

BORN AGAIN IN THERAPY

I am a Christian without a label, but I know the evangelical one intimately. I grew up the daughter of a minister, took in Bible stories and the gospel from birth. When I was six years old, I told my parents I wanted to ask Jesus into my heart. One June day two months later, I was baptized—immersed in the cold waters of a New Hampshire lake at dawn.

But it was in therapy at the age of 37 that I experienced a transformation so profound that no other words would adequately apply: I was born again. I remember saying to my therapist, "You have given me back my life."

This is why I appreciate modern recognition by many secular therapists of the need to seriously consider the power of a deeply held spiritual source to produce and sustain change. I can speak with the authority of my own experience that until I went into therapy I was guilty of what John Welwood calls "spiritual bypassing," i.e., using spiritual practices to bypass personal emotional unfinished business." He writes, "Spiritual bypassing may be particularly tempting for individuals who are having difficulty making their way through life's basic developmental stages."

Exactly my case. I was a good little Christian, prompted by two powerful forces in my home: my father, whom I adored, and who held his Christian faith within an open frame and whose affirmation of me was unswerving; and my mother, whose warm embrace was comforting as long as I was "good" but whose rigidly held beliefs became a constant threat to my freedom and ability to please—either her, or the God she represented to me. Sympathetically, I realize now that her strong introjected picture of God came from her own aborted relationship with an adored but strict father.

Unfortunately, my parents shared with their generation the inability to connect flesh and spirit, so my attitudes toward my body and sexuality became increasingly distorted. In my fourth grade gym class in a Kansas City public school, I knew that I had to sit out the dances "because I was a Baptist." In high school, in this case a Christian prep school, I felt young, ugly, and ill-prepared to compete for the attention of the few boys in my class.

Over time, I withdrew from the social arena for the most part, occupying myself in all-female activities where my talents could be expressed freely. Eventually, after college graduation, I took a job in a youth organization working with girls, which allowed me fine opportunities to develop professionally. But in terms of psycho-sexual development, I was impoverished and immature. It was bewildering to me that I had no

apparent way to fulfill my childhood dream of marrying and having a home. My heart ached.

My inner misery increased, contrasting with my professional success and high spirits. I had no way of dealing with my growing despair except to continually try to submit to God's will. In the 1950s the peer in my subculture had not exposed themselves to therapy, unless mental illness was involved. It did not occur to me to try to get help outside of prayer and reading the Bible.

One day, in my late 30s, I made the crucial call. The woman with whom I shared an apartment was planning to train to become a counselor, and she gave me the name of someone whom she trusted, a former Presbyterian minister, now a therapist. I remember walking into his office that January day, hesitant and unsure, and sitting down as if I were in a confessional booth. Yet I began to feel tremendous relief almost immediately. And six weeks later, I naively suggested we "summarize" because I was planning to terminate. (After all, therapy costs money! And I thought I was "o.k." now.) The therapist wisely retorted, "You have just begun!"

That stung. I was shocked, a little humiliated. I was feeling so good. I am so grateful now that he influenced me to stay, for it was then that I began the real work of therapy. We started by dealing with matters of sexuality, and the body, and my mother—and a door began to open inside me. We worked with dream images—these came instantly—and we talked. One day, after a particularly strong session, I went home to my apartment and lay down on my bed, reaching out with my fingers, feeling the surface as though I was outside lying in the grass. A surge of energy was moving up my body, starting at my toes and moving up my thighs and my back to the tip of my head. Words came to my lips spontaneously, "I'm glad I'm a *girl!*" A thrill of joy filled me.

Then I cautioned myself, "Eunice, you're 37. It should be 'I'm glad I'm a *woman!*'" But something else within me countered, "No. I can't be a woman until I have been a *girl!*" And I stood up, exhilarated. And changed. The movement up to this point, and the many movements following it played their part, but there was something extraordinarily powerful about that single point of transformation. From that moment to this I have never questioned that I am "a woman greatly loved and capable of great loving," as Marion Woodman once wrote. It was my identity as a woman that had never been lifted up—first by my mother, but this negative attitude was subtly reinforced both by Christian teaching, and certainly also by the larger secular culture at the time.

It was indeed "my private miracle," I have often said. I did begin to date right away, and sometimes wondered why I had thought relating to men in this way was so difficult. I had encountered them easily on a professional level. What was so hard about the personal level? A year later, I had the fortune of being given another miracle when I met the man whom I married and with whom I have lived happily ever since.

I couldn't help but talk about my experience in therapy with all the zeal of an evangelist. Because it had the force of new birth, it had the ring of "gospel truth," I suppose. Some of my Christian friends misunderstood, and thought I had given up my faith. Far from it. But I did hold my faith differently. I knew that in the end, it was God who was responsible for the miraculous element in my experience. I was just grateful that the therapist was a ready instrument for that transformative work, for his presence was essential.

I embarked on a quest to find out who God was in the context of this experience. It led me into training to do this kind of spiritual midwifery myself, now in the context of vocational counseling. Persons from a variety of religious tradition and experiences ask to meet with me and I am challenged to find the common threads between these traditions. Because of my own history, I find I work best with women who have a grounded Christian faith, but are moving toward a more open perspective on it. Often they feel constrained by limited or rigid definitions of Christianity, and are gasping for a fresh breath of air provided by a more wholistic integration of body and soul. I am thankful for the women out there who have paved the way before us—some in the psychological context as healers, and some primarily in the Christian framework as spiritual directors.

I no longer see a Great Divide between psychological and spiritual truth. I do not have to quote the Bible to a client because I have incorporated its wisdom into my own language. I also do not have to back away from a person's reliance on a Higher Power, for I know how essential faith is to life. I also know that in the end only God can effect change; I am just grateful that sometimes I seem to be able to be of help.

I listen more deeply because of this integration of my work with God's work. Even as I listen, a silent prayer arises to keep me from talking too soon, saying too much, trying too hard. I am gentled and quieted by the Unseen Presence in the room upon which I rely for my own life and that of the person who has come to me. Working with a woman in mi-life yesterday morning, the image of the Psalmist came to me:

*I do not occupy myself with things
that are too hard for me,
but still my soul and make it quiet,
like a child upon it's mother's breast;
my soul is quieted within me.*

And so we sat together, and she felt held. By God who is Mother and Father. And by me.