

follow would in certain ways be different for me as a woman from that required of a man. Both are a high calling, one is not greater than the other, but there is a difference. Christianity is not like that. As far as I can discover, Jesus never utters a command of counsel that is gender specific. He never makes any distinction on those grounds; he is the Way for all to follow. So, when it comes to prayer, is it different for women?

Yes, but also, no. The message of Christ is a message of liberation from constraints, from limitations, from divisions. Hell would be some women's prayer ghetto where men are excluded. Men and women go to God together, we complement one another, learn from one another, balance one another. We share much more than that which differentiates us — our common humanity, our common status as children of God and members of the body of Christ.

### A Room of One's Own

These thoughts may seem somewhat disjointed — my apologies. I remember reading Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* in my single days and now understand why even with a 'new man' for a husband, all (or some) mod cons, and a word processor, it is still not easy for a woman to produce a work of art.

But one can pray — it's just writing about it that's not easy.

## A Tear & a Smile

Catrina McPhail

WHEN I was asked to write this article my immediate reaction was 'What do I know about prayer?' and I thought that what I did know would fit on a postage stamp. On further reflection it occurred to me that experience is the basis of prayer, and so, like everyone else, I do indeed have an understanding and inner knowledge of praying, '*of dialoguing with what is deepest inside me, which for convenience sake I call God,*' as Etty Hillesum says.

I shall start by being controversial and say that I do not think there is a prayer form specific to women. But there is an area of prayer which belongs to the feminine within us, which has historically been viewed as less important than a highly structured organised, and 'correct' prayer form. The so-called feminine values of intuition, openness, trust, vulnerability and wisdom have often been set aside — even ignored — in both our institutional and our individual prayer so, as a people called to wholeness, we have become imbalanced.

A reclaiming of the feminine in prayer is as necessary for men as for women, in order to redress this imbalance. For '*the praying person is a free person . . . no form of prayer is deemed superior; all that matters is what is right for the moment*' (Lavinia Byrne). What is specific to women however is their experience of the feminine, and this is the source of the richness we as women bring to prayer. Our agenda as women praying is to listen to our experiences and awaken to the God within and without.

The richness and the fruits of women's prayer are to be found in the ordinary and the mundane, in what Patrick Kavanagh calls '*the bits and pieces of everyday*.' The everyday is a mystery which women in their experience of the feminine can live with, and at their very best and most



whole, blossom in. What is to be found in the ordinary and the mundane is tears and smiles, the stuff of birth, death and rebirth, the basis of our experience as women and so also the basis of our prayer.

Our experience of body, relationships and life events is mirrored in creation and gives us the most fruitful potential for relating to that which we call God. Creation is messy, bloody and seemingly cruel, but also growing, blossoming and beautiful. The most prayerful woman is the one who sees, accepts and rejoices in the cycle of creation she experiences within herself.

Two women who seem to me to have been prayerful in this way are Hannah, in the Book of Samuel, and Cornelia Connelly. Their experiences of being women, especially their experience of pregnancy, birth and motherhood, were for them the path to God. For each of them suffering and joy were inter-related and inseparable from the divine. Hannah and Cornelia understood and rejoiced in life as Kahlil Gibran describes it:

*I would not exchange the sorrows of my heart for the joys of the multitude . . . I would that my life remain a tear and a smile. A tear to purify my heart and give me understanding of life's secrets and hidden things. A smile to draw me nigh to the children of my kind and to be a symbol of my glorification of God. A tear to unite me with those of broken heart; a smile to be a sign of my joy in existence. The life of a flower is longing and fulfillment. A tear and a smile.*

The Song of Hannah (1 Sam. 2:1-10), her song of praise, is made after and not before she has given Samuel, the child she so longed for, to the temple and to Yahweh. Her words of glory and joy :

*My heart exalts in Yahweh,  
my horn is exalted in God  
my mouth derides my foes,  
for I rejoice in your power of saving*

are a response which many of us would find impossible. But Hannah's struggle, her experience of persecution and ridicule before she gave birth to Samuel, linked her with the struggle of God's creation, and just as the seeds of a flower do not 'belong' to it, so neither do the children we bring to birth.

Having witnessed many times in my work as a midwife the struggle of women to bring to and give birth, I can understand Hannah's

actions. The experience of pain and suffering is so much easier to put into words and actions than is our joy. The overwhelming joy at being released from the pains of labour (which for Hannah had begun long before her physical pregnancy) and at receiving the gift of a child demands thanks and gratitude.

Hannah gave the greatest praise she could by presenting Samuel, an expression of her whole self, to God. She found God in her suffering and also in the joy of giving birth and she was able to sing:

*Yahweh gives death and life  
brings down to the grave and raises up;  
Yahweh makes poor and rich,  
humbles and also exalts.*

How many of us are able to acknowledge the presence of God so joyously in the midst of our own struggles?

Whilst perhaps we can distance ourselves from Hannah, with history and culture sterilising her experience for us, it is not so easy to be distant from Cornelia. She knew

*the exhilarating truth that every single moment of our life, every experience, at whatever time and at whatever place, can serve, and is meant to serve, as spiritual exercise — so long as we, by our attitude, recognise that the experience is meant for that purpose. Every single experience of our daily life is grist for the grinding stone of holiness.*  
(Donald Nicholl)

Cornelia's experiences as a wife and mother at Grand Coteau brought her 'rapid growth in the spiritual life' (Annette Dawson). Here she learned to recognise in homemaking, pregnancy, childbirth and mothering — in fact in the ordinary nitty gritty events of a married woman in the nineteenth century — her own spiritual exercise, by her attitude to these events and experiences. Her spirituality was shaped by the events and circumstances of her life, and whilst her experience of motherhood may seem particularly cruel, in its heights of joy and depths of suffering it was not exceptional for a woman of the time.

*The praying  
woman  
rejoices  
in the cycle  
of creation  
she  
experiences  
within  
herself*



... to see  
God  
in the  
heart of  
experience

What was exceptional about Cornelia was her ability to see God in the heart of her experience, both in her joy and in her suffering, so that *'her word arose not so much from logic as from the impact of an encounter.'* (Positio, p 112)

The events of December 1839 to February 1840 revealed to her the full scope of human possibilities or, to be more specific, the whole range of the feminine experience. She wrote on 20 January 1840, a few weeks after her 'conversion' retreat, *'O God trim thy vine, cut it to the quick, but in thy great mercy root it not yet up'* — words that might be those of a woman first pregnant, fearful and afraid for the future.

Yet by the end of the month she said, as someone who 'loved much,' *'My God, if all this happiness is not to thy greater glory and the good of my soul, take it from me'* — much as the woman in the fullness of pregnancy awaits her time. After the death of John Henry, from the depths of despair — like someone in the final stages of labour to give birth — she wrote, *'I will ask of my God, without ceasing and he will give me to drink.'* (Positio, p 113)

In those few short weeks she had gone through a psychological and spiritual conception, pregnancy and labour. She could relate the feelings to her own physical experience, and she realised she had yet to 'give birth' to something other and new, although she did not yet understand what that was to be. (I note that Pauline Darby in the last issue of *Source* surmised it was to be the Society.) All these experiences contributed to her understanding of *'the struggles of a woman's heart,'* and through them she *'discovered her spirituality was of a joy mediated through suffering. Not a joy which left suffering behind but one which co-existed with it for as long as she accepted it.'* (Positio, p 111)

As a midwife I believe that the woman who successfully brings to and gives birth has to accept that suffering and joy are inevitably interlinked, and that only by working with both can she in fact give birth. The same is true for all of us. Our acceptance of suffering-and-joy is the key to recognising our own lives as our spiritual exercise. Although we are not all destined to give birth physically, we are all called to contribute in the birth, death and rebirth cycle of God's creation.

Perhaps the most important contribution we can make as praying women is to remember that our experiences are our path to God/holiness, and to remind ourselves constantly of this by our attitude to the *'bits and pieces of everyday.'* Accompanying other women along the spiritual way, we want them to discover and trust the deeper truths of their experiences; that they are not destroyed by the seemingly negative in their lives, nor are they only whole when in the midst of joy. But rather like

*[t]he life of a flower which is longing and fulfilment. A tear and a smile.*

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