

Memories: our power

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Every woman seeking divine truth and responding to grace

in her life vividly manifests God's presence

Elizabeth A. Johnson (1998:224)

Some years ago I attended a Feminist Theology Conference at which Sara Maitland, English theologian and writer, was the keynote speaker. Her investigation of the buried and terrifying aspects of Sarah's memories from the stories in the Book of Genesis, especially what she calls *the abiding emotional reality of Sarah and Hagar... the text vibrates with their presence... Hagar praising in the wilderness, Sarah laughing in her tent* (Hassall 1995:18), gave me courage to delve into hidden aspects of my own memories. I learnt to trust the power of stories and let them rise from the places where I'd hidden them over the years.

One of these memories and my analysis of it opens out before me as I listen to the struggles of women in the Australian Churches today to be visible, audible and present in the abundance of their dreams, cries, resources and unreleased power. I share this memory with you in this article. I write it as an incident in its own right, in the present tense to take you immediately into the scene. I name the woman I was at the time Emma. She lives through

the experience of this memory with its questions, shock and stumbling awakening of the power of the clerical hierarchy to define her life and set its boundaries.

Let the memory speak its own truth.

Then follow me into the shift I make to a second voice. I become the researcher testing the memory against poststructuralist feminist theory, literature, history and culture. This is the voice I use for the analysis. Be patient as I use H el ene Cixous, French writer and dramatist and her exclamatory sentences. I write as she does. Read the statements aloud to yourself and they will come alive. I use italics to quote Cixous and other writers, flowing freely in my own sentences because they have become my own awarenesses. The spiraling meaning doubles back on itself and gains in depth in the process. Let the words speak intuitively and symbolically. Don't try to rationalise them.

I endeavor in this analysis to articulate some of the contradictions, ambiguities, struggles, different ways of making meaning of the occasion. Intensity of anger, resistance— inability to comprehend anything other than the loss, alienation and oppression of the experience— are uppermost in my recognition. My choice is sudden like a syncopation or turning point in music. It comes out of the illness, tears and anger.

The third voice I use in the last section of the paper makes another shift in language. It's a different form of reflexivity. It's attempting to ask some of the questions arising from personal awareness that this reflection has brought with it. It opens gaps, fragments of

insights, discoveries, possibilities, curiosities—perhaps on the edge of this new millennium some magic for some readers also. These are some of the challenges facing us in the wider society, especially in our Australian churches: resisting the dualisms in order to bridge communication gaps between feminist forms of awareness and more traditional patriarchal stances of authority; finding new ways of expressing the meaning of obedience to the promptings of the spirit; searching for mutuality, creativity, justice, compassion and mercy in a world of consumerism, controlling power and violence.

Come into the reading/writing of these three voices with me. Let each of them speak to you. Let your own questions, awarenesses and issues arise. Let the Spirit who is Sophia-Wisdom energise. Let the vision of the wisdom tradition and women's collective wisdom make their own connections in what arises as you forge new meaning and claim the power of story in your own life.

The memory: November, 1978.

The Bishop clenches his fist, bangs it three times on the table as he speaks. He is a big, florid man, his face becoming redder, puffed with the wrath he is experiencing. His voice lifts with anger as he stands, faces Emma. 'You will not introduce MACOS in the schools of my Diocese. There will be no more experimenting with this dangerous learning. What has happened to you since your visit to the Philippines? You must stop this MACOS immediately Sister!'

Emma, summoned a few minutes ago, came to the Bishop's office unconcerned. She has had very little personal dealing with him, only meets him at Diocesan Board Meetings, official functions. (They all call him Freddie behind his back.) He seems to like being thought of as knowledgeable, but appears to Emma to be gullible, easily swayed by public opinion. He has invited her to sit with him at the round table just inside the door. Has questioned her about the Bruner material she is trialing. 'Is this MACOS being used in the schools in this Diocese?' Emma, at first thinking he is interested, responds unhesitatingly. 'Yes, Bishop'. She has been excited about this material for most of the year. 'Man: a Course of Studies' it is called. She introduced it to the Education Team with whom she works late last year and, with their approval, has gained a grant of a few thousand dollars to buy the films, booklets, trial the process in three schools—in Mutlegar, Corola and Orawa. The teachers, two women religious from her own congregation and a lay man, have attended preparatory workshops in Sydney, are enjoying the teaching/learning process, implementing the units with distinct flair. She has visited each of them, filmed their work with their students during the past couple of weeks. All this in her mind as the Bishop speaks 'What is it supposed to be teaching? What is it about ? '

Among the responses she gives the Bishop is her own understanding of the overall educational goal of the material. She endeavors to share with him her expectation that the children will learn how to speak from both within and from outside an ideology. The studies of the Eskimos, some of their practices, which are so contrary to Christian thinking, are enabling the children to see that all peoples do not speak from the same position, belief

system. 'I see the children learning skills of critical analysis, a valuable educational outcome.' Emma volunteers at one point in the conversation. She explains how the MACOS Project was introduced in the United States a couple of years ago by a group of educators, led by Jerome Bruner, who employed the foremost thinkers in many disciplines to gather the material for him. Emma tries to tell the Bishop that the material consists of a series of Case Studies — Salmon, Herring Gull, Baboons, Netsilik Eskimos, the children's own family history. The Case Studies themselves are the means of analysing some basic concepts like life cycle, tools, language, beliefs and values. It is this movement to a deeper level of thinking for the children (Fifth class in the Primary Schools) that interests Emma. She wants to investigate its power to assist the children to move to critical skills and critical thinking.

As the Bishop questions further Emma becomes aware that his concern, has been stirred by the present situation in some of the Queensland Schools. A Mrs J. has been voicing her concerns about MACOS. Media throughout Australia have picked up the issue. 'Eskimos Drinking Blood'—has recently been splashed across the national papers as hardly a fit topic for primary school children. Now the Bishop has discovered that this same material is being used in his own schools!

Emma patiently tries to show the Bishop that this topic is certainly not a concern for Catholic school children. 'The Catholic children learn about drinking Christ's Blood in the Eucharist from their earliest years. They have no problem with the concept of drinking blood. They grasp that the Eskimo group will drink the blood of the seal they have

harpooned, in the same way as the Aboriginal people in Australia drink the blood of the kangaroo they catch'. 'But that reference to Christ's blood is different' maintains the Bishop. 'Not essentially. The symbol of blood is known to them. They are not frightened by the idea of drinking blood. It's part of the language they use'. Emma responds. 'The children find it more difficult to understand that a grandmother in some of the Eskimo groups will willingly walk out onto the snow to die if there is insufficient food for her as well as the family. This idea the children do find difficult to grasp'.

As Emma names each example the Bishop's anger deepens; his inability to understand the educational implications of the material, or even make an effort to understand that there are educational implications, grows. His fear of something he does not understand is obvious to Emma. His only means of dealing with the dilemma now to put a stop to the experiment. He will not allow this kind of educational experiment to occur in the schools of his Diocese. Emma knows this will be his decision even before he voices it.

She rises as the Bishop thumps the table; steps back from the gesture; listens to his decision and quietly walks out of the room. She knows that this is an important moment in her career but she can find no words to express the significance, even within herself. She tells the rest of the Consultancy Team Members the Bishop's decision. She mentions it at the dinner table that evening at the Convent, treating it in an understated fashion. She dismisses it from her mind over the next few days in the busyness of end-of-year activities. The Office Christmas Party is to be held at the Convent. She has a lot of preparation for that event. Before and after work over the week Emma cleans, decorates the hall for the

party. She brings pots of ferns, growing plants in from the verandahs, cloisters; satisfies herself that the hall looks better than it ever has. The evening itself proves to be an enjoyable gathering. The team farewell the man who has been their leader for the past four years. It will not be the same in 1979. They will all miss Mark.

Christmas comes, goes, uneventfully. Emma packs to go on holidays as she has done over the past couple of years. The packing is an effort. She feels hot, cold, feverish. All will be well when she reaches the holiday destination. Nothing is easy. She drives on her own, as the other nuns with whom she will be holidaying, have left earlier. She stops to get a drink at a couple of towns on the way. Each time she does not want to get back into the car again. It is all too hard, too laborious somehow.

The holiday cabin is a close living situation, four or five bunks in an open area. Normally Emma enjoys the company, the fun, jokes. This year she finds it all too strenuous. She has developed a cough. Cannot cough comfortably in the night without waking everyone. One night in a fit of coughs she goes out to the car, sits there a long time. The cough becoming worse over the next days. A visit to the doctor becomes imperative. He sends her for x-rays, tells her she has pneumonia. Within the next twenty four hours she is in Hospital in St. Vincent's in Sydney. It takes a week's treatment to break the congestion on her lungs to enable her to return to Beechwood.

The two weeks back in Beechwood before she has to return to work for the new year are more restful. The first day back at the Office in late January is a hot, steamy day. Emma

comes home to the Convent for lunch, which she rarely does, walks to the Chapel. She passes the maidenhair ferns she so carefully tends, loves seeing so beautifully green in all their summer glory. They are massed on steps on the verandah leading to the chapel. They are her pride and joy. There is a large fern missing from the back row! Where is it? The gap is obvious. She knows who has taken it. One of the Sisters who seems to think she does not have to ask anyone for anything. Emma cannot bear to be treated so casually. Her whole being throbs with intensity of living, tautness, strain, anger she has not known how to express these past weeks.

She meets Margaret on the verandah soon afterwards, verifies that she had been responsible for taking the fern, lets forth a torrent of abusive words. 'Why could you not ask me for the fern if you needed it?' she sobs. 'Does my responsibility for these plants mean nothing to you!' She gives Margaret glowering looks, lifts her voice with each statement she makes 'Do I care for them only for people like you to give them away! Am I not to be considered at all in the things for which I am responsible!' She spits out finally 'Who do you think you bloody well are!' as she brushes past the startled Margaret who has not said a word. The wrath she is expressing making further words impossible. She has spoken harshly with a vehemence Margaret later admits frightened her.

The tears, anger she has held back for the past weeks escaping at last. She hates the Bishop. She has never admitted to herself that she hated anyone before. She has never hated like this ever. It takes hold of her this rage. It makes her furious, incensed to think this man can change her life with one command. He holds control. He can stop, with one

slap on the table, all she has worked for two years, longer, to develop, encourage. He has not even wanted to know what she is doing in the schools until the concern about MACOS was made public.

Ten days later Emma is still crying. She can see no way out of the impasse. She disappears to her room, cries for hours. She goes to sleep exhausted, then wakes to remember the dilemma again. The tears, frustration, anger are back with her again. Each of the members of the community try to talk with her, tell her to forget about MACOS, go back to work, show this man he does not affect her. She knows one thing for sure. She is never going back to the Office where this man holds control.

Exploring the memory

This way of resistance I took, one of rebellion against the physical constraints that prevented the spirit from expressing deepest desires. The illness, the recurring bodily interruption like the pneumonia, that took me outside the chronological time allocations, of holidays, or work patterns; the rearrangements of my life that refusing to return to the Catholic Education Office required; the courage to remain without direction for the next months; all built up the tension to the pitch of the extreme that expressed the refusal to continue, a turning point, a syncope moment: *for syncope is youth. ...testifies to the subject's capacity to escape from the world. It is a game, a child's game ... which allows*

itself to manipulate the jigsaw puzzle of reality by exchanging roles or sexes, moving from one heart to the next. Or rather moving from doing to being... completely immersed in the pure female element (Clement 1994:229). No long discernment process: an intuitive leap to a life decision—*completely immersed in the pure female element*.

The return, the resolution, the cure, the unburdening therapeutic. No wonder women throughout history have fainted, given in to depression in greater numbers than their male counterparts, continued to read romantic novels in which falling in love and love at first sight are credibly narrated: *everywhere, we have run across the pebble in the road, the obstacle, the chasm that has to be leaped. And we have glimpsed weak people suddenly endowed with enough prodigious, metaphysical strength to cross over, in a single bound* (Clement 1994:254). Such I became.

The Bishop spoke his understanding of the situation, that day he called me to his office. He pointed to my trip to the Philippines, Asia impinging, the hazards of getting involved with material like that of MACOS which questioned the established order. He took for granted my subservient position as woman, educator in his system of schools, obedient Catholic who would do exactly as he requested. He assumed there would be no further word of the situation after he had spoken to me. He missed the opportunity to speak with me of different ways of understanding, different approaches to education.

Helene Cixous realistically sees the complexity with which he was faced. The energy that prompted my anger to keep blazing: *She has never "held still"; explosion, diffusion,*

effervescence, abundance, she takes pleasure in being boundless, outside self, outside same, far from a "centre," from any capital of her "dark continent", very far from the "hearth" to which man brings her so that she will tend his fire, which always threatens to go out. She watches for him, but he has to keep an eye on her; for she can be his storm as well: "will I die by a storm? Or will I go out like a light that doesn't wait to be blown out by the wind, but which dies tired and self satisfied? ...or: will I extinguish my own self in order not to burn down to the end?" (That is what my companions thought I was doing—extinguishing myself in what they called a nervous breakdown when I cried so much—I think of it now as distinguishing myself in hysteria, resistance, voice). *Masculine energy, with its limited oil reserves, questions itself. Whereas, the fact that feminine energy has vast resources is not without consequences—still very rarely analysed—for exchange in general, for love-life, and for the fate created for woman's desire. Exasperating: he's afraid she "goes too far". And the irony of her fate has her either be this "nothing", which punctuates the Dora case—"You know my wife is nothing to me"—or this too-much, too-much reversed into not enough, the "not how it should be" that reminds her that her master is on the limited side* (Cixous and Clement 1986:91). This man had asked me to continue watching over his dark fire. He expected such service. I refused. I had wandered far from (t)his hearth. *She watches for him, but he has to keep an eye on her.* I had begun to use words differently, see different meanings. *He's afraid she "goes too far".* I considered I had hardly begun. The vast reserves of feminine energy hardly tapped.

This man was of course not alone responsible for the decision he made about my educational experiment. I glimpsed his tight positioning even in the midst of my turmoil.

He was part of the patriarchal, clerical, hierarchical world of male domination to which I was subject. I was one of the women, not fit to govern, belonging to one of the groups of people excluded from power in the socioeconomic, political practices of the Church to which I gave allegiance (Schüssler Fiorenza 1992:120). I was only just glimpsing this positioning. I was also guilty of looking for advice to other authorities (lay friends, educationalists—who introduced me to the MACOS material—and academics), not to this *properly constituted male authority* (Maitland 1983:77). In the accepted church discourse of the past centuries women were subservient, submissive, obedient (at least in the public image). I could no longer be any of these things without modification. The Bishop was not accustomed to meeting articulate women who spoke up for themselves. He had only one response to the situation—stop their words, shut up such women. And that is what he did (or tried to do!)

Margaret took the fern, gave it away without any word to me, unwittingly lit the fire of my anger and hysteria.

No opportunity was ever given me to demonstrate my anger, exasperation, indignation to the Bishop or his assistants, or for that matter to any in my community. I was not permitted to explain the educational orientation I had chosen to any of the authorities. Labelled dangerous, highly flammable, too forcibly enthusiastic about the Project I was monitoring in the schools, my Superiors negotiated with the Education Office for the termination of my Contract. Kept me at a distance. Excluded me. They lamented my refusal to return to the work I had been doing. They spoke of me as ill, hysterical. So close to the symptoms

Cixous gives of the hysteric —*Antiestablishment... revolt and shake up the public, the group, the men, the others to whom they are exhibited... The hysteric unties familiar bonds, introduces disorder into the well-regulated unfolding of everyday life, gives rise to magic in ostensible reason* (Cixous and Clement 1986:5). I must have made the little world of my Mercy community a hazardous one those days.

The Mercy Superiors—Martine who was Leader, Margaret her Assistant— were my companions. We had experienced the last twenty years of religious life together. I felt equal, was their representative at the Catholic Education Office. They acted from within the authority structure they had inherited from nineteenth and early twentieth century understandings of hierarchical power, unquestioning obedience and submission. *The Sisters are always to bear in mind that, by the vow of obedience, they have renounced their own wills, and resigned them to the direction of their superiors...* (Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia 1960:38). They never considered that I might not remain within the tight boundaries of that authority structure as earlier defined. They had conferred with me very little on educational matters (as opposed to the Sister of St. Joseph with whom I worked, whose leaders gave her the status of wise consultant that I was never accorded). I was moving into a position in relation to obedience that was dangerous to these women, becoming a threat to their authority. My vow of Obedience, discernment of the Spirit within my life, coming to be about God's prompting, a wider discernment process, no longer just the word of these women. I refused all their suggestions of overseas study, renewal, possible leave of absence from the Congregation. It took until May 1979, while holidaying, convalescing in Melbourne for a couple of weeks, for me to choose a direction. I sat with

my friend Pamela (then working on a Mercy National Team in Canberra) at Tullamarine Airport. I heard myself tell her I thought I would work for a couple of years in another country, not study, but become immersed in activity in another culture. A gentle, easy choice when it came. With little discernment assistance from the authorities.

I know now I was beginning to speak from a different place, a feminist discourse I could hardly understand. From 1974 to 1978 I had been studying for my Masters Degree in Education at Sydney University, while working as Supervisor of Schools, Education Consultant around the forty or so Catholic Schools of the Diocese of Beechwood. Critiques of Education Systems throughout the world, deschooling issues, cultural analyses of deprived peoples in countries like Brazil by writers like Paolo Friere and Ivan Illich had led me to believe, with many other educators of the time, that it is *possible for human beings, through the problematising of the unity being-world (or of human beings in their relations with the world and with other human beings) to penetrate more deeply the prise de conscience of the reality in which they exist* (Friere 1974:107). Beginning to understand all culture as of human creation, open to change, transformation. Awakening of critical consciousness in my students and the school staffs with whom I worked was coming to be the key to human development for me. Awareness, breaking through the silences enclosing institutions of power, summons *to break the obsolete social and economic systems which divide our world between the overprivileged and the underprivileged* (Illich 1971:17) the challenge I took seriously to work upon in my own small milieu. MACOS like a gift, to commence in small ways to crack through into new awareness, in the schools I knew.

The trip to the Philippines in September 1978 to which the Bishop refers in the memory, funded by my Congregation, two weeks of exposure to poverty, powerlessness, oppression. I wrote to the Sisters in my Congregation on my return, telling them what it felt like to sleep on the floor in a small hut in a barrio, with the rain coming through the slats joined to make a roof, the family (there were ten members who normally lived in this small three metre square space) moving out of the only dry spot to give it to me. Shocked into awareness of my middle class values of tidiness, neatness, comfort; sensing the force of materialism to sway opinion; questioning my reliance on comfort (had I not publicly vowed poverty as my way of life—this scene demonstrated that what I lived was far from the desolation and destitution of these people). Another incentive to give greater time and energy to the MACOS Project on my return to Australia.

The different positions from which each of us spoke—Bishop, Congregational Leaders, educational colleagues and I—hardly comprehended with any sensitivity. I had learnt in the previous years, in Spiritual Direction talks with a Priest friend who was also a Freudian Counsellor, to allow some of the workings of my unconscious to surface, be expressed, be articulated. I could acknowledge my hurt, vulnerability, exposure, pain, blazing anger now in ways I would never have used in the past. No longer ashamed of such feelings, (though everyone else was certainly afraid of them). I refused to hide them, offered myself patience as the only remedy I could see from within the suffering position, to move beyond them. If I could get away I would be safe. I would not damage others with the intensity of my anger.

I hardly glimpsed the fire, desire, energy, beyond the educational idealism, that required expression. *She doesn't hold still, she overflows. An outpouring that can be agonising, since she may fear, and make the other fear, endless aberration and madness in her release. Yet vertiginous, it can also be intoxicating—as long as the personal, the permanence of identity is not fetishised—a "where- am- I", a "who-enjoys-there", a "who-I-where-delight": questions that drive reason, the principle of unity mad, and that are not asked, that ask for no answer, that open up the space where woman is wandering, roaming (a rogue wave), flying (thieving) (Cixous and Clement 1986:91). Wandering, roaming, flying. Directionless. Passionate. I was all of these.*

I held onto my anger, resistance, knew if I could walk with others of like mind I might find what I was trying to say. It was all I seemed to have left. *This power to be errant is strength; it is also what makes her vulnerable to those who champion the Selfsame, acknowledgment, and attribution. No matter how submissive and docile she may be in relation to the masculine order, she still remains the threatening possibility of savagery, the unknown quantity in the household whole (Cixous and Clement 1986:91). The power of this anger and resistance would open the world, whirl me out of Australia, expand the map to encompass frontiers never dreamed possible.*

Reflecting in the new millennium

For twenty years I have struggled to see further implications for obedience, personal autonomy, governance, in the experience that this memory taps. I have acknowledged that mutual discernment with my church, or in the case of my vow, with the leaders of my Congregation is essential for working out my commitment. I admit that discernment needs to happen with the group and its historic and learned insights to give balance to the personal response.

I have endeavored also to plumb the desire that prompted the hysteric response in the above memory to hold onto personal autonomy, knowing that the flight that I used to escape from the seeming oppressions and control of the Bishop was not the generally accepted response to such confrontation. Looking back on that response I see it now as courageous, positive and meaningful. Yet I know I have learnt other more significant and relevant responses in the intervening years—with more power to assist in cutting edge dialogue or participate in learning situations from which change may result.

I have acknowledged the gift that my escape from the education ministry in which I was engaged has become. I've made my peace with the bishop, who is now long since dead. His action sent me on a journey of search and discovery that I may never have taken without his challenge.

More recently I have watched as a number of events and happenings have brought examples of authority/obedience/legalism relationships on many levels to the forefront of current public thinking. Women and men throughout Australia expressed opinions which are

recorded in the Report on the Participation of Women in the Catholic Church in Australia (MacDonald, Cornish, Dixon and Manning 1999). Many quotations in the document speak from a similar stance to that of mine in the memory, for example, *There is an ongoing need for Theological reflection based on the experience of women in the Church. The question of patriarchy in the tradition must be open to revision, so that our Christian heritage can be liberated from what is oppressive and discriminatory. If we looked to the life and mission of Jesus as the scriptural endorsement for the fuller participation of women in leadership and pastoral ministry, we would be compelled to free the biblical message from patriarchal perspectives* (MacDonald and others 1999:80). Other instances include the choice made by the Sisters of Charity at St Vincent's Hospital in Sydney in 1999 to open an Injecting Room for Drug Addicts and their later acceptance of the Pope's ruling to withdraw from their decision. This choice lifted discussions of control and authority to the front pages of the daily newspapers.

The tension that is often generated when members of two different approaches or discourses are compelled to discern together on a moral issue is at the heart of the practical dilemma of obedience. Women like myself cling to the possibilities of expression of feminist creativity, equality of persons, agency and power for all, mutuality, visibility and continuing dialogue. Many of the members of the hierarchy and other leaders in church, both women and men, still maintain a historically mandated position that persists in marginalising and trivialising most women and less powerful men, and seeks domination and control in an authoritarian manner. Others take a position less extreme than either of these, but again different from either. The spiritual emphasis of the different discourses is expressed in a

great variety of understandings. God images, ways of interpreting scripture, language of rituals differ. Consciousness and meaning making are so different that it is very difficult for a person with one set of meanings to view reality from the other position.

The questions that arise from possibilities of bridging some of the differences or acknowledging that such differentiation is a significant aspect of life are mainly ones of process, relationship and possible communion.

How can dialogue across the boundaries of such discourses continue with integrity? How can relationships across the differences express compassion and love? How can awareness of the interconnectedness of all creation open aspects of respect, justice for all and relief of suffering for many regardless of positioning? I do not want to see too many women or men experience vulnerability such as I knew in order to take a healthy stance of resistance. How can we leave aside the surface issues that do not matter and in communion be the wisdom figures that we are each capable of being in new understandings of obedience to the spirit in the church and the world?

I have found in play and imagination a way of glimpsing some of the deeper truths that I believe to be at the heart of this issue.

In June 1998 I stood in the National Gallery of Victoria in front of Mexican artist Remedios Varo's *Creation of the Birds* (1957). At a table in a monastic style room sits an owl-like figure, delicately drawn and carefully presented. The figure holds my attention.

The face is heart shaped. There is a small violin round the neck and the feet are balanced centrally on the central squares of the floor mosaic. The figure is concentrated and peaceful. She/he is using colours, that flow from a series of alchemical egg-shaped vessels, to draw a number of birds. The figure holds a brush in the right hand and uses the left to focus light through a prism onto the drawings. The ray of light enters the window from a distant star. As it touches the page the birds fly into life. No longer sketches on a page they are alive and free. Besides the birds at the table there is a bird on the floor pecking grain, another flying out the window.

I link the story of the painting. The creation of the birds occurs, life flows into the still forms, when the person outlines them with the colours available in her world and the light of vision and creation gives them identity and flight.

I saw the figure at the centre of that painting as you reader or me or any person in the wisdom of their own integrity, leaving aside ego needs, expressing the maturity of their being. When all superfluous trivia, furniture, and distractions are cleared from the life and the person is centred and at peace within themselves, alert to the god within and the activity or ministry without, attentiveness to the spirit is possible. All the learning and wisdom of a lifetime, of a group is focussed. Obedience to the life spirit, that may come with music from within and light from without can unfold wonders, bring new creations. Obedience to the incarnate god within and the light of god in the universe, outside the self can continue the work of creation.

What is imperative is that we listen to one another, let the spirit into our different worlds. Maybe the listening can only happen at this deep level of awareness Remedios Varos is painting in this picture. Maybe I have to be as concentrated and focussed on the spirit in my life as she suggests in this painting. With such awareness and new consciousness I am capable of creativity I never dreamed of expressing.

Ritual, with its quick and easy entry to such playful, imaginative and emotive parts of being may be one of the few ways of entering this kind of dialogue. Tentative efforts to build new relationships with others of different thinking than myself may also give entry to other ways of dialogue. Learning together as the children did with the MACOS material may be effective in opening dialogue. We need to link our search for meaning across the different discourses together. Even to begin to acknowledge the power of such differences may be the first tentative steps we take together—I see this happening powerfully in small groups and some areas of church. We all need assistance. It's too difficult alone.

The figure in the painting may also signify the figure of the group. As Elizabeth Johnson suggests, we... *all know in some way the pull of the power, joy, shock, and challenge of Wisdom's gracious action in (our) lives...the extraordinary status of simple human women and men in the image and likeness of god, trying to find their way, called and gifted by grace* (1998:228). God's presence quickening to new life.

Such moments of insight as this, and others in prayer, hold me to my vow of obedience and my continued search for ways to come closer to an understanding of this god who enlivens

my being, prompts my spirit and needs my contribution and choices to continued creation and revelation. Obedience at this level is key to my whole life journey. We need such obedience within our church. I need my vow of obedience as a women religious to assist me in my attempts to bring light and spirit to my world. We need other ways of finding new awareneses in our world together.

The Spirit who is wisdom assists me in my creative fidelity. She is there in the memories . She is there in consciousness of this moment. She is there in the future as we search together for the integrity of creation in which we can all participate.

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