

Blessing and Hope: Creating a Dream for Religious Life in the 21st Century

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*When we are dreaming alone it is only a dream.
When we are dreaming with others, it is a beginning of reality.*

--Dom Helder Camara

There is a fascinating body of psychodynamic work that has been developing since the early 1980s through the pioneering work of W. Gordon Lawrence and Mary Dluhy. It is called “social dreaming” and, in some wonderfully metaphoric and rather mysterious manner, it invites participants to activate both the *power of the community* and the *power of the dream* to create a new communal culture. While this involves a very detailed group process much too complex to explain now, I would like to share with you some of the central tenets of this creative development. You will also note that it bears some similarities to Peter Block’s work on community.

In a more traditional understanding of communal culture, a community focuses its efforts along two dimensions: on its life and mission as it is experienced as *a process in real time* and on its life and mission as it is in the *process of becoming*. That is, how do we evaluate our current state of affairs and what might we surmise about how we will be in the future? To concretize this a bit, if we were to look at common ways in which we enter into chapter deliberations, financial planning or various other decision-making strategies, we typically examine how

things are going now and in what ways we see things developing and plan accordingly. (e.g., TRENDS, actuarial studies, demographics, rates of retention of novices, etc.) While this is certainly important work and provides good data, it can lead us into a quagmire of problems that seem to have no particularly exciting resolutions.

When we typically think about vocation and formation processes, we find ourselves focusing on programs and processes that have been more or less successful. In the experience of partial success, we attempt to inject these programs with various B-12 shots to see if something more can happen to improve outcomes. We try to eliminate or patch up what isn't working and then return a year or so later to see if it has worked better. If our processes have not yielded results, demoralization takes hold and we lose the energy and heart to continue. The CARA study on vocations has provided us with much data, but now it is time to settle into the dream work, if you will, that holds the possibility of communal transformation.

In Paul Bednarczyk's analysis of the results of the CARA report, Paul suggests a number of areas that call for our attention: clarity in the identity of our life; education of our members about the desires of those seeking religious life; communal reflection on deep questions concerning personal and communal prayer, our relationship with the Church, and our living of community life. The CARA data are certainly sobering and the questions that emerge for us could prove quite disheartening were we to engage in tedious analyses of what we are doing wrong, or try to rationalize the reasons for the research outcomes. I would suggest that we

engage in neither of these activities. I do not believe we can problem-solve our way out of this situation. Instead, I invite us to let the data settle in our heads and rest lightly in our hearts as we open ourselves to dreaming and creating together an alternative future.

Dreaming the Future into Being

The social dreaming matrix injects a third dimension into the traditional construct of analyzing the present and planning for the future. It introduces a dimension that calls us to *dream together to discover possibilities*. That is, the community matrix is invited to explore its life and mission *as it is the process of being dreamt*. This surely brings us all into the realm of hope and blessing!

So what can happen when we begin to share dreams together? What truths might we unexpectedly discover? What are some implications for formation ministry? How is the mission of Jesus impacted and how is our identity intensified? These are some questions I would like to explore with you today. Stepping away, now, from the precise definitions and complex processes of the social dreaming matrix which is actually predicated upon dreams that occur in sleep, I will focus rather on those waking dreams that speak to our collective imagination, those musings that prompt us to hope and invite God's blessing.

First and foremost, we need to listen to and engage the dreamers. It has never been a secret that the young are great dreamers. There is a freshness of perspective and a certain boldness and fearless freedom in conceptualizing a world that has few limitations. I believe *our* "dream genes" are still there, too, but

sometimes need a little shaking up! The young provide a service to us by doing exactly that—shaking us up a little. Over the course of the past six years as Prioress I have had the chance to listen to the dreams of our sisters in initial formation as I have had visitation with them and as I have joined them when they have gathered each year to spend time with each other reflecting on their lives. They convene themselves to share life and to imagine together a future they wish to participate in creating. In the act of imagining, they are actually creating the future. These sisters have served as wise counsel to me, even as they likely had no idea they were doing so. Their questions and hopes and imagination have prompted new initiatives in our Congregation and new ways of reframing the essentials of a rich tradition. In particular, they have impacted our sense of belonging, our identity and our communal participation in mission. Let me offer a few examples that speak concretely to some of the issues raised both directly and indirectly in the CARA study: belonging to a group that offers meaning, connection and engagement; affiliating with a group that has a clear sense of its identity; and being a part of a vibrant, prayerful community in mission, often in direct collaboration with sponsored institutions or with the institutional church and, many times, with those who are among the marginalized in our world.

Belonging and Engagement

During large gatherings of our sisters, it is often customary for sisters to meet with those who entered the Congregation with them. We call those groups “crowds.” Each crowd was given a title by the novice director or by the Prioress.

The lack of a crowd posed a particular sense of aloneness for our newer members, and underscored their small numbers, especially during those times when many crowds were gathering to celebrate. One day, several of them approached our Director of Formation and me, wondering if perhaps they could be named a crowd. While they had not entered at the same time, they did represent a cohort in the Congregation. Naming them a crowd gave them a sense of identifying with the tradition and history of the community even though this would be in a slightly different manner. Also included in their “crowd” of eight are the five young Iraqi Dominican sisters with whom they have shared life for the past five years. Named the Peace Crowd, with the Vatican II document *Pacem in Terris* as a source of inspiration, they, along with other young Dominicans in the US and across the world are dreaming a global Dominican community into being. My intuition suggests a global community of apostolic sisters is truly in the process of being dreamt to birth.

Especially in light of the demographics of most of our communities, the importance of providing the open spaces for the newer members to connect with each other and with others from different congregations who are part of their cohort cannot be underestimated. This has implications for where the newer members are missioned and for the receiving local communities of which they will become a part. Timothy Radcliffe, OP, former Master of the Dominican Order, reflected with our Congregation leadership that, in his experience as Master General, he noted the young men fared far better when they were missioned to communities where there

were some others in their age bracket. My own experience has supported Timothy's observation. It is simply not an optimal situation to mission a 20-something to a community with two others who are 60 or 70-something.

The issue of belonging has numerous dimensions including: the need to be part of a group where one is known by name; to be respected and called upon to use the gifts one has; to be counted upon to participate fully in the apostolic mission of the community; to trust and be trusted in sharing faith with others; and to take on increasingly significant roles in leadership. We must engage our younger members to help us together dream these desires into being.

Identity with the Charism

For us, Dominican identity is embedded in the charism of preaching. As the time was approaching for one of our candidates to be received into the novitiate, she raised with her Director the issue of receiving some symbol. She was taking an important step on her way toward becoming a professed Dominican. Steeped in the study of the preaching mission of the Order and in the passionate commitment to confront the heresies of these times through her firm grounding in study and prayer, she queried how her reception into the Dominican Order might be visible. Proud of her commitment to search for truth, to contemplate and give to others the fruits of contemplation, she asked if she might receive some *sign* of this preaching mission to which she was so strongly attracted. Questions are frequently the product of dreams, and one person's dream infects the imagination of another's reverie. After some extended time imagining what this could be, the rite of

entrance into the novitiate was re-envisioned. While the words of our sister, Catherine of Siena, “Clothe me with your eternal Truth,” are sung, novices now receive a white preaching habit that visibly identifies them as one among an 800 year long procession of daughters and sons of Dominic whose lives are dedicated to the pursuit of the truth of the Gospel. They choose when or if they should wear this sign of their commitment to preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. In a particularly novel way, some novices have chosen to wear their preaching habit during their public witness for justice and peace at the School of the Americas. This is a far different conceptualization from what you and I likely ever held, but it is an example of what can develop when the younger and newer members’ dreams are shared. We elders dare not interpret the dreams of the young with jaded or disparaging critiques, but rather treasure their dreams as fresh glimpses of a reframed religious life in this century.

Desire to Be Part of a Community in Mission

In another encounter with some of our younger members, the question of community and ministry arose. Remember, those questions are frequently the stuff of dreams! As profession neared and the time for leaving the relative stability of the formation house was nearing, a group of novices was anxiously chatting with me during a party one evening. “Will you *mission* us, Donna? We entered so we can be *sent*. We want to be sent some place where we are really needed. And we want to live and pray in community.” Their question and their desires were poignant and

called me and the other members of the General Council to engage in serious conversation about possibilities for missioning these women.

We, like many communities, have a dearth of larger communities and, generally, since 1971 or so, have lacked housing that is manageable for more than two, three or four. (This was due to the Cardinal's closure of most of the Catholic schools across the state and with the schools' closure, the loss of parish housing options.) We wondered whether there were dioceses in significant need whose bishops might welcome developing a collaborative initiative with us. Could such collaboration serve a number of important concerns, including healing wounds experienced from the inevitable tensions between diocesan clergy and women religious? Could we dream about communities in mission where we might send our newer members to be mentored by wise, experienced sisters? Could these new communities nurture new vocations by welcoming young women to pray with them? If such initiatives could take shape and form, we would have strong communities that could support our sisters in initial formation and temporary vows and provide new options for others among us.

When we are dreaming alone, it is only a dream. When we are dreaming with others, it is a beginning of reality. Over the course of the past five years, we have established seven new "communities in mission" across North America. Predominantly these have been established in collaboration with bishops who deeply desire our presence in their dioceses and who have been marvelous "brothers" with us throughout the process. The majority of the collaborating

bishops are vowed religious themselves and hence know well the importance of communal life and support. (I must admit, the sisters were more than a little astounded when their bishops did such things as pick them up from the airport, fix their plumbing, and prepare supper for them!)

The sisters live in community and engage in various ministerial works in the dioceses. They serve as welcoming houses for young women interested in religious life and as places where we may send our novices and candidates for immersion experiences. Their ministries include lay pastoral formation; pastoral care and nursing care for the homeless; pastoral ministry in bilingual parishes; religious education; superintendent of Catholic schools; diocesan administration; and pastoral work among the peoples of the First Nations. [show 7 minute video clip of bishops' evaluation]

Obviously, the realization of dreams is never without struggles. The communities in mission have had their challenges. One ultimately had to be abandoned because the overwhelming needs of that diocese were such that it was not geographically possible for the sisters to live in community together. The lack of a solid communal life then made it difficult to fulfill the objectives of the mission initiatives and we determined we had to close the effort.

Another challenge to the dreams and desires of the newer members is that some of us older members have sometimes wondered if the young are becoming more "conservative" because of their deep desire to witness publicly to their life and to live in common. On the other hand, there are many whose imaginations have

been sparked and who have made considerable changes in lifestyle in order to be of support to the newer members.

Some Implications

For those of us whose insomnia has robbed us of adequate dream time, we need all the more to be attentive to the young whose dreams have not yet been shattered by others' anxious nightmares. We elders obviously hold dreams and visions, too, but our dreams have often been tamed by the memory traces of our lived days. We have learned well the skills of reflecting on our past as we engage in planning for the future. Necessary and valuable as this is, do we dare join our younger members in dreaming ourselves communally into a future that is built upon possibilities, gifts, hospitality and affection? For this, we need great formators and leaders.

Certainly, only those among us who have the courage to dream should accept the role of formator. Those of us in leadership are charged with trusting their intuition, their sometimes out-of-the-box thinking. We celebrate their generosity in taking on this awesome task. In the best of all worlds, we should select those members whose imaginations are rich, whose fear of failure is minimal, whose energy is high and whose joy is boundless. These are the formators who will free the space for our new members to "dream us together" into a transformed world and an uncompromised, gospel-driven community that is worth committing our lives to.

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References

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