WOMEN IN SEARCH OF A WAY

Sue Delaney

MANY YEARS AGO, AS A YOUNG WOMAN in my late twenties with three small children, I found myself living for the best part of a year in a place that was little more than a construction camp on the edge of a desert in Western Australia. There was nowhere to go, nothing to do. The nearest town was a hundred kilometres away over red dust roads. Every afternoon, while the youngest child slept and the others were at school, there was an hour or two of silence. For me, this was a time for reading novels or writing letters to family on the other side of the continent. Sometimes, looking for intellectual stimulation, I retreated to a battered copy of Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy*.

Before long, a question that had haunted me since childhood rose to the surface. Did God really exist? Despite being a cradle Roman Catholic, going to a Catholic school and being actively involved with the Catholic community, I had always postponed trying to resolve my childhood doubts. Now, with this quiet time, came my chance to settle them. So began my own spiritual quest.

Some years, and several university degrees, later, at an impasse in my search for God, I became interested in how other women had engaged in that same quest. Why only women? In my own exploring I had noticed that across all the main religious traditions, the enlightened sages and spiritual writers were, with rare exceptions, men. Moreover, many of these taught that family life was an impediment to spiritual life, and some went even further to say that enlightenment was not possible for a woman. From there it seemed that the only way forward was to plunge headlong into the hidden underground of women's spirituality, by listening to what women themselves had to say, either in conversation or in written accounts. How did their quest begin? What aided the search? What hindered it? What did they find?

The Way, 49/4 (October 2010), 41–54

Gradually a bookcase filled, then overflowed, with spiritual autobiographies from contemporary and early twentieth-century women. Increasingly the internet played a role, yielding briefer and more informal accounts of spiritual adventures. Every woman's story was unique and different. I had not expected such diversity, so trying to identify common themes was an almost impossible task. Determined to find some guidance for myself, however, I persevered and gradually some glimmers concerning different phases of the spiritual journey emerged.

Beginning Questions, Beginning the Quest

A common beginning to a spiritual quest was a growing awareness that there was something missing in life. This might only be a vague wondering if there was not more to life than ordinary everyday reality, or a far deeper discontent. Even though a woman might have been leading a very satisfying life in terms of family, friends, work and material security, something seemed to be missing. Sometimes her wondering coalesced into a particular question that would not go away. What was it that was missing? What could be done to satisfy that elusive longing for something more? A change of lifestyle? A search for a spiritual dimension within the reality of everyday life?

Many turned first to the religion either of childhood or of family tradition for answers. They sought contact and conversation with others more actively involved in their tradition. They turned to books for information and to academic studies. Then, still dissatisfied, they began to experiment with lifestyle changes and the spiritual practices of other religious and New Age groups, until finally they found a path that attracted them. Most of the women were married and involved in family life, and this raised other issues. The best way to describe this phase, and suggest something of its diversity, is to tell the stories of some of the women whose lives give context to it.

Deciding to Become a Believer—Dorothy Day

Dorothy Day (1897–1980) suffered, as a child and an adult, from existential anxiety in the face of death and from a deep personal loneliness. Not for nothing was her autobiography entitled *The Long*

Loneliness![1] The panacea was to believe in God. As an adolescent in a nominally Christian family, she struggled to believe. As a university student, encountering a dismissive attitude towards religion as a prop for the weak, she gave up the effort and turned to politics and social justice. In her late twenties, during a peaceful time away from the distractions of city life and political activism, enjoying life with her partner, spiritual questions surfaced again, together with the old existential anxieties of childhood. She turned inwards in a quest for faith and an orderly way of life.

Day was 29 years old. She had had enough of the freedom of doing whatever she wanted to do. Now she wanted a way of life to follow, and so was very much attracted to Roman Catholicism. This brought difficulties between herself and her partner, the father of her child. He was against all religion and threatened to leave her. He was also against marriage. If she became a Catholic, they could no longer live together unless they married. It took a year to make the decision, but make it she did. She decided to become a Catholic, and her partner consequently moved out.

Not unexpectedly, even as she participated in the rituals of being received into the Catholic Church, there was no joy. Her inner voice constantly questioned what she was doing, chiding her about trying to induce faith, and suggesting that she was partaking of the 'opiate of the people'. She felt herself a hypocrite as she knelt before the altar. However, she had made up her mind to accept the Catholic teachings without inquiry or question, trusting that understanding would come with time.

Dorothy Day's chosen way to faith in God was to override her doubts and lack of belief in the hope that these would disappear once she became a Catholic and engaged in the spiritual practices of the Church. For the rest of her life she refused to allow doubt to surface. She regarded doubt, whether religious doubt or doubt about her own vocation, as a temptation and a source of suffering. She also avoided silent retreats. While this way of proceeding worked for Day and for some other women, many modern women would not be able to stifle the voice of doubt so successfully. And yet there is much to be said for engaging in a particular spiritual practice (regardless of doubts) to see where it leads, rather than rejecting it out of hand.

[1] Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of Dorothy Day*, illustrated by Fritz Eichenberg (New York: HarperCollins, 1952).

Searching for 'More to Life'—Ayya Khema

For other women returning to a family religious tradition was not so easy, especially if they had had little religious education as children. A religious culture imbued in childhood bestows a religious 'mother-tongue', a set of beliefs and practices not always easy to acquire in later life. The spiritual autobiography of the Buddhist nun Ayya Khema (1923–1997), written only a few years before she died, shows a similar attempt to Dorothy Day's, but against a very different background.[2] Ayya Khema was 34 years old when she began to wonder if there was more to life than children, community activities and a house in the suburbs of Los Angeles.

Born as Ilse Kussel, to a secular Jewish family in Berlin, Ayya Khema did not even know she was Jewish until she was ten years old and Hitler was making life increasingly difficult. It was so difficult that her family decided to leave Germany. Ayya Khema was sent to England on a children's transport, later going on to join her parents in Shanghai, shortly before the Japanese occupation in 1941. When the Japanese arrived life again became difficult. Eventually the Americans replaced the Japanese, bringing three years of peace. She married another German Jewish refugee and was soon the mother of a baby girl. However, with the imminent arrival of Maoist forces, the small family fled to America in 1949. Once there, husband and wife worked hard to buy their own home, the first real home Ayya had had since leaving Germany ten years earlier. Then she had another child, a son, and with his birth became a full-time mother.

On the surface, life was peaceful and secure. She had everything she had ever wanted. Below the surface however, something was stirring. There was a vague feeling of incompleteness. Surely there was more to life than meeting its immediate needs? She began to read books on philosophy and religion, and tried to discuss the matter with family and friends. To her dismay, she found herself alone.

> With these ideas and feelings, I was entirely alone. I knew no one who thought the same way I did. Every time I brought up this type of subject at home, my husband would lose his temper. 'What is it

[2] Ayya Khema, *I Give You My Life: The Autobiography of a Western Buddhist Nun*, translated by Sherab Chodzin Kohn (Boston: Shambala, 1998).

> you want?' he would ask, upset. What did I want? A new kind of human life, a way of living that related to my innermost heart. But I had no idea how to approach this idea of mine.[3]

One day, at her mother's house, Ayya met a young man from the Berlin of her childhood. He too was searching for answers. She felt greatly encouraged at finding just one other who shared her longing for something that was missing. Again she tried to talk to her husband about wanting a different way of life. He was not interested in her ideas. He did not want her to change. He did not want their life to change. Her husband's inflexibility brought a distance into their relationship. Finally Ayya Khema made the difficult decision to leave. Her husband was outraged when she asked for a divorce, but she did not relent. Leaving their thirteen-year-old daughter with him and her mother, she took her three-year-old son and left.

Ayya went to Mexico, to a ranch that had been converted into a health resort by a professor, Edmund Szekely, who had written books on physical and mental health. He was teaching the philosophy of the Essenes, a Jewish sect that existed at the time of Christ. He also gave courses on natural nutrition and lifestyle. Ayya Khema and her son

Ayya Khema

[3] Khema, *I Give You My Life,* 44.

were given room and board in return for secretarial work. Here, she also met others who were looking for spiritual nourishment. Encouraged, she began to study the teachings of an Indian guru, Swami Yogananda.

She kept in touch with the young man from Berlin. A year later he came to the ranch, and within months they married. Two years later they left the ranch and, taking her son with them, began travelling. Their travels included several months at an ashram in India where they learnt to meditate. Eventually they settled in Australia, establishing an organic farm in Queensland to put into practice their belief that that a simple, healthy lifestyle, combined with daily meditation practice, would lead to inner happiness. An unused shed was set up as a small temple for meditation, with carvings of Hindu gods, statues of the Buddha, articles of Jewish worship and aboriginal artefacts.

Gradually however, Ayya Khema began to realise that a healthy, natural lifestyle was not enough to satisfy her spiritual needs. She tried to find her way back to the Judaism of her forebears. Only too aware of her ignorance of Jewish culture, she read widely and found herself attracted to the mystical Hassidic tradition. She contacted a Hassidic organization in Sydney and spoke to the teacher there.

> I listened to him and understood that in order to enter into this mystical teaching, to begin with one had to have a more or less perfect command of Hebrew. I knew just the most important prayers by heart, but I couldn't speak Hebrew at all, let alone read it. In addition to that, I would have had to adopt an Orthodox life style. That would have meant keeping a kosher household, which was an impossibility for me, since I didn't even know the basic principles. And the third thing was that I would have had to be a man. That was in any case beyond my reach. To put the matter more precisely, as a woman I would have been allowed to listen, but not participate.[4]

That was the end of her interest in Judaism. A year or two later, a visiting Buddhist monk introduced husband and wife to the teachings of the Buddha. As he spoke, Ayya Khema realised that she could understand and practise these teachings in her own life.

[4] Khema, *I Give You My Life*, 142–143.

> This was the first time I had heard something of which I could say: I understand this completely, I don't have to think about it at all. I know that it's right, I know what I have to try to achieve. Here was a spiritual path that really showed how you can change in order to attain inner purity.[5]

Her intense desire to learn more of this path and its practices led to long absences from her husband and the farm. One day she returned from a three-month retreat to be told by her now eighteen-year-old son that her husband had left. After fourteen years together, the time had come to go their separate ways. She sold the farm. A few years later she went to Sri Lanka where, at the age of 58, she became a Buddhist nun.

Isolation, Loneliness and Family Life

When Ayya Khema's spiritual search began, the first step she took in looking for an answer was to turn to those closest to her. Their reactions surprised her, varying from a total lack of interest to outright hostility. She found herself alone, wondering if there was something strange about her that she should be asking these soul-searching questions.

Other women also wrote about the feelings of isolation and loneliness that arose as the spiritual quest took hold. It was a vulnerable time, especially if a spouse or partner was unsympathetic, as both Dorothy Day and Ayya Khema found. It was not uncommon for a woman's relationship to encounter difficulties when the spiritual quest became the focal point of her life. Fortunately most women did not leave their husbands or abandon children. Husbands, if mentioned at all, mostly seemed a benign presence in the background—sympathetic and supportive but resisting involvement themselves.

In their spiritual autobiographies, women said little about their lives as wives and mothers—although most of those writing were family women. There was a sense in which they were leading double lives. Family and work were quite separate from their inner life. They wrote at length about their spiritual explorations, but recorded only the barest facts about their families, unless there were particular issues that

[5] Khema, *I Give You My Life*, 129.

impinged on their spiritual activities. One such issue was often the feeling of conflict and guilt about taking time away from home to nourish their own spiritual needs. On the other hand, the responsibility of staying at home with children frustrated the desires of many women to spend time with teachers and spiritual communities.

The Intellectual Search for Wisdom—Gillian Ross

There were a number of women who could not return to the religion of their childhood because of grave doubts about fundamental religious beliefs. If clergy and religious teachers were unable to resolve these doubts they had no choice but to turn elsewhere in search of answers. This 'elsewhere' was usually to books or to educational courses that seemed to address their questions. For some, this extended to formal study in philosophy and comparative religion.

However, until relatively recently, university students studying the humanities and sciences encountered a degree of scepticism, even outright hostility, towards religion among both lecturers and fellow students. The story of Gillian Ross illustrates some of the effects of this.[6] Enrolled in a science degree at a British university in the 1960s, she found an intellectual climate in her faculty that viewed religious belief very negatively. Furthermore, the attitude and lifestyle of her fellow students was enough to convince her that anyone holding such beliefs was either unintelligent or emotionally needy. As a consequence, she abandoned her earlier interest in Christianity and settled for agnosticism.

Gillian Ross

Years later, after marriage, divorce and remarriage, Ross enrolled in a masters degree in anthropology, which gave her the opportunity to explore

[6] Gillian Ross, *The Search for the Pearl: A Personal Exploration of Science and Mysticism* (Sydney: ABC Books, 1993).

religion in an academically acceptable way. This degree was followed by a doctoral thesis comparing the personalities and experiences of Catholic converts and ex-Catholic atheists. Impressed by the experiences described in some of the conversion accounts, and by the personalities of those converts who seemed to have few social problems and had enjoyed a happy childhood, Ross gained a new respect for and interest in the experiential side of religion

At the same time, Ross inadvertently began to explore spirituality in a different way. The stress of being a student, a wife and the mother of three small children had been taking its toll on her. To counteract this, she began a daily practice of 'yoga nidra', combining mental alertness and deep physical relaxation. Though profoundly therapeutic, it was not enough.

> In my case steady progress did not come about until I removed myself from the conditioned stimuli of negative reactions—I took myself and my children off to the mountains to create a new life.[7]

She began living in a different way, exploring new spiritual and dietary practices. She continued her yoga practice and became a yoga teacher herself. At one stage, a form of Buddhist meditation known as Vipassana attracted her and led to a two-year commitment to the teachings of a Burmese teacher, S. N. Goenka. However, dismayed by the extent to which spiritual seekers indiscriminately handed power over their lives to a guru, Ross decided to trust only her own judgment and inner wisdom. She read widely across the natural sciences, then delved deeply into the philosophies of Eastern religions, developing her own spiritual practices as she did so. Through a process of experimentation, she found that a macrobiotic diet and daily practice of yoga nidra, meditation and yoga exercises helped her to move from spiritual bleakness to some lasting sense of peace and light. In later years she encountered Jungian and transpersonal psychology, creation spirituality, and finally the writings of the Christian mystics. This led to a growing realisation of the interconnectedness of all being.

> The pattern that connects is the Tao, Brahman, the 'I am', the Absolute of all mystical traditions. In rediscovering interconnectedness,

[7] Ross, *The Search for the Pearl*, 21.

> we touch the Divine Ground of Being. We flow with the Tao. In these desperate times the Cosmic Christ in the heart of each of us yearns to reconnect and calls us to renewed worship.[8]

Searching for a Path—Amatullah Armstrong

Others were not as successful as Ross in defining their own path in this way. An Australian woman, Amatullah Armstrong, and her husband, both artists during the hippie era of the 1970s, hoped to find new meaning and purpose in life by becoming vegetarian and moving to the country.[9] They did not realise that they were just substituting one set of restrictions for another. The physical demands of tending vegetable gardens and livestock on the farm left no time for anything else. Though she was happy, her husband was restless. In 1978, after three years on the land, they sold the farm and went instead to live in Paris and, from there, to the French countryside. She was thirty years old. Now deprived of the constant physical activity of farm work, Armstrong explored her new environment and found herself drawn to the quiet interiors of Roman Catholic churches, and to prayer. Having long ago left behind the Sunday-school Christianity of her childhood, she began wondering if she had missed out on something important. Knowing little of the French language, she led a life of solitude. She read, took long walks in the countryside, and began wondering how to bring more rhythm and harmony into her life.

> I started to search for how this could be achieved and I mistakenly thought that I could find the answers in my own way, by taking a little bit from this religion and a little bit from that system and then trying to form them into some sort of coherent whole.[10]

She read about the ancient Essenes and found a recipe for bread of the same type that Jesus would have eaten. She began a daily practice of baking bread, a ritual that had a profound effect on her, giving her a feeling of being connected to Jesus. Already a vegetarian, she fasted, maintained a rigorous yoga programme, and added what she

[8] Ross, *The Search for the Pearl*, 284.
[9] Amatullah Armstrong, *And the Sky Is Not the Limit: An Australian Woman's Spiritual Journey within the Traditions* (Kuala Lumpur: A. S. Noordeen, 1973).
[10] Armstrong, *And the Sky Is Not the Limit*, 24.

referred to as 'a sprinkling of modern mysticism directly from another self-made mystic then resident in the USA'.[11]

Amatullah Armstrong

After some three years in France, Armstrong and her husband had to leave. On the way back to Australia they spent a few days travelling in Tunisia. Lacking accommodation one night, they turned to the Christian church in Tunis, but found the door locked. The local people sensed their despair and looked after them. The warmth and hospitality of the Tunisians led Armstrong to an interest in Islam, an interest that continued on her return to Australia. She had found her path, but had little to support her in her new home in Tasmania. She knew no Muslims. There were only books. She spent hours in a library looking for information on Islam. In the process she too learnt that the spiritual quest was a solitary endeavour.

> I was very much alone in this search, as each person is who undertakes the journey to true knowledge. But this was merely the initial phase of the search and the more urgent the search grew the more isolated I became.[12]

Nevertheless she persisted. Two years later, now in her mid thirties, she became a Muslim, so bringing to an end this phase of her spiritual quest. A few months later, on a visit to an Islamic book shop in Perth, she met a North African Muslim, who taught her more about life as a Muslim. At this point, her husband also embraced Islam, happily forestalling some of the difficulties that might otherwise have arisen in

[11] Armstrong, *And the Sky Is Not the Limit*, 24.
[12] Armstrong, *And the Sky Is Not the Limit*, 43.

their relationship. The North African also introduced her to Sufism, a path that would lead her deeper into the heart of Islam as the years passed.

Impact on Marriage and Family

Looking back to the stories of Dorothy Day, Ayya Khema and Gillian Ross, one thing they had in common was that in the early years of their spiritual search they were mothers with young children. The first two separated from the fathers of their children as a direct result of the awakening of a spiritual search. Ross referred only to moving to the mountains with her children. While none of the women discussed the impact of having children with them, there is no doubt that fitting in with the everyday practicalities of life with children would have added a stabilising social dimension to their lives. While Amatullah Armstrong had no children, life with her husband and their nomadic existence would have still given her days structure and stability.

Other women mentioned that having to look after children frustrated their desire to attend retreats, join spiritual communities, or engage in certain spiritual practices. Very few abandoned young families altogether in their search for spiritual fulfilment. The few who did later regretted how deeply this had affected their relationships with their children. The important point here, however, is that being a mother with children need not be a barrier to following a spiritual quest. From a psychological perspective, women with family responsibilities have a source of stability and structure in their lives that women who live alone do not. This is a benefit, since there are some spiritual practices which can become psychologically destabilising if people are not anchored in a daily routine and in the demands of others, whether family or community.

The same could be said of the marital relationship. Most of the women were married but rarely spoke about their spouses, unless there were difficulties. Sometimes a partner felt threatened, fearing changes in the couple's relationship and lifestyle. The women generally worked hard to keep a balance between their spiritual activities and their partner's needs, realising very quickly that a spiritual quest was a very individual matter. Partners, even when spiritual aspirations were initially shared, could not move in step with each other for very long.

Different life experiences, different family responsibilities and different personal psychology made that impossible.

Nevertheless, it was a relief to discover that most women in committed relationships did not go off and live in spiritual communities or insist on drastic changes in lifestyle. Instead, in the midst of family life they managed to practise yoga, meditate, pray, read and attend spiritual events in whatever time they could glean for themselves.

Christian Tradition and the Seeker

Unfortunately, the traditional Christian mystical paths of the western world have barely survived the last century, with its suspicion of spiritual experience and consequent lack of guidance for those seeking authentic mystical experience. Where those paths still exist, they were, until recently, reserved for the few men and women prepared to forgo family life and enter either a monastery or a convent at an early age. Moreover there was the prerequisite of a belief in God. Christianity was closed to those many spiritual seekers who had difficulties with that belief.

Books were an important resource, but these questing women soon learnt that books and academic studies alone did not provide the answers they were looking for. So they explored non-intellectual ways of addressing their questions, experimenting with spiritual practices from different religious traditions, the most popular ones being various forms of yoga and meditation.

Some experimented with different lifestyles or embarked on a quest for personal growth. Others looked to New Age or Hindu gurus for teachings and practices that might lead them to an answer. Or perhaps they were attracted to Buddhism and the quest for enlightenment, or to Sufism and its goal of union with the Beloved. Overall, there was a sense of drinking at many wells rather than of drinking deeply at one. The result was that many of the women followed an eclectic and changing mix of beliefs and practices, sometimes roaming the world in search of a way forward.

Some women never settled and continued like butterflies to flit from one practice to another, from one teacher to another. Others were distracted by the joy and promise of a new relationship or project. More seriously, several became fascinated by psychic phenomena and

seemed unable to move beyond the visions and voices. However most of the women who had set out on the quest persisted, and these were the ones who gradually became attuned to an inner intuition that too often whispered, 'Not this … not this …', until eventually, finally, there was a 'Yes … yes'. The way opened before them, and their hearts rejoiced.

Sue Delaney is a retired psychologist and university counsellor. She has been active in interfaith dialogue and was for many years the leader of a weekly interfaith meditation group. She lives with her husband in Sydney, Australia.