

Unveiling Angela Merici: A Pre-Modern Narrative for a Post-Modern World

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This study examines our human vocation through the life and pedagogy of Angela Merici, whose organizing principle was to reclaim our Christian Story and vocation that was subverted by the ideology of patriarchy during the 16th century Italian Renaissance. A pre-modern narrative for a post-modern world, Merici's life was a prophetic impulse that has implications for our current familial, social and political structures, as well as for life within the Church and society today.

I. Setting the context; the problem, significance and purpose of the study

Without the symbols, poetry, and beauty that nourish the imagination we suffer from amnesia. With our current images and symbols we suffer from cultural amnesia. Amnesia is an illness that involves an identity crisis. Individuals forget their past, their story, their relationships. Amnesia[...] threatens communities and cultures as well; for they can forget their story, their tradition, and identity.

from John Navone in Enjoying God's Beauty (1996)

There is an urgent need for new images and symbols that can redeem us from the matrix of patriarchal and consumeristic patterns of life today. Stories have the power to liberate the imagination and at times the people within them can act as guides to help us resurrect new lives. The story of Angela Merici depicts how she lived her life in resistance to the status quo and the teachings that emerged from her narrative became a vehicle for social change. I will examine how transfiguring symbols guided her educational ideology.

I will explore a pre-modern narrative for a post-modern world by unveiling the original teachings of Angela Merici and examine their relevance for educating religiously in all forms of life today. Angela Merici was born between 1470 and 1475 in Desenzano, Italy. In 1535 she formed a "Company of Women," an intentional community which offered women an alternative way of living in the world. Instead of "marriage or the wall," women of varying age groups and stations of life could choose to resist these scripted roles and live a counter-cultural life style. The research I'm currently developing attends to the documents recently discovered that trace back to 1546. These historical documents known as the Trivulzian Rule, as well as historiographical literature and the other Merician documents, seem to indicate that Merici's original vision in creating the Company of Women was a prophetic response to the alienation created by the corruption of patriarchal structures during the Renaissance in the 16th century.

Merici's pedagogy was absorbed into the patriarchal culture of the church shortly after her death. The Company of Women that Merici began in 1535 as the Company of St. Ursula became the Ursuline religious Order in 1609. The Ursulines took a fourth vow of education and the pedagogical writings of Angela Merici were eventually adapted over several hundred years primarily for schooling of young girls. (Eichmann (1991, p.106) My intention is to retrieve her original teachings and examine them within the context of post-modernity and the possibilities they may or may not provide to educate or lead us out from a collapsing world order into a new creation.

This study will explore Merici's pedagogy, which involved fostering educative

environments of contemplation, care, creativity, incarnational methods of learning through story and art, and communally discerning the spiritual gifts of women. All of these methods assisted these women to model virtuous living within the midst of their homes, work, and Brescian society in order to reshape patterns of life. The vocation of these women was to model/mentor authentic Christian living that resisted the status quo so the reign of God could become visible in Brescia. Our human vocation is to be re-heard, responded to and restored to the image and likeness of God. As religious educators it is our moral responsibility to create a new pedagogy that no longer suppresses our spiritual gifts, and that liberates our religious imagination and inner wisdom so that we might reshape the oppressive patriarchal structures that no longer function in the world today.

Stories and symbols that once liberated people in the past need to be remembered and re-appropriated in the present so that we can hope and envision a new future. There is no knowledge without acknowledging the past but symbols that have become fossilized and symbols that have enslaved our social imagination need to be let go of. These symbols are killing us physically, emotionally, and spiritually. It is also imperative that we listen to the stories that have not been heard so that symbols that live within them may become transformative and help heal the separation created by addictive processes such as patriarchy. This researcher uses the language of narrative because in the words of Susan Shaw:

Narrative gives shape to experience and turns the raw data of experience into meaning. Therefore, narrative represents a primary or privileged form of discourse and significant way of knowing. Narrative also offers possibilities of legitimating notions of reality or destabilizing them. . . . Learners experience their lives narratively, and in many respects they live out their lives in accordance with the self-narratives they have constructed. These self-narratives are shaped within meta-narratives, or larger stories...(Shaw, 1999,p.5)

The significance of this study is that no research exists linking the Merician pedagogy to education outside of the schooling of elementary children or Higher Education. There has been no study on her narrative as a form of education that can educate in many forms of life, nor on how her way of educating leads towards the vocation of *all* people, not just women. There is research on the lifestyle of consecrated virginity lived in the world of post-modernity but again this study examined women only. This paper will reflect that most of this previous research has limited Merici's narrative and teachings from their original educational purpose. Her narrative is not just about Angela's teachings; her story is about a *way* to live toward our human vocation. This paper will begin to unveil Angela Merici's narrative and explore her *way* of teaching and living intentionally in the secular world in order to recreate it.

I will now present a portion of Angela's historical narrative and teachings to provide a "way" to re-remember and reconnect us to our larger story and vocation as a people.

II. Historical Background

In this section I will examine the environment that gave birth to Merici's world-view and the context in which her educational ideology emerged. I will demonstrate how the historical documents of her Primitive Rule were a prophetic response to the signs of her times and her teaching design is modeled after the central symbol of Jesus the Christ, although some secondary symbols changed. Angela Merici's life was rooted in a larger story; the Master Story of Jesus the Christ, whose life was guiding symbol that, shaped her vocation. I will begin with Angela's first encounter with stories.

Family and Childhood

Little is known about Angela's years as a young child or the exact date of her birth. Biographers calculate her birth between 1470 and 1475. Later, biographers recorded March 21, 1474, as the date of her birth but there is no evidence to support this date. However, there are a few facts known about Angela and her family. Angela was born in Desenzano, Italy. She grew up on a little farm in Grezze, which was very close to Desenzano. This place is described as one of the most beautiful places in Italy. She was surrounded by the Alpine slopes and a great lake with a natural harbor. She lived with her mother and father, three brothers, and a younger sister. (Ledochowska, 1968, p.13)

Ledochowska (1968) relates that the depositions of Merici's friends during the Processo Nazari, held twenty-eight years after Merici's death, provide reliable information on her early years. For example, Antonio Romano, who shared his home with Angela for fourteen years reported under oath that, "She told me herself that, from the time she was five years old, after she listened to her father reading the lives of Saints and holy Virgins, she began to devote herself to a spiritual and contemplative way of life." Ledochowska states: "that the family was thoroughly Christian and the spiritual reading made in her home was the origin of Angela's vocation". (p.13-14)

St. Ursula and Catherine of Sienna were popular saints at the time Angela was growing up. Contemplating the lives of these women saints planted the seeds in her imagination, which later blossomed into a guiding vision for her Company of Women. To Angela, St. Ursula symbolized courage, leadership, and the empowerment of women. It would seem after reflecting upon how these saints lived their lives Angela recognized the power virtues had in changing oppressive social situations and patterns of life. St. Catherine of Sienna, noted for the mystical marriage with Christ may have represented Angela's belief in divine-human integration as a way of life. Later in life, Angela would choose St. Ursula to be the patron saint of her Company so other women could also use her story and life to support their own struggles. (Ursulines of the Roman Union, 1998, p.26)

Angela's religious imagination appears to be rooted in the numinous experiences she had as a young girl. Her ability to contemplate and discern the lives of saints, her desire for prayer and fasting, and the intrinsic need to serve others all seem to stem from the educative environment of her home. I will now briefly explore the vision that may have been shaped by her deep contemplation on the lives of saints and /or was a direct result of the grace of God.

Angela's Vision

All of Angela's biographers seem to agree that her adolescence was the most important event of her spiritual life. This well accepted and documented vision was to decide the form of her vocation. This vision occurred after a catastrophe broke up the family life of the Merici's. Angela lost her parents and her sister, who was her closest companion. Angela prayed daily for a sign her sister was in heaven. One day in the fields, when she was deep in prayer, she had a deep inner experience. The following is an extract from a letter written twenty-six years after her death by Father Landini, Vice-Superior of the Ursulines of Brescia. Although the letter is indirect information the facts and themes correlate with other accounts that were given by those who lived with her. The letter reads:

At harvest time out in the fields, when her companions went to have their meal Angela usually withdrew to pray. On day while she was in ecstasy, she saw heaven open and a glorious procession of angels and virgins advancing two by two. The young virgins were singing to the sound of music made by the angels. The song was so deeply impressed on her memory that afterwards she was able to sing it. While

the procession passed before her the young girls recognized one of the virgins as her loved sister whom, shortly before, had died a happy death. Her sister stood still and the whole procession with her; the, looking into the future, she told Angela that God wanted to make use of her to found a Company of consecrated virgins; she added that the Company would grow rapidly---and certain other details. I have heard this fact related by several persons, all of the servants of God and nearly all of Angela's own generation. (Ledochowska, 1968, p.16)

Cozzano, her secretary also relates that Angela never spoke of the Company as "her Company" but of "Christ's Company". Whatever the details of her spiritual experiences were in her adolescence the point is that Angela believed God intervened in her life and made his purpose clear for her and the Company as her life progressed into adulthood. (Ledochowska, 1968p.19)

Angela and the Franciscans

Due to the scope of this paper, I will only mention that Angela's entered the third Order of the Franciscans of the Strict Observance. After her parents' deaths she went to live with the family of an uncle on her mother's side in the town of Salo. In this family she encountered the luxurious way of life of Renaissance nobility, but chose not to take up this lifestyle and joined the Franciscans instead. (Ursulines of the Roman Province, 1998, p. 4) The Franciscans created an educational environment of joy, simplicity of life, and contemplation and action that led her to bring the Gospel teachings to the poor and needy of Northern Italy. (Curry, 1992, p.6) Her exposure to reform movements such as the third Order gave seems to have given her the ability and way to creatively imagination how patterns of life could be different when she moved to Brescia as it was hitting a bottom.

Angela's Life in Brescia

Angela's educational ideology begins to take form when she arrives in Brescia, Italy in 1516 at age 40. She moved to Brescia care member of the great Franciscan family, Caterina Pategola, who just lost her husband and two sons. There is little information for the twenty years between her entering the Third Order and her arriving at Brescia. This time opened a new chapter in Angela Merici's life. Her biographers describe Angela's encounter:

She witnessed the carnage of war and decay. Brescia had been defeated by the French four years earlier and ten thousand people had been killed. There was destruction to buildings and churches had been destroyed. The official religion had been in a state of decay for a long time. For the first time Angela encounter not only the destruction caused by war but a deeper destruction and alienation created by immorality. (Ursulines of the Roman Union, 1998, p.4)

Angela saw the struggles for power. Ledochowska (1967) describes how "the Renaissance values became confused with the beauty and faith in human nature that grew from the artistic and intellectual movement and at the same time the majority of people were illiterate and disregarded". The new discoveries in science, art and learning were only available to the elite, usually men. Many of the masses did not always want the values that came with this movement. She states: "The dazzled generation, having forgotten God's place in the scheme of things quickly became an unbalanced one; for when primary values are confused, the wildest aberrations become possible". (p.3)

Ledochowska (1967) continues to write: "as towns were rebuilt laws were passed to check extravagant spending on clothes and banquets". Moral decline and decadence also influence the Church. "Rome became a political arena that attracted famous humanist and intellectual leaders, which created religious indifference and lack of moral purpose". (p.4) The historical documents used by Ledochowska in writing Angela Merici and The Company

of St. Ursula, depicts a time in history where there was practically no pastoral work done. She states:

Absentee clerics were the rule, not the exception, parish priests ignored their flocks, the bishops ignored their clergy; monasteries earned the name of hospices for the nobility for less presentable children or younger daughters who could not be married off for lack of an adequate dowry! True vocations were difficult to accept, if not accompanied by noble birth or money. Convents and monasteries with these principles had low moral tone and observance of a Rule was disrespected by breaking vows of poverty and chastity. (Ledochowska, 1967, p. 4-5)

In reading court cases, Ledochowska found “that crimes of adultery had to be dealt with more than offenses against faith.” Her words paint a dark picture of how families were disintegrating; there were rebellious children, and an increase of children born outside of marriage. “Sexual diseases, blatant sexuality and dress, and extravagances spread by the free love of the humanist were rampant.” Yet, at the same time charitable foundations increased through the third Orders which were organized through the parishes. She states that “during this time the reaction to these extravagances paved the way to the Protestant Reform as much as to the Catholic-Counter Reformation.”(1967, p.6-7)

The long period of war with the French had been followed by a terrible social, economic, and moral crisis. Perversions among men, women, and children were the norm. De Saint Jean Martin depicts what Angela struggled with as she began her work. In her words:

Under the influence of Protestantism, the first signs of the loss of the traditional idea of family appeared in Europe. Heresy had given license to the passions by denying the sanctity of marriage and by ridiculing chastity, which it denounced an impossibility and a crime against nature. In this unbalanced society, rich and poor had nothing in common but their religious ignorance and their abandonment of all discipline. . . (Marie De Saint Jean Martin, 1946, p.96)

Angela became involved in “protection, moral salvage, and the education of the child, especially of the young girl. While waiting for divine indications to become clear, she continued to seek God in prayer”. Angela was moved to take pilgrimages from Brescia to various holy places prior to starting her Company. One pilgrimage was to Varallo, Italy in 1532. Varallo is a meditative, visual walk of the Stations of the Cross. She took widows and orphans with her on this last journey before starting her Company. (Ursulines of the Roman Union, 1998 p.7)

Angela forms a Company of Women

Upon returning to Brescia, Ledochowska reports that Angela gathered a group of women to meet for prayer and guidance. The widow Isabella Prato gave Angela a large room at her house and Angela converted the room in an oratory. She commissioned artist to create frescos of several women saints, including St. Ursula and Catherine of Sienna. Ledochowska writes these frescoes are helpful in understanding the “Primitive Company” because of the many scenes painted on the walls “showing scenes in the life of our Savior and His Holy Mother; the Annunciation, the Nativity, the Boy Jesus in the midst of the Doctors of the Temple, Mary and Joseph finding Him again in Jerusalem. Then followed the mysteries of the Passion and Assumption of Our Lady”. There were many other frescos depicting martyrs. Documents indicate that these frescos were painted in 1533, two years before the official foundation date of the Company. (1968, p.104)

These pictures inform us about the characteristics of the spirituality and teachings of Angela Merici. Ledochowska relates the frescos to Angela’s desire to “deliberately return to the early days of the Church to find models satisfying the need and heart-searchings of the

morally decadent age in which she lived". (p.104)

Johanna Eichmann in her historical survey about the Company describes the event of forming the Company of Women as follows:

When Angela assembled her 28 companions and with them recorded her name in the Register of the Company, she was 60 years old. After the signing and a Mass she sent her companions home. She founded no Order, opened no convent, prescribed no habit and obliged no one to take vows. She only encouraged them to practice celibacy. Angela's companions were virgins in the early ecclesiastical sense: they lived in midst of the world this way. They understood their celibacy as union with the Christ--as consecrated to God--devoted to the service of their neighbor. (Proceedings; 1991, p.101)

Most all of the "Mothers" and "daughters" of the Company were from all walks of life. There were aristocrats, the poor, widowed, orphaned, and unmarried women of varying ages although a girl must be at least 12 to formally enter. To ensure the necessary protection for her Company she divided the city of Brescia into four districts and placed at the head of each district a group of three leaders:

A Superior ("colonella") from the ranks of the members of the Company, who was to teach them spiritual ways;

A Mother who, surprisingly, was not an official member of the Company, but a lady, usually a widow of distinguished family. She had the care of the corporal and spiritual well being of her daughters.

A Father as "administrator" (Rule Ch.11 and legal adviser in the external matter and needs of the Company. (Proceedings, 1991, Eichmann, p. 101-102)

Curry (2001) writes:

Angela is aware of her identity as a disciple of Christ and embodies the Gospel values. She has realized these values conflict with the dominant values of society. This awareness intensified when she began to see herself in relationship to the economic, social, political, and religious structures around her in Brescia. Angela's belief in the creative, incarnational, and transforming activity of God allowed her to see the "signs of the times" as a prophetic call. During the period of the Renaissance she was seen as a "wisdom person". . . . She believed that the "one who teaches us all truth" would provide all we need to be prophetic witnesses in our times, in our global world. (Curry, 2001, p.1)

Angela envisioned life as a pilgrimage toward creating the Reign of God. The journey begins within to connect with inner wisdom and then back out to share these spiritual gifts with others to repair the world. Angela collaborated as a teacher with her learners in the creation of the Rule. (Ledochowska, 1968, p.103) She gave the completed text to her secretary Gabriele Cozzano, who then presented it to the Vicar of the diocese. The Rule was approved in 1536 and at the First General Chapter elected Angela Mother for life. In 1539 she falls ill and dictates the Testament and Counsels. She died on January 27, 1540. Six years later Pope Paul III approved the Rule and publishes the "bull" of approval. (Ursulines of the Roman Union, 1998, p.13)

The original Company founded in 1535 did not place the Company under the bishop, but in 1582 Charles Borromeo, at the time of his apostolic visit to Brescia, was bestowed the title of "father, pastor, and superior" of the Company. Angela asked her daughters to be obedient to the different levels of the Church, the superiors of the Company, the spiritual father, and the bishop. However, it was not her intention to be placed within an institution. Her main focus was that if "one worked unceasingly at inner purity that the

Spirit's voice could be fully understood; nevertheless, it was always a question of listening directly to the Holy Spirit, on whose guidance one would rely for action." The need to control of any form of revelation or direction of Holy Spirit must have been threatening to the church patriarchy as noted by Mariani, Tarolli, and Seynaeve (1986) "the freedom of spirit seemed too risky to Cardinal Borromeo, and later it was moderated and restricted". These authors of Contributions toward a Biography tell us the difference in attitude between Merici and Borromeo reveals the complex history of the Catholic Reformation. They write:

Her work grew from below, without being organized by patriarchal systems or encouraged by the hierarchy. . .the ecclesiastical authority intervenes to take over or to have a hand in the structures of the institution, even modifying its exterior shape. This type of evolution, imposed from the outside is typical of the influence exercised by the Council of Trent. This reflects the religious and social atmosphere of the 1530's. (1986, p.xxvi-xxx)

The organizing principle of Angela Merici was to network from the margins to build up and make visible the Kingdom of God in order to resist the ideology that enslaved the people of 16th century Brescia. Merici discerned the signs of her time. I want to use the narrative of Merici's life as an educational text that may assist in intervening the patriarchal structures that enslave our creative ability to reclaim and re-appropriate our human story and vocation today. Due to the length of this paper, I am going to take great liberty and place the rest of Merici Curriculum in dialogue with post-modernity utilizing themes within religious education.

III. The Merici Curriculum In Dialogue With Post-Modernity

Stories that are educative will bring a new awareness of the past that generates new possibilities to the old ways of living in the present, which then brings hope for a new vision for the future. However, re-authoring our larger human story and taking a prophetic stance against the enslaving social structures first requires that we name our world.

Naming Our World

Our pluralistic society presents us with multiple forms of life and ways of knowing but many people disown their own wisdom because it does not fit the images that are generated by a media driven consumer society. These false images hijack our identity and guides our behaviors, relationships, and work in the world. People will continue to suffer from cultural blindness until there is an educational process that can help us resist the dominant culture and at the same time offer us a way to live together in the world that creates peace and justice for all human and non-human life. Education must shift into the solution and quit being part of the problem that continues to separate us from our larger Story. This separation has created damage to the earth, misuse of power, insanity and death. Dairmuid O'Murchu (2000, 1992) suggests the problem of separation and alienation may be rooted in a much larger context.

O'Murchu's thesis in Religion in Exile, is that we are a species living in exile, or as he refers to the words of Brueggemann, (1993) "a species that has largely forgotten its own story; that religion itself has contributed significantly to our alienated state; and moreover, that religion thrives on perpetuating that state of exile and alienation". (2000, p. viii) The problem of alienation and cultural amnesia is all pervasive and requires deeper and wider solutions. According to O'Murchu, "standard systems and institutions are likely to become more inept and incapable of grappling with the realities of our world. Increasing numbers of people, disillusioned or disorientated, may become embittered, angry and violent". (1992, p.10)

O'Murchu suggests the dominant patriarchal value system that fosters mechanistic, linear and rational thinking has "severed us from our inherent need for narrative and myth" (2000, p.45-46) Mechanistic consciousness tends to fragment and compartmentalize our life experiences, which furthers our sense of separation. Because Western schooling promotes an uncritical and competitive approach that fosters and sustains the "patriarchal, capitalistic infrastructure of an outdated culture" there is an ethical concern for all educators. Educators need to confront pedagogical questions as a matter of moral responsibility. (O'Murchu, 1992, p.152)

The Old World order is collapsing and the dominant culture in its desperate attempt to maintain its power is creating more fragmentation in all forms of life. O'Murchu offers the suggestion: "it may be the prophets outside our churches who will be the saviors of humankind" (1992, p. 58-59) How can educators contribute to a paradigm shift that will generate the prophets needed to redeem the world when institutions are part of the problem? O'Murchu notes:

Our educational system is *still* geared to preserving and maintaining the mechanistic consciousness that belongs to a past evolutionary phase of our development as a species. . . . Now that we have moved into the information age, which among other things throws new light on the human personality (our bodies, our brains, feelings, perceptions, etc.), we need a whole new pedagogy of education. It is inappropriate and even immoral to continue to *mechanically interfere* with the human mind when our human capacities seem to be *non-mechanical* in their essential nature. . . we don't have to procure those skills from *without*: increasingly we are realizing that they are all *within*. Can we create an educational system that will activate them appropriately? (O'Murchu, 1992, p.92-92)

Angela Merici appears to have understood the importance in developing and "activating" the inner skills within the women she taught. Contemplation was always followed by social action as was seen in the historical research. The oratory and pilgrimages were just one way she utilized non-mechanical methods teaching. Her life was educative in how she lived the larger Story, which I will soon discuss.

This study is not proposing that the solutions Angela's teachings provided to heal the alienation generated by corrupt patriarchal systems in 16th century Italy would work in the same way today as they did then. Nor, is this study suggesting the social, political, educational, or religious problems today are the same as the problems that Merici encountered. However, this study will propose that her narrative is an example of how changing the symbols and stories around a central figure within master story can reconcile us to our larger Story and human vocation. Merici's narrative could be re-conceptualized into a curriculum design that would evoke a prophetic response to the separation created by oppressive systems in postmodernity. Her pedagogy also places education within all forms of life not just schooling, which would provide a deeper and wider context for education as Moran (1989) suggests in Religious Education As A Second Language. The teaching methods used by Merici could also contribute to the conversation many educators are having regarding the imagination, multiple forms of intelligence and artistic, incarnational ways of teaching and learning.

In the words of O'Murchu:

It is time ripe for a religious quantum leap!--not into the vast unknown, but into the deep *story*. . . the time is ripe to forgo and outgrow the amnesia imposed by the culture of exile and to reclaim the great subverted story of who we really are as a spiritual species. When we choose to come out of alienation then we liberate the

Spirit within: that's the beginning of the long journey home. (O'Murchu, 2000, p.55)

How can educators unveil the web of propaganda and decode the cultural text that blinds us from living authentic lives together? What educational ideology can create new symbols to build a sense of connectedness and authentic social existence? What form of life curriculum can provide "inter-cultural, inter-generational, inter-institutional, and inter-religious dialogues"(Moran, 1989, p.217) so that we may educate out of the box? How can we as a community create non-mechanical forms of education that could foster the spiritual gifts of each person so they can share these gifts with the world? Educating religiously may provide the critical hermeneutic necessary for resisting the status quo but educators will need new skills and multiple forms of education for the prophets of the third millennium to rise up and reclaim our deeper story.

It is the task of curriculum making to design and structure environmental forms that will provide revelatory possibilities. Curriculum must allow people to access their own biography and cultural story to open the future for transformation. There must be an educational process that will empower people to reclaim their identity and direct their lives towards their human vocation. In order for education to be holistic and nurture all of our sensibilities it must cultivate and strengthen our innate potential and possibilities instead of suppressing them through the misuse of power through indoctrination or transmissive education. Angela Merici's narrative holds a *way* that allows humans to function as artists, who can reshape the way we live and dwell together.

The historical research indicates Angela Merici re-defined and retold the master story of Jesus the Christ and stories around Him in relationship to women. The stories of the women saints and the women that surrounded Jesus were a consistent vision to the Company of St. Ursula. It seems that Angela intentionally created this visual environment so the Company of St. Ursula could internalize these stories and become intervening force that could liberate the social imagination of Brescia. Angela Merici often appears to use stories and symbols of saints to challenge those around her to question their basic assumptions about family, church, and society and she wanted the women in The Company of St. Ursula to create the same counter-cultural impact upon society.

Merici was able to do this by creating educative and contemplative environments such as the oratory described in Section II and the pilgrimage at Varallo. The life-like picture book environment of the oratory and Varallo allowed women to be in relationship with these stories and symbols. It would seem contemplating these visual scenes assisted these women to access their what Winifred Whelan (1993) terms "bodily knowing". She relates the fact that stories mediate this form of knowing by manifesting a "felt sense" that can access "body wisdom" and inspire one to act upon their world. The value that is symbolized in the story externally may become internalized in the learner who then through a larger "felt sense" of knowing takes the "body wisdom" into the world in which they live. (1993, p.273-274)

. Utilizing art, stories, and symbols provided an incarnational method of teaching where contemplation led to action. Her pedagogy integrated a non-mechanical form of education that accessed their religious imagination. The transfiguring symbols that emerged from their imagination reconnected them to their Christian story so they could model a counter-cultural lifestyle. The key point is that these artistic forms of education provided alternative symbols for people to live their lives by.

Teachers and learners could become prophets of the third millennium but will need to examine what central and primary symbols in their own narrative are guiding them if any. There are symbols within every story that can be transfigurative or diabolical. The work of

Peter Slater (1979) in Dynamics of Religion contributes to the purpose of my study by providing a language to speak about the narrative of Angela Merici in a non-mechanical educational framework of stories and symbols.

We need *a way* to access transfiguring symbols and stories to create a new paradigm that will allow our human vocation to unfold in the world. I will now discuss the work of Peter Slater in conversation with Merici's teachings, which will begin to bridge this pre-modern narrative and our post-modern educational concerns.

Slater has been helpful in unveiling Angela's Merici's *way* or pedagogy in the following three ways: First, by showing how stories and a central, primary symbol guided and framed her pedagogical process. Second, by identifying how the symbols we currently live through are inadequate and how important it is for the narrative of a central figure and the stories around them to be redemptive. Slater indicates that if the central figure of a master story is "to come alive for new generations it needs to be retold, especially in relation to stories of new secondary figures. Their lives touch the original, while making contact with our own". (p.49-50) A critique of Merici's narrative reveals what could be possible when we re-appropriate the central figure in a master story and the stories around them in relation to our own narratives. Third, Slater's work assisted me in looking at the Merician narrative and teachings within context of pluralism because his framework may be applied to any religious tradition or culture.

An educative process will be transformative when it can resurrect our religious imagination and provide a way to reconnect us to our human Story and vocation. Angela Merici demonstrated that the power of creating new symbols to live through allowed people to transcend an existence that was no longer working. Her pedagogy created an alternative way of relating in the world by showing women how to resist the symbols or images being offered to them and instead they showed people how to live from a larger Story as they lived from the margins. How do we discern what symbols can guide us beyond this world to one that is more relational, collaborative and intentional in how we live? What stories or symbols need to be heard, re-heard, or buried? Slater discussion of his terminology will help answer these questions.

Slater (1978) uses the term primary symbol as "one which is central to the development of a particular religious tradition. It is constitutive of the distinctive character of that tradition and is not lightly given up by believers or followers of that particular way of life". (p.29) He makes the distinction between symbols or what may be a primary or secondary symbol not so much by the "symbol as such but its place in the pattern of current life and thought". He distinguishes this by their "places in the pattern" and calls them "central" and "auxiliary" symbols. (p.30) He notes:

Those symbols that are more or less central to the formation of a pattern are generally primary. Those that are marginal are generally secondary or tertiary. In almost all traditions, among those symbols which are constantly kept in a primary position, I find the one which consistently holds the central position. I shall refer to this. . .as the central symbol of a tradition". (Slater, 1978, p.30)

To be able to transcend the separation created by a fragmented culture or as Slater puts it the "negativities of existence" we need symbols that inspire new images of hope. Slater states:

I need symbols which both give me a sense of continuity through change and enable me to adapt to changing circumstances and perceptions along the way. . . .As we act on the vision communicated through particular images, we redefine our symbols in

relation to our developing situation. . . . The meaning of the symbol shifts as we act in terms of it and relate the history of our thinking to new and different frames of reference. (Slater, 1978,p.31)

According to Slater symbols “are not only used to articulate are chosen ways but also we live through them, gaining in wisdom as we do. Seeing through the inadequacies of previously satisfying symbol systems is one essential aspect of this process”. (p.31) The images of decay and corruption in the church and family in 16th century Brescia created a loss of hope and faith in people that concerned Angela Merici and others involved in lay ministries. The good news is “every tradition at its core has an actual human figure or text to which we may turn when asking what in this world affords us the possibility of something better” (1978, p.34) It is important to note the central figure or symbol “must at some point, connect our everyday religious encounters with the brute fact of existence”. Merici seemed to have the awareness that the life and death of Jesus the Christ was a *way* of resistance to the status quo and provided a “means toward a transcendent end” but just as important was the “*sense of being on the way*”. Slater emphasizes “*the sense of being on the way to its realization is intrinsic to the experience of the central figure among the faithful*”. (p.34-35)

. Merici’s biographers recorded that Angela Merici strongly believed that if each person could live the story of Jesus the Christ in their particular way within the world then the family and eventually society would be transformed. Authors, (Ledochowska 1968, Curry, 1991) who have written about her life and teachings convey that she understood the need to mobilize the poor and rich, men and women, young and old to transcend the dominant culture that created the corruption in the church and civil laws, as well as, the corrosion of human values which led to blatant sexuality, abuse of children and the destruction of family life. Biographical documents also indicate that the people who knew Angela Merici, or who were involved in her vision were also converted into a new way of life. (Ledochowska (1968), Mariani et al, 1986).

Angela re-appropriated the religious story of Jesus the Christ from the past to her present experiences that eventually shaped her future vocation. Slater’s theory is “the symbol that best concentrates thought and action on its distinctive way toward the realization of some transcendent end becomes central in a particular religious tradition”. He articulates:

The sense of direction informing the way is developed through the distinctive stories of the tradition which weave together its primary and secondary symbols that is religiously meaningful to the believer. . . Faced with the ambiguity of “the meaning of meaning,” when our concern is to express the intentionality of a particular tradition we do so by recalling its central story line. Told properly this “master story” conveys the spirit in which the tradition is lived. (Slater, 1978, p. 49)

It would seem that for a paradigm shift to be successful today it will depend on “the level of vision and intentionality” that directs our thinking. (Slater, 1978, p.167) More importantly, Slater places the emphasis on the “consistency of the priorities and values of central figures so that, whether they lived or died, their cause became a movement not restricted to their physical presence among their supporters”. The “saving identity” is resurrected so that “the same realism, the same priorities, the same principles of compassion and justice are found in stories about them and their way, after their deaths. . . as in their stories which they told when they were on their way”. (p.168-169)

For the narrative of a central figure and stories around them to be redemptive, educators would need facilitate a way so that in the words of Slater: “Whatever transcendent references we allow in our stories serve to raise our sights to whatever force we consider

capable of carrying our sense of meaning and value in life beyond the physical limitations of our current situation.” (p.169) Slater’s contention is “whatever our way” is that “even when we lose confidence in the plot-line of a traditional master story, our character will be such as to carry us through to new or renewed hope”. (p.174)

It seems the primary symbols within the Church and family was no longer providing the quality of life that could guide people and instill the much-needed hope. Angela retrieved the central character in Jesus the Christ to reclaim the vision of our larger Christian story. This indicates that her curriculum design had to be based in an education that allowed the freedom to critically reflect and discern institutional forms, including their own Church and family life. Because Brescian society operated under an ideology that was oppressive, corrupt, and immoral “Angela instinctively went back to the Sources”. The primary symbols in the narrative of Jesus the Christ and of the “Consecrated Virgins of the primitive Church had captured her imagination”. (Ledochowska, 1968, p.105)

Merici’s organizational design or what we would call today a curriculum design had an organizing principle in teaching women how to live and what might be defined today as educating religiously in the family, work, church, and community. Moran (1997) states: “the beginning point for teaching by design is a human in action”. Angela was not involved in schooling but she could be called a life artist, who taught from the margins to reshape patterns of life. Her curriculum was involved with analyzing what Brescian society was teaching and instead proposing a different design of life, or in Moran’s words: “the teacher by design studies the present design and proposes a redesign (p.70) Because she was a prophetic and wise woman, who was guided by a central figure whose own life taught that life was a constant process of birth, death, and rebirth, she advises her lady governors in her last Legacy that: “*if according to the times and circumstances, the need arises to make new rules or do something differently, do it prudently and with good advise*”. (Stone, 1996, p.231)

This legacy implies the understanding that as teachers and learners change then the design may change depending on the relationships in the environment. For now, I will examine just a few teachings from her original Primitive Rule, Counsels and Legacies.

The Merici curriculum was created in an ongoing process that invited the gifts of each woman to be used in a way that assisted them in forming their work or vocation in the world. The Rule was created at the beginning of the Company and was for all the women in the Company. It was a method to show them how to live in a particular way. The Counsels were directed toward the leaders or mentors of young women. It is a curriculum all teachers could benefit from today. The Legacies or Testament were directed toward the Lady-Governors, who will have the full responsibility of governing the Company after Angela’s death. Both the Counsels and Legacies were written shortly before Angela died. The first content I will examine is the Rule. (Proceedings, 1991, Eichmann, p. 101-102)

Stone (1996) writes: “the authors of Angela Merici: Contribution to a Biography do not hesitate to say that Rule provides the key to understanding the Company as a whole. . . .the maidens will be set apart by their behavior and way of life. . . .There will be something special about them which will invite others to say: ‘Who are they? In the world, yes, but not of it’ (p.3) They are united together in solidarity to serve God and neighbor in and through the social structures of Brescia by their alternative lifestyle, charity and service. The purpose of the Rule is to *advise* but never force young women how to live in the corrupt and immoral structures of Brescia. The “sacred precepts” were to guide everyone in the Company to live

how God created them to live as authentic Christians.

Angela believed the Rule was inspired by God to *arm* the women with the tools to create a new way of life. “Armed with the sacred precepts, they will be able to face all the difficulties and trials and trials in daily life, as the great Old Testament heroine, Judith”. (Stone, 1996,p.11-12) The Rule has eleven chapters or precepts that range from how to behave in public to prayer, poverty, virginity, and government. Virginity is a key symbol that sets the women’s behavior apart from people in their culture but does not separate their relationships with them as v21-21 indicates: *But let all our words, actions and behavior always be for the instruction and edification of those who have dealings with us, always having charity burning in our hearts.* (Stone, 1996, p.84)

Once the registration in the “Book of The Company” took place Angela sent her “daughters” back to their families. Remember that the life that these women went back to during the luxury of the Renaissance which was so sexualized that authorities had to publish regulations on dress to prevent an open scandal. Brescia was in the depths of misery “corruption of manners, moral wretchedness, the ravages of syphilis had contributed to the breakdown of family life and young women and girls were victims of violence and degradation”. The most disturbing social problem was young girls being the victims of vice because of the economics. The problem of “protecting and educating women and girls became one of acute urgency”. (Ledochowska, 1968, p.66)

Angela’s educatees engaged this life by living an alternative lifestyle where they refused to be bribed by luxury and unrestrained sexuality and chose instead abstinence and a life of simplicity. In chapter III of the Rule, Angela gives advise on how women should behave in public to resist “diabolical snares and traps” and other destructive social norms. (Stone, 1996, p.4) Due to the length of this paper I will not expound on these teachings but I will suggest that if they were to be re-appropriated some may be beneficial as an exercise in critical discernment of our sexualized culture. Her teachings could also be considered a pedagogy of resistance to create social change in post-modernity.

Learning how to live in a detached way from the dysfunctional norms of the Brescian dominant culture assisted women in maintaining their own identity and the space to develop their own spiritual gifts. Creating educative environments that maintain a critical distance from the status quo may awaken our desire for a deeper story and identity.

The Merici curriculum has other themes centered in developing the inner gifts of young women. One way previously mentioned was the nurturing of contemplation, prayer, and artistic forms of knowing. The content in the Legacies also stresses the importance of each person’s gifts and particular location when she advises the lady-governors to take their daughters seriously as individuals and to be especially attentive to the unique qualities: *Have each and every one engraved on your mind and heart, not only their names but also their situation and character and every detail about them. This will not be difficult if you enfold them with heartfelt charity.* (Proceedings, 1991, p.103)

Angela personalizes her curriculum towards the different women in the Company as seen in her organizational model. The mutual collaboration of women leading and teaching women provided was educational in itself. The right use of power was established and each person was a teacher according to his or her particular gifts. She is inventive and as a teacher her creative process directs her to know what kinds of problems and interests her learners will have. She then connects them to “a way” that would develop their virtues and the gifts that would help solve their problems and the problems of others within society.

These women became mirrors or symbols that modeled the image of God as they participated in their everyday existence.

Her multi-leveled curriculum has too many dimensions to examine in this paper so I will only briefly explore the Counsels. They provided the educational content that guided the formation of women. In part the teachings directed the way to live as a symbol of God by mirroring the *way* of Jesus the Christ in their particular circumstances. Angela utilizes what is known today as feminist language and images in the spiritual and educational formation of women. Most of her pedagogy embodies a feminist form of educating as seen in her mutual, relational, and intuitive, ways of teaching, as well as, her collaborative networking within Brescia. The Counsels have been admired as a formation handbook and have over the centuries attracted educators by their profound human and pedagogical content. (Stone, 1996, 107)

The historical section of this paper reflects Angela's own educational process was formed through the modeling and mirroring of others. It would seem she recognized the importance of a teacher to be a symbol for others in modeling virtuous living. How did she envision the central figure, Jesus the Christ as Teacher in the context of the "mothers" as teachers in the Company? To be an authentic teacher the leaders must model what they teach. For example, in the Sixth Counsel, there are three themes: superiors or leaders must be a model to those in their charge; a necessary self-examen; and examples of model behavior. *v1-2, 6 1. As for you, live and behave in such a way that your daughters may see in you a model. 2. And what you want them to do, do it yourselves first. 3. Act therefore in such a way that also following your example, they may stir and spur themselves into virtuous living.* There should be no dichotomy between their teaching and how they live and behave. Leaders should be a mirror for those in their charge (Stone, 1996, p.149-150)

The content in Self-examen is shaped to allow the critical discernment of the leader in relationship with the text, student, and community. Angela proposes questions for them to reflect upon usually in the context of gospel teachings and their own lived experience. *3. How will you reprove or admonish them for some defect if it is still in you? 4. Or counsel them, and urge them to any virtue, which you do not first possess? 5. or at least, do not then begin to practice yourselves with them?* The model behavior Counsel is related to service, integrity, modesty and solidarity of effort and action. "Angela attaches value to good example and imitation in the whole process of learning--especially from those with whom we live and work." *For it is right and fitting that the mothers be an example and a mirror for their daughters, especially in modesty, and behavior, and other actions, ordinary and extraordinary.* (Stone, 1996, p151)

Eisner (2002) might agree that Angela's curriculum reflects the values of her times. (p.204) The lady-governors made access to curriculum content easier for young women. Their position in society allowed Angela to bring educational processes into the home, work, and community of the young charges. The girls would go back into their home, their leaders would meet with their parents and /or work supervisor to ensure the young women would have no obstacles to their learning, which was to practice and model the teachings of the Company. (Stone, 1996, p151) The Merician curriculum became more inclusive because many people within the family, community, work and church who interacted with the women had access to the teaching and learning because as Moran writes, the learning emerged in the interplay within and between these multiple forms of life. (1989,p.43) Women, children, and men who resisted the poisonous atmosphere of the age became the catalyst for subverting

patriarchal ideology through modeling in their daily lives Christian living.

Gallagher (1998) suggests that the Religious Education needs to become “counter-cultural, in the sense of helping students to identify dehumanizing factors present in the lifestyles and assumptions of the culture”. To resist the images of the dominant culture and to distance oneself from the diminished life it offers. Gallagher cautions us not to fall into “moaning” about the “isms” (materialism, capitalism, hedonism, immanentism...) because real Christian discernment and critique is “ultimately positive search for a genuine life”. (1998, p.114-115) It would seem important to look for transfiguring symbols in multiple forms of life as we socially discern and critique our culture.

In closing, Gallagher (1998) proposes “new energy” may be released into our culture today because “principle features of the postmodern sensibility awaken ancient dimensions of Christian faith”. He is among other religious educators, (Bacik 1996, Harris, 1989) who are aware of the mystical and prophetic dimensions of faith that are emerging today. He summarizes a few of these post-modern features that call forth “ancient dimensions of faith”. Here is where we may find a case for utilizing the pre-modern narrative of Angela Merici today. These features are as follows: the postmodern “distrust of the rational” calls forth the “narrative”, the awareness of the “feminine and ecological” calls forth the “Christian “connectedness and holism”, the quest for post-materialist quality of life”, calls forth the “Gospel as an alternative way”, the “return of spirituality” calls forth “contemplation” and “prayer”, the “sense of dispersal”, calls forth the “community as support”, the disillusionment with “utopias” calls forth “compassion and social solidarity”. Gallagher calls us forth to discern contemporary culture and to find a means of connecting to it so we can embody a “genuine life”. (p.142-145)

Could it be that “echoes of ancient wisdom have been awakened by postmodern sensibilities”(p.142) with the narrative of Angela Merici? However relevant her story is to religious educators we must recognize that our master story in a Christian tradition might not work for everyone. Every tradition or culture has a master story with central figures that can connect us to our deeper story and identity. It is also important to say that in our pluralistic world there is no one way, no one master story, and no one central figure. The narrative of Angela Merici was chosen for this study for two reasons. First, because her life and teachings clearly reflect an educational form that could easily be adapted to other religions or cultures, as long as the central character, “would carry them through to a renewed hope” and provides a *way* that is redemptive *along the way* to a transcendent end. (Slater, 1978, p.173) Second, this writer’s own lived experience and development was shaped by the Jesus the Christ and stories of saints, as well as, other figures who lived *a way* that brought me from my painful existence into a vision of hope. Researching the narrative of Angela Merici led this writer to concur with Slater’s point “that each master story is incomplete if it is thought to refer only to the past”. (p.173-175)

Slater (1978) articulates the need for pointers not for what is “hidden but ways of transforming the other’s vision of what is potentially already present”. It is important to remember, especially now before another war, Slater’s advise that to be able to liberate people toward a new future transfiguring symbols will be needed to provide a counter-story. (1978, p.23) Who will assist the blind to see what is hidden? Who will help us to discern between transfigurative and diabolic symbols? Slater states: “a creative thinker and great teacher is one who takes us through the familiar stories and earlier expressions of principle and points us to new conclusions, which we can then see to be congruent to what has gone on

before”. (p.167) Unveiling the narrative of Angela Merici may be a pointer towards what is already present. I will now pose some questions to critique her pedagogy.

Merici’s curriculum connected women in an interplay with the home, school, community and church. Men were also transformed when they interacted with Angela as it was indicated earlier in this paper but does her pedagogy provide the inclusiveness for today? Can her artistic methods of educating be embodied by most educators? Can they can model a counter-cultural lifestyle? Merici’s process provided enough critical discernment for 16th century Italy but would it hold up today? Are there enough people who would care to take the time and create the space that is needed to “liberate people toward a counter-story” especially within schooling? Would people that are accustomed to high intensity stimulus be too uncomfortable in the silence that is needed in contemplative environments? Are institutions willing to surrender their addictions and power? Can multiculturalism be rooted in transcendence? Thomas Groome (1980) has some wise advise for educators who want to deal with education critically, creatively, and prophetically but do not feel they have the courage to be a prophet. He reminds us that “whenever we cause people to critically reflect on their lives in light of the Story, and propose a Vision that calls people beyond their taken-for granted world, we are being prophetic”. (p.271) Groome speaks about the courage it took for Jesus the Christ to be a prophet and proclaims:

Prophecy in our time requires no less courage. But if we cannot be great prophets, we can at least try to be small prophets. As best we can, we need to cause people and ourselves to question our social world and act to create it in the direction of the Kingdom (Groome, 1980, p.272)

Many of the current Ursulines, who teach from the margins, believe it is the *time* and the *circumstances* are right to *do something differently* with the teachings and narrative of Angela. I intend to continue the unveiling of Angela Merici through the investigation of her teachings. I also hope to access some of the “bodily wisdom” that these postmodern Ursuline women may have to offer this study from living the story of Angela.

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