

Firing the Vision

[Speech presented April 25, 2008, at the Wyndham O'Hare Hotel, Chicago IL to 600 members of the Federation of Dominican Sisters USA Convocation entitled "Fire the Vision"]

Have you ever prayed to have vision? "Lord, just let me SEE what You want done, and I'll do it."

I don't remember praying that way. But throughout my life I have SEEN anyway, whether I wanted to or not.

God sometimes gives us gifts we don't ask for.

And VISION has always gotten me deeper into life than I ever wanted to go.



Cynthia presents excerpts from *Marginal Eyes*

I don't own a TV set, but when I heard the proposed theme of this conference, "Fire the Vision," the very first thing I thought of was a reality TV series.

I could see myself in the role of Donald Trump in *The Apprentice*. I could imagine myself in my posh executive offices, looking across my desk, and yelling, "Vision, you're FIRED."

It was very satisfying.

That's what I had planned to tell you about "Firing the Vision": Just FIRE it. Kick it out the door, and your life will be so much simpler.

The fact is that we are taught from earliest childhood NOT to have a certain kind of vision, NOT to see certain things.

I've written a book manuscript, now in search of a publisher, entitled *Marginal Eyes: Portraits of Hidden Teachers*.

This is how it begins:

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SOME THINGS WE SHOULD NEVER HAVE TO SEE.

That is the implicit RULE of the society in which I live.

We shouldn't have to see poverty or suffering.

We shouldn't have to see death or dying.

We shouldn't have to see severe illness or pain or insanity.

It's not that suffering and death and madness shouldn't exist. We just shouldn't have to see them. That's the Rule.

The Rule isn't written down anywhere, like a law or a commandment. It has, however, been spoken out loud by at least one government official. In the San Francisco *Chronicle* one morning in September 2001 there was a quote from Mayor Willie Brown, justifying one of his recurring "sweeps" of the areas where homeless people congregate.

Visitors to the city, he said, "have to have a pleasant experience . . . Right now [with homeless people on the streets] you get a negative impression of the city. You've got to change that if you want to entice the little old lady from Hillsborough to come into San Francisco and drink tea at the Ritz-Carlton."

I was there in 2001, walking among the human detritus being swept away by Hizzonor's campaign favoring the wealthy little old lady and the Rule.

BUT I DIDN'T LEARN THE RULE FROM WILLIE BROWN. I had already learned it more than fifty years earlier. In my middleclass family in my Midwestern

childhood village I was protected and instructed by the unwritten, unspoken communal Rule: *there are some things we shouldn't have to see in our daily lives.*

Whatever we shouldn't have to see, therefore, was simply not seen, was not spoken of, was pushed to the far edges of our awareness and our world, kept at bay and hidden away from us who lived safely in the middle.

It was a long and circuitous journey from my childhood village in the middle to my midlife work in the margins.

My journey was an agonizing, exhilarating sequence of invitation, resistance, life experience, formal education, risking, surviving, amazement – and no small amount of divine trickery – that gradually brought the margins into focus and lured me out into relationship with the people who live there.

Along the way, I developed "marginal eyes."

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With those Marginal Eyes I saw injured and sick and dying people in emergency rooms, nursing homes, and hospices; I saw people with addictions that controlled their lives; mentally ill children hidden away in psychiatric hospitals, destitute and homeless people hidden away in shelters and under viaducts and in the nighttime corners of downtown doorways; I saw lonely elders hidden away in their own homes.

And I touched them all.

I touched their bodies, I massaged their shoulders, I anointed their hands and feet, I entered their eyes with my own eyes while my hand rested on their arm.

And now you may be thinking, "Oh, how wonderful it is that she could help all those people."

And you would be mostly wrong.

The truth is that genuine "help" happens very seldom in the margins.

It was just about two years ago that I learned about help, and in particular about helpLESSness.

Again, this is from my manuscript:

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IT IS EVENING, ALMOST 9 PM, and a gorgeous full moon is rising out of the mist-shrouded trees to the east. I am the caregiver at the bedside of Wade, an 80-year-old man who was supposed to have died several weeks ago of leukemia.

Now – against all odds – he appears to be improving physically; his full-body bruising has faded away, his overall skin color is good, he eats well, and he looks almost as strong as the longshoreman he once was.

But his MIND, full of vocabulary and political history, philosophy and classical music, now seems to be leaking away like wine from a cracked goblet.

He hallucinates extensively, does not recognize his own home nor understand that he has a terminal illness.

He is reverting to some of the coarser character traits of his early life, including combativeness and the most creative and colorful profanity I have ever encountered.

I have been told that Wade has an almost-0 blood platelet count, which means that in the end he probably will “bleed out” – hemorrhage to death – and an experienced nurse assured me that “a cup of blood often looks like a gallon.” The night after I received this information I spent sleepless hours trapped in the worst scenarios my mind could dredge up. When my shift began the next day I was tired but ready for anything – my imagination had already “experienced” the worst.

Except for one thing.

Which happened this afternoon around 4:30.

Nancy Wise, MD, had come to see Wade.

He was unimpressed that she was looking for ways to make him more comfortable. As far as he was concerned he was in a motor home on his way back from a Mariners ballgame and was just fine. He didn’t need any doctor, particularly one who insisted on asking questions about illness.

He tolerated Dr. Wise’s questions for several minutes, then lost his patience, called her an ugly bitch, and told her to get the hell out of there.

She and I went to the kitchen and looked through the recent entries in the caregivers' log so she could get a sense of what his current daily needs were.

Dr. Wise was just gathering her bag to leave when my "sixth sense" told me to check on Wade. I looked into the bedroom and discovered he had somehow worked his legs over the edge of the bed and was trying to get up.

Voluminous diarrhea was spread all over him and his hands and the bed.

Of this, too, "one cup can look like a gallon."

Wade is 6'1", weighs about 185 pounds, and is incredibly strong, except for his hips and legs that no longer support him. Now he was covered in shit, confused, embarrassed, and angry as a pestered hornet.

I approached to console him and get him righted onto the bed; he struck me once on my arm and once on my chest, swearing at me and threatening to really hurt me if I didn't back off. Grasping his ankles beyond the reach of his fists, I lifted his useless legs onto the bed and shouted for Dr. Wise, praying that she had not already left the house.

She hadn't.

Nancy earned my undying gratitude as she rolled up her sleeves and without hesitation plunged into the job with me. Wade fought us both. He struck out at us, stiffened his body, and refused to cooperate. He grabbed my hands, and his fierce arms trembled as he tried to either tie my arms into knots or break my fingers. A few times it felt as if he might succeed at both.

Taking advantage of his own hold on me, I pulled Wade to one side while Nancy cleaned him from her angle; then we diverted his attention and anger to her on the other side of the bed, and traded tasks.

It took forty-five minutes for the two of us to wrestle with Wade, the linens, the bed pads, his clothes, and all the malodorous organic matter until he was finally clean, dry, reclothed, and lying between clean sheets on clean bed pads, still fuming and swearing.

I couldn't have done it by myself.

Without Nancy I would have been "help-less."

Now, on this day, knowing what helplessness feels like, I have newfound compassion for those who insist that there are some things we shouldn't have to see. I fully understand wanting to make some experiences and some people invisible. In the first, worst moments of this afternoon I would have welcomed almost any suggestion that could have ended my predicament: sedate Wade, restrain him, make him disappear, ask God to make him well or to let him die right now. Anything, but please don't leave me help-less with Wade in the mire of his mess.

It was not the feces, not the foul language, nor even the combativeness that was so awful. It was the way the complexity of Wade's needs collided with my inability to change anything. I couldn't even move from my spot at his bedside without endangering Wade's safety.

I wanted my feeling of helplessness to crawl back into its dark lair so I could go on mistakenly believing that I am in control.

Later: Now Wade dozes, and I have let his room grow gradually dark around us. I twist the knob on the small lamp beside me. The light bulb glows and a primitive part of me is amazed, once again, that when an electrical circuit is completed Edison's invention actually works.

Because I'm a writer, that amazement sets me to thinking about electricity as a metaphor for helplessness.

Here is how today's helplessness was like an electrical circuit: Wade needed help, but did not want to need it: broken circuit.

I offered help, and Wade would not accept it: broken circuit.

I called for help, and Nancy responded: completed circuit, energy flowing.

Nancy and I jury-rigged a response to Wade's needs; we FORCED a circuit: energy temporarily restored but certain to break down again.

It's faulty circuitry, a restricted flow of compassion, that can make marginalized people HELP-LESS.

The margins are a huge collection of broken circuits waiting to be completed: HELP ASKED FOR, and then GIVEN; help OFFERED, and then ACCEPTED.

It has nothing to do with forcing, or demanding.

And it doesn't matter who initiates the action, or whether it's asking or offering, so long as one person moves toward the other, and that other RESPONDS.

But, before the asking and the offering, first we have to SEE each other.

A few hours ago Wade worked loose his disposable brief and urinated in the bed. I noticed, and offered to help. Reluctantly, but this time without violence, he allowed me to clean him and to change the linens.

He even said, "Thank you."

Circuit completed.

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But why would ANYone want to SEE into the margins? Why would anyone voluntarily want to RISK helplessness? That's CRAZY.

Do you understand why I want to FIRE the VISION, hand it a pink slip and say, "You're OUTTA here!"

And yet I can't do that, any more than you can.

In fact, I'm here today to beg you to see even MORE clearly, and to follow that vision straight into the presence of those who dwell in the margins. I'm here to ask you to risk being helpless. I ask you even to allow helplessness to happen to others and for helplessness to continue unchanged unchanged for them.

Allow YOURSELF to be helpless in the presence of their helplessness.

Don't try to FIX what you find; don't try to be in control. Let God do that part. Let God complete the circuit. Or not. God knows what's needed.

YOUR part is to bring God, living inside of YOU, to where God needs physically to be.
Carry God to where the helplessness is.

YOU have no idea what needs to happen next. Just follow the vision.

SEE where we're not supposed to see. See WHAT and WHOM we're not "supposed" to see.

Don't fire the vision, don't get rid of it. Instead, BE in it, thoroughly, and with your whole self. BE the VISION. Be available for God to complete circuits through you.

And may God have compassion on us all.