

**Joan Brown, osf, Franciscan Action Network presentation April 24, 2020**

**This is not a polished document for publication, but one for conversation that I share for your reflections and conversations with others to move into a new future.**

**I begin by recognizing wherever we are that we walk and live upon lands of our Native American brothers and sisters...**

Everyone here walks, lives, and breathes within these sacred lands of Ancestral Peoples.

As we begin our activities, let us fully acknowledge where we are and give thanks, respect and ask in a humble way that our time will be of service and healing.

**My name is Joan Brown, a Franciscan sister from the Rochester, Minnesota community and Executive Director of New Mexico Interfaith Power and Light** and I am in our kitchen, place of conversation, sharing sacred meals, and now this sacred sharing in an unprecedented time of economic collapse, coronavirus pandemic, economic inequities and climate crisis. I am reminded of a quote from Dorothy Day.

*"Life is a banquet, even with a crust of bread, if it is shared in community."*

This is a profound invitation for these times and essential to imagining and working for a just, economically equitable, and ecologically honoring life on the planet.

New Mexico is a beautiful and culturally and spiritually rich place. Yet it is also sacrifice zone with a heritage of colonialism, doctrine of discovery and extractivism from mining, uranium legacy and nuclear chain woven into the mountains and deserts. New Mexicans suffer these consequences in their bodies with health concerns and those passed onto future generations. Challenges run throughout the state from our Navajo and Pueblo people, to communities in the oil and gas area of the Permian Basin in SE NM, a new Saudia Arabia of the world.

But we as a state are a reflection and microcosm of those vulnerable around the world. Now in the Navajo nation the virus is running rampant in an area historically given less than human dignity by corporations and dominant systems. Over a third of people have no running water or electricity. This community is on lockdown and accounts for more than 55% of the deaths from the pandemic in New Mexico. Around the county African Americans account for more than 35%, and Latino new immigrants who are the front line janitors and cleaners are also most vulnerable and receive hardly a nod for their work. The undocumented, have worked, and paid taxes get no relief from the government and are also most vulnerable workers. The Navajo Nation has had to sue the US government yet again to get stimulus money promised to them. Our context is sobering, but we are in this moment with a particular call that is rooted deeply.

Reflecting upon the theme of this gathering.

We are beyond Imagining, God's Earth and People Restored.

We must be the imagination and dreams in action. And yet we are not called to restore what has been, but listen and act for a different future.

**“Imagine, God's Earth and People Restored.”** Our title for this talk made me feel uncomfortable. I remembered a rabbi colleague who was writing a book on Tikkum Olam from the Jewish tradition which carries the call to be repairers of the world. He was very concerned about climate change and he felt that this teaching was no longer possible and was inadequate.

Our moment does not call for restoration, because how we have lived no longer fits and the systems were not working. We cannot put new wine into old wine skins. We are in an evolutionary transformational moment that requires new systems and structures, with new ways of living and healing and being community. Much of this we may not have imagined yet. We must listen to the future in the in between cracks. The way forward needs to be in collective community in many new ways.

To this point we have been in the rat race of the dictates of capitalism and individualism expressed in what seem like misguided virtues of getting ahead, greed, and desouling all that exists. This has led us to domination of people and Earth aptly described by Pope Francis as a Throw Away Culture. We are acting against our souls and our own human interest in destroying Earth with climate change and moving ourselves deeper down the road of the sixth greatest extinction.

We are in the Anthropocene Era and we must now face our collective shadow. We can draw upon our spiritual traditions to understand more clearly the moment our souls are in and face. We, like Christ before Good Friday, are in the Garden of Gethsemane. We like many saints, holy people and mystics of various world religious traditions find ourselves in a surreal place and perhaps feel immersed in a sort of Dark Night of the Soul, only this is a Collective Dark Night of the Soul.

A description of the moment for which we have very visceral body and spirit feelings, that I find helpful is from Rick Tarnas author of *Psyche and Cosmos*, professor at California Institute of Integral Ecology. He said we are feeling the “volcanically intense evolutionary pressures for the radical reconfiguration of all life’s structures.”

*Perhaps we like Francis of Assisi who in trying to be faithful to what he heard God asking and then acted upon really misunderstood or came to know differently his initial call, “Go and rebuild my church which is in ruin.” Have we been spending time doing what we thought was good, and has been good in some ways, but we now realize this is not what we are now led to do? Near the end of Francis’ life, he reflected again and saw that perhaps he still, near the end, did not understand or was only learning what the call was. “Let us begin now to follow Christ, up until now we have little or nothing.”*

What is our call at this moment? Not 10 years ago or even 10 minutes ago? We live in a world where “See I make all things new” happens continually. Spring bursting before us reminds us of that which is hidden being revealed.

Could it be that we need to revision ourselves and what ours is to do in this mysterious, painful moment of death and birth on a global and even cosmic scale?

How can we be open to the vulnerability of not knowing and the temptation to fill space with old systems, structures, actions, and worldviews that cover up injustice, inequity, the path to climate change....when what is required are new wine skins?

Rumi has a poem that in part sings... the breezes at dawn have secrets to tell you don't go back to sleep...How do we stay awake when we are weary from so much living, suffering and unknowing and unpredictability?

I believe that the more conscious and compassionate we can be the more skillful and free we can be to participate in the energies moving around us and within us. These are the cosmic energies and the powers of the universe that we are part of as earthlings, and ultimately all are the Powers of Holy Love.

To be so open, I believe requires space within and around and courage to be immersed in mystery and seeing and hearing in new ways so that we act in new and sometimes impulsive ways because we are aware of the impulses of love and cosmic energies. It is like Francis embracing the leper, what a reckless thing to do. Or Clare and her sisters who threw out caution and faced the warring parties at their monastery door with the Eucharist. Or Greta Thurnberg speaking boldly to world leaders' decades older than herself.

We must shift our worldviews. We must shift our consciousness. We must shift the ways we pray. We must shift the ways we see and hear and the ways we leave people and creatures and the unsightly things out of our vision and ear shot. We must allow the energies and wisdom around us at all moments an entry place to help us become a different consciousness of Love in Action.

There is a quote from Terry Tempest Williams that inspires me often. From, **An Unnatural History of Family and Place**

*"The eyes of the future are looking back at us and they are praying for us to see beyond our own time. They are kneeling with hands clasped that we might act with restraint that we might leave room for the life that is destined to come. To protect what is wild is to protect what is gentle. Perhaps the wilderness we fear is the pause between our own heartbeats, the silent space that says we live only by grace. Wilderness lives by this same grace. Wild mercy is in our hands."*

We are all holders, carriers and bearers of Wild Mercy. At the end of December 2016, after the election of our current administration, with climate change closing in more deeply, social inequities ever more blatant and any number of social soul challenges....I made a Novena. For 9 days I reflected, walked with and nurtured wild yeast as I co-created a sour dough starter.

My dearest Aunt Dell always used sour dough to make bread. During the depression, my mother set the starter for bread to feed 13 plus in her family. I carried my Aunt's starter from Kansas to Colorado one year, but the heat along the way killed it.

This spiritual Novena retreat of Wild Grace Yeast is now part of my spiritual practice as I make sour dough bread each week. It reminds me of mystery and that invisible to the eye powers are present,

strong and transforming.. The wild yeasts are all around us, like the coronavirus that we fear. Yet we do not see, smell or hear the yeasts. The wild yeasts are like grace that surrounds and infuses us which we are not conscious of. Grace can transform life in an instant. It is this grace and mystery that sustains me and guides me, like the crust of bread Dorothy Day spoke of, or community in so many creative and compassionate and self-giving ways that now sustains us as we shelter in place.

The Wild Grace evolves and grows into yeasty bread raised very tall. It is our invitation to “Leave room for what is destined to come.”

This is our evolutionary path that we have been on for 14.3 billion years through great chaos, suffering, death and new births....into the consciousness of the human.

The more consciousness and compassion we become the more skillful and free we are to participate in energies moving around us and within us.

I believe openness to a spacious Cosmic Love Energy must have been the space that Francis of Assisi lived in some of the time. It is out of this energetic space of cosmic love that the Canticle of Creation emerged. Today I believe there are new lessons to learn from the Canticle as we walk into the future. While the Canticle is beautiful poetry, it was written when Francis was blind and sick and even wanted to die. He prayed that if it was his time he was ready to Passover. In some ways he may have been in a Dark Night of the Soul. Yet, he awoke with the Canticle upon his lips.

A few things I am reflecting upon within the Canticle are:

1. The deeper meaning of the paradigm/ worldview shift of Sister, Brother and kinship
2. Be Praised and gratitude
3. Sister Death who is a reality all around us and within us
4. Community

**\*All as sister and brother** requires a paradigm shift from seeing ourselves as separate from air, trees, and viruses, and all those whom we think are different. We must be humble to realize that we are still learning who is the neighbor and what it means to love neighbor.

For instance, the coronavirus is not an enemy, but a brother or sister that needs to be understood. Political leaders that we may think misguided are not objects of denigration, but teachers and reflections of our own collective shadows and illusions.

I do not always like my brother or sister, but I need to listen. Everything is a teacher and brother and sister. I may want to cut them off, but now more than ever we know that we ARE ONE and travel on this fragile Earth always together.

**\*Be praised**...all is gift, all requires gratitude. Gratitude is imbedded in the story of Francis and the brother about Perfect Joy. If one is locked out of a brothers home, cold and hungry there is Perfect Joy. Be praised and gratitude is for what one has knowing all is Wild Grace. Be Praised is the Dayenu of the Jewish Passover where had we just escaped Pharaoh it would have been enough or only gotten

through the turbulent Red Sea, it would have been enough. We experience Beauty and Joy because we know, often at profound levels, suffering and pain.

Gratitude and Joy are about reciprocity. What we give opens us to receive with gratitude, which moves us into the cosmic energetic flow of life at the deepest level. “The more conscious and compassionate we are the more skillful and free we are to participate in the energies moving around us and within us.”

**\*Sister Death**, was added to the Canticle at the end of Francis life. We have lived in a culture that denies death, denies that which is unsightly, these things are not to be talked about. Several years ago when I had a conversation with some young folks about this. They said our peers, we do not talk about climate change, poverty, sad things because that would be a bummer of a day. Yet, death in so many forms is part of the cosmic story and energies we are part of. Death leads to rebirth, the new place, evolution of Love....that is necessary for what Terry Tempest Williams invites.... **that we might leave room for the life that is destined to come.** Without dying in so many forms there is no room for what is to come.

**\*Communion, community** is the whole message of the Canticle. All sisters and brothers are needed for life and all are intertwined within Sister Mother Earth who Sustains and Governs us. Earth Governs us is an important idea that we have yet to take seriously that flows for eons in our very blood and evolution.

Now more than ever we need to come into new ways of understanding and living community. Thomas Berry near the end of his life transcribed a message for the children that reads like a beautiful litany. It is recorded in the book, ***Recovering a Sense of the Sacred: Conversations with Thomas Berry.***

**Just two of these beautiful teachings on community for the children and those who may lose hope and mooring.**

“Tell them that the Powerful Loving Voice that spoke through every cosmic activity is speaking again now through voices all over the earth—voices who recognize that loving the earth as their common origin unifies all. In the sacred, all opposites are reconciled.”

“The Loving Voice is also speaking through every bird, leaf, and star, and through the polar bear, the wolf and every threatened species, awakening humanity to see all living forms as a single sacred community that lives or dies together.”

**I would like to leave you with a Prayerful Reflection:**

Today we understand the meaning of interconnections. We know One Earth, One World, Coronavirus, Economic collapse and economic disparity and Climate Systems Change ---they are all teachers and brothers and sisters.

While technology can assist, it is not the answer.

While public policy changes can assist, they are not the answer.

There is not one answer. There is not one problem. There is no enemy though some try to convince us it is the virus, or oil companies or politicians or anyone other than ourselves.

Our challenges are Soul Sized. The deepest change required is perception. Our strongest tools are the Soul Force of Gandhi; the dream of Martin Luther King; the courage of Berta Caceras and Sr. Dorothy Stang; the fortitude of Jane Goodall and Warangathi Maathi; and the contemplative vision of mystics and saints like Buddhist teacher Joanna Macy who said,

*“Out of the darkness a New World Can arise. This is a dark time, filled with suffering and uncertainty. Like living cells in a larger body, it is natural that we feel the trauma of our world. So don’t be afraid of the anguish you feel, or the anger or fear, because these responses arise from the depth of your caring and the truth of your interconnectedness with all beings.*

*You don't need to do everything. Do what calls your heart; effective action comes from love. It is unstoppable, and it is enough.*

*The biggest gift you can give is to be absolutely present, and when you're worrying about whether you're hopeful, or hopeless, or pessimistic, or optimistic, who cares? The main thing is that you are showing up, that you are here and that you're finding ever more capacity to love this world because it will not be healed without that. That was what is going to unleash our intelligence and our ingenuity and our solidarity for the healing of our world.*

Alone and together Love made visible for our world flows through our bodies. We are the ones called into this amazing, painful and miraculous moment. Please join me in a reflective embodied prayer. Take your eyes off the screen. Open your hands and gaze at them lovingly.

These hands are formed from carbon elements of the first flaring forth of the universe 14.3 billion years ago.

These hands carry the memory of evolution of the arboarboreal tree shrew that lived about 60 million years ago who tirelessly climbed trees heavenward forming bones and flesh to grow, and strengthen over eons.

These hands speak of genetic ancestry from saints, grandmothers, farmers, bakers, construction workers, immigrants, social workers, change agents, and scientists.

The palms and lines of these hands sing as a fractal of mountains and streams of Sister Mother Earth.

These hands have clenched in fear and pain and opened to give and receive.

These hands have kissed with a touch the foreheads of sick or dying parents, grandparents, children, loved ones and even strangers.

These hands have wrapped around and around during thousands of washings with Sister Water over the months out of love to heal and protect family and community.

These hands, concerned with climate justice, make phone calls, sign petitions, and write letters to care for our sacred, land, water, air, vulnerable communities and children and then wonder what else they might they do.

These hands bake bread, plant seeds, pray and perform rituals, cook dinner, open acequia water gates, pull weeds, change diapers, construct homes with hammers, give shots in hospitals, clean schools, stock grocery shelves, play ball with six-year-olds, rest open in meditation, type letters to editors, and harvest food for the community.

These hands take plans of the mind and heart to create solar panels, to compose cello music, to advocate for climate refugees, to organize communities, to teach school, and to make visible new paradigms for life.

These hands join with human hands around Sister Mother Earth, and with the winged, two legged, four legged, leafy, flowering, and finned ones forming One Sacred Earth Community.

There are no simplistic answers.

There are only these hands.

These hands hold Sister Mother Earth. We are the holy flesh of her body. We are the visible expressions of sorrow, conversion, transformation, tears, imagination, suffering, solidarity, gratitude, equity, beauty, justice and Love as One Holy Earth Community.

In gratitude to the Holy One of All Names and Beyond All Names.

Blessed Be, Amen, Amen.