

*"A new year stands on my doorstep
ready to enter my life's journey."*

—Joyce Rupp, OSM

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Going Up into the Gaps Prophetic Life and Vision

by Janet Ruffing, RSM

RECENTLY, AS I WAS READING A WONDERFUL PASSAGE at the end of *Pilgrim at Tinker's Creek*, Annie Dillard's phrase, "going up into the gaps," captured my imagination as I contemplated whatever we might mean when we persist in claiming the prophetic character of religious life. Further, this phrase "going up into the gaps" has become a powerful image for me of an urgent task for many of us who have lived a long time in religious life to shift our hearts and imaginations away from the past and toward the future. We need to begin to take our soundings more in terms of embracing the dawning future rather than looking over our shoulders toward a past which has, indeed, shaped us, but which those who join us as newer members can never know.

Listen to Annie Dillard give some feeling for what this "going up into the gaps" is like.

There is always an enormous temptation in all of life to diddle around making itsy-bitsy friends and meals and journeys for itsy-bitsy years on end. It is so self-conscious, so apparently moral, simply to step aside from the gaps where the creeks and winds pour down, saying, I never merited this grace, quite rightly, and then to sulk along the rest of your days on the edge of rage. I won't have it. The world is wilder than that in all directions, more dangerous and bitter, more extravagant and bright. . .

Ezekiel excoriates false prophets as those who have "not gone up into the gaps." The gaps are the thing. The gaps are the spirit's one home, the altitudes and latitudes so dazzlingly spare and clean that the spirit can discover itself for the first time like a once-blind man unbound. The gaps are the cliffs in the rock where you cower to see the back parts of God; they are the fissure between mountains and cells the wind lances through, the icy narrowing fiords splitting the cliffs of mystery. Go up into the gaps, if you can find them; they shift and vanish too. Stalk the gaps. Squeak into a gap in the soil; turn and unlock--more

than a maple--a universe! This is how you spend this afternoon and tomorrow morning and tomorrow afternoon. Spend the afternoon. You can't take it with you. (276-77)

We are, I believe, to be women and men who know the wildness of these gaps intimately. Some of us do; some of us don't. Some of us want to; some of us really don't. Some of us are experiencing "change fatigue;" some of us look for even more change. Some of us have already been changed by the terror and the mystery in the gaps; some of us are just beginning to notice.

Vita Consecrata and the Challenge of the "Gaps"

What does it mean for us to be men and women of these gaps? *Vita Consecrata* powerfully affirms the prophetic nature of religious life and lifts up the great prophet Elijah as the model of prophecy in religious life. The Synodal document locates this prophetic character first of all in the life itself, in its discipleship of Christ, in its apostolic thrust. Religious life as prophetic is first of all a witness to the primacy of God and of the gospel. Secondly, *Vita Consecrata* explicitly links personal love of Christ with love for "the poor in whom he lives" (#84). So there is something of the "gap" in the inherently "liminal"¹ nature of religious life. As religious, we permanently attempt to live in this "betwixt and between state" of radical *communitas*, on the edge of a society or even in its midst, but never quite understood by it.

I believe the "gaps" are real social locations. Our first world societies are rapidly creating ever greater gaps between the very wealthy and the poor. Wealth is accumulating at alarming proportions among a smaller and smaller group of people. This is the economic situation which all the prophets of the Hebrew scriptures denounced. Such disproportionate distribution of resources completely erodes the basis for shared community because this kind of accumulation of wealth results in escalating levels of oppression and violence at the expense of the poor.

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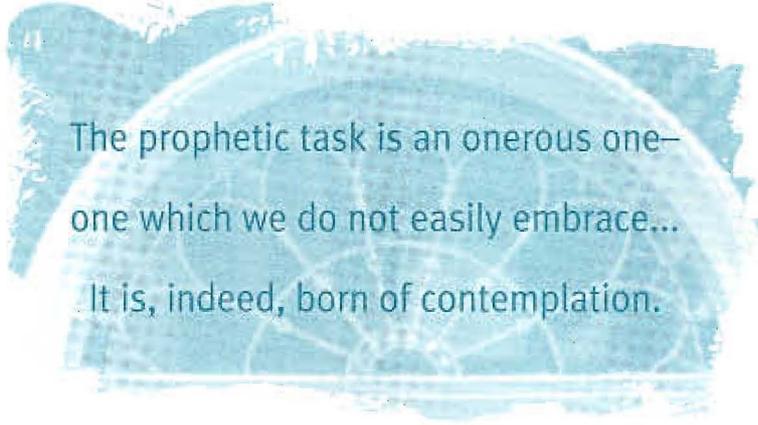
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Some of us have
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When religious men and women are themselves in these gaps crossing back and forth between the rich and the poor, the oppressed and the oppressors, between those in the center and those on the margins, profound dislocation and suffering may result. It is precisely in this capacity for crossing such boundaries that insight emerges. I imagine that formation directors experience something of this as they move back and forth between their communities and its newer members or those men and women who are considering membership. This generational or cultural gap may be quite enormous, and formation directors find themselves most likely in such a gap. The precise form of insight which emerges from dramatic discrepancies, Schillebeeckx named "contrast experiences." This is a way of experiencing our vision and our hope in their absence--when they are contradicted. If we are too settled and do not find ourselves in these gaps, there may be something not right about our religious lives.

Vita Consecrata assumes religious are prophetic in more of an implicit way than in an explicit, public way. Such an assumption makes me suspicious. I find it personally hard to imagine that, if religious are "going up into the gaps,"



they would not eventually utter prophetic words to both church and society in so far as one or both are unresponsive to the human and spiritual needs of the people who permanently live in these gaps. However, despite its doubt about the extent to which religious become fully prophetic, the document eloquently describes some of their prophetic characteristics:

... there have been men and women consecrated to God who, through a special gift of the Holy Spirit, have carried out a genuinely prophetic ministry, speaking in the name of God to all, even to the pastors of the Church. True prophecy is born of God, from friendship with [God], from attentive listening to [God's] word in the different circumstances of history. Prophets feel in their hearts a burning desire for the holiness of God and, having heard [God's word] in the dialogue of prayer, they proclaim that word with their lives, with their lips and with their actions, becoming people who speak for God against evil and sin. Prophetic witness requires the constant and passionate search for God's will for self-giving, for unfailing communion in the church, for the practice of spiritual discernment and love of the truth. It is also expressed through the denunciation of all that is contrary to the divine will and through the exploration of new ways to apply the Gospel in history, in expectation of the coming of God's reign (#84).

The Prophetic Task

Need we be surprised that the hierarchy and sometimes our own communities are somewhat ambivalent about our prophetic role even as religious world-wide are increasingly embracing this role and all the passion and the risks which come along with it. Are we people who are speaking for God against evil and sin? Are we enlivened by God's Spirit toward creative and fresh responses to the people and needs of our times? Are we both saddened and angered by social sin and blindness and full of hope and possibility? I also wonder whether or not we are somewhat less concerned about the holiness of God than we are full of compassion for those who are suffering in the present situations which confront us.

The prophetic task is an onerous one; one which we do not easily embrace. It requires, indeed, friendship with God--an authentic intimacy with God which is capable of overcoming all of our natural resistances to both speech and action. It is, indeed, born of contemplation. How else to do we hear God's word spoken in our hearts? How else can we be sure it is God's word and not simply our own? Walter Bruggemann's classic book, *Prophetic Imagination*, remains a most powerful description of this task. The prophet suffers in his or her own heart the discrepancy between what is and what ought to be. The prophet is somehow unable to maintain the false consciousness which is essential for the continuation of unjust structures and for the benefits which accrue to those who are most invested in keeping the status quo. However, the prophet is more than a complainer. Denunciation is really a very small part of the task--and one that is also not entirely enjoyable. The prophet's own heart breaks, grieves, laments, mourns the suffering wrought by such injustice.

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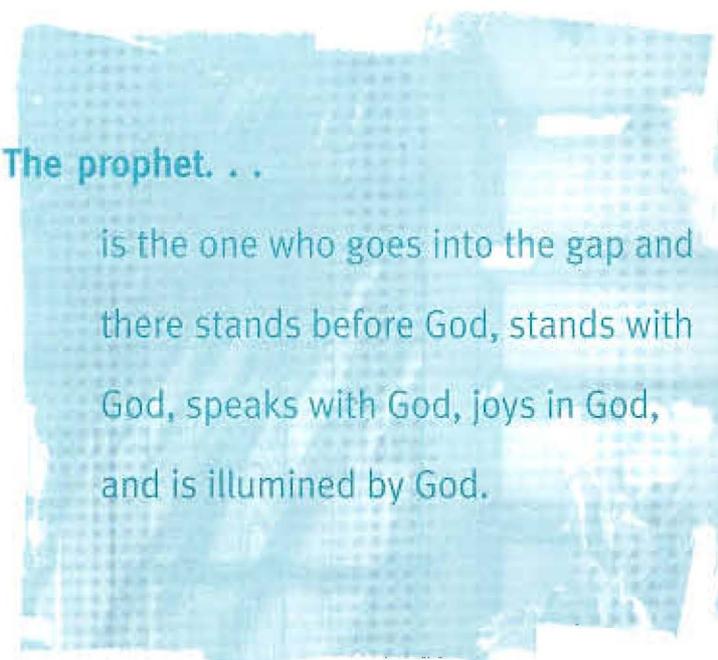
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The prophet . . .

is the one who goes into the gap and
there stands before God, stands with
God, speaks with God, joys in God,
and is illumined by God.

What is the origin of both the perception of discrepancy and the compassion which energizes the prophet to speak? It is somehow a deep and expansive appropriation of the vision, values, and ethical responses inherent in the believing community. The prophet's criticism is always grounded in deeply held shared convictions about the way, in our case, Christians ought to behave--the way the church ought to be. The prophet is only able to convince others from the perspective of the same teaching, norms, or vision. The prophet is always appealing to something the community already knows and wants to value but has managed to "hedge" its moral claim on their behavior. To be effective, the appeal needs to be poetic and symbolic. It needs to re-energize and help the community remember its own history, and promise and possibility in a way that will inspire conversion and fresh action. As Michael Waltzer says in *Interpretation and Social Criticism*: "Prophecy aims to arouse remembrance, recognition, indignation, repentance" (75). Such prophecy is based on "an appeal to their audience's better nature, confronting them with the demands of God that they know (or knew) but wish to ignore or forget..."²² In the end, they deeply trust that the hearts of their audience are already allied with them in some way.

Liberation theology is itself a powerful form of prophetic speech. It is not necessarily Marxist as its detractors claim, but it does disturb the status quo because it demands conversion on the part of those who benefit most from the present arrangement. Liberation theology is a result of placing the Scriptures in the hands and hearts of a community of the poor who have discovered from their own prayer, reflection, and discussion the dangerous message of the promise of the reign of God when they engage these sacred words in the context of their own poverty and oppression. It is a very powerful alternative interpretation that has arisen in these communities. And it is precisely because of its destabilizing power that there are world-wide attempts to discredit those who articulate it most visibly in the world church.

Prophetic speech is the creation of a fresh interpretation of that part of the tradition which has slipped from view and thus was failing to make an effective claim for action in the community or the larger society. "Royal consciousness"-- the false consciousness which favors those in power and which makes it very difficult to "see through" the illusions and behaviors which contribute to suffering and injustice --always resists such a new interpretation. I suspect that is what is going on in the recent actions taken against liberation theology in El Salvador and Mexico. The conservative bishops and their allies in the Vatican are attempting to silence the most eloquent voice for the option for the poor in our contemporary church. It is

not an accident that these actions specifically include forbidding members of religious communities to send their members to these schools for their formation theology. These are attempts to discredit the claim on other parts of the church and of these local societies to relinquish privilege and create a more just church and society.

Sustaining Hope in the "Gaps"

The great prophet evoked in the synodal document was no stranger to exile, to doubt, to threats of death and to fear. Elijah suffers the consequences of his possession by the Spirit of God. He is driven by the Spirit into the desert, up into the mountains and to the river. Despite his insecurity and his fear, he learns to rely on God for everything. During drought and famine, he is fed night and day by a raven's freshkill and with bread. When the river itself dries up, Elijah is led to a widow whose store of flour and oil miraculously outlasts the famine. When her son dies, Elijah raises him from the dead quite unappreciative of God's allowing the boy to die after the widow has sheltered him. Jezebel was not at all happy with Elijah's destruction of the prophets of Baal and the prophet fled for his life. Exhausted, alone, isolated, he prays for death under the broom tree. Despite the power of God manifested through him, he wants only to die. In answer to this prayer of desperation, God provides him with bread and water, ordering him to eat and drink in preparation for his journey which takes him to Horeb, the mountain of God. It is there that God appears to him not in the wind nor in the earthquake nor in the fire, but in a tiny whispering sound. There, restored in confidence through resting in the divine presence, Elijah sets out again on his next mission. Concealed in this powerful prophetic narrative is the entire gamut of emotions from despair to hope, from abandonment and disillusionment to extraordinary intimacy with God.

I suspect for most of us, the story is too dramatic. Our lives are so ordinary, so pedestrian, so lacking in passion. Yet I wonder. As I return in my more mature years to these prophetic stories, I am beginning to understand more clearly that words of energy and hope may be uttered only after one has actually tasted death. We are beginning to distinguish between hope and optimism. When our natural optimism fades before the enormity of human suffering in the gaps or even when we touch the depths of ordinary human life, we begin to appreciate that one only needs to arouse hope when it appears all is lost, somehow over. Hope arises in the face of challenge, conflict, disappointment, loss, disruption--not when things are going smoothly and growing rapidly. Hope arises in the face of evil, in the face of suffering, in the face of diminishment. It is only in these limit situations that we can know that, indeed, we can hope. Before this there is simply no need. Unless we risk going up into the gaps of societal distress or the wildness of the wilderness itself which renders us defenseless before the power of God, we

are unlikely to experience the sort of theophany--the manifestation of God's presence gentleness, nurturance, tenderness or passion which might engender hope in us. The prophet, according to Ezekiel, is the one who goes into the gap and there stands before God, stands with God, speaks with God, joys in God, and is illumined by God.

Hope also emerges not only from limit situations but from positive experiences as well. Hope arises from experiences of personal or communal development so characteristic of human life. The experience of joy is "one that opens the heart, quickens the human spirit and ultimately brings about a movement of self-transcendence."³ Equally important are experiences of meaning, however provisional or fragmentary. Yet another experience is the sense of the worthwhileness of human life--life, our lives are simply worth living--incredible grace. And finally, the experience of friendship and of love awaken hope and engender a selfless and empowering love that enables others to hope.

According to Mary Grey,

Daring to dream is. . . already a prophetic stance. Prophetic action, hoping, longing are of the essence of a countercultural spirituality. But to celebrate the sacred dimension of life when all hope of the just society seems lost and the enemy is at the gate, be this Bombay, Lagos, Caracas, Chicago, Toronto, or London, is to proclaim that in the end, as the mystics say, "All will be well." The God who drives to justice keeps open the invitation to the messianic feast on the holy mountain, where there will be no more grief and sorrow, only joy.⁴

The Place "Between the Worlds"

I believe as prophetic people, we do live in these gaps. But sometimes, we do not actually notice that is where we are. We forget we have set out on an adventure of our lives toward God--that in some wild abandon we left behind many of the ordinary securities of human life, risking all in great hope of being nourished by one another and by God in unexpected ways. We live on the margins and in the mainstream. We experience the discrepancies between the way things are and the way they might be. We discover loves beyond all telling in our friends and companions on the way even though we do not marry them or settle in with them. We live in the prophetic and contemplative insecurity of receiving our food for the journey one day at a time or in occasional solitudes strengthening us for the days ahead. God's Spirit does and can do amazing things in us if we are willing to continue to be boundary crossers, moving from world to world.

On a recent trip to Ireland, I was struck by one of the features of Celtic monasticism. These great settlements were often established in places of great natural beauty and along borders or natural boundaries. They were located in places which were known to be sacred by virtue of their opening to the other world--a veil which is rather transparent and extraordinarily thin in Ireland. At Glendalough, the monastic settlement established by St. Kevin, the upper lake is edged by an extraordinarily beautiful gap as two mountains fold into one another. This natural undulation of the Wicklow Mountains on the horizon at the upper end of the lake creates a place where the wind rushes down. The mythology of the place names this gap as the place "between the worlds," the place where this monastic Eden opens into the unseen world beyond. As one looks up the lake toward these mountains, one senses the opening into the other world. The topography of this sacred place in a contemplative way literally draws the viewer into a leap of transcendence.

This union of the contemplative and the wilderness is a regular feature of religious life through the ages. It is one of the ways that the prophetic and contemplative dimensions come together. In this instance, it occurs usually in solitude and in prayer. However, as the prophetic stories remind us, God can show up anywhere and usually does. There is a real dialectic between the theophanies of God in the gaps and on the heights and the theophanies of God which take place in the midst of the people. However, these theophanies reveal both our best possibilities as well as our worst infidelities. They evoke in us both lamentation and outrage--a wild grief at the failures of our communities large and small, as well as fresh hope and creative imagination engendering action which moves toward life. We need to reflect and notice

where we might be stuck, depressed, discouraged--flung in despair under the broom tree--and where we we might be energized and hopeful, walking in the strength of the food God constantly supplies us with for the journey to Horeb, the place of intimate encounter with God, and to the human city where we bind up the wounds of one another and pour the oil of compassion over those left for dead in the ditch.

In Denise Levertov's poem, "The Beginning," we find reason for our prophetic hope :

We have only begun

to imagine the fulness of life,

How could we tire of hope?

--so much is in bud.

How can desire fail?

--we have only begun

to imagine justice and mercy,

only begun to envision. . .

We have only begun to know

the power that is in us if we could join

our solitudes in the communion of struggle.

So much is unfolding that must

complete its gesture,

so much is in bud. ■

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Endnotes

- 1 Liminality is that indefinable, ambiguous space thrust upon a person or a group. Simultaneously, it is a position of privilege and of pain; it is inviting and frightening. It may be described negatively as marginalized, alienated, and lone, set over against the mainstream of society. It may be perceived positively as a countercultural movement on the frontier, opening up new horizons, dreaming new possibilities. It exists not for its own sake, but for a society at large to articulate the deepest hopes and aspirations of people; that is, their archetypal values. Diarmuid O'Murchu, *Religious Life: A Prophetic Vision* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria, 1991) 41.
- 2 Moshe Greenberg, *Biblical Prose Prayer as a Window to the Popular Religions of Ancient Israel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983) 56.
- 3 Dermot Lane, *Keeping Hope Alive: Stirrings in Christian Theology* (Mahwah: Paulist, 1996) 61.
- 4 Mary C. Grey, "Epilogue" in *Women Resisting Violence: Spirituality for Life*, ed. Mananzan, Oduyoye, Tamez, Clarkson, Grey, and Russell (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 178.