

For the Future: Furthering Mercy Spirituality

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Twelve months ago I spoke to some of you in Ireland about what I believe are distinctive (if not unique) qualities of a Mercy educator's spiritualityⁱ. Beginning with the significance of Catherine McAuley's encounter with a young woman in need — "Mercy in Action". I proposed that a Mercy spirituality engendered by such encounters is:

a response to immediate need and the imagination that enables that response to be sustained.

I then went onto to fill out what are the characteristics are taken up as qualities of a Mercy educator's spirituality:

forgiving, global, interior life is real, ordinary, no rejection of the world.

Since then I've been rather exercised by a further task: where education in Mercy schools is going and what might the issues impacting on a Mercy spirituality *for the future* — ie not a spirituality of the sisters but a spirituality so human that it belongs to us all.

Of course education today is always about the future. Now our world (here in the "Oceanic west") is post-industrial (and has been for nearly 30 years). The "post" part of the descriptor not only denotes the end of the production in the western world of *things* — "post" also means "not at the *next* yet".

So how does this translate into a spirituality for education *for the future*?

Firstly it has to be "*FOR*" the future — to believe in the future and its promise.

This is the "next" of the slogan I proposed for Mercy spirituality

what's closest

what's next

Since the 1970's there have been a number of significant attempts to do the future-thinking to keep public policy here in Australia aimed at the best possible projections of future trends and challenges. Fred Emery and others at the Australian National University produced for-ground projections for such bodies as the Commission for the Future (set up by the Australian Government) and Australia Telecom (which became Telstra).ⁱⁱ It's quite amazing to read these studies now and see how prescient they were, even though they could not factor into their predictions neither the fall of the Soviet Empire nor September 11, 2001 and their huge consequences. I have also found it helpful to recognise in the trends they plotted some of the difficulties we face already and which must develop further into the future that your students will live.

Emery et al described what they termed 3 types of Passive Maladaptive scenarios:

- superficiality
- fundamentalist segmentation
- dissociation

These “maladaptive strategies” are only too evident in our Current Australian and New Zealand political-economic contexts. But Emery also suggests more active adaptations that thereby add layers of meaning and values to any projected future.

“Ideal-pursuit can provide cohesiveness and continuity to extended and unpredictable processes, to life and history.”

“ A purposeful system is of a qualitatively high order than is a goal-seeking system; it can pursue objectives. A goal-seeking system only selects its course of action with respect to goals. A purposeful system can choose courses of action with respect to a criterion, an objective, which is not necessarily attainable over the period considered, but which may be attainable in future situations of which the outcomes of the current situation are potential co-producers.”

Then Emery and co. presented nurturance (lifelong education) and connectivity (eg “the democratisation of work”) as the two ways of actively adapting to the “turbulence” of change. So this projects a future that a Mercy Spirituality could supply much to the values promotion that is stunted and distorted in the maladaptive scenarios

Again this requires values that have a purposefulness — a hope that is real. Tony Kelly Australian Redemptorist and teacher of many of us, explores this in his new book *Eschatology and Hope*:

“The life of Christian hope lives by surrendering to the creative and redeeming mystery of love working in time, at every moment in life and death throughout the whole creation. The divine gift is being given. It precedes all our beginnings.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Hope makes a future for us with God. It is “love working in time, in every moment in life”. It is hope that propels

a response to immediate need and the imagination that enables that response to be sustained.

But hope is not automatic or even obvious in our times. How often are those hopes dashed? There are all the hopes that our students, their parents and your staffs entrust to you as leaders in education — more hopes than anyone would seem able to bear. We see these hopes dashed so easily by shifts in economic conditions, by changes in educational policy and funding, by risks of injury and assaults on health, and by the ever-present limitations between what we hope for and what we can do. Cynicism and denial are much easier attitudes to sustain than hope. But Kelly reminds us that:

“A cultural form of depression results from living in a social milieu that tends to negate a hopeful sense of self. But just as a dispirited culture can have an adverse effect on hope, a community alive with the energies of hope affects both the individual and the cultural aspects of our lives. Hope is a social virtue. It enables the individual to join or rejoin the human race with confidence and freedom. The hope of each

one needs to be sustained by a helping community. If that community is to be a milieu of hope it too must be able to renew itself by drawing on other and deeper resources if it is to bring healing and confidence into any depressed situation.”^{iv}

So to be *for* the future means we need a spirituality that embodies such hope, individually and communally. So what might be the sources for such a spirituality *for the future*.

Firstly it needs to be real, it must include who we really are, how we are embodied and what are our aspirations? But a spirituality also needs to go beyond us, for whom is this? As well a Mercy spirituality means going beyond “what’s closest “ but, we always ask, how far? Finally all spirituality while individual is also communal, about communion, asking of us with whom do we venture into this future?

For some direction towards an answer I find it never hurts to go to the gospels. Not because I’ll find there a situation like ours or some pithy teaching of Jesus’ to use like the daily quotes on desk calendars. Going to the gospels is one way to reflect beyond myself, beyond my experience and hopefully be caught up in some other thinking for a while, which then allows me to face my situation with some freshness.

So when trying to project what our Mercy spirituality for the future might look like I kept finding myself returning to the following Gospel story. Now it’s really an odd story that we don’t look at often enough and it’s one that doesn’t present Jesus in such a good light. So for me that’s all the more fascinating.

Mark 7:24-30

24 From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, 25but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. 26Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 27He said to her,

‘Let the children be fed first,
for it is not fair to take the children’s food
and throw it to the dogs.’

28But she answered him,

‘Sir, even the dogs under the table
eat the children’s crumbs.’

29Then he said to her,

‘For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.’

30So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

I find myself focusing on 4 elements in this story which seem to connect for me with my above questions:

- “*a woman*” Who we really are, how we are embodied and
“She begged him” what are our aspirations?

- “whose little daughter had an unclean spirit “ For whom is this?
- “a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin” How far? the dogs.
- “you may go—the demon has left your daughter” With whom do we venture into this future?

Now any of you who know about New Testament studies might already be concerned at the apparent allegorising I am doing here. Be at ease! This is not a parable, which definitely should not be allegorised. As it is a story it is merely an association of ideas that I am attempting through this Gospel. This is what I’m doing: taking a story as a framework, asking what are its concerns, what does it emphasise, and what then does this say to us? But this is not seeking some moral advice about how to act like Jesus. This Gospel story is ambiguous. Jesus does not show up well in it.

How does this story connect up with the Mercy story? It helped me focus on four areas that I believe are crucial for a Mercy spirituality of educating that is open enough to be *for the future*:

COUNTING THE BODIES — gendered — woman teaching Jesus
 YOUNG ALLOWED TO BE YOUNG — young child free of devils
 GLOBAL RESPONSIBILITY — beyond Israel
 EMBRACING — CONVERGENCE — unity of differences

• COUNTING THE BODIES

Any Mercy spirituality begins with the experience of women. This is not exclusive to women as women always create varied gendered configurations around them, eg families of males and females, partnerships with males and females, education of males and females. Even so, the starting point is women, because we have come to understand that the fate of all people depends on how women are treated, what opportunities they are allowed and which destinies they can claim. There is a specific Mercy concern with the education of women (but not only by women).

This has led me to some interesting thinking on the place of gender in the education process — gendered pedagogy, ie how teaching and learning are affected by our gender, the teacher’s and the student’s. Unfortunately recent necessary focus on the negative and destructive effects of sexual abuse can cause us to retreat from a crucial understanding of other more benign impacts of sexuality on the education process.

The work of Professor Amanda Sinclair of the University of Melbourne Business School is instructive and innovative on this:

“The body is critical and overlooked mediator in pedagogical relationships, shaping and constraining how teachers and students act, what they think and what is taken away. I seek to show how the bodies

of teachers and students affect learning. The sex of bodies is important helping to explain why and how bodies have been kept invisible.”^v

“the immediate impact of a person’s body on another is profound. A great deal happens before either person opens their mouth. Emotions are aroused, judgements are made. Comfort, or discomfort, levels are established well in advance of verbal communication. We unconsciously and consciously register and make judgements about stature and voice. Bodies elicit feelings of excitement and admiration, attraction and desire, envy and distaste.”^{vi}

“ The bodies of students influence how the teacher teaches which in turn influences the teacher’s body as well as mindset. Body position actively shapes our mood and our capacity to project.”^{vii}

Sinclair particularly focuses on the impact of women’s bodies, both as teachers and as students. She notes the stereotyping of certain women’s bodies and the prejudice against women in business and other arenas often disguised by their over-visibility or their invisibility or depreciation as leaders:

“Women’s bodies are more watched and judged than men’s. Women teachers respond by covering up and concealing their bodies and also by censoring movements. They hover behind lecterns concealing breasts, they sit rather than stand, concealing legs. But traditional ambivalence towards women with authority adds to the visibility they already experience because they are a minority [in Business schools].”^{viii}

I believe that a spirituality of education *for the future* will need to contend with these gender issues more and more. The young women *and men* in your classes deserve to be made more aware and confident in the power for good of their sexuality and its manifestation in gendered behaviours and consciousness. This means going beyond the modesty codes that were once taught (separately) and more openly engaging them in their social reality.

A song to illustrate this:

Missy Higgins: "Scar"

• YOUNG ALLOWED TO BE YOUNG

One of the dangers in the future posed by Emery et al is the separation of social groups into cauterised domains where they hardly interact with others. They term this “dissociation”, adapting the psychological description to illustrate a sociological trend. I see this more and more in the designations and oppositions attributed to “Baby Boomers” and Generations X and Y and the conflict that is predicted between them. Young people can act as the “exotic other” for us. They represent everything that is unapproachable, not containable and scary (ie if you are “baby boomers” over 50). This is what

infuriates us in the “Yuk”/“Wow” or (in my teaching world what we call) the “whatever” generation.

I noticed this tendency in me one day recently on a tram when a group of young persons disturbed me with their noise and shouting over their already loud music blaring. Then, thankfully, I realised that I am getting old, and too easily forget that I too acted that way when I was young (maybe with a folksy guitar rather than a ghetto blaster).

The young must be allowed to be young and neither be stunted by our ageism or be exploited by adult advertising and other means of turning the young and cute into a commodity. We deplore paedophilia, but there are many other ways in which young people and children are exploited without their interests being a primary concern. A spirituality of education *for the future* must not only protect young people from the incursions by adult or old-fogey judgementalism, but it must also allow them their creativity and exuberance.

Another song by Missy Higgins comes to mind:

"Going North"

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• GLOBAL RESPONSIBILITY

Already in this conference your attention has been drawn to the inescapability of global responsibility in Mercy Education *for the future*. Resources such as Deirdre Mullan RSM's "*Where in the World are my Sisters?*" (Mercy Global Concern) and Adele Howard RSM's and Anne Walsh's *Mercy and Justice Shall Meet (Fraynetwork)* equip us well for raising this consciousness in our educational communities.

I will only add to this our continuing shame as Australian citizens for the way our government has chosen to incarcerate asylum seekers. It is shocking to think how little our Catholic Social Teaching impacts on those members of government and their supporters who share our faith. Catholic teaching has consistently urged on us respect for the rights of those forced from their homes to seek a future in our vast land. This is not some recent politicised propaganda but teaching that goes back to Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI:

The loss of citizenship “does not detract in any way from one’s membership in the human family as a whole, nor from one’s citizenship in the world community.” *Pacem in terris* [25] Encyclical of Pope John XXIII

“assure person’s right to emigrate, favour their integration, facilitate their professional development, and give them access to decent housing where their families could join them.” *Octogesima adveniens* [17]. Encyclical of Pope Paul VI

A further way in which we are being called to global responsibility and will be even more challenged into the future is sharing our resources closer to home (no longer only out there). By receiving (even the small number we allow of) these migrating populations we have also to learn to make a future together, in ways that make more equal the distribution of our resources here in Australia. This will become more pressing into the future as climate change shifts our current abundance into a more contested collection of resources such as water and food production. This calls us to a spirituality *for the future* that has come to a broader understanding of the neighbour. As Gustavo Gutiérrez says:

to “be a Christian is to draw near, to make oneself a neighbour, not the one I encounter in my journey but the one in whose journey I place myself.”^{ix}

Another image of this appears in Crowded House’s song:

Pour le monde

• EMBRACING — CONVERGENCE

Finally, the last direction of a Mercy educator’s spirituality *for the future* is an embracing or a convergence of things in our world that have tended to be opposed in the past. The Sisters of Mercy Institute Chapter of 2004 described this as:

“there is an urgent need to respond to the world-wide movement of God’s Spirit towards reconciling and embracing difference, replacing fear with hope, suspicion with trust, violence with peace; we are becoming conscious that we are an organic part of an unfolding universe”^x

The examples of this convergence in a spirituality *for the future* are threefold for me:

- eco-sensitivity, care for earth, its creatures, its life-giving. In a recent article written for Sisters of Mercy, Sr Patricia Powell from Bathurst poses the question of for this century:

“How can we reflect the need to care wisely for all creation as well as the people of the earth in the way we do our Mercy ministry into the future?”^{xi}

and

- indigenous acceptance

Here in Australia, less so in New Zealand, we have a problem that we fail again and again to embrace. Mostly because we have made it only a problem instead of an opportunity to meet other people who so differ from us that we have failed to recognise their right to be, to own and to contribute to our common future. Our acceptance of indigenous Australians is a present and future challenge to Mercy education.

Jesus’ behaviour is not a model for a Mercy spirituality for the future [cf Mark 7:29]. This reminds me instead of a more worthy teaching — not from the Gospels — when a previous Prime Minister called us to a new consciousness,

more like that of our Tasman neighbours and their longer and mostly effective embracing of their indigenous population. This was the Redfern reconciliation speech by Paul Keating. In the recent *Keating! The Musical* the only non-satirical song was based on this speech and so I'd like to play it for you now.

REDFERN (music and lyrics by Casey Bennetto)

- Mercy Sisters Reconfiguring

There is actually another movement of convergence that you will be hearing more and more about in the future and I believe it will have a profound effect on our spirituality as Mercy Educators *for the future*. This is the current efforts of the Mercy Sisters to reconfigure their Institute (or nationwide structure) from 17 separate congregations plus Papua new Guinea and Pakistan into ? We don't know *what* yet but currently and until 2010 (when the next Institute Chapter is due) the sisters are exploring and deciding what sort of governance would best now promote of God's mission in the world and the message of God's mercy through our lives and works. So far the process looks like this:

2004 Institute Chapter — call to pursue reconfiguring of the institute

2005-7 — 3 Consultations with Sisters — prevailing voice is affirmative of combining into a single canonical congregation but there have also been some significant concerns expressed about such a move.

So watch this space: the schools and other Mercy institutional and sponsored works will be hearing more and also will become engaged in the development of whatever decisions are made.

Conclusion

The conference theme contains it all — Mercy in Action. This is the spirituality of a Mercy educator that is open enough to be *for the future*. How will you add to this spirituality of a Mercy educator into the future? Whatever, the answer will be, in the words of Crowded House's latest hit — "Don't Stop Now":

Don't Stop Now

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ⁱ This was published on the MSEIF website as Janette Gray RSM, *All Roads Lead To Mercy Spirituality of A Mercy Educator: A Woman, a Search, a Future* (2006).

ⁱⁱ F.E. Emery et al *Futures We're In* (Canberra : Centre for Continuing Education, Australian National University, 1975), pp. 46-7.

ⁱⁱⁱ Anthony Kelly CSsR *Eschatology and Hope* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2006), p.12.

^{iv} Kelly, pp.11-12.

^v Amanda Sinclair "Body and Pedagogy" (Melbourne Business School), pp. 1-13 (p.1.). (accessed 12/8/07)

<http://www.mbs.edu/index.cfm?objectid=951E3441-123F-A0D8-42535588B213E90B>

^{vi} Sinclair p.3.

vii Sinclair, p. 4.

viii Sinclair, p. 11.

ix Gustavo Gutiérrez "Toward a Theology of Liberation" in Alfred T. Hennelly (ed.) *Liberation Theology: a Documentary History* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990), pp. 62-76 (p.64).

x Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia, Papua new Guinea and Pakistan, "5th Institute Chapter Statement" (accessed 12/8/07)

<http://www.mercysisters.org.au/about/vision.html>

xi Patricia Powell RSM "Are We Coming or Going? The Metamorphoses of Mercy" in Reconfiguring Co-ordinating Committee (ed.) *Occasional Papers* (July, 2007), pp. 20-22 (p. 22).