



A Practiced Art: Walking Through the Chaos Intact
By Keynote Speaker Marie Dennis



A Practiced Art: Walking Through the Chaos Intact (Part I)

Last night I asked you to think about your experience-your community's experience-of the transition we are in. How would you describe the storm, the shift? How do you experience it?

What came to my mind were, I am sure, many of the same factors that you named. Some are drivers of the shift, the transition – others are more manifestations of transition or even of chaos. I'll name three, but there are many more:

- First, because it is so much on my mind these days, let me first name what feels like unending global crises – the issues, the challenges we face are no longer distinct but are intertwined, interconnected at a root deep level; so, for example, the economic injustices so many of us try to address – persistent poverty, the huge and growing gap between the very rich and the many impoverished, unjust trade agreements, illegitimate and overwhelming debt and so on – are connected as cause and consequence to war and violent conflict and both are connected (again, as cause and consequence) to environmental destruction and climate change. No matter what is your point of entre, you will arrive at this knot of brokenness and dysfunction that has many expressions but similar roots. Furthermore, the complex of issues we are dealing with include existential threats (nuclear weapons, catastrophic levels of carbon emissions) to the existence of the human community and the survival of Earth herself (although there are many indications that Earth would survive once the human assault on her integrity has been brought to a halt). So, my first manifestation of chaos is the tidal wave of violence and crisis from which we humans seem entirely unable to extricate ourselves. It is clearly chaos. Does it signal a transition? Can the shift we make be *out of* this quagmire? I am not sure... hopefully so!
- The second shift I want to note is obvious-communications technology that is completely transforming the way we talk or don't talk to each other; how we express our opinions; with whom we relate and how; what information we can access; and on and on. We are intensely aware of this transition and are trying to bend it to serve the good.
- And third, I would name the greatest shift of all – the amazing scientific discoveries at a super macro and super micro level that are completely changing our understanding of the human's place in the universe as well as the tremendous challenges, great danger, and real hopes that this new consciousness occasions.

I am sure you also have identified the great transition in demographics and membership experienced by your communities; the shifts in the Church, in Catholic theological thought, in the spirituality of women's religious communities; the changing role of the United States in the world and on and on. Keep those in mind as I talk now because they are all relevant to how we enter "the transforming future."

As you know well, *all of this* has a huge impact on our work for social justice, peace and the integrity of creation. How do we walk through the chaos intact? What tools and skills do we have that can not only enable us to survive but can help us reclaim resilient hope and play a leadership role in shaping the new and better world we all seek?

First, I'd like to say a bit about the challenges we face in this new – or newly visible – context, using a few specific (but huge) examples. Later this morning we'll spend time lifting up the resources we have to help us walk through the chaos – navigate the shifts (as Pat Farrell so eloquently says.)

I love the images that Ilia Delio's "Emergent Christ" and "God ahead" evoke. I think we are beginning to understand what that might mean and it is-or ought to be-profoundly hopeful if we are willing to risk embracing that future (not-we are beginning to realize-that we have a choice)! If we are willing to embrace the future – better said, *engage* the future.

Some years ago one of my sons who was then a senior in high school-after yet another challenging conversation around the dinner table in Assisi Community said, "I don't know whether to curse you or bless you, Mom. All my friends are dreaming about graduating from high school, going to college, getting a high paying job and a big house and living happily ever after. You made me look at the reality of injustice in the world and now I can't un-know that and go on with a normal life." I laughed, but it really is exactly what we are all facing now-we cannot un-know what we have begun to learn about the immensity of the universe, the fragility of the planet, the human's place as part of Earth community, the importance of diversity, the depth of relationality, the challenge of sustainability.

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Two examples:

Every day, we who are given the mission to promote social justice, peace and respect for the integrity of creation see a human community devastated by poverty and war-by violences of every imaginable shape and intensity, by greed and corruption. We see that the rest of creation is under an unrelenting assault that may soon render our beautiful planet uninhabitable. We see threats that were almost unthinkable a few decades ago: the Ebola epidemic, seemingly incurable poverty, terrorism, wars in response to terrorism, climate change, the evils of racism, sexism and heterosexism, forced and massive migrations, torture, trafficking in drugs and weapons and people, overdevelopment, extreme concentrations of wealth and power, private control for profit of basic resources like water, food, land and minerals considered essential to "modern or post-modern" life. We know that the now-global economic system is marginalizing billions of people; bringing

brehtaking if empty prosperity to a few; and simultaneously driving the wanton exploitation and destruction of natural systems, of species and of the earth's limited resources.

Again, *cosmic consciousness has to affect who we are, how we live, everything we do – the ground has shifted; the context for all our work is different.* At the same time, we are not in unfamiliar territory – we who have worked in this field for so long. I was struck by a particular paragraph in Pat Farrell's LCWR address from two years ago:

The human family is not served by individualism, patriarchy, a scarcity mentality, or competition.

That is not news to you – or to me. For as long as I can remember we have worked alongside other feminists (both sisters and brothers) to make exactly that point clear. The good news, as Pat describes it, is that

The world is outgrowing the dualistic constructs of superior/inferior, win/lose, good/bad, and domination/submission. Breaking through in their place are equality, communion, collaboration, synchronicity, expansiveness, abundance, wholeness, mutuality, intuitive knowing, and love.

I hope so... these are basic values we can support, promote, pray for...

Our work in response to all of the issues we face, our work for social justice and peace has to *continue* to seek real and hopefully *attainable* solutions that reflect these values. At the same time, we are learning more and more clearly that *all of the solutions we seek must be sustainable in the deepest sense* – must contribute to the integrity of creation. The ethical implications of this insight are extremely important. The courage and creativity necessary to move into a truly sustainable and just future are almost unimaginable. Talk about transition!

We have known for a long time, for example, that an unregulated, neoliberal free market economy was a really bad idea. Those of us who were doing this work in the 70s and early 80s knew it was going to hurt people who were already poor and we watched that happen. Illegitimate debt and debt-driven structural adjustment programs, self-serving foreign aid programs and unjust trade agreements-then, the financial shenanigans of global powerbrokers-have all contributed to the huge and growing gap between a few who are extremely wealthy and the majority who are impoverished. Even the statistics the world has used to measure levels of poverty in a given country don't work anymore because the distribution is so distorted. We-all of us-have engaged fully in this arena of work and have had an impact-not yet a big enough impact, but we do know our way around these huge issues and have brought a serious moral debate into corporate board rooms, to Wall Street, to the international financial institutions and to the U.S. government decision-making tables. We are simply unwilling to stand by while a system that is extremely powerful and now globalized makes a mockery out of social justice and the dignity of every human life.

But what was new information just a few years ago—at least it was for me—is that the global economy (as it is now being driven by the pursuit of quantitative economic growth that depends on the expanded exploitation of natural resources) is *completely unsustainable on Planet Earth*. We have to muster the creative imagination and political will to transform our way of life and the economic system that supports it to one that respects the carrying capacity of earth, resource limits and natural processes and is in harmony with the rhythms of the universe. *The bad news is that such a shift is virtually unimaginable; the good news is that, given only one Earth, we don't have a choice*. Our job is to make that new economy—whatever it may look like, one that ensures social justice; honors the dignity of every person and of all life; and is in harmony with the rhythms of the universe.

So one shift we have to embrace, nurture, encourage is economic. It is eons deep and miles wide—a profound and urgent systemic shift.

Another example of the kind of shifts we are facing in our work has to do with security. Several years ago, as we tried to understand the significance of the new cosmology, the new universe story (macro and micro) for our work at the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns, we described one main area of focus as “sustainable pathways to peace and inclusive human security,” but we had a very hard time figuring out quite what that meant. It has been interesting for me in the past few years after I finished my work for Maryknoll to focus entirely on peace.

I am still finding it challenging to define sustainable peace holistically. A few things are clear. One is what I said earlier: violent conflict and war are “of a piece” with poverty and economic injustice, as with ecological destruction. There is no such thing as a sustainable future—any future—unless we (at least in the United States and increasingly in the global North around the world) *radically shift our understanding of security* and move onto an entirely different track that reconfigures our definition of success and happiness. That is not a new thought to any of you, but it will require a shift that is as at least as huge as (and closely connected to) the economic shift we have to make.

For much too long and very intensely since 9/11 we have been living in, and subjecting the world to, a paradigm that justifies enormous loss of human life and widespread destruction of the planet in pursuit of an elusive peace and a false security. The consequences of this framework have been front and center in the lives of millions of people around the world.

Actually, as we have all said a million times, September 11th gave us—fleetingly—a glimpse at a new paradigm that may be at the heart of the matter in terms of sustainable peace. Remember how—for a very short while after the planes struck, there was an intense rethinking of our priorities as a people – of what we really value. The scenes in the rubble of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were painful but spectacular illustrations of what was important in life—and it was not economic or military power or rank or job description or income level or color of

skin or nationality-but life itself and the relationships that nurture life. September 11th could have been a watershed event for our nation's soul, but that possibility was not nurtured. I think we completely lacked the capacity to imagine right relationship (in a biblical Jubilee sense) or shalom or to create the conditions for sustainable peace.

Bryan Massingale says, "*Security in the biblical worldview, is an outcome of pursuing [a] more comprehensive vision of shalom. When shalom is established through the pursuit of justice, then true security is found...Security is a state of being that flows from the inclusion of all in the bounty of the earth.*" And, I would add, from a deep respect for the rhythms of the universe.

Since that tragic day, hundreds of thousands of others in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Yemen, now Syria, Libya and elsewhere have been killed or maimed in response; millions have been displaced; and international human rights laws have been undercut with impunity. I don't need to go any further. My point is that the shift we need to make as a nation and as a human community in this arena is profound.

Let me end with a brief story that I believe points in the direction we need to go:

A few years ago I visited a small village in the Shamali Valley outside of Kabul-a few tents and a house or two populated by families trying to reclaim life after years living as refugees in Pakistan. The narrow pathway to one of the small houses was lined with stones painted half red and half white. The white half of the stones marking the pathway faced in, indicated that the path itself was cleared of landmines. The red half of the stones pointed out to the rest of the yard around the house, indicated that there could well be landmines buried there. How a family with children and animals can survive in such a situation is beyond me. They, like all their neighbors, were trying to eke out an existence in a geography riddled with landmines and unexploded ordinance, including bomblets from cluster bombs.

Hope in the village was clearly present. What else could have driven those few courageous families to return? But it was hard to pin down. The vineyards were bursting with life, laden with grapes; they also were riddled with landmines. Deminers were carefully inching their way down the rows of grapevines, slowly pushing back the fear, the terrible threat of violence to make room for life.

Work toward the New Creation, work for peace is like that – slowly pushing back the fear, the terrible threat of violence, the reality of social injustice to make room for life.

Effective peacemaking acknowledges the interdependence of communities around the world. The fact that our security is intrinsically interconnected with that of the families in that little village in Afghanistan is crucial. In the soil surrounding the village are planted the landmines of further violence and the seeds of peace. But to understand that fact and to discern how we as individuals or nations might nurture

the seeds of peace and snuff out the roots of violence, we have to get close enough to such marginal places - from where the world looks entirely different - to understand.

We have to learn to “do” peace-not a peace synonymous with my “feeling good” or with national security-not global control by the United States or any other nation-something much deeper than that-shalom, an integral well-being that embraces all human beings and the rest of creation-a peace that preempts every inclination to violence and war-we have to promote a shift, a new paradigm rooted in an unwavering commitment to the value of every life, even the life of my bitterest enemy. We are called not only to navigate the shifts but to embrace them, to instigate them.

I have only mentioned two, but they are huge: the shift to an ecologically sound global economy and the shift from fear-driven security to shalom. As promoters of social justice, peace and respect for the integrity of creation, we are used to standing in the storm. We have learned well to identify the roots of injustice; to seek a peace that is inclusive and sustainable; to help shape the human journey in a cosmic context. We are ready, as (again) Pat Farrell says, to “step into the flow, and be carried by it” believing that “the Spirit of God still hovers over the chaos.

Please take some time now at your tables to discuss the following in relation to your work as a promoter for your congregation: *Cosmic consciousness has to affect who we are, how we live, everything we do-the ground has shifted; the context for all of our work is different. We have to continue to seek real and hopefully attainable solutions to specific problems, but all of the solutions we seek must be sustainable in the deepest sense-must contribute to the integrity of creation. What does that mean for the future of our work? What next right steps are we taking or could we take together into the future?*

Tools That Are Practiced, Yet New (Part II)

Welcome back-I hope you had fruitful conversations at your tables. Obviously, those conversations will continue for the rest of your time here together – and beyond.

As we enter the transforming future, we are intensely aware of the challenges-of the long road we have to walk and the chaos we will encounter (are already encountering). I would like to add to our conversation this morning a few words about the abundant resources that I think you bring to the task-as women religious or those who work for communities of women religious. It would be good for us to talk together about how these and other resources you will name can help you not only weather what might feel like chaos, but also enable you to make real contributions to a just and sustainable future.

I see many tools in your toolbox. I have described them as *practiced, yet new* because I think that is truly the case. Much of the new terrain onto which we are being invited is pretty familiar-many of the issues we address have been on our collective “to do” list for decades, but the air we are breathing has changed quite a bit-or perhaps better said, we *perceive* that the air we are breathing has changed.

The cosmos has been as spectacular as we now perceive it to be for something like 13.8 billion years. We humans came very late to the fiesta and we are just now beginning to pay attention to the amazing relationships on display and the lovely, intricately choreographed dance in which all parts of the universe are participating. We were always obliged to arrange our affairs in a manner that respected the order of what already was-we just never knew it, or never paid attention.

So, one of the tools that you have is the experience of exploring together (with all the challenges that has presented and still presents)-the experience of exploring together in the context of a common charism the meaning and significance of cosmic consciousness-the implications for your worldview, for your theology, for your ministries. I may be completely wrong, but I do not believe there are many other groups of people who have taken so seriously the challenges presented by new scientific discoveries and deep theological reflection. You are light years ahead of most of us and I know that is in no small part due to the deep and rich support you have given to each other through LCWR. Again-I deeply believe that you are a gift to all of us and to the future because of your experience of exploring together in the context of a common charism the meaning and significance of cosmic consciousness.

With just about everything that connects to the new cosmology I feel like I am still talking in one syllable words-and I have to try them out every time I open my mouth. But as I understand it, we humans are beginning to recognize the impact we can have on the future. Recent advancements in science, medicine, technology, psychology, sociology, and spirituality, suggest that some decisions we make will affect the very future of our species. If that is true, then the engagement of religious

communities-*your* engagement-in the public arena: in the socio-political, economic, cultural and theological debate-about what we humans will do or what we will not do-is crucial. Where are we going? What values will be represented in the path we take? Who will benefit? Who will pay the cost? Who will decide?-all are questions that you regularly ask as you do your work as promoters of social justice, peace and respect for the integrity of creation. And all will be even more critical as we move into the future. Your interrogation of systems and structures, of decision-makers and powerful institutions, your habit of careful analysis in search of root causes and your grounding in faith have prepared you well, I think, for the moral and ethical challenge we face in the coming years.

Likewise, to the shift, to the transition, you bring deep experience on the ground and with marginalized people. (Using Pope Francis' metaphor-you smell like the sheep.) In this country and around the world your communities by vocation and commitment have long-term deep relationships with people most often affected by injustice and violence. We know that experience has served very well in the past as we evaluated the structures and practices that define our way of being in the world: what they did to impoverished/excluded people; what they did for impoverished/excluded people; and most importantly, what they enabled impoverished/excluded people to do for themselves.

Fourth, you bring deep experience of community, especially of communities that nurture the values essential to the future survival of humans and possibly the whole earth community. Pat Farrell named many of the values we seek: equality, communion, collaboration, synchronicity, expansiveness, abundance, wholeness, mutuality, intuitive knowing, and love. I would add integrity, truthfulness and courage. You may not live them perfectly, but you try and you know the potential.

As part of your community experience you have tested and refined many of the practical faces of communal living as few others in Western/U.S. culture have tried to do – at least in the past 100 years. This experience of communal lifestyles is another important resource that you bring to the table as we all move into the future and navigate the shifts. You know how to live simply. You have a long history of sharing property and wealth and of mutual accountability. Your communities, even as your numbers diminish, are contributing to the development of contemporary models for value-based living in right relationship with each other and the whole earth community. You have reworked your communal (as well as personal) relationship with earth, commissioned land assessments and implemented their recommendations, maintained community supported agriculture farms, been changed by weeks on Genesis Farm, and on and on. Many people who simply do not know the history or structure of Catholic religious community life are surprised by the rich experience you bring to the challenge of reconfiguring urban and rural life in this country to ways of life that are more sustainable, more inclusive and more just. Transition towns have a lot to learn from you-really!

Fifth, beyond community and simple living, your congregations have also supported many different models of business and community organization in this country and overseas, including producer and worker cooperatives, land trusts, community-owned utilities, worker owned firms, community development financial institutions, community supported agriculture, etc. etc. As I said earlier, you also know your way around corporate boardrooms and shareholder meetings. In other words, your practical experience is phenomenal!

Sixth, it is obvious that you also have great credibility. I am sure you experienced that as the doctrinal assessment got underway. You have learned, I think, to protect it well and to use it for the good. Though it was partly coincidental, the timing of Nuns on the Bus could not have been a better illustration of your credibility-that you do have such credibility and why!

Seventh, you are practiced at prophetic action and have a rich sense of the importance of symbol and ritual, including prayer and sacramental celebration, as you engage in the public arena. Our radically incarnational faith has the capacity to speak to the cosmic reality we are now living. We have a growing reverence for the cosmos and a strong symbolic sense (ashes, water, wine, bread, oil) that ties us to earth community. You are exceptionally adept at articulating that. In fact, creativity and imagination are critical to the work you/we are called to do.

Eighth, you have excellent communication skills and you are learning quickly to adapt those skills to new media and social communications.

Ninth, you are also part of an amazing global network. If-as many say-our most precious asset is the web of relationships we have, you are (we are) blessed beyond measure. Imagine for a moment marking on the globe the connections within your own religious community; then LCWR; then all the Catholic religious communities in the world; then all the affiliate, lay mission, and volunteer programs; then the institutional church (dioceses, parishes); then the Catholic universities, high schools, elementary schools; then Catholic organizations like Pax Christi, CRS, and on and on. That doesn't even begin to include the common cause and many fruitful links we have with people of other faith traditions and with secular organizations doing good work social justice, peace and respect for the integrity of creation. We have made use of this amazing network in many ways, but my guess is that we could have a huge impact if we could all "sing in harmony" as we navigate the transitions and move into the future.

Pope Francis' arrival on the scene and his refreshing manner of gently repairing some of the painful tears in that network is filling many of us with hope, which leads to the tenth and last "tool" I want to mention-and that is hope itself. The work we promoters do is fundamentally hopeful work. Hope is a very powerful tool. People often ask me how I can tolerate moving from one war zone to another, interacting with so many difficult and violent situations. In reality my experience (like yours I am sure) is exactly the opposite. Every place I go, I meet and spend time with and

am inspired by amazing people who are full of active hope and are seeking transformation. They are living their way into the New Creation and-at least for me-their hope is always infectious.

So here's my list of what's in your toolbox as you enter into the transforming future that, admittedly, has many of us more than a little anxious. You have

1. A well developed cosmic consciousness;
2. The practice of-grounded in faith-interrogating "the system," decision-makers and powerful institutions, and of constantly seeking to identify root causes of the brokenness you see;
3. Deep relationships with marginalized people
4. Tested models for living in value-based communities in right relationship with each other and the whole earth community
5. Practical experience with alternative forms of social and economic organization
6. Huge credibility
7. Experience with prophetic action, symbol and ritual
8. Excellent communication skills
9. An amazing global network
10. Hope itself

Obviously, I am looking on the positive side of the ledger. I know your communities are also dealing with diminishment and aging. As you continue the conversation now and tomorrow, I will leave it to you to include those dimensions in your discernment. But, in reality, I suspect that your thoughtful and honest way of approaching these challenges-even death-will prepare you well for walking safely through whatever chaos comes your way.

Thank you for who you are and for all you do to accompany our broken world into a more hopeful future.