‘Contemplation-in-Action’ Means Business
To Harvard-Educated Terri Monroe, RSCJ (2008)
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IT WOULD BE TEMPTING to draw a contrast between a religious of the Sacred Heart and the “heartless” world of corporate America. Yet many mid-career executives are drawn to the classes taught by Terri Monroe, RSCJ at the University of San Diego’s School of Leadership and Education Sciences. Sister Monroe does not experience this as a conflict or problem. In fact she would likely say the perceived contrast stems from a “mental model” out of sync with today’s social reality.

One could, she admits, view her work through a filter that says “this is not the kind of thing a nun does.” She, however, views it as an opportunity to help people who are often “suffering from a kind of wasteland of the spirit” recover a sense of meaning in their work by confronting and responding to questions such as Who am I? What is my Purpose? What is the source of my power? Who can I trust? How should I live? What is the nature of the force field of life in which I (we) dwell?

“Most students arrive on the first day of my introductory class aspiring to be leaders—or in many cases, assume they already are leaders who just need a diploma to certify this fact,” she said. “Thus, I am interested in the depth dimension of leadership education. I want my students to see spirituality as a practical discipline—one capable of motivating and guiding leaders who are able to “discern” where the sacred and transcendent are to be found in our culture and world so that they can become sources of meaning and inspiration for others.

From the very beginning, Ignatian spirituality and the charism of the Society have been at the core of Sister Monroe’s interest in leadership. As a graduate student at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government she enrolled in a leadership class taught by a young professor, Ronald Heifetz, who was starting to experiment with a method referred to as “case-in-point” or “here-and-now” teaching whereby a group is helped to study its own behavior and the dynamics that unfold as they are actually happening.

The process requires one to be attentive and aware of what is taking place in the present moment. “It suddenly dawned on me,” she said, “that this was a form of teaching the capacity for contemplation-in-action and discernment, in a secular context to people who would likely never take a class in theology or spirituality.

Sister Monroe ended up spending the next eleven years teaching and working in close partnership with Heifetz at the Kennedy School on the development of the theory and teaching methodology which was eventually articulated in Heifetz’ Leadership Without Easy Answers (Harvard University Press, 1994) and by Sharon Parks in Leadership Can Be Taught (Harvard Business School Press, 2005) which reports the results of a six-year study and evaluation of the teaching methodology. Both authors continued
for our problems) forms the basis of a process of self-study and observation that frequently surfaces patterns that participants recognize as operative in their places of work.

 Asked to give an example, she related an incident from her most recent conference having to do with ‘gender dynamics.’

 “There comes a moment during these conferences when participants “get” that staff members are not going to deliver answers in a way that corresponds to their expectations of authority. Suddenly it dawns on them that the next step depends upon their taking the initiative.

 “Each of us has interior ‘mental models’ that tend to govern the way we respond during these ‘moments of crisis.’ While I recognize this is a broad generalization, I think it is fair to say that many more men than women are socialized by a whole host of previous experiences to respond to crises by taking the initiative, leaping into action and trying to ‘fix’ the problem.

 “So, as the anxiety in the room was building, it was not surprising to me that Jeff, a tall, articulate, confident-looking male, was the first to speak up and make a suggestion for how the group might proceed. As he began to speak, you could almost hear a collective sigh of relief coming from many people in the room who felt ‘rescued’ from the awkward silence. Jeff’s statement broke the ice, and others began to chime in. Most of the subsequent comments were addressed to him, and almost took the form of an interview.

 “On and on it went, until a female member of the group, Emily, virtually exploded: ‘Jeff, why do you feel so entitled to dominate this conversation? Don’t you feel it’s about time to hear from some of the women and people of color here?’ Jeff concluded his response with the statement, ‘OK, I get the picture. You don’t have

 acknowledge the critical role Sister Monroe played in the formulation of their work.

 Since coming to the University of San Diego in 1999, Sister Monroe has continued to develop and refine this method of instruction. Twice a year (usually on the second weekend of January and July) she offers and directs *Leadership for Change Conferences.*

 Each time she is joined by different faculty colleagues recruited from leading universities around the world (e.g. Harvard, Columbia, UCLA, NYU, Oxford and INSEAD [France]) and a complement of distinguished practitioners. They included, for example, the former Dean of Westminster Abbey who presided over Princess Diana’s funeral, incumbent mayors of U.S. cities, cabinet-level state officials, superintendents of school districts, prominent business people—and “even a shaman!” she said. These individuals come together and form the temporary “staff” for one of the *Leadership for Change* conferences directed by Sister Monroe.

 Dissecting the “mental models” held by the participants and the social dynamics that arise during the course of their interactions (e.g. projection, scapegoating and “blaming” authority

* www.leadership.sandiego.edu

In a classroom at University of San Diego, Terri Monroe, RSCJ, drives home a point.
to worry about my speaking again. I’ll shut up.’ From that point on he began to acquire the role of the ‘angry, insensitive, dominating white male,’ and Emily began to acquire the role of ‘shrew.’”

“We don’t pay enough attention to how these sorts of interactions and roles get co-constructed,” says Sister Monroe. It wasn’t just a matter of Jeff’s or Emily’s individual personality. Initially, she said, Jeff performed a service and was viewed as the group’s hero. Emily also performed a service by calling attention to the fact that many potential contributors weren’t being heard, but it was expressed in a way that made it easy for some to stereotype her as an ‘angry female man-hater.’

Fortunately, Sister Monroe said, in this instance, staff members were able to intervene and help the group “unpack” the complexities involved in what had just happened. Jeff, for example, was helped to see how his gifts for quick thinking, extroversion, confidence, and so forth, combined with the social expectations others held of someone who ‘looked’ like him (e.g. white, male, tall, handsome, etc.). Staff members worked to help him understand ways in which he could contribute from his wealth of gifts, but also be alert to opportunities for refocusing attention and responsibility to other members of a group.

Emily was helped to think about alternative ways that she could have formulated her intervention so that it would have had a better chance of producing the outcome she desired which was to hear from people in the group who had so far been silent.

“We have entered an era that demands new paradigms for perception and action,” Sister Monroe said. “This is true in religious life as well. Many religious orders made a huge leap after Vatican II from a model of authority that demanded conformity and obedience to one that honored inclusion, collaboration, diversity and difference. But, my fear is this ‘mental model’ is becoming frozen in a way that makes it difficult to perceive the next stage emerging.

“When we have been trained to think and act in a certain way and belong to a group that thinks the same way, it is difficult to imagine thinking and acting differently because so many aspects of the culture are implicit and unconscious. Real cultural change becomes possible only when we are able to enlarge our perceptions by engaging in important encounters with others significantly different from ourselves. And, it is not enough for individuals or organizations to want to be able to change these patterns or to adopt new mental models.

“The real question is, when all is said and done, can we really live and operate in new ways? Lasting systemic change in the Church will require challenging deeply rooted personal and institutional habits—the ways we think, feel, act and, perhaps even pray.

“It will require adopting fresh perspectives, initiating new ways for clergy and laypersons to work together with one another—all the while allowing God’s love to shine in the darkest recesses of our souls so that we become more discerning in our choices, forgiving in our relationships, and more healthily disengaged from disordered desires and patterns of relating and acting.”

God’s love shines in a new way to approach our world. Sister Monroe guides from experience as a Religious of the Sacred Heart, discovering and illuminating this love in all its forms. Those touched by her guidance experience growth, anchored by Christ-rooted contemplation-in-very-dynamic-action.