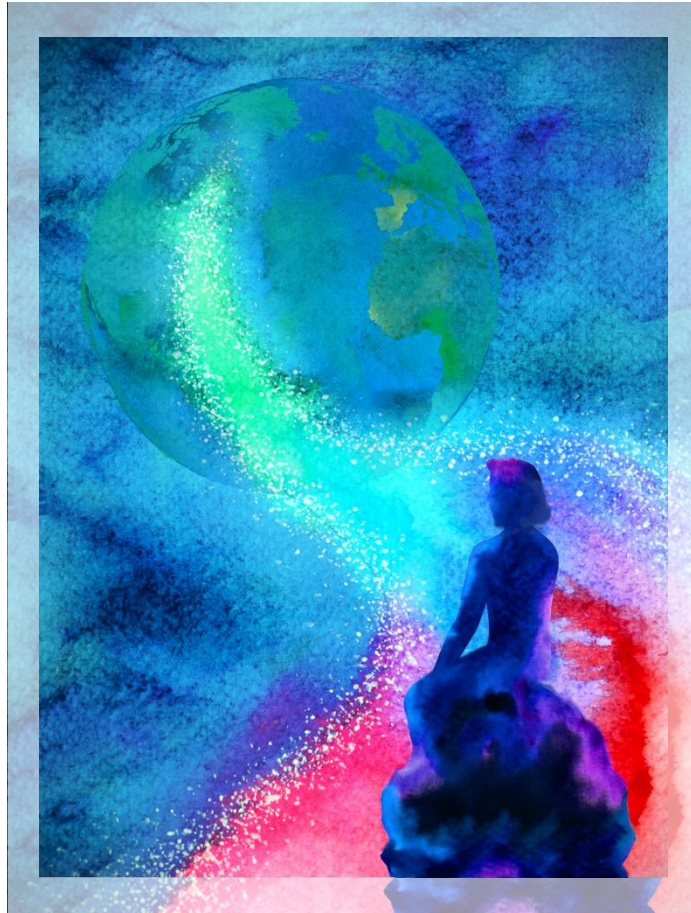


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Navigating the Unknown  
Moving forward in an evolving world

## Navigating the Unknown...

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**“IF YOU CAN DREAM IT, YOU CAN DO IT.”**

*Walt Disney*

Disney’s words are a message for our times and a particular context for members of religious communities. First, we need to honestly embrace the darkness and despair that come with living in times of polarization and fragmentation. With these inner feelings of vulnerability and fragmentation, we must re-emerge with new energy and vision. We can complain, criticize, and blame, yet God is calling us to dream, to reimagine, and to create a new world. It will not be easy!

Each historical period calls for deepening a culture’s collective soul. That often means a collective and radical detachment from the comfortable status quo of the present. It is a period demanding we take risks by walking into the unknown to create and imagine a new world. Let’s be honest: it is easier to critique and blame than to embrace our vulnerability, not knowing the how and risking failure. Yet, it is this very act of embracing vulnerability and the unknown that requires immense courage, empowering us to face the future with bravery.

Fear often paralyzes us, as it did Jesus’ companions upon his death. Yet unbeknownst to them, going to the empty tomb, embracing the Emmaus walk, feeling the future, and realizing their anxiety opened them to unimaginable resurrection. Our call, like theirs, is to find the subsequent collective resurrection for the common good.

Regardless of how we perceive the world - whether it is through VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity), the influence of AI, or a new global reality, communities, and organizations must anchor themselves to three pivotal elements: a profound purpose or mission, continuous learning, and real-time adaptation and or innovation.

These are not just strategies! Instead, they are vessels of strength that will guide us through the storms of change. At the same time, it reassures us and instills confidence in our ability to navigate the unknown. This steadfast focus on being mission-centered becomes the compass that guides religious communities through the tumultuous waters of constant change. Being rooted in a collective mission provides a profound sense of purpose and focus in an ever-shifting landscape. By prioritizing learning and adaptability, we equip ourselves with the tools to navigate any challenge. This is not just about survival; it’s about thriving. It’s about being inspired and motivated to face uncertainty head-on, encouraging us to embrace change with a positive mindset. This is the power of continuous learning and real-time adaptability.

A group living by a committed mission, vision, and values can change the world. Mayo Clinic is an excellent example of an organization that has been mission-focused and committed to learning and adapting since its foundation on August 21, 1883, after a tornado devastated the prairie town of Rochester, Minnesota. As a consequence,

the Sisters of St. Francis and William Morral Mayo M.D. and his sons formed a partnership. This partnership, rooted in the idea that “patients come first,” has adapted and changed with innovations, methods, and needs that surfaced in its first century of caring for others. Throughout its history, Mayo has continued to grow and adapt to contemporary culture, methodology, and technology while always maintaining its core purpose.

Since its inception, Mayo's working motto has continued to reaffirm that the patient always comes first. Gianrico Farrugia, MD, the President and CEO of Mayo Clinic, says: “Setting the standard for patient-centered excellence is a tremendous responsibility, and one our teams take seriously.” This vision and desire are lived out through these values: RICH TIES (Respect, Integrity, Compassion, Healing, Teamwork, Innovation, Excellence, Stewardship). These core beliefs have guided Mayo through periods of unfathomable success and also through eras of struggle when they wondered if they would financially survive. This resilience and adaptability should inspire us, demonstrating that even in the face of unprecedented change, an institution’s core mission guides it through difficult times.

In a successful organization, a passionate commitment to collective and individual learning enhances the focus on the mission. In a changing world, it is necessary to recognize that when people are engaged and challenged as active participants in the mission, as the organization grows, they realize a sense of purpose and contribute to

the larger vision. Learning is a way to enhance people’s feeling of being a part of the living mission through learning in their core competency, new skills, or participation in committees.

In Mayo Clinic's story, they quote the Dalai Lama, who emphasizes hope: “Without losing hope, there is the possibility to overcome. Our very life, you see, is based on hope, so hope is very, very important to our survival” (22). That is the power of integrating mission with ongoing transformative education and adaptation.

Challenges, uncertainty, and hope are not unique to our generation. Every generation has a unique call and challenge for their times. For example, when I think of my own family, I see this pattern:

- My parents grew up in the great depression and World War II.
- My generation has experienced Vatican II renewal, going to the moon, and the Vietnam War.
- My nieces and nephews have grown up in the first significant phase of the technological era with texting, chatbots, etc.
- My great nieces and nephews are growing up with the emergence of AI and seeing the possibility of living in space.

What’s timeless for both individuals and organizations is to be passionately rooted in the principles of their core identity: mission, vision, and values. These principles guide us through the tumultuous waters of constant change. They maintain a collective sense of purpose and relational context in an ever-

shifting landscape. For example, religious communities such as the Dominicans and Franciscans have been around for centuries because they have constantly adapted. Yet, they have remained rooted in the core of their mission, vision, and values.

### **MISSION, VISION, VALUES FOCUSED**

In *What it Takes to Heal*, by Prentis Hemphill, Robin G. Keller states, “Without new visions, we don’t know what to build, only what to knock down. We only end up confused, rudderless, and cynical, but we forget that making a revolution is not a series of clever maneuvers and tactics but a process that can and must transform us” (3).

The tendency is to see our mission, vision, and values as separate entities. Yet they are interconnected, and when lived together with enthusiasm and passion, they lead to continual transformation both within and outside society.

Today, an organization needs to align everything with its mission. This begins with the hiring process, professional development, planning processes, and engagement with various stakeholders. An organization should also want all of its relationships and partners to align with its mission, vision, and values.

In *Management Lessons from the Mayo Clinic*, Berry and Seltman speak to the organization’s need to see how to live its mission and values, beginning with the hiring process. “We look for the person who wants to be a member of a team, wants to collaborate with others, is open to discussion, and does not view himself or herself as smarter than the next

person”(137). The mission is the soul of the organization and gives meaning to every action and decision.

Studies have demonstrated that when groups hire from criteria based on their mission and values, it creates organizational alignment to a higher purpose. At the same time, employees bring increased passion, a sense of teamwork, and a greater connection to each other.

These interlocking realities of mission, vision, and values create a passion and energy to be transformative agents.

- Mission: focuses on identity and its highest aspiration
- Vision: defines the direction
- Values: defines how both employees and management want to be in a relationship both internally and externally.

In *Leading from the Roots*, Dr. Kathleen Allen tells this story:

There is a story of a person watching three bricklayers. He talks to the first bricklayer and asks what he is doing, and this bricklayer says, “I am laying bricks.” He goes to the next and asks him what he is doing, and this bricklayer says, “I am building a wall.” The observer then asks the third bricklayer, and his answer is startlingly different; he says, “I’m building a cathedral” (35).

This story speaks to the power of mission. It would be instructive to ask owners and managers how their employees would answer this question.

In today's changing world, each group must recognize the interconnection between its purpose and society's larger purpose. Society is increasingly asking organizations to participate in solving critical social issues.

## LEARNING

With the rapidity and speed of change, continuous learning is one of an organization's most critical imperatives. Every group needs to ask and define how it is creating a culture of learning. We no longer live in a world where any group can maintain previous knowledge or insights. The knowledge explosion caused by the internet and other resources has moved into a world of continuous learning.

Brene Brown defines vulnerability in her book *Daring Greatly*.

Vulnerability is not weakness, and the uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure we face every day are not optional. Our willingness to own and engage with our vulnerability determines the depth of our courage and the clarity of our purpose (2).

This definition speaks to the importance of seeing vulnerability as a gift. When embraced, it opens us to a more profound sense of purpose and creativity, allowing us to embrace and create new visions and implement new ideas.

Learning is about embracing vulnerability, which, at times, feels like a sense of failure. For us to grow, we need to embrace both success and failure. Yet, in our culture, we minimize the potential of exploring and learning from failure. When someone makes a mistake, we often demean or negate them

rather than engage in what we learned. Even though we may not have succeeded in what we aspire to, it is always a means to gain insight. None of us wants to be embarrassed, ashamed, or feel like a failure.

Amy C. Edmonson, in her new book *Teaming, How Organizations Learn, Innovate and Compete in the Knowledge Economy*, quotes Peter Senge: "The organizations that will truly excel in the future will be the organizations that discover the capacity to tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at all levels of the organization" (22).

Group learning is crucial because it strengthens problem-solving, innovation, self and group improvement, and collaboration. Edmonson goes on to say the leadership needs to:

- ~ Frame the situation for learning
- ~ Make it psychologically safe to team
- ~ Learn to learn from failure
- ~ Span occupational and cultural boundaries (76)

Also, a group needs to integrate learning into their organizational planning annually and strategically. The three questions below are fundamental to creating a learning and growth organization.

- *What learning challenges do we face? Describe the learning style needed because it may be different for maintenance than for product or service development.*
- *What are the learning goals? It is crucial that every individual and department has learning goals. These goals should be specific, measurable, and evaluated regularly.*

— *As part of every meeting, focus on what we have or need to learn.*

In her section on “Organizing to Learn,” Amy C. Edmonson lays out six crucial capacities:

- ~ Asking questions
- ~ Sharing information
- ~ Seeking help
- ~ Experimenting with unproven actions
- ~ Talking about mistakes (learn to learn from failure)
- ~ Seeking feedback (27)

Learning is essential if the group wants to achieve its vision and make a difference in the world. In an era of rapid change, learning cannot be an afterthought but needs to be within the fiber of the organization.

## ADAPTATION

It is crucial to be flexible, nimble, and adaptable to changing circumstances in a complex and changing world. As we see in the previous paragraph, Blockbuster, even though they knew the change was coming, lost their ability to respond. Thus, in the end, they lost their ability to be adaptable in the long term to benefit their direction.

The core questions a group is called to address are as follows:

- Do we have an existing framework, mental model, or behaviors that need to be updated?
- Is our culture based on rigidly holding to a successful service or a previous mental construct?

When both of these practices become rigid, they often impede learning and adaptation. Every successful group or organization evaluates its past and current patterns and

behaviors and adapts accordingly. Thus, it's crucial to develop a learning and adapting culture.

Two critical challenges face groups. One is social activists' growing commitment and organizations challenging groups around their social impact. The second is the continuing changing landscape. It is increasingly clear that social justice advocates are having an impact, imploring organizations to review their policies and activities in light of the collective social good.

Corporations, politicians, and individuals are beginning to acknowledge the imperative to support integration and collaborative partnerships to solve problems of justice and equality. For example, there is a greater awareness of the reality that climate change, diversity, immigration, etc., are interconnected and need to be seen both in their uniqueness and intersection. Advocates are imploring all organizations, with no exceptions, to incorporate social responsibility into their core way of existing in their communities.

These groups expect more than a simple statement. It must also be proactive. For example, they expect each department to become ecologically sensitive. Every employee should be able to articulate how they are living this value in their work and relationships. This is the social impact they are demanding to give one example.

Also, in the rapidly changing world, every group must realize they are living in a constantly changing landscape. For example, Netflix challenged Blockbuster and

subsequently replaced it. They created a mail rental service for videos, which replaced Blockbuster's in-store, limited supply, and expensive late fee. The Netflix model offered customers greater variety and an easier way to return merchandise because there was no need for stores. Blockbuster had explored this model and even planned to purchase Netflix but eventually decided against it. Thus, Netflix's innovation changed the landscape and became the new model. Blockbuster's failure to change and risk were subsequently replaced. All organizations need to be sensitive to falling into the trap of believing theirs is the best way.

In *Teaming to Innovate*, Amy C. Edmondson shares an illustrative example of short-term and long-term reflection:

It's like a Lego box that you buy for your children. "They start trying to play, trying to find a new way to build the image on the Lego box. They give up, throw out the box, and put the pieces away. The next weekend, you put all the Lego pieces on the floor, and then they try to imagine something. Not what was on the box, but what they had in their heads. (6-7)

That is a simple example, yet graphically depicts the challenge of leaving the past and the known to embrace a new way. The example seems obvious, yet how often do we decide to stay in the known and safe and resist change?

In the book *Teaming to Innovate*, Edmondson offers four crucial aspects of how to integrate learning and adaptation:

- ~ Diagnosing: It is looking at the situation and the challenges it provides.
- ~ Designing: taking the time to identify possibilities that can be acted upon.
- ~ Act: move from doing to acting
- ~ Reflection: After taking steps or acting, step back and reflect on failures, knowledge, successes, and potential next steps. (241-242)

The integration of these four elements integrates learning and adapting in real-time. It also acknowledges that failure is normative and something to learn from rather than negate oneself or the group. Adaptation is rooted in continuous growth and change processes that foster adaptive change. This reality nurtures and motivates the individual and the collective passion to adapt with hope by embracing new ideas, concepts, and services unique to their time.

In *A Beautiful Constraint* by Adam Morgan and Mark Barden, the authors focus on two questions:

- ~ Assets: What do we have in abundance? What can we trade?
- ~ Reframe: How can we reframe these assets to give them more relevance and value to others? (119)

The two approaches support adaptability and innovation. They explore what is possible and has potential rather than becoming mired in constraints. When stuck in one limitation, it can often create a lack of a can-do attitude and, at times, paralysis. Addressing these two questions opens the door to reflecting on new possibilities.

## SUMMARY REMARKS

In this world, for a group to move forward, every member must be mission-focused, a learner, and an adapter/innovator. Old frameworks that are no longer beneficial must be released, while new solutions must be found. Rainer Maria Rilke states on a card I received at a workshop: “The future enters into us in order to transform us long before it happens.” That speaks to the adaptive/innovative process that organizations are called to embrace at this historical moment.

Every group faces the critical question of how its members will embody its mission, vision, and values through learning and innovation/adaptation. We live in a world with both possibilities and constraints. As Robert Frost claims, “Constraints are always there. It’s a matter of how we move”(231). That is the question for our time: how will we move forward? As Walt Disney stated in the initial quote, “If you can dream it, you can do it.” That is the call of our time to move forward through dreaming, believing we can do it rooted in our core beliefs, learning, and being adaptable.



## Navigating the Unknown Moving forward in an evolving world.

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