

Open Letter to All Interested in Abuse Survivors

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Women's Recovery

NETWORK

Knowing Ourselves through Story

by Gaye Spetka, Columbus, Ohio

Note from Faith R.: In June I was lucky enough to be invited by my cherished friend Gaye to attend a writing workshop she offered. Actually, it was a 2-part journaling/writing/storying event, attended by 8 other women who work 12-step programs. Gaye agreed to excerpt this article, with minor revisions, from the handbook she prepared for us.

We may not all call ourselves writers, but we all have stories to tell. And in telling these stories, first to ourselves, then to each other, we come to learn something about our lives. Our lives come to teach us something about ourselves. And we teach each other about our lives and our stories. This is how we build sisterhood/brotherhood/community. This is how we learn to relate to and identify with each other. This is how we create spiritual transformation and plant the seeds of inner and global peace.

We are women who have lost our stories. These losses may have been caused by memory blackouts because of sexual abuse, incest, alcoholism, drug addiction. Or our stories have been lost simply because the female version of the human experience has been lost for centuries, burned in witchhunts,

thrown out of churches and temples, or cast out of the family records as our mothers and grandmothers and greatgrandmothers traded in their names for their husbands' names.

How many of us, in our respective invasions of addiction and/or abuse have had to work hard at recalling certain moments or large chunks of our lives? Often, those times are lost to us. They have been taken from us in many cases.

A Personal Example

I was leafing through a photo album my mother had given me as a birthday present. She had collected over the years various papers or awards or newspaper notices, family photographs and baby pictures and carefully arranged most of what she gathered into the album. There were yellowed news clippings and grade school test results that were left loose between the pages of the album. These fell out when I looked through the album my first chance to be alone with it. One of the items was a faded newspaper story with a photograph of three high-school orchestra members. I was in the middle, wearing a long black skirt

Statement of Purpose

Women's Recovery Network is a forum for women recovering from/ living with emotional, physical, ritual, sexual, societal, spiritual, or substance abuse and the issues abuse raises. We have a lot in common, and we have a lot to teach each other. We believe that "recovery" is a process of naming and claiming our personal power, and we celebrate the diversity of women's healing/spiritual paths.

Not content to await "contributions," we work actively to publish the words of women of different ages, beliefs, cultures, experiences, and races. We are committed to a minimally-controlling, supportive editorial process which is accessible to women who cannot or do not write.

We strive to do business in ways which nurture ourselves, our readers, our community, and our planet. We intend to cherish our resources and redistribute a portion of our profits to our community.

This statement may change as we do.

Knowing ourselves *continued*

and white blouse (standard orchestra attire). Two other students, a flutist named Denise and a cellist named Mark stood on either side of me.

I read the caption below the photo. The three of us had apparently gone to Columbus to perform in some high school contest or exchange performance. I hurt my head trying to recall that day. I could not. I don't remember a thing about it. I don't remember what pieces we performed, how we got to Columbus, or anything.

Not remembering what ought to have been a remarkable day during high school unnerved me. I stuck the newspaper article back into the photo album. My inability to recollect that day haunts me still. Who was I then, what was going on in my inner life that blotted this event from my memory? This is an example of a story lost from my own life. While I may never recover that particular story, I know I can go back to that time and recall other events. Ironically, though, losing that story IS a part of another story. I may even imagine what happened and court the story that way.

Rather than mentally scourge myself because I don't remember exactly what happened that day, I may look at the photo, and recall other moments at the time in my life that would illuminate who I was at the time, and give me the freedom to imagine that day.

In her remarks during a series of talks given at The New York Public Library in 1986, writer Toni Morrison spoke about the relationship between "self-recollection (memoir) and fiction." Her talk was published as part of the book *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, edited by William Zinsser. Morrison is the author of the prize-winning novel *Beloved*. She states, "... a very large part of my own literary heritage is the autobiography" (p. 103).

In her talk, Morrison refers to

slave narratives, noting their important role in the abolitionist movement. She says, "Whatever the style and circumstances of these narratives, they were written to say principally two things: One, 'This is my historical life—my singular, special example that is personal, but that also represents the race.' Two, 'I write this text to persuade other people—you, the reader, who is probably not black—that we are human beings worthy of God's grace and the immediate abandonment of slavery'" (pp. 104-105).

The purpose of telling OUR stories is not unlike the purpose of the slave narratives. Telling our stories has not only a personal benefit, but a universal one. Especially as women in recovery, the need to tell our stories is great, for in doing so, we reclaim a large part of our lives that otherwise may have been lost in the process of our addiction and abuse—and sometimes even in recovery.

12-Step Leads Tell Stories

We may use the 12-step "lead" as a model for telling our stories. For that is exactly what the person in front of the room is doing: telling us a story of her addiction, her recovery, and her life today. The reason for giving the lead is two-fold. One, it affords members of the meeting, newcomers and oldtimers alike, opportunities to identify and relate to the speaker's experience. We are given many opportunities to recognize ourselves in another woman's story. The second benefit of the lead belongs to the speaker. Telling the story affirms her experience and brings her into the circle of humanity. It affirms her existence, validates her feelings, and acknowledges her presence on the planet.

Most 12-step leads are spoken. The custom is for the speaker to speak off the top of her head, extemporaneously, without notes. The idea behind this is to allow spontaneity, "it keeps us honest," and permits Divine Grace to work

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Women's Recovery Network (ISSN 1052-1763) is published bimonthly by **WebWords Press, Inc., P.O. Box 141554, Columbus, Ohio 43214, USA.** Subscription prices: \$27 individuals, \$45 businesses/libraries/organizations. In Canada, add \$10 U.S.; in other countries, add \$15 U.S. An audiocassette edition is available for the same prices. Free to women institutionalized in mental hospitals and prisons. Women who can't afford \$27, choose your price.

The information in this newsletter is of a general nature. It is not intended, and should not be relied upon, as recommendations for any individual.

Women's Recovery Network is dedicated to open debate and dialogue. The opinions expressed here are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily represent the opinions or recommendations of the publishers. All factual material is published on the authority of the author.

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Printed on recycled, recyclable paper
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through us. This tradition reveals a third purpose in telling our stories: it brings us to a spiritual place. Telling our stories is sacred because the storyteller is not only telling her story of addiction and recovery, she is also telling something about Divine Grace. Her story is sacred. In other words, it is like a parable.

Our Stories, Too, Are Sacred

Writing our stories and speaking them are a little different, and it is often easier to speak them aloud than to get them to flow through our hands onto paper. In my workshop we used an exercise designed to prime the creative juices. Although the beginning exercise we used was one I came up with, other exercises could be used. Selected sources of writing exercises can be found at the end of this article.

We do not bulldoze through the void, where memory turns dark, and where the lights are turned off. Instead, we can use our bodies to find our stories.

1. Eyes — sight
2. Ears — hearing
3. Hands — touch
4. Nose — smell (scents, odor, fragrance . . .)

Our hearts tell us where to keep our stories.

Our guts tell us when to speak our stories.

The Writing Room

Creating a safe space for ourselves and each other is important. To assure this, bring to the writing space some item of personal meaning. It can be a teddy bear, a book, a candle, an article of clothing, a trinket; something to bring to the altar of sacred stories, an item also you are willing to share if you share writing space with others.

Some ground rules were developed for the workshop. They were intended to keep the circle so each participant would feel welcome to tell her story. The ground rules,

quoted from the handbook, are as follows:

1. We will go around in a circle. You may share any part of your story you choose, or you may choose not to share it at all.
2. Suspend the critic. Each of us is allowed our experience and feelings and our own language. We are not composing themes, we are creating our lives; there is no one right way to express them, there is no wrong way to express yourself.
3. We accept the joy as well as the pain in our lives.
4. We accept all that is shared as truth, because there is no singular truth.
5. We respect the personhood of one another. We will not pronounce judgment on each other's background, spiritual tradition, family experience, political beliefs, or personal appearance. All are welcome to our story circle, and only the stories you wish to share will be heard. Hopefully, you *will* feel safe enough to share your story as that is the purpose of this workshop.
6. There is no one method to write a memoir or autobiography or personal story. You do not need to use formal or complete sentences, for instance.
7. You do not need to fill pages and pages during the writing times. Sometimes just a word or two, or several brief sentences, may be all you will write. That's OK. Remember that whatever you write is enough.
8. This is fun, really.

Exercise

Place the personal item in front of you, or hold it in your hand. Spend a minute or so looking at it. Be aware of your body's reactions to it. Notice any pictures that may be forming in your head. Write down one or two words that come immediately to mind as you look at your memento. Start with: *This item is important to me because the day I got it . . .*

Write down as fast as you can the words and pictures that come immediately to mind. If nothing comes, write "nothing comes to mind, nothing comes to mind," over and over until something comes to mind.

When you finish the exercise, share what you wrote with the group, if you are doing this with others. If you are doing this on your own, read it aloud to yourself.

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Suggestions for Writing Resources

Goldberg, Natalie, *Writing Down the Bones*. New York: Shambala Publications, 1986.

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Ullman, Brenda, *If You Want to Write*, second edition. Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 1987.

There are numerous books offering writing suggestions; the three listed above I consider among the best. Browse your bookstore shelves and discover some on your own.

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Gaye Spetka is enrolled in Antioch University's individualized MA program in creative writing. The "Knowing Ourselves through Story" autobiographical workshop comes from her graduate work. She is also one of three publishers of the Columbus, Ohio lesbian newsletter, *The Word is OUT!*, and serves as editor. Beginning in September, Gaye's workshop will meet every month. For details, write to her c/o Dept. 6, WebWords Press, Inc., P.O. Box 141554, Columbus, OH 43214.

WebWords

We consider all letters and response cards for publication. This is the only material we publish without having the writer approve our (gentle) edits. Ellipses show sections we omitted.

Please tell us yes or no about whether it's OK to print your name. We don't print letters criticizing or praising our contributors unless they're signed. You can use a pseudonym or ask us to withhold your name.

Our keyboard won't make a women's symbol. Where you see "[women]," you'll know that the writer used a women's symbol and doesn't necessarily spell "women" the way we do.

"I'd Like to Read/Write About . . ."

Co-counseling, which I know practically nothing about. It seems like it would be a big boost to my sponsorships and friendships in recovery. How come we don't hear more about it? Could it be because no one makes big money from it? — *Columbus, OH*

Compulsive spending vs. recovery spending, relationships after a breakup/dating, working different programs together. — *Harrisburg, PA*

. . . Feelings that survivors have when learning physical things, especially self-defense, or martial arts. — *Brooklyn, NY*

. . . How hospitals and doctors abuse their power over [women] and give them unnecessary prescriptions and how they keep them for weeks on mental wards (until insurance runs out!) It's about time we [women] gather together to recover from "patriarchy." — *Chicago, IL*

Lesbian alcoholics who've left A.A. and what they do now to maintain their sobriety. — *Madison, WI*

Lesbian separatists staying sober without the 12 steps. Links between childhood physical abuse and covert mother-daughter incest and chronic yeast infections. Link

between childhood assault and adult phobias. Link between childhood abuse and sado-masochism. Connection between lesbian sexuality, shame, lesbophobia and childhood assault and date rape. Exploring "new age" thinking as victim-blaming. The link between incest and "sex addiction," between prostitution and sex addiction and incest and alcoholism and drug addiction. Adult children of compulsive overeaters.

A few concerns. Do men have access to this? What about [women] who choose to use their own names when writing? How are they to be safe from perpetrators reading and writing to them? Also—is there "cross-talk?" Are angry responses to [women's] writing "allowed?" — *Madison, WI*

WRN is not a separatist publication. Even if we wanted to, there'd be no way to keep men from reading it. We have subscribers who are partnered with men, subscribers who live with their parents, and subscribers who are therapists and put the newsletter in their reception areas. Also, we have received inquiries from male counselors and prison administrators. If we limited their access, we'd limit the access of countless women.

So no, women who use their own names are not completely safe from perpetrators. In what situation is a woman ever safe from perpetrators (not all of whom are male)? We trust our contributors to weigh the risks for themselves.

As for crosstalk, it's not only allowed but encouraged. All responses to our contributors' writing are considered for publication as long as they're signed.

. . . Should partners of incest survivors be allowed to attend meetings with the survivors? No! If they want support they can form their own group. I am concerned with anonymity. This topic seems to be discussed quite a bit. — *Columbus, OH*

. . . Survivors of strict religious organizations like Jehovah's Witnesses. — *Audubon, NJ*

Sisterhood between the generations, sponsorship. — *Raleigh, NC*

Substance abuse by siblings (as well as parents) and how that affects a family, recovery from effects of growing up in a Catholic family (no kidding, actually!) — *Northampton, MA*

CrossTalk

Reading "Spider Hairs" in your July/Aug 91 issue left me feeling abused and revictimized. It reads like pornography, and this was totally unexpected coming from WRN. I kept waiting for the "recovery" that never came. — *Name withheld, Columbus, OH*

Our first impulse was to rush to respond to this subscriber. However, on further reflection we decided her comment deserves a respectful beat of silence. We'll reply in the next issue, and in the meantime we welcome additional comments.

Requests

Among other ways that I sabotage my writing efforts I have lost all but the return envelope of the information you sent me. Please consider this my small first step and send some info so I can try again. — *Garland, TX*

We relate to this entirely!

Please send me information regarding Women's Recovery Network. — *Anaheim, CA*

This request came on a postcard with no indication of the sender's name or address. Similarly mysterious requests come about once a month. We know it's hard to "stay present" sometimes, but this is soooo frustrating! If someone complains to you that she wrote to us and never heard anything, please ask her to try again.

The Network in General

. . . I am really impressed with what you're doing . . . I, too, have felt the pull between my feminism (and my feminist spirituality) and my program, and am looking for ways that the two can work together. Keep up the good work. — *Athens, OH*

I can't tell you how wonderful it is to find recovery and feminism in the same place! My recovery has been going in this direction lately, but I was catching a lot of grief from my traditional 12-Step friends. And unfortunately, my feminist friends are not "into recovery." I thought they were enemy camps that could not see eye-to-eye, and I was crazy for being drawn in both directions. God (or whatever) bless you for bringing both concepts together into one package for me. . . . Unfortunately, I live in a very small, southern town. I feel safer from crime, but sometimes the soul perishes. Keep up the good work. Recovering feminists in Podunk-ville need you. Thanks! — *Auburndale, FL*

I VOTE REVOLUTION. — *Hammond, IN*

I wonder about classifying people by their dysfunctions [in WRN's advertising], but I'm interested. — *Santa Rosa, CA*

Thank you! My first issue of WRN proved just as uplifting as a 12 step meeting. I like to read it at night before bed. Especially enjoyed and cried to Darlene Prestbo's "The Dolphin's Tale." Re Ginny Wemmerus' "Politicizing Our Recovery": I am on the edge of my seat in anticipation of Part II! Great writing and she makes such wonderful points. She left me right where I am: substituting "Higher Power" for "God" and "it" for "he." Please hurry with the next issue! — *Teresa P., San Francisco, CA*

. . . I'm especially pleased with your publishing decision to provide tapes of issues for subscribers who can't/won't/prefer not to read, since it was an "inner voice" dictating the "Boundary Exercise" to me—you'll be returning the article to its original aural form. This is a fine publication—I devoured it front to back right away. . . . — *Julie K., Raleigh, NC*

Julie's "Boundary Exercise" appeared on pp. 12-13 of the May/June 1991 issue.

In response to readers asking about computer networking: Usenet has groups "recovery" and "support" under the "alt." classification. Unfortunately, not all Usenet sites carry "alt." Also of possible interest: the groups "feminism" and "women" under the "soc." classification. — *A.L. Person*

No therapy is as confrontive as the newsletter! Your [third issue] pushed me over the edge. I love you and hate you all at the same time. I feel the growth of the news quadruples in maturity with every issue. — *Seattle, WA*

What you're doing and focusing on is very needed—make a point of having positive articles and stories as well as the rest. Good luck. — *Sewell, NJ*

WOW. Had a terrible evening after reading my first issue. The tears and pain are closer than I thought. Maybe the memories are too. I hope so. Special thanks to "Anonymous" for "Remembering" (May/June 1991). — *L.H., Long Beach, CA*

"Claiming Our Power, Claiming Our Cash"

In "Claiming Our Power" I briefly mentioned secured credit cards as an option for women with bad credit histories. Jane White, writing in *Working Woman*, recently provided more info: There's typically a \$20 fee, and you have to deposit \$500 to \$1000 as security. You can charge up to the amount held as security, and you only have to pay the minimum required each month. (I still think that's dangerous for us overspenders.) Most issuers charge 10% to 20% interest on the balance and pay about 5% interest on the security. To find a list of reputable institutions that provide secured credit cards, send a check for \$3 to Bankcard Holders of America, 560 Herndon Parkway, Suite 120, Herndon, VA 22070. Be sure the issuer will report your improved payment record to the major credit-rating bureaus, Equifax

and TRW. Finally, avoid companies that "guarantee" you a card or neglect to mention the issuing bank. — *Faith R.*

Women Telling Us about Themselves

I am a partially blind adult child of an alcoholic, have been sexually abused as well. I am currently in counseling for these issues and for a depressive illness and get much out of it, however, I feel very isolated and lonely often. I have tried one or two self-help groups in the area, but found the same barriers there that I encounter elsewhere, people hesitate opening up to me due to my blindness and treat me as if I don't have a working brain at all.

In a situation where I have come for support, this hurts even more than usual. Also, transportation is a problem and cabbage it is just too expensive every week.

I would like to hear from other women who are recovering in any of the areas I mentioned. I will write in print, tape and braille. Gratefully yours — *Valerie Moreno, 423 N. Stiles St., Linden, NJ 07036.*

I am chairperson of adult education at our local Catholic parish — we are starting 12-Step programs next Fall — and we're looking for a woman-centered as one of our options. — *Findlay, OH*

I couldn't seal the envelope without mentioning topics of personal concern: surviving/transcending rape, chronic indebtedness, and perhaps most closely linked to the "network"—a sense of isolation from other women. Moreover, a sense of cultural isolation as women. What is woman's voice?

As a heterosexual woman, I am concerned that this publication may become too involved in lesbian factionalization—power struggles and infighting within the lesbian community. And, I guess an overriding fear that this publication is concerned with an exclusively lesbian point of view.

WebWords *continued*

Again, I'm not gay—and as much as I love and treasure my friends who are—I “come from” a different place. (No pun intended—but I kind of like it.) I'm not interested in yet another arena where I'll feel left out, devalued, etc. — *New York, NY*

We want this newsletter to be a forum in which every woman can discuss her recovery process. Sometimes social institutions such as 12-step groups and treatment centers present barriers to recovery; sometimes our struggles are with those closer to us. We want the newsletter to be open to these latter issues. We hope lesbian relationships, politics, and community-building will be among the topics but not dominate the newsletter.

We don't expect there to be a nice easy consensus about anything. If nothing else, this work is showing us that no one path to recovery works for all women. Although we believe recovery is a very political issue, we are not looking to find a “politically correct” approach. Rather, our ever-evolving editorial policy is to shepherd, but not direct, the dialogue. We won't publish material that is not about women's recovery in some way, and we give more space to topics that are traditionally considered “recovery” issues.

... I've just graduated from a BA program and plan to start to work on my Master's ... I'll be about 50 by the time I get out of school. So much for getting an early start on your career. But then they say that old souls mature late in life, so I ponder that dubious bit of wisdom when I feel the need for a morale boost.

In the future I may want to write about my childhood, but am not quite yet ready. I'm recovering from cult ritual abuse and have recently been pondering just how prevalent these cults are. In the past few years, through school and from having been in incest recovery groups, I've learned of the past and present existence of Satanic cults in eight small towns in Washington State—which makes me wonder how common this type of abuse is. After all, using the

glorification of Satanic rituals to aggrandize the sexual abuse of children seems like the next step up for addicted, multi-generational pedophiles, so I wonder.

Someday I hope to write about all of the foregoing, but for now I wonder how many of your readers have heard of, or were born into cult families and survived ritual abuse, and I wonder what the secret existence of multi-generational cults says about our culture as a whole. I think of how mainstream Americana has overlooked these dark activities in their sleepy little burroughs (and big cities), while cordially nodding to the cult members as they pass on the streets during the day, pretending that they're just like everyone else in Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood.

It is no quirk that cults exist and that their survivors are coming out of the closets by the numbers. Yet it is a quirk that the survivors do not feel safe to tell their stories in the mainstream and that they are instead tittered over on Geraldo as though they were mad as hatters. But cult abuse is madness and getting over it takes years of diligent, determined and thoughtful work. Surely, though, it's high time that some of us felt more free to discuss our recovery and the reality of the original sins of our fathers that caused our need to search for healing and compassion in the first place.

These are my thoughts of the moment. Do you feel this subject area to be too controversial and “off-beat” for your newsletter? I'll admit that a lot of the cult survivors seem weird, weird, weird, but not all of us are wacko. — *City withheld*

P.S. Please—no men. I've heard little else but male opinions on everything for the past 2 years (college) and, frankly, I don't care what they have to say.

Cult/ritual abuse is a topic sorely in need of feminist analysis. We are actively seeking stories and letters like yours. We have been corresponding privately with several ritual abuse survi-

vors who so far are too weary or too terrified to write for publication.

One topic I would like to see addressed is learning disabilities. I can't seem to get any help.

About the 12 Step programme—seems very limiting and won't let go of your dependence—one substitution for another. For something like alcoholism, drugs, etc. one needs a licensed professional. I heard a good programme about the 12 Step craze from the Canadian Broadcasting Corp. Some of the people that were interviewed were: Sandra Butler (San Francisco) [author of *Conspiracy of Silence: The Trauma of Incest*], Stan Katz, who wrote a book *CoDependency Conspiracy*, and Bruce Alexander (?) It seems the 12 Step has gotten out of hand. It's letting something else take your responsibility. Also, there are other problems that AA can't deal with like what's right for you may not be right for someone else, etc. (your full potentiality).

How come AA is accepted by the white males and seems to form a male bonding around Christianity? Why do men (term loosely) go to god and expect everybody to do it their way—ie group mentality and expect us to be cheerleaders? They don't even respect us as human beings even though it's us who gives them life! How 'bout our own theory of feminism to deal with this! ...

My mental health is better when I'm not around my family. I'm almost 40—next year! Never had a date or gotten fully independent. I'm getting mixed messages. Can't get a man (ugly) so you have to work. Women should be seen and not heard. My Mother and Sister-in-law never worked and they keep telling me to go get a job. With what? No skills or talent or physical appearance!

My brother molested and terrorized me growing up. He still jokes about it to this day! He won't take responsibility for it. He blames his age, my availability etc. All Dad did was yell at him for five

minutes minutes. Mom told me to stop crying and grow-up! Later talking in the car with her (as an adult) what me punish him? I feel betrayed. They don't think much of me I guess if they stand back and let my brother treat me the way he does.

I'll say this much, I'm not going to be treated like that anymore! I won't go home for Xmas because of him. I'm supposed to just "be

there" and fill a place for completion of "family." No way!

I said something about being scared at night to my brother and having the fear of rape—typical response—"lay back and enjoy it"—guess where he got it from—Dad! Since I'm ugly I shouldn't worry!

I'm the outsider in my family. I was sent away to school for emotionally disturbed kids. Always chaperoned. I'm the one that's

supposed to conform. They haven't broken my spirit yet! My therapist said that if I wasn't strong as I am, I would've committed suicide.

Why does my brother want to destroy me? I'm no threat to him! He watches me like a hawk, keeps me isolated when I visit him, treats me like a child and I'm only 4 years younger! He's a homophobic, racist, etc. He doesn't seem to have any friends. He's got 4 kids and just doesn't get involved—just the usual—"I work," etc. Think I got treated rough—I pity his wife! She's scared of him and expects women to be like her—don't make waves, no autonomy, nothing for herself—just the kids 24 hours a day. She looks like a zombie and anorexia! I've stopped feeling sorry for her—now she's pathetic!

I feel more power and confidence since joining NOW and reading about feminist ideas, theories, etc. I'm left to be myself. The focus is off me.

Let's tell the male gender to go to hell and do it ourselves! We can accomplish a lot more without them. Somebody has to say no! (Agh!) — *Lynn C., Houston, TX*

The Illinois Coalition Against Sexual Assault . . . [is] very much interested in learning more about your network and alternatives to the traditional 12-step programs. We will be talking in our trainings about the fundamental differences in the philosophical approaches when working with survivors who are substance abusers. We would welcome any suggestions or resources you may have to aid in these discussions. — *123 S. 7th St. #500, Springfield, IL, 62701*

Erratum

In the "Resources" column of the July/August 1991 issue, we neglected to provide the address for *The Cutting Edge*. It's P.O. Box 20819, Cleveland, Ohio 44120. (For those just joining us, *The Cutting Edge* is a forum for women living with self-inflicted violence, notably self-mutilation.)

Open Letter to All Interested in Abuse Survivors

by MPDignity/LOOM

As an organization, MPDignity/LOOM [see p. 8] is concerned about survivors and others using abuse labels that are racially-based or religiously-based. The term "Satanic abuse" includes the religion of the abuser. Even though we might as individuals strongly disapprove of Satanism, we believe that the use of the term "Satanic abuse" is bigoted. Using this term invites other minority religions to be persecuted in a similar way (for example, "Native American abuse," "Jewish abuse," etc.). Using this term may promote racism, since many minority religions consist mainly of non-Anglo races. . . . *With some professionals and laypeople declaring any minority religion as "Satanic," other minority religions and races suffer persecution as well as Satanists. All non-white, non-Christian people are threatened when survivors and others condone the use of the term "Satanic abuse."*

The term "ritual abuse" is a more accurate term, since it is supposed to describe a type of abuse, not the religion or race of the abuser. However, since some survivor literature confuses ritual abuse with "Satanic abuse," the term "ritual abuse" is becoming identical in the minds of many laypeople and professionals

with "abuse done by a member of a religious minority." . . . Types of abuse include ritual abuse, sexual abuse, physical abuse and emotional/psychological abuse. We urge all survivors and interested others to be non-racist, non-bigoted and accurate with abuse descriptions. For example:

"I was ritually abused by a Christian" *NOT* "I am a survivor of Christian abuse."

"I was sexually abused by my Hispanic uncle" *NOT* "I am a Hispanic abuse victim."

"My emotional abuse involved my rabbi" *NOT* "Jewish abuse affected my life."

"My abuser was a Satanist" *NOT* "I received Satanic abuse."

We ask survivors and interested others to join us in taking an active anti-racism, anti-bigotry position as individuals and as organizations. We invite those individuals and organizations to sign the "Position Against Racism and Religious Bigotry" . . . We will publish (with permission) those individuals and organizations who take this position against racism and religious bigotry.

Copies of the position statement are available from MPDignity/LOOM, P.O. Box 4367, Boulder, CO 80306-4367. As an organization, we at WRN plan to sign it.

Notices

A subscriber in Brooklyn, NY would like to hear from **female incest survivors who are 60 years old or older**. She's interested in forming a support network. (We printed a letter from her in the last issue, but we didn't provide an address.) Write to Anita c/o Dept. 4, WebWords Press, Inc., P.O. Box 141554, Columbus, OH 43214.

"I'm looking to hear from any grateful recovering women who were in the front, back and passing through a place called **Pat's in Ewa Beach, HI** anytime from the late 50's until 1967. The main reason I'd like to hear from you is to personally thank you. Without the love that I received from these anonymous women, I'm not sure I would have ever survived my childhood years." Suzie, 511 14th St. #D-3, Ramona, CA 92065.

We extend our condolences to Melody Beattie, author of *Codependent No More* and other books, whose 12-year old son, Shane, died in February of injuries sustained in a skiing accident. The May 27 issue of *People* magazine carried Melody's story of making the decision to have her son's respirator turned off, her near-relapse on drugs prior to his funeral, and how the disciplines she learned in her recovery have helped her since. Cards and notes may be sent to Melody in care of her publisher, Harper-Hazelden, Editorial Dept., Box 176, Center City, MN 55012-0176.

Readers in the Columbus area may wish to watch Faith and Ginny describe WRN on *Stonewall Union Reports*, a local cable TV show. (Stonewall Union is Columbus's gay and lesbian political organization.) The show will be aired at 11:30 PM on ACTV on Oct. 21, Oct. 26, Oct. 28 and Nov. 2. Our thanks to producer Donna Adassa for inviting us.

Resources

MPDignity, an organization for people with multiple personality disorder, was founded in 1989 by Dr. Cindee Grace, a recovering multiple. The group operates according to non-religious "12 Practices" and provides worldwide support groups, penpals and phonepals, a newsletter, and educational material about dissociation and MPD. A sister organization, **LOOM**, is for loved ones of multiples. "Since types/degrees of dissociation vary and there is more to learn, MPDignity/LOOM does not restrict 'multiple' only to people formally diagnosed with M.P.D." For more information write to P.O. Box 4367, Boulder, CO 80306-4367.

"Women and Addiction: A Bibliography in Process" is available free from Susan Searing, Women's Studies Librarian, The University of Wisconsin, 112A Memorial Library, 728 State Street, Madison, WI 53706. If possible, enclose a 9" x 12" envelope with postage for 3 oz. (75 cents as of this writing). The bibliography primarily lists books, including those for/about young women. Films, videos, reference tools, and organizations are also included. Topics covered are alcoholism, abuse of other drugs, eating disorders, and codependency. Compiled in October 1989; 21 pages; suggestions for additions are welcomed.

Incest Survivor Information Exchange is a quarterly newsletter for non-offending female and male survivors, published by a group of women. "We encourage articles, poems, graphics, and one or two lines about who you are or how you are or what you think," the publishers state. (Write for specific guidelines.) National news about lawsuits, conferences, and like-minded organizations is also regularly included. Each issue has a theme, and the publishers' suggestions for topics are always thought-provoking. (For example, for the December theme, "Defining Family," one of their questions is, "Does our society's definition of family promote the continuation of incest?") Suggested donations, which are tax-deductible: \$10 for individuals (\$12 for first class mail instead of bulk rate), \$15 organizational/professional, \$15 U.S. overseas, and \$2 for a sample copy. Write to ISIE at P.O. Box 3399, New Haven, CT 06515.

MPDignity (see p. 8) is organizing a **protest against a forthcoming feature film, *Mirror Image***. The film's main character is reportedly "a lesbian with many different personalities" who kidnaps and brutalizes a woman and kills a male psychiatrist.

Dr. Cindee Grace, founder of MPDignity and a multiple lesbian, has declared the film's plot and main character inaccurate and dangerous. "Multiple Personality Disorder is a response to trauma," she explains, "almost always child abuse. . . . 'Mirror Image' is unfair to both multiples and lesbians.

It increases feelings of shame that interfere with child abuse survivors getting support. It also increases homophobia, threatening the lives of multiple and non-multiple lesbians. We are not protesting that a multiple is portrayed as a lesbian or that a lesbian is portrayed as a multiple. We are protesting that a multiple lesbian is portrayed as a murderer."

Financial contributions, letters of protest, and ideas for peaceful action are needed. Contact MPDignity, P.O. Box 4367, Boulder, CO 80306-4367.

Patch Work

Sobriety and Depression

I am 35 years old and have been in recovery from alcoholism just over a year now. When I think about the 20 years that I drank and drugged I consider it a miracle that I lived to make it to A.A. and recovery.

Last year I also learned that besides alcoholism I also suffer from depression. I find depression as baffling as alcoholism and have come to realize that it is one of the main reasons I drank and drugged.

My depression has been diagnosed by a doctor and anti-depressants have been prescribed to me. Since anti-depressants are not mood changing drugs I've decided to try them and life has become not only bearable, but also fulfilling. I have found it extremely difficult to share anything about this disease at regular A.A. meetings since some feel that by taking prescribed medication you are not sober. These people are not doctors and I highly suggest that they read the A.A. pamphlet "A.A. and Other Medications."

Here in New York I am very grateful that we have "Depression in Sobriety" meetings where we feel free to talk about items such as being on medication and seeing results in each other.

—Lois, Brooklyn, N.Y.

Authorized Bragging

After my lover had had a particularly difficult week, and had told me all about it, I asked her to make a list of all the things she had done that she was proud of—the time she had felt angry and had actually expressed it, the time she introduced a difficult topic, the time she said no. We both really got into it. It was authorized bragging. All this modesty stuff is so ingrained. I've found it helps me a lot to have someone give me

permission to say what I'm proud of. (Once I get started, though, I'm hard to stop!) It was particularly helpful that first time because the week had seemed so painful, so difficult, so awful—to discover all these nuggets of growth, of small steps taken towards self-respect, towards independence—it was really quite inspiring. It has since become a habit in our lives.

"I'm sorry I hurt you on the phone yesterday, but I'm proud that I didn't beat myself up about it all day long."

"Thank you. I'm proud that I didn't hang up like the old me would have done. I stayed on the phone, and finished what I wanted to say. And I'm proud of the way you showed me your anger. Did you notice how readily it came out?"

And so on!

—Anonymous

Butterflies Are Free

"You want me to do what?"

"Chase butterflies." My therapist grinned at me. "Do you know where to find them?"

I thought for a minute. "Well, in a field, I guess."

"That's right." I got out my checkbook, shaking my head. "There's one more thing," my esteemed advisor said.

"Now what?"

"You have to run."

"Run?" I echoed, still a little dazed.

"Run," she repeated firmly. "And leap."

That's how it happened that last Saturday I was up to my waist in meadow. I hadn't thought to wear long sleeves or pants, or wear a hat, or pick a day that wasn't 95 frigging degrees. The air swarmed with flying

things—gnats and bees and bugs I couldn't name. But there was nary a butterfly.

"I'll flush them out," I thought, and gritted my teeth. Arms outstretched, I strode into even taller grass and wildflowers. So pretty from the road, so scratchy up close. At last a monarch butterfly flitted in front of me. I lunged for it. It disappeared.

"This is crazy," I said to myself. There were burs on my socks, and my legs itched. I turned around.

A white butterfly was headed right for me. I reached for it, and it flew between my hands. If I'd been quicker, I could have smooshed it.

"Heck, this is too easy," I thought. The butterfly flew past me, then off to one side. It wasn't very fast, and no one was around to see me. I decided to go after it. After all, I'd have to report *something* at my next session.

I hurried along, raising my knees high to get through the matted weeds. A second white butterfly joined the first, and they started crisscrossing and flying higher. I hurried faster. "Run and leap," I heard my therapist say. I held my hands up and jumped a little jump.

I almost got one! I remembered what my mother taught me, that a butterfly can't fly if you rub the dust off its wings. I didn't want to touch it—and yet I did. I was *supposed* to chase it. I ran for real now, zigzagging as the butterflies did. I leaped higher. I waved my hands more wildly. I forgot about anyone watching me.

Suddenly, the butterflies went in opposite directions. Hands still high over my head, I whirled one way, then the other, face to the sun. The grass was up to my shoulders here, and I couldn't see where they'd gone.

I felt absolutely delighted.

—Joann Williams Child

BookMarks

Allies in Healing

It's out, it's out, it's out. Laura Davis has just published her book for partners of incest survivors, *Allies in Healing: When the Person You Love Was Sexually Abused as a Child* (HarperPerennial, \$13 USA/\$17.50 Canada).

In short (2- to 3-page), read-then-take-a-break sections, Laura addresses actual questions partners have asked in her workshops: "I didn't abuse her. Why do I have to live with the results?" "How do I explore my own needs while my home is so full of her pain and her healing?" "How do you know when to throw in the towel?" "How can I deal with my fear of the survivor's suicidal tendencies?" "Can a person 'learn' to desire sex?" She then steps aside

and lets 8 partners (men and women, gay and straight) tell their own stories. There are two sections of basic information about sexual abuse (e.g., its effects, the healing process, multiple personalities), and the book concludes with a 33-page list of resources.

Laura deliberately uses the gender-neutral word "partner" throughout the book, and she varies her use of pronouns. I'm struck by how few distinctions need to be drawn between recovery issues for women and those for men. Yet Laura doesn't mute her feminism. She urges readers to take a political stance against abuse, and she challenges male partners of female survivors to explore the power dynamics of their relationships. I'm also glad to see

that, as in *The Courage to Heal*, Laura is "out" as a lesbian. In fact, *Allies* is dedicated to her own partner, Karyn Bristol.

I think this book might save my relationship. My partner and I have "broken up" 3 times in the past 4 months, so we've agreed to read and discuss a section every week. We would have liked to see more information in this book explicitly for two-survivor couples (our situation, and one that's so common among our sister dykes) and more about covert/emotional incest, as distinct from emotional abuse. But don't get me wrong; this is a milestone book. Besides being essential for partners, it will be helpful to friends of survivors, survivors themselves, and every therapist worth her salt. — *Ruth Stanton, Clintonville, OH*

What Feminists Are Saying Elsewhere

Harriet Goldhor Lerner.
Women who read too much: the problem with the self-help industry. Balance 2(1), Nov/Dec 1990.

In this article the noted clinical psychologist and author (*The Dance of Anger, The Dance of Intimacy, Women in Therapy*) discusses self-help books. Lerner summarizes the message of the advice-giving industry as continuous attempts "to privatize, individualize and pathologize 'women's problems' rather than to understand these difficulties as a natural and shared outgrowth of inequality and the socially constructed fabric of work and family roles." In the maze of advice, Lerner says, a feminist perspective can help us choose. "Beware of books that tell us women are sick . . ."

Lerner fears "that the recovery movement is lulling us back into

sleepiness, self-blaming and parent-blaming, back into diagnostic labels and a narrow disease model of our problems and pain." Because it ignores social problems (e.g., devastation of neighborhoods, families and lives shattered by drug wars, and physiologically damaged brains), she considers "the ubiquitous labeling of primarily white, middle class problems as 'addictions' to be both pre-emptive and callous."

Lerner does find some good in recovery literature. She lauds the focus on authenticity, and she is encouraged by the strong sense of female community in which women share and validate their experience. Still, she wonders why women are so comfortable calling themselves by recovery labels, such as "adult child," and so uncomfortable calling themselves feminists. "Women tend to feel so

guilty and anxious about any joyful assertion of self in the face of patriarchal injunctions that each small move out from under is invariably accompanied by some unconscious act of apology and penance. I believe it is an act of deep apology for women to move forward in the name of recovery, addiction and disease."

Lerner sees recovery as a compromise solution between the bold self-affirmation implicit in feminism and patriarchy's virulent backlash against its power in women's lives. She closes with her belief in women's ability to take what they need from self-help sources without self-negation and without de-politicizing their lives. And she declares her expert opinion that women are *not* sick.

Balance, a magazine for female physicians, reprinted this article from *The Women's Review of Books*.

Re-searching the Research

Incest Survivors Don't Fantasize Abuse

Most incest survivors who try to find corroboration of their memories are able to do so, Boston researchers have found. Dr. Judith Herman and Emily Schatzow studied 53 survivors (predominantly white, unmarried, and working for pay) whom they treated in 12-week therapy groups.

Overall, 74% of the patients obtained confirmation of sexual abuse from the perpetrator, family members, or evidence such as diaries and photographs. Of the 9 patients (17%) who did not, 6 made no attempt to do so, and 3 confronted families who united in absolute denial. Gathering information from family members or physical re-exposure to the environment in which the abuse occurred was frequently sufficient to stimulate memories. Hearing other group members' stories also stimulated memories.

Based on what they recalled during therapy, 64% of the patients were found to have had mild to moderate memory deficits prior to therapy, and 26% were found to have had severe memory deficits. Severe memory deficits were usually associated with abuse that began early in childhood (often in preschool years) and ended before adolescence. There was also a relationship between amnesia and the nature of the abuse: 59% of the group with severe memory deficits eventually recalled abuse that had been violent or sadistic.

Herman and Schatzow emphasize that the survivor should retain the greatest possible control over her recovery process. She should choose her own pace and define her own goals (sample goals: recovering memories, disclosing the abuse to a family member, confronting the perpetrator).

"Urge your readers who are in-

cest survivors to join support groups," Dr. Herman told us when we called to request a copy of her paper. "It's empowering, and that's how some women get their memories back."

Judith Lewis Herman and Emily Schatzow. "Recovery and verification of memories of childhood sexual trauma." Psychoanalytic Psychology 4:1-14, 1987.

Why Battered Women Who Kill Go to Jail

In her book *Justifiable Homicide* (Ohio State University Press, 1989), Seattle attorney Cynthia Gillespie discusses why U.S. courts so often rule that the law of self-defense doesn't apply to battered women who kill their abusers. Such women face 5 major legal stumbling blocks:

1. **The equal force rule.** For example, a woman who used a gun can't successfully argue self-defense unless her 6-foot tall, 250-pound abuser also had a gun. As another example, in approximately 35 states there's no guarantee that rape will be considered such a serious bodily injury that it warrants a fight to the death.

2. **The imminence rule.** To successfully argue self-defense, one must prove that she was in imminent danger. This is generally interpreted to mean that the assailant must make an overt act which shows he will carry out his threat. However, after a woman has lived with an abuser for a while, she becomes so attuned to his patterns that he may not even need to make a threat. She may know, for example, that his insults and throwing of food will be followed by rape or a severe beating.

3. **"Retreat to the wall" rule.** Like many other U.S. legal standards, this requirement comes from medieval England. A man who felt endangered was literally required to go to the wall of the

city before actively defending himself.

Today, one must still make reasonable efforts to avoid attack, unless one is assaulted at home. (That exception is called "the castle doctrine," as in "a man's home is...") Yet if a woman's abuser is a boyfriend who has a key to her apartment, for example, it may be impossible for her to prove self-defense. He'll probably be termed an invitee or co-tenant (in other words, she didn't try to avoid him; she asked for it).

4. **Provocation rule.** In most states, someone who provokes a confrontation can't successfully claim self-defense if she kills someone. Women who arm themselves with weapons are often considered to have "provoked" an attack, especially if their abuser had no weapon.

5. **Reasonable person standard.** It must be shown that a reasonable person in the same situation would have believed she was in danger of death or serious bodily injury and would have responded the same way. But the question usually becomes, "What would a man have done?" (In fact, this doctrine was formerly known as "the reasonable man standard").

The answer usually fails to consider women's size and strength and our lack of training in defending ourselves, including using weapons skillfully. (For example, the prosecutor may argue that there were too many shots fired.) Furthermore, few courts understand the cycle of abuse mentioned in #2 (explosion of violence —> "honeymoon period" in which the abuser feels remorse; —> tension-building stage, e.g., verbal abuse, slaps, etc. —> explosion of violence). A woman who kills during the tension-building stage is rarely considered "reasonable."

This information was gleaned not from the book but from a lecture Gillespie delivered at Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, on February 7, 1991.

Politicizing Our Recovery: Feminism and the 12 Steps

by Ginny Wemmerus

In the last issue of *Women's Recovery Network* I began this feminist analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of 12 step programs. The strengths I find include the focus on personal responsibility, the recipe for change contained in steps 4-9, the focus on living in the moment, and the daily living skills contained in steps 10, 11 and 12. In this issue, I turn my attention to the first three steps.

About Politics, Powerlessness and Spirituality

To me, politics is about the distribution of wealth and power. Those who have more economic power are less dependent on others. They have more options about how they live their lives. The key here is who gets to make decisions. When I say that the personal is political I am saying that my choices, my ability to govern myself, as it were, are affected by my economic and political relations with others. When I go to work I give some power, some authority, to my boss. When I join an organization, I accept its precepts. When I am in a relationship I allow my partner some influence on my behavior. And so, these are political relationships.

My choices are also influenced by the language I use to describe them. I believe the language we use shapes the way we think about things. When I started to attend 12 step meetings I changed the language. I found the phrase "a power greater than myself" far more acceptable than the term "God." Changing the term, changing the language changed the way I responded to the concept.

What is more problematic is the language of power in the first three steps. It is here that the language has confusing, dangerous and very political implications.

It intrigues me that the focus on the self, change and living in the moment which I have found so empowering is not called power in the 12 step model. Instead, the very first of the 12 steps requires me to admit that I am powerless over the substance or process that is the focus of that meeting, e.g., alcohol in AA, or gambling in GA. Especially in the family programs, like Al-Anon or ACoA, we are quickly asked to generalize being powerlessness over the substance or process to being powerless over a person who has that substance or process addiction and then to being powerless over all "people, places and things."

Admitting powerlessness paves the way for the second and third steps, in which another power, a higher power, is acknowledged and authorized. A common shorthand for these three steps is "I can't," "God can," "I think I'll let him."

At 12 step meetings I hear that many of my problems come from looking for something outside myself to fix me: alcohol, drugs, a relationship, a completed project. At the same time, I am told to turn to a higher power for help. I am continually assaulted by references to an external god that has a plan and/or a will for me and exhorted to ask for "knowledge of God's will for me and the power to carry that out." I am told in essence that the only thing that can fix me is something outside myself. This insidious contradiction is generally ignored and serves to perpetuate our dependence on externals. That this "God" is referenced with male pronouns only adds insult to the injury.

As far as I'm concerned this is where the 12 step model contains a fundamental error. I believe the founders of AA shared a common misunderstanding of power, what

it is and what it means to have it.

In this culture we are increasingly losing sight of personal power and confusing it with dominance, control and coercion. The very first definition of power in my big fat dictionary is "ability to do or act; capability of doing or accomplishing something." Starhawk likens this power to "the power we sense in a seed, in the growth of a child, the power we feel writing, weaving, working, creating, making choices. . . . It is the power that comes from within." (*Dreaming The Dark: Magic, Sex & Politics*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1982, p. 3.) It is about our own abilities and capacities. It is power *to*, not power *over*.

It is not until we get to the fifth definition of power in my big fat dictionary that we get to another kind of power: "the possession of control or command over others; authority; ascendancy." Starhawk describes it this way. "Power-over comes from the consciousness I have termed estrangement: the view of the world as made up of atomized, non-living parts, mechanically interacting, valued not for what they inherently are but only in relation to some outside standard. It is the consciousness modeled on the God who stands outside the world, outside nature who must be appeased, placated, feared, and above all obeyed." (*Truth or Dare: Encounters with Power, Authority and Mystery*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987, p. 9.) The distinction between power as *capability* and power as *control* is very, very important, and the use of the same word for both concepts is misleading.

Power over, *control*, is the kind of power we commonly speak of and the kind of power that 12 step programs constantly remind us that we do not have. If that is the only kind of power there is, then

the admission of powerlessness creates a void. To feel alone, incapable and exposed is terrifying, at least to me. I can certainly understand a need, desire to fill that void, to not feel so alone, so vulnerable, so "powerless." Here, I believe, is where many of us make a fundamental mistake: we try to get some power back by attributing power to "God." Belief in an omnipotent being is a way to retain power. We admit our powerlessness but at the same time ally ourselves with a powerful other. It's as if we take the position: I can't handle my life (I'm powerless), but my buddy God can (a power greater than myself), and since he's taking care of me (has a plan and a will for me) I'll be all right.

What is wrong with this perspective? First, it perpetuates the myth that power equals control—that I am only powerful if I can get what I want. This is another kind of dependence on externals. Power over requires outcomes to attain.

Second, the steps concern themselves with the power I don't have and ignore the power I do have. The first of the 12 steps admonishes me to admit that I am powerless over my particular demon. And, in truth the sooner that I accept that I cannot dominate it, the better off I am. But this does not mean I lack power. I still have the power to make choices, to will, to act, to become.

Third, the steps ask me to give my power away. When the "program" ignores this power of mine, and encourages me instead to turn to and attribute my power to an external force or higher power, it precludes me from seeing myself as a powerful woman. It diminishes me. This is a heavy price to pay for sobriety. It maintains the kind of hierarchical relationship that is the basis of patriarchy. As a feminist I have come to see this kind of burden as oppression. My big fat dictionary, again, defines oppression as "the

exercise of authority or power in a burdensome, cruel or unjust manner." If the steps are "the authority" in the 12 step model, then the language of the steps is a vehicle of oppression.

The founders of AA tried to create a spiritual and political vacuum. But a vacuum is not passive: it sucks things into it and it sucks whatever is closest, and therefore whatever is most common. While the literature says that "AA has no opinion about outside issues" (Tradition 9) and "AA is not allied with any outside organization or belief" (from "What AA Is"), *people* in 12 step meetings do have values and beliefs, and they talk about them.

For me the most important aspect of this is the politics of the spirit. While the 12 step literature says that members can believe anything they want, what actually emerges at most meetings is a lowest common denominator theology: those beliefs which bother the fewest people and which reflect the beliefs implicit in the language of the steps and other program literature. And then those beliefs get reified.

For example, I hear at meetings that however this "power greater than ourselves" is understood, there is no reason not to call it "God." I hear that "it" is more powerful than I: it can do for me what I cannot. I also hear that it has a will or plan for me, and that I should turn my will and my life over to its care. This is a judeo-christian "God," an all powerful other. To turn my will over to a powerful other is to give my power away, to deny my own ability to make good choices. These are acts of self-deprecation. They perpetuate my belief that I cannot take care of myself, that there is something so wrong with me that the only solution is to find a benevolent parent to take care of things for me.

In most meetings it is also said that there is no reason not to refer to this "power greater than our-

selves" as "he." For women this is especially damaging, because no matter how powerful a woman becomes she will never become a "he." While this makes me uncomfortable, I have come to the conclusion that arguing over the pronouns is a red herring. Those arguments distract us from the far more serious and damaging assumptions which underlie "higher power," "its will for me," etc. What is implied in the pronouns, again, is the powerful other. Yes, let's get rid of the male pronoun, but to stop there is to leave the power assumption unchallenged.

Spirituality does not have to be oppressive. Instead of a higher power, I have an inner power. I call her my wise woman soul. She is the part of me that knows what is best for me, that wants me to grow and to be present in my life. When I am connected with her I know what I need to do, and I am fully engaged in whatever I am doing. I feel my connection to other people and the universe. And while I believe she is connected to the universe, that connection is not hierarchical. The universal web or whatever is not greater or more powerful than I am. Neither does it have more wisdom. It has different wisdom and power, the knowledge and capabilities of a collectivity rather than an individual.

My wise woman soul is not omnipotent; she doesn't make the bad things in my life happen, or the good. I participate in the cause of some events, and some just happen. I prefer to think that I am continually encountering situations which I can choose to make meaningful or not. I can look for my part in them, I can use them as a catalyst or an incubator for change. Doing those things does not mean there was a plan for me. If I took an opportunity to learn, it does not mean I was being given a lesson. Rather, it means I choose to make a lesson of my life. Most of all, if something bad happens to me, *continued*

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continued

it does not mean that I am being punished or am being given a painful lesson because I'm such a slow learner.

My wise woman soul does keep me focused on taking responsibility for myself. She is clear sighted, knowing all my dodges and maneuvers. She laughs at my follies and gently reminds me that I could do things another way. She helps me see my choices and my power to act on them.

My inner power is the antithesis of the externally referented male authority figure I commonly evoke with the word "God." Words do carry associations and as such they can be political elements.

The founders of AA didn't see the language they used as political, as perpetuating a cultural system based on dominance and control. They didn't know that the personal is political. They thought they could divorce themselves from politics by fiat. They didn't realize that when people say they are apolitical, they are making a very political statement. They are either saying that everything is all right with the world or that the state of the world doesn't matter. So by remaining silent on political issues the 12 step programs have blessed the status quo. The 12 step programs specifically turn our focus away from the greater culture.

But people who come to meetings are struggling not only with their internal oppression but also with the external manifestations of a political and economic system based on dominance and control as well. Are we honoring our own power when we remain silent on issues like racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia in 12 step meetings? Moreover, how much comfort do women struggling with these concerns find in 12 step meetings? Do they come at all? Do they come back? To the extent that we deny the reality of each

others' lives by not labeling the oppression we experience outside of meetings, the meetings themselves perpetuate the oppression.

I can't ignore the power I found in 12 step groups, but I can no longer ignore the oppression I found there either. I believe we can do better than this.

A Personal Vision

What could be different? What kind of focus would be necessary to overcome the difficulties and maintain the positive aspects of this model? Looking at my life, I've tried to sort out what is working for me. The following are some things that seem to keep me headed where I want to go.

The first, and probably the hardest, is to give up the illusion

that somewhere, sometime I will have safety, certainty. It isn't going to happen. When I give up an omnipotent higher power, I have to allow that "shit happens." I experience feelings of "controllessness." But trying to have control has gotten me in trouble repeatedly. I am working to get free of my need to have control, to have power over the events and people in my life. Trying to get it, trying to keep it preserves my dependence on externals, on outcomes and others' opinions of me.

An important aspect of this is recognizing my oppression. I need to stop denying it, stop thinking that my situation is different. Which is not to say that each of us is not special and unique with her own particular set of strengths

Women's Recovery Index

- 11 Percentage of women who will develop clinical depression at some time in their life
- 5 Percentage of men
- 25 Percentage of non-monogamous heterosexual men who said, in a 1988 survey, that they wouldn't tell their partners if they became infected with HIV (the virus that can cause AIDS)
- 12 Percentage of gay and bisexual men who wouldn't tell their partners
- 56 Percentage of bisexual men who said, in a recent survey of 3 U.S. communities, that they don't use condoms
- 70 Percentage by which the risk of dying from heart disease is greater for people whose weight fluctuates (notably, dieters) than in those whose weight remains at a reasonably steady level
- 73 Percentage of female teenage runaways in one study who reported having been sexually abused either before or after leaving home
- 38 Percentage of male runaways

Unless otherwise noted, all statistics apply to the United States.

Sources:

Clinical depression: Katherine Griffin, "The Unbearable Darkness of Being," *In Health* 5(1):63-67, 1991. **Refusal to tell female partners about HIV infection:** "Keeping AIDS a Secret," *The Plain Dealer*, January 9, 1988, p. 6A, citing the *San Francisco Examiner*. **Failure of bisexual men to use condoms:** "Young gays having unsafe sex," *Medical Tribune* 32(14):10, 1991. **Fluctuating weight increases risk of heart disease:** *Wall Street Journal*, June 27, 1991, p. A-1 (Midwest Edition). **Sexual abuse in runaways:** Arlene McCormack, "Sexual abuse of adolescent runaways," *Medical Aspects of Human Sexuality* 24(4):15, 1990.

and burdens. But, we also share fundamentally the burden of women in this culture. I need to be willing to look at that burden, to get angry about it.

Instead of denying my oppression, I try instead to focus on my own choices in the moment, given the oppression. I don't have to be a victim just because I am oppressed. I can see myself as important and deserving of peace. I can rage, I can work for change, but not any longer at the expense of self. When I do this, I am taking back not only the word power, but also my own personal power to be, to do and to influence, but not control, events.

All of this is a part of honoring myself, knowing that my situation, my feelings, wants and needs are just as important as anyone else's. Feeling my feelings, knowing my mind, experiencing both my body and my spiritual self, taking responsibility for my behavior are all ways of exerting my personal power.

At the same time, I find I must honor my connection to all of us. We are all in this together. I'm oppressed when anyone is. I have to learn to live with my anger about the distribution of wealth and political clout in this culture. To do otherwise, to see each other as separate, to see our situations as unrelated, feeds my alienation. I have to find a way to connect to each of you and support you without losing myself in the process. A way which I would venture to say is virtually unknown in this culture.

The benefits of this are moments of feeling powerful, energized, congruent. It has its costs. This way seems harder, it's certainly less familiar. It requires more honesty, more openness, more willingness than I have ever needed before. I continually fall into the trap of confusing control with capability. It is far easier to try to manage my life than to be centered and have my life from that place. It requires more toler-

ance for missteps, more patience with ambiguity.

Sometimes these seem like impossible goals. I often feel overwhelmed with fear. I have come to know that I certainly can't do this alone. Part of embracing this new way of thinking is embracing my need to be in community, to have companions on my journey.

Not only do I need companions, I need a structure and tools to use. Many things I found in 12 step meetings help. Stripped of patriarchal images and transformed to a feminist perspective they can be even more empowering.

I need steps or guides along the path. A key phrase in my recovery has been, "What step applies here?" When I bake a complicated cake it makes it easier to have a recipe. That is how the steps function in my life. They are a quick and handy reference in times of trouble. I want to keep them.

But I am done with being abused by them. I need tools that do not contain abusive, patriarchal language. One of the most empowering things I have done is to write my own personal version of the steps. Then I worked with a group of women to create our collective version of the steps (see *WRN*, Jan/Feb 1991, pp. 14-15). It is possible to have tools that are simply helpful, without the overload of images of patriarchal power and abuse.

I need meetings, or at least a group of women who meet regularly. I need a way to talk about what happens to me every day. I need companions to help me see the patterns in my life, both within me and among us. I need support for my attempts to take responsibility for myself and to change.

It's hard to do my own work. This culture does not value that. I certainly was not taught how. I still use "professional help," but I dream of ways we could do more of this for each other.

Kay Hagan suggests that some version of the old consciousness

raising groups might work.

("Codependency and the Myth of Recovery: A Feminist Scrutiny," *Fugitive Information* 1(1), 1989, p. 10. Her essay was reviewed in *WRN*, Jan/Feb 1991, p. 5.) In those groups we took time to share our experiences, to see how they were similar. In future groups we could look for ways culture supports dysfunctional behavior in our daily lives. We might come to see how the issues are common to being raised in patriarchy, that they are broader than our own families, as dysfunctional as they might have been.

In such groups it would be easy to get distracted by everything that is wrong with the world, as we have so often. Kay Hagan predicts that if instead of saying at meetings, "I'm so and so, I'm an alcoholic or codependent," women said, "I'm oppressed and I'm not going to take it anymore," we wouldn't be going to meetings very long. Rather, we would be on the barricades within a month, working to change the world. (Workshop at Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, August, 1989.) This misses the point the 12 step programs have made so successfully: the place to start changing the world is with us.

My vision is to see myself as part of a community of changers. We would keep the focus close to ourselves, changing the world by starting with ourselves. Like the phrase "Think globally, act locally," the challenge would always be to see the connections to the larger culture but to work at the individual level.

Little by little I am realizing this dream in my life. And I am changing the world.

Ginny Wemmerus is a sometime essayist who writes about feminism and Wicca in the context of relationships and recovery. She is one of the publishers of Women's Recovery Network. She loves falling leaves, full moons, seashores, her awesome partner of many years, and being part of an active Lesbian community.

Cathy's Garden/Prairie Girls

by Lori Barron, Santa Rosa, CA

There are mustangs in your yard replete
with fearless grazing,
vines which bend with roses too heavy
for children to hold.
The air is thick, like cake,
with woodsmoke and summer grass
forever left unbraided.

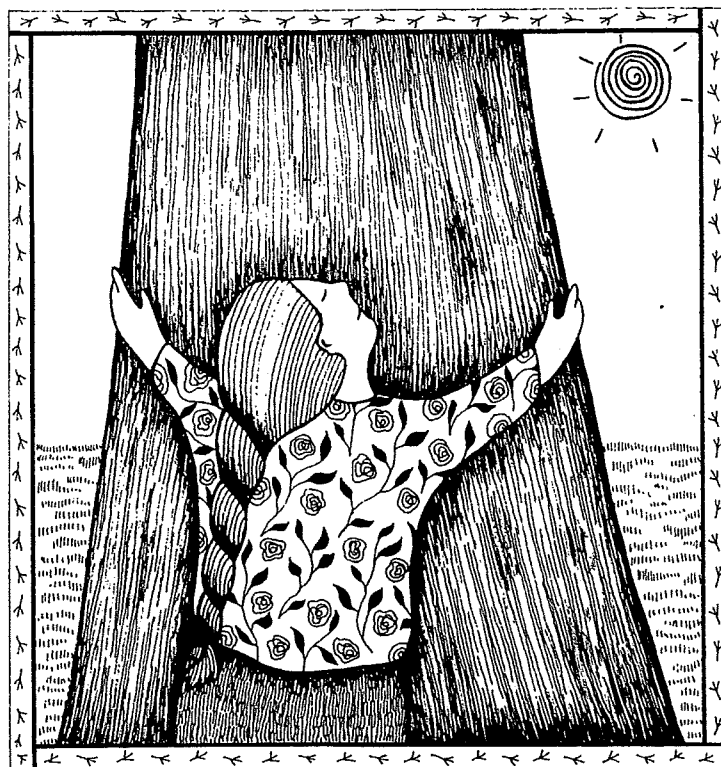
In a prairie suburban backyard
a child embraces mother-maple.
The sweetness is buried too deep in bark;
the branches are too high to touch.
The child's snowmen are formless, genial, hatless,
not like Daddy. At night
her mittens curl with heat.
Her angels are left unmade.

In the middle of winter
I see that God is a robin under the snow
who wrestled and lost. I watch him
break the icy crust, beak empty of song,
wings frantic to reach a place of warm worship
and softer ground.
My soul, blind worm, slides back
to its underground grave.

But summer comes even for prairie girls.
The darkness outside does not thicken and
probe between sheets drawn tight. Out her
I step to the praying-rock, cast out words
like the candy the firemen scattered
in last year's Fourth of July parade.
Mother brings banquets of cookies and fruit
beneath the maple, avoiding my eyes.
I rub red berries upon the sidewalk,
watching to see if their stain
can ever disappear.

The roses are pruned, the hedges are trimmed in the suburbs.
Your bushes spill gladly over the fence;
your steady birds remain.
I spend my days in this clear hot sun,
waiting to thaw, wrestling with my own heart.
My beak is stronger than God's.
At night the mustangs rest by your doorstep,
under the low-limbed trees.
The child, her desert crossing done,
climbs over the fence,
stretches her soul like a hammock beneath their guardian hooves
and sleeps at last.

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*a child embraces
mother-maple*