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10 Patient Weavers

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Fragile as a spider's web
Hanging in space
Between tall grasses,
It is torn again and again.
A passing dog
Or simply the wind can do it.
Several times a day
I gather myself together
And spin it again.

Spiders are patient weavers.
They never give up.
And who knows
What keeps them at it?
Hunger, no doubt,
And hope.

May Sarton, "Love"

One must be a patient weaver if one is to spin that delicate, intricate web of wonder called "women loving women." And if one is a woman religious in a homophobic church, my perception of today's institutional church, one must be even more determined

in the pursuit of weaving a pattern of integrity and truth. I know only too well how weary one can become with the weaving, but I am convinced that the energy expended is well spent in view of the beauty of the creation.

From the time that I was a very young child, I knew I loved differently and that my most nourishing bonds were with women. I had no name for what I was experiencing, but I was certain that such feelings were deep and real, and that they were growing only stronger as I grew older. Through the years, I struggled with the guilt that made me think I was less than God wanted me to be because of the way I loved. When I entered religious life at the age of twenty-six, I knew I wanted my life to be centered in the Godness who had created me, but I felt there was a hidden, secret part of me that could never become one with the offering I sought to make. And so it was, until I reached my thirties.

At that time, the supportive, reflective, prayerful environment of my community life led me to an inner openness that allowed me, finally, to embrace the fullness of my personhood as it had been fashioned by God. I thought that this self-acceptance would be enough to sustain me and that I would now live quietly with my newfound peacefulness. At the age of forty-one, however, I fell deeply in love and was wonderfully loved in return. This gift of a vibrant, passionate, life-giving love drew me to deeper levels of my being as well as to a more profound experience of the Godness within. With this gift have come moments of gentle joy and purifying pain, both of which have led me to new insights. The delights and decisions that have been an outgrowth of this particularly precious love relationship have brought me home to my true self and deepened my sense of responsibility toward those who, like myself, are searching for the truth that links their God-life and their life of loving, which, I propose, cannot be separated. It is the heart of these insights that I wish to share in this chapter.

The first insight is that, for the woman religious, the tearing of this delicate web of love between women can be caused by a multitude of circumstances. One of these is a community vision that sees the celibate as being asexual, a sorry state that would eliminate the need for a vow of chastity altogether. The sadness of

this situation is that the woman religious never feels safe enough in this environment to explore the meaning of her sexuality, whether heterosexual or homosexual. Without such freedom, she may become locked into a false understanding of her personhood, experiencing interior and exterior conflict that drains her of energy and prevents her from reaching out to others in a healthy manner. One hopes that religious communities are growing in their ability to enable their members to become who they are in the safety of an open, loving environment. The following passages from *Call to Life*, the norms of life and governance for a number of Benedictine monasteries in North America, propose a style of search that is honest and relatively open-ended. They leave room for the reality that the living out of celibacy, like the living out of poverty and obedience, is a lifetime process that one learns in a loving atmosphere:

Through fidelity to her vow of *conversion* through the monastic way of life, the Benedictine woman acquires that sensitivity to God's presence in herself, in others, and in the created world which helps her to *grow in openness*. . . . This *conversion becomes a reality* in the life of a monastic through her *dedication to rebirth, growth, and final maturity* in union with Christ. In such a life, the primary aim of the Benedictine vocation "to seek God" . . . is realized.

The monastic way presupposes commitment to consecrated celibacy and poverty. By sharing deeply on human and spiritual levels, the members of the cenobitic community sustain one another in celibate love. The Benedictine way provides a form of community life in which members can *maintain supportive and loving relationships over a long period of time* in an atmosphere of *faith, affirmation and healing*. ("The Vowed Life," p. 12; emphasis mine)

The newcomer must discover her need for intimacy and determine whether it is compatible with the celibate life. She must have *realistic expectations of celibate community life* and be able to face the fact that chaste love and faithful attention to God in prayer will sometimes seem to demand more of her than they immediately give back in satisfaction and assurance. At the same time, she must consider if she is *capable of expressing the degree of love and friendship that is essential to both personal growth and community life*. ("Formation," p. 26; emphasis mine)

As I repeat these words from *Call to Life*, I am deeply aware of their "size" and implications. I know only too well that to relate to them honestly involves a certain struggle, but I believe we need people who say to us, "It's all right to struggle." Perhaps the struggle will empower us to lay down guilt, whether self-imposed or imposed by others, and take up responsibility for who we are and how we behave. Too often, guilt is the great manipulator in our lives, even to the point of paralyzing us. When we learn to dance without demons, we strip them of their power to be a death force in our lives. For the lesbian woman religious living in a community that sees all religious as asexual, guilt can play havoc with her humanity; it can tear asunder that fine web of love she seeks to spin. In such an atmosphere, how will she ever learn that the core of celibacy has to do with loving freely and nonpossessively, loving with open hands and expanding heart?

A second insight discloses a danger to the delicate web of love for lesbian women religious: the often disproportionate emphasis given to the genital expression of love in general can be a trap. This is not to negate the value of the physical/genital aspect of loving, but rather to place it in perspective. If a person becomes fixated on this aspect of lesbian loving, there is the danger that she will never discover the deep riches of what I term "lesbian spirituality." To be confined to a closed physical/genital understanding of lesbian love is to be in touch with only the tip of this vast iceberg, which reaches to mighty depths. In my view, we lesbian religious have treasured gifts to bring to one another, to the church, and to the world, once we tap into the spiritual and emotional wealth of our woman-love. Among these gifts are a sensitivity and a tenderness that gather in the groaning world to be held, healed, and hal- lowed. Such tenderness ventures forth in vulnerability to be one with all who are born of the blessed womb of God. Could it be that our love for other women, our "affectional preference" (Lewis 1979, 11),¹ is capable of empowering us to be great lovers in community? Could it be that this love, lived well and honestly, in the context of community, could energize us to be movers and shakers in relation to community concerns involving justice, nonviolence, and peace? Having had a taste of oppression ourselves, we can readily relate to such issues with strong conviction

and personal commitment. Let us at least allow ourselves to pursue this possibility.

I am not naive enough to say that such gifts are always present or always lived out. I would venture to say that often they are not. This is because fear and lack of freedom, both personal and communal, have foreclosed the development of these creative forces. I am also aware that one's own personal development, interpersonal relations, and prayer life require tremendous amounts of energy and openness and that all of these evolve interdependently over long periods of time. These areas of growth are the soil from which the gifts of compassion and constant love spring.

I maintain that love is the greatest offering that we lesbian religious have to bring to the church. There is no doubt that we attempt to make this offering through a humanity that struggles to become free under adverse social and ecclesial circumstances. It is my hope that more and more of us may gather the courage and be given the support to bring forth our gifts in joy.

Daily I ask myself how I am being a patient weaver as I attempt to create this beautiful web called woman-love. How am I reaching out and networking with others who share this common bond of being women who love women? Over the past several years, my involvement with other lesbians who are seeking to discover and deepen their selfhood has expanded greatly. Initially, I shared with my prioress the path that my journey home to my true self had taken. We dialoged about where the future journey might take me and how I could continue to grow in my unfolding recognition of the gift God has bestowed on me by creating me as I am. She sent me forth with her blessing to grow in wisdom and the wonder of loving. Now, I realize that this is not, and will not be, the experience of many women religious who go to their superiors with the "good news" that they are lesbian. From that time to this, I have shared with a number of my sisters in community what my "affectional preference" is and how this influences my search for God, as well as my search for true and tender human relationships. To this point they, too, have been exceptionally open and loving.

Having had such affirming experiences within my community circle, I have felt strong enough to push the boundaries a little

farther. I became a member of an organization called Conference for Catholic Lesbians (CCL); wrote an article about my own adventure of "coming out" that appeared in their quarterly publication, *Images*; offered to be a contact person for my locale; and began thinking with CCL about ways to reach out to other lesbian women religious who might be interested in networking. On a local level, I have met with the vicar for religious, who happens to be a woman, to discuss possible channels for spreading the word that there is interest in initiating a local support group for lesbian religious. She and I also discussed possibilities for education on this topic for religious communities in the area. The vicar meets regularly with the superiors of the four major communities in my locale and has agreed to "plant the seed" of expanded understanding by telling them of our conversation. I am also contacting administrators of various spirituality centers in the area hoping that they may be a channel of information for the religious whom they serve, as well as a source for education for those in spiritual direction concerning the topic of homosexuality and the spiritual life. It is my hope that such contacts will open up pathways for those who are trying to bring integrity to their lives as lesbian women religious, expanding the possibilities for exploring the issues of identity, self-esteem, and intimacy.

In these ways, I am attempting to weave a "web" that can withstand the winds of adversity. You may ask what keeps me spinning. I can only reply from the deepest source of my own integrity, which is the Godness within. I believe that living a vowed, celibate life does not exempt me from becoming as fully human as possible. This endeavor necessarily involves searching out the processes of my sexuality, which happens to be lesbian in orientation. My search for longlasting, God-centered relationships may be a little more challenging than the average, but I am convinced that these are possible in my life. Because the living out of my sexuality has been under more social and personal stress than that of heterosexuals, perhaps I have had to be more conscious of my choices and their consequences. Perhaps my awareness of what loving means and involves has had to be more highly developed in order for me to remain a healthy individual. Over the years, I have been encouraged to continue my spinning

when I would come upon the works of such boundary-stretching thinkers as Adrienne Rich and Isabel Carter Heyward who, themselves, claim and celebrate their lesbianism. Through their writings, I have been enriched and more fully freed for loving.

At this time in my life, it is Heyward (1984) who articulates best what it means to truly take the responsibility of relationship seriously. The following are powerful statements on this subject:

Sexual lovers and good friends know that the most compelling relationships demand hard work, patience, and a willingness to endure tensions and anxiety in creating mutually empowering bonds. For this reason loving involves *commitment*. We are not automatic lovers of self, others, world or God. Love does not just happen. We are not love machines, puppets on the strings of a deity called "love." Love is a choice—not simply, or necessarily, a rational choice, but rather a willingness to be present to others without pretense or guile. Love is a conversion to humanity—a willingness to participate with others in the healing of a broken world and broken lives. Love is the choice to experience life as a member of the human family, a partner in the dance of life, rather than as an alien in the world or as a deity above the world, aloof and apart from human flesh. (pp. 186–87)

To say I love you is to say that you are not mine, but rather your own.

To love you is to advocate your rights, your space, your self, and to struggle with you, rather than against you, in your learning to claim your power in the world.

To love you is to make love to you, with you, whether in an exchange of glances heavy with existence, in the passing of a peace we mean, in our common work or play, in our struggle for social justice, or in the ecstasy and tenderness of intimate embrace that we believe is just and right for us—and for others in the world.

To love you is to be pushed by a power/God both terrifying and comforting, to touch and be touched by you. To love you is to sing with you, cry with you, pray with you, and act with you to re-create the world.

To say "I love you" means—let the revolution begin!
God bless the revolution! Amen. (p. 93)

To my mind, these wise words have much to say about lesbian loving as it can be lived out in the context of celibate commitment.

It is my contention that when a woman feels she must conceal her true sexual/affective identity in religious community, it is even more difficult for her to live her vowed commitment to celibacy. Under the stress of such "secrecy," the love energy that flows through her cannot easily be channeled to healthy, creative outlets that can serve to transform her as well as society. When the lesbian religious gives responsible expression to the truth of who she is, I believe her vow of celibacy can be revitalized, contrary to common belief that such expression will undermine her celibate commitment.

This chapter is not a work that determines definitions. Rather, it is more a "perhaps" paper: *perhaps* this is the meaning of such and such an experience; *perhaps* we could think about such and such an issue in these terms; *perhaps* our vision can be stretched to search new horizons. Ultimately, I hope that the thoughts I have shared will be a challenge to continue the conversation, a call to consider on a personal and communal level such questions as: Is there such a thing as lesbian spirituality? What are the gifts that lesbian religious have to bring to community life and to the church? How can we create an environment in which lesbian religious can be open and affirmed in the totality of their personhood?

As we lesbian religious address these questions, we ask for patience to continue weaving the fine and fragile web of women loving women, for empowerment to transform unjust situations, and for constancy of prayer to sustain us in our search for integrity and truth.

Note

1. The author uses the term "affectional preference" rather than "sexual orientation" in reference to lesbian relationships in an attempt to broaden understanding of such relationships beyond the sexual/genital aspect.

References

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