WOMEN'S METAPHORS FOR FREEDOM

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THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES are a way to freedom. At the outset and throughout the retreat, Ignatius insists on 'the conquest of self and the regulation of one's life in such a way that no decision is made under the influence of any inordinate attachment' (Exx 21). In the First Week, the retreatant identified his/her personal intentions and gradually relinquishes the need to be in control. Through the contemplative process of the Second Week, the retreatant fine-tunes the mind, the will and the heart. Asked to listen carefully for the election call, each retreatant contemplates the person of Jesus and prepares to respond with the greatest possible freedom and love.

Ignatius' central metaphor in calling a person to freedom of heart is inordinate attachment. This metaphor carries the tone of regulation, control, detachment and striving for the distinctness and freedom of every human being made in God's image and likeness. To some, Ignatius' call suggests a process of separation, isolation and self-renunciation required in order to curb the tendency to possess or to control. To others his call has to do with balance, intimacy and surrender. Ignatius' metaphor, while couched in antiquated scholastic language, nevertheless opens us to richer insights related to theories of development, particularly women's moral development.

The necessity of freedom from 'inordinate attachments', a key element of discernment, of a decision to follow Christ and of growth in maturity is particularly relevant for women today, although women may use different language to talk about it. These pages deal with women's experience of coming to freedom and the language women use in working for an attitude of detachment from self-interest in making decisions, in loving God and others. The theme will be explored with the intention of opening up discussion on the topic, not offering a complete picture. The objective is simply to render more imaginable and intelligible some aspects of women's process of coming to freedom and distinctness. The discussion will draw from contemporary research on moral and human development and from journals of two women who confront questions of ultimate

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meaning in their lives. It is hoped that this article will enable readers to identify points of agreement or disagreement in their own experience and contribute to their understanding of woman's journey.

Insights from research on moral and human development

Pioneering research on moral development in women suggests that in situations requiring moral decisions, women use different values from those used by men. Carol Gilligan found that where men use abstract rules of justice or principle to decide whether an action is right or wrong, women seem to view moral problems as those that arise from conflicting responsibilities and relationships rather than from competing rights. Women consistently use relationship and personal responsibility as their primary reference points in making moral decisions. According to Gilligan, 'Male and female voices typically speak of the importance of different truths, the former of the role of separation as it defines and empowers the self, the latter of the ongoing process of attachment that creates and sustains the human community'.[1] Do these differences also affect the way women come to freedom in their lives? If so, will women's language, particularly their metaphors, reveal the difference? What contribution can contemporary women's experience make to the Ignatian tradition?

'Freedom', according to process philosopher Bernard Loomer, 'is a moment by moment affair'.[2] The truth of this statement lies in the fact that human reality is the context in which freedom is realized, and human reality is not predictable. Rather, it is continually expressing subtleties of its meaning. These nuances are often expressed in metaphor, a language that uses the sense of one reality in order to express the meaning of another. Metaphors often bring the conscious and the unconscious together. Jungian psychiatrist Marion Woodman explains that by definition 'metaphor' means a transformer, a crossing over from one place to another. She gives examples of how healing/wholeness come about through metaphor, 'an image that is part matter, part spirit . . .'. Significantly, she says that 'living the metaphors often involves a leap of consciousness that forces us to recognize not only gifts we buried long ago but also gifts we know not of. The leap involves taking responsibility for our own potential'.[3] The process of 'living the metaphors' is related to the process of coming to freedom, as will be shown below.

In this article, freedom refers to that capacity of the individual to be its own cause in shaping itself, to act out of its integrity. Imaged in

feminine language, an individual woman may be described in terms of what she makes out of what she has been given. When truly free, she is not externally determined but internally determined, in accordance with her integrity. In this respect, freedom means that 'she is her own person'.[4] The price of her freedom, solitariness, means that although she is a person in relationship, only she can/must take responsibility for what she sees and knows.[5]

If women identify themselves through their connections with others, while men define themselves through separation, there may be a difference in the way each experiences freedom. However, both will pass through developmental phases or stages which involve a certain kind of balance between differentiation and integration, between autonomy and inclusion.[6] Both will have and identify 'inordinate attachments' along the way and both will exhibit defences typical of those stages.

Women's journeys to freedom have taken many different forms, and in recent history we have remarkable accounts. Two writers, Etty Hillesum and Edwina Gateley, kept journals over a significant period in their lives. Each one's story is a dialogue with God and a journey into freedom; both use an abundance of metaphor and image which can help us imagine their struggles and victories more vividly. Both achieved to some extent that kind of total human perception and experience which Ignatius calls 'interior knowledge'.

The diaries of Etty Hillesum

Etty Hillesum, a Jewess who died at Auschwitz in November of 1943 at the age of twenty-nine, wrote at length of her last two years of life in German-occupied Amsterdam and first months in the concentration camp.[7] In the end, her life was not taken from her. She laid it down freely, of her own choice. More than anything hers is the story of a journey into freedom.

At twenty-seven, Etty felt her life needed sorting out and firm direction. She consulted Julius Spier, who was twice her age, and fell in love with him. He soon became the focus of her thoughts and emotional energy. She knew very early, however, that she must become a separate person and 'get him out of [her] system without running away'. Through their friendship, Etty gradually grew in self-reliance and independence, discovering that 'parallel with the process of growing-towards-each-other there runs a process of more-and-more-freeing-oneself-of-the-other'.[8] In her journal she examines the intensity of their relationship, their possible marriage, the place

of the erotic and sensual in her life, and always her longing to expand her love to everyone 'with whom one happens to share one's life'. Most importantly, he was the one (she wrote after his sudden death) who 'taught [her] to speak the name of God without embarrassment'.[9] Perhaps it was also he who led her to the gospels (she particularly liked St Matthew).

More than a place to write down her reflections on the man/woman relationship, however, Etty's journal became 'a place from which one can continue to spin one and the same thread, where one can gradually create a continuum, a continuum which is really one's life'. She used this process to discern her choices and direction, her fears and her faith. In passages such as the following, she discerns her own moral development:

> If only I listened to my own rhythm, and tried to live in accordance with it. Much of what I do is mere imitation, springs from a sense of duty or from preconceived notions of how people should behave. The only certainties about what is right and wrong are those which spring from sources deep inside oneself. And I say it humbly and gratefully and I mean every word of it right now, though I know that I shall again grow rebellious and irritable. 'Oh God, I thank you for having created me as I am. I thank you for the sense of fulfillment I sometimes have; that fulfillment is after all nothing but being filled with you. I promise You to strive my whole life long for beauty and harmony and also humility and true love, whispers of which I hear inside me during my best moments.'[10]

Etty here describes in metaphor her search for moral power and freedom: to listen to her own rhythm and live by it. This is classic. She is learning to discern her emotional states and how to balance the forces within her. She seems to know that her heart is a mass of attachments and inclinations, that she is affected by consolations as well as desolations. Etty also recognizes the feeling she has when right attachments come to prevail and prays her surrender to God. Later on she writes of

> a feeling of being at one with all existence. No longer: I want this or that, but: life is great and good and fascinating and eternal and if you dwell so much on yourself and flounder and fluff about, you miss the mighty, eternal current that is life.[11]

Etty's knowledge is experiential; she wants to live independently from the ups and downs of daily living and ride with buoyancy the current of life.

Etty discovered her internal strength and courage in the face of profound suffering. She learned that Nazis who harassed the Jews, robbed them of material goods and freedom of movement could not take away one's inner, essential freedom. Rather, she saw that it is we who

> forfeit our greatest assets by our misguided compliance . . . Our greatest injury is one we inflict upon ourselves. I find life beautiful and I feel free. The sky within me is as wide as the one stretching above my head. I believe in God and I believe in people and I say so without embarrassment. Life is hard, but that is no bad thing. If one starts by taking one's own importance seriously, the rest follows. It is not morbid individualism to work on oneself. True peace will come only when every individual finds peace within themselves; when we have all vanquished and transformed our hatred for our fellow human beings of whatever race—even into love one day, although perhaps that is asking too much. It is, however, the only solution. I am a happy person and I hold life dear indeed, in this year of Our Lord 1942, the umpteenth year of the war.[12]

Etty has a vision of an ideal state of existence and seems to feel her way into understanding it. She believes peace is possible and seeks a way of serving God through making peace with her persecutors. Etty knows that her affectivity must be ordered before it can become a reliable guide: that she must take herself seriously, find peace within and let ill feelings towards others be transformed. Only then can she say 'I believe in God and I believe in people'. In this passage, it is possible to see the spirit of consolation at work in her, despite a backdrop of unspeakable suffering and cruelty.

Perhaps the most powerful metaphor in Etty's journal is that of kneeling. She recognizes its significance in her life and allows its meaning to penetrate the core of her being:

> Last night, shortly before going to bed, I suddenly went down on my knees in the middle of this large room, between the steel chairs and the matting. Almost automatically. Forced to the ground by something stronger than myself. Some time ago I said to myself, 'I am a kneeler in training'. I was still embarrassed by this act, as intimate as gestures of love that cannot be put into words either, except by a poet. A patient once said to [Julius], 'I sometimes have the feeling that God is right inside me, for instance when I hear the St Matthew Passion'. And [Julius] said something like: 'At such moments you are completely at one with the creative and cosmic forces that are at

> work in every human being'. And these creative forces are ultimately part of God, but you need courage to put that into words. This phrase has been ringing in my ears for several weeks: you need courage to put that into words. The courage to speak God's name.[13]

Kneeling, she finds there are no barriers to love; she has seen the face of God, has died to her fears and hesitancies and is ready to follow the way of the cross. She had the courage to live her metaphor and speak God's name.

Etty's short lifetime of conscious choices led to her great decision to share the common fate of her people and to be a source of healing among them. She volunteered to accompany the first group of Jews being sent to Westerbork camp, where her life continued as 'one great dialogue' with God.

> Truly, my life is one long hearkening unto my self and unto others, unto God. And if I say that I hearken, it is really God who hearkens inside me. The most essential and the deepest in me hearkening unto the most essential and deepest in the other. God to God.[14]

Etty has learned that in order to be truly free she must give up control and be in God's hands. She counsels her friends against bitterness, advising them to turn inward and destroy in themselves what they think should be destroyed in others. Etty models for them what it means to accept and embrace the condition of the world, where the struggle between the powers of darkness and the light continues to rage.

The journal of Edwina Gateley

Like Etty Hillesum, Edwina Gateley is led to a profound grappling with the human condition. She also wants to open herself totally to God and to be a presence of the healing power of God to others. Edwina searches out those most abused by patriarchal society: the prostitutes. She had to come to recognize her inability to save another, that grace cannot be forced.

In the late autumn of 1981, Edwina became a hermit, in response to a call to solitude. She took up residence in an old trailer in a forest outside of Chicago, but with mixed feelings: she experienced resistance, not knowing if she feared the Ultimate Encounter, solitude, loneliness, or what she called 'utter uncompromising nakedness'.[15] She wanted 'to touch and hear the gentle God within' and experienced an urgency in herself to take the time apart for that. Within a

month, she recognized her 'need to be in control' and that people and God seem to be in competition for her love:

> I know I will always love others and love being with them. Maybe one day they will not compete with God, rather, they will be a special gift of God to surprise and delight me. It is only by immersing myself in God that I will truly and deeply love other people and value them as God must do. Then people and God will be in harmony within me and I will glimpse a piece of the Kingdom.[16]

Two months later she wrote:

> My restlessness is passed. There is, instead, a deep voiceless yearning—born more of God than of me, dependent more on God than on me, leaning more towards God's glory than my own effort in service. I hope I am beginning to understand what ministry and following Jesus is all about—ultimately, little to do with me and a lot to do with God.[17]

Throughout the dark of winter Edwina feels little consolation; she seems to be in solitude to meet her own darkness. In the spring she has deep insight into her own strong will and expectations, her need 'to be in the center of activity' when she is with others. At this stage, she is 'seeing' more and more clearly. She believes that 'God wants me to learn that I do not need to be a heroine or martyr. I just need to learn my own needs and limitations'.[18] On the eve of her retreat (at the Jesuit Retreat House in Barrington, Illinois) she writes:

> I am available as a woman is available to her lover. She knows her lover is there, she knows her lover will always come to her, but she does not always know the time or place. She searches in love and trust and when she does not find, she waits. This waiting is not heroic or masochistic—it is a personal decision to claim love and not let it escape. If anything, the woman is obstinate and single-minded rather than pious or virtuous! Time for her is infinite. She waits, and in her waiting, she sees.[19]

As the thirty-day retreat began that summer, however, Edwina acknowledges that she feels 'like a child left alone in the dark too long'. It is only when she discovers the feminine face of God at the end of the First Week that she is released from her darkness, from the tired and weary search. As she 'prayed that Mother God will show her face to me' she experienced new life, creativity, excitement and joy.

At the end of the Second Week, Edwina tries to be patient with the conversion process ('I can't expect instant conversion like instant coffee!') as she finds a metaphor for the face of God revealed in her:

> It is the compassionate woman who will feed the sheep—not the soldier in you. You have fought a good fight. Give birth to the compassionate woman. I am aware of the struggle. I am leader, guide, catalyst. But the compassionate woman follows, tends, feeds. I am afraid of changing roles. Where is the King? The battlefield? Where are the soldiers? I am a good leader, but I only see the Shepherd and all he says is—'Feed my sheep' . . . Why am I afraid? I have been a soldier for such a long time. But it is the compassionate woman who will feed the sheep. From soldier, strong, unyielding, to woman, life-giver, nurturer.[20]

The masculine images and metaphors no longer hold for Edwina. She is aware that she has been deeply formed by them and lived by them until now, but that she must give birth to a new image, a new way of being. In another meditation she saw Mary as feeding the Word in darkness, a compassionate mother. And she saw this for herself:

> The compassionate woman bows to truth and in accepting the reality of herself, also accepts the reality of the pain, suffering and sin of the world. The compassionate woman is one who sees her people hurting and gently grieves. She does not stand heroic and brave before the reality. In her love she grieves, in her compassion she reaches out even to that which causes pain.[21]

At the end of retreat, she hears God's call to her:

> Go to those, my loved ones, my lost ones, my rejected ones. The ones who live by darkness. Go to those my people for whom I came, for whom I lived, and for whom I died. Invite them to the banquet. My Spirit will rise powerfully in the poor. There will be a new creation.

There is not space enough here to explore further unfolding of Edwina's growth in freedom. She does walk into the darkness of the homeless, the poor, the marginalized; she embraces the pain of the prostitutes on the streets of Chicago. Her journal has many stories of the first years, including the founding of Genesis House (to mean 'new beginnings out of chaos') where guests may stay and get their feet on the ground. Edwina describes how, in her zeal to 'unbind'

them, she over-identified with their struggle and had to learn 'not to sink beneath the anger and pain'.[22] In her deep compassion and love for Dolores, a victim of prostitution and alcohol, she 'became sick with her, and took on her highs and lows, her ups and downs, till [she] lost [her] own anchors'.[23] Edwina learned to accept her own helplessness and set boundaries: 'I know I cannot do for her what she needs to do for herself. Only the grace of God is left now'.[24]

The metaphors each woman uses to describe her journey to freedom are transparent. Their principal characteristic is a growing sense of self-ownership or self-direction, leading to a maturity characterized by what Robert Kegan calls 'a self which has control instead of being control'.[25] Both Etty and Edwina struggled honestly with the need to control. The mature self, according to Kegan, 'can now be brought to others, rather than derived from others'. Genuine 'self' sacrifice is now a possibility. There is a self which can surrender its rebellious independence for freely chosen interdependence with others.[26] Etty and Edwina both had the courage to live their metaphors; the first, to kneel and speak the name of God; the other to be a woman of compassion. The power of the living God was released in each one and transformed her in the process.

Metaphors and personal freedom

In reviewing metaphors in the two spiritual journeys above, we see that women's moral development leads to moments of coming to freedom that have to do with identity and intimacy, with recognizing and owning attachments, and with surrendering to God. Etty writes of her journal as 'a place from which one can continue to spin one and the same thread, where one can gradually create a continuum, a continuum which is really one's life'. Woman's age-old task of telling her story, of spinning, of connecting things, is reflected in this metaphor.[27] When she speaks of 'the sky within me as wide as the one stretching above my head', Etty conveys her sense of connection with a large perspective and a 'more' to life and meaning. She shows herself becoming her own person when she writes that 'we forfeit our greatest asset by misguided compliance' or when she determines to 'listen to my own rhythm and try to live in accordance with it'. She expresses a feminine ideal to realize or attune one's unique focus to create a harmonious world, when she calls for her people to 'vanquish and transform our hatred for our fellow human beings'. For Etty, the luminous experience of kneeling holds moments of 'crystal-clear honesty'. When kneeling, she says, 'I listen in to myself, allow myself

to be led, not by anything on the outside, but by what wells up from within'.

Edwina strives for harmony within, especially in her relationship with God and people; her insight is to immerse herself in God so she will 'truly and deeply love' and even 'glimpse a piece of the kingdom'. She opens her heart receptively, 'available as a woman is to her lover' and seeks to 'touch and hear the gentle God within'. The cost, she knows, is 'utter uncompromising nakedness'. Like Etty, she does not fear autonomy and self-direction because she has gained true interiority. She has owned her attachments: her need to be in the centre of activity, and her propensity to over-identify with those she is serving and lose her own 'anchors'. Edwina's God-image undergoes transformation when she opens herself to grace. In emptying out her own demands to be the all-competent saviour of others, and learning to become the channel of God's loving, empowering patience, she gives birth to the compassionate woman, the fruit of her Election.

Finally, it must be said that both women trust their own religious experience. This trust is evidence of 'the freedom given by God to those who have given up on the law as justification and, like the adult Jesus, give themselves over to the mercy of God who knows, and is greater than, our heart' (1 John 3,20).[28] Their metaphors suggest that both women dealt with human suffering through a faith in God who has not abandoned creation but reaches out to the human family with possibilities and grace for transformation. Their way might be said to be the Ignatian way.

NOTES

[1] Gilligan, Carol: *In a different voice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), p 156.
[2] Loomer, Bernard: 'Dimensions of freedom' (an unpublished paper given in Berkeley, CA: 1975), p 4. Loomer explores freedom as a composite notion with contrasting, interdependent and overlapping dimensions of meaning. He writes about freedom as self-creation, as self-transcendence, as power and as commitment.
[3] Woodman, Marion: 'The rose in the fire: a meditation on soul-making', *Humane medicine* vol 6, no 2 (Spring 1990), p 132.
[4] Loomer, *op. cit.*, p 4.
[5] *Ibid.*, p 2.
[6] Kegan, Robert: *The evolving self: problem and process in human development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), pp 85–110.
[7] *An interrupted life: the diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941–43* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985).
[8] *Ibid.*, p 141.
[9] *Ibid.*, p 209.
[10] *Ibid.*, pp 75–76.
[11] *Ibid.*

[12] *Ibid.*, p 151.
[13] *Ibid.*, p 76.
[14] *Ibid.*, p 214.
[15] Gateley, Edwina: *I hear a seed growing* (Trabuco Canyon, CA: Source Books, 1990), p 3.
[16] *Ibid.*, p 12.
[17] *Ibid.*, p 19.
[18] *Ibid.*, p 22.
[19] *Ibid.*, pp 29–30.
[20] *Ibid.*, pp 47–48.
[21] *Ibid.*, p 51.
[22] *Ibid.*, p 260.
[23] *Ibid.*, p 168.
[24] *Ibid.*, p 215.
[25] Quoted in Conn, Joann Wolski: *Spirituality and personal maturity* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989), p 57. Conn demonstrates how Kegan's model of an evolving self can serve both pastoral counselling and spiritual direction.
[26] *Ibid.*
[27] Keeping a journal is a way to 'carefully observe the whole course of our thoughts'. See Rule 5 (Exx 333) in Rules for the Discernment of Spirits in the Second Week.
[28] Conn, *op. cit.*, p 119.