internal process, a journey that shifts the patterns, practices, norms, and values, along with the structures that support these,

realigning the soul with its outward expression. As they say in AA, "You can change where you live, but you take your patterns with you."

Crises always precede transformation but do not insist upon it. A crisis, by definition, is a situation in which our capacity to cope is exceeded by the stressors we face. When in crisis, we have a choice to either change to ease the pain or transform the pain into a new beginning. Often, we try to change by reducing the stressors or increasing our capacity to cope. Sometimes, however, we choose the road less traveled, a path of transformation that brings forth new life.

What Happens at a Graced Crossroads?

A graced crossroads, while it is a painful place to be, is simultaneously a profoundly freeing place to be, a place of refuge where we gladly take the yoke (Matthew 11:28-29). As painful as it is, at a graced

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crossroads there is a feeling of liberation and relief once we let go of denying our suffering or fighting against it. It is liberating for us, for a community, once we let go of all the unnecessary suffering that comes from our exhausting and futile attempts to cling to what is not working, to control what is outside of our control, and to deny, blame, and shame ourselves or others for our suffering. When we hit bottom, and finally accept the hand we have been dealt, we begin to ask questions for which there are no immediate answers, but for which answers must be found. With our denial gone, we can begin to listen and search for these answers. We can begin to hear

that still small voice (1 Kings 19:11-13). The Celts call this a "thin" time or a place where the veil between the two worlds of heaven and earth is thin. Christine Valters Paintner, in *The Soul's Slow Ripening*, calls this a "threshold time," when we are moving from one time and one awareness to another. It is a place where we can make "deeper connections with the divine." [4]

Grace flourishes in every nook and cranny of creation, but never are we more aware of its presence and amenable to its ways than when we are at such a crossroads. Grace comes bidden and unbidden, whether we are aware of it or not. When we arrive at a crossroads, individually or communally, the pain we must endure hollows us out (Philippians 2:7-8). We are emptied of all hubris and stripped of our defenses (kenosis). It is here in the deep quiet of our own soul's searching that we come face to face with those parts of ourselves we had rejected, hidden from ourselves and those we loved. It is here, at the crossroads, that grace works its way into every nook and cranny of our being.

A graced crossroads, for individuals and communities, is a place wherein God continually puts before us choices between life and death. God invites, lures, beseeches us to choose life, but these choices are always ours to make.

Religious communities are now at a graced crossroads, a threshold between what was and what is yet to come. Here, at these graced crossroads, is a deeper invitation: Choose life so that your descendants might live. Choose life so that you might live more fully in whatever time you have left. Choose life so that you might have a hand in the transformation of religious life and our planetary home. Choose life ... (Deuteronomy 30:19).

The divine paschal mystery of transformation is beyond our comprehension, but it surely does not happen without our active participation. Sitting in a prison cell, a young Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote that, "Human progress never rolls on the wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be co-workers with God." You can either try to plan your future or create the conditions for grace to intercede. To do the former, you must presume to know what the future is. To do the latter, you need to learn how to cooperate with grace and do the inner work of transformation.

Not far from where my daughter once lived is a place called Death Valley. We know Death Valley to be the hottest, driest place in the United States. Nothing grows there because it is parched, hence,



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its name. But every once in a great while, against all odds, it does rain in Death Valley. And when it does, Death Valley bursts forth with flowers, a phenomenon called a “super bloom.” What it proved is this: that Death Valley is not dead. It is dormant. Right beneath the surface are seeds of possibility waiting for the right conditions to come about. In other words, in organic systems, if the conditions are right, life surges forth. It is inevitable. It happens all the time.

In transformative times such as these, we must move to a model based more on the principles of farming than one of manufacturing. Now, I am not a farmer, but I know enough to recognize that farming, like human growth and transformation, is not a linear or mechanical process. It is an organic and emergent process. And you cannot predict or engineer the outcome of organic processes. All you can do, like farming, is create the conditions under which life can flourish, plant the seeds, and let God take care of the rest.

What is the inner work of transformation that helps us cooperate with grace, that creates the condition for grace to intercede and for life to flourish? In my work with men and women religious across different cultures, both individually and congregationally, I have come to identify five dynamic elements that are key to cooperating with grace and engaging in the inner work of transformation. These are supported by our faith traditions and by contemporary research on personal, interpersonal, and organizational transformation. These are:

- Shifts in consciousness: creating a new narrative
- Reclaiming our inner voice: the seat and source of everything that lives
- Reconciliation and conversion: the womb of our becoming
- Experimentation and learning: acting our way into a new way of being
- Transformative visioning: gather the wisdom, weave a dream. [5]

The journey of transformation is an approach to communal transformation that integrates the pragmatics of

planning and visioning along with processes aimed at deep change. These five dynamic elements inform the processes used for communal assemblies, local community gatherings, and ongoing personal work. Taken as a whole, these provide communities with a framework for members to collectively understand their work of transformation and a container that holds communities together while encountering the necessary chaos of transformation.

The journey of transformation is a multilayered, multidimensional, and integrative approach. It is multilayered in that it goes beyond the surface changes (where most groups focus) to address the deep layers of community. It is multidimensional, going beyond the organizational dimensions of your lives (where most groups focus) to include the personal and interpersonal dimensions. And it is integrative, weaving together the outer work of organizational change with the inner work of transformation. At its core, it is a communal faith journey aimed at helping communities to discern God’s call to new life and transform the meaning, purpose, and lived expression of community and its mission. Bottom line: While you must proactively plan, you cannot plan your way through transformation. And, while you must ardently pray, you cannot merely pray your way through transformation. Transformation is not a heady, passive, or strictly spiritual experience. It is a visceral, proactive, and soul-to-surface experience.

Thomas Merton tells us that grace is granted us in proportion to how well we “dispose ourselves to receive it.”[6] We have only to create the conditions for grace to intercede and dispose ourselves to receive it. For a community to do this, it will need to engage not only in organizational changes, but the personal and interpersonal work of transformation. Admittedly, the personal and interpersonal work is far more intimate and painful than organizational change. It is why most groups avoid it. Yet, members, and the communities they create, are the heart and soul, the glue that holds it all together. If there is no

concentrated focus upon personal and communal transformation, what will you have, and who will you be, at the end of all your organizational change?

The journey of transformation is for communities courageous enough to listen and respond to a deeper invitation at their own graced crossroads. Transformation is not something we can control or engineer. However, we can participate in this divine mystery by cooperating with grace and doing our own inner work of transformation. Communities who participate in these ways, will have the opportunity to not only transform themselves, but help transform religious life and our world. They will put their mark on this Great Turning and add a page to the ongoing story of creation.

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Endnotes

1. Ted Dunn, *Graced Crossroads: Pathways to Deep Change and Transformation*, St. Charles, MO: CCS Publications, 2020
2. John W. Gardner, *Self-Renewal: The Individual and the Innovative Society*, Rev. ed., New York: Norton, 1981, p.45
3. Thomas L. Friedman, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, 1st further updated and expanded hardcover ed., New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007
4. Christine Valters Paintner, *The Soul’s Slow Ripening: 12 Celtic Practices for Seeking the Sacred*, Notre Dame: Sorin Books, 2018, p.1
5. Journey of Transformation, in Dunn, *Graced Crossroads: Pathways to Deep Change and Transformation*
6. Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth*, A Harvest/Hbj Book, New York ; London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981, p.5