

Hunger for Hope

*Prophetic Communities, Contemplation,
and the Common Good*

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Introduction

I never set out to be anything but faithful. It has been a surprising journey, but not all that unique. I have come to see that, although my experience may seem mundane, it is critical that I give it voice, and I encourage you to do the same with your experience. In the face of the political and social crises of our time, I believe that, at the heart of it all, we as a nation—and maybe even as a church—face a spiritual crisis. Unless we embrace the challenge of faithfulness in these chaotic times, I believe that we are lost. But I am getting ahead of myself. Let me start at the beginning.

THE FOUNDATION

I grew up in southern California as the eldest of four. I went to Catholic school and learned early on that the Gospel was not an old book, but rather a living reality. I have always known that faith has consequences. As a young person, I listened to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on television. I saw young people in Birmingham stand up for civil rights. Both my sister Katy and I knew that civil rights were important.

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We also knew that these rights were integrally connected to faith.

When my sister was a sophomore and I was a senior in high school, Katy was diagnosed with Hodgkin disease and given three to five years to live. Needless to say, this shocking event changed everything in our family. Katy fully lived those five years. For myself, I have come to know that, in her dying, I picked up some of her spirit and urgency. In some ways, I have lived with two intensities.

This double intensity led me to join my religious community, the Sisters of Social Service. We were founded in Budapest, Hungary, in 1923 and in Los Angeles in 1926. We are dedicated to the Holy Spirit and, therefore, open to a spirituality that trusts the movement of the Spirit more than the strictures of the rules.

The focus of our work as a community is to embody the social teaching of the church through meeting the unmet social needs of our time. We have always been about responding to such needs without creating big institutions. We are creative and pioneering in responding to the pressing needs around us.

It is from this tradition that I set out to write this book. My more extensive memoir, published in 2014, *A Nun on the Bus: How All of Us Can Create Hope, Change, and Community*, chronicles my journey in greater detail. This book shares the spiritual lessons that I have learned over more than fifty years of religious life and contemplative practice. It is not an academic treatise or a compendium of prayer techniques. Rather, it is the result of my experience amid a politically chaotic time. My fondest hope is that this effort might give others the courage to talk about their own experience.

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Briefly, you should know that as a Sister of Social Service I did social work for a few years. In the process, I discovered that I was not the best social worker. I did not have the patience needed to be truly effective. However, my work in community organizing and social policy led me to realize that I had an interest in practicing law.

After taking final vows, I enrolled at the University of California Davis School of Law. Once I had graduated and passed the California bar, I opened the Community Law Center to serve working poor families in Oakland, California. Our clients were those who did not qualify for free legal service but could not afford private counsel. We charged everyone on a sliding scale based on income and number of dependents.

I loved this work. We handled most of the high-conflict, low-income family law cases in the county. Because of crowded court calendars, I learned how to quickly summarize a case and make my most compelling argument to a judge. I cared for my clients and worked with them to improve their family circumstances, especially those having to do with their children. I gained a deeper understanding of family dynamics. Repeatedly, I “listened deeply” to my clients’ needs in order to be effective in their lives.

COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

After eighteen years of practicing law, I realized that the Law Center was like my child. During this time, it had grown from just me to an organization employing six attorneys and six paralegals, as well as support staff. For it to flourish, it seemed to me that I should leave so that my

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partners, who had more skills in administration, could take the Law Center to the next level. I, with my talent for innovation and creativity, had some ideas of what else I could do to respond to social needs. However, my community elected me to be general director of our small international community for a five-year nonrenewable term.

My sisters taught me much during those years of leadership. One of the most painful lessons early in my term was that I was seen as too “corporate” and not a spiritual leader. This shocked and hurt me. But in good prayer practice, I took this pain to meditation, knowing that if it hurt me it was because there was some truth in the criticism.

What I came to learn was that I was a spiritual leader, but my sisters did not know this because I never talked about my spiritual journey or insights. My sisters have since taught me to speak of the spiritual journey and the challenges that we face. It is this learning that has led directly to my writing of this book.

I can talk policy and politics for hours on end. I can debate the benefits of different health care proposals or what housing policy will be good for low-income families. But my insight in this moment is that, if I do not speak of the spiritual practices and insights that are essential for today, then I am betraying the challenge of the Spirit to live in relationship with the people who are most in need in our time.

POLITICS

Through my ministry I have been given a unique exposure to the needs of the people of our nation, and to the political

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realities involved in responding to those needs. In 2004, I was recruited to be the executive director of NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice. NETWORK began in 1972 as an organization to weave together the federal advocacy work of Catholic Sisters in the United States. I was the fourth executive director in almost thirty years. Our mission is to lobby for just legislation on Capitol Hill and in the administration. From our beginning, we have worked on a variety of economic, justice, and peace-building issues.

In 2010, NETWORK received notoriety when, in support of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), we released a letter signed by fifty-nine Catholic Sisters who held leadership positions in their religious congregations. Because many of the signers' congregations sponsored health systems, their support for the ACA was based on their extensive knowledge of the ins and outs of health policy. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) had come out opposing the bill two days before we released our letter. In the end, the Affordable Care Act was passed and benefited almost twenty-five million people in our country. This "nuns vs. bishops" view of the media garnered NETWORK a fair amount of publicity at the time. After all the media ruckus had died down, I thought we had "moved on."

In April of 2012, we celebrated the fortieth anniversary of NETWORK. At the celebration the big question was, "How are we going to let people know that we have been lobbying on Capitol Hill for forty years?" We had a lot of little ideas. However, four days after our celebration, we received from Rome an answer to our prayer. The Vatican issued a censure of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) and identified our little organization,

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NETWORK, as a bad influence on Catholic sisters. We responded with prayer, conversation, and action.

The result of the censure was an explosion of interest in Catholic sisters. NETWORK's Nuns on the Bus campaign was a direct result of this notoriety. It is true that it was painful to be so misunderstood by the Vatican. However, there were other benefits. Because there were places around the country where we could not speak on church diocesan property, we went to our interfaith partners. For NETWORK, this resulted in an expansion in terms not only of numbers of members but also of their diversity. We learned that being faithful to mission led to surprising growth and opportunities. It felt like a Pentecost event, one in which we had been huddled together in fear and then tossed out onto the rooftops and roads to speak our truth about the needs of struggling families throughout the country and how Republican policies (principally Congressman Ryan's budget) were going to make their lives worse.

This adventure of Nuns on the Bus has included six bus trips over seven years. We have had various themes for each our trips, including the federal budget, immigration reform, tax policy, voter turnout, and bridging the divides in political conversation. Each trip has deepened our awareness of the struggles of our time and the joy that is possible in being together in community. These trips have made us aware of the worry and loneliness that characterize our polarized nation.

On the first trip, during a stop in Hershey, Pennsylvania, a woman in her mid-thirties wanted to know whether, if she joined NETWORK, we could give her the names of some people in her area with whom she could talk about

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things she cared about. It made me want to weep. How have we become so divided and so far from each other?

The bus has woven my spirituality into the reality of encounter. Taking time to listen to the stories of people in different parts of the nation fuels our commitment to work for justice for everyone—the 100 percent. Each stop on our routes has been seared into my memory. As the sisters create community among themselves and the staff, that community begins to include everyone we meet along the way. It is a community that nurtures all of our lives and moves us in new directions, both in politics and in how we care for one another.

THE CURRENT CRISIS

The current political chaos is not just a political crisis; it is also a spiritual crisis. The political crisis is fueled by a president who is lost in his own ego and sees no suffering outside his own. However, the deeper issue is that people voted for him as president. It is true that he lost the popular vote, but he got sufficient votes to be elected. This means that we need to look at the underlying reality, what it was that made this chaotic, reactionary, and hostile personality attractive to voters in our nation. Politics alone cannot answer this question. In my view, the answer lies in a deeper place and has to do with a spiritual crisis that we are facing as a nation—a crisis spawned by the corrosive lie that our foundation, both as people and as a nation, is individualism. It is this lie that is sucking the life out of the heart of our nation.

Spirituality is at the core of our daily lives and struggles. It is the values we live by and the care that we take of

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each other. For me, this spirituality is rooted in the Catholic tradition, but I have come to learn that there are many ways to be open to the divine presence in our midst. In my experience, it is this divine presence that knits us together. You do not have to be Christian or Catholic for this journey. You just have to be open to a story that is bigger than your own.

If we are faithful, we can connect with each other in surprising ways. We can even turn back from the destructive path that we are on and find a way to weave our society back together. We need to stay faithful to the spiritual journey that challenges us to be aware of the needs of others and to care for our earth. In the face of the pain and crises of this political time, I cannot be silent, nor can any of us. We must share with each other. Our sharing needs to be rooted in faith and in mutual connection. Only then will we be strong enough to engage together the challenges of our time.

The current chaos is sometimes overwhelming. I yearn to avert my eyes from the often-grim reality. I don't want to hear the dehumanizing slogans chanted by our leaders. I am horrified by the policies that tear children from their parents and demonize immigrants. I am shocked that elected leaders lie with impunity. The communal sins of racism, anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia are eroding whatever moral fabric we have left as a nation. But I cannot turn away.

I ask: What is happening to our nation? How are we to deal with these impossible circumstances? It strikes me that we as a nation have a life-threatening illness. We are soul-sick in our individualism and heart-sick in our emotional/

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spiritual distance from each other. I encounter anguish at every turn. So, in the face of our national anguish, join me as I share what I have learned on the journey.

EXPLORING A TOXIC ENVIRONMENT

The crassness of our current political leaders is undermining our democracy. It touches an anger that is crippling so many of our people, especially in small towns and rural communities. Anger and fear are making our nation more violent, yet political leaders are addressing neither the source of the anger nor the ease with which angry people can get access to guns.

Just as our civic leaders are failing us, many people view our religious institutions as untrustworthy. The clergy abuse scandal has undermined the Catholic Church. The incapacity of our church leaders to offer spiritual leadership is crippling the church's capacity to minister to this pain-ridden world. The hierarchy's fixation on rules and conservative politics has torn the heart out of any response in this time of spiritual crisis.

Our leaders, both secular and religious, are failing us to the extent that I find myself often paralyzed in the face of the anger and hate.

In 2015, I was invited to give a talk at a small Christian college in southern Indiana. The committee sponsoring the lecture gathered in a sun-drenched living room for informal conversation before the lecture. One of the women on the planning team brought a flyer that had been put in her rural mailbox. It was an advertisement for joining the Ku Klux Klan. I could barely touch the paper. It had a shocking

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caricature of President Obama and stated clearly that he should not be president . . . and should be shot! How do we live in a world with such hate?

I recall a man I met in Indianapolis in 2016. A rugged machinist in his fifties, he told me with great exuberance that he was for Donald Trump for president. I asked him why. His reply was telling: "I saw him on television, and he is tough!" The man went on to describe the TV show *The Apprentice* and how Mr. Trump had said to people "You're fired!"

I asked him why he felt that "toughness" was so important.

He proceeded to tell me some of his story. While he was growing up, his parents had told him that if he "worked hard and played by the rules" he would get ahead. But this had not been the case. He had worked hard but was still struggling. His two kids were having an even harder time. They had gone to college but had to move back home because they could not find good paying jobs. They could not pay rent AND pay off their student debt. They were struggling, so the whole family was working to help them.

As he spoke, he kept returning to his parents' "promise."

After a nudge from the Holy Spirit, I asked him if perhaps he felt ashamed that he had not measured up to his parents' expectations. Suddenly, he got tears in his eyes. It startled both of us!

What I realized in the exchange was that his anger and his need for "toughness" were connected to his feeling that he was a failure. He had not fulfilled his parents' expectations. He felt that he had failed his parents and his kids. He

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had accepted the fallacy that we are all simply individuals struggling on our own. This misconception, this view that individualism is the cornerstone of our nation, is undermining our society by making our people blind to the systemic reality that is shifting money to the top of the economic ladder and hurting everyone else.

THE LIE OF INDIVIDUALISM

President Reagan, through clever commercials, shifted our founding narrative from the story of a communitarian genesis to one based on rugged individualism. He stated that we each must take care of ourselves, and offered us the image of the lone white man riding off on his horse to “settle” the West. This was the myth—or dare I say lie—that he sold to the American people.

We know that no single individual created our nation or our communities. No individual raised a barn or completed a quilt. Jamestown was a community of people struggling together, and the Pilgrims came by the shipload to create a colony. The indigenous people living on this land when the Europeans arrived had strong communal bonds, and in the beginning were able to help the European settlers.

But the lie of individualism was a better fit for President Reagan’s political rhetoric. He successfully embellished it by stigmatizing struggling families that were not earning enough to get by. Building on the endemic racism in our nation, President Reagan then proceeded to create another myth, that of the “welfare queen.” The myths had all been invented to support what was in essence a lie.

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Forty years later, we are experiencing the consequences of this lie. We have an eroded sense of community. We continue to perpetuate a racism that leaves out and alienates large groups of our people.

What do we do when our leaders have lost their moral voice? When our leaders are silent or endorse hateful attitudes? What do we do when civic leaders undermine the very institutions that have allowed us to prosper as a nation for almost 250 years? What do we do when our religious leaders are not voicing moral truths? To whom can we look amid these civic and moral crises?

Ordinary action and power politics are not the answer. Something more is required. We have reached a point at which it is clear that we ourselves must take responsibility. We are the leaders we have been waiting for!

To engage in the struggle that faces us, we need a contemplative approach. I have come to see that only from deep listening to the Holy Spirit—a still, small voice or a whispering breeze—will we be able to find our way through the chaos and work effectively for change. In this book I attempt to share how I came to this insight through my work for justice and my experience of more than fifty years in religious life.

The book is divided into three parts. The first, “The Contemplative,” outlines both the “how” of a contemplative practice as well as its benefits. The next section, “The Community,” explores what is necessary to create a community that nurtures a prophetic imagination. This type of imagination is essential if we are going to find a way out of the mire of our political time. In the final section, “Expressions of Hope,” I apply some of the insights of the first two

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sections to two critical issues of our time. It is in the application of faith lived in community to current struggles that we come to experience true hope.

My own hope is that, by lifting up the nexus of the contemplative life and the work of justice, we will find a new enthusiasm and a renewed faith and confidence that God is alive in our time.