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SOULLY RESPONSIBLE: A SINGLE MOTHER'S SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

A Thesis Presented

by

Tamar Bouchard

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Education
Specializing in Interdisciplinary Studies

January, 2011

ABSTRACT

This thesis is a scholarly account of my personal journey as a single mother to find my place in the world both spiritually and professionally. Deep personal and universalizable issues are covered including the transition from childhood to adulthood, parenting, birth, death, significant life changing events and the dramatic effect that changing spiritual, gender and religious views have on facing life challenges.

Special emphasis is centered on the importance of my feminine spirituality and the pursuit of religious/spiritual experiences within traditional and non-traditional educational opportunities up to and including the present day and my hopeful vision for the future.

My writing is heavily laced with spirituality, personal insights, stories as illustration for key points and a few surprising revelations. Surprises included the nature of growing up in Generation X with a healthy understanding and disrespect for organizations of all types, especially religious, and the effect this had on nurturing my atheist Millennial children; the actual impact of my travels in Tibet and China versus what I had expected from going; and how everything I have learned up to this point makes me more convinced than ever that pursuing further studies in Women's Spirituality is absolutely the route for me at this time and my way of making life a little bit better for those who come after me.

My hope for this thesis is to further the understanding of the general interested public of the challenges facing single mothers and their children, to show the helpful effects of a spiritual connection or search in getting through life's difficult moments, the power of writing as a means of spiritual and personal connection and to reinforce the notion that there is still a long way to go in making our society a just place to be a woman in.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the University of Vermont Graduate College for having the foresight and integrity to allow and support the Interdisciplinary Studies Master of Education program, without this program I would not have been able to uncover and pursue my life's work in feminist spiritual theory and practice, I would not even have known it was something worthy of pursuit.

I am deeply grateful to Robert J. Nash for creating the Interdisciplinary Studies program, advising it, constantly championing everyone in it and for providing an environment where it is safe and encouraged to face and delve deeply into the most sensitive and evocative issues facing our society, and our personal selves, today. Robert's classes are some of the most broadly diverse at the University and I have been privileged to experience moral conversation, the most inclusive and respectful dialogue tool available, first hand in these classes.

Personally, I want to thank Bowie, Keenan, Logan, Rafe and Jesse Bouchard: My Boyz, you have all been alternately supportive and understanding of my time and attention while pursuing my education and for that I am eternally grateful. I love you guys, you are my *raison d'être* and I could not have done it without you. To Muffin and Trax, even though you are dogs and cannot read, I want you to know that talking through my finer points while on our walks together made all of the difference.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“My father was very sure about certain matters pertaining to the universe. To him, all good things - trout as well as eternal salvation - came by grace; and grace comes by art; and art does not come easy.”

A River Runs Through It

- Norman Maclean

I have always liked Norman Maclean’s image of a river running through a story as the theme and the touchstone. The river that runs through my thesis is one of an evolving feminist perspective and the pursuit of a personal spiritual identity, created through my interactions with the natural environment, deep study of a multitude of religions and spiritual practices, scholarship, travel, reflection and writing on major life events while raising my five sons on my own as a single mother.

My experience was not unique: I was solely legally responsible for the upbringing of five other people, with little outside support, many economic disadvantages and a constant set of societal pressures and prejudices. This package of external pressures at many times were more than I could handle emotionally and the only thing that kept me going was a belief that I was here on this planet for a reason and that everything would, ultimately, be OK, if I could just hold on long enough. Spirituality and the fact that my children needed me kept me going when I had nothing left to give.

Knowing this about myself, that spirituality could be so powerful for me that it helped me to be a successful single mother, having already raised four out of five of my sons to empowered and self-actualized adulthood and having the fifth well on his way, I wanted to learn more about the factors that affect single mothers and to share what I know in the hope that my experiences and the information I have collected can help others and perhaps give one more voice to those who have spoken up in support of the powerful role of single mothers in our society and offer an additional tool to my sisters who come after me. My informal research has, time and time again, spoken to the great power all types of spiritual perspectives have had on women going through deep emotional struggles. When I have presented my ideas to helping professionals working with women they often share anecdotes that support the idea that spirituality is a real and useful support for their clients.

I was musing recently that education is set up like a mystical mystery school: the higher you go, the more you learn about how things work, the closer you get to having the keys to the castle and the stronger your ability to effect change in the greater society. It is with this hope that I present my thesis that spirituality can greatly support the demanding role of single motherhood, because, as Ruth Sidel says, single mothers are “unsung heroines” in our society. Anything we can do to help a single mother, helps her children. Since, as Stephanie Seguino enumerated recently, 40% of children in this country at this time are being raised by single mothers, helping single mothers also helps an enormous percentage of our children, children who will shape our future.

In my experience it has not been particularly relevant which religious or spiritual tradition has been practiced, but that the spiritual connection be beneficial to the emotional support and well-being of the woman. I have found that my spiritual connection to the natural world and with writing has been deeply beneficial to me and has been vital in processing deep issues that have eroded my sense of well-being at various times, even while I was investigating specific religious traditions.

My methodology for presenting this thesis is Scholarly Personal Narrative, with an emphasis on each in turn. I intend to use plain and accessible language, so that readers have no confusion about what I am presenting and what I put forth in my writing. I truly want my teenage son to be able to read and understand this thesis while not tiring those of you who have reached high levels of academia.

It has been pointed out to me that my writing style comes across in short intense bursts. You will find short sentences and short chapters. I was reflecting on why this particular style is mine and what I came up with is that I have always been a particularly busy person. You don't raise five children alone, while pursuing higher education, volunteer work and employment simultaneously without having a very full schedule. I have not had the luxury of swimming in every thought and experience. My writing style very much reflects the pace of my life, the experience of being a single mother. My life has unfolded in short, intense bursts and when I reflect back that is how it presents itself to me personally. When I have gone through big changes, and there have been many, I

try to pack as much change into one period of time as possible, if it is going to be difficult it might as well all happen at once, so I don't have time to get all worried and upset about it. I also have to admit that I appreciate it when people get to the point. There does not seem to be anything more enlightening about reading someone else's fluffy writing style when all they have to do is say it straight to communicate effectively. You will not find me writing a 20 dollar word when a 10 cent word will do. I know the 20 dollar words or I would not be in graduate school, so there is no need to be, as my sons would say, a "pretentious show-off" about it.

I have been very open about my personal experiences up to a point in this thesis. There are personal matters that I do not discuss or do not explain. This is intentional. I would be happy to have a conversation about anything you have questions about, but committing some events to public written documentation is not conducive to my best interests at this time.

CHAPTER 2: GEN X

*“The Baby Boomers [mucked] up the entire planet!
Hope they had fun. Oh, by the way,
Thanks for the:
Debt
AIDS
Ozone Hole
And the lack of jobs out there*

- Generation X

Seen on the wall of a men’s bathroom stall
At the University of Cincinnati”

- Quoted by Stephen Bennett and Stephen Craig

There has been a long running and hotly debated argument between researchers and intellectuals about the apparent feud between the Baby Boomers and Generation X. Generation X is the first generation in the history of the United States to expect a lower standard of living than their parents. I was born in 1965, at the arguable beginning of what has been branded in the media as Generation X, or Gen X for short. When I graduated from high school in 1983 the economy looked just about the same as it does today, with sky high unemployment and tremendous national debt, except that the reason for the financial crisis was due to the fact that the Federal Reserve had tightened lending to the point where home mortgages came with a 20% interest rate, so my prospects for the future seemed pretty bleak without continued education. I was raised on television, watching the Vietnam War footage on the evening news every night during dinner. I was informed by the media from the time I can remember that no matter how much of my

paycheck goes toward Social Security and Medicare I will never get to benefit from those programs, because they will be bankrupt long before I am old enough to retire.

We were called the generation who believed in nothing, raised on post-modernist thought and exploration. We tore apart and reassembled iconography to meet our own needs. It was no wonder that the religious tradition that I was raised on would not suffice for me and that I would turn away from the ideals of my family of origin and search for something my own and more personal. It was beyond a youth revolt, it was a struggle for survival by any means possible in a hostile environment.

I was not willingly a feminist in the beginning. My entire extended family, except for one outspoken uncle, was diehard Republican and I was too. I believed in President Ronald Reagan's picture of how America could be, if we would just be nice and get along. I believed Phyllis Shafly's rhetoric and voted against the Equal Rights Amendment in my very first voting experience. I had the same arguments against it that college women today have; I did not want to be drafted to go fight a war I did not believe in. I had been raised on Vietnam War footage and I wanted no part of it. At the time it was that simple. I had no idea how much that decision would haunt me later.

Other than my political affiliations I was definitely following a counter cultural path. I experimented with everything, died my hair pink and blue, partied too much and left home at 16 to spend a summer in my car and then my entire senior year of high

school living in a store my family owned in another town, sleeping on the floor at night, because for me it seemed better than being at home. After a tremendous amount of therapy and research I was sophisticated. I knew how things should be, the way they were was not acceptable, and so I did something about it. I became tremendously good at aloneness.

After high school graduation there were no jobs to be had other than picking apples or working long hours and overnights at summer resorts, so, even though I had not previously planned on it, I enrolled at Champlain College in Burlington, Vermont a few weeks before the beginning of the fall semester. I became a Fashion Merchandising major with big hair, long red nails and worked three jobs just to be at school. I learned very little in college at that time, mainly because the store I had lived in through my senior year of high school was a clothing store and I had already learned about location, location, location from the school of hard knocks. I was a scathing intellect with an independent streak a mile long trying to fit into this cute decorative little trade school box.

As college graduation loomed, I was terrified about how I was going to pay for my student loans when I knew how much I already wasn't making from my three jobs. The retail industry is notoriously low paying and I had just gone into debt to be a part of it. I wanted to travel, see the world, never have children and never be tied down. I did the next logical thing, I joined the Army. I tested out super high on their entrance exams,

so they sent me to study German at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California. I panicked about leaving home too, so I married my high school sweetheart before I left for Basic Training, that way I would have someone with me in California.

As one of the older members of Generation X, I have always prided myself on being cutting edge, sometimes bleeding edge, average. This means that by the time a phenomenon is evident in my life it is just about to hit mainstream society in a big way. I feel very alone initially, but later find out that what I experienced was just a precursor for things to come. By the time everyone else is waking up after being hit with some big societal change I am already pretty competent at managing to deal with it. The fact that I jumped into the first academic program that would take me when I saw that the economy was inhospitable after high school and went into debt to make it happen has become a characteristic of my generation. We are more educated and more in debt than the generations that came before us. We have never actually made the income required to have the standard of living our parents raised us on and debt has been our only means of keeping up appearances and having the life the media assures us is ours for the taking. Our country has been in debt our entire lives, so why not us as individuals as well?

CHAPTER 3: RELIGION

"In our early struggles for liberty, religious freedom could not fail to become a primary object."

- Thomas Jefferson

Jefferson was referring to the liberty of our then young country and the importance of our Constitutional right to religious freedom, but it seems as though this sentiment is just as much about our own very personal “pursuit of happiness” and meaning.

What is the purpose of religion?

Ideally, we turn to religion for support and faith to get through the changes in our lives, to make it through transitions, the kind that scare you and haunt you, the kind that you feel more than one single person can bear – Relationships, Family, Money, Birth and Death, especially Death. Religion gives us community and connection and a feeling that there is something greater, that life has meaning and all of the struggle is not wasted, but is part of something more and something grander. Religion has been a source of comfort to the oppressed and the oppressor alike, but also a source of empowerment to those seeking enlightenment.

Religious faith can be a valuable support when you have blown up your life completely and wonder how it is all going to turn out and have skepticism about whether or not there is a deeper meaning to the seemingly crazy things you put yourself through for no apparent reason.

I have reflected long and hard on how I have managed to find meaning in my own life. I began with one perspective and have come out working toward another, studying and grasping and gleaning at first and now beginning to truly get it.

The way has definitely not been easy and straight by any means. I have had a lot of issues to work through along the way and it has been a challenge. I know that I am not alone in this pursuit, that many, many people have been on their own spiritual journeys.

I find it admirable when a person makes a decision about their religious and spiritual views based on searching and questioning the tradition in which they were raised and researching other schools of thought and other religious traditions.

I cannot get away from religion; wherever I go it follows me. I even had an experience in an organizational leadership class at the University of Vermont recently. We had two speakers come into the class, both were there to discuss leadership, but time and time again as the presentations went on each man brought up his religious faith and belief in God, one even had pictures of Moses, Jesus and Mother Teresa in his slideshow

to illustrate great leaders throughout history. These speakers were accomplished men, men who have made something of their lives and wanted to share what they know and time and time again they went back, one nervously, to their belief in God and how their religious morality effected the form of leadership they both used to run their respective businesses. Neither man could be silent about his belief, but each time one mentioned it he did it with a nervous air of apology. I listened with a nervous air of defensiveness as well, not because I was upset about them bringing up religion, but because I was worried about what direction it would turn and if someone else in the room would be upset by it. I was defensive for other people.

That seems to be the downside to the politically correct movement, every word spoken about anything deep and spiritual is treated with suspicion and kid gloves. It is sad that we are so far removed from the very things that can give us such strength and inspiration during troubling times and contribute time and time again to phenomenal successes.

CHAPTER 4: MY RELIGIOUS ROOTS

I was raised a United Church of Christ Methodist in a medium sized, modest, low profile church in the town I grew up in. My grandmother sang in the choir, my grandfather was an usher and we went to church with my mother almost every Sunday throughout my childhood. I went to Sunday School, helped with the Nursery and knew we sat in the third pew on the left. My father always said the steeple would fall in if he went with us, so he did not go. I was Confirmed and got a black *Bible* with gold edged pages with my name inside. It never occurred to me that we were religious.

I grew up with an image of God as a kindly old man with long white hair and a long white beard, who dressed in robes and sat up on a cloud and looked down on all of us. He was the ultimate father figure, maybe actually even a grandfatherly figure. I liked God. I had good feelings about him. I thought he loved me and all the little children of the world. He was a man of Peace and Love. I am still reminded of this when I see the sun's rays breaking through clouds to reflect off the Lake, to me that has always been an indication of God looking down on us all.

I never really got the Jesus thing. I mean, I learned about him and I thought he was also a man of Peace and Love, but to me he was NOT GOD! When people would call Christ "God" it would make me insane, because to me God was God and Jesus was Jesus and that was it. There was no blending of identities in my understanding.

We were lucky to have had a female minister in our church rather early on. She was a wonderful role model, but I do not remember looking up to her or anything. I just remember that she was controversial, as the first female minister our congregation had ever had, and she overcame that controversy, because she was very good at her job.

Otherwise I was raised in a very conservative, but also welcoming and accepting religious community. One of the most devoted men in our choir and my grandparent's hairdresser was an opening gay man, there might have been another term used for his lifestyle, but it was not meant as a slur so much as an indication of his identity.

Being raised in the dominant culture and religion, as a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, meant that I did not grow up with religious guilt, that would come later. I never understood how there should be RULES about following a religious faith, everything seemed perfectly natural and logical to me. The rules seemed to be consistent all the way across the board – church, school and society. It never occurred to me that I lived in a male-dominated culture and faith.

I remember saying once when I was 9 that Hitler was just killing Jews because they killed Jesus, so it was OK. My mother was appalled and quick to correct me. Later, in my shame, I understood what had sucked in the masses in Germany - a simplistic answer to seemingly insurmountable and complicated problems, plus I wondered about a

book in an elementary school library that gave a precocious fourth grader such a message.

I was trying to remember when I stopped regularly attending the church of my childhood and I could not recall the exact time. It was sometime after I was confirmed and became a teenager. The real severing came a few years later, after I had children and the church got a new minister, a younger man with a strong born again tendency, a zealotness that was no longer inclusive. My cousin was a single unmarried teen mother and this particular minister would not baptize her daughter, because he said my cousin's daughter was illegitimate and could not be blessed and welcomed into the congregation without her parents being married. This was a child we all loved, just a few weeks older than my second son, Keenan, and someone who should never have been held accountable for anything her parents may have done or not done. She was alive and well and somehow not good enough? I was still a young married mother at the time, but the seed was planted that somehow being a single mother was absolutely something that was sinful and unacceptable to the larger culture, specifically the dominant culture that I was born and raised into.

CHAPTER 5: FAMILY

“But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife and God is the head of Christ.”

- I Corinthians 11:3

“Folly is bound up in the heart of a boy, but the rod of discipline drives it far away.”

- Proverbs 22:15

Many of us have an idealized picture of family in our heads, something like that famous painting by Norman Rockwell showing everyone around the dinner table for Thanksgiving. The ideal family has a mother, a father, 2.1 children and they live in a spacious house in a nice quiet suburb somewhere. I always wonder about the .1 children. My son's girlfriend asked me about it once when we were discussing an assignment she had in school and we decided that saying there is .1 of a child anywhere is not only nonsensical, but completely irresponsible, statistical fact or not.

In my family of origin, we were one mother, one father, four sisters and one brother. I was the oldest of these siblings and between each of us had been another child who did not make it, who died at birth or very shortly surrounding birth. My father was not particularly religious, but he definitely knew he was the boss. I was raised to know that at any major holiday event the women stayed in the kitchen and made the food and the men stayed at the table talking or they went out to the barn to look at something or other, maybe drinking a beer outside my grandmother's teetotaling house, and when

everything was ready, men ate first, children ate next and the women ate last. We women got used to cold food. We said it tasted better when it was not quite so hot. I still cannot drink a cup of tea until it is somewhat like bath water.

This is how I became not a feminist.

We girls were not exactly beaten regularly as children, but we were definitely not treated equally or with care and consideration. My much younger brother got to go to the stock car races, beer camp and do really cool guy things with my father. The girls stayed home and cooked and cleaned the house. I always found this particularly annoying.

I found that the biggest things I rebelled against as a child were the things I found to be unjust. I may not have been a feminist, but I definitely admired feminists and wanted to be just like one. I was always the warrior in my family of origin, persistent in fighting for the oppressed and speaking up when things were not fair. This made living at home untenable, because every child can name a hundred injustices a day and in my case there might have been two hundred. Feeling put down for being a girl was only the beginning.

In the family I created, the one I cherish and hold onto, there is one mother, five sons, many pets and we are a whole family.

CHAPTER 6: RELATIONSHIPS

“On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, ‘They have no wine.’ And Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.’ His mother said to the servants, ‘Do whatever he tells you.’ Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, ‘Fill the jars with water.’ And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, ‘Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.’ So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, he did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, ‘Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine until after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.’ Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.”

- John 2:1-11

There are many types of relationships; the ones I touch on are love relationships, spiritual relationships, cultural relationships and family relationships. Religion can be a key factor in relationships. Many relationships have been squashed due to religious differences, even among couples who are not personally religious, due mainly to the family stress that comes from differing traditions and concerns over how children of a mixed religious union will be raised.

Many of my friends and a few of my cousins growing up went to the Catholic Church. I was told that the Catholics who worshipped in the church beside ours thought we were sinners and would get into trouble for crossing the lawn and coming over to

worship with us. As I got older I went to Mass when I had a sleepover with my Catholic friends. Other than the centrally located and graphic crucifix, which I found upsetting, I thought the rituals were very interesting and exotic. I loved the statues of the Virgin Mary and the incense, candles, Communion and Holy Water. I was intrigued and wanted to know more. I wore Novenas and St. Christopher's medals. I grew up and married into a Charismatic Catholic family, the equivalent of Born Again Christian.

I have sometimes thought I fell in love with my ex-husband mainly to be part of his devoutly, vitally Catholic family. I have always maintained a love for the ritual and showiness of the Catholic faith and my in-laws knew everything about it. It seemed as though Catholicism had so much more substance than the simple, conservative faith I was raised in. I have had some beautiful religious experiences in Catholic churches, shrines and services. I held a huge admiration for Mother Theresa and Pope John Paul II.

My in-laws were very upset and threatened not to come to our wedding when their son and I decided to trade in the Catholic wedding we had planned, which had caused the two of us all kinds of relationship stress and turmoil, even after we completed our prerequisite *Pre-Cana* classes, to get married by a Justice of the Peace, purposely and completely leaving any mention of "God" out of the five minute ceremony.

There were also cultural differences between my ex-husband and I. I am predominantly WASP and he is a nearly full blooded French-Canadian Catholic. You

would not think that there would be much difference between us. We were both born in New England and raised in Northwestern Vermont to prosperous old farming families whose land was only a few miles away from each other on one side of the family each. Our uncles were such close friends that they were best men at each other's weddings. Even so, the differences between us were dramatic. He had grown up in a small city and I had grown up on the four hundred acres of the family farm. His family spoke French fluently and frequently, especially when the old people were around and my family spoke only English. I did not know that French-Canadians do not trust WASPs very much and some of them have a big problem with the dominant culture, because they were marginalized after the English took everything over. I learned about this, because one evening at a holiday dinner my mother-in-law was talking to her mother-in-law about me, they were speaking in French, so they did not know that I could understand them. My husband's grandmother said I was "A Good One," because I would kiss them on the lips when we said hello and good-bye to each other. It never occurred to me that they would think of me as "One of THEM," as though no matter how I was related by marriage, I would never actually be part of their blood. I would always be "OTHER." I had done everything I could to be one of them and fit in and yet that was not something they actually accepted.

This would matter a great deal when my marriage ended, because when I lost my husband I also lost his family, even though I began studying Catholic Catechism, at age 26, because I did not want to face getting a divorce. I prayed and I prayed. I read the

Bible. It was pretty clear God wanted me to get a Divorce, so Catholicism was OUT! It seemed senseless to be in trouble with a religion before really even getting started with it. My in-laws had already let me know they were not going to accept me either way.

In rereading the Biblical text at the beginning of this chapter I could not believe Jesus called his mother “Woman” like that. My children say that to me when they are being very fresh. They, like Jesus, do what I tell them to in just exactly that same way Jesus did for Mary, and there has to be that same freshness first, just so a girl is not telling them what to do and they are not complying immediately. In two thousand years not so much has changed in the relations between the sexes.

CHAPTER 7: BIRTH

“Do only that which is right.”

Every person has the natural right (and the responsibility) to peacefully determine what is right. We are advocates of religious freedom.”

The Universal Life Church website

Many people with children will point to the birth of their children as major life events, often spiritual in nature. For me it was no exception, I had four miscarriages before I had my first son. Birth is painful, supposedly Eve’s legacy to women, punishment for her Original Sin. Miscarriage is just as painful, but without the bundle of joy at the end to make it all worthwhile. I could not understand how something like that could happen, but when my oldest son was finally born – happy, healthy and spoiled - I did not wait to have him Baptized in the church that I grew up in. I wanted him to have every bit of protection that was promised. His birth stirred in me a need for some kind of protection not only for him, but also for me.

Having five children did not diminish the impact each of my sons’ births had on me personally. Each child came into the world in a way that was uniquely his own. As I got more experienced I was able to have a couple of them at home and that was an especially intense experience in trust and faith. I did not want to be numbed. I wanted to feel the pain. I wanted my babies to be healthy and unmedicated.

The bond between mother and child is significant. The mildest mannered woman will commit heroic and heinous acts to ensure the comfort, care and safety of her progeny. I am no exception.

As our family grew, so did the issues in my marriage. Eventually there was a Christmas when I was pregnant with three babies in diapers and my husband left us all, never to return.

After that I was a Divorced Single Mother briefly on Welfare, and people wanted to save me: I went to the Community Bible Church to be friendly; The Church of Latter Day Saints to try to understand their ideas and the Jehovah's Witnesses would stop by to chat, although I would often try to avoid them. I chaired non-denominational spiritual AL-ANON meetings. This was the birth of my real journey to find a religio-spiritual faith to sustain us all. I read and I listened and I learned, but none of these traditions were for me.

I went back to my United Church of Christ roots at that point, because the minister was a remarried woman who had been where I had been and did not hesitate to say: "Fuck!" when it was called for. She was my hero. That was the first time I thought of becoming a minister.

Around this time Dan Quayle started talking smack about single mothers being the downfall of the economy and American culture. Television character *Murphy Brown*, a single mother by choice, was held up as the example of what was wrong with our world. Here I had been raising my four sons on my own after my ex-husband abandoned us and somehow I was to blame for how messed up the world was? I promptly traded in my Pro-Life Republican card to support Bill Clinton and I never looked back. I would later become a Notary Public and an activist, just to get young people to vote.

This was also when I found out that my youngest son would soon be joining us. I, just like *Murphy Brown*, chose to be a full on single mother at that point. I may have traded in my Pro-Life Republican card, but there was no way I was giving up my baby for any reason. I every expectation that I could handle being a single mother all on my own, I certainly had plenty of firsthand experience by that time.

In 1996 I became an ordained minister in the Universal Life Church. I saw the founder on *60 Minutes* one night as he was discussing his troubles with the IRS over his status as a church and I knew he had the right idea, so I looked him up on my then new computer with internet connection. I was so excited when I got my ordination certification in the mail. I never really did anything with it, but I have always been happy about it.

Later I joined the Unitarian Universalist Church and was very excited. I thought again about becoming a minister. I went to Harvard Divinity School to investigate their Master of Divinity degree and fell in LOVE! I had no idea how I would move my big family to expensive Boston and survive. I decided to wait.

In 2005, I went to England and took a class in Old Testament Studies. The professor was a Church of England minister. We had amazing discussions. The deep research was fascinating. I loved the cathedrals. I fell in love with the deeper learning. I bought rosaries. I was aghast at the truly misogynistic, elitist and murderous messages of the Old Testament. I found myself aroused to anger, again and again, over the repeated mistreatment of women and children by the protagonists in the Bible. We studied the historical times of the Old Testament, the geography, the politics, and the intentions behind the writing of it. I was surprised by the candor of a pastor in “outing” the dirty little secrets of the faith. I decided that the God we pray to is not the God we said he was, but the Devil we supposedly so despise. Only the Devil could be so full of HATE! It made me very disillusioned about everything I had thought about religion up to that point.

As I studied Mass Communication in England at that same time we had discussions about the media perceptions of feminism and I realized that I thought feminists were people just like me, in fact this was the birth of my intentional feminist journey.

CHAPTER 8: SINGLE MOTHERHOOD

“...working seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day without a break, ever, ever, ever, fifty-two weeks a year, year after year. And maybe the only time I get to myself is in the evenings after I’ve put them to sleep. But usually I have already put in a fourteen-hour day and I’m too tired to relax....I have a kind of relentless schedule. So those are the hardest things. Not to sound like I am pitying myself, but realistically, it’s hard.”

“Sarah Stanley” Single mother

- Quoted by Margaret Nelson

In my experience as a single mother “Sarah Stanley” has the schedule pretty much down to a science. It made me cry just to remember briefly the worst days, the days when there would not have been enough of me to go around if there had been ten of me.

When Robert Nash, my thesis advisor, suggested that I write about being a single mother of five sons in my thesis I was a little bit scared. He was completely thrilled about the idea as a basis for my thesis. He wanted me to write what I know and just let it all flow out of me.

Except me having five children and raising them alone has always been privileged information. There are many people who know me who do not know that about me. Those who do know would find that strange I am sure. My kids might even find it strange and believe me; it was not because I was ashamed of them or anything. It’s just that having five children was not really “in” when I was in the thick of it. The world had not

experienced *John and Kate Plus 8*, *19 Children* and *Octomom* yet (think of the vile diatribes that have come out of people's mouths about Nadia Suleman, Kate Gosselin and the Duggar's by the way). It was not exactly cool to have a bunch of kids. Now I am told it is a status symbol to have a big family.

I am a single mother, by chance and by choice, through many trials and triumphs. As a working woman I kept that information close to my chest and I could never define why, other than a sense of extreme danger and the need to be very careful at my workplaces with sharing any type of personal information, especially about being a single mother, because information like that can come to be used against you later on, as I well know. It wasn't until a recent presentation by Stephanie Seguino, where she mentioned that single mothers are 40% more likely to be laid off than white men in an employment down turn, that I was fully validated concerning why being a single mother, especially of five children, has been my deepest and most closely held secret.

I think the biggest reason why it has always been a secret is because of the otherness I have always felt when someone finds this out about me or when I talk about my children and people get that confused look on their faces and suddenly feel the need to make some comment about how I must be a saint and then they announce to everyone in the vicinity that I have five kids as though it is the most startling thing in the world that they have ever heard. I feel like a freak when this happens and it is fairly humiliating. I have learned to cope and to keep my mouth shut.

It used to happen all of the time at my children's schools or their sporting events and I would feel so weird not being able to just talk to other parents as though we were all the same.

It's hard to be close to people who always treat you differently when they know something about you that freaks them out. It is hard to be friends with people who think embarrassing you is funny. It has certainly meant I did not get asked on dates as often as I normally would have. It was very hard to make friends and keep them, because I had a constant barrage of outstanding and superlative commitments.

I have a terrible sensitivity about the population control information out there. I am the greenest person I can be and yet I have all of these kids, so somehow I am also sinning against the planet. I have gotten that type of disapproval as well, especially in green Vermont.

I remember one day when my children were very little and I had a daycare in my home. We were on one of our daily walks around the city of Burlington and I had about seven children with me. I think maybe one was Jesse and the others were all little ones of various ages I was caring for who were either in the stroller or holding onto it or in a backpack. A nasty green van drove by and the sloppy fat women inside screamed out the window, asking me if I knew about birth control in disgust. The fact that the children

were actually mostly not mine did not matter to me, because they could have been. I was very deeply wounded by this and after that episode I felt my otherness even more deeply.

It is a little bit different now that my older sons have become adults and moved out or are doing their own thing. Many people think Jesse, my baby, is an only child. It is different now to tell people about having five, because at Rice, a catholic high school that Jesse currently attends, having five children is not weird at all. I can tell people I have five children and they say, “Oh, well, we have seven.” It is a huge relief to me. I wish I had known about and could afford the benefits of catholic school when I was raising my older boys.

I always feel as though I need to explain about how many children I have, I can't just give a number. I feel like an apologist for the best thing that ever happened to me. One thing that advancing my education has given me, especially at the graduate level, is validation. I have learned over and over again that my experiences of being marginalized were not acceptable. There are academics I have read who study the impacts of society and economic disadvantage on single mothers, rather than spewing rhetoric about how single mothers have ruined the society and economy. It has been a revelation to know that people who have been paying attention know what I know, that single mothers have gotten a bad reputation for no legitimate reason.

I am a single mother of five sons; mostly grown now, by circumstance and by choice and I would not have it any other way.

CHAPTER 9: RAISING SONS

“Girls are raised by women, who teach them how to act in caring and nurturing ways, and thus they are likely to want to become mothers, to get gratification from that role. Boys are also raised by women, but they are taught by numerous sources to distance themselves from that love, to prove their autonomy and independence by identifying with the father, an idealized and often absent figure.”

- Jane Juffer

Although in many traditional nuclear families the father is there for a son to bond with and emulate, in a single parent family headed by a woman her sons do not have that same advantage of modeling. A single mother has to be both mother and father to her children and try her best to make it all work out. It is especially difficult to ensure that sons do not run over their mother when it comes to rules and discipline.

As the single mother of five sons I constantly felt the pressure to find my sons a resident father. As I dated and made connections over the years it was always with the added pressure of finding someone who could and would be good and trustworthy with my precious children. It turned out that I was unsuccessful in my search for a father for them. It used to always make me kind of laugh that I was surrounded with more boys than anyone on the planet, but getting one single man to stick around was completely impossible; “Water, water everywhere, but not a drop to drink,” as the old saw goes. You have to have a sense of humor about these things.

I did my best to try to find my sons alternative means for constructive male role modeling. I made sure that they played soccer; a sport that I knew well, from an early age in order to have the benefit of male coaching and I sent them away to summer camp with good male people who I knew upheld the positive ideals that I valued and wanted my sons to value. I was mostly successful. My oldest son had some serious issues with being raised without his father, because he was old enough to remember the close relationship he had had with his father before his father left the family and losing that bond had lifelong devastating repercussions for him. This was the son who became the classic child of a single mother when looking at the gruesome statistics of the things that happen to boys who are raised without their father.

Interestingly, when things got very bad as my oldest turned 15 I sent him, briefly, to live with his father and things only got that much worse. I brought him back home after picking him up at the police station a month after he had moved in with his father.

The one thing that Bowie's experiences gave to the rest of the family was a model of what not to do. He would say he was the one who was sacrificed for the good of everyone else. I would say I tried and tried again to get him sufficient help and support, but the overwhelmed system of mental health support was so cobbled together throughout his childhood that by the time I could get him a pediatric assessment he was on the brink of adulthood and by that time the justice system had its hooks into him for other reasons. My requests for a Big Brother were repeatedly met with no response or an impossibly

long waiting list. Bowie was a personable and charming kid, by the time he became a problem child he had already dropped out of school and there was nothing more I could do except cope with a variety of extreme and unsettling behaviors until finally I had to force him out of the house with the help of a restraining order and the Burlington Police Department as a young adult. Bowie ended up in jail and it was my fault. He HATED me.

That was the darkest time of my life. I was on the brink of suicide and the only thing that saved me was an excellent hypnotherapist, Betty Moore-Hafter, who helped me to transcend my obsessive anguish even while she wondered if I should be seeing a mental health professional. Talking about it was only making it worse. I needed to have the ability to stop emotionally beating myself up and find something hopeful to attach myself to. Betty's careful attention to my words as I cried out my misery gave me a personally created CD of our session that I put headphones on to listen to every day, sometimes morning and night, until I was well on my road to emotional healing.

Bowie still has a ways to go, but he is a good man and I love him. I hope that he is going to be able to pick up the pieces of his life and remember who he was before all of the substances, but I feel that is a time off at this point. We have a relationship. We love each other. He is still angry with me and blames me, but he knows I did not do it to hurt him and we can talk without having it ruin everything.

I have fairly close relationships with my other sons, but they have their own lives. They tell me what they want to tell me, when they want to tell me. I am extremely proud that Keenan, Logan and Rafe have all been successful in relationships, have pursued their art and music, have found gainful employment, have been respectful and kind to their girlfriends and are generally adored by others, including me. My home is filled with inspiring works of art and with talk of the music that my creative, talented sons have brought home to me. There are so many things I would like to share about them, but the most important is that they got through being raised by a single mother pretty much unscathed. There are things they had to do without that their friends took for granted, but they managed to find value in the simpler things in life. They each have a talent, or two, that is a gift to the world.

I have noticed my youngest one pulling away from me the most, mainly because he and I have been left to ourselves as the others have gone on to other things. It is also because Jesse is the most concerned with upholding a traditional male role. He has always been very interested in sports and while his older brothers gave up soccer after elementary school, Jesse switched from soccer to football and then added lacrosse to his repertoire of team sports, both very male dominated and dominant. He loves that super masculine energy he is surrounded by when he is part of a high contact sports team. He comes home from practice or a game and is often very resistant of my control and fresh with me in a very chauvinistic way that he thinks is appropriate for a “real man.” This behavior is a little bit amusing and fairly annoying.

CHAPTER 10: A MALE DOMINATED SOCIETY

“The woman, the mother, the teenage girl is still, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, more likely than the man to be blamed for a relationship breaking up or a marriage not working, for the man walking out, and particularly for becoming pregnant in the first place. But clearly, the woman is not solely responsible for any of these events, including pregnancy.”

- Ruth Sidel

It is no secret that men in the United States still make more money than women and that there is no Equal Rights Amendment for women. As pointed out in a recent organizational leadership class by my classmate, Denise Abele, we are raised from a time before we are even born with expectations about who we are and what we are supposed to be based on our gender. It is indoctrinated into us that girls are pink and boys are blue. We are raised to expect educational environments with separate gender bathrooms; separate gender sports teams and separate gender sleeping accommodations. Even now, people who cross the boundaries between the genders are demonized and ridiculed, some to the point of suicide and ruin. We are so concerned with gender separation and differences that there are people who feel that their bodies must be reconstructed in order to “fit” their self-perception as the opposite sex.

In my case, sole responsibility meant that I was awarded child-support, but it was only a small fraction of the actual cost of child-rearing, meaning that I paid a disproportionately high portion of the care and feeding of my five children when

compared to the child-support contributions of their fathers. Considering that those child-support contributions, which implies some type of beneficent gift they bestowed upon me, were used as a reason for not providing gifts and other support directly to my children as they grew, it turned out to be less a gift and more an excuse for a lack of substantial parental involvement.

There were many times when visitation was cancelled for a variety of reasons and I was left to explain to my hurt and disappointed children that the plans had changed and we were going to be together for the weekend.

I often felt the blame of being a single parent, the onus of being someone that no man wanted to be with as though it were my personal defect and disease. The fathers of my children went on and remarried, but I was left alone, holding the bag as they interacted with the children either at their leisure or not at all. What was wrong with me? Why was I the one left and some other woman was the one kept?

Once when I was very young I tried to legally force my ex-husband to see his sons during his scheduled visitation after months of no contact and I was told that he had parental rights. He was entitled to see them when and if he wanted, but I could not force him. He also could go years without paying court ordered child-support, because the system was so backlogged that pursuing him was just not something that was a priority

until the arrears were extremely high. I already knew the ropes when my youngest son wanted to meet his father and his father was not interested.

CHAPTER 11: MONEY

“Women are more likely to be poor than men...in each age group, but especially adulthood, the rate of poverty is higher for females.”

- Joel Handler and Yeheskel Hasenfeld

“A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favour is better than silver or gold.”

- Proverbs 22:1

“The reward for humility and fear of the LORD is riches and honour and life.”

- Proverbs 22:4

“So I say to you, Ask and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you.”

- Luke 11:9

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”

- Matthew 5:5

“Your emotional discomfort is a powerful indicator that something is very wrong. You are meant to succeed, and failure should feel bad to you.”

- Ester and Jerry Hicks

Single mothers are often forced to depend on government subsidies in order to survive economically without the assistance of another income earning adult in their family. When a single mother needs government assistance of any kind, she is restricted to cash assistance that is set at 52% of actual need.

While young single women are starting to make equal pay with their male counterparts, single mothers are still finding pay disparities. There are many societal judgments with long historical precedence, based on interpretations of Biblical texts, that are used to decide money issues and who is entitled to money in this society. Having money can be a sign of worthiness as a human being. Being without money is a sign of some moral inadequacy that should not be supported or encouraged.

My religion inspired guilt, the guilt I was not raised on, centered almost exclusively around my lack of money as a WASP. They have a name for WASPs without money, it's poor white trash. There is shame in being part of the economically disadvantaged when you are part of the dominant ruling culture. There is no excuse for someone with all of the advantages finding herself without enough money. It is actually the greatest sin if you are a WASP.

I have worried about money, and the lack thereof, for so long that sometimes MONEY has been the only focus of my life and it is the only thing that I have the ability to think about.

There are many New Age spiritual gurus who sell the idea that being spiritual means being prosperous and if your money life is a mess, then your spiritual life is also a mess. It seems as though most of these people found success selling these ideas, so it is hard to know if that is legitimate or not.

Christianity is a bit murky about these things. On the one hand there is this same idea of “ask and you shall receive” and yet you also get “the meek shall inherit the earth” thrown in there to really confuse you. The truly spiritual of the Christian community go off to be monks or nuns and most live very frugally, but if those same people have aspirations of grandeur they have only to apply for a post in Rome at the Vatican.

The Catholic Church is the single wealthiest entity on the planet with vast stores of priceless items hoarded away throughout the millennia and yet they preach of the goodness of helping the poor and suffering. It seems The Church could ease the suffering of the world by selling a few things they forgot in the catacombs.

I guess that is not how it works. Only NEW donations go to the poor and suffering, to the upkeep of the stores in the catacombs and replacing the gold leaf on the statues.

Money is my enemy. I work very hard for it and, when I get it, is gone in an instant and never goes as far as I need it to. I have had times where I had it pretty well figured out, but then something or other came up and the whole apple cart would get tipped over in an instant. That is the story of most single mothers, we live the best way we can and when something unexpected happens we do not have enough to cover it, so we have to risk or do without something else or go into debt for it.

What is confusing to me is that I have had moments where things just came to me, seemingly effortlessly, and I felt magical and connected and in the flow of blessings and abundance. Most of these moments actually were the result of years of small things coming together to make something positive happen, but at the time I felt spiritual and blessed.

Personally, as with everything else, if I have a dollar and someone else needs it they get it. I am surrounded by children, so you can easily see how I burn through money as if it were never there to begin with. I never say something is too expensive and we can't. I find a way to make it happen. I send everything out. So, by the spiritual laws that supposedly run the universe, I should be a very rich woman. Apparently there is a flaw in the logic somewhere. The energy you put out does not come back to you, it just gets spent.

I was raised by people who were both ways. My father is magically able to collect money and is not particularly generous unless he sees a profit in it. He is very rich. My mother is magically able to collect money and spends everything as if it were water. She is in dire poverty and very needy. This magical quality my parents have seems to be spiritual and ethereal, but somehow I seem to only be able to tap into it very occasionally and only through much laying of groundwork over time. Both of my parents pretty much belong to the church of themselves and yet money comes to them just fine.

If selfishness were not such a dirty word to me, then maybe money would not be my enemy. My spiritual self cannot withhold. I have tried to train it to, but it does not come naturally to me in any way.

When I look at my parents I see my father as having financial wealth, but only having people around him for what he can give them and I see my mother as someone who has nothing and no one. Money seems to denote worth as a human being to other people.

I need to reconcile this for myself. I need to make friends with money. It would be nice to get to a place where I can have enough and more to give away too.

Money has become the only real religion and morality shaping the world. I know that might make you gasp, that I would say something so crass about faith and belief, but how do you explain the cross-cultural, international political reach of huge multinational corporations that are running everything in the world, if money has not become its own divine focus and power?

I see so many “faithful” who pray to their god or goddess of choice to ask for the money they need and the future they desire and the car they want to drive. Many tithe 10% of their income with the express promise that everything they give out will come back to them tenfold, or a hundredfold or a thousandfold, depending on the sermon.

“Ask and you shall receive” is often quoted from the Bible; it is our promise and our covenant.

I did not always feel this way, it happened over time. It started when I was a young married woman and old friends called; wanting to come over and show us something. It turned out to be Amway and it sounded like a super great opportunity. We dutifully contacted every person we ever met and tried to sell what we could. Mainly, it cost us a lot of money, but when we were offered the “amazing opportunity to grow our business” by going to a district meeting with our “up line” in Portland, Maine we packed up baby Bowie and split a motel room with our friends. Friday night and Saturday we were regaled with amazing personal stories of adversity and struggle that ended with great wealth and triumph. It was inspiring, we were pumped.

Then Sunday came and there was a religious service to start the day. The same people who had been wearing the gowns and tuxedos telling of their successes were again up on stage talking about how the riches of the world would come to all who accepted Jesus Christ as their personal Savior. They asked for people who had not been saved to come to the front of the stage to be blessed and accepted. I watched in horror and dismay as my sheep-like young husband began walking to the front of the arena.

I thought of this walking home the other day, thinking of the empty foreclosed houses and the homeless in this country and how we just, as a nation, went into debt for

hundreds of billions of dollars, so that those people could be homeless, but the people who ripped off those same homeowners with bad mortgages and huge fees would not have to be. It would have cost us a lot less money and saved us decades of social program expenses to give the people in trouble the money to stay in their homes, but that would have meant the rich white guys would have had to give up their yachts.

Would Jesus have done that?

CHAPTER 12: SPIRITUALITY

“Rosebay willowherb
epilobium angustifolium
“...The plant is also known as codlins and cream, flowering willow
and fireweed. The last name was given it because it grows up
quickly after woodland fires. It was a familiar sight for this reason
on bomb sites during and after the Second World War.

...Rosebay willowherb is the birthday flower of 11 August,
symbolizing celibacy.”

- Josephine Addison

Rosebay willowherb is the flower of my birthday. It seems apropos that I would have one of the hardiest of survivors and the first of those to thrive as my representative. I have been through many bomb blasts in my personal life over the years and have always managed to get back up and dust myself off even when no one imagined that it would be possible, least of all me. The celibacy thing just makes me laugh, considering I had quite the reputation in high school, some of which was actually a little bit true, and yet as a single mother my whole adult life has been devoted to my children with very little exception.

I have always been an outdoorsy person, so the spirits of the living world around me did and still do hold a special connection for me. I explored Goddesses and Wicca. I cast spells and called down the Moon. As I gardened I thought of my connection to the Earth and my responsibility to create beauty and give it loving care free from chemical

additives, just as I tried to raise my own children in that way. Nature has a name, Gaia, the Earth Mother, and I have felt one with her.

*“4 The Emperor
...The Emperor is the explorer whose curiosity and initiative is
always on the forefront of human experience. He is the traveler
with the globe in his hand who has the ability to make things
stable, solid and secure for himself and others...”*

- Angeles Arrien

The Emperor is my Tarot card, the one that represents me according to my birth date. I spent months learning the meanings of all of the cards and becoming adept at doing accurate readings. One year the principal of the elementary school my children attended asked me if I would be a fortune teller for the annual fall Apple Fest. I had that gig as the most popular attraction for eight years. Now, my greatest ambition is to travel. I made everything stable for my children as they grew up and now that they have gone out on their own I have begun to travel. I started my traveling with a trip to London in 2004 and then took all of my children with me when I did a semester abroad in England in 2005. This last year has been the best travel year yet, with trips to Niagara Falls, Toronto, Hampton Beach, travel for Jesse's lacrosse team and then a study tour of Beijing and Tibet.

It is funny to look back and realize that when I was younger I wanted to travel and see the world and never have children and now I have spent my life with many children and the best trips I have taken are the ones when we were together as a family. I have learned so much from my choices.

I have always had a certain spiritual gift. Most psychics will tell you that everyone has the ability, they just need to accept it and nurture it a bit and then they too will know things without being told. My gifts are in compassion, I can physically feel what others feel. I can think other people's thoughts and often know exactly what someone is going to say next. This can be extremely draining for me at times, because often it can be difficult to tell which feelings are actually mine when I am not careful about protecting myself. It can be very difficult to end a close love relationship when I have been connected to that person for any length of time, because I have been so tuned into his energy and thoughts as well as my own.

There are times in my life when I get a tingly sensation all over my body that I have recently identified as Hope. This is a sensation that makes me feel a connection to the world around me and makes me know that we are all one energy field and whatever is behind this field is good and loving. Some people think of this as their conscious contact with God.

There are other times when I get a knot in my gut and I know something is very wrong. It tells me to slow down and be careful. If I ignore it for too long it makes me sick.

When I was a child I had a pony, but mostly I have always had special dogs and cats who have been constant companions and confidants. These were my best friends in

every sense of the word, because if I had a thought or idea I would say it out loud in front of my pets and see how it sounded. They had nothing critical to say, but they were always there to help me have someone to talk to, if not to talk with. Long walks in nature with my animal friends have helped me to formulate many top notch papers over the years and they always gave me that loving companionship that I needed most at pivotal times. Even without my own companions I have often come in contact, sometimes remarkably, with wild animals who have crossed my path at an important point in my thought process and have helped me to have epiphanies of one sort or another about something I am trying to work through.

CHAPTER 13: DEATH

“Death is the central dream from which all illusions stem.”

- Foundation for the Course in Miracles

“CARING FOR THE DYING makes you poignantly aware not only of their mortality, but also of your own. So many veils and illusions separate us from the stark knowledge that we are dying; when we finally know we are dying, and all other sentient beings are dying with us, we start to have a burning, almost heartbreaking sense of the fragility and preciousness of each moment and each being, and from this can grow a deep, clear, limitless compassion for all beings.”

- Sogyal Rinpoche

Death is one of those rites of passage that most of us fear and dread. We love life and we despise death. There has been a boom in ghost hunting programs on television in recent years, because people want to know what happens after we die. We want some assurance that death is not the end, but just a transition to something else.

Death comes to my family in threes. There is some old superstition about bad things coming in threes that has seemed to hold true for us.

I have read a lot of metaphysical literature that says that we are surrounded by angels and the spirits of those we have lost, that the people who love us watch over us and make sure we make it through our lives in good shape.

I came to Buddhism wanting to know more about reincarnation. I was interested in the idea of immortality and rebirth. I wanted a world where people do not die, but somehow continue and come back to be with us.

My grandfather the usher died while I was in England. I found out a week afterwards, at the same time the Pope died in nearby Rome. I watched all of the funerary proceedings for the Pope in lieu of my own grandfather's funeral. I went to the cathedral and lit candles and prayed on my knees.

What really got me through losing my grandfather was not anything Christian though; it was *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, which was one of the first things I bought when I arrived in England. A Buddhist monk that I once read said that every tool you need to solve a problem is there for you. Being drawn to that particular book and reading it just before I needed it was the sign I needed that my faith in my own well-being did not have anything to do with some old guy on a frothy cloud, the vision of God that I was raised with, but in my connection to the Life force around me that LOVES me and takes care of my every need when I allow it to. I read that book and everything I needed to know about dying well was in there, so when I heard of how my grandfather died, at home with everyone around him and not disrupted and moved and rushed anywhere, it gave me great comfort to know he had died well.

CHAPTER 14: THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH

“I wear my truth like a scarlet letter”

- *“David”*

- Quoted by Robert J. Nash

I have felt the scarlet letter; it is such a New Englandy thing to feel. I grew up in a small town about twenty miles outside of Burlington, Vermont and my uniqueness was something extremely unwelcome in the culture I grew up in. I was not a boy, but I was interested in everything, including “boy” things. I wore my individuality as a scarlet letter, because I preferred to make outfits that matched and looked like the ones in *Seventeen* or *Vogue* magazines, rather than the usual teen uniform of Levi’s, button down oxford and the turtleneck everyone else wore all of the time. It was a scandal, because I had a gorgeous sheer gauze Indian print dress in a bright blue with satin at the front yoke and I did not wear a slip underneath, but had matching tights, headband and satin Chinese shoes instead. That outfit made me feel like a princess. I was dubbed a “whore,” because of this and because I liked to wear all black sometimes, even when it was not a funeral and I liked to hang out with the guys.

I am the black sheep of my family of origin, because I do not agree with the status quo of how things have always been. I don’t like keeping my mouth shut and pretending everything is fine when it is not.

When my five sons were small and I had a daycare in my home and the horrible people in the beat up green minivan drove by and screamed out the window at us “Haven’t you ever heard of birth control?” My little ducks all in a row were kind of like a scarlet letter at that time I guess. It definitely made me stand out alternately for ridicule and perceived sainthood. It made me *outré*.

I remain a single mother to this day to protect my children from bad men. I have heard too many stories and experienced too many things to trust again.

I remember when visiting Harvard Divinity School to see about enrolling I wore a bright red sweater with a black frog clasp at the throat and as I walked into orientation I was thinking how much I did not belong there and how the scarlet sweater was like the letter and everyone could clearly see how much I did not belong. As it turned out, Harvard ended up giving me chills and I was sure someday I was absolutely meant to be there.

I am not sure what the TRUTH about religion is. I do believe that LOVE is the common theme of almost all religious traditions and in that loving space the truth must surely be found.

I can only aspire to “*wear my truth like a scarlet letter.*”

CHAPTER 15: WRITING AS A SPIRITUAL PURSUIT

“Looking at God’s creation, it is pretty clear that the creator itself did not know when to stop. There is not one pink flower, or even fifty pink flowers, but hundreds. Snowflakes, of course, are the ultimate exercise in sheer creative glee. No two alike. This creator looks suspiciously like someone who just might send us support for our creative ventures.”

- Julia Cameron

Spirituality and the metaphysical have to be what I write about. I have a lot of anger and fears and issues right now and I wish like hell I could pray and feel as though there were someone up there who would make it all better, but frankly I tried that route for a long period of time and it seemed to offer absolutely nothing in the way of either comfort or solutions. I am a far better manifestor than God is.

I truly love the idea of a creator though. I like this image that Julia Cameron created with the abundance of beauty in the natural world and the idea of a natural support system for Creatives who are actually creating.

It is a strange time for me. I have always been a 110% person, so doing everything at once and then doing some more is not really a stretch. I am someone who always manages to pull off the most incredible things in the shortest stretch of time possible and then I look back and go “Whew, girl, you did it. I’m proud of you. You are a rock star!” Other people mostly just think that is craziness, and I suppose it is, but it is

my way. I like to do as much changing as I possibly can, so I can rest on my laurels for a while and relax later on.

“Your dissertation should be the worst piece of research that you ever write...”

- Peg Boyle Single

Accepting that there can be a lot of bad writing that comes before the great writing is something important for me to keep in mind at all times. I want to write something amazing and wonderful and full of lovely goodness that will receive accolades and a standing ovation, but thinking about that is just too much pressure for one little laptop. It makes me want to clean my room and I *never* clean my room. It makes me avoid writing and I *LOVE* to write. I have a writing degree that was supposed to give me the license to write, but I have been so busy trying to make a living and live up to my distinction that writing has been nearly impossible.

I have always been able to journal. I logged 424 pages, which is exactly 216,460 words, in *Journal 2009*, most of it whiney, some of it important to know, a tiny fraction of it was insightful, maybe two or three sentences were brilliant. I have to be able to distill quite a bit more out of my scholarly writing than a brilliant sentence or two. When I read someone else's written work, it is pretty common to only hold onto a sentence or two, in fact if I remember even one sentence a writer has written I am sure that is great writing.

“...remember and reflect on what a privilege it is to be in graduate school...embrace this time and make the most of it...”

- Peg Boyle Single

I remember my first meeting with Robert Nash at Chef’s Corner. I had heard about the Interdisciplinary Studies program from a professional career coach who was just completing the program and I was very excited. I had questions. I thought I had a focus that was important to me and I could not get started fast enough. Robert and I had a wonderful discussion and I felt truly inspired and hopeful. I got goose bumps. I felt elated.

As I was leaving Chef’s Corner after that conversation I was in a daze. I saw someone who knows me well and she actually asked me if I was OK. I told her that I thought that I just got into grad school and finally felt like I was not crazy for wanting something more from my life. I felt as though I had arrived or been accepted, not just into graduate school, but into the promise of something more and better for myself and my children.

It took me years just to have that meeting with Robert. I went and looked at other programs and felt that feeling of wanting and knowing I belonged, but I never felt like I accepted the program fully myself. I was accepted by the Interdisciplinary Studies program, but I also accepted that the Interdisciplinary Studies program is where I am committing my focus.

“The memory had acted as an organizing principle that determined the structure of her remarks. Structure had imposed order. Order made the sentences more shapely. Shapeliness increased the expressiveness of the language. Expressiveness deepened the association.”

- Vivian Gornick

Gornick’s passage has a very elegant structure in itself. It builds and weaves and sucks you into wanting to know the secret of good writing. It makes the writing process sexy just with the use of the word “shapely.” I want to write like that.

“She was, after all, many people...Because the narrator knew who was speaking, she always knew why she was speaking.”

- Vivian Gornick

I appreciate Gornick’s allusion to the complexity of our human lives and the many hats we wear and how a particular hat shapes how we relate to any given situation. It is important to stick to one hat per story to be clear and evocative.

“And then I could see, this as soon as I began writing, that I needed to pull back – way back – from these people and these events to find the place where the story could draw a deep breath and take its own measure.”

- Vivian Gornick

This one idea, getting distance from the subject matter you are writing about, has held me up for a very long time. I have tried to write this piece about the journey I have taken so many times and every time I am too goddamn pissed off to pull it off. Sadly, the

passion of being that pissed makes the writing flow like rain in a hurricane, but there is little left after the storm subsides that is worthy of human consumption.

I spent years writing fiction and then discovered memoir and then wanted to be married to creative non-fiction as an MFA student, but I could not commit to telling that story. I could not be held down and accountable to telling that much truth, with people I knew would stab me in the back in self-defense when I told my side of the story.

I spent months in libraries and museums and attics finding the facts and artifacts that would be the skeleton for my novel. I would plan and write and plan and research and write and write.

Then my ex-husband left me in the middle of the wilds of Vermont, pregnant, with three babies in diapers, no money, no place to live, a car in the shop, a calf, a couple of bunny rabbits and two dogs, one of which was shot by the neighbors later to flush the errant husband out and required an amputation, and my writing career was over for the ensuing twenty years while the novel moldered in a box in the basement.

In the meantime, I journaled every single day; journaling was my connection to the creator in me, it was my emotional outlet, it was my best friend. It was the rest of what I came away with after walking around talking to the dogs and taking care of the

daily crises of child-rearing. It was how I found my connection to the divine. It was what kept me sane in a constantly shifting world.

CHAPTER 16: MY WRITER'S VOICE

My writer's voice is loud and proud when it is in service, but it goes through long periods of being loud and personal and only for me as well. Most of my writing is just for me, even though I have known since I was a child that I was meant to be a novelist of some sort, a writer for sure.

I love words. I used to make long lists of words, sometimes three columns of words on a page, just because I liked to put them all in a stack and feed off of them. I always had a notebook full of quotes I found interesting and poignant and sometimes profane. I read everything in several libraries and would have things ordered especially for me, just so that I could get to know more about something, or read everything from a particular author.

I had a teacher in high school who told us never to apologize or preface our words with self-effacing things like "I think," because of course it is what I think, so why bother saying that. Someone once said that leaving out the "I think" made me sound like a know it all. I am a know it all and if you tell me what you know I will know even more.

My writing is my best friend. I have always been in love with making meaning, making sentences, making paragraphs, making sense.

My voice is loud and proud and unapologetic, but also not meant to hurt anyone. I am very supportive and every tirade comes with a first aid kit as needed and hopefully a suggestion for making improvements once the heat has been spent.

CHAPTER 17: THE EPIPHANY OF SCHOLARLY PERSONAL NARRATIVE

“SPN writing can be emotionally upsetting to many students, particularly to those who might be unearthing buried memories that are extremely painful to recall.”

- Robert J. Nash

I was struck by the idea of SPN as an agent of emotional catharsis and the need it might create in some writers for further psychological support to process the feelings evoked by diving into the deep end of sharing experiences and feelings. I often think of good writing as the writing that lets you into the places we all share, universalizability, if you will, and lets the reader know they are not alone in those thoughts, feelings and actions that are often excruciatingly difficult to allow others to be in on.

“I well remember the student who came to me after her dissertation was bound and displayed in a number of venues at my university with this request: ‘I am afraid that I might have hurt my mother’s feelings.’”

- Robert J. Nash

I also deeply understand being careful of sharing things about others that might come back to haunt me. I find myself self-censoring so often in public writing. I have a blog that I am very careful and diplomatic with. I would never Tweet anything about my job or my family that would be dangerous later, no matter how deeply I feel it, because I know that there will be repercussions.

These are things I am eager to get over in my writing. I am trying very hard to get to a place where I can walk in my own Truth and be authentic without the self-censoring. I want to be brave enough to tell the truth without shame or fear or regret. I also want to be in a position where being authentic is required rather than dangerous. I have no wish to be Joan of Arc, although I admire her greatly.

SPN is an epiphany to me, in that I have often been frustrated by scholarly writing for what is often its pretentious filling and stuffing and lack of true substance. I have read and written a fair amount of both, as have all of us, to get to this point in our educational experience and I know well what it takes to get the A or be recognized in the academic world up to this point. I have consistently translated many paged scholarly papers down to a paragraph of plain English and I appreciate having that skill be valued.

I find it a little bit sad that SPN is something that has had to be fought for in academia. The people and ideas that many scholars pursue, when not their own discoveries, the subjects that have withstood the test of time and scientific discovery, were, almost to a person, people who spoke from their truth and walked outside the lines. Their personal conviction and creativity colored their work and that is specifically what made it compelling, timeless and evocative. How would the work of Leonardo da Vinci or Galileo have stood up against the rigors of modern scientific scholarship? What would have been lost if Socrates had not spoken up? Creativity, interdisciplinary integration and personal voice have been a part and parcel of academic pursuit and publication since

the recorded beginning and omitting these from the academic discussion seems egregious and short sighted. We learn much more about a scholar's body of work when we know the lens from which he or she views the world.

In the present day, there is a growing body of research that is manufactured for commercial gain in all areas of study. It would be helpful if more published findings included this information honestly in the first paragraph. I can relate to being a scholar who needs to pay the house payment and has set up experimentation that will yield personal gain. I might even buy a product to help this specific person out. I cannot tolerate research that is written to seem unbiased and yet the very fact that it is being intentionally presented in a particular way illustrates that there can be no other conclusion drawn.

"I was a very verbal, macho athlete..."

- Robert J. Nash

The fact that academia has been traditionally male dominated and that scholarship is hallmarked by presenting argument and findings that are opposing and belittling to scholars of differing view in the same field, with theoretical war resulting, is not surprising to me. As the mother of five sons, who raised them to be nonviolent, ideally, even took the weapons out of the Batman toys when they were little, I still witnessed my little boys making guns out of toast and shooting each other across the breakfast table.

The willingness to wage war just might be one of those guy things we all know to be generally applicable.

SPN feels to me decidedly feminine and idealistic and welcoming. I am appreciative that an admittedly macho man could be a creator and champion of it.

It takes real bravery to put yourself on the line in SPN writing, even if you are not making deep personal revelations. Even choosing this writing style outside of our department and even our institution is still a major risk in the academy.

There is little doubt that risk taking is dangerous, but it is perhaps the only way to true personal greatness. Courage is something we value mightily in this society, and yet fearing risk seems an oddly prevalent hypocrisy of ours nonetheless. We want to be safely part of the group, the norm and yet we all admire greatly those courageous enough to swim in the other direction SUCCESSFULLY. Success is the measure of courage over folly. Courage is something Artists pursue, smoochy Artists, and not rigorous scholars.

Maybe it is time to break free of the chains of the academy. Was da Vinci's body of work any less scholarly because he was well-rounded and diverse and engaged in everything in the world around him? Why did the academy constrain itself so rigidly to begin with when the models on which it was built were unbound and brilliant?

The times of the Inquisition and the burning of heretics and libraries have long passed. We no longer have to hide behind the safe walls of the campus and self-censor in a way that will be beyond reproach and emotionally removed from the subjects we are passionate about. We can risk without threat to our lives and livelihoods, within ethical reason of course.

Building up this revolution in voice is important to the evolution and longevity of the academy. Scholars have always led the way. Robert asked me what I personally would do to be revolutionary and stand up to the academy and I did not readily respond, because I wanted to think about that a little bit. I do not find myself to be particularly timid and daunted by very much, but at the same time I do not want to be brash and full of bravado. I do know how to walk the careful line.

I was listening to an audio book called *The Jewel Tree of Tibet* by Robert Thurman while researching Tibetan Buddhism in preparation for my recent trip and I was so inspired by his speaking of the path to enlightenment. In essence what Thurman said was your deepest reality is freedom. Break away from conventional society. Individualism is important. Fulfill yourself. You yourself are Buddha, so do not follow the way of the society. Minimize your own harmfulness. Militaristic societies feel that this is bad, that fulfillment will make people unwilling to fight. Just reading that made me evolve and become a bit more revolutionary.

Time and time again the path to something better is not the path where you are a face in the crowd, but where you fly and soar and make people crane their necks to see what you are up to.

I need this Idealism to hold me up and make me feel that this rough road I am currently on is worth it and worthy of me. I need to know that I am doing this for something more than just to get a degree and have the ability to make more money. I am drawn into the ability to make my corner of the world a better place.

Where I am from and where I am going are so far from each other that even contemplating this journey seems something a bit far-fetched and grandiose, but at the same time, how do you make things happen without first imagining that they are possible and reaching for them and wanting them?

I have been a militant revolutionary in my lifetime, maybe from day one. I see how things are and then I see what I can do to make them more the way they Could be. Sometimes I just have to say something when I see how things could work another way. Sometimes I speak loudly and stridently and repeatedly. Sometimes I refuse to participate in a system that is unfair and unjust. Sometimes I return after a time and find that things have changed and it is more comfortable. Sometimes I help others to build a new format. Sometimes I see something really good and put everything I have into becoming an evangelist for it.

I have a big personality and I know how to use it. I know how to politic and incite. I know how to nurture and encourage. I know how to be supportive and helpful. I know how to stand up tall and square my shoulders and resist being put down where I do not belong. I know how to show people how it is done and teach them a better way.

I am proud of my voice. I am happy to have a strong ability to communicate effectively and clearly. I can be a chameleon and a lion as needs be.

I am not a person to stand idly by while things go on in a way that is unacceptable, but I do not have to act impulsively to respond. I know many methods for address a need for change and I am adept at finding the correct one.

Perhaps going forward I will be another evangelist for SPN.

CHAPTER 18: TIBETAN BUDDHISM

“Tibetan Buddhism is not a local thing, it is Buddhism, and it is a response to a call to become awakened. You feel the suffering of others deeply. You must respond to help, because it hurts you. You cannot force this. Pressure only makes this worse for the suffering. You realize your blissfulness. You are interconnected with all other beings.

...The problem with this goodness and prosperity is vulnerability to the outside world violence. Decadence is only a militaristic view – we are the evil violent cultures, we are permeated with it. Social paradise could only be temporary, because of the violence in the world. The need to conquer destroyed that which they were seeking. The great Siddhas foresaw this danger in India and saw Tibet as the answer. Tibet at that time was full of violent barbarians, but their geography kept them near home and from conquering. That is why the Indian Buddhist Siddhas went to Tibet to take their knowledge and treasures, because they felt they would be the easiest to convert and least vulnerable to attack. This was not an easy task, but they worked on it for many centuries.

All of the monasteries and libraries of India were destroyed, so Tibet was the keeper of everything. The Tibetan warlords turned to the monasteries and asked them to take over the society, so that there would be peace and calm. The Potala is the celebration of the monasteries taking over the society.

Compassion is the dominant ethics of the society.”

- Robert Thurman

Before I made my journey to Tibet I wanted to know more about Tibetan Buddhism. I spent a great deal of time scouring books and learning all I could ahead of time. I was interested in the juxtaposition of the peaceful Tibetans and the evil empire of

China. I knew the people were all the same good people, but I also knew some terrible things had happened in Tibet.

What I got from Tibetan Buddhism is that the *Dharma* transcends all of the big things that we use religion for - Relationships, Family, Money, Birth and Death, especially Death. My study abroad instructor for the trip, Jim Hagan, told us during our pre departure meeting that when he was in India as a young man studying Buddhism he was a little freaked out by the Tibetans he would meet, because they would peer at him with a welcoming open look of expectation. He said he asked someone what that was about, why the Tibetans always looked at everyone that way and his friend told him that the Tibetans knew that they have been connected to everyone they met, that everyone they meet has been their mother, so when they meet someone they expect to find someone familiar to them, someone precious who loved them dearly.

In Tibetan culture money is fine, but it is not a reason for being. It is just as good to be a monk who begs for lunch as it is to be a very rich person, as long as they have enough they are fine.

We are born and we die and we will be born and die again and again and a body is just that, an embodiment. The best that we can hope for is to be removed from the cycle of death and rebirth, *samsara*, through a good life followed by a good death and a

practiced experience through the *Bardo* states, described and discussed in *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, in between lifetimes and embodiments.

Tibetan Buddhism does not have a jealous need to be exclusive, His Holiness the fourteenth Dalai Lama says that you can be a Christian Buddhist if you want to be, you can be an Atheist or Agnostic Buddhist if you want to be, it is possible and not hypocritical or problematic in any way, at least on the Buddhist side of the equation.

I had wanted to go to Tibet as long as I have known that Tibet existed. I have always had a love affair with Asia, with Chinese and Indian clothes and shoes and accessories as a teenager and with the food from a very early age, but Tibet was more, it was seemingly transcendent.

One Art Hop an artist painted a golden Buddha on the little brick utility building on Pine Street next to Burlington Electric Department and ever since I have bowed in Namaste – the Light in me sees the Light in you, we are all ONE – OM – I salute every time I pass, sometimes six times a day.

Every time I see the Dalai Llama's face I pet it. I used to carry a card with his picture on it in my coat pocket for comfort. Jim Hagan also told us during the same pre departure meeting mentioned earlier that if I had taken that card with the Dalai Lama's photo on it with me to Tibet I could be in big trouble with the Chinese government. If I

had given the card to a Tibetan, and a Tibetan would want a picture of the Dalai Lama and adore it even more than I, the Tibetan could be shot.

The history of the Tibetans is one of fierce warriors who were extremely feared. I always wondered what it was that at some point caused them to see the error of their ways and change completely into a peaceful, loving, interconnected people. It is powerful to know that the Buddhist teachings, *Dharma*, brought to them by the Buddhist masters of India over many centuries was what completely changed the Tibetan people. It gives me hope for our militaristic civilization, it gives me hope that we can change completely.

CHAPTER 19: DEATH AND REBIRTH

“Sky burial or ritual [dissection](#) was once a common [funerary](#) practice in [Tibet](#) wherein a human corpse is cut in specific locations and placed on a mountaintop, exposing it to the elements or the [mahabhuta](#) and animals – especially to [birds of prey](#). The location of the sky burial preparation and place of execution are understood in the [Vajrayana](#) traditions as [charnel grounds](#). In Tibet the practice is known as jhator ([Tibetan](#): རྩ་གཏོར་; [Wylie](#): bya gtor), which literally means, ‘giving [alms](#) to the birds.’

The majority of Tibetans adhere to [Buddhism](#), which teaches [rebirth](#). There is no need to preserve the body, as it is now an empty vessel. Birds may eat it, or nature may let it decompose. So the function of the sky burial is simply the disposal of the remains. In much of Tibet the ground is too hard and rocky to dig a [grave](#), and with fuel and timber scarce, a sky burial is often more practical than [cremation](#).”

- Wikipedia

“The 7.1-magnitude earthquake that rocked Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture on April 14 killed at least 2,200 people.”

- Zhang Jin

I studied Tibetan Buddhism for a few months before my departure, more than ever before. After the recent earthquake in Tibetan populated China I learned about the Tibetan practice of Sky Burial. It never crossed my mind before that there would be such a visceral and pragmatic approach to the processing of human remains. The Buddhist monks had to cremate the overwhelming number of bodies left over after the tragic earthquake and that was a direct break with the normal tradition of chopping up a dead

body to feed to the vultures. I was stunned at first by this concept. I was almost traumatized in my Western Judeo-Christian socialized mindset. I went searching on the Internet and found a series of photos and then a video. As I watched the process, struck by how fat and young and seemingly perfect the deceased appeared, the only clue to the actual death of the individual was the complete lack of bodily fluids visible during the evisceration. It was a rather gruesome process, as every last bit of the corpse has to literally be chopped and ground up to leave no trace behind when the flock of vultures is through. This process is performed either by a group of guys who get together to share the work or a monk or monks at a ritual site, depending on the situation and the economic status of the family of the deceased.

The Tibetans believe in reincarnation, so after death the body is just that. It is nothing at all; the soul of the person has already been reborn in some other body or has reached Nirvana and is not coming back. The ground is too hard to bury people and there is not enough fuel available to cremate people normally. Feeding the vultures is continuing the circle of life without interruption while at the same time keeping everything neat and clean.

At last count something like 2,200 bodies were left after the earthquake in April, 2010. There are not enough vultures in the world to handle that many bodies at once, so the mass cremation was called for.

Thoughts of the Holocaust aside, I find this practice strangely humane. When we think of burial we think of the words “ashes to ashes, dust to dust...” in that same circle of life motif and yet modern American burials are very far from the circle of life.

I remember my horror when my grandfather was buried. I spent a lot of time examining everything, because I had missed the actual death and because he was not buried until two months after he died in March due to frozen winter ground. My grandfather’s coffin was a beautiful polished maple with sparkling metal fittings. The hole was dug at the family plot, six spaces side by side for my grandfather, his two brothers, who had predeceased him, and their three wives, one of whom was already interred. The headstone had all six names and only two dates of death were missing.

Inside the grave was a shallow plastic mat with raised edges, like a giant version of one you might place next to your back door to hold muddy boots. On top of the plastic liner was the cement vault, two inches thick all around with a removable cover that was somewhere nearby under the profusion of fake grass carpeting that covered any evidence of dirt both inside the grave and beside it.

This hiding of the dirt disturbed me so much that I turned to my grandmother beside me in distress and said: “why have they covered the dirt?” My grandfather was a farmer. He gardened. He made things with his hands. He was a craftsman. He loved the outdoors. He was all about the circle of life.

Mimi then told me that Grampy was always terribly afraid of death, as though that somehow explained the removal from the dirt and the inevitable decay. It was no secret Grampy did not want to die; the man was on his death bed for something like six years, with all of us called to his bedside several times. Every time he recovered, because he just did not want to go. He lived long past the point of being happy about it and became a very crotchety old man at the end in a way that he in his grandfatherly years never was. Grampy's mother died when he was three, and he was the oldest and longest lived of her three children.

While my great grandmother's death haunted my grandfather his entire life, he often recounted a story of his dead father coming to him as a menacing specter during my childhood. My grandmother said he was nutty, mainly because she never liked being in their house alone and would not consider it a possibility, but also because she was more afraid of some menacing flesh and blood stranger coming to the door at our rural farm. I did séances for my cousins in the house when we were kids and I knew from a frightening experience when I had to stop and clear the room that there was definitely someone disapproving lingering, so I believed my grandfather completely.

When I think about how far my grandfather's burial was from nourishing the earth with his remains and becoming food for the worms that feed the soil that grow the plants that feed the herbivores that feed the carnivores that die and keep life going, how far from that circle of life his body is, I cannot help but feel the immortality of it.

Then there is of course the western burial practice of embalming, the filling of the circulatory system with chemical preservative, so that the dead body stays pretty a bit longer. Those Tibetan bodies looked lovely. I am sure they sat for a bit before they processed them, but they still looked better from behind than any dead person I have ever seen dolled up in a coffin after three days or so.

I cannot imagine being a mummy or the skeletal remains of anyone sitting in a museum display or archive to be studied and scanned after a few thousand years of preservation and subsequent grave desecration. I know I would rather be cremated; “crispy fried and sprinkled” is how I like to say it. I am not sure about sky burial, but I can see the humanity of it. I know I will not care about my body once I have a chance to leave it. I know I will be gone from it and it will no longer be anything belonging to me. It might be kind of cool to be able to fly after I die. At the very least being put into the ground in my natural state, wrapped in a nice shroud and then having a flowering or fruiting tree planted on top of me would be lovely. That’s how we treated our beloved pets who died.

I object to the box, the coffin, the body is placed in. When I was younger my maternal grandparents died within a year of each other. Both were cremated after terrible battles with cancer, both were buried beside their beloved first child, Winnie, in a sprawling cemetery on a hillside in Chelsea. Winnie’s death had killed my grandparents a bit at the time, she died of complications of the mumps when she was 8 years old and

their despair at the loss of an adored child caused them both to become alcoholics for the rest of their lives. I was so terribly hurt that the tiny polished wood boxes, much like tiny cubical versions of Grampy's casket, contained my Grumper and Grammy. How could everything they were to me fit in those terrible little boxes?

I go to that cemetery once every year or so and cry on Grammy's grave. I always have a terrible time remembering where the cemetery is and then an even harder time finding the family plot, where now my Uncle Roger and cousin, Denis, have been added, but I remember the funeral for my Grammy, the rain, the mist over the surrounding hills, the fall foliage in splendid display. I hate the autumn to this day.

CHAPTER 20: TIBET

I went to Tibet expecting to have my mind blown. Instead I had my heart broken. I expected this transcendent, magical place of spiritual delight. What I found was something very different. I had never seen poverty on the scale of what I saw in Tibet. I had never seen so many desperate people begging for anything they could get just to survive. I had never seen so much military presence outside of an Army base. I had never seen so much destruction, destruction that was pointedly not discussed in anything but the most historic terms and yet was so obviously recent and devastating. I came home with so many questions. It took weeks and months of depression and processing to put the pieces together and finally be able to talk about it, to write about it.

The natural beauty of Tibet is there. The natural beauty of the Tibetan people is there. The soul of the Tibetan Buddhist faith is in Dharmasala, India, but many of the faithful and the brave have persevered in order to keep the faith strong for the Tibetan people who have remained. The Tibetans are faithful and hopeful. They work hard, many of them still live in the old style of the generations before them, nomads without modern conveniences or barley farmers with good crops and a diverse farmyard with a few livestock. The terrain is rugged and often inhospitable, with stretches of sandy desert or alpine gravel that make grazing land or farmland relatively scarce. Where the landscapes are the least enticing, the people are the most colorful and decorative. The homes are designed after the monasteries, filled with colors and motifs pulled directly from the *Dharma*.

While nothing was as I expected from my trip to Tibet, I learned something that I would never have been sure of if I had not gone and faced it firsthand. I learned that we here in the United States are extremely fortunate. I have worried about money my entire adult life and yet I always found a way to make it through. I am not so sure I would have been able to do what I did here raising five children alone if we had lived in Tibet. I am not sure what I would have done without some kind of support to fall back on, however meager.

I saw male and female deities together in Tibet. I even saw deities who were joined in sexual union. All of the many thousands of deities and Buddhas are really only different manifestations of one divine force that is shared with everything else on the planet, including you and me.

I saw many monasteries and a couple of nunneries. The places where the nuns lived were fairly meager in comparison to the monasteries, but none of the monasteries was wealthy or free of surveillance. It bothered me that there were monasteries where there was a chapel for the wrathful deities that women were not allowed to enter.

It also bothered me when I saw little girls working alongside grown men doing hard menial road labor in the hot summer sun. I want equality, but I am not sure having children working under those conditions is safe. The children worked everywhere. Where they were not able to work, they used their cuteness to beg and then they would

take whatever they got and go home to share it with their families. That was another form of work.

Seeing the deepest oppression I had ever seen made me react in a way that I had a very hard time understanding at first. It made me angry. It made me want to do something about it. It made me sad and it made me want to cry. It made me scared, because I knew that if I were not absolutely careful and diplomatic with every word I wanted to say I would forever be barred from returning. Here I wanted to be authentic and open in my writing and I was prevented, again and again, by the powers that be from publicly calling it the way I saw it without fear of reprisal.

I came home knowing that my decision to pursue women's spirituality was the right choice for me. I became more a feminist than I have ever been. I remember being extremely impressed by the strong proud women of Tibet and knowing that Tibetan Buddhism was not immune to sexist tendencies, even while including and revering female role models and deities.

My spiritual experience on my trip actually came at the very end and was not in Tibet, but in Beijing, in the wetlands area of the Beijing Zoo where there is a large man made pond filled with lotuses and surrounded by weeping willow trees that attracts dragonflies and birds. I sat on a bench by the side of the pond and just rested after a whirlwind tour a world away from home, watching the breeze tumble the lotuses and

make the weeping willows sway with her breath. I had seen so many artistic representations of lotuses in the monasteries of Tibet, but there in the Zoo was the real thing. It made me think of the lotuses and the pandas and Tibet, all attractions to draw the world to China.

I wondered about a religious tradition that could seem to so fail the most faithful people in the world in their time of greatest need. Then I thought about the painstakingly created sand mandalas, how they were meant to be reminders of impermanence, lest one become too attached to their creations and it gave me new respect for these devout people who remain intent on saving all of humanity with their prayers, even as their own lives are utter misery and struggle.

CHAPTER 21: FEMINISM

"Cautious, careful people always casting about to preserve their reputation or social standards never can bring about reform. Those who are really in earnest are willing to be anything or nothing in the world's estimation, and publicly and privately, in season and out, avow their sympathies with despised ideas and their advocates, and bear the consequences."

- Susan B. Anthony

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

- Margaret Mead

"In my heart, I think a woman has two choices: either she's a feminist or a masochist."

- Gloria Steinem

"It is my experience that women who do not 'belong' to a man are not seen as women or are seen, subconsciously of course, as belonging to all men."

- Beverly Holt

Single Women:
Affirming our spiritual journeys

Many people have a perception of feminists as man haters. When men ask me what I am pursuing academically and I mention the word feminist, as in "spirituality from a feminist perspective" there is an immediate physical reaction. Each man I have spoken to jumps back and lifts his hands in front of him in a defensive posture. It might be half

joking, but the fact that this reaction is consistent means that feminism is something many men really do find threatening.

When I think about my journey from not a feminist to very much a feminist I realize that the idea of feminism was threatening to me too. I was a woman, leading a traditional woman's life in every respect and it seemed as though feminism was thrust on me as another of those means of survival that I had learned to embrace. I forgot that I have always admired adventurous women who did not abide by the rules. I was obsessed with Amelia Earhart and Susan B. Anthony and the way that they did not allow men to dictate their lives for them at a time when most women would have considered it bad form to even think about behaving in that way. Margaret Mead's bravery in going to another culture and immersing herself fully was inspiring and gave me the urge to see the world in rich detail. I forgot that I went around my high school without a bra, just to show that I could have control of my own body. I forgot that I fought the gender inequalities in my own family of origin from my first memory.

As life got more complicated and difficult, sometimes impossible, I wanted to play nice and be a good girl, in fact, after I was a single mother I would crave having a man I cared about tell me I was "a good girl," as though being a good girl would get me a husband and ensure my security for the rest of my life. Maybe it is a good thing that I never remarried, because looking for that acknowledgement that I was fulfilling my traditional female role was never going to have made me happy in the long run.

I really wanted Hillary Clinton to be elected president in the last election. I only grudgingly supported Obama, because I did not think his rhetoric was going to bring the change that he spoke about. I voted for him and gave it a shot, but I knew that he was getting a bad deal and that things would not be smooth for him.

I have heard recent rumblings that we are in a post-feminist era. Apparently the idea has been around for some time, but I have barely come to identify with feminism, so considering that it could be over is not something I am willing to accept. There is no Equal Rights Amendment and we still have not been represented in the White House, so feminism is still needed. If my cutting edge average abilities hold, feminism is about to get a great big shot in the arm.

Feminism is going to change, maybe it already has and it is only the perceptions of feminism that need to be re-examined. We can be feminists without having to hold onto every single tenet in the same way we can be divorced Catholics who do not go to Mass every Sunday. We can be feminists while loving and supporting the men who support us. We can be feminists and not choose to have an abortion. We can be feminists and stay at home with our kids. We can be feminists and be happy when men succeed equally. We can be feminist and have it all, if we want to, because we have been trained to be more than amazing wonder women.

Feminism is another way to embrace being fully a woman.

CHAPTER 22: MY AMALGAMATED FAITH

As you can see from my writing, I have tried on many religious traditions. I have been a seeker. I have put my all into understanding and finding out what each religious tradition I have studied is about. The deciding factor about whether or not to continue my affiliation with a religious faith has consistently come down to whether or not I felt I was supported, mainly in a very feminist sense.

I can be very Zen when the need calls for it. I have not always been this way, but I have learned that things happen for a reason and they tend to work out for the best. I am able to feel this the most strongly when I have a sense of being part of something bigger than myself, it does not necessarily matter what that outside agent is, but it has to be on my side and there for me when I need it. I have felt the most lost, alone and despairing when I turned away from spirituality and thought it was rubbish. When I lost my conscious contact I lost all hope. Hope to me is my connection to the greater good, the divine universal, whoever she/he/it is or they are.

Every day I used to walk or drive by the Buddha mural on Pine Street in Burlington and place my hands together in acknowledgement – Namaste – the Light in me recognizes the Light in you, we are all ONE. Every evening I used to walk home from work and place my hands on the foot of the Mary statue that securely holds down a snake that sits on the grounds of the Catholic Church on the corner near where I used to live and ask for help to do what I need to do to be the Mother and take care of my

children and family. I never go to church. I do glory in every sunny day and stop to say hello to a snake or a bunny that crosses my path. I LOVE.

My belief has been shaped by so very many diverse experiences and investigations. What I believe now is very different from what I believed even a few years ago. I am proud to know that I have been open to what I would discover when I looked to know more. I have many more doors to open. I have many I am not ready to open. I have a few I will probably never open. I do believe that LOVE is the only common denominator that really matters and is the only area in which most every faith can agree, and so to me that is the Truth, if there is such a thing.

I was open and willing to be moved greatly by my experience in Tibet. I was sad that when I was there, sitting in the heart of compassion, all I could feel around me was the pain of the Tibetan people, even while the Tibetans around me were chanting, “*Om Mani Padme Hum*,” the Tibetan Buddhist mantra for the uplifting of all mankind, including me. When I hung my prayer flags on the rooftop of the world, a few miles from Everest and as close as we were allowed to go, I thought of my children. I thought about how much I wished they were there with me. I was moved by that Great Mother Goddess of the World, even if she only coyly peeked out at us and allowed us to see her. I was moved by the fact that something as grand as one of the highest mountains in the world, if not the highest, has a feminine identity and I was there with her, she came out

from behind the clouds after ten days of hiding to show herself to me. I was moved by strong proud women who persevere.

CHAPTER 23: WOMEN'S SPIRITUALITY

“Feminist psychological professionals are beginning to explore the implications of the ‘feminization’ of religion, learning as they go that many women are finding in women’s spiritual groups elements of health and healing that they seek. By feminization I mean the process by which the needs and experiences of those previously marginalized, especially women, but including others such as those who are economically poor and racially discriminated against, are taken as normative in the shaping of religion.”

- Mary E. Hunt

Women’s Spirituality, Women’s Lives

Women’s spirituality is not a new ideal, it has ancient global significance. The fact that feminism has now begun reshaping what we know about religious traditions, some detractors call this rewriting history, means that women are discovering that having an amalgamated, self-created, but shared faith is healthy and healing. In what has traditionally, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, been a male dominated realm, religion, women are finding their own voices and their own empowerment both inside and outside of this tradition.

It is difficult to shake the good girl mentality, without also shaking the paternalistic nature of our religion based society. We have lived in judgment. We have been told what our place is and that we were responsible for Original Sin, even though if you read the Bible carefully, Eve actually thinks she is being helpful to Adam and fulfilling her role as his companion and partner, not in any way tempting him to sin, but

supporting his growth as any kind loving person would. We have been haunted by our lack of good moral standing based on our social and economic disadvantage. We have constantly been questioned about our motivations and allegiances when wanting to break free of the boxes we have been placed in. We have climbed up impossibly high mountains pushing the weight of our oppressions ahead of us and dragging the even heavier guilt of displeasing our traditional family members and social groups behind us. We have aspired to have what we want without upsetting anyone around us or contributing to anyone else's discomfort and suffering. We take care of the children and the house and also bring home the bacon and fry it up in the pan, right on time, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year, with no break – ever, ever, ever. If we are really good girls we also go to the gym, wear nice clothes and remember to freshen our lipstick, so we look pretty as a peach while we are doing it. We are the Madonna and the Whore, as needs be.

No wonder so many men are scared of us, of feminists. Even with all of the roadblocks and the trials and tribulations we have done it ALL. To accept ourselves as goddesses of our own new religion is only the next logical step. We don't need to destroy the old male dominated society, we can transcend it, and we have risen above it.

Men are raised by women. We have always held the power. We have just chosen not to use it until now. We allowed ourselves to be closeted and placed, so that we would

not have to worry about upsetting anyone or damaging our ties that bound us to those we loved and held dear.

As the mother of five sons, who has been solely responsible for their care and feeding, their education and indoctrination, their preparation for the world they were born into, I am proud to know that I allowed myself to be the strong powerful woman they needed me to be, mother and father at once. This knowledge of what I have been capable of has led me to know the divinity within me, and to know that without a connection outside of myself to something greater I could never have maintained my hopefulness.

I leap into this new adventure of studying and shaping women's spirituality with open arms and a feeling of coming home. A sense of relief at finding a place of belonging, someplace just for me, where I am accepted for the complicated, dynamic person I am, including a lover of men and a mother of beloved sons.

CHAPTER 24: CONCLUSION AND FUTURE VISION

“In contrast to the purported benefits of welfare to work, since the inception of such policies, researchers, social workers, and health professionals have taken issue with the assumption that single mothers, who have been shown to have high levels of psychological ill-health, such as depression and anxiety...can unproblematically move into the workforce... the prevalence of moderate to severe mental illness disability was more pronounced among single mothers (28.7%) compared with partnered mothers (15.7%)... Similarly, ... single mothers were more likely than other women to have experienced suicidal thoughts... and self harm... single mothers had a higher prevalence (11.7%) of major depressive syndrome than did married mothers (5%).”

- The Quality of Life of Single Mothers Making the Transition from Welfare to Work

Single mothers have it rough. It's not hard enough that they are economically disadvantaged and politically and religiously scapegoated, but they are also more prone to mental illness and self-harm as a result of the continual stress of being solely responsible for their beloved progeny with few supports and little standing between them and utter ruin. This set of circumstances and social constructs is impossibly oppressive and continually terrifying. Single mothers would be suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, except that the Trauma never really hits the Post phase for them, the hits just keep coming.

I let you in on the most intimate details of my life, things that I hold carefully close to myself, in the hope that you will come to understand a little bit more, from the perspective of my first person account, about what it is like to be a single mother.

Single mothers need support and they need to feel as though this support comes from outside themselves, because inside there is nothing left to draw upon. Finding a supportive uplifting spiritual source from which to be replenished is vital to their continued mental health and well-being. Hope must be nurtured, because without it there is only the endless daily grind and the terror of insecurity for the most basic human needs.

I find hope in an empowering, uplifting feminist perspective on spirituality, because it has freed itself from the patriarchal oppression so dominant both in our society and in our Judeo-Christian traditions. It celebrates the strength and courage that is feminine.

My intention for this thesis was to show you how it has been for me as a single mother. I let you into my world in the hope that by baring my soul and opening my closets you would see that a single mother, souly responsible for her children's well-being, is not a threat to our society. I just want us single mothers to catch that big fish that is in the river that runs through all of our lives – the well-deserved respect,

appreciation and loving support we all need so passionately: mentally, physically and spiritually. Sisters, I applaud you and me too.

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