

THE PLACE OF DANGEROUS CLARITY"

Philip Pinto, cfc

Beware
 when you pass through a gate of quiet
 and enter into a place of stillness.
 Know you are at risk,
 that you never re-emerge unscathed. Never!
 You may return fierce and hungry for justice,
 a passionate lover, a surprise to yourself,
 a risk taker, seen as a trouble maker.
 You may emerge a seeker
 seeking ever to open to each moment's invitation.
 You may be invited to be generous
 with what you most cling to,
 bold in ways you've never been,
 dared to take that step you have most feared,
 speak out your truth and have it prized or criticized,
 live your life the way you have always wanted to
 and never dared,
 know the depths of love and pain compassion brings,
 say yes to being you.
 Know that place of stillness grows inner trust
 and becomes in time a place of dangerous clarity.
 Be aware!¹

"The Christian of tomorrow will be either a mystic or nothing at all." Rahner's famous dictum has been much quoted, but little understood or taken seriously. Dr. Robert Muller, former Deputy Director General of the UN wrote: *"Either the twenty-first Century will be a spiritual century, or there will be no century at all."*

From our previous reflections, it is obvious that practising religion as we have done in the past, is no longer a viable option. That way of living religious life is over, and if we are to be relevant to our world, we are invited to respond in radically new ways.

They said of our founder, *"No man was surer of himself than Edmund Rice."* Where does such certainty come from? When I look at the life of Jesus of Nazareth, I am constantly amazed at the consistency I notice in his life. He never acts out of character. Where does this come from?

*That day I saw beneath dark clouds
 the passing light over the water
 and I heard the voice of the world speak out,
 I knew then, as I had before
 life is no passing memory of what has been*

¹ Noel Davis, *The Place of Dangerous Clarity*

*nor the remaining pages in a great book
 waiting to be read.
 It is the opening of eyes long closed.
 It is the vision of far off things
 seen for the silence they hold.
 It is the heart after years
 of secret conversing
 speaking out loud in the clear air.
 It is Moses in the desert
 fallen to his knees before the lit bush.
 It is the man throwing away his shoes
 as if to enter heaven
 and finding himself astonished,
 opened at last,
 fallen in love with solid ground.²*

Poetic images can be so powerful for us. Moses saw part of his world go up in flames and he heard the voice say: take off your shoes for you are standing on holy ground. I believe that Moses' life did not change when he saw the burning bush but when he heard the voice say: "Take off your shoes, for you are standing on holy ground". And he looked down and saw that he was standing on holy ground, not just at that moment, but that he had been standing on holy ground all his life! It is the moment of revelation: the moment when everything suddenly makes full sense – and nothing will remain the same again! This is the moment of dangerous clarity!

A kind of shriving took place and a huge structure came to the ground and left a gap in his life. And also, he began a conversation in his life that he hadn't been having until that moment.

*And we know when Moses was told, and the way he was told:
 "Take off your shoes!"
 He grew pale from that simple reminder of fire in the dusty earth
 He never recovered his complicated way of loving again
 And was free to love in the same way he felt the flames
 licking at his heels loved him.
 Every step he took from there was carefully placed.
 Everything he said mattered
 as if he knew the constant witness of the ground
 and remembered his own face in the dust
 the moment before revelation.
 Like the moment you too saw for the first time your own house turned to ashes
 Everything consumed, so the road could open again
 Your entire presence in your eyes
 And the world turning slowly into a single branch of flame.³*

"Moses, himself a man at "the bottom" (a murderer on the run and caring for his father-in-law's sheep), first encounters God in a burning bush (Exodus 3:2), which, like so many initial religious experiences, is experienced alone, externally and yet interiorly as well, both earth-based and transcendent at the same time: "Take off your shoes, this is holy ground" (3:5). This religious experience is immediately followed by a call to a very costly social concern for his own oppressed people, whom he had not cared about up to then. God said, "I have heard the groaning of my people in Egypt. You, Moses, are to go confront the Pharaoh and tell him to let my people go" (3:9-10).

² David Whyte, *The Opening of Eyes*, from 'Songs for Coming Home', 1984

³ David Whyte, *Fire in the Earth*

There, right at the beginning of the Judeo-Christian tradition, is the perfect integration of action and contemplation. First, the contemplative experience comes: the burning bush. And immediately it has social, economic, and political implications. The connection is clear. There is no authentic God experience that does not situate you in the world in a different way. After an encounter with the Presence, you see things differently, and it gives you the security to be free from your usual loyalties: the system that you have lived in, your economics, and your tribe. Your screen of life expands exponentially.

I believe the Exodus story--with Moses and the Jewish people--is the root of all liberation theology, which Jesus clearly exemplifies in the synoptic Gospels (see Luke 4:18-19). Liberation theology focuses on freeing people from religious, political, social, and economic oppression (i.e., what Pope John Paul II called "structural sin" and "institutional evil"). It goes beyond just trying to free individuals from their own particular "naughty behaviors," which is what sin has seemed to mean to most Christian people in our individualistic culture.

Liberation theology, instead of legitimating the status quo, tries to read reality, history, and the Bible, not from the side of the powerful, but from the side of the pain. Its beginning point is not sin management, but 'Where is the suffering?' This makes all the difference in how we read the Bible."⁴

Here is another way of looking at the same truth. It arises out of the Universe Story instead of Scripture, but is equally telling.

Blowing through heaven and earth, and in our hearts and the heart of every living thing, is a gigantic breath--a great Cry--which we call God. Plant life wished to continue its motionless sleep next to stagnant waters, but the Cry leaped up within it and violently shook its roots: "Away, let go of the earth, walk!" Had the tree been able to think and judge, it would have cried, "I don't want to. What are you urging me to do -YOU are demanding the impossible." But the Cry, without pity, kept shaking its roots and shouting, "Away, let go of the earth, walk!"

It shouted in this way for thousands of eons; and lo! As a result of desire and struggle, life escaped the motionless tree and was liberated.

Animals appeared--worms--making themselves at home in water and mud. "We're just fine here," they said. "We have peace and security; we're not budging!"

But the terrible Cry hammered itself pitilessly into their loins. "Leave the mud, stand up, give birth to your betters!"

"We don't want to! We can't!"

"You can't, but I can. Stand up!"

And lo! After thousands of eons, man emerged, trembling on his still unsolid legs.

The human being is a centaur; his equine hoofs are planted in the ground, but his body from breast to head is worked on and tormented by the merciless Cry. He has been fighting, again for thousands of eons, to draw himself, like a sword, out of his animalistic scabbard. He is also fighting--this is his new struggle--to draw himself out of his human scabbard. Man calls in despair, "Where can I go? I have reached the pinnacle, beyond is the abyss." And the Cry answers, "I am beyond. Stand up!"⁵

⁴ Richard Rohr, *The Gospel Call for Compassionate Action*

⁵ Nikos Kazantzakis, *Report to Greco*

What is the cry within me? What is it demanding that I leave behind or shake off? Where am I being invited to grow?

What is the cry of the world saying to us? Listen to the way the Holy One summons Moses from the burning bush in the desert. The four verbs of this text are utterly revelatory of the heart of God:

"I have seen the misery of my people here in Egypt; I have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know well what they are suffering; therefore I have come down to deliver them."
[Ex. 3:7-8]

The text reveals that the God of Israel sees, hears, knows (feels) the affliction of these enslaved people, and so comes to set them free. No wonder the bush was on fire!

"*Liberation*" becomes the language for exploring this precious, startling insight. God is a liberating God whose signature deeds set people free.

The Voice crying in the wilderness: its reverberations shook society. Prepare a way of the Lord, coming to bring you home. The exiles' cries are now being heard.

Mark's gospel is an inclusion between two cries: the cry of the demoniac, '*What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth?*' and the cry of the Lord at his death which rends the veil of the Temple in two.

Pope Francis calls us today to '*awaken the world*'. What does this entail?

It was precisely for times like ours that God sent the prophets. "*Prophets do not conform. They burst upon our flat horizon with creative alternatives and new models of being human. Not for them the mediocre, not for them the binding of the human spirit to societal, political, or religious norms.*"⁶ It is surely time for this generation to discover them.

"We aren't the only people who have gone through such social disorientation, such moral confusion. We aren't the only ones in history who have put down our ideals in favour of our desires. We aren't the only people in the world who have wanted more comfort than challenge, more money than community, more power than equality.

We shrink from the very thought of raising our voices above the crowd. We want a religion that chants but never howls, that prays but never brings the foolish standards of the Gospel to the issues of the time."⁷

As it is experienced today by many practising Christians, our faith does not give rise to "*disciples*" who are learning to base their lives on the Gospel of Jesus, but adherents of a religion; it does not generate "*followers*" of Jesus who identify with his project, strive to open up ways to the Kingdom of God, rather it does generate members of a religious institution that comply more or less with what has been established. The Gospel of Jesus cannot manifest all its saving power when it is presented from a cultural and religious tradition that is losing its attractiveness.

Nazim Hikmet wrote: "*This life is not a joke. You must take it seriously. Seriously enough to find yourself up against a wall, perhaps, with your hands bound.*"

⁶ Edwina Gately

⁷ Joan Chittister

The first prophetic action is to cry, to make known the pain of the world. We do this in different ways. Mother Teresa did it by picking up the bodies off the streets of Kolkata, creating an awareness across the world. Romero did it through his homilies each week, bringing hope to his people.

*'The first job of a citizen is to keep your mouth open.'*⁸

Martin Luther King said *'a time comes when silence is betrayal'*.

*"When it is genuine, when it is born of the need to speak, no one can stop the human voice. When denied a mouth, it speaks with the hands or the eyes, or the pores, or anything at all. Because every single one of us has something to say to the others, something that deserves to be celebrated or forgiven by others."*⁹

*"In God's circle of compassion, the poor are not left outside. In God's dream, margins are erased and barriers of exclusion are dismantled. Jesus was not a man for the poor, he was a man with them. There is a world of difference in that. His Beatitudes were not about spirituality, they were about geography. They tell us where and how to stand. Our truest measure of servant leadership, of Christian presence, is in locating ourselves with the powerless and seeing ourselves in kinship in the struggle."*¹⁰

"A prophet", says Richard Rohr, *"is one who keeps God free for people and who keeps people free for God."* It is a two-sided task. He or she is committed to the covenant love between humanity and the Divine--at all costs--and keeping God totally free for people. That is a very hard thing to do because, at least in the Bible, the priestly class invariably makes God less accessible instead of more, in such a way that: *"Neither entering yourselves nor letting others enter in"*, as Jesus boldly puts it (Matthew 23:13). For our own job-security, the priestly mentality tends to say, *"You can only come to God through us, by doing the right rituals and obeying the rules."* Formal ministers are too often good at teaching people *"learned helplessness."* That's why the prophets spend so much time destroying and dismissing these barriers to create *"a straight highway to God"* (Matthew 3:3), as John the Baptist tries to do, and Jesus does with such determination and partial success. And now you know why they were both killed.

The other half of the prophet's job is to keep people free for God. People get trapped in chains of guilt and low self-esteem, what they judge to be poor performance and less than perfect attendance. As if the goal of religion is *"attendance"* at an occasional ritual instead of constant participation in an Eternal Mystery! Recall the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: *"Jesus calls men, not to a new religion, but to life."*

*There is a strange, untouchable, unseeable thing in me.
It hungers
Grasps, strains for something I do not know, far beyond –
It stirs,
Turns, disturbs.
It brings with it unknown things, unidentified longings. It reveals a vision hazy, far,
far,
Very far away.*¹¹

(The story of Edwina Gately and her journey into understanding the idea of mission)

⁸ Gunter Grass, German novelist

⁹ Eduardo Galeano, *Celebration of the Human Voice*

¹⁰ Martin Byrne, *100 Gritty Voices*

¹¹ Edwina Gately, *Stirrings*

PART II

To be leaders today, one must come from this place of dangerous clarity. I would like to share with you some of my own learning about leadership. I have been very blessed.

My mother was a convert. She was a Parsee, a Zoroastrian by birth and only became a Christian before marrying my father. She did not want religion to be a divisive force in our house, and was attracted by Christianity, having studied in an Anglican school. She was the one who taught me that God was larger than any particular religion, and that God embraced all people of all faiths.

Right from the novitiate I was fortunate to be placed under the guidance of a mystic. From him I learnt how to pray, how to read Scripture, and to love literature. I realized early enough that it was far more beneficial for me to read the mystics rather than the theologians – both arrive at the same truth, but the mystics are so far quicker.

I have been in leadership for much of my life as a Religious Brother -- probably too long. I have found most of it enjoyable and life-giving. And yet, there is something in me that keeps saying: there has to be more to life and leadership than I am currently experiencing. I remember the one thing that was said to me when I was elected to this present ministry. A brother said to me, *"Just be yourself. You were elected for who you are, not for what you can do, and certainly not to continue what someone else did."*

There is a Hasidic tale which speaks about a rabbi named Zusya who died and went to stand before the judgement seat of God. As he waited for God to appear, he grew nervous thinking about his life and how little he had done. He began to imagine that God was going to ask him, *"Why weren't you more like Moses, or why did you not exercise the wisdom of Solomon, or why were you not brave like David?"* But when God appeared, the rabbi was surprised. God simply asked, *"Why weren't you Zusya?"*¹²

The big question is: *'What do you want to share with your Sisters/Brothers?'*

I knew instantly what I wanted to share with my Brothers:

- I wanted to share my experience of God;
- I wanted them to know that our great temptation is to stay within the boundaries of what we are told God is like;
- I wanted to say to them that the Gospel is worth staking one's whole life on, if we can move beyond a pious Jesus and rediscover the radical Nazarene who threatened the good order of his time;
- I wanted them to discover that we are all mystics, and that the mystical journey allows us to see life as it is.

I knew too that I could only share this if I committed myself more deeply to the search for the One who, as Paul said, *'took hold of me'* (Phil. 3:12). I realised that this search was about the presence of God in the middle of my leadership. I had to explore the relationship between my private encounter with God in solitude and my call to leadership in the public arena – as Ruth Haley Barton writes.

I would like to share with you three stories about leadership.

The first is a story from the book of Deuteronomy. Listen to the text (Dt. 5:24-27).

The incident takes place at Mount Sinai, the place where the Commandments are given to the

¹² Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*

Israelites and a covenant is made between God and them. They hear the thunder on the mountain, see the cloud covering it and are afraid.

"For this great fire might devour us if we go on listening to the voice of Yahweh our God, and then we should die. For what creature of flesh could possibly live after hearing, as we have heard, the voice of the living God speaking from the heart of the fire? Go nearer yourself and listen to everything that Yahweh our God may say, and then tell us everything that Yahweh our God has told you; we shall listen and put it into practice!"

We are aware that the incident is not history recalled but theology outlined. The leader is one who dares to stand in the line of fire and there discover what God is saying to the people.

The second is about an interview I heard with Basim, an Iraqi who worked as an interpreter for the American troops. He took the job believing that the Americans represented hope for his country. But when Abu Ghraib showed the indiscriminate killing of Iraqi civilians and that Americans could be as brutal as Saddam's police, Basim's efforts to bridge the two cultures brought death threats against him and his family and they were forced to flee to their homeland. *"Was it naïve to believe that you could stand in the middle like that?"*, the interviewer asked. Without hesitation Basim answered, *"No. It wasn't at all. If reconciliation is going to happen,"* he added, *"there must be people who are willing to live in the tragic gap and help the two sides understand each other."*

Leadership is about the willingness to stand in the gap and be a presence of integrity in conflict.

A few years ago a younger African Brother shared with me a story that deeply affected me. He told me that when he was a boy, each afternoon, after work, his father would go over to a big tree at the edge of the village and sit under it. The boy was never allowed to disturb his father during that time. When he returned to the village after completing his studies as a young Brother, he asked his father about that. His father said: *"Now you are a man and can understand what I tell you. I would go over to that tree and ask myself how I could be a good father to you."*

Our deepest wisdom comes from within our own hearts. We need to give ourselves the time and space to discover it in solitude.

Transformational leadership is a way of being leaders arising out of the depths of the wisdom within each of us, a wisdom that allows others the space and opportunity to transform their own lives. The only sort of leadership that is worth the name is spiritual leadership. The rest is management. We, in this room, are called to be spiritual leaders. If we are not this, we are nothing at all.

*'Lighthouses don't go running all over an island looking for boats to save; they just stand there shining.'*¹³

¹³ Annie Lamott