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*Transformative Communities: Culture of Discernment*

## *Transformative Communities: Culture of Discernment*

“It will take a great deal more discernment – understanding of what is at stake spiritually, theologically, politically, and economically – to move from the ideal to its translation and into lifestyle and ministry.”<sup>1</sup>

This quote is foundational to transformative communities. It names the communities’ ability to move from aspiration to the living of it in the dailiness of life. With the world in transition, it is often safer to live the espoused concept rather than struggle to create it in the ordinariness of life. Historically, religious institutions and communities, who became great spiritual leaders, in essence wove together their aspirations witnessing them in their daily lives.

Iliia Delio advocates that “our graced discernment for this time requires of all of us a new openness to what is unfolding around and within us. Contrary to the mechanistic, closed, systemic thinking of the past, we perceive all around us new expanding horizons awaiting our response and engagement.”<sup>2</sup> This speaks to the importance and reality of transformative communities in creating a culture of discernment.

*At their core, transformative communities have a consuming passion for participating with God in the creative process of transforming the world.*

These communities embody the mystery of God as an individual and collective transformative path. In a world often defined by *volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity* (VUCA), transformative communities are a spiritual catalyst, exemplars of transfiguration. By their compassionate presence these communities embody the painstaking and challenging journey into the unknown exhibiting without compromise the traits of truth, justice, and compassion in the midst of this reality.

*On complex times these communities comprehend the necessity to focus their energy and spirit on being regenerative.*

In the book, *Designing Regenerative Cultures*, Daniel Christian Wahl states, “a regenerative human culture is healthy, resilient and adaptable; it cares for the planet, and it cares for life in the awareness that this is the most effective way to create a thriving future for all humanity.”<sup>3</sup>

The transformative community at its essence is spiritually connected with all God’s creation. They are committed to being a community that fosters an organic level of discernment that endorses an emergent process of seeing the future. There is a recognition that what is accepted today may change tomorrow. They live with a receptive rather than a fixed discernment process. The discipline of this connectivity by the community fosters the ability to embrace being regenerative through living

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<sup>1</sup> Murchú, Diarmuid Ó. *Religious Life in the 21st Century: The Prospect of Refounding*. Orbis Books, (2016) Print. 173-174

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 11

<sup>3</sup> Wahl, Daniel Christian. *Designing Regenerative Cultures*. Triarchy Press Ltd, (2016) Print. 194

with questions rather than seeking quick solutions.

*The transformative communities' spiritual growth is rooted in the excitement and willingness to move forward into the daunting uncertainty of the journey.*

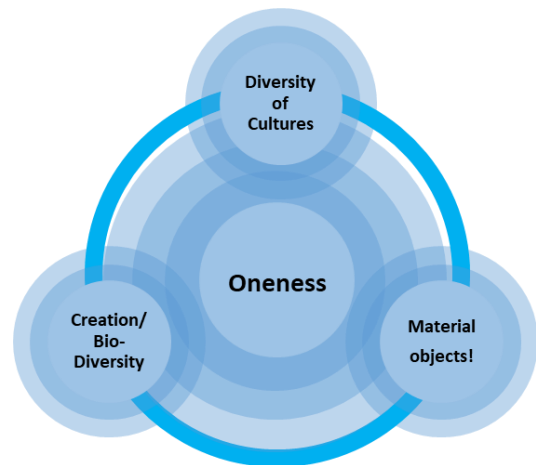
With open and sometimes tremulous hands, transformative communities experience God in the mystery of the unknown. They focus on questions that open their hearts to experience a passionate and dynamic spirit leading each sacred step. In this way, the spiritual pilgrimage unfolds into the mystery of the issue, through communitarian dialogue and often surprising solutions.

Transformative communities encompass a world that is inviting them to embrace the richness of so many diverse and precious cultures. They welcome this spiritual richness that encourages them to reconcile their inherent and often dormant prejudices, bias and avoidance of the other. With open hearts, they accept and recognize their own unreflective disposition and tendencies to be faithful to their tribe.

This deep and honest reflection and the admission and recognition of this truth intensifies the thirst to embrace God's beauty in the rich cultural diversity of the world. In this way transformative communities are ever growing and deepening their "oneness" with all creation. It is important to understand that this

journey is an ongoing pilgrimage rather than a goal one achieves.

Oneness dwells in pursuing the mystery of God's presence in relationships, environment, and the material world. The graphic below manifests the unity of God's ongoing creative presence. Each of these components, when lived, has rich spiritual value.



The beauty of our environment is the unfolding mystery of its creation, majesty, and wonder while material possessions bring aesthetics and beauty through their variety of shapes, forms, and concrete realities. The oneness with others fosters a precious and beautiful experience of God's agape to every unique and diverse person. When embarking upon this expedition, the transformative community experiences the expansive majestic presence of God. As Goethe states "Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it, /Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it."<sup>4</sup> The hallmark of the transformative community is unleashing the divine energy that creates mystical

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<sup>4</sup> Anderson, Robert J., and W. A. Adams. *Mastering Leadership: An Integrated Framework for Breakthrough Performance and Extraordinary Business Results*. Wiley, 2016.

ways of transforming society by its “oneness” with all creation.

For this to emerge, transformative communities need four critical contemplative processes: presence, planning, action, and adaptation to create a culture of discernment. These four disciplines are essential because they allow the transformative community to become resilient, adaptable and sustainable in a changing environment.

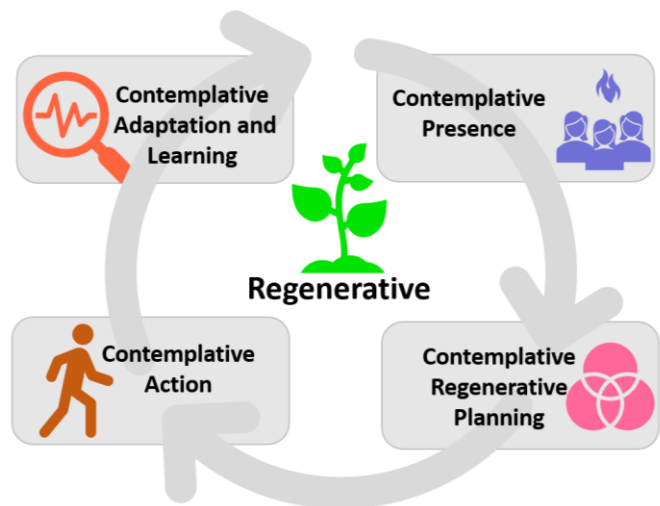
Most collective discernment models stem from an era when a five-year plan could follow a step-by-step process from vision to implementation. In today’s disruptive world, a group needs to have a regenerative model that allows them to be resilient, adaptive and sustainable with the sudden shifts in their environment. The community discernment process requires these three capacities to remain agile and able to shift quickly to societal changes. Thus they continually ask the question of what is changing in our environment and how it will impact being communal and on a mission. At the same time these communities foster reflection around being fiscally sustainable while engaging the group’s partners and co-workers.

These four integrated processes are grounded spiritually through living in the meeting point of the paschal mystery and the incarnation.

*This is a profound spiritual path that leads the transformative community in the process of both birthing the new and ongoing transformation of all that is.*

In a complex world, birthing and continuous change are not spiritually separate instead they are woven together.

Those who walk this journey are like pilgrims ever contemplating how God’s unfolding creative process is expressed in a complex world. In light of this, transformative communities are continually discerning the invitation to reevaluate and change their worldview.



### **Contemplative Presence:**

Contemplative presence is a capacity. It is grounded in being open and receptive to both oneself and the other. This capacity is essential as we move toward an intercultural world and a transformative community. It is learning how to engage mutually with one’s entire eco-system. It is valuing presence in a new way as communities hold in tension the polarity of tribal safety while opening themselves to a world that grows ever more culturally diverse. Contemplative presence is the ongoing development of the capacity to remain grounded in one’s identity while being receptive and open to others. These relationships allow transformative communities to be regenerative, that is,

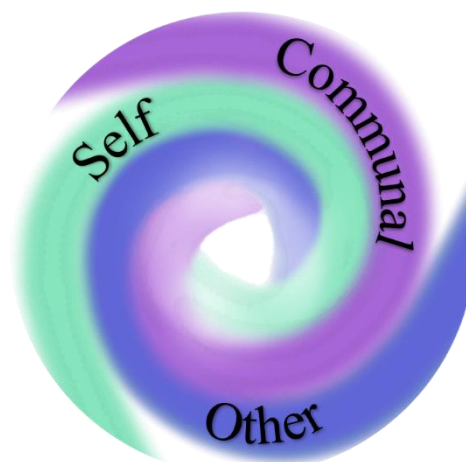
being open to both the many blessings and challenges of a more diverse world.

This is experienced in many lived moments. “In today’s world we suffer from record levels of inner and outer struggle, and find ourselves more polarized politically, and spiritually. We need a new paradigm; a fresh approach to conflict.”<sup>5</sup> In standing amid public disagreements, the transformative community is called to a nonjudgmental honesty and presence to themselves and others. It is the penetrating spiritual journey of integrating both the collective demons and gifts that witness to being a loving and caring presence.

Rick Hanson in, Buddha Brain, states “each of us has two wolves in the heart, one of love and one of hate. Everything depends on which one we feed each day.”<sup>6</sup> The rigor of living in a seemingly unstable world creates inner tension and stress. As a transformative community embraces the reality of these two wolves, it opens itself to deepening spiritual experiences of healing and resurrection. As the community opens its heart to being vulnerable and receptive to transformation and the needed skills, the experience creates an increased communal capacity to seek the common good. Through this spiritual journey, the transformative community becomes a regenerative, lifegiving presence in addressing today’s complex realities.

This regenerative presence happens through living a three-dimensional perspective of self, other and the communal. Each of these dimensions has both an inner and outer spiritual

perception. God is always active in both the individual and collective soul’s expedition. Presence is about being vulnerable and authentic in walking an often-perilous path in complex times.



These inner and outer perspective weave a story or narrative. The individual’s and the collective’s spiritual understanding is formed by how they choose to integrate their mental model, assumptions, and experiences into a worldview. When a person shares an idea, it automatically creates a response on both the individual and communal level.

*Presence means being attentive to the reaction at multiple levels self, other and collective*

As Otto Scharmer states, “...when you cross the threshold from empathic to generative listening; your listening becomes a holding space for bringing something new into a reality that wants to be born. You listen with openness to what is unknown and

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<sup>5</sup> Allione, Tsultrim. *Feeding Your Demons: Ancient Wisdom for Resolving Inner Conflict*. New York, NY: Little, Brown and, (2008). Print. 4

<sup>6</sup> Rupp, Joyce. *Boundless Compassion: Creating a Way of Life*. Sorin Books, 2018. Print. 107

emerging.”<sup>7</sup> This level of being present allows us to discern and experience God’s unfolding call as the new is birthed both in the individual and community.

There are a variety of critical global issues impacting our daily lives: environmental catastrophes, human trafficking and income inequality to name a few. Each of these issues is an opportunity to open our heart to a wounded society.

Transformative communities recognize that these are complex issues requiring persistence, zealous commitment and contemplative reflection to solve them. Within each of these issues is a range of different points of view, passion, and often contentious opinions and beliefs. Presence is the foundation for addressing them. It is an essential gift that allows individuals and groups to hold the fire of their emotional triggers honoring the other in contemplative reflection.

When we consider contemplative presence, the tendency is to exalt the positive dimension. The faith journey also includes dealing with the woundedness of the individual and collective mission. Elie Wiesel in the book, *Witness*, states: “Kierkegaard wrote that faith must be lost and found again.” Wiesel replaced the word “lost” with wounded. “At one point in our life, we must be wounded to be true. One Hasidic master said, ‘No heart is as whole as a broken heart.’ I believe that no faith is as whole as a wounded faith.”<sup>8</sup> Transformative communities are rooted in a spirituality that integrates the incarnation and paschal mystery. Regenerative presence is the

ability to hold in tension the enthusiastic energy of birthing the new while recognizing the woundedness and areas that are in need of transformation. This regenerative presence is the radical presence modeled by Jesus in the gospels.

Transformative communities must determine if they are going to be spiritual leaders and catalyst for social change. To choose to do so requires intensive inner work. It requires being continually summoned to review their mental models, assumptions and the rigidity of their beliefs while at the same time being present and compassionate to the differences both within and beyond their communities. It is an undertaking of great proportion and not for the faint of heart.

#### **Contemplative Design:**

This undertaking begins with contemplative design. The contemplative design path is not a static discernment process; instead, it embraces an unfolding spiritual pilgrimage to the future. It is a regenerative process based on the capacity to create a plan that is visionary, sustainable and builds resilience. These qualities are vital to developing a direction in a complexed world. The process is a radical invitation to embrace God’s unfolding call. As Sister Joan Chittister states in her book, *Between the Dark and the Daylight*, “What we suppress in the light emerges clearly in the dusk. It’s then in the still of life when we least expect it; the questions emerge from the damp murkiness of our inner underworld. Questions with ringtones that call the soul

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<sup>7</sup> Scharmer, C. Otto. *The Essentials of Theory U: Core Principles and Applications*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., (2018). Print. 27-28

<sup>8</sup> Burger, Ariel. *Witness: Lessons from Elie Wiesel's Classroom*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, (2018). Print. 89



to alert but do not come with ready solutions.”<sup>9</sup>

*Transformative communities understand they are called to enter the mystery of the generative question that opens them to their prophetic role in societal transfiguration.*

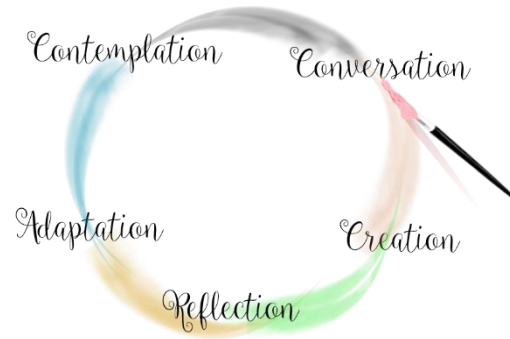
Through this discernment process, the transformative community is imaging the path, not as a navigator who seeks points on an existing map but as an artist gazes upon a blank canvas full of possibility and endless potential in a landscape not yet imagined. Trusting creativity, the artist is able to embrace the terror of the canvas by asking the bold question, What if? In standing amid public disagreements, the transformative community is called to a nonjudgmental honesty and presence to themselves and others. It is the penetrating spiritual journey of integrating both the collective demons and the gifts that witness to being a loving and caring presence.

As the group reflects on its what if questions, the discernment experience allows the wondering to unfold as vision. It is similar to the artist who with each brush stroke allows the image to emerge and come to life on the canvas.

The contemplative design progression involves this type of disciplined discernment. The community has an idea,

and with each step, the path opens and matures into the desired outcome.

The process, as depicted in this graphic below has these steps: contemplation, conversation, creation, reflection, and adaptation.



It is an active and revealing process. This sacred pathway is a balance of affirming the communal gifts and with sincerity reframing the group's assumptions and mental framework. It is this inner work that leads to designing a future vision and direction.

As scripture states, “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”<sup>10</sup> This passage speaks to the importance of contemplative design. In these times of radical change, it is essential to release worn assumptions, narratives, and mental frameworks. The regenerative journey is one of exploring the gospel invitation to reimagine our charism and vision for our time.

One of the critical discernment processes is to establish scenarios based on what-if questions. This disciplined approach allows transformative communities to experience both what can happen in current reality and

<sup>9</sup> Chittister, Joan. *Between the Dark and the Daylight: Embracing the Contradictions of Life*. Image, 2015. Print. Introduction

<sup>10</sup> NAB, John 12:24

at the same time see emerging trends. This process, at its deepest level is a spiritual experience of observing the unfolding universe.

**Consider:**

*Pause for a moment and think of someone or some community where you have witnessed sacrifice for a larger transcendent vision.*

*What characteristics and qualities did this person or community exude?*

*Sit in the quiet and ask yourself do you and your community have the courage to risk a transformative vision of the future?*

Contemplative design nurtures the collective courage to walk into the unknown and risk. It is embracing the gospel call to agape for a new and evolving world. It is again framing the gospel message in ways similar to the historical experiences of founders and foundresses of movements and religious congregations. Their courage is God request of transformative communities of our era.

**Contemplative Action:**

Courage and perseverance are the two cornerstones of contemplative action. The courage to risk the shared direction by testing each step and being receptive to continual adaptation. It means nurturing the collective will to persist and trust the mysterious unknown as the plan begins the implementation stage. Any action will have a mixture of missteps and success. The transformative community commits to individually and collectively remain in a discerning mode.

Communities tend to spend more time in the creation of the vision rather than the

arduous work of implementation. The excitement of developing the vision and direction often becomes muted or dissipated in the daily struggle to implement. The implementation process is rooted in testing and adapting which matures and gains clarity over time. Transformative communities realize contemplative action takes tenacity to walk the path to achieve the aspiration. When we reflect on the great scientists, founders, and foundress, it was not their holding onto a vision but their resolve to see the aspiration become actualized that made a difference.

The foundation for understanding the emerging future is in the implementation phase. Transformative communities embrace the pilgrimage that tests the visionary and strategic assumptions, beliefs and mental framework. Perseverance is critical because the community cannot foresee spontaneous disruptive events like an economic downturn, losing key staff or funding that impacts achieving the vision.

The core elements of contemplative action are measurable action steps that establish accountability and responsibility. Hallmarks of the implementation phase are always recognizing the changing needs of others and adapting the plan. The complexity of the world makes collaborative relationships vital to build the necessary capacity and investment to solve the most pressing issues.

Collaborative relationships often have inherent tension with various visions of the future. These relationships invite the transformative community into deepening their understanding of mutuality, shared visioning and moving beyond one's tribe. In theory, while the concepts are high-minded in practice, they invite the group into deep



soul work around their desire for control, being self-righteous, and other hidden bias that blocks true mutuality.

You take any of the great inventions of our time from the computer to the internet, to the environment, it was based on testing and persevering to reach the solution. Every great vision starts with a question and moves to a concept that leads to action.

“Faith asserts that God’s Word is enunciated in every age and every human life by the work of God’s Holy Spirit.”<sup>11</sup> The real power of contemplative action; is the vision becoming flesh for our times through collaboration and cooperation.

#### **Contemplative Adaptation and Learning:**

“Since God calls us new every moment, the response of faith is never-ending. The hearing demands an asceticism of attentiveness. There is never a moment before death when faith can say, ‘Enough it is finished.’”<sup>12</sup> This statement speaks that God is always engaging and calling the transformative community to learn and adapt their evolving direction. It allows the group to continue experiencing God in both the known and unknown.

One of the hallmarks of adaptation and learning is creating a resilient community on mission. It is the ability to adapt and change with sudden shifts in the economic, political, social and spiritual dimensions. “Resilience is what happens when we’re able to move forward even when things

don’t fit together the way we expect.”<sup>13</sup> As we have experienced, these swings often happen without warning and create seismic shifts to society.

“We live today in an age of transition, in which traditional ways of thinking and living are passing away, yet new ways have not been found to replace them. It generates doubt and confusion and above all, a sense of profound dissatisfaction.”<sup>14</sup> This quote speaks to the question and needs to create transformative communities that demonstrate the ability to be nimble. God is actively present both in the darkest times and moments of light. There is a collective need to nurture the virtue of hope.

In times of significant change, continuous learning and adaptation is not a luxury. These qualities are essential for achieving any bold direction. A key ingredient is foresight, the capacity to explore emerging questions.

Foresight as describe in Webster Dictionary is “the act of looking forward.” “Foresight is different from prediction! Foresight scans and anticipates possible futures in recognition of the fundamentally unpredictable and uncontrollable nature of the complex dynamic systems we participate in.”<sup>15</sup>

This virtue invites us into experiencing God, not as a static presence rather in walking with us to explore emerging questions. That presence will support us into greater

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<sup>11</sup> Johnson, Luke Timothy. *Scripture & Discernment: Decision-Making in the Church*. Abingdon Press, (1996). 24

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 24

<sup>13</sup> “Resilience and Tolerances.” *Seth's Blog*, 17 Mar. 2019, [seths.blog/2019/03/resilience-and-tolerances/](https://seths.blog/2019/03/resilience-and-tolerances/)

<sup>14</sup> Smith, Cyprian. *The Way of Paradox: Spiritual Life as Taught by Meister Eckhart*. Darton, Longman and Todd, (2004) 1

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. Wahl, 119

participation in the unfolding universe. Foresight is keeping the “what if” questions and emerging trends in front of us as we pursue a visionary direction.

For example:

- How has your community/organization been transformed in the past six months?
- What is one evolving issue that will impact your community/organization in the next five years?
- By 2020, what adaptive capacities will the community need to develop?

One of the critical elements is for a transformative community to seek continual formation. A significant capacity is to see what is emerging, and what new capabilities will be needed to cultivate and develop individually and collectively. There is a need to nurture ongoing formation and capacity development in light of our desired direction. We often affirm a plan without taking the time to explore the transformative adjustment needed to achieve it. There is a tendency to believe we can create a bold vision and maintain the same skills and mental frameworks. Discernment is always calling us to leave the known and move into the unknown. These historical times are teaching us anew the spiritual discipline of collectively living in the known and unknown. This ancient spiritual practice invites us to release control and live the gift of receptive

openness. It is not comfortable to hold the tension of the two.

What allows the transformative community to live this spiritual path is to create a real-time structure that supports ongoing learning and adaptation. We live in a world with shifting events on a weekly, monthly and yearly bases often without notice. Thus the community needs to foster a community culture that encourages learning and adaptation not as an idea but instead as a living discipline.

#### **Summary:**

What is clear is that the transformative communities’ discernment process is rooted in being present to God’s movement in a significant paradigm shift. They live the words of Donella Meadow, “Vision without action is useless. But action without vision does not know where to go or why to go there. Vision is necessary to guide and motivate action. More than that, vision, when widely shared and firmly kept in sight brings into being new systems.”<sup>16</sup>

Transformative communities create a culture of discernment through contemplation in the areas of presence, design, action, and adaptation/learning. Transformative Communities recognize this is a sacred path in an integrated and diverse society. Thomas Merton offered a definition of contemplation that is simple, yet challenging. He said it is a way of being “fully active, fully aware, fully alive.”<sup>17</sup> It speaks to the gift and challenge of the spiritual path for the transformative community as it becomes a culture of discernment.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. Wahl, 147

<sup>17</sup> Valente, Judith. “Spirit and Life Magazine.” *Spirit and Life Magazine*, 2019, 4.



### *Transformative Communities: Culture of Discernment*

*Author and consultant, Mark Clarke, is a Senior Consultant for CommunityWorks, Inc. He is available for consultation and welcomes a conversation to discuss your thoughts and questions about his writings.*

*For more information about using his article and concepts, please contact him at [mark\\_5777@msn.com](mailto:mark_5777@msn.com) or call 616-550-0083. Additional articles are available on the CommunityWorks, Inc., website: [www.cworksindy.com](http://www.cworksindy.com).*

*Throughout 2019, Mark will further explore key concepts shared in this article. You can access his work through CommunityWorks' website.*