



With Head, Heart, Hands & Feet

A Framework for Educating for Justice & Peace

"Leading the Way: To Go Where There Is No Road and Leave a Path"

Sr Joan Chittister – NCEA Conference 2001

Three stories provoke today's reflections on spiritual leadership: the first story tells about a guy who was pulled over by a state trooper.

"Sir," the trooper said. "You are the 5000th person to cross this traffic counter wearing a seat belt. You have just won \$5000! What are you going to do with all that money?"

"Well, the driver said slowly, I don't rightly know for sure but I suppose the first thing I oughta do is buy a driver's license..."

So the lady sitting next to him said. "Oh, don't pay any attention to him, officer" 'he's always a smart aleck when he's drunk."

Then the guy in the back said, "I told you we wouldn't get very far in a stolen car."

And finally a muffled little voice from the trunk yelled "hey, buddy, are we over the border yet?"

Point: reality is not always what it may seem

The second story is about a map. In the mid 17th century Spanish seafarers sailed up the west coast of the Americas to what is now known as the Baja peninsula. The cartographers of the time, aware of the drake expeditions and good Cartesians as well simply drew a straight line up from the strait of California to the Strait of Juan de Fuca between Vancouver Island and Washington State.

Consequently, the maps that were published in 1635 show very clearly that California was an island.

Now that might be only a quaint story if it were not for the fact that the missionaries of the time were using that map to travel inland.

So, given the information on that map, they developed the first great pre-fab boat construction project in human history. They cut their flatboats in Spain, shipped them over in pieces and then, on the shores of Monterey, California put them all back together again. To be transported on the backs of mules to the other side of California. Then they carried those boats 12,000 feet up the Sierra Nevada Mountains for passage across the great strait which the map showed ran from the Baja to Puget Sound.

But lo and behold the other side of those mountains was no seashore at all. It was what is now the state of Nevada and the beginning of the great American desert. California was the mainland!

It would be a rather funny story except for one thing that makes it tragic: when the missionaries wrote back to tell the cartographers and the crown that California was not an island no one--no one--believed them. In fact, they insisted that the map was certainly correct: it was the missionaries who were in the wrong place!

What's more, in 1701,-- almost 70 years later-- they reissued an updated version of the same map.

For fifty years, then, -- the years of the most constant, most crucial explorations of the California coastline, -- those maps went unchanged because someone continued to work with partial information, assumed that data from the past had the inerrancy of tradition and then used authority to prove it.

Finally, after years and years of new reports a few cartographers--the heretics, the radicals, and the rebels, I presume-- began to issue a new version. And in 1721, the last mapmaker holdout finally attached California to the mainland.

But--and this is the real tragedy perhaps-- it took almost a hundred years for the gap between experience and authority to close. It took almost a hundred years for the new maps to be declared official. Despite the fact that the people who were there all the time knew differently from the very first day.

Point: vision is the ability to realize that the truth is always larger than the partial present.

The third story is a monastic one: once upon a time, the story goes, a teacher travelled with great difficulty to a far away monastery because there was an old monastic there who had a reputation for asking very piercing spiritual questions.

"Holy one," the teacher said. "Give me a question that will renew my soul."

"ah, yes, then," the old monastic said, your question is 'what do they need?'"

The teacher wrestled with the question for days but then, depressed, gave up and went back to the old monastic in disgust. "Holy one," the teacher said, "I came here because I'm tired and depressed and dry. I didn't come here to talk about my ministry. I came to talk about my spiritual life. Please give me another question.

"Ah, well, of course. Now I see," the old monastic said, "in that case, the right question for you is not 'what do they need?' the right question for you is 'what do they really need?'"

Point: the ability to give meaning to life is of the essence of spiritual leadership.

Immersion in the immediate, a sense of spiritual vision-- the pursuit of meaning-- and the courage to question the seemingly unquestionable is the essence of spiritual leadership: we cannot--and should not-- attempt to lead anyone anywhere unless we ourselves know where we are, where we're going, and what dangerous questions it will be necessary to ask if we really want to get there.

In a century that has spawned Adolph Hitler, Ferdinand Marcos, and nicolae Ceausescu, on one side, and martin Luther king, jr., Dan Berrigan, Dorothy day, Rosa parks, Eleanor Roosevelt, and mahatma Gandhi on the other, the problem of spiritual leadership and the questions that underlie it have never been more urgent-- or more confused.

We find ourselves confronted with conflicting notions of leadership. Is it force or is it persuasion-- is it power or is it passion? What kind of leadership is really needed to save the soul of a society? Are we to be faithful followers or independent individuals? The definitions seem to shift and sway.

In highly communitarian societies, it is extremely important, for instance, to foster individualism so that people do not get swallowed up in the name of the group.

The pharaohs built mighty pyramids, true, but at the price of a million lives. The kings of Spain created a national treasury of American gold but at the price of entire Native American populations. We created a cotton and textile industry but at the price of the enslavement of a whole people then and long lingering distrust now.

On the other hand, in highly individualistic societies-- like our own-- it is just as important to foster a sense of group goals so that private interests do not usurp the common good. As they often have and often do.

Corporate executives who take million-dollar salaries for themselves-- who earn as much in an hour and half, as their employees make in a year! (use today) while their laid-off middle-class workers lose their homes to failed mortgages-- do not lead a community to community, though, god knows, they do indeed affect it.

No, leadership is not force. Leadership is the ability to see the vision beyond the reality and make a road where no road has been.

Spiritual leadership is the ability to question the present in order to show the way to the greater good-- whether it is popular to pursue that good or not.

The questions of leadership are organizational ones, of course, but they are spiritual ones, too. They have something to do with the structures of a society, yes, but they have more to do with the spirit of that society and the compass of its soul.

Spiritual leadership is, as the psalmist says, the ability "to be a light in the darkness for the upright."

And it is often a lonely, lonely task. Knowing where to go is one thing; breaking the path to it is another. And it is breaking the path that is of the essence of leadership.

Spiritual leadership is not an exercise in social isolation. Spirituality and spiritual leadership have something to do with critiquing the present, envisioning a better future and asking the right questions as we go.

But, fortunate for us, we are a tradition rich with such people:

We are, in fact, a veritable roll call of courageous figures, who in the face of the Jesus who assessed his own reality and, then, contrary to its claims, envisioned fullness of life for lepers, humanity for women, freedom for those possessed by demons, and the responsibility to question, question, question authority after authority from his first Passover in the temple to his journey to the tomb so that the reign of god might come-- they committed their lives to doing the same.

Benedict of Nursia assessed his world,-- asked why the few controlled the many and envisioned a whole new way of living that was the antithesis of the hierarchialism of Roman patriarchy.

Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac assessed their world-- asked who would help the helpless in it and envisioned a whole new kind of security for the poor.

Oscar Romero assessed his world-- asked where political legitimacy was and lost his life to stop oppression.

Indeed, the tradition is clear: spiritual leadership is about assessing reality, about reclaiming the cosmic vision, and about being courageous enough to ask the right questions along the way.

Clearly, if we want to be spiritual leaders, we, too, must wonder whether today, now, here, our catholic schools are asking what today's students really need? We must ask if we are really steeping today's students in the stench of this world's total reality, we must ask ourselves if we are really using the right maps to lead them on their gospel way.

How can we possibly be the spiritual leaders the tradition has a right to expect and we purport to be, -by virtue of our very vocation to the process of human growth-- unless we are using the right maps or at least have the courage to ask for another one as did the missionary teachers before us.

If catholic education is really education that makes a difference, that leads the way!-- we have to enable students to assess their world-- both its raging possibilities and its limitless brutalities-- as well as simply to function in it.

They must leave us able and willing to envision something better for the world than power and profit at any cost.

They must have the skills to question its assumptions about Darwinian economics and biological stereotypes rather than simply to accept them. They must have the commitment to question its social axioms rather than simply to comply with them.

From Piaget to Wallace, from Kohlberg to Gilligan from Smetana to Harvard's Robert Brooks developmental psychologists, social domain theorists-- and now resiliency researchers have all warned that the development of moral maturity and emotional strength is not a matter of class exercises or verbal learning's or even peer group analyses of hypothetical social situations.

The fact is that children, they all point out, simply cannot rise to another level of moral development unless they see it modelled in someone else, in parents, in teachers, in, as Julius seal calls them, "charismatic adults."

Obviously, for that to happen,-- if teachers truly want a better life for the next generation-- this generation of adults, of Christians, of teachers, --you and I-- have the obligation to assess our world first, proclaim the vision, and ask a few questions of our own. And no uncertainty of yours and mine will forgive us for failing to do so. No whimpering "economics is not my field," no demur, "I don't get involved in politics," no pious, "I'm sure that god will lead the church in the way it is meant to go" will satisfy for our spiritual responsibility now any more than it did for those who sat by while someone else engineered slavery or colonialism, the crusades or the inquisition.

Massive social change-- today's only social certainty-- when devoid of spiritual vision leads to social chaos, and social chaos leads to confusion, and confusion leads, social psychologists tell us, to alienation. It is a sorry state.

Alienation is that feeling of rootlessness and disorientation of soul that comes with a loss of social bearings and fixed values and immutable standards and clear consensus on the things that count. It is a direction without destination, a voyage without values.

When everything is in flux, but old institutions and yesterday's leaders, lend their energy only to resist rather than to light the way down the new road, when standards become uncertain and integrity blurs because more energy is being put into rebuilding the age that is dying instead of, as Boethius implies, giving soul to the age that is coming to life, we get out of touch with what matters, with what really matters-- with what really matters!

The alienated distance themselves-- certainly psychologically, often even physically,- commonly spiritually.

They ignore or they withdraw from what they do not understand and cannot control for fear of its unknown demands on them. They hide in a citizenship that deteriorates, at best, into a kind of patriotic civility and a religion that becomes, at most, a checklist of customs-- a pious nest, a spiritual Jacuzzi-- all of those things weak and puny and unacceptable substitutes for the gospel life.

But constant change and total chaos and complete confusion and deep, deep alienation is the very nature of life in a world a-spin in technological change, adrift in space, and engulfed in the globalization of industry, economics, politics, race and even religion.

And what will happen to the technological have-nots in the world who are already a century behind?

Those are the kind of questions that must plague the Christian soul today. That's the stuff of spiritual leadership. That's the task for teachers in catholic schools now if those schools are really to "make a difference." if we are really to 'have faith in the future,' If teachers are really to 'lead the way' into this new century but, most of all, into this gospel.

It's not the catechism answers we teach them to give; it's the moral questions we teach them to ask that are the index, the measure, of spiritual leadership now.

So what shall we teach about reality, what vision shall we give, what questions shall we ask what map shall we ourselves use this time to chart the unknown: one drawn from past realities or one hard-gotten by walking new and unknown territory ourselves. It is precisely ambiguity, in other words, that is the very geography of leadership. Tutors are for times of light; we have need for leaders now.

What you model, what you value, what you question and where you lead through your curriculums, your textbooks and your own personal commitments in life will be the values, the visions and the answers we get in the next generation.

The map you use to explore this new world will be the path by which the next world walks.

So the question for spiritual leaders in catholic schools today must become on what roads should we lead them now?

The answer to that question, I contend, has been clear for 2000 years. We must lead them down the roads of the one who said, "I am the way."

Lead them down the road to Egypt where Joseph and Mary, refugees from the dictator Herod, sought political asylum. Take them into a world where today's 14m refugees and 25m displaced persons live in squalor and starvation, fear and destitution everywhere. Teach them to ask of a country created by immigrants why its borders are tight against them while countries far more poor, far more crowded, are far more open to them than we are.

While forests were coming down in behalf of western economic interests and farmlands were drying up under a punctured ozone layer, global population increased from 2.5 billion in 1950 to 6 billion in 1999. Now those people are swarming across the borders of the world, following the garbage cans of the world looking for water, food and work.

Ask them as you map their way through history how it was that in 1942 this Christian country sent boatloads of Jews anchored on our shores back to European concentration camps-- and sends boatload after boatload back to other bleak and barbaric places yet today. Ask them in the name of Jesus who is the way what that has to be with being Christian?

Lead them down the road to Galilee where Jesus walked day after day healing the sick, feeding the hungry defending the poor.

Show them the 10m children on their own streets who wait without health insurance in the richest country in the world.

Help them to see the working poor, those 6m Americans who are working low paying jobs for part-time pay, or, worse, who work two jobs with no benefits, no compensation, no paid vacations, no day care services no pensions and less than full-time pay. Teach them to ask what they will do in their day to heal this?

Lead them up the road to tabor to the mountaintop where Jesus appears to the apostles not with Nathan the priest or with David the king, the institution men of Israel, but with the prophets Moses and Elijah-- with Moses, a liberator of peoples, and Elijah whom king Ahab called 'that trouble-maker of Israel.

Take them up the road to tabor, indeed, and teach them to question aloud how it is that Jesus did not allow the apostles to stay there but led them instead straight back down to the bottom of the mountain, to the dirty towns and throngs of hurting peoples below who were waiting to be healed.

Teach them to ask, for instance, whether or not the fact that we have not sent healing medicine to the hordes of people with aids in Africa might not just be a new kind of racism...

Teach them to ask whether or not in our lust for capital punishment, the fact that we and china account for over half the executions in the world every year, and that we ourselves are the leading violators of international law against the execution of child offenders whether we might not just be becoming what we hate.

By all means, lead them--both to the top of tabor-- and to the bottom of tabor, as well, where, now as then, the poor wait for the disciples of Jesus who claim to lead the way to cast out demons on their behalf.

Lead them down the road to Samaria to the place where Jesus the Jewish man spoke deep theology to a Samaritan woman, announced to her first that he was the messiah and then sent her to evangelize an entire city.

Lead them to where all the women of the world-- wait today at wells gone dry for them to become visible, to have their questions heard, to have their answers listened to, to hear a word of theology that ennobles them, too, to be sent, as she was, to evangelize the cities where, as scripture says so clearly, "because of her thousands were converted that day."

Teach them to ask why- in the light of Samaria-- it can possibly be that women are forbidden to ask for the fullness of the spiritual life?

Most of all, teach them not to despair. After all, the disciples who were with Jesus that day didn't want him talking to a woman either. "Send her away," they said. "She is following after us." but, scripture says, he did not.

Teach them, like Jesus, to silence the silencing.

Lead them down the road to Jerusalem, the centre of the synagogue, the centre of the state.

How is it that we can put half the budget of this country into wartime preparations in peacetime and plead that we don't have money enough in this country to meet human needs.

Teach them that crying out for the other is, in the end, what spiritual leadership is all about.

Finally, lead them down the road to Emmaus lead them to where community happens-- as it did for the disciples on the road-- in the 'breaking of the bread'-- where no one is outcast and no one is without value and no one is excluded from the feast..

Spiritual leadership demands that in this world of power and profit, sexism and economic domination, we bring them to see what reality really is. We lead them to envision a better way, and we teach them to question the things that obstruct its coming.

We must show them in our own lives the kind of courageous persistence it takes to wrest the gospel from the caricature of old maps and bring it to new life in new ways that protects both the born and the unborn child, and that recognizes that abortion on demand is not just a woman's decision. It is the decision of every one of us who allows one last sexist trick on women by those who will pay for abortions but not for the day care and food stamps and educational monies it would take to raise the children that are conceived.

We must lead them to speak for all the nobodies that nobody wants to be, so that the poor do not have to add grovelling to poverty in the next generation.

We must call them to give human dignity to the gay and lesbian community, so that no more beautiful people die cruciform on barbed-wire fences in the next generation because we tolerated hate in the name of religion in ours.

We must show them how to respect all the brown and black and red and yellow "others"-- all the cripples and the lepers and the outcasts and the women-- who swarm this time to us for acceptance, for community, for equality, for the safe, warm touch of the Christ whom we say lives in us.

The philosopher Chuang Tzu says, "How shall I talk of the sea to a frog that has never left its pond." how can we expect of them what we fail to be ourselves?

What you are, you see, your students will be. What you have the courage to question. They will learn to question, too.

Spiritual leadership demands, in other words, that you yourself take them where there are no roads and leave a path.

We must teach them when we teach them the doctrine of 'free will' that the other side of free will is responsibility. That we are all agents-- not spectators, not victims. We must teach them, in other words, that time changes nothing, people do. And we must teach it with our lives.

You are what makes catholic education different. Pity the church that does not think and its teachers who are not thinkers themselves. Pity the children who are taught to recite the past but forbidden to examine the present or to imagine a different future. Pity the country left with the children who are forbidden to think by teachers who fail to show them how.

When I was a young catholic school teacher we suddenly realized that we had ghettoized ourselves to the point that we were teaching from "catholic" arithmetic books and "catholic" history books and "catholic" geography books and even 'catholic spellers!' whatever in heaven's name that was.

But i have come these years to think it would be a great new act of spiritual leadership-- totally consonant with 100 years of papal encyclicals on social justice-- if there were indeed a catholic arithmetic that concentrated not on the splitting of apple pies to teach fractions but on the distribution of the food of the world to others.

A catholic geography that taught who was taking whose resources and at what cost to them.

A catholic history that taught the sin against conscience of the authoritarian state.

A catholic science that taught the full humanity of women.

A catholic economics that taught the sinfulness of the ill-gotten gains of sweatshops.

We've come a long, long road since Hiroshima and Vatican ii but without you it is only one short thought back to the dangers of the cold war and the intellectual boundaries of Vatican I.

You are catholic school teachers. You are the shapers of the real future of both church and state. Decide which church, which state, you want and teach it, be it, lead it.

What is spiritual leadership? It is the commitment, the courage, the questions it will take to make the prophetic normative,

What is your curriculum? Ceaseless focus on real issues, and a vision for the gospel.

Where is your school? Everywhere.

What is your task? To honour the questions of those for whom old maps do not show the way and old answers do not persuade, to teach students that precisely when people do not want them to ask questions, that is exactly when they must.

Teach them that when we do not allow questions, we do both church and state irreparable harm. We deny the Holy Spirit; we turn the state into a gulag and the church into a cult. Worst of all, we make suspect the very quality of thought in the catholic school.

The task of the teacher, --the Christian teacher,- must be to determine not what is the world that is politically convenient for us today but what is the world we are called to leave behind.

I'm begging you, if you really want to be spiritual leaders, leave behind a cold, clear sense of reality, leave behind a vision of the better, leave behind a memory of the unremitting courage to ask the hard, the necessary questions.

And whatever you do, do not give up. Persist. Have faith. And when your most sublime ideas meet the greatest resistance, remember that today's heresy is tomorrow's social dogma. So it was when Galileo questioned the nature of the universe. So it was when Luther asked for the publication of the scriptures in the vernacular, so it was when sojourner truth demanded the end to slavery, so it was when Elizabeth Cady Stanton went on a hunger strike for a woman's right to vote, so it was when John Courtney Murray argued for freedom of conscience, so it was when mlk wanted to integrate busses! So it was when people wanted communion in the hand...

Can you honestly say that those questions should not have been asked?!

Teach them to question, teach them to question.-- for all our sakes, teach them to think. The integrity of the church, the existence of the globe, and, without doubt, "faith in the future" depends on your leading the way.