

# MOTHER-DAUGHTER REMNANTS IN RELIGIOUS LIFE

JANET RUFFING, S.M.

I am a woman who hears voices and replays scenes inside her head, vivid memories and impressions from childhood and from experiences in religious life. I often wish I had the strange gaps in my memory that many of my friends report in theirs—but I do not. Instead, I have images and traces of conversations that refuse to disappear. From time to time, these remnants that belong to the young girl in me erupt into my present consciousness and plead for fresh attention. In my struggles to say “yes” to recent changes in my life I have had to hear these voices out again. Feminism has helped me to hear them differently: I have found an important way of coming to understand myself as a woman who bears within herself tensions inherent in a society that still refuses to admit women to full personhood.

My voices often seem to be the introjected ecclesiastical and secular expectations and limitations set by our society for women. When I began to interpret these voices against their societal background, feminism enabled me to see that what I was perceiving to be a struggle with my religious community was merely one version of the common struggle on the part of contemporary women to define themselves differently. I believe that we women religious can claim opportunities from feminism for grace and transformation if we can free ourselves from the culturally defined limits that have been set for us. In the reflections that follow, I would like to explore some of our common ground as women, to look at one way of describing our constricting fears, so that we might develop

confidence in our capacity to re-imagine our way through these impasses.

Nancy Friday, through her book *My Mother, Myself*, led me to engage in more than two years of reflection and discussion on the influences of the mother-daughter relationship on other relationships. This book awakened a chorus of voices from my past that seemed to be on the side of choosing security instead of challenge, voices within my religious life experience that carried the traditional patterns of female expectations in church and society. I had come to value in myself what was useful to the patterns of community life and ministry. I had forgotten or neglected those aspects of myself that did not seem to fit but now wanted a place to thrive.

## CHILDHOOD RELATIONSHIP PERPETUATED

Friday contends that most women are still concerned with unfinished business related to mother-daughter relationships. She asserts that our emergence into a fully autonomous identity requires the working through of unresolved ambivalences in this primary relationship. The entire book is a reflection on the initial symbiotic condition:

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Sister Ruffing is currently pursuing a doctorate in Christian spirituality at the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California. She is also a staff member of the Burlingame Sisters of Mercy's *Fully Alive* holistic workshop team.

"An infant needs an almost suffocating kind of closeness to the body whose womb it so recently and reluctantly left. The technical word for this closeness is 'symbiosis.'" Most women in our culture have been socialized to maintain this symbiotic childhood relationship for a much longer time than men have been.

Because many women have inadequately completed the early-life process of separation, it is common to transfer symbiotic styles of being to relationships with both men and other women as well as to social groups or institutions such as religious communities, the church, or business corporations. This issue of inadequate or incomplete symbiotic nurturance and its resolution is an invitation to work to examine our relationship with our own mothers with the greatest possible honesty. Moreover, I think that exploring some of the common transferences we experience in religious life (despite more than ten years of attempting to restructure our communal forms on a model other than that of mother-daughter) will enable us to enhance rather than inhibit one another's human development.

### JESUS INTENDED SEPARATION

Although most of my reflections will be drawn from experience and tend toward a psychological and cultural analysis, I would like to give a theological context to this set of issues. When Jesus discusses the conditions of discipleship with his followers, he emphasizes the independence and separateness necessary for them:

Do not suppose that my mission on earth is to spread peace. My mission is to spread, not peace, but division. I have come to set a man at odds with his father, a daughter with her mother, a daughter-in-law with her mother-in-law; in short to make a person's enemies those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother, son or daughter, more than me is not worthy of me. He who will not take up his cross and come after me is not worthy of me. He who seeks only himself brings himself to ruin, whereas he who brings himself to nought for me discovers who he is. (Matthew 10:34-39)

Earlier in our religious lives, we may have applied these words of Jesus to the disruption of familial relationships that entrance into religious life occasioned. We did separate from our families; we did experience being at odds with our culture and sometimes even with our friends. Those closest to us often did not understand and could not wholly support us in our decision, even though they loved us.

I have come to understand a deeper meaning in these words of Jesus, words that we often manage to forget or to treat as merely figurative. The call of

Jesus is to a radical form of personal and communal freedom, a freedom that only comes into being when we can effectively separate ourselves from the "oughts" and "shoulds" of our familial archetypical relationships. It is ultimately Jesus who invites us forward into a life of discipleship and intimacy, causing us to transcend the limitations imposed on us by our initial family configuration and cultural milieu. This separation from our internal complexes as well as from the collective expectations of society is described in Jungian terms by the concept of individuation. It is a process that both happens to us and requires our conscious participation.

The series of divisions in the lives of the disciples is occasioned by the new demands Jesus brings. The old rules of social relationships no longer hold. The disciples followed him, listened to him, and now they are called to invest themselves in his mission, a mission that will lead to hardship, disappointment, persecution, and a full sharing in Jesus' life. Although the disciples are commissioned as a group, each is required to respond individually. It is the diminishment of this capacity for individual responsiveness that I would like to explore in relation to the specifically feminine problems of symbiosis, separation, and competition. These problems represent the sometimes misunderstood, and even discouraged, attempts of women in religious life to achieve the necessary level of autonomy that makes a life of service and surrender possible.

### AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL EXCURSION

Once I started distinguishing the voices in my past that discouraged me from risking separation and achievement, I also began to hear the same kinds of inhibiting voices in conversations with other women. I began to wonder how much we reinforce this particular set of feminine patterns within religious communities. At the time, I was planning to begin doctoral studies; I was also trying to understand why it had taken me so long to realize that this was an appropriate and desirable course of action for me. Within my congregation, few women had been encouraged to pursue advanced degrees. Among those who had attained them, there was a history of difficult readjustment after studies or else departure from the order. I had successfully taught high school for a number of years and felt many strong bonds with the women who had shared this ministry with me. I did not want to become a misfit. Yet I had to come to terms with my gifts and desires, the unmistakable direction in which God seemed to be moving me, and their apparent disharmony with some of the perceived goals and values of my congregation. If I went to graduate school, I would be initiating a process of separation leading to an unpredictable outcome. Yet I did not feel that opposition was necessary between my new ministerial goals and my



fundamental choice of religious life. I needed to find a way of being true to myself and to religious life as well. This process was frightening, exciting, painful, and challenging.

This tension became easier for me to resolve when I realized that one of its sources was rooted in conventional feminine attitudes existing in my community. Advanced degrees—and the ministry that would necessarily follow—did not seem to fit the typical role of women in the church. The need for us to train our own theologians had not risen to a conscious level, nor were we as a group yet questioning the continued dependence of women religious on theology produced by men alone. I began to understand that what I was experiencing as a conflict between my own desires and goals and those of my congregation was not as personal as I had first imagined but was a conflict shared by many women whose self-definition no longer fit their society's. Unfortunately, most women have internalized these societal expectations and unconsciously impose them on one another. Reading feminist literature has helped me to interpret my experience in this light and enabled me to become more compassionate and less frustrated.

### SYMBIOTIC RELATIONSHIPS

While preparing this article, I gathered together a small group of women religious to share their stories. We were all graduate students in theology and living apart from our religious communities; we all had dealt with the mother-daughter re-

lationship in its transference to our communities, but our conversations revealed the great diversity among our experiences.

What is this symbiosis that manifests itself in the lives of many women religious? Nancy Friday offers this explanation:

"It is especially important for women to understand the meaning of symbiosis because for so many of us, it becomes a lifelong way of relating. Very early on, the young boy is trained to make it on his own. To be independent. As young girls, we are trained to see our value in the partnerships we form. To symbiose."

"At the beginning of life," writes Friday, "symbiosis is of prime, positive importance to both sexes. It begins as a growth process, freeing the infant of the fear of being vulnerable and alone, giving her the courage to develop. If we get enough symbiosis in the beginning, we will later remember its pleasures and be able to look for it in others; to accept and immerse ourselves in it when we find it and 'move out of it again' when we are sated, knowing that we will always be able to re-establish it. We will trust and enjoy love, take it as a part of life's feast—not feel we must devour every crumb because it may never come again. If we do not experience this first symbiosis, we look for it the rest of our lives, but even if we do find it, we will not trust it—hanging on so desperately that we will suffocate the other person, boring him to death."

Friday goes on to describe the initial symbiosis of the fetus in its mother's womb, literally a condition in which the fetus cannot live without the mother.

After birth, the infant slowly distinguishes between itself and the mother, becoming accustomed to the mother's comings and goings in response to its needs. It is this process that establishes basic trust, according to Erik Erikson's theory of development.

Yet, as Friday points out, the legacy of basic trust from our mothers encompasses much more. A woman identifies with her mother; she becomes deeply influenced by the image of her as a woman. A boy will not be so keenly marked by his mother's trust; he will usually take on (introject) his father's sense of trust along with being influenced by his early symbiotic experience with his mother. With our mothers as role models for us as women, we may have problems: if they "are not separate people themselves, we cannot help but take in their anxiety and fear, their need to be symbiosed with someone. If we do not see them involved in their own work, or enjoying something for themselves, we too do not believe in accomplishment or pleasure outside of a partnership. We denigrate anything that we alone experience; we say, 'It's more fun when there's someone else along.' The fact is we're afraid to go any place alone."

When we sisters discussed these qualities as we felt them in our religious lives, most of us agreed with this statement made by one of our group: "I think when we come into religious life, not after college, maybe, but after high school, just as we put our identification with mother as a child, we put ours with the community. I think in doing that we never come to our own identity, never grow to the security of listening to the life within ourselves. I think this has to happen for religious life to evolve." Another woman described the societal images we have internalized in this way: "I think women have been trained, conditioned in society, to image themselves in relationships. I am the mother of . . . the wife of . . . instead of *I am*. All of us have to cope with the problem of emergence out of these traditional images of women and the expectations of our own culture."

### SEPARATION NEEDED FOR IDENTITY

The transference of a symbiotic style of relationship to one's religious community is common, especially among younger women. During the initial stages of formation and the first few years of ministry, we tend to become identified with the community. Our partnership relationship is with the congregation as we adapt to its life and ministry. Eventually, however, if we are to become fully self-actualized women, we will find it necessary to separate our personal identity from submersion in the group.

Friday gives several checkpoints or symptoms that may suggest when relationships in adult life have become symbiotic. For example, in decision making, one experiences a problem in choosing between security and satisfaction. This indicates a

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poor ability to take risks. A symbiotic woman takes the first job that comes along, being willing to relinquish creative and challenging possibilities for seemingly reliable security. She is unable to imagine herself being alone or independent even for relatively short periods of time. Finally, she has very little energy left to cope with her current life situation. In addition, her relationships often exist only at the lowest level of common interests for fear of breaking the bond with her partner or group by asserting her individuality and unique interests.

In religious communities this pattern manifests itself in women who are unable to seek new styles of ministry even after they are no longer challenged by the kind in which they have been competent. Others find excuses for not taking available sabbaticals or time off that would leave a vacuum in the secure patterns of their lives. Some are fearful about venturing into an activity that others in the community may disapprove of or not be able to share. Often, a sister's ambivalent feelings, though not always apparent, surface as tensions in her relationships with other women in the community. Women, more than men, seem to fear that if they enjoy personal achievement somehow their relationships with others will be weakened. The deep fear is that if I am myself, I will lose the nurturing I want.

Friday suggests: "Another place to look for clues as to whether we may still be overly tied to mother is in our relationship to men, to other women, and in our approach to work." If we find ourselves experiencing "the need to cling, fear of loss, the inability to push forward and/or compete" with any degree of intensity, these symptoms might suggest

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a look at our mother-daughter memories when we are feeling stuck or trapped.

These issues, which are internal and psychological, are often complicated by societal norms. They can also become confused with gospel values, which invite us to be self-giving, self-sacrificing, self-forgetful, and concerned for others more than for ourselves. Moreover, while I want to hold on to these values, I am often humbly brought to admit that I cannot give away a self I do not have. This self-sacrificing kind of love presupposes a stage of personal and spiritual growth that is possible only after having established an identity that is not based solely on a partnership.

### SEPARATION FOR LOVE

I think it is important to keep in mind, since none of us had a perfect mother, that each of us has a certain degree of growing and understanding to accomplish in our lives. We need not concern ourselves with whether our mothers were perfect but only with whether they were adequate. Friday poses the question in this way: “Have the two of us loved each other in the early years and separated in the latter so that we allow each other room, air enough, freedom enough to continue to love?” I think we can fruitfully reflect on this question in relation to our religious communities as well. Do our expectations of one another and our structures create a social situation in which most of the members may freely love one another?

This experience of relational freedom can be described in several ways. One is by contrasting adult relationships with the earlier symbiotic form of

relationship. Friday notes that “if women are able to attain separation through therapy, we see a dramatic difference. There is a sudden burst of energy, of creativity. And we see this in their lives, their work, their sexuality.”

After listening to many women religious talk about what a year off for study has meant in their lives, I would say the following comment was typical:

The description of low-energy and low-intensity relationships fit me perfectly the years I was teaching elementary school. But when I went to study for a master's degree in Canada, I experienced a sudden burst of energy. I was myself. I was more than a nameless “sister.” I no longer felt I was being stuffed in a mold; I was able to test out what I really could do without all that pressure, yet in a very competitive situation, mostly with men. I could be myself where it wouldn't be a huge thing reflecting on the community.

In her autobiographical reflections, *Changing*, actress Liv Ullmann describes the sharp contrast in her life before and after the separation phase. About her pre-separation period, she says, “I have spent hours completely involved in what I thought other people wished to see me doing. The fear of hurting, fear of authority, the need for love have put me in hopeless situations. I have suppressed my own desires and wishes and, ever eager to please, have done what was expected of me.” This penchant for pleasing and doing what is expected has been reinforced in us women over and over again, by other women, ourselves, and society in general. If I have grown up learning to value myself only in relationships, then I have probably become quite skilled at finding the pleasing response to another's expectations.

One finds much less depression and more hope in Ullmann's description of becoming separate: “I made better contact with others. I found respect when I became independent, ceased to cling. Ceased to rely so desperately on others for my own happiness. Demands and expectations on other people's behavior, in order to make me secure, vanished. Not quite. Not forever. But I never reverted to the old state. Sorrow turned—if you like—into joy. I think some experiences are less frequent now, but I live a more harmonious life.”

### MINISTRY REQUIRES INDEPENDENCE

Abandoning reliance on others to make us feel secure is significant not only for the way in which we respond to our communities but for the way in which we act in ministry as well. In mature relationships the separate person is free to seek closeness, communion, and union—and is free to part again. The relationship is not based on a mu-

tual clinging need for another in order to be oneself. Ideally, the same kind of separateness, which Ullmann describes as enhancing to interpersonal relationships, is essential to ministry if our ministry is not to be self-serving. If we as women are involved in ministry because we need the other to be ourselves, need another to be dependent on and attached to us so that we can feel close, do we have any business imposing ourselves on someone else's life? On the other hand, if we can stand in our own space like Jesus, "knowing whence he came and whither he was going," aware of who he was, we can evoke that same kind of awareness in those with whom we work and live.

The separate (independent) person is not afraid to be intimate and does not use experiences of intimacy as a form of domination over another. This person can appreciate people for their distinct otherness, for the unknown in them, for the peculiar mystery of God revealed in the other and not in oneself. A woman can appreciate herself even when the girl in her refuses to die. She can strive, as Ullmann does, "to learn the way . . . To find peace, so that I can sit and listen to what is inside without influence."

#### INDIVIDUAL VERSUS COMMUNITY NEEDS

An issue that emerged repeatedly in our discussion group was the tension experienced between our individual growth and our communities. The difficulty of reentry was a problem for some of us after having been away on study sabbatical for a year. Because we returned to our communities with a new sense of self, a new identity, and an enlarged capacity for relationships, most of us found we had to assert ourselves continually to be viewed as our new selves. At times we struggled with authority figures over the issue of ministerial options.

We all acknowledged that there will always be some degree of tension between the needs of individuals and the needs of the larger group. The community may fear autonomy in its members. The extent to which this dissonance is felt may be indicated by the community's efforts to require everyone to merge with the group in a stifling conformity. In communities that offered a wide range of ministerial and living options, the individuals seemed to feel valued more for themselves and less in relation to the projects of the community. By them, this tension was scarcely felt.

On the other hand, if the community experiences a strong tension between the needs of individuals and the needs of the group, the nature of the group might bear closer examination. Is the group so symbiotic in its style of relating that it distrusts any movement toward autonomy? Does the community perceive itself able to value diversity, or does it only accommodate members who are willing to merge, to belong to the group in a compliant fashion, who will not seriously question the modus

operandi of the group? Is the community able to question previous structures, works, or economic arrangements that restrict the members' opportunities to tolerate diversity in life and ministry?

#### OTHER MOTHERS FOR ATTACHMENT

This tension between dependence and independence characterized by the union and separation phases of development also has expression in larger ecclesial and societal structures. Not only can the community respond to its members in the fashion of an unseparated mother, but the church, local parish, or school can function in the same way. There is a big difference between institutionalized dependency and the kind of freedom that operates when one chooses to cast in one's lot with others. If one is separate, one can move on to the next task, the next relationship, the next job. Arrangements are negotiable and not determined solely by whoever is on the mother side of the relationship. Docility and compliance seem to be a greater problem for women than for men in this kind of situation.

Institutions tend to be on the mother side of the equation, Mother Church included. The institutional church seems to prefer that we stay in our accustomed roles by encouraging us to remain within church-dominated works rather than to work in a more secularized environment. It would prefer to continue a system in which women religious are expected to do only what the official hierarchy wants us to do. One of the tensions in the contemporary church is the shift of some women religious away from these easily definable structures and the contractual relations that go with them. This movement signals a recovery of a characteristic common to the foundation of most religious institutes, which was the attempt of the foundress to address a situation or need that was being ignored by the status quo arrangements of either church or society.

The division mentioned earlier, which Jesus' proclamation announces, may not only be from familial patterns but may refer to the institutional church, a religious community, or a diocesan structure. Any of these may be the mother or father or mother-in-law from which the Lord calls us to divide ourselves, not in the service of ourselves but in the service of the gospel. For a religious community to be effective in implementing its vision, it too must have a sufficient degree of autonomy to actualize the gospel proclamation without the threat of crippling restraints being imposed by the structures within which the members operate.

It seems clear that economic arrangements are part of the problem in balancing the needs of the community with the needs of individuals. In communities where women are receiving salaries above the usual "sister salary" and parish benefits, the congregation is able to provide more adequately for

the individual needs of members without undue conflict. Other communities are dependent on the income derived from the near-subsistence level of living built into the parish structure. Of course, this is no easy problem to resolve. But the fact that many religious orders of women are dependent on the institutional church to sponsor their work financially creates a structure of powerlessness that makes it difficult for these communities to fund the ministerial projects they see needed. It also weakens their ability to respond to the needs of their members.

## COMPETITION AMONG WOMEN RELIGIOUS

In addition to the ambivalence over the pattern of union and separation rooted in the mother-daughter relationship, female competition poses another problem. Nancy Friday sees the jealousy and competitiveness that first exists between daughters and mothers continuing in women's relationships with other women. Many have the nagging feeling that if they succeed in something important or creative they will lose the nurturance from the group or from a partner in a relationship.

This attitude tends to color relationships between women in many subtle ways. One of these is the avoidance of evoking jealousy or hostility. An example of avoidance behavior in a graduate school setting is the woman who is making good progress on her dissertation and decides she can no longer talk about how her work is progressing with women whose work is going more slowly for fear of alienating them. Another manifestation of avoidance of jealousy is a pattern of maintaining a "low profile" by downplaying competencies rather than allowing them to be resources for the group. Women may be highly competitive with one another yet unable to admit they are competing. Underneath the experience of competition is the fear that if I win I cannot also enjoy a positive relationship with the woman I defeated. Risking competition with other women often means the risk of alienating myself from those women.

Competitive women often say they prefer the company of men to that of women. Within the male world, men are trained for competition. They learn that if I lose today, I may win tomorrow. Best friends often maintain a friendly competitive rivalry. For men, competition does not necessarily carry the fear of losing a relationship. For women, combined with the fear of losing the nurturing relationship is what Friday calls "the economy of scarcity," which is rooted in the family pattern in which the mother is attached to the only available male. The feelings that accompany a psychological economy of scarcity are often reinforced by actual scarcities of economic resources and limitations of opportunities experienced by women in our society.

In talking in our group about having had more

than the usual opportunities for education and challenge, most of us felt we were something of an exception in our communities. We realized that time away for study or a sabbatical was not a realistic expectation for most sisters. We all felt some degree of guilt in recognizing that we had received what others had and would not. The fantasy from childhood of there not being enough to go around is undergirded in our lives by the real economic scarcity of resources in our communities.

## RELATIONSHIPS WITH MEN

Another issue over which this feeling of scarcity emerged was the experience of women in our communities who had found time for personal renewal in a setting that provided good interactions with men as well as women. Many of the women felt that this opportunity to interact with men as friends and peers was a dimension in their lives that they were going to miss when they returned to their normal ministerial locations.

One woman critiqued the significance of relationships with men in an academic setting:

Almost all of our sisters who study either at Berkeley or Weston say that experiences with men are among the most important elements of the experience. It is an opportunity for relationships and a form of separation to achieve identity. However, I wonder if it can't also be the psychological trap of feeling one is dependent on men for an essential aspect of identity. That then becomes the reason why it is difficult to leave study to go back to community.

Although relationships with men can become an alternate form of inappropriate symbiotic interaction, the opportunity to develop relationships with both men and women provides an occasion for negotiating Erikson's developmental stage of intimacy. Many women I have talked to have experienced difficulty within their ministerial situations in finding other women and men who share a similar range of intellectual and personal interests. One woman stated that she had been teased about being a "priest fancier" because she used to enjoy talking with the clergy who came within range of conversation. She said she simply presumed other women were not interested in the same things she was, and it took her quite a while before she began to discover that she was wrong. However, for many who have enjoyed gratifying relationships with people outside the usual convent setting, the return to their home environment is difficult because they find fewer men or women there with whom they are able to interact in a comparable way.

The exchange between men and women religious in renewal programs has proved to be growth producing for both groups. It has allowed religious to

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learn from one another and to discover that their experiences and problems in religious life are not always identical. In many ways this type of association of religious women and men from different parts of the world and different congregations has tended to produce a broader vision of life and ministry in the church—a vision that is more inclusive, mutual, and collaborative.

### DIFFERENCES BETWEEN WOMEN AND MEN

My relationships with male religious have enabled me to understand that part of the difficulty in women's communities comes from women's attitude toward socialization and is not necessarily a problem with religious life itself. Whereas most men take for granted a certain availability of educational opportunity (because that has been a high priority for them for many years), some are either unable to afford further education or they have come to view themselves in roles that do not require advanced educational preparation. Moreover, men are usually expected to develop a certain level of independence, which is valued by the group. For women, "belonging" can sometimes seem more important than the excitement and challenge of achieving, competing, and contributing to a larger world.

At this moment in history it seems necessary to be aware of these differences. Since men are trying to attend to the value of intensifying communal bonds, they can easily think the same is desirable for women. However, women need to be encouraged to free themselves from the suffocating feeling

of belonging that demands all of a person's time, attention, and psychic energy. Whereas many women need to become separate and free from pressures built into the structuring of community relationships, men may need to experience the more vulnerable side of close relationships.

A difference between men's and women's views of autonomy and partnerships frequently shows up in the experience of ministerial teams. Men are conventionally socialized very early toward independence; as boys, they find themselves different from the mother and are encouraged to leave her behind and set out for action in the male domain. Men may be more skilled at maintaining independence than in forming partnerships. On the other hand, women are usually taught to maintain their relationship with the mother as well as to maintain other interpersonal bonds. As adults, women may be more skilled in maintaining partnerships than in sustaining an independent self-awareness. Ministerial teams often experience the tensions created by these differences. Whereas priests are more used to working alone than within a team, many women religious often prefer a team situation. However, these women are often frustrated and confused when their expectations about team functioning are not met.

More frequent interaction with men is, I believe, one source of consciousness-raising for women accustomed to a single-sex situation. This interaction challenges women to question and to think so that we can imagine rejecting whatever part of the "formula female" we have internalized in our socialization with women, which we tend to enforce in one another. A heightened awareness of the differing effects of socialization can enable us to be more objective in interpreting our experiences and to support both personal and social change.

### INDIVIDUATION NOT EASY

The struggle women are undertaking today to move toward a truly individuated personality in the face of both social constraints and internalized fears should be understood within the larger context of the ordinary fears shared by all human beings. Such individuation is not an easy process. Women have simply had less practice standing alone and less encouragement to do so. This is still true despite the actual experience of most women in our society, which includes periods of profound aloneness, especially in old age.

Our life stories seem to be a pattern of unions and separations, or of births followed by deaths and rebirths. Each successive experience of union and separation, or birth and rebirth, has the power to evoke the old fears and anxieties, the hostilities and jealousies from earlier events in our lives. Because women seem to have had more difficulty in achieving and maintaining the separation phase, it is not surprising that this phase of development

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## The movement toward self-assertion is anxiety-ridden because it involves the breaking of the communion in which self-worth is nourished

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currently requires conscious attention in order to support individuation. Yet the successful negotiation of this stage is a prerequisite for genuinely self-transcendent religious and ethical experience. I think it is very easy for women to confuse self-destructive surrender to another person or group with the more profound self-surrender to the in-breaking of God in our lives announced by the gospel. We will always be destined to fall into a symbiotic form of relating until we have gone through the process of forging a personal identity that allows us to love others as much as we love ourselves and to be fully creative, generative women.

### FEAR OF DEATH MOTIVATES

Passage from one stage of spiritual growth to another is always a risky business. The temptation entailed is the classic one of preferring safety to the risk of the unknown. But a threat stands on either side of the tension. Our fear of life keeps us safe while our fear of death pushes us forward. Either way there will be anxiety and at times guilt. In an article in *Theological Studies* (Vol. 39, No. 4, Dec. 1978) on the art of believing, Joseph Powers, S.J., summarizes psychiatrist Otto Rank's view of human life as "a story of unions and separations in which the self-assertion is both grounded and threatened by the surrender of will to community, but is still experienced as a need of one's deepest nature." Rank saw both movements, toward self-assertion and toward community through will, as traumatic. The movement toward self-assertion is guilt- and anxiety-ridden because it involves the breaking of the communion in which one's self-

worth is experienced and nourished. Similarly, the movement toward communion is laden with guilt and fear because one sees in communion the extinction of self-assertion, which can be the deepest experience of being alive. Hence, Rank speaks of two anxieties: the fear of life (self-assertion that could leave one completely cut off from the community) and the fear of death (absorption of the self-asserting person in communion).

### VALUING SELF AND FREEDOM

I am no longer surprised by the voices that express these anxieties inside me. I have heard them in the anxieties of many women around me for years. And I have heard the voices in society that prefer women to be dependent rather than autonomous. As I choose to listen to the newer voices of my feminist sisters and all those who support women in their struggle to achieve full personhood, I struggle to value myself and my freedom and encourage others to hear these same voices.

These are voices that call attention to conflicts like the ones explored in this article—and to the ambivalent nature of the mother-daughter bond and many of its unacknowledged disguises. They are voices that offer a new vision of social reality and call us to make choices about our lives. As a woman religious, I want to hear the voices that can enable me to respond to Jesus and the gospel with greater freedom and maturity and that can free us as communities to be about the work of the kingdom of God in our midst.

To move through our own stories of unions and separations, or passages of liberation, requires a faithful response to our life experiences and to the way God's presence impels us to move beyond the successive idols we manage to create in place of Transcendent Love. Religious life, lived communally, is meant to foster an awareness of the presence of God's Holy Spirit evoking, beckoning, enticing each individual and community into the future that lies mysteriously in God. Insofar as we constrict these movements toward creative identity, we deny a foundational purpose of religious life, the intimate following of Jesus that includes both personal salvation as well as prophetic ministry. We denigrate the individual at the risk of subverting the entire possibility of community. It is only when individuals are courageously and faithfully able to overcome fear and distrust that true community can be born.

### RECOMMENDED READING

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pain, the confusion and darkness. This kind of crisis, which John of the Cross calls the "dark night of the spirit," begins in God and can only end in God's good time. I think, however, that many people find themselves in the midst of a major transition that is not as drastic as this dark night and suffer more than is necessary because they lack understanding of the normal spiritual consequences of change and growth.

Familiarity with the Western mystical tradition can help to relate the process of psychological growth and change to spiritual transformation. This transformative process fosters the health and healing of the ego. Ordinarily, sufficient adult development is a precondition for spiritual transformation. Only when the ego has become both strong and flexible can its role be relativized and its needs transcended when a person relates to the mystery of God, to other people, and to life experiences. It is the mystical tradition that carries most strongly these deepest transformative dimensions of religion and serves as a guide for development beyond the formative level of conventional religious belief and practice.

#### MINISTRY OF SUPPORT

In summary, whether a person's experience of transition seems to come primarily from external circumstances or from internal ones, it is an important ministerial task to support and encourage an individual's spiritual growth and attempts at prayer during this time. As companions to another's

journey in faith, it is necessary for us to understand the differences between the major patterns I have described: that in which the belief system remains coherent and that in which coherence (and sometimes a significant form of mediation as well) is lost. Our task is to help the person work through the different difficulties in prayer that characterize each pattern. Finally, we should remember that any experience of major transition is difficult enough without being compounded by unnecessary alienation from one's religious tradition. We must do whatever we can to make the transformative dimensions of our tradition accessible in order to help people in transition grow through a renewed, critical appropriation of their faith. Thus we may be able to ease some of the unnecessary pain of isolation and alienation from God or the community as we encourage growth to a mature religious freedom.

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