

Notes for Milwaukee, 12 July 2006, Midwest City Centre.

Hello to all of you, Sisters of St. Joseph, Associates and Friends, of the collective. It is a very great pleasure to have been here with all of you and I thank the Federation Planning Committee who were kind enough to include me and who have, with many of you, offered me such gracious hospitality. A special thanks on behalf of the Canadian Federation for your invitation to share in this anniversary event and to our international Sisters who have gifted us with this beautiful shawl for our fortieth anniversary. I wear it in the name of Canadian family members of the collective, with humble pride and in the spirit of love that it represents.

This has been, obviously, a brilliantly planned and exuberantly lived experience – the colors, creativity, the memories, the music, the dance and dazzle and very real depth of call that we heard from several compelling voices. This was an experience where all the pieces - and our reflection on them - worked to engage and support and further the central dynamic of seizing love. It worked so well that even before the conference ended the hallways buzzed with exchange of e-mails and plans to connect. And, seized by compassion for the neighbourhood of our world, the assembly spoke a word of loving and stern admonition to the American President for his stand on the current conflict in Iraq.

All of us and maybe especially those of us who were within the immediate force field of our liturgists were lifted out of ourselves and taken deeper into ourselves and brought closer to one another in prayer and song by the sheer joy and energy and talent of the performers – and during that magnificent Eucharistic liturgy, when Cathy Sherman exhorted us to Come on People, sing! well, we may not have been Stompin' at the Savoie but we were certainly highstepping at the Hilton. And last night! The drama of history, the songs of solidarity, and the joyous dances of camaraderie – it may well be, as Alfredo hinted, our dawning of the Age of Aquarius. With apologies to Elizabeth Johnston and Irenaeus, Gloria Dei, during these days, the glory of God was certainly the Sisters of St. Joseph, Associates and Friends fully alive, seized by love - and rocking.

It occurred to me often during this conference that we are indeed a very privileged people, events in the neighbourhoods of our world remind us every day. We might well spend the remainder of our days giving thanks with our prayer and presence and work to the God of great and true love, thanks for the call that has brought us together into a visionary community, and the graced faith that allowed us to choose it again and again; for the opportunities to grow personally and as a group in spaces and places of nourishment that water our imagination, and for the privilege of being able to offer some small or greater service in our neighbourhoods. And, one more time in our history to

have, as Kathy so eloquently said in her homily, the circle of our embrace widened, to hear ourselves called to a new and vaster neighbourhood suffused with divinity and swimming into the ken of our caring love. From this stance of profound gratitude we will best shape our response to the call we have heard in Milwaukee.

There is much to remark upon throughout these five days (and most of it has been remarked) and each of you has her or his special insights and moments of grace with which you will walk away. I would not presume to intrude or improve upon them. Just to say that something important happened here. There was a birth certainly, as the poet said. Or - maybe a rebirth, sprung from the matrix of disadvantage and disaster, of emerging consciousness, and the Spirit of creative compassion. Or perhaps it was the fresh recognition that our destiny is the expansion of our souls, to meet the soul-sized enterprise of exploration into God, an enterprise that we named together in the Litany of yesterday afternoon's session. I know only that none of us individually nor all of us together will leave here unchanged. We will return to our homes and places of work, God willing and in God's grace, no longer at home among the alien gods of toxicity and separateness and unlove. We will return with the important questions asked or about to be asked and in the sure and certain hope that in the not so distant time we will be living, as Rilke so famously said, into the answers. Pat Kozak reminded us at dinner last evening that the biblical span of forty (days, years) is a metaphor for a time of formation. For two of our Federations specifically, and for all of us in a general sense, we might well ask if having completed the allotted time of formation, we are just now being called to the full profession of our charism. And what does that actually mean for each of us? for all of us? It goes against my nature to be quite so direct as to answer that at this point in my reflections! so allow me to work my way to some spots of time, recollected in Wordsworthian tranquility, out of which your own hopes and loves may emerge.

This was a conference of striking images: of our many groups swanning into the ballroom the first night under banners that eventually coalesced to form this stunning backdrop, a kind of visual prescience of the dynamic that would unfold here; the image of a single red rose dropped into the Milwaukee River while a flock of geese swooped down to greet it; of brilliantly costumed and swirling dancers from faith and language groups throughout the world, and our international congregations, shawling their sister communities and dancing their passion for peace and for their sisters who cannot dance; a multi-coloured globe held high and then carried aloft in a procession by those who would seriously resolve to heal its ills of poverty, pollution, hunger, oppression and war.

This was a conference of pictures, photos of hundreds of our neighbourhoods, of our heritage as Federation, of the faces of women who have walked before us and with us in the St. Joseph family.

And, most of all, this was a conference of words. And what wordsmiths there are among us. As Willie Yeats would say: I write out their names, now and in time to come: Elizabeth, Jean, Paula, Connie, Eileen, Mary Ellen, Kathy, Joyce, Alfredo, Marietta, Joan, Clare, Thérèse, Carol, Diana, Maria, Janet, Simone, Kathleen, Patricia, Donna. They have limned for us a way to walk in this moment, the only one we will ever have, on this planet, in this universe. They have helped us appropriate a spirituality deeply rooted in the Christian vision of a sacramental cosmos; rooted, too, in the belief that human co-creativity takes a responsible part in the ongoing act of creation. So for a few moments, I would like to speak of the power of words and the creative imagination.

Doug Coupland was born on 30 December 1961, on a NATO base in Germany, and a short while later was taken by his parents to the west coast of Canada where he grew up among other youngsters like himself in the privileged and gorgeous middle class enclave of North Vancouver. They were, as he has said, the first generation raised without God, with strong religious impulses that have nowhere to flow in this world of malls and TV, Kraft dinners and jets. How do we cope, he asks, with loneliness? anxiety? the collapse of relationships? Coupland began writing their experiences in novel form early on and at least two of his works have attained a kind of iconic status among his peers, *Generation X* and *Life after God*. They are not particularly easy reads, especially if you are prone to an Aristotelian beginning-middle- and-end story. But this post-modern scattergun approach manages, nonetheless, to reveal a new sensibility, a “new language of living for today.” From the unlikely experience of this particular lost generation; their meaninglessness and drift, the seeming amorality, the desperate fear that they may never be seized by love beyond inevitably transient relationships, their indifference to material culture at the same time as their saturation in it, their cynicism about authority and truth, their narcissism, from an imaginative imposition of form on this experience, Coupland manages to reveal a remarkable opening of the soul, (Gallagher, 145-6). What does it look like? It emerges tentatively as a shy humility, a growing tenderness toward one another, a gentle acceptance of his friends’ and his parents’ strange lives, above all in his longings and vulnerability. Sort of a latter-day Holden Caulfield with a greater depth and sensitivity. In *Life After God*, the first person narrator has come to the lowest point of his existence, his marriage finished, a clinical depression, medicated zombie-like days, and complete breakdown. At which point he says, “And then I got just plain lonely and just so fed up with all the badness in my life and in the world and I said to myself, ‘Please, God, just make me a bird – that’s all I ever wanted - a white graceful bird free of shame and fear and taint of loneliness, and give me other white birds among which to fly, and give me a sky so big and wide that if I never wanted to land, I would never have to. But instead, God gave me these words, and I speak them here.’”

In the creative act is the possibility of redemption and that, of course, is why Coupland haunted me during this conference. In the imposition of form upon experience and

inspiration is the possibility of meaningful act. These days have been full of words forged in the creative imagination of persons in whom the Spirit of God is alive. They were spoken and I think received with a new humility, a new tenderness, a vulnerability that we have had to relearn during the winters of our discontent. Perhaps we, too, have an opening of the soul that will allow us to hear these words and translate them into Being and action befitting this moment. Recalling Elizabeth's words to us early on, ours is an evolving spirituality; it is constantly being shaped from the creative amalgam of reflective religious experience, new images of the God of our charism come freshly into view, and our own tentative steps on the ethical paths that open to us from both these experiences. As Sisters of St. Joseph, Associates and friends, with our senses alert to the God of great love and truth, to the real circumstances of our sisters and brothers and the neighbourhood of the universe, and with a penchant for practical action it would seem that there is being created as we live and speak, whole new dimensions of our charism and mission. And lest it seem to anyone that we lack a presumption of graced divinity in the shaping, we remind ourselves of the narrator's secret at the end of Coupland's novel: "My secret is that I need God – that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. In need God to help me give because I no longer seem capable of giving, to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness, to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love."

And what can we say of Alfredo's words?

My graduate studies in literature and drama were done at Toronto in the department where Marshall McLuhan taught and moved and had his institute of technology 'n things, and it was there I first heard of the global village and society of which Alfredo spoke so profoundly. The major difference here was that I understood Alfredo a little better than I did Professor McLuhan, who was wont to stop you in a dusky corridor, ask a terrifying question to which he immediately gave an incomprehensible answer. Nonetheless, we revered him because he kept calling us back to the medium which is the ultimate educator of our souls.

One of the many strengths of Alfredo's transcendent vision of a global society and global beings and his hopes for that vision, is its rootedness in the midst of our cultural moment: politically, economically, socially, and 'religiously.' After 30 years with the World Bank, why not? His is not the first and only voice in recent years that has critiqued the dominant development model and said that the current economic paradigm is not working; that the search for a global ethic for human development is necessary and needs to emerge from something more than a process of Western deductive and abstract reasoning. The World Summits for Human Development, the Parliament of World Religions, various UN bodies, the World Council of Churches and certainly Pope John Paul II, have echoed in various ways Barbara Ward's passionate plea; "We must love one another or we will die."

But Alfredo's message goes to the heart, I believe, because of the unabashed integrity of both the message and the messenger. (It is a long time since I've heard the word "purity" spoken of in mixed company but Alfredo's use and limpid reflection of it are newly compelling.) He makes no apology for his insistence that the move from local to global healing and right ordering is impossible without a universal value system of love and compassion. And he is equally insistent that individual conversion to this same ethic is essential to the global process. It was impossible not to be moved by his own portrayal of self-realized compassion, and by his candid admission of moving over time beyond the fear of dying, the fear of ridicule, by dint of deep personal conviction of the rightness of his vision. I felt that, like Elizabeth, he called us powerfully to courage, in living out of the fullness of our charism, going wherever the demands of its love take us. Certainly it was a call to retrieve what is best in our own tradition in support of the collective well-being, now and into an unlimited future, and a call to lovingly critique that same tradition and leave behind what does not give life to the enterprise.

Finally, I have three or four thoughts by way of envoi.

The alternative way of walking suggested by engaging Elizabeth's frontiers is far from mainstream. Although many of us, by the grace of God, may have set our eyes on these horizons of praxis and prayer, very many others in all parts of our neighbourhoods, have glimpsed them only through a glass, and very darkly. This includes many in our communities of the church which, as Carol Zinn is wont to say, we love. When we choose to walk this path that will sustain the kind of Global Being Alfredo sees as creating and sustaining a Global Society, when we choose this we will need, I believe, a deep eucharistic spirituality. We will need eucharist where we stand together in humility before the mystery of life's journey, where we lean upon one another, accept the solidarity of human weakness and woundedness. Eucharist is where we respect the value and dignity of each other and where, by its very nature, as Denis McBride so wisely says, we experience "structured dissent from the culture of narcissism." It is the ultimate act of imagination, where the Word becomes Bread for the world. Wherever and however we celebrate eucharist, I believe we have a deep need to do so.

Wherever our imagination takes us from here it would be well, I think, if it germinated in the fertile soil of our history, so wonderfully gathered for this event by Barbara Baer and presented by Donna in her inimitable style last night. We enter our storied past, not to repeat outmoded ways of being and doing, but to be encouraged by the faith-fuelled imaginative leaps that have brought us to this threshold, to know that "our mothers from

way back used to pray,” as we sang last evening, and they are with us in those “thin places” the Irish intuit, where the other worlds are very close. We need their example of contemplative courage to discern this moment and take the leaps of faith and imagination we need to take. Not to change, as we sang during these days, is to dishonour their memory.

I think there was deep learning among us in the internationality of this event. I hope that we will allow the passion for connectedness that is flaming among us these days to take us to new and more profound levels of being together, ways that we have not yet imagined; that we allow the gifts, the needs, the vision, the cultures of one another to shake us out of our ways of sharing resources that are good, but not quite adequate, perhaps, for Global Beings. It is relatively easy to act out patterns of asking and giving that address immediate needs and make us satisfied that we’ve done a Good Thing, got a Good Deal for our project, our country. But I think Alfredo was asking us to consider a deeper way of being and sharing, one in which we truly partner, in which we become the other in suffering and in joy without losing oneself, a way that carries with it the promise that this connection, this deep giving to one another, will somehow prevail beyond our immediate time, beyond the actions of an empowered few, that will allow us and those after us to the seventh generation to become carpenters of a very different world.

Lastly, and not unrelated, as Timothy Radcliffe has said recently, perhaps our most profound challenge is to purify how we speak of strangers, so that our language may be stretched open, and draw close to the wide-open spacious hospitality of the word of God. Then people will be able to catch some hint of the mystery of God whose centre is nowhere, and whose circumference is everywhere,

and for whom no one is on the edge.

Au Revoir and Godspeed

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Michael Paul Gallagher SJ. *Clashing Symbols: An Introduction to Faith & Culture*. Darton, Longman and Todd: London, rev.2003.

Timothy Radcliffe OP. *What is the Point of Being a Christian?* Burns & Oates, 2005.