

The Role of Meaning-Making in Transitional Times

Ted Dunn, PhD



*"There is nothing in the world,
I venture to say, that would so effectively help
one to survive even the worst conditions as
the knowledge that there is
a meaning in one's life."*

-- Viktor Frankl

In 1997 a think tank from the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) created a list of competencies they thought would be essential for new leadership. Hats off to the women who put this document together as it was as relevant then as it is today. The competencies listed were placed within three broad dimensions of leadership: 1) meaning-making; 2) relationships; and, 3) organizational change. They believed that future leaders would need to be skilled within all three dimensions.

Of the three dimensions, my focus here is on "meaning-making," the dimension hardest to grasp and even harder to put into practice. Perhaps the most authoritative author who literally wrote the book on it is Viktor Frankl. He not only wrote the book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, he developed an entire therapeutic approach (logo therapy) based upon the importance of meaning as a fundamental life-force unique to our species. I will borrow from many of his insights in addressing these three questions:

1. Why is meaning important in our lives?
2. Why is meaning-making especially important in times of transition?
3. How can communities and leaders, in particular, attend to this meaning-making effort?

Purposeful versus Provisional Existence

*"The mind is its own place, and in itself can
make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven."*

John Milton

Why is meaning important in our lives? It gives us a "purposeful" existence. For Frankl, meaning-making is a fundamental human drive and, when we lose a sense of meaning and purpose, we wither and die. Meaning is the basis for our will to live. It is the ground out of which the WHY of our existence is formed uniquely for each one of us. Day-by-day, our sense of meaning informs our decisions, defines our identity, and shapes our destiny. Living a purposeful life is key to both



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living fully in the present and in shaping our desired future.

Our will to live is directly proportional and tied to the meaning and purpose we have in our lives. We all know people who once had a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives and, who subsequently, withered and died when this was lost to them. For example, think of those people you know who loved working and died soon after they retired; or you may know persons who, despite a terminal diagnosis, lived just long enough to see their granddaughter marry or to reconcile a longstanding wound. We know others who succumbed to death early in life for no discernable reason other than losing their will to live. Their souls and bodies dried up like dead leaves because their life held no meaning or purpose.

Frankl observed that the prisoners who found meaning and purpose amidst the unimaginable horrors of Auschwitz were the ones most likely to survive. Surrounded by suffering and death, these survivors focused intently upon their interior life. They searched for any small semblance of humanity: a gesture of kindness by a prison guard offering a piece of bread to an inmate; the beauty of a sunset; or, a hope, however miniscule, of returning to their loved ones. Their will to live, rather than

being extinguished, was strengthened by their choices to make meaning out of opportune moments.

Sadly, Frankl noted that most prisoners lived a "provisional existence," which only hastened their death. A provisional existence, said Frankl, is a "lifeless existence" devoid of meaning. He described these prisoners as existing in a fog-like state, walking like ghosts amidst the external world but unable to touch, or be touched by, it. Dissociated from reality in this way had the benefit of numbing their pain; however, it also prevented them from being present enough to proactively transform their pain. "We stop living in the present," said Frankl, "and miss opportunities for choices to make something positive." With present opportunities and future hopes obscured, they were left only with a slow decay and certain death.

Isaiah's words are a frequent refrain in communities these days: "See I am doing something new! Now it springs forth. Can you not perceive it?" (43:19) Yet, very few communities can perceive it. Can you? All of the energy and resources that are required just to keep things going seem to obscure the "new." The status quo thinking, grieving, and letting go seem to eclipse the "new." The "new" remains agonizingly ambiguous and ungraspable, leading some to live a

similar kind of "provisional existence" – an existence lacking in meaning, purpose, or any vision of a future.

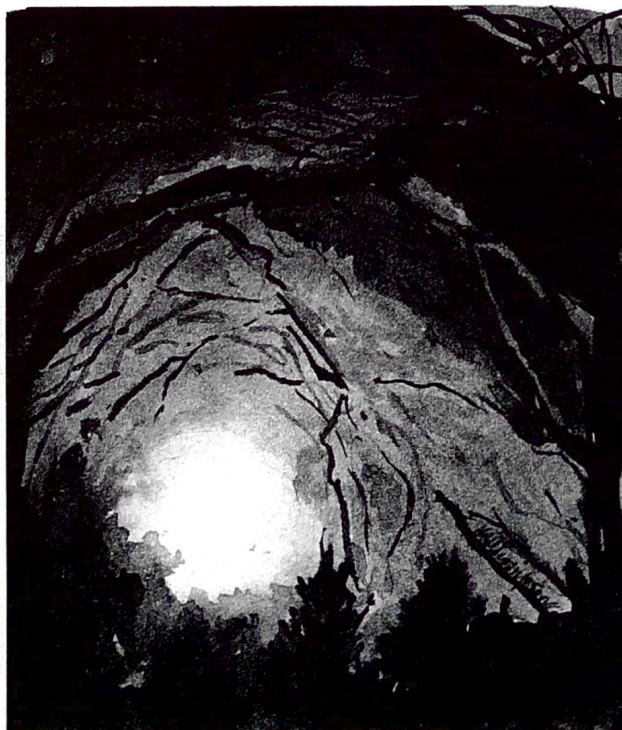
The ache of ambiguity and an unpicturable future robs some persons not only of any hope for a future, but of experiencing much meaning in their present reality. Stories of a nostalgic past bring solace, but not the "new" of which Isaiah foretold. Without hope for a future, what do you pray for, plan for, or live for? Without a vision for a future, are you left only to perish? (Proverbs 29:18) In order for communities to move from a provisional existence toward one that is purposeful, they will need to awaken the opportunities to discover meaning and purpose within their present reality so that this can help them let go of the past and give hope for the future.

Meaning, Transition and Transformation

Why is meaning-making especially important in times of transition? I believe it provides these three functions: 1) a purpose for our letting go, 2) a pathway to our future; and, 3) a container, context, and catalyst for the inner work of transformation. If there is meaning and purpose to all the letting go you are doing, then it can become a "mature surrender," instead of an act of closing up shop and throwing in the towel. Experiencing meaning in the present moments of your life also informs and guides your steps to the future, revealing to you what steps are right and true, even if you cannot see the road ahead. And if you are to live a purposeful existence, and not a provisional one, then the meaning of your lives, itself, must be transformed and redefined. Meaning is the container, context, and intervening agent for the inner work of transformation to which we are all called as people of faith.

A Purpose for Our Letting Go

In times of transition, letting go is a requisite step in making room for the new; absent any meaning, change holds only despair. For what good reason are you letting go of all your treasured people and places? Surely, all of this



These communities are not planning for death, but for life, their future, and the future of their descendants. They are not driven by fear, but by love of their mission, one another, and an alluring God.

letting go cannot be just about “aging and diminishment” and a continual “downsizing” unto death. What, through all of the letting go, might be the deeper invitation and possibilities for new life? When the pain of letting go has meaning and purpose, it can become a more mature surrender, not a mere resignation by victims of circumstances. Mature surrender is an act of sacrificial love – a purposeful, proactive, and generative choice to surrender what exists in the present in order to make way for something new in the future.

A Pathway to Our Future

In transitional times, the path to the future is always ambiguous and we must create the pathway by walking. We must make decisions and act without a clear path or vision of the future, recognizing and allowing each step, in turn, to reveal the “next best step.” In times of transition, we have intimations of the future by what is meaningful in the present. These are guideposts to the future that help us to discern the right path. If we succumb to a provisional existence, numbing the pain by blocking out the difficult present, then we lose these touchstones for discerning our future. Times of transition demand that we are ever more vigilant to what holds meaning for us in the present in order to discover our “next best step” in our emerging vision of a meaningful future.

A Container, Context, and Catalyst for the Inner Work of Transformation

Our experience of meaning, the container, and context for our lives, is upended in times of transition. The tapestry of meaning that once held our lives together with wholeness and purpose becomes tattered and torn. The ground beneath us shifts, and all that held meaning and purpose begins to unravel. We are forced to create a new narrative and weave a new tapestry made of new meaning and purpose for our existence. The very act of doing this becomes a catalyst for our transformation.

Parents transitioning to empty nesters,
seniors transitioning to assisted living,

and religious facing this current life cycle transition all must redefine the meaning and purpose of their lives in light of their changing circumstances. Recreating and reclaiming the meaning and purpose of our lives happens only when we commit to doing the substantive, inner work of transformation.

Sadly, if history repeats itself, the vast majority of communities will become extinct during this transitional cycle. Most will make new improved versions of the past. They will try harder, rather than try differently. They will download the same information with the same operating system (OS), rather than create a new OS. They will focus on external change through strategic planning, rather than upon their individual and communal call to embrace the inner work of transformation.

While most communities will focus on the external bricks and mortar of change, some will discover and embrace a deeper invitation. They will listen to the lure and love of God urging them to choose life and discover, anew, the meaning and purpose for their lives. These communities are not planning for death, but for life, their future, and the future of their descendants. They are not driven by fear, but by love of their mission, one another, and an alluring God.

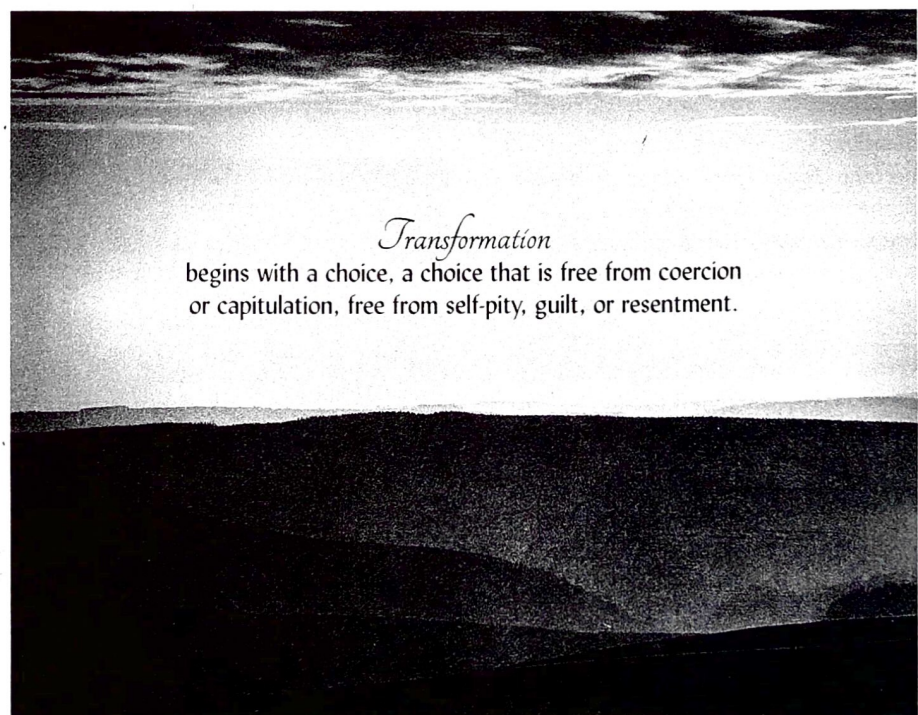
Make a Free Choice

“Everything can be taken from man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms -- to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.”

-- Viktor Frankl

The challenges facing communities today are daunting and can lead some to believe that they have few, if any, life-giving choices available to them. Indeed, circumstances can be dire if there is little money, few viable leaders, or limited healthcare options. An even greater challenge, though, might be to accept the hand you've been dealt, and claim the freedom that still remains. Recalling his imprisonment, Frankl said: “Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom; which determined whether or not you would become the plaything of circumstance, renouncing freedom and dignity to become molded into the form of the typical inmate.”

Transformation begins with a choice, a choice that is free from coercion or capitulation, free from self-pity, guilt, or resentment. Our choices are neither a direct consequence of changing



circumstances, nor something that can be forced upon us. Even under the most restrictive circumstances, we have the freedom to choose. We may not be able to change the circumstances, but we are always free to change and transform ourselves: "To be sure, a human being is a finite thing, and his freedom is restricted. It is not freedom from conditions, but it is freedom to take a stand toward the conditions."

While working with one particular community, I would inevitably pass Sr. Ann in the hall. "Ann, how are you doing?" I'd always ask. "Flourishing!" she'd always say with a wry and spirited smile. Sr. Ann had been confined to a wheelchair for years but was flourishing, nonetheless. She reminded me of Christopher Reeve (Superman) who championed innovations in spinal cord injuries following an accident that left him paralyzed from the neck down. He championed the belief in our innate and enduring capacity to transform our lives, saying: "At first, dreams seem impossible, then improbable, and eventually inevitable."

We all know people like this, super women and men who contend with, seemingly, insurmountable circumstances only to become interiorly stronger and more actualized than before. They manage not merely to accept their circumstances, but they are transformed by them and, in turn, become agents of transformation to others. They redefine their lives. The meaning and purpose of their lives become clearer and claimed in earnest, perhaps for the very first time. They transform tragedy into triumph, suffering into compassion, and death into new life.

When I hear men and women in communities say that they are too old, too few, or have too little money or time, I fear they are relinquishing their freedom and capacity to be self-determining. I see the "walking wounded" and "chronic malaise" among those who live a provisional existence. You still have choices. Norman Mailer nuanced it this way: "Every moment of one's existence one is growing into more

or retreating into less. One is always living a little more or dying a little bit." If you are not to be a plaything of circumstances, accept the hand you have been dealt; listen for a deeper invitation; and, make choices that preserve your freedom and dignity.

Listen to What Life is Asking of You

"It is we ourselves who must answer the questions that life asks of us, and to these questions we can respond only by being responsible for our existence."

-- Viktor Frankl

For Viktor Frankl, making meaning was not some philosophical abstraction. It was embedded in the flow of everyday life, an answer to what life was asking. Frankl said, "It did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life – daily and hourly. Our answer must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action and in right conduct. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual."

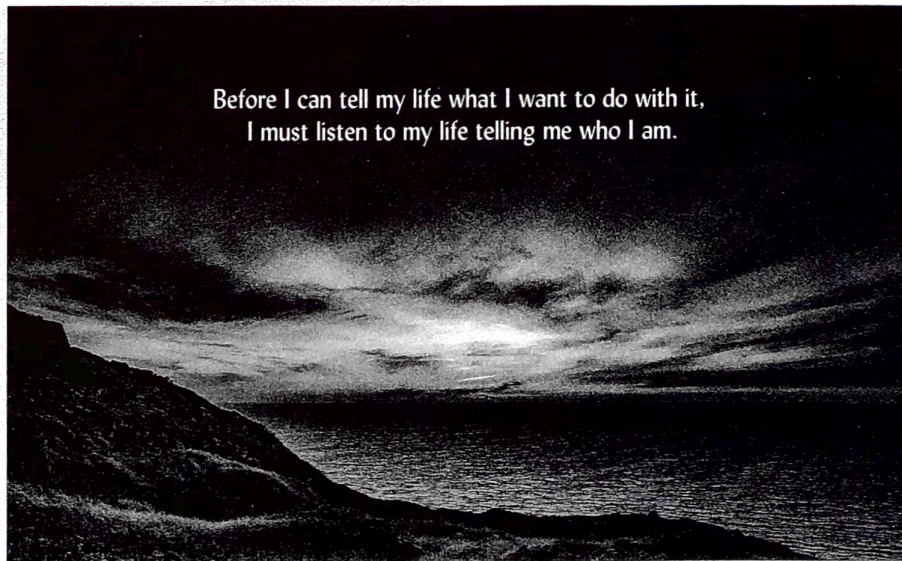
God lures and invites us to choose life, but what does "new life" mean for communities at the crossroads? The answers are as varied as there are communities who claim them. For some,

their only hope for new life is in the recruitment of new vocations. For others, it is in the rekindling of their charism, revitalizing members, or refounding their mission. For many, it has something to do with discovering a new meaning and purpose of life. What does new life mean for you today? Your life today is trying to tell you. Are you listening?

The Quakers have a belief about truth and enlightenment. They tell us, "Let your life speak," to suggest that our life, as we have lived it, offers us intimations as to our authentic values and God-given purpose for living. Parker Palmer, who embraces this belief, suggests that it is more important to listen to our life's ever unfolding efforts to actualize our own true nature than it is to embrace a long list of ideals, however noble or virtuous. Our life's journey gives us clues, he suggests, to our true vocation. The path that God intends for us, in other words, does not come from our own willfulness; it is not a goal to pursue; rather, it is discerned through our listening. Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am.

We cannot act outwardly in a way that contradicts our inner truth without paying a great price. Palmer said, "True self, when violated, will always resist us, sometimes at great cost, holding our lives in check until we honor its truth." The poet Rumi also knew this when he said: "If you are here unfaithfully with us, you're causing terrible damage...."

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We will make promises we cannot keep, build houses from flimsy stuff, conjure dreams that devolve into nightmares, and other people will suffer – if we are unfaithful to our true self.”

How many times in life have we come to know this from our own experience? When we are unaware or deny our limitations, vulnerability, or own sinfulness, we must eventually come to reclaim, and reckon with, our own humanness or we pay a terrible price. When we are unaware or deny our gifts and abundant blessings we have received in our life, our task is to reclaim these as well. We must accept the circumstances that are ours, embrace the truth of who we are being called to become, and trust that we, in embracing this call, are surely more than enough.

Let your life speak. Reflect upon the unfolding journey of your life and glean from these reflections who you are growing to become. As you listen to what your life has to say to you, ask yourself, Is the life you are living the life that wants to live in you? Ask yourself, What does your life intend for you, and your community, to become?

Search for Meaning in Ministry, Beauty, and Suffering

*“There is only one thing that I dread:
not to be worthy of my sufferings.”*
-- Fyodor Dostoevsky

While there is no prescription for meaning-making, Frankl believed that creative work, encounters with beauty, and suffering are three prime sources from which meaning commonly springs. It is easy to see how a ministry that draws forth our creativity and passion fills our life with meaning. Likewise, when we encounter beauty in art or nature, or in our love of something or someone, its meaning flows easily. Finding meaning in suffering, on the other hand, is typically far more challenging to discover and accept. Yet, for Frankl, it is worthy of our efforts: “If there is meaning in life at all,” he said, “then there must be a meaning in suffering.”

Of course, there is a difference between necessary and unnecessary suffering, and Buddhists are quick to point out that the latter is caused by our inability to accept the former. The goal is not to suffer intentionally, or unnecessarily, but to transform the suffering we encounter when life serves it up. When we have been betrayed by a friend, failed at a job, lost a treasured someone or let go of a treasured place, the invitation is to heal our wounds, turn tragedy into triumph, and loss into new life. In other words, the invitation is to find meaning in our suffering and transform it into something noble and full of hope.

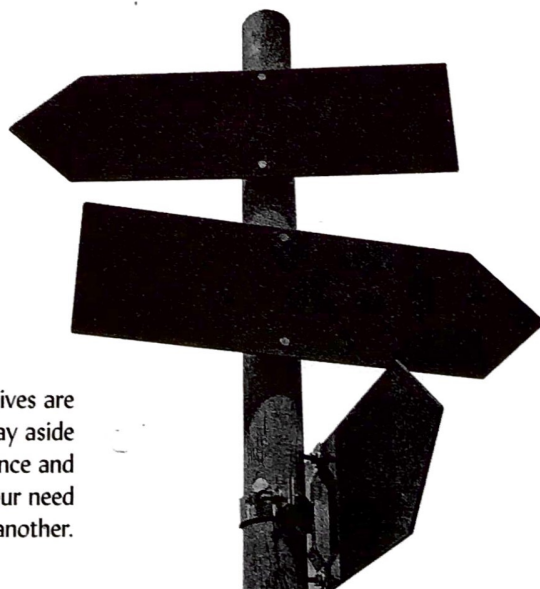
Suffering, stress, and tension are necessary catalysts for human growth

and fulfilment. Unlike Sigmund Freud who believed that mental health results from a resolution of distress, Frankl believed that a healthy life requires a certain degree of tension and that the idea of living in a tensionless state was a “dangerous” notion. He said, “What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for a worthwhile goal, a freely chosen task.” He analogized, “If architects want to strengthen a decrepit arch, they increase the load which is laid upon it, for thereby the parts are joined more firmly together.”

Who we are always holds the tension between who we have been and who we are yearning to become. And this tension is never greater than when we arrive at a graced crossroads in our own life. This is when our loyalties to the way things have been come face-to-face with our fidelity to truths that we are birthing anew. This is when our personal journey encroaches upon relationships that languish from neglect, causing us to look anew at what we have hidden from one another and kept from the people we love. These crossroads in our lives are where we are called to lay aside our illusions of independence and recognize our need for one another. This soul-journey is where our need to be right is overcome by our need to be reconciled, where our need to be safe is surpassed by our willingness to suffer for a greater good. Our graced crossroads are the junctures in our heart where we turn fear into courage, exhaustion into forbearance, and darkness into the light of faith.

If meaning can be made of the suffering that religious communities are experiencing, it can become a catalyst for transformation. I would caution here against any platitudes (e.g., “Offer it up;” “It’s God’s will;” “We’ll get our reward in heaven”). The inner work of transformation is arduous and particular to each person and each community. Do not over philosophize or spiritualize this search for meaning. You must get real and own it. Spinoza said, “*Affectus, qui passio est, desinit esse passio simulatque eius claram et distinctam formamus ideam*” – Emotion, which is suffering, ceases to be

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suffering as soon as we form a clear and precise picture of it.

To be worthy of your suffering, pin it down, not once and for all, but for now, and for yourself personally. "For the meaning of life differs from man to man, from day to day and from hour to hour," said Frankl. "What matters, therefore, is not the meaning of life in general but rather the specific meaning of a person's life at a given moment." What meaning does all the suffering, letting go, and breaking down you are experiencing hold for you and your community?

Live Purposefully in the Present with a Hopeful Eye Toward the Future

*"It is a peculiarity of man that he can only live by looking to the future."
— Viktor Frankl*

Marcia Allen, in her 2016 address to the LCWR assembly, spoke of this suffering, the ache of letting go, and of the possibilities that could emerge in the future. "And still, the numbers keep slipping away... We are wrapped in a sense of futility, doing more of the same in a most tiresome and enervating way... After all the rational has been tried, the solutions have been attempted and failed, old language turns to ashes in our mouths, then we are reduced to silence. That is when the

hope is activated." What is needed then, she said, is not a new vision, plan, or even a promise, but "the eyesight of the imagination or the eyesight of faith."⁹

In the silence of our graced crossroads, there is a hollowing out, a kind of a self-emptying (kenosis). That is when we are most amenable to God's grace and predisposed to the inbreaking of God's liberating love. The horizon questions then beg our imagination: What is the transformation needed in your congregation over the next 10 years? What will your future realities require of you and the grace of God ask of you? These are questions that cannot be answered in a strategic plan or property assessments, but through prayer and discernment.

It is pain that breaks us down and hollows us out but Love that pulls us through. Pain compels us to change, but Love is the transformative agent that impels us to change and pulls us toward the future. Love tugs at our heart-strings, stirs the soul, and gives us reason to let go of the old and make room for the new. It gives us meaning and motivation to work through the pain and reach for a new shoreline. With the eyesight of faith stretched across a whole horizon of possibilities, a landscape filled with potential and unlimited opportunities will appear.

Living in the present with an eye toward the future requires that we make a new narrative for our lives. These are the kinds of questions that can help you form a new narrative and elicit new meaning: What are the stories you tell yourselves about your lives as a community that are no longer true or that no longer fit your emerging reality? What, therefore, do you need to let go? What are the threads you need to hold onto? As you gaze upon the horizon with the eyesight of faith, what do you see unfolding before you as you shape a new narrative? Who, by the Love of God's grace, are you being called to become?

What Can Leaders Do?

*"He who has the why to live for can bear with almost any how."
— Nietzsche*

While leaders cannot make meaning for their members, they can create the conditions that invite members to discover new meaning and purpose for their lives, both personally and communally. They can invite members to explore the "deeper invitation" during this time of transition and transformation. They can help to integrate the inner work of transformation with the outer work of change. They can, as suggested 20 years ago by the LCWR think tank, listen, integrate, and articulate the following:

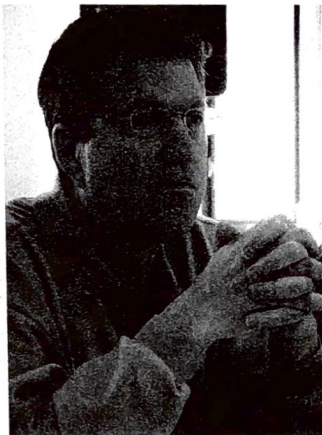
- "Articulate deep rootedness in God, their charism and the Gospel
- Connect the soul of the congregation with the soul of the global church and the soul of the world
- Articulate a dynamic sense of the charism in a compelling way in shifting and complex times
- Draw on the faith of the members
- Look reality in the face and also communicate hope
- Draw wisdom out of information/ data and articulate to relevance
- See below facts to the significance of patterns, trends and events
- Recognize and draw upon the potential of multiple perspectives of reality."



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The task before you is not to become architectural designers of a strategic plan, but to discover and enable the archetypal expressions of your charisma for a world in desperate need of your loving and transforming presence. Listen to the inner voices of your ancestors, recall times of transition in your own life through which you have successfully journeyed, embrace your images of hope, and allow these to be your touchstones to guide you in the unfolding of a new vision.

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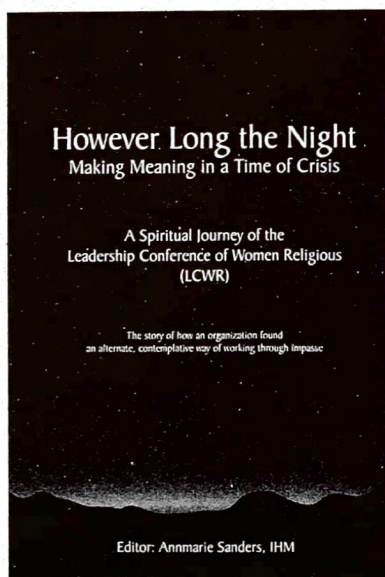
Endnotes

- 1 Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), p.66.
- 2 Ibid., p.130.
- 3 Ibid., p.77.
- 4 Ibid., p.67.
- 5 Ibid., p.105.
- 6 Ted Dunn, *Graced Crossroads: Journey of Transformation* (2019). Submitted for publication
- 7 Frankl, p.108.
- 8 Marcia Allen, "Transformation – an Experiment in Hope," LCWR Assembly (Orlando, Florida, 2016).

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A Primer for Learning to Work Through Conflict and Appreciate Difference

LCWR's However Long the Night: Making Meaning in a Time of Crisis



However Long the Night: Making Meaning in a Time of Crisis is a new book published by LCWR that chronicles what the organization learned as it went through a six-year doctrinal investigation by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF).

The authors -- the LCWR presidents and staff involved in the crisis -- not only explain how they led a large and complex organization through this difficult period, but with great transparency show how their own spiritual grounding helped them make this journey. Through the sharing of their own stories, these leaders describe methods, processes, and practices that are readily translatable for use by other individuals, communities, and organizations as they weather a crisis.

Readers will see how these women handled the decisions that confront any of us when faced with conflict. How can we build relationships that cross divides? How might we embody humility, while staying true to one's mission, and operating with integrity? How can we manage anger and respond with strategies that create peace? How might we find truth in complex situations? How can we handle media attention if the conflict becomes public?

☐ The book is available in print and Kindle editions through Amazon.com.