

MOTHERHOOD AS A SPIRITUAL PATH

Sue Delaney

WANDERING THROUGH CHURCHES, synagogues, temples and mosques in many cultures, one cannot but be struck by the fact that religion is basically 'men's business'. The sacred spaces, the scriptures, the teachers and guides, the rituals and the codes of behaviour have been evolved by men to meet the needs of men. Religion is a male world. Even wandering along the shelves of any religious bookshop is enough to confirm this. Books of spiritual guidance are almost all written by men. Why are women so absent from the heart of all the great religious traditions of the world?

Family as Impediment to Spiritual Life

In most of these religious traditions, there seems to be an understanding that marriage and children, especially for women, are an impediment to pursuing spiritual goals. While women have long felt themselves to be second-class citizens within the religious world, the woman who does not marry at least has a chance of redeeming herself and becoming an 'honorary man' if she chooses to dedicate her life to God in whatever way her tradition suggests. Bluntly, the choice is between having children and seeking a deeper experience of God.

Within Catholic forms of Christianity, for example, those men and women who are serious about their desire to encounter God in this life enter religious orders of monks or nuns, taking vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. But what if the call to encounter the Source more deeply arises after a commitment to marriage and children? Men and women may seem to face a similar predicament in this situation. However, while men are able to find a certain freedom from domestic duties in order to attend religious gatherings, this is not necessarily so for women.

Raising a family can take twenty or more years of a woman's life. That is too long a time for a person simply to postpone the spiritual

quest. Consequently, in those years of raising children, a woman can find herself living two different lives. One life is set firmly in the everyday world with its responsibilities to home and family. The other is the life of the spirit, where the search for meaning arises and takes form. Is there more to life than being a wife and mother? Does God really exist? Is there life after death? What do I really want in life? Discussions with family and friends lead, more often than not, to a deep sense of spiritual loneliness as a woman realises that others either avoid such concerns or are indifferent to them.

In her spare time she turns to books for guidance and seeks out spiritual practices that might yield answers to her questions. However, attempts to follow traditional practices have often been a source of great frustration to such women, whatever their religious tradition. The constant presence of small children makes daily meditation and other spiritual practices well nigh impossible. Even at the end of a busy day, a woman with a husband and children cannot close her bedroom door and regard the night as her own.

With these family responsibilities, it is also difficult for a woman to participate in the life of the local religious community; bringing small children to services or meetings is too great a distraction both for the woman herself and for everyone else. Even within the Christian churches, where mothers and children are expected to attend, women with small children can come away from the service feeling that, though they were physically present, they were often too busy keeping the children quiet to attend to their own spiritual needs. When it comes to searching out spiritual teachers and courses, or going away on religious retreats, many women hesitate: arranging the care of children can be so complicated and disruptive to the lives of others.

Family life places severe limitations on women's ability to follow the call to a deeper spiritual life. As a consequence many women, rather than fully enjoying the present moment of family life, find themselves looking forward impatiently to the time when they will be free of dependent children.

Choosing Between Family and God

Family life is seen as so much of an impediment to serious spiritual practice that occasionally women have been challenged by their spiritual guide to choose between their family and God. Such a choice

faced Indira Devi, an Indian woman from a prosperous Sikh background. Her spiritual guide, Dilip Kumar Roy, was a disciple of the sage Sri Aurobindo of Pondicherry. After meeting Sri Aurobindo on a visit to his ashram with her spiritual guide, she was invited to live at the ashram to further her spiritual life. To do so she would have to leave her family behind. This was a devastating choice. Her elder son was at boarding school, but the younger was only three years old, a mere baby. In the end, she left him in the care of his nurse.

A few months later, word came to her that this child was seriously ill and not expected to live. Was she to go to him, or to stay at the ashram? She felt utterly torn. Her 'worldly attachment' to her son was revealed in all its strength. Her spiritual guide said that the choice to follow her worldly duty to her son, or her soul's duty to God, was hers. After a night of anguish, she made the decision to stay. He approved her decision, saying that what was right for other mothers was not right for her. She needed to dedicate herself completely to God.¹

Indira Devi was not alone. Eileen Caddy, a Christian woman and co-founder of a spiritual community at Findhorn in Scotland, abandoned her first four children after being told that to stay with them would be running away from her destiny. The man she loved and looked to for guidance told her that there was more at stake than her personal happiness, that there was important spiritual work that the two of them were called to do.² Other women in search of spiritual meaning have abandoned a husband or partner when he was not interested in accompanying them, or when he became antagonistic to their spiritual interests.

The US American Dorothy Day, who was instrumental in the founding of the *Catholic Worker*, wrote in her autobiography, 'To become a Catholic meant for me to give up a mate with whom I was much in love. It got to the point where it was the simple question of whether I chose God or man'.³ Her partner did not believe in marriage. If she became a Catholic she would have to leave him. Though it took a year to make that difficult decision, she chose God, separating from the father of her baby daughter.

¹ Dilip Kumar Roy and Indira Devi, *Pilgrims of the Stars: Autobiography of Two Yogis* (Porthill, Id: Timeless Books, 1985), pp. 267-269.

² Eileen Caddy and Liza Hollingshead, *Flight into Freedom* (Longmead: Element Books, 1988), pp. 40-42.

³ Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of Dorothy Day* (New York: Harper, 1952), p. 140.

To leave a much-loved partner, or a child, is a heart-wrenching decision. That these women have had the strength and courage to make such decisions illustrates the passionate intensity of their search for That which lies beyond all names and forms. But did they need to make such sacrifices?

No Spiritual Path for Mothers

Intuitively, it seems that something is not right here. Why should following a spiritual path be so difficult for a woman just because she is a mother? Why are there no recognised spiritual paths within the major religious traditions that are more suited to the reality of a mother's life? While mothers of young children can to some extent participate in the public ritual life of synagogue, church, mosque and temple, there is always the sense that they remain on the periphery. Whatever outward public praise and acknowledgment they receive in their role as mothers, this does not make up for the feeling of being unable to follow spiritual aspirations—which are often deeply felt—along established routes.

But perhaps something obvious is being missed—the possibility that motherhood is itself a spiritual path. This does not seem to have been considered either by women themselves, or by those who guide them spiritually. While women are encouraged to incorporate into their lives whatever spiritual practices they can, they use for this purpose the small gaps in their lives, gaps which are liable at any moment to be taken away from them by pressing family needs. Because the conventional ways of thinking about spirituality are not really suited to the circumstances of their lives, they see what they can do as merely makeshift.

***Motherhood
is itself
a spiritual path***

The birth of a first child is an experience which totally changes the life of any woman. The birth itself is life-threatening and painful, even in these days of powerful medications. On a psychological level, it may be the first time in a woman's life that she has experienced her body as totally out of her control. Nature takes over with relentless efficiency, and there is nothing she can do about it. All the control over the process that she was promised in the antenatal classes turns out, for many first-time mothers, to be an illusion. When a woman becomes a mother, she is abruptly initiated into a new way of life, with no respite and no days off. Often she loses a sense of her own identity. What is

left, beyond being someone's wife and the baby's mother? Her previous life and identity seem to have vanished completely.

She simply lives 'being a mother'. In doing so, she enters into a life of self-denying service to her child—a life far more demanding than that asked by a guru of his disciple, an obedience far greater than any vow can command. If a baby needs something, everything else has to be put aside until that need is met. If not, the need only escalates. Furthermore, to deal impatiently with a fractious baby only upsets it further; thus a new mother is forced to learn patience and self-control. Contrary to popular myth, this does not come naturally to mothers. It comes only with the repeated experience of the consequences of impatience. Despite the challenges, however, motherhood is not without its spiritual consolations. A Sufi woman of Turkish origin, when asked how she integrated her family life and her spiritual life gave a simple, thought-provoking reply: 'When I looked at the faces of my children, I saw the face of my Beloved'.⁴

Trying to Meditate

The constant physical demands of caring for a baby make many traditional spiritual practices all but impossible. Meditation has long been recognised as an essential part of a spiritual life, especially in Hinduism and Buddhism. In Christianity contemplative meditation was formerly restricted to monks and nuns, but is now being taken up by lay people, who often have little awareness of the difficulties that can arise. An Indian Hindu woman, Deepa Kodikal, spoke of her own experience in trying to meditate as the mother of a small child. One afternoon, when her two-year-old daughter Aqeela was asleep beside her, she decided to try meditation, inspired by a book by Swami Vivekananda that she had been reading:

How long and on what I meditated I do not remember, but after some time, I had apparently got into a state of oblivion. Suddenly I became aware of a far-off place of utter solitude, and, from somewhere very distant, I heard a child calling out to me. But as if in a coma, neither my mental nor physical faculties could function and recognise the fact that I should respond. I remained in that

⁴ Personal comment made to author, quoted with permission.

state of oblivion, continuing to hear the distant cry and yet not responding to it till I was nudged by Aqeela herself. Then I became aware that Aqeela was actually yelling away at me for attention and had crawled over me as I was not responding to her crying.⁵

Of course not everyone who meditates has the ability to reach this level of absorption in meditation, just as individuals vary greatly in the level of hypnotic trance they can reach. But if a person does find this a natural and easy process, and also happens to be a mother with a baby or a small child in her immediate care, she needs to be careful. She must not enter so deeply into meditation that she cannot respond to the cries of her child. Deepa Kodikal waited another fifteen years before she tried practising meditation again. When she did, a problem common to busy women beset her.

I found that, within no time, my head would slump forward and I would be fast asleep. I knew that it was not quite right to try to meditate after a long day of tiring housework, but there was no other suitable time. So I persisted. But the pattern continued. No sooner did I assume the erect posture than I would fall off in a deep slumber. For half an hour, I would struggle with myself to keep awake but to no avail, and then would decide that it was more practical to sleep in a normal, comfortable lying-down position than make a pretence at meditating.⁶

Conflicting Demands

Within the Eastern religions, the recommended times for meditation are at dawn and dusk. For a woman with the demands of family life, this is impossible. These are the very times that family work falls most heavily on her, especially if she is also working outside the home. If she does not have outside employment, then she may be able to give time to meditation once her children begin to go to school. Even so, she needs discipline and determination to take that time for herself while the daily work of the household stares her in the face. School and family holidays disrupt that discipline. In addition, women speak of the sense of being 'on call' even in those spaces where they can find a half hour

⁵ Deepa Kodikal, *A Journey Within the Self*, (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1992), p. 2.

⁶ Kodikal, *A Journey Within the Self*, p. 3.



© Mary Leung

There's no place like home

for meditation or spiritual reading. And using that space for their own spiritual nourishment in the face of conflicting demands for their time can leave a residual sense that they should be doing 'something more useful' while the baby is asleep or the older child is at school.

The reality of modern life suggests that meditation, in its traditional form of silent sitting, cannot be a core spiritual practice for a woman with family responsibilities. This is not to say that she should not meditate when spaces in her life appear, but rather that she should not feel her spiritual life has stalled because she cannot meditate on a regular basis. There will still be small, unplanned spaces where meditation can happen. The Englishwoman, Theosophist and mother

Alice Bailey suggested a different approach to mothers who came to her for spiritual advice:

I told them they could regulate their thinking and learn mental concentration and spiritual orientation whilst peeling potatoes and shelling peas because that was what I had had to do, for I was no believer in sacrificing your family and their welfare to our own spiritual urges.⁷

Surrender as a Spiritual Path

More importantly, a mother has to develop a flexible attitude to life. This in itself is a spiritual practice in disguise. All the religious traditions speak of surrender as essential in the path to the Divine: abandonment to divine providence; submission to the will of God; the giving up of the desire that life be different when change is not possible; the surrender of the 'I want', of the 'I am right'; in this instance, the giving up of the wish to practise regular meditation, or to have a satisfying spiritual life during this phase of the mother's life-cycle.

In reality, the practice of surrender pervades a mother's life. Every day, without fuss, she has to put aside her own needs to respond to those of her family. This reveals another spiritual practice that is integral to this way of life: the selfless service given to family, and often to neighbours and the local community. Unfortunately, within Christianity, the predominant stories of women are about saintly celibates, living a supposedly more heroic form of spiritual life, a life of service to others beyond the domestic sphere. To emulate this is just not possible for women with children. They are already fully committed to the selfless service of their families. Such service proves its validity as spiritual practice by the fruit that it yields.

***A spiritual
practice
in disguise***

Judy Petsonk, a US American Jewish woman, recognised that her love for her child and her trust in her husband were actually intense experiences of God. She also remembered another experience of God that she had had as a young mother. As her baby slept in a pram and

⁷ Alice A. Bailey, *The Unfinished Autobiography of Alice A. Bailey* (New York: Lucas Publishing, 1951), p. 182.

she folded sheets in her backyard, she suddenly realised that she had some time for herself. She could pray with her prayer book, something she rarely had time to do, or get some sorely needed exercise. Or else she could continue with her laundry so that she could play with the baby when he woke up. After some moments of indecision, she decided to try it all:

So I cast out a quick silent prayer and asked the *Shekinah*, the loving Presence of God, to help me do it all. I ran inside, grabbed a prayerbook, scurried back outside, wrapped myself in a sheet, said the blessing for putting on a prayer shawl, and felt the Presence gently embracing me with arms of sunlight. I danced around the yard, folding the laundry in great swooping dancier motions, turning pages as I passed the prayerbook perched on a lawn chair, singing, laughing at myself. I could feel the Presence bathe me in Her loving laughter.⁸

The memory of this experience still moved her many years later:

Sitting here at my word processor, remembering that day, new thanks pour from my mouth and heart and my suddenly tearful eyes. I realise now that there was even more blessing in that luminous moment than I understood at the time. Often I have read the commandment to 'Love God with all your heart' and wondered despairingly how it is possible for someone like me—someone to whom God is sometimes real and sometimes not real, someone whose faith glimmers and wanes—ever to love God. I think, 'This very moment, dear Presence, you are showing me that I can'.⁹

It has also been written of Sarada Devi, the wife of the great Bengali Hindu saint, Sri Ramakrishna, that she attained spiritual realisation as deep as her husband's, though she did not practise his austere way of life. She had no children of her own, though in later life she took care of a little niece whose mother suffered a mental disorder. We are told that,

⁸ Judy Petsonk, *Taking Judaism Personally: Creating a Meaningful Spiritual Life* (New York: Free Press, 1996), pp. 3-4.

⁹ Petsonk, *Taking Judaism Personally*, p. 4.

. . . she preoccupied herself with household duties, preparing vegetables, cooking, sweeping the house and the courtyard, washing clothes and dishes, kneading dough, worshipping in the shrine, and with infinite patience and compassion looking after the comfort and welfare of her relatives and visiting disciples.¹⁰

The only problem for women in regarding motherhood and housework as an opportunity for spiritual practice is that it looks too much like a plot to keep them 'barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen'. There is too much of an echo of the biblical words:

Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. . . . Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty. (1 Timothy 2.11-15)

What woman does not feel rebellion arise when she reads these words? They support the idea that religion is men's business and that women's spiritual path is different. Women do not have to take on the spiritual practices of temple, mosque, synagogue and church that men have designed for their own spiritual evolution. What spiritual path they should choose if they do not have family responsibilities is another question. If they are mothers, then they need look no further than their own family life to find a powerful and fulfilling spiritual path—perhaps, even, a path that is the model for all others.

Family Provides Structure and Stability

Many women find a deeply primitive satisfaction and a sense of bodily fulfilment in bearing children. Motherhood brings a structure and a discipline to life. Though the work is at times nothing more than pure drudgery, at least it has meaning and purpose. For women on a spiritual quest, the necessity of responding to everyday family demands and household tasks also provides stability and a ruthless grounding in reality. Such stability is important when 'psychic' or spiritual experiences arise, as they are bound to do if a woman is serious about her quest.

¹⁰ *In the Company of the Holy Mother, by her Direct Disciples* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashram, 1963), pp. 17-18.

The novelty of such experiences, whether they are authentic or merely the result of some mental disturbance, has caused some women to withdraw into themselves, especially if spiritual guidance is not available. Flora Courtois, a US American woman brought up in the Roman Catholic tradition, was a student in the 1940s. Even though she was living with a family and helping with chores in exchange for her board, she had her own room where she could close the door and be on her own. After two unexpected mystical experiences, she stopped looking for answers in books, and became intensely interested in exploring her own inner experience.

Seeking an immediate experience of Reality, she began to spend long periods alone in her room. Soon she began to have dreamlike visionary experiences. Her sense of aloneness deepened. Recognising that she was moving into dangerous territory, she made two attempts to seek guidance. In the first instance she went to the Catholic chaplain on campus; in the second, she went to her philosophy professor. Neither was of help to her. Acquaintances became so concerned about her behaviour that she was referred to the university's psychiatrist. He instigated practical measures that included a few days in the infirmary, regular meals on campus and further counselling, and thus averted the transformation of a spiritual crisis into a mental health breakdown. The regime also gave her a stability that allowed her to continue her spiritual quest, and her academic studies, without further threat to her mental health.

She married, and plunged into family life and further post-graduate study. Only when she was in her forties did major surgery and a time of convalescence bring her to the realisation that she had lost her way spiritually. A profound sense of abandonment engulfed her, and she longed for guidance. But she could not find it in her local churches. She abandoned her academic work, spent more time with her husband and family, wrote poetry, and returned to her earlier practice of sitting alone in quiet concentration. She joined a Zen centre, and eventually found the guidance she sought from a visiting Zen master.¹¹

¹¹ Flora Courtois, *An Experience of Enlightenment* (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1986).

Search for Guidance

Flora Courtois' story, and many others like it, reveal the deep hunger for spiritual guidance felt by family women who have been called to a spiritual quest. In essence, this quest is a mystical one. Within the Christian tradition especially, it is not easy to find authentic guides who have themselves experienced the razor-edge path of mystical life. As a result, many Christian and Jewish women, and women of no faith tradition at all, have looked towards Hinduism, Buddhism or Sufism to find spiritual guides and spiritual teachings in harmony with their own yearning. Yet even in these traditions little recognition is given to the spiritual needs of women with children. Motherhood is—in more senses than one—a spiritual 'no-man's land'.

There are many women who have been mothers, and who have written intimate accounts of their spiritual exploring. But in these they have neglected to say anything about the years spent caring for children. It is as if they too believed that their spiritual lives had gone on hold while they were immersed in the busyness of family life and careers. The hard work of this phase of their lives is not seen as intense spiritual practice. And yet there is a maturing and a mellowing going on in preparation for the next phase, a phase that might not begin until a woman is in her forties or fifties. Then the spiritual quest can take on a new intensity. The little moth can at last break through the casing and take off in joyous flight in search of the searing, consuming flame of the Beloved. The child-rearing years have been the cocoon in which the slow but inevitable process of spiritual transformation has taken place. Nothing is wasted. All the years of preparation and training are needed so that this might happen. Motherhood can truly be a time of intense spiritual practice for women engaged in a spiritual quest. Perhaps it is time to recognise motherhood as a spiritual path in its own right.

Sue Delaney is a wife, mother and grandmother living in Sydney, Australia. A clinical psychologist and former counsellor at the University of Sydney, she has had a long personal and academic interest in mysticism and women's spirituality across different religious traditions.