“Vignettes from the Great Generation of Mercy: Inspiration for the Unknown Future”

In this brief time together I wish to do some storytelling. Stories, as theologian Jack Shea says, are humble servants, waiting upon the Spirit to bring them Home to the heart.

I have had the privilege of giving a 5-8 day retreat “This one-day—is our whole life’: Living Catherine’s Charism in the Second Half of the Second Half of Life” to elder Sisters of Mercy 9 times since 2007. Eight years ago I was invited to Aurora outside of Chicago to give the annual retreat to the Sisters there, then in Chicago. I went to Omaha and Cedar Rapids, two years ago in May and June in Detroit and Erie, PA. In May 2014, I went to Burlingame, CA and I also had the privilege of giving the week at Mercy International Center at the end of June 2014. Last June, 2015, I was in St. Louis.

The title of the retreat is taken from an undated—early November 1840

This one-day—is our whole life. You might suppose the daily and uninterrupted repetition of duties was tiresome. It is not so. Religious life affords more lively solid lasting happiness than all the variety this world could give—M.C. McAuley

The context was Catherine’s discussion of the horarium—the daily presence to unfolding time… In her *Familiar Instructions* (p. 97), we read: “With regard to the ‘Horarium,’ or distribution of time, we have only to consider that it is the expression of God’s will, and as such, deserves our undeviating fidelity…” Provides the context for the perfection* of ordinary actions” (perfection: meaning in today’s understanding: *integration/wholeness) The horarium was meant to help, as Paul’s Letter to
Timothy says, to be who you say you are. A discipline to hold us in time in a special way that we choose. Today, it is a term we do not use but one that remains key to spiritual life—the inner horarium that brings with it a conscious use of time: disciplines and practices of prayer, meditation, quieting, silence and attention to the inner voice that reminds us of time’s preciousness and our responsibility to live it well amid, as Jesuit Karl Rahner says, the *daily drudge*.

(****Slide****) Over these past 8 years, I have witnessed that the elder years hold a **summons** not a sinking. The years of active wisdom are not a shrinking from life or a sinking into it, like quicksand. It is not summed up as an era of deficits, but of sumsmons.

(****Slide: Sarah at 90****) A summons to what prolific scholar of the Hebrew Bible, Walter Brueggemann said: “The world for which you have been so carefully prepared is being taken from you by the grace of God.” What does this mean? How carefully so many of those we tend were prepared for the life they were living. Then, in the passing of years, the dawning of an awareness of needing to abandon everything they once knew and trust that God was in the loss—the loss of hearing, sight, mobility, purposeful work, being needed. And to see this not as robbery but relinquishment. To end up in such a place by the grace of God requires an act of enormous trust; a leap of faith.

(****Click****) This is a young Sister Mary Ellen Greeley, a St. Louis Sister of Mercy. She entered in 1948, received degrees in music and a Ph.D. in sociology of religion in the early 1970’s. Had a lush a varied ministerial life in education, pastoral ministry, and health care. I remember meeting her at General Chapters in the 1970’s. While in St. Louis at Catherine’s Residence for a retreat last June, someone mentioned that I might remember S. Mary Ellen. I remembered the name. “She’s here.” “Oh, really.” “Avis, she’s the one who is walking around so much.” “That’s S. Ellen Greeley?” I went over to her and said, “Sister Ellen.” “How do you know my name?” I remember you from
chapters years ago. I remember you were a force to reckon with.” She smiled. “I was, wasn’t I?” (Click) “The world for which you have been so carefully prepared is being taken from you by the grace of God.” And so the week progressed and S. Ellen walked in and out without a strong sense of awareness of any given moment. The final day of the retreat I went over to her to say goodbye and told her it was wonderful seeing her again after so many years. She replied without hesitation, “Avis, you did a very good job this week. I was a force to reckon with, wasn’t I?” She smiled with completed connected knowing eyes and there was an opening to the window of her soulful essence. (Click) Like Sarah at 90, S. Ellen is still birthing the mystery.

(Slide) I think encounters such as this are what prompted Sister Teresa Maya, CCVI, a Sister of Charity of the Incarnate Word from San Antonio last January to write an open letter to elder women religious reinforcing that their gifts are continuing to be harvested their fruit, even in their late autumn years. She wrote:

“Yes, you the Great Generation of religious life – to you all I write today. You may not know this, but your lives were the first catechism of my generation –yes, your lives! Your attempts, your quest for meaning and purpose, your questions, your guitar, your commitment to peace and justice, your new liturgies, your folk music, your theology, your poetry, your art. Your lives were indeed our first theology. Your journey was our textbook.

(Click) Thank you, thank you all. Your lives were indeed our first theology. Your journey was our textbook.

(Slide) Thank you, thank you all. Your lives were indeed my first theology. Your journey was my textbook.
(Slide) Pope John XXIII carried the sense that the world for which he have been so carefully prepared was changing dramatically by the grace of God and he called a council knowing he would not live to see it to completion. (Click) “At least I have launched this big ship,” the pope confided to a friend after the opening ceremonies of the Second Vatican Council. “Another will have the task of taking it out to sea.” So many of those whom we now tend are those who took it out to sea, and then there is us, who are trying to keep it seaworthy—yes, that is the church; for in our ministry to elders we are part of the mission of the church and the great and enduring legacy of Catherine McAuley to care for the most vulnerable.

(Slide) Psalm 23

During a retreat in Detroit a few years back with 60 elder Sisters of Mercy, (Slide) I met Sister Theresa Pelky, [Last week, the following arrived to my email: Sister Mary Theresa Pelky, RSM died peacefully Oct. 9, 2015, at McAuley Life Center. She was 87.] pictured here in her active years, who taught and then was the principal in the diocesan elementary school for most of her active ministerial life. (Click) It was not hard to notice her when I arrived in Detroit because she walked with a staff. Not a cane or walker, but a staff. She had broken her back and the doctor directed that she needed to walk with some kind of a walking stick to keep her back straight. A former student from many years ago, now a carpenter, heard of her plight, found a fallen tree limb in the forest and made her a staff.

When I first approached her, I commented, (Slide) “Well, Sister, are you in training to be a shepherd or simply following the Shepherd? She smiled and looked at me with the gentlest gaze and tapped my forehead with her staff. (Slide) We bonded instantaneously. One afternoon after the conference, Sister Theresa, staff in hand, came up to me to share with me how much she was getting out of the retreat. “Today
was just so good for me,” she said, “but, Avis, [pause] see the doorway [about 20 feet away]. When I walk away from you and get to the doorway, I shall have forgotten everything I heard and what we are saying now.” “Then,” I said, “Let’s focus only on NOW and our talking here right now and let that be enough.” She smiled and tapped my forehead with her staff. (Click) Then I put my hand on her staff and asked someone to take our photo. I wanted to hold her staff with her in hopes I might get a little closer to the Shepherd.

(Slide) I watched her walk door the doorway and leave the room.

I had a sense she lived Psalm 23 long before the staff became part of her daily existence. I had a sense she shared kinship with the psalmist whose words reverberated in her own life and living: “Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life.” [Psalm 23: 6] Standing there I remembered a story I read in Madeleine L’Engle’s book Glimpses of Grace. It was a true story about Psalm 23

(Slide) The story involved an English dinner party and the custom of entertaining guests after dinner by inviting them to use their talents singing or reciting. At one such party, (Slide) the great British actor Charles Laughton recited psalm twenty-three. He was applauded loudly for his magnificent performance. At the same party, a very elderly aunt, being deaf and drowsy, missed his great performance. Later on, the guests coaxed her into reciting something. (Slide) In a quivery voice she also did the twenty-third psalm. However, tearful emotion muted the response of her listeners. One of the guests made mention of this to the famous actor, saying to Charles Laughton: “You recited that psalm absolutely superbly. It was incomparable. So why were we so moved by that funny little old lady?”

(Slide) He replied, “I know the psalm. She knows the Shepherd.”
I met the Shepherd recently in the disguise of an 80something older nun.

When I returned to Chicago, I sat with now 103 year old Sister of Mercy Solina Hicks and told her this story. This is her 80th jubilee photo.

She went to get up from her chair so I stood, too, to help her. She moved me in front of her and put her hand on my hand and whispered, “Avis, the shepherd is near.” Then she made the sign of the cross on my forehead, sat down in her electric wheelchair, and drove away without saying another word.

My point: The Shepherd wears many guises and I want to know this Shepherd when the Shepherd is near and under whatever disguise. I want to have such a heart.

In August 2013, Pope Francis said that he is looking for “true shepherds who know their sheep” in appointing new bishops to vacant dioceses across the country. Archbishop Brown, the papal nuncio to Ireland, revealed the directions he received from Pope Francis himself in a meeting with nuncios from all over the world. “He wants men who are true pastors, true shepherds, men who know their sheep,” Archbishop Brown said.

“He doesn’t want people who are hyper-academic. He doesn’t want people who are detached from their people, or who want to lord it over their people. He wants shepherds who are with their sheep, who – as he said very memorably – have the smell of their sheep on them.” Be those shepherds. Don’t wait for them. Be those shepherds now. Have the heart of a Theresa Pelky or Solina Hicks.

“Give Me a Heart of a Shepherd”

From a Jungian point of view, there is always a task facing us in growth; always an edge upon which to stand and gaze at the unlimited spiritual future.
Jung said, in the second half of life, one can only live completely if one has faced the fact that one is no longer going out into life but ultimately facing inward. Interestingly, as we age, the voice becomes weaker/softer just as our hearing becomes less acute, as if our physiology is telling us that we no longer need the big voice, the voice heard across a classroom, down a hospital corridor. Our body itself tells us it’s ok to speak softer and as our hearing changes, we are asked to go inward and sharpen our inner sense of hearing, of listening more within than without. The keenness of our outer senses changes and we are invited to attend to the development of our inner seeing, inner hearing, inner sense of touch, taste and smell. As the body declines, these inner sparks provide a different form of strength—a new inner horizon of sensing. The inward turning a new pathway of strength and creativity. Interesting, that is the quiet of our dying, the last sense of leave us is hearing.

St. Benedict told is followers to “listen with the ear of their hearts.” There are no earlids [like eyelids].

This is a photo taken by Sister of Mercy photographer Christian Molidor. She died over a year ago at the age of 84, leaving me the legacy of her more than 5,000 slides! In *What Matters Most* author James Hollis speaks of the agenda for the first half of life that is forged from responding to the outer demands, blows, & challenges, of life; while the second half of life has more to do with inner wrestling with the aftermath: guilt, anger, recrimination, regret, recovery, and the possibility of forgiveness of self and others (251).

In *Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life*, Hollis writes, “The second half of life presents rich possibility for spiritual enlargement, for we are never going to have
greater powers of choice, never have more lessons of history from which to learn, and never possess more emotional resilience, more insight into what works for us and what does not, or a deeper, sometimes more desperate, conviction of the importance of what really matters (10).

(Slide) Still on this side of eternity, we are invited to embrace the truth that the afternoon of our life cannot be lived by the morning’s rhythm. Carl Jung, in The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche, (Slide) said: “One cannot live the afternoon of life according to the program of life’s morning; for what was great in the morning will be of little importance in the evening, and what in the morning was true will at evening have become a lie.”

(Slide) As Richard Rohr says in his book Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life: “Far too many people fail to full embrace the invitation and never “throw their nets into the deep” (John 21:6) to bring in the huge catch that awaits them (Falling Upward,1).

(Slide) And, again, the wise elder Fr. Rohr, spinning from Jung, writes: If we do not transform our pain, we will most assuredly transmit it. (Click out)

(Slide) As we get older our borders dissolve. [Avis, you are blurring the lines]. (Click: a photographer photographs her grandmother at 21 on the left and 92 on the right) This ought to be a time of greater transparency and fluidity. Even as bones creak and stiffen; the heart grows to greater suppleness; we are who we are—no more/no less & always: God’s daughter or son.

(Slide) 87 year old Marion Woodman, named a wisdom keeper in Jungian circles, is a renowned Jungian analyst and author, in conscious aging, one is relieved of person
desires, one’s ego strivings dissipate and the heart is opened. One tends the world’s soul and carries the freeing function to the community by caring for the earth and its young.

(Slide) I received a telephone call a month ago. The caller was someone I knew many, many years ago who works in recovery work with women religious. She began the call by saying that she heard that I do a retreat on Humpty Dumpty. I could feel a certain rise of annoyance and tried to suppress it to respond, (Click) “No, the retreat I give in on the Wizard of Oz.” So there!

(Slide) The Jungian analyst and author James Hollis writes, “It is the troubling conundrum of our condition is that we are living longer while there is more ‘early death’...Something dies inside faster than our bodies. In the face of progressive physical diminishment, what we have as our continuing companions are our imagination and our curiosity.

(Slide) Musing on turning 80, poet Mary Oliver said: “The most regretful people on earth are those who felt the call to creative work, who felt their own creative power restive and uprising, and gave to it neither power nor time.”

(Click) “I want to think again of dangerous and noble things. I want to be light and frolicsome. I want to be improbable beautiful and afraid of nothing, as though I had wings.”


(Slide) The Art Institute had an exhibit of Monet’s paintings several years ago, remembering him in particular for his paintings of water lilies. Sister Margaret Knittle
shared, “As I wandered around I came to a room filled with paintings of huge water lilies. These were the paintings of Monet in his old age, in his near blindness. He had used his talent in aging to draw, to paint, bigger. (Click) When faced with new limits, Monet decided to paint bigger.

(Slide) Jung noted: The first half of life is devoted to forming a healthy ego. The second half is going inward and letting go of it.

(Slide) As Ger-ta wrote: So long as you haven’t experienced this: to die and so to grow, you are only a troubled guest on the dark earth.
— Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in the The Holy Longing

(Click) The stereotype of an older person as rigid, selfish, and envious of youth is actually a result of failure to development; these personality traits can be found at any age.

(Slide) Fr. Ronald Rolheiser, OMI in “Spirituality in the Two Halves of Life” says:

With the majority of life experience gained, most of us assembled here stand on a plateau facing three options:

• (Slide) becoming a pathetic old fool by investing in the false self of youth already lived,

• (Slide) becoming an embittered old fool by resenting all the persons, places and things that you deserved but were denied you, or

• (Slide) becoming a holy old fool who accepts the actual life one is leading by embracing the gifts and tasks of the spiritual journey
The given is the “becoming old” part! The choice looms on the horizon: pathetic, embittered or holy old fool. Of course, in any given day we are all three—we know each place.

(Slide) Growing old is mandatory; growing up is optional. (Click) Do not miss the string of pearls around the squirrel’s neck!

(Slide) Two years ago on a spring retreat at the McAuley Center/Farmington, I met Sister Mercita Logan. (Click) “I’m going crazy but it’s a short trip!” [A light note before offering something heavy.]

(Slide) There is a deep piece of the religious tradition I wish to raise as we close this Mercy Conference on Aging. It arises from the wisdom of fifth century St. Benedict whereby spiritual maturity breeds a special kind of hope.

In the Benedictine order, (Click) there are “senpectae,” that is, members chosen to talk with a person who has a problem or is a problem, such as over drinking, temper tantrums or excessive self-indulgence. These are among those who became holy old fools. (Slide) The senpectae are chosen because they are gifted in the area of confrontation and had the capacity to establish the confidence of others. I think that Pope Francis is exerting this charismatic role in the church today with a focus on transforming that in our characters that needs transformation so as not to transmit more pain. The senpectae try to win the monk over to the need of seeking help. This is a fifth & sixth century version of a pastoral interventionist. (Slide) Senpectae have the capacity to hold dear somebody who is alienated or alienating. They exercise the art form of holding another while confronting, which is a painful exploration. All confrontation is exploration of difficult content. One never confronts without a sense of empathy for the other.
In the sixth century they had this kind of dynamic operating within community. *(Slide)* Benedict has a very definite place for the heart to heart, the ‘*cor ad cor loquitur*’ in his monastery and it is advocated in a number of places in his Rule. *(Click)* In one such reference he advocates that if the abbot is encountering a problem with one of the brothers, he should send in older and more experienced monks—‘*senpectae*’ he calls them—to try to discover a good way forward. Success is not guaranteed but, at times, solutions cannot be found through authentic conversation; one has to dig deeper. “Let him,” says St Benedict, “send in *senpectae*, that is, mature and wise brothers who, under the cloak of secrecy, [ah, the lost art of discretion] may support the wavering brother, urge him to be humble as a way of making satisfaction, and console him lest he be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. We are in an era in which we need to learn to carry more and more complexity with maturity. *(Slide)* Therein, the awareness that if one can own one’s participation in the problem, then change, while not easy, is preferred to censure. *(Click to metanoia)* We are being summoned to address the dysfunction that undermines authentic community. We will never have ‘perfect’ communities and really, ought not desire such on this side of the great divide. We shall have imperfect communities, but they can be ‘beloved communities,” if we so choose by the dint of our wills and the grace of God. *(Click)* As Martin Luther King said, “Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives.” That which is not transformed is transmitted. That which we fail to address in healing ways does not evaporate but gathers energy in aging and erupts to hamper and dampen the experience of our beloved communities.

*(Slide)* When preparing for the Omaha retreat a couple years ago, I received this image of an Omaha Sister, circa 1960. Right before leaving for the retreat, I asked for a list of the names of the Sisters making the retreat. There was Sister Lucina’s name—she was a
resident of Mercy Villa and would be at the retreat. I called to find out her state of well being and was told that while she is diminished and on oxygen, she was alert and very much herself.

“When we come to religion, we make an entire offering of the remainder of our lives to God. This offering in itself is so pleasing to God that at however advanced a period of life it is made God will reward the oblation with God’s grace, provided the offering is generous, cheerful and unreserved.”

As I was talking about this entry in Catherine’s *Retreat Instructions*, and suggesting she was not talking about older women entering but about the decisions we make over and over again to give our lives to God, I faded out her young photo and up came this... *(Click).* From the center of the chapel a voice announced: “And she is as beautiful today as she was then.” Everyone applauded. Later that evening as I was sitting alone in a room, Sister Lucina wheeled in and came over to me. She said, “Today was special for me, thank you. Avis, I wasn’t embarrassed because I knew you were talking about all of us.” I’m not that young nun, but, then again, she lives in me…it’s still me and even though I am where I am now...in this chair, dependent on the oxygen...I feel beautiful inside...I think the applause in chapel today was our desire to keep celebrating our lives just as they are and for all they have been. She looked at me and held me in her gaze and in her eyes I saw woman of mercy through and through, transparent now in her wisdom years, wearing her vulnerability as she wheeled herself out of the room, the divine in guise of an old nun. In that instant saw something of where my life could go and I wanted to know—in the biblical sense—what she knew... Sister of Mercy Lucina Kozeny died this past November 1st—the Feast of All Saints—at 82. Sister Kay O’Brien who wrote her obituary said, “When her body began to completely wear out and her will to live could no longer overcome this, she was still reluctant to give up her struggle.
‘Maybe God has something more for me to do,’ she said after the doctor had delivered his scientifically derived verdict. She struggled on for another week, rallying for two days, then spent her last days teaching us how to die with true grace and love. The final evidence that she had indeed lived a life of Mercy came when she died on All Saint's Day. She will be missed by many.”

(Slide) “The world for which you had been so carefully prepared was finally taken from you by the grace of God.”

(Slide) Like those from Tennyson’s *Ulysses* (Click):

Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

(Slide of Merton at 100) I’ve been drawn to Thomas Merton these past months because his centenary was celebrated last January when he would have been 100 years old.

(Click to young Merton)

(Slide of Pope Francis with Congress) Pope Francis listed Trappist monk Thomas Merton as one of four exemplary Americans who provide wisdom for us today. “A nation can be considered great when it defends liberty as Lincoln did, when it fosters a culture which enables people to ‘dream’ of full rights for all their brothers and sisters, as Martin Luther King sought to do; when it strives for justice and the cause of the oppressed, as Dorothy Day did by her tireless work; the fruit of a faith which becomes dialog and sows peace in
the contemplative style of Thomas Merton... *(Click)* Merton was above all a man of prayer, a thinker who challenged the certitudes of his time and opened new horizons for souls and for the Church. He was also a man of dialogue, a promoter of peace between peoples and religions."

*(Slide)* His legacy is rich and enduring, sharing Catherine’s sentiment, he said: The biggest human temptation is...to settle for too little. *(Click)* We can never say it is enough. *(Click)* ...The Great Generation...Though much is taken, much abides; and though we are not now that strength which in old days moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are; one equal temper of heroic hearts, made weak by time and fate, but strong in will to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

*(Slide)* In his book, *The Sign of Jonas*, Merton writes on his experience within the Abbey of Gethsemane. The epilogue is entitled “*Fire Watch, July 4, 1952*”.

*(Slide)* The fire watch was a duty for younger members of the community. The monk would inspect the buildings and property of the monastery after dark, insuring that all was well and that potential risks and hazards were attended to. After careful observation, with the assistance of a flashlight, the watchman would then retire with the rest of the community in relative peace and security.

*(Slide)* Yet for Merton the fire watch becomes something quite personal and introspective. Shining that flashlight into the kitchen and then the refectory, he recalls the experiences he has shared there with his brothers; he is a man of community who has to discern whether and how well he has loved his brothers in that place. He shined the lamp into the novitiate, where he himself was formed for the priesthood, then into the chapel where he was ordained for service and charity. Has he been faithful in these solemn duties and responsibilities? *(Click)* He recognized, all too well, that this is where
one comes “face to face with your monastic past and with the mystery of your vocation.” And then, suddenly, he began to realize that all the while, as he was fulfilling his work as watchman both exteriorly and interiorly, someone else was actually watching him:

And then, suddenly, he began to realize that all the while, as he was fulfilling his work as watchman both exteriorly and interiorly, someone else was actually watching him:

(Subtitle) The fire watch is an examination of conscience in which your task as watchperson suddenly appears in its true light: a pretext devised by God to isolate you, and to search your soul with lamps and questions, in the heart of darkness.

(Subtitle) How do we live like this? How do we summon ourselves to our own firewatch?

(Subtitle) Depth psychologist and spiritual writer, Robert Johnson, surprised the Jungian community when he announced in April 2002, at the age of 73, that he was drawing close on his “public life.” He offered the following on the occasion of his final public conference:

I believe that one should bring one’s life to a close consciously before the actual event of death. (Click) Dr. Jung once said, “One should accomplish his [her] death.” This is an act of high consciousness and requires one’s best energy for the last part of one’s life. To come to physical death without this accomplishment is to lay one’s self open to the fright, fear, and regret that so often accompanies a modern person at that moment. It seems to be our American way to cling to life—even life by mechanical assistance—as long as possible. Or even worse, to deny our aging by any artifice possible.
My own belief, perhaps simplistic or naïve is that Heaven is not a matter of time or place, but is a level of consciousness. This may be experienced while we are in our ordinary life state and is more common than anyone realizes. (Slide) To love, to be overwhelmed by some brief beauty, a tender moment—all of these are touches of Heavenly consciousness.

These experiences are previews of Heaven and are the bridges by which we make the transition from Earth to Heaven. Some of this process is voluntary and lies within our grasp in our time-bound life. It should be the primary task of old age.

I am in good health, happy, content, under no pressure; I choose now to invest my best energy in building the bridge to the next world.

Robert Johnson died three years later in October 2005.

(26 July 1929 – 17 October 2005; died at 76 years of age)

(From Journeys A Quarterly Publication of Journey into Wholeness, Inc. Balsam Grove, NC, Volume 10, No. 2, Spring 2002, pp. 6-7)

(Slide) Speaking of touches of heavenly consciousness and being aware of bridges to the next world. I had a dream this past summer. The veil, at times, is thin. Days like Mercy Day are days of a thin veil between the Great Mystery and our now. Sister Vincent Schaefer was sitting in her room on third floor here at Mercy Circle. She was seated in a chair wearing a red dress. There was a pause in what was going on and I said to her, “So, what is it like?”

(Click) She was smiling and replied immediately, “If only I knew, I would have bypassed my whole life to be where I am now...Tell them.” [about what really matters]
Catherine McAuley, Thomas Merton, Vincent Schaefer, Lucina Kozeny, Theresa Pelky and on and on... completed their fire watch and now live within the God who was always watching them.

May we discover a desire for a watchfulness... for a sense of love—all around us in disguise, being overwhelmed by some brief beauty, a tender moment, unanticipated dreams, a yielding to the Divine strength—daily touches of Heavenly consciousness.

Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield...until the Great Yielding. By the grace of God.

Remembering, as Sister Joan Chittister has reminded:

—from *A Passion for Life* by Joan Chittister (Orbis)

Merton the man taught the world that the spiritual life is not the elimination of struggle; it is the sanctification of struggle. It is struggle transformed to wisdom.

Merton the monk taught the world that withdrawal is not of the essence of a holy life. The essence of a holy life is immersion in the spiritual and commitment to the significant.
Merton the contemplative taught the world that we know that we will have come to see God when we have come to see people as sacred.

Catherine, the woman of the gospel and of God, witnessed the sanctification of struggle transformed to wisdom by convincing the church and inspiring generations of women & men to immersion in the spiritual and corporal works of mercy.

and living her love for all God’s people in our extraordinary variety in ways that imprinted it upon us, her spiritual daughters & sons... let yourselves come “face to face with your past and with the mystery of your vocation.” And then, suddenly, begin to realize that all the while, as you are fulfilling your work as watchwomen on your fire watch, both exteriorly and interiorly, feel the Someone Else actually watching you. It is the time of fire watch accompanying those of the Great Generation where their stories disclose a vibrant theology; their lived journey a textbook for deep consideration as we forge a path into the unknown future.

I wish to conclude with a poem by Mary Oliver and a fire watch meditation for you to carry in your imagination.

“In Praise of Craziness, of a Certain Kind”—a poem by Mary Oliver

On cold evenings
My grandmother,
With ownership of half her mind-
The other half having flown back to Bohemia
Spread newspapers over the porch floor
So, she said, the garden ants could crawl
As under a blanket, and keep warm,
And what shall I wish for myself,
But, being so struck by the lightning of years,
To be like her with what is left, that loving.

(Slide) And what shall I wish for myself,
But, being so struck by the lightning of years,
To be like her with what is left, that loving.

(Slide) “Traveller, There Is No Path,” (Click to music)
(Slide) a poem by Antonio Machado: translated from the Spanish, traveler is also translated as wayfarer and path maker.

(Slide) Everything passes on and everything remains,
But our lot is to pass on,
To go on making paths,
Paths across the sea.

(Slide) I never sought glory,
Nor to leave my song
In the memory of humankind;

(Slide) I love those subtle worlds,
Weightless and graceful,
As bubbles of soap.

(Slide) I like to watch as they paint themselves
In sunlight and scarlet, floating
Beneath the blue sky, trembling

(Slide-video) Suddenly then popping...

(Slide) I never sought glory.

(Slide) Traveller [pathmaker], your footprints
Are the path and nothing more;

(Slide) Traveller, there is no path,
The path is made by walking.

(Slide) By walking the path is made

(Slide) And when you look back
You'll see a road
Never to be trodden again.

(Slide) Traveller [wayfarer], there is no path,
Only trails across the sea...

(Slide) Some time past in that place
Where today the forests are dressed in barbs
A poet was heard to cry

(Slide) "Traveller, there is no path,
The path is made by walking..."

(Slide) The poet died far from home.
She lies beneath the dust of a neighboring land.
As she walked away she was seen to weep.
(Slide) "Wayfarer, there is no path,
The path is made by walking..."

(Slide) When the goldfinch cannot sing,
When the poet is a pilgrim,
When prayer will do us no good.

(Slide) "Pathmaker, there is no path,
The path is made by walking..."

(Slide) Keep walking into our NOW & unknown FUTURE
(Click) by the grace of God

(Click to instrumental: Somewhere Over the Rainbow)
[[(Click) to walking nuns and (Click) three women walking]
Keep walking, walking Sisters.