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## A Woman Alone and Spirituality

by Wendy Weseen  
July 27, 2008



Unitarian  
Congregation of Saskatoon

*Freedom of Religious Thought*

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When I was invited to speak today, I didn't know what I could say. As a new member of the Unitarian Congregation, I've listened for almost 2 years to others generously share themselves and what most matters to them. I wondered what most mattered to me and if I would have the courage to share that with you. I thought it should at least be something spiritual. At the time I was asked, I was reading a book called *On My Own: The Art of Being a Woman Alone* by Florence Falk. Then this summer, I went on a road trip with a small rented van to B.C. through the mountains and came up against myself again. I was surprised to experience a renewed sense of aloneness. Since I separated from my husband two and a half years ago, perhaps one of the most difficult adjustments I've had to make is learning to be comfortable and secure when I'm by myself. But I'm aware that despite this particular hardship in my life and the consequent learning to live alone, my spiritual self-discovery has blossomed.

I'm one of five siblings, not the oldest child but the oldest daughter. I was born in post-war England and lived there until the age of ten when my parents immigrated to Outlook, Saskatchewan. Most of my childhood was spent caring for three younger sisters.

I'm writing a memoir. Perhaps the best way to describe how being the oldest daughter was for me would be to read a passage from this memoir:

*I was rarely alone. I'd see that my sisters had their hands and faces washed and their skinned knees bandaged. When we were given thre'pences for fish and chips, I took them to Barker's Chip Shop and made sure they got their fair share of crispies (the fallen-off pieces of batter that collected on the bottom of the deep fryer). At tea time, I'd usher them to the table, help them cut their toast into little soldiers to dip into the yolks of the perfect eggs sitting primly in their little blue and white striped egg cups. Then at bedtime, I'd take them up the apples and pairs, Mom's expression for the stairs, lead them in songs and games, and finally sush them to sleep. I'd watch my mother's pleased face as we sang together and were called upon to entertain guests. We'd stand in a row one, two, three then four, our little harmonic voices floating out "Sisters, sisters, never were there such devoted sisters!" a song made popular during the war. Our sisterhood was like a communal mental state. Like all siblings we were united by a powerful shared childhood history, but there was excruciating gender shaping too. We were a bundle of little girls - a giggling, squirming, wriggling, rubbery, shining bundle of little girls apologetic, pleasing and resigned to our fate as girls.*

I went from my childhood into a nurse's residence. For four years I was part of a new group of sisters, who shared their physical, emotional, and learning space. This was a time of intense growing up, seeing and experiencing illness, aging and death. I was full of confidence that I could learn to help. As student nurses, we shared our growing up, the angst of making mistakes on the ward, the fear of giving our first injections and enemas,

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and the heartbreak of our personal relationships. It was a protected environment with room mates, den mothers, and strict curfews.

I met my husband when I was 17; we were lovingly called childhood sweethearts. I went from a family of four sisters and a brother into a Nurse's Residence and then into a marriage, and very soon into motherhood, never once having been alone, never having a time to find out who I was when I wasn't trying to merge with another person or still please two parents. I never developed the ability to be self-reliant or accessed the strength I had to be an independent person.

I'd been married 38 years when I moved alone into an apartment. I suffered a whole parade of feelings. I was catapulted back into a childlike state. I had incredible separation anxiety like a child going off to school for the first time. I discovered I had no capacity to be alone. I felt abandoned much like a child left on a rock and told to stay there until the adult came back and then discovering the reassuring person wasn't coming back. It was as if part of me was missing, as if I was hauling around a phantom limb, a stump with nothing at the end of it but the pain of the nerve endings left dangling. I experienced extreme discomfort I called existential aloneness though I didn't know what that really meant. As I clamoured around for someone or something to cling to, I wore out my friends and family. In the midst of this profound discomfort and pain, I needed to heal. There had always been someone to scaffold me from the outside and prop me up.

At the same time, I became aware of a societal attitude that sees an unattached woman as a sign of personal failure; no one must want her, she must be miserable, somehow deserve to be alone, and be responsible for her manless state. Added to the feelings of loss, and separation was a feeling of being an outcast with the accompanying shame for being alone, and a fear I would remain so; it was a huge loss of status and for a while I felt pain whenever I was around what seemed like an endless supply of happily married couples.

I was a woman's libber in the seventies, one of the first members of the Saskatchewan Action Committee on the Status of Women, I actually did burn my bra and gender studies was one of my major passions at University. I have a life long interest in gender roles and in my life as an artist, my works have often poked fun at gender relations and the depiction of the female body in art. Suddenly what I had been spouting off about for thirty years had a whole new meaning for me. The long history of women being seen as objects in our society and I feared by men became very relevant to me. I saw myself through those eyes too.

I instinctively knew though that until I was able to feel secure in myself without the reassurance of a relationship with another to make me feel happy and okay, and until I didn't feel the need to twist myself out of shape to gain approval, I wouldn't be on the path towards authentic selfhood. I think this is a necessary developmental task for all

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human beings, single or no, male or female. But women especially have a long history of being supported and protected, and I think they must come of age by themselves.

Knowing that no matter what happens to me, I needed to stand alone, I started to seek ways to be alone. I tried to listen to myself for clues on what it would take to make me happy. It was hard because in my life, as part of a couple, I didn't ask "who am I?" or "what do I want for myself?" Instead, I asked, "what does he want me to be?" "What does he want from me?" So I didn't see being alone as a state of potential liberty or sovereign solitude. But rather, I felt alienated in the world. I didn't realize the person I was most alienated from was myself. I discovered I didn't really know what I wanted. But I did start to work out what wasn't right, or no longer worked for me, by trying a whole bunch of new things. I started to travel alone, attended meditation retreats and writing workshops. I went to movies, out-to-dine and to cultural events alone. I engaged in things I had always wanted to do – spent whole days at the library, cruised Value Village leisurely; allocated Fridays as my pleasure day and did only those things that made me happy. Slowly, I developed a sense of what Eckhart Tolle in his book *The New Earth*, calls my inner purpose in life and started to do things that enhanced that purpose.

The most difficult part though, was to sit with my discomfort when at home or when doing activities I used to do with my husband. It seemed so strange to be alone for days at a time. As time went by, I started to realize that there was a difference between being alone, loneliness and solitude and that my feelings varied accordingly and were changing.

Aloneness felt the most strange and is still the most difficult. I became aware of being totally responsible for myself, not having anyone there to rescue me, or ameliorate my difficulties, or consult with when making decisions. I couldn't even uncork a bottle of wine. I had thoughts of what would happen to me if I got really sick, or had to deal with another emotional trauma. Who would be there to help me? One night this summer while on my trip, I couldn't find a place to camp. Everything was booked and overflowing. I tried three places. As I pushed on, I started to become very anxious I wouldn't find a place until I remembered that Wal-Mart has a policy that anyone can stay overnight in their parking lot and that Medicine Hat had a Wal-Mart. I ended up finding a spot near Maple Creek where I stayed for two nights and was invited to a family's campfire to watch the full moon rise and the marshmallows brown.

Sometimes I still experience the lost feeling and it's like a free fall from an airplane. For a long time though, I have also experienced a shift towards the healing space of solitude, and have become much more self-reliant.

Loneliness on the other hand, is a yearning to share with another or the awareness of the absence or lack of someone to touch or talk to; in my case, a particular person I had

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journeyed with for forty years. The intensity of this can vary too, ranging from not being able to find a friend when you want company to full blown longing.

Eventually though, solitude entered my life. In the midst of my new solo journey, there rose a joy in some of my times alone. I saw them as essential to my emotional and creative self. I realized a need for solitude I had never known and wondered how I could live so long without knowing this. It was then that the practice of solitude began to serve me rather than defeat me. I like Florence Falk's phrase that solitude is "like a state of communion with oneself."

Which brings me to the SELF. The self gets so much of our attention these days especially in the popular media. It's a word bandied about by all the latest gurus of psychology and spirituality. I have a natural tendency to rebel against what these folks tell us but I have to admit there's certainly something about the self that can't be distilled into a nice neat package of descriptions and definitions. There's the authentic or genuine self, the true and false self, the divine self, Buddha nature, ego self, our essence, the Presence, Being, or Source, the conscious and unconscious self, shadow self and so on. In amongst all that is a sense of self which according to many authors often isn't the true self but that which we adopt along with a belief system about ourselves defined by our family and culture.

It's through time by myself that I've come to understand what all this *self talk* means to me and how I see self awareness and discovery as an essential part of spirituality, perhaps even the inner purpose of my life. Aloneness has given me time to nurture and heal myself; bereavement takes time and coming to terms with loss can only be partially shared and is essentially private. Eventually I came to realize that the significance of my life is not entirely defined by personal relationships; that my life without a partner also has meaning. As I spent more time in solitude, I came to understand solitude allowed the coming together of feelings, ideas, imagination and thoughts that led to making me feel that my life is worth living. It transcended the periods of despair when I felt I couldn't create anything new. In addition, I've been able to practice a kinder acceptance of myself, to seek and sort out new information and experiences, to solve some problems, live creatively, and find fulfillment in a spiritual experience.

In the past three years there's been moments of intense clarity in my life when I reached a realization that, "no matter what, I need to take a particular action." These moments have arisen from the forced solitude I found myself in and the capacity to *not* respond immediately and automatically to a problem. These moments have been a spiritual revelation for me, an assurance that I could and would reach a higher purpose in my life and that the sorrow I had was the route to that realization. I had to befriend being alone, face the losses squarely, acknowledge my pain, and eventually come home to

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myself. I love a particular metaphor I found in a book by Jungian Psychologist, James Hollis called the *The Eden Project: In Search of the Magical Other*. He compares coming home to getting back into paradise, that the banishment from Eden is about losing the essential essence of oneself when we comply without thought to the demands of our culture. In the process, he says, we lose touch with our true inner feelings. Coming home is finding that self again, reconnecting with and discovering the inner self that's there all the time but covered up by our conditioning. I came to see solitude as a gift that led to my wholeness, independence and empowerment.

I'd like to conclude with an understanding I received from reading a little book called *Solitude* written by psychoanalyst Anthony Storr. He states that we are driven by two forces – the force to connect with others and an equal force towards sovereignty of selfhood. In our culture he argues, we have over-emphasized relationship and undervalued solitude. There's a body of thought that in western society we invest too much importance in the idealized intimate attachment; that human relationships are naturally imperfect and that encouraging people to look for complete fulfillment in this way is an impossible task though we are led to expect and want this. The psychological community has not made a sufficient effort to restore the balance between relationship and solitude. He goes on to argue that good relationships are based on the solid foundation of a secure self, rather than a shadow self swollen by need, and the capacity to be alone is essential to their formation.