Opinion
News
Spirituality
Spirituality



(Unsplash/Miguel Bruna)



by Alex Mikulich

View Author Profile

## Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

November 8, 2019
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Undoubtedly, as we celebrate the cloud of witnesses in the solemnity of All Saints, as colorful autumnal foliage falls into the dank, dark earth, we may not perceive the transformative potential of contemplation in the face of the societal breakdowns that afflict us.

Whether or not we enter societal dark night with the openness to be educated in contemplative transformation, as Carmelite Sr. Constance FitzGerald suggests, may be more important than any great question of bioethics, cybersecurity, orthodoxy, or even justice and solidarity.

FitzGerald invites us to face a question that has been repeatedly raised by contemplative traditions yet is repressed and muted by the church and society: that it is time for public education for contemplative prayer.

By this, she means education for a contemplative process that is not hidden away in the cloisters, hermitages and ashrams of the world.

We may miss that this seasonal and societal dark night, so fraught with brokenness in our minds, bodies and spirits, is God's milieu of prayer, including societal breakdown and impasse, where God draws us into transforming faith, hope and love.

The problem is: That condition of the possibility of authentic revolutionary transformation is not primarily in our human will, intellect or power. Deep within the recesses of our being, of our time, and the prayer milieu of our world, Sophia Wisdom gently draws us into a wholly different way of proceeding.

We struggle to see God's milieu of prayer, drawing us into deeper relationship, in these terrifying in-between times in which injustices, corruption, self-dealing and institutional breakdown seem to mount upon each other in a cascade of unending lies and violence.

It seems unbearable. We must do something about it. Rightly, people all over the world are in the street in Hong Kong and Iran, in Ukraine and Lebanon, in Baghdad and Santiago, to demand revolutionary change.

While the human yearning for freedom and justice is unyielding and offers hope in the midst of despair, the desire for change is not without its pitfalls. There are temptations all around, including but not limited to the desire to escape, to succumb to despair, or to take control of societal change for our own selfish ends.

In this moment full of the potential of new life and transformation, it seems that too many have chosen a path of proud and self-confident hate, which relishes abuse and violence against women, children, migrants, black people, people who live with disabilities, and the vulnerable among us.

Whether consciously or unconsciously, through short-lived and shortsighted political, economic or military schemes, we seem not to realize that our own burning hatred enkindles the fires of our own destruction and the whole world. It seems like a collective fanaticism consumes the world and overtakes us.

The transformation God invites, however, is full of pain, discomfort and disorientation, too. FitzGerald explains that precisely because we may not feel faith, hope and love in the midst of breakdown and deprivation, maintaining a contemplative posture is extremely difficult.

I know I, for one, feel possessed by anger, fear and rebellion against the path of darkness, unknowing and loss of everything I have possessed. I want transformation on my own comfortable terms.

Or, perhaps, I want to change others without really changing myself. In this time of the urgency of revolution, we may easily re-create the us-vs.-them approach that we claim we despise.

Advertisement

Our desire to change others without embracing the transformation to which God calls us reveals our own violence. We remain attached to economic growth, security, wealth, status and power that prop up a system of domination and hatred.

The systems of domination by which we live deceive us into thinking that what we possess makes us worthy of love.

On the contrary, these very attachments prevent us from dwelling in the faith of Sophia Wisdom's healing love. The prophets, like Isaiah, recognize that it is only by walking in darkness, without any light, relying wholly on trust in Yahweh, that we may find our way (Isaiah 50:10).

The dark night, FitzGerald reminds us, is not some thing, not an impersonal darkness causing unnecessary psychological distress but rather someone who is the indwelling presence of Sophia-Jesus who transforms all of the destructive values we insist on protecting.

Sophia-Jesus facilitates, within our own capacities, the maturation of our self-image, our image of God and Christ and our relationship to the world, including our cultural violence and lust for domination.

Ultimately, she gently touches our hearts, minds and souls, transforming us from domination, control, anxiety and competition to become true lovers who delight in the dance of God's creation.

Sophia-Jesus engenders the creative preservation of the whole web of life as she facilitates a way of being in which we relearn with her and oppressed peoples everywhere how to co-create and co-exist on the grounds of co-relationality in the milieu of God's creation.

She draws us gently, in loving tenderness, into intimate interdependence and interconnection with all oppressed peoples and the most vulnerable creatures of the Earth.

While we rightly sense the urgency for revolutionary action, a deeper transformation in love awaits us within ourselves and in our suffering world. We may miss, without public education for contemplation, where God draws us into the renewal of life.

[Alex Mikulich is a Catholic social ethicist.]

***Editor's note:*** *We can send you an email notice every time a Decolonizing Faith and Society column is posted to NCRonline.org so you won't miss it. Sign up for it here.*