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Divine Duality | Reconciliation between Women and Men

by Will Keepin and Cynthia Brix



Cynthia Blix and William Keepin, directors of Satyana Institute

“Last year, two boys raped my fourteen-year-old daughter,” Verena confided ruefully in a soft voice. “One of the boys was HIV positive,” she continued, her voice shaking. Verena took a long, slow breath, clutching a crystal heart in her hand. “Now, my daughter is HIV positive,” she said with an air of defeat, as large tears welled up in her eyes.

Verena’s words struck home like a dagger in the hearts of everyone in the room. A Member of Parliament in South Africa, Verena was sharing her personal story on the fourth day of a special workshop called ‘gender reconciliation’ held for Members of Parliament and other South African leaders. The authors and their staff at Satyana Institute organized the six-day event in Cape Town in November 2006. Joining as co-facilitators were Nomfundo Walaza, Director of the Desmond Tutu Peace Center in Cape Town and Karambu Ringera of International Peace Initiatives in Nairobi, Kenya. Nozizwe Madlala Routledge, a Member of Parliament and former Deputy Minister of Health and Defense in South Africa, hosted the gathering.

Sitting in silent witness surrounding the

women’s circle was a circle of men—also Parliamentarians and other leaders—listening intently, some choking back tears. This was the first time male and female Parliamentarians had ever shared so deeply and personally about the catastrophic gender violence in South Africa. Verena continued. “When I first learned about the rape, I blamed my daughter. I figured she’d been sleeping around. I was so angry with her! How could she let those boys have their way with her!?” Verena paused, looking up slightly and glancing at each woman before continuing. “But at the hospital, I found out that she’d been a virgin when she was raped. She’d been truthful, and I didn’t believe her. I feel so ashamed.... How could I blame my daughter, my baby girl? I’m so angry with myself!” Tears streamed down Verena’s face as she kept repeating, “How could I? How could I?”

Satyana Institute’s Power of Reconciliation Project

Verena’s story illustrates one of the countless realities of gender injustice; in this case an example of women blaming women for their violation and oppression. Verena’s sorrowful tale is one of many hitherto-untold stories

disclosed by women and men in the Power of Reconciliation project, developed by the Satyana Institute and documented in the recent book, *Divine Duality: The Power of Reconciliation between Women and Men* (Will Keepin with Cynthia Brix and Molly Dwyer, Hohm Press, 2007). The premise of this project is that both women and men are afflicted by gender injustice and each needs the other for a true and complete healing. Over the past 15 years the authors have organized or co-convened more than 40 events entitled Power of Reconciliation (or ‘Gender Reconciliation’) in the United States, India, Australia, Croatia, South Africa, and this year in Canada.

The Power of Reconciliation project creates a rare forum for women and men to jointly confront gender injustice and unravel the insidious knots of cultural conditioning and oppression relating to gender and sexuality. In this unique context the ‘undiscussables’ of gender are confronted unflinchingly as participants plumb the depths of their experiences and move beyond habitual ways of relating to discover new forms of healing and authentic intimacy between the sexes. Satyana Institute has trained a group of fifteen professional facilitators in this work in the United States and is initiating a new training program in South Africa.

Spiritual Process of Reconciliation Between Women and Men

Key to our methodology is the direct application of spiritual teachings and contemplative practices drawn from a rich spectrum of spiritual and religious traditions. This makes the work effective in a wide range of religions and cultures and it invokes a higher, universal wisdom that both empowers and protects the sometimes delicate and sometimes volatile healing process. The Power of Reconciliation model has proven effective not only in the United States and

other affluent Western countries, but also in more challenging cultures where gender oppression is severe, such as India and South Africa, which are the focus of this article.

Cape Town Workshop Continued

After Verena's story more agonizing tales emerged from the women's circle. A deep, mournful sob erupted into the room, startling the group, when one man broke down in despair while hearing one woman after another share tales of abuse, rape, AIDS and sexual harassment. Silence was held in the group for several minutes as two men went over and gently embraced the grieving man.

Afterwards, roles were reversed with the women listening in silent witness to the men's truth forum. Again, powerful stories emerged of betrayal, abuse, sexual violation and grueling accounts of masculine socialization endured in the cultural institutions of church, military, corporation, family and society.

Deep spiritual work is rarely easy. Yet the jewel found is priceless. Gender reconciliation work requires both courage and humility—to speak one's truth, to open to the pain of others, to take personal and social responsibility. The process follows an alchemical wisdom; the pain of gender oppression is confronted head-on and deep in the 'core of the wound,' a hidden light or grace is discovered that unfolds into a profound healing and transformation.

Toward the end of each Power of Reconciliation workshop the women and men create heartwarming ceremonies to honor and bless one another. The male Parliamentarians in South Africa choreographed a beautiful hand washing ceremony. Carrying a bowl of water, they gently washed, dried, and massaged lotion on the hands of each woman. Then the men stood up in a line, faced the women, and delivered the following declaration:

We have met over the past five days in community as men, and in community with you as men and women. We have listened to each other's stories—some personal, others told on behalf of vulnerable, degraded, hurt, brutalized human beings—all for no other reason



1. Men honoring women, India. 2. Men bowing to women, South Africa. 3. Hands. 4. Women planning honor ceremony for men, South Africa. 5. Men honoring women, India.

than that they are women, sisters, mothers, and girl children.

We have heard, too, that through the social structures of power and decision making, many of our brothers have abused our intended roles of caring and protection—for their own selfish power, personal pleasure, and gain.

The bonds of humanity have been broken. We acknowledge that we have shared in the unfair and unjust advantage that has upset the Creator's intended balance of human relationships for love, companionship, and cooperation. We further acknowledge that we

have been complicit in breaking the intended dream of equality.

So now we come forward to say to you: we are sorry. We affirm that we want to start anew.... And we ask, will you accept our offer to take responsibility as we commit ourselves to live out—and challenge and support all men everywhere to live and work for—gender equality, and thereby seek reconciliation?

In silence, the men then bowed before the women.

It was a profound moment, to witness this group of male leaders in South Africa—a

nation plagued by the worst AIDS crisis on the planet and skyrocketing sexual violence—declare their deep commitment to transforming gender injustice across the land.

The women were stunned. Some wept. Nothing had prepared them for the power of this offering. Deeply moved with their hearts open, the women honored the men with a ceremony that included a colorful dance of veils.

New Gender Reconciliation Initiative

“I have been looking for a long time to find a way to bring healing and reconciliation between women and men here in South Africa,” said former Deputy Minister of Health and Defense Nozizwe Madlala Routledge, “and this work is the answer. We need much more of this work in South Africa.”

Accordingly, a South African Gender Reconciliation Steering Committee was formed in December 2007, comprised of Nozizwe Madlala Routledge and five other prominent leaders including Keith Vermeulen of the Parliamentary Office of the South African Council of Churches, and Nomfundo Walaza of the Desmond Tutu Peace Center. This Steering Committee invited Satyana Institute to launch a three-year Gender Reconciliation Initiative (2008-2010) in South Africa. We are collaborating with Phaphama Initiatives, a national training organization for conflict resolution and Alternatives to Violence in South Africa, to raise funds to train South African facilitators in the Power of Reconciliation model.

Introducing Gender Reconciliation in India

Satyana Institute is also introducing Power of Reconciliation programs in India. In 2002 the Sadhana Institute, a pastoral retreat center outside Mumbai founded by Jesuit priest Anthony de Mello, hosted a weeklong program for Catholic nuns and priests. Satyana staff conducted subsequent programs at Sadhana Institute entitled ‘Mysticism: Birthright of the Heart,’ including one in 2007 that again incorporated the Power of Reconciliation process.

The priests and nuns exhibited tremendous courage and compassion as they tackled the

injustice and patriarchal institutions of both Indian society and the Catholic Church. In the women’s and men’s truth forums disturbing accounts of sexual violation and other forms of misconduct and abuse were brought forward, coupled with reports of enabling complicity and denial within the Church leadership—reminiscent of recent revelations within the U.S. Catholic Church.

In one event a backlash emerged within the group following the most poignant revelations led by a few priests against the nuns and other priests who had brought these revelations to light. This precipitated a powerful confrontation in the group and the priests and nuns worked tenaciously through the ensuing difficulties to reach a profound resolution that brought deep healing and liberating release for all. The power of gender to humble a community to its knees and then uplift it into grace was exquisitely demonstrated.

After the intensive and intimate healing work the nuns and priests in both these events honored and blessed one another in remarkably beautiful ritual processes (see photo). As reported later in their community newsletter,

The group of 21 men and 21 women religious who participated in the [Gender Reconciliation] course bore witness to the wounds of their lives from culture, religion, and personal history. They also testified to the healing experienced...that included an awareness of the partiality and incompleteness of their perceptions of each other, and opening to the healing light of compassion for one another.... There are also signs of a major shift that is happening in the consciousness of many of the participants, [and] a deepening awareness of the need to include in religious formation [the] wonderful richness of this holistic approach.

Circles of Women and Men Committed to Gender Reconciliation Across the Globe

Despite major advances made by the women’s and men’s movements, gender injustice continues to afflict most human societies across the globe including the affluent West. However, a new era is dawning that holds great promise for transforming the ancient gender wound.

As the authors continue to organize programs on gender reconciliation in South Africa, North America, India, Italy and elsewhere we are witnessing the emergence of a global phenomenon. Committed groups of women and men—now on four continents—are working diligently to transform gender injustice within their respective societies and to reclaim the sacred union of feminine and masculine.

To our knowledge these small but deeply committed Circles of Gender Reconciliation are unprecedented. These remarkable women and men have one thing in common; they know that the era of ‘patriarchy’—which has plagued human societies across the globe for millennia—is now coming to an end. These are men who know that beyond all the ‘male privileges’ offered by patriarchal society there is another far more profound privilege; to uplift the feminine, and begin dismantling the structures of patriarchy altogether. These are women who know that the ‘gender war’ can never be won by either ‘side,’ but is rather a collective spiritual crisis that can only be transformed by calling upon the larger spiritual wisdom and unitive consciousness of all of humanity. In 2010, Satyana Institute plans to convene leaders from these diverse circles in an International Conference on Gender Healing and Reconciliation.

The passion and inspiration guiding these dedicated gender reconciliation circles is not wishful thinking but rather active incubation of new pathways for women and men that foster a culture of integrity, love, and mutual respect between the sexes. A new era of gender reconciliation is being born.

Will Keepin, Ph.D. and Cynthia Brix, M.Div. M.A. direct the Satyana Institute based near Seattle, Washington. They are authors of the new book, *Divine Duality: The Power of Reconciliation between Women and Men* (Hohm Press, 2007), which documents over 40 reconciliation gatherings in five countries. They teach graduate courses on new pathways to peacemaking, and lead spiritual retreats for religious leaders. Will is an environmental scientist internationally known for his work on global warming. Cynthia is an interfaith minister specializing in international peace building and spiritual direction for young adults. For further information, and to register for upcoming Power of Reconciliation programs, please visit www.satyana.org.