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Women and the kingdom

Partners in ministry

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Awakening

One woman's testimony

Awakening
by Peggy Voth
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The world I had structured for myself disintegrated one July night in 1974 when I was confronted with a statement I knew to be true the moment I heard it: "You have rejected your womanhood."

My husband, Dennis, and I were attending a voluntary service orientation at Deer Creek Christian Camp in Colorado. During the first day, we orientees were led into a detailed look at our personal histories. The session was extremely unsettling for me. I was shaking as I left the meeting room.

The session had put me in touch with the pain of earlier years. As a child I experienced a gnawing guilt. Depression marked my adolescence. As a young adult, confusion joined the guile and depression. I never talked about the unnameable fear that stalked me. I shied away from the risk of exposing my inner anguish.

By the summer of 1974, at the age of 27, the load had become too heavy for me. After two days of vomiting and shaking, I asked to talk with a counselor.

The counselor had been observing me since I had arrived at the camp. After a short time of careful, probing, he told me I had denied my womanhood. There in the Colorado mountains, surrounded by a star-pricked night and the whisper of pines, the truth was out at last.

The counselor had made a shattering statement as gently and kindly as a mother telling her child he is writing his letters backward. Though dropped softly, the truth hit me like a bombshell. I trembled as I returned to my cabin. I lay awake all night, feeling naked, vulnerable and scared.

Though I had experienced God as a child, I always doubted that I, a female, could receive all he offered in his Word. I felt God preferred men to women. Feeling discriminated against by my Maker caused much sadness and pain.

I felt forbidden to even look at the promises he offered his children. I honestly believed he had a different set of gifts for men than for women. When I felt the emergence of certain spiritual gifts, I suppressed them. After all, they belonged to the male species.

I had been convinced that only one creature "deserved" life in the fullest sense. That was the male creature. The fact that I was a female negated everything I did, everything I was. Being a female was so difficult and undesirable that for a time I chose to disregard my femininity.

For several years I pursued "masculine" activities and characteristics, thinking that would buy my right to existence. I gritted my teeth and went motorcycling, worked on

car engines and read *Hot Rod* magazine. But I didn't enjoy doing those things. I was not male. I was keenly aware that I did not fit. I did not belong. Anywhere.

Eventually I made some feeble attempts to leave the "masculine world behind but my feminine dabblings seemed frivolous. I was so convinced that "feminine" qualities and activities were worthless and inferior that I never accepted those parts of myself. Instead, I felt ashamed of them and tried to hide them.

On that July night in 1974, I knew I was the one who refused to accept the fact that I was woman. A tiny streak of dawn began creeping across the blackness of my soul.

The next four months reeled past in agony and anger. The travail of an emotional rebirth seemed unending. But at last I took that first breath of new air: I decided to accept my femaleness.

I worked hard at fitting into the world as I saw it defined for a woman, and made some progress. However, I discovered a woman's world to be one of dependency. As the years passed I became more and more aware of a sadness deep within me, and a cold fear.

By 1979 the sadness and fear were dominant feelings in my life. They lurked behind my laughter, undermining everything I did.

Last January my emotional pain was so acute and so constant that I again went to a counselor. There I was confronted with another shocking statement: "Deep down you believe you are a person in the fullest sense of the word."

I was stunned. Could I be the same person who seven years earlier had rejected so much about myself? Was it really possible that my pain came from believing in my personhood but fearing to live out that belief?

Then came February. Dennis and I were to teach a church class about the biblical perspective on male/female relationships. Afraid to delve into that issue, I told Dennis he should teach and I would support him the best I could.

Dennis covered the Genesis accounts of creation in two class sessions and then, because his work load was increasing, he asked me to cover the histories of the Old and New Testament cultures. I agreed, thinking there would be nothing threatening in cultural history.

By the end of the two classes on culture, my interest in the topic had ignited. I dug into the course, reading numerous books and commentaries to gain more understanding of the New Testament passages we were studying.

I soon discovered that the Bible has little to say about roles and much to say about relating to each other as people.

I was pleasantly surprised to find that nowhere does the Bible teach that women are inferior to men. Yet I had ordered my life according to that assumption. Gradually I saw how much unnecessary distortion and sadness had stemmed from that false belief.

While studying for the last class session I saw that the abundant life God offers to his children is meant for women as well as men. Suddenly I was reading the Bible differently. For the first time in my life, I felt *included* in all that the Bible offers. The spiritual gifts were available to *me*. Right here on this earth.

I was elated. It was thrilling to think that even though I was a woman I had a place in the kingdom of God. No longer on the fringes of God's grace and benefits, I was a full-fledged recipient.

I began reading over and over the Scriptures that speak about spiritual gifts. I read them in context, I read them out of context. I studied them, and simply could not find anything that said the gifts of wisdom, miracles, knowledge, administration, discernment and teaching were restricted to men while women could only receive the gifts of helps and tongues. I could not find a verse that said the church would be given apostles, prophets, teachers and preachers who were only male.

Yet that's how I had read those passages preciously. I had assumed I was excluded.

God gently removed those blinders from my eyes. The possibilities for me as a member of his kingdom expanded greatly. Psalm 84 finally rang true for me: "He withholds no good thing from the person who walks uprightly."

On the heels of that revelation I began to sense the call of God upon my life. As I snatched a half hour every morning to leave the house and walk in the quietness of the fields where I could enter the presence of God without interruption, the tugging grew within me. God was calling me, a woman. I had thought I could receive no further call than that of coming into a relationship with him. A man could be called deeper and into a specific discipleship. I, however, might at the most be called to help a man who had received a call.

Now I was sensing a call myself. I reminded God that I was a woman. But the inner tugging persisted, and so did the struggle. I wanted all the Lord promised; I wanted all he held out to me. Yet I found myself resisting.

Then one morning during my walk, the parable of the unfaithful servant played itself out in my mind. The silent drama was vivid and striking. And at the end of it, I knew that the servant who hid his talent in fear was a woman. That faithless servant was me!

I had been given gifts, abilities and potential. But I was burying them, deep. Because I was afraid. Afraid of rejection. I thought if I buried them and refused to acknowledge them, the gifts I had been given would cease to exist.

I quaked as I remembered the master's verdict: "Take this faithless servant out of my presence and give his talent to someone else." How close I had come to hearing those words myself.

A few days later a friend who had recognized and tried to call out the gifts within me said in exasperation, "I have the perfect epitaph for your tombstone: 'She didn't'." I was jolted into the realization that I would be held accountable for what I did *not* do with my life as well as what I did do.

I knew then that the call I felt on my life was the call to responsibility. I counted the cost of saying "yes." I counted the cost of saying "no." They were both very high.

Finally, in a quiet way I said, "Yes, Lord, I am willing to see who you have made me to be. I am willing to look at what you have entrusted to me. And I will accept it and live responsibly with it."

For an entire week after that I was acutely aware of being surrounded by the presence of God. I walked through my daily tasks enveloped in his peace. Joy permeated my body, my mind and my spirit. I felt his pleasure as he disclosed, bit by bit, all that he has put at my disposal. My spirit soared as he gave me glimpses of what he has in store for me.

The seventh day of that intimate week with God was Easter Sunday. As I sat in church, I had a vision in which Jesus came down a path to meet me. As I looked up into his face, I saw myself reflected in his eyes and I was beautiful.

"You please me," he said. "As long as you follow me, you will be able to see me."

The vision faded and I walked to the communion rail in our church.

My life has done an about-face in the last months. My view of God, of others and of myself has changed drastically. My basic beliefs concerning male/female roles, who men and women are, and how God relates to us have crumbled.

Seeing the equality between God's male and female creations has opened a new way of relating to both men and women. Both have become persons to walk beside, persons to work with, persons to respect.

Sensing and accepting the call to responsible living has removed my lifelong need to earn my place on earth. In many ways life is tougher than before. Taking responsibility for who I am and the choices I make is risky. It is no longer possible for me to sit back and follow without question the direction Dennis wants to take. Our future is not his responsibility alone.

We are finding that when both of us are called to active discipleship, both of us are given opportunity to submit to each other. Submission is becoming a mutual privilege in our life together. It is through that reciprocal submission that our future is born. By taking into account my gifts and abilities as well as his, direction emerges.

I am excited about knowing an unbiased God. And I have seen that my responsibility now is to exercise all that is within me.