

TOPs

TRANSFORMING THE MYTHS:

Telling Our Stories

MID-COURSE CORRECTION
GETTING A NEW FOCUS ON MY LIFE

On the very day that I received the letter from Liz confirming the invitation to speak on this occasion I received a letter from a friend in Baltimore who follows series to series what we are doing here at the Theological Opportunities Program.

In her letter she said, "From Myth to Authentic Selves (a title for this series that we had earlier considered)-how do you TOPs people keep thinking these things up? How do you keep them fresh? I can imagine beginning to tell my story and then reflecting is this the story, or is it only a story I have memorized and keep repeating?"

And what if it was something different that I lived? And I've been assuming all the time it was the way it wasn't really? So you see I can get some traffic out of your challenge. But then" she says, " I come to the really unsettling part: Where did my real life go?"

THE STORY?

Have I been telling the story or only a story? I reread the three experiential papers I've give here at TOPs.

1983---Journey to Awareness

Living with Change--Sharing our Scary Emotions--Anger

1986---A New Balance of Power--Dependence, Independence, Interdependence.

Between Generations: Oscillating Power Dynamics.

1988---Honoring Experience: Reclaiming Our Wisdom.

The impact of Women's Experience on Feminist Theology.

It seems that I have been telling the same story with a particular emphasis on each occasion. There has been a changing sense-of-self as the years passed but other basic details have remained the same. Whether or not it is the real story it is a story I'm stuck with.

THE TASK?

Where did my real life go? Adding that concern to the given task for the day

1992---Transforming the Myths--Telling Our Stories

Mid-course Corrections: Getting a New Focus For My Life.

has nearly overwhelmed me.

My life story is too long and the correction began well past mid-course.

The myths I want to transform--Patriarchy-and the myth that undergirds and sanctifies it--the Judeo Christian myth of the scriptures--are simply too all encompassing to undertake in less time than a week-end seminar--or should I say--ovular? But let us begin.

CHILDHOOD.

From this vantage point I see the roots of my current sense-of-self in my childhood being. I grew up on an Indiana farm where I was part of the vastness of the earth and sky. I was a child of the soil who often wandered alone in the woodland, amidst the growing grain, comfortable with solitude. A sense of euphoria comes over me as I see her in my mind's eye and relive her yearning to be entwined in the forces of life. She preferred the out-of-doors, the open spaces. The fullness of her being was interwoven with all of life.

THE DREAM.

I was sixty nine years old when I began searching my memory for the roots of my spirituality. That search brought me closer to that small child than I had been for more than half a century. A reoccurring childhood dream came sharply to mind. Night after night in that same dream a wraith, a ghost of myself in form only, ran from me--ran out of and ahead of me as I walked the same spot on the same road. It, my wraith, running lightly, almost drifting, went up the same wooded hill and became more and more nebulous as it approached the crest. Then it dissolved into vapor.

What a portent! An apparition of myself-my exact likeness-often considered an omen of death. I didn't know what to make of that dream as a child, but I now believe that I was experiencing a form of death. My childhood spirit was being suffocated-stifled by the dark shroud of acculturation.

RECALLING THE DREAM

Recalling that dream was a powerful experience! I found myself walking the floor and sobbing, "I want her back!". "I want her back!" "I want my childhood spirit back."

Did my girl child escape being incarcerated in what we have known as reality?

Growing up I had no clue, no conscious understanding that I was being indoctrinated into a global consciousness that much later I would come to know as "patriarchy."

PATRIARCHY.

In recent years I have begun to catch on. Patriarchal indoctrination informs us from birth to death. That is unless we become inoculated with feminism along the way.

The implanting of Patriarchal consciousness happens subliminally. Through the acculturation process we become submerged in a medium of existence that is invisible, odorless and silent.

Through language, expressed verbally, through gestures and even by silence and sometimes by absence--by all agents of information transference, we are indoctrinated consciously or unconsciously, explicitly and implicitly into a consensus world view that underpins most, if not all, cultures of the world.

I embraced all the clues for "doing it right" as if my life depended on it.

In the process I was also being (I couldn't find a word for what I want to say so I've turned a noun--gender- into a verb)--I was being genderized or genderated.

GENDERATION.

We talk a lot about the socialization process without lifting up the ways in which the boy child and the girl child--the male teenager and the female teenager are genderized to play out their respective but very different roles in society.

These roles are difficult to fill as currently prescribed. It is doubtless as difficult to try to be a model male and act out dominance and power over as to be a model female and act out subordination and the empowerment of others.

The result is that boys and girls, men and women become aliens within the same culture. They use the same words but they are often not heard as intended. The result is that the sexes often do not understand one another while assuming they do.

I wish I had known that fifty years ago! Deborah Tannen ("You Just Don't Understand". Women and men in conversation). where were you when I needed you most?

"Keep your knees together when you are sitting down!" "What will people think?" "You have to be responsible for your own----for your own--well, you know what." (the words "sex" and "sexuality" weren't available to us back then). "Boys can't control themselves and you could be sorry."

She was being genderated to be a girl while feeling inadequate.

THE CHURCH

While family, schools, companions and all communication media participate in this inculcating process the church and its doctrine play a preeminent role.

4

By making the basic assumption of Patriarchy --hierarchy or ranking--divinely ordained --one is made to feel evil in questioning and examining Patriarchal and religious teachings.

She tried to go all the way with religion. Dutifully she went to church with her mother, tried for conversion at revival, was totally submerged in a lake at baptism. Nothing made her feel changed in any way--certainly she didn't feel transformed.

God hung out a lot at the church across the fields in front of the house and watched over her shoulder when she was dressing and undressing to be sure she didn't look at her body in the mirror. It all seemed to have something to do with her-- "you know what."

THE EMBODIED SELF

I don't know when the embodied self sensed that she was less than adequate. It would have been better if she had been born a boy. Early on she assumed that what she lacked was brawn--strong muscles to do work on the farm and she spent many happy days being her dad's companion and assistant. But muscles didn't get her included in sports at school even if she could match the boys ability physically.

If not brawn, then brains. She was able to make top grades but continued to feel inadequate. In later years she realized that it was her mother that she was trying to please.

The family Bible in the living room and the well worn one her mother read played a major role in how her mother viewed the world.

In the scriptures women were secondary at best. Her mother felt the same way--often ashamed of and critical of women's thinking and actions and accepting of men's.

She, the child, began to pick up a lot of guilt. It must somehow be her fault that she wasn't right for her mother. Accepting blame became an addiction! And bottling-up anger trailed right along.

COLLEGE.

Except for a brilliant but profligate grandfather and one aunt no member of her family, including her own generation reached for a college education. At the insistence of High School Principal her parents agreed to try to finance four years of College.

So off to ^{ene}state University she went with a fifty dollar scholarship from the county, high energy, a surfeit of natural wonder and naivete and a determination to make her parents proud.

In recent years I've looked again at the contents of the carton labelled "COLLEGE". There were academic awards, athletic ribbons and pins, leadership honors and service recognition. She had it all or so it seemed. But then there were the diaries. Page after

216

page, year after year of self-castigation for poor performance. Regardless of her successes, she attended to the inner voice that said she was inadequate.

Many of the symbols of accomplishment were beyond her parent's ability to appreciate.

WHO WAS SHE?

Who was she now? An "educated woman" who didn't know who she was. She had acquired little information that was applicable to the life she was living. Such clues came from the culture and she was looking for herself in other's eyes.

Academically qualified "I think, therefore I am" she graduated in 1933 at the depth of the depression and ended up back home baby sitting and teaching an occasional night class and substituting in grades one through twelve throughout the county.

One year later she began teaching mathematics and physical education. Now she was somebody--the one hundred and fifty dollar monthly check verified that.

But the message came through loud and strong that to be a real woman she should be a wife and a mother. After five years of teaching she gave up her earner role and became wholly submerged in another's identity.

MARRIAGE .

It wasn't quite as abrupt as that sounds. She and her roommate, a YWCA secretary, were dating two prominent and eligible men in town. The men worked in the same department and lived in the same home near the company. Along the way partners were exchanged and both couples were married in the same year--1939.

As was the custom both women gave up their employment and their basic identity--their names.

Both husbands brought to the marriage approximately the same number of socks to darn and adequate, even excessive, professional drive.

Wholly embedded now in another's identity she undertook to prevent anything from happening that would interfere with her husband's career and to do what she could to enhance it.

The pursuit of his STAR took over their lives.

CHILDREN.

The threat of war was in the air. (Now folks this was the second world war--not the first). He was called to do anti-submarine warfare at Harvard Underwater Sound Laboratory. Their first child -a son-was born a month after Pearl Harbor. As a mother caught up in the insecurity of first motherhood she experienced much of the belittlement that medical professionals of that day distributed. "Do you think I'll be able to nurse this child?"

Response, "We'll see. You're a better mother than a cow."

Fourteen months later, the second child, a daughter was born. There was plenty of work which was understandable. What she couldn't explain was the tension. "What was wrong with her? Other women could manage when husbands were either gone or preoccupied with their job and there were small children to care for every hour of the day".

And, unwittingly, she began genderizing her own children. Nursery rhymes, fairy tales, tone of voice, appropriate boy/girl clothing--she was ever anxious to do it right. The authorities told her how and warned her against any ideas she had--"Old Wives Tales!" "Old Wives Tales!"

EARLY YEARS IN MINNEAPOLIS.

The war ended. He took a position in Minneapolis. She was six months pregnant. Her father's heart was giving out. She and the children now four and three years respectively, didn't get there in time and there was no time for her to mourn. Her mother, exhausted and distraught was certain that she couldn't stay on without her life companion nor could she accept leaving the place unattended. She would have to sell the farm and come to live with them, for a time at least.

There were the details of the funeral, sale of grain on hand, sale of farm equipment and excess household supplies and finally--the land--the grounding of her earlier sense of-self.

Back in Minneapolis the third child, a girl, was born. Her widowed mother, still distraught, realized that leaving the farm and friends in the community was too much. She returned for a visit and wonder-of-wonders, she was able to buy the farm back. For twenty years she managed it and built a new identity for herself, modelled persistence for her daughter and the farm provided a retreat for the whole family.

GROWING DEPRESSION

Following the STAR became more demanding. He, the head, wearing gray flannel suits was aimed upward on the corporate ladder. She, at home with the body, was adjusting to being a corporate wife, giving dinners, parties, teas and picnics. She was somehow juggling being mother, daughter, housemaid, corporate wife and community volunteer.

She did it all but a real lethargy plagued her.

And now comes the part of the story that hasn't been explored before. In previous tellings I have always brushed over it--saying merely,--"the gray fog settled."

Her inner voice, telling her that she was inadequate, continued to be with her. She had had bouts of depression but in those

days "that was life". You didn't mention it. The depression, too, was her fault. She should "shape up."

The children were growing. Teen-age problems came along. Unpleasant developments in their lives was assumed to be the mother's fault. The culture told her that.

It now seems that it was the self-renewing trips to the farm, to the open spaces, that sustained her--carried her through.

Through those years of periodic depression her frequent response to requests for assistance in climbing the ladder and following the STAR was "I can't", "I simply can't do another thing.". Feeling over-whelmed, it was her way of asking for understanding but in the end she always managed to come through one more time. The "I can't's" she later realized, had been heard as annoying preliminaries.

THE RETREAD PROGRAM.

A psychological test at the University resulted in her being connected with an experimental educational program for adult women that was just then beginning. The participants called it their retread program and referred to themselves as the rusty ladies. It stimulated new interests and changed the lives of many of the women in significant ways. It changed her life. After six years she was scheduled to be a lecturer at the University. She was gaining a positive image of herself.

The progeny had gone off to college. Some of the pressure was off. But the climb up the ladder was being blocked and there was a one year appointment at Stanford University available.

After twenty years of permanence they became mobile. The STAR drew them first to the west coast and then to the east. A heart problem for her husband travelled with them. Her mother in declining health now came, too. Her being now centered on their needs. And she was trying to manage details of their Minneapolis home, now rented and the farm in Indiana as well as a house in Palo Alto rented because the progeny were gathered there and the rented place in Belmont, which was now their temporary home.

The gray fog became a dark void. She was suicidal. At the depths of despair she, only by chance, found a doctor who prescribed an anti-depressant. Slowly the light at the end of that dark tunnel began to clear. She was one of the lucky ones for whom drugs make a difference--a world of difference.

A NEW BEGINNING.

Not only did she find light at the end of the tunnel--she found new insights all around her. The women's movement was spreading, particularly in the Boston area where they were now living.

And International Conference was to be held at Harvard and MIT. Bringing this about was part of following the STAR. She was asked (apparently had been volunteered) to plan the week's program for those who would be accompanying the real people, the delegates. It was called the "Women's Program."

Her response shocked them both. She didn't say "I can't" and then end up doing it after all.

She said, "I won't do that."

Long pause-----.

"What will you be doing".

"I don't know but I won't be directing the Women's Program."

From that day, that moment, they both viewed her in a new light. She was beginning to claim an identity separate from his.

ENDLESS ADJUSTMENTS.

The times were changing. She was adjusting to change and changing with the times. But even more change was forced upon her.

As it turned out neither one attended the International Conference. He was facing heart surgery--not a reassuring situation in 1972. Then it happened--a massive heart attack as he was entering the door at work.

He had followed the STAR as long as he lived.

Six weeks later her mother, now in a nearby nursing home, died after having been kept alive against her will through many previous bouts of pneumonia.

That was nearly twenty years ago. She was sixty one. The adjustments were endless.

I am amazed now at the reserve energy she had. And confidence. Even guts. She asked a lawyer friend to recommend a lawyer she could consult by the hour. She was determined to know what was going on in the settling of her husband's and her mother's affairs. She had always been very frugal and now that she was on her own she was particularly cautious.

RETRIEVING THE CHILDHOOD SELF.

She returned for a time to the farm in Indiana. She had managed it for her mother in recent years and, as an only child, it was now hers. There, amidst the growing grain, the thrust for life, she sought a renewed identity.

What did she have to build on? She made lists of hopes, strengths and resources. Out of it all came the obvious answer. She was female and growing older. She would focus on those aspects of her reality. (She had yet to learn about sexism and ageism)

That was the conscious part. I am now convinced that she also began to embrace that spirit--that childhood self--that had disappeared in vapor nearly half a century before.

I was deep in the patriarchal closet, but reading, reading. I wasn't a feminist, whatever that was. I read "Our Bodies, Our-Selves" and put up full length mirrors in the bathrooms. I have a great body.

And, you know what, one day I took a hand mirror, locked and chained the outside doors, went into the bedroom and locked that door and then into the bathroom off the bedroom and locked that door. Then I took a look--a look at "you know what".

For a time I thought of requesting the men present to shut their eyes while I was sharing that secret. But then I remembered that "you know what" has been decreed to be men's territory through the ages and still is according to the church and the state.

MY GOLIATH.

Without even a sling shot I took on my Goliath--my ignorance of how patriarchal consciousness had controlled my life.

I read and read. Read intentionally and selectively. Read only women writers:

"Sexual Politics" by Kate Millett

"A Different Heaven and Earth " by Sheila Collins

" Beyond God: The Father" by Mary Daly

I am on a journey to awareness. The door encasing patriarchal consciousness flew open. I tear out shredding that shroud--that winding sheet of perceptions in which my whole understanding and my sense-of-self had become so tightly encased. The whole cocoon, the overlay of socialization, including all of the cultural patterns and roles that we live out in our daily lives is legitimated and sanctified by the stories, the myths of the Bible. Many of the stories reinforce, as divinely ordained, the domination of men and the subordination of women.

What a revelation! Once you see it, the thought world is transformed. I must run right out and share the "GOOD NEWS". If members of my denomination are alerted to this evil in religion they will take up the task of remything patriarchal religion right away.

Not quite! Change moves at snail's pace.

WHAT IS MAN GIVING UP NOW?

One of the concerns that I carried away from the Retread Program for the Rusty Ladies was the question, "What is man giving up now?" (we used the term "man" generically back then)

I kept reflecting on that question for many years.

The lecturer, after having reviewed the fact that man must have considered himself to be the center of the universe when he thought the earth was flat and the sun went around the earth, pointed out that Copernicus had been responsible for changing that perception. By proving that the earth and man went around the sun he forced man to give up that centrality.

If man wasn't the center of the universe at least he was divinely created but Darwin and subsequent theorists came along and man is gradually giving up that centrality.

If man was not divinely created, at least he knew more about himself than anyone else. That was before Freud, Jung and others began showing man that another might know more about him than man himself.

WHAT IS MAN GIVING UP NOW?

I think I have it!! Man's centrality in the human race and among life on the planet is being questioned. Man is having to give up patriarchy.

THE MONSTER.

In the intervening years, with the help of my sisters who are critiquing Patriarchal Religion and because of my own reading, for instance "Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse"-A Feminist Critique - edited by Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (a collection of ten articles by feminist theologians from a variety of denominations and Theological Schools) and because of work we are doing here at the Theological Opportunities Program I have come to see and name some of the evils of patriarchy and religious dogma as they entwine and sustain each other.

What we need to transform are two monstrous myths that have been controlling human consciousness for centuries. They are patriarchy undergirded by orthodox religion. Both myths are not only sexist and racist but also ethnocentric, imperialist, heterosexist and destructive of the global environment and all life on the planet.

PATRIARCHY ON A GLOBAL SCALE

Patriarchal practices appear everywhere particularly in hierarchical relationships between men and women. However, awareness of subliminal controlling assumptions is minimal. This was evident at the three global Conferences held during the Decade of the Woman. These Conferences were sponsored by the United

222

Nations with the first one held in Mexico City in 1975.

That conference was the first instance in history when women, as a category of human beings separate from men was ever on a global agenda. Many governments would not send women to any conference, even one concerning women.

International conferences of this nature are composed of delegates appointed by their respective governments. Parallel to this meeting but in a different location in the same city are meetings called Tribunes or Forums. To these auxiliary meetings go any of us who are interested and can afford it. Some individuals attending these meetings represent global non-governmental organizations and are credentialled to audit the conference itself.

As a result of the three global conferences during the decade 1975-1985 all governments have been charged to consider the situation of women in their country. There is a long way to go as the following statement confirms: "Women are one-half of the world's official work force, account for two-thirds of all working hours, receive one tenth of the world's income, own less than 1% of the world's property and constitute two-thirds of the world's illiterate."

Many of the delegates insisted that they had no word in their culture for for bias by sex-"sexism" and "patriarchy" as a designation for a type of consciousness was practically unknown in any country including the United States of America.

BEYOND PATRIARCHY

Endeavoring to dislodge patriarchal understanding and embrace a feminist perspective has been tremendously exciting. After years of believing "I think, therefor I am" I am stunned and challenged to have respected sisters maintain that all knowledge is body mediated.

To be enlightened day after day by new feminist perceptions is a delight. I am glad to have lived to this day when I see society beginning a massive shift away from our long-held, male centered, life-threatening consciousness.

But feminism has also been a source of confusion. For too long I assumed that feminism was a single perspective. It was a relief to learn that feminism has many strands and that each perspective has a specific political theory and understanding of woman's nature. Mainstream or liberal feminism is so dominant that it is often assumed to be feminism in its entirety. It sees getting equality of women with men in the on-going patriarchal system as the essential goal. Equality within patriarchy is a contradiction that many often overlook.

As you can tell from what I have been saying my goal is the transformation of patriarchy. We need to go to the root cause

and eradicate it. That is a radical concept and is known as radical feminism. I also believe that we must radicalize mainstream feminism or this wave of the women's movement will stall short of the liberation of women from oppression.

"IT HAS BEEN A GOOD LIFE."

I haven't succeeded in relinquishing my addiction . I still gather and hold more than my share of guilt. Although there must be plenty of us with the same problem no twelve step program has come to my attention.

"It has been a good life." That is what I remember thinking early one December morning five years ago. My home had been broken into and I was being physically beaten and sexually assaulted. I thought I was going to be killed. The horror cannot be described. I escaped by jumping out of my bedroom window and running to the neighbors who responded to my screams, let me in and called the police and ambulance.

Much later, months, perhaps even a year, I recalled the words I spoke as I entered the house when I returned from the hospital. "I must take this place back," I said. Even more than that, I've had to recover my sense-of-self.

My place, my space is very important to my sense-of-self. I feel a connection to the earth, the sky and to nature that I had experienced in my childhood on the farm. I am at home when my spirit feels at one with all of life and with the earth.

The farm in Indiana was sold in 1977. That was a financial necessity but I was ready to give it up for I was settling into my current home.

It is a good life. I like myself and am pleased to know the woman I am becoming. Daily, when I wake I appreciate again the picture that hangs on the wall opposite the foot of my bed. That picture depicts a woman kneeling with her head bent to the earth. It says: "I AM WOMAN GIVING BIRTH TO MYSELF."