

“Birth Pangs of Social Transformation: A Talk for the AMU Symposium”
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My hope for the next 15 minutes is to build on what Todd has just shared about collective angst. One of the quotes he shared by James Baldwin I think serves as a good bridge between angst and birth pangs. The quote is,

“There are so many ways of being despicable it quite makes one’s head spin. But the way to be really despicable is to be contemptuous of other people’s pain.”

And hopefully what I have to share will serve as a resource as you hear from Dustyn about the changing complexities of laying the foundation for engaging future generations, who I hope will not have to suffer through as many birth pangs as our world is experiencing now.

I am still wondering if it is a coincidence or not that I, the one in our group of three who is a mother who has given birth to a son, was chosen to talk about responding to birth pangs. If intended, I probably should have mentioned to Bro. Tom and the committee that I was not the best at responding to birth pangs (as my spouse can certainly attest to) and I will always be glad that I only had that experience once, but have the joy of raising two boys, the first one, Jonathan, is adopted.

It is reflecting on Jonathan’s adoption, rather than my giving birth to Gavin, that most inspired me as I wrote this talk. For Jonathan’s birthmother, whose name is Angela, birth pangs were so much more and so different from the birth pangs I experienced. Yes, both of us probably pretty closely experienced the same physical/anatomical pains of birthing a baby, but MY birthing process brought new life TO MY family. Angela’s birthing process was to bring new life to another family and to very solidly choose life for that baby and for us. Her birth pangs included the pains of soon saying good-bye, soon passing on a so intensely intimate part of her “being” in this world. I can’t even begin to imagine the feelings that were behind her choice and her process.

In adopting, it is this new life that comes from birth pangs and the giving of this new life to others out a deep compassion for life that can guide us in what it means to love – to love so deeply that your very core desires new life for others – not just for your life or your family and colleagues or out of some performative desire to look good, but a deep love for each and every human being and living creature on this planet. And to love this deeply is painful – one will experience birth pangs with this deep love because the world is not yet just, and some might say we are widening the gap, instead of closing the gap, between reality and the ideal of the Kingdom of God.

Get out your therapy balls and deep breathing tools and find your midwives, because we have a long birthing process to get through.

Midwives – that’s a perfect segway to tying in our Marianist identity with birth pangs and social transformation. I very much see the promise of a Marianist education as forming midwives who guide, comfort, lean into, and encourage our world through the birth pangs of

social transformation. How can we form students who are sources of hope and serve as midwives intent on bringing a new humanity into existence? More on that in a minute.

Trying to be midwives to birth a new social order will be like a never-ending obstacle course for sure – and will involve our own birth pangs. But let's not forget that for some in our world, life has always been one great obstacle course filled with people and systems telling you that you are not worthy, you are not human, I don't "see" you. So many of our sisters and brothers experience the constant and intense birth pangs of racism and other isms in our world and suffer the direct impacts of our destruction of Mother Earth. If we are to be midwives, we have to face that pain and even reflect on our role in inflicting that pain. We have to be healers and literally bring that healing and peace into the world so that others do not need to keep suffering.

I read a weekly newsletter that always provides 5 tips on how to be a better ally. One of the tips reflected on how we need to change how we talk about other people experiencing painful injustices. How often do we see vulnerable communities dealing with significant birth pangs and we think or say, "wow – they are so incredibly resilient." How much of thinking this way actually allows us to not do something to end what is causing their pain? To say – they don't need a midwife, look at how great they are getting through the pains. What if instead we asked, What can I do so that the marginalized don't have to be continuously resilient? What can I do to aid in healing and bringing about justice?

Being a midwife requires us to HEAR – truly hear. Matthew 13:45 tells us "Whoever has ears ought to hear." Hearing in this case means being moved to respond – no, actually, I believe it means being obligated to respond to the pain and the cries of birthing.

I have read wonderful reflections, including one by Jaime Waters in America Magazine, on the parables of the sower and the parable of the weeds, which I believe have a lot to say to us about being attentive listeners and good responders. The parables point out the need to recognize the birds and weeds in our midst that create division and promote hatred. These parables ask us, "do you promote justice or do your actions OR lack of actions damage communities and other's dignity?" Be careful not to be trapped into "I am not the weeds, so I don't have to worry, or I surely have good soil – I do my best to be kind." Pull your earplugs out as we listen to these parables – they have much to say about how we MUST respond to the birth pangs of injustice, not just listen. The parables are not giving us a pass for inaction, ignorance, or outright denial of the need for change in our world and in ourselves.

One of my current favorite quotes is by Valerie Kaur, who writes from the Sikh tradition. She says, "what if the darkness in our country right now, in the world right now, is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb." Wow – talk about another way to look at the very dark times we are living in right now. Similarly inspirational, Martin Luther King Jr. has said, "when the night is darkest is when we can see the stars more clearly." In 1957 Martin Luther King Jr. gave a sermon in Montgomery Alabama – "Facing the Challenge of a New Age." In this sermon he talks about a new social order being born – believing in those stars and believing the darkness will lead to new life not ultimate death. But, as we also hear from many Biblical passages, there will be no birth or growth without pain. As Dr. King says, "the emergence of the new must confront the recalcitrant of the old."

These parables, sermons, and quotes all have an important message for us as Marianist educators – one that I think we easily overlook, or we often respond to only performatively. We do have a purpose as Marianist educators, much as Todd said just a few minutes ago – we educate to transform the world, we educate to form midwives who lead our world through its birth pangs and offer hope.

BUT NONE of this matters if we do not also educate our communal responsibility to examine our own individual position in this world – how we participate in causing the pain, how we might benefit from others' pain and oppression, and how our societal role of being a consumer is taking us far away from our Catholic and Marianist values. Only a deep examination of ourselves, requiring the contemplation we heard about earlier in this symposium, will allow us to truly see with new eyes, hear with new ears, and love in new ways, which I believe is one of our Marianist education purposes and promises.

What if the world is laboring not only to give birth to a new social order, but to a new me, a new you? Guess what, it's not easy – it is painful, it requires each and every one of us to experience the birth pangs – not just the vulnerable and marginalized who are in pain because of the rest of us. First, we each need to do the painful work of examining our privilege and the ways we intentionally AND unknowingly harm others and the Earth.

Perhaps we should stop asking what we can do to make the world a better place and instead ask - what are we willing to give up and change in ourselves for the world to be a better place, as Michelle Mijung Kim also suggests in “Wake Up: Closing the Gap Between Good Intentions and Real Change”? Are we willing to do any of the following for another human being or the Earth...

Risking your professional reputation to stand up for others and call out injustice?

Being an ally AT ALL TIMES not just through our words, but also through our actions?

Giving up time to daily work on Marianist Habits of the Spirit to bring out our true self and keep our ego selves in check?

Giving up decision making power so that those who are more vulnerable can access power they have been denied?

Spend more time ensuring the wellbeing of all and less time getting an A+ on being a consumer?

Sparing your own personal comfort? Living more simply?

How do you – YOU – perpetuate injustice, destroy our earth, fail to promote peace or stifle other's opportunities and access? In some large or small ways, we all do. Reflecting on our role in perpetuating injustice probably feels like the darkness of the tomb, right?

Let's get to the darkness of the womb - How does a Marianist respond to these injustices? We personally and collectively face up to what we are doing or not doing, and we make the necessary changes. We embrace that we are called to reflect the image of God in our community and beyond. We say Yes, I do perpetuate racism and violence in our country, and I am not okay with that. I will do everything to learn how I perpetuate both and then do

everything to learn how to stop doing so – and stop doing so! We say Yes, I will birth the Kingdom of God to the world and we say NO, I will not let others live through injustice anymore.

All of this means making conscious choices about what will occupy our minds, hearts, time, and energy. Reverend Laura Rose of the 1st Congregation Church of Alameda shared a wonderful reflection on virtues and what occupies our minds, hearts, time, etc. – and she ties it right into the theme of birthing... she says,

“If we are occupied by pessimism and despair, the hope that envisions a new future can’t be born.

If we are occupied by divisiveness and mistrust, the peace that builds bridges will not be born.

If we are occupied by an endless flurry of activity, the joy that springs from a true giving of self to others will not be born.”

If we are occupied by maintaining what is or what has always been, rather than dreaming of what can be, the love that demands justice and the common good will not be born.”

What I am suggesting here is that we – each of you – and me – have a lot of hard work to do – work that will be just like birth pangs. We must lean into the birth pains of an allyship that goes beyond performative allyship that we all too often see, experience, and engage in. Our Marianist charism demands us to work beyond that, as Marie Thérèse demonstrated years and years ago.

Then, and only then can we be the leaders and educators that can help our students do the same. Then, we can be midwives for our students as we form them into midwives for the world. We won’t take the pain from them as they lean in, but we will lead them through it and show them a new way of being. As Martin Luther King Jr has preached, we can be... “Leaders not in love with publicity, but in love with justice. Leaders not in love with money, but in love with humanity, leaders who can subject their particular egos to the greatness of the cause.”

There are many great examples of how we are forming students to respond to the birth pangs of social transformation and lean into their own birth pangs of seeing with new eyes. Examples include UD requiring students to take a designated diversity and social justice course, St. Mary’s deeply engaging with a few local community partners for more meaningful impact, Chaminade collaborating very intimately with the local Hawaiian culture and taking on the new responsibility of ensuring progress towards SDG’s for the Pacific Islands. Other examples:

- When we take the time to connect students into our community engagement work in meaningful ways – to show them how a sustainable and reciprocal partnership works, instead of just expecting them to serve for a certain number of hours.
- When we teach our students to do a social analysis before responding to an issue and to include in that analysis a critical reflection on Catholic Social Teaching.

I want to share a quick, more personal, example...

I'll never forget the moment that I stood on a Tijuana beach in Mexico with a group of Center for Social Concern Students on one of the Breakouts. A few students started posing in front of the border fence for pictures. As soon as they did that another student said, "how dare you use a symbol of oppression, fear, and division as a backdrop for your picture." Wow. That student had been greatly moved by what we were learning and seeing on that immersion. He was deeply touched by the dinner we shared with migrants who were just sent back to Mexico from trying to birth a new life of dignity in the US. By spending a lot of time preparing for that immersion, reflecting on our own power and privilege, and truly examining how our every day choices cause injustices in Mexico, this young man was seeing with new eyes. This is Marianist – educating the whole person, doing so in community, and being with them as we lean into the pain of injustice and the pain of realizing our lives cause much of the injustice for others.

I would like to wrap up by sharing a few things other presenters have shared over the past two days, and then to summarize what I believe is the Marianist way to respond to birth pangs of social transformation. This will just take 2 maybe 3 more minutes...

First, the quote from Tuesday's dinner:

"Each of us, in the communities where we find ourselves, are called to be living pastorals: listening deeply with the heart, finding Christ's presence there, and then acting boldly, with others for God's reign.

From Paul Uhlig:

We create space for the practice of community, presence, and connection. We curate experiences and we model the principles of leading like Mary and sharing a family spirit.

Dr. Claire Wright:

"Who is not here today and why?"

Molly and Chris:

Our goal is empowered moral consciousness – we want you to be contemplative. We are supposed to rise up against injustice we see.

And Gail, who gave the breakout on environmental justice:

"What are our ultimate ends, what are we going for?"

And a colleague who shared:

Let's not just focus on the band aids, we need to acknowledge that our overconsumption and unfettered capitalism are at the very root of it all – it requires each of us to change our behavior and our approach. Do we have to do that person by person and office by office, or should it be instrumental to who we are as Marianists?

So, to summarize - how can we respond to birth pangs of social transformation in Marianist ways?

1. Form ourselves and our students as midwives who are sources of hope, who go to where the pain is and lean into it, who understand their role in the pain and what is causing the pain, and use their prophetic voice to birth a new world.
2. Enter into our own pain of birthing a new self – our true self. Accepting the obligation to understand our position in the world and change our thoughts and behaviors that are perpetuating systems of injustice.
3. Return to our Catholic roots of subsidiarity and solidarity, asking “whose voice has been left out? Who isn’t here? Why aren’t they here? Are the people most impacted by a decision a part of the decision-making process? Am I creating and sustaining community and responding through and with community to the pains of the world?”

As educators, this means:

1. Ensuring contemplative space for our students to identify their gifts, find and use their prophetic voices, and practice the habits of the spirit.
2. Curate authentic community experiences that catalyze examining social issues through the lens of Catholic Social Teaching, examining our privilege, and making sense of our purpose in the world.
3. Much like forming and sustaining communities in permanent mission – always be explicit about education not being for self or for an internal community, but for others, for the world, to birth a new world.

I end with a prayer that I say each and every morning to begin my day:

“I swear I will not dishonor my soul with hatred, but offer myself humbly as a guardian of nature, as a healer of misery, as a messenger of wonder, as an architect of peace. Amen”

(by Diane Ackerman)

References Used and Opportunities for Further Learning:

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