

IMMERSE

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Two pastors, two sermons,
two reshaped souls

Barefoot exists to provide youth workers with effective ministry tools and resources. Our deepest desire with the *Immerse Journal* is to partner with you in guiding students into spiritual formation for the mission of God. This is why we have sought content that ensures the shaping of the whole of a youth worker's life. We believe that if *your* life is being transformed, you will be able to aid in the transformation of others.



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AWAKENING TO MUTUALITY

You can be anything you want to be in life except a pastor, elder or deacon. Because of no reason other than your gender, you are to submit to male authority. Though you can be anything you want to be except a leader of men, your highest calling is that of wife and mother, so you ought to be satisfied with that. And once you obtain this most worthy of callings, your duty is to please your husband and care for your children, even if it means repressing your own dreams.

BY PHILEENA HEUERTZ

For a long time, this was the mental tape that played over and over in my subconscious mind. I am a 37-year-old, socially engaged, married, Christian woman. My faith is grounded in the Catholic tradition, and I have chosen not to bear children. I've lived an unusual North American life, spending more than half of my adulthood in and out of some of the poorest neighborhoods in the world. My friends range from people of privilege and influence to women trapped in the commercial sex trade and young men recovering from war-torn childhoods.

As a young person I was known to be compliant and deeply connected to faith in God—a personal, relational God. But gradually, faith demanded non-compliance in what it means for me to be a Christian woman. We'll call this *feminine awakening*. Feminine awakening is life shattering for most conservative Christians. But it is not only for women. Many men also need to come to terms with male-dominant paradigms.

Dismantling Patriarchal Paradigms

Reflecting on the gospel message, Fr. Thomas Keating, a Cistercian monk and modern Christian mystic, says that the first stage of the spiritual journey involves the dismantling of worldview and self-image.¹ It seems Jesus was always doing this to people. For me, patriarchal paradigms had to be identified and dismantled in order for me to continue to grow and develop.

Male dominance and superiority dominated the culture I grew up in. The typical model of male-female relationships I witnessed looked something like this. In church, only the man was allowed to teach from the pulpit. Women were not permitted to teach men. Women weren't allowed to pass the offering plate or serve communion. They were consigned to playing the piano, singing in the choir, teaching other women and children and cooking and serving church dinners. More revered women became missionaries in faraway places, where they could minister freely.

Though my dad was supportive of my mom and me pursuing our dreams, many of the marriages I witnessed took on a different expression. The husband always drove the car, even if the wife wanted to. The husband expected dinner to be made by a certain time and his laundry washed. The wife was expected to meet her husband's every need. And if the husband

committed an affair, social gossip usually indicted the wife for not being attentive enough to her husband's sex drive.

The woman wasn't even afforded a name of her own. She belonged to her father and then to her husband. And a woman was subtly defined in relationship to men through her title as Miss, Ms. or Mrs. Obviously, a man is not subjected to such definitions.

Though my mom often resisted the status quo, she couldn't escape all the influence of male dominance. Bright, talented and hardworking, Mom did what many women in her day did—she discontinued her college education once she married. Many women in her generation were noted for such an accomplishment. Even 20 years later at the college I graduated from, the tradition was evident. My peers and I witnessed the same phenomena—women attending classes and receiving education but ultimately aspiring to attain their “M-R-S” degrees.

Many of the predominant people in my life as a child, teen and young adult viewed women's place in life as reflected in Debi Pearl's book, *Created to Be His Help Meet*, published in 2004. Pearl gives advice about how to be godly women, wives and mothers. She sums up well the patriarchal teaching with which I was conditioned. While this view has left the mainstream, it can still be found in understated forms, and its impact on both women and men extends well beyond the fundamentalist churches that still preach it.

In essence, Pearl suggests that being a woman is defined by one's role as wife and mother—it is her “created nature.”²

“A good help meet will have a passion to be of service. Her first calling is to be of service to her husband, then her children, and when time affords, her passion of service will spill over to serving others.”³

At one point early in the book, she responds to a woman who sought Pearl's advice about her husband's emotional affair with his secretary. In shocking rhetoric that has been so widely accepted in Christian circles, Pearl instructs this woman and all those reading her book to exploit her beauty and sexuality and compete with the secretary in order to

win her husband's affection and fidelity. "God has provided for your husband's complete satisfaction and deliverance from temptation through you."⁴

Pearl goes on to explain that if the woman confronts her husband, calls him to account and asks him to change his behavior, the marriage will end in divorce. She'll be standing on principle, but she'll be sleeping alone. If she finds another husband, he'll be no better than her first.

As I reviewed Pearl's book, which was being read by a number of my friends, I couldn't believe the blatant female subordination and male domination she promotes. This kind of submission is a picture of power and powerlessness, exploiter and exploited, superiority and inferiority, better and less. Submission of this nature is the result of a power paradigm that favors men. When this view is adhered to, women and men are held captive from reaching their potential.

Mutuality

In stark contrast to Pearl's perspective, when my husband and I made a 33-day pilgrimage to Santiago, I learned a different kind of submission. Chris and I each encountered physical, mental and emotional obstacles that we'd never encountered before. At times, I needed Chris to support me and keep me going. At other times, Chris needed me to support and encourage him.

Mutuality. The presumption under which I had grown up—that the woman submits to the man as part of the natural order of things; that to submit

meant to suppress myself and elevate someone else, not as an act of mercy but as an act of penance for my gender—was subverted and reshaped as we made our way together along the Camino. We needed one another, and we needed to trust each other. The same is true in our everyday life together.

As my self-perception and understanding of what it means to be woman was healed and transformed, so also was my perception of God. Early in my awakening, I had the sense that God wanted to reintroduce Godself to me. Since so much of my understanding of God was shaped by masculine influence, my understanding was limited. If God is perceived as male and men are often overpowering and all-pervasive, then there's no room for me as a woman in relationship to God or men.

But here was this revelation of God in Jesus, who as a man doesn't overpower, overshadow or impose himself. Though Jesus could fill the space of the world and is certainly self-sufficient, he restrains himself with remarkable discipline and control to make room for the other—all others. And he doesn't stop there. He invites us into a relationship of mutuality—giving and also receiving.

Incredible. If the God of the universe can make room for me and receive what I have to offer, then certainly humanity can too—most notably men. In Jesus, we see the portrait of what it means to be the best of masculine humanity—powerful but free of ego, dominant but tempered, strong but yielding to others. He has nothing to prove and everything to give. He is a

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respector of persons—he affirms that masculine and feminine are both divine reflections. In relationship to him, there is enough space for all of us to live in mutuality, offering our gifts and influence to one another.

Sadly, a lot of Christian women have embraced the role of “submission” to their detriment. I think one way this subjugated posture can be endured is to pretend that we as women don’t need anything. We can do it all and ask for nothing in return. In a world where the woman is intricately connected and subjected to the needs of everyone around her, there is no room for dreams of her own. She exists *for* everyone else. And she can continue to live that way if she pretends she is not vulnerable and needy herself.

In contrast, mutuality between men and women invites us to true intimacy and frees one another to give *as well as* receive. In this way, we are each propelled to live into our full potential.

The Sin of Self-Abnegation

Awakening caused my worldview of submission to be shattered, along with my inferior and subordinate view of self. This was a new way of understanding brokenness. Often I had equated the need for brokenness in relation to the sin of pride. Strangely, the brokenness invitation I now received was one of being broken of self-abnegation or self-denial. Like the woman in the gospel of Luke, who was bent over for 18 years by an evil spirit—Jesus’ healing of her meant a strengthening of her spine to stand up straight. She didn’t need to be broken of pride but broken of what shackled her in a posture of oppression.⁵

Some of what I needed to be liberated from were familial, cultural and religious paradigms of what it means to be a woman. I realized just how much I was living my life for other people rather than for who God made me to be. I realized how much I put everyone else first, like a good self-denying Christian, only to discover how in some of those ways I was *hiding* and pretending I didn’t have needs and dreams. In my awakened state, I realized that I was not living up to who God made me to be. The easier, *broader*⁶ way was to hide behind selfless deeds rather than live up to my potential to influence and create change, to heal and to lead.

Sadly, a theology that overemphasizes self-sacrifice has served to devastate many a woman. But there is another way. The Christian journey has helped me wake up to the fullness of being created in the image of God—male *and* female God created them.

There is something beautiful and divine to be embraced in feminine identity. Patriarchal systems that divorce us from the feminine rob us of wisdom and perspective that men and women both need. When we don’t allow ourselves to reflect on the feminine nature of God, our understanding of God is deficient. Similarly, our communities are deficient when they restrict the definition and expression of what it means to be woman.

Redefining Woman

When Chris and I first got married, we were certain we would have children. Chris planned on having six. He is the oldest of six and thought that was a good number. I also wanted children but thought it wise to start with two and see what we could handle after that (being careful about not being outnumbered made sense to me). We were so disposed to having children that before we were married, Chris bought a small Indian dress for our first baby girl and a small Nepali jacket for our first baby boy. We still have them. Everyone who knows us knows that we love children. So people are usually surprised when we tell them we decided not to have any of our own.

We didn’t make this decision hastily or impulsively but after years of honest, soul-searching conversation with one another and after prayer, fasting and seeking counsel from others. And being sensitive to the maternal instinct, Chris largely deferred to me in the final decision.

As I took inventory of my upbringing and the people in my life, at the time I couldn’t find anyone who had made an intentional decision not to have children, unless they’d also made a decision for celibacy. It seemed to me that a woman’s identity centered around her relationship to her husband and her children. Even after 15 years of marriage without children, when I visit some places, I still get asked, “When are you going to have a baby?” And I still get told, “You should have

Making the decision not to bear children meant I had to let go of some of the parts of myself that wanted to be connected, understood, accepted, free of judgment and criticism. And most importantly, I had to relinquish the experience of ever conceiving a child and giving birth and having little reflections of Chris and me to enjoy and cherish for the rest of our lives. Not an easy decision.

a child.” And always, one of the first questions I’m asked when meeting someone new in *any* culture is, “Do you have children?”

There is a similar pressure associated with unmarried women. In many cultures, if a young woman post university is not engaged or soon to be, people start getting nervous. A lot of my young, single, female friends struggle to make lives for themselves if they don’t involve solid prospects for marriage. One young woman was heard talking about all the home furnishings she will not purchase until it’s time to register for her wedding (she was not even in a dating relationship!).

Other young women I know struggle to find personal inner drive and ambition for anything other than getting married and having children. If they start a career, it is sometimes viewed as temporary—until marriage. And many women have too easily given up their life ambitions once they do get married under the assumption that that is what a wife and mother is meant to do.

I understand that marriage and conceiving and bearing children are some of the most extraordinary experiences a woman can have—and in a lot of cases rightly requires the sacrifices women make. Marriage is a sacrament, and I feel blessed to be married to such an incredible man. I esteem motherhood (and fatherhood) as one of the highest callings.

But I’ve also come to realize that there can be more to life than being a wife and mother—contrary to what the dominant culture seems to suggest. And not

being married and not having children can actually be a fecund thing to do (though traditional Christian teaching has guilted a lot of us into thinking it is our Christian duty to get married and be fruitful and multiply in the form of biological reproduction).

The identity struggle and role tension I see in young women today can be understood from a number of perspectives. Human development theory suggests something insightful for this discussion. According to Robert Kegan in his book *The Evolving Self*, there are six stages of human development: incorporative, impulsive, imperial, interpersonal, institutional and, when fully mature, inter-individual.

Contrary to conservative Christian opinion, human development theory suggests that we don’t acquire gender roles completely inherently. Culture plays a large part in shaping expectations for men and women. And in many cases, women are denied nurture for institutional development—development of their personal interests, ideologies, strengths, skills and gifts beyond relationships. Instead, they are reared, trained and educated to remain in the interpersonal stage; forced to find identity in relationship to others.

Men, in contrast, are afforded the opportunity to develop into the institutional stage, encouraged to pursue their own interests, ideologies, strengths, skills and gifts toward contributing to society. This explains why young men aren’t plagued with the same tensions in relationship and toward marriage and children and why young women often struggle to develop their identities into the creative stage of institution.

It's the 21st century, and we've come a long way in recognizing the equality of women and men. But we still have miles to go before women and men are both free to develop to their fullest potential, liberated to make free choices that connect to their deepest selves. For some men, that might mean that being a homemaker would be the truest expression of who they are, but the pressures of society and culture don't typically allow that as an option.

The most difficult and most mature stage in human development theory—inter-individual—is usually a struggle for both men and women. But if men and women are nurtured through the interpersonal and institutional stages of development, they can also find their way into the inter-individual stage, where mutuality is possible and where they will become fully actualized men and women expressed through a lovely exchange of persons—where giving and receiving are met with grace and appeal.

Since I was reared well for the interpersonal stage, it was an earth-shattering proposition for me to consider choosing not to bear children. I had to wrestle with what it meant to be a woman. If being a woman meant being defined in relationship to others—primarily husband and children—and I denied having this most sacred experience, would I still be a woman?

Making the decision not to bear children meant I had to let go of some of the parts of myself that wanted to be connected, understood, accepted, free of judgment and criticism. And most importantly, I had to relinquish the experience of ever conceiving a child and giving birth and having little reflections of Chris and me to enjoy and cherish for the rest of our lives. Not an easy decision. There was a necessary grieving and mourning involved. But the fruit and life that have come and continue to come from that decision are that I get to be available to a world of children who long for the same opportunities I would give my own.

So what does it mean to be a woman? Certainly it may include motherhood. There are plenty of happy mothers in the world. What I've come to understand is that being a woman (like being a man) means to be free to be one's truest self. Being a woman (like being a man) means not to be defined by the expectations and obligations of family, religion, culture,

society and gender roles. Being free means that we are not defined by what we have, do or what others say about us.⁷

My decision not to bear children is an expression of how the grace of God moved me from being *defined* by relationships to *having* relationships. A woman who chooses to bear children can achieve the same ends. Both decisions can be the truest expression of who we are. The point is not the outcome. The point is to move from the interpersonal stage, where we are defined by our relationships, to the institutional stage, where we are free to choose our true selves and uncover and be oriented by our ideologies (institutional)—and ultimately to be liberated toward mutual relationships of genuine interdependence (inter-individual). Is this not the freedom Jesus represented and offered?

Women and men alike, we are on a journey of becoming who God created us to be. Any form of domination prevents that for both. Mutuality offers an alternative to traditional views of submission. In 2011, we can be anything we want to be. For the hope of the world, may we choose postures of mutuality that support the full development and potential of both men and women.

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1. Thomas Keating. *The Paschal Mystery: A Journey into Redemption and Grace*. Contemplative Outreach LTD, 2007, p. 100.
2. Debi Pearl, *Created To Be His Help Meet* (Pleasantville, TN.: No Greater Joy, 2004), p. 23.
3. *Ibid.* p. 25.
4. *Ibid.* p. 29.
5. I owe this insight to my gifted spiritual director, Anne Pellegrino, OSM.
6. Matthew 7:13.
7. Henri Nouwen with Philip Roderick, *Beloved: Henri Nouwen in Conversation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), p. 12.

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