



Spiritual Direction with Women: Reclaiming and Reinterpreting Key Themes from the Spiritual Tradition

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In spite of more than three decades of the current wave of feminism, women continue to struggle to take their place in both church and society. Feminist theologians call our attention to woman-damaging theologies and spiritual teachings embedded in our tradition that continue to affect women negatively in the most interior of all realms—their spiritual lives. Those of us who offer spiritual direction to women need to be alert to the way some key spiritual teachings may be both true and at the same time problematic for women directees. These teachings carry profound spiritual truth for both men and women but also often reflect women-denigrating, women-controlling assumptions within the religious and secular cultures within which they were taught. Carol Lee Flinders observes in *At the Root of This Longing*, "If two things really were true, then somehow or another you would be willing to reconcile them" (p. 60).

Taking this cue from Flinders, I offer these reflections on four key themes from the spiritual traditions, taking into account their potentially negative effects on women in order to clear the way for appreciating their positive contribution to women's spiritual growth:

Silence versus silencing/voicelessness,

Enclosure, sanctuary, withdrawal versus confinement and incarceration,

Ego-lessness, self-naughting, self-denial versus self-possession, and

Desire versus restraint of desire or extinguishing of desire.

All of these remain ambiguous in women's experience. I find in them profound spiritual truths only when they are practiced and understood in woman-affirming ways because God's will is women's flourishing.

Silence Versus Silencing/Voicelessness

Adrienne Rich states, "Where language and naming are power, silence is oppression, is violence" (cited by Belenky et al., p. 23). The ascetical discipline of silence must not be confused with silencing or voicelessness.

There is a dialectic between silence and speech, between speaking and being heard. Nelle Morton's phrase, "listening one another into speech," is commonly used by second-wave feminists and is an important feminist and spiritual practice. But that does not mean women have no need of silence.

Belenky et al., in *Women's Ways of Knowing*, discovered that the metaphor of "voice" applied to many aspects of women's experience and development. Women described themselves as:

Speaking up

Speaking out

Being silenced

Not being heard

Really listening

Really talking

Words used as weapons

Feeling deaf and dumb

Having no words

Saying what you mean

Listening to be heard. (P. 18)

Some of these phrases relate to the strength or weakness of the woman's sense of self. They either felt isolated from or connected to others. Speaking and being listened to indicated agency, intellectual and moral development, and critical reflective thinking. Women used the metaphor of voice to express all of these aspects of a woman's sense of self.

All women regardless of their level of education have experienced some form of silencing in their lives. Consider how women have experienced being silenced. In your personal experience: Who told women or girls to "shut up"? Who told them they were stupid? Who belittled them because they were only girls or women? Who showed so little interest in their thoughts or feelings that many stopped trying to speak? Who simply ignored women when they spoke? Who ridiculed women for their ideas or for making a mistake when speaking in public? Who in a church context silenced girls or women?



How does language about God in worship fail to mirror women's experience of God or include women explicitly as made in the image of God?

How do women silence themselves? Are women feeling silenced now? In families or communities, are women's voices valued? How comfortable are your women directees with speaking up, offering their insight and perspective in daily life? Is their experience the same in the churches? Historically, how have innovative, assertive women, even those empowered by God, been treated? How are women punished for refusing sexist definitions of themselves? How have women passed on fear among themselves? Have you noticed a man being heard and appreciated for a comment in a meeting while no response at all was made to the woman who made the exact same comment earlier in the meeting?

Belenky et al. discovered that the most voiceless women in their sample were the most oppressed and had the least sense of self. They were isolated, abused, and words were one of the many forms of violence used against them. However, even more fortunate women retain some ambivalence about the voicelessness they have overcome regardless of education and professional success.

Silence as a spiritual discipline becomes fruitful and nourishing for women after they have found their voices and feel comfortable and respected when saying what they think and feel. Silence is most helpful when women have had relational experiences of being listened to, appreciated, understood, and responded to. Once women have experienced being listened to and responded to empathically from parents, friends, other adults, and especially spiritual directors, they can embrace silence as a profoundly necessary and helpful spiritual practice.

Silence as well as speech supports the development of an authentic and self-transcending self. Silence can help women encounter themselves, still the external voices, distinguish their own voices from the outer messages they have all introjected to one degree or another. In silence, women may discover their own thoughts, feelings, and desires. For many, reflective reading, journal writing, and spiritual direction help them listen to their own voices, record their thoughts, inspirations, intuitions, questions, struggles. Frequently, this quiet reflection leads to new choices, to a determination to act, to an impetus to change something.

Once silence feels safe and silence becomes nurturing, the solitude that deepens in silence may relieve loneliness. Women may grow to enjoy their own company and form a more solidified sense of self. May Sarton asserts, "Solitude is the richness of self" (cited by Razdan, p. 62). Time alone in silence reduces stress, heals, and nurtures.

"No Limits," a chant by Trisha Watts, captures these positive effects and potentials of silence:

There are no limits
to the depths of stillness,
calling us from deep within,
weaving mind, body, spirit to oneness
within the all of being.

The practice of silence not only supports the growth and health of the psychological self but also increases the quality of our attentiveness and openness to the sacred. Silence supports introversion, reflection, and attentiveness. It helps us focus on the object of our concentration, for example, the amazing beauty that may surround us, the presence of God, or a life challenge.

Silence resists dissipation, unfocused and superficial consciousness. It restrains our sometimes thoughtless, sometimes careless, sometimes mean-spirited words. Silence resists what Sharon Parks has named the "systemic distraction" our culture now considers normal. Our postmodern forms of incessant communication almost insure constant fragmentation of consciousness. We answer our phones, read our e-mails, surf the Web, listen to news or watch it, bombarded the whole time by unremitting advertising.

At even deeper levels, silence can create community through spiritual presence and awareness of others in shared silence. This deeper silence encourages us to enter into a very deep part of ourselves beyond ego and its endless concerns. The contact with the deep self often leads to a profound connection with God. From this synergy between the true self and the encounter with God, qualities of heart and mind and spirit emerge that are authentically rooted in women's deep, feminine, sacred selves. This deeper connection with the divine in the depth of women's sacred selves may express itself in energy, creativity, stamina, resourcefulness, ease, wit, patience, loving-kindness. In this deeper connection, the feminine self often tends to emerge from these experiences in silence more wholly



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itself. Women discover in their core a God who images them, blesses them, and originates their feminine selves. Women may spontaneously embrace the qualities of Mother/Sophia God even though they may not explicitly name them. Such qualities may be inclusiveness, playfulness, care for creation, beauty, reverence for materiality, and appreciation of relationality with all living beings.

Spiritual directors who are sensitive to these delicate interior movements can be very helpful to their women directees as they listen for and respond to these fresh experiences of wholeness, of integrity, and of women's mirroring the Divine in their own beings. Their attentiveness and receptivity to these emerging feelings and understandings are especially needed in the face of the often unremitting masculine images for God that continue to permeate official ecclesial discourse and worship.

Regular, repeated cycles of nourishing quiet times deepen and strengthen our connection with the Divine. A stronger connection with the Divine helps women focus their passion and energy to resist oppression, make choices for solidarity, and engage in mission, ministry, and mothering. Out of this silence, women respond to the pressing spiritual and material needs of our times. They utter prophetic words, alternative teachings, and new words. They also act concretely, caring for others.

Joan Chittister sums up the benefits of silence in this way:

Silence...is that place just before the voice of God. It is the void in which God and I meet in the center of my soul. It is the cave through which the soul must travel, clearing out the dissonance of life as we go, so that the God who is waiting there for us to notice can fill us.... A day without silence is a day without the presence of the self.... To be a contemplative we must put down the cacophony of the

world around us and go inside ourselves to wait for the God who is a whisper, not a storm. Silence not only gives us the God who is Stillness but, just as importantly, teaches the public self of us what to speak. (Pp. 107–108)

Enclosure, Sanctuary, Withdrawal Versus Confinement and Incarceration

The practice of withdrawal into sanctuary or enclosure is closely related to the practice of silence. Women have not always flourished from the practice of enclosure. Nancy Mairs writes: "Ours has been a history of confinement, in childbed, in crinoline, in the kitchen, even in the asylum.... But most of us have needed no turn of an iron key, no leather thong. We've known where we belong" (Flinders, p. 78). There is a very strong paradox here. On the one hand, women, especially respectable women, have been controlled by patriarchy through various forms of forced confinement. Typically, according to Flinders, women and children were gradually segregated from shared activities with men and relegated to female spaces that were by definition private rather than public. These spaces were cut off from economic and political life, education, and science. This enclosure or segregation took many cultural forms, such as forts, convents, homes, living quarters (harems), carriages, and walled gardens. Women were also segregated by clothing, such as burkhas, veils, and habits.

The negative side of women's experience with enclosure is forced confinement, power exerted over them, male aggression, predatory sex, and restriction to the private sphere. Forced confinement—such as involuntary confinement in asylums—has a long history. Elaine Showalter traces the changing theories of mental illness from the nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth centuries



in both the medical literature and the autobiographical accounts of women who survived confinement for real or imagined mental illness because they did not conform to the limited social expectations of women.

In *Women and Madness*, Phyllis Chessler argues that "women who reject or are ambivalent about the female role frighten both themselves and society so much so that their ostracism and self-destructiveness probably begin very early. Such women are assured of a psychiatric label" (p. 116). Betty Friedan, in *The Feminine Mystique*, the book that almost single-handedly launched second-wave feminism, arrived at the conclusion that the "problem without a name" was largely due to the culturally encouraged confinement of women in the 1950s and early 1960s to their own homes as wives and mothers. Psychoanalytic theories about women were part of this cultural matrix restricting women. She cites numerous studies showing the negative effect on women's health and well-being of being limited to the domestic sphere without any other meaningful work to do beyond the home.

Among the new house-wife mothers, in certain sunlit suburbs, this single decade saw a fantastic increase in "maternal psychoses," mild-to-suicidal depressions or hallucinations over childbirth.... In Bergen County, N.J., during the 1950s, approximately one out of three young mothers suffered depression or psychotic breakdown over childbirth. This compared to previous medical estimates of psychotic breakdown in one out of four hundred pregnancies, and less severe depression in one out of eighty. (P. 293)

Treatment for these mental illnesses often involved heavy medication, induced insulin shock, electroshock treatment and even lobotomy on the basis that the damage done to one's brain would not impair a woman's ability to do housework (Chessler, pp. 222-229).

Women are not always safe and welcome in public spaces. Yet they have made much progress through affirma-

tive action and initiatives addressing discrimination and violence against women. Nevertheless, these gains remain fragile and need to be continually defended.

When freely chosen, enclosure can mean sanctuary—safe places either set apart and protected in some way or expansive, open spaces that may also serve as sanctuary. For example, in many indigenous cultures, enclosure provides protection, respect, solitary time, recovery from

childbirth, rest from some household tasks when menstruating, and space to grieve. Enclosure works against sanctuary only when spaces restrict rather than free women.

Enclosure can be something as simple as a "hut of one's own" or a "room of one's own" (Spayde, p. 63). It is a door a woman can open or close as she desires to gain some space alone. It can be a garden or yard. Many women talk about working in the garden as a

sacred activity. Gardening provides a connection with the cycles of nature at home, a physical form of movement meditation, and a time to reflect or contemplate.

Enclosure can also provide spiritual sanctuary. When women enter into contemplative prayer or live a contemplative life, enclosure offers physical protection from intrusion, external distraction, and the observation of those who might be unable to appreciate a trance state or deep meditative awareness. Such an enclosure can be a community that gathers to meditate, to sit in silent centering prayer, za zen, or sufi circle dancing, chanting, or drumming. It can also be a labyrinth that provides a pattern for symbolizing the journey into the center and out again. Retreat houses and hermitages are familiar enclosures. They are places set apart for spiritual practices that release their guests from daily routines and busy lives. Such places provide a safe environment that encourages women to sink to other levels of awareness. Enclosures allow women to soften the defenses they maintain to protect themselves and to stop the constant "radar" and early warning systems they maintain to alert them to approaching danger. I often notice, when I make a longer retreat, it usually takes me

The desert tradition considered the cell to be a place of revelation and stability.



a couple of days to drop my New York City alert system as well as to detach from my ordinary preoccupations. Paradoxically, sanctuary or enclosure in large or small spaces allows women to enter into the vastness of interior space—the interior castle of their own souls that is open to an infinite variety of possible sacred experiences.

Historically, cloister or enclosure for women religious, again when freely chosen, enabled women to flourish. Medieval monasteries were centers of learning, arts, and culture for women. They nourished women's minds and creativity. In the particular cloister of religious life, women developed female networks with women in their own monastery and with those in other monasteries. The focus on spiritual life left a legacy of mystical women's experience of a feminine divine as well as a masculine divine that continues to nourish us today. Caroline Bynum discovered that the earlier a woman entered the monastery, the stronger her sense of self and the more original her metaphoric language was. It appears that the women who entered these female spaces as young girls were less affected by some forms of sexism than were women who were less protected. Women claimed the authority to teach about the spiritual life on the basis of their mystical experience as well as juridical authority within female communities.

The desert tradition considered the cell to be a place of revelation and stability. "Go and sit in your cell and your cell will teach you everything" (Chadwick, p. 42). The cell and its corresponding silence and stability led to God. Catherine of Siena created such a cell for herself in her family home. She enjoyed, as the last of twenty-four children, a room of her own into which she withdrew for nearly three years. When her interior transformation had progressed sufficiently, she ended this period of solitude by simply joining her family for meals again. After that intense period of withdrawal, she wrote, "My cell is not to be made of stone or wood; instead it will be the cell of self-knowledge" (cited by Griffiths, p. 14).

A final form of enclosure might be the practice of reading. Nancy Malone, in her recent memoir, *Walking a Literary Labyrinth*, describes reading as such a hermitage.

"Systemic distraction." This is the term that Sharon Daloz Parks uses to describe the state we live in. Like systemic racism, distraction is not simply a matter of individual disposition and choice, but exists in and is encouraged by the

very structures of contemporary postmodern life. In such a culture, the stillness, silence, solitude, and focused attention that reading offers is to be prized; it may be the closest some of us get to a spirit of contemplation in the hurried, noisy, scattered lives that we lead. A good book can create a little hermitage for some people anywhere, even in an airport waiting room. (Pp. 72–73)

Silence and sanctuary work together to restore us to our true selves. David Whyte suggests as much through the imagery of "Sweet Darkness":

You must learn one thing.

The world was made to be free in.

Give up all the other worlds
except the one to which you belong.

Sometimes it takes darkness and the sweet
confinement of your aloneness
to learn

anything or anyone
that does not bring you alive

is too small for you. (P. 23)

Ego-Lessness, Self-Naughting, Self-Denial Versus Self-Possession

Dorothee Soelle has a wonderful chapter on ego and ego-lessness in *The Silent Cry*. She frames this difficult topic within our postmodern consciousness in challenging and insightful ways. She tells this story from the desert tradition:

One day an Egyptian monk was tormented by temptation. He decided to leave his cell and move to another place. As he put on his sandals he saw another monk not far away who also put on his sandals. "Who are you?" he asked the stranger. "I am your own ego," came the reply. "If you are leaving here on my account, you should know that wherever you go from here I shall always go with you" (p. 209).

This parable describes the central problem. None of us can ever fully escape from our egos; we can only partially



A Spiritual Exercise for Tutoring in Resistance

Colleen Fulmer's early "No" song, in the recording *Her Wings Unfurled*, provides a sing-along opportunity to enjoy practicing saying the no's that must come before the yes to self-naughting.

There is a piece of wisdom that all the world
must know;
The same Spirit who bids us to say yes
also bids us to say no!
So I say:
No! No! No! A thousand times I'll say No!
Read my lips it's so clear, just open up your ears
I'm saying, No! No! No! No! No! No! No! No!
No! No! No! No! No! No! No! No! No!

Singing this song aloud in a group or even by oneself releases an enormous amount of energy and supports women who have a difficult time saying no to their own injustice or unreasonable requests. ■

break their control over us. In our postmodern context, Soelle describes this same dilemma.

Frequently there is a desperate search to "find oneself" and finally, to find time, space, and freedom for oneself. Yet that search thoroughly negates any sense of leaving oneself and the mystical desire of getting rid of one's ego. It is precisely for that reason that it also fails to satisfy the realistic practical desire "to gain one's life" [in the Gospel sense] and finally come to enjoy it. But mystical desires can be as little denied as "that of God in us." (P. 210)

Women who have developed a finely tuned feminist consciousness may cringe a bit at this topic. They fully recognize they have been socialized culturally and religiously to sacrifice themselves, to put themselves last, to deny themselves as a spiritual good. Whose will counts anyway? Too often in their experience, the will of patriarchy has supplanted the will of God. As they have learned to say no to this idol, they may also find it increasingly difficult to say yes to God's will. They have too often given themselves away before becoming fully themselves. So a theme such as self-denial or ego-lessness gives pause. Yet within

authentic spiritual practice, there is wisdom here.

It is important to remember that the "self" in these teachings about self-negating is not ordinarily our vital aliveness, the origin of our choices and desires, namely our authentic graced selves. These teachings are better reinterpreted as resistance to self-centeredness or selfishness. Self-denial helps us enter into genuine relatedness, to steady an impulsive self or to oppose an indulgent self. The purpose of any such discipline is to mobilize and focus the energy needed for meditation, prayer, and presence to another. But this teaching presupposes the universal need to decenter our needy, noisy ego clamoring for attention. Such decentering is meant to serve mutuality, not colonization by patriarchy. It moves toward a positive good.

Women invest an amazing amount of energy in maintaining their sense of self, even if it is quite fragile, weak, or wounded. Introjected voices from patriarchy continually reinforce that women are not "enough," helpless, and powerless. Even relatively healthy egos are in need of conversion—either toward becoming more adequate or less inflated.

Feminist analysis has demonstrated that when a "sacrificial" attitude is imposed on women who are powerless, trapped in asymmetrical relationships, and lacking a coherent sense of self, women actually lose themselves and cooperate in their own negation of self. When women choose life for themselves as well as for others, they often feel exceedingly selfish.

Sometimes what appears to be altruism is closer to condescension. While believing themselves virtuous, they can use a need to be needed in a very self-serving way. Women may often need to learn to say no before they can utter an authentic yes.

When, on the other hand, women do respond with an authentic yes to the help another welcomes, they approach genuine self-transcendence. Because such self-transcendence is rooted in self-possession and motivated by a good or necessity they embrace, rather than by a condition imposed on them, women experience such self-transcendence as life-giving. This ego-lessness is focused on the Other rather than on one's self and its pleasures. "Losing ourselves in something that is not us is the most wonderful way of disempowering the ego and in this sense becoming free" (Soelle, p. 212).

However, the freedom that issues from even momentary



release from ego-needs is pervasively overwhelmed in our consumerist culture.

The consuming ego...is bombarded with ego-propaganda. Needs are altered in the sense of "more often," "faster," "more," "right away." The education in ego fixation is conducted worldwide by media, adroitly using the real needs of human beings that traditionally are all affirmative: I would like to "be" more attractive, musical, quick-witted, appreciated.

These "being" needs are changed into "having needs." I am diverted to the product that I am to "enjoy" instead, which means buying it. "The ego is not only to be made greedy for new things. It is also to become thoroughly dependent on the possibilities of choice and the abundance of options." (Ibid.)

Even more strongly, Soelle asserts: "In the consumer culture of plundering, the ego turned into an addicted identity functions as the best guard in our jail; it controls and effectively suppresses our attempts to escape. We need a different relation to the ego that includes ego-lessness as the liberation from impositions and constraints destructive of life and that perceives the ego in terms of communal participation" (ibid.).

Soelle means that ego needs to grow profoundly relational—connected to others, addressed by God, conscious of those who have gone before us and will come after us. This ego takes up less room in the universe and consumes fewer of its resources. It can move toward the ego-lessness that does "not begin with the super-ego's demands or rituals of purification but in the amazing sharing of the one life that is in everything" (p. 213).

This sitting lightly with ego really only happens when God takes possession of us. Only in ongoing and authentic encounter with God does such transformation toward self-transcendence occur. It cannot be willed; it can only be surrendered to. We must discover that we are not our own God. Dag Hammarskjöld put it this way: "God does not die on the day when we cease to believe in a personal deity, but we die on the day when our lives cease to be illumined by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a wonder, the source of which is beyond all reason" (cited by Soelle, p. 226).

A woman who can embrace self-naughting, self-denial, leaning toward ego-lessness in a discerning and critical way, can tell the difference between self-destruction and self-transcendence. Surrendering when it is appropriate brings women to self-possession and choice after they have grown through a healthy stage of refusing to consent to their own oppression.

Spiritual directors who work with women need themselves to have gone through this conscious feminist development so that they can distinguish between authentic self-transcendence and the internalized demands of traditional religious teachings that have encouraged self-denial before having achieved self-possession. Making this discernment is very delicate. When women are in the process of working through these issues, they may sound rather iconoclastic as they move toward self-possession. A director needs to recognize how developed a woman's ego strength is in order to decide how to support initial and hesitant movements toward self-possession and personal power.

On the other hand, women directors as well as their women directees may be very reluctant to approach the suffering involved in genuine self-transcendence once a woman has grown strong enough and free enough to reject the claims of the false self. It helps to recognize that the true self is never being denied. Eventually, all versions of the false self need to surrender to self-transcendence.

Desire Versus Restraint of Desire or Extinguishing of Desire

The final theme we will consider is the nurturing of desire versus its restraint or extinguishing. This theme also includes willfulness versus submission as well as erotic love in both its human and mystical dimensions. The Western Christian mystical tradition affirms that for both men and women our most authentic erotic desires and deepest longings are made for God, whom we discover by welcoming these longings and correctly interpreting them as a school of love leading to God. Augustine articulates this most clearly in his well-known, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in you, O God." But since he struggled so desperately with his addictive sexuality, his writings betray a deep ambivalence that has permeated our tradition and that has tended to deny a path to God through erotic, partnered love as trans-



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formative and graced. Many more women mystics than men affirm an erotic and passionate love mysticism. An example is Mechtilde of Magdeburg, one of whose texts is woven into the following song from the CD *Woman's Songs of Love*:

Woman! Woman!

When will you soar on the wings of your longing to the blissful heights

Where I await your love?

And if you meet me with all your desire,

I will touch you with my presence divine.

Ref. And you shall delight, in body and in soul, in my love.

Woman! Woman!

Come now to me in your sighings;

In your heart's desire, for I am the one you seek.

Since I am in you, and you are in me,

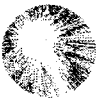
We are one and forever shall remain.

Women mystics such as Mechtilde assert not only a spiritualized spousal mysticism but include women's bodiliness in the mystical experience. An appreciation of the goodness of sexuality combined with a spiritual path that transforms erotic desire leads from possessiveness to mutuality and deep love for another, stretching beyond human lovers to the divine beloved.

All spiritual practices and attitudes are transformational when they recognize that our desires do not originate from some pristine center untouched by sexism and culture. Culture shapes our desires in both conscious and unconscious ways. Sex is commodified in our culture and saturates advertising and entertainment, reinforcing old stereotypes and promoting many forms of distorted sexuality.

Women continue to be portrayed as sexual objects, and now women are encouraged to view men in the same way. There is little in our public culture that portrays sexual relationships in healthy psychological and spiritual ways. Our times, no less than other historical periods, require containing and controlling our passions and impulses in order to focus and sublimate sexual longing and desire into respectful relationships of mutuality with another and with God.

Historically, women have been taught that their way to holiness consisted in denying all of the bodily desires—



appetites for food, sex, sleep, pleasure. Ascetical practices aimed at mastery of the bodily self—gaining freedom from its insistent demands. Contemporary mind-body theory and contemporary theological anthropology value the body. Today, we promote an incarnational spirituality and an embodied knowing that complement more abstract ways of knowing. We recognize the interdependence of all of creation. We appreciate its beauties and pleasures as well as its challenges. Bodyliness and bodily care have traditionally been relegated to women. This female experience, expressed in sexual union, conception, pregnancy, nursing, feeding, caring for the ill and dying, yields a bodily knowing that has been denigrated in Western philosophy but that women know and trust. Giles Milhaven suggests that this connected form of knowing through touch, smell, and taste is more akin to mystical experience than is the more distanced knowing through sight and the word prized by men.

Bodyliness is also connected to the role of will in women's lives. Because women have been taught to remain silent, deny themselves, and restrain their wills and because women's roles required conformity to others' desires, enforced through a system of obedience, they may not even know what they truly want. Some may suspect (because they have been told this) that their desires are wrong and must be contrary to God's desires. Traditional interpretations of the Adam and Eve story reinforce these notions—women are blamed for wayward desire and so must be controlled.

Within the church, a system of obedience replaces God's desires with desires approved by men and promoted as the divine will. Many women live with a cognitive dissonance, knowing that God wants them to flourish in freedom on the one hand, and experiencing a markedly different system of obedience on the other.

Contemporary feminism resists this alienation of women from themselves and their desires. Desire and its passion lead to action, to moving toward actualizing desires and claiming intentions. When women's desires become transparent to themselves, women become responsible for honoring their desires and acting on them. In so far as women's social situation in either church or society diminishes their ability to act on those desires, the pain intensifies when desires surface and their attempts to act on them are externally frustrated.

When women want to be persons, want, as women, to participate fully in church and society, want to become fully themselves, it may be profoundly threatening to them and threatening to society. Women would have to change, mature, and become more conscious and skillful. And social systems would also have to change to accommodate them.

I have developed this theme more fully in the chapter on desire and mutuality in loving in my book, *Spiritual Direction: Beyond the Beginnings*, and can only reflect on it more briefly in this article. But I understand that when we have the courage to sort out our desires and to be sorted out by them, our deepest and most authentic ones correspond to God's desires for us. Distinguishing our authentic desires from ego-generated or culturally generated ones leads us more strongly and freely into a mutuality of relating with God and with one another. These authentic desires lead to availability for energetic action in the world so that our desires are no longer for ourselves alone but embrace all that others genuinely need for a fully human life. This is an ongoing transformative process—a way through desire rather than around desire.

In the Buddhist tradition that vows to extinguish desire, there is a profound recognition of the self's endless production of cravings and attachments. This attempt to extinguish desire is a different way of going beyond ego to ego-lessness, beyond the observing self to discover that absolute reality is also going on and is more real. Extinguishing desire can very easily become confused with self-denial rather than be understood as a way of subverting the cravings of the false self. Extinguishing desire must be interpreted in ways that support women's flourishing.

In a deep way, our erotic energies and our deepest desires propel us on a path of transformation. We discover that we are not alone, that the Other we ache for longs for us even more. By entering on this path we find that these originally self-centered longings and the ego that generates them are led by their fulfillment and their frustration to the Christ within us, which then grows and develops toward authentic agapic and erotic love.

Soelle says:

If there really is love, it has to meet two conditions. It has to bring about a kind of mutuality in which the unknowability of the known is preserved, the otherness of the



other. Only in this way can love impart participation in sacred power, in the shared power of the holy. This power is called holy because its nature is not to rule over others or to exercise domination that is sustained by domination. It is "holy" because it is in essence a sharing in the power of life.... A mystical understanding of the erotic relationship must reflect in a new way activity and passivity, giving and taking, singleness and duality....

An understanding of mutuality nurtures...mysticism: giving and taking, desiring and claiming, being loved and loving continually flow one into the other without one being primary...and the other being secondary.... "There is no clapping of hands with one hand alone." ... In love the boundaries of time, space, and assigned role are crossed over; mysticism is an ever renewed deconstruction of socially constructed sex roles. It forever subverts and transcends the relations of domination and submission. (Pp. 128-129)

Such loving works its transformative way in us until we recognize for whom we long and whom we serve in care and compassion.

Spiritual directors who want to support women's flourishing will not decline exploring experiences and longings of their women directees whether spiritual or erotic, because they are often intertwined. Women directors will need again to have explored their own desires deeply and be attentive to those that are falsely generated by our consumerist culture and those that arise from the true self.

Men directors will need to reflect rather deeply on their own experience of these four key themes in the tradition. Much of our spiritual writing is based on an idealized male experience of these dynamics. Contemporary men will need to reinterpret and reclaim these themes based on their own unedited experience to discover what about these themes may also be true for them today. They will also need to be open to the particular ways their women directees may struggle with each of these key themes so they can support their liberating growth toward fullness of life. ■

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