

It is human to suffer, then the principle theological question when we are confronted by loss and grief is not "why do we suffer?" but "who suffers with us?"

Mitchell & Anderson

Hope in Suffering

The Spirituality
of Life and Loss

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This offering is specifically oriented toward women and men Religious.



How do we create space to respect the suffering and loss of our past and current reality, and at the same time, honor how this moves us into what is emerging?

Throughout the ages, the Church struggles, and transforms to find new expressions of the same lived reality. For women and men Religious, this change is a constant in our life and is a source of conversion, albeit difficult. Perhaps this is a countercultural element of our life. As people of faith, we hold the tension of living into the reality of the paschal mystery – the dying and rising that is foundational to ushering in the hope embedded in our relationship with the radical nature of God.

Holistically moving through change can witness for others that God is continually calling us to transform ourselves and the systems and institutions we engage with, including the continual transformation of the living, universal Church. Our prophetic witness of embracing the paschal mystery in this most elemental way is foundational to living our vocation as women and men Religious in the 21st century.

Loss is something that we are acutely experiencing right now in our world, in our individual lives, and in our communities.

Reflect on what comes to mind when you think about personal experiences of loss. What do you see as individual, communal, and societal losses?

We may experience loss of literal life, loss of what was, or the loss of the very institutions that support the fabric of our lives. As a global society, we are watching the crumbling of governmental systems, witnessing the ever-growing gap between the wealth holders and those suffering with poverty, devastation of the planet, and the experience of a global pandemic. As a Church, we lost the ideals of security and integrity due to the ills of clericalism, abuse scandals, and division of what it means to be church.

As men and women Religious, we are losing the idealism of what was, letting go of institutions that held enormous promise and accomplishment. On a personal level, the loss of physical ability, loss of loved ones, and loss of *what I thought I joined* are staggering and difficult to embrace, let alone see creative potential and possibilities in this dynamic.

These realities create a tapestry of life, loss, and hope. It is each person's particular journey, and we share it within a collective – in our Congregations, society, and Church. Within each of these losses are many layers – like peeling back an onion, layer by thin layer. When we think we are done with it – whatever 'it' is – this 'it' has a way of letting us know that 'it' is not finished, and 'it' requires more attention.

In this paper, I provide a framework for finding hope in suffering and for the work of grieving and moving through personal and collective loss. As I provide the framework, you will provide the content – *your experiences, your life, and our life together* in community and as men and women Religious.

The individual and collective nature of this work is essential. We may each experience the same situation and yet, individually have a different response. Honoring our process and respecting the process of others allow for the realization of transformational potential. While struggling to understand what others are experiencing, I can come to terms with the collective reality of suffering and allow this to bear the fruit of hope.

As you read this paper, pay attention to what is stirring within you and write down what emerges: words, memories, emotions. Notice where you experience resistance and notice what captures your attention, as these are an invitation from God. Questions to prompt reflection are provided to promote a reflective experience.

This paper is divided into five sections.

(1) God's desire for wholeness, an exploration of eschatological hope for wholeness.

- (2) Change as a life task, an exploration of our call to embrace, rather than resist, the ebb and flow of transition.
- (3) The journey of life and loss, an exploration of models for individual and collective loss.
- (4) Entering the mystery, an exploration of the Christian imperative to grieve.
- (5) Risking hope, an exploration of the countercultural nature of embracing hope in times of suffering and loss.

SECTION ONE GOD'S DESIRE FOR WHOLENESS

Creation's greatest movement is toward regeneration and wholeness. It is in this movement that God enters our lives and is in relationship with us. It is God, as Creator, who moves us toward regeneration and wholeness. It is through the process of living the tension of life and loss that we move closer to our authentic self – toward wholeness. In so doing, we move closer to God and the unique creature God desires us to become in this world.

Yet, our Western culture tells us to avoid this tension, creating an imbalance. We are conditioned to focus on life and avoid confronting loss. Thus, we avoid it, compartmentalize, and internalize our emotions. We are conditioned to believe talking about our struggles or our experience of loss will drag other people down, and that it is not a topic for polite conversation. There is also a belief that it is time-limited, and if someone goes past the 4.3 weeks allocated for the grief process, something is wrong. Deep down, we are conditioned to believe that we should just get over it.

We know this conditioning does not work, yet for many of us, we continue to support this imbalanced response, using well-practiced strategies to cope with loss. The strategies may work for a time; however, grief has a way of creeping into our lives, demanding to be noticed. The pain becomes more conscious – it demands to be felt – and, once again, we use our beloved strategies to avoid the pain. The cycle continues until the loss is shoved away. It takes a lot of energy to keep something from breaking down a door. This energy continues to be used to keep it down, pulsating just below the surface, sapping us of the energy necessary to live a full and vibrant life.

Our brains are programmed to avoid pain. It is a primitive function. Think about what happens when we touch something hot. We immediately retract our hand. To our bodies, pain is bad. To our emotional mind, we grow to believe this as well. However, as people of faith, we are called to enter the pain because we know that God is journeying with us; we know that God is also grieving. Pain is not our enemy. Pain signals when something is hurting us, or when something is wrong or needs to change. Pain is our invitation from God to befriend our loss and be gentle with our pain.

How do you invite God into those most tender spots?

There are times when I do not invite God into these places because they are too raw – they simply hurt too much. I do not invite anyone into these places. Yet, I know that I must, eventually. I cannot move through this alone. I slowly sit in the rawness with God.

The spiritual writer, Brennan Manning (2004), writes about the alchemist's crucible

in which our losses, pain, and reality are like unrefined precious metal waiting to be purified. Pain is the crucible in which one is made whole. This metaphor speaks a truth that needs greater awareness in our society. The crucible holds the unrefined metal and by applying high temperature, the impurities from the metal are separated and taken out. This is like the process of unresolved loss. Eventually, the pain begins to subside, and we move toward understanding what has occurred and how life will differ. The heat, or pain, is needed to create the process of purification. The pain is needed to create movement toward wholeness, toward our authentic self.

Diving into a crucible to be purified is not something anyone would look forward to, unlike anticipating a pleasant walk on the weekend.

So, why do we suffer?

Why is this part of our existence?

These are age-old questions. I remember watching a television show many years ago in which there was a battle between good and evil. To end the battle, a third group intervened. They took away all the pain, so everyone in the world was simply happy and content. However, this 'gift' resulted in no passion, no feelings, and no real relational connection.

We suffer because we are human – because we are relational. We respond to love and because the things we love are earthly, all that we love is marked with finitude. God created us to be in relationship and because of this, we are attached to temporal things.

The experience of loss is built into our human experience. If we do not have attachments or love, we are closed off and are unable to give or receive. This is

contrary to God's abundant and extravagant love. Thus, we are called to be in relationship, to give and receive, and because of this, we experience loss.

SECTION TWO OUR LIFE TASK - CHANGE

Not this *change* word again! Of course, change is not new to any of us – whether it be personal or communal change. However, most people do not like the process of change and avoid it (here is that *other* word again, *avoid!*) If we look at systemic change – changes to society, our structures, and our institutions – these also do not welcome the process of change and move into a stance of resistance.

In the first part of the 21st century, consecrated life itself is going through a radical adjustment. From its very inception, Christianity, the Catholic Church, and all forms of consecrated life have changed. Yet, we often hold to what is now, as if it is how it has always been.

In my Congregation, we recently discerned what to do with our Motherhouse building. Many Congregations are doing the same. It is a difficult, and very emotional process, which needs to be honored and ritualized. It is a significant loss for this generation of Religious. However, what was key in our discernment was the reminder that this was our third Motherhouse. We have changed before because there was a need to change. We are at a time, once again, when there is a need to change.

The flexibility and insight of children can be helpful in times of change as adults. The following is a poem, *Flow*, by Kyle Blasi, a sixth-grade student who won a poetry contest in 2020.

● ● ● ● ●
As I sit upon the mountaintop
Looking at the sky
I hear the roaring of the stream
As it passes by

Always moving
Always churning
Always flowing by

It never ceases in its movements
Always saying bye

Next to the creek there is a bush
Blowing in the wind
I hear the rustling of the branches
Above the city's din

Always waving
Always coping
Always standing by

Perpetually finding ways to win
Against the wind's long sigh

And on that very mountaintop
Like every patch of sky

Like every log
Like every hill
Like every bird that flies

There is a force that rules the world
Over what lives and dies

For this perhaps is the strongest flow
The force you can't deny

Always sobbing
Always laughing
Always getting by

As I sit upon the mountaintop
Looking at the sky
I hear the flow of life and death
And wonder at the why

● ● ● ● ●

The wisdom of a sixth grader! Kyle speaks to a deeper understanding of change, as the strongest flow, the force that cannot be denied. It is always sobbing, always laughing, always getting by. We experience the slow churning of change every day, it never ceases in its movements. Yet, we also try to deny that it is happening. We make every attempt to slow down change, to pretend that change is not real. We pretend that our current Motherhouse is the only Motherhouse we have had.

How do you see change being denied in your life, in your Congregation, in the Church, and in society?

If we do not face the reality of change and grieve the loss of what is no longer, we move toward a stagnation, which is a stalling of life-giving energy. Our life task is to move toward the generative impulse of life-giving energy, which enables us to reach beyond ourselves and be of service to others. In essence, it is to be Love incarnate in the world. Unresolved loss is a barrier to this impulse.

The following diagram provides a visual for understanding change and of the movement toward growth and wholeness. Components of this growth and development model (see page 6) include:

- (1) Pre-integration (*unconscious*)
- (2) Disintegration (*suffering*)
- (3) Chaos or Confusion (*death*)
- (4) Re-integration (*resurrection*)
- (5) Post-integration (*conscious*)

Carl Jung (1970) captures the shifts within our various life states. He is speaking to the movement into and beyond mid-life; however, his words can also speak to the shifts, disintegrations and re-integrations throughout the adult life cycle which parallel the change we experience.

Thoroughly unprepared, we take the step into the afternoon [next movement] of life. Worse still, we take this step with the false presupposition that our truths and our ideals will serve us as hitherto. But we cannot live the afternoon of life according to the program of life's morning [what was known], for what was great in the morning will be little at evening and what in the morning was true, at evening will have become a lie.

Called to be the outpouring of Christ's love in our world, our own suffering, death, and resurrection brings us to greater wholeness. There is an imperative to realize what was morning is now transitioning to the afternoon and eventually will become evening. The cycle will continue with sunrise, and we begin the change process again.

This cycle allows us to come closer to this place of wholeness and become the unique individual expressed in the world and the person with whom God longs to be in relationship. The process toward wholeness is never complete in our lifetime. The continual movement toward wholeness is our witness to the paschal mystery alive in our world. Along the way toward wholeness, we experience life.

Movement Toward Wholeness: A Model of Change



Reflect on the model of change.

How does this cycle of change resonate with you?

What are specific examples in your own life and in the life of your Congregation? Religious life? The Church? Society?

Although Jung is speaking of an individual process of development in the quote above, this can also parallel the experience of a system, like a religious Congregation or institutional ministry. The part of the quote that stands out for me is that “we take this step with the false presupposition that our truths and our ideals will serve us as hitherto.” Our truths are from a limited perspective – even our truth about God. We speak of God as if we know God, yet we really speak of the God-image. We experience religious life in its particular life-form at this moment and hold to its truths about ministry and community living. We speak about this as if it is absolute and unchanging. Yet, it does change. There are numerous Motherhouses in our history.

SECTION THREE THE JOURNEY OF LIFE

This section explores a model for the journey of loss and life, providing a framework for how we can move toward integration or fragmentation. Either journey is difficult and takes energy. It may seem counterintuitive to embrace pain and suffering – if nothing else it is extremely unpleasant! However, think about taking a road trip. You have fueled the car and only have so much energy (fuel) to get you to a destination. There are two options. The first is a difficult drive on some narrow roads;

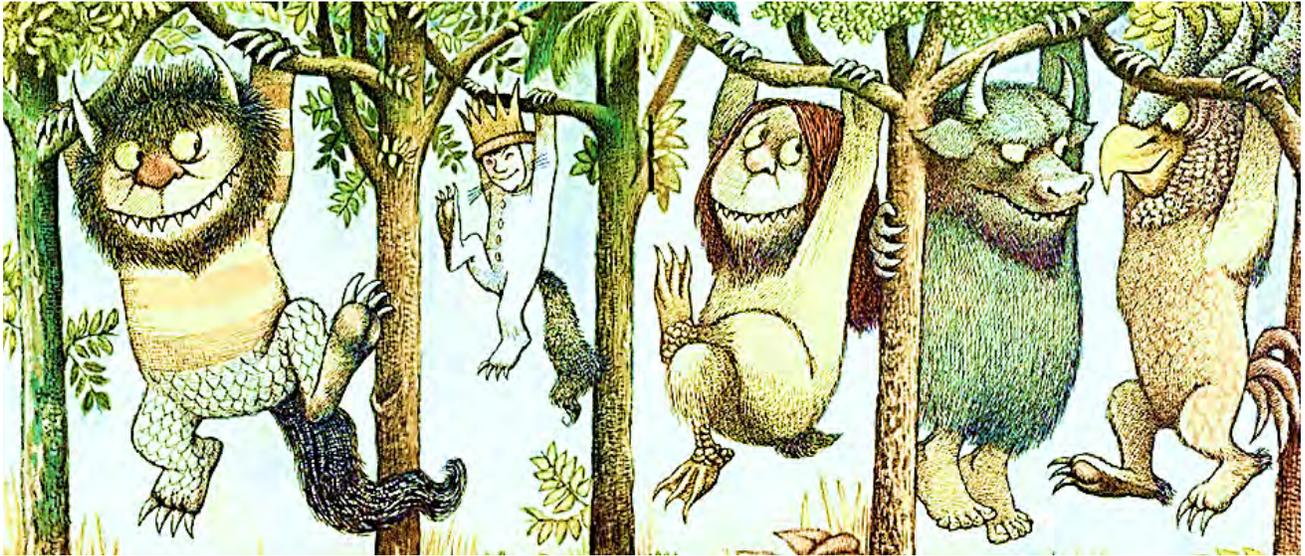
however, the destination is a beautiful beach. The other option is a more comfortable stretch of road; however, the destination is a small, walled off garden that is dormant. Both take energy and result in very different realities.

If we do not work to resolve the impact of change and loss, these realities continue to use energy we could use for other, more life-giving pursuits. Unattended losses build up and accumulate. It could be the death of someone, disappointment over something not happening, a collective choice made that did not sit well with you, a hope diminished, or the loss of an ability. Loss can also be from a positive change, such as a desired shift in ministry, or move to a new living situation. These also create stress in our life that needs to be addressed. With every ‘yes’ there is a ‘no’ – a very important concept that speaks to the fact that every change has a loss.

What are some disappointments and losses you have experienced in the past decade? Think about positive changes as well. What were the losses in these situations?

Given the list that emerges, what have you done with these in terms of processing? Were they put to the side and life moved on? How did you deal with the stress they brought into your life?

Unresolved loss is like a low-grade fever. How does your body feel with a slight fever? Low energy? Just ‘off’ and we know something is not quite right? Unresolved loss is similar. It is always present, and we become accustomed to it, influencing us, and although we do not feel quite right, we accept this experience of self as normative. It becomes our status quo.



With unattended loss, there is a gradual diminishment of our life force. It becomes something pushed into the unconscious, and we are not aware of its potency. Just as when we have a fever, we need to take care of ourselves, tend to our healing, and address it before we become sicker with a higher fever. With unattended loss, we need to address it before it diminishes our energy and vitality for the mission.

If loss is not processed and it begins to layer upon other losses, emotions such as fear, anger, resentment are often the avenue of its expression. These, and other emotions, arise and we do not really know why. They stem from the buildup in the unconscious of all the losses to which we did not pay attention.

We did not want to see them, deal with them, give them time. However, they want to be seen and if the only way they can be noticed is to go underground and maneuver in the depths, this is what they will do. I think of the children's book, *Where the Wild Things Are*, in which the night brings the wilds of imagination to work out the issues of the day. Unresolved loss is like these little

monsters wanting attention.

If we do not do the work to befriend them, we are left with a loss of hope. We can barely find our deepest selves in the layers of resolved losses, resentments, and disappointments. These fill the space that the hopeful and creative energy needs to flourish.

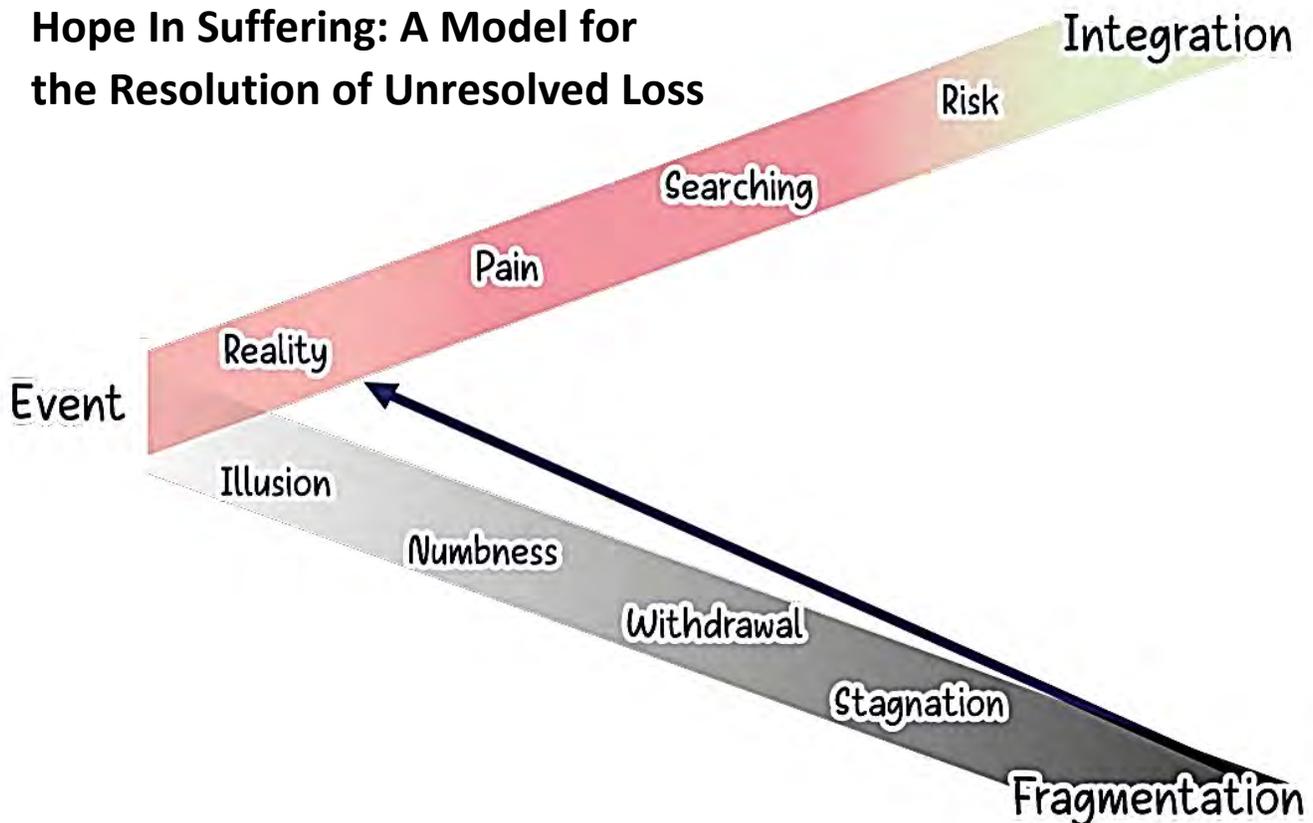
Let us start with the most important question in the face of loss: What is your choice? Do you let the moment confine you or do you allow it to free you for new possibilities? The next part of this paper focuses on this choice and how it determines the journey. It is not a choice about if events happen or not; rather, it is about how we respond. It is about the everyday response to change.

It can be difficult to think that we carry unfreedoms; however, we are all confined in some manner.

What parts of your history continue to create barriers that hinder personal freedom?

We think that the point is to pass the test or overcome the problem, but the truth is that things don't really get solved. They come together and they fall apart. Then they come together again and fall apart again. It's just like that. The healing comes from letting there be room for all of this to happen: room for grief, for relief, for misery, for joy.

Hope In Suffering: A Model for the Resolution of Unresolved Loss



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The diagram titled “Hope in Suffering: A Model for the Resolution of Unresolved Loss” provides a framework for understanding this journey of befriending the wild things that may be pushed aside. At any time, we have a choice to move away from fragmentation toward integration and wholeness.

The Event

Change is inevitable and it is often beyond our control. We do not decide if a friend is going to die or if our body becomes older. We may be a part of a collective decision for change – like changing the use of Congregational property or shifting institutional ministries. We do have some change that we are able to control, like saying ‘yes’ to a new ministry opportunity

or deciding on where to go for vacation.

On the other hand, as men and women Religious, we collectively determine some things that seem within our control. Let us take the idea of a vacation. It seems simple enough. For vacation, I want to go somewhere I can enjoy sitting on a beach and listening to the water. However, perhaps there is a group of us going and the majority want to go to the forest. *Or* I cannot go to the beach because it costs too much. There are likely a lot of ‘or’ scenarios. This is a disappointment. What do I do with this sense of disappointment?

What to do for vacation may be a simplistic example; however, the Event can be subtle moments, like not seeing a friend because

of another commitment or the gradual loss of a dream. They can also be shattering, like an unexpected death or medical diagnosis, global events like an earthquake, fire, or hurricane. Regardless of whether the moment seems shattering, subtle, or somewhere in between, something has changed. Even if we do not acknowledge it, this change is embedded in our psyche and has impact.

The choice one makes at the initial moment of loss determines which path one will begin to journey – one resulting in life and the other, symbolic death or stagnation.

However, once the choice occurs and the journey begins, it is not set in stone. If a person begins to journey toward stagnation, at any time there can be an awareness to choose differently and thus shift to journey toward life. It is a more difficult journey; however, it is well worth the struggle. The opposite is true as well. The pain and searching may push someone to move to the other trajectory, toward illusion and numbness.

The following provides a brief description for the stages of the diagram offered. This model outlines the journey in a linear manner; however, these stages are anything but linear – they cross-over, bridge one another, meaning we can be in both at the same time. I may fluctuate between denial (illusion) and reality, or touch into and then find something to numb the pain. The diagram also speaks to “resolution” which does not mean it will disappear once this process is complete. Rather, resolution means that the unattended loss takes less energy, and more energy is flowing into life-giving pursuits.

It is also important to note that this is not a diagram that speaks of the normal stages of grief. A person may be numb with shock or

go into illusion through bargaining. What this diagram speaks to is a longer-term manner of dealing with loss in which seeing loss as an illusion and staying numb from its effects is a coping mechanism rather than a moment’s reaction.

Illusion vs. Reality

The initial loss, or more realistically, the layering of losses, has occurred. There is now the choice to move toward the next step of illusion or reality. Do I move into a place where I acknowledge the loss or do I move into a place of illusion, of pretending?

Illusion takes hold when we avoid facing reality and it can be experienced as a general malaise, or manifest as addiction, depression, anxiety, aggression, and other expressions that indicate something is not right in one’s life. One moves into illusion when they become focused on disbelief – a long-term entrenched version of a false reality. This is tricky because on the surface things may look normal. It is often a deeply held understanding that holding onto something will make it better or ease the pain. An extreme example is when, after the death of a child, a parent keeps his or her bedroom exactly as it was, even when the child died ten years ago. A less extreme and more likely example may be the attachment to an institutional ministry, as if it continued in the same way as it did years ago.

Not facing reality moves us onto the path toward stagnation and fragmentation – and this path is not life-giving. It robs a person of their creative life-force, and it diminishes relationship, not allowing room for “the dearest freshness deep down things” (Hopkins, 1985).

Numbness vs. Pain

As I mentioned before, no one wants to be in pain. We turn away from it as soon as we are

able. For emotional pain, like the experience of loss, we develop clever ways for coping and avoiding its reality. It might be that we do not think we will survive the pain – that it will consume us and take over. Maybe it leaves us feeling helpless or not in control. Regardless of what we think and what we use to push it away, the pain does not go away. We cannot remove it with tweezers or put a bandage over it as if hidden from view. However, we can learn to integrate it into our life experience.

If it is ignored, it will hover like a cloud, blocking out the sun at times. The sun is life-energy. We need to claim our pain and reclaim our life energy. Notice that the lower trajectory does not include pain. It is not until we face reality that we are able to experience the authentic pain that resides in our body, mind, and heart. To claim it and integrate it, we must face the reality of the situation and our experience. Pain is present to tell us something is not quite right and needs attention.

Healing is entering – with mercy and awareness – those places within ourselves that we have withdrawn from due to fear and a sense of helplessness. Healing takes a lot of courage. It means reoccupying the areas of ourselves that we have abandoned.

Withdrawal vs. Searching

Numbness moves towards a phase of withdrawal. Withdrawal is characterized by avoidance, a pushing away and not accepting reality. In contrast, searching comes after facing the pain of reality. Searching is taking the plunge to understand and integrate the experiences of loss.

In both reactions, we may seek solitude and move away from the business of life; however, there is a difference in motivation. *Withdrawal* is pushing away from relationships, trying to hide and isolate from

life. *Searching* is a struggle to be in relationship, needing reflective space to process what is happening in order to move back into our relationships.

As humans (as with all of creation), we have an intuition towards healing. In searching, we can hold onto the intuitive impulse of healing and search deep within. It is through this searching that we move toward the phase, risk. Yet, this intuition can become trapped, and the journey becomes unclear and unsafe, thus we withdraw. When we deny this intuition and back away, we move toward the path of stagnation.

Numbing behaviors are a major mechanism of withdrawal. These can be in the form of an addiction, like drugs, alcohol, gambling, sex, or shopping. It can also be behaviors that allow us to ‘zone out’ like playing video games for hours or binge-watching Netflix – anything that allows us to withdraw from being present *to the present*.

Stagnation vs. Risk

The question at this stage is are going to be a passionate person, connecting fully in relationships; or are you going to be passive, take a grin-and-bear-it approach, and not fully engaging in life?

A trait of unattended loss is a loss of trust. Little by little, trust in others, in self, and in God, slips away. There is a deadening of vitality and of desiring connection. We may keep with the same relationships that are comfortable. This may look like staying in a ministry or living situation that is comfortable, yet the situation may not be fulfilling our deepest needs or challenging us to authentically fulfill our vocation.

Because of this lack of trust, it is risky to reach out, open our hearts and be vulnerable. Risk can be absolutely frightening and yet, it often results in greater freedom. In Brené

Brown's (2010) breakthrough TedTalk, *The Power of Vulnerability*, she speaks about the numbing of our vulnerability:

You can't numb those hard feelings without numbing the other affects, our emotions. You cannot selectively numb. So when we numb those, we numb joy, we numb gratitude, we numb happiness. And then, we are miserable, and we are looking for purpose and meaning, and then we feel vulnerable, so then we have a couple of beers and a banana nut muffin. And it becomes this dangerous cycle.

There is a reason this video has almost 52 million views. We are not alone in the life struggle of risking, of being vulnerable. Yet, our social narrative indicates that we need to be strong and perfect.

What is the narrative of Religious Life?

What is our "beer and banana muffin?"

For us, as men and women Religious, I see an acceptance of similar social norms in how we live and deal with loss. However, we are called to be counter-cultural, resist ascribing to the dominant social narrative and rather ascribe to gospel values. Jesus is a witness of vulnerability, and he encountered the vulnerability in the people he met. We see this in the story of Lazarus' death.

When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. (John 11: 32-35)

I do not think this was a special divine ability that we mere humans cannot attain. In Jesus' full humanity, he allowed himself to be seen, to risk connection and rejection, and to see the vulnerability of the other. Every day, we experience personal vulnerability, and we encounter vulnerability in others. Are we willing to risk leaning into this so that we create a greater freedom rather than stagnation?

What would our narrative look like if we choose to replace our "beer and banana muffins" with vulnerability and enter into the process of risking?

Fragmentation vs. Integration

Another word for fragmentation is compartmentalization. Whichever word is used, it has the same effect – putting our experiences and emotions in a nice box and setting it on the highest shelf, out of view. However, it really is never out of view; rather, it is a shadow hovering over everything we do, and it demands energy. These boxes have a way of piling up over time and eventually the demand on our psychic energy is too great – we feel depleted, worn, and our creative life energy flickers.

The goal at this stage is to integrate – to take those boxes off the shelf, pay attention to their meaning, and ask the questions:

How did this inform my life?

What still needs tending?

How does this relate to other experiences in my life? Is there a pattern and/or lesson?

What is the gift received?

An important aspect of integration is relating to our affective emotions, like fear and

anger, rather than reacting from them. When we *react from* our emotions, they are in control, and it seems like something is happening to us. If we *relate to* our emotions, we begin to understand them, and they can help us journey through this process.

When we *relate* to these emotions, we start to re-inhabit our bodies. What does this mean? We feel again. We are no longer numbing the feelings and pushing them away. We begin to feel more energy and engaged with others. This is no easy task. It takes time and energy (and unfortunately suffering as we feel difficult emotions). Yet, as we expend the energy toward integration, we retrieve more life energy to expend in creative life tasks. It is this life energy that allows us to reflect on Mary Oliver's (1992) question: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

**Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?**

Reflection on Unresolved Loss

You will need more room than what is offered here. Use this as an outline.

Recall an event or events that occurred in your life. It could be a long time ago or more recent. The key for this exercise is that it is something that seems unresolved for you. Spend a moment to reflect on this and write down what comes to mind.

EVENT(S)

Then go through each of these stages and write down how you see yourself impacted by this event in each stage.

ILLUSION

NUMBNESS

WITHDRAWAL

STAGNATION

FRAGMENTATION

After reviewing how this unattended loss holds you in some sense of stagnation and unfreedom, begin to reflect on the journey toward integration and what that might look like for this event. You may already have glimpses of thoughts and experiences. Be creative and play with what this might look like for you at this time in your life.

REALITY
PAIN
SEARCHING
RISK
INTEGRATION

Reflection Questions

What emerged for you as you completed this exercise?

Did other unattended losses come up that need attention?

Do you see how this can be helpful when something emerges in memory or present-day event?

Collective Aspects of Life and Loss

Are we so trapped in our institutions, tending to the dying structures, and grieving the loss of so much that the structures themselves do not allow for a radical presence to what is most needed in our world today? (Buck, 2017)

Our experience of now will shape the future. In *The Prophetic Imagination*, Walter Brueggemann (2018) speaks of a royal consciousness, or the dominant cultural narrative, that leads to an illusion of immortality.

More specifically, the royal consciousness is committed to numbness about death. It is unthinkable for the king to imagine or experience the end of his favorite historical arrangements, for they have become fully identified with his own person. And therefore his historical arrangements must be invested with a quality of durability if not eternity. Kings need to assign the notion of “forever” to every historical accident over which they preside. Thus it is not thinkable among us that our public institutions should collapse and we must engage in deception and self-deception about our alienations. So we must practice the royal game with our marriages [or Congregations] and all serious relations, with our bodies, our age and our health, our nerve, and our commitments.

Ultimately, we are incapable of facing our own death. All these denials about endings are necessary in the royal community because it is too costly to face and embrace them. It would suggest that we are not in charge, that things will not forever stay the manageable way they are, and that things will not finally

all work out. It is the business of kings to attach the word “forever” to everything we treasure. The great dilemma is that religious functionaries are expected to use the same “forever,” to attach it to things and make it sound theologically legitimated. But “forever” is always the word of Pharaoh, and as such it is the very word against which Yahweh and Moses did their liberating thing.
 (Brueggemann, 2018, p. 42)

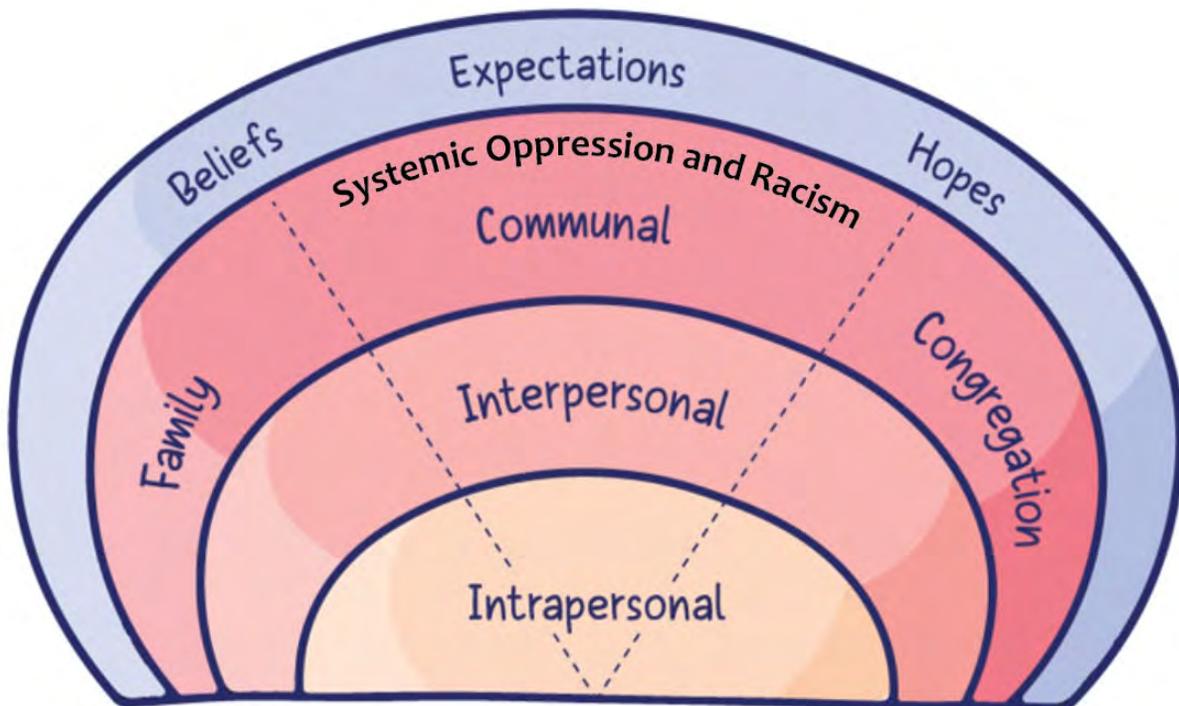
Reflect on Brueggemann’s words and imagine how you and your Congregation are the king, seeking everlasting life in ministerial institutions, possession of the charisma, and maintaining a way of life described as “apostolic religious life” or the form of consecrated life you live.

The most important work to ensure the future of Religious Life is to address those

spaces where we are “incapable of facing our own death” and understand the obstacles that impede our freedoms. There is new treasure to find, yet in our minds and hearts we keep protecting what has already been found. I am not proposing that the reality of Religious Life is dying; rather, I believe it is seeking its authentic expression. What we need to address are the ways we behave, believe, and think that hinder what that fuller expression may be – a dynamic and continual birthing of something rather than a time-stamped slice of reality that is *forever*.

In the model below, Collective Aspects of Unresolved Loss, there are four levels that need tending when addressing this collective dynamic. The following section explores these levels and then explores three aspects already mentioned: everlasting institutions, possession of the charisma, and holding onto an everlasting version of consecrated life.

A Model for the Collective Aspects of Life and Loss



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Intrapersonal

Thomas Moore (2004) expresses the ultimate reason for our need to explore these interior parts of ourselves – our interior reality – and to move toward integration and wholeness – to be a more authentic presence in the world.

You probably know more about the depths of your soul from periods of pain and confusion than from times of comfort. Darkness and turmoil stimulate the imagination in a certain way. They allow you to see things you might ordinarily overlook. You become sensitive to a different spectrum of emotion and meaning. You perceive the ultraviolet extremes of your feelings and thoughts, and you learn things you wouldn't notice in times of normalcy and brightness.

Much of the previous section addressed the personal reality of loss, and the energy needed to move toward stagnation/fragmentation or toward risk/integration. You will notice that *intrapersonal* is at the base of model, suggesting that it is foundational to the other work and speaking to its significance.

The work of the other three levels is difficult if there is not an awareness of how the intrapersonal facet is functioning in our life. I encourage you to review the previous sections regarding the change and unresolved loss to clarify intrapersonal aspects of loss.

Interpersonal

As we move into the next level, we move from the interior of our experiences toward the exterior, as we find ourselves in relationships with others. We can also see this as beyond persons to all of creation. Our presence to these relationships is

foundational to our personal growth and nurturing the growth in others.

When we seek for connection, we restore the world to wholeness. Our seemingly separate lives become meaningful as we discover how truly necessary we are to each other. (Wheatley)

Pope Francis (2014) has called us to be people of encounter, to be people of relationship and communion, and to model these interpersonal relationships on triune love. In order to do this, we must have the energy and freedom for connection, for this encountering. If we have not dealt with the intrapersonal aspect of unresolved loss, our relationships are impacted, there is a distancing from others, and we will not be available for authentic encounter.

Don't be closed in on yourselves, don't be stifled by petty squabbles, don't remain a hostage to your own problems. These will be resolved if you go forth and help others to resolve their own problems and proclaim the Good News. You will find life by giving life, hope by giving hope, love by giving love.

Because we are people of encounter, we also experience the joy and pain of these encounters.

What relationships do you have that are life giving?

What relationships do you find difficult or draining?

What relationships have unresolved hurts that need mending?

What relationships have you lost (by death or some other factor) that may still be lingering with the hurt of that loss?

This is a tricky part of the puzzle. If we retain the hurts, unresolved losses, and lingering issues that leave us drained, our energy is not available for the life-giving relationships and authentic encounters to which we are called as men and women Religious. Our relationships suffer, the mission suffers, and we diminish our ability to radically incarnate the gospel message.

The layers build on each other – fractures in the *intrapersonal* level impact and create fractures in the *interpersonal* level. This is compounded when we move to the next layer – the communal aspect of unresolved loss.

Communal

This layering can be quite subtle – we do not even realize it is happening. For example, if I have an unresolved loss from my youth in which I experienced a sense of abandonment (perhaps a friend moved, parents divorced, a close family member died), I may be cautious about who I am in relationship with and resist letting anyone get too close. I am more inclined to be attached to a place – where I live, my ministry, or Congregational property. Most likely, this is an unconscious process that I am engaging in, unaware of the root cause or the impact on my relationship.

Given this background, let's explore a likely scenario in which the Congregation is deciding about the future of a ministry to which I have dedicated myself, or perhaps a decision is being made about a property. What can happen? I bring my unresolved intrapersonal and interpersonal issues to the discernment process.

I may have a good argument or reason for resisting a change for this ministry or property; however, underneath the logical discussion, I have a secondary motivation –

a more personal, and likely unconscious reason. Or I could be detached from this decision, a *laissez-faire* attitude. This may stem from being disconnected from relationships and it is another form of resistance. Either of these reactions create an unfreedom for me, as well as for my Congregation.

Think about a decision your Congregation has made or is making.

How are you reacting to this discernment?

Think about what is causing this reaction. What are some *intrapersonal* and *interpersonal* dynamics?

What secondary motivations can you glean from your reflection?

What are the effects of these dynamics on the communal discernment process?

This is a difficult reflection because much of what is happening for us at this communal level is unconscious, outside of our awareness. This is when it is helpful to process this with a trusted friend, spiritual director, and/or therapist.

For many years I have presented on the topic of communal living and family-of-origin. This is a passion of mine because I see, and have personally experienced, the impact our way of being within our family, our earliest learnings about relationships, impact how we live in community.

When we enter any relationship or a communal setting like ministry, and in our case, most acutely in community living, we experience a recapitulation of our family-of-origin. Recapitulation – this is an important

word and one we do not hear too often, if ever! What does it mean? This is where it gets exciting. Well, I am a therapist, so I do 'geek out' with this stuff.

Basically, we re-do the dynamics that are part of our history, much of it coming from our family-of-origin or earliest relationships. Often, we are unaware that this is happening, yet this dynamic is the reason we become reactive to Sister X or Brother Y. Living in community and dealing with communal decisions is the perfect classroom to see how we react to relational dynamics and areas that we need to address. With intentionality, we can become more aware of these dynamics and begin to own them.

It would take pages to do this topic justice. An important companion topic is shadow work. Please review the reference and resource section (p. 28) for resources that provide greater explanation and ways to enter this work.

As women and men Religious we are called to both communal and personal liberation. This is a life-long journey and one that is never completed in our lifetime. Yet, we need the awareness of this liberating journey to be brought to the table. We need each other for this journey, and we need this journey to allow this gift called Religious Life to flourish and bring God's active and passionate love to every encounter.

Systemic Oppression and Racism

In the 1970s, an Australian aboriginal activist group wrote a powerful truth that speaks to our reality today.

If you come here to help me, you are wasting your time. If you come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let's work together.

Overarching the communal lens of loss is systemic oppression, such as racism. I can not do this topic justice; rather I offer some thoughts for reflection.

When I think about systemic oppression, I immediately go to the concept of intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to describe how race, class, gender, and other individual characteristics "intersect" with one another and overlap (see Resource section for a link to a TedTalk with Crenshaw).

A main premise of intersectionality is how identities intersect, such as being a woman and African American, or being male, Caucasian, and homosexual. We all have multiple identities; however, there is an implicit bias within society that deems what is normative. Normative in the United States is a white, heterosexual, cisgender, Christian male who holds privilege above other because of how his identities intersect. This privilege affords him a place at the table where decisions are made, and access is to be had. This is where intersectionality becomes real. It is really about who holds the power to keep certain identities marginalized and struggling for what seems should be mainstream opportunities, like education, employment, economic security, and safety. The privileged group maintains who is at the center, who is deemed desirable, and who is afforded ample opportunities. This is an issue of power within our systems that need to be addressed, including in religious life.

Because of my intersecting identities (White, heterosexual, cisgender), I am privileged. When I am with my Religious sisters, I move among the group as a privileged woman. When I am outside Congregational activities, generally the only place where I do not experience privilege is

based on my gender, as a woman. However, given all my other privileges, I can generally manage these situations. I know my experience is different for many of my Religious sisters who are Latina, Asian, African-American, African and others in the diaspora, lesbian, trans-gendered, and any other identities that are not supported as normative in most Congregations today.

For those who hold dominant social privilege, our part in the system can evade our perception.

Few things are more difficult than to see outside the bounds of your own perspective – to be able to identify assumptions that you take as universal truths but which, instead, have been crafted by your own unique identity and experiences in the world. We live much of our lives in our own heads, in a reconfirming dialogue with ourselves. Even when we discuss crucial issues with others, much of the dialogue is not dialogue: it is monologue where we work to convince others to understand us or to adopt our view. (Takacs, 2003)

Reflect on your identities and how they intersect. [Click here for a document to assist in this reflection.](#)

Who holds the power to ensure your identities remain in place? This could be to support an identity as privileged or to marginalize an identity.

As Religious, we hold privilege by our membership to our Congregation.

Reflect on what this might be like (your privileged identities) for others you encounter. What is it like to hold a range of identities that are not privileged, whether for yourself and/or for others?

You may be wondering what this has to do with unresolved loss? Anyone who does not *qualify* as normative has experienced some form of discrimination, oppression, racism, or the many other *-isms* swirling out there. The unearned special rights, immunities, and societal advantages granted members of the dominant social identity group has evaded their lives. Because privilege represents an expression of power, there is less power built into these identities. To exist is to exist as *other* and assimilate and collude with the group who holds this privilege and power.

Living as *other* can wear a person down. It has its cost and takes enormous energy. What becomes *normative* is the navigation of the privileged and dominant systems, the fight for access and equity, and to be seen and understood as oneself.

For anyone who identifies as *other*, or experiences oppression due to their unique configuration of identities, it is important to acknowledge the energy needed for this struggle, the loss of ideals and hopes because of barriers, and the intrapersonal conflict that comes with assimilation and those parts of self and culture that are lost. The poem, “Who Said It Was Simple” by Audre Lorde (1973) speaks to this reality.



There are so many roots to the tree
of anger
that sometimes the branches shatter
before they bear.

Sitting in Nedicks
the women rally before they march
discussing the problematic girls
they hire to make them free.
An almost white counterman passes
a waiting brother to serve them first
and the ladies neither notice nor reject
the slighter pleasures of their slavery.

But I who am bound by my mirror
as well as my bed
see causes in colour
as well as sex

and sit here wondering
which me will survive
all these liberations.



The question before us as we explore the multitude of identities we hold – some privileged and some marginalized – is what parts of me will survive; or as Lorde says, “which me will survive.”

The other part of that question is, given the multitude of identities we hold, which of these identities survive? Which ones do not survive or are suppressed?

Expectations, Beliefs, and Hopes

We all have them – ideas of how things *should* be, unspoken ideals, and hopes that keep us going. Most of the time, these do not interfere with our day-to-day functioning and assist us in making decisions and getting to the next day. They linger in the background. However, these hopes, expectations, and beliefs may need to be articulated to create an understanding with others. At times, they remain unconscious and can create difficulty in our relationships.

Expectations, beliefs, and hopes comprise the fourth level, like an umbrella covering all other levels. They intersect and influence the other layers. They are derived from culture, family of origin, personality tendencies, and personal experiences.

The key issue regarding our expectations, hopes, and beliefs is that we grow in our awareness of what they are and how they impact our thoughts and behaviors. We make decisions based on these – whether we

realize it or not. The tricky thing here is that each person comes with their own set of expectations, beliefs, and hopes.

Think about a current relationship – perhaps one in community or in ministry.

What are your beliefs about being in relationship with this person or group?

How do these beliefs create expectations?

What are your hopes for how this relationship will be in the future?

I have been in several situations where I thought I was doing what was expected and then it was like the line I needed to cross to be successful or be seen as fitting in would move. I came to realize that in these situations, it was about expectations. I was not understanding the expectations of the other. I would make a guess and when I got to where I thought I should be going, the target would move because I was not guessing correctly. My challenge at that point is to have a conversation to clarify expectations. *And*, I have no doubt that I have been on the other side – unknowingly moving the target for another. As I become more aware of my own hopes, expectations, and beliefs, I can articulate what these are, making them tangible rather than illusive.

Feminist scholar Sara Ahmed (2016) speaks to our collectiveness while bringing our different selves to this collective. In addressing solidarity, something we strive for as men and women Religious, there are struggles unique to each person. It is in these struggles that we form our beliefs, hopes, and expectations and allow us to form a common ground. Out of our diversity comes unity and from this unity, diversity flows.

Solidarity does not assume that our struggles are the same struggles, or that our pain is the same pain, or that our hope is for the same future. Solidarity involves commitment, and work, as well as the recognition that even if we do not have the same feelings, or the same lives, or the same bodies, we do live on common ground. (Sara Ahmed, 2016)

All of this – finding common ground, exploring our history of loss and its impact today – is sacred space for transformation. We see Jesus as a model of this in his self-emptying nature which allowed for the vastness of interior space for authentic encounter.

The Kenosis [to empty out] of Jesus was complete, so complete that there was space enough for all expressions of his humanity to find fullness and integration. (Ferder, 1986)

What does this collective and personal self-emptying look like for Religious Life today? I will explore three areas for consideration. Each of these are very sensitive areas for reflection. All I ask is for you to pay attention to your response. What resonates with you? What do you resist? Explore these reactions and see what emerges for you? Bring it to prayer. What is the invitation?

Everlasting Institutions

One thing that has become apparent as I talk with other Religious who are 30 years or less in their communities is that there is a dynamic that goes something like this (paraphrasing from many conversations I have had in the last few years).

It's like I'm in a time warp. I am listening to stories about ministries and what the sisters are doing, and I get confused. There is a disconnect because

I know these ministries and the stories do not add up with what I see today. Then I realize that the stories are from 20 years ago and they are being told like they happened last year.

I call this *living a myth*. This goes beyond storytelling. There is a sense that time stands still, and we have not caught up to the reality of the present day. There is a similar dynamic regarding physical aging. Perhaps both create a similar underlying dynamic – a denial or resistance to acknowledging that change is occurring and with that, we are also changing, as individuals and as Congregations.

This seems to be happening with the ministries and institutions which were created or became more developed during the latter part of the 20th century. So many of our ministries became more corporate at that time. This is not a bad thing. There was and continues to be a need for structure to ensure the ministry continues its mission. What is difficult is the myth that we can continue to be part of it in the same way. It is like the high school football player who continues to live out his glory days as if the big game was last week instead of 40 years ago.

Perhaps a question to ask is if we need to be a part of a ministry, or are there others who can lead the way, freeing us to tend to new and emergent needs?

Reflecting on the writing from Walter Brueggemann (2018), how do we continue to perpetuate the royal consciousness when it comes to our institutions (and ourselves)? The king promotes the everlasting quality of our institutions and our lives; that it will *always* be a certain way. The only everlasting quality to anything is the steadfastness of triune love. Everything else

changes. Not consciously acknowledging the shifting nature of our lives and institutions places us on the road of royal consciousness rather than being a countercultural witness in our world. Rather than being a prophetic voice, we witness to a myth that hinders the ultimate unfolding of God's plan for creation.

For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:9)

Possession of the Charism

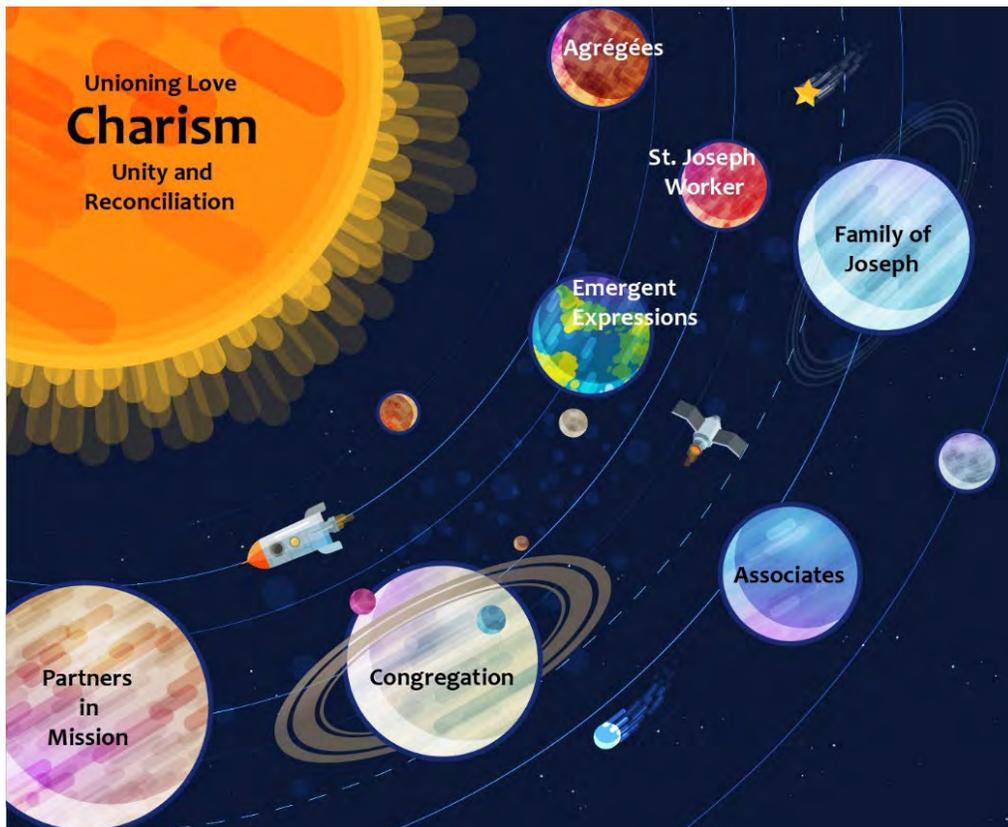
The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* provides the following explanation of charism.

Whether extraordinary or simple and humble, charisms are graces of the Holy Spirit which directly or indirectly benefit the Church, ordered as they are to her building up, to the good of [all people], and to the needs of the world. (799)

Charisms are to be accepted with gratitude by the person who receives them and by all members of the Church as well. They are a wonderfully rich grace for the apostolic vitality and for the holiness of the entire Body of Christ, provided they really are genuine gifts of the Holy Spirit and are used in full conformity with authentic promptings of this same Spirit, that is, in keeping with charity, the true measure of all charisms. (800)

Each of our Congregations has been given a particular charism, or gift, to bring about the Gospel message in our time and place in the world. The Catechism states "charisms are to be accepted by the person who receives them and by all members of the Church as well" (800). These charisms that we hold so faithfully belong to us and to all of God's people.

Over the past decades, a movement has been afoot to *de-center* the charisms of our



Congregations. There is a shift in the Congregation being the sole holder of the charism – where the charism has been historically held as the gift for their time. Instead, the charism is at the center, and the Congregation, associates, partners in ministry, and other groups circle the charism.

When I reflect on this, the image that comes to me is our solar system, with the planets circling the sun (charism). This image (on the previous page) is how I envision this for the Sisters of St. Joseph. Swirling around the charism are the many ways the charism is articulated in our world. What would the image look like for your charism family?

This is an emergent concept and not everyone ascribes to this understanding. It may evolve into something different as Religious Life changes over time. No matter how you are perceiving the place of charism in our lives, some questions are worth pondering.

What is your relationship to the charism?

How does your Congregation perceive its responsibility for the charism?

Does your Congregation see the charism as something shared? How is it shared?

Do you believe that others, outside the Congregation, can be called to the same charism? How does your answer inform how you relate to others?

Maria Cimperman (2014) invites us to reflect on the charism and the gift it is to the Church and the world.

I too am invited to radical availability, a Suscipe to Jesus lived out through my

charism in religious life and for the Church and world.

These are all hope-filled invitations, looking at the world around us and offering our charism to be the love of Christ in the world today. Our success is not the point, but our effort is. God does the transforming – of us and of our world. We seek to participate – with love, to wake up the world, to console and rejoice.

As gift, the charism is given and received freely, without need for reimbursement. Yet, it appears to me that there is sometimes a competition for the charism, holding it like a prize. There also seems to be a dynamic in which the competition extends to other charisms, each vying for a place of superiority – like, “our charism is what is needed in the world today” or “we are the best group because of our charism.” Of course, we may say the first statement (because ALL of our charisms are needed today!); however, we do not dare say the second statement. Rather, we may infer it or behave in a manner that shows how we really think.

How does your Congregation view the charism when relating it to other charisms?

Do you see some distinctions and similarities in the various charisms you know?

Is there an invitation for us as we continue to enter emergent space?

In this conversation about loss, I encourage us all to have a conversation around how we hold onto our charism in a way that hinders the charism from being fully expressed. What in our interpersonal and intrapersonal

histories causes unfreedoms for this expression? What is needed to liberate the charism and allow it to be fully alive in our world?

Everlasting Version of Consecrated Life

Since the inception of Christianity, there has been everchanging forms of what we call consecrated life today. With every era, these forms look different.

From the beginnings of monasticism to the “new communities” of our own time, every form of consecrated life has been born of the Spirit’s call to follow Jesus as the Gospel teaches. (Pope Francis, 2014)

Much has been written on this and this is not a history lesson. For suggested reading, see the references and resources section (p. 28). Rather, the point to highlight is how we react to this ebb-and-flow of shifting tides within consecrated life. Is there a sense that it has always been this way – everlasting rather than everchanging? We know in our mind that this is not the case, yet our mind has ways to ensure we are safe and comfortable.

We are in a change of era. In his Christmas Greeting to the Roman Curia, Pope Francis (2019) describes this for us, as he speaks of change as conversion, specifically interior transformation.

This journey, of course, is not just geographical, but above all symbolic: it is a summons to discover the movement of the heart, which, paradoxically, has to set out in order to remain, to change in order to be faithful.

All of this has particular importance for our time, because what we are experiencing is *not simply an epoch of*

changes, but an epochal change. We find ourselves living at a time when change is no longer linear, but epochal. It entails decisions that rapidly transform our ways of living, of relating to one another, of communicating and thinking, of how different generations relate to one another and how we understand and experience faith and science. Often we approach change as if were a matter of simply putting on new clothes, but remaining exactly as we were before.

This shifting calls us to question everything, discern the Spirit’s emergent movement, and have great faith and flexibility. I wonder how this idea of epochal change relates to our lives? What is the seismic shift or developmental process that calls us to a collective conversion and transformation?

Brueggemann’s (2018) concept of royal consciousness and the king’s everlasting quality of what we know and prioritize at our present moment thwarts the Spirit’s efforts to allow this developmental journey to emerge and for us to see who we are to become as an institution, or counter-culturally, beyond the institution as we know it today. For Sisters of St. Joseph, we are called to a nothingness that is everything in the eyes of God.

Jesus in the Eucharist, my dear daughter, is entirely empty of self. And should we not also, at his urgent invitation, work to establish an Institute totally empty of self? Yes, our very dear sister, our cherished association will be a body without a body, and if I dare say so, a congregation without being a congregation, and perhaps in time, a religious order without being a religious order. In a word, it will never appear to be anything in the world, and it will be

in the eyes of God whatever that same good God, in his infinite mercy, will deign to make of his Institute. (Medaille, 1660)

What concept is core to your Congregation's foundation that needs to be expressed more fully?

We need to understand and grieve everything we have known and currently experience. It is only in this letting go of the belief of permanence that we have the energy to dream what will be and allow the emergent to invite us to the dance.

Reflect on your form of consecrated life. What are some aspects of this life that seem everlasting, yet are everchanging?

How do you and members of your community react to the shifting tides of change within consecrated life?



Don't look at your feet to see if you are doing it right. Just dance. (Lamott, 1995)

What needs to be freed in order to "just dance"?

SECTION FOUR ENTERING THE MYSTERY

The spiritual life is not the elimination of struggle, it is the sanctification of struggle. It is struggle transformed by wisdom. (Chittister, 2014)

Knowing that we are people invited into the reality of the paschal mystery – embodying the dying and rising in our lives – we open ourselves to the pain, the suffering of the cross, and we then allow life to re-inhabit our bodies, the resurrection.

Saint Augustine proclaimed that "we are Easter People and Alleluia is our song!" We are called to grieve more profoundly and deeply because we know our life is grounded in God and in the paschal mystery. Yet, as Christians, we are in a world that promotes a denial of death, covering up the reality of a loss by moving on quickly, not allowing a full grieving process, and ignoring the grief of others.

Dare I say that we also collude with these reactions to loss. Perhaps you are saying, "not me," yet I think we all collude to some extent. We may deny the process of aging, holding on for all its worth. We may cover up our losses by keeping busy and distracted. We may believe we have to have it all together – no messiness allowed! Perhaps there is a part of us that wants to hide and ignore what is happening. Anything sound familiar? Maybe some other reaction came to you.

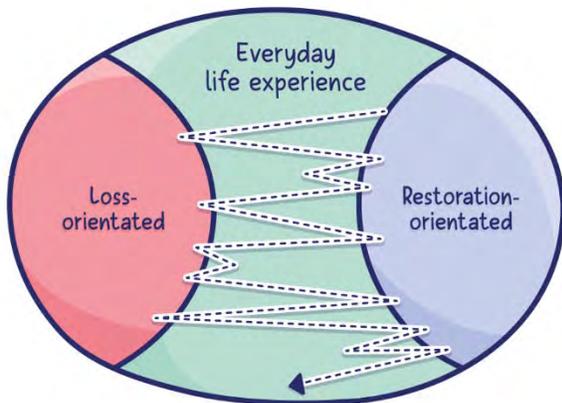
We see this denial of death, the aging process, or the [fill in the blank...] all around us. There are stories of using extraordinary means to keep someone alive, the latest and greatest procedure and products for rejuvenation, promising the fountain of youth. I for one am prone to be

enticed by those miracle potions that will help ward off wrinkles.

How do you navigate around and resist facing the reality of change, loss, and grief?

Grief is the normal but bewildering cluster of ordinary human emotions arising in response to a loss, intensified and complicated by the relationship to the person or the object lost. In Buddhist teaching, attachment is one of the causes of suffering. Because we have attachments, we will suffer, and we will experience grief.

Given this is the inevitable nature of our lives, whether collectively or individually, we are then called to risk entering the paschal mystery. It is this redemptive nature of suffering and movement toward the impulse of resurrection that we are reminded of the cyclical nature of the paschal mystery.



Stroebe & Schut 'Dual Process' model

The "dual process" model developed by Stroebe and Schut (1999) allows us to see the ebb-and-flow of grief and loss.

This model identifies two types of stressors, loss- and restoration-oriented, and a dynamic, regulatory coping process of oscillation, whereby the

grieving individual at times confronts, at other times avoids, the different tasks of grieving. (p. 197)

As people go through everyday life, they move from times of being loss-oriented to restoration-oriented. It is not linear.

I know for myself, after facing the death of my brother and father, I would go from being loss-oriented, the grief hitting me at unexpected times, and then moving toward restoration-oriented moments. The same has happened for me with each significant ministerial change. This dual process model reminds me of the continuous rising and dying of the loss process.

How have you experienced the ebb-and-flow of loss, moving from being loss-oriented to restoration-oriented?

To be a follower of Christ is to be a bearer of sorrow – our own and collectively (from our communities extending to all people of God with the assurance that God suffers with us.

This is a radical picture of God – that God suffers with us. Many people have the expectation that God can and will eliminate our suffering. They hold to the idea that God is the great fixer. There is bargaining, like "if I only pray enough." Sometimes these expectations lead to frustration and anger because God is not resolving things. We question our own faithfulness, and we might question God's faithfulness. The affirmation that God suffers with us shifts the focus from resolution (fix it) to mutuality.

How does your heart experience God's suffering alongside you as you experience loss?

Grounded in God's extravagant love, we can grieve and risk holding onto hope.

SECTION FIVE RISKING HOPE

*Love is like the Hokey-Pokey – sooner or later you have to put your whole self in.
(Hoover)*

Can we risk being countercultural? Can we truly risk entering the paschal mystery knowing our lives rest in the abundant love of God. We are reminded by Meister Eckhart that “whatever God does, the first outburst is always compassion” (Fox, 1980). It is knowing this impulse toward compassion that allows us to risk. In 2019, Pope Francis gave a homily calling us to risk and put our whole self into God’s way.

This then is the consecrated life: praise which gives joy to God’s people, prophetic vision that reveals what counts. When it is like this, then it flowers and becomes a summons for all of us to counter mediocrity: to counter a devaluation of our spiritual life, to counter the temptation to reduce God’s importance, to counter an accommodation to a comfortable and worldly life, to counter complaints, – complaints! – dissatisfaction and self-pity, to counter a mentality of resignation and “we have always done it this way”: this is not God’s way.

We are called to “not pretend that life is all beauty. We are aware of darkness and sin, of poverty and pain” (St. John Paul II, 1986) and we become bearers of this sorrow.

We carry the darkness of grief and risk being countercultural. We can do this because we have the assurance that God suffers with us. God is the rock on which we stand – especially when amid this darkness. The life,

death, and resurrection of Jesus affirms that God is not apathetic but rather a faithful comforter. As we carry this darkness we shall be comforted by this faithful comforter.

The Greek for “those who mourn” implies active lamenting – crying and wailing. Modern Western translations have not kept this active sense – they have been reshaped into a passive state of feeling. I think of the video clips of Middle Eastern mothers lamenting, wailing at the loss of a loved one. They are actively lamenting. Their whole self is involved.

God calls us to lament – to cry out. In this active process of lamenting, we become hopeful because we are not alone, we are getting the grief out and being transformed by the experience.

This hope is contained in the process of healing. Every person has the instinct to heal – we have what we need – we need to access it, listen to it – we are active participants. This sense of active lamenting can take many different forms. It will depend on your culture, the dynamics of the loss, and your personality, among other things. The key is to *do something* with your experience.

By *doing something*, we can focus on the intrapersonal aspects of our lives and respond to the urgent need to hear what is within. We sort through the external messages that bombard us, that keep us paralyzed, or tell us that our experience is not important. We are compelled by God’s desire for us to befriend our interior life, to ensure energy is available for life-giving pursuits.

Religious and civil rights leader Howard Thurman (1949) wrote about Jesus’ life as urging a radical change, within our attitudes that flow out to all God’s people. Jesus’

countercultural life is a witness to this risking and gives us a framework for radical hope.

In the case of the Jewish people in the Greco-Roman world the problem was even more acute than under ordinary circumstances, because it had to do not only with physical survival in terms of life and limb but also with the actual survival of a culture and a faith. In the midst of this psychological climate Jesus began his teaching and his ministry. His words were directed to the House of Israel, a minority within the Greco-Roman world, smarting under the loss of status, freedom, and autonomy, haunted by the dream of the restoration of a lost glory and a former greatness. His message focused on the urgency of a radical change in the inner attitude of the people. (pp. 20-21)

This section started with the question:

Can we risk being countercultural?

Unfortunately, times have not changed much since Jesus walked on earth. Can we *not* risk being countercultural? As we look at the many layers of change and loss, what stands in the way for each of us, individually and collectively, to put our whole self in? How do we ascribe to the attitudes of the Greco-Roman world (the dominant culture) rather than the people of Israel (the seekers on the margins)?

What is our ultimate hope and what are we willing to risk, bringing this hope into greater consciousness for ourselves and the world?

CONCLUSION

There is no easy conclusion. Life cannot be wrapped up like a pretty package. The individual and collective story continues to unfold. To this end, I offer three quotes and a bit of commentary and a question for your reflection.

This is my way of not finishing the story. Perhaps these quotes will spur you into further thought about the individual and collective tasks before you and your Congregation – and all of us living as consecrated men and women in a Church that begs for us to be witnesses of a hope that compels us to risk.

Your visions will become clear only when you can look into your own heart. Who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside, awakens. (Jung, 1973)

Triune love waits to be discovered in our heart. It is here that we can awaken to God's desire for our lives, and then be propelled outward. When you think about the vastness of the heart, there are places that are closed off because of pain and unresolved losses.

How can you create space to be vulnerable and begin opening those spaces, releasing its energy for yourself and for others?



A man dies when he refuses to stand up for that which is right. A man dies when he refuses to stand up for justice. A man dies when he refuses to take a stand for that which is true. (King, Jr., 1965)

This quote has been loosely translated, saying ‘Our lives begin the day we become silent about things that matter.’ What really matters to us? Comfort, safety, being liked, belonging...the list can go on and on. *Or*, risking, being in the margins, confronting systemic injustices...the list can go on and on. The things that really matter for us will inform our actions. If we claim to be followers of Jesus, incarnating the gospel in our world today, then we are called to no longer be silent about things that matter. Do we need to resuscitate ourselves? The Church? Society?

How have our lives begun to end because we are silent about things that matter?

To end, the wisdom of Chardin can speak for itself.

Someday, after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love, and then, for a second time in the history of the world, [we] will have discovered fire. (Chardin, 2002)

How are we discovering fire?

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