The Constancy of Change

Michele Naar-Obed

If there is one thing certain in life, it is that change will occur. Change seems to be a constant in our lives. We can approach it with fear, apprehension or pessimism, or we can approach it with openness, hope and optimism. In all honesty, I tend to fall in the first category, but community and faith help me to lean into the latter.

At Hildegard House Catholic Worker, we started the summer with great hope that new live-in volunteers would commit to a life of service in hospitality as well as in resistance to the violence of our times. We hoped that their commitment would be born in faith and nourished by the Spirit, because without a call to, and a source of nourishment for this life, it is not easy to sustain.

Volunteers came and volunteers went all for a variety of reasons they felt made the life of a live-in catholic worker volunteer too difficult. And difficult it surely can be. We commit to this life without salary, without a retirement plan, without material security. Some of our guests are so wounded that they lash out at us, and we are asked to absorb their anger, frustration and wounds and then count ourselves lucky that we are trusted enough to have them unload these feelings on us. We are asked to lay down our lives for one another. Like them or not, this is what we are expected to do when the Sermon on the Mount is our manifesto of sorts.

We are asked to challenge the status quo of violence and exploitation in our society and we risk being labeled as traitors. Sometimes we are labeled and treated as terrorists. One only has to look across the border to North Dakota to see how the water protectors are being treated to understand just how much love, nonviolence and care for the common good is a threat to the empire and its minions.

We also witness miracles. We see the rising of spirits with such grace and love over hardships and suffering that most of us will never experience. We see the spark of life turn into a passionate flame. We all receive acts of kindness and charity at our doorstep which gives us substantial evidence that God exists and love can conquer all. In our worst moments we can at least be grateful that darkness has not yet been able to overcome the light.

Well, what does all this have to do with change and Hildegard House? We are in an exciting time of change and transformation. We are in dialogue and in hope that the work of Hildegard House will be led by the survivors of human trafficking. The survivors who are called to this work were, at one time, our guests. They want to be the new community. We, our Hildegard House core community, will be their support, their advisory community, and their aides.

The miracle here is in everybody's desire to pay it forward. We believe this is led by the Spirit. We are honored and grateful that the Spirit is calling us all, workers and guests, to move it forward. The possibilities are endless. We invite you, our supporters, our extended community to be part of the change and of moving this forward with us. We still need your financial support, your prayers, your wisdom, your encouragement, and yes, your toilet paper and SuperOne gift cards. Hildegard House is not finished. It is transforming in more ways than one.
Dear Brave and Wonderful Soul,

Believe it or not I am so proud of you. May comfort and support find its way to you. You have made it, the first steps to the rest of your life. You are breaking free from a lifestyle, a routine, a cycle, and a comfort zone. Change, even good change is hard and at times may even feel impossible. Who wants and can be hopeful and positive when all you feel is everything but. For some reason though, you have made it to the front door of the Hildegard House. You were meant to be here for a reason. My best advice to you is to make the most of what you got. Good things can come out of bad situations. Only you can figure out what good things will come to you.

Nobody deserves to be treated as you were or are. You are so much more than the toxic environment you’re in or have come from. There is no shame in knowing you want something different out of your life and doing something about it. Yes, we can develop damaging complexes. Yes, bad days are to be expected. It takes a whole lifetime to figure out who you are and where you’re going. You have made it this far and I have faith that you will make it to where you want to be.

There are many influences in life. So take the time to really listen to your heart. This may not come naturally if you have learned to tune it out. It will find its way back to you given some endurance and a chance. There will be times when you think you are doing so well and then situations occur and you are unsure of which directions to go. Evaluate your situation, gather facts and information, weigh out your options and start trusting your gut. Life has a way of falling apart; however, it also has a way of coming together. You can give up but tomorrow could be the day it all turns around. Nothing worth having comes easy, I guarantee you; better days and moments are yet to come.

It is normal to feel angry, abandoned, scared, lost, numb and perhaps even excited. Everyone feels differently and has their own path to walk. One of my biggest and still current struggles is trust. With lots of caution and time, I have allowed trust to be built. Not just with the people I have connected with in my life but with myself. When you are in the abuse no matter what kind, you are in survival mode. There will be moments and actions that you are not proud of. Let me tell you something; it is unfair to expect yourself to act rational in an irrational situation. Who you are in the moments isn’t who you have to be. Those people and lifestyles were a part of your life. They are not your whole life. Nor does it define who you are at heart.

Maybe now instead of living in survival mode, you can find a place to start healing. Maybe one day start living again. Oh how I deeply and sincerely wish that for you. Healing is a long, exhausting, ongoing process. There is a good possibility that you are just not in a place in your life where you can take that leap of faith. Don’t force it, don’t fake it, just let it be. Focus on what you can and are doing. Live in the moment; take things for what they are. You may be doing so much better than you give yourself credit for. If you take it slow, have lots of patience, respect your thoughts and feelings giving them the time they deserve and basically just do the best you can with what you got. I have no doubt that one day you will realize your true potential and live up to it.

Sometimes as human nature would have it, we look at other people with assumptions and judgments. I assure you, your energy is best spent being open minded and on yourself. We truly do not know the reason for what others hide and what they let show. You are important too and amazing in your own way. Some people will see it, not see it, envy it or cherish it. May you learn the ability to set boundaries and the stubbornness to keep them.

This is your life and you must do what is best for you. Whether you stay or leave, come or go there is someone out there who is crawling out of the same darkness that surrounds you now and is learning how to smile. That same someone knows you have to do things in your own way and in your own time. Nevertheless, no matter what, there is someone out there that believes in you and she hopes one day you will believe in her too.

Love, Luriyah
Clarification of Thought And Why It Is Important

Peter Maurin, co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement, was a strong advocate for clarification of thought through round table discussions. He believed in education through dialogue, although some would remember him for his unending monologues. In any case, clarification of thought was the first point in Peter’s 3-pronged Catholic Worker program. It was and still is, necessary to work at and cultivate our minds and our intellects through dialogue. We live in a society that tells us what to do, and what to think. Clarification of thought calls us together to both form and inform our minds through open discussion with all manner of people on a variety of topics.

This is the second year that Hildegard House will host monthly clarification of thought.

October 11—”Gitchi Ode’ Akiing-The People with the Big Heart. Babette Sandman shared the importance of a name, the story it tells and the truth that’s set free as she shared the significance of changing the name of Lake Place Park and the impact the name will have on our understanding of Duluth’s history.

November 10—Power. Dr. Connie Gunderson will lead the discussion on power as a dynamic, relational and multi-dimensional force. Power within, with and to, can pave the way for safety, empathy and community and foster calmness, acceptance, responsiveness, and energy.

December 4—Gratitude for Community. A gathering for Hildegard House volunteers and extended community to express our heartfelt gratitude for the ways in which we have come together for the common good of the community.

January 4—Very Young Girls. A documentary about the “Girls Educational and Mentoring Services (GEMS) and a few of the lives that the program has touched by empowering girls and women who have experienced commercial, sexual exploitation.

February 2—Community. Author of the recent book, Making Waves; Grassroots Feminism in Duluth and Superior, Beth Bartlett will lead the discussion about groups and individuals who have made a difference in our community through innovative, grassroots organizing.

March 2—Trauma. Corrie Ehrbright, psychotherapist/MHP at Genesis Recovery Services will lead us in discussion through the complexities of trauma, healing from trauma and how to be a friend and ally to someone who has experienced trauma.

April 6—Lifting our Spirits through Poetry. Facilitated by Treasure Jenkins, she invites us to bring a favorite inspirational poem that lifts our spirits, restores our sense of humanity or carries a message of healing and justice to share with the community.

May 4—Rania, Iraqi Kurdistan, Our Newest Sister City. Michele Naar-Obed will share her latest experiences and insights following a 3 month visit to Rania and surrounding Kurdish regions.

Time: 6:30-8PM except for December 4 which will be at 2PM
Choosing Life, Nail Polish and Facials at Hildegard House—Mary Kay Thornton

Everyone enjoys a bit of pampering every so often. For us at the Hildegard House, our monthly spa night fulfills that need. Guests, former guests and volunteers check out the table which is spread with vivid nail polishes, fragrant lotions, creams and masks. Oohs and aahs can be heard as warm eye masks are applied and tired feet are submerged in a soothing foot bath. On a recent spa night, over a flurry of chatter, choosing colors and scents and applying face masks, the conversation drifted to expressing thoughts on just what the Hildegard House meant to them.

The women agreed that this is a great place to feel safe and to get their lives together. It is a place where they can transition from their past life to a healthier life. They appreciate that there isn’t a rigid structure. But having a curfew helps put up boundaries for themselves. There was a general agreement that living here gives them a sense of family and belonging. As one woman stated, “For years I was just surviving and evading. Being here is like a finish line for me. I can put my pack down and breathe.”

This monthly event of pampering and conversation (and eating of a decadent dessert) plays a vital role in the amazing bonding between women who believe that given the opportunity and supportive community, they can be successful in striving to be the best person they can be.

Coming Into Fullness at Hildegard House—Patty Woods

The house changed my life. When I got to the Hildegard House I was a woman who had been treated very nasty by people who said they would help a woman like myself. I know when I met the volunteers at the Hildegard they were not like the rest of them. These people really cared about me as a person. I was not looked at for what I had done. I was given the chance to be myself and be silly, wear whatever I wanted. I was loved. The love and encouragement I received while I lived there was like no other. Now I’m working full-time, I have my daughter back and I look forward to helping other women so one day they will know how much they are loved and worth. My life has changed for the better and I give all the credit to God and the Hildegard House.
Sister Jean Maher—Presente

September 13, 1942—July 26, 2016

Sr. Jean Maher OSB, our beloved spiritual advisor and core community member of the Hildegard House Catholic Worker blessed our house on July 8, 2014. She did this after months of prayer, guidance, and discernment as 9 women discussed the possibility of opening up a Catholic Worker house for hospitality for women who had experienced sexual exploitation through human trafficking.

Sr. Jean shared with the core community her experiences as a volunteer in Genesis House. Located in Chicago, Genesis House, under the direction of Edwina Gateley, provided both live-in and day hospitality for women escaping prostitution during the 1980’s. Sr. Jean volunteered her services as spiritual director for the women at the house. Sr. Jean connected our Duluth group with Edwina who was able to give us very practical suggestions steeped in wisdom from experience. “Let the women themselves teach you”, was one piece of profound advice Edwina passed on and Sr. Jean made sure we remembered.

Up until the end of Sr. Jean’s life, she remained open and willing to guide the community into deeper spiritual discernment. Even when she could no longer speak, she let us know that she was willing to listen and would take all our concerns to the Spirit. We know she is still listening, still taking our concerns to the Spirit, and interceding on our behalf. She is now part of the cloud of witnesses.

Sr. Jean, you have reminded us of Edwina Gateley’s sound advice to let the women lead. As we now explore the possibility of having Hildegard House be survivor-led, we know you are with us in discernment and intercession. Sr. Jean Maher, OSB, presente.
"Love and ever more love is the only solution to every problem that comes up. If we love each other enough, we will bear with each other’s faults and burdens. If we love enough, we are going to light that fire in the hearts of others. And it is love that will burn out the sins and hatreds that sadden us. It is love that will make us want to do great things for each other. No sacrifice and no suffering will then seem too much."

-- Dorothy Day
from House of Hospitality, chapter 14 (Sheed and Ward, 1939)

A Temporary Goodbye-Michele Naar-Obed

Barring insurmountable odds, I plan to be on a plane bound for Iraqi Kurdistan January 2017. I will stay amongst friends in the Kurdish region for 3 months. I’m making this trip for a number of reasons. I will be part of a 5 member delegation from Duluth visiting our sister city, Rania, Iraqi Kurdistan. In the sister city tradition of citizen diplomacy, our delegation resolves to deepen our commitment to cultural exchange and friendship.

I am making this trip to deepen my commitment to building bridges with our friends in the Middle East. I am going to be in solidarity with our friends of goodwill, our friends who live for the common good.

I am making this trip to bring hope and encouragement from the people of Duluth MN, to the people of Kobane, Rojava, Syria. I am bringing the funds that will be used to help rebuild their community. They will use the funds to build a library so that they have a place to store their history so they can pass that on to the future generations.

I am making this trip because I hope to bring my skills to improve, even if ever so slightly, the horrific traumatic conditions that the people of the Kurdish region are living in as a result of war and conflict. The Yezide women and girls who were taken as sex slaves by ISIS are a blatant example of the tragedies of war. There is no pointing fingers here of who did what to whom. The fingers on my hands will only be used to build the beloved community to relieve the suffering and help with the healing.

I am making this trip because my friends need me and I need my friends. That’s what I do as a Catholic Worker.

I am making this trip so that I can find a renewed resolve to continue the struggle to build the beloved community through Hildegard House in Duluth MN and throughout the Catholic Worker Movement.
**Why We Need You To Support The Hildegard House**

It is November 11, 2016 as the Hildegard House community writes this appeal. As a nation, we have come through months of hurtful political attacks which have permeated into our communities and relationships. Everyone has suffered. Women in particular, have suffered tremendously as more and more opinions lined up with the notion that women are men’s property to be used, played with, exploited, belittled and then swept away like broken trash taken to the dumpster. Now we find ourselves under the leadership of a man who has not only verbalized those male “locker room” sentiments, but has enacted them literally.

During these times, many people are scared. Many women are feeling scared and triggered. Everything that can possibly be exploited for the benefit of the very few is up for grabs. Exploitative policies can very well become law. The exploitation of women becoming legal and protected by law is a realistic possibility.

We need safe places, safe houses, safe people. Hildegard House is trying hard to be one of those places. We are trying to be one of those places not only because we minister to the exploited, but because we are committed to doing away with the institutionalization of exploitation. We are committed to providing a place of offering not only the means to survive, but also the means to become empowered. Not just for one’s personal agenda, but for the good of the whole. We are committed to upholding our basic human rights. We are committed to holding all of those who buy and profit from the sex trade accountable to the violation of such human rights.

As it stands, we do not take grants or government money. We rely solely on the goodwill and generosity of you, our neighbors and friends who are also committed to peace, justice and living for the common good. In order for us to continue being a refuge, a place of healing, a place of growing, and a place of empowerment for the common good, we need to keep basic necessities like heat, electricity, water, and food available. We can run this house on approximately $500 per month. This is bare minimum. We are starting the new year with an almost empty bank account. We need your help. The women of our community who are already vulnerable and who have been exploited need your help. These women are our daughters, our moms, our aunties, our sisters.

Please dig deep into your pockets as we enter into this new year, this new season, this new reality in which we live.

In September, 2016, the Hildegard House community and supporters launched candle-lit lanterns onto Lake Superior Harbor. The following message was sent to the community through the public lantern launch. This message was written by one of our previous guests and survivors who is now part of our core community:

*To all those who are suffering silently in human sex trafficking, we, the people who have been there, would like to tell you that there is life after sex trafficking. We know how it feels to be stuck in that lifestyle. Despite all the obstacles, we also know it’s possible to leave that life behind. We know it is possible to escape and heal from our addictions and trauma. So start imagining a life without trafficking and negativity because it is possible if you believe in yourself and your dreams with a motivating passion. We hope one day you will believe in your capabilities and self-worth because once you do, anything is possible.*

Hildegard means “keeper of the light”. Please don’t let the light go out.
In keeping with the Catholic Worker tradition of opening up ways in which many people could participate in the life of Hildegard House, we asked for 50 people to pledge $10 per month for one year. Thanks to a great response, we have made it through 3 years with ample electricity, heat, water, and phone communication, house insurance and property taxes. That's where the money goes and that's why those pledges play a vital role in the life of Hildegard House. We are not a tax exempt organization because we are convinced that justice and the works of mercy should be acts of conscience, without need for governmental approval, regulation or reward. Your investment is leading to a much greater return, which is the breathing of life back into the spirit of all who walk through our doors. Please can we do it another year? We are starting 2017 with virtually empty bank account.

**Hildegard House Wish list:** Monetary pledges which can be made in monthly, quarterly, bi-annual or one time payments. Grocery gift cards (SuperOne, Cub, or Co-Op). Toilet paper

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**Who are we:** Laura Hoelter, Treasure Jenkins, Greg and Michele Obed, Judy Sausen, Diana Stephoni, Mary Kay Thornton, Sr. Linda Wiggins.