Esther's Gamble

Reflections on Abundance

Rembrandt and the Purim Story; Jan Victors, ***Banquet of Esther and Achashverosh*** *c1645*

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

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Contents

Author's Note

I wrote ***Esther's Gamble*** in the early months of 2020 when the notion of a global pandemic was far from the thoughts and minds of most in North America. Revisions and final editing took place in mid-March as I self-quarantined after returning from Mexico City via Chicago. St. Joseph's Day, March 19, 2020, the original publication date is particularly meaningful to me as it marks a small celebration of my Congregation's patronal feast day – all other celebrations having been cancelled out of an abundance of caution.

Today, May 1, marks another patronal feast day. It is St. Joseph the Worker Day. Many countries also observe this as May Day, a celebration of workers and labor. It seems ironic that as we live through the daily uncertainties that accompany the Covid-19 pandemic it has become quite clear that we rely most on many whose work and labor are valued least in our society.

As a society, we have lost so much. And much of what is lost is irreplaceable. From life's milestones never to be marked, to jobs and livelihoods, to a sense of collective wellbeing. We mourn for the shuttered businesses and endless lines at food banks, the pervasive isolation and despair, and for the incomprehensible reality of loved ones dying alone without the most basic gestures of faith and farewell – a caress, a kiss, a wake, a funeral.

Like everyone else around us, we are anxious about an uncertain future. Will we be able to take care of ourselves? What about our ministries? How will our savings and investments, intended to fund our future and our mission, be impacted by the economic turmoil?

As a global community, we hold so much collective, cumulative grief. This grief is compounded for religious communities who have lost and will lose sisters and brothers to this pandemic before the spread is contained.

I dedicate this writing to all of them in gratitude for their vocations and their faithful lives spent witnessing by prayer, word and deed to the way things are in the reign of God where everyone belongs, everyone has what they need and where everyone is free. Together we honor their memories by a renewed commitment to our own vocations and, like Esther, to using our position to help shape a more fair, just and compassionate world in "just such a time as this."

As the pandemic rolls on with no discernible end in sight and with grim predictions for recovery of any kind, many voices are emerging, both faith-based and secular, recognizing this moment as a culmination of the failures of a past that favored only some, and an opportunity to shape a future that provides for all.

I invite you to read ***Esther's Gamble*** considering the collective contribution that religious institutes might make to that future.

Introduction

I use this story fully aware of the problems that it may present for contemporary readers, particularly gender power imbalances and what appears to be a culturally acceptable practice of what today we would likely call human trafficking. Despite these limitations, I believe that the story of Esther provides rich metaphor to help us consider the landscape in which we find ourselves at this time in the history of the church and world, and in the evolution of the life that we are living. I use it as Jews use it to consider the salvific activity of God at times of impasse.

Contextual Questions for Consideration by the Reader

As institutes plan for the future, both for an emerging transformed expression of religious life and for the legacies that we will leave, a question to consider is what can we and should we be investing in and freeing ourselves from so that we can have a transformational impact now and into the future?

What opportunities for an emerging religious life can we invest in for the sake of those coming after us and for a life that we ourselves will not live?

What do we need to do or do differently, see or see differently in order to shift our perspective from scarcity to abundance? How can we free ourselves and our institutes from the attitudes, behaviors, structures and organizations that were appropriate for another time but are an encumbrance in such a time as ours?

The Story

Through a series of unlikely events Esther, cousin and adopted daughter of Jewish royal official, Mordecai, finds herself living in King Ahasuerus' palace, competing with women from all over the land to be selected as the next queen after former Queen Vashti is dethroned for insulting the king.

Life in the palace seems agreeable to Esther. She wins favor with the custodian of women who makes sure that she receives all that is needed to help her stand out among the other women - proper foods, clothing, jewelry, make up . . .

Each day Mordecai walks up and down the courtyard of the harem in order to keep an eye on Esther to see how she is doing. He has instructed her not to reveal their relationship and, further, not to reveal that she is a Jew.

As her time at the palace progresses, she wins favor with King Ahasuerus who "liked her more than any of the others" and who eventually makes her Queen.

Mordecai for his part, is busy in his role as chancellor, finding favor with some, irritating others. While he saves the king's life by uncovering a plot intended to kill Ahasuerus, Mordecai refuses to bow to and honor Haram, the king's second in command.

Haram is enraged when he learns of Mordecai's disrespect and plots to not only punish Mordecai but all of Mordecai's people throughout the land. He convinces King Ahasuerus to promulgate a decree calling for the extermination of all Jews – including women and children – on a date determined by casting lots.

When Mordecai learns of this and of his part in bringing about the destruction of his people, he rends his clothing, dons a sackcloth and ashes and makes his way wailing throughout the city.

Esther hears of the commotion and sends a messenger to learn the reason for Mordecai's behavior. Through a brief exchange mediated by the messenger, we learn that Mordecai asks Esther to intervene with the king on behalf of the Jews. She is reluctant to do so because the king has not asked to see her in 30 days and to enter uninvited into the king's presence is to risk death.

With that Mordecai sends this message to Esther:

> ***"Do not suppose because you are in the king's palace that you will be the one Jew to escape. No, if you persist in remaining silent at such a time, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another place, but both you and the House of your father will perish.***
>
> ***Who knows? Perhaps you have come to your position for just such a time as this."***

Esther sends this reply to Mordecai:

> ***"Go and assemble all the Jews now in Susa and fast for me. Do not eat or drink day or night for three days. For my part, I and my maids will keep the same fast, after which I shall go to the king in spite of the law; and if I perish, I perish."***

Esther then takes off her royal robes and "puts on sorrowful mourning." She covers her head in ashes and dung and prays fervently for deliverance for her people. She concludes her prayer begging to be freed from her fear.

On the third day, having completed the prayer and fasting she removes her supplicant's attire and adorns herself in full royal splendor preparing to enter uninvited into the king's presence. With her she takes two attendants, one to carry the train of her dress and the other to lean upon so that she does not collapse from fear.

King Ahasuerus is enraged when Esther enters uninvited. The color drains from her face and she nearly faints. With that, the king's heart is turned, and he rushes to revive her. He begs to know what is the matter, at which she completely passes out.

When she regains consciousness, Esther sets into motion a plan that exposes Haram's duplicity, vindicates and honors Mordecai, saves her people from certain destruction, and allows her to be known in the palace and the land for who she really is.

Unpacking the Story

In many ways Esther's is a story for our time. It not only illumines something about our own societal circumstances but also makes demands on us that, if we allow them, can help us to gain greater clarity of purpose as we shape our future and the future of religious life in the Church and world.

The potential loss of what was core and most dear to Esther was a life-changing experience for her. She intuited what she needed to do. She brought her spiritual wisdom to bear, surrounded herself with the support of others and navigated a shift in consciousness from the constraints of her perceived scarcity to the abundance of her creative potential.

The realities of religious institutes today are life-changing experiences for all of us. At some level, I believe that most of us intuit what we need to do, but we simply do not know how to get there with the same clarity of purpose that Esther demonstrates.

To that end several aspects of the story deserve our attention as we consider the ultimate gamble that Esther made and what it might mean for our institutes today.

Esther's Marriage to the King

At the end of the day, whether we are aware of it or not or whether we like it or not we are all, like Esther, wed to the empire. And like hers, it is an uneasy marriage.

Scripture scholar Walter Brueggeman writes that while there are many ways to conceive of empire it is always about a controlling force that runs counter to human freedom and seeks to diminish human capacity. It is an overriding power that trades the long, hard work of justice-making, moral engagement and promotion of the common good for short-sighted gains of oppression, abuse of power, and the accumulation of wealth, power and goods by a few.

Consider "empire" as all that is opposed to the creative activity of God – all the forces, attitudes and accompanying behaviors and choices resulting in exploitation, violence, hatred, domination, abuse of power, obscene accumulation and hoarding of goods, wealth and power while denying others opportunity and access. Empire demonizes differences – of thought, politics, religion . . . while sanctifying loyalty, fealty, silence. It

typically distorts the fundamental authenticity of faith traditions reducing religion and religious expression to some form of nationalism or patriotism. Consider the way the prosperity Gospel, popular among many evangelical Christians and a growing number of American Catholics, conflates economic wealth with spiritual blessing.

Empire is what allows institutional racism, white privilege, systemic and historic sexism to appear as normal cultural and human conditions. An imperial narrative is what allows the failed promises of capitalism and globalization to be perceived as necessary trade-offs for universal progress.

The overarching narrative that accompanies empire is recognizable first by its clear themes of exceptionalism, triumphalism and prosperity, and then upon closer read by the distorted revisionist history that it portends as truth. Those supporting the imperial narrative and what it stands for can act with impunity, while those questioning, critiquing or challenging the empire and its narrative are swiftly labeled unfaithful, disloyal or unpatriotic.

These unquestioned and unquestionable narratives are what create the conditions for our most destructive forces to thrive. Consider the toxic, murderous nationalism of Hitler's Fascist Nazism. Or the unquestioned exceptionalism afforded clerics that created the conditions for decades-long sexual abuse of children in the Catholic Church to go unchallenged and unaddressed. Consider, too, the narrative of the American Dream that champions hard work and ingenuity yet fails to acknowledge that even the opportunity to dream was built on the backs of enslaved Africans and decimated and colonized Native peoples.

Imperial narratives thrive on the cognitive dissonance they create. That cognitive dissonance in turn creates an ambivalence that results from knowing that something is not right or runs afoul of our values and yet we remain wedded to it because of perceived benefits.

The power of empire is so pervasive and all-encompassing that most of us are unable to see the forest for the trees, or if we can we do not know how to navigate the forest for the trees. We have heard Mordecai's voice calling to us from the fringes and peripheries outside the centers of influence reminding us that we are all one and that what befalls one of us befalls all of us. We know cognitively (and spiritually) that all is one and yet we continue to behave as though we are separate.

Many of us, attempting to divorce ourselves from the power and sway of empire, are engaged in important individual efforts that address deep societal needs. Important as these individual efforts are, they are insufficient to affect a lasting or transformational impact. What is needed at this time is a shift in our collective consciousness from the primacy of individual efforts to the primacy of our corporate or communal efforts. Esther did

not fast and pray by herself. She called on all of her attendants and Jews throughout the city for a collective, communal act.

Arguably one of the greatest transformations in American society in the 20th century was affected when all or the vast majority of religious institutes' resources were directed toward education and health care. While the economic models within society and the institutional church that supported those efforts were unsustainable, the impact of those efforts is undeniable. Religious institutes at that time responded systemically, corporately and collectively to the needs of their era and brought about a transformational impact with lasting generational effects.

Our time and circumstances are very different today. Neither call to us to build institutions as we did in the past. And yet they may call us to consider how the efforts of our religious institutions – and perhaps our ministerial institutions - might have a transformational impact with lasting generational effects on the deep needs of our day.

The tentacles of empire are massive and far-reaching, subtle, insidious and blinding all at once. The machinations and relentless frequency of political and ecclesial corruptions, the decline of civil societies and the national and international scales of moral bankruptcy are so consuming and pervasive that we are left emotionally paralyzed, feeling ineffectual and impotent, unable to influence the very things that we care most deeply about.

Like Esther, we are often unable to see past the constraints of the way things are *(It is unlawful to enter uninvited into the king's presence.)* to creative possibilities that lie ahead – regardless of the risk *("If I perish, I perish.")*.

Such A Time As This

"Perhaps you have come to your position for just such a time as this."

In many ways, Mordecai's wonderment is a show-stopper. His cogent analysis makes us sit up and take notice. Of both our position and our time. It has the capacity - if we allow it – to pierce through our doubts and hesitations, and at times, our paralysis and inertia, so that we are better positioned to bring our values and mission forward in just such a time as ours, despite our perceived challenges and obstacles.

We could use many words to describe "just such a time as this." "Polarized" is certainly one of them. The polarity with which we align ourselves typically determines other ways we might name the moment. For example, separating families and placing children in cages along the southern US border is either making America great again or it is creating concentration camps.

Loosening our grip on what we hold most dear and the narrative that shapes our perspective can feel like surrender and moral failure. The harder we cling the less capable

we are of moving beyond the impasse. The less capable we are of moving beyond the impasse the more paralyzed we become. Naming the cognitive dissonance that we experience would be a first step in grappling with its impacts. A further step, and one more significant as it is more difficult, is to recognize and name the signs and impacts of our *collective* cognitive dissonance, the dissonance that we experience in and as communities, not just as individuals.

As early as 1984 Carmelite Constance FitzGerald identified our era as a societal dark night evidenced in the escalating threat of war, increased incidents of violence and exploitation particularly against women and children, racism and the accumulation of wealth. Today, we are 35 years deeper into the impasse and darkness, more paralyzed and polarized than before with many signs indicating irreversible decline and destruction.

Today some are suggesting that we are moving into a "post-secular" era marked by a recalibration of the categories of sacred and secular. This era, they observe, is marked by an increased role of religion and faith in global society, politics and governments. This freshly-emerging role of faith, however, is primarily experienced as weaponized distortions of otherwise peaceful or pacifist faith traditions and teachings resulting in the escalation of faith-based violence that we see almost on a daily basis.

In the midst of it all many religious communities in North America are facing unprecedented challenges and urgencies related to our own realities and needs. Like Esther the loss of much that we once held dear, including certainties and expectations, are life-changing experiences for us. Like Esther the circumstances of our time challenge our own relative comfort, not so importantly as individuals, but especially as communities. What if we had a collective opportunity to move the arc of history toward greater justice, mercy and compassion in our day? What if religious institutes in the US again had an opportunity to have a transformational impact on society?

What if, like Esther, our position affords us opportunity?

Mordecai's challenge to Esther - to consider her position relative to her times and in light of her deepest identity - was also a revelation of the opportunity that she alone had to act on behalf of what was most precious and important to her. The challenge is not for Esther alone, nor just for a time long past.

In many ways this is both the challenge and the opportunity that religious institutes have today as we consider how to leverage our position (the full range of our resources) through the lens of our mission (our core identity) in service to the needs of our day, 'in just such a time as this."

Our Position

Consider "position" as a description of the full range of resources that a religious institute brings and places in service to its mission. These are tangible resources like money, investments properties, institutions. "Position" also includes the intangible, yet potent, resources of our decades and sometimes centuries-old spiritual heritage, wisdom and energies, along with the wealth and network of relationships that we have, our influence, moral authority and credibility, and the unlikely, yet unmistakable strength of our vulnerability.

Years ago Quaker author Parker Palmer noted that the quality of our lives – and that of others – depends upon whether we assume a world of scarcity or a world of abundance.

"Do we live in a world," Palmer writes, "where what people seek – from food and shelter and a sense of competence and being loved – is available to all? Or is this a world where such goods and feelings are in short supply, available only to those who succeed in beating everyone else to the "scarce" resources?"

For many years the assumptions made about and by religious communities, especially women's communities, were assumptions of scarcity. We did not have "enough". . . of anything. Enough members, enough money, enough time, enough resources, enough energy. . . It seems that these assumptions of scarcity and the fear of not having enough has been an unconscious driver of many of the decisions that we have made or not made in relationship to investing our time, energy or resources. Assuming a position of scarcity focuses attention on what we do not have, what we think is not possible. It tells us that our position is weak and ineffectual.

The imperial narrative is a scarcity narrative. It thrives on illusions and assumptions of what cannot be done or is not possible. An assumption of scarcity is what caused Esther to focus on what she could not do: *"I cannot go into the king's presence without being invited."*

Assumptions of abundance, on the other hand, focus attention on what we have, shifting our consciousness from the constraints of scarcity to the creative possibilities of abundance. Assumptions of abundance allow us to see everything we have and everything we are as resources in service to mission.

"In a world of scarcity," writes Palmer, "only those who know the art of competing will be able to survive. But in a world of abundance, actions of generosity and community become not only possible but fruitful." ***(See the Addendum for a current illustration of Palmer's thinking about scarcity and abundance amid the Covid-19 pandemic.)***

What might happen if we were to rightfully assume a world of abundance about our institutes rather than scarcity? What might happen if we were able to shift our thinking away from constraint toward the creative possibilities that more fully engage our potential –

certainly our personal potential, but more importantly the corporate and communal potential – the potential of our institutes.

Shifting our thinking in this way allows us to think differently and perhaps more freely about the resources we have to steward and the decisions that we make and need to make in order to place our resources at the service of mission, vision and charism - not only for our own sakes, but for the sake of the Gospel, of those we serve and of the legacies we will leave.

Our Abundance

Social Capital

Mordecai's wonderment about Esther's position had nothing to do with any material possessions, tangible wealth or money. She possessed nothing of her own – in fact, she herself was owned by King Ahasuerus. Mordecai's wonderment about Esther's position was all about her influence and credibility – the intangible resources that her position afforded her. It was all about her *social capital.*

Women religious and our institutes possess an enormous amount of social capital. Our influence, credibility and moral authority are recognized almost universally throughout the world. On a global scale, it is widely known that if you want an objective view of what is taking place on the ground in areas of extreme violence or poverty or instability, go to the religious institutes serving there. It is universally understood that we have no agenda other than caring for those in need and danger, that we have no agenda other than the Gospel imperative.

The faithful consistency with which we have lived and ministered for decades and even centuries, immersed in the lives of so many living on the margins in untenable, extreme and unjust circumstances has earned our institutes an enviable position of abundant credibility, moral authority and influence. We have global networks and relationships of influence that rival any multi-national, global corporation or initiative.

More than anything else that we possess communally and corporately – regardless of whatever other resources we have or do not have – our social capital is the richest resource we have to leverage in service to our mission and on behalf of those who have neither voice nor standing.

Tangible Capital

Along with social capital earned over decades or centuries of faithful investment of our lives in service to the Gospel and the mission of our institutes, the position of many of our institutes also consists of *tangible capital* earned over decades or centuries of wise investment,

stewardship and management of our financial, property, material goods and corporate or communal wealth.

Tangible capital consists of all of those things that contribute to our institute's financial position – cash, investments, property, buildings . . . In many ways the moral imperative of the Gospel has an equal, if not more urgent claim on our tangible capital than on our social capital, particularly if we have excess of these resources.

St. Basil made this clear to Christians as long ago as the 4th century.

> ***"When someone steals another's clothes, we call them a thief. Should we not give the same name to one who could clothe the naked and does not? The bread in your cupboard belongs to the hungry; the coat unused in your closet belongs to the one who needs it; the shoes rotting in your closet belong to the one who has no shoes; the money which you hoard up belongs to the poor."***

Basil may have had an austere view of abundance, but his message is clear nonetheless. While each of us might individually heed his message and adopt a simpler lifestyle, I suggest that the greater moral imperative of our times is directed to the ways in which our institutes direct – or do not direct – the abundance of our *corporate or communal resources.*

Religious institutes have two equally important responsibilities – to care for our members and to care for our mission. What is not needed for the care of our members belongs then to the care of our mission. Our posture or disposition toward these resources is not one of ultimate ownership but rather responsible stewardship . . .in service to the Gospel and to the mission of institute.

A growing self-critique of religious institutes in North America – and a clear example of cognitive dissonance - is that despite the vow of poverty and a communal way of life, our members live middle to upper middle-class lifestyles. We want for very little or nothing at all. Many of us live in spaces far too large for our needs and sometimes for our own safety. In the US, we enjoy and sometimes feel entitled to a level of health care that is ordinarily unattainable by those whom we serve and the majority of people in our country.

A surprising number of religious institutes have a surprising amount of unexpected wealth. In some cases, the members of these institutes could be millionaires one or more times over. Outside of religious institutes, that amount of wealth would place an individual in the 1% of the wealthiest people in the world. Again, more cognitive dissonance.

In addition to our canonical status as religious institutes in the Church, our institutes exist in the United States as not-for-profit civil corporations. As such our institutes are held to the same standards of social accountability to which other not-for-profit civil corporations are

held. One standard of this accountability is that any financial profitability that a not-for-profit organization realizes is to be redirected to its mission-focused activities.

Consider your institute and be brutally honest. What do you have that you do not use or do not need for yourselves? Space? Property? Material goods? Money? In what ways are you using more resources than you need? More space? More property? More material goods? More money?

What meaning do you make of your institute's circumstances? What are the implications for mission and for those you serve? What are the implications for your institute's communal lifestyle?

The point here is not to demean ourselves or make us feel defensive or guilty, but rather to raise our awareness of the expressions, impacts and optics of our *collective* lives and to reframe our understanding and perspective about the resources that we have to steward – those we need for ourselves and those that belong to others through the mission of our institutes

Our social capital combined with our tangible capital create the fullness of our position, the full range of resources that we have to place in support of ourselves and in service to the mission – in just such a time as ours. I believe that all religious institutes – no matter our financial positions – have an abundance of social capital. Some also have an abundance of tangible capital, as well.

For many of us and for our institutes, though, we function out of an assumption of scarcity when it comes to our tangible resources, and we may not perceive our social capital as a resource at all. How do we, then, following Esther navigate the region between the constraints of scarcity *(It is not lawful to enter uninvited into the King's presence*.) to the creative possibilities of abundance . . . despite the perceived risks *("If I perish, I perish")?*

The Journey from Scarcity to Abundance

The biblical story tells us that Esther intuitively knew what she needed to do *before* she had the wherewithal to actually do it. Intuition is often both a beacon and a guide. After a period of communal preparation (prayer and fasting) she was able to move forward with what she knew was right . . . despite her lingering fear.

More than anything else the journey from the constraints of perceived scarcity to the creative possibilities of abundance, despite our doubts and fears, is a spiritual journey and one not undertaken alone. Too, the spiritual path is not a fearless path. Risks are real. "Crossing the bridge from scarcity to abundance," notes Palmer," is a risky venture."

While Esther begged to be freed from her fear, she wasn't. She could not walk without assistance. She could barely stand up, and she fainted twice. Despite her fear she

approached the king undefended. In many ways her vulnerability was unexpected and disarming. Despite her fear, she placed what was beyond her control in God's hands and risked everything for the sake of her people.

That was Esther's gamble.

If, like Esther, religious institutes have come to our positions for just such as time as our own, then Esther's gamble belongs to us, as well. I am not suggesting here that our actions be reckless or irresponsible. On the contrary, I am suggesting that our actions and decisions, like Esther's, be calculated, carefully discerned and critically decisive. I am suggesting that we leverage the abundance of our resources -those we do not need for ourselves - not on predictability and comfort but in service to those who have no resources at all to leverage, and that we invest our energy and social capital in efforts worthy of the heritage of our institutes.

In 2016 Krista Tippett, host of NPR's On Being podcast, interviewed social researcher and author Brene' Brown, who writes and speaks extensively on leadership and vulnerability. Brown made this sobering observation: "…when you choose your own comfort over trying to bring people together, and you're a leader, either civic leader or a faith leader, your days of relevance are numbered"

How many places can we look in our church and society and perhaps in our own institutes and recognize the truth of that statement? Esther chose to invest her energy and spend her social capital in service to a life larger than her own rather than to try to preserve her life within the constraints of the palace. Her gamble paid off. Both her legacy and generativity live on.

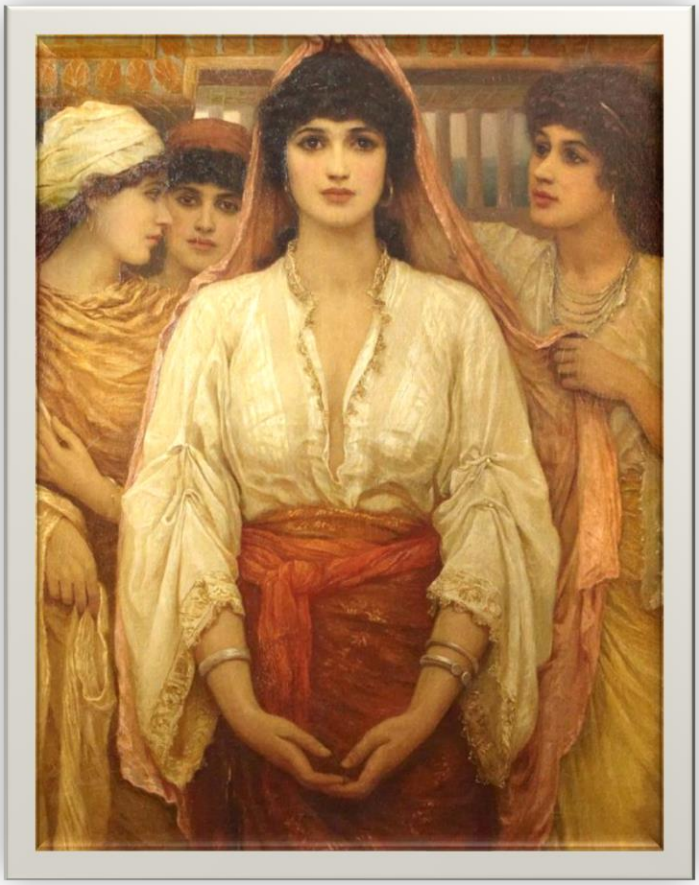
We are called to no less. We are called to invest the abundance of our resources in a future expression of our life and mission that most of us will not see, but about which we care deeply.

As institutes plan for the future – both for an emerging transformed expression of religious life (outside the constraints of the palace) and for the legacies that we will leave, a question to consider is what can we and should we be investing in and freeing ourselves from so that we can have a transformational impact now and into the future?

What opportunities for an emerging religious life can we invest in for the sake of those coming after us and for a life that we ourselves will not live?

What do we need to do or do differently, see or see differently in order to shift our perspective from scarcity to abundance? How can we free ourselves and our institutes from the attitudes, behaviors, structures and organizations that were appropriate for another time but are an encumbrance in such a time as ours?

For inspiration we have only to look to Esther and our foremothers - to their courage, bravery, creativity, faith and audacity to make something out of nothing, to build from the ground up, to persevere without privilege, to assume there would be when there wasn't and to embrace the risk of abundance rather than scarcity's false certainty. These are the women we come from.



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Addendum

This article was completed prior to the current and continually escalating impacts on nearly every aspect of global society of the Covid-19 pandemic. Each day we see illustrations of how Parker Palmer's observations about scarcity and abundance play out in real life. Each day we see how those who cannot "compete," in a world of scarcity fall further and further behind and become more and more vulnerable. In most cases, if not all, scarcity of resources is not the issue. Hoarding and excessive accumulation, resulting in the grossly unequitable distribution of resources is the human behavior that creates the illusion of scarcity.

Amid the Covid-19 pandemic as in other emergencies, we see that it is typically people with means (those who arguably already enjoy an abundance of resources, particularly access to transportation and disposable income in this case) who are panic buying and depleting stores of everything from toilet paper to disinfecting wipes to anti-viral cleaners.

Beginning in January two brothers virtually wiped out the state-wide supplies of hand sanitizer and protective face masks from stores throughout Tennessee and Kentucky and then sold these items for an exorbitant profit to consumers who found their store shelves depleted of these items when they were needed.

For weeks, stores have been unable to keep their shelves stocked with toilet paper, and those who can are limiting quantities that can be purchased at one time in an effort to control hoarding by consumers who have the means to purchase extreme quantities and the means to transport them home. These items aren't scarce. They're being accumulated and hoarded, unevenly distributed causing the illusion of scarcity.

The Covid-19 pandemic also gives us a glimpse of what a scarcity or imperial narrative can look like on a national level as well. As global health organizations struggle to find adequate ways to stop the spread of Covid-19, test for the virus and ultimately develop a vaccine, we learned that President Trump attempted to broker a deal with a German lab to purchase the vaccine to be used "only for the USA," when developed.

Those who are left most vulnerable at a time like this are those who are resource-poor, those who do not have access to adequate transportation, have little or no disposable income to "stock up" on essential items, who have limited or no access to health care or health insurance and who may not have access to the internet or other communication networks to keep them safe and socialized during long periods of social distancing and the isolation that it may bring.

A narrative of abundance counters these short-sighted and unsustainable real-life examples. It will be gestures of community, generosity, courage and civic mindedness that will ultimately see us through this crisis and strengthen society at local and global levels.

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