



Our truest life is when we are in our dreams awake

Henry David Thoreau

When a community has more memories than it does dreams, it is dying. In my work with religious communities I have had the privilege of hearing many stories of life in the good old days, nostalgic stories about days gone by in formation and the early years of life in community. As these stories are shared with laughter and tears, I often watch the faces of the novices and those newly professed and wonder to myself: What are the stories they will tell? Is there more of a past than there will ever be a future for this community?

The purpose of this article is to describe a type of journey that aims not merely to create powerful new visions, but to transform the heart and soul of communities by the very processes used. Such processes are not for every community. These processes are integrally connected to, and best suited for, communities on a journey of refounding, transformation or revitalization. The processes I will describe are intended to bring about deep and radical change. Previously, in an article entitled, *Refounding Religious Life: A Choice for Transformation Change* (HUMAN DEVELOPMENT Fall 2009), I outlined five key elements to such refounding efforts intended to birth a new cycle of life. These are:

1. Prophetic vision: the aspiration of refounding
2. Transformation of consciousness: seeing through new lenses
3. Re-appropriation of your charisma: authenticating your inner voice
4. Conversion and reconciliation: the crucible of refounding
5. Experimentation and learning: evolution in action

Gather the Wisdom, Weave a Dream Transformative Visioning as a Refounding Process

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What I would like to focus upon here is the element of visioning. While a prophetic vision is the ideal outcome, it is the process that this article intends to describe. If your community is at a crossroads of life and death and is courageous enough to go all-in on a future that transcends the past, then perhaps transformative visioning may provide you with a viable means for birthing new life.

WHAT IS TRANSFORMATIVE VISIONING?

Transformative visioning is, in essence, a communal faith journey. While the end goal may be a prophetic vision, the power of this journey lies more in how you walk it than in the vision claimed. It is a journey that will test your readiness to live authentically out of your deepest beliefs. It will cause you to leave behind all that has become misaligned and bereft of meaning, all that is made more of nostalgia than of your call to further the reign of God. It is a journey that seeks to transform the very culture of community through holy and intimate conversations, loving and reconciling exchanges and communal discernment of God's call. It is less about the future that awaits you than the sort of people you are, who you are growing to become and the very purpose you claim for your existence.

With that as an introduction, let's start with a basic description and then add to our understanding as we explore further: Transformative visioning is a multi-phase process of envisioning a future distinct from your past. It is a means for re-discovering, re-vitalizing, co-creating and transforming the culture of community. It involves spiritual, intellectual, emotional, behavioral and existential processes. It is not about forecasting the future, eliminating risk, creating vision statements or engaging in conventional strategic planning.

The primary reason for engaging in transformative visioning is to gather the wisdom and weave a dream powerful enough to awaken a community's soul. It is a journey intended to bring forth deep and radical change enabling new life to emerge. Such processes are part and parcel of refounding religious life, the part that invites you to create, articulate and activate a prophetic vision for the future.

LESSONS FROM CONVENTIONAL PROCESSES: POTENTIAL PITFALLS

A sad and cautionary truth about conventional visioning processes is that most fail to produce the intended results. In fact, a review of the literature by Henry Mintzberg suggests that upwards of 80 percent fail! The good news is that the reasons for such failures are well documented. And while we are not focusing upon these conventional approaches, the lessons learned are worth studying because transformative visioning will, at the very least, demand that we stay clear of these pitfalls.

While there are a host of potential missteps, I would like to give honorable mention to five of the most common problems with conventional approaches. Allow these to serve as red flags, cautionary benchmarks for assessing your own efforts along the way.

1. Less Than an All-out Effort

Visions that wither and die are often ones that were never given a full measure of life from the beginning. They were not infused with a sense of urgency, a forceful call or a compelling set of reasons that would oblige an all-out effort. Too often the "real work" of community takes precedence. Keeping the community going on a daily basis, maintaining the lives and wellbeing of its members, keeping ministry and family obligations are all part of the ordinary press of life. The work that has to be done while visioning seems extraneous. What communities fail to realize is that efforts to transform themselves, if seriously pursued, must become the real work of community. If your visioning effort is less than an all-out effort, if it is not the real work of the community, then it will neither transform your lives nor will live up to its name as prophetic.

2. Insufficient Depth

Even if a visioning process begins in earnest with stirring calls to push out into the deep, rarely do communities stray far from the shore. Pledges to have soul-searching conversations, though sincere at the time, are continually confronted by the natural resistance to what promises to become tension-filled conversations. Fear of conflict, lack of trust, limited skills and a backlog of prior unsuccessful efforts bring members and leaders alike to look for a way out: We don't have the time. It will cost too much. We're too old to change. We need more study. There is never a dearth of reasons (rationalizations) for staying ashore. If your urges to stay ashore are not successfully challenged and worked through, there will be no depth to the process and your efforts will fail to transform.

3. Limited Ownership

If there is no ownership by the members for whatever vision is claimed, it will never get off the ground. In order to create and carry out a transformative vision, members must believe in it and be asked to sacrifice to see it through. Only owners feel this kind of responsibility and are willing to make such sacrifices. And to become owners, members must be involved in every step of the process, have an experience where both planners and leaders listen to what they say, and know that their voice matters in shaping the process and the vision. They must have real (not pseudo) choices along the way and real power to say yes or no to these.

Too often attempts are made by leaders to sell the vision by persuading members why they ought to buy in. Members know when they are being sold something that they were not a part of creating. These measures don't create genuine ownership and, consequently, any vision that follows will be quickly orphaned.

4. Working Around Resistance

Forces of change inevitably evoke forces of resistance resulting in conflict. Despite this well-known change/resistance dynamic, leaders and members continue to collude in a dance of avoidance. They see resistance as “out there,” in others who voice disappointment and anger. Rarely do they recognize their own collusion in this dance, let alone thank those who speak their unspoken resistance, giving them the appearance of cooperation and propriety.

Failure is inevitable when, instead of dealing directly with voices of resistance, strategies are formed to minimize, work around and diminish the power of resisters (e.g., discrediting their integrity by labeling them oppositional or crazy; appeasing their anger by agreeing to disagree, containing their airtime with processes that keep things moving in the name of accomplishing a task). These tactics not only limit the other’s persuasive strength, but also sap the strength out of any vision claimed in this way.

5. Glorification of the Past

This is a tough one for a church steeped in ritual and tradition. Yet visioning processes that invite deep rather than incremental change are ones that require more time spent looking forward than looking in the rearview mirror. However, processes that pit a loyalty to the past against a fidelity to the future are doomed. What are needed are integrative, both/and visions that have a bias toward the future.

If honoring the past means behaving strictly in accord with yesterday’s interpretations of canon law, the constitutions or the words of your founder, and disallowing any new interpretations or changes, then prophetic visions are pre-empted. Yes, the past must be honored, understood and appreciated and, simultaneously, it must be re-incorporated into a new vision and understood in a new way. This newness carries with it a necessary departure from the past in such a way that transformation can occur. Transformative visioning processes require that any future claimed is one that transcends the past, not severs it. There must be a dying of old ways for revitalization to occur and for a future to be born—the way of the Paschal Mystery.

PRINCIPLES OF TRANSFORMATIVE VISIONING

In contrast to conventional visioning processes, a transformative visioning process requires an entirely different kind of mindset and approach to planning and implementation. It places a premium on face-to-face dialogue and in-depth conversations over breadth of coverage and written reports. It values the cognitive skills of intuition, imagination and poetry at least as much as logic, reason and prose. It values substantial partnership between leaders and members who together orbit

around a developing vision. Let me describe more fully just a few of the more salient principles in order to help explicate the distinctions.

1. Destiny over Destination

Visioning processes of all kinds seek to create new visions. But the primary purpose for engaging in transformative visioning processes is not simply to arrive at the destination with a new vision statement. Rather it is to embrace the journey itself as the pathway to embracing your destiny, your primary purpose for existing. It is not that the end goal of claiming a new vision is irrelevant, but it is secondary to the deeper reason for engaging in such processes. The deeper reason for engaging in a transformative visioning process is to respond to God’s call to discover anew your destiny.

Parker Palmer frames it best when he asks, “Who are you meant to become?” In his book, *Let Your Life Speak*, he suggests that our life’s journey is an ever-unfolding one. In discerning our next best step it is, therefore, wise to listen to what our life has to say and that our journey can thus far reveal. What can your life tell you about who you are growing to become?

I would add that who we are in the present always holds the tensions between who we have been and who we are growing to become. Reflecting upon this tension, this betwixt and between state of becoming, can help us appreciate our deepest yearnings. It invites us to address what is yet to be reconciled between past and future and who God is calling us to become. These are the kind of deeper questions asked over and over again in different ways throughout the journey of transformation.

2. Care of the Whole

Much has been written in recent decades about the developmental shift within religious life from highly dependent to highly independent relationships that individuals have had to make relative to community and church hierarchy. The more recent shift from independence to interdependence has highlighted a need to care for the good of the whole and the individual. In other words the identity and well-being of both the community and the individual are important and interconnected. Hence, a great deal of work is being done to foster values such as mutual accountability, shared wisdom and partnership between leaders and members. New paradigms are continually being proffered to support this movement, for example: Sandra Schneiders’ idea of reframing spirituality and the vows, my idea of shifting from hierarchical to circular models of governance and Peter Block’s idea of creating structures of belonging.

The transformative visioning processes I am describing here are ones that invite and promote this kind of continued growth toward interdependence. The values of

interdependence are integrally woven into the processes. This challenges the more conventional visioning processes, which are heavily skewed toward dependency (e.g., leadership creates and sells the vision) or those skewed toward independence (e.g., personal transformation done in parallel fashion rather than together as a community). Transformative visioning processes encourage both freedom of individual choice along with invitations to care for the whole as a both-and principle of accountability.

3. The Vision Is Already in Us

Reiner Rilke once said, “The future enters into us, in order to transform itself in us, long before it happens.” Transformative visions are not made from the advice of others, deduced from theory or acquired from yesterday’s dogma (i.e., the realm of more conventional visioning approaches). Rather, they are homespun dreams realized only through a process of discovering the wisdom that lies within each member, beneath the floorboards of the known and familiar. Such visions are conceived from within the womb of a community seeking to discover its own destiny and co-created by leaders and members alike.

While the future of religious life may be “unpictureable,” as Patricia Wittberg suggests, it nonetheless exists in trace amounts. There are intimations of a future that currently exists along the edges, manifested by outliers of community who dance to the beat of different drummers. Other fragments are seen by the many prophetic authors of our time, who again and again offer new images of what lies beyond the horizon. Most prevalently, however, are the seeds of a future that lie within each member’s dream of what could be if only they had the invitation, support and the courage to risk birthing its potential. Creation fervently awaits our participation in co-creating the next version of the future; one better than the last, but one still leaving space for generations to come. Transformative visioning processes invite you to weave the strands of a future already in you into the next best step in the ongoing journey of religious life.

4. Appreciating Paradox

Engaging in a transformative visioning process requires an appreciation of paradox. For example, leaders and members will need to embrace ambivalence, ambiguity and anxiety as part of our human condition. These emotions will be constant companions throughout the betwixt and between phases of transformation and in your efforts to picture the unpictureable. Allow yourself to become clearly confused as part of the process and view this confusion as a harbinger for change, rather than a problem. Confusion simply means that you are trying to understand things in a new way. It will be important to become more at ease and adept at being peacefully in conflict. Working with tension and conflict is part of the

creative process, part of the necessary chaos and what it means to honor diversity.

Orderly chaos is the name of the game. Making chaos out of your ordered ways and making order out of the chaos that ensues will be an ongoing effort. A transformative process is a perfectly flawed one at best. You will need to make mistakes as a part of the process and get better at being fascinated by these; learning from these in order to grow. Being persistently flexible in planning is likewise important. Doing your best at planning, setting goals and holding your feet to the fire will be just as important as adjusting to changing circumstances and emergent insights. Planners of transformative processes do not pretend to have the roadmap clearly laid out in advance of the journey nor do they insist upon following a plan when new circumstances and wisdom dictate otherwise.

ORIGINS OF TRANSFORMATIVE VISIONING

Most communities continue to use conventional visioning and strategic planning processes, although, as we have learned, the research reviewing these methods has not been particularly glowing. In recent decades a number of creative alternatives have been offered that emphasize the types of principles related to transformative visioning as described here. Appreciative Inquiry, World Café, Scenario Writing, U-Theory, Open Space Technology are among the more well known. All of these approaches have merit and deserve our attention. In searching for methods specifically geared toward transformation, there is a wealth of literature worth considering.

In reviewing this literature and reflecting upon my own personal and professional experiences, it is evident that visions which transform us are the result of five basic dynamic movements: awakening, grounding, dreaming, discerning and realizing. I invite you to test the validity of these against your own experiences of transformation. While different authors refer to these dynamics using different language and emphasis, all five exist as necessary movements for genuine transformation to occur and for new visions and new life to emerge.

These dynamics, roughly outlined here in sequential fashion, typically overlap in practice and unfold in spiraling, ever-deepening fashion. While the details of these will largely be determined as the process unfolds, the outline that follows will give you an idea of what these movements might entail. It provides a starting point for planning, though the road map will surely change once the journey begins.

1. Awakening

It is now or never! For a new vision to mobilize an entire community, the case for deep change must carry more weight than the incentives for leaving things as they are. Members

need to know that going on as is or making only incremental changes, while appearing safer, is a road that leads to certain death. To get off of the path of least resistance, to penetrate any urges toward denial or complacency, members must know unequivocally that time is up. A profound sense of urgency must be conveyed with hard truths that insist that life cannot go on like this any longer. Transformational visions begin with an acute understanding of these painful realities and all-out assault on a status quo.

Yet to engage in deep and radical change there must be more than pain that motivates. To turn a phrase, there must also be audacious hope for a future. To awaken a community's soul, there must be intimations of a future with purpose beyond mere survival, one that speaks to the very essence of a community's existence. Souls will awaken to audacious visions, not wishful thinking or plain vanilla plans. Transformative visions are bold, yet doable with nothing less than an all-out effort. When we are inspired by visions that ask us to be a part of something larger than our own self, our courage, call to service and willingness to sacrifice are also roused. Thus, while pain may provide the initial spark, it is only in calling forth our noblest ambitions that we ignite a more lasting fire in our belly.

2. Grounding

What types of wisdom must be gathered in order to create, transform and birth a new vision? In this age of information, where the Internet places at our fingertips the collective knowledge of our planet, what key words do we type into the search box in order to become well informed? The three main content areas for exploration are: culture, context and dreams. These will be our key words in our initial search for wisdom.

The culture of a community consists of identity and core ideology. The focus here would include such issues as charisma and mission, core values and beliefs, attitudes and normative behaviors as well as strengths and liabilities. The context in which a community is situated consists of the world, the church and the community's neighbors. The explorations here might include trends and events that seem to have an impact on the community as well as areas of challenge and opportunity. The dreams are endless and consist of the members' dreams for a hope-filled future.

These three elements (culture, context and dreams) make up the primary content in which to search for wisdom as well as the primary focus of transformation. You may have noticed that the raw material of transformative visioning processes is not substantially different from that of conventional visioning approaches. The primary difference is not so much in the content, but in the process that is used.

Visions that transform us are not dependent upon what new information is collected but on what new meanings might emerge. New meanings emerge as a result of new methods

used for gathering, new lenses used for understanding and the new emotions and insights that are evoked from dialogue and contemplation. It is more about dwelling in the questions than finding right answers. It is about depth conversation, rather than breadth of coverage. In other words, this is *less about fact-finding than it is about meaning-making*.

You can't download the same information, using the same old software and expect to come up with novel solutions. New software or ways of processing new information will be critical for two reasons: It disrupts the normative ways of gathering that frames and supports our usual way of seeing things; and second, it brings forth new energy and fresh ideas. A simple way of disrupting the same-old, same-old is trying out new methods of gathering and cross-fertilizing conversations. If, for example, members-only gatherings have been the norm, perhaps bringing in outsiders (i.e., partners in mission) would add a new dynamic.

Alas, wisdom is not really found by Googling. Wisdom is forged from experience unearthed in a context of intimate conversations with God and one another. For intimacy to exist, there must be safety and trust. For this to happen in community your skills will be tested. Giving and receiving feedback that is direct, honest and respectful, engaging in loving confrontation, offering empathy and listening intuitively are all skills needed to gather wisdom. If you can dialogue skillfully while remaining present to one another and to God, you will not only unearth new wisdom, but you'll find the courage needed to act upon this wisdom and transform your lives anew.

3. Dreaming

When you have been awakened and enlivened, when sufficient wisdom is gathered, you'll need to engage in a process of opening up possibilities. Anchored in a new understanding of your world and community, in light of a new understanding of your identity and culture, you will be invited to dream big! Everyone will need an invitation to weave a dream of a hope-filled future.

What kinds of dreams might you want to share? Well, what would you want to do for the love of it? What would make you want to get out of bed early and get out the door today? Who would you love to become that would not only bring you new life, but bring a smile to God's face as well? These are the kinds of questions you might be exploring. Such passion is needed for transformation to occur and you will need to explore different methods of rekindling this flame.

Visions that transform are based in hope, not "have to's." While suffering and challenging circumstances may require us to change, we are only transformed by freely responding to God's call to choose life. It is for the love of God that we dig deep and claim hope once again. Why else would we choose to go through the agony in the garden, let go of the past and set

out into the deep? When we can imagine a future full of hope and possibilities for new life, something that beckons us to risk again, try again and choose life again, somehow letting go becomes more possible.

Doing a lot of dreaming can become kind of, well, dreamy. It might be fun for a while, but sooner or later somebody is going to want to get out of the clouds and get real. Having worked so hard at getting out of the box, it is time to try to make sense of what these dreams could actually become.

Transposing dreams into viable visions requires some challenging conversations. Who is to say what makes for a viable vision? Setting criteria together and ahead of time will prevent arbitrary, leadership-driven or committee-approved approaches to its development. Without community-owned criteria the critics will resist and rightfully complain. Eventually, you will need to settle on what constitutes a viable vision. Here are some sample criteria:

1. Will it forward your mission?
2. Will it make God smile?
3. Does it fit with reality?
4. Does it stir the embers of hope and passion?
5. Is it doable with an all-out effort?

As viable visions begin to emerge, these will need further study and development. You'll need to put meat on the bones and create a data-rich composite picture of what these can look like. One way to do this (and there are many) is through scenario writing. Basically, what this means is that a group of members in love with a possible vision would write a scenario of what this vision could look like if chosen by the community. Who would be doing what? Whom would it serve? What would it require of you? While being developed, these kinds of questions would need to be continually tested against the criteria your community set for viable visions.

4. Discerning

Once your dreams are shaped into viable visions you will need to evaluate and further mold these into the best possible options from which to ultimately choose. It will be important then to discern which of these best reflect the pathway you believe God is calling you to pursue. While leadership or a committee could do this on behalf of the community, it is far more beneficial if this discernment is done as an entire community.

Though many religious have been schooled in personal discernment, it remains a growing edge for most to engage in this kind of communal discernment. Yet communal discernment is uniquely suited as the method of decision-making for transformative visioning because:

1. In the communal effort to discover God's intentions, the collective resolve to carry out the chosen decision will be deepened.

2. "Holy indifference" (discussed below) intensifies and deepens the transformation process as my will, our will and God's will are knitted together.
3. The gifts of communal discernment will further inform and add a new dimension to the visioning efforts.

The collective journey to discover what God intends is among the most intimate and powerful spiritual journeys any community can take. This power helps to transform the minds and hearts of members and, in turn, the vision. Furthermore, it coheres their collective resolve to carry it out. In discernment you will be sorting, shaping, letting go and prioritizing visions all the while interlacing your heart-felt desires with those of God. Members will put their blood, sweat and tears into these efforts and this kind of sweat-equity engenders tremendous ownership. This investment is exactly what is needed in order to forge the commitment required to realize a vision once chosen.

Yet, it is this very investment that confronts members with the greatest paradox of discernment—holy indifference. This great paradox of discernment is an effort to become *deeply rooted, while holding all things lightly*. Members will be asked to become invested in something and simultaneously to hold the outcome lightly. The indifference here is not a matter of self-denial or not caring. To the contrary, it is about caring deeply about pleasing God and giving life to your own passions. And it is about holding all this lightly as it is woven and surrendered into the larger tapestry of truth and love.

When placed in the context of communal discernment, this paradox of holy indifference becomes three-dimensional, an intricate weaving together of my will, our will and God's will. For those who accept the challenge and use communal discernment the gifts can be profound. In communal discernment the gifts of wisdom are bountiful, relationships can be deepened by intimate exchanges and newfound understandings. Both the vision and the community shaping it can be transformed by the journey. The truth that emerges from such intimate dialogues can set a community free and on fire. These are a few of the many gifts of communal discernment that can help transform a community.

5. Realizing

Dreams remain only dreams until and unless they are put into action. And these actions do not simply happen at the very end of the journey once the dreams are articulated as viable visions. These actions take place throughout the process. In a sense, a transformative visioning process relies more upon *acting your way into a new way of thinking*, than it does on the conventional approach of thinking your way into a new way of acting. This does not mean you will act without thinking. It simply means that sometimes we need to try something and this, in turn, leads to new insight. It can get us unstuck when we are procrastinating for fear of making a mistake or can't agree on what to do next.

For example, a community once grappled with developing mission guidelines for their newly developed lay-administered board. After months of studying core documents, debating the issues and rewriting mission statements, the fourth draft brought no more agreement or enthusiasm than the first. Each maintained their belief about what mission was and how to use their money based upon their reading of their founding documents and past missions statements. They were stuck.

In an effort to break through the impasse each member was given a sum of money to spend on mission according to personal predilections. Two months later they gathered and shared what they had done with the money in the name of mission. They shared how what they did had affected them and the learnings they gleaned. The power of their experience was enough to infuse new passion and insight into their efforts resulting in a document that came to life. Their actions had led them to a new way of thinking.

Patricia Wittberg has been among the most prolific authors writing on the future of religious life. In her book entitled, *Pathways to Re-Creating Religious Communities*, she chronicles the efforts of communities attempting to break the cycle of decline and find a refounding pathway. In the end she draws few conclusions, but one conclusion she states rather emphatically is that religious communities must “do something!” They must do something other than study, debate and plan. They must act before it’s too late.

Experimentation is a necessary part of refounding and a vital ingredient of transformative visioning. It is a word, however, that many dislike, especially those who believe that experimenting is what has led communities “astray” since Vatican II. For some members, experimenting conjures up a fear that you might be recklessly disregarding the edicts handed down by tradition, church documents or your own constitutions. It may even seem to some like breaking the law and disobeying church hierarchy.

If those who believe that there is only one right way to forge a future remain unwilling to engage in a dialogue of mutual influence, then experimenting will be rendered impossible. New wisdom, integrative understandings and prophetic visions cannot be born from unyielding minds and hearts holding fast to one-dimensional loyalties. If genuine experimentation and mutual dialogue are intolerable, then transformation will be blocked every step of the way and any embryonic visions that might have been conceived will be aborted. The challenge is to carry the tensions inherent in these differing loyalties without succumbing to either/or answers; rather, to stay in the struggle long enough to discover wisdom that transcends and integrates.

Beyond all of the experimenting, as you grow further into what emerges as your prophetic vision, you will need to create a comprehensive pastoral plan. Such a plan would provide the framework for activating your vision. It would include measurable goals and objectives, time lines, budgets, lines of authority, etc. Though all of these will be planned, it ought to remain a work in progress, subject to evaluation and subsequent modification. Your experience of acting, evaluating, learning and growing will be an ongoing dance that continues well into the future.

CONCLUSION

Will there be more of a past than there will ever be a future for your community? I believe that opportunities abound for religious life to emerge anew and that intimations of this already exist. The great challenge is to listen to who God is calling you to become and to embrace the kind of uncertainty and risk from which most of us normally retreat. Such a journey challenges communities to live the very bedrock of our Catholic faith, to live into the paschal mystery, communally discern God’s call and actualize the gospel in today’s world. Such challenges can be met, however, if communities gather strength from being-in-it-together, believe in their abundant wisdom, draw upon their passion for mission and count on God as their ever-present guide and source of new life.

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