

Presidential Address.... AFC, 2013 July 21, 2013

Evolution, novelty, creativity, expansion, Christogenesis ... the words swirl around us these days and draw us into hopeful newness. To situate ourselves individually and communally in this magnificent, emerging universe story gives us perspective so grand as to be dizzying. Yet, isn't it true that the more directly our daily lives are touched by the changes that evolution requires, the less in awe we may be about them! There "where the rubber meets the road" the grandeur of evolution is shadowed by various degrees of resistance or denial, and change may be experienced as more *awful* than *awesome*. It is my purpose here to speak about evolution in the Franciscan Federation. Exactly one year ago, we accepted the provisional by-laws as normative and cheered the good news that the Federation has climbed out of debt. I suspect most of us went home last July pleased with another great conference and relieved that all has returned to normal with the Federation.

And then began a national search for a new executive director to fill Ann's big shoes come August, 2013. When the Federation Board met in April of this year, with no applications in our hands, we took a hard look at our reality, a reality that mirrors what our member congregations are also seeing: an increase in median age, a decrease in the number of members (which translates into a decrease in annual income, since we are a dues-based organization), a smaller pool from which to call forth leadership, increased responsibilities for those in leadership, decreased availability of time and energy.

The other side of our reality is that the Federation is stronger today than it was five years ago. Conferences in recent years have been of excellent quality – you've affirmed that. While CEL members can benefit from LCWR or CMSM or CMSWR, the Federation provides similar quality presentations for a wider audience of Franciscans. A definite strength of the Federation has been its ability to provide people-friendly, inspirational material for its members, both at the annual conference and in some regions. Woven into the fabric of the AFC are time to do business, time to network around important topics and causes, and time to build and renew relationships. The vision and mission of the Federation are still needed to be proclaimed and lived... in some way.

So here we are, straddling a paradox. For all our efforts to normalize and stabilize our organization, change beckons to us again. Parker Palmer says, "Every life is lived toward a horizon, a distant vision of what lies ahead."¹ We are by nature oriented toward development, unfolding, toward greater complexity. That is also true about our congregations and our federation. When individuals or groups reach that point beyond which no more expansion is possible, chaos erupts, and the system experiences breakdown. Yet life presses on with great insistence and persistence, and sooner or later, re-organizes itself, and develops in a new direction.

¹ French, Henry F., Editor. **Forty Day Journey with Parker J. Palmer.** Augsburg Press, 2008, Day 38.

Over the past few decades our Franciscan charism has been highlighted by the emergence of a plethora of specialty groups. To name a few: Franciscans International (FI), Franciscan Action Network (FAN), Franciscan American and Brazilian Sisters (FAB), Next Generation Franciscan Mentors, Franciscan Common Novitiate (TOR FCN), Association of Franciscan Colleges and Universities (AFCU), Commission on the Franciscan Intellectual Tradition (CFIT), etc.

As organizations grow, they, too, tend toward greater complexity; hence what may start as a gathering of colleagues engaged in similar endeavors morphs into a dues-paying organization with officers, an annual or biannual assembly with a keynote speaker, banquets, awards, etc. It's how we are; we are corporately and individually "hard-wired" for development, complexity. But all that comes with a price and sooner or later we must face our limits, take stock of our available resources: human and material, and create – or allow new paths to be created - so that evolution may continue in a sustainable manner.

According to statistics gathered from a recent survey of Franciscan member congregations in the Federation, we will likely see a 25% reduction in membership, and consequently dues, in five years; which will increase to a 46% reduction by 2023. The annual conference is by far the most appreciated aspect of the federation, although many survey respondents recommended that it be held biannually rather than annually. The AFC is the second major source of funding after dues; holding the conference biannually further reduces income. It may be what we need and choose to do; however, there will be financial consequences.

As I reflect on the future of the Federation, I find myself pondering what will best advance its purpose, vision and mission. Is the mission better served if we were to dispense with a national office and encourage the proliferation of small seedbeds of Franciscan presence and influence all over this country (and abroad), each responsible for their own on-going formation, relationship building and action for social justice, and perhaps networking with Franciscans in other geographical areas via technology? Would the better plan be to maintain a strong national office as the hub of Franciscan networking efforts, as a resource center, capable of producing and/or distributing DVDs with Franciscan formational material, or offering webinars that could be televised throughout the country's motherhouses, infirmaries, and outlying regions where there are few Franciscans? What is the interest in collaborating, and possibly even merging with other Franciscan groups to co-sponsor assemblies, on-going formation, and social justice endeavors? Will the Franciscan charism be stronger and clearer if all three branches of the order pool our resources and efforts, or will we, by doing so, water down our individual charisms to an unacceptable level? What does the 21st century world need from us Franciscans? And how can we best respond?

I don't pretend to have answers or even recommendations at this point; they will be lived into by all of us as we embark on this journey of transformation. All I know is that we can't simply stand on the shore, disengaged from the ebb and flow of organizational evolution, pining after what used to work so well for us and resolving to try harder to prevent breakdown.

Change analyst and consultant, Gil Rendle,² points out the difference between a problem and a condition. Problems require fixing; conditions require learning. It is not a problem that we are growing smaller in number with fewer resources with which to operate; it is our condition at this time in history. What do we need to learn?

Gil also notes that when a system doesn't know what to do, it typically just works harder doing what it *does know* how to do. We can't simply try harder to make the Federation work as it has in the past; we're being nudged toward something new. So, what will happen to us – to our federation if we allow ourselves to be nudged forward? What can we expect?

Celeste DeSchryver Mueller³ compares the process of change to going on a kayaking adventure, where we leave a familiar harbor and head toward a distant shore. On the way we will travel uncharted and turbulent waters. We have to learn to navigate through all this, while still maintaining enough stability not to tip the kayak or crash. She describes four stages in the journey through which we can expect to pass.



Leaving the Shore All change involves loss. It can feel like someone has died. Taking time, in solitude, with a trusted friend or a small group of colleagues to express this loss is important. Instead of blaming those who have upset my world, I will fare better if I admit my fear of the unknown and my fear of letting go of what is familiar. In solitude or in safe company I can get in touch with my resistance and spend time gently probing my own heart as to the cause of this resistance. If we are unaware of these feelings associated with grief, or if we push aside our feelings as unwelcome and they remain unexpressed, we may behave by withdrawing, becoming more resistant or belligerent, passive aggressive or even by sabotaging the new plan when it presents itself.



Eyes on the Horizon Once we've launched from a familiar harbor we find ourselves in a fast-moving stream of change. The far shore is not visible. The more tumultuous the waters, the more we are required to paddle blindly. We are trying to be open to change, to deep down conversion, but it's easy to get discouraged for all the unknowns facing us, the confusion this causes, and the energy it demands. We might feel as though we've lost our goal, or we may be caught completely off guard by a new development we hadn't expected. It helps here, particularly if we're dealing with change in an organization, if someone is able to hold up the vision of why we launched this journey of transformation and where we can potentially go if we pursue this vision.

² Rendle, Gil. Senior Consultant at The Alban Institute. Insights taken from a workshop presentation at Weber Center, Adrian, MI

³ DeSchryver Mueller, D. Min., Celeste. "Leading Change," **Human Development Magazine**. Vol. 32: Number 3: Fall, 2011, pp. 30ff.



Open Waters Between what we've left behind and the vision we're aiming for there is a time when we feel like we've stopped moving. No one has clear answers or directions, the course is not clearly charted and the initial commitment to this transformative journey now wanes. We may feel frustrated and disappointed and may be tempted to throw in the towel, wanting to go back to the old way while at the same time realizing we can't. We may be in this space for a long time. But even when it feels like the kayak is

not moving, know that it's not wasted time, for *this* is where the real transformation takes place, in the contemplative spaces of our hearts. Scientists tell us that the universe has a built-in ability to reorganize itself from what looks like chaos. We humans, too, are wired for organization. Something new and workable will eventually emerge. Some of that we will be able to control, some we will simply receive as revelation and gift when the time is right.



A New Shore If we have stayed the course of change during its most tumultuous times and through its seemingly aimless times of drifting, we will discover where we need to go. Eventually we will find ourselves on a new shore. We will look back on the journey, remember all the effort it required to get here, but also we will notice the growth that's come about in us. We'll discover that "this or that" is still the same, making this new place a little more comfortable and familiar.

We discover that the values and faith which have carried us through are now stronger than ever. Sometimes we can even be grateful for the change. As J. Stone says, "Each of us who travels further than the obstacles will know a different kind of life from that time on."⁴

Let me conclude by reiterating a few of our foundational Franciscan values that can help us in times of change:

1. Look at the world through the lens of abundance rather than scarcity. Change can trigger a reaction of scarcity. "I won't have what I need;" "We'll lose too much!" "There won't be enough N to go around;" (*i.e.* resources, opportunities, love, etc). A philosophy of scarcity dominates our culture in this most affluent country in the world. It threatens our security, stokes our anxiety, increases our craving for more or bigger, makes us into packrats, steels us against change, and robs us of happiness. Francis had such confidence in the God who always provides our needs that when his brothers came back from the day's begging with only a few scraps of bread for their evening meal, he would lift his voice in gratitude to God, for he concluded that this must be all they needed today, because God always provides for their needs. Can we believe in a God who answers all our needs and assures us that we won't be bereft if we allow ourselves and our federation to be transformed?

⁴ J. Stone Cards, Inc. © 2001. Used with permission.

2. Adopt an attitude of non-appropriation. All is gift. Life itself was given to us, without our choice or effort. We joined communities or fraternities that have called forth the best in us and given us far more than we have given them. Membership in the Franciscan Federation has nurtured our Franciscan spirituality, expanded our circle of friends, and engaged us in ventures for the common good. Lady Poverty reminds us that the path to serenity is realizing that all is gift, not entitlement, not for self-appropriation. None of the enormous energy that our members have poured into projects like the TOR Rule, on-going formation opportunities, the prayer book, restructuring, etc. will ever be wasted. Those who lost their homes this summer in floods, fires, or tornadoes, and who, even in their grief, shared their faith and determination to start over are showing us that major change doesn't have to embitter us, discourage us, or deplete us. Reference Brother Job: "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away; blessed be the name of the Lord."⁵

3. Rejoice that we have been chosen to live in this time of grace/perfect joy. We are in the midst of a major cultural shift; we are making history every day of our lives. Five hundred years have come and gone without witnessing the kind of "stirring of the waters" that has characterized our sojourn on earth. Scientists point it out with awe; historians, anthropologists, artists, theologians, and mystics take note, with hushed wonder, in laboratories, studios and chapels. Something new is coming, breaking through the old, beyond our control. Faith tells me the Spirit of God is visiting the waters of Bethesda once more⁶, bringing healing and renewed life to any who are courageous enough to step into the pool, or launch their kayak into unknown waters. After Jesus healed the sick man, when questioned by the Jews, Jesus replied, "My Father is at work until now, so I am at work."⁷ That has been the proven case for 13.8 billion years. Be not discouraged or fearful; the entire universe, so certainly also the Franciscan Federation, our congregations, ourselves are in good hands.

May we gather into our backpacks the values we need: those familiar ones: conversion, minority, poverty and contemplation; along with abundance, non-appropriation and joy... and launch the journey that beckons.

Questions for reflection & discussion:

1. Share a change that was hoisted on you, either by a person in authority, or by a life circumstance. What were the stages you went through as you dealt with this change? Are you still in the kayak, or have you reached the distant shore?
2. What are the changes we face as a Federation in the next 3-5 years? How can we help one another deal with those changes?

⁵ Job 1:21

⁶ Jn.5: 1-9

⁷ Jn. 5:17