

Polarization and Justice: Why ‘Evolving Consciousness’ Matters

Panel Presentation by Sue Wilson, CSJ

Splits between left and right, liberal and conservative, are pretty much second-nature to us: My family members try not to talk politics at family gatherings so as to keep the peace. Our parliamentarians resort to name-calling instead of working together to address critical issues. The gap between rich and poor is creating two solitudes in our cities and in the world. There are those who support pipelines and those who don't; those who think it's urgent to address climate change and those who think it mustn't get in the way of economic growth. And then there's the Roman Catholic Church, where there even seems to be reference to the split between liberals and conservatives in the decision that was made to confer sainthood on both Pope John XXIII and Pope John Paul II at the same time.

All of these examples of polarization are pointing to struggles of consciousness, to individuals and groups that are looking at the same reality through different worldviews (different lenses, assumptions, thinking patterns and values), and so understanding it differently. But there's more to it than that. There are also justice issues that fester at the core of these polarizations, that is, inequities that need to be addressed and relationships that need to be transformed. These issues are urging us to go beyond polarization in order to create systemic change; they embody deep yearnings for transformation.

Examining the Dynamics within Struggles of Consciousness

In order to lay a foundation for delving more deeply into the question of why the evolution of consciousness matters, let's turn to a well-known struggle of consciousness that still endures today: the struggle between the vision of the papacy of John XXIII and that of John Paul II.

In *Pacem in Terris* (1963), John XXIII emphasized that God is present and acting in the world – healing, transforming, and inviting all people to join in that work. He pointed to the women's movement, the movement for workers' rights, and the ending of colonialism as important “signs of the times.” They were liberation movements that embodied sacred energies of healing, transformation and new life. The challenge for people of faith was to recognize, in the midst of the social messiness, those sacred energies that were moving us toward greater liberation and equality so that we could cooperate with these energies.

If we look at this through the lens of evolving consciousness, these social movements, and other social and environmental movements that followed, can be understood as signs of postmodern consciousness. A liberating evolution of consciousness was emerging in the collective psyche of the human community. Postmodern values were challenging modernism's inadequate notions of truth and justice. Individuals and groups that had been pushed to the margins were finding their voice and their power. As a society, we were waking up to the oppressive biases that undergirded social structures.

Decades later, John Paul II saw the shadow side of postmodernism. By that time, it had become clear that basic postmodern insights were presenting a formidable challenge to what counts as truth or justice in a society: If people from different social locations can encounter the same reality yet see or experience things differently, then how can we establish a firm basis for truth or justice? Society struggled to negotiate this challenge, and ended up choosing too often (and unnecessarily) to abandon efforts at creating shared meaning or a collective sense of ethical norms. John Paul II saw this tendency toward relativism, as a threat to both society and the Church. His papacy worked to hold onto the Church's deep and authentic values. And it was

important work because, for example, while marginalized groups often need to *challenge* accepted notions of justice, their struggle for equality can't survive in a context that abandons any hope of establishing a shared sense of justice. Without question, a sense of shared values has an important role to play in our lives.

At the same time, for many people, the papacy of John Paul II seemed to lose touch with the positive, liberating aspects of postmodernism. And, in those places where the church lost its transforming connection with postmodern values, that aspect of its living tradition too easily degenerated into an ossified traditionalism. Consider, for example, that the church still has not found ways to include women in its higher-level structures of decision-making.

Transformation and the 'Evolution of Consciousness'

Albert Einstein's well-known advice is applicable here. We can't solve a problem by using the same level of consciousness that created the problem in the first place. We need our thinking to evolve to a higher level. But here's the thing: We only move to a higher level of consciousness when we become *aware* that our current ways of thinking are not sufficient for addressing the problems in front of us.

Evolving consciousness is fundamentally about conversion. So, for example, the split between liberals and conservatives will only be transcended as each pole becomes attuned to the limitations and inadequacies of their own perspective. That's when we see that we need the authentic values and insights from other stages of consciousness. That's when we open ourselves to a more integrated stance that carries forward authentic values and embodies them in new ways, in ways that the world needs today.

Here is where the papacy of Francis is already making a mark. Many of us, both in the Church and beyond, are attracted by Francis' simplicity and his call to live in solidarity with the poor, and rightly so. But I think his most significant gift to the Church is his capacity to see the limitations and inadequacies in the Church, especially with regard to the Church's call to be a presence of compassion and justice in the world.

In his lengthy interview in *America* (Sept. 2013), Pope Francis critiques the ways in which the Church has put dogma before love: "The Church sometimes has locked itself up in small things, in small-minded rules." And he offers a vision of an inclusive Church, a "home for all." Francis insists: "The dogmatic and moral teachings of the Church are not all equivalent. The Church's pastoral ministry cannot be obsessed with the transmission of a disjointed multitude of doctrines to be imposed insistently." Instead, he reflects: "We have to find a new balance; otherwise even the moral edifice of the Church is likely to fall like a house of cards, losing the freshness and fragrance of the Gospel."

With these words, Francis is recognizing that the authentic values that lie within the Church's teachings are not being expressed in ways that nurture truth, compassion and justice in the world. The challenge is to pull forward authentic values and incarnate them in the world in a new way, in a way that brings the radically loving and transforming message of the Gospel alive today.

This challenge illumines the need for an integrative consciousness that pulls forward the wisdom of the past, integrates it with the new insights of today, and embodies it in new forms that are able to encounter the wounds of the world with a healing, life-giving presence. This challenge exposes the many polarizations in our society as symptoms that are urging us toward a more evolved consciousness, toward integral consciousness. Evolving consciousness matters

because it opens up a path from polarization, pain and impasse to transformation, healing and new life.

The Contemplative and Justice Dimensions of ‘Evolving Consciousness’

There are both contemplative and justice dimensions to this journey into evolving consciousness. It’s contemplative in that it calls us to a deeper awareness of our inner terrain, on both personal and collective levels, so that we might be attuned to the presence and activity of Love in ourselves and in the world. It’s justice-based because it opens us to see more clearly how the critical issues that we face (aboriginal poverty, refugees fleeing violence, migrant workers seeking fairness, the young graduate who can’t find a job, the family without a home, the worker with low wages and no benefits, ravaged habitats, contaminated water, and our carbon-filled atmosphere) are pressing us toward transformation, toward a more evolved consciousness that will find new ways to respond.

Contemplation and justice: the two arms of the prophetic tradition. Walter Brueggemann stresses that in scripture, “Israel is characteristically concerned with the action of God – the concrete, specific action of God – and not God’s character, nature or being, except as these are evidenced in concrete actions.”

It’s a challenging call to the kind of discernment for which the great prophets are well known: to be attuned to God’s presence and activity not only in ourselves but in the world. And so, for example, in the devastating political experiences of Exile, the prophet recognizes divine energies for transformation and helps the people to connect their longing to return to their homeland with the deeper vision of returning to a life of truth, compassion and justice.

To recognize divine activity in the midst of human messiness – this is also the kind of mysticism that we see in the life of Jesus Christ, whose contemplative heart is laced with prophetic and political energies.

The contemplative and justice dimensions of evolving consciousness are urging us to be attentive to the healing, liberating and transforming action of God – not just in our ourselves but in the critical issues of our day, be it climate change, environmental devastation, human rights abuses, poverty, religious fundamentalism, civil war, social unrest, or a blatant disregard for indigenous rights. This is the sacred space where we learn that graced inner transformation and action for wider systemic change interact with each other in ways that create hotspots of healing, transformation and new life.

Many of us have been nurturing a contemplative heart. Now we are being called to release its prophetic and political energies by immersing ourselves in the critical issues of our day, not as a workforce but as ‘readers of the signs of the times’ who want to influence culture and change social systems. In spiral-like fashion, the polarizations of our time are impelling us to pick up the values of *Pacem in Terris* and carry them forward in a new way – in the deeply transformative way that is made possible by our growing awareness of the stages of consciousness as well as our awareness of the role that structures of consciousness play in shaping relationships and creating social and economic systems in the world.

What Transforming Energies Need to Be Nurtured and Released?

How are the justice issues of our day pointing to the transforming energies that need to be nurtured and released in ourselves and in the world?

Consider the many resource extraction projects that are destroying land, water and climate as well as abusing human rights and disregarding indigenous rights. And then consider the significant healing and transforming energies that are present within those First Nations communities that are trying to break these oppressive patterns. I'm thinking, in particular, about some First Nations communities that are trying to bring economic development to their communities through resource extraction projects, but insisting that it be done in ways that protect land, water, and their way of life. They are carrying forward sets of values that have long been seen as being in conflict, but carrying them forward in new ways that hold the possibility of transformation.

And What about Us?

Will we have the courage to look with compassion at the world around us and ask what transforming energies need to be nurtured in ourselves and in the world?

Will we risk transformation by opening ourselves to the weaknesses and limitations of our comfortable patterns of response?

Will we use our awareness of the different stages of consciousness to be a reconciling presence in the midst of conflict; to carry forward seemingly-conflicting values in new ways?

This is **our** moment in the long story of evolution. Teilhard de Chardin gave us a vision of a Unifying Influence at the core of the whole evolutionary process, a presence that holds the process together and pulls it forward toward greater complexity and unity. He identified the Mover of this process as the Cosmic Christ.

But Teilhard's vision also highlights a critical role for us: What future are we sowing? What energies will we embed in the world?

We are being asked to cooperate with profound grace in the world; to see that when we immerse ourselves in the polarizing justice issues of our day and allow these issues to pull us, with others, into a higher level of consciousness, we are – to use a phrase from Ilia Delio – opening ourselves to Christ in evolution.