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“Last year, two boys raped my fourteen-year-old daughter,” Verena confided ruefully in a soft voice. “One of the boys was HIV positive,” she continued, her voice shaking. Verena took a long, slow breath, clutching a crystal heart in her hand. “Now, my daughter is HIV positive,” she said with an air of defeat, as large tears welled up in her eyes. Verena’s words struck home like a dagger in the hearts of everyone in the room. A Member of Parliament in South Africa, Verena was sharing her personal story on the fourth day of a special workshop called ‘gender reconciliation’ held for Members of Parliament and other South African leaders. The authors and their staff at Satyana Institute organized the six-day event in Cape Town in November 2006. Joining as co-facilitators were Nomfundo Walaza, Director of the Desmond Tutu Peace Center in Cape Town and Karambu Ringera of International Peace Initiatives in Nairobi, Kenya. Nozizwe Madlala Routledge, a Member of Parliament and former Deputy Minister of Health and Defense in South Africa, hosted the gathering.

Sitting in silent witness surrounding the women’s circle was a circle of men—also Parliamentarians and other leaders—listening intently, some choking back tears. This was the first time male and female Parliamentarians had ever shared so deeply and personally about the catastrophic gender violence in South Africa. Verena continued. “When I first learned about the rape, I blamed my daughter. I figured she’d been sleeping around. I was so angry with her! How could she let those boys have their way with her!” Verena paused, looking up slightly and glancing at each woman before continuing. “But at the hospital, I found out that she’d been a virgin when she was raped. She’d been truthful, and I didn’t believe her. I feel so ashamed.... How could I blame my daughter, my baby girl? I’m so angry with myself!” Tears streamed down Verena’s face as she kept repeating, “How could I? How could I?”

Satyana Institute’s Power of Reconciliation Project

Verena’s story illustrates one of the countless realities of gender injustice; in this case an example of women blaming women for their violation and oppression. Verena’s sorrowful tale is one of many hitherto-untold stories disclosed by women and men in the Power of Reconciliation project, developed by the Satyana Institute and documented in the recent book, Divine Duality: The Power of Reconciliation between Women and Men (Will Keepin with Cynthia Brix and Molly Dwyer, Hohn Press, 2007). The premise of this project is that both women and men are afflicted by gender injustice and each needs the other for a true and complete healing. Over the past 15 years the authors have organized or co-convened more than 40 events entitled Power of Reconciliation (or ‘Gender Reconciliation’) in the United States, India, Australia, Croatia, South Africa, and this year in Canada.

Spiritual Process of Reconciliation Between Women and Men

Key to our methodology is the direct application of spiritual teachings and contemplative practices drawn from a rich spectrum of spiritual and religious traditions. This makes the work effective in a wide range of religions and cultures and it invokes a higher, universal wisdom that both empowers and protects the sometimes delicate and sometimes volatile healing process. The Power of Reconciliation model has proven effective not only in the United States and

feature | connecting beyond borders

Divine Duality | Reconciliation between Women and Men

by Will Keepin and Cynthia Brix
other affluent Western countries, but also in more challenging cultures where gender oppression is severe, such as India and South Africa, which are the focus of this article.

Cape Town Workshop Continued
After Verena’s story more agonizing tales emerged from the women’s circle. A deep, mournful sob erupted into the room, startling the group, when one man broke down in despair while hearing one woman after another share tales of abuse, rape, AIDS and sexual harassment. Silence was held in the group for several minutes as two men went over and gently embraced the grieving man.

Afterwards, roles were reversed with the women listening in silent witness to the men’s truth forum. Again, powerful stories emerged of betrayal, abuse, sexual violation and grueling accounts of masculine socialization endured in the cultural institutions of church, military, corporation, family and society.

Deep spiritual work is rarely easy. Yet the jewel found is priceless. Gender reconciliation work requires both courage and humility—to speak one’s truth, to open to the pain of others, to take personal and social responsibility. The process follows an alchemical wisdom; the pain of gender oppression is confronted head-on and deep in the ‘core of the wound,’ a hidden light or grace is discovered that unfolds into a profound healing and transformation.

Toward the end of each Power of Reconciliation workshop the women and men create heartwarming ceremonies to honor and bless one another. The male Parliamentarians in South Africa choreographed a beautiful hand washing ceremony. Carrying a bowl of water, they gently washed, dried, and massaged lotion on the hands of each woman. Then the men stood up in a line, faced the women, and delivered the following declaration:

We have met over the past five days in community as men, and in community with you as men and women. We have listened to each other’s stories—some personal, others told on behalf of vulnerable, degraded, hurt, brutalized human beings—all for no other reason than that they are women, sisters, mothers, and girl children.

We have heard, too, that through the social structures of power and decision making, many of our brothers have abused our intended roles of caring and protection—for their own selfish power, personal pleasure, and gain.

The bonds of humanity have been broken. We acknowledge that we have shared in the unfair and unjust advantage that has upset the Creator’s intended balance of human relationships for love, companionship, and cooperation. We further acknowledge that we have been complicit in breaking the intended dream of equality.

So now we come forward to say to you: we are sorry. We affirm that we want to start anew.... And we ask, will you accept our offer to take responsibility as we commit ourselves to live out—and challenge and support all men everywhere to live and work for—gender equality, and thereby seek reconciliation?

In silence, the men then bowed before the women.

It was a profound moment, to witness this group of male leaders in South Africa—a
The ancient gender wound that holds great promise for transforming gender injustice continues to afflict most human societies across the globe. However, a new era is dawning. Women's and men's movements, gender reconciliation programs, and the passion and inspiration guiding these dedicated gender reconciliation circles is not wishful thinking but rather active incubation of new pathways for women and men that foster a culture of integrity, love, and mutual respect between the sexes. A new era of gender reconciliation is being born.

As the authors continue to organize programs on gender reconciliation in South Africa, North America, India, Italy and elsewhere we are witnessing the emergence of a global phenomenon. Committed groups of women and men—now on four continents—are working diligently to transform gender injustice within their respective societies and to reclaim the sacred union of feminine and masculine.

To our knowledge these small but deeply committed Circles of Gender Reconciliation are unprecedented. These remarkable women and men have one thing in common; they know that the era of ‘patriarchy’—which has plagued human societies across the globe for millennia—is now coming to an end. These are men who know that beyond all the ‘male privileges’ offered by patriarchal society there is another far more profound privilege; to uplift the feminine, and begin dismantling the structures of patriarchy altogether. These are women who know that the ‘gender war’ can never be won by either ‘side’, but is rather a collective spiritual crisis that can only be transformed by calling upon the larger spiritual wisdom and unitive consciousness of all of humanity. In 2010, Satyana Institute plans to convene leaders from these diverse circles in an International Conference on Gender Healing and Reconciliation.

The passion and inspiration guiding these dedicated gender reconciliation circles is not wishful thinking but rather active incubation of new pathways for women and men that foster a culture of integrity, love, and mutual respect between the sexes. A new era of gender reconciliation is being born.

Will Keepin, Ph.D. and Cynthia Brix, M.Div. M.A. direct the Satyana Institute based near Seattle, Washington. They are authors of the new book, Divine Duality: The Power of Reconciliation between Women and Men (Hohm Press, 2007), which documents over 40 reconciliation gatherings in five countries. They teach graduate courses on new pathways to peacemaking, and lead spiritual retreats for religious leaders. Will is an environmental scientist internationally known for his work on global warming. Cynthia is an interfaith minister specializing in international peace building and spiritual direction for young adults. For further information, and to register for upcoming Power of Reconciliation programs, please visit www.satyana.org.