

*I want to know...
if you are willing
to live, day by day, with the consequence of love*

— David Whyte, "Self Portrait"

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It Matters How We Tell the Story of Religious Life

By Janet K. Ruffing RSM

(Text was presented at an RFC Jubilee Workshop.)

THE JUBILEE THEME, "A Movement to Hope: A Conversation on the Theology of Religious Life" offered a number of rich reflections on religious life in this now thoroughly postmodern context and significantly moved the conversation further. I was particularly taken by Mary Maher's keynote address¹, and believe that she succinctly traced our theological journey over the last thirty years and pointed a possible direction into the future for all of us, leaders, formators, and members of our congregation. I would like to make some further observations on her conclusions: These are related to the controlling image from which we make decisions, the identity of religious life as Gospel life at its heart—pointing to God's love revealed—and her thesis about a coherent mission of religious life in our postmodern context. I want to begin my expansion on these themes from the perspective of narrative theory and how much it matters how we tell the story of religious life today.

The theme song of the celebration explicitly attended to the communal development of our story even as the conference itself reprised the amazing story of the leaders of Sister Formation Movement and their amazing effect on religious life in this country and beyond.

We come bearing our stories of God's great love and faithfulness,

*For Christ who guides and shepherds our soul,
invites us to join the mission of God....*

*When gathered as a movement in hope, new stories
unfold as we listen and we contemplate.*

*As Gospel truths resound in our depths, the mystery
of Love is revealed in new ways...*

It's a movement of hope; and the story continues.²

The song suggests that we come bearing stories of God's love, that in the sharing of these stories of religious life, we are transformed by listening to each other's stories, that by so doing we discover new stories, stories that will continue

beyond this narrative moment of rich articulation. In interesting ways, the song itself discloses how thoroughly postmodern our consciousness has become. The very story that we tell is already changing, incorporating new elements, and becoming a new story. Our story is provisional, open to influence, creating continuity by connecting past, present, and future, yet innovative and susceptible to the wild and unpredictable interventions, annunciations, and invitations of God's Spirit in our midst.

Yet our story is rooted in another narrative, the complex interweaving good news of the Gospels, the story of Jesus, his revelation of God's incredible love for us and compassion for our world. We are all invited to incarnate this story in our own flesh, in the deep story of our unique congregations, and in our moment in history. When we evoke the language of hope as a dynamic movement, we also touch the suffering in resistance to which hope rises. We do not require a language of hope unless we are experiencing loss, failure, disillusionment, dread, confusion, or despair. Hope is not identical with optimism—a peculiarly American trait of trust in our own creativity, ingenuity, and technical competence. Just give us time, and we will figure this out. No, we are pushed to hope through adversity, through the possibility of failure, through the disappointment of things, or life not turning out as we expected, through encountering a mystery beyond our control. And still we hope, trusting that God claims us, that God's love is trustworthy, and that God's faithfulness endures. Even more than all of that, Christ invites us to join in the mission of God.

A short time ago, I was at San Francisco's Museum of Modern Art and visited an exhibit featuring photographs of California from the 1950's to the 1970's. These years were my first twenty years in California since our family moved there in 1950 when I was five years old. The photographs evoked many personal memories, and I felt the poignancy of the photographic documen-

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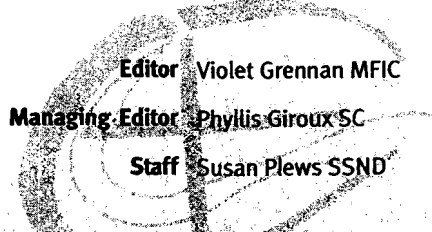
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we were so identified
in the minds of
clergy and laity with
our deeds, our
ministries, our
works, somehow the
significance of our
lives as religious
men and women
escaped them.

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tation of a small community just before it was obliterated by a project that dammed the river downstream. We can easily become nostalgic for how things used to be, but almost none of us actually want things not to change. We may not always like the results of change, but nothing in life, culture, or communities remains static. Everything changes, and we do too. We may plan some change, direct some change, but often we are madly adapting to the complex changes on every level that have overtaken us.

The experience of this exhibit coincided for me with reading a memoir by Kevin Sweeney, *Father Figures*, which featured San Bruno and our local parish and neighborhood beginning in 1960.³ Again, I was flooded with memories, often very good ones about the way St. Robert's Parish at that time was a complex faith community that took care of one another. From one neighborhood, consisting of about five blocks, some ten of us entered religious communities, most of us the Sisters of Mercy. As one woman said to me recently who had joined another order and subsequently left, what might account for that? My spontaneous response was that we knew the Franciscans who taught us really loved us. Somehow we were attracted to religious life through a complex coincidence of a faith community that took care of one another quite concretely in illness, bereavement, and most other emergencies, combined with teaching sisters who both loved us and introduced us to contemplative prayer as children. Things unfolded after that, of course, in unique and unpredictable ways. Today the story of the experience of church and the experience of religious is a different one. But I would wager that at its heart it is still about God and about concrete experiences of love and service.

Plotlines and Central Images

When I thought about how we tell the story of religious life, a number of possible story lines and central metaphors came to mind. Partly this was sparked by reading John Fialka's *Sisters* and Anita Caspary's *Witness to Integrity* rather close together. Although Fialka interviewed many leaders in religious life, including Anita Caspary, I was struck by how he just couldn't "get it." In his own love and fondness for the Sisters of Mercy he grew up with, he could not himself move beyond a narrative of deeds. He tells a good story and makes more widely available some of the most sensational stories of women religious in their service during the Civil War, their power struggles with clergy

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and bishops, their creativity in addressing problems of homelessness. While he is sympathetic and appreciative of the courage, dedication, creativity, sacrifice, and adventurousness of religious women in the American context, he can not move beyond a story of often heroic, self-sacrificing deeds that he transforms into a story of loss and diminishment. Having portrayed what we did in the American church, he then bemoans the loss to the American church of the continuation of such actions of women religious.⁴ In many ways, this story line puzzles me. Because we were so identified in the minds of clergy and laity with our deeds, our ministries, our works, somehow the significance of our lives as religious men and women escaped them.

Then and now, most of us were only putting one step in front of the other. Scarcely able to articulate why as young people we entered religious life in the first place except for some inexplicable mystery that we could not do so, most of us learned the life by living it. We did not dream so much about doing something great but of doing something useful for others and of doing something meaningful with our lives. We were then and now God-focused. But God's Spirit, in response to massive cultural changes in church and society, changed the plot on us.

When Helen Prejean's *Dead-Man Walking* appeared and was subsequently made into a film, I thought that finally the contemporary story of religious life was finally accessible in popular culture. This is a narrative of character development, of Helen's interior changes in her sense of self. It is a narrative about internal conversion, about discerning reflection, about struggling with good and evil, about insertion into a new social location, about a commitment to justice—all supported by the local bishop and a community of women living together. But this is not the story that sticks in the popular mind, even the mind of a sympathetic committed Catholic. Although Helen Prejean's story is one of action, it is more than that. It is complex, ambiguous; good and evil are mixed in everyone. The gradual development of Helen's relationship with the prisoner she accompanies mystifies her and enrages the family of his victims. An action story has been transformed into a relational story of ministry as accompaniment. Further, as the film version so poignantly portrayed in the final scene, Helen invites the condemned prisoner to look at her loving face. She becomes in her visits with him the human person who incarnates God's unconditional love for him. But people who see things in black and white think that only the good deserve such an experience of God's love and human accompaniment. Yet the gospel tells us otherwise. Religious men and women through our vow of consecrated celibacy are meant to be such lovers in the world. By choosing a life so focused on the God relationship with other like-minded companions who are just that, and not our life-long partners, opens up the possibility for such random acts of faithful love. Our lives are meant to embody the endless circulation of God's love flowing over us through Jesus and flowing out again in the inclusiveness of our love, growing over the years to love all whom God loves. It matters how we tell the story. It matters who tells the story. It matters whether or not we who live the story tell our own story or not.

Anita Caspary IHM writes a history, nonetheless a narrative, offering her perspective on the troubling events in which she participated, that evokes the plot of *Witness to Integrity*.⁵ A complex interplay between intelligent, creative, and initiating women conflicting with a narrow-minded and powerful cardinal who could not understand what was at stake initiated a new form of religious living because they could not keep the peace or comply without sacrificing their own integrity. This is both a sad and a hopeful story. It documents misunderstanding, opposition, sexism, and clericalism at its worst, and yet it should not have been so. It is hopeful because something new for the church was born from this debacle, and most likely, many of us learned important lessons from this experience and managed to avoid such open conflict as renewal progressed somewhat more slowly and unevenly in our communities. From this experience a new story emerged. When Fialka treated this incident, he bemoans the fact that from around a high point of five hundred members when this conflict occurred, there is only a remnant of one hundred seventy members of the new community. My guess is that most

of our communities' numbers are about the same. About one hundred sisters left The Immaculate Heart Community all at once because of the intense stress and pressure of the fast-moving conflict and impasse with the cardinal. But most of our communities lost a similar percentage of members throughout the 70's due to multiple factors.

When I read Caspary's account of these events, I was frankly rather amazed at their explicit sense of themselves as women and their expectation that they were agents in their own lives—a realization that took many of us much longer to develop and to act on. They were the visible tip of the iceberg while most of us were still under the water line. Caspary was encouraged to write her account because recent biographies of Cardinal McIntyre portray a very different version. In many ways, she is setting the record straight by providing documentation of the other side of story. Voiceless no longer, feminist historians know that the winners write history. Historical narratives are a matter of perspective. The voice, experience, and point of view of the losers is typically obliterated from memory by the account written by the winners or, at any rate, by those who hold the most official power in a system. In the church system, that has been and remains the clerical point of view. As this story so clearly shows, clericalism defends itself at all costs. Threats to its dominance, authority, and actions are often ruthlessly or subtly suppressed. It matters how we tell the story. Once again, as I finished reading this story, told from the inside, I wondered why the received story rejects celebrating the integrity and courage of these religious women. I wonder why we fail to celebrate the emergence of a new form of religious life in the church that may well become in this century one of the new flourishing forms of committed life although it departs from traditional criteria.

In the remarkable survival novel, *The Life of Pi* by Yann Martel, the voice of the narrator offers this reflection on Pi's experience that will soon follow:

Words of divine consciousness: moral exaltation; lasting feelings of elevation, elation, joy; a quickening of the moral sense, which strikes one as more important than an intellectual understanding of things; an alignment of the universe along moral lines, not intellectual ones; a realization that the founding principle of existence is what we call love, which works itself out sometimes not clearly, not cleanly, not immediately, nonetheless ineluctably.

I pause. What of God's silence? I think it over. I add:

An intellect confounded, yet trusting sense of presence and of ultimate purpose.

I can well imagine an atheist's last words: "White, white! L-L-Love! My God!"—and the deathbed leap of faith. Whereas the agnostic, if he stays true to his reasonable self, if he stays behold-

Our consumerist and technological culture fills all our available time and silent space with noise and constant communication which makes it increasingly difficult to really listen to one another. Think only about e-mail, cell phones, radios, TV monitors on in every waiting room and many dining rooms. Our own bedrooms, or chapels if we have them, may be the only spaces of quiet that support a more contemplative awareness of both our human situation and the Presence permeating all that is. Margaret Wheatley asks, "Am I willing to reclaim the time to think?" Our relentless busyness militates against being reflective, thinking about what we are doing, paying attention at a deeper level, making the connection to change. Wheatley says,

No one will give it [the time to think] to you because thinking is always dangerous to the status quo. Those benefiting from the present system have no interest in new ideas. In fact, thinking is a threat to them. The moment we start thinking, we'll want to change something. We'll disturb the current situation. We can't expect those few who are well served by the current reality to give us time to think. If we want anything to change, we are the ones who have to reclaim time.⁹

This time to think, time to contemplate, time to consider deeply and mystically about where we are and what our world needs grounds the prophetic action and lives we are meant to live. Action and living that emerge from this deeper place are not just more items on our "to do" list. Action and living emerging from this place are the 'one thing necessary.' David Whyte's poem "Self Portrait" fiercely claims the significance of an individual life. I would like to claim it for our corporate life.

*It doesn't interest me if there is one God
or many gods.
I want to know if you belong or feel
abandoned,
if you know despair or can see it in others.
I want to know
if you are prepared to live in the world
with its harsh need
to change you. If you can look back
with firm eyes
saying this is where I stand. I want to know
if you know
how to melt into that fierce heat of living
falling toward
the center of your longing. I want to know
if you are willing
to live, day by day, with the consequence of love
and the bitter
unwanted passion of your sure defeat.
I have heard, in that fierce embrace, even
The gods speak of God.¹⁰*

To what extent are we willing to live in that fierce embrace? To what extent are we prepared to live in the world with its harsh need to change us, yet to know who we are and where we stand? How well do we know the center of our longing? Are we willing to live for love alone? Are we willing to suffer the consequences of choosing to be and live love day by day despite some measure of sure defeat?

It matters the story we tell ourselves about these realities. It matters because in and through our stories we orient and continually recommit ourselves to discover ever new ways to live faithfully into these mysteries. In this moment in religious life, it is more necessary than ever to tell our personal and corporate stories of our own lives. Conversations about matters of significance often push us toward narrative. Narrative is the form of discourse that enables us to discover the plot of our life-stories over time. Some themes repeat themselves; some characters remain amazingly stable and consistent over time.

Yet the discontinuities are also significant. God's Spirit may do something new. The new stories of religious life today are emerging from both individuals and groups. None of us lives our lives alone. We belong to larger circles of relationships that shape us and expand to include the stories of all those who belong. To include what we may have once excluded and to discover complications and challenges hitherto unsuspected opens new possibilities for coherence and meaning.

If these are sacred stories, we may need to reshape and reimagine the elements in the story in order "to tell the better story." The better story will convey the mystery and awe of our experience of the sacred. The better story will show the relationship among the various aspects of our lives. The better story will capture both the centrality of Gospel love as well as the amazing variety of ways we may tell it.

The Mission of Religious Life

The final theme I want to address is the on-going centrality of mission to the identity of religious life. We need to carefully distinguish mission from ministry. Ministry may be one way that religious institutes further elaborate and express their mission. Our lives themselves are implicitly mission-focused. As a differentiated life-form within the community of faith, we witness to something beyond ourselves... the mysterious Other to whom we have dedicated our lives, a way of living that goes against the grain, a communitarian reality of interdependence and mutuality in love, contemplation, and service. Living within the larger meaning supplied by our mission ignites our interior renewal. It may well be more difficult in North American culture to recognize and articulate this communitarian interdependence because our culture is so adept at making it invisible within the larger society. Nevertheless, as religious we know that we are in this together for a reason beyond ourselves alone. It is critical that our on-going internal renewal maintains a tension and balance with our outward thrust.

Mary Maher made a proposal in her keynote as well as elsewhere that could help us focus our mission in the context of our postmodern culture and begin to chart a future for religious life related to it. She says: "the greatest and single most vexing problem facing humankind today is our inability to deal with pluralism, with those who are 'other.'"¹¹ If she has rightly named the central issue, then religious life in all its diversity must respond to this issue of difference, diversity, and otherness.

She offers this thesis: "Post-modern apostolic religious life will be defined by the call to bear the ancient wisdom of Christianity with a new justice to a world marked by radical pluralism and the inability to deal with difference."¹² How does that strike you?

I am personally quite struck by its elegant simplicity and by an interior sense of congruence

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that perhaps this is the new story we have begun to live without yet quite being able to tell it. As our communities struggle with new understandings and ways of being with the diverse cultures we confront within our own membership as well as with the populations we serve, we are engaged in a both/and process of outer mission and internal renewal. As we struggle with the violence all around us, are we not committing ourselves to the "new justice"? As many of us engage in dialogue with other religious traditions and many embrace some form of dual practice employing meditation practices from one or another non-Christian tradition, are we not already moving toward an openness to religious diversity and otherness? How many of us are already trying to hold together the inherent contradiction we see playing out all around us. Despite the conviction and organic reality of our planetary interdependence that we inhabit one earth and live in an ecosystem of interdependent relationships, yet communities, families, cultures and societies have never been more fiercely hostile to one another.

What I find compelling about this vision is that it begins to unify so many disparate issues each of us already struggles with. We have grown into a unitary sensibility of better ways to inhabit our shared planet, yet our current social systems mightily resist the deeper transformative change that is required to develop a whole new world order of mutual cooperation and respect. To move toward this better story of religious life in this new context requires a construal of faith and the Gospel that engenders hope in a possible future.

Ivone Gebara suggests that there is no way to portray an alternative to the present set of social conditions unless we project some kind of utopia, an outline of what salvation might look like that embraces the new justice, difference, and the Gospel. Always this has to be provisional. But I find her further specification in terms of gender justice compelling. She says:

I myself envision a utopia of humanity, men and women together trying to build better relations of justice and solidarity.

This is a utopia for women, but not a monopoly. It is a utopia of sharing, of mutual recognition of men's and women's values. It incorporates a plurality of discourse deriving from a plurality of cultures and people. Finally, it is a utopia tied to the experience of the life of Jesus of Nazareth and to a whole tradition that has wanted to safeguard its wisdom and its struggle for justice, respect, and equality among people.¹³

We lean into this future most likely with both anxiety and hope. Humanly, our lives require continuity among past, present, and future. Our capacity to hope is based on the experience of the past that we bring forward into the present. If in our present we cannot imagine a future, despair sets in. We hope for some relationship between this moment and the next, between this life and the next.

Ultimately, for Christians this hope is based on the faithfulness of God and the vision carried in our sacred stories that convince us that evil, and sin, and suffering, and death do not have the last word. Our sacred stories are full of examples of unexpected revelations and surprising transformations. God desires for us fullness of life, a life that is not only one we imagine beyond this one, but even now, perhaps in the tomorrows still available to us on this earth in this life a poignant and longed for possibility. To commit ourselves to realizing the new justice is to help make that future possible.

Endnotes

- 1 Mary Maher, SSND, "Making Conversations Real: Reflections on Religious life in Postmodern Times," in *A Movement in Hope: A Conversation on the Theology of Religious Life, Proceedings 2003* (Silver Spring, MD: Religious Formation Conference, 2004), 16-31.
- 2 "A Movement in Hope," Amy McFredrick OP, 2003.
- 3 Kevin Sweeney, *Father Figures: A Boy Goes Searching*. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2003.)
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- 5 Anita Caspary, IHM, *Witness to Integrity: The Crisis of the Immaculate Heart Community of California* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003).
- 6 Yann Martel, *Life of Pi* (New York: Harcourt, 2001), 63-64.
- 7 Mary Jo Leddy, *Radical Gratitude* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002).
- 8 Margaret Wheatley, *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope in the Future*. (San Francisco: Berret-Koehler Publishers, 2002), 3.
- 9 Wheatley, 98.
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- 11 Maher, 28.
- 12 Ibid., 28.
- 13 Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths: Women and Evil*. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 70-71.

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