

Three Key Questions:
Towards Unlocking Woman's Religious Identity

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For all my sisters
over all the years:
the ones I chose, the ones who chose me,
and especially the one who shared glimpses of God since birth -
with much love and so many thanks

Chapter One: Introduction

My application of principles of pastoral care under discussion in this paper has to do with enhancing the well being of a group of women with strong religious sensibilities who expressed a feeling of conflict with regard to their current church experience.

The background to the issue they brought to me is as follows: For the most part, these are women who belong to a church where I served several years ago. A few of them came to me separately last summer and indicated a sense of spiritual hunger that was not being met by the church's programming. Their attempts to introduce new concepts (a labyrinth and an adult studies class on Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father* for example) were met with little clerical enthusiasm. In light of this, the ones who would become a nucleus of this group asked me to develop and lead a book group in which they could explore their relationships to spirituality and to the Christianity they know.

One way to bring the eight women in this study into quick focus is to call them "soccer moms." They live in a small, affluent New York bedroom community. They enjoy the kind of financial security that allows them to set aside their careers while they care for their young children. All were well educated and well functioning individuals. Most of them are in the fourth decade of their lives, at Erikson's border between his stage six's concerns with identity, intimacy and committed relationships and his stage seven's concern with "generativity" the adult's ability to look outside oneself and care for others.

Whatever caused their neediness to flare up into consciousness, the women who would become the study group now known as *Dissident Sisters* (their name choice) seem to have come to a kind of impasse in their religious lives. It should be noted that a

considerable proportion (75%) had already made a break with their church /denomination of origin. Another break is not regarded as appropriate action now: partly because of social considerations regarding the well being of their families, they are not looking to leave their present church home. They are, however, doing things like teaching the children's Sunday School classes that meet in another room during the Sunday morning sermon so that they may preserve appearances while sparing themselves the irritation of participating in a form of religion they no longer find nourishing.

The group is made up of eight women: Emma, Caitlin, Molly and Samantha form the group on alternate Tuesday mornings and Megan, Olivia Kayla, and Nicole come on the corresponding Thursday evenings. Of these, the core of the group consists of the first six individuals. Kayla and Nicole are less committed and come when it's convenient. All but Caitlin and Megan are members of the River View Community Church, a theologically moderate Protestant community church. Emma and Samantha are very active on church boards. Caitlin is a Roman Catholic, educated in high caliber parochial schools, strongly drawn to religion but presently not a church goer. Megan has no formal religious training or affiliation. She is fed by the rituals and meaning within a group rather than by the larger church.

The group is divided in two because Olivia is no longer a stay at home mom and has gone back to work, making it impossible for her be part of the morning group. Megan could switch to mornings, but stays in the evening group for Olivia's sake. The results of this are mixed, creating a very strong morning group and a small, less energetic evening group. It does, however, remain true to my principle that "church" needs to be available when people are.

Looking back to the time when I was considering their request to form this group, it seems that it contained several layers. There was the spoken "we want a book group." There was the counterpoint "we don't want to leave this church and we need something if we are to stay part of it." And then there were a number of variations on this disturbing theme, "I feel like I'm losing touch – maybe with church, maybe with Jesus, surely with something I hold sacred, but can't quite define any more."

One resource I can bring to this conversation is my own experience. It led to my understanding that the first step in the process of uniting a particular feminine story with the Christian story, as it had been told by centuries of male theologians, is to reach for an individual experience of God and help make that available to conscious thought. Then the intuitive, right brain, encountered truth becomes be able to dialogue on some level with learned, left brain dogmatic truth. I am convinced that a mature and authentic faith can evolve from this dialectic and that the women in this group would benefit from this exercise.

As I tried to frame a response to their request for a group, several boundary issues troubled me. On the one hand, I am not a member of their local church. Not only do I have no official standing in that religious community and no authority to effect any change they might want or even need, I have an obligation to refrain from intruding into their religious life. On the other, I am a part of Christianity, an ordained minister of the Church.

It became important to me at this point in our negotiation, to sort out some definition of "church/religion". The word, religion, comes from the Latin *religio*, *religare*, to bind back, to tie fast. One can certainly hear the relationship to *regula*, and to

regula fidei, the rule of faith. Balance the classical understanding that religion (church, in this case) is an institution created to protect the purity of the tradition as it has been handed down, against the Jungian understanding that the function of religion is to offer containment for primordial experience. If the "handing on of what was handed on to me"¹ is a process by which we hand on the mysteries of God's self-communication as the Church hears them, then that the essence of the handing on must include the wisdom of both the ancient and also the present Church.

In short, then, if the wisdom handed on to our mothers was handed on to me, I am obliged to hand on those feminine religious and psychological insights I've learned to the individuals who ask for them. And so I agreed to form the group, stipulating only that it begin by being the context of my Doctor of Ministry demonstration project. As this was acceptable to them, I began the project by listening more specifically for the nature of the disconnect they were expressing.

I did this in part by asking them to write a few paragraphs about how they experience the presence of God: "Who is God to Me?"² By doing this, I began the process of setting up a way to address what I had sensed were their deeper spiritual needs, while still not ignoring the cognitive one as they perceive it. My intention was to stay in touch with their sense of stress as it played out in their church related conflicts while providing them with new ways to understand their relationship to their own sense of the sacred and to the specifics of today's Christianity. Staying in touch with the stress

¹ 1 Cor. 15:1.

² See Appendix for all written statements: three statements each from Emma, Caitlin, Megan, Molly, Olivia and Samantha. Kayla and Nicole did not participate long enough to effect the results of the study and, for this reason, their statements are not included here.

in this case means staying attuned to their church-related perceptions so that I can tailor a series of psychological and theological readings that could give insight into the nature of women's behavior patterns and how these initiatives and responses might play out in their individual lives.

Staying in touch with the stress suggests that the second question they need to address on their own is the profoundly crucial: "Who am I?" Only after these two questions are answered and enough theology digested to change some misconceptions they most likely hold, will they be able to consider the third question, the heart of this project: "Who are you and God to each other?"

I worked on the premise that the counselor part of my role here was to facilitate a way for them to do two things. The first was to recognize that – whatever else may be involved³ – much of the discomfort that most of the group expresses was consonant with their difficulty in relating private experience to communal practice. The second was to begin to give them some tools (some understandings of women's psychology in particular and some highly focused theology segments) so that they might start to reconcile the two.

The pastoral part of my role in this group has to do with being open to the still small voice of God. It is true that a pastoral counselor is equipped to recognize the immediate problems of psychological stress. It is also true that a pastoral counselor needs to be sensitive to insights that include meanings which can transcend neurotic conflict by

³ One of the constant pitfalls in this endeavor is the ease with which this becomes a way to blame the local church for the discomfort these women feel with that relationship. My understanding here is that there is conflict within the individual that needs to be resolved and that conflict is our concern. It may well happen that once they are able to clarify their understanding of a connection to the sacred, it will not mend the relationship to the church. But it may not be that they can do so, and in any event, that mending is outside of our present concern.

offering a basis for new hope. And so I listened. I listened for what they said and I listened for those amazing moments when a subject took a sudden turn and someone sparked a new understanding or even a new way of being in the particular moment. God, I sense, is in these gaps. And so I waited. And listened. And hoped.

What I was hoping for, in the long view, was nothing less than the conscious correlation of individual experience with religious tradition. To restate this concept in terms of Alskog's fundamental counseling stance of "undivided attention to the client's concerns within an atmosphere of benign benevolence" (*The Guide to Pastoral Counseling and Care*, p.3), "undivided attention to concerns" translates to attention paid to both the stated concern which first formed the group i.e. they want to learn feminist theology, as well as attention to the unspoken piece of their need, the distress caused by their various levels of discomfort in finding spiritual nourishment within their tradition.⁴

An "atmosphere of benign benevolence," as presented here has at least two primary components. One is the highly selective way in which the materials are presented so that ideas and feelings – necessary for the integration of personal and communal experience, but previously disregarded – can surface. For example, each woman in the group has some (usually half forgotten) sense of being a member of the second sex, but no member of the group had ever discussed it. Therefore, Sue Monk Kidd's "primal feminine wound" provides a major talking point.

The other component of benign benevolence with this group is to be found in my very intentional creation of what feels like a safe space. A safe space in this instance is

⁴ I do not mean to indicate this as a flat line. The discomfort varies from the response of one who is quite adept in focusing mainly on the good, to one who periodically considers becoming a Buddhist.

both a time and place where each woman is free to explore her own sense of the Sacred, and a fertile atmosphere for encounter with the Holy.⁵ I am careful not to "do church" here, my intention is to ease the way into a richer experience of individual traditions. This group experience is structured as a time out, a place apart, a safe space.

To sum up: the women who came to me with a request for a book group actually had multilayered needs. They wanted to learn about feminist theology, but sent out signals suggesting that they needed a way to reconsider outgrown religious and spiritual understandings so that what they know cognitively might integrate with what they know spiritually.

The ultimate question to be addressed by the project is, therefore, as follows. "Does relevant and appropriate cognitive learning ameliorate pertinent situational stress and lead to a more integrated understanding of the self as one with meaningful ties to the Sacred?" The specific need to which I plan to minister is the disconnect that I think I see between these women's chronological age and developmental stage as it relates to their religious development.

I plan to do this by introducing them to feminist theology. The elegance of this concept has little to do with my design: basic⁶ tenets of feminist theology point to crucial concepts with the ability to effect change (once assimilated) in and of themselves. All

⁵ Encounter with the Holy is not, of course, quantifiable. Yet two interesting results have occurred so far, the one being a time when a highly defended participant allowed herself to be validated and comforted by the group and the other being another's formulation of an online journal in which contributors will share their own awarenesses of the varieties of religious experience. She relates the new project directly to experiences with the group.

⁶ Basic, but not exclusive. Theologies with ties to any form of liberation theology hold these and similar other principles in common.

gain authority from the foundational understanding that Revelation is not that which is contained in a book or other teaching from the past, but instead takes the form of a living present relationship with God. This relationship is mediated through creation and human (female as well as male) history, and as such, is an ongoing process which includes the individuals in the group. Further, Jungian psychology's understanding that God can work directly in our non-conscious dovetails with the feminist principle that God can be discovered in human heart. My ministry will take the form of providing this learning along with a series of three questions designed to provide a way for each individual to discover that these principles – and God – are at work within her own self.

One relevant insight that this project will bring to ministry in a wider context is to be found in the recognition of the project as a microscopic, but concrete visioning of some of the implications of the relationship between psychology and religion, i.e. the conscious correlation of individual psychological experience to a more completely imaged religious tradition.

Dissident Sisters, then – the name notwithstanding – is aimed at consonance by structure of its reality as a means of perception by which its members can discern the presence of God in their own lives.

Chapter Two: Principles

In contradiction to traditional understandings held by many mainline Protestant churches – including the one with which *Dissident Sisters* is associated – a major contribution brought by psychology to the workings of religion has to do with the concept of God working directly in our own non-conscious depths, and doing so in a way that is sensed just as immediately as through Scripture and tradition.⁷

One of the tasks confronting the psychology of religion, therefore, is the conscious correlation of individual experience to religious tradition. If a person can do this, it becomes possible to hope to build a bridge from personal spiritual moments to the vast reaches of a tradition of God's unfolding self revelation. The separateness and smallness of a personal connection can be stretched and deepened through its connection with biblical understanding as recorded human experience of God.

The Judeo-Christian tradition, however, is recorded in androcentric language that includes strong patriarchal cultural biases. A feminist biblical hermeneutic which makes building that bridge a possibility thus becomes important to many women – and certainly to these women – if they are to be able to embrace the tradition in their adult lives.

Narrowing this focus down to the factors encountered by *Dissident Sisters*, we will first consider clinical principles that relate to these women's self understanding – starting with where they place in developmental schemes and ending with where they place themselves and where their relationship with the church seems to place them. To

⁷ See Ann and Barry Ulanov, "The Function of Religion for the Human Psyche" and "The Function of Psychology for Religion" in *Religion and the Unconscious*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975) pgs. 25-58.

this end, we will be guided first by concepts developed by Erik Erikson and James Fowler and then by Nancy Chodorow's self-in-relation paradigm.

Let me offer a caveat before turning to a brief discussion of the relevant theories of Erikson and Fowler. Leaving aside feminist criticism of Erikson – rightly based on a critique of his androcentric notion of the primacy of the highly individuated male – it is important to notice that both schemes are linear and progressive. The end stages are assumed to be somehow “higher” or “better” because they represent a culmination, but this is an assumption that I wish to exclude in the consideration of progress within the members of this group. I expect that well-being occurs when an individual's spiritual life coincides with her developmental life, regardless of where she stands on any developmental scale. Translated into concrete terms, just as a young child would appropriately be uncomfortable with multivalent exegesis, so a grown woman could experience a disconnect in a religious setting where she feels infantilized. Translated into activity that reflect the needs of *Dissident Sisters*, the introduction of feminist theology can present a valuable tool for the development of a greater sense of wholeness and integrity by allowing them to base their understandings on their own spiritual experience.

Returning to the developmental psychologists, let us begin with the agreement that, because Erikson names feelings associated with psychosocial developmental stages, his categories can provide us with a clinical vocabulary that is useful for discussing the background of the study group. In *Insight and Responsibility*,⁸ he speaks of hope, will, purpose and competence as the rudiments of virtue developed in childhood; of fidelity

⁸ Erik Erikson, “Human Strength and the Cycle of Generations,” in *Insight and Responsibility*, (New York: Norton, 1964) pp. 111-157.

and love as the adolescent and young adult virtues, of generativity as the gift of middle adulthood and wisdom as the goal of later adulthood. The virtues of childhood are about growing into a functioning, stable self. Adolescence and early adult characteristics are about being that self in relation to an other. Later development involves intentional, relational functioning within the whole web of life.

It is possible to project this pattern out to an understanding that an individual's God image would either reflect these virtues or become less powerful because it would become less relevant to life as the person knows it. In Erikson's progression, the women of *Dissident Sisters* fall within the boundaries of middle adulthood. They are, to a greater or lesser degree, stuck between their developmental adulthood and the Sunday school quality of the religious instruction to which they have been exposed.

Let it be abundantly clear, as we turn to James Fowler's scheme of developmental steps toward a mature Christian faith that I consider it to be idiosyncratic, privileging, as it does, certain characteristics over others for reasons that are highly selective and presumably based primarily on his own faith. Predictably, they prize a male modeled sense of individuation at the expense of any valid female pattern. Further, his notion of an "executive ego" seems to confuse the accepted concept of ego with one of its designated functions. The term, however, is useful here because it points toward a developmental shift that I found in the group and so we will use his words to describe my finding.

Before moving on, there are three of his stages that I would like to highlight because they will be discussed later. The first is his "Mythic-Literal" faith: faith is about reliance in the stories, rules and implicit family values and community traditions. Narrative is key. Fowler sees this development beginning around six years of age.

Adolescence ability to deal with abstract concepts heralds the onset of "synthetic-conventional" faith. "Synthetic" connotes the pulling together of disparate elements into a unity: deeply felt and strongly held, not yet the object of critical reflection. "Conventional" suggests that belief and value elements are derived from significant others, but formed into individual configurations.

The movement at the heart of transition to next stage is a shift in the grounding and orientation of self – and therefore the emergence of "executive ego," the differentiation of self behind the composite of roles and relationships through which the self is expressed. Fowler calls this stage "individuated-reflective" faith: because it makes choices (i.e. decides that literalism or disbelief is not only alternative for dealing with improbable stories [miracles, creation myths], but that the importance is the meanings conveyed by these stories. This is, of course, a critical examination and regrouping of a person's whole system of values and beliefs and may eventually give rise to a "second naiveté, a postcritical receptivity and readiness for participation in the reality brought to expression in symbol and myth." ⁹

Feminist thinkers critique ego psychologists, Erikson in particular, for their devotion to male developmental values. The highly individuated person, like the male-imagined solitary and demanding Father God in the sky, is not a female construct. Women's continuum of experience stretching from birth to old age has led to their understanding that their living is within a web of mutuality, a concept that appears – if at all – only at the highest developmental levels projected by Erikson and Fowler.

⁹ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: the Psychology of Human Development*, (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995) pgs. 48-71.

Nancy Chodorow has argued that boys develop gender identity by separating and individuating from their primary love object, their mothers. By doing so, they develop a self with strong ego boundaries; they will become grown men who tend to be more differentiated and more autonomous than women. Because girls' sense of self doesn't require this degree of separation, they develop stronger relational skills at an earlier age and grow to become woman who usually exhibit more permeable ego boundaries as well as greater capacity for empathy than their male companions.¹⁰

Turning from developmental theorists for a moment, we need to set out some of the principles of narrative therapy theory as background to the work of this study, not because this is a therapy group, but because my goals for this group are quite similar to the goals of narrative therapy as Christie Neuger presents them in *Counseling Women*.¹¹

Along the lines of the understanding that we are a meaning-making people, the approach begins with the assumption that people live their lives in keeping with the story they create out of their personal experiences and the foundational interpretive assumptions that give it meaning. When a person encounters an experience that is not in line with the primary narrative, she ignores it, reshapes it, or allows it to be transforming.

Narrative therapy theory is based on postmodern and poststructuralist philosophies that include the assumption that our interpretation of reality is reality...a major part of the work of narrative counseling is to help people generate new language and new interpretive lenses and thus new realities. How people engage the experiences they have and the contexts in

¹⁰ Cited in Berzoff, Flanagan and Hertz, *Inside Out and Outside In* (Northvale: Jason Aronson Inc. 1996) pgs.251-256.

¹¹ Christine Cozad Neuger, *Counseling Women: a Narrative, Pastoral Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001) p. 43 ff.

which those experiences occur is fundamental to the way they move forward in life and build their future stories.¹²

To sum up relevant clinical principles: if we are to know ourselves as whole persons, our images need to be consonant with the whole adult, who, according to Erikson and Fowler, develops in predictable stages from non- differentiated to highly differentiated. Their progressions, however, fail to bring out the female growth pattern which begins and ends as self-in-relationship. So, we must temper these insights with the kind of awareness Chodorow suggests. We must also keep each woman's personal story in mind while in the process of choosing and evaluating readings that are intended as a tool to generate new language and new lenses by which they can look at their relationships with themselves, other persons and even God.

Further, if it is the case that the search is about finding the *imago Dei* within but apart from and greater than one's own self, the most likely place to look – and keep on looking – is within one's developing self. Which brings us to Jungian psychology's understanding that God can work directly in our non-conscious, a concept that dovetails with the feminist principle that God can be discovered in human heart and also with my – predictably feminist – understanding that theological constructs are really about relationship and that sooner or later a sense of the Other within one's own particularity will register on consciousness. That sense might be expected to change as we do and so the introduction of a benign factor that creates change – feminist theology in this instance – will enhance well being and should be measurable in time.

¹² *Counseling Women*, p.44.

Turning now to religious principles that guide and inform this project, we need to begin with the theological understanding that we, as creatures, have no earthly way of comprehending the nature of God as God. What we can tell each other is stories in which we sense transcendent mystery. What we can name most confidently is how it feels when we sense an interaction between ourselves and God. And so, while the surface of this project involves the teaching of theology, the heart of it and the work each woman is doing has to do with God images, our deepest symbols.

The primary God symbol to be considered in this theological survey is Trinitarian. God – for the purpose of this study at least – is rightly imaged in three different ways of being: the One loving without limits, creator and wholly other, beyond our defining, the One so accessibly human that we dare call by name, the One so intensely particular as to be experienced in the depths of our own particularity.

Perichoresis, a description of the indwelling relationship between persons of the Trinity, as it was first imaged by fourth century Cappadocians, can be recognized as a feminine mode of being. Although beyond the bounds of this study and my caveat about understanding the nature of God, it is interesting to notice that the Trinity is imaged in terms of mutuality and inter-relatedness: very feminine concepts.

Moreover, personal experience indicates that the One so particular as to be known in the depths of our own particularity can be sensed as intensely feminine. I offer this understanding to the group as a way to navigate the mists and fogs of Trinitarian theology, not as objective “fact.” It is, however, the lens through which I teach theology.

Let us turn then to the highlights of some feminist theological principles and begin by noting that, as one of the modes of liberation theology, it relies on the insights

of psychology, sociology and similar disciplines along with a guiding awareness of the limitations of the wisdom of the fathers.

To borrow a structure created by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza,¹³ feminist theology is about revisioning, reclaiming, and reconceiving. Revisioning begins with the bone certain awareness that patriarchy and androcentrism, the twin pillars of the biblical and post-biblical culture, are anathema. And so we read ancient texts very carefully, always with an eye to hidden life-nourishing meanings that are locked within the symbols, myths and metaphors of Scripture. Additionally, feminist theology works to either deflect the impact of misogynist texts or to eliminate them from liturgical consideration.

"Truly I tell you," Jesus said to the woman with the alabaster jar,¹⁴ "wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her." This is the highest know praise Jesus gave to anyone, yet – thanks to the male redactors of the story – we do not even know this women's name. Revisioning is about seeing the story clearly with all its implications available.

Reclaiming is about realigning the values that have been handed down to us. In another of the four gospel retellings of the story of Jesus and the woman with the alabaster jar, for example, only Luke touches on the sacramental significance of hospitality in ancient cultures. The unnamed woman extended all the ritual gestures appropriate to a guest, while Simon, the ritually pure Pharisee, forgot his sacred

¹³ Cited in Regina Coll's *Christianity and Feminism in Conversation*, (New York: Twenty Third Pubns 1993) pgs. 16-27.

¹⁴ Mark 14:9.

obligation to a sojourner.¹⁵ The woman not only remembered and performed them in his place, she did so with such deep faith and love that "her sins are forgiven."¹⁶ To extricate the high status of this woman from this text is to reclaim her significance from the emphasis on her as a sinner, probably the prostitute assumed by centuries of eisegesis.

Reconceiving envisions a way of retelling a story or concept so that it has value for the people in today's world. The members of *Dissident Sisters* have little need for a connection with an unnamed sinner who perfumed Jesus. But they would gain much by knowing the powerful figure to whom New Testament faith witnesses as intuitive, courageous, gracious and worthy to become the first to receive the revelation of the risen Christ.

Revelation, in this story and all the others, must be received in order to function. Usually subsumed under the traditional systematic theological rubric "Word of God," the concept of revelation requires separate attention in a feminist view of theology. That God's otherness is one of communion is a classic statement recognized by all Christians, but one that is not understood by all stripes of Christianity in the same way. It is not the case that the "Word of God" and the Bible are interchangeable entities. Teachings which equate the Word of God with any object, including the Bible, turn God into an object and are marked for disbelief in biblical faith.

For feminists in particular, it follows that biblical revelation is not synonymous with the whole self-revelation of God. Psychology's understanding that God – or our God

¹⁵ See Genesis 18: 1 ff, the story of Abraham and his guests under the oaks at Mamre or Deut 10:19: "You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

¹⁶ Luke 7: 37- 48

images at least – work directly in our non-conscious depths in a way that is sensed as immediately as it is through Scripture and tradition, dovetails neatly with a uniquely feminist understanding that God can be discovered in the depth of the human heart. Central to a feminist theological perspective is the claim that God is to be discovered in human experience, i.e., that human experience had the potential to disclose the divine. Surely, if revelation constitutes a relationship of communion with God as mediated through creation and human history, it is an ongoing process.

Theological feminism insists that female experience is also normative for an understanding of religious experience and searches Scripture for veiled references to the nature of holy women. Theological feminism draws strength of conviction from women whose experience tells them that the kingdom of God – as Jesus taught it – promises a quality of relationship among persons markedly different from that which is common today. It labels efforts to project onto God false dualisms and/or hierarchies between men and women, spirit and earth and so forth as idolatrous. It exposes the harmful effect of patriarchy and androcentrism on the humanity of all persons and strongly condemns the use of sexist language which perpetuates this sin.

To tie up the relevant theological principles that guide and inform this project: feminist theology is a matter of praxis: theologizing in the light of past and present injustice demands an effort to change present sinful systems; it is holistic, and consciously ideological, its stated bias being the liberation of all the oppressed, particularly women.

Christian feminist theology is done in the context of the reclaimed tradition, understanding 'tradition' as the process of handing on the mystery of God's self-

communication that, while it reaches its fullness in Christ, includes both the annotated wisdom of the ancestors and the insights of present believers. Central to a Christian feminist perspective is the understanding that the disclosure of the passionate mystery of love at the heart of the universe reveals that Love precedes being, creates being, and traditions being through the feminine mode of mutual indwelling.

Chapter Three: Method

As background to the design of this project, I built on the group's professed interest in theology as well as their successful negotiation of Erikson's stage six requirements (the ability to achieve self definition and engage in close relationships) and their reach for the rewards of stage seven (generativity) I also worked with the borders between Fowler's "synthetic-conventional" and "individuative-reflective faith"

The project is an intervention, an application of principles of pastoral care to the needs of six individuals who came to me with a request for a book group, but actually had a multilayered need. They wanted to learn about feminist theology, but sent out signals suggesting that they needed a way to reconsider outgrown religious and spiritual understandings so that what they know cognitively might integrate with what they know spiritually.

The project was designed to ultimately address my question "Does relevant and appropriate cognitive learning ameliorate pertinent situational stress and lead to a more integrated understanding of the self as one with meaningful ties to the Sacred?" and to do so by making use of two separate tools. The tools are intended to be used both separately and together in an effort to address both the spoken need and the roots of the participants' original questions. The outcome of this process is intended to begin to channel the energy, now being wasted in frustration, toward a new way of understanding both each woman herself and her relationship to the Holy.

Tool #1 would be a short course intended to introduce some fundamental principles crucial to women's way of doing theology along with some insights into the

psychology of women. The reader will remember that the elegance of this concept has little to do with my design: certain basic tenets of feminist theology have the ability to effect change (once assimilated) in and of themselves. They gain authority from the foundational understanding that Revelation is not that which is contained in a book or other teaching from the past, but instead takes the form of a living present relationship with God. This relationship is mediated through creation and human (female as well as male) history, and as such, is an ongoing process which includes the individuals in the group.

The specific selections are chosen, therefore, according to principles of feminist theology and in congruence with the developmental needs of the group, considered as a whole. Specifically, the psychology reading is Clarissa Pinkola Estes's book, *Women Who Run With the Wolves*, supplemented by additional information as indicated. The bridge book is Sue Monk Kidd's *Dance of the Dissident Daughters*. The theology readings include my unpublished master's thesis, "*Only Begotten Daughter?*," and Catherine Mowry LaCugna's anthology, *Freeing Theology, the Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*.

The first psychology reading, *Women Who Run With the Wolves*, is chosen to illustrate the following principles: women need to – and are equipped to – trust intuition as a primary strength because experience and psychological inquiry suggest that for women, the self is recognized and validated by intuition, and understood as self-in-relation, i.e. the primary experience of self is organized and developed in the concept of mutually enhancing relationships.

In an effort to confront the conflicts still found in the churches and definitely present in the experience of this group, we would consider questions such as the following in connection with this reading:

Can the God whose presence we sense in the depths of our particular beings be a solitary omnipotent, omniscient immutable being?

The next book that would be considered is Sue Monk Kidd's *Dance of the Dissident Daughters*. This book would tighten the focus to Christianity and validate individual struggles by placing them in context with other disenchanted Christian women.

In an effort to shorten the gap between the experiences of the group and the experiences of the author, we would pay particular attention to the following comments and questions raised by this book: For example:

According to Elizabeth Johnson: "One [theologian] seeks to give 'feminine qualities to God who is still imagined predominantly as a male person. Another purports to uncover a feminine dimension to God, often finding this realized in the third person of the Trinity. A third seeks speech about God in which the fullness of female humanity as well as male humanity and cosmic reality may serve as divine symbol in equivalent ways. The symbol functions-- the core symbols we use for God represent what we take to be the highest good.

Many new concepts need to be addressed in this quote. We would concentrate on one which is probably foreign to most in the group, i.e., the nature of language and symbol in theology. Accordingly, we would consider the following questions:

How does a feminine naming of God relate to a woman's self image?

How did non-inclusive language affect you? Does it still hurt?

How does inclusive or non-inclusive language affect your children?

Can we or should we "heal the Goddess" image i.e. why/why not stay within the patriarchal confines of Christianity?

The next selection would be *Only Begotten Daughter?*, my master's thesis. This reading would expose the group for the first time to the language and concepts of biblical hermeneutics and systematic theology. It would serve as an indicator of their readiness to read a theology text, as well as allow them to explore the dynamic of one individual struggling with concepts such as language as symbol, the significance of primary process thought and its relation to biblical narrative, the concept of relationship and differentiation as paired "in the beginning," and similar notions they never entertained before.

Moreover, the inclusion of *Only Begotten Daughter?*, would function specifically as an introduction to the principle text, Catherine Mowry LaCugna's anthology *Freeing Theology, the Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*. The chapters read would present concepts relevant for group consideration of alternate and more congenial ways of envisioning the Christian story. Once these understandings are appropriated by the women in the study, they will be able to build on them. Therefore, the chapters to be read begin with Sandra M. Schneider's "The Bible and Feminism," This provides an opportunity to make the primary feminist point that patriarchy plus androcentrism equals sexism.

Crucial to my role as pastoral care-giver is the emphasis I place on this ongoing theme. Sue Monk Kidd called the notion of female-as-second-sex, the "feminine wound." My position is that this attitude represents one of the primary sins of the fathers and it needs to be exposed as such if women are to find value in key biblical texts. Initial

discussions had indicated that the women in this group consciously rejected the notion of a "feminine wound," but told stories of how they had been affected by it.

One of my main objectives here is to point out that because sexism is pervasive in both testaments, we need to reconsider how these texts might be understood. Among the concepts I will reinforce is that biblical language is metaphorical; it includes the potential to mediate God, but does not by definition always do so. The group needs to understand that the whole enterprise of interpretation implies that any text has multiple meanings and – a point I thought was especially well made by Schneider – meaning is not in the text itself, but occurs between the text and the reader, just as music is not in the score but in the playing and hearing. Meaning is in the relationship, in the bond these women already know in the depths of their own being.

The second chapter to be considered will be Mary Catherine Hilker's "Experience and Tradition: Can the Center Hold?" A relevant new concept is the notion that tradition can be defined as a process, and that this process of handing on the mysteries of revelation includes handing on both the wisdom and spiritual realities of the ancestors and present believers. "Present believers" refers directly to this group struggling at this moment with their own defining religious questions.

The second important point will be that as revelation constitutes a relationship of communion with God as mediated through creation and human history, then it is an ongoing process. Critical questions to be discussed here include "If revelation is located in experience, whose experience?" The eventual hoped for answer, of course, is "mine."

The third chapter to be discussed is Catherine Mowry LaCugna's, "God in Communion With Us: the Trinity." Her primary point in this essay – that the divinity of

God as God is about relatedness, not substance – is a powerful insight for these women to consider.

Her treatment of the notion of *perichoresis* is relevant here because the Trinity imaged in terms of mutuality and inter-relatedness becomes a very powerful symbol to women who sense the entire web of life in a similar fashion. This mode of mutual indwelling of both a “me” and a “not-me” seems, in fact, to characterize a profound quality of being itself. This would be the moment to introduce discussion of Nancy Chodorow’s work on feminine relational skills and more permeable ego boundaries. The thrust of this learning segment is toward helping these women see a relationship they can eventually come to trust and from which they can eventually draw strength.

The final chapter to be considered will be Elizabeth A. Johnson’s, “Redeeming the Name of Christ: Christology.” Her central thesis – that the concept of the Christ has been distorted by early Church fathers – desperately needs to be said out loud today. These women – and all other Christians – need to hear that, while no one disputes the maleness of Jesus as constitutive of his historical identity, it is not the case that maleness is constitutive of his Christic function and identity.

We will end the formal study of feminist theology by considering the implications of identifying Jesus with *Logos* rather than with *Sophia*. I believe that it is crucial to point out the purely sociological foundation for the misunderstanding in the identification of Jesus with a Greek philosophical symbol connected with rationality and therefore (in the Greek scheme of things), to androcentric theological anthropology, maleness. Nowhere

does the prologue to John say that the Word was made male flesh but that is how over two thousand years of women have been forced to hear it.¹⁷

Because my primary intention in teaching theology has to do with guiding a woman's shifting self understanding, no attempt will be made to treat this as a course in systematic theology. Topics have been introduced according to my determination of need, not according to any attempt at completeness with regard to the subject matter. Accordingly, theological learning will be assessed only by questions and answers during the sessions and only to aid me as a teaching evaluation.

Let us approach the women's study from another angle: from a theological perspective, how will this work? Turning to the frequently quoted Augustinian phrase, *viderim me, viderim Te*, it is a mistake to keep repeating it without considering its complexities. To address one major factor at the onset of this study is to point out that to "know myself" requires – at the least – knowledge, introspection, honesty and courage. To know God, however, requires faith and faith is a gift from the Giver. Teaching these women an alternate understanding of what Christianity knows about God does not and can not give them God. So why do it? The answer to that has to do with receptivity. Biblically speaking, the answer can be found in the gospel parable of the sower.¹⁸ A sower went out to sow and some of the seed fell on the rocks and into the thorn bushes and even became breakfast for the birds, but some fell into good soil and grew there and flourished. Sometimes we need to nourish the soil so it can support life. Teaching

¹⁷ I can not stress this point too strongly. Recent media coverage of the papal funeral bears unnerving witness to the limited exposure of this crucial Christological point.

¹⁸ Matthew 13:1-9; Mark 4: 1-9; Luke 8: 4-8.

feminist theology to women impoverished by centuries of androcentricity will go a ways toward nourishing the potential for life.

Tool #2, based on the "knowledge, introspection, honesty and courage" component of the Augustinian precept – would be a series of three questions: the first, "Who is God to Me?;" the second, "Who Am I?," and the third, "Who are you and God to each other?." The first question, "who is God to me," represents an effort to encourage an individual to consider her image of the Sacred as it exists before the cognitive work begins. The second question, "who am I," directs the same kind of attention to the individual's sense of self. Both these questions refer to the person's understanding as it is before the study begins. Toward the end of the seven month period spent discussing and living with the psychological and theological principles set out above, the third question, "who are you and God to each other?," will be considered.

Tool #2 is designed to have a double function: it will serve as both a means of individual self learning and a final method of assessment to determine gains, losses or lack of change in God and/or self image. This determination will be made by the individual first and will be considered as I do my assessment of the effectiveness of the project.

I intend to consider the three answers together, individually and collectively, in light of Erikson and Fowler's developmental guidelines, possibly tempered by Chodorow's insights, as a way of measuring progress. I hope and expect to see the progress – if there is any – expressed in the terms of feminist theology. At the very least, I hope to see a lowering of the distress that is related to the acceptance of androcentric terms and concepts that diminish the self understanding of these and of all women. If, as

a corollary, I find any improvement in any relationship with the church, I will be profoundly grateful.

Furthermore, in some recognizable guise, I expect some beginnings of an answer to the question "Does relevant and appropriate cognitive learning ameliorate pertinent situational stress and lead to a more holistic understanding of the self as one with meaningful ties to the Sacred?"

Chapter Four: Results

Let us begin our discussion of both the anticipated and the unanticipated results with a brief sketch of each participant in the group, along with a consideration of her answers to the three questions.

Caitlin is brilliant, funny, grateful for any small kindness, very driven, graciously opinionated and needy. She is one of the members of the group with a dying parent, but – perhaps more at the beginning than the end – Caitlin seemed to shrink from soul searching. Her most valuable skill, she says, is “flying by the seat of my pants and remaining calm in the face of the storm.” That is not happening in her personal life right now. Caitlin holds a teaching certificate, but works days as an office manager and evenings in a book store so that she can afford her share of her son’s upcoming tuition bills. Although she was educated through college in Jesuit schools, Caitlin has had no church affiliation since her break with Catholicism after an argument concerning her son’s christening ceremony.

Let me say in passing that it is difficult for me to imagine Caitlin rejecting a religion she values so highly because of details of a ceremony. I would expect the full story goes deeper than this. Let me also add at this point that I am purposely shying away from drawing too many conclusions from any of Caitlin’s story as heard in the context of the group interaction. She has begun to stay after the sessions or to find reasons to return later. I take this to indicate a growing sense of safety and a desire to finally confront the needs and conflicts in her life.

Caitlin's answers to the first of the three questions reflects the least self-involvement of the group.¹⁹ God (He) "is the all knowing and all pervasive, but very distant presence... Jesus is the conduit to this distant power, the God human that understands all the complexities and emotions of my personal everyday life." Caitlin is one of the two who mention Jesus; for her, he is the human (not man) who understands her troubles. This insight becomes more interesting when we balance it against the stories of her life.

Caitlin was highly defended for the first few sessions. By the fifth or so, she trusted us enough to spill out some of the story of her complex life. Caitlin and her father, who is now suffering from senility, were once very close. There is some condescension in her recollection of her mother, but she and Daddy were tightly bonded during her childhood. As the first child, she was expected to live at home and help care for the younger children until she married and left. Caitlin remembers that she was a "wild" teenager, and when she was in her late teens, she consciously set out to be difficult because that was the only way she thought she could negotiate the twisting path that led to independence. Independence led quickly to pregnancy .

Caitlin never married; she raised her son alone under the watchful eye of her disapproving family. Presently, Mark is finishing his last year in high school and going away to college in September – an event that is costing her much emotional upheaval because Mark – in a manner not unlike that of his mother's a generation ago – has suddenly become very difficult and almost impossible to control.

¹⁹ See Appendix for all six complete statements in response to all three questions.

The group, Molly especially, devoted considerable time to hearing and supporting Caitlin. More will be said of this when we consider the group as an entity, but the interesting and relevant scene here took place at the close of one session toward the end of the project. Caitlin had become so upset by her son's behavior that she threatened to throw him out and change the locks. We clustered around, trying to be helpful and then they left. Before the next meeting, Molly told me that Caitlin had burst into tears in the parking lot and said "All the men on this earth have let me down and now Mark is going to do it too."

"Jesus" Caitlin had said in answer to the first question," is the "human who understands my troubles." Caitlin projects her pain and need onto the one male figure who hasn't let her down. But she can not lower her guard enough to allow Jesus his maleness or to allow herself to revisit the God of her childhood.

Caitlin has spoken frequently about the nuns who taught her, always referring to them as strong women – fine role models with an ability to manage and control their own lives with no interference from men. But she has little respect for the abilities of her mother, her sisters or herself in this regard and I hear her saying that the difference between a strong woman and a weak one is the ability to control. I also hear her saying that God is alternatively demanding and terrible and suddenly sweet and giving and always completely incomprehensible – in short, manipulative. What would happen to Caitlin, I wonder, if she could allow herself to relinquish some small portion of control enough to allow another living being to understand her?

Her "Who Am I?" answer shows anxiety: "I am a Jack of all Trades and master of none...I put time into my parenting, my extended family and my friends, but never really enough...Unfortunately, I am also a perfectionist ..."

Caitlin's answer to the third question presents a number of challenges. She began with the understanding that "God is one being but like the three faces of Eve each face has a different relationship/purpose toward humankind...The first - Yahweh - [is] alternatively demanding and terrible and suddenly sweet and giving and always completely incomprehensible - who could possibly believe this was not a woman. The second - Christ sent through Jesus [is] a bridge transforming the great and terrible first into "Abba"...The sacrificial lamb offered to the world which took the bait and killed him. The Christ became this sacrifice so we wouldn't have to. The third - the holy spirit, the Sophia or Logos, the force within that makes us who we are, if we allow it...When we look for God we look for ourselves and when God looks at us, God sees God."

Then she turns to a consideration of her beliefs before she joined the group: "I was uncomfortable with [any notion of Church, but] Catholicism is an anchor on which I built my faith. [I sense in my bones that there is] something powerful beyond the now...Catholic sacraments and rituals [seem to be a] familiar and safe way to express it."

Now she believes that the "language and traditions of the Church can be wrong, and should be changed...But I am cautious. [I have] little experience with inclusive language and rituals, but now want to seek them out. [There is] value in church as community...I am going to try to go back to Church, mourn John Paul II and watch to see the dawn of the new age (was that too sarcastic?)"

Leaving aside the theological implications of this statement, the demeaning feminine references are significant here: the Trinity is "like the three faces of Eve; [God as seen in the First Testament is] "alternatively demanding and terrible and suddenly sweet and giving and always completely incomprehensible – who could possibly believe God was not a woman." In light of the distancing suggested by the sarcasm and unexpected twists of logic, yet paralleled by direct statements of engagement, her statement includes considerable pain which almost certainly speaks to her personal conflicts. Does learning ameliorate pertinent stress and lead to a more integrated apprehension of the self as one with meaningful ties to the Sacred for Caitlin? Not yet.

Emma is a very "together" person with a healthy sense of self esteem. Words like kind, organized, intelligent, and practical come to mind in thinking of her. Her three children are in grade school now and she is ready to consider returning to her career in computer technology.

The only born and raised Protestant in the group, Emma came to this group with a strong faith, an informed religious background, and a considerable ability to ignore her local church's strong androcentric bias. She is president of their Women's Association and the prime mover for their semi-annual rummage sale. In light of the fact that these tasks have traditionally been held by strong minded and now elderly ladies who once ran the church, the appointments are a tribute to her gifts.

Emma's mother has Parkinson's disease and her illness has prompted her daughter to take another look at religion. While Emma is not one of the women thinking

of leaving the church, she misses the emotional connection she knew in other congregations. Emma joined the group to learn.

Emma's answers to the first of the three questions indicates that her sense of encounter with the Sacred has matured along with her. Her earliest image of God as "Santa in white, but with a less kindly side when angered" has morphed into an adult awareness of the light of a loving Power. This first statement moves from God as male (childhood) to God as perhaps female (late adolescence) to a present God as an "asexual entity" to whom she sometimes also prays as "Mother Mary or Jesus" – both as persons in the recognizable sense of the word.

Her response to "Who am I?" is fragmented, glossing over her considerable strengths and listing characteristics rather than making a core statement – as is her final understanding that "some days I still feel so lost and undefined... that I am struggling to find 'me.'"

Her answer to the "Who are you and God to each other?" question, taken in conjunction with her first statements, suggests that some kind of benign energy or progress is included in Emma's sense of the Sacred. Emma, who has yet to develop a sense of Fowler's "executive ego" trusts that if God can be encountered as morphing Power, and "God and I are part of each other." then she can hope for a greater sense of wholeness.

To that end, she shares her insights about the ordering of community: "These past few months that the group has spent together have been a special time for me," she begins. Turning to Sunday worship, the group experience suggests to her that improvements to the service would include the use of inclusive language and less

emphasis on the sermon because "active 2-way participation in contemplating spiritual matters is more satisfying for me." In short, if there was at least some hint of a feminine principle to be found in the traditional Worship Service, Emma expects that she might be better nourished.

Emma's narrative, then, is that of a happy wife and mother, living a comfortable life. The outcome, as it appears at the moment for Emma, is about small movements towards a more complete sense of wholeness. Predictably, she has neither become a feminist theologian nor chosen to forsake the church she loves. Still, she has understood and been in agreement with some feminist principles and is eager to use them within the framework of the Church. Further, for her, relationship with God is an ongoing process that is mediated through human history and can be encountered in her strong sense of "God and I are part of each other." Emma's answer to the question of whether relevant learning leads to a more integrated apprehension of the self as one with meaningful ties to the Sacred is a soft spoken "yes."

Megan is grounded, upbeat, adaptable, generous, and bright. Sadly, her understanding that "the Sacred is in the bond" also speaks of her loss of bonds going back as far as her mother's early death. Her father remarried and, predictably, Megan felt the need to reconnect with him. She did this by organizing time or trips together, but he always bailed out at the last minute. This left her unhappy and frustrated to be sure, but with a growing set of coping skills. The adult Megan has an almost chameleon-like ability to appear to be what the other person needs. Megan is a certified grade school teacher with a Masters degree in communication. A blue-eyed blond Californian, she

married into a Hindu family and adopted their dress and customs for a while. Because her husband has clients on both coasts, there are periodic separations lasting several weeks at a time. They have two small children.

Megan's family was Episcopal, but she received no religious education at all. She knows the Christian story and when I asked how she learned it, her answer was that she "took a lot of art classes." Megan struggles with occasional bouts of depression. For reasons she will not discuss, she does not have a driver's license. Part of the now defunct women's church group – although not a church member – she joined this group for friendship and intellectual stimulation.

Megan's answers to the first of the three question the group considered suggests that she has pieced together a God image that reflects back ways of coping with her own longings. The Holy, for her, "is in the holding up or breaking down together. Because moments become memories...to support the weight of hard times, harsh realities, inconsolable truths." Megan sees God as the spark that first ignited life, still carried within us, which can lead us in mysterious ways...We have a choice: to accept our own divine attributes (God within us) or reject and deny them (God outside us)."

Her answer to "Who Am I?" is not fragmented as it appears at first glance, but it is touching and wistful: "In building my life," she says. "I am an adaptor, not a renovator." She is one of the two who do not say that she specifically identifies love or loving attributes with God.

Her answer to "Who are you and God to each other?" glows with feeling and primary process imagery. "God and I Together" is how she titles it: "stillness and quiet rest and peace yoked to the inner spark of God...God and I together in a powerful

triangle when others reach out to me and I let them in...catalyst for healing, restorative force...a sanctuary, a fire: God."

The group was a valuable experience for her: as she says "The readings, the bonding, and friendship strongly reinforced my beliefs regarding God and my relationship with the spiritual energy of all life...deeply satisfying and soul-affirming."

Megan tells the story of a survivor and her connections and the need to tend them so they might be strong enough to defend against 'inconsolable truths.' Hopefully, her healing will continue and one day life will bring her to a greater sense of the trustworthiness of these bonds so that she will not need to surrender as much of her identity to them as she does now. Megan's answer to the question of whether relevant learning leads to a more integrated apprehension of the self as one with meaningful ties to the Sacred is a comforted "yes."

Molly is a wonderful surprise. Someone I barely knew before the group started, she is warm and emotionally generous: very grounded, with a connection to her own spirituality and a wonderful laugh. People are far more important than ideas to Molly and she loves it when a simple kindness smoothes out a situation. She returned to her psychotherapy practice soon after her daughter was born, making her the only one to have returned to her career. As the group began to grow in trust, she willingly put her heart and skill into supporting Caitlin. Molly is a red-haired, green-eyed Irish ex-Catholic who enjoys listening to televangelist Joel Osteen, probably because he is upbeat, practical and doesn't deal with what she might consider dry complexities. Molly was very quiet at first. When she did begin to speak, it was with a lack of sophisticated theological

language, but with an unexpected force and clarity. Upset by the language and attitudes at the church, she feels frustration because she doesn't know how to even start to "fix it," doesn't want to have to try, and doesn't want to leave.

Molly tells the classic story of losing confidence in her ability to make theological sense when she grew adult enough to ask religious questions, but never able to accept the answers as credible – an impasse she understood as a lack on her part. She needed to be heard and she needed someone she trusted to guide her back to the deep waters that she could navigate. Time and again she hovered at the edge of an important point about a soul and her link to God, too shy to say it out loud. Time and again I asked her "Can you put that into clinical language?" She could, but no one had ever suggested before that she connect her psychological and theological selves and so one part of her life was compartmentalized away from the others. Molly was heard into speech.

Her answers to the first of the three questions seemed somewhat disconnected and un-felt when I first began to read it: "Higher truth. Inner wisdom... My mind does not understand God. My heart knows God. To know God we must know ourselves." But then: "Faith is a feeling. There are teachings that feel instinctively right, like Jesus. I feel most connected to God when the deeper part of me taps into the eternal safety...and love."

Her answer to "Who Am I?" is centered: I am (a) my soul...named Molly. ♫ My earth clothes are many – female, white...I am or can describe myself by my choices – to love or trust in the Divine or Fear."

Molly's answer to the third question, "Who are you and God to each other?" takes the form of a meditation on her previous thoughts:... Meditation, prayer and inner silence

and their human creators come together in what Winnicott calls a transitional space so they might discover a sense of the presence of Someone else.

There are spaces between us, places where I end and you begin and in which we are present to each other – so starts the concept of transitional space as D.W. Winnicott first defined it. As the space cradling both projection and introjection, transitional space is where we live our fullest, interconnected to each other and to the Other. In this transitional space, a projection which initially carried only individual psychic meanings, becomes a means of perception because it is now somewhat separate from the individual and can be looked at and responded to, separated from or connected with, valued and loved. Looking with Winnicott's eyes at what opens in the space between experiences of self and experiences of God, we find a space of meeting where something new arrives, something we know we did not make, but which we experience as given.²³

Beginning with the moment that I made the connection between this concept and my sense of change in the group, I intentionally set about ordering our safe space along the lines of transitional space, holy space. This was when the candle lighting ritual first became an important part of our time. It signaled, as these rituals usually do, an invocation and a desire to draw a circle around this time and space, setting it apart for a special purpose. That was when I devoted a session to telling them something about what I knew about Winnicott's transitional space as I learned it from Ann Ulanov. This was the moment when Molly came into her own: she knew Winnicott's theory and this new interpretation felt so right to her that she began to speak with confidence.

²³ I am deeply indebted to Ann Ulanov for this understanding of Winnicott's concept of transitional space. It comes from her lectures while I was at Union Seminary and it also comes from reading in at least three of her books: *Religion and the Unconscious*, *Picturing God* and particularly *Finding Space: Winnicott, God and Psychic Reality*.

This was when I knew for sure that the final question needed to be this and no other: "Who are you and God to each other?" The question was amplified and understood by all to mean "in this transitional and holy space, filled as it is with so much that you know is at the heart of your being and so much you now imagine as at the heart of God's being, what else is there and how do you speak of that? How will you live out of that?" Each woman answered the question for herself, as best she could.

If I were to imagine myself as the group as a whole so that I might formulate a group answer, the response might be:

Something within each of us has shifted a bit, maybe because I-the-group feel a little more at home within the being of God. And so, more than before, individual parts of me acted together so it became possible that I-the-group offered our best to Caitlin, affirmed Emma, welcomed Megan, gave voice to Molly, soothed Olivia, helped Samantha discover affirming new ways to find answers. I-the-group, would say that for a few precious moments in this time and space, God and I were partners.

Chapter Five: Reflections

The implications of this project first need to be projected in terms of the group. Clearly, we identified a population with unmet spiritual needs, women who seemed to be caught between the rock of their spiritual sensitivity and the hard place of their inability to find language to put their personal experiences into the context of modern Christianity.

But this is simply one facet of the issue. The three questions were aimed at nothing less than the women's sense of wholeness: their sense of self, of self in relation to God and others, their sense of purpose or calling. Because "who am I" presented difficulties, a need for exploration into the realms of psychology/theological anthropology is indicated. Because "who am I to God?" caused great confusion and consternation, we need to find a way to make it possible to at least consider the question. These women have just begun to consider the possibilities of the questions and it will surely be in their interest to keep this conversation going.

As for the implications of the introduction of feminist theology, the group seemed to appropriate what each individual needed at the moment. One extraordinary result of our work is the determination that – at a time when Protestant churches are intrigued by considerations of the value of Alpha groups (catechism-level small group study for grown ups, using simplistic and evangelical study resources) – these women read, understood and enjoyed a seminary textbook. We need to cultivate that skill.

The spiritual companionship that was generated in the group was its major success. True, most of the underlying relationships were already in place when we began, but no one had ever held these relationships up to them in the light of spirituality. Now

they feel "companioned" in the Celtic sense of spiritual friendship and that sense enhances their well being and, given a chance, will continue to do so. For me, the evolving nature of this group presents a strong case for a feminine approach to religious discovery: to function in the ambiguous space between the wisdom of the psyche and the wisdom of the Spirit is to learn and experience far more than is possible by predefining a structure and then assessing its success or failure with regard to the definitions of a solely human pattern.

The contribution the project made toward clarifying and expanding the clinical concepts discussed in Chapter Two are as follows. Erikson and Fowler's developmental stages were used for their value as talking points or yardsticks. My clinical question was phrased thusly: might it be the case that a sense of religious balance or well being occurs when an individual's developmental stage and religious stage are experienced as coinciding.

The project concluded that the answer to my question appears to be yes. Stress and dissatisfaction are present when stages do not coincide. Well being begins to appear as religious understanding comes closer to both chronological age and Erikson's stage. Further clarification could be increased if the individual stages were evaluated in terms of gender psychology, but I would expect the results would be similar.

Once the consideration of many Protestant worship experiences – conducted as they are at the stage of mythic-literal faith – is added to this mix, the contribution to ministry could be the presentation of a newly envisioned situation and the opportunity to consider and evaluate it.

The effective implications of this information (assuming that it is borne out by work with more and/or larger populations) are as progressive or regressive as the church chooses to consider and implement them – or not. I see the best case scenario as nothing less than a revisioning of an alternate Order of Worship.

Let us digress for the moment to consider the order of worship as it is now structured in the reformed churches. It is to be found at the other end of the spectrum from a Catholic mass which has minor seasonal changes but remains first last and always a Eucharistic celebration. A reformed service usually privileges the sermon as the centerpiece. The difference reflects the reformers acceptance of certain understandings of the Enlightenment, the intellectual background to the Reformation. It also reflects the loss of many psychological inducements to wonder such as symbolism, liturgical movements, the intentional building of a sense of awe. In a time when a considerable number of people are turning to New Age spirituality in an attempt to fill needs brought to consciousness by the dark poverty of our civilization, one wonders if seventeenth century recipes are complete enough to nourish the souls of God's people today.

An intentional use of the implications of structuring worship as transitional space could make a very meaningful difference. Sunday morning is probably the only time in the week that many American Christians take a deep breath and allow themselves to simply be, and perhaps to contemplate being at one with Being.

If a minister were to sit in her office on the customary Wednesday afternoon with nothing more than the lectionary and an willingness to order a form of transitional, holy space, the emphasis of Sunday worship could shift noticeably: readings could be lifted up and cherished, sermon focus could shift towards deeper understandings, prayer could

become more centered. The Sacrament could be offered with a liturgical potential for becoming the locus of "transitional sphere, the heart of transitional space...the discovery of personal meaning"²⁴ at the heart of the encounter. The Sunday morning hour, in short, might edge a little closer towards becoming a sacred personal time and space.

In an attempt to define the more elusive contribution the project made toward clarification and expansion with respect to the theological concepts discussed in Chapter Two, we need to return to the parable of the sower: the sower went out to sow and some of the seed fell on the rocks and into the thorn bushes and even became breakfast for the birds, but some fell into good soil and grew there and flourished. Sometimes we need to nourish the soil before it can continue to support life. Introducing feminist theology to women impoverished by centuries of androcentricity can go a long way toward nourishing the potential for life.

It goes without saying that, except in the highest realm of abstraction, theology is not about pure knowledge for pure knowledge's sake. With respect to feminist theology and in light of its preferential option for women and other marginalized persons as well as its emphasis on praxis, it is clear that the principles of theological feminism and their effects are somewhat interchangeable. The women of the group did not run out to batter down the doors of theological schools, but they all spoke of an enhanced sense of well being either because of or relative to the introduction of feminist theology. Who could not be grateful for that?

²⁴ Vivienne Joyce in a private email sent 3/30/05.

It can be projected out that the applications of this part of the project would have to do with small groups studying within a mainline church. But the implications could reach further. Slowly to be sure, I see the introduction of worship services within liberal mainline Protestant churches with strong ties to Rosemary Ruether's women church. They are not so much about feminist exegesis as they are about being based on a feminist/liberation understanding. The results of this project could serve to encourage these budding concepts.

Moving from theological implications as such out to the implications of the project as a whole, it seems clear that a tightly knit small group with a focus on revisioning, reclaiming, and reconceiving the Christian story in light of the state of learning in the twenty first century need not focus only on strictly feminist theology. Other theologians – Marcus Borg, for one – share the conviction that the kingdom of God, as Jesus taught it, promises a quality of relationship among persons markedly different from that which is common today. They also label efforts to project onto God false dualisms and/or hierarchies between men and women, spirit and earth and so forth as idolatry. Study groups based on their efforts would serve a similar purpose in revisioning, reclaiming, and reconceiving the tradition.

Primary considerations regarding the planning of such a group would need to include the three crucial questions (or others with the same intent to address faith and spiritual/psychological issues) and an awareness of the present and target developmental stages of the group, as considered in relation to chronological age.

The group need not be limited to adults. This structure could very well benefit a Confirmation class. Imagine asking a thirteen year old "Who, really now, is God to you? Have you ever dreamed of God? Where do you feel a sense of the Sacred for yourself? How do you put that together with what Jesus knew?" Not only would they enter adulthood with a more aware and better considered faith, they would enter adulthood with some protection from the stresses that the women of this group endured.

Connection to these women has become a sacred covenant for me. I feel both humbled and extraordinarily blessed to have been trusted with their intimate longings for God. I also feel saddened to have come to the inescapable realization that, in all these years since Jesus, the Church has never thought enough of the specific bond between God and each person to help its congregants bring to individual consciousness the many ways God touches each separate one of us. You might attempt to excuse them perhaps by saying that psychology is a new science, but it is a feeble enough excuse. In all its history, the world has seen no more insightful psychologist than Jesus.

The primal awareness on which the group dynamic rests is simple: we need help in order to see. We need something outside us to open our eyes and to lead us deeper within ourselves. Music can do it. So can a shaft of sunlight or poetry or an amazing insight that flies straight from your brain to your soul – anything can do it that beckons from outside our selves and whispers, "Here, right here, here is the more you are longing for."

The gospel of Luke tells the story of how once, at a very sad time, on a road leading of town and far away from fear, something about a stranger caused two grieving

provide me with the "transitional space" to look into my heart for clarity and understanding...trying to get through the layers of God denial. The parts of self that say, I am not good enough, I am not worthy, I have to control things to be safe, etc. In order to move from fear and doubt to love and trust, I must know myself, and love myself. My emotions are key in this understanding... Everything that happens in my life is an opportunity to connect with the deeper part of myself which is divine. The self journeys...while God waits to love as God loves.²⁰

For Molly, who moved from insecurity concerning her ability to think theologically to the development of considerable confidence in this regard, learning has clearly lessened stress and led to a more integrated apprehension of herself as one with meaningful ties to the Sacred.

Olivia is gentle, empathetic and a wonderful story teller. A little older and perhaps not as financially secure as the others, her somewhat low self esteem may well result from her difficult background. There was an abusive first marriage that left her a little scarred, but profoundly grateful for the contentment she feels in this marriage. Her husband is a free lance photographer and they have an eight year old daughter whom she considers an "old soul." She once was an administrative assistant in an advertising agency and now does similar work for the family photography business. Additionally, she has a part time clerical job at her daughter's school.

²⁰ This is a reference to a comment I had made on Ex. 17:6 to the effect that even after all the people's whining, God waited patiently on the rock waiting to give them water because it is God's nature to love and give water.

Olivia was a Roman Catholic, who was raised in a working class Italian family. She left that church along with her first marriage and joined the Glen Ridge congregation with her second husband when their daughter Joy was ready for Sunday School. Olivia wants her to grow up in a church, but has said that she would not be upset if Joy chose not to stay. She and her family enjoy the fellowship of church membership. Olivia became part of *Dissident Sisters* for the companionship and conversation.

Olivia's answers to the first of the three question indicate that she came to the group knowing Being within the web of interconnected life. She recognizes the presence of the Sacred as a physical sensation which speaks to her of "the warmth of the sun...a sense of connection...in the kindness and compassion exchanged between people."

Her answer to the "Who Am I?" question is centered: "a spiritual being on a human journey." She understands thinking as a way to come "to some deeper understanding of myself and what I am capable of in giving to others." And she sees life as a search for "what my special gift is. That's my challenge."

Her answer to the "Who are you and God to each other?" question fits well with Olivia's sense of who she is: warm, loving, for the most part comfortable and contented with her part of the web of life:

The best analogy I can think of [to my view of relationship to God] is that of the relationship of a mother to a child and vice versa. A relationship of deep unconditional love, knowing, understanding and trust. I think of my own child and our relationship. How much I love her, hope for her, need her. How I've tried to guide her, help her. How we teach each other and

how we grow. In this way I feel God and I are connected, seemingly independent but really as one.

The outcome, as it appears for Olivia, is about cherishing the love she knows. Her enjoyment of the safe space is expressed in her unanticipated desire to continue the group after the project ends. Of the six women, however, she was the one least interested in the theology readings. Her stated preference for inclusive language is probably rooted in her all-pervading sense of the maternal-infant bond. If I were to inquire whether her statement means that she identifies with God as a mother loving unconditionally, or understands herself as being unconditionally loved as an infant, if she thinks that she and God learn from each other, or what she thinks about any of the other questions I might ask her about the divine-human or parent-child relationship, she would smile and shake her head in slightly amused wonder. For Olivia, relationship with God is an ongoing process that is mediated through human relationship and can be encountered in the trust she felt and feels within her own womb: "God and I are connected, seemingly independent but really as one." Olivia's answer to the question of whether relevant cognitive learning leads to a more integrated apprehension of the self as one with meaningful ties to the Sacred is a gentle "you miss the point."

Samantha is energetic and creative, intuitive and caring, a mover and a shaker: a joy to teach. No major self esteem issues are apparent from her demeanor. Samantha is an architect who seems close to being ready to return to her field, but her two children still need her at home. She sees a need and sets out to fix it. She is fascinated by religion, has thrown out the simplistic part of what she knows and is searching diligently for

something to replace it. On the one hand, this has led to conflict at the church as she tries to pursue a liberal agenda in spite of the concerns of conservative clergy. On the other, she is the one behind the forming of this group. Samantha is thinking of leaving the River View Community Church for her own sake, but convinced that she should stay for her children's sake. Some days she – or the voice of her frustration – wonders out loud if she should become a Buddhist.

Samantha was born and raised Roman Catholic. She seems to carry the sensibilities of a Christian feminist without the theological knowledge to support them. I have sensed for a while now that she may need to look for her answers in seminary one day. *Dissident Sisters* might have provided some temporary relief from her conflict, but unfortunately, sudden surgery caused her to miss all the *Freeing Theology* sessions – the sessions she needed most and would have enjoyed most.

Turning to her answers to the three questions: like Olivia, Samantha recognizes the presence of the Sacred as a physical sensation “a low vibration that hums so softly and I know it is there in the center of my chest, deep within. Maybe it's a voice...And She doesn't talk to me with words, She responds with moments... Sometimes I don't catch them when they are happening [but later]I can understand and I can say, “aha! Next time I will do better!” But is it always a “She”? No! A “He”? It doesn't matter, I just need the companionship, the guidance, the voice to say... something.”

Like Emma, Samantha sees a fragmented self – a mother, a wife, a dog walker, laundry doer, volunteer etc. etc., but also a wanderer, former architect, workaholic but lazy, smart but not *really*, a person who needs guidance. “I am many things.”

Samantha's frustration with the church appears in her response to the third question, Who am I and God to each other? God is the one who "protects me, keeps me sane and shelters me from the more harrowing moments of fear in my life. God is trying to help me live up to my potential by slowly allowing me to realize what and who I really am..."[Her questions ,, really about church discipline] make me confused about our relationship sometimes.

Right now we are adversaries. And we are lovers...I am a Ying and a Yang, and God keeps my two pieces tied together. I cannot exist without God." [Lengthy digression about warring religions here.]

Who am I to God? I am told that I am a child that God loves. I believe this. And like a good child, I want to make my parent proud, to do well, live up to expectations, and use the talents I was given to express myself to others."

Samantha's deep relationship with God is presently obscured to her consciousness by her dissatisfaction with religious institutions. She needs help in untangling the gift from the Giver, and a way to focus on her own relationship with the Holy. She would benefit from spiritual guidance; the intensity of her images suggests that God must delight in her ability to sense Wonder, but she does not seem to recognize that. Would relevant learning lead to a more integrated apprehension of herself as a whole person with meaningful ties to the Sacred? The answer, I think would be a resounding yes.

To recap, three of the women (Emma, Samantha and Molly) benefited from the introduction to feminist theology. Three of them (Olivia, Megan and Caitlin) benefited from the group interactions, if not directly from the study. In short, there is considerable excitement, of not total acceptance of specific theological tenets to which they were

exposed. It is too soon, I think, to find any movement to an understanding of words as symbols and no greater sense of what I would call, for lack of better words, a relationship of creatureliness with the Creator: God is part of them, say a number of statements but no one has considered the possibility that she might be part of God. Childhood Trinitarian understandings are difficult to replace and the notion of *perichoresis* has fallen of deaf or resistant ears. The artificial distinction between an understanding of "Jesus" as the man who lived in the first century and "Christ" as a job title/description has proved helpful. Pointing out the presence and implications of patriarchy and androcentrism has been both comforting and challenging. Revisioning, reclaiming and reconceiving are prized as long as I do the work for them. Understanding that female experience – both the experience of women in general and their own experience in particular – is normative: has perhaps been the crowning activity of the theology project for now. But we have just started and our starting point was a memory from long ago. We have come a long way.

The group experience was wonderful. The notion that six women would be so eager to talk about God that we set a kitchen timer was as unexpected a prospect as it was thoroughly rewarding. The evolution of this group can be seen in that, at the last project-related session, it was determined that we would continue and the next book will be Anne Lamott's latest, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, ("because that's a quick, enjoyable read. We could do it in a session or two.") to be followed by Peter Gnomes, *The Good Book*. I might add parenthetically that previous considerations of Lamott books took months.

The commonality that I originally found in the group is in the facts that all are women, well educated, eager to be in the group, and dissatisfied – to a greater or less

extent – with their present religious life. I saw them as women who were caught between the rock of their spiritual sensitivity and the hard place of their inability to find a common language with which to put their personal experience into the context of Christianity.

At that point, I had wondered if it might not be the case that well being occurs when an individual's developmental age (per Erikson) and religious stage (per Fowler) are experienced as coinciding. Chronologically, all the participants in the group are near the borders between young and middle adulthood. Answers to the second question indicated that the delineations might not be so precise with regard to Erikson's stages. There are unresolved issues concerning identity and some struggling against awareness of isolation. But most are functioning comfortably within the ranges bounded by satisfying personal relationships and a willingness to reach out to others.

In an attempt to locate the women on Fowler's scale, we need to note his distinction between two adult stages. The psychic movement that Fowler sees as triggering the transition to the next stage is the emergence of the "executive ego" which orders the differentiation of self behind the composite of roles and relationships through which the self is expressed.²¹ Because we see people on both sides of the executive ego divide in the answers to the "Who Am I" question we can position the members of the group somewhere along the continuum that leads from adolescent synthetic- conventional faith to individuated-reflective faith:

One more factor is at work here and that is the nature of religious experience as they encounter it at the local church level. At the surface, it is often conducted at the level

²¹ James Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult Development and Christian Faith*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000) p.50.

of Fowler's stage three "mythic-literal" faith: a matter of reliance on the stories, rules and implicit family values and community traditions²² comparing roughly to Erikson's six to twelve year old stage four. Meanwhile, observation suggests that the group fits roughly into the chronological continuum between Erikson's stage six and seven and spiritually into the continuum between Fowler's adolescent synthetic-conventional and post-midlife individuating-reflective stages. If they are church goers at all, these women participate in services that are highly intellectualized variations on a mythic-literal core faith.

It becomes clear that the members of this group do not experience individual developmental age and religious stage as coinciding. Because corporate religious experience is nowhere close to meeting their developmental requirements, the addition of feminist theological learning did indeed tip the balance toward some sense of empowerment. Some were elated: "This," announced Molly during the Christology discussion, "changes my whole perspective! This is what I've been needing to hear since I was thirteen! Erin [her daughter] won't wait as long as I did." Some were dismayed: after struggling with androcentric texts one day, Emma put her head in her hands, shook it slowly and asked no one in particular, "what are we going to do about this? It's unfair. How can we change it?" Samantha began to incorporate women's stories into the Sunday School curriculum and Molly followed her lead. Some, however, remained silent, but apparently not unmoved.

The group discussions have indicated that these women have indeed begun to develop some sense of what I consider to be adult female religious identity. Specifically,

²² I do not mean this as judgment: many would consider this the essential of faith and dispute Fowler's categories. Some would intend or understand this as post-critical naiveté.

the concept that text has multiple meanings, and meaning is found in the relationship, raised their confidence levels in reading biblical text for themselves and lowered their threat level when confronted by unwelcome exegesis from the pulpit. The understanding that tradition can be defined as a process that includes the wisdom and realities of the ancestors and of present believers allows them a way to see their own stories along with the Christian story, to tell their own experiences in the Sunday school classroom. That God is to be discovered in human experience and that discovery is an ongoing process is liberating. The assurance that patriarchal constructs are not faithful to the life and ministry of Jesus, but are faithful instead to the focus of an andocentric selectivity at work in the process of interpreting and traditioning his story means, as one put it: "maybe I can bring who I really am into church."

Returning briefly to the results from the three questions, the answers to the first one, "Who is God to Me?" all spoke to a sense of a sacred force of transcendent love, but only Caitlin's statements included a statement of the breadth of the Christian story. Emma, Molly and Megan sense God abstractly, but one senses an inner voice speaking intimately and requiring that we reach out and form bonds with other. Olivia and Samantha recognize the presence of God through the physical sensations they have come to recognize as gift.

The answers to the second question, "Who am I," show an equal split between those who have developed what Fowler calls an "executive ego" and those who are still in the process of doing so. The answers range from job description to true introspection. No one answered with a consideration of herself in relation to either the Christian story or to God.

The answers to the third question "Who are you and God to each other?" reveal few surprises. All seem to present something of a greater self confidence and a deeper awareness of the person who was always there and that, of course, warms my heart.

There was, however, one surprise and it transformed the nature of the group. Partway through the sessions, I began to realize that something was happening that I had neither planned nor even anticipated. It began to develop around Caitlin and her concern with the perceived loss of her son. The group coalesced around her need. In the process, it became evident that people were changing.

Samantha was not only losing the edge to her anger about church activities, but was beginning to author a web site devoted to a sharing of spiritual experience. Caitlin said that we were privileged to have this time, that she counted them a blessing sent to her from God. Megan was appearing more secure about being an integral part of the group. This was when Molly confided how much she "cherished" these meetings. They put her life in perspective, she said. It was as if she could stop swimming upstream and calm down and be herself. The group had received a spirit that simply hadn't been there at the beginning.

The main thing I had done at that point was to provide a comfortable, accepting, safe space. A moment when "well this is only what I think..." was treated with respect. A time and place where they could let the masks slip and think a bit about themselves as beings apart from their other ties and responsibilities, beings with ties to God. And then I remembered D. W. Winnicott's concept of transitional space and how Ann Ulanov had projected his theory into a concept of how it can be felt and understood when God images

people to set aside their sorrow long enough to talk with him and then invite him into their home. There they recognized him, Luke says, in the ordinary, everyday act of breaking bread.

For those disciples, believing meant running back up that road to shout the news from the holy mountain to the ends of the earth – God's love happens, not only as promised in ancient texts, but within individual human experience.

This is how faith still happens. We see a bit more. We learn something new about something old. Then grace disturbs and deep within us, Wonder beckons.

Appendix:
Three Key Questions,
answers grouped by respondent²⁵

Caitlin

God

God is the all knowing and all pervasive, but distant presence. My "God-image" is very traditional old man with flowing white beard.

Jesus is the conduit to this distant power, the God human that understands all the complexities and emotions of my personal everyday life. He in turn reveals the incredible power that is God that supports and comforts and allows the pettiness of the day fade into irrelevance and the joy of life flare into incandescence.

Glimpses of this joy sustain me. I am the bumblebee. I fly although everything known says I shouldn't. It is God that makes this possible. The miracle is not life itself but rather is embedded in every piece of it. The physical walking and breathing, as well as the accomplishments and failures of the everyday make up the mosaic of your life as a miracle. It is through this pattern in the whole of our lives that God's love and attention can be sensed although we are unable to see the whole picture.

Who Am I? - Caitlin (last name)

I am a Jack of all Trades and master of none. I do a little of everything; doctor, lawyer, cook, engineer, sanitation worker, teacher, student, sales person, soccer player and on and on. I put time into my parenting, my extended family and my friends, but never really enough. My biggest talent and most valuable skill is flying by the seat of my pants and remaining calm in the face of the storm. My biggest need is to cut a lot of extraneous garbage out of my life (i.e. the full time job) so I can spend that precious time with the people I want to, volunteer for something really worth while (not just the PTA) and actually study/practice something in depth. Unfortunately, I am also a perfectionist and can not purposely do a shoddy job. So the merry-go-round that is my life continues. Luckily knowing that friends and family are truly what matters I am able to hold on to and those relationships even though I wish I could do more.

Who/ What is God to me Now

God is one being but like the three faces of Eve each face has a different relationship/purpose toward humankind.

The first - Yahweh - an infinite "terrible" and impersonal power, the demanding God of the Old Testament. The tormenter of Job, destroyer of Sodom and Gomorrah, the God of the flood, the killer of unicorns that sent the dove and sowed the seeds of a new

²⁵ Note: this is raw data. No changes of any kind have been made.

world through Noah, spared 2 sons of Abram sending water and a ram. (Alternatively demanding and terrible and suddenly sweet and giving and always completely incomprehensible – who could possibly believe this was not a woman.)

The second face is the Christ sent through Jesus becomes a bridge to humankind transforming the great and terrible first into “Abba”. The beginning of the ability of humans to wrap their minds around the concept of “God within” is here. The sacrificial lamb offered to the world which took the bait and killed him. The Christ became this sacrifice so we wouldn’t have to.

The third – the holy spirit, the Sophia or Logos, the force within that makes us who we are, if we allow it. The tie that binds us to God and to each other. The call within our souls to back to God. Catholic, Wiccan, Buddhist, Protestant, all are just expressions of a pathway to get back to our origin. When we look for God we look for ourselves and when God looks at us God sees God.

What I wrote doesn’t seem to fit exactly with what we’ve been discussing and I can’t come up with real clear theological logic behind it, but I don’t want to unsay it.

When we started this journey I was uncomfortable with the Catholic Church and Christendom in general because they seemed to be so far out of the realm of practical living and even hurtful to those struggling to survive. If you don’t follow the rules, even sacrificing yourself and your family for some ideal held up by old men that never knew a day of want worth of speaking is ridiculous. I held on to the tradition of Catholicism as an anchor on which I built my own personal faith. I have discussed many things with Jesus and John Paul II, seen the world as a gift, meet amazing people (okay mostly women) and felt like my life was being pushed in a specific direction. Where I was supposed to go I didn’t know and am still not sure. In my bones I knew there was something very powerful beyond the physical now and the Catholic sacraments and rituals were a familiar and safe way to express it. The fear of God that was instilled in me that anything not sanctioned by the Church was a quick way to summon the thunderbolts and be sent straight to hell.

Now I can entertain that the language and traditions of the Church can be wrong and should be changed. I am cautious as to how. I have little experience with inclusive language and rituals, but now I want to seek them out. I actually picked up a Wicca book without being afraid of being burned. I originally saw Sue Monk’s journey away from the Church into the evils of Paganism (not county dwellers, but the same as Satanism as I was brought up to believe.) Now I see the rituals and symbols she explored were a journey to find God in herself and herself in God. There is no intrinsic evil in those ancient symbols. I still believe there is value in the Church as community. The God within us is a bond between humans, not just with God. This bond is nourished in community. While finding a homogenous community of like minded people would be nice I’m not sure that is my purpose right now or that I would even want it. (Who would I argue with?) I am going to try to go back to the Catholic Church, mourn the loss of John Paul II and watch to see the dawn of the new age (was that too sarcastic?) I believe in the basic tenets of Christian faith, but now I am not an observer to listen and obey (okay or not), but a part of both the past and present. I am looking forward to finding myself in both the Church’s past and present.

Emma

My View of God

When I was younger, my "picture" or notion of God was of the traditional patriarch. You know: kind, loving, long white hair and beard, sort of like Santa Claus but wearing white clothes. As a child, I felt that God had a less kindly side when angered. It was not all fun and games.

The first change for me in this view came when I was a college student. One of my primary lessons at this time, was to question everything. Now, this was in the late seventies and the feminist movement was growing. The notion that God could be a woman was novel and definitely worth contemplating. I don't think that I ever truly believed this, but what was most interesting to me was that God was not a man; that the traditional view (based upon my cultural background) could be challenged.

My current view, which has developed over the last 5-10 years, is of God as an asexual entity; neither male nor female. It wasn't until I read the book "The Spiritual Life of Children" by Robert Coles that I felt this idea was validated. In particular, the notion of God as a morphing entity, more powerful, loving and great than we humans can imagine was something I could relate to. I find it very difficult to use language to describe what God is or looks like to me. When I pray, I visualize a bright, white light. Sometimes when I pray, I "speak" to Mother Mary or Jesus.

Emma [last name]: Who Am I ?

I am the daughter of Pat and Betty and sister to John. I am the wife of Greg and the mother of J.P., Andrew and Lizza. I am the cook, the maid, the bookkeeper, the family administrator, the taxi-cab driver, the tutor, the classroom volunteer, a Sunday school teacher, a Rummage Sale manager, the GRCC Women's Association V.P.. I am a friend to many. I am a niece, an aunt, and a cousin to many. I am a nature lover who enjoys outdoor activities. I am a practitioner of yoga. I am a spiritual entity looking for my niche in the world.

Isn't strange, given the previous paragraph, that some days I still feel so lost and undefined . that I am struggling to find "me", just Emma.

Who am I and God to each other ?

I feel that God and I are part of each other. Wherever I am, good or bad, happy or sad, God is there. I feel like Jesus is one of my best friends that I can always talk with. The best part of the church experience for me is when we pray as a congregation. I feel a strong connection to God when we are all focused or "tuned-in" to the same channel.

These past few months that the group has spent together as been a special time for me. Although, my thoughts and feelings about God and being a Christian have not changed much, I have come to realize that the use of inclusive language at church services would improve the experience for me. I also think that the focus of a church worship experience would be better for me, if there were less emphasis on the sermon. Having participated in a number of religious discussion groups, I have decided that more active participation (2 way) in contemplating spiritual matters is more satisfying for me.

Megan:

My Sense of God

Sacred

For me

The sacred is in the bond

The relationship

The community

The family

That grows

Out of the familiar, the shared

The holy

Is in the holding up

Or breaking down

Together

Because moments become memories

To build the future on,

To support the weight

Of hard times, harsh realities,

Inconsolable truths

But also the joy of

New cycles

The burst of energy

That accompanies each new revolution,

Each new coming about, coming again,

Transformation, or revelation

That makes us whole

Makes us kin

One

Human and divine

Written during Womenspace discussion on the nature of God and how we feel God's presence in our lives (2001).

To me, God is the spark that first ignited life and created our Earth as we know it. God is like the literal and figurative spark flying out of the blackness and spontaneously igniting a bonfire. God is the "Big Bang" that started us on our human journey on this planet. I believe that the essence or spark of God is still carried within all of us, in the fiber of our bodies, minds, and spirits. I also believe that it can lead us in ways that are mysterious, that we can not always suspect or anticipate. We can cherish it and allow it to lead us in ways that are positive and helpful toward the Earth, ourselves, and others, or ignore it, refusing to let its light shine out from under all of our heavy, human foibles.

I believe that we have been offered a choice: to accept our own divine attributes (God within us) or to reject and deny them (God outside of us). Accepting them involves a certain amount of giving over to listening to our intuition, to our "inner voice" as a guide, instead of just trying to control everything in our lives "alone." (To me, this inner voice is God within us, knowing us and speaking to us in the most intimate way possible.) It also requires a huge amount of reaching out and forming strong relationships and bonds with others: in our families, in our communities, in our global environment, DESPITE fear and despite differences. I believe that making connections with others based on trust, faith, and love is what God allows us to do, if we are tuned in to the divine parts of our own selves.

I sense God around me most often in nature, in quiet moments, in my family, and in friendship. When I do, I sense the choice that I am being given: to look within and access (and balance!) my own humanity and my own divinity or to look outside myself. I find that, although I am not traditionally religious, in order to keep my "balance" spiritually, I must always try to look within; that is where God and I commune!

Who Am I? - Megan

I am a woman, mother, daughter, wife, sister, and friend. I am a grounded person, who seeks balance and equity in my life and the situations around me. I am a loyal advocate for the people and activist for the causes that I believe in. In building my life, I am an

adapter, not a renovator. I am persistent and have lots of stamina; I believe in finishing, bringing to resolution, whatever I sow. I am stubborn and strong-willed and can be demanding and ruthless with indecisive or inconsiderate people. I can be flexible, but also structured and disciplined, according to what is necessary for the task at hand. I am a willing, open, mostly tolerant person who seeks connection with the critical people in my life, while trying to hold onto my own core self. Some days I succeed better than others

God and I Together

God and I are together in stillness and quiet. We are together when I find rest and peace in yoga, when my mind, body, and spirit are working together and are yoked to the inner spark of God within myself. We are also together when, amidst the noise, chaos, and confusion of everyday life, I am able to look within myself and focus my energy (psychic, emotional, physical) to rise to cope with whatever situation or crisis is emerging on my horizon. God and I are together when I listen to my intuition and gather my forces to reach out to others in ways that make a positive difference in both of our lives and God and I are together in a powerful triangle when others reach out to me in the same way and I let them in.

The God within me is a catalyst for healing action, if I am feeling vulnerable or overwhelmed. God is a restorative and rejuvenating force when I am tired or lagging. The seed of God within my soul is a sanctuary for me if I am feeling sad, isolated, or lonely and a fire within me when I am motivated or inspired. I sense that the God-link within all of us is what connects us to our own souls, to God, and to others, if we choose to acknowledge the bond within, "above," and extending out. This, to me, is the holy and sacred "trinity."

The readings that we have undertaken as part of this group, as well as the bonding, camaraderie, and friendship that we have all cultivated as part of the experience, have strongly reinforced my spiritual beliefs regarding God and my relationship with the spiritual energy of all life. I feel comforted that "organized" or institutionally-sanctioned religion does not have "all the answers" and that my intuitive and personal connections to God coincide with many other valid "alternative" interpretations, shared by millions of women (and men!), over centuries. I found our readings and the perspectives offered within to be deeply satisfying and soul-affirming.

Molly

God

Higher truth. Inner wisdom. Wider reality, a natural order. Divine safety and love. Light. Divine consciousness.

My mind does not understand God. My heart knows God. To know God we must know ourselves. Connect to God within. Heart is compass.

Faith is not intellectual. It is a feeling. There are teachings that feel instinctively right > Jesus.

I feel most connected to God when the deeper part of me taps into the eternal safety...and love.

Who Am I?

I am (a) my soul...named Molly. ✨

My earth clothes are many – female, white...At different times I am or can describe myself by my choices. The choice to love or trust in the Divine or Fear.

Who are you and God to each other?

"To know myself is to know you" St. Augustine

We are born with the essence of God within us. I am a soul and God is my energy source. To me, God is heart centered, our higher truth. Meditation, prayer and inner silence provide me with the "transitional space" to look into my heart for clarity and understanding...trying to get through the layers of God denial: the parts of myself that say, I am not good enough, I am not worthy, I have to control things to be safe. etc.

In order to move from fear and doubt to love and trust, I must know myself, and love myself. My emotions are key in this understanding. Anger, fear, jealousy, envy, the capacity to love, forgive, let go etc., reveal where I am on my journey.

Everything that happens in my life is an opportunity to connect with the deeper part of myself which is divine.

The self journeys...while God waits.
to love
as
God loves.

Olivia

When I "Sense" God

Here are some thoughts that I have of moments when I have felt that God, the higher power, the Holy spirit was very close.

During a spiritual revelation - those times when it seems that a very special thought or notion comes to you. It is an incredibly intense moment of clarity when you know that what you are thinking or feeling is very true. I have had revelations that have dramatically changed my life; my view of things forever altered.

During an act of charity - sometimes there is a very special feeling that comes over me. Some claim to see the "face" of Jesus or hear his voice during these times.

During a special moment between individuals - this is the same feeling as when performing a charitable act. It's this sense of connection and a vision of pure love. I find it hard to put this experience into words. I do know that these have been the most intense, beautiful moments in my life, filled with either joy or sorrow.

During moments when contemplating nature - sometimes there is a great sense of peace during these instances, but I have also felt the presence of God during times of chaos and upheaval. It's a feeling of great power and awe that can be completely silent or deafening loud.

I've never been comfortable with the image of God in our likeness. Somehow that never felt right to me, too limiting a concept. I'm more at home with the notion of God in relation to nature, something that's so complex, mysterious, beautiful, powerful, etc. something so wonderful and indescribable.

I often "feel" the presence of God as the warmth of the sun. Something that comes from above, covers over me like a blanket, but even more so as it penetrates through my skin right to my very core. It's silent, and invisible, but you know it's there...no doubt about it.

In day to day life, I sense the presence of God whenever I encounter those moments of kindness and compassion that are exchanged between people. Often unexpected they can happen anytime, any place. The smallest kindness can have such a powerful effect on someone, and we each have the ability to touch someone in this most profound way. It doesn't require any special training, degrees, or economic status. There's something about that I just love. So small yet so huge.

Who am I?

I can best describe myself as a spiritual being on a human journey. I think to experience, to learn, to grow, to give and to receive. To come to some deeper understanding of myself and what I am capable of in giving to others. Perhaps, one day I may come to find out what my special gift is. That's my challenge.

"Who are you and God to each other?"

The best analogy I can think of is that of the relationship of a mother to a child and vice versa. This is how I view my relationship to God. A relationship of deep unconditional love, knowing, understanding and trust. I think of my own child & our relationship. How much I love her, hope for her, need her. How I've tried to guide her, help her. How we teach each other and how we grow. In this way I feel God and I are connected, seemingly independent but really as one.

Samantha

Who is God to Me?

To me, God does not have a shape or a face. When I think of God, I cannot picture a face on a body. I think of a low vibration, that hums so softly and I know it is there in the center of my chest, deep within. Maybe it's a voice. It's also in the back of my head, just above my hair, and when I am working or doing something and having a conversation with God, I know I can almost feel a body standing behind me. And She doesn't always talk to me with words, She responds with moments. Sometimes I don't catch them when they are happening and later when I run the moment back in my mind I can understand what happened and I can say, "aha! Next time I will do better!"

But is it always a "She"? No! A "He"? Sometimes God is neither, or both. A tomboy? A feminine man? I don't know. It doesn't matter, I just need the companionship, the guidance, the voice to say... something.

In short, most of the time my conversations are with Her, but many times I feel a masculine force as well.

Who am I?

I am a mother, a wife, a dog walker, laundry doer, chef, housecleaner, homework helper, schedule organizer, food shopper, church volunteer, school volunteer, artist and former architect. I am a wanderer, a person who needs guidance, who likes to run and dance and help people. I am a motivated person, but also a depressed person. I am a workaholic but I am lazy. I am smart but not *really* smart. I am many things.

Who am I and God to each other?

I am the small, small person who fumbles around in my little world, trying to follow. God is leader and I am follower. God also protects me, keeps me sane and shelters me from more harrowing moments of fear in my life. God is trying to help me live up to my potential by slowly allowing me to realize what and who I really am. It makes no sense to me that I have to fight for my existence purely because of my sex. It makes no sense to me that the next time the savior comes it will be the end of time, why can't another savior come and this time it be a woman? These questions and so many more make me feel very confused about our relationship sometimes.

Right now we are adversaries.

And we are lovers.

I am a slave in my own chains, and God helps me liberate myself a little bit more every now and then.

I make mistakes, and God somehow points me in the right direction. A teacher who makes sure that I understand the lesson.

Nothing comes easy.

I am a Ying and a Yang, and God is the force that keeps my two pieces tied together. My physical and spiritual person, swirling around in a chaotic jumble.

I cannot exist without God. If I thought there was no God I would be miserable. When I feel abandoned by God I am depressed and hopeless.

But trying to understand why I am the way I am, and why the world is the way it is, is

what drives me more to God than many things.

Why Jesus, Mohammad and Buddha, and all the other representations of God are out there? Why the feeling that one must destroy the others? Why the feeling that there should be a right and a wrong when it comes to believing who God is being represented by on earth?

Who am I to God?

I am told that I am a child that God loves. I believe this. And like a good child, I want to make my parent proud. I want to do well and make sure that I lived up to the expectations, used the talents that I was given to express myself to others. It's a lot of work!

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