

Too many women have been taught that self-less-ness is the best spiritual path. This is wrong.

THE HEROINE'S JOURNEY: RECLAIMING THE FEMININE "ISH" OF SELF

By Michael Farnworth

*I was always ashamed to take. So I gave.
It was not a virtue. It was a disguise.*

—ANAIS NIN¹

I BELIEVE MANY WOMEN LIVING IN THE PATRIARCHAL culture of the United States have been seduced to make an unknowing compromise between their spiritual selfhood and culturally determined feminine role-plays. Unfortunately, women have been made to feel perverse if they attend to their own self. They have been labeled “selfish,” one of the most emotionally laden cultural insults that can be levied against them. Women have been shamed into hiding and pretending that their real self, feelings, and accompanying wants and needs are bad, wrong, or just unimportant.

I do not believe that being one's self is a bad thing. In fact, I believe it is the first pivotal step on the road to salvation because as long as we remain unauthentic, even God can't do anything with us. One's true self is the only essence Christ can change and redeem. The spiritual adventure of reclaiming one's true self requires a surrendering of the dishonest ego we have spent a lifetime constructing. This ego is our culturally contrived outer life. We must be willing to relinquish its stranglehold on who we truly are and embark on the spiritual pilgrimage to which we are all called—that of reclaiming the inner kingdom of our soul. This pilgrimage is the most difficult thing we ever attempt. But it is why we're here on earth.

This journey is for both women and men, but this essay concentrates on a paradigm shift that women, especially, need to make. We live in a sexist culture which generates a great deal of feminine contempt hidden behind manipulative, patronizing esteem. This demeaning dynamic can anesthetize a woman's spirit so she is unable to challenge the dominant culture's agenda for her, for to do so brings fear of reprisal and rejection. Women who do not fit into the culture's pattern for female behaviors and roles are marginalized, dismissed, and negatively labeled. Though this culture damages men, too,



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women especially must learn to awaken and reorient their selves from objectification toward the intimate compassion of the heart. It is impossible to embrace a self that either remains asleep or sponsors deep-rooted feelings of self-contempt.

In this essay, I call into question an ideal that many members of U.S. culture consider a sacred cow: the ideal of being selfless. By feigning a selfless personality, women embrace cultural assumptions that are challenging to deconstruct. In our cultural vocabulary, the opposite of a “selfless” personality is a “selfish” one. That opposition, as applied to women's identities, is troubling. The dictionary defines the suffix “ish” as “of, pertaining to, or being, characteristic of, as in girlish, having the qualities of a girl.” Given this definition, “self-ish” would mean having the qualities and characteristics of *yourself*; manifesting the attributes or traits of *yourself*; behaving in ways congruent and consistent with *yourself*. “Self-less,” on the other hand, is the condition of not having a self, of doing only what others want and expect of you. Our culture wants women to be self-less because feminine selflessness comes in very handy when catering to the masculine personality.

I am not saying a woman should reject the social and religious roles provided by her culture, but I am persuaded that many women need to awaken from a culturally induced slumber. They need to awaken to and engage in the heroine's journey of reclaiming the sacred inner landscape of their souls. The act of birthing, mothering, and marriage are heroic undertakings and are of great value both personally and culturally. But if, because of the demands of living a culturally determined life, a woman's own inner soul remains stillborn, abandoned, orphaned, or never embraced in love, then a profound spiritual wound occurs. The pearl of great price—her unique and singular spirit—will never be revealed.

Masculinized religious and secular cultures do not place women's spiritual awakening on their agendas. As a result, women are socialized to surrender their unique thoughts, feelings, and gifts in exchange for a deadened, homogenized, one-size-fits-all feminine role. A woman can, however, fulfill her mortal responsibilities with creative, life-giving options that do not necessitate giving away her unique voice, personality, powers, interests, goals, dreams, intellect, and spirituality. I believe what Carrie Miles wrote about the nature of gender roles:

“Anyone who has tried to live her life solely within the gender box knows that there is not enough room in there for a whole person, let alone a God.”²

Women have a sacred obligation to go beyond their cultural socialization to reclaim their sacred nature as equal companions with men in creation’s truth. God never intended women to become caricatures: “happy mother, satisfied wife.” Women are much more than what patriarchal culture pressures them to believe they are. They are infinitely more than even the most expansive cultural definition of “true womanhood.”

IF SOMEONE ACCUSES us of being selfish, they certainly don’t mean it as a compliment. We generally think of being selfish as something shameful, and we try to deflect any appearance of selfishness before this accusation ever comes our way. Our preoccupation with not appearing selfish in a culture steeped in philosophical individualism is hypocritical.

I am sure most of us have heard of the notion that one can tell what a culture deems most important by the number of words that its language has to express it. For example, we may have heard that Eskimos have more than twenty different words to describe different kinds of snow. That’s because snow is important for the survival of the Eskimo people. As I look up the word “self” in the dictionary, I find more than 160 self-words, beginning with self-abasement and ending with self-worship. If not having a self—selflessness—is a cultural ideal, why is our society so preoccupied with the self? It doesn’t add up, and the reason it doesn’t add up is that we live in a dishonest society. Our society epitomizes self-indulgence, and most of us are unconsciously socialized to follow suit.

For example, while men may preach the importance of selflessness, these same men have been socialized by the culture to pursue selfish interests. Men marinate in selfishness. From the time of boyhood, males are taught to seek and obtain whatever they desire. Beginning in boyhood, men are trained to be rugged individualists. They grow up steeped in competition, whether athletic, academic, romantic, financial, business, or religious. Every domain of modern culture is fertile soil for a man to display his superiority—every domain, that is, except for involvement with the family. *That’s* woman’s work. For men, the “ish” of self is accepted and promoted because male individuality is valued.

While masculine socialization idealizes selfish interests and endeavors, feminine socialization emphasizes the opposite. Women are socialized to meet other people’s needs and are taught not to want anything more in life than masculine approval. If women are beautiful and willing to play the prescribed supportive feminine roles of girlfriend, wife, mother, house cleaner, cook, and lover, they will receive this masculine approval in abundance. As a result, many women seek success in these “womanly” roles. The problem is that in so doing, many never nurture their own unique characteristics and gifts. Female individuality is not valued in our culture, however, so the “ish” of the feminine self is too often substituted for selflessness.

If we think “selfless” is an appropriate spiritual condition to pursue, what would happen if we substituted the word “soul” for “self”? Would “soul-less” be a spiritual condition worth seeking? I don’t think so, but “soul-ful” would be.

Let’s play a bit with another self-word that we never hear. That word is “self-full.” Being self-full would mean being grounded in and conscious of one’s potential as well as limits, yet having the courage to honor both. A woman’s self is of divine origin. A self-full woman would be stable and not easily manipulated by her culture. She would be acquainted with her sacred center, protecting its spiritual nature and origins.

Some have referred to Christ as being selfless, but I don’t believe he was. I believe Christ was self-full. He knew who he was. Christ often retired by himself to commune with the heavens and to refill his own reserves. He gave of himself because of that fullness and shared with others his gifts of light and life. He stood up for himself and others when they were abused by the community before choosing to surrender himself to the plan of redemption. Christ was self-full and was, and is, more than willing to invite us to share that kind of self-full awareness with us. I believe God wants self-full women and men who are grounded in compassion and mercy and thus have the courage to follow Christ on their spiritual paths.

THE PARADIGM SHIFT I am exploring is difficult to explain. In reclaiming the inner kingdom, our souls speak from within and call us to be the persons we were born to be. As we abide in the inner kingdom, we gain clues to our nature. These clues are sacred invitations that summon us to embrace and speak our own voice, our own truth. Our souls speak in safe and gentle ways that compel us to grasp our true selfhood and to care for it as the sacred essence it is. Having existed in other dimensions before coming to this earth, we each brought with us a personality and gifts that were uniquely ours. This gift of self is the result of eons of timeless living and discovery. This self is our birthright.

The spirit and the body are the soul of woman. Just as each body is different and unique, each spirit is remarkable and unlike anyone else in the world of creation. Joined together, they create a rare and matchless soul; but many women don’t feel it. Too many women have been taught that they don’t deserve a genuine self—that selflessness is the best spiritual path to walk. This is wrong. We can’t, with integrity, profess that we are eternal and divine offspring of God and then foster contempt for that eternal identity. Christ’s principal command to love our neighbor as we love our self is often displaced by peripheral concerns.

Reclaiming the inner kingdom is a complex enough spiritual task without the added chore of understanding and shedding the self-contempt that masquerades as selflessness. When our egos attempt to conceal their fallen natures behind shows of selflessness, we wreak havoc on our self and others. Our ego wants us to remain unconscious of its capacity for mischief and will do anything to hide that, including clothing itself in a sense of worth offered by the environment at large. Our ego will gladly embrace the cultural agenda if it receives esteem for

doing so. It desires to fit in, to feel important and accepted within the culture.

Honestly undertaking the healing adventure requires of us a spiritual awakening that involves introspective confrontation of the ego and exploration of things that we may have never really considered. Our ego typically wants nothing to do with the challenging spiritual adventure of awakening because that would mean its eventual demise.

This is a difficult conundrum when one lives in a culture that devalues the unique feminine self. How can one embrace what the culture considers worthless? How can service to God's other children be considered noble but service in behalf of self, depraved?

I am sure we have all heard the advice: "If you don't feel happy or are experiencing a lack of meaning in your life, then go out and serve someone." Service is a wonderful thing, but this advice is worth deconstructing a bit. What is going on in our lives that we feel such emptiness and worthlessness to begin with?

When we resort to self-serving service to engender more happiness in our lives, something is amiss. Christ gave out of his abundance, not out of his insufficiency. There is something inappropriate about giving service for what are ultimately selfish reasons. If service is done to medicate woundedness or to establish one's own sense of purpose or goodness, then it weakens both giver and receiver. Such service is wrong-headed. Ponder the statement of the poet Anais Nin: "I was always ashamed to take. So I gave. It was not a virtue. It was a disguise."

There is dysfunction in the act of giving service to others as a way to reduce the lack we feel as a result of inauthentic living. As humans, we are all indulgent when it comes to the self. To conceal that self-indulgence with self-righteous service is dishonest. Living lives that are not our own will lead to superficial, divided, and fraudulent encounters with the self and others. We will become unfaithful to our natures and strangers in our own lives, regardless of the wonderful roles we play. We will eventually surrender our authentic souls for the pretense of socially acceptable behavior. We will metaphorically sell our unique birthright for the mess of cultural pottage. When we wear other people's faces and live other people's lives, we lose our sense of integrity. Depression will ultimately set in. Depression

is the state of spiritual disengagement from ourself and from the adventure of life we were sent here to live.

WOMEN WHO ARE truly grounded in themselves will be more resistant to manipulations that our fallen culture prescribes for them. In fact, grounded women are difficult to control—and that causes problems. Our culture does not want women to have a sense of self because if they did, they would be differentiated, mature, and independent, which would cause all sorts of inconveniences for the males in charge. Men have an investment in maintaining the status quo of women acting like children. Thomas G. Plummer described the childlike condition known as the "Ophelia Syndrome":

The Ophelia Syndrome is being chronically ignorant, dependent and submissive. One who is an adult but chooses to be a baby, one who does not know her own opinions and who would not express them to an authority if she did.³

Many women may not be sensitive to the fact that our culture prescribes male-female relationships that are modeled on parent-child relationships. Sociologist, Erving Goffman explains:

Gender relations are patterned on the parent-child complex. In other words, men are to women as adults are to children: loving protectors, who will hold open doors, offer the first portion of sweets, reach high shelves, and lift heavy loads. But along with the privileges of childhood come liabilities. Children's activities are interruptible, their time and territory expend-



JEANNETTE ATWOOD, INSPIRED BY A CARTOON BY AN UNKNOWN ARTIST

able. Along with the privileges of being protected comes the loss of rights, and not being respected and treated like a full-fledged person. Being the protector frames someone as competent, capable and deserving of respect. Being protected frames one as incompetent, incapable, and deserving of indulgence.⁴

Remaining in a childlike state is antithetical to being a mature, spiritual woman with a voice. Understandably, some women love to be indulged, protected, taken care of, treated as special. Nevertheless, such treatment creates problems when these same women want to be taken seriously as respected, equal partners. When they take steps in this direction, they are often patronized, ignored, or dismissed with an authoritative pulling of masculine rank: "Trust me." The doctrine of men and women being one flesh in the eternal worlds does not square at all with this notion of a parent-child relationship.

AT THE RISK OF BEING SEEN AS JUST ANOTHER man who thinks he knows what's best for women, I nevertheless extend this invitation: Do not let a perverse culture shame you out of the spiritual heritage that is your self. The invitation to reclaim the inner kingdom of your soul is a spiritual pilgrimage, a transformative adventure to a sacred place deep within you. The healing powers of Christ can unify your displaced and fragmented soul, leading it successfully through the labyrinth of the spiritual journey. I recognize that some of you, understandably, are reluctant to make the trip. As Cher has suggested: "Romance and work," and I would add domestic roles, "are great diversions to keep you from dealing with yourself."⁵

Sometime in your life, however, you will receive an invitation to return to yourself. It may come in the form of a dream, class, thought, or book. The invitation may come from another who is on the path of selfhood, or it may bubble up in your own heart as a result of living a life that you know is not your own.

The invitation to reclaim all of yourself will come to you when your soul is ready. You cannot force the season. When the call comes, it will usually be associated with your having to face uncomfortable beliefs you have about your self.

Our culture has induced a slumber that too often obscures the invitations God is continually sending, calling you to the most important spiritual odyssey of your lives. It is an offense that this is so and that you are not better acquainted with or more supported by our culture for this adventure. The transition from self-contempt to intimate compassion will be realized when you embrace your own inner kingdom. The ability to reclaim your true identity is a spiritual work. It is a metaphorical awakening to another reality. It is a heroine's adventure.

If you were stripped of all your roles, who or what would be left of you? Take away your name, your work, your role of wife, mother, or girlfriend, your education, family or reputation, your spouse or lover—who would you be? The work of discovering your true identity is an excruciating spiritual enterprise which will forever change your sense of self and the

people you share your life with. When you receive this invitation to explore your inner kingdom, I hope you will remember and have hope in the promise, "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear." When the time is right, someone or something will come into your life and will point you in the right direction, give you a little push, and whisper: go that way. When God sends the teacher, I hope you will have the faith to go.

Within

by Carol Lynn Pearson

I read a map once
Saying the kingdom of God
Was within me
But I never trusted
Such unlikely ground.

I went out.
I scoured schools
And libraries
And chapels and temples
And other people's eyes
And the skies and the rocks,
And I found treasures
From the kingdom's treasury
But not the kingdom.

Finally I came in quiet
For a rest
And turned on the light.

And there
Just like a surprise party
Was all the smiling royalty,
King, Queen, court.

People have been
Locked up for less, I know.
But I tell you
Something marvelous
Is bordered by this skin:

I am a castle
And the kingdom of God
Is within.⁶



NOTES

1. This quotation can be found at <http://www.meirionnydd.force9.co.uk/english/quotes.html>.

2. Carrie Miles, given as part of the 2006 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium presentation, "The Genesis of Gender, Or Why Mother in Heaven Can't Save You," audio available at www.sunstoneonline.com, Session SL96135.

3. Thomas G. Plummer, "The Ophelia Syndrome," *BYU Today*, September 1991.

4. I have not been able to relocate the source of this quotation, which I've had in my personal notes for years, but it is consistent with the ideas found in Erving Goffman, "The Arrangement between the Sexes," *Theory and Society*, 4 (1977): 301–33.

5. This quotation can be found at <http://www.dailycelebrations.com/052003.htm>.

6. Carol Lynn Pearson, "Within," *Beginnings and Beyond* (Springville, Utah: Cedar Fort, 2005).