



## Chapter Five

### Toward a Female Spirituality

*Activity: Again using the medium of your choice, make a representation of the demons or the “monsters” which plague you—the sins, temptations, failings you wrestle with or the negative voices and criticism you hear. Some people find it cathartic to ritually destroy these representations. Offer the demons to God in prayer, then burn or dismantle your creations.*

When my father died unexpectedly, the community's response was so wonderfully overwhelming at first that my family will never be able adequately to express our gratitude for their love and support. However, as anyone knows who has had to sit with grief, there came a certain point in the calendar—and I'm not quite sure precisely when it was—when the community expected us to be done with grieving. A very close male friend of mine said to me that I wasn't handling my dad's death like he thought I would. Well, no, I guess I wasn't. And if the truth were told, I wasn't handling it like I thought I would. At first there was a sense of loss, which is to be expected, but then came feelings that were anything but expected: I experienced a crushing sense of personal failure. Whenever I made the mistake of men-

tioning this, well-meaning friends would lecture me about all my accomplishments. How could I possibly feel that I was a failure? How could I possibly, indeed? Yet I did, and their words only exacerbated my condition because I was not allowed to acknowledge how I felt. I grew more and more silent and withdrawn and depressed. An avid writer and reader, I could not write for months and did not want to read, either.

I had always suspected that my father had felt failure all too keenly, having lost his business, then suffered through a series of jobs that didn't quite work out for him. He was even fired from one. Slowly I became aware that I was drawing parallels in our lives: I, too, had suffered some major career setbacks, some of them of my own choosing, others not. I began to wonder what Dad had thought of me, if he had seen me as a failure, too. I began to wonder what he thought of himself.

Eventually I was able to write about my father. Doing so allowed me to own my experiences and feelings. I reevaluated my definition of success. And I reclaimed my past as mine, not as a life lived under his approving or disapproving gaze—nor anyone else's, for that matter.

## **Women and Relationships**

Although my grief process confounded my friends, my family and even myself, it was, I later discovered, not really that unusual. Carol Gilligan, a psychologist who has studied female life development, has discovered that often women experience the disruption of a relationship as not only a loss of the relationship, but also as a loss of self. Children leaving home for college, a divorce or the death of a family member may affect women in ways that baffle others and, perhaps, even baffle themselves. I have known women who slid into serious bouts of depression requiring medical intervention after their youngest child left home while their husbands

watched helplessly. My own situation was compounded by the fact that my eldest child had entered college only a few months before Dad died.

It is not that relationships are more important for women than for men. It is not that women grieve more than men do. I have witnessed in my own small community the devastating loss men feel after the death of a child or a spouse, and a woman friend told me in genuine awe that her husband cries after each phone call they receive from their college daughter. I am also not surprised—although greatly saddened—when an elderly neighbor abandons the struggle for life after his wife of fifty years dies, dying himself soon afterwards. Rather it is that women define their very identity in a context of relationship, judging their worth by a standard of responsibility and care—at least this was so for every woman interviewed in Gilligan's study.

In the traditional idea of human development, women, triggered by the loss of relationships at midlife because their children are grown or they have experienced family deaths, return to the unfinished business of adolescence, the business of separation from family and growth into autonomy. That is, of course, the male model, which has always suggested that women never complete their separation from parents and which has always depicted women as mired in relationships. (I remember my mother halfheartedly complaining after a parent-teacher conference for me that she had always been known as "someone else's": She used to be introduced as her parents' daughter, then her husband's wife and now, when she finally thought she could be the possessor and not the possessed, she was known as her children's mother. It just didn't seem fair, she laughed.) But is the male model the ideal model for all humans?

Gilligan's research would suggest otherwise. For a male, leaving childhood means that he renounces parental relationships, especially his relationship with his mother, in order to achieve autonomy, the certainty of his own beliefs and his

freedom of self-expression. The search for autonomy often wins for a man respect, approval and even relationships. However, highly successful men have very few attachments. One has only to read the lives of Martin Luther or Mahatma Gandhi for examples. In fact, men will often see relationships as qualifying their identity rather than helping them realize it. Men define their identity through achievements, accomplishments.

However, the development for women is often much different. Rather than separation, women's lives are usually characterized by the ongoing process of attachment, a process that creates and sustains the community. Rather than a search for more autonomy and freedom of self-expression, women often relinquish these qualities in order to preserve relationships or to protect others. Autonomy frequently becomes a dangerous word for women. Such acts of relinquishment often lead women to see themselves as powerless and helpless, constantly compromised. Yet at other times they will feel power and magnanimity precisely from the self-sacrifice. Rather than seeing relationships as jeopardizing their identity, women see professional achievements and accomplishments as jeopardizing their relationships, thus also jeopardizing their identity.

### **Spiritual Development Patterns**

It would seem logical, therefore, that since the development patterns are different for women and men, their spiritual development patterns will be different also. That is just what Gilligan discovered. For a man, the path of adult spiritual development will lead him from autonomy to intimacy, bringing to an end his isolation and indifference toward others, and leading him toward adult love. For a woman, the opposite is true. At some point she must realize that she, too, should be included in the group of people she cares for and nurtures, that she, too, is a member of the group it is moral not to hurt. Whereas the transformative spiritual experience for men is

intimacy; for a woman, it is choice—the choice to be true to herself as well as true to the people she loves.

The dilemma, therefore, is really the same for both sexes: the conflict between personal integrity and the care for others. Male development emphasizes the absolute value of personal integrity, giving rise to an ethic of justice, an ethic embedded in rights, fairness, equality and reciprocity, truth and respect. Female development emphasizes the absolute value of care, giving rise to an ethic of responsibility, embedded in compassion, generosity and a desire not to hurt others. For spiritual growth to occur, the individual must move away from the absolute that has up to then defined him or her and move toward the direction of the other qualities. The result will be both a fuller sense of self and fuller relationships. Rather than seeing the “self” as something that is against another, threatened and opposed by another, the more mature spiritual vision is that the true self is not totally separated from the other, but grows with the other alternately through identification and differentiation into a mutually enhancing relationship. What had once been thought to be opposites can now be held together in a constantly evolving synthesis: the self and the other, matter and spirit, God and human, love and power, being and doing, private and public, compassion and self-affirmation.

The point is that men’s and women’s spiritual paths are often very different, yet far too often women have tried to follow the male model, frequently to their detriment. Trying to move from the personal integrity perspective to the care perspective caused me much anguish since I had not yet defined my own personal integrity. I should have been moving in the opposite direction. For twenty years I struggled against what I thought was a selfish desire to become a writer in favor of teaching, which seemed to me the better way to serve God. What else could I add to the world of ideas, I asked myself. How will the world be better with one more book in it? Isn’t it escapism to live in my imagination for hours upon hours?

Finally I realized that writing ultimately has nothing to do with publication and potential readers. Writing is a solitary pilgrimage into the center of my being. What I most feared during those twenty years was that I would not like what I would find there at my center, or worse yet, I would find only emptiness there. And, too, I realized that my teaching was actually rooted in the ego, in the need for my students and colleagues to assure me that I did have something to offer, that I was a worthwhile and good person. I had to learn to open myself, let go and trust the writing process to take me where I was supposed to go. I quit my job and gave myself one experimental year as a full-time writer. Facing the blank page every day was more difficult than facing a room full of students, because I couldn't hide behind my notes and textbooks and grade book; for the first time I had to squarely face my own thoughts and ideas. What I always thought of as a selfish dream has proven to be the most self-denying thing I have ever done.

Paradoxically, beginning this solitary pilgrimage on paper has made me more open and accepting of others. I don't see my students, now that I've returned to teaching, as vessels that have to be filled with knowledge and experience, but as fellow sojourners on the way to truth. I am more relaxed and happy around my friends and family now and recognize the great gifts they are to me. I have touched others with my written words, inspiring them to write and to read and to begin their own journeys to discover self. (By eschewing publication for a time, I have been granted a receptive audience, although not the audience I would have guessed.) My husband said the enthusiastic, dream-filled and hopeful girl he married was back. I thought she was lost. She hadn't been lost, merely imprisoned by years of neglect. What if she had died in her prison? What would have been left of me? What would I have been able to offer others then?

My journey is my journey, of course. Each woman will have to find her own way. Sometimes that way may seem to conflict with everything she has been taught about the spiritual

journey, but she must remember that often what she was taught was the male model that has eclipsed female experiences and female models of spirituality. Let's reexamine one model of female spirituality: the model of Mary, Jesus' mother.

## **Mary**

There are two ways of speaking of Mary's holiness, both of them deriving from Luke's presentation of her. The traditional way is to see Mary as the sinless virgin and mother, a model of humility and selfless devotion. However, some feminist scholars caution that we must be careful in our devotion not to idealize her until she becomes a kind of "goddess." Luke certainly does not present her this way. Rather, Luke presents Mary as the first disciple. Because we are called to be disciples, we likewise are all to "give birth" to Christ, to make Christ apparent to the world. We are all graced in this mission. And we all carry out the mission through graced human endeavor. To say otherwise precludes us from imitating Mary.

Mary herself in Luke's Gospel characterizes herself as a slave (1:38; new translations upgrade the language from bond slave or handmaiden to servant). She, therefore, becomes a model of submissiveness, dependence and helplessness. As a result, Mary seems passive to many readers of Luke's Gospel, submitting to God, husband, son, political authorities and the early Church leaders.

Yet the Magnificat Mary sings is not the song of a passive victim (1:46-55). She praises God at the same time that she realizes her own worth. She will now be called blessed by ages to come, not, according to her prayer, because she has virginally conceived but because she has remained faithful, recognized the Messianic message of the angel and will witness the rehabilitation of Israel as God promised to all who remain faithful to the Law. Julia Esquivel, a Guatemalan teacher, poet and human rights advocate, sees her as the model of prophetic freedom:

*Mary, the young peasant from Nazareth, is a paradigm for all women who have faith and hope for a new society in which human life is the most sacred value. Engaged to an artisan, Mary was preparing herself for a married life. But the intervention of the God of the poor superseded that dream and project for something larger, a plan for her own people and for all of humanity.<sup>1</sup>*

So the second way to talk about Mary's holiness is as a woman on the universal quest for liberation and wholeness. When she calls herself a slave, she is not passively acquiescing to the will of another (even though that other is God), but actively accepting God, linking her will with God's will. When she calls herself a slave, she is actually using for herself the honorable Jewish title of "slave of God"—a title applied to Abraham, Isaac, Joshua, Moses, David and the prophets. When we consider all the other allusions to biblical themes Luke has woven into this first chapter of his Gospel, we begin to see that Luke's description of Mary is far more complicated than that of a passive virgin. Elizabeth and Zachariah recall another aged and childless couple, Sarah and Abraham, and God's power to make fertile what is not. We hear echoes of Samson's birth to Manoah, which was also announced by an angel, and Samuel's birth to Hannah. The angel who visits Mary is Gabriel, the angel who appeared to Daniel in the Old Testament, announcing the beginning of the end times. The spirit overshadowing Mary reminds us of God's presence above the Ark in Exodus. God dwells with his people, first in the form of fire and smoke; now in the form of a man, Jesus. The child leaping in Elizabeth's womb at Mary's greeting recalls Esau and Jacob leaping in Rebekah's womb. Are John and Jesus the new Esau and Jacob where the older (i.e., the Law, the Covenant) serves the younger (the Christ, the fulfillment and realization of the Covenant)? Joseph and Mary's journey to Bethlehem sounds very much like the journey Jacob made with his pregnant wife Rachel to his homeland, Bethlehem, where Rachel gave birth to Benjamin. Joseph and

Mary's losing Jesus as a child reminds us of how Jacob lost Joseph. And like Jacob, Mary pondered, treasured everything in her heart.

These allusions suggest that Mary's life should be seen within the context of God's Messianic promises to all of the chosen people. Mary is the New Israel, willingly and joyfully accepting both God's promises and the world's persecution in order to realize the Kingdom that has now broken through with the birth of its Messiah. She is anything but passive. As such, her life challenges women to their own spiritual acceptance of God's promises and the world's persecution.

A better way to look at spiritual development, then, is not to reject one model in favor of another, but to see that the male and female models are mutually enhancing, having much to teach each other. Mary represents the response of the perfect disciple in two ways. She represents the absolute value of care, exhibiting obedient trust, self-sacrifice and an intimacy with God that was unparalleled. She also represents the absolute value of personal integrity, believing in her own worth despite what the voices of the world around her proclaimed: You are poor; you are a woman, an unwed mother, lowly. She knew that in God's eyes she was much more. She was beautiful, mighty, grand. She was blessed.

### ***Questions for Reflection and Discussion***

- *Describe your devotion to Mary. What factors shaped your attitude toward her? Has your attitude changed over the years? Why, do you think?*
- *Who have been your models of the spiritual life? What about these models attracted you to them? How would you characterize their spiritual lives?*
- *Has it been true in your experience that women often find professional responsibilities and accomplishments threatening not only to important relationships in their lives, but*

*to their own sense of identity?*

- *Describe your feelings and reactions to a lost relationship: a broken friendship, divorce, the “empty nest” stage when the children left home or the death of a loved one.*
- *If you were to include yourself in the group of loved ones you care for, what would you do in order to nurture yourself?*

## **Note**

<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Fischer. *Women at the Well: Feminist Perspectives on Spiritual Direction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), p. 36.