



REVOLUTION OF THE HEART: GENDER HEALING AS A PATH TO THE BELOVED

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“The future of humanity will be decided by relations not between nations, but between women and men.”

- D. H. Lawrence

“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 a sense of defeat as large tears welled up in her eyes.

Verena’s words struck home like a dagger in the hearts of the others in the room. Verena is a Member of Parliament in South Africa, and she was sharing her personal story on the fourth day of a unique workshop entitled “gender equity and reconciliation” for Members of Parliament and other South African leaders. We organized and facilitated the workshop in Cape Town was organized and facilitated with our staff at Gender Equity and Reconciliation International (GERI), a project of the Satyana Institute. Joining as support facilitators were Nomfundo Walaza, Director of the Desmond Tutu Peace Center in Cape Town, and Karambu Ringera from the International Peace Initiatives in Nairobi, Kenya. The gathering was hosted by Nozizwe Madlala Routledge, a Member of Parliament and former Deputy Minister of Health in South Africa

who revolutionized the nation's AIDS policy in 2006, saving countless lives.

Beloved community created through authentic and heartfelt truth-telling is key component of the work of GERI. Most of us in our daily lives are at least marginally aware of the dysfunctional gender dynamics taking place in our communities, workplace, families, and the society at large. We often become desensitized to it, even while knowing somewhere inside that profound social transformation is needed.

A good example of this desensitization is the revelation of sexual misconduct by the Republican nominee in the recent presidential election campaign in the United States. Other examples include the recent Stanford University rape case in California and the painful revelations of historic abuse of vulnerable boys by pedophile Catholic priests.

Rarely are we given an opportunity to gather in a safe forum—as women and men together—to bear witness with others to the sensitive, and often taboo, stories of gender conditioning and sexual challenges. Rarely are any of us given a compassionate space within which to share our gender story. Such safe and compassionate spaces constitute a key aspect of GERI programs.

Verena continued her tale. Sitting outside the women's groups was a large circle of men listening intently in silent witness. "When I found out about the rape, I blamed my daughter at first. I figured she'd been sleeping around, and 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 when she was in the hospital, I found out that she had been a virgin when she was raped. She had 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 my-

self!" Tears streamed down Verena's face, as she kept repeating, "How could I? How could I?"

Verena's sorrowful tale illustrates one of many painful realities of gender injustice, in this case an example of women blaming women for their oppression. Verena's story is one of many stories shared by women and men in the GERI project developed by the Satyana Institute (documented in the book, *Divine Duality: The Power of Reconciliation between Women and Men* by Will Keepin, Cynthia Brix, Molly Dwyer, Hohm Press, 2007). Over the past 24 years, we have organized more than 100 such gatherings in nine countries and launched professional facilitator trainings in the United States, South Africa, and India.

THE SPIRITUAL PROCESS OF RECONCILIATION

The process used by GERI brings women and men together to jointly unravel the invisible knots of cultural conditioning related to gender and sexuality. Open to men and women of all sexual orientations, the "undiscussables" of gender are jointly confronted in this rare forum as participants plumb the depths of their experiences and move beyond habitual ways of relating to discover new forms of healing, mutuality, and relational harmony between the sexes.

As Martin Luther King observed, "Injustice and corruption will never be transformed by keeping them hidden, but only by bringing them out into the light, and confronting them with the power of love." This has been the cornerstone of our methodology, and it has proven highly effective not only in the United States and affluent Western countries, but also in cultures where gender oppression is more severe, such as India and South Africa. Key to the methodology is the application of spiritual wisdom and contemplative practices, which render our work efficacious and applicable across a broad spectrum of cultures and religions.

CAPE TOWN WORKSHOP CONTINUED

Following Verena's story, similar stories emerged from other women in the circle. The men continued to listen in silent witness, often choking back tears. Afterward, roles were reversed with the women listening in silent witness to the men's truth forum. Again, powerful tales emerged of men's betrayal through abuse, sexual violation, and painful episodes of masculine socialization endured in the cultural institutions of family, corporation, military, and society.

Toward the end of the workshop, the women and men created simple ceremonies of honoring and blessing for one another—to acknowledge the healing that had transpired and express mutual gratitude, respect, and love. The men created a beautiful hand washing ceremony for the women. Each woman had two men gently washing and drying each of her hands. After the washing, the men stepped back, stood in a line before the women, and offered 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, companion-



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ship, 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?

After delivering this proclamation, the men completed their ceremony by bowing in silence before the women.

In a nation profoundly afflicted by the worst AIDS crisis in the world and skyrocketing sexual violence, it was a profound experience to witness this group of South African men, all of whom hold prominent positions of leadership, proclaim their deep commitment to transform gender injustice. The women were stunned. Some wept. No one spoke for minutes afterward. Nothing had prepared them for the power of this offering. Deeply moved and with their hearts open, the women proceeded with a ritual offering for the men that included a beautiful dance of veils. The workshop concluded with song, dance, and celebration.

HEARTBREAK CAN TRANSFORM CONSCIOUSNESS

“I don’t know how to be a man anymore,” lamented James, a 24-year-old man in a GERI workshop. “I feel traumatized,” he shuddered. James was visibly shaken after Rebecca, a 35-year-old woman recounted, in

graphic detail, the horrific story of her rape. Rebecca had come to the workshop as a way to prepare herself for facing her rapist in court the following month.

The men sat frozen in their chairs, and many of the women wept. None had ever heard a rape story told in such a direct and shattering way. “You don’t know how to be a man anymore,” we reflected back to James, “because you have truly heard and opened to Rebecca’s pain. You have taken her pain into your own heart. And so you feel traumatized—as we all do.”

This moment illustrates a key principle of this work: When we experience the pain of another as our own pain, a bridge of the heart is created, which transforms or challenges our identity.

Prior to this workshop, Rebecca had carried this pain by herself. In hearing her pain, James’ heart broke open, and he now carries a piece of Rebecca’s pain with her. In so doing, he also carries part of the pain of every woman who has ever been raped. This necessarily transformed his identity as a man, and also lessened Rebecca’s suffering because she was truly heard.

James subsequently entered into our intensive facilitator training and is now an active certified facilitator in our GERI program. James is a transformed man, who now transforms others, embracing the lesson that men cannot bear witness to the deep truth of women’s pain and remain the same men. Nor can women hear the deep truth of men’s pain and remain the same women.

IMPLEMENTATION OF GENDER EQUITY AND RECONCILIATION

“I have been looking for a long time to find a way to bring healing and reconciliation between women and men,” said the former Deputy Minister of Health in South Africa, Nozizwe Madlala Routledge, “and this work is the answer. We need much more of this work.” Accordingly, GERI began systematic training of professional facilitators, and to date we have conducted five year-long trainings in South Africa, three in the United States, and our first training is underway in India. Certified facilitators who complete the training are launching GERI programs in selected sectors of the society including universities, religious communities, gender activist groups and women’s organizations, struggling township communities, health professional networks, and non-governmental organizations. The long-term goal is to seed a transformation of gender relations between women and men throughout society.

GENDER RECONCILIATION SUPPORTS RELIGIOUS RECONCILIATION

“I am a Muslim, and a Hindu, and a Christian, and a Jew—and so are all of you!” Thus exclaimed Mahatma Gandhi in a moment of inspired exasperation, responding to his advisors who were pressuring him to forego meetings with Muslim leaders during the struggle for India’s independence. Gandhi was illuminating the universal truth of the human spirit and highlighting the reality that all religions are currents in one vast river that flows through every human heart,

connecting it to the infinite ocean that many call God (or the Source, or *dharma*, or many other names).

Never before in human history has it been more important—nor more possible—to bridge the world’s religious and spiritual traditions than it is today. Barriers between religions are shifting and breaking down as never before, forging new spiritual pathways in the broad wake of the emerging “Second-Axial” consciousness that is now widely recognized. A thousand years from now, historians will look back on this period in human history as the pivotal period when this crucial inspiration from Gandhi and other pioneers of “interspirituality” such as Raimundo Panikkar, Swami Abhishiktananda, Beatrice Bruteau, and others finally began to manifest on a broad scale. The emerging field of “interspirituality” moves beyond traditional interfaith dialogue and comparative theology—to unveil the transformative journey of the soul that characterizes spiritual life across the religions. Here the religions are found to meet as one, and practitioners of different faith traditions learn not merely to tolerate, but to love one another’s traditions.

This spiritual evolution is fueled by the human heart, which cries out for new bridges of love, healing, and reconciliation across differences—not only religious differences but also racial, gender, caste, social, and class disparities. “The stakes are higher than ever,” says the Dalai Lama, “not only for the survival of our species but also for the very planet itself and the myriad other creatures who share our home.”

In answer to this call, the world religions are slowly beginning to come together in new ways despite their vast and rich differences. Teachings of compassion and deep respect for others is universal in all religions, and the ‘golden rule’ is found in every tradition. In the end, the only realistic path

forward for the human race is to live as one family and one species, in harmony with millions of other species on this planet.

Yet a troubling question remains: in this emerging harmony across the religions, will the patriarchal oppression that has afflicted every major religion continue? Although spiritual consciousness ultimately transcends gender altogether, women still face major challenges and obstacles in every major world religion. Patriarchy is systemic across all religions in large part because it was inherited from the cultures in which these religions emerged. Even in the case of those religions that uplift the divine feminine such as Hinduism or religions that proclaim gender equality such as Sikhism and Ba’hai, patriarchy was nevertheless absorbed into the religious customs and institutions by cultural osmosis from the larger society. Hence today’s emerging trend toward interspirituality entails a crucial challenge. Will the patterns of patriarchal domination that afflict virtually every sector of life, from the bedroom to the boardroom, to the church, temple, and mosque, continue to be perpetuated within the interspiritual community or can religious patriarchy be systematically and finally eradicated?

The jury is still out on this question, but encouraging signs are emerging. Several years back in Turin, Italy, we organized a women’s interspiritual conference entitled *Cultivating Women’s Spiritual Mastery*. The conference drew 75 women from 15 countries, representing many spiritual paths. Three women spiritual masters were featured: Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo (Buddhist), Swami Ambikananda (Hindu), and Sr. Lucy Kurien (Catholic Christian), each of whom has founded a remarkable spiritual mission. All three directly confronted patriarchal injustice within their traditions and overcame it with love and truth. During the

conference certain systemic patterns of gender and sexual discrimination emerged that were shared in common across all the women’s experience in the religious traditions represented. Although this common ground was not surprising, it was very sobering, and gave strong impetus for GERI to develop new programs in gender healing designed for religious, spiritual, and interfaith communities.

Since that time, we have implemented GERI programs for various religious and interfaith groups, including the South African Council of Churches, the Cape Town Interfaith Initiative, communities of Catholic nuns and priests, and the Parliament of World Religions. Rev. Mpho Tutu, daughter of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, invited us to conduct an intensive program on gender reconciliation for an invited group of religious leaders convened by the Desmond and Leah Tutu Legacy Foundation. In her words, “The work of racial reconciliation will never be completed without the work of gender reconciliation.”

The results of all these programs are encouraging and inspiring. Poignant stories have emerged relating to experiences of clerical abuse, such as sexual misconduct and male-dominated imbalances in church hierarchy and leadership. Participating women and men confront these issues skillfully together, establish a new mutual trust and faith in one another, and create powerful ceremonies to honor and bless one another. One priest exclaimed afterward, “This was more than a workshop; it is a whole new tradition!”

As one example, intensive GERI programs were conducted annually for diverse groups of Catholic priests and nuns between 2002 and 2007. In these events, intrepid priests and nuns courageously tackled the injustice and patriarchal institutions of both secular society and the Catholic Church. In

the women's and men's truth forums, painful experiences of sexual violation and other forms of misconduct and abuse of power were brought forward by both nuns and priests, coupled with accounts of institutional denial and enabling complicity within the Church leadership—mirroring similar revelations that emerged elsewhere within the Catholic Church at that time. Tremendous courage and compassion were exhibited by most of the priests and nuns within the group. In one event, a backlash emerged, led by a few priests against the nuns and other priests who had brought some of the most poignant revelations to light. After a powerful confrontation, the group worked through the ensuing difficulties to reach a profound resolution that brought deep healing and learning for all. The power of gender to humble a community to its knees and then uplift it into grace was exquisitely demonstrated.

Following this intensive and intimate healing work, the nuns and priests in these gatherings honored and blessed one another in remarkably beautiful healing ceremonies. Together they created palpable energy fields of healing, reconciliation, and forgiveness that uplifted everyone present and hearkened toward the auspicious possibility of a healed and transformed Church.

CULTIVATING INTERSPIRITUALITY

In 2013, we organized the Dawn of Interspirituality Conference in collaboration with the Snowmass Interspiritual Dialogue, founded by our mentor Fr. Thomas Keating. This conference brought together 175 religious leaders and seekers from 12 countries, representing all the major world religions, including those who identified as “spiritual but not religious”. The conference provided a unique forum for deeper conversations in inter-religious dialogue and exchange, including specifically taboo issues of gender discrimination, religious intolerance,

and other challenges. A major goal of these interspiritual conferences is to facilitate potentially challenging conversations around delicate issues with the intention to move through and beyond these conflicts to reach a place of empathy and mutual understanding.

Interspirituality offers a crucial new opportunity for profound healing of gender injustice within each religion and between diverse religions. Precisely because patriarchal imbalance and injustice are systemic and afflict every major religion, transforming patriarchy in religion offers a profound pathway for leveraging systemic healing and transformation across both gender and sectarian boundaries. If God enters through a wound, then God enters more deeply through a deep wound. Skillful healing of gender injustice draws women and men together into a dynamic balance and mutual empowerment by moving through the gender wounds into a profound space of not only mutual respect and forgiveness but also of mutual reverence. This portends a new spiritual covenant that can heal gender divisions in religious communities and, thereby, help us all to reclaim the birthright of gender balance and inter-religious harmony in the human family.

The new interspirituality movement thus has the potential to forge an unprecedented pathway into gender healing and thereby facilitate a profound transformation of patriarchal injustice that has not yet been achieved within any of the established religious traditions. This could be one of the greatest gifts of interspirituality.

CIRCLES OF WOMEN AND MEN CREATING BELOVED COMMUNITY ACROSS THE GLOBE

Despite major advances made by the women's and men's movements, gender injustice continues to afflict most human societies across the globe, including the affluent West. However,

a new era is dawning that holds great promise for women and men working in concert to jointly transform this ancient gender wound. Across the globe, men and women are beginning to join together in mutual collaboration to heal gender injustice, and reclaim the sacred union of feminine and masculine.

As GERI continues to organize programs on gender equity and reconciliation in South Africa, North America, India, Kenya, the United Kingdom, Colombia, Costa Rica, and Australia, we are witnessing a global network beginning to emerge. Remarkable groups of women and men—on six continents, spanning East and West, North and South—are working together to transform gender relations within their respective societies.

To our knowledge, this global network of emergent circles of gender equity and reconciliation is something new and unprecedented. These remarkable women and men all have one thing in common: they know that the era of patriarchy that has tyrannized human societies across the globe for millennia is coming to an end. They know that humanity must and will find new pathways for people from diverse gender categories to create together loving, harmonious, and peaceful societies on Earth.

These circles of gender equity and reconciliation are actively seeding fertile ground that will foster a new culture of integrity, love, and mutual respect between the sexes. The inspiration guiding these circles is not wishful thinking but authentic interconnection that is skillfully cultivated by small groups of committed women and men to become practical, living examples of beloved community across the globe. An inspiring new era is of gender equity and reconciliation is being born. §