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Eco-centric worldview defines cultural creatives

by Sharon Abercrombie

Eco Catholic

More than 10,000 people in 49 states gathered in vigils in early February to protest the expansion of the Keystone XL transnational pipeline because of its impact on wildlife and their habitats.

At Paul Quinn College, a 250-student, African-American Episcopal college in Dallas, Texas, the administration converted its 1.3-acre football field into a working organic farm to help local food pantries thrive in the midst of their food desert neighborhood.

A group of rice farmers in drought-stricken California partnered with an environmental organization to postpone the draining of their paddies for two extra months to create temporary "pop up" wetlands to help thirsty migratory birds survive.

And in Rome, word has come that Pope Francis will address environmental issues in an upcoming encyclical on "the ecology of man."

There is a common-bond mover and shaker in these four diverse developments. Her name is Spirit, and she is surely a "movin across the land. She has to work through us because we are all she has on this earth-plain.

Spirit is no respecter of rigid, fearful hearts. She moves where she will, delighting in toppling boundaries around politics ("it'll cost too much?"), social beliefs ("but we've always done it this way?"), and religion ("nature is there for us to use as we see fit?"). She scatters her pearls and amethysts of grace and wisdom in our paths, hoping that we will succumb to her sacred

promptings for turning our oft-fearful selves into agents of hope, change and action.

As I added those four good news stories to my already overstuffed folder on "hopeful environmental happenings," I remembered Fr. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Spirit surely touched the thoughts of this Jesuit mystic and paleontologist. Teilhard was a prophet of good things to come, when he talked about "noogenesis," the growth of the collective sphere of human consciousness for the greater good (later known as the global brain). Before his death in the middle 1950s, he was writing about the hope of transcending the barriers to human unity and peace.

In a 1997 issue of *Computer-Mediated Communication* magazine, Paulist Fr. Phillip J. Cunningham noted that Teilhard predicted the emergence of an organic informational system in which we are linked together within a web of conscious reflection. It later came to be known as the Internet.

Before the Internet's genesis, preceding technologies -- radio and television -- were already linking people across the world, bringing new ideas and cultures in touch with one another, according to social researcher Paul Ray.

That brings us to another level of Spirit's workings through human beings, where she brings more of us together into a social caring bond called the "cultural creatives."

Those little news snippets a few paragraphs back, are all about cultural creatives. Ray and his wife, Sherry Ruth Anderson, coined the term in 2000 in their book of the same name to describe a significant new subculture emerging in the U.S. "They are carriers of a whole new way of life," Ray explains at CulturalCreatives.org.

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The historical development of this "bridge group" took off in the 1950s, thanks to the growth of the global-wide information explosion and the birth of new social movements, said the researchers.

They describe cultural creatives as people who place prominence in ecological concerns, as well as women's concerns and other cultures. They cherish relationships, peace, social justice, and value authenticity, self-actualization, spirituality and self-expression. They are both inner-directed and socially concerned, functioning as activists, volunteers and supporters of good causes.

Their profiles differ greatly from Americans who regard themselves as "traditionals," or as "moderns," according to Ray and Anderson.

Traditionals long for a 19th century world and its values, and react against today's culture. Typically, they hail from a small or rural town, or hold religiously conservative stances. Their nostalgia for their small town past and strong churches, the researchers say, are "based on a mythic image of an America that never existed in history."

Moderns, on the other hand, can fall anywhere along the political spectrum, see the world as a place to reach personal success and financial gain, and accept the normal order of things.

In 2000, Ray and Anderson put the numbers of cultural creatives in the U.S. at 50 million adults. Their 2008 follow-up survey, conducted with 150,000 people and some 500 focus groups, revealed their ranks had grown to 80 million adults in the U.S., with another 90 million in Europe and 25 million in Japan.

In an interview with KindredCommunity.com, Ray said that today's cultural creatives are willing to look at the world in a longer timeline, whereas "businessmen are only interested in next year or next quarter's earnings."

The cultural creatives view often extends generations, both into the past and present, Ray said in the interview, but that doesn't make them more virtuous than other people.

"They are not necessarily the good people of American life, or smarter than other people, or better educated. They are a subculture so they can be smart, dumb, neurotic, sane, spiritual or true believers," he told Kindred Community.

While the concept of cultural creatives is relatively new, they have existed throughout history, Ray told Kindred Community, dating back to spiritual hermetic people of the Middle Ages, often persecuted by the Catholic church. Other groups Ray defined as cultural creatives include the Quakers, the women's movement and the anti-slavery movement, all viewed at times as dangerous by traditionals and moderns, who place their worldviews above others.

So where does Pope Francis fit into this scenario? Ray told *NCR* that the pope "looks like a cultural creative in many ways, but he is limited by various doctrinally conservative traditions. My guess is that he bridges cultural creativity and tradition."

That sounds about right to me. Francis has upset some segments of conservative Catholics by veering the church's focus away from culture war issues while stressing compassion and concern for the poor and the earth. But he hasn't altered church teaching, much to the chagrin of women's ordination proponents and others seeking church reform.

I particularly empathize with the women's concerns, but the news of a possible papal encyclical on environmental issues is cause for major cheering. As for women's ordination, an observation from Ray may shine a light of hope: It can take up to 10 years for a person to make the transition into cultural creativity.

Perhaps Spirit is not finished yet.

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