

THE

Occasional Papers

The Leadership Conference of Women Religious

Winter 2017

Living
into
Love

An Interview with Krista Tippett

'The Mystery and Art of Living'

Krista Tippett is the host and executive producer of the national public radio program and podcast, *On Being*. The program explores the questions of what it means to be human and how we want to live. Krista, who holds a master of divinity degree from Yale, has worked as a journalist, a special assistant to the US ambassador to West Germany, and an oral historian, and in 2014 received the National Humanities Medal at the White House for "thoughtfully delving into the mysteries of human existence." She published three books, the most recent of which is *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living*. LCWR communications director Annmarie Sanders, IHM interviewed Krista about some of her insights into taking up the great questions of our time.

Q You have been described as someone who has created a whole community of questioners and searchers, transforming public discourse by opening up the inner landscape. Would you talk more about what it means to "open up the inner landscape," and particularly so that it leads to a transformation of public discourse?

Opening up the inner landscape is a natural longing that we possess, but doing so can feel daunting because it makes us vulnerable. We become more vulnerable to seeing that which hurts in the world around us and to seeing what is in ourselves that we wish were better. Our traditions give us tools for traversing this territory and we need those tools because making this journey is, in many ways, the most essential and sometimes most urgent thing we can all do. It's hard to open the inner landscape and that's why we need one another and communities in which we can do this together.

Q And how might doing this work lead to a transformation of public discourse?

Our strengths are so often our blind spots. As Americans we are "can do" people, we're action-oriented, and we have been trained to be about opinions, positions, arguments, and debates. This way of being is not serving us now. We



Photo by Ann Marsden

have to reckon at this moment with a lot of human pain and fear that is present in our public lives at every level – in our families, communities, neighborhoods. I think of that statement by Oliver Wendell Holmes – "there is simplicity on the other side of complexity." All of our complex political dynamics are being shaped by the human heart and by fear and pain that have no way to show themselves in public. We don't do pain in public; we do outrage and action. We fight; we don't grieve. A friend of mine who is very wise said to me that all of our hearts are a little bit broken right now after this election season and that the people who are

expressing hate are also expressing that their hearts are broken. We don't know how to dwell with this human drama in public, and we have to learn how. It is absolutely not going to start at the level of national politics. It's going to have to start where we are. And because it is scary, it's going to have to start with one person at a time reaching out to another person.

I was in Iowa recently and I heard a group of mothers talking about the effect that the presidential campaign had on their children – particularly as the children heard how people were using words and how some people were being treated. Half of this group of women voted for Donald Trump and the other half for Hillary Clinton, and they were coming together around a shared love for their children. I think that is a model of what we all have to find ways to do. Our instincts and our training lead us to duke it out. We talk about how offended we are and how angry we are. But there is so much that is broken and fractured in the world and we have to live together in it. There is repair to do, and there are many injured people as well, so there is protection to do. Much of what has to be done is practical action, and we can only do the right thing if we engage in discernment about the steps ahead and become grounded in our own inner lives and stay attuned to the hearts of others.

Q You write in *Becoming Wise* that “the crack in the middle where people on both sides absolutely refuse to see the other as evil – this is where I want to live and what I want to widen.” You go on to say, “The axial question is: can human beings come to understand their own well-being as linked to that of others, in wider and wider circles?” If the fate of the world depends upon our addressing this question, how might we live so that we foster that true communion among us?

It’s a hard observation to make right now. There are so many places where we can see people, governments, and societies moving in exactly the opposite direction from communion. This reflects on the fact that this transformational move towards greater communion unsettles the ways things have been done. The movement toward communion is underway in a lot of lives and communities, and what we are experiencing now is the reaction to that which is probably inevitable.

Moving toward communion is the work for now and is the only way we survive and mature as a species. One thing that is clear – and this is good news as well as bad – is that we will not move this way by looking to the high national levels of leadership and of policy-making for modeling and indications of the way forward. The work of building common life is handed back to each of us. So while the vision of communion, especially as expressed by Teilhard de Chardin, is cosmic and vast, the work of realizing the vision is still through one life at a time. We have it in our grasp to figure out what we can do with our life in the place we are. This is the way change happens.

Q You wrote, “There’s a bewilderment in the Ameri-

can air both frustrating and refreshing for its lack of answers.” You also quote the Jewish-Buddhist teacher Sylvia Boorstein saying, “I’m waiting for the time when the whole world is suddenly too vulnerable. Then we all look around and say we all have to stop. We have to share.” Do you sense that this time right now might be pushing us toward that vulnerability and that our lack of answers may somehow help us create a new way forward?

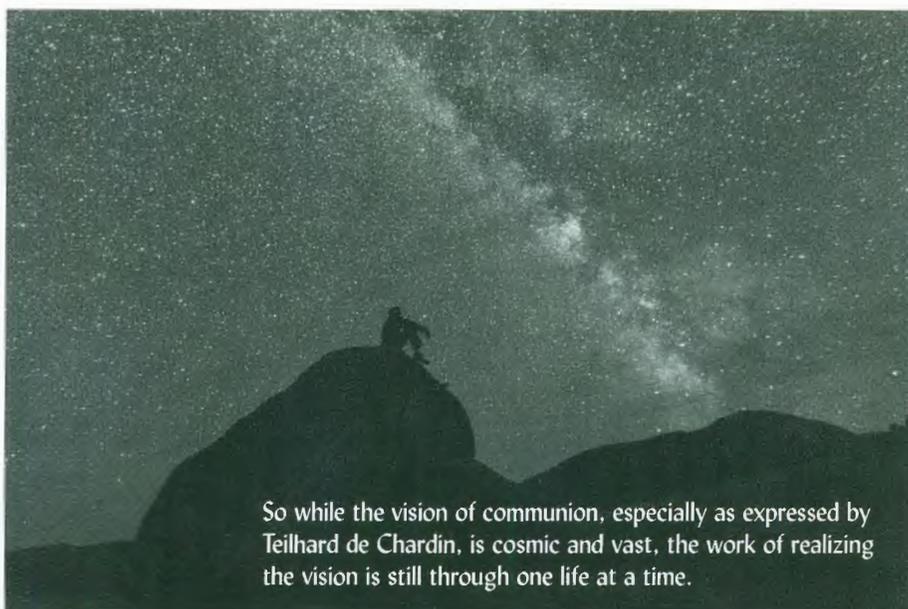
You’re quoting some of the lines that have meant the most to me, and hearing them now, post-presidential election, reminds me that it is a changed world in some ways. I absolutely think there is a sense of rawness and vulnerability all around, as well as a humility in places where it hasn’t been before. Everyone is very wide awake. This creates an opening. The problem is that we don’t have any public vocabulary for vulnerability. We see vulnerability in healthy individuals and communities, but we don’t apply what we know about emotional intelligence to our public life. We need to feel this vulnerability there and attain tools that help us call this what it is and walk together into the possibility it presents.

Q You note that religious institutions are struggling to reimagine their contribution to the unfolding world and that this is leading to the invention and renewal of sacred spaces where the virtues we are better under-

standing can be practiced and applied. You note as well a widespread interest in contemplation. What do you think could happen if more of us devoted ourselves to nurturing inner wisdom and contemplative practices?

I see exactly that happening, particularly in the lives of young people, whether they are calling it contemplative practice or not. The world has become so noisy and the kids who are growing up with all this immersive technology at their fingertips are finding it not humanly possible to go on. They have to create some boundaries. All of this noise helps us understand our need for quiet, and now people are looking for places where quiet and contemplation are valued. But it feels very much as if people are just crafting this on their own, and that’s stressful.

I think our radio program introduces listeners to people and places and traditions where quiet and contemplation are practiced, and people are so happy to find this. I find it interesting that immediately after the November elections, there was a huge surge in reading poetry and downloading poems. I think poems are a form of contemplative language; they put people in a contemplative space. So I see this movement happening organically, but I believe we can be better at showing people the depths to which quiet and contemplation can go and how much more it can be an anchor in their lives.



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Q Speaking of young people, you wrote in your book that your own hope for the future rests in part in a self-aware core of young people poised to do things differently. What are you seeing in them and how might we, as a society, help foster and support these young people who see another way forward?

I write in the book about some intentional communities – the new monastics, but there is also a big trend among young people now with co-housing, a movement that takes many forms. Co-housing might be as simple as two couples or families living in a duplex and sharing some life tasks or childcare or it sometimes involves more structured communal lifestyles. These intentional communities aren't the kind of utopias of previous generations; they are very pragmatic. They seem to grow out of a very acute sense that people who have grown up in the last couple of decades have that the structured life of their parents' generations is ultimately very lonely. They feel that that life did not attend enough to the inner landscape nor did it let that landscape form one's working life and one's ambitions.

I see new forms of community life and service springing up everywhere, and they are changing the world and are a beautiful part of the narrative of our time. But because they are so quiet and gentle and humble, they don't get publicized and they aren't seen as part of the narrative. I meet people who are doing really beautiful things in the world, are leading beautiful lives, and are creating new realities, and they despair over the state of the world. They aren't factoring in how their lives are also a part of the state of the world. So, yes, there is work

to do in creating new realities and structures, and there is also work to do in seeing and honoring what is already being done and the models that have already been created. We need to shine a light on this and help those creating and living in new structures see that what they are doing really matters.

Our challenge is to open our eyes to the fullness of reality – the dark parts and the parts of beauty. We have to do that or we will fall into despair. We will begin to define reality by what is on the front pages of the *New York Times* every day, and doing that would not be good for us and it's not the truth.

Q Let's talk about love. You point out that we have ruined the word love and have lived it as a feeling, when it is a way of being, a way that we have scarcely begun to mine and see its potential. You even say, "I long to make this word echo differently in hearts and ears." What potential do you see in love – love as the way you describe it – muscular, resilient?

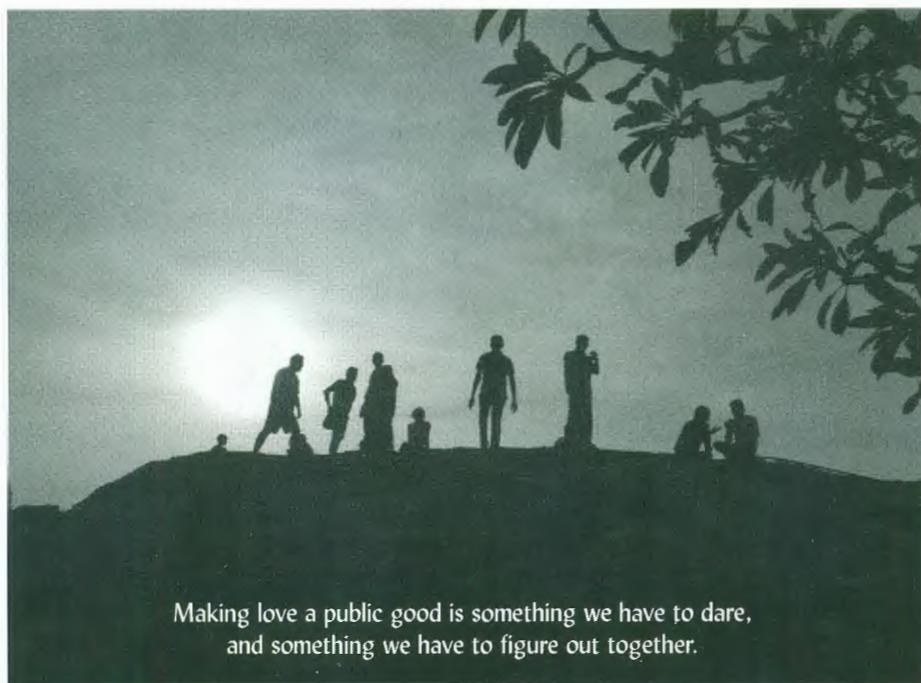
Given all the many ways in which we are capable of loving and being loved, as well as the many different forms of love, we impoverish the word when we culturally narrow our concept of it to just romance. It's life-giving to honor all the different forms of love in our lives.

It's hard to talk about love as something we should consider in politics or society. However, if we think about the social reformers who have changed the world, they often used the word and called the world to love – people like Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day. People whom we consider as world-changing figures use this word boldly. An ironic reason for why we should become more courageous about using this word in the public sphere and insisting that it be considered something respectable, necessary, and practical is that we have started using the word "hate" in the public sphere, such as in hate crimes. We have named and, in a way, honored love's opposite – that worst place that the mind and heart can go. This gives us an opening to name as well the highest place that the mind and heart can go. When we speak about hate, we also point out its consequences. If we want to wield love as a public good, then we must be committed to pointing out and making visible the consequences of love.

I would say, in fact, that rather than making love visible in our public lives, we have devolved into doing just the opposite. Wielding love as a public good feels unimaginable right now. However, none of us wants to stay in this place. So making love a public good is something we have to dare, and something we have to figure out together.

Q You also say that the choice to be hopeful is more courageous than the choice to be cynical. You say that hope is a choice that becomes a practice, it becomes part of our "spiritual muscle memory." Would you say more about how one can make hope a practice?

A lot of the virtues have become watered down and we treat them superficially. We have this idea that some of us are born happy, some have an optimistic nature, or some of us are naturally compassionate. But, in fact, these are all ways of being that we can learn, choose, and practice. The science around this is so liberating and empowering, saying that we can change our bodies through our behavior, and we can change the imprint we make on the world. So hope is some-



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thing we choose. It is not a choice to deny what is hard and what is failing. Hope has very open eyes about the suffering in the world, and about what needs repairing and tending.

Choosing hope means our eyes are open to the places where beauty, grace, and dignity are also real, and to choose to live by that, to be faithful to it and allow it to shape our life. I talk about hope, in part, as a counter to cynicism which is more fashionable in educated circles. It's intellectually acceptable to be cynical, and you have almost to defend yourself if you are hopeful. But cynicism is basically lazy. It says, "Well, I am not surprised. So many things are bad and I am not going to be able to change them." Right now that's not a luxury that we can afford.

Q In your book you quoted someone in one of your audiences in a small Ohio church saying, "This is a community that is dying and being reborn at the same time." US Catholic sisters know this reality well as our way of life is dying yet we simultaneously sense that something new is being born. You write, "We don't quite trust that rebirth will follow the deaths of what we knew. We sense that somehow what comes up next is up to us, but we're not sure where to begin. Yet it's precisely in these moments when we let our truest, hardest questions rise up in our midst ... that we become able to live into them rather than away and to do so together." What would you name as the truest, hardest questions we should all be grappling with in this middle space?

There is something natural and almost inevitable about change in human life, and it is true in communities. Isn't it funny how we don't tend to apply to the outward, larger world what we know about our personal lives, such as that in any life and in any community change will happen. It will come and sometimes it will be welcomed and sometimes it will feel as if it is taking away our very calling or our greatest achievement. So, change is inevitable, yet it always takes us by surprise, is usually painful, and is a source of grieving and confusion.

At this moment, virtually all of our institutions and communal structures don't make sense in the way they once did. For example, I have been thinking a lot right now about journalism, the field that formed me originally. The way in which journalism worked and served society for a long time suddenly looks so broken and wrong. In places it is irrelevant, and in other places actually destructive, without anyone meaning to be destructive for the most part. And this is the movement occurring in community after community, and institution after institution.

So I wish I had an answer to your question, but I think this is a discernment that has to happen one community at a time. In terms of religious life, I see what is happening among the Benedictines in Collegeville where I spent time. This is a community that is much smaller than when I first met them, but at the same time they provide a place of quiet that a growing number of people are looking for. One of the most fundamental parts of your life is becoming irresistible and necessary for the sustenance of ordinary people who may not have any religious or spiritual life. Who knows where this is going to go or how to foster it, but it's one of the most interesting things hap-

pening. There is an important calling that was once more hidden within your larger calling of service that once seemed more relevant.

Q Is there anything that we didn't talk about that you would like to say to us?

I can't tell you how many people over the years from all over the world talk about the Catholic sisters who formed them. I see a magnetism that draws people to the idea of this life. There is something very special about this charism you have that is still very much alive. You spoke earlier to me about the interest of sisters in contemplative dialogue. Just knowing that something like that is possible and is being practiced would be so helpful to people right now. People become discouraged by what they see all around them which is just the opposite of contemplative dialogue and they don't know what the alternative could be; it hasn't yet been presented. I would hold that up to you as something you have that the world needs, and I will keep thinking about ways that our project can shine a light on that. I feel as if my project and the work of LCWR are kindred in this world. □



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