

Listening and Speaking from a Contemplative Heart

by Nancy Sylvester, IHM, President of the Institute for Communal Contemplation and Dialogue / Originally published in Spirit Journal September 2015

“Be the change you want to see in the world” is a phrase I am sure you have heard. Changing, however, is not always easy. Having wanted to be perfect when I was a little girl, I was not attracted to change. Change implies giving some things up and receiving new ideas, insights, values, etc. Why would you want to do that? We were taught that God is perfect and unchanging and that in our culture leaders were leaders if they never changed their minds – if they didn’t blink! You were to develop your identity, values and beliefs and maintain them throughout your life.

So what is so great about change?

We are learning from quantum physics that change is our one constant. Everything around us, including ourselves, is constantly evolving and changing. Every interaction we have affects us and helps shape who we are becoming. But it is not just through what I have studied that I now value change. It is also through my experiences.

Having grown up a Catholic and white on the South Side of Chicago in the ‘50s, I was gifted with a set of lenses through which I viewed the world. A whole set of assumptions, beliefs and values shaped me and provided a way of navigating through my world. At different stages of my life I either read something or experienced something that made me pause. All of a sudden what I knew didn’t fit what was before me. I couldn’t make sense of it. It was as if I was vision impaired. . . I couldn’t see it because my lenses were too restrictive.

Those moments, when I faced into my white privilege or my church’s unequal treatment of women or a new understanding of how the Universe came into being or the clerical abuse scandal, were invitations to change. They were moments where the lenses with which I made sense of the world were broadened and I was invited to let go and to integrate these new realizations into my consciousness.

Those moments are never easy.

For me, bringing these experiences to prayer has been lifesaving. When I go through a shift in my consciousness – the way I view the world, the assumptions, beliefs and values I operate out of – I can feel so alone. My “critiquer” who sits on top of my head is full of admonitions, negations, doubts and warnings. The egoic self which I have cultivated for so many years does not want to change. It takes a lot of work to open myself up and allow the truth of these new realizations to shape me anew.

I believe that contemplative practice softens our hearts and minds in ways that can help us embrace the changes that are part of our becoming more complex, evolved human beings. There is much written today about how our consciousness changes in developmental ways. Our becoming more is what we are called to as members of the human species and as persons of faith.

We are called to encounter what Thomas Merton called *le pointe vierge*. It is “a point of nothingness at the center of our being which is untouched by sin and illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God”

The journey to that point passes through contemplation. As I have practiced contemplative sitting, I discovered I want to change. I want to change how I am with others and with myself. I find that as well among the women and men whom I encounter in my work.

The initial changes are in relation to how I listen to that “still small voice within” as John O’Donohue, the poet, speaks of God; to my “self” and my “egoic self;” to those whom I encounter; and to the wider realities that shape the social, cultural, political and historical world of which I am a part.

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