

# Exercising contemplative power in the face of growing racial, religious and sexual diversity

 [globalsistersreport.org/exercising-contemplative-power-face-growing-racial-religious-and-sexual-diversity-21581](http://globalsistersreport.org/exercising-contemplative-power-face-growing-racial-religious-and-sexual-diversity-21581)

by Nancy Sylvester

by [Nancy Sylvester](#)



Mar. 16, 2015 in

- [Contemplate This](#)

Too many atrocities bombard us when we pick up a newspaper, watch the news or read the many blogs and websites that come to us on a daily basis. The challenge for people of faith and those of us practicing contemplation is: How do we respond? Where do we begin to address these injustices? Two incidents which recently happened in and around Detroit (where I live) caught my attention, and I offer them as a reflection on exercising contemplative power.

One involved an Arab-American man who was talking to his children while shopping at a Kroger's supermarket. He chose to speak in Arabic. Two white men, also in the store, were outraged at this and began to attack the man. A witness to the event said she heard the white men yelling "ISIS," "terrorist," "Go back to your country" and "raghead" before they began hitting the man. The police assured the community that this was not part of a larger effort but rather a "spur-of-the-moment event."

The second involved a lesbian couple who brought their 6-day-old infant to the pediatrician whom they had chosen because of her reputation and holistic approach to health care. They had met the doctor earlier and so she knew they were a lesbian couple. As they waited in the doctor's office another doctor emerged to inform them that their chosen pediatrician had a change of heart. After "much prayer" she decided that she couldn't treat their baby because they are lesbians. The doctor did write a letter to the couple apologizing for the hurt and angry feelings that were created by this and asking them to accept her apologies.

Your immediate reaction may be: Wait a minute these are two very different situations. And they are. There are many differences between these two incidents, but what I see they both embody is the challenge we face as we live into an evolving world which is oriented toward greater compassion, complexity and deeper understanding of our unity rather than our differences.

We are at the early stages of this evolution. At a time of such great transition fear looms large within us. We act unconsciously out of the worldviews we have inherited, learned and fed. One major fear is that of difference. We tend to identify ourselves and others by how we are different. I say I am thin (not fat), I am white (not a person of color), I am Polish (not Irish), I am Catholic (not Jewish) etc. Each one of those affirmations holds feelings, ideas, values, expectations and beliefs that shape my reactions to situations.

In times of stress and transition those assumptions can come into play in ways that can be destructive and hurtful. We react in ways that defend the way we believe things are, and perhaps more importantly, how they *should* be.

Take the men in the first situation. Hearing Arabic being spoken in a Detroit suburban grocery store triggered a reaction that far exceeded the act. Here is a father who is Arab-American speaking to his children in Arabic. What might have gotten triggered in those seconds prior to the assault? Perhaps these were some of the unconscious

thoughts: “Who does he think he is not speaking English . . . real Americans speak English . . . he’s giving a bad example to his children . . . He’s not really one of us . . . Look at him he looks like the terrorists who are trying to destroy us . . . He has no right to be here.” Unconsciously each trigger grew in intensity and fed a reaction that in this case turned violent. The “spur-of-the-moment event” had its roots in years of unconscious beliefs and attitudes.

What about the pediatrician? What might have been triggered in her? In this case she had some time to think about the promise she had made to the couple to care for their infant knowing they were lesbians. Perhaps these kinds of thoughts moved through her: “I don’t know what I think about homosexuality. I liked them, but I’ve been taught homosexuality is wrong. My religion is adamant against gays and lesbians. Do I feel I’d be supporting this kind of lifestyle and behavior if I cared for their child? How can I support this which is so unnatural? What will my family think? How can I do this with integrity? I can’t, can I? But don’t they have rights? Didn’t I promise to take care of all people when I took my oath? Well, other doctors can do it. I’m not the only one.”

The doctor’s action, the letter she wrote to the couple, was more measured than the men in the first situation. Yet, it was still a reaction that defended her worldview when faced with an invitation to make room for different expressions of sexuality in her patients as she exercised her rights and responsibilities as a doctor.

I know there are many other ways to look at these two situations and to critique what I’ve just written. I didn’t want to analyze the situations but rather to use them as examples to show how when faced with those whose differences threaten my way of seeing things, I, too often, react in a defensive way flowing from unconscious assumptions, beliefs, values that are part of my worldview.

Contemplation invites us to become more conscious, more aware of what has shaped us. It opens us to greater ambiguity and paradox. Taking a “long loving look at the real” acknowledges that what we see is not necessarily the only view; rather we always see through a lens that is partial and too often cracked. In opening ourselves to the work of the Divine within us we are allowing ourselves to see how we judge, react, assume. Contemplation invites us to see things as others see them and open ourselves to compassionate love which widens our vision rather than restricting our view.

I believe we experience these kinds of situations more often than we think in our daily life. Perhaps not as dramatic as the ones that get in the newspaper, but the increasing racial, religious and sexual diversity within our country is “in our face.” For many it signifies a loss: loss of identity, loss of morality, loss of our way of life. The reaction then is one of pulling back, staking one’s claim, defending what was and building the walls of separation even higher.

As I reflect on exercising contemplative power, I see it very operative in such everyday moments. We need to become more aware of our own biases, prejudices, assumptions and worldviews. In doing so, we can become more sensitive to where other people are coming from and why they feel and react the way they do. Deepening our contemplative practice frees us to speak clearly and passionately to the injustice or lack of consciousness without judgment or righteousness. It emboldens us to speak our emerging truth not only to those in power but also to our family and friends as well.

Why is this important? Because in this country we are in a struggle to embrace the emergence of greater pluralism within our democratic society. Unless we can do that and come together to discuss the multiple issues facing the future of this planet, we will destroy ourselves. The diversity we are experiencing and are aware of through the Internet is far greater now than ever before. As Einstein said, we cannot solve the problems facing us at the same level of consciousness that created them. People of faith committed to fostering a more contemplative approach have something vital to offer toward the transformation of consciousness needed now more than ever.

Second, the direction of our evolving world toward greater compassion, complexity and deeper understanding of our unity rather than our differences is another way of expressing the Kingdom of God. It is the Gospel promise embodied in the life of Jesus. It is the task of discipleship to help bring it about.

[Nancy Sylvester, IHM, is founder and director of the [Institute for Communal Contemplation and Dialogue](#). She served in leadership of her own religious community, the [Sister Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary](#), Monroe, Mich., as well as in the presidency of the [Leadership Conference of Women Religious](#). Prior to that, she was national coordinator of [NETWORK](#), the national Catholic social justice lobby.]

***To read Nancy Sylvester's entire series, click on her author name above or click [here](#) to see a list of her columns.***