

Mark Clarke
June 2019



Transformative Communities Series:
Contemplative Presence in an Era of Complexity

When one reflects on contemplative presence, there is a tendency to focus from the lens of the interpersonal rather than communal. This article explores the power of the Transformative Community to be instruments of peace and reconciliation when it embodies contemplative presence from a collective perspective. The Transformative community's essence to the world originates with the acronym, "HOLD" hospitality, oneness, love, and diversity. These four virtues, when connected, establish a safe container for public dialogue and collective action. The interweaving of these core values creates pulsating energy that permeates the Transformative Community's presence to society. Through this level of connection, they can participate with others to solve issues like environment or racism for the common good.

The heart of healthy societies is the ability to live from a contemplative dimension. The heart of community life is fundamentally sharing the richness and beauty of everyone's journey. Each daily moment, whether the group is feeling energized or is struggling, opens them to reflect and engage in the God experience. The divine is always inviting us to the meditative state of presence. This posture nurtures the quality of the individual and communal way of seeking the common good. It is a spiritual perspective that can bring light into darkness.

When one of our brothers or sisters is suffering, we all suffer. The daily news shares stories of desperate people traveling thousands of miles for a better life in a foreign land. People in the Midwest impacted by the 2019 spring floods were forced to leave their homes, and in many

cases to seek new work. The practice of presence calls us to recognize both the need in those within our inner circle as well as beyond. We are summoned to acknowledge that we are all part of a larger world. The more extensive the group's associations the more numerous are the encounters with heartfelt, tangible experiences of compassion and empathy. This deepens their bonds through contemplative presence both with others and the divine.

Transformative Communities that embrace hospitality, oneness, diversity, and love open the door to being prophetic. In her book, *Time is Now: A Call to Uncommon Courage*, Joan Chittister points out that two things are relatively clear about the process of prophecy. She quotes, "As Jean de La Fontaine wrote, patience and time do more than strength and passion."¹ Communities who collectively trust the unfolding of time mature in their ability to be prophetic. Their prophetic existence is grounded in preaching and modeling the "oneness" of all creation human, natural, and material. Their pilgrimage becomes a sacred and holy spiritual channel to affirm God's interconnecting love with life. Albert Nolan, in his book, *Jesus Today*, shares this message. In Africa, they say: "A person becomes a person through other people. In other words, your identity depends upon your family, the friends, and the community who relate to you and to whom you relate."² This statement becomes tangible for the group through acts of engaging relationships from a contemplative presence.

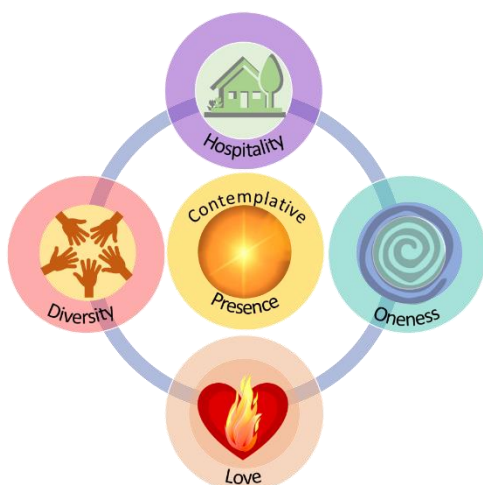
¹ Chittister, Joan. *Time Is Now: A Call to Uncommon Courage*. Crown Publishing Group, 2019. Print. 76

² Nolan, Albert. *Jesus Today: a Spirituality of Radical Freedom*. Orbis Books, 2008. Print. 15-16

If we image ourselves holding a child, flower, or art piece, we might feel a sense of awe and reverence. Our spirits become enraptured through the beauty and fragility of the person or created thing.

When we hold something either in our hands or heart, God's ever-creative process illuminates our spirit. When a Transformative Community operates from this reflective dimension, it embodies a reverential disposition for all.

Transformative Communities recognize that living at this level of contemplative presence requires a deep and maturing collective spirituality. There are both moments of harmony and profound suffering in being present to the world's challenges. The depth of connection among the members and their collective ministerial service opens them to the power of love and suffering. For these groups, it happens by embracing and transforming long-held prejudices of those included and excluded from their community. Thus as they welcomed and through the power of "HOLD" represented in the graphic below their ability to become instruments of peace and hope to society matures.



The four virtues of hospitality, oneness, love, and diversity are essential if we are going to engage with a complex and challenging world.

Transformative Communities recognize through their lived experience that society is unearthing a range of emotions, identity issues, and a changing paradigm. With this, these timeless values become a dynamic and insightful presence to those wounded by the scars of discrimination or loss of identity. The integration of these qualities establishes a spiritual depth that produces the courage to risk seeking the common good.

Contemplative presence is imperative in this historical time of transformation. Every institution, mental framework, and spiritual belief is being redefined. Many people feel that nothing is stable or permanent. This instability often leaves communities feeling lonely and isolated rather than connected.

Collective contemplative presence animates the truth expressed by Harriet Tubman, "Every great dream begins with a dreamer. Always remember, you have within you the strength, the patience, and the passion to reach for the stars to change the world," Harriet Tubman.³ Collective contemplative presence, along with the "HOLD" virtues, allow Transformative Communities to be receptive to the dream they hold both for themselves and the larger society.

Transformative Communities by their nature are called to be a prophetic witness of the gospel. As they mature in their ability to provide warm hospitality, oneness, love, and diversity, they become instruments of peace, healers, and reconcilers for an anxious culture. In Luke's gospel it states,

³ Chittister, Joan. *Time Is Now: A Call to Uncommon Courage*. Crown Publishing Group, 2019. Print. 82

“The spirit of the lord is upon me because he anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery sight to the blind, to set free those oppressed.”⁴ When the collective exemplify hospitality, oneness, love, and diversity, it opens the door to walk with others in a time seeking authentic transformation. These “HOLD” virtues offer optimism in a time when many feel bewildered in a transitory world.

Hospitality

Hospitality at the core is welcoming, inviting, and embraces others with reverence and dignity. As Jesus modeled by washing the feet of the apostles, we are called to create an open-hearted space for people to explore their life journey. A hospitable setting is one where the community members can explore both its gifts and warts without ridicule, judgment, or being ostracized. This hospitality fosters respectful dialogue. For example, even in the face of vehement opposition, hospitality enables the Transformative Community to fashion a space for transformation. The hospitable attitude creates an atmosphere that allows the different threads of intense emotion and passionate conversation to move toward clarity and shared direction.

For the collective to be hospitable, it necessitates breaking open their assumptions, emotional hopes, and fears while sustaining a contemplative presence. This disposition is necessary because there will be statements that trigger anger and possibly past hurts either from an individual or group. It will mean as Luke states we must, “Take the log out of your own eye, then you can see clearly.”⁵ This passage voices the regenerative purpose of the

Transformative Community. Often a group desires to be prophetic and transform the world, yet the members trip over their worn and tired mental models, ministries, structures, and security. Thus a hospitable environment that seeks oneness and acceptance of diversity opens the door to deepening the love between the members to become a transformative witness to the world.

Oneness

As we enter into the mystery of God, we are called to embrace oneness, an often complex and creative process. Our lives are lived in the tension of the emerging world. Revelation 21: 5 - 6 states, “I am making the whole of creation new...”⁶ This declaration speaks to the reality of God’s unfolding mystery. Transformative Communities recognize that the oneness they thirst for can be found in miraculous wonders seen in nature, humans, and the material world. We experience oneness as we enter into a world that is continually rejuvenating at every level.

The spiritual practice of oneness calls for an ongoing honest review of the collective attachments, mental constructs, and prejudices that block a group’s ability to be present to others.

It is an acknowledgment that transparency is a process of deepening one’s faith; hoping in an age of despair and loving without boundaries. This creates metamorphosis.

In this stage of metamorphosis, the Transformative Community has to beware of the tendency to fall into the trap of nurturing an all-knowing ego and tribalism.

⁴ NAB, Luke 4:18

⁵ NAB, Luke 6:42

⁶ NAB, Revelation 21: 5-6

As the members embrace their separateness, heal, and transform, they become wounded healers that radiate beacons of light to the society.

David Bohm, the quantum physicist, describes the universe as the implicate and the explicate order. “The implicate order is the creative vacuum, the universe’s unbroken wholeness, which is invisible because it is not available to our senses. The explicate order is the multiplicity of the diversity of things and events that arise out of the implicate order and present themselves as empirical evidence.”⁷

For the transformative community, every encounter is both an experience of the known and unknown. The community that is present to the moment is able to experience the mystery of the creative process in many moments. Whether the members are alone or together, immersed in the beauty of nature or the pain and joy of walking with those on the margins, it leads them to a sense of wonder beyond their grasp. For a transformative community, *this* is the spiritual path to wholeness.

Love

Shared love or agape is an immense, boundless gift that creates profound ability to be collectively present from the heart. In contrast to the romanticized love portrayed in movies or books, this love breaks one's heart opening it to include all in the mystery of life just as, “The Community of believers were of one heart and one mind. None of them ever claimed anything as his own; rather, everything was held in common.”⁸

The Transformative Community demonstrates the gift of love through its passionate commitment to the common good. This passion often takes the form of a deep desire for justice and concern for those who live on the margins of society and those who suffer discrimination “Dorothy Day, a Catholic social activist who used nonviolent action to serve the poor and homeless said, the greatest challenge is “how to bring about the revolution of the heart.”⁹ It is not an easy path. Instead, it calls for a deeply spiritual experience of appreciating as gift those called unworthy of being at anyone's table.

Hans Rosling said: “If you live near the crossroads or if you live near a river, you’re going to be okay. But if you live on the margins”- and here he used his pen to mark four corners of the page – “the world is going to forget you.”¹⁰ The Transformative Community has the courage to guarantee those on the margins experience the love that exudes passionately from living the gospel.

Prophetic spirituality does not pit one side of an issue against others from a different perspective. Instead, as Sister Joan Chittister states, “prophetic spirits come to notify the world of what will happen if, as a people, we continue in the direction we’re going.”¹¹ Transformative Communities incarnate this transformative love in every action, always seeking the common good.

Diversity

During the Renaissance, diversity was held and treasured as a gift. Individuals and groups who embodied this charism received

⁷Nolan. 40

⁸ Acts: 4:32

⁹ Gates, Melinda. *The Moment of Lift: How Empowering Women Changes the World*. St Martins Pr, 2019. Print. 258

¹⁰ Ibid. 240

¹¹ Chittister, 95

the title “renaissance people.” Men and woman in that historical period were held in high esteem because of their commitment to exploring a variety of interests and disciplines. Today, diversity has an unfavorable perception. In reality, being open to diversity is a spiritual benefit for seeing the wonders of God in the fullness of life. Brian Swimme speaks of the universe as wanting “diversity, and complexity...He sees the universe as creative caring, nurturing, and never satisfied... God is the self who diversifies, creates, and energizes.”¹²

Experiencing diversity is a profound invitation to growth. This gift opens the door to real transformation.

Pause your reading for a moment:

Reflect on a recent time in the past week when diversity knocked at your door – be aware of the emotions, mental constructs, and the choice.

Embracing diversity is encountering a different culture, fresh ideas, or a new horizon. It is an adventure that moves the group into exploring the splendor of the world. Jesus in the gospel embodies diversity, both personally and with his apostles and disciples. He was continually inviting and summoning all whom he encountered to become detached from the known and enter into the mystery of the unknown.

Embracing diversity will deepen the group’s capacity for being vulnerable and receptive to the wisdom in diverse opinions. This receptivity requires the exploration of a common purpose, the hopes and dreams both within and without their larger eco-system. While developing a common

purpose will not be easy, it demands a level of discernment and regenerative reflection that holds in tension both the community and outer world. Members will need to explore the varied ideas that arise to see the benefits, challenges, and risks as they choose God’s call. It will require at times suspending the dialogue should it become so intense and painful that it needs space to regroup in order to move forward. At other times diverse ideas will come together with ease. Often times, it will seem that the rigors of contemplative presence can be tested beyond the group’s capacity when engaging on two fronts both within and beyond the group. That is why it can be helpful to create space allowing the group to reconvene often with fresh insights and perspectives.

For Transformative Communities to continually be regenerative, they must enter both the mystery of their gifts and the inherent conflict of different visions. There will be a range of understandings and feelings about current reality. This diversity will lead some members to advocate staying the course, or make minor changes, while others will have radical suggestions. To understand the next steps, the members will need to enter into the conflict, emotions, and aspirations in order to seek a shared future. The community members are committed to having open hands and heart even when wanting to hold fast to their own opinions and perceptions.

Charles Duke, one of the astronauts who participated in the challenge to land on the moon, exemplified this understanding of contemplative presence:

“You take a stand on what you believe in, and I think that comes

¹² Nolan, 179

from a sense of duty. If you have a sense of duty to your unit, or a sense of duty to the mission, then you will make a courageous decision. I was willing to accept the risk of death..."¹³

Transformative Communities realize that contemplative presence is rooted in a more extensive search for the common good and a willingness to risk all. Society becomes transformed through communities of faith, hope, and love. These groups modeling these virtues show us that accepting diversity opens avenues for revitalizing and affirming the blessing within the social order.

Summary:

"All mystics tell us the words or images we use to describe God are inadequate."¹⁴ That is why contemplative presence is essential because in being present, we experience the vastness and penetrating love of God. Transformative Communities in their essence live the gift of "HOLD" being hospitable, seeking oneness, sharing the love, and embracing the diversity as gifts from God. Through the power of this style of living, they illuminate the sacredness of all life and God's unfolding creation. They are instruments of God's creative presence for the world.

The four virtues of hospitality, oneness, love, and diversity can help us re-envision what it means to be a prophetic *and contemplative presence in the world*. Together these aspects are a collective spiritual path that opens the door to a reimagined and new sense of mission. This historical time is a moment filled with perilous relational tension, rapid innovation,

and natural catastrophes. The Transformative Community has a unique role through contemplative presence to become a healing and reconciling gift. These communities rooted in their charism through solitude, dialogue, and openness to diversity model transformation. This level of connection and shared purpose allows them to become instruments of peace and transparency as people who walk the pilgrimage of a new paradigm.

The Transformative Community's contemplative presence is grounded in Ignatius's prayer of radical detachment and trust in God.

*Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty,
My memory, my understanding,
and my entire will,
All I have and call my own.
You have given all to me.
To you, Lord, I return it.
Everything is yours,
do with it what you will.
Give me only your love and your grace,
That is enough.*

¹³ Hero, Basil. *The Mission of a Lifetime: Lessons from the Men Who Went to the Moon*. Grand Central Publishing, a Division of Hachette Book Group, Inc., 2019. Print. 27

¹⁴ Nolan, 70

Transformative Communities Series: Contemplative Presence in an Era of Complexity



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 or call 616-550-0083. Additional articles are available on the CommunityWorks, Inc., website: www.cworksindy.com.

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