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An Interactive Guide to Self-Discovery for Women

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An Interactive Guide to Self-Discovery for Women

by

Elaine J. Taylor

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Department of Women's and Gender Studies
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Abstract

This project is a translation of ideas I have encountered in my journey through Women's Studies. With this interactive book, I offer a concise, understandable, and empowering method for self-discovery from one feminist's perspective. Traditional self-help materials often set the reader up as the one with the issue or problem and they rarely call out the functioning systems of oppression as a stumbling block or offer ways to circumvent them. With this project, I hope to shine light on the functioning systems of gender discrimination, racism, classism, and heterosexism, and to provide a framework for understanding. There are three main theoretical contexts for this project. The first context includes perspectives on language and the ways in which language limits women's communication with themselves and with each other. The second is gender socialization and how it enforces norms of "appropriate" female behavior. The third context is recent work in feminist spirituality and the possibilities it offers for recovering a spiritual self in direct relationship to a higher being. By narrating my own experiences in these three areas, and by offering resources and tools for further exploration, I hope this thesis will enable readers to understand that it is not they who are sick or in need of "self-help" but the society and culture in which they live.

Chapter 1

Introduction

I was born in 1960. That makes for easy math whenever I forget my age, which is quite often. I don't forget because I am absentminded, I forget because age isn't something I focus on very often. My earliest wish was to be grown or dead. So now I'm grown and that particular wish came true. I did not attend college after I graduated from high school. I recall that I mildly wanted to continue my education but at the time I really didn't consider it a viable option. My family never talked about college. Neither one of my parents graduated from high school. The conversations in my family centered on a good work ethic and Christian righteousness. Instead of going to college, I went to work, got married, and had children. I married at twenty, delivered my daughter at 23 and my son at 27. Everything proceeded according to a plan carefully laid out for me by my family, my church, and my community. It was a plan I happily implemented, a plan that would place me neatly into my position as a second class citizen in the United States of America because I was born a female.

In the spring of 2003, I chose to return to college. At the time, I had become a full-time caregiver for my mother-in-law who had experienced a debilitating stroke. I graduated from high school in 1978. I remember reviewing the list of available majors along with an advisor. I read the entire list because I had no idea what I wanted to study. Near the very end of the list I spotted a major that gave my heart a little jolt. "Women's Studies" was the name of the program, and I was instantly intrigued. I asked the advisor

about it, and s/he told me that wasn't a very good choice. "Much better to go with something more traditional, more acceptable, something with a broader appeal," s/he said. I don't remember if I declared a major at that point in time, but I did register for classes, and three of the five classes I took that semester were offered by the Department of Women's Studies at the University of South Florida (USF) in Tampa. From the moment that first semester started, I knew that I had discovered a program that would finally explain many of my "why" questions that I had asked from my earliest memories. Simultaneously, I discovered the Department of Communication, also at USF. For me, women's studies explained the "whys," and communication gave me the tools to write and to speak about my discoveries. Women's Studies did more for my mind, body, and spirit than any counselor I ever met. I earned my BA in Women's Studies and another in Communications in May, 2005. I immediately secured employment, and for the first time in a very long time, weekends were my own. There were few family demands or commitments, and I loved it.

My daughter Heather had a baby in May, 2007. She had returned home, and my intention was to stay out of the way so that Heather and her new baby could settle into their new relationship. In January, 2008, I returned to school once again. I was on track to graduate in May of 2011. But life intervened and by November, 2010, I had legal, full-time custody of the baby Heather delivered. That baby was named Madison and she calls me mommy now. I tried to find a way to keep my original graduation goal. In November of 2010, I took an unpaid leave of absence from work; I asked friends for financial support; I applied for a preschool scholarship; I applied for grants; I tried to find a way to have my educational dreams completed and be a mother to this amazing child. I simply

needed more time, and I needed more money, and that was an unlikely combination to get delivered. For the two children I gave birth to, I had put my life on hold as I performed the social and cultural expectations of motherhood. Now, at 50, I did not have that desire. I wanted my life, and I wanted to be a mother, too. There is an upper-level class at school called “The Politics of Motherhood.” Wow! I would have loved to have taken that class.

Now that I have taken all of the required classes and now that I have passed an exam called “The Comprehensive Exam,” there is a final process before I graduate called writing a thesis. This writing, these words, are the beginning of my thesis. My advisor told me, “Just start by telling your story, that’s what you’re good at. Don’t worry about the other parts of the project right now. Set it up into three parts: Past, Present, and Future”. Just start writing, she says. I have no choice but to trust her. Well, I do have a choice, but in my opinion it would not be a very smart choice. So, I will make the smartest choice I can make and trust her. I had no idea that in her agreement to support me in this project that she was committing so much time, energy, and effort into me. I am humbled and afraid about this task at hand. Through this task of writing a thesis, *An Interactive Guide to Self-Discovery for Women*, I want to ultimately share my ideas with many women around the globe as we talk about the concepts of patriarchy and all the –isms that come with it. I must interrupt the negative voices in my head asking me, “who in the hell do you think you are?” or whispering, “Don’t worry, she’s not smart enough,” and taunting me with phrases like, “You just can’t have everything; you must sacrifice someone or something.” I must make sure I pick up Madison from daycare on time, that we have milk in the refrigerator, that her laundry is caught up, that we don’t run out of

diapers, that we eat as nutritionally sound a diet as possible, and I must push away the nagging thought that I haven't exercised for months now. And, I do have an understanding of just how lucky I am to have these kinds of things to think about.

These are the first words; many will be deleted, and some will be expanded, and I will pursue this goal with tenacity that is one of my ways of being in this world. I'll finish or I won't, but I'm not going to quit unless it gets to the point that I just can't take another step. I am not there yet. I have surrounded myself with wonderful, wise, talented, and kind women, women who emulate the me I want to become, women who are cheering me to cross the finish line. And so, I continue, each day, each step, each day closer to my goal.

This book is my final project. I will share my personal story of self-discovery, and it is my deepest hope that this book will provide readers an opportunity to discover themselves in a new way. I hope this book will be useful for women who seek recovery and self-discovery after living in our social system of patriarchy. Many of the primary social and cultural institutions that we live and participate in are rooted in patriarchy. Family systems, religious institutions and leaders, educational systems, political systems, and systems of commerce have all been defined primarily through the male lens (Gilligan, 1993). Gender rules and norms have denied most women access to the co-creation of these systems (Tong, 2009). It may be difficult for a woman of middle or later age to know herself in a personal and self-supporting way after she has participated in these rigid and established systems for many years because these systems most likely did not celebrate her unique self, an individual self that has not been identified as powerful or valuable (Tong, 2009). People are not just bodies, or just minds, or just spirits; they are

rich combinations of minds, bodies, and spirits. Many women attempt to follow the social and cultural “rules” dictated with regard to female bodies because women’s bodies are offered as a woman’s primary value in the system of patriarchy (Tong, 2009). Because many women do not fit the defined body ideal, they often self-identify as women who can’t measure up. The minds of women develop in family and community systems that may place them as “other” or as less than their male counterparts (Gilligan, 1993). The spirits of women have been dominated by their orthodox religion for as long as we have written records (Tong, 2009). These orthodox religions dictated a divine order calling for a hierarchal order of God and then man as leaders and rulers with women and children called forth as followers. As a result, for many women, recovery will include all three integral components, mind, body, and spirit.

In this book I consider aspects of our language system and the development of women’s minds as they are forced to function in a system that was created by men, from the male perspective, and primarily for men (Tong, 2009). Language not only places restrictions on the ideas and thoughts and words of women, but also directly supports gender binaries which place significant limits on the possibilities of their lived lives.

The social construction of gender begins by addressing the physical body of a woman that begins at birth and continues throughout her life (Tong, 2009). This gender creation and reinforcement causes many women to desire to understand themselves in new and unique ways that allow them to unhook from the yoke of expected behaviors, desires, and needs. Dictates about gender also support the idea that the spirituality of women is not within their personal realm of exploration. The spirituality of women has been beaten and burned until near extinction as traditional religions have placed men at

the top of the hierarchal structure closest to God and as masters to their wives and daughters (Ehrenreich & English, 1973). This book will encourage a woman to seek her own spirituality, her spirit, in spite of patriarchal religious training and teachings that she may have endured.

This book is important to me because of the sheer length of time it took for me to understand these “built in” limitations that support patriarchy at my expense which I have identified as the language, the gender dictates, and the lack of a personal spirituality that limit me as a woman.

There are three main theoretical contexts for my project. The first context is focused on the language limitations that women are forced to exist in. Our cultural and social language still supports male pronouns and nouns as the standard. For example, the term “you guys” has become the default phrase when addressing a group, even if the group is all or primarily women.

The theorists who focus on the limits that language places on women are many, including Marilyn Frye (2005), Joan Scott (2005), Elaine Pagels (2005), and Cynthia Enloe (2000). The Bible was the earliest mass-produced text and was written by men from their perspective and the published text supported their belief that women were their right and responsibility. From these earliest texts, and from the texts and cultural messages that followed, women learned that saying “no” was not an acceptable option (Frye, 2005). Language limitations exist today for women, and they have been carried forward since the beginning of the written word. Language limits women from communicating with themselves and with each other.

Secondly, the way women are gendered to become women sets up a situation where women are expected to know much about other people but very little about themselves. That is why gender socialization is the next context in this project. Gender rules dictate that women focus on body image and “appropriate” female behavior, and our society and culture teach parents to socially “gender” children (specifically little girls). Gayle Rubin (2005), Judith Lorber (1994), Linda Silverman (1993) and Carol Gilligan (1993) all articulate that little girls are taught that their places in the world are in support roles. These authors make a strong, supported case that little girls are nurtured differently and because children are often primarily parented by a mother, little girls are set up to focus on others at the expense of themselves. This focus on gender differences is further cemented by many religious institutions that support the idea that men are in between women and God and that is why the third context of this project is feminist spirituality and the movement of many women away from personal spirituality in reaction to the orthodox words of a male God.

Many women are limited in their exposure to the possibilities of other options to celebrate their spirituality. Authors have done a great deal of work in this area in recognition of this “missing link.” Winnie Tamm (2002), Sue Monk Kidd (2006), Carol Lee Flinders (1998) and Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow (1992) are just a few of the feminist authors who have brought this topic out of the basement into the house. Women are often taught their “place” within patriarchal religions that place women as second. Many women struggle to recover their spiritual selves in direct relationship to a higher being.

In this book, I am translating just some of what I learned on my academic journey. This is an interactive book that will bring this information to any woman who wants a concise, understandable, and empowering method for self-discovery from one feminist's perspective. Traditional self-help materials often set the reader up as the one with the issue or problem and they rarely call out the functioning systems of oppression as a stumbling block or offer ways to circumvent them. With this project, I hope to shine some glimmer of light on the functioning systems of gender discrimination, racism, classism, and heterosexism, and to provide a framework that women can thrive in instead of survive in. In my work at a not-for-profit organization that serves primarily women, my work as a graduate assistant at the University of South Florida, in my friendship relationships with other women, and in my community, I have come to understand that knowing yourself by exploring mind, body, and spirit remains a primary desire for many women. However, many women do not have the knowledge of what that process might look like. These women repeat a common theme: "I don't know who I am. In my role of caring for others, I have lost myself. Where do I even begin to know myself? The project seems enormous and overwhelming!"

It is my belief that the process of self-discovery can begin with questions: What do we know? And, what do we think we know? What social and cultural stories have we been told and who told them? What stories have we told ourselves? Is it time to rewrite any of these stories? What do we believe? When have we been successful? What were the components of action that supported that success? What are our personal values, and do our lives and current choices support those values? Story-telling is vital in the process of self-discovery primarily because many women have not had the opportunity to speak

their personal stories. The cultural message that many women receive is that their personal stories are not important. These stories are the basis of beginning to understand our minds, bodies, and spirits in a new and personal way. Throughout the book I offer various writing exercises as opportunities for the reader to explore the key ideas in more depth. Some of these are adapted from the work of other authors as noted, but most are my original ideas.

I have met women in their twenties who have lived a lifetime of experiences and who desire self-discovery, and I have met women in their nineties who are asking themselves for the first time who they are and what is important to them. Primarily, the women who are most often interested in the topic of self-discovery are women disillusioned by the unfulfilled promises that have been delivered by media, literature, educational and social institutions, families, and places of worship. These were promises of personal fulfillment that were supposed to magically arrive when a woman focused her energy on her partner and her children.

My position is primarily one of a Materialist Feminist functioning within the Third Wave of Feminism, hopefully on the cutting edge of the Fourth Wave. I believe that the categories of economic class, gender, race, and sexuality all work together to oppress women within the systems of patriarchy and capitalism. I also identify with Radical Feminists, who claim that the patriarchal system is characterized by power, dominance, hierarchy, and competition, and that in order for change to happen the system must be dismantled completely and rebuilt (Tong, 2009). The work of Liberal Feminists in demanding equal pay and equal access for equal work has provided an invaluable contribution to feminism, but I have come to believe their desire to “pull up to the

masculine table” isn’t as desirable as creating a new table. I agree with much of what queer theory has to say with regards to the solutions to the oppression of women, and I believe that we live in a society of enforced heterosexism which contributes to the oppression of women. I am in a position to work in the borderlands between groups of women to bring about communication, conversation, and cohesiveness.

I remember a communication professor, Carol Jablonski, asking our class if we thought poor people were unhappy because they were poor. I had never thought about that before but as I did think about it and what I have come to understand is that poor people aren’t unhappy because they are poor, but it makes sense to me that they might be unhappy because of inaccessible basic human services and an unequal education system that empowers the powerful and disempowers the poor.

We don’t know what we don’t know, and this book will provide some opportunity to find out about some things that aren’t talked about on daily talk shows or on the eleven o’clock news. I do not believe that people can have whatever they want just because they put a red envelope in the correct corner of their house or because they meditate daily to bring abundance their way. What people can do is learn to identify and utilize their resources and understand and evaluate the long-term cost of short-term decisions. My purpose is not to tell people they are limited based on their race, class, gender, or sexual orientation. My purpose is to provide a space for people to focus on what they have to be grateful for and to provide a perspective about the challenges faced daily by people who are not white, who are not male, who are not wealthy and who are not heterosexual (Mohanty, 2003).

In this book, I will narrate my experiences, my fears, my discoveries and my struggles to untangle the cultural and social messages I received from my family, my church, and later, my schools, and the mediated messages in pop culture. I will call upon the words of authors who have traveled paths of self-discovery before me. I will provide sources so that readers can find more about these authors and their works if they choose. This book does not place the responsibility of healing on an individual woman. Many women are convinced that the struggles they have are theirs alone. In this thesis, a woman will come to understand it is entirely possible that it is not she who is sick or in need of “self-help” but the society and culture that she lives in and that she is powerful and whole.

The second chapter, exploring the “Past,” will begin at my beginning. My goal is to convey the fact that all that we are is a combination of every life experience we have had. Poor women, women of color, women who were subjected to males because of their gender, abused women, as well as women born to privilege have traveled a specific and unique life. Many of these first experiences provided little opportunity for choice. These beginnings left them little or no say in the matter.

The section identified as “Present” will begin at my present point in time. It will be the reconstruction or reframing of some of the materials in Chapter Two. This section will provide an opportunity to make a move away from what was to what is. If a woman has never asked herself what she would choose if she had the choice, this chapter will provide the space for her to explore some of those questions. In this project, I offer the reader specific writing exercises as ways to begin the process of self-discovery.

Chapter Four, “Future,” will plant the seeds for future possibilities. Spirituality will be the central theme of this section because I believe that feminist spirituality will be what ultimately saves us all. Our personal calls to evolve into our spiritual selves will be the catalyst to bring about the changes that our world and our communities so desperately need.

The journey of self-discovery cannot be taken without asking many questions. This book will ask a woman to remember the times when she would have labeled herself the most “happy,” the most “content,” the most “excited.” This book will ask a woman to identify how she limits her own success. Does she blame? Does she shame? This book will introduce a woman to herself. She will meet herself as a champion and as a lover of herself. She will understand that she must say no to others so that she can begin to say yes to herself.

Chapter 2

Understanding My Past

Why start in the past? The past is finished. What's done is done. Leave it in the past where it belongs. Well, as an answer to that question, imagine a ball coming into contact with a bat. The bat represents your personal beginning: what you were born into. The ball represents you as you were gently tossed into your life. That first smack from the bat created a trajectory for the first years of your life. A path, a distance, and a speed were all determined for you by those first life experiences. Because we have no choice initially except to travel the path that has been determined for us, we are thrown into a pattern that comes to seem familiar. The scenery, the people, the behaviors are all very comfortable because they are what we know and what we understand our reality to be. That first smack may have been terrific, or it may have been horrendous, or maybe it was something in between. But after that first pass through life, when we had very few, if any, choices to make about the way things were, we get another shot. We get to be that ball again except this time we get to be the batter too. We don't have the chance to pitch to ourselves, but we do have the chance to pinch hit to others around us who may need some assistance.

We cannot make changes unless we understand what we want to make changes to. Without some insight into our pasts, it becomes impossible to articulate what changes we might want to make. We can choose to move from a place of powerlessness to a place of

greater power. Evaluating the past gives a person the opportunity to locate responsibility for past happenings where it really belongs. As a child, I felt so responsible for many things that happened to me that simply were not my fault. When I can let go of that misplaced sense of responsibility, it may be easier for me to claim responsibility for my present life and my present decisions. Everything that I learned from that first smack of the bat to the ball needs to be evaluated, and some of those things need to be discarded in order for me to take proper aim at my future.

Childhood and Family: My Earliest Lessons

In my childhood years I was taught that a woman had the primary responsibility of supporting her husband and raising their children, which was referred to, in my church, as God's Divine Order (1 Corinthians 11:3 New International Version). In return for doing my part in this magical plan, I would be taken care of, financially, emotionally, physically, and mentally, and I would be honored, nurtured, and protected from harm. In the event that there was not yet a husband, then this primary responsibility was in the hands of the human father and in the event that he was absent, in the hands of the brothers. This kind of conditioning happened over many years in many covert and overt ways.

I was born the youngest of six children. My mother and father married in their early twenties and immediately started their family. Four children were born in rapid succession between twelve and eighteen months apart. The next years brought a halt to new babies. I've been told that my mother discovered and used condoms. Eventually, one of those condoms failed and my mother became pregnant once again, not with one baby, but with twins. My twin brother and I were born when the next oldest child was four

years old and the oldest child was nine years old. That completed our family, six children total, four boys and two girls. Many people are told their birth story. The telling of my birth story over the years did not make me feel special or wanted. I call my birth story a defining experience. As a type of family story, it constructs and solidifies the meanings I attach to my experience (Bruner, 1990). Because I have no memory of the events, the account of my birth was one of the first stories that began to shape who I was. What I know now is that this story, as it was told to me, came from faulty memories, from personal perspectives and feelings, and from a language steeped in patriarchy.

In the following sections, I will invite you to think about how the past affects your present. Maybe some of my experiences will be similar to experiences you have had and maybe some will not have any similarity to yours. What is certain is that we all have a past and we can choose to let it define who we are and how we think about things or we can choose to redefine ourselves in our own terms and with conditions that we set.

Defining Experiences

We have all had the defining experience of birth. Many of us have been told the experiences that surrounded our birth. Whether it was our actual birth or an adoption story, these first narrative stories that we heard in childhood are the way we began to describe and explain ourselves (Frank, 1995). These stories were the beginning of what we understood about ourselves and our family, regardless of whether the stories were joyful, terrifying, sad, or triumphant. Some of us don't know our birth story. If that's true for you, I invite you to create one for yourself. If your birth story has been told to you full of trauma, I invite you to re-write it, to re-write your beginning.

My Birth Story as it was told to me:

The diaphragm slipped. They hadn't really wanted more children. They had four already. Then they got the news, it was going to be twins. The boy child was born first eager to arrive and take his place in the world. The second birth didn't happen immediately after the first as it should have. Blood pressures dropped, there was an emergency.... the doctor had to create a path through the membranes and the birth canal...forceps were required. One hour after the first, the tiny girl was born. My brothers were thrilled...they had a brother. My sister was thrilled...she had a sister. My parents were exhausted mentally, physically, and financially.

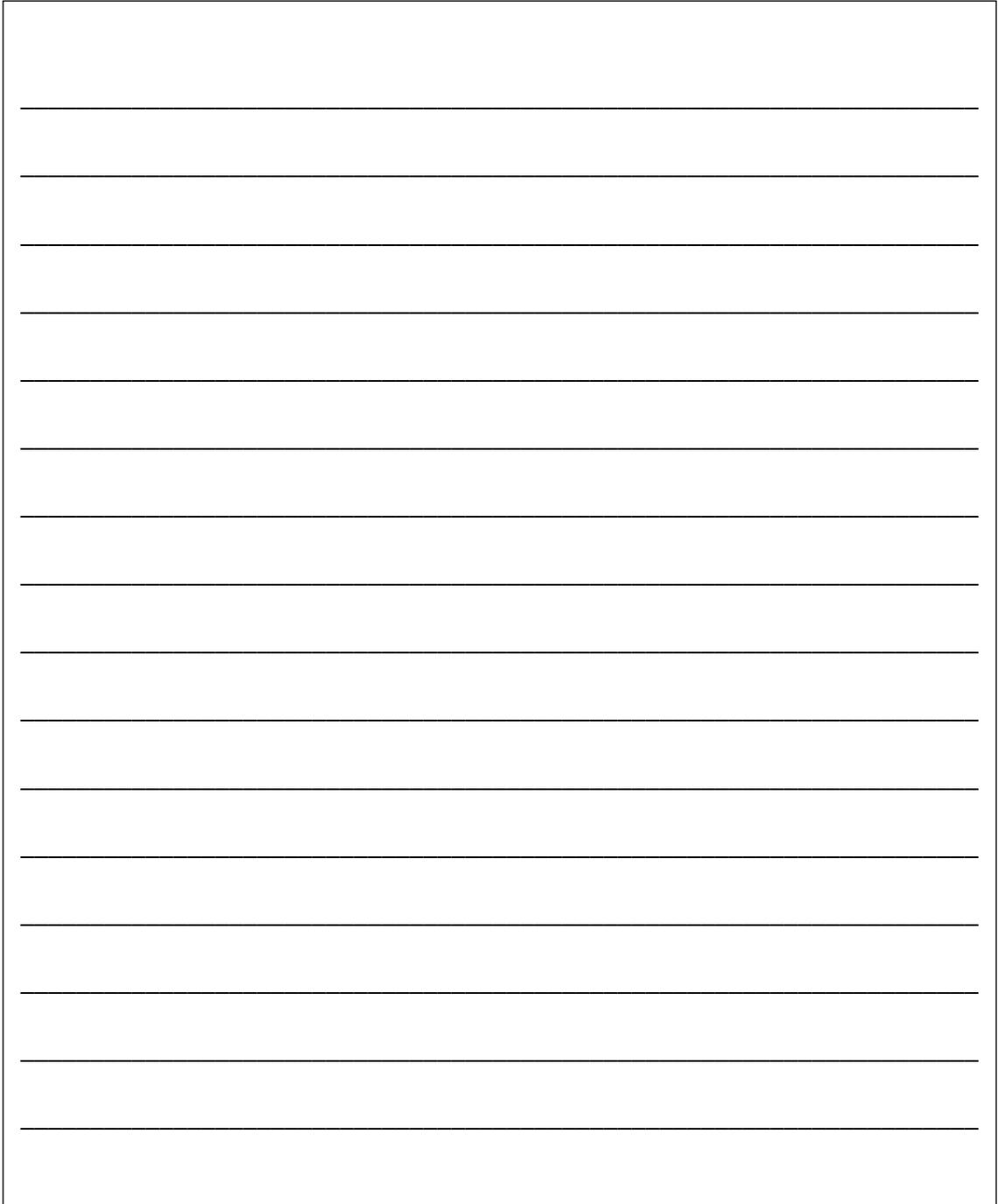
My Birth Story as I have re-written it:

The diaphragm slipped. It was divine intervention. This family would grow to include six children. Twins! Twice the joy, twice the love...a boy and a girl...no troubles telling these two apart! My brother was born first moving through the birth canal with determination. "Come on," he called to me; it's our time to be born. I was alone in my mother's womb, something I had never experienced. There was so much room to move about, to stretch, to swim. No feet in my mouth, or elbow in my ribs. It was so much more comfortable, I wanted to stay just a little while longer...I stayed a little too long, and things got a little complicated and help was needed and given as I transitioned into the world. My brothers and sister were thrilled...two healthy babies. My parents were full of joy and had a deep sense of faith that caused them to know that whatever the storms

ahead, their family would weather them together and arrive safely at many destinations.

Writing Exercise: Defining Experiences

I created this exercise. Write your birth story as it was told to you or as you choose to re-write it.

A large rectangular box with a thin black border, containing 20 horizontal lines for writing. The lines are evenly spaced and extend across most of the width of the box, leaving a small margin on the left and right sides.

I have tried to find myself in the many books that are written about birth order and it is not an easy task. First of all, the fact that there is a four-year difference between “the twins” and “the others” has the likelihood of making me more similar to a first born than a last born according to the books I have read. Second of all, the fact that I was born a twin also complicates my story. The bottom line for me was that the birth order psychology books did not provide me with many answers about how I function within my family or my place within my family. I did find out that family members create a system in which members are interdependent (Galvin & Brommel, 1982), and I wanted to understand our family system. My quest to find some answers about my family dynamics started long after I was born and long after I started a family of my own. Everything in my family was what might be termed traditional in the current language. My mother primarily raised children and kept house, and my father earned most of the money. Our family structure was extremely gendered starting with the roles of my mother and father, and these gender roles determined how the children would be directed and managed into their gender roles (Lorber, 1994). Because my mother had the primary task of mothering, all of her children were socially gendered men and women who reproduced the sexual and familial division of labor in which women mother (Chodorow, 1999). My mother was allowed to work because my father agreed, but that work came second to her jobs of wife and mothering. My father, and later my brothers, took care of everything outside the house and my mother, and later my sister, took care of everything inside the house. By the time I was old enough to help out, I had figured out how to get out of the work so my sister would have to do it. By the time I was six, she was almost twelve. I

only have the stories to go on about those early years. One of those stories is that my mother primarily cared for my twin brother and my sister primarily cared for me.

Those early years, birth until about five, were, as far as I can tell, stable, nurturing, and busy for my parents. The fact that I was a female and that my place was secondary to my brother's didn't seem unfair to me. It was imparted to me as a fact, and I accepted the fact. It was the way it was. I have baby pictures of us dressed alike, male and female versions of course. One set of pictures that everyone thought was darling showed my twin as the Captain and me as the First Mate. I was happy and content, protected and cared for, and that was all that was important to me. The year before I started first grade, my older brothers were entering puberty and with puberty came rebellion and with rebellion came the beatings. Now that I have experienced parenting teenagers, I can only imagine my parents' dismay at what must have seemed like disintegration of our precious God-fearing family. They followed the models they were raised in, models dictated by the church, captured in the phrase, "Spare the rod and spoil the child." My father chose to not spare the rod, and my mother chose to support his actions. It was during this period of upheaval that I was sexually molested. All of the books that say beware of family members and close family friends are true (Philpot, 2009). The people who have access to our children, those we trust the most, can't always be trusted and in my case, my world began to unravel the year before I went to public school. Maybe that's why I loved school so much. School was safer than home, and there were rules at school that everyone had to follow, and there was always someone in charge to take care and to look after me. I worked hard to please my teachers, and I was devastated when I made a mistake. All I wanted was to belong, to be safe, and to be

recognized sometimes. Things were so chaotic at home that school became my safe place.

Communication: Learning My Place in the World

As a child, it was understood that my role was “to be seen and not heard.” There were no questions to be asked because everything was clearly defined. Speaking was reserved for those in charge so they could communicate to the others what to do, when and how. The most revered words were the words of God, words given to men who wrote them in the Bible. God said that men were created in his image and they were the next most powerful people after God. Women were made as helpers for men, but they were not equal, and they did not have anything of value to communicate unless that communication supported the actions of husbands or her fathers (1 Corinthians 14:34).

My parents were both born into families that needed to have children in order to help sustain the family as soon as they were old enough. My parents each had eleven brothers and sisters, and all of the children worked to help sustain the family until they left and started families of their own. They lived in a preindustrial world where “the family was the economic unit of production” (Christ & Plaskow, 1992). However I do not know why my parents had six children. We did not have a farm to work or a family business. Six children was a lot of children in the 1950’s and ‘60’s although the church often preached that children were necessary to carry on the work of the Lord. I sometimes wonder if my mother wanted children for the same reason I did. Having children validated her station as a wife and a mother. Female children are raised to be mothers as they emulate and are guided by their mothers to fulfill that role (Gilligan, 1993). Psychologist Carol Gilligan says “girls, in identifying themselves as female, experience

themselves as like their mothers, thus fusing the experience of attachment with the process of identity formation” (Gilligan, 1993, P. 8). Without the title of wife and mother, women were left with devaluing terms like “spinster” and “barren.” If I had a nickel for every woman who told me that raising her children was her greatest accomplishment, I would be a wealthy woman. I have never heard a man say the same thing, although in fairness, I haven’t asked many men what they considered their greatest accomplishment.

I was once told by a workshop facilitator that it is estimated that by the time we are five years old we have heard the word “no” thousands of times. As I thought about this piece of information further, I remembered my own children as I encouraged them to walk and to talk. What a cheerleader I was for them as they began to explore their world. That first step, that first word, all of the wonderful milestones that told me that my child was developing normally. Then it occurred to me that after those firsts had been applauded, the “no’s” started and continued at a much higher rate of frequency than the applause. How confusing this might be for a child to get to the point where the firsts are over and the “no’s” begin and how this one switch from the message, “Come on, you can do it!” to “No, don’t do that!” may plant the first seeds of self-doubt and (depending on punishment) fear of reprisal that folds into fear of failure. As I continued my internal dialogue, I evaluated my own childhood and tried to remember when the encouragement turned to discouragement. I don’t remember the switch. I only remember the no’s and the punishments for not following the rules. Since this switch would most likely occur around the age of two, I doubt if anyone can remember the encouragement, or the switch. I can imagine that most people have a memory of the thousands of no’s handed out by parents, siblings, caregivers, and religious institutions, but how many people have a

memory of yes's. It was my experience that the females in my family heard the word no many times more often than the boys. The reasons, when given, were that things are different for boys and for girls, and when I was older, the reasons became more specifically tied to sex, rape, and pregnancy. Even without having read Gilligan's (1993) *In a Different Voice*, I vowed not to allow more freedoms for my son than my daughter, but I worried twice as much about my daughter than I did about my son because of my personal experiences with sex, rape, and pregnancy.

Those early no messages not only involved what we could not do, but also who we could not associate with and/or be like. Judgment was a big part of my learning, something that God and his followers did and something I needed to do to set myself apart from the "unrighteous" and "sinners." I absorbed the importance of judgment and absolutism: right and wrong, there was no middle ground.

I was reared in a strict traditional Christian church where I learned about judgment, the righteousness of being right, the promise of wrath and hell fire, eternal life versus burning in excruciating pain for all eternity, and right versus wrong. I will not call out the denomination of the church that I grew up in, in this document. There are some who may make sweeping judgments about this particular religion based on my personal experiences and that would not be fair. The point I wish to make is about some things that can happen within the structure of fundamental, traditional, or orthodox religions. Within this structure, my first lessons were about judgment. They were delivered swiftly and surely from the pulpit as many times each week as the church doors were open.

For much of my life, I have had a great desire to be right. I understand now that being right then meant that I would not be punished. That pattern that was created, that

need for me to be right gave me a sense of safety. It did not occur to me for many years that it was not even my definition of right that I was struggling to achieve. I know now that when I think I am right, someone else must be wrong. When I work with that attitude, I don't get far in my personal or working relationships. If I can focus instead on what is, instead of what's right, then I have an opportunity to grow and learn.

Women have been taught to keep other women "in-line" while at the same time, being kept "in-line" by women around them. Historically, the division separated "women who were sexually available and those who were not" (Flinders, 1998, p.112). It is possible that the women labeled as "good women" went along easily enough with the division because of the rights and options they were afforded. The women labeled as "bad women" wouldn't have had any option to object to what is called Middle Assyrian Law #40 which legislated women's dress in Biblical Times. This law "required that wives, daughters, and widows of 'gentlemen' must wear veils in public. Prostitutes and slaves, on the other hand, must not, and if they did they would be punished severely, as would any man or woman who failed to report a violation of the veiling law" (Flinders, 1998, p. 112). Women today still tend to identify each other as good women, right women, and respectable women, or as whores, sluts, and women not deserving any respect or social care (Douglas, 1994), and this setup pits us against each other began with this Assyrian Law about three thousand years ago. Women in the United States aren't brutalized anymore for not obeying this law because we don't have to be. This knowledge has become a way of a woman's knowing, and she has internalized her place on either side of the divide. We have social rules that must be followed about dress, make-up, speech, and behavior. When we see another woman who is not following "the

rules,” we may subtly punish her, ostracizing or gossiping about her, or we may criticize her openly.

Judgment kept me focused on everyone and everything except myself. I am not saying that I did not judge myself. What I am saying is that the act of judging did nothing to help me grow as a person, to learn as a person, to experience deeper and richer relationships, and it certainly did not keep my personal goals front and center.

When I became aware of my judgment of just about everything and everyone, I learned that I can be judgmental about judgment. I had to become comfortable with the way things were and to recognize that the way things were was just fine. I did some work on living in the present moment (Tolle, 1999; Hanh, 1996). I practiced empathy and spoke to people whom I might not have spoken to before. Not living in a world of judgment has freed me to focus on the good things all around me. I have experienced an “opening” to possibilities that I never before considered.

I have come to understand that whether or not I am right is not the question that serves my highest good. The question that serves my highest good is: Am I doing the best I can considering the circumstances?

Painful Lessons: Childhood Abuse

Children continue to be abused in our society every day. Our little girls are the most vulnerable because they are taught from birth to give in, to get along. We may use phrases like “that’s not ladylike” if a little girl yells on the playground or if a little girl gets her clothes dirty or shows her panties by accident. Our little girls are put in harm’s way entirely too often. Family members, step brothers and fathers, uncles, brothers in law, and neighborhood teenage boys can be perpetrators of abuse. We might like to

convince ourselves that our daughter's primary risk comes from the stranger driving through the neighborhood or lurking in the department store. Those are the stories we hear about. Those stories told often in crime drama television and movies woo us into forgetting where the primary dangers are lurking. If every woman reading this asks herself first of all, have you experienced abuse in your early life, and second of all, if you have, was that abuse delivered by a stranger, the answers would overwhelmingly tell the truth. Many of us have been abused, and the abuse was delivered by someone we knew.

Researchers and practitioners have identified three kinds of abuse: emotional abuse, physical abuse, and sexual abuse, and all are intertwined. Child abuse is defined as any action that "results in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development, or dignity" (Gillberg, Harrington & Steinhausen, 2006, p. 4). While there are still an abundance of parents who believe that spanking is the best method of punishment, there are growing numbers of parents who believe that physical violence begets physical violence. Numerous sources and experts explain the tragic results of spanking and physical abuse (Hyman, 1997). These conversations give parents an opportunity to think about how they feel about the issue and to change their minds in the face of compelling evidence and strong arguments.

Emotional abuse is learned behavior. Yelling, the silent treatment, withholding affection, embarrassing someone in front of others, requiring one child to witness the punishment of another, implied threats are just some of the ways that many people have been emotionally abused. These experiences become a part of who we are, and they are often re-lived in our own families without our even thinking about it. Emotional abuse is

rarely talked about on the talk shows and in the magazines. Emotional abuse is often one way that female children are molded into compliant women.

Fear of sexual abuse causes us to keep our daughters inside and to keep ourselves inside after dark. The messages delivered by our powerful media continue to be that our daughters and women are vulnerable to sexual abuse and attack from strangers, but rarely from family members and people that we know and trust. Sexual abuse is considered to be the most shocking even though all forms of abuse change children in irrevocable and indescribable ways. Sexual abuse may be the most shocking because the fear of sexual abuse has been used to control women and girls since recorded history.

If a person has experienced emotional and physical abuse, the message, frequently, is that at least they weren't sexually abused because that's the worst. It is my testimony that sexual abuse is not the worst. There is not a least offense among the kinds of abuse. I have experienced all three categories of abuse. Because the reader may wish to know, I am now healed enough to say that I was sexually abused for the first time at the age of 5. I experienced sexual abuse throughout my childhood, in my early teen years, and on more than one date. None of the sexual abuse I experienced came from a stranger. I will not name or call out my abusers. Who the perpetrators were is not my point. The legacy of abuse is my point. Because sexual abuse was my first experience with abuse, it may have caused the most mental damage. I did not understand then that emotional abuse and physical abuse were happening to me during that time as well. I did understand the shame of sexual abuse and because of that message of shame I never told on any of my abusers.

At some point in my thirties, I encountered a magazine article about disassociation, and I understood immediately that I had been using that as a coping mechanism for a very long time. I searched for and located a good counselor and my journey of healing began. It has taken years, and while I can speak of my experiences when I feel very safe to do so, it is not something I can do without some discomfort. I have not disassociated for a very long time, and I feel very confident that I am able to advocate for and protect myself. What I understand now, that I did not understand as a child, was that for a very long time, I held my child self-accountable for experiences that I had zero control over. It may sound a little strange when I say that I am a dependable and loving parent to the child who still lives within me. I owe so much gratitude to all of the good counselors who walked with me as I journeyed through the tangle of messages and beliefs that I received and accepted during my childhood.

I have been told by more than one mental health counselor that emotional maturity is hindered and sometimes halted when a child experiences abuse (Blume, 1990). Emotional maturity is as vital as physical and mental maturity, yet it is assumed to arrive naturally with age. Rage, outbursts, silence, fear, denial, mistrust, intense frustration experienced in mild circumstances all may indicate emotional immaturity and emotional immaturity is often a direct result of childhood abuse (Courtois, 1988).

Part of my educational experience included teaching undergraduate students some introductory Women's Studies courses. I had the opportunity to facilitate some very brilliant students, and I got to know many of them over the course of the semester. I know from talking to many of them, by looking at some of them, and by sharing with them that abuse of our children still occurs. There are a lot of people who are missing

some basic parenting information about keeping their children safe. We have to take a test to drive a car, but all we have to do in order to be a parent is complete an act of sexual intercourse. I think there should be a tax break for families willing to invest in their children by participating in some basic parenting classes. Imagine the investment that would be in our future generations.

The following exercise is one that I have participated in in workshops a number of times. It is used to create a tangible starting point in the process of self-understanding.

This is the Woman I Was

I was loud. I was so loud that I could, and often did, frighten people. I was loud on purpose. I discovered early on that when I was loud, people left me alone. It was my experience that when people left me alone, then I was safe.

My world was black or white. It was right or wrong. I was decisive, concise, and quick to pass judgment on myself and others.

I was clean. I chose clean over everything else. I chose cleaning over relationships, over personal growth, over playing. When things were clean and in order, I felt safe. I felt accomplished. I felt necessary.

I was driven. I was driven to be the best mother, the best wife, the best employee, the best neighbor, the best patient, the best daughter, the best sister, the best parishioner, the best everything. When I was the best, there wasn't anything to find fault with. There was no possibility of criticism, of judgment, of what felt to me like attack.

I was afraid. I was afraid of not measuring up to anyone's standards including my own. I was afraid that if something bad happened to me that I would not be able to protect myself like I was unable to protect myself when I was a child. I was so afraid that I would

not admit my fear to myself or to anyone else. I was so afraid that I was immobile and unable to function on my own behalf.

Emotionally, I was a child. I was sexually and emotionally abused as a child. It started when I was five years old, the year before I started elementary school. My emotional growth stopped when I was five years old, and it did very little growing until many years later.

Chapter 3

Present

Who of us has a very accurate idea about what will be in our future. The days link together; the goals are met and reset; the months turn into years which turn into decades. If a psychic had predicted the future accurately for me ten years ago, I would have laughed hysterically at how far off she was. I am amazed at the events that have happened that functioned as catalysts for significant shifts in my life. At the time, these events seem so very ordinary, just another problem to be solved, option to be explored, question to be answered, a path to take a step on just to see what might happen.

In May, 2007, I cut my first grandchild's umbilical cord. Her mother, my daughter, gave birth to a miracle, to a child she named Madison Rose. They both lived for some time in an efficiency apartment attached to our home. Heather parented Madison and I co-parented when Heather worked. Heather was fired from a job that she had had for years, the month before she delivered. Nothing will ever convince me that this was not a case of gender discrimination because she was pregnant. Of course, I cannot prove any of this. Besides, it doesn't matter why she was fired; we live in the great state of Florida which proudly proclaims itself as a "right to work" state. This translates into the "right to discriminate and treat people like shit" state. Heather used her health care benefits to pay for the delivery but soon after that, Madison was put into the state's Medicaid program. Heather accessed programs like Good Nutrition for Women, Infants and Children (W.I.C.) and food stamps, and my husband and I covered the shortfall.

These programs didn't cover formula for an entire month. Do you know what the cost of baby formula is? No wonder the state won't supply all that these babies need. It's expensive, too expensive. Do you know that if you add too much water to formula that a baby can die? What do mothers like Heather do if they don't have a family to provide back up support? That frightens me. These children, who are starting their lives in circumstances that, from the beginning, put them at the back of the line in terms of access to resources, are not to blame. Heather pulled herself together and got another job. It's what people call "a man's job," the kind of job her father has had for her entire life. She went to work in the middle of the night on a delivery truck. She delivered to the grocery stores, convenience stores, and the schools. She worked five days a week. Wednesday and Sunday are the two days off for folks in this kind of work. There is not even a weekend or two days back to back in which to recover. She would get off work sometime during the day. The time always varied because of all the variables like how many stops she had that day, whether the inventory truck was late getting to the "depot," whether her truck broke down by the side of the road, and whether there were a lot of receivers at the stores out sick causing her to have to wait for long periods of time to get checked in. Some of the men at her work told her that she had no business doing this kind of work. They told her that she belonged at home with her baby, that she was taking a job away from a man with a family. This wasn't fifty or one hundred years ago, this was in 2007. She persisted, however, told them all to screw themselves and committed herself to her job. Between Heather, my mother, and myself, we managed to meet Madison's every need.

In Heather's baby book, in 1983, I wrote her a note that said that I didn't fall in love with her the moment she was born. In fact, it was months before I fell in love with her. I told her this because I was quite surprised that it wasn't "love at first sight." That is really what I expected to happen based on all of the social and cultural messages I had received. Besides, not one of the hundreds of women I knew who had a baby told me anything different and to me that supported the "love at first sight" story. I told her this because no one told me the truth, that everyone's experience is different. No one told me that at first, after the baby is born, there may be powerful feelings of betrayal. I felt betrayed that nobody had the courage to speak the truth to me about the downside of motherhood. I am not sure what I expected, but I did not expect a baby that screamed for hours on end, and I certainly did not expect the physical exhaustion. No one told me that most bodies are in significant hormonal transition. For some strange reason, I didn't feel guilty for not experiencing "love at first sight." In the telling, I meant to be honest, to set an example of some different kind of story, some different kind of experience. Heather has admitted many times to feeling crushed that I felt the way I did.

With Madison it was different. It was "love at first sight." My body hadn't delivered her. I was well rested. I thought I was done with my round the clock commitment to children and that I would be on the "support" team, not the "primary" team. I had the luxury of falling in love like that. It soon became apparent that while I wanted my role to be that of "support," Heather's desire was for my role to be "primary," especially when she had a hard day, which was often. And here comes one of those events I spoke about at the beginning. In my problem-solving mode, trying to figure out how to stay out of the house (beyond my fifty- hour work week) and allow Heather the

experience of parenting, to “butt out” as a lot of people would say, I identified two reasonable choices. One, I could get a part-time job. The way I saw it, I was either spending it or making it. A part-time job would serve the purpose of getting me out of the house and it would yield extra money, money that could be used to pay bills, money to spend on Madison. Or, two, I could check out the possibility of returning to school. I loved school and everything that came with it. Option two was the most selfish choice, but it seemed to me, the most satisfactory one to start with. My plan was that if I hit a brick wall in the application or the loan process, then I would go with plan one. So, in the fall of 2008, I applied to the graduate program in the University of South Florida’s Women’s and Gender Studies Department in Tampa. I applied for student loans. I applied to function as a teaching assistant or a graduate assistant to help defer school costs. I completed the department application which required letters of reference and writing samples. I studied for and took the dreaded Graduate Record Exam (GRE). There were so many things that could have brought the entire process to a grinding halt. I really worked hard to get it all together, but I really didn’t think it was going to happen. But it did. In that couple of weeks, the direction of my life took another radical turn and in January of 2009, I entered the program with a full course load. I just knew that my course of action would allow Heather the opportunity to settle into the role of motherhood. I was so proud of myself because I not only was doing something really great for myself, but also, I was giving Heather a chance to grow into the role of motherhood, a role she willingly choose, a role that I did not choose again.

Heather did not “settle” as I had hoped. She became increasingly hostile, increasingly unavailable, and increasingly angry with the baby. Don’t get me wrong. I

don't blame her now, although I did then only because in her anger, she set me up as the perpetrator of her injustice. School became increasingly difficult in the face of work, managing Heather's emotional state, and parenting/protecting Madison, but things were limping along. My professors and advisors were amazing systems of support. They told me that I could do it, I was smart enough, I wasn't too old. They encouraged me, demanded more from me, and celebrated my victories with me as each semester drew to a close.

In February of 2010, Heather moved out of the efficiency apartment into an apartment complex about 7 miles away. Most weeks went like this: Heather would go to work in the middle of the night, I would get up with Madison in the morning and get her ready and deliver her to preschool. My dad would pick Madison up at noon and take her to my mother who would watch her until Heather got off work. Heather would pick up Madison and take her to her apartment and keep her there until I got off work, and then I would stop on my way home, pick up Madison and bring her home for dinner, bath, stories, cuddles, and bedtime. Heather's days off were spent with Madison, but these days became increasingly frustrating for Heather, and this frustration transferred directly to me. What she needed was a wife, and she really needed me to fill that role for her. That was the last thing I wanted or was willing to do. After all, I married in 1980 and had been a wife for more than half my life; I was not looking for another eighteen-year sentence. Sometime during this year, I went from a full-time working position to a part-time working position. It was a huge hit in income, in professional development, and my boss was none too happy about any of it. As an organization that primarily served women in transition, this workplace followed the traditional patriarchal workplace patterns, and

what that meant was that my personal transition was impossible for the organization to support.

In October of 2010, Heather took Madison on a trip to visit family in Virginia. For three weeks, she was Madison's sole caregiver. It was simply the straw that broke the proverbial camel's back. In a very brief conversation between Heather and me, at the tag office downtown, Heather confessed that she was done. She was done with Madison, done with parenting, done spending the money, just done. She asked me if I wanted custody and I told her that yes, of course, I wanted custody. She had two concerns at the time. She called them deal breakers. One was that she didn't have any money to pay a lawyer, and the other was that she wanted to claim Madison on the upcoming tax return so she could use the money to move. I held my breath as I retained an attorney, signed the papers with Heather, and went to court. So many things could have gone wrong during this process. But, they didn't go wrong, and by December of 2010, I had legal custody of Madison. They call it "Legal Custody by an Extended Family Member." The judge even thanked me – a smart man that judge. The details of my circumstances may be unique, but they are a concrete example of the multiple commitments that many women manage. Many women do not have the luxury of coming home to a kept home and a fed family. Many women are working outside the home and coming home at the end of the day to work unpaid for their families. These varied and multiple roles that so many women manage day after day are a significant and constant source of stress for me and for many women.

Stress

Stress will kill me if I don't manage it. It will kill you too. Studies over the past decades indicate that men are more likely than women to experience significant health concerns that often result in death than women (*Harvard Men's Health Watch*, 2010). One explanation for the difference may be that until recent decades, women did not participate as fully as men in the demands of full-time work outside the home. Women are catching up in stress related illness and diseases like stroke and heart disease and high blood pressure. Could that be because the "second shift" (Hochschild, 1989) is still firmly in place in households where both parents work? The second shift is the unpaid shift that many women work at home when they get home from their paid work. These answers are hard to come by because research findings are not as cut and dried as I once thought they were. I used to pick up magazines that claimed to hold answers about life and living based on research. These magazine covers and the articles inside often caused internal feelings of stress. The front covers almost always focus on how I could look better, manage better, be sexier, and be a better worker, wife, and mother. They conveyed the message that I am in need of serious help, and so is every other woman. Now I know that these magazine articles may or may not be very useful to me as I try to navigate my life and as I try to manage my stress, things are even more complicated.

What I have become very clear about is that it is my responsibility to practice good self-care. It is not likely that anyone in my life will ask me to take care of myself. Why would they? I am taking such good care of them. No one is coming to make me and what I need a priority. I know now that it's not Prince Charming even though that is a well communicated myth that continues to be transmitted. It's not my husband, or my

grown children, my boss or my best friend. It's my task to do if I choose to do it and if I don't then I will be the one to suffer because of that decision.

I am living in a world where things seem to be moving faster and faster, where technology is upgraded just about every other week. My children must be assisted to assimilate to this pace, and my parents are almost totally out of the loop and require assistance from time to time. I know that I am just as likely to make a date and time mistake in my calendar that impacts my time management, as someone else is to make a date and time mistake that impacts my time management, and I am living at a time when my income is shrinking and my expenses are increasing. The current work place is becoming more and more a place with increasing pressures to perform, that demand longer hours, and the idea that I need to find a few minutes to relax each day is moving farther and farther from my reach.

So, if I know that stress will kill me, and my life is full of stress with no signs of lessening, and in fact it feels like there is more and more, what can I realistically do? That's the question, simple on the face of it, yet far from simple in the implementation of it. The following writing exercise is one I created to explore exactly what specific stressors are happening at this point in time. Without understanding the what, it is impossible to create a reasonable plan of action to do something about it.

Simple Stress Remedies

Many people are dehydrated and oxygen deficient. These are two of the most simple stress combatants available to everyone. Drink water! Coffee doesn't count (yes I know it's made with water), tea doesn't count, wine doesn't count (and it doesn't count as a fruit either). Cola products are strong enough to disintegrate metal, so imagine what they do to your organs and bones. By the time your body lets you know you are thirsty, you are already dehydrated. Drink water. If you can, drink filtered water. Do you know that if you drink water that is bottled in the state you are in there are a lot less restrictions on how that water is bottled and filtered? If you buy bottled water, buy it from a state other than the one you are in. Better yet, buy it from another country because the laws get more and more strict depending on how far it has to travel. Get your water tested. Most cities and counties will do it for free. If tap water is all you have, it's still much better than any other thing one could drink. Drinking plenty of water helps our bodies' combat stress more effectively (Parker, 2007). Breathe! Take a deep breath or two several times a day. It is vital that oxygen reach the lower lobes of our lungs and it is healthy to get that lifeless air that just sits in the bottom of the lungs out. These two things, drinking more water and deep breathing will increase your brain's ability to think more clearly. It will give your body the tools to function more efficiently. It will help with skin problems, irritability, and fatigue. It is like drinking an energy drink without the chemicals and the after crash. Don't just take my word for it. What do you have to lose by giving these two things a try? I offer the following writing exercise as an opportunity to identify exactly what you are willing to do to begin to support your body.

Writing Exercise: Stress Remedies

What simple remedy are you willing to implement to offset the impact of stress?

Your Life's Desk Top

Have you ever noticed that the desk top on your computer gets filled with icons that you didn't put there? They just show up somehow, and maybe at some point you take them off the desktop or maybe they just sit there interfering with the background picture you have installed. I think life is like that; at least my life is like that. The hours of my life get filled up with things that just "show up" one by one and all by themselves are really very small commitments. But when I stop to take a look at all of them together, they represent a lot of stress and more importantly, they rob me of the time I need to reach my own personal goals, to live a life that I design. One simple exercise is to make a simple list of what you do in a week, or a month, and assign an approximate amount of time that you spend. I have found that it makes a lot of sense to take that approximate amount of time and add fifteen or thirty minutes to it because things almost always take longer than I anticipated. If we know there are twenty-four hours in a day and there are seven days in a week, we can get out a calculator and determine that our weeks have a precious total of one hundred sixty-eight hours. One of my biggest blocks of time is spent sleeping. Many women are sleep deprived. Sleep deprivation in and of itself causes stress on the body, but it also often causes a short temper, lack of concentration, clouded judgment, and this list goes on and on. I made the decision some years ago to just get the sleep that my body needs so that I can actually be present for my "awake" life. Many women are still working to be all things to all people, and sleep is a sacrifice that must be made to "get everything done." Constant sleep deprivation shaves years off a person's life and severely impacts the quality of life while one is living. So I confessed to myself that I am an eight-hour-a-night girl, and every time I do this "time spent" activity, I immediately

subtract fifty-six hours plus another three and a half hours (that extra thirty minutes) from the one hundred sixty-eight. This leaves me with one hundred eight and one half hours to evaluate and because everything takes longer than I anticipate, I round that number down to an even one hundred eight hours.

If participating in a painting class or writing poetry is a heart's desire, the time to do that will most likely come from taking something else off of the endless list of things to do. There are tools that are necessary when evaluating how time is spent, and there are endless sources on how to implement them. Some of the tools are delegation, being more efficient, asking for help, and setting boundaries (learning to say no). I would love to have just one hour a week to think. I call it debriefing: one hour during which no one is calling my name, during which I am not exhausted, and during which I am not feeling guilty that I am spending such a valuable hour on such frivolous nonsense. Guilt is self-imposed stress. Some stress is simply unavoidable, such as that knock on the door, the medical test that shows that more testing needs to happen, the checking account balance that gets to zero before all of the bills are paid. But sometimes we choose to experience stress. We participate in holiday rituals, we get married or have children, we move or get another job. Out of all of the ways that stress arrives in our life, the stress that's the real killer of women is the stress that is self-imposed. If women can move away from self-imposed stress, there would suddenly be time in that one hundred sixty eight hours of the week to focus on what's important to us. As I write this document for my thesis project, I am aware of the number of hours that I spend each week working and how few (count zero) I spend on rejuvenation. I sooth myself by telling myself that when this project is over, there will be time to rest, but I fear that I am just kidding myself. When this project

is complete, there will be another and another after that. I have found that things to do expand to fill the time. It is almost a test to determine if I can or if I will stop in the middle of the madness and begin to allow myself time to recover, time to recharge and reevaluate. “They” say that awareness is the very first step to recovery. Don’t ask me who “they” are but it sure makes good sense to me. I designed the following two writing exercises to provide an opportunity for you to explore what you would like to do, and for you to explore what you are ready to replace.

Writing Exercise: Wishes and Dreams

What do you wish you had time, or more time, to do? Use this space to dream.



A large rectangular box with a thin black border, containing ten horizontal lines for writing. The lines are evenly spaced and extend across most of the width of the box, leaving a small margin on the left and right sides.

Writing Exercise: Clearing Your Desktop

What is on your life's desk top that you are ready, willing, and able to remove?

Include things you can delegate to others.

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Self-Induced Stress

I do know more about self-induced stress. We all have an inner voice, the chatter in our head that goes something like this: Don't forget to.... What about.... Did you call...? Have I forgotten anything? ... I'm so stupid! ... I wish I had normal sized thighs... Why did she get normal sized thighs? did I miss the thigh line?... What's on sale this week? ... This barrage of questions and comments are pretty constant unless I can find a way to quiet them so that I can actually think. Some people achieve this through meditation. When I make a mistake, or what I determine to be a mistake, the voices rise in volume and criticism to such a crescendo that I want to put my fingers in my ears and begin to say "la, la, la" over and over again to shut them up. That's what I used to do before I knew how to bring my inner voice under control. Actually, I refer to my inner voice as my inner boardroom, and what I had to do was appoint myself president of the board and set the terms of the meeting. First of all, I tell them when they can speak. They must be polite at all times and only speak one at a time. They must speak to me like I am their boss who has the capacity to fire them without warning. This strategy has worked well for me because the folks who were in my inner boardroom were getting downright out of control. They had me shaking in my shoes just about every day!

What kinds of things are self-imposed? Feelings of guilt, jealousy, lack of self-confidence, judgment and comparison, hatred, and fear are some self-imposed stressors. Self-imposed demands of perfection of everything from how clean our toilets and floors are to our body shapes. While I don't think a group of people came together and decided to create a system that would keep women as a gender subordinate, I do think that somehow this all came together and now supports such a system.

We are all going to experience stress at different times. The only thing we can do is to make sure that we are as physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually healthy as we can possibly be. How are you doing? Are you healthy and strong and ready for the next life slam? What if we focused on getting healthy and strong instead of focusing on the ways that we don't measure up?

Do you eat as nutritiously as you can? How many times a week do you find yourself in a fast food drive through? Being all things to all people leaves us no time to be anything to and for ourselves. I am tired of the sacrifices that do nothing more than ease another person's burden just a little. I want to begin to ease my own burden. Like the flight attendants tell their passengers, "Put your own oxygen mask on first before you help someone else." Now that makes sense, doesn't it? I want to bring that concept into everyday life. I need some oxygen first every day!

I created the following writing exercises to give you the opportunity to evaluate how you impose stress on yourself, what you are willing to do in order to stop, and what feels good to you when you think about ways that you can provide additional support for your body.

Writing Exercise: Self-Imposed Stress

How do you impose stress upon yourself?

Four horizontal lines for writing.

What are you willing to let go of?

Four horizontal lines for writing.

How can you support yourself towards a healthier body?

Four horizontal lines for writing.

Tools for Stress Management

There are so many tools written about stress management. I believe that many women don't manage their stress more effectively because of a long ingrained belief that everyone is more important than they are. If we could find a way to examine our beliefs about our own worth, and if we could root out the lies that are so deep in our psyches that have convinced us that we aren't good enough, or smart enough, or worth enough, then we could begin to get our stress under control because we could give ourselves permission to put ourselves first. We are all so convinced that this kind of behavior is selfish and undermines the family that we are afraid to act on our own behalf.

Coping is what we do when the world is crashing down around us, or when we are just too tired to do anything else. We learn coping mechanisms as children. We continue these coping mechanisms as adults unless we decide to change them. Changing how we cope can often be difficult. Coping is normal and healthy. I think addictions to drugs and alcohol must often begin as coping mechanisms that turn into addictions. Coping is good, but those mechanisms can become a part of who we are every day simply because those behaviors may become habitual ways of being in the world.

Change is the only thing we can be sure of. I can remember for most of my life working so hard with a goal of getting to a place where things didn't change. I thought if I just worked hard enough and "right" enough then life would level off and would settle into some kind of predictable pattern or routine. I understand now that those desires were based on childhood experiences full of negative unpredictability. I wish I had those years back to practice living and leaning into change instead of gritting my teeth and waiting for my life to be over.

Noel Burch, (Gordon & Burch, 2003, p. 19) posits four “Stages of Learning”:

One: We don’t know what we don’t know

Two: We know what we don’t know

Three: We begin to learn and practice what we don’t know

Four: We know what we know

Stage Two can be contemplation and excitement, and it can bring feelings of dread. This might be where we gather more information so that we can decide if we want to continue the learning process. I can tell you that, in Stage Two, I decided that I did not want to be a brain surgeon. Stage Three is where the mistakes happen. This is where we practice living. Sometimes in Stage Three, we change our minds about learning about something. In Stage Three, I decided I did not want to learn how to drive a motorcycle. This was right after the accident that broke my right arm and my right ankle. It is okay to change our minds after we get more information. Stage One is the most blissful stage in my opinion, when we live in ignorance of evils in the world. Operating at Stage Four gives me time to think...it’s functioning on autopilot. Stage Four is an illusion of knowing everything there is to know. Stage One and Four are resting places and Stages Two and Three are action places.

Many women experience a great deal of angst in stages Two and Three. We learn the lessons that “good women don’t make mistakes.” That’s what discipline in the form of punishment taught me. Don’t make mistakes or you are going to be punished. I am often afraid of trying new things because of those old thought patterns about retribution. If punishment doesn’t come, then the fear or embarrassment to be seen making a mistake comes. These early lessons take the safety out of learning something new and encourage

“safe” behavior patterns like staying quiet and not asking questions. It is one lesson learned well for many women reared in the house of patriarchy.

So we cope. We medicate with food, drugs, and/or alcohol. Maybe we cope because we are too afraid to act. Maybe we are afraid to act because we might fail because failure is the ultimate defeat. But is failure the ultimate defeat? Maybe the ultimate defeat is never entering Stage Two or Stage Three. The danger with coping is that a person can cope her entire life. There is a wonderful short story circulating on the internet by Mary Sullivan called “The Egg, the Carrot and the Coffee Bean” in which the reader is asked to consider what each of these items does in reaction to hot water (what Sullivan calls adversity). The egg reacts by changing from delicate and easily broken to hard. The carrot reacts by changing from hard to soft and maybe even mushy. The coffee bean reacts by changing the hot water into something useful and pleasant. I love this story and it reminds me that I want to be a coffee bean instead of the hardboiled egg head that I became while I was coping with a life that was created for me without my assistance or permission. I developed the following writing exercise as a way to explore the ways that individual women cope, to identify what might be patterns of coping that are not supportive, and to reframe the process of change in a positive way.

Writing Exercise: Coping

In what ways do you cope? This is not a negative question. We all cope in constructive ways. Sometimes, some people, cope in ways that are destructive.

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Are there any ways that you cope that you choose to change and replace with other patterns?

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Do you react, or do you act, most of the time?

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How can you be more comfortable with change?

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What do you think would be exciting to do or to learn more about?

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Comparison

Comparison is the act of comparing any aspect of your life and circumstances to something or someone else. Comparison keeps us buying more, and if we can't afford to do that, it keeps us feeling bad because we cannot buy more. The act of comparing literally robs from us our personal joy because we do not focus on what we have accomplished; we focus on what we have not. It does not focus on the fact that we took a few moments to read an extra story to our child, but it does focus on the fact that our kitchen floor is dirty. There will always be someone smarter than me, prettier than me, better than me in a thousand named ways. When I compare myself to those that I perceive to be better, or to have more, then I become discontented with what I have. I lose sight of my accomplishments and more importantly my goals. I forget to be grateful for the good things in my life. I would prefer to remember that every bit of media that I consume is created to keep me comparing. When I compare, I want to buy and spend. Buying and spending keep capitalism going (Veblen, 2007). This compulsion of buying and spending separate me from my higher self. When I compare myself to someone else, I lose sight of what I might be able to learn from that person. The act of comparison is most often performed prior to placing a judgment on ourselves or on someone else. In order to judge, there must be a "good" and "bad," a "right" or a "wrong." These judgments that begin with comparison must function with the binaries of good or bad and right or wrong, and these binaries have been created for all of us by the society and

culture that we live in. The process of constant comparison followed by the action of judgment as appropriate ways of being has been transmitted to us primarily by the media which are driven by capitalism (Gergen, 2009).

Judgment and comparison kept me focused on everyone and everything except myself. The action of judging and comparing did nothing to help me grow as a person, to learn as a person, to experience deeper and richer relationships, and it certainly did not keep my personal goals front and center.

Judgment and comparison locked me into a negative vortex of wanting more, of lamenting what I did not have, and of feeling worthless. Judgment and comparison were the basis of my poor self-esteem.

Fear

There is a wonderful poem written by Marianne Williamson titled “Shine” (1993) in which, she suggests that we are not afraid of not being enough; what we are really afraid of is being amazing. In this poem, Williamson tells us that it is our responsibility to be the best that we can be, and that by setting that example, others will see our lights shining and be willing to let their own lights shine too.

Fear is a tool of patriarchy and is a weapon used to exert control. Fear is rampant in our culture, and we experience it about the most trivial things as well as about some very real things. The plethora of violent television shows not only desensitizes us to that violence but it also confirms our beliefs that we are not safe unless we play by the rules, the rules that are in place to protect “good” women. Often, the women who are victimized in these shows are prostitutes, and others are women who are isolated because of this addiction or that psychological disorder. Rarely, if ever, do these shows present

married heterosexual upper-class women as victims of violent crimes and this sends the message that if you are those things, then you will be safe (Gerbner & Signorielli, 1979). Because the media present the “norm” as white male middle or upper class and heterosexual, everyone who does not fit into those categories is defaulted to “other.” These visual stories contain messages that burrow into our belief and value systems, messages about worth and messages about deservedness, and messages that convey who has the right to feel safe in our society (Holtzman, 2000).

Because human beings are social creatures, most of us have a strong desire to fit in and to belong. Maybe it is because we know there is safety in numbers or because if there are others like us, then we are internally confirmed as acceptable somehow. The older I get, the more I am able to ask myself, fit into what and belong to whom?

Fear is a positive emotion when it causes one to act and to work for change. Fear is not positive when it causes one to cower and to pretend that women are victims over and over again because they have done something to deserve it.

Sometimes, this fear that permeates our culture and many of our traditional religions seeps into our souls and festers there as it convinces us that we are doomed to fail, and if we don't fail, we will become social outcasts as a result of our success. In other words, many women are afraid to fail and afraid not to fail (Reis, 2002). So where is the possibility of personal power and success in our own right? This fear is one I struggle with often, and I have to remind myself over and over again that this is my one life. What I choose to do with it is my responsibility, and most importantly that f.e.a.r. (false evidence appearing real) is an illusion created by ancient warring civilizations and continued by organized religions and current nations who still thirst for power and

control and who continue to kill to get it. I think that Rosa Parks must have experienced feelings of fear that day not so very long ago on that bus, but she sat anyway and decided to take a stand for what she believed in.

In my childhood church, the messages of hell and what would happen to me if I went there were another source of great fear. Father God was said to be a kind God if one followed his rules as they were interpreted by the men of the church. Girls were taught to become Godly women and what that meant was to become women who would serve a man and her family. There was no talk of personal fulfillment or self-satisfaction unless that was in relation to serving your husband and caring for your family. The only path other than to become a Godly woman was the path directly to hell where a person would be aware of her biggest fears becoming real every minute of every day. My biggest fear (that I was aware of then) was of spiders, and I imagined them crawling all over my body, into my mouth and ears, biting me with poison fangs so that I would swell up and fill with pus.

My brothers would come up behind me when I was unaware and yell at the top of their lungs “SPIDER!” and I would just about lose my mind. They thought this was very funny, and I understand now that they were attempting to experience some personal power in a world where they felt very little. They did it at my expense, the smallest, the littlest, the one unable to defend. That’s what bullies do, and bullies are becoming more and more prevalent in our world as we become more and more violent as a society and culture.

When I was little, my dream was not to grow up and work for peace. It was to grow up so that I would not have to be little anymore. Even to write those words causes

my eyes to well up with tears. As a child, I didn't feel safe. I was told that away from the home and family was an unsafe place to be, and I often experienced home as a place that wasn't safe either. So my fear based existence began and was reinforced over and over again.

I am weary of being afraid. I am angry that there are still so many women, elders, disabled people, and children who are not safe away from their homes and who are not safe within their homes either. I think of Martin Luther King, Jr. and want to know about other spiritual leaders currently living and teaching in our culture leading the way back from violence and forward into peace. I wonder where the conversations are about these things outside of my department at the university. So I shall begin where I am, and I shall begin to stand on my wobbly afraid knees and speak my truth. My return to school was the beginning of my plan, and as I approach graduation, it's time to make a new plan.

What is the plan?

What is your plan?

It seems as though my entire life has been spent implementing a plan that I had little part of making. My plan was made for me and communicated to me from birth. It came to me from my family, my pastors, my teachers, the media, and my peers. My plan was designed around limited financial resources and my place as a female. Why it didn't occur to me before just recently that I can change any part of that plan that I want to, I could not tell you. Before just recently, I was resigned to my assignment. Maybe where I am now shows what can happen with a quality education, a good therapist, and a few likeminded friends. Some of the voices in my head tell me that it's too late for me. At the age of fifty-two I should be thinking about retirement these voices clamor. Yet that just

doesn't feel right to me. I remember that there is no promise of tomorrow or how many there will be. The only promise is the promise of today, and I ask myself, what can I do today that if it is followed by tomorrow will become a part of a self-created path, a self-designed plan.

Making a plan means that I really have to know what is important to me. I must understand what my personal values are. I have to understand limitations as they exist right now. I must practice good self-care, set healthy boundaries, communicate as clearly as I possibly can, spend time with people who say I can, play with my new daughter and continue to heal my inner child, do things that bring me joy, investigate every opportunity that comes my way, allow the tears to fall, and to focus on relationships that contribute to the creation of me. My plan involves putting on paper where I want to be in five years and maybe where I want to be in ten years. We cannot make a plan for ourselves if we do not know who we are, and I don't mean who others wish we were or who they want us to be. In order to make a plan, I must evaluate all of my resources, for in the implementation of my plan, I will need them accurate and handy. I designed the following writing exercise as a way to begin to put a self-created plan into words

Writing Exercise: What Is Your Plan?

What is your plan? Where do you want to be in one year, or in five years?

In one year, I would like

In five years, I would like

Boundaries

When we were little girls, it is unlikely that many of us were taught to set boundaries. Boundaries include saying the word “no.” I was taught that the word “no” was unacceptable for a child to say. In fact, saying “no” usually meant swift and immediate punishment. I’ve wondered often about how to rear my children to be willing and able to set boundaries and yet to keep the parental role in place. I still do not have very many answers. What I am sure about is that there are many people in my world who don’t wish for me to know how to set boundaries and who certainly don’t want me to set them, especially with them. What if I had been taught to set boundaries as a teenager? Would I have rebelled against all authority, which included my teachers? Would I have become a drop out, a drug addict, a derelict? Would I have had the courage to say no to my abusers? I don’t think it’s possible to expect a child to understand how to say “no” only in peer situations. That is what was expected of me. I was to say “no” to my friends and peers and to say “yes” to everyone else.

Saying “no” is a matter of respect, primarily self-respect. Saying “no” can mean that I am putting my own needs and desires before someone else’s. Do you gasp at the thought? I was taught that everyone else’s needs and desires are more important than my own: that to put my needs and desires ahead of someone else’s, anyone else’s, was selfish and mean. So, here I am at 52, learning over and over again that if I don’t learn to say no, if I don’t use the word, and use it often, that I will be lost in this swirling madness of

life never knowing who I am and what I choose. What I choose to eat, to wear, to drive, to watch on television, to read...

In these messages of my youth, I came to believe that speaking or hearing the word “no” was all tied up with meanings that included “I don’t love you” and “I don’t like you.” So in the process of my emotional growth I never learned to hear the word “no” for what it is.

So what is a boundary and is there a book with a list inside of what I should set boundaries about, and with whom, and how often? I will go ahead and share now that I have never found such book. While boundaries to some extent are different for everyone, they tend to involve setting limits. The general nature of boundaries involves drawing a clear line in the sand that another person may not cross. Setting boundaries creates an invisible protective barrier around yourself and is a practice involved in self-care (Beattie, 1987).

My questions about boundaries were: How do I know what my personal boundaries are? What’s the difference between healthy boundaries and boundaries that are not healthy? Can a person have too many boundaries, or too few? What might happen if I begin to set and hold boundaries? What might happen if I choose never to set and hold boundaries? What happens when I set a boundary and another person is not willing or able to honor my request? If I set a boundary, can I move it later? Can I change my mind? Do I honor and respect boundaries that other people set for me? Whom do I know who is a good boundary setter?

What I do know is that I can’t say yes to myself until I learn to say no to others. I also know that this attitude of self-sacrifice, of putting others first and myself last every

single time simply does not support my personal goals and dreams for me as an individual or for my relationships.

Communication

Women had little to do with the creation of the written word. Language and education, writing and teaching were primarily fields dominated by men. As our ways of living left the realm of community interdependence and entered the realm of ownership and wealth, language developed that supported man's quest for power. So much of our language is steeped in violence because it was born to communicate within a violent society (Spender, 1990). Current social science research demands a different kind of approach. When women are asked open ended questions, the responses are often filled with pauses, words like "um," and requests to "let me explain." It makes sense that women communicate the way they do because the vocabulary does not exist to support the lived experience of women (Reinharz & Davidman, 1992). What happens is that women are labeled as indecisive, unclear, and/or wavering, instead of investigating the possibility that language lags far behind for a socially and culturally conscious world. I've been told that Eskimos have many different words for our one word – snow. That's because their lives depend on communicating what is going on with the weather. I think the language of women is like this example. We function with such a limited vocabulary that it is impossible to share our lived experiences.

But we have the language that we have, steeped in patriarchy and violence. We use it every day in the ways that we have been taught. We understand primarily two ends of a broad spectrum of possibilities, aggression and passivity. Where is the language in the vast middle? Hickson & Stacks; Mehrabian; Birdwhistell; & Mehrabian & Ferris (as

cited in Introduction To Communication, 2002) state that as much as ninety-three percent of communication is transmitted nonverbally. As much as seven percent of everything we communicate comes from our words. The question we may ask ourselves is what are we communicating both verbally and nonverbally?

Author Gary Chapman explains what he calls *The Five Love Languages* (Chapman & Campbell, 1997). He says that children communicate using all five of these ways of communicating love. His theory is that as we grow into adults, we settle into one or two primary love languages and that we no longer recognize the others. He further states that if we are in relationship with another person who uses a language that we do not and who does not overlap with one of our love languages, we can't "hear" them say the words "I love you" or "I care about you" (Chapman & Campbell, 1997). I found this book at a time when my husband and I were having a really hard time in our relationship. What I discovered was that he was telling me that he loved me all the time, I just didn't recognize the language. I wasn't listening to what he was saying; I was hearing what I was translating. I have learned to listen.

Listening is a powerful action. It is likely the most powerful action that a person can do. I don't mean pretending to listen so your turn can be over and I can speak. I mean blocking out distractions and coming into communion with another person and shutting my mouth so I can listen. Listening is often given a bad rap in our society. Children must listen. Employees must listen to their bosses. We understand listening to be what one does in the absence of power. Yet listening can be an action that will bring positive change to our neighborhoods, states, countries, and the world. The thing is that we have to stop speaking in order to do it. Listening communicates respect and caring. Listening

enables another person to develop her personal power. It doesn't mean sitting mute. Communication involves two people. One person can ask questions to gain further understanding or can utilize body language to communicate she is actively engaged and interested in what is being said.

It is beneficial to ask yourself two questions. What do you communicate? What do you want to communicate? Our language limits can make communication seem laborious at times, but I have learned that the only time I learn anything is when I am listening. I developed the next exercise as a fun and different way to play with words in the self-discovery process.

Writing Exercise: Language as Leverage to Self-Discovery

“Who are you?” is a question with some specific answers that are rooted in language. It’s a great place to begin to explore the topic. In grade school, we learned about adjectives, nouns and verbs. Let’s take these parts of speech and make choices based uniquely on us.

An adjective is a word that describes something or someone. Use this list of common adjectives to identify those qualities that are uniquely you. The list of adjectives is endless; you may use other sources to build your list of personal adjectives. It’s a good idea to create a list of at least twenty adjectives.

COMMON ADJECTIVES

dark light bright dull tall short large small fat heavy thin
skinny big little light tiny flat old antique ancient young
new excellent great super wonderful interesting exciting fun slow
boring dull beautiful gorgeous pretty attractive handsome ugly
unattractive plain sexy sweet sour spicy hot fresh stale warm
cool cold damp dry nice comfortable uncomfortable funny cool
friendly mean shy outgoing energetic aggressive violent helpful
sweet kind smart intelligent dumb stupid

List Your Personal Adjectives Here:

Verbs are action words. People are action oriented. Find all of the verbs that you can that are descriptive of you. What follows are a list of verbs. Choose the verbs that describe actions that you take most often and list them as a component of self-discovery.

COMMON VERBS

accepting	allowing	believer	borrower	buyer	changer	cleaner			
complainer	counter	dancer	drawer	drinker	driver	eater	explainer		
finder	finisher	fixer	forgetter	giver	hearer	leader	learner	listener	
organizer	payer	player	reader	runner	seer	seller	shopper	singer	
sitter	sleeper	smoker	speaker	speller	starter	beginner	studier	swimmer	
taker	talker	teacher	teller	thinker	traveler	user	walker	worker	writer

List your personal verbs here, research more verbs if you wish. It's a good idea to list at least as many verbs that are uniquely you as you can.

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Nouns are words that are people, places, or things. When you are thinking about yourself, there are people, places, and things that may have had a great influence on you and the you that you are today. Think of the people in your life and list them here. Take some time and remember family, teachers, neighbors, or friends that have touched your life in a significant way. Remember the places in your life. Places you've lived, worked, gone to school, visited, or spent time in that you remember and list those places. Finally, remember the things that have been significant in your life. Perhaps a special toy as a

child, or maybe the strap your parents used, a favorite blanket, or a dreaded bath that was too hot. What are your personal defining nouns?

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Take the words that have been identified as uniquely you and create a paragraph about the woman you are. See your variety and contradictions, your strengths and your specialness.

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Assertiveness or Aggressiveness

Many women have been trained that being aggressive is the last adjective we want to be called. The name, “bitch,” is associated with a woman who is aggressive and many women would rather be called just about any other name in the book than a bitch. One of my favorite quotes is by a woman named Rebecca West (1913) who said, “I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is: I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat.” Often, in our culture, to be called a feminist is to be called a bitch, something less than a woman, someone who is aggressive.

Understanding what it means to be assertive and performing assertiveness perfectly still will often be labeled as aggressiveness simply because the use of that label will make some women back down from the point they are trying to make.

It is important to understand the difference between the act of aggression and the act of assertion and to practice being assertive and to avoid being aggressive. Aggression is violence and abuse. Aggression is what bullies use to get their way. Aggression tears another person’s spirit and is called the means to an end. Aggression leads to violence. Assertion is standing up for what is right for you without demanding that others see things your way. Assertion can be protecting yourself or your family by saying to someone else, “stop what you are saying or doing right now” because I will not tolerate that language, behavior, or implication.

It is wise to understand that when you practice the behavior of being assertive, that you will be called a bitch, a feminist, and something less than a “real” woman. And it is wise to make your own judgment to decide if you are being aggressive or assertive.

When women are assertive, they display that action for others to model. They show others another way to behave, to be, and they begin to grow and bloom into a force that cannot be shut down. Women can assert their values of peace, protecting the environment, providing adequately for their families and equality for all people, regardless of race, class, gender, or sexuality. They can create another model and then live it. When the line is crossed from assertion to aggression that can be amended and made right through sincere apology. I am reminded of another quote I encountered some years ago that stated that we cannot fight for peace; we must act peaceful to achieve it. We all have the right to co-create our world, and with that comes the responsibility to step out of the model that patriarchy has set up.

Passive Aggressive Behavior

The best example of a passive aggressive action that I have seen is in the movie, The Color Purple, with Whoopie Goldberg. The scene finds her father-in-law visiting and her husband demanding that Celie (played by Whoopie) make the man a glass of iced tea. Celie demurely leaves the front porch and goes to the kitchen for the tea and after she pours the tea into the glass, she spits a big wad of spit into the glass and stirs it up. Then, she passively serves the glass of tea to her father-in-law with a secret smile as he gulps it down. As a viewer of this scene, I am pleased that she finds a way to take some pleasure in her difficult existence, and I am very happy to see the mean father-in-law get some of what is coming to him, even though he has no idea about what has happened at all. This is a classic scenario in which Celie is finding some way to cope with her life and to experience some personal control.

Throughout the course of time, women in particular, have developed coping mechanisms in order to live in patriarchy. Passive aggressive behavior is one such coping mechanism, and we've seen it in action many times. Gossip, that carries no purpose other than to tear another person down, and back stabbing are examples of passive aggressive behavior. When we feel powerless, we find ways to feel, if not powerful, at least less powerless and passive aggressive behavior helps us feel better about a situation. "Don't tell your father" is an instruction to a child given from a passive aggressive parent. I love the phrase, "when we know better, we can do better" and this is true about spotting and stopping passive aggressive behaviors. Passive aggressive behaviors undermine relationships.

Passive aggressive behavior is not a psychological illness, and that is really good news. That means that all we have to do is learn to recognize the behaviors and implement assertive behavior in place of it. That requires clear communication about whatever is going on. "I don't agree" and "I am not comfortable with your yelling at me" might be phrases to start with. In order to stop passive aggressive behaviors, one must be willing to set and hold boundaries. Clear communication is also key as well as a firm belief that you are a person worthy of respect and care.

Aggression, whether passive or active, is not a solution to healthy relationships and healthy relationships are the foundation of our families, our communities, our countries and our world.

I am not suggesting that the use of passive aggressive behavior is not sometimes necessary as a coping mechanism. I am suggesting that we begin to recognize it and make active choices about the behavior. I do not posit myself as an expert about healthy

relationships. I do have an understanding that a healthy relationship feels good and does not hurt. Unhealthy relationships, on the other hand, do not feel good and often do hurt.

Media Literacy

The media have gotten very sophisticated in their messaging techniques. Messages about what to buy, how to look, and how make life decisions are no longer only delivered overtly. We still have commercials that communicate everything explicitly from how clean our toilets should be to what kind of car we should drive, but it is important to understand how sophisticated the media have become.

When the same message is delivered over and over again, people begin to accept that message as “normal.” Some overt messages that continue to be delivered by commercials are the gendered messages that girls play with dolls (in order to become good future mothers as well as to know how to dress and act) and that boys play with action figures, blocks, and sports equipment. In advertisements, we never see a boy playing with a doll, and we rarely see a girl on a skateboard. In toy magazines, little girls are still modeled with cleaning carts and dolls, and little boys are still modeled with bikes and blocks. Subconsciously, we may begin to believe that these ways of being are “normal.” that these toys are what girls and boys who are “normal” play with.

Another overt message is that men and women are smart and sexy until they get married. After marriage, men become creatures that are unable to make even the simplest decisions, and women become nags and bitches whose primary task is to bear the burden of being married to a buffoon. Media represent male as vigorous and desirable until he is married, at which point he becomes an immediate imbecile. Media represent women as beautiful and available until they are married at which point they become controlling

bitches. Why, then, is the message to those people who are single, one that states that marriage and monogamous relationship should be the primary goal of every single person on the planet. Annabell Mooney (2010) of Roehampton University UK reviewed a videocast of Current TV, with Sarah Haskins in “Target Women.” Sarah Haskins calls some of the television media to task in their messaging and confirms the fact that media have the primary function of selling products to unsuspecting consumers by convincing them that things will be better just as soon as they make the next purchase. One of the videocasts of Sarah Haskins can be found at this web address on you tube.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a7vtyheqPVU>

These messages that are delivered overtly in commercials are delivered covertly in the shows they are embedded in. Current programming on the network Nick Jr. geared to preschool children has shows like “Dino Dan” and “Franklin” about little boys who are interested in and who do stereotypical boy things and shows like “Angelina Ballerina” and “Olivia”, which are about little girls who are interested in and act stereotypically like little girls act. When a child moves from Nick Jr. to Nickelodeon, the message becomes clearer in shows like “My Little Pony” for girls and “Go, Diego, Go!” for boys. For the next age group, children watch Nick2 and Teen Nick where there are outrageous shows directed primarily at girls like “Victorious” and “Unfabulous.” The information about these shows often uses words like “crush” and “plot.” For example, “The girls plot revenge against...,” and the storyline supports the idea that the top focus of girls is boys and their appearance. There is also a common theme of an absent or undesirable mother. The media are filled with messages about what women should and should not do

(Douglas, 1994). If you or your children view any television program, you can rest assured that the advertisers paying for that show to air are delivering their agenda.

These messages tell us and our children how to be and shape our ideas about what is “normal.” In addition, they also tell us that whatever ideal they are trying to present is “normal,” and we won’t measure up. On some level we know the ways in which we don’t measure up. Whether it’s the car we drive or the way we parent or how clean (or not) our house is or how sexy we are (or not). Many of us stay focused on the ways we don’t measure up instead of the way things are. This leads to poor self-esteem, bad money management, unfulfilling and unequal relationships, and frustration.

Parents beware. The media are teaching our daughters and sons how to be men and women. It starts with the Disney movies that imply an absent mother, a wicked step-mother, a beautiful but weak girl/woman who is always rescued by the dominant, world traveled, wealthy prince (Bell, 1995; Sun, Picker, and Fordham, 2010). Moving from Disney, we find that a majority of shows support the idea that girls focus on their looks and on getting a boyfriend while boys focus on sports and sexual conquests. Media represent the unmarried male as vigorous and desirable. Television primarily represents women as beautiful and available until they are married at which point they become controlling bitches. Current programming that supports this claim are “Modern Family” and “How I Met Your Mother.”

In Women’s Studies, I was introduced to something called the Bechdel Test (Levy, 2010) for media. There are three questions to apply to any given programming: 1. Does the show have more than one primary female character? 2. If the show has more than one primary female character, do they relate and interact with each other? 3. If they

relate and interact with each other, is the subject matter about something other than men or a man? Still, many shows fail to pass this simple test that shows male dominance in the media, which then implies male dominance in our social and cultural world. If you add the criteria of the presence of women of color or sexuality other than heterosexuality, even more shows fail the test.

Character selection, covert messaging, and overt messaging continue to promote and support patriarchy as our social and cultural norm and our children march to the message with alarming compliance. Our daughters are especially at risk because patriarchy by definition places females as secondary or even out of the social picture all together.

Authors seem to be responding to the cry that there aren't enough books about "Daddy" as the primary parent figure, and the bookstores now create displays of picture books that herald men as primary caregivers. Still on the shelves are rows of books about little boys and about animal characters that are male. These books dominate the market as far as I can tell, and the books that are about little girls are most often so gendered that these little girls are pretty and clean and polite, and they play with dolls and stuffed animals. When we read these books to our children, they continue to cement ideas about what little girls and little boys "should" do, be, and become. As a guardian of a four-year-old little girl, I am appalled at the lack of active stories about little girls. While the public library offers a better selection, the ratio is still far from fifty/fifty. How is it that in this day and age, the messages still present our little girls and females as secondary while at the same time they seem to suggest that problems of gender inequality have been resolved. Women are "allowed" to work and go to school; they don't have to marry if

they don't choose to, and there are anti-discrimination laws in place. So everything is solved? Middle-class and wealthy women who are in that class because of a partner are not likely to complain for fear of losing the financial security they have. In retaliation for the feminist movement that happened in the 1970's, many states (including Florida) passed the "No Fault Divorce Act," and that means that women are not often awarded alimony or spousal support, and that assets are split fifty-fifty. It means that women who chose to stay at home and rear their children and support their husbands are not granted compensation for that, and if they enter the work force, they start from ground zero working for minimum wage. Many states no longer pay child support on behalf of a deadbeat dad, and media have been a primary culprit for spreading the message that divorced women with children squander the child support on new clothes and boyfriends. This has caused a shift in bringing many women (especially middle class and wealthy women) back into the protective arch beneath a man's umbrella with his ability to provide financially. Women who claim head of household, especially those with children, experience the highest rate of poverty in our country (Conniff, 2008).

Grief

As with many things, our society and culture have specific rules about grieving. There are specific ways that men and women grieve differently. There are appropriate things to grieve about, and there is an amount of time assigned to the process and when that time has passed, the message is clear that it is time to get over it and move on.

I am a woman who is grieving. Recently, I returned my car to the dealership because I can't afford to pay for it anymore. At a point in time in the next months, I will turn the keys to my home over to the bank because not only can I not pay the mortgage,

but the mortgage is more than double what the house is worth, and I cannot wait for things to turn around any longer. In May of this year, my daughter in my heart and I will leave the state we have called home for eighteen years and move to a new state where my husband is already working. I am grieving because I will leave my eighty-something-year-old parents and some very good friends behind. I know that I cannot begin to process these losses until the legal processes are complete and the move is behind me. So now, I find myself in limbo, waiting for things to be over. I know that acceptance of what has happened might not be arriving any time soon.

A number of years ago, I grieved the loss of the wedded fairy tale. I am not sure why I did not recognize the lies communicated about wedded bliss, but I fell for them hook, line, and sinker. I had unrealistic expectations about relationships, about marriage, about parenting, and about grown children. I have a really smart friend who told me one time that she knew that she would never have children because she recognized that the only model she had of parenting was such an awful one that she recognized that at least to some degree she would duplicate some of that tragedy. Why was it that I thought these things wouldn't happen to me and that I would create a new model for my marriage and my family? One answer is media messaging, of course, along with the fact that my foremothers rarely spoke the truth of these things but nodded and smiled like marriage and children are the most fulfilling and rewarding thing that a woman could do. I am not saying that my foremothers should have or could have done anything differently than they did. I am saying that I have felt lied to by omission. So many families nearly push young women in particular down the church aisle and they must know on some level that marriage and parenting are extremely difficult. I have met countless women who

experience the same feelings that I did when they discover that wedded bliss is not all that blissful much of the time and that children really can and do suck the physical and emotional marrow right out of a woman's bones. On top of that, there is no guarantee that the relationships with your adult children will be positive. And how could it be anything different with the models that some of us have and the education about communication and parenting so non-existent for lower and lower middle-class people?

Short of an experience with a death, this might be the first experience with grief and grieving that some woman experience and because there is no conversation about it, many women isolate themselves and convince themselves that they must be the only ones and that means there must be something wrong with them instead of the insane system of patriarchy that so many women continue to live in and with.

Many people are not taught that relationships often end. The phrase "reason, season, lifetime" does not come up in conversations about relationships. So, whether it is a school friend or a boyfriend, many young women find themselves in a deep depression when these early relationships fail because they have not been told that these early relationships are vital to helping them find out so many things about themselves. Many women who experience divorce grieve the loss of that relationship for years, often until they find another partner who will make them feel desirable and necessary again. Often, women are forced to live in poverty when they experience divorce because of the number of states that have "no fault divorce" laws. In an article "The Wage Gap and Its Costs" published in the book Race, Class, and Gender in the United States (Rothenberg, 2010), the author confirms that women continue to earn only seventy-five cents to a man's dollar. The author uses information provided by the WAGE: Women Are Getting Even

Project and further states that women who have children, will experience an average wage of about fifty cents to a man's dollar. Because the states say they can no longer pay child support on behalf of deadbeat dads, child support is often hard to come by. Many men do not want their child support to pay for family housing and groceries and so they don't work or work and get paid under the table so they can say they "can't pay" and even if a man is working, a woman finds it expensive and time consuming to take a partner to court for non-payment of child support. I make these claims because of the countless conversations I have had with women over the past twenty-plus years.

And so we grieve. Grief is the emotion we experience when we lose something or someone. The loss of a dream, a belief, a beloved pet, a relationship, a car, a house, a purse, and any number of other things can bring about the feelings of grief on some scale.

Grieving is a process, a path, and a journey, and when it is not acknowledged it is near impossible to reach the final stage of grief which is acceptance. The stage of acceptance is the point from which a person can assimilate the experience and move on.

Grief carries other stages according to a well-known author, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross (2005, p. 19). Denial, anger, depression, and bargaining are also documented stages of grief. I believe that forgiveness for ourselves and others would be useful as an identified stage of grief. So often, it's the regrets that continue to eat away our souls. What should have been, could have been, or might have been are questions of regret that are put to rest with the act of forgiveness. I did have some idea about these stages of grief and of Kubler-Ross, and I wish I also had known that these stages do not arrive in order, they don't have a time that they last, and they can come and go at random. Even the stage of acceptance may be experienced and then put aside if something causes another stage to

manifest again. I believe that many angry people are grieving the loss of something that they have yet to acknowledge.

I also believe that if I am not conscious about the grieving process, I may stay in the stages of grief for a very long time. I want to know what I am grieving about. I want to be kind to myself as I grieve, and I want to give myself permission not to get sucked into all of the insane social and cultural rules about women and grieving. I believe that if I do these things, I can assimilate the experience into my being sooner instead of later and use that experience to enhance my life if only in the fact that I can have empathy for another person when they have a similar experience. I created the following exercise to provide an opportunity for women to evaluate what they are grieving through their own lens using their own definitions.

Writing Exercise: What Are You Grieving?

Use this space to identify what you might be grieving?

Are you ready to be finished? If the answer is no, then love yourself as much as you possibly can as long as you need to and check in with yourself every once in a while to re-ask the question. If the answer is yes, then make a conscious decision to let whatever it was go and to move on and fill your life with something you choose to do instead.

Many of us are familiar with the expression “that person has a lot of baggage,” and what we mean by that is that person has a lot of unresolved issues that impact and interfere with their lives. Unresolved grief, sadness, and anger add a lot of weight to the baggage of our lives. Something that happened years ago in childhood or early adulthood, may still have a significant presence at times in our lives partially because that event hasn’t been allowed to experience personal expression.

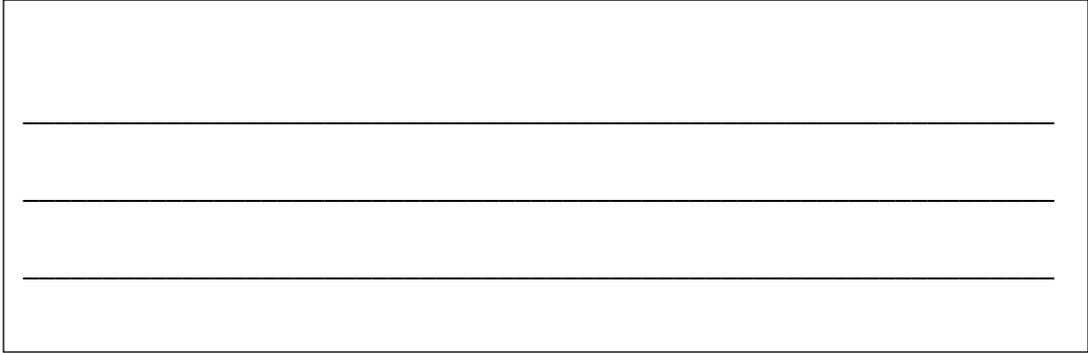
Please evaluate what is in your personal baggage that you drag from place to place as you experience your life. Think of it the same way you would think of cleaning or moving. What are you finished with and ready to throw out of your life? Does the stinging comment you got from your Uncle Jack on your twelfth birthday still cause you to cringe? If there are events and experiences that are years old in your baggage that still cause intense emotional pain, maybe a good therapist would be a good place to start. I think some people get used to carrying around a lot of emotional baggage and not only is that exhausting physically and emotionally, but it leaves little room for new experiences and people, and after a while, it might be the only way we know how to be. Imagine being a sea creature washed up on the shore waiting for the tide to come and take you back to sea and while you are waiting, children come and start to poke you with a stick. Maybe you felt like that at some point in your life, and even though the tide has taken

you back to the safety of the sea, the trauma of the event is so present in your life that all you can do is hide at the bottom of the ocean. The physical healing is complete, the children are gone, yet still we hide.

The pain some of us experience as children and young people is not who we are, although it is a part of our life experience. It does not define us or limit us or diminish us in any way, unless that is what we allow. Shame is a weapon of patriarchy. We are ashamed that we have been raped, molested, cheated, physically assaulted and lied to. We convince ourselves that it only happened to us so it is us that there must be something wrong with. And so we grieve the loss of ourselves and our innocence without even understanding that grieving is what is going on. A damaged spirit can only hold so much before it shuts down to lock out more bad and with that locking keeps out the good things that are waiting for us. What can be taken out and put aside or better yet, thrown into the sea? I think it is a good thing to have a new idea in mind about what we want to bring into our lives. I created the following exercise to provide a space for some specific thinking about those good things.

Writing Exercise: Make Room For Good Things

What good things can you make room for?

A rectangular box with a thin black border, containing three horizontal lines for writing. The lines are evenly spaced and extend across most of the width of the box.

Responsibility In Relationships

There are many self-help books dealing with the topic of relationships. Many of these books, rightfully so, focus on the reader as the active participant within the relationship, the one who makes changes that will cause the relationship to change. The danger about some of these books is they may create the illusion that if only the reader will change, if only she (the woman) will do something different, will “get it right,” then she will save her existing relationship or find the one that will bring her bliss forever.

One book that I have on my personal bookshelf is *Passionate Marriage* by David Schnarch, Ph.D. I really love this book because it delivers the message that the relationship that we have with ourselves must be considered before any relationship that we have with someone else (Schnarch, 1997).

There are important questions to be asked about personal relationships. Who am I in relationship with? Are these people whom I have sought out or people who have crossed my path for some reason or another? Do these relationships bring me joy and hope or suffering and sadness? When one relationship that was initially nurturing and supportive turns into its polar opposite, do I remember that relationships may be for a reason, a season or a lifetime? Do I surround myself with people who encourage me to “go for it,” “try it,” and who may say, “Can I come along?” or “How can I support you?” Or do I surround myself with people who discourage and say, “That won’t work,” “You shouldn’t because it might not work out,” or my personal favorite, “Who do you think you are?”

Imagine my surprise when I discovered that I actually could choose who to be in relationship with. Understanding that sometimes family relationships are unique and

interactions are sometimes unavoidable, I invite my readers to evaluate exactly who they are in relationship with. So many women get so involved with raising children, with the tasks of wifery, and working that personal relationships are sacrificed in the face of all there is to do. Peer relationships can be catalysts for tremendous personal satisfaction and growth. In the 1960's, it was common for groups of women to gather on a regular basis. These gatherings were called, "consciousness raising groups." During this period of time, the phrase "the personal is political" was created by Carol Hanisch and it meant that the lived lives of women, the experiences of women, were not just isolated experiences but pointed to political actions that needed, and continue to need, to take place to better the lived experience of many women (Hanisch, 1970).

I evaluate my relationships often. My questions are the ones that started this section. In addition, I ask if they bring me joy, provoke me to action, open my field of vision, and shift my perspectives. Do they grow because they are nurtured and honored, and do they allow for disagreement?

I met a yoga teacher, Bharat Thakur, in India who said a phrase that I never want to forget: "Relationships fail because we fail to take care of ourselves within them." For many years of my life, I took care of other people and gave them the responsibility of caring for me. When they didn't measure up, or "do it right," I blamed them. This left my care in the hands of others and removed responsibility for myself away from myself. This is a model that many women are groomed to follow.

What if every relationship I am in is one that I choose, one that I care for myself within, and one that nurtures my mind, body, or spirit? When shining stars come together,

that's how new galaxies are formed. I want to come together with new stars. I want to form a new galaxy.

Personal Values

Personal values are ways of being that are important for our growth and wellbeing. The first personal values we have are given to us by our families, religious institutions, educational systems, communities, and now the media heavily influence our early identification with what is important to us. The personal values that are given to us as we grow up may not be the ones we would choose if we stop to think about it. There are plenty of personal values that we might choose to embrace if we explored the endless possibilities.

Many people never stop to consider or to reconsider their individual personal values, but it is an important exercise in order for one to understand who they are and what is important to them. Without identifying personal values, there is no way to make a plan, to chart a course, or to make changes to a plan that is in place.

While my family may have imposed rigid ideas about what I should value, media also communicate loud and clear that a woman's place is in the home rearing happy healthy children, keeping a clean house, supporting her man, and being fulfilled and happy in the workplace so she can contribute financially to the household income.

As an adult, this insight into the meaning underlying these messages came to me very late but not so late that I could not evaluate these early messages and realign my life to support the values that are truly mine. I came to understand that social activism, feminist spirituality, and facilitating these conversations are a vital part of who I am and

wish to be. Without the knowledge about personal values, I may never have had that epiphany.

Another important thing to know about personal values is that they may change depending on what is going on in your personal life. Personal values may shift from first place to fifth place depending on circumstances. If a person experiences the loss of a loved one, family may shift to the top of the list for a time.

When people are unhappy in general with their lives and circumstances, they may choose to evaluate their lived lives along with their personal values. When a lived life does not support personal values, discontent is sure to be present in some form or another.

It makes sense to evaluate your personal values annually as a way of checking in with yourself and what you might need to create fulfillment. Here is a simple exercise to help you identify your current Personal Values. In a workshop some years ago, I participated in a personal values activity similar to the one that follows. I was not able to find the original document or who created the original activity.

Writing Exercise: Identify your Personal Values

From the list below, circle all of the Personal Values that you feel are important to you. Don't worry about how many or how few you circle. The most important thing is to take your time and ask yourself if that value is truly important to you.

Achievement	Advancement	Adventure	Affection	Art/Beauty	Challenge
Community	Companionship	Competence	Competition	Cooperation	Country
Creativity	Decisiveness	Democracy	Ecology	Economic Security	
Effectiveness	Efficiency	Ethical Practice	Excellence	Excitement	Fame
Family	Fast Living	Financial Gain	Freedom	Friendship	Helping Others
Independence	Influencing Others	Inner Harmony	Integrity	Intellectual Status	
Involvement	Job Tranquility	Knowledge	Leadership	Location	Loyalty
Meaningful Work	Money	Nature	Order	Personal Consistency	Personal
Growth & Development	Physical Fitness	Power & Authority	Privacy	Quality	
of Life	Quality Relationships	Recognition	Religion	Reputation	Responsibility
Security	Self-Respect	Serenity	Sophistication	Spending Time with Like-	
minded People	Spirituality	Stability	Status	Supervising Others	Time
Flexibility	Truth	Variety	Volunteering	Wealth	Working under Pressure
Working with Others	Working Alone				

Take a look at the values you have circled on the previous page. If you have circled more than ten Personal Values, cross out some of the circled values until only 10 Personal Values remain. List the ten Personal Values that remain here:

Looking at your list of ten Personal Values above, decide which five to remove so that only five Personal Values remain. List them here:

Now, from the list of five, select your top three Personal Values. These are the identified values that you embrace above all the rest. List your top three here:

Self-Esteem:

Self-esteem is simply how we feel about ourselves and our ability to achieve our personal goals and dreams. To be the captain of our own ship in other words. Good self-esteem happens when we feel powerful enough to take care of ourselves and those that we care for. In order for that to happen, there has to be enough of what we need. We all need adequate shelter, clothing, food, and all of those things come with a financial cost. That means that we all need an adequate source of income so that we can meet our most basic needs.

Issues of race, class, gender and sexuality have had a direct impact on the self-esteem of many people, including me. Our society and culture has been designed to support and label one set of labels as primary. If one is not a white, middle or upper class, heterosexual male, then society, by action and access to resources, places those individuals as other. The consequences of this are significant in that it is not possible for most of us to evaluate poor self-esteem and talk ourselves out of it. Self-esteem is wrapped up in a belief system that has been transmitted to us for most of our lives. It is about having a sense of worth. So many people think that all one has to do is pull oneself up by one's bootstraps. I am not saying that people cannot better their circumstances. In fact, I believe that one can bring about significant changes with the right amount of support, education and determination. What I am saying is that women might feel bad all the time about so many things. These things that women feel bad about are distractions from what might be a bit more important to them if they were given the chance to choose.

How to feel better, how to have higher self-esteem are similar to book titles available in mass in the self-help section of the bookstores. Many of these books convey the message that having low self-esteem is just another thing women can't get right. If we just thought about ourselves differently, if we just managed our lives differently, then we would experience higher self-esteem.

Identification of Resources

Money is the first resource that comes to mind, and it is a mistake to think of money as your only resource. I think it is unfortunate that money has the priority that it has in our culture and society. Money and the accumulation of wealth was, according to historians, was most likely a primary point in herstory (her-story, as opposed to his-story) when women moved significantly further from a position of helpmate to a position of owned resource (Miles, 1988). However, money and finances must be evaluated as a resource in the world we live in today. There are many books encouraging a person seeking financial stability to pay off credit cards and to save at least six months of living expenses in a liquid account and then to begin to save for retirement. That's a fine idea for small percentage of the population of the United States. That path to financial security will only work if there is significant income to begin with. So for the sake of this conversation, let's put the resource of money aside.

The first resource that must be utilized is one's self. That is you and me. What are my skills and talents? How motivated am I to do whatever it is that I want to do, to create the life I want to live in? *Strengths Finder 2.0* by Tom Rath (2007) explains how to identify your skills and talents. As I worked through the book, my top five came in as: input (I am inquisitive, and I find many things to be interesting); intellection (I like

mental activity and problem solving); connectedness (I believe in a collective unconscious, and I believe we are all connected); maximize (excellence, not average, is my measure); and strategic (I have a distinct way of thinking about things, a unique perspective; I create a strategy by eliminating choices first). According to Rath, if we focus on our strengths instead of lamenting or trying to change what might be considered our weaknesses, we can begin to bring about real change. I believe we live into those labels that are assigned to us in our early lives. A child who is labeled shy believes that is who she is and often simply accepts that assignment for her entire life. I wish we could find a way to stop labeling people, especially children. Maybe you already know what your strengths are, or maybe it is a good time for you to figure it out. After you have your list, then make a list of the people in your life who sit in your personal cheering section. I don't mean the people who sit in the bleachers and I certainly don't mean the people who seem to be playing on the opposing team. I mean those people who believe in you even when you are having trouble believing in yourself. Use that list and identify their strengths, and now you have a list of tangible resources that will support you as you reach for your next step. If you check your cheering section and you don't think you have anyone in it, I encourage you to ask yourself how many cheering sections others find you in when they make their lists. If you don't find yourself in any, maybe that would be a better place for you to start, building a network of friends by selecting some people whom you can support. In turn, these are the people who will become your supporters, your resources.

There are other resources that are often forgotten but are invaluable when we need them. A computer with access to the internet is a wonderful resource if you have one or if

you have access to one. Time in a day or in a week to devote to yourself and your goals is necessary and without it, there is little chance for change. I find myself so busy sometimes that asking myself for fifteen minutes seems like asking myself to fly to the moon without a rocket ship. A place or a space to call your own where your things will be undisturbed is another resource that is often not identified. Are you willing to clear one space and give it to yourself as a gift? Virginia Woolf had it correct when she said, in her book titled *A Room of One's Own*, that all women need is money and a place of their own (Woolf, 1992). If you have collected books, or written journals, or made notes and outlines from classes that you have taken, they are resources. Once you have identified all of your resources, it is time to identify your finances. Do you have the finances to support yourself and to support the creation of the future you design? If the answer to the question is no, I suggest you do what I am going to do and let the money take care of itself. Have faith that when you identify your other resources and make your plan, the universe will be there to support you. I believe that if I make money my first resource that I will never reach my goal. Besides, putting money first is the order of patriarchy and what I am going to do is to create a new path and a new order to achieve my goals.

This is the Woman I Am

I have a unique combination of logic and creative abilities.

I am a mother of a four-year-old at 52.

I am empathetic, sensitive, intuitive, and a good listener.

I need people in my life who have similar values and beliefs.

I can be very funny.

I am tired.

I am excited.

I am worried about many things that most likely will never happen.

I am grieving about present losses.

I am overweight.

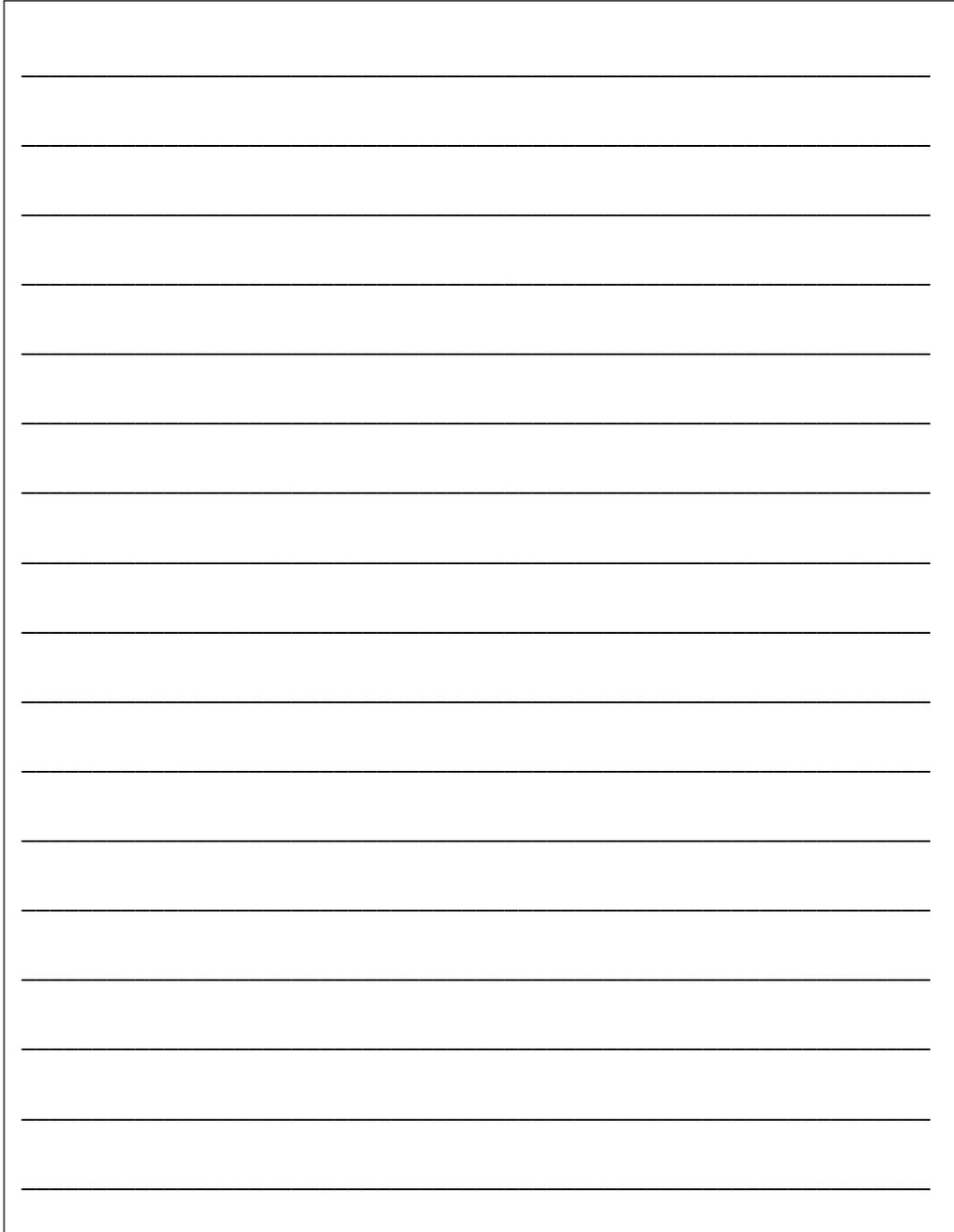
I am facing the things that I am afraid of the best I can.

How would you describe the woman you are today?

I have participated in writing exercises similar to the one that follows. I found them useful to think about in my personal journey of self-discovery.

Writing Exercise: The Woman You Are

Identify the woman you are beginning with “I Am”.



A large rectangular box with a thin black border, containing 20 horizontal lines for writing. The lines are evenly spaced and extend across most of the width of the box, leaving small margins on the left and right sides.

Writing Exercise: Hello – I'm Glad To Meet Me Created by Elaine Taylor

I Dream of becoming _____.

because _____.

I Wish that I _____.

because _____.

I Hope for _____.

because _____.

I Fear _____.

because _____.

I Love _____.

because _____.

I am Really Good at _____.

I am Not So Good at _____.

I Want to be Better at _____.

I am Excited about _____.

I Want to be Excited about _____.

The Most Difficult Time in my Life was When _____.

because of that experience, I _____.

.

Chapter 4

The Future: Feminist Spirituality

The First Wave of Feminism earned women the right to vote, the Second Wave focused on equal pay for equal work and reproductive freedom, and the Third Wave has seen an explosion of conversations revolving around identity and difference (Tong, 2009). Spiritual Feminism was named during the Third Wave and I believe that the Fourth Wave will continue to focus on Feminist Spirituality and within that context a new Feminist unity will be born. The Third Wave explorations, research, and conversations that developed and expanded theory that made room for difference was a necessary step. Early feminism was dominated primarily by white, middle-class women, many of whom had the luxury of working husbands and hired help to manage their duties of homecare and childcare (Tong, 2009). These women thought their life experience was similar to all women and that was not true. When the Third Wave has expanded to be as inclusive as it can, it will be time for these individual groups to come together and move forward together and I believe that will be the beginning of the Forth Wave that will center around feminist spirituality. Spirituality has long been linked to traditional religions in a way that makes spirituality and feminism seem at odds with one another. Feminist authors have begun the work of separating and realigning the two words so that feminist spirituality can be given a name and a space to grow and become an identifiable internal source, a well spring, that can allow a personal connection between spirituality and some religious traditions (Flinders, 1998). Women have access to education in ever increasing numbers

in a variety of ways; we have a greater understanding of our bodies than ever before. Next, will be the rediscovery of our spiritual selves.

For me, the difference between religion and spirituality can be found in the message. Religion often feels rigid to me, spirituality feels fluid. Religion asks me to follow rules to be a part of a group, spirituality asks me to honor the spirit within everyone. Religion feels exclusionary and isolated to me; spirituality invites me to explore all of the places that Spirit can be found. My feminist spirituality allows me to focus on what is important to me. I use the phrase my feminist spirituality because feminist spirituality can be many things to many people. I do not wish to convey the idea that my way of thinking is the only way, or even the best way of thinking. I offer my ideas and my opinions as an example of one within many, spiritual feminists. What is important to me are issues that surround the environment, calling for an end to gender violence, participating in actions that seek to protect our elders and our children. It is also important to me that I find a spiritual community to grow in, to function in, and to celebrate in. When I support companies, publishers, and films that support my spiritual values, that supports my personal spirituality. I ask the following questions to allow space for you to explore these concepts for yourself.

Writing Exercise: Religion, Spirituality, and Community

What do you see as difference between religion and spirituality?

What do you see as similarities between religion and spirituality?

What issues are important to you that you feel are spiritual issues?

Is spiritual community important to you? Why?

In this chapter, I focus on the future, and the potential for personal and social change found in feminist spirituality. Drawing a variety of scholarly and more contemporary and popular feminist authors, I consider what impact feminist spirituality may have on the next activist wave of feminism. Many feminist spiritual authors do not come from a Christian tradition. Author Mary Rose O'Reilly (2000) identifies herself as a Quaker and a Buddhist. Author Miriam Simos is a priestess active in pagan groups (Christ & Plaskow, 1992, p. 259). There are many others. Some women have found a way to reconcile the religions and traditions they were reared in. Rita Gross reconciled Buddhism and Rabbi Sue Ann Wasserman reconciled Judaism (Flinders, 1998, p. 317). I have met women personally who have reconciled Christianity and feminism. I am currently a non-active member of a Christian church. Whether or not I will be able to reconcile my feminism with Christianity remains to be seen. In the writing exercises above, I simply invite the reader to begin an introspective journey into her spiritual self. My assumption is that we can define our spiritual selves based on beliefs we choose to keep, change, or adopt. Wars, famine, rape, and oppression exist in parts of the world we live in. Are these the result of thousands of years of patriarchy? Racism, classism, sexuality, and gender discrimination have been born as a result of patriarchy. If we choose to fight for peace, we are doomed to fail from the start. However, we can be peaceful. We can set boundaries about what is acceptable, and we can refuse to participate. We can self-educate and educate each other about feminist spirituality. We can come together in peace and create groups of people seeking and settling for nothing less than peace and equality for all people.

I was reared in a fundamental Christian home. In my earliest memories I find messages of the secondary place of women in relationship to men. I also find the messages that communicated my place in heaven as a “good woman” if I followed the dictates and rules of the church. In the 1960’s and 1970’s, the terms “New Age” and/or “spirituality” would be used in a sermon or conversation and were usually identified as “things of the devil.” At that time, the term, “New Age,” was associated with the occult (Sutcliffe, 2003). My questions, when answered at all, were answered with words and instructions to believe and to have faith in the “truth,” for in the “truth, all of us are set free” (John, 8:32). None of it has ever felt true to me. My family and religious community were interwoven so completely that all members understood the real danger in leaving the safety of the home and the church. For many years I existed within my home and community pretending to believe something that I knew was not true. I still pretend when that’s necessary to preserve peace within the family. Now I find myself in a place of outrage that my spirituality has been all but stripped away by the forces of patriarchal religion. I don’t have spiritual mothers, personal experience, or the energy to create a personal spirituality for myself, and for many years, my primary question was “why?” Through my education in women’s studies, I have come to understand some of the answers to my questions.

I wanted to know why I always found myself returning to church when there was a celebration or to mourn, and authors Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow (1992) explain that because traditional religions are symbol systems, even those who reject or no longer participate in religious institutions still fall back on that traditional structure when age-old rituals are practiced because there are no alternative structured rituals in place to

celebrate marriage and birth or to mourn loss through death (Christ & Plaskow, 1992). I understand that in the world I grew up in, there were no rituals in place that connected body and spirit other than those that took place in church.

I wanted to know why only male pronouns were used. God was the father who sat in judgment, who gave men the authority to speak and direct on his behalf (Daly, 1975). This never made sense to me. Jesus had a mother and if it weren't for her, he would not have been born. It is likely that Mary nursed her baby and that because of her, Jesus thrived and lived into adulthood. I did not understand where the female pronouns were when we would sing "Good Christian Men Rejoice," for example. I found out that religions that center on the worship of a male God keep women in a state of "psychological dependence on men and male authority" and, at the same time, place men in political and social authority in religious institutions (Christ & Plaskow, 1992).

Because I saw women as so central to the support of their husbands and families, I couldn't fathom why a woman would disconnect from her family and her responsibilities to strike out on her own path of spiritual discovery without resources but with the faith that her needs would be met. I understand those women now, and I applaud their courage and strength. I learned my lessons of responsibility too well to embark on a journey of solitude and self-actualization, specifically, my responsibility to the commitment that I willingly made to my children. I've learned to filter out what works for me and what doesn't in every religious situation so that my spiritual path becomes clearer. I do know that I must be vigilant in my practice of non-judgment, empathy, detached compassion, and peace. My celebration of my practices is most often a solitary experience. At USF, in

my Feminist Spirituality classrooms, I discovered feminist spiritual authors such as Sue Monk Kidd (2006), who have come to my aid as I seek my personal spirituality.

Her memoir, *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter* (2006), describes her personal “journey from Christian tradition to the Sacred Feminine.” She divides the text into four main sections that illustrate the stages of her journey, including the events, thoughts, and feelings she experienced in each phase. The first section deals with her “awakening,” which is simply the phase in which she begins the process of becoming aware of the systems of patriarchy that she has functioned in, lived in, and supported her entire life. Next, is her “initiation” phase during which she goes within, in her words, and begins her “solitude of descent” (p. 94) while she “dismantled” her old way of being “both inside and out” (p. 115). The third phase of her journey is titled “grounding.” It is in this phase that “healing was also taking place” as she begins to connect with other women who encourage her journey and provide unconditional love and support for her journey into her new found beliefs. Importantly, she begins to recognize and to put into practice self-love and self-care. In the fourth and final section of this book, Kidd speaks of “empowerment.” In this section, she explains “having Sacred Feminine experience isn’t enough.” What must be is to “become” the experience. In other words, action must be taken in order to experience our fullest spiritual possibilities.

During her personal awakening, Kidd confesses that she spent much of her life “trying to live up to the stereotypical formula of what a woman should be—The Good Christian Woman, the Good Wife, the Good Mother, the Good Daughter—pursuing those things that have always been held out to women as ideals of femininity” (Kidd, 2006, p. 13). I believe that the implications of the word “good” are what lock so many of us into

expectations of perfectionism and maintaining order and control within family and relationships and that this way of being hinders or maybe completely stops our explorations of our spiritual feminine selves. However, when Kidd released her need to oversee, over-nurture, and over-manage, her life became newly her own (Kidd, 2006).

Kidd conceives of spiritual growth as a series of stages: Sleeping, Awakening, Initiation, Grounding, and Empowerment. What stage are you in today? Sue finds herself in the Empowerment stage after six years of work in which she was able to travel, to experience, to write, to explore, and to research. In my world, I am not in a position to take the next number of years to disconnect from my family and my life in order to process through these stages. So, I must begin where I am. One way to begin is through meditation.

Meditation is a spiritual practice that can be done alone or in a group. It can be done with a body at rest or with a body in motion. Meditation can be another word for prayer, and within the practice of meditation and prayer women can ground and steady themselves (Flinders, 1998) as they embark on a voyage of self-discovery that is based on their personal truth. Peace is not a place we can get to because peace can only be with us where we are in a present moment. Peace, stillness, quality of life, and joy are not waiting to be found. They do not exist in the future because they can only exist in this current moment. Many adults have been taught to function in the future where “we are incapable of actually living one minute of life” (Hanh, 1987) or in the past, bemoaning what can never be changed or wishing for that moment of joy to return and exist again. However, few have been taught how to be in the present. “We are very good at preparing to live, but not very good at living” (Hanh, 1992). Many Americans have learned to put off

peace, joy and quality of life until the next vacation, the next holiday, the next raise, and often put these things off for a much longer term with the promise of finding and enjoying them in retirement. Why is being in the moment where those things exist so difficult? One reason is that we have been taught that the solution to all that troubles us is found outside ourselves. This usually involves spending money to purchase the solution or buying into the idea that in order to achieve a better result in our lives, we must simply reorganize our lives to be more efficient. The headline of a recent newspaper article proclaimed “Switch off Stress, Ways to Balance Work and Life” (Sarasota Herald Tribune, 2009). The article offers solutions for the reader such as “Determine your priorities,” “Examine your daily routine,” “Approach personal time like you do your job,” and “Accept others’ help.” Embedded in the article is another article called “Running Late?” This section emphasizes the importance of managing stress by reorganizing one’s life and by practicing better time management. In other words, go into the future of your life and set things up differently so stress will be reduced and your life will be more manageable. The time management section of this article cements our idea that “our family, place of work, and society rob us of all our time” (Hanh, 1987). The responsibility for having poor time management is placed in the lap of the reader who is most likely not doing “it” right. Media messages like this cement the idea that there is something wrong with us if we cannot find a balance between work and life, and that it is primarily about technique. My point is that women have been conditioned to be all things to all people and that unless those beliefs are called into question, the possibility of a work-life balance may not be attainable. In order to find balance, women have to be able to focus on their life first because all of the roles and responsibilities that most women fill

are built upon that foundation, the foundation of the “self.” Meditation can be a useful tool as a woman chooses to focus on her “self” and what she desires.

Many adults are working with incorrect definitions about the act of meditation. Meditation is not something a person does; meditation is a way of being, an act of living, a conscious choice to fully participate in life as it is in a particular moment (Hanh, 1992). Meditation provides direct access to our inner knowing, which can be a direct and serious threat to the system of patriarchy. When a woman finds her own power she can imagine what the lives of women without patriarchy and within that imagining, she can imagine a powerful life experience in her own right.

Many people misunderstand meditation as something else they must put on their long list of things to do. They assume that meditating means to sit still and do nothing for an identified period of time. How can doing nothing have a positive impact on my life when I am already not accomplishing everything I have to accomplish? This is the question people ask when they encounter the idea of meditation as an act of life support. Sitting meditation is a meditative act that some people find extremely beneficial. However, sitting meditation is only one form of meditation, and it may not be the best place for a novice to begin. Guided meditation is a gentle way to begin the practice of meditation. In a guided meditation, a speaker (or a recording) invites a person or a group to participate in a spoken meditation that often begins with a request for the participant to physically relax and take some cleansing breaths as they prepare to listen to a combination of the voices of speaker and the inner self of the listener. The speaker invites the listener to imagine their self in a quiet, peaceful place. Sometimes, the place is described in some detail, and sometimes it is left to the listener to imagine a place that

has meaning for them. One of the most powerful guided meditations that I have ever experienced was one that called upon my wise woman self to come to me with a special message. I was amazed and astounded that not only did “she” come but she looked upon me with such unconditional love that I came to understand that the only struggle I was in was with me. Guided meditations are a wonderful way to wake up in the morning and a wonderful way to prepare for sleep at the end of the day. They are very successful as small breaks throughout a stressful day, and they can be as short as five minutes. There are guided meditations that help a listener create an internal guided meditation for herself that can be called upon as needed without the use of the outside speaker. They become self-guided meditations. There are guided meditations focusing on specific needs and topics that can be purchased at many progressive book stores.

Guided meditations can invite women to forgive themselves and the people in their lives, and, most importantly, they can impart a sense of peace and wisdom as listeners connect with their wise woman selves. Another successful meditative act is walking.

Thich Nhat Hanh’s *The Long Road Turns to Joy: A Guide To Walking Meditation* (1996) describes the practice when he says:

You don’t need to join your palms together or wear a solemn face to practice walking meditation. If possible, choose a quiet path in a park, near a lake, or along a riverbank. The best practice is formless. Don’t walk so slowly that people think you are strange. Walk in a way that others do not even notice that you are practicing. If you meet someone along the way, just smile and continue your walking. (p.50)

Meditation can happen anywhere and it doesn't have to be an act that calls attention to your behavior. Hanh explains that one can be mindful when walking but also when eating, driving, and speaking. "You've got to practice meditation (mindfulness) when you walk, stand, lie down, sit, and work." In mindfulness, we facilitate healing of ourselves and our world.

I have personally benefitted from the practice of meditation and have found it very useful in moving away from my judgments and my desire to name things as right or wrong, good or bad. In meditation, judgments often come up in my mind asking for acknowledgement and agreement. It is almost as if they were waiting in line to be heard and when a time of stillness comes it is that time. Meditation is a good time to remind myself "not to be dominated by the distinction between good and evil, thus creating a battle within oneself" (Hanh, 1987). I have learned that judgment and comparison are close siblings and lead straight to the path of discontent. In meditation, I am able to practice compassion for myself and others. Many of the great spiritual masters suggest that detached compassion is the greatest emotion that a person can experience and that remains one of my goals. As a child, I was taught to let other people do my critical thinking. I was given my place as a woman on the earth, and thinking was not a part of my place. I was not encouraged to know myself on any level. Meditation gives me a place to meet myself, to learn about who I am and what is important to me. "If you want to know your own mind, there is only one way: to observe and recognize everything about it" (Hanh, 1987, p.37). Each step that I take on my journey brings me one step closer to self-actualization also named nirvana. "As you begin to arrive with each step, you become more solid. As you become more solid, you become more free. Solidity and

freedom are two aspects of *nirvana*, the state of liberation from craving, fear, and anxiety” (Hanh, 1996, p. 31). I am becoming more free and less gripped by fear and anxiety, and I have learned to recognize and appreciate my teachers and to disassociate from those who stand in my way on this path. I may not have time to sit and listen to a guided meditation, but I have to get from one place to another and walking meditatively has brought me to myself in my journey. I have learned from Hanh that “[I] can practice walking meditation between meetings, on the way to [my] car, up or down the stairs. When [I] walk anywhere, allow enough time to practice. Instead of three minutes, give [myself] eight or ten. I [will begin to] always leave for the airport an extra hour early, so I can practice walking meditation there. Friends [will] want to keep me until the last minute, but I [will] resist. I [will] tell them that I need the time” (Hanh, 1996). There have been many stories in the news that tell about people who have been diagnosed with illnesses that are not treatable by the medical establishment. The stories almost always tell the reader how the subject in the story, when faced with rejection of help of the medical model, turn to holistic healing that often involves meditation as an act of self-healing. People who begin to focus on themselves as healing agents may experience success in healing physically and emotionally. Why do we wait to practice self-healing until we are faced with no other alternative? “When confronted with death, we realize the preciousness of walking on the green Earth” (Hanh, 1996, p. 56). What happens when we focus on self-healing before we become sick?

One aspect of self-healing involves becoming aware of the real but invisible cord that connects a mind to a heart. I have come to think of it this way, when a child is born, that cord is healthy and strong and that person transmits information back and forth from

the mind to the heart as they grow and learn and make decisions. Sometimes, when a child or an adult experiences abuse, the cord snaps and the person spends the majority of their life in their head, the place of thinking and logic, or in their heart, the place of emotions. When internal communication cannot travel between the two body locations, because of a severed cord, the person is functioning at a severe disadvantage. When a person spends their time in their head they are out of touch with their emotions. When a person spends their time in their heart they are a feeling person primarily ruled by their emotions. Many people appear to be so angry about so many things. Meditation is a safe way to explore anger and act upon it and stop reacting to it. “After a while, the anger will subside and you will feel strong enough to look directly at it, to try to understand its causes, and to begin the work of transforming it” (Hanh, 1996). Meditation is a wonderful way to reconnect a broken cord. It is a way for me to begin to feel again without fear that I will be eaten alive by my intense feelings kept locked away after years of childhood ridicule and abuse.

We can use our breathing to be in contact with our feelings and accept them... our feeling is us, and for the moment we *are* that feeling. Our attitude of not clinging to or rejecting our feelings is the attitude of letting go, an important part of meditation practice...If we face our unpleasant feelings with care, affection, and nonviolence, we can transform them into the kind of energy that is healthy and has the capacity to nourish us. By the work of mindful observation, our unpleasant feelings can illuminate so much for us, offering us insight and understanding into ourselves and society (Hanh, 1992).

Emotions and feelings are a vital part of who we are. They are part of our internal guidance system that some call intuition.

When children experience abuse, they develop coping strategies that they carry with them into adulthood. Often, the patterns of behavior no longer serve them as adults but they are unaware of the fact that they continue to use these strategies. What in childhood was a strategy for survival becomes a habit in an adult. Often the strategy for survival is the act of running away from a new or unexpected situation. Mary Rose O'Reilly, in her memoir, *The Barn at the End of the World*, explains. "Running away has become a habit, but when we practice [meditation] we recognize the habit. It is as though we are chased by a spirit. We eat as if our house were on fire, sit as if on coals. We learn the habit of agitation. *Stopping* means to recognize unhealthy habit energies" (O'Reilly, 2000). Meditation is an act of healing to avoid or to address illness mentally and/or physically. One reason that meditation is so healing is the focus on breath and breathing.

In her memoir, *Eat Pray Love*, Elizabeth Gilbert (2007) talks about the difference between mediation and prayer. "I've heard it said that prayer is the act of talking to God, while meditation is the act of listening. Take a wild guess as to which comes easier for me. I can prattle away to God about all my feelings and my problems all the livelong day, but when it comes time to descend into silence and *listen* ...well, that's a different story. When I ask my mind to rest in stillness, it is astonishing how quickly it will turn (1) bored, (2) angry, (3) depressed, (4) anxious or (5) all of the above (Gilbert, 2006, p.132).

Hanh instructs his students to “Learn to practice breathing in order to regain control of body and mind, to practice mindfulness, and to develop concentration and wisdom” (Hanh, 1987, p. 22).

I have practiced as well as shared the benefits of meditation. I find that when I meditate, I am more grounded, more centered, more focused, and have a greater ability to put difficult situations into perspective. In meditation, I have found healing. In meditation, I have found myself. I have discovered the present as the only possibility, and I have found a friend who holds this belief, and we work to remind each other when we fly off into the future or find ourselves ruminating in the past. “Only this actual moment is life” (Hanh, 1987). My research has yielded a list called “the fourteen precepts of the Order of Interbeing” (Hanh, 1992). I am filled with delight. Here are words that ring true to my spiritual self, words that ring much truer for me than the Ten Commandments, although some of the items are the same on both “lists.” I believe meditation has the potential to bring about peace in our world. Using the words of Mahatma Gandhi, I will “live the change I wish to see” by living meditatively as I walk, work, and communicate.

Feminist author Elizabeth Debold (2009) and others have offered specific goals as we venture forth into a collective feminist spirituality.

The goal would be to develop a consciousness that both includes our biological and cultural inheritance and also transcends it, so that a new, free space of relationship is created in culture in which to catalyze a new partnership between women and men. This would be a new expression of the feminine, and given how

essential it is for transforming our world, such an endeavor is nothing less than sacred” (Debold, 2009, p. 1).

There is a way to transcend the models that we have lived in for so long. There is a way that we can come together and create a future that is full of possibility for everyone and not just for the chosen few with access to wealth and power. The time is ripe to create the plan that will give birth to the steps that will see our goals achieved.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

This thesis is meant to provide an initial framework for understanding the structures that are in place that have shaped the lived lives of women. These social and cultural structures are usually not explicitly identified for anyone. In fact, the messages are often communicated that gender discrimination, racism, classism and sexism are structures that existed in the past. Because individuals absorb the message that these structures no longer exist, they may convince themselves that they are the only ones who experience discrimination because of something they do or do not do. Instead of identifying the social and cultural issues that continue to function in our society and culture, people may isolate and self-blame. Within the confines of isolation and self-blaming, people do not come together to find out that what happened or happens to them has happened or happens to many others. When people come together, the fact that the personal is political comes to light and when that happens, people can begin to work together to bring about social and cultural change. This thesis is not meant to serve as a panacea for anyone. It has not been that for me nor is it what I expected.

I am not, and will never be, a therapist. The information that I discovered in Women's Studies was therapeutic for me because I learned many of the answers to my "why" questions. I have an understanding about the structures of power, the benefits of war to many of those structures of power, and why natural resources are more important

to some people than women and children who are living in great peril every day as a result of not having the basic of necessities. I think it is time we take a look at public leaders and redefine them as the servants they are, to everyone. I am not saying there has been a big conspiracy to subjugate women, the poor, people of color and people who do not claim to be heterosexual. I am saying that for whatever reasons, these systems do operate and because they operate it is important that we have an understanding about them for two reasons. One is so we can stop participating in them if we can and if we choose to, and the second is that maybe our daughters and future generations can create a new path for themselves that is based on what they want and not based on what they are told to want.

This project involves some of my personal story and I have drawn on the wisdom of feminist scholars and theorists to put my experiences into political context. I have told parts of my personal story not only to take a step out of the silence that I have lived in for most of my life but to set an example for someone else to take a step out of their silence if that makes sense. I do not expect my stories to resonate with everyone and the telling of my stories was not my primary point. My primary point is that women have untold stories, so many untold stories that the social, cultural, religious and cultural backdrop that we live in does not support all of us. Many of us have been told what to value as the most important and we have designed our lives around those values without ever evaluating our own thoughts, feelings and opinions about them. I believe there are many reasons why women continue to be divided. We continue to follow socially imposed rules about behavior, appearance and dress and we ostracize women who do not. We hold beliefs about race, class and sexuality that keep us separated from each other, and

because men often continue to be the primary wage earners many women find themselves in a place of financial dependence or in a place of such stark poverty that, in their mind, there seems to be nothing they can do about their situation. The term feminism and feminist have been labeled as old-fashioned, radical, elite or unnecessary and many women are cautious about identifying with these powerful terms.

This project was created within the halls of established academia which is one of the oldest established patriarchal organizations in existence today. It is not meant to lead feminist scholars into theoretical conversations and it is not meant to be held up as the experience of all, or even most, women. It is meant as a basic handbook for women who have not had access to any education that was created by women, for women, from the perspective of women, which is called Women's Studies. With this most simple document, maybe a person can begin to reframe the story of their life. When I reframed the story of my life, my life experiences were no longer what defined me. Because my life experiences no longer define me, I am able to create a plan for my future that is free of shame and blame. And because I have an understanding of the fact that my life experiences happened, not because I did something wrong, but because of a lack of knowledge, education, communication and understanding, I can move away from being helpless to powerful.

I do have a knowing that has nothing to do with education or with words. I have a knowing about what is important for our future generations. I find myself in conversation with people who are convinced that patriarchy, gender discrimination, classism, racism, and sexism do not exist anymore and when I can get them to the point where they admit they might still be around to some degree, practiced by people other than themselves,

they often fall back on the phrase “well look how far women have come.” Is that supposed to make me feel better? It doesn’t! The phrase might come up, “these things take time.” Well how much time?

Beliefs cannot be proven and that is why they can change in an instant. When people understand the systems that are in place that support inequality, they can choose to stop participating in and thereby supporting those systems and they will collapse. When marginalized people believe they have as much of a right to speak, to grow, to live and to participate, they will demand the marginalization end.

Our leaders must be servants of the people. They must lead by example and be held accountable. Our leaders must possess a spiritual center that focuses on the generations to come and on those in our world that are unable to fend for themselves. Women in the United States do not often experience home invasions and violent rape by those invaders, but there are places in the world where women are not safe within their own homes and where women and children are captured and sold into slavery and put to work in brothels all over the world, including the United States. The new term is human trafficking and it is one of the fastest growing crimes in this country and in the world.

I have addressed the idea in this thesis that we do not know what we do not know. This project brings some things to light that maybe some people want to know. So, now what? I hope my reader begins by practicing great self-love and self-care. When we love ourselves, we can love others and when we know ourselves, we can come to know others. When we come to know others, we can empathize, and we can become a part of the solution. All any of us can do is to start where we are. Identify that point and then

identify the next point and make a plan to get there. It does not have to be a ten-year plan. It can be a ten-day plan. When you arrive at that point, create the next point or step. Begin, just begin. Use the tools in this book, identify your resources, figure out what you want and what is important to you, and then begin. Forgive yourself in advance for the mistakes you will make because you will. The alternative is to do nothing because you may make a mistake or because you may change your mind about something, or to do something and step into your life. I sure hope you look me up on your journey and that we can travel for awhile together.

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